From Unsettling Dreams

Michael Whatling

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

June 1983

ABSTRACT

FROM UNSETTLING DREAMS

Michael Whatling

This collection of eleven short stories intends to explore alienation—alienation from one's environment, others, or oneself. It may be that increased understanding can arise from alienation, and this will be explored as well. Stylistically, some of the stories follow conventional story-telling techniques, while others are written in a more experimental fashion. The stories encompass diverse characters in a wide-range of situations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INDIAN LAND

The car turns from the supermarket onto the highway. The grocery bags rustle in the back seat. My father holds the steering wheel firmly and stares out the windshield.

A large truck passes. It leaves a trail of thick dust. I roll up the window and watch the truck as it moves ahead. The highway is lined by woods. This road was once trees and bush until a strip was cut to build the highway. Up front the truck slows down and moves to the side of the road. As our car passes I see that the truck has a flat tire.

There's a huge rock at the side of the road. It leans towards the soft shoulder. On its face are crudely written letters, words I have read time and time before. I read the red painted words again.

THIS IS INDIAN LAND.

We'll soon be home.

II

"Wait here. I'll just be a minute." We have stopped at a roadside garage. My father gets out of the car and walks towards the garage office.

"I want to go too," I call after him.

This garage is the only building on the highway and is surrounded by mountains of smoldering old cars, rusting trucks and bus shells. They only need the metal—the cars are gutted—what they don't need is burned. A black smoke rises from the ruins and a breeze carries the dark cloud towards the reserve beyond the trees.

My father opens the screen door and enters the office. I follow and head for the soft drink machine. Orange? No. Coke? Never. It's too American. One sip and I might begin to like John Wayne movies. 7up is safer. I put in my quarter, push the 7up button, and the cup drops into position.

My father leans over the desk towards the garage's owner and speaks loudly above the sounds of cars whistling down the highway. "I need your help, Calvin. I don't think it's fair. You've been a friend for a long time."

Calvin looks down at the floor and shakes his head. "It's up to the Band Council. I can only say my piece when we vote."

"Why can't you tell me <u>now</u>? I need to know <u>now</u>."

"Because . . . I don't know. Wait till the meeting. Then we will vote. I don't want to start any trouble. But I'll try to help you then. As much as I can."

My father bangs the counter with his fist. Then he sighs. For a moment there is silence, then Calvin continues.

"It's more than some will do. I hope you understand what position I am in. I'm sorry." Again there is a pause in the conversation. The only sound is the passing cars and a rumbling noise made by the burning car shells.

Calvin's voice changes. He speaks more quietly.

"Have they visited you yet?"

"No. But I know it will be soon." My father's voice also lowers. "Thanks anyway."

He walks to the door and I follow. He seems to have forgotten I am with him. We get into our car. The wind has strengthened. As we drive away the garage's screen door bangs in the wind.

III

"That goes in the refrigerator," my mother tells me. We are at home putting away the groceries.

"It was really interesting," I say. "The police searched the whole car, even the food we bought. I never was in a roadblock before."

"Do they expect trouble?" she asks my father.

"They don't want another Wounded Knee. They're worried that arms will be brought onto the reserve. I guess the RCMP will be keeping up the roadblocks for awhile."

My mother tells me to put the frozen food in the freezer. We silently continue to put away the groceries.

I open a package of dog food and put it in Awahoo's bowl. Awahoo is part German Shepherd and part wolf. He was given to us by our neighbour, an old man, days before the old man died. Awahoo was raised to understand Mohawk only.

"Awahoo, hagotz." He slowly walks into the room. His ancestral prowl. White eyes glowing. He has been blind since birth.

There is a knock at the front door.

"I'll answer it."

Two men are waiting on the front porch. I'm sure my father knows one. The other I have never seen before. He carries a rifle.

"We want to speak to your father," says the one my father knows.

Behind them at the bottom of the porch stairs are three others. On the road is a patrol car from the reserve's Peace Keeper force. Two of the Peace Keepers stand outside the car leaning against its door. One adjusts his stetson hat to shade his eyes from the sun. Beyond them, on the

other side of the street, is a group of people who stand watching. Among them I see my friend Donny. But there are no smiles.

My father comes out onto the porch. I go back into the house and stand with my mother in the doorway. Awahoo senses something and moves beside us.

"Yes?" my father says.

The man my father knows opens the paper he has taken from his shirt pocket and reads.

"It is decreed that all non-Indian people living on the reserve will be required to leave by the end of next week. This applies to all non-Indians without exception." He speaks the words formally. He then folds the paper and puts it back into the pocket over his heart.

My father opens his mouth then closes it. He is searching for words.

"But," he begins to say, "I have lived here almost all my life. I don't think I should have to leave."

The stranger with the gun speaks.

"You are white." He spits the words. "You must leave. This is Indian land. Our land. We don't want whites here. No more. Leave or else."

He bangs the rifle butt on the porch for emphasis. Awahoo growls then makes a leap in the direction of the noise. I hold him back by his collar. The stranger raises his gun in defense, then, seeing that Awahoo is being held,

lowers it cautiously.

"The end of next week," he adds. They turn and leave. The others move away too.

As I watch them go, I look beyond them. The houses, the streets that are so familiar, they are all a part of my home. Here on the reserve the houses have no numbers, the streets have no names. Everyone knows everyone else and how to reach them. Names and numbers have no meaning if you have lived here all your life. I watch the people go down those nameless streets into those numberless houses. I'm afraid. We have been told to leave.

Donny is the last to move away. He stands on the side of the road, then starts up the pathway to our house. He hesitates, then slowly turns and walks down the road.

IV

It's night. The streets are empty. Most people are inside or away in the city where there are movie theatres and bars. I walk past Hazel's pool hall. It's filled with loud music and laughter. Many of the kids I know go there to play the pinball machines. I'm tempted to go in, but I decide not to.

I move towards the tunnel. It's a darkened hole in the side of a hill. As I walk through, the black surrounds me. I stop. For a minute I can't see light from either end. I

walk out and climb the hill. A train bridge starts from here. It spans the St. Lawrence Seaway. On the other side of the water is the city of Montreal.

I look at the lights in the city's skyline. Millions of lights, some moving, some going off and on, most still. There is one light on a tall building that I always look for. It sweeps in a circular motion across the night sky like a lighthouse beacon. When my family and I go somewhere and we return at night, it is that light that tells me we are near home.

I see that light now. It swings across the stars. They seem to be glowing more brightly than usual. Somewhere ships are using those stars to navigate home. In school the teacher told us how light from some stars can take maybe ten years to travel to earth. When we look at stars like that, we are only seeing light that was sent out ten years ago. We see the star as it was ten years in the past. Maybe it isn't even there anymore. If there is life up there, on that star, maybe they can see us. Maybe they can see how we were ten years ago. Just a moment in the past.

I stare at one particular star.

Maybe they would be able to see the way it used to be.

The star seems to glow brighter.

The wind begins to pick up and clouds move to hide the stars. I look for the light that circles the sky, but that too has been blocked by the clouds.

V

"Time to go to church." My mother sounds almost taunting. They don't go to church, yet they expect me to go.

This was the first settlement for Roman Catholic Indians in North America. At church the priest proudly states that fact every chance he gets. Nearly everyone on the reserve is Catholic, except for some who are Longhouse. That's the traditional Indian religion. They believe in the gods of the trees, the streams, of nature. I guess Christianity seems as funny an idea to them as their beliefs do to the white man.

"Why do we have to leave?" I have already heard the answers, yet they don't seem to be the right ones.

My mother is sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee.

"It's getting to the point," she begins, "where they feel that even their reserves are being taken over by white people. Your father's parents were white. But when his mother died, his father married an Indian woman and he came to live with her here on the reserve. But your father is still white and I'm white. So we may have to leave. I know that's hard to understand, but we may have to go very soon."

"Can't we do something?"

"Your father is trying everything he can. But it's

difficult for him to get support since some of his Indian friends don't want to turn on their own people in favour of whites. They're stuck in the middle. It's difficult all around."

I remember my father talking at the garage. I can still smell the smoke from the burning cars.

"Tension is high. No one wants trouble." She looks into her coffee cup. "It may sound sometimes that the Indians hate the white people, but most of them have no bad feelings towards us. A lot are just indifferent to the whole thing. But there are some who still feel the treatment by white people from hundreds of years ago all the way to today."

As I open the back door to leave, I turn and see her sitting, searching the coffee cup, looking for other answers.

I shut the door and breathe in the Sunday air.

VI

They think I'm at church but I'm really outside the clinic under the statue of Kateri Tekakwitha. She was an Indian heroine. She now stands under the sun with her arms stretching outward towards the seaway. For eternity.

In the distance I can hear organ music from the church. It's like all Catholic masses going on around the world.

It's not Indian. Maybe it should be asked to leave, too.

Now that I think of it, there is little on the reserve that is Indian. Tourists go to Chief Pokingfire's Indian museum hoping that the Chief himself will do a rain dance. Don't they know that most of the souvenirs they rush to buy say "Made in Hong Kong"? Or does it matter?

Indian houses here aren't teepees. Most live in brick houses with front lawns and hedges and worry about keeping the grass looking nice. Many of the Indians work for white companies and with their pay cheques they buy American cars and Japanese colour t.v.'s.

Yet the tourists still gather to gape at them, looking for some low standard of living they've read about in history books. They really hope to see natives in loincloths.

I was once at a pool party with my family. Many people were there swimming in the backyard pool of a neighbour. We were the only whites. Along the back road came the "Sunday Special" tourist bus. It was filled with staring people hoping to see a piece of history they had thought dead. As they slowly drove by, one of the party guests held up his beer bottle and the pizza we had been eating and yelled, "Want some good Indian food?" Everyone laughed, but it sounded bitter.

Tomorrow I'll have to go to school. I go to the regional school in the nearby white town. Grade 8. The school has about three thousand students. A fifth are from

the reserve.

When the kids in school found out I live on the reserve they assumed I was Indian. The Indian kids know that I am white. So somehow I am neither, locked somewhere in between.

I stare up at the statue of Kateri. She was the first Indian to become a Christian. To me she looks white, but she is Indian. She died before she was twenty years old. Her arms still stretch outward.

VII

The bus pulls up to my stop. The side is printed with the letters "Mohawks of Kanawake." The letters stress that this isn't my bus. It will only bring me to school.

I sit by myself. We will soon be pulling up to Donny's stop and it will be a test to see where he sits.

I look out the window as the bus moves down the road. Pass the Deers' house, the McCombers' . . .

Donny is on the bus almost before it stops and the doors are fully open. He looks around, sees me, then walks down the aisle towards me. He sits beside me and I look straight ahead. So does he. We ignore each other for some unspoken reason. But as I finally turn to look at him and at the same time he turns to look at me, we both break into laughter.

"I'm sorry," Donny says. We are serious again. "There is something going on that is hard to understand. My parents don't want to talk about it, I don't think they know what to make of it. But I asked my grandfather."

I look at him. He continues.

"He says for our people it's like a journey where you don't exactly know where you're going, but you'll know when you get there. When you find what you're looking for you'll recognize it, though sometimes you're not really sure what that is when you start out. It has been that way for us for a long time. Maybe now the white man must start his journey."

"But why ask <u>us</u> to leave? We never did anything."

"It's not just you. It's <u>all</u> white people regardless of how good or bad they are. They <u>all</u> must leave. Grandfather says we must free ourselves from the white man. We must regain the lands and rights that were once ours."

"Free from whites? Then why don't you get rid of the cars and the houses and everything that was made by whites and bought with white money." I heard my father say that. But it sounds different coming from my mouth. Hollow.

Donny looks ahead. The bus has picked up its last passenger and is now turning onto the highway towards school. He turns to me.

"All I know is that Indians must stick together. My father agrees it is wrong for your family to have to move

after all these years. But it is sometimes better for us to be united with our own kind, together, than to go against ourselves. We have been raised with your books that even admit how you took our land and killed our people. Yet, they say that in 1492 Columbus discovered America. That's news to us. We would rather say that in 1492 the Indians discovered Columbus. Isn't the way we see things just as good? We have to be on our own side for a change."

I look out the window. In a way what he says makes sense, but in other ways it doesn't and never has. Just like living on reserves must have once made sense, yet it also couldn't have ever made sense when you remember that all the land had been theirs. Sense and no sense—that is the Indian way now. That is how they live and survive.

We pass the rock.

THIS IS INDIAN LAND.

"We are friends no matter what," Donny says.

I know he means it, yet, now, the words no longer sound convincing. They are words said by innocent participants in an undeclared war, forced to opposite sides.

I smile, unsure.

"What do you have first period?" he asks.

"French," I reply.

Donny stops me before we enter the school. "Remember," he says, "if you have to leave the reserve you'll have the whole country to choose from. Ocean to ocean. We don't

really have a choice beyond the boundaries the white man has drawn and corralled us into." As he talks he seems older to me. He speaks words his father, his grandfather, and all his ancestors have spoken, and still need to have heard.

But now there is nothing else to say. We both turn and walk into school.

VIII

"I'm home."

I throw my schoolbooks onto the kitchen table.

"Mom, I'm home."

No answer, I see a note taped to the refrigerator door. We'll be back before supper.

I sit down at the table. The back door opens and my parents walk in.

"Where were you?" I ask. They look unhappy as they sit at the table with me.

"At the Band Council meeting," my father says. "We went to tell them how we feel."

"Can we stay?"

They both look at each other. It is the look they use before bad news. Their secret question, should we tell him or not? He'll find out soon enough.

"We don't have a choice." My father pauses before continuing. "If we stay we'll just be starting trouble. No

one wants that. I know it's unfair, but in a way, everything's been unfair all along. This is their reserve and they want it to themselves. There's nothing we can do."

He looks down at the table, tracing the wood grain with his finger.

"I know this is hard. . . . " His voice fades to silence. "I'll start making the plans to move."

My mother reaches out and places her hand on my father's.

"As far away as possible."

He nods, understanding.

IX

I don't think I'll like it here. Sure, it has the same kind of houses. The sky is the same, I suppose. But the people are different. There is no urgency in their voices. What they say seems to mean nothing beyond a memorized dictionary meaning. Words without importance. The people here see themselves as individuals, alone against the world.

I didn't say good-bye to anyone. We just left. I guess it's better that way. My parents arranged everything. Soon we were miles away. Light years away.

I walk down this new street. No Hazel's. No tunnel. I'm sure I won't be able to see the light. We're too far away. There's no statue here.

I see some kids playing street hockey. I walk by them and they stop playing.

"Did you move into that house?"

I look at the house one of them points to. I nod. They gather around me.

"Where ya from?"

I hesitate. It seems like so long ago. But of course I know where I live. Where my home is. Was.

"You've never heard of it."

They look at me. They probably have heard of it, but I turn and walk away leaving them muttering "What's with him?" and "Weird!"

I think it will take some time before I can find my way around here. My new house has a number. This street has a name.

THE END

THE ORANGE LADY

The walls were once white. Now they exist somewhere between white and black. How to describe one shade of grey from another? One table. One chair. One bed. One window. And then there's the mouse in the cage on the table. White. It runs around and around in its wheel.

In the hallway, Thomas asks about the room. Mr. ——, he doesn't catch the name behind the coughing and spitting. Are you alright? Thomas asks. Mr. —— looks up from his clenched fist to Thomas' face. This is the room, he says opening the door. Thomas walks in. It's good for the price, Mr. —— says. Do you want it, yes or no? Thomas says yes. He thinks it is better than nothing. Mr. —— takes the money.

What's this? Thomas asks as Mr. —— moves to leave.

A mouse, he says.

I don't like mice, Thomas says as he looks more closely at the mouse in the cage. The bars are rusty. Most are bent out of shape. Plenty of room for the mouse to escape.

Why doesn't he try to get out?

Why? Mr. —— asks. After silence: If you don't like it, you can kill it. It's your room.

Thomas decides to keep the mouse in the cage. It continues to run around and around in its wheel.

* * *

He has seen the Orange Lady before. She always walks up and down this street. The street's long, but she doesn't seem to care.

Thomas watches her. From one garbage can to another. She picks out a soft drink cup, top still intact, and sucks through the straw. She spits onto one of the embedded stars in the sidewalk. Every star has a different name on it. She sucks at the straw again.

The orange is the biggest Thomas has ever seen. Big as a grapefruit. Maybe bigger. The Orange Lady hugs it close to the breast of her flower-print dress. She turns and starts to walk towards the next garbage can. Her blond rag hair is bright under the sun. Her stooped back moves on.

The telephone booth is stifling. Thomas opens the door compromising silence for air. But he notices no difference either way. The operator's voice comes disembodied. Who

are you? Thomas wants to ask. Instead, he gives the number he wants. The operator's voice vanishes and another voice replaces it. Still disembodied.

Who are you? Thomas asks.

Your mother, it answers. Thomas, are you alright?

Thomas answers yes.

When are you coming home? the voice demands.

I don't know.

We're your family. You should be here with us. It pleads for his return, bringing voice back to body, body back to voice. What's wrong with you? We're your parents. You're our son.

Should that have meaning? Thomas asks the voice.

The voice says that it doesn't understand him. That the connection is bad.

The air burns Thomas' eyes. He lies on the bed in the room. A washcloth, once cool, now warm, is on his eyes. He hears them again. Overhead. Beyond the ceiling of the room, beyond the roof of the building. He stands up and goes to the door. He opens it and looks out. Mr. —— is on the stairway.

Why are there always helicopters? Thomas asks.

Mr. —— looks at him strangely. What helicopters?

Those. Thomas points through the ceiling and through the roof.

Mr. —— says: Those? They're there to protect us. This is a big city. There's a lot of crime. Do you want to get robbed? Do you want to get killed?

Thomas closes the door and goes back to the bed. He lies down. He replaces the warm washcloth over his eyes. He listens to the mouse in the wheel.

Does it ever stop? he wonders.

Thomas only goes out at night now. In the daytime the air burns his eyes and throat. He walks down the street. The sidewalk is full. A tourist bumps into him, poking Thomas in the side with his camera. The tourist checks to see if his camera is damaged. Thomas moves on. The tourist looks down at another embedded star.

Thomas sees the Orange Lady again. She moves from the sidewalk and goes up to the stopped cars. The traffic is heavy. From one car to another. From one window to another. She offers the car's occupants her orange. They look away. All the windows are shut. The doors are locked. Those not near her watch amused from the safety of their cars. Until she reaches them. Then they sit back in their seats and look the other way.

She moves on.

A prostitute says something to Thomas.

What? Thomas asks.

She asks him if he wants love.

Thomas doesn't know what to say.

She speaks to him in a low voice, looking around between each word. A car horn obliterates what she is saying.

Thomas starts to walk away. The prostitute yells but after him. The words follow him down the street.

But he doesn't know what they mean.

He is careful not go near junkies. They look at him. They watch him. They stare at him. Thomas hopes they don't think he has any money, because he doesn't. He wonders if they would kill him to find that out.

A bald man comes up to him. The neon lights reflect on the shiny scalp. Thomas sees the lights are from a movie marquee overhead.

Do you want to be saved? the bald man asks Thomas.

Thomas says he doesn't know what he should be saved from.

The bald man says he knows God.

Thomas tries to walk away, but the bald man stops him.

Don't you want to be saved? he asks again.

Thomas pulls his arm from the bald man's grip. He sees his own face reflected in the bald man's eyes.

Thomas says he doesn't have time to be saved right now.

The bald man says there won't be any time later.

Thomas says he'll save himself.

The bald man laughs.

Thomas continues down the street. He hears the bald man yell something about hell.

Thomas doesn't listen.

Thomas sleeps in the daytime. The sound of the mouse in the wheel no longer bothers him. But the mouse still doesn't stop.

When Thomas awakes it is already dark. He hears voices outside the window. He opens it and looks out. In the alleyway there are two gangs of boys. Two boys, one from each gang, are fighting. One holds a knife; the other holds a length of chain. People move in off the street to stand and watch. The boy with the knife is chained across the face. Then the other boy is knifed. They both fall to the ground screaming. They don't move to get up. The crowd looks a bit more, waits, then moves on. The two boys are left, alone and together, as a red flashing light approaches.

Thomas closes the window.

Thomas wants to call the operator. He has forgotten her voice. He is about to put a dime in the pay phone when

the telephone rings. Thomas looks at it. A derelict standing nearby makes a drunken move towards the booth to answer the phone. Thomas picks up the receiver.

Can you see a lady out there? it asks.

Thomas asks What lady?

A lady with an orange.

Thomas looks through the telephone booth window, past the derelict who has his ear pressed against the glass listening. Thomas sees the Orange Lady across the street. Moving from car to car.

I see her, Thomas says.

Call her to the phone.

Thomas doesn't know what to do. Call the Orange Lady to the phone? he asks, unsure.

I'm her son, it says. I have to speak to her. Thomas doesn't think this is true. Orange Ladies don't have sons.

The derelict hears. He runs across the street. Cars brake just short of hitting him. With gestures he tells the Orange Lady about the phone. She looks over at Thomas. She starts across the street. More cars brake. She continues to stare at Thomas while crossing. At the telephone booth Thomas hands her the phone. She looks him in the eyes. He thinks she is going to say something, but, instead, she just takes the phone and closes the door on Thomas and the derelict. Thomas hears her grunting into the receiver. The derelict jumps up and down, proud of what he has done. He

makes noises that Thomas doesn't understand.

He is being followed. He can't see by whom. Every time he turns around, he only sees the moving crowd. No one seems to be looking at him in particular.

He walks faster. He turns into an alleyway and starts to run. He trips over something in the dark. He falls to the ground. He tries to stand and his hands touch skin.

Thomas runs.

The room seems quiet. Beyond the sound of the white mouse Thomas doesn't hear anything. He goes to the window and looks out. The sun is about to set somewhere behind the wall across the alleyway. Thomas goes to his bed and sits with his back to the headboard. His right shoulder touches the grey wall beside the bed. He watches the mouse going around and around.

When it's dark Thomas leaves the room. He walks through the people on the street. He walks around clusters of tourists standing around particular embedded stars. Others have no tourists around them. No one is sure who those names are.

Thomas sees some boys sitting on a bus bench. The Orange Lady leaves the lines of cars and approaches them.

She offers the orange, shoving it under the face of the first boy on the bench. He looks away embarrassed. The other two boys laugh. She moves to the second boy who stops laughing. He looks embarrassed. The other two laugh. Before the Orange Lady can move to the third boy, he jumps up and grabs the orange from her hands. He throws it into the street, yelling at her to get lost. She runs into the street. Cars are moving. She screams unintelligible words. The cars stop. She picks up the orange and holds it against herself. She rocks it back and forth with the motion of her body. The cars start to move again, making their way around her. Thomas sees her crying.

Thomas can still hear the helicopters overhead. He wants to tell them he is being followed. He wants to tell them they can save him. But they're too high up. With the noise they make they can't hear Thomas. Thomas sees Mr. —— as he goes back to his room.

I need a new lock on the door, he says.

Mr. —— asks him why.

I don't think the helicopters know I'm here, Thomas says.

Mr. —— asks, What helicopters? Thomas points through the ceiling and through the roof. But he doesn't hear them anymore.

Mr. —— asks Thomas if he felt the earthquake.

Thomas says no, that he must have been asleep.

Mr. —— says it was only small. The Big One is going to kill us all. Drop us into the ocean.

Thomas is in his room. He has closed the window. He has shut the curtains. He hears the helicopters. They've come back, he tells himself. Maybe he doesn't need another lock after all.

Thomas sees a crowd up ahead. It seems that the street is empty except for the people circled around one point. Red lights flash. The movie marquees are no longer visible.

Thomas walks past the crowd. He only looks to confirm that he can't see what they've gathered around. There are too many people. The crowd continues to stare into the centre of their circle. Some people move away and walk towards a movie theatre.

Thomas sees something under a wheel of a car. He stoops to pick it up, then moves on.

The room isn't the same. Someone has moved the bed. Moved the chair. Moved the table with the mouse in the cage. How could they move the window? Thomas wonders.

Thomas knows that they watch him beyond the door. He knows that they have followed him to the room and are waiting.

Thomas doesn't hear the helicopters. The sun has already gone down behind the wall across the alleyway. There is only some stray light left.

Thomas sits in the growing darkness. The mouse runs in its wheel. In its cage. The orange sits on the table next to the cage. It has been bruised. The peel is slightly opened. There is room for the liquid to run out, and a few drops lie on the table.

Thomas waits.

The white mouse goes around and around.

THE END

AND THEY STILL PLAY WAR

It was difficult to breathe.

The surrounding vegetation choked what little air there was.

Private Robert Reeves moved on. Ahead, Privates Rodriquez and Coors struggled along the semi-path. Further ahead marched Sergeant John Whittier.

Reeves didn't mind being last in line. Most of the men would rather face a court martial than be in that position. Or the first. Both seemed to guarantee certain death—an obvious mark for a sniper. But Reeves didn't mind. He liked watching the others yet not being watched by them.

The sun was unbearably hot.

It had just rained. But as Reeves looked around, he was unsure it had at all. The drops had disappeared as soon as they had touched the dark green leaves. Reeves couldn't

tell whether they had evaporated in the hot air or if they had been drawn in by the trees.

The four men continued to make their way through the jungle.

Occasionally Reeves would hear Coors grunt loudly as he stumbled on some undergrowth. A few curses— then silence. Every movement they made seemed to echo in the quiet. Reeves wondered why there weren't any other noises. Not even the sound of a bird. Nothing. Just the men moving forward.

This was hell.

Reeves had heard it all before. Recently, Rodriquez and Coors had taken it up. <u>They were going to be destroyed. All of them. Even if they went back alive, physically okay, they'd never be the same. Never.</u>

Reeves also knew what they were saying at home. He had agreed with them once. But now he was here. Being here made it different. Feelings were a luxury he couldn't afford.

Reeves wondered, if under different circumstances, if he were on some college campus back home, wouldn't he be able to feel those same emotions that moved the students to protest? Wouldn't he despise death and destruction as strenuously as they did? He didn't know. He wasn't sure he'd be able to feel anything. Even back there.

Now that he had seen.

He was used to death, or, at least, used to it in a way that if a day passed without his seeing at least one person dead or dying, he'd think that was strange. Some people had told him he'd get used to it. Some said he never would. He did get used to it, but not in the way they meant. He could no longer feel anything for something dead. Here death seemed to be perfectly functional. A deliverance.

There had been a time, long before Sergeant Whittier had arrived, when Reeves had felt nothing was real. He had been under the command of Sergeant Miller then.

Once, Miller had been leading Reeves and another man (Reeves couldn't remember his name) on their first mission into the jungle. Miller seemed to know his way, and almost immediately Reeves had found himself in a small clearing. A shack-like dwelling stood to one side. Reeves remembered how at the time he wondered how anything human could live in there. It seemed to be in the final stage of decay.

Miller approached the shack. Reeves and the other man followed closely behind. Miller used his gun to push aside a board that served as a door. Quickly he leveled the gun and fired into the darkness.

Then they entered.

Reeves saw a woman and a young girl lying dead on the floor. But he didn't feel they were dead. They couldn't be. Wouldn't they jump up and laugh? They became as much a part of the shack as the make-shift door. He tried, but he

couldn't feel anything else.

Reeves saw Miller kick out. His heavy boot made contact with something and it hit the wall solidly, then slid to the dirt floor. The wall was stained with its blood.

Only then did Reeves realize it was a baby.

"Damned thing touched me," Miller said. "I thought it was a rat or something."

From then on Reeves could only feel one thing: it's almost over. He was going home in a month. Amazingly, without one scratch or mark worth mentioning. He truly had been blessed.

Then the letter had arrived.

His mother wrote to him every week. Her letters kept him informed of what was happening at home. Reeves thought it cruel for her to torture him like that while he was here, but he could never bring himself not to read them. At the end of the day, he would lie in his cot and read the letters as though compelled to read every word, silently moving his lips with every syllable. If only he had not read that letter, he thought, if . . . . His mother had wasted no time in telling him about his younger brother Joey.

"He's doing so well in school," she had written, "I'm so proud of him. He's already received an award for one of his papers—and it's only his first year! Joey says his professor is helping him to get it published. I'll keep a copy for you."

Reeves had wanted to stop reading, knowing what would follow.

"And Bobby," the letter had continued, "I'm proud of you, too. Without you, your brother and I wouldn't be able to get by. The money you send does such good—Joey's education is so expensive. Sometimes I wonder what would happen if Joey couldn't go to school. I suppose he'd have been drafted. I don't know how I could go on, knowing he was there—if both of you were there."

"Here," Reeves had thought. "I'm here!"

When he had finished reading the letter, Reeves had run blindly through the jungle on his own. They were always being warned about going alone, especially at night, but he couldn't have stayed still. He had needed to feel what it was like to be free, free from everything, responsibility, this place, his own thoughts. But he had found it impossible to escape the problem at hand. While running, he had tripped time and time again on vines and roots—each time he had picked himself up to run again. Finally he collapsed beside a tree trunk. He tried to figure out what he would do.

His family had been through tough times since his father had died. But somehow they always seemed to manage. His mother found occasional work, but it was really Reeves who supported the family. They had even reached the point where they were able to send Joey to college. Reeves had

always wanted to go. He felt it was the only way he could go beyond what he was. But finances and time conspired against him. He had been forced to drop out of school to help his family. Then he had been drafted.

Joey was the one with all the bright ideas that would solve the world's problems. Reeves believed that. Joey had the imagination. The sensitivity. If Reeves couldn't go to college, he was determined Joey would.

Reeves knew he would have to find a job when he got home. With money Joey could stay in school. They wouldn't be able to get him then. Reeves knew they were waiting for Joey just like they had been waiting for him. Watching. Ready to send him here.

But what job could he find back home? He had had a hard time finding work after he had quit school. No education. No experience. No jobs.

"I won't stay!" he screamed again and again. His voice bounced off the surrounding trees and came back to him hollow and distorted. He picked himself up and made his way out of the jungle, knowing what he had to do—the only thing he could do. He had re-enlisted.

He had tried to find some other way, another answer, but it always came back to the same thing: he was here and he'd be staying. At least there would be money for him to send home. Joey would never be able to stand all this. In a way, Reeves had felt since he was already here it didn't matter

any more if he stayed on. The idea of going home suddenly had seemed like the vaguest of dreams—the cruelest of jokes.

"I've re-enlisted," Reeves later had told another soldier who was scheduled to go home the same time as Reeves. The man had just offered him a cigarette.

"You're nuts," the soldier had said.

Reeves knew no one here would understand his sacrifice.

His mother wrote to thank him for "saving" Joey. "You're a saviour," she wrote. But Reeves was still here: he didn't know how to save himself.

Sergeant Whittier continued to lead the men further into the jungle. Reeves was amazed how all at once direction would seem apparent, then suddenly non-existent. He saw Sergeant Whittier looking indecisively through the labyrinth of trees and bushes and paths. Reeves knew the Sergeant had never been in this area before. He couldn't have been. He had just arrived within the last month. But the Sergeant continued to move the men forward.

Reeves was confused and lost, but he continued to follow Sergeant Whittier.

Just then the Sergeant turned around and looked at the three men. Whenever this happened, Reeves made a special attempt to march a little straighter. Rodriquez and Coors never bothered to make adjustments for anyone. It wasn't worth it. Not anymore. Reeves noticed the Sergeant looked

displeased, worried, whenever he turned to look back at the men. Must be Coors and Rodriquez, Reeves thought. All the draftees seem to have that same bad attitude. Reeves no longer considered himself a draftee, not since he had re-enlisted for Joey. Reeves was surprised Sergeant Whittier never said anything to reprimand them. Or compliment him. The Sergeant would merely look away and move on.

Sergeant Whittier motioned for them to rest.

The four men sat down under the camouflage of the high underbrush. They each laid down their guns within quick reach. Rodriquez and Coors sat apart, taking out cigarettes for a long-awaited smoke. Sergeant Whittier sat ahead of the others, by himself. Reeves was about to go over and sit with the Sergeant when he saw the man looking straight at him.

"What's eating you?" the Sergeant said. "What's wrong, Reeves?"

Reeves suddenly felt uncomfortable. "Nothing, sir." He sat where he had been standing, near Rodriquez and Coors. The two men ignored him.

Sergeant Whittier turned his attention from Reeves to the forest.

From his position, Reeves had a good view of the man. Sergeant Whittier was surveying the area. He looked into the distance, occasionally squinting to see among the many trees. He was about twenty-three years old, Reeves thought.

He had heard the Sergeant's family's money had bought him a good education. It probably could have bought him out of the war, if he had wanted. But Reeves could tell that Sergeant Whittier was different than most of the people in that position. Reeves knew the Sergeant must have enlisted even though he really didn't have to. He knew the importance of serving one's country. It must have been a painful decision for the Sergeant to have made, what with the way sentiment was running back home. But, although Reeves admired Sergeant Whittier, he couldn't help feel it was a mistake for him to be here. How could they waste someone so intelligent? They should have kept the Sergeant somewhere away from the action. Somewhere he could work on a way for them to win quickly. So they could all go home. Sergeant Whittier was a Harvard man. Or was it Yale? Now that Reeves thought more about it, he wasn't sure he had heard exactly where the Sergeant had gone to school. And was he rich? Reeves wasn't sure if he had heard that either, or if it was just the impression the Sergeant gave. Anyway, he was certain the man was intelligent.

Reeves closely examined the man's profile. The Sergeant's face was deeply tanned. This was in direct contrast to the shock of yellow hair that hung out from under his cap. But to Reeves, that tan seemed unhealthy. It wasn't the tan of a summer's vacation, or a good day's work outdoors; rather, it was a tan that alters a face so there no

longer seems to be any suggestion of gentleness.

For a moment, Reeves was almost certain that he saw the Sergeant crying as he looked into the dark jungle. He was embarrassed to see this in the man— a hidden side he never knew existed. He felt close to him and made a vow never to tell anyone what he had just seen. But then, suddenly, he was unsure he had seen it at all.

Reeves shuddered.

Sergeant Whittier signaled for the men to move on. Rodriquez and Coors begrudgingly put out their cigarettes. Reeves stood up and reassumed his position at the end of the line. Now he made a special point of watching the Sergeant, hoping to catch another glimpse of the man's emotions. Again, when the Sergeant turned to look back, Reeves made an extra-special attempt to look military. More than he ever had in his life. The Sergeant turned away as quickly as he had turned around, and Reeves couldn't tell if he had noticed. But he was sure Sergeant Whittier couldn't fail to be pleased with him. Pleased that there was someone who knew what he was going through, someone who respected him and thought he didn't deserve to be . . .

Sergeant Whittier stumbled and fell.

Reeves wanted to rush forward to help, it took all his strength to stifle a gasp, but he didn't move. The grace with which the Sergeant had recovered himself was stunning. All in the same movement, the Sergeant had fallen, then

seemed to have flowed back to his feet. He only paused for the slightest moment to brush some dirt from his right knee.

Damn it, Reeves thought. This . . .

Suddenly the Sergeant told the men to get down. He had heard something, and carefully started to crawl forward. The other men followed his example.

Reeves began to move closer to Rodriquez and Coors. They pulled away in panic as though it was him they were afraid of. When the Sergeant had turned to warn them to get down, Reeves had seen his fear, too.

Reeves looked ahead, raising himself from his crawling position in order to clearly see Sergeant Whittier. The Sergeant was on all fours. Crawling like an animal, Reeves thought, an animal forced to wallow in dirt and mud and blood.

The Sergeant stopped moving. He slowly raised his head, turning to face his men. His cap had fallen off and his blond hair shone under what little sunlight that was able to filter down. Whatever bits of illumination had managed to penetrate the treetops now seemed to have gathered around Sergeant Whitier. Reeves stared amazed, his breath halted by what he saw. Then the Sergeant started to rise out of the underbrush. He began to move to his feet.

There was a single shot.

Sergeant Whittier fell to the ground, vanishing among the underbrush that had served as protection.

Reeves swiftly moved forward, retaining an animal-like crawl. He passed Rodriquez and Coors. Both looked at him with wide, blank eyes.

He reached the Sergeant.

Reeves gently raised the Sergeant's head and pillowed it on his lap. He was still alive . . . still breathing. There wasn't a mark on him, as far as Reeves could tell. Reeves started to rock him gently.

"I knew it," the Sergeant mumbled. Then his voice grew stronger. "I knew it. . . . One of my own men. Why, Reeves? Why?"

"Everything is going to be O.K. now," Reeves told him. "It's all over now. You won't have to be here anymore. Everything will be all right."

Blood began to form at the corners of the Sergeant's mouth. Reeves wiped it away with his sleeve. "You're saved," Reeves told him.

When the Sergeant died, Reeves said a prayer. It was one he remembered saying with Joey every night when they were kids. He could still remember every line of it, even though he hadn't said it since he left home.

He laid the Sergeant down and stood up. Rodriquez and Coors were nowhere to be seen. Deserters, he thought. Damn them! For a moment he hoped they'd be shot, then he hoped they wouldn't.

They deserved to suffer with the rest of them.

Reeves wasn't sure what direction he should take. He looked around. He wasn't sure which way was back. Then he knew exactly which way it was. He knew it with the same certainty he knew the Sergeant had been saved.

He took another look at Sergeant John Whittier. The tan on his face was gone now. Reeves smiled.

Private Robert Reeves started walking.

THE END

DOG CEMETERY

It stands up ahead. Squat. A cross-legged warrior. The rock leans towards the highway into another culture.

Its message has not changed.

THIS IS INDIAN LAND.

But the red-paint words have faded.

The car turns towards the direction of a sign that reads: CAUGHNAWAGA. Emphasis made with a compelling arrow.

It has been three years. Three units of time. Three lifetimes.

From pavement to dirt road, from the present I return to a past.

. . . . . .

Good-bye is said again and again. A repetition of a

word I don't understand.

My parents move to their car. They climb in. Doors bang shut. The car moves onto the road, then into the haze of distance.

"Are you hungry?"

I turn to look at the woman who has spoken. I'm supposed to call her Aunt Rhonda, but she is not my real aunt. She is my parents' friend. Someone from their past.

"You must be happy to be back on the reserve. It was terrible that you had to leave."

What does that mean?

I smile at her, forcing an emotion. She returns the smile. I know she feels she has just reached out and set a link between her and me. Between red and white. She feels she completely understands my white ways, but I'm not sure that I do. And do I understand her?

. . . . . .

I feel I can walk these streets without ever stopping. Each leads towards some future. Once I could have chosen one, bringing me closer to what lies ahead. But that no longer exists.

They told us we had to leave. They came to us at a time when Wounded Knee was reality. History in the present. We were white living on red land. No questions lead to no

answers. Why? seems as foreign to them as Mohawk does to whites. It didn't matter what kind of people we were. Good. Bad. Indifferent. The crime of being white is punished, just as the crime of not being white has been punished throughout time.

What does "revenge" mean?

. . . . . .

What do my parents expect from me? Why am I here? Why have I returned?

They say I should be happy to be here for the summer. Where we once lived. But my voice cannot yet speak about pain or of trying to forget. The places. The names. The people. They all live. I try to fade them into an indiscernible state, like the pattern of a blanket left under the sun. But they resist fading; patterns still repeat themselves.

I sit by the window looking out at the road. Aunt Rhonda (what should I call her?), moves around the kitchen. The wooden floorboards sing; trees that once lived still cry out. But I can't begin to know what they're trying to say.

On the road, a car passes. Do I know the people inside? I'm not sure. The car turns out of sight.

I see a figure approach the house. Just when I think

he'll pass by, he turns up the pathway with determination. He climbs the stairs to the front porch.

There is a knock at the door. I move to the door and open it. Donny stands before me.

Time collapses into itself.

We are friends again.

. . . . . .

I have to get out of here. This house. This box shape. It's perimeter holds other box shapes. From the largest, to a smaller, to the smallest room. Until I am cornered by one box shape reinforced by the power of others.

Donny knows of work for the summer.

"The Old Lady of the dog cemetery is looking."

"The dog cemetery?" Words I haven't heard for awhile. Their familiarity runs like the faces of warriors in a rainstorm. Performance at 1:00 p.m. every Sunday.

"I don't think I want to work there," I tell him.

"I don't think I want to either. I know nobody goes near her. But what else is there for sixteen-year-olds?" He adds: "Specially here on the reserve."

. . . . . .

We walk down the church road to where the Old Lady

lives. Bobby Snow and Wendall Montour pass us, walking towards the woods. They carry rifles.

Donny nods at them. They acknowledge his greeting, all the while staring at me until they pass by.

"You remember them from school?" Donny asks.

"Yes, but they don't seem to remember me."

"They do," he says. "But now you are a Hardface. You belong to the white man's world."

We turn up the dirt path that leads to the Old Lady's house. It is a shack-like structure that stands away from the road. The outside is covered with tar paper.

We wait on the small front porch for her to answer Donny's knock. A yellow Toyota pickup is in the driveway. We know she is at home.

Feet shuffle inside the house. The door opens. The Old Lady looks from Donny to me, then back to Donny. Her face shows strength. It masks the years she has lived. She may be fifty years old. Or eighty. Maybe she is eternity.

Her hair is grey and pulled back into two braids. She is just the way I had seen her years before, driving out to the cemetery. But I had never heard her speak.

"What do you want?"

Inside the doorway are three large dogs. One growls at us rhythmically.

Donny speaks. "We are here for work."

She looks at us closely.

"This is hard work," she tells us. "You have to dig graves and bury the animals."

Donny nods that he understands. She looks at me. I nod too.

"Be here tomorrow. The sun rises early. Be here and we, too, shall start our work early."

She goes into the house and shuts the door.

. . . . . .

The pickup sways along the rutted dirt road. The Old Lady is driving. One of her dogs sits in the cab beside her. Donny and I sit in the flatbed with the shovels.

We turn onto the highway. Halfway between here and the edge of the reserve is the cemetery.

The pickup now moves along smoothly. The wind exerts power against our skin. As we pass Goodleaf's garage, the Old Lady slows the pickup. She turns off the highway down the embankment to the cemetery. Rows of small tombstones run alongside the highway. The pickup stops and we climb out.

The dog, a large mongrel, bounds from the pickup's cab. It sniffs among the rows and stops at one of the tombstones to urinate. It then romps into the surrounding woods.

The Old Lady tells us to bring the shovels. We walk between the rows, past markers that say: TO MAN'S BEST

FRIEND - REX; REST IN PEACE - PEPPY; WE LOVE YOU - TIPPY.

The Old Lady stops at a spot which has been marked off with sticks. They form a rectangle.

"Dig here," she tells us. Then she walks back towards the pickup. She pauses to pull out a weed and rearrange a small bouquet of flowers on one of the graves.

Donny and I start to dig. The grass on top is easy to remove. But, as we dig deeper, the dirt is hard. The sound of the shovels digging becomes a hymn. It joins with the sound of the cars passing on the highway.

"How is Awahoo?" Donny asks. He remembers the times we played with the dog. Times of laughter.

I pause before I answer. "He died. Just after we moved. He was old." Donny nods silently.

We dig deeper. There no longer seems to be any dirt to shovel. Now it's just rocks. Donny and I try to pry each one loose. But they seem to get larger the deeper we dig. The footing in the hole is precarious. Donny slips and falls. He skins his hands on some of the rocks.

"Damn it!" Donny stands to examine his bleeding hands. But he picks up the shovel and starts to dig again.

I can hear him grunt with exertion, then stop to re-examine his hands and to wipe the sweat from his brow. Somehow this work doesn't bother me. I had thought it would.

On the highway I can hear the endless line of cars

speed by.

"I wish I was dead," Donny mumbles.

"What?"

"Them! The cars! Don't you see them staring at us?"

I stop to look at the passing cars. I see faces pressed against car windows. Curious eyes. Unsmiling.

"They think we're as crazy as her," Donny continues. "I didn't know it would be like this."

I continue to look at the stream of eyes focused on the only movement along the highway. Life against a wall of postured trees. One of the cars slows down. I see some men inside laughing. One of them sticks his head out the open window. He yells out at us: "Creusez! Creusez! Travaillez fort, petits fossoyeurs." He then breaks into laughter, joined by the other men in the car. A beer can accents his revelry. It barely misses Donny's head.

"Damn French bastards!" He throws down his shovel. "I quit!"

"But we've only just started."

"Well, I'm finished. I have pride. I'd rather not work than do this. I don't need the white man laughing at me any more than he already does."

He starts towards the yellow pickup. I gather up the shovels and quickly follow.

"Have you dug the grave?" the Old Lady asks.

"No. I'm quitting." Donny's face shows his anger.

The Old Lady turns to me. "And you?"

I look at her, then at Donny. "I . . . " I begin. "No. I'll stay."

"I'll drive you back to your house," she tells Donny. Then to me: "You may come along too. It will be your rest."

We climb into the flatbed of the pickup. The Old Lady calls for her dog. It runs from the woods and climbs into the pickup's cab.

There is silence on the way to Donny's house. When he climbs down from the pickup outside his door, he looks straight at me. He wants to say something, but, instead, he turns and goes into his house.

. . . . . .

The Old Lady's dogs growl at me as I enter her house.

"Come in," she says. "Do not worry about them. They are not used to your smell."

I slowly move into the house. It's just one room. A table stands near one wall. A bed is near the other. There's a chair at the table.

The Old Lady goes to the area that serves as a kitchen. She opens a cupboard. She starts to prepare our lunch.

"You did good work this morning," she tells me. "It will take longer now to prepare the graves I will need for

the summer, but I think you can do the work."

I want to tell her that it will be lonelier now that Donny isn't there. But there don't seem to be any words.

"I must pick up another dog this afternoon. You will be at the cemetery by yourself."

I nod my understanding. We eat the sandwiches she has made.

"Good?"

I am not exactly sure what it is I'm eating, but I nod politely.

The dogs smell around my legs. Their muzzles snuffle against me. She tells them to leave me alone.

"They have never smelled a white man," she says.

I smile, unsure of what to say as a response.

"Why are you here?" she asks.

I look at her confused. "To work," I say.

"No. Why are you on the reserve? You are not Indian. Do you live with the white man in Châteauguay, or do you live with the white man in his big city?"

I say "no." I tell her that I don't live in either Châteauguay or Montreal. That I live far from here, now. I explain why we left the reserve. She wants to hear more, and words seem to breathe on their own as I explain. Then I lapse into silence. I drink from the glass of milk she has set before me.

She gathers the dishes and brings them to a small sink.

She pumps some water and begins to wash them.

She starts to speak, "A long time ago . . ." Her voice comes from somewhere distant. "Years in the past, I once loved."

I turn in my chair to look at her. Her back is towards me as she bends over the sink.

"He was white. They told me I had to choose between him and my people. According to Indian law, if an Indian woman marries a white man she is no longer Indian. This is still law."

Her silence again. Then . . .

"He was in the war. He said we would decide whether we were to marry when he returned."

More silence.

"He never returned. My people think I drove him away so I would be preserved among the tribe. They still don't know the truth."

"Would you have married him?" I ask.

"I do not know. They said I would no longer be a person if I did. I would no longer be an Indian. And I couldn't be accepted among the whites. I think I believed them then. But I have my dogs. I have my cemetery. I know now that there is nothing one person can say to another. Everything is already there." She sweeps her arm outward beyond the walls. "Everything there is to know. About everything and about yourself."

She pauses to pump more water, rinsing the dishes of the soap that clings to their surface.

"Most of the people on the reserve think I am crazy. They do not want me to bury the white man's dogs. They say the white man has dumped his garbage on our land for centuries. They are embarrassed by me. They see me as being less than them in a world where they have been made to feel less than others. But I have been here for years. It has been too long a time for them to stop me now. So they wait for me to die."

She has finished the dishes. She turns to face me.

"And when I die," she says, "I want to be buried in my cemetery."

. . . . . .

We are driving back along the highway. I'm to finish my work for the day. The Old Lady will go for another dog.

"The Indian of long ago did not bury his dogs the way the white man does," she says.

I tell her that I know. When Awahoo died, my parents wanted to call the S.P.C.A. I had seen what they do. They arrive in a truck. They throw the dead dog in the back, then drive away. But I went into the fields near our house. Under a tree I returned Awahoo from where he came. With time, the soft mound of earth retreats into the land, re-

turning life from where it came.

"And sometimes," she continues, "the white man wants the resting place of his dogs to last forever, just as he wants his own to last eternally. He wants a coffin for the animal. A tombstone. Sometimes he wants a funeral with one of his priests."

. . . . . .

The sun is about to set. Long gray shadows move quickly across the cemetery. The trees become a black form.

Cars continue by. They now go towards Châteauguay and the towns beyond. The cars' occupants are too tired after a day of work in the city to give anything more than a half-hearted look of interest in my direction.

I have dug two graves this afternoon. I have slowly formed each grave into four walls and one floor. Each smooth.

I now work on a third grave. The last for the day.

I look down at my body. Thick dirt sticks to me like another skin.

I bend to move a rock with my hands. I stand in the grave as I lift and throw out the rock. It makes a solid sound as it again makes contact with the ground.

The grave is nearly finished. I sit down in it to rest. I cross my legs to accommodate myself in the small space. Then I lie back and stare up at the sky. Overhead

the dark clouds swirl and overlap and merge into each other.

I feel a small grain of dirt under my right index finger. It burns into my flesh. I remove my hand from where I had placed it against the grave's wall. I manoeuvre myself to see that grain of dirt. It shines in the decreasing light. It glows like a burning star fighting to exist.

Suddenly it joins with the particles around it. They, in turn, quickly form with those around them.

I see each grain and what each contains. Then I see two together. They multiply and expand until I see their strength as a whole. Yet, I can still see each of the parts so clearly. I'm at both ends of a microscope at the same time. I see and am seen. At both ends of a telescope. World so far—made close. World within grasp—made distant.

Union becomes all-encompassing. From grain to grave and woods to land (insects and animals, too)—they join with water and air and fire and . . .

Spirit.

Soul.

I feel the earth turning. I feel the motion. Its revolutions. The slightest of its shudders. Waves of light pour over me—and through me.

I see a universe.

I see beyond.

I know . . .

Then it's gone. As suddenly as it came, it was as though it never was.

I hear the cars passing on the highway.

I sit up. It's dark. In that slightest period of time, day had passed into night. I see the yellow pickup move from the highway to the cemetery.

I climb out of the grave and pick up the shovel.

. . . . . .

We drive back in silence. I want to talk to the Old Lady but I don't know if she'll understand. I'm not sure that I do.

I try to think back, forcing myself to remember everything that just happened. But it moves beyond my grasp. Just when I feel I am about to remember it all, I realize that it has only brushed against me.

And then moved on.

THE END

are 'friends' electric?

people living in places
or in time and space
with signs saying WELCOME
or COME AGAIN
depending on ambition
i close my eyes for 3.6 seconds
places pass
people i never knew

It was morning when 15/03/62 started for the river.
He didn't bother with the ritual of breakfast.
(He hasn't eaten eggs since the time he cracked open a hard-boiled and found a perfectly formed baby chick. He still dreams of slowly eating wings and beak and tiny feet.)

He didn't bother to stop by the barn where fear and loathing, the horses, would be waiting.

barb would be there, too.

(One kiss. One 'Good morning.' One 'Looks like a nice day.' And one 'Yup.' Then the saddling of horses and riding out.)

15/03/62 crossed the main drag, but didn't look both ways.

Nothing was moving.

It made him feel he was the last one left on a world devastated by a nuclear holocaust.

(He wonders if it is more like biological warfare. The buildings are still standing.)

Only a single neon sign in the long row of neon signs was as animated as he was that morning.

It rotated its WE'RE OPEN FOR BREAKFAST—BEST COFFEE IN THE WORLD message.

Cars stood outside like horses at a trough.

It was three miles to the river.

black-bored
tired of night ways
sandwiched thickly between empty days
so throw out shoes that won't fit
and words no longer in sentences
darkness waits for those who sit willing

* * *

'It's all shit, man. Don't you understand? Rot here or rot there. It's all the same. What does it matter?'

billy z. bob's words reached 15/03/62, barb wire, hate, and war.

(Formerly Blake Stephens, Jenny Lewis, Karen Brown, and Jamey Reid. Someone once called billy by some other name, but now he won't say what it was.)

'Summer's a nowhere blink,' billy continued. 'We're wedged between school-finished and school-yet-to-begin.'

(Not that they ever went, but it was always there if they wanted to go.)

barb's mother and father (referred to as 'the organisms that had produced her') had gone to a movie.

'Some Clint Eastwood realism thing,' barb told them.

hate and war, (having dated since eight-level), moved towards the nearest closet (bedrooms being too conventional). They proceeded to join mouths in quenching desire.

billy continued to those left without coat hangers to count.

'It's not Us to have ambition.'

'Shit!' joked 15/03/62. 'Who has that?'

barb walked in looking out of it.

Old Man Johns was on the phone from the barn.

Seems Dancer and . . . rather, fear and loathing, might be coming down with something.

Seems someone forgot to turn on the heater the night before.

'Great stuff!' war said. 'We do eat horsemeat, don't we, billy?'

barb looked straight at 15/03/62.

'It was real cold last night,' she said. 'The change was too sudden. That's why they're sick.'

billy told her she shouldn't care.

'They're only horses,' he said. 'They die too.'

barb pulled 15/03/62 to her.

'We never tried under the sink.'

She smiled.

When he wrote about it he wanted to write 'her teeth smiled' but he crossed it out and simply wrote 'she smiled.'

He hoped they would never read the things he wrote.

The sound system roared with the newest record billy had bought with the money he stole from his parents.

'They'll never know it's gone,' he said. 'And so what if they do?'

(This being before billy told them money wasn't Us. Now they only steal the things they want.)

15/03/62 could pick out words here and there in the labyrinth of music.

Inseparable . . . lonely . . . forever. . . .

* * *

lips sliding over my body
saying 'This is love'
she smiled
i ache
yet she still goes on
like a tide that robs life

They all sat around dusted.
L.S.D.
T.H.C.
P.C.P.
Letters 15/03/62 was sure he had seen in a bowl of alphabet soup.
When he was young.
But he never realized they could hold meaning.
They had just looked like nonsense, not neat and clean like C.A.T. and D.O.G.
He laughed.
barb asked him 'Why?'
He laughed again.
hate wondered if war was real.
war told her it was because he saw his cousin in the United States come back from Vietnam dead.
he was only small then, but he told them he could remember looking at his cousin in a coffin.
And he knew he was really dead.

He knew it was real.
hate said she agreed death was real, but was war?
15/03/62 laughed again.
'It's the 1980's,' he said.
billy quickly passed around another spliff.
15/03/62's mind raced.
hate and war went looking for a cardboard box.
barb fell down a flight of stairs.

children inject morphine into popsicles
hopscotch around the block
where a nine-year-old pusher deals hope
mother out on a date
sleeps during the day
father sleeps all the time
one two buckle me too
i trip over my shoelace into life

15/03/62 and barb slowed the horses to a trot.
It had been a week since the gang became Us.
Every so often 15/03/62 would call barb 'Jenny.'
barb would get angry.
She never made that mistake.
Why did he?
They were riding along the riverbank.
They had done this same thing many times before.

Except now they were barb and 15/03/62.

'What are we doing tonight, 15/03/62?' barb asked.

He answered that he didn't know.

It now seemed to be up to billy to decide those things.

'hate and war want to do something really different,' she said.

15/03/62 mumbled.

'What?'

'Nothing,' he answered.

He wondered how long Us would last.

Jen . . . barb seemed to take to it.

So did the others.

He didn't know why he didn't.

He looked over at barb.

She stared straight ahead, following the river.

That night billy told them they were never to talk about what they felt.

'It isn't Us,' he warned.

'If you can, don't even feel. Action is all that is necessary. Existence is feeling enough.'

'We are nothing. It's important to be nothing.'

billy drew pictures on the wall.

Eyes.

He always drew eyes.

barb told 15/03/62 that their union had no meaning.

He wanted to remind her about love, but that was no longer talked about.

Not among Us.

He wanted to make her remember horseback rides along the river.

Manoeuvring the animals close together so Blake and Jenny could kiss.

Then galloping off in playful pursuit.

But they were 15/03/62 and barb now.

And Us was all that was important.

And it was important to be nothing.

barb said that war offered her a different place.

'The refrigerator,' she told 15/03/62.

He laughed.

barb went on: 'hate agrees—union is nothing.'

15/03/62 could hear the television in the next room.

Only billy could watch it now.

It was too hard for the others.

But billy said it told him things.

He found them pleasing.

'From the very second you're born—' he said, 'you die.'

15/03/62 tried to tell barb how he felt.

'We can't talk about that,' barb said.

barb looked around.

'We never talked about it before, so why do you want to talk

about it now?'

15/03/62 didn't know what to say.

She was right.

But he did tell her he was tired of Us.

Barb told him never to say that.

'I like what's happening,' she said. 'I don't want to have to think about all those things anymore. billy will think for Us.'

'But I want to feel,' 15/03/62 told her.

'Why? You never wanted to before.'

He thought back.

He was sure Blake had felt something.

It was true Blake never talked about it.

He never talked about feelings, just about things.

He knew he had never told her.

But he was sure Blake did feel.

And he knew 15/03/62 could not stop feeling.

billy walked in.

He looked from barb to 15/03/62 then back to barb again.

'If you don't care, you won't get hurt. If you don't live, you won't die.'

barb was sure fear and loathing were going to die.

They were already sick, and someone forgot to turn on the heater again.

15/03/62 could see a glimpse of worry in her eyes.

He wanted to hold her.

He wanted to reassure her that they would live.

'Death,' said billy, 'could be an experience. I think the animals are showing the way.'

He looked straight at barb.

barb told them she was getting bored with riding, anyway.

'It's not Us,' she said.

billy and hate and war nodded agreement.

war said he hated animals.

hate said she didn't think it was fair there were only two horses for five of Us.

billy said he was the one who would 'think.'

'Remember?'

That was his thing.

hate and war had their own thing to do.

'All is fair in hate and war. Right?' billy said.

hate and war smiled.

Old Man Johns phoned from the barn.

He said he didn't think the horses would make it through the night.

That they seemed real sick.

'It's as though they'd been poisoned,' barb told them. 'They're in so much pain.'

hate and war shrugged in unison.

billy said the television told him a lot that day.

war asked about tomorrow.

'Yes,' billy said after thinking. 'It's possible there will be tomorrow.'

barb was staring at him.

15/03/62 wondered why.

She opened her mouth then closed it.

He waited for her to say something, but she didn't.

'I can't go on like this anymore,' he told her.

She said nothing.

'We can be together, but we don't have to be Us.'

barb looked away.

'There is so much I want to tell you.'

She didn't turn back to face him.

'Then I'll leave by myself. I want to feel and think and love.'

tracks leading home
i think i'm lost
back-stepping
i find my own footprints
i follow carefully
each eye on each mark
leading me out
until i see they're going nowhere

15/03/62 reached the river.

It ran through nowhere.

A dirty scratch on the earth.

He watched car tires and old wood and bottles and cans.

They floated towards the edge of the world.

The edge of time.

15/03/62 knew that barb was probably . . .

'No! Damn it! No!'

He shouted across the murkiness to the distant riverbank.

'Her name is Jenny. My name is Blake.'

Jenny would wonder why he wasn't at the barn that morning.

Like every other morning.

Before and after Us.

'No,' he shouted. 'Them.'

His voice echoed.

The river stopped flowing.

It stood silent.

Waiting.

He picked up a round stone.

He wanted to toss it into the water to see the reality of ripples moving outward.

Circles that express some finite interpretation of eternity.

He tossed the stone gently.

It lay on the water's surface without any effect.

Then it sank as if sucked down from below.

He turned to see billy standing behind him.

'Came to tell you,' billy said.

'There's nothing I want to hear from you.'

'Think there is.'

billy smiled.

He paused before speaking again.

'barb's no longer with Us,' billy said.

'Good. That's great. And I'm no longer with Us, either. It's about time we thought for ourselves. It's about time we told you . . . '

'You've got me wrong,' billy said. 'That's one of the reasons I should do the thinking for Us. I don't get anything wrong.'

Blake waited.

'When I said "she wasn't with Us, anymore" I meant she no longer existed.'

billy paused again.

'barb hung herself in the barn last night. She was looking for you, but . . . The horses are dead, too.'

Blake turned away.

He looked at the river.

It ran dark and secretive.

He couldn't see under its surface.

Blake knew he couldn't begin to know what lay there.

* * *

at her grave i wrote obscenities in the wet topsoil

words we never spoke

of love

of life

of dreams still-born

THE END

THE SPANISH LESSON

She was the type of girl you'd find studying in the library on Saturday night. At least that's the way I saw her. And I had been watching her closely, having seen her more often these past few days.

I hung out at Dusty's, an old, little bar not far from the college, and lately she was there a lot. I wasn't sure she ever noticed me (we never spoke to each other), but I had noticed her.

She always sat on the opposite side of the room. Dusty's wasn't big, so she was never out of hearing distance or too far away if I had the guts to go over and speak to her. But that wasn't all that important, then. She was usually with a friend, but tonight she was alone—she sat by herself reading a book. I enjoyed watching her read and absently sip at one of the two "exotic" drinks Dusty's had (Pina

Colada or a Singapore Sling—I didn't know which was which).

Her hair was the sort described as "silken flax"—I couldn't help thinking that when I first saw her—and it was long, below her shoulders. She had soft blue eyes that made me wish I could look into them forever. With a description like that, I'm sure you can envision the most beautiful woman you've ever seen. And she is that woman to me, even though, description aside, she wasn't really a "beauty." Actually she was very skinny. In itself not all that bad, except her face was long and thin, too. But she wasn't ugly, either. Don't get me wrong. She was just— well, the kind of girl you wouldn't be attracted to unless you knew her personality. If it's good, she starts to look a lot better. If it isn't, she isn't so good-looking.

I didn't know anything about her personality (I only dreamt what it would be like); I didn't even know if she had one at all. But I was confident she did. And I was almost as sure it would be fantastic!

She wore one of those great big fluffy sweaters, but still looked skinny. She had on the kind of jeans everyone wore, and fashion boots which only made her look taller.

She wore glasses.

I did too.

It was perfect.

She sat alone at her table reading a book through her glasses, and I sat alone at my table looking through my

glasses at her. I couldn't help but think there had to be something amazingly "cosmic" about the whole damn thing.

I only hoped she would sense it, too.

I resolved to make that evening the evening she would notice me.

The place wasn't crowded (just right for walking over and talking to her)—there were only four other people besides the two of us. Dusty's was never crowded. It was small and out of the way and you could hear everything anyone said no matter where you were sitting. Most of the students went to Berry's where it was big and noisy and you couldn't hear the person next to you over Zep or the Stones. That's why people came to Dusty's—for the quiet—it wasn't a pick-up place like Berry's. People at Dusty's would talk, or read, or play backgammon and chess.

Sometimes you'd hear a great conversation. It could be something about life, or death, or who was knocking up who in the philosophy department. What I chose to listen to depended on how I felt. I would sit back and focus on something, taking it all in. Usually the talk was about schoolwork and was always about how there was too much and not enough time. I never bothered to listen to that; school was one of the few things I did well. Sometimes someone would say something that was so preposterous I just wanted to go over and tell them how stupid it was. But I never did. I'd try to talk myself into doing it, but by the time

I had enough nerve, they'd already moved on to some other subject.

I just wasn't good with people. I suppose my roommate thought I was a nice enough guy, but we never did much together. I hadn't made any friends in my first month of college, but I hadn't really expected to, either.

I was about to order another beer (courage to stick to my resolution) when the Mexican walked in. I didn't know he was a Mexican at first, but right away I could see that both him and the guy he came in with were pissed out of their trees. The first thing one of them said was, "You bloody Mexican. I'll drink you under. Just wait." That's how I knew.

They both wavered in the middle of the room trying to decide where to sit. There wasn't much choice. Dusty's had a grand total of eight tables and four of them were already taken. But they took their time looking around. Then looked around again.

The Mexican's friend finally weaved over to an empty table right next to her, and she looked up from her book as he yanked out a chair and sat down. Then she went back to reading.

The Mexican followed his friend and sat down, too.

"Hey!" His friend yelled across the room a lot louder than necessary. Everyone looked over at him. "Where the hell is the service around here? My friend and I want a

drink."

Nicole, the only waitress, quickly came out of the back room, still holding a towel and a dripping wet glass, and took their order. This quietened him and he just sat and looked around some more, waiting for the beer.

They were about twenty-three or twenty-four, a few years older than me, I judged. I had never seen them at college. I wasn't even sure they went, although most of the people that came to Dusty's did. Anyway, as I said, I didn't really know anyone.

I thought it strange that the Mexican didn't look like one. At least to me. His friend was the usual type you see around, beefy looking, not all that bright. If he went to college he probably took Commerce and his ambition was to work at an office job for some multi-national and die from liver disease by fifty. That's if a heart attack or cancer didn't get him.

But I didn't think the Mexican looked Mexican. I wasn't sure whether it was because I had some preconception or not. I had never seen one before. At least not in real life. I had only seen them on television or in the movies. He was tall and well built, muscular but in a way that didn't imply that was all he had going for him. He had dark brown hair, perfectly styled. Both he and his friend wore jeans. The Mexican had on a faded-to-white denim shirt, while his friend wore a black t-shirt with a new jean jack-

et. I can't say why I thought that—why he didn't look Mexican. It was just something I felt.

After they paid for their beer and poured it out from the quart bottles into the glasses Nicole had brought them, they took long, silent drinks. The Mexican's friend put down his glass and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his jacket. Then he leaned towards her, casting a shadow over her book.

"Whatcha reading? Something dirty?" He asked her and gave her a big crooked-teeth smile.

She looked at him over the top of her glasses and smiled at him weakly.

"No. I'm <u>not</u>. I'm reading Bronte."

She began reading again.

The Mexican's friend sat back in his chair with a big "I'm so impressed" look that made the Mexican laugh.

"Oh," his friend said with obvious sarcasm. "Really, now. <u>Brown-Tay</u>. Aren't <u>we</u> in a different reading bracket. Well. Some of us just don't shit!"

The Mexican laughed again and his friend joined in. Their laughter filled the little room and everyone looked over, again.

The Mexican's friend turned back to her.

"Hey! What's your name?" He spoke all honeyish, it was very obvious, and she answered, "<u>You</u> probably couldn't pronounce it."

"Sure I could," he told her. "I'm pretty smart, too. My friend here's Mexican. Hey! He speaks Mexican, too. He even taught me how to speak some."

"Spanish," the Mexican corrected. It was the first time I heard him speak. He didn't slur like his friend—he didn't seem to be as drunk. He didn't act it, at least.

"Ya," his friend said. "Spanish. He's just up here for awhile. Not many Mexicans come to Montreal, you know. Pretty far out, eh?"

She turned to the Mexican and I could tell she was interested.

"Oh, <u>really</u>? How do you like it here?"

"It's nice. Very nice," he said. He didn't talk like a Mexican, either. Of course I hadn't heard many Mexicans talk, like I said, only in the movies, and I didn't suppose he'd say something like "Geeb me your <u>moanies</u>, <u>greengo</u>" for comparison.

"What's your name?" his friend asked her again. "Come on. We just want to be friendly."

She looked at them both, thinking it over, then sighed.

"Susan," she told them.

"I'm Jerry," he said. "And he's—Hey! What's it again in Mexican?"

"Raúl," the Mexican said. "I don't know what it translates in English. You call me Ralph like Jerry if you cannot say 'Raúl.'"

Susan smiled.

"No. I think I can manage with 'Raúl.' There! Is that right!"

"Very good. ¿Hablas español?"

"Pardon?"

"You speak Spanish?"

"Oh, no. Not at all. I wish I did though. It's like French, I heard. I speak some French."

"Yes. It is like French," he said.

"He's taught me all these Mexican words," his friend told her. "Hey!" he said to the Mexican, "tell them to her."

"No," the Mexican said smiling. "I do not think so." And the two men laughed.

She looked embarrassed as everyone turned again. This time they looked at her as if, somehow, it was her fault.

The Mexican and his friend stopped laughing and took another slug of beer. The Mexican's friend asked her if they could move over to her table.

"Well, I have some reading to do," she protested. A bit mildly, I thought.

"Oh, come on. Live a little." And without really waiting for a "yes" or a "no," they moved over.

She closed her book with a defeated rise in her shoulders and sat back in her chair. The Mexican's friend sat down to her left while the Mexican sat across the table from

her, his back to me.

"Whatcha do there, Sue?" the Mexican's friend asked.

"I'm a student," she said.

"Oh, a student." He gave the Mexican another impressed look. "Whatcha studying?"

"English literature."

"Don't read much, myself," he told her. "At least," and he directed this at the Mexican, "nothing I can't hold up with one hand."

He laughed loudly again. The Mexican looked at him, uncertain at first, then started to laugh too, though he didn't seem to be sure what he was laughing at.

Susan looked disgusted.

"I <u>have</u> to go," she said. She quickly stood up to leave but the Mexican's friend also stood up and he stopped her as she picked up her book.

"Don't go. We're just having some fun. A good time. Sit. We'll buy you another drink. Hey!" He called Nicole over. "Give the lady here another drink."

"I <u>really</u> have to go," she told him. He took her by the shoulders and guided her back down to her seat.

"<u>Just</u> a drink," he said to her, firmly.

"Well . . . " She kept the book hugged close to her breasts. "Just <u>one</u> drink," she told him. "Then I <u>do</u> have to go."

Nicole went to fill the order.

"Sure. Sure." And he smiled.

Nicole returned and for awhile they drank in silence.

I could see she wanted to leave. She sat at the end of her seat like she was expecting to be called away at any moment. Or at least hoped she would be.

I knew I should go over and help her. I didn't know what I could say, but I had to do something. Maybe anything would help. I tried to think of what to say to them, to her, but I could see them talking quietly now. The Mexican and his friend were more intent on who would be the first to finish his quart than bothering her. It was a tie. They ordered two more.

She drank quickly, not fast, but I could tell she was drinking more quickly than she was used to. The more she drank, the more she loosened her hold on the book, until finally she put it down on the empty chair beside her.

"From where do you two know each other?" she asked.

"Oh," the Mexican's friend said. "From this bar from where we were just thrown out from down the street. Bunch of shithead assholes!"

Her face went red.

"What's wrong? Drink too fast?" he asked.

"No. I just don't like to hear language like that. It's not very polite and I think it's unnecessary. Vulgar in fact. I wish you'd stop."

He looked at her as if he was about to blow up. I've

seen that look before. You know you're seconds away from a fight when the face goes tight as if it's forming a fist before the hands do.

But then he relaxed.

"Sure. Okay." His voice played at being hurt. "I'll just sit here and keep my filthy uneducated mouth shut."

And that's what he did. He kept his mouth firmly closed, only opening it at intervals for a swill of beer.

The Mexican took up the slack.

"Do you know México?"

"No. I've never been there. But I hear it's beautiful. I'd like to go there someday. I'd like to be able to travel to faraway places like that."

He looked her straight in the face and smiled. "I would like to show you my country." She blushed and suddenly looked down, but not before she gave him a tiny smile of her own. They were silent for a moment or two.

The Mexican's friend took another swig from his glass, finishing the contents. He filled it again with beer from his quart.

"You are very beautiful," the Mexican said. She looked up at him, first with surprise, then embarrassment. "I speak these words with truth. Very beautiful."

She looked down again. Her fingers nervously traced the circle around the top of her glass.

The Mexican's friend looked at him as if he was nuts.

I couldn't see the Mexican's face but I knew he did something while she wasn't looking because his friend suddenly smiled and sat back in his seat seeming content just to listen.

"Do you have a lover?" the Mexican asked her.

She continued to look down into her drink and I thought she wasn't going to answer him.

Then she looked up straight into the Mexican's face.

Her cheeks were slightly red, but it wasn't like she was still embarrassed—it was very attractive. It added a fullness, a life to her that I had never seen before. And her eyes! They glistened and glowed softly like they would if the room had been lit by a fireplace.

"No. I don't." She spoke slowly. "I'm not all that popular. I'm <u>not</u> that type—the one everyone asks out."

The Mexican said he didn't believe this, that it was impossible and that Canadian men must be blind.

She looked back into her drink. He reached out and lifted her head gently from under her chin until she looked at him again.

"There are words," he told her, "that we have to describe beautiful women. Do you want to hear?"

She said she had to leave, that it was getting late, but she didn't stand up. She continued to look at him without moving, staring into his eyes.

He started speaking to her in Spanish. I don't know

what he said, but he said it soft and slow, each word seemed to drip from his mouth until even I started to like the sound of it.

His friend found it hilarious. I could see him laughing quietly to himself, but since she was looking straight at the Mexican, she didn't seem to notice.

I caught only a few of the Spanish words. Ch-sounding mostly, which the Mexican kept repeating in different ways. I heard "puta" real clearly because he said it at least three times. But I didn't know what it meant. He said it a few times with her name, except her name sounded different when he said it. So I guessed he was calling her that like a nickname or something.

And she loved it, there being something romantic about a foreign language if it's spoken the right way. And the Mexican made it sound like he was reciting poetry to her.

His friend turned in his chair with his back to her and bent over grasping his sides as if in pain. I could see he was laughing, but trying not to laugh out loud.

Then the Mexican spoke English again.

"Do you know the word a man from México says to a woman like you, my dear Susan?"

She slowly shook her head.

"They call her una perra." He said, and rolled the R's so it sounded guttural, like it came from inside with meaning.

His friend couldn't keep it in any longer. The room thundered with his laughter.

She turned and looked at him, puzzled, the way people look in the morning when they see sunlight through the window when they think they've just gone to bed.

She looked from the Mexican's friend to the Mexican.

"What's wrong? Why is he laughing?" she asked.

"He drinks too much beer," the Mexican said. "We will go, now."

He stood up and helped his friend to his feet. His friend continued to laugh.

"Do you have to?" Her voice choked with disappointment. It must have taken her a lot of courage to say that to someone she didn't know. Her face looked the way it did when he spoke Spanish to her, shining and enthralled.

"Yes. I must go now." The Mexican said. "But I give my love to you, my little puta."

His friend's laughter was just about to die off when it again rose, louder than before. He started wheezing as he laughed, and I heard him repeat the same word the Mexican just said, and he laughed louder still, tears running down his face.

The Mexican steered him to the door and then they were gone. I could hear laughter outside, and, though I wasn't sure, I thought I not only heard his friend laughing, but the Mexican, too.

She sat looking into what remained of her drink. She raised it to her lips and drank it down to the lemon twist.

I thought how this could have been my big chance. I could have stood up, walked over, and offered my assistance to the fair damsel in distress when they had first began to bother her. Surely she would have been grateful to the knight who saved her.

But all I had done was sit there and watch, just like I had watched her before. And before that. Just like I was sure I'd continue to watch her until there was nothing left to look at—until she was no longer there.

Even now I wanted to go over and talk to her. I wanted to tell her how I felt about her, though I knew we didn't know each other, but that shouldn't matter. I only wanted to tell her how I cared, how I thought we understood each other, how we were alike.

But I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to tell her all those romantic things some people could. I didn't know another language like the Mexican who spoke magical-sounding words to interest and impress her.

So I did nothing.

A moment later she picked up her book and left.

THE END

THROUGH THE WOODS

June started pulling on the walking boots Shaun's sister had lent her. She had already carefully rolled up the bottoms of her jeans so that they'd end at the top of the boots, just below her knees. Shaun was waiting by the back door and watched her struggle as she sat on a kitchen chair trying to fit into the boots.

"You coming today?"

"Yes. Can you wait a minute? Patty's feet are smaller than mine."

She wiggled on the boots and stood up. She banged her feet down hard against the linoleum causing the salt and pepper shakers on the kitchen table to jump, and the "Bless This House" plaque on the wall to rattle.

"I guess they'll do."

From the table she picked up the pair of woolen gloves

that Shaun's mother had found for her in the family sock and mitten drawer and slipped them on. Then she put on the dark blue tuque Shaun said he remembered wearing when he had played street hockey with the Connell kids over on Lang. He said he last wore it when he was about seventeen and had punched Johnny Connell in the mouth because Johnny had jammed "about a foot and a half" of hockey stick into his ribs. June tucked in the loose strands of her light brown hair. Only her face showed. Finally she pulled on a large down-filled jacket over a t-shirt and Shaun's red and white suspenders. She wondered how she must look. Not at all like her city self. But it was, well, fun being bundled up like this—rather like those "earth mother" types she saw back in the city. It was different from her usual well-groomed look and clothes.

Shaun looked uncomfortable without his Harris tweed—something she felt he wore more for effect than anything else. But she imagined he was actually quite used to being dressed in jeans and t-shirts, having grown up here.

"Ready."

Shaun opened the door.

"Oh, wait!" June said. "I forgot something."

Shaun gave a long sigh and closed the door.

"What now?"

June looked around the kitchen. She walked over to the counter nearest the refrigerator and picked up the brown

paper bag Shaun's mother had filled with fruit and vegetables and cheese. "Keep you till dinner," she had told them. "You'll probably be hungry walking through the woods." June unzipped the jacket and put the bag in a large pocket she had noticed inside. Then she zipped it up again.

"Now can we go?" Shaun asked.

Shaun's mother came into the kitchen and went to the oven. She opened the oven door using her apron so she wouldn't burn her hands. The room filled with the sounds and smells of a home-cooked meal.

"You two have a good time, now. This bird won't be ready for another hour or so—" She pulled out the oven rack and used a long-handled spoon to ladle some of the grease over the cooking turkey. It sizzled and popped loudly. "—And by the time I prepare all the fixings and everything else, and this turkey sits awhile, it'll be another hour still before we eat."

"We won't be long anyway," Shaun told her.

"Smells good, Mrs. Renaud. I would like to help, that's if you want me to do anything."

"Oh, no, no, Juney. Oh, it's June, isn't it? I don't know why I keep wanting to call you Juney. But thank you anyway. You're a guest here and I'm sure you'd like to spend some time with Shaun and rest a little. Shaun always comes back home from the city all tensed up." She shook her head and said, "My son, the future lawyer. He only seems to

rest on holidays, and there aren't nearly enough of them. I have Patty to help me. She'll set the dinner table and Father will do the honours and carve the turkey—" She smiled at June. "—I just hope it tastes good. A Thanksgiving meal is a special thing in our family—" She slid the turkey back into the oven and closed the oven door. She wiped her hands, one side first, then the other, on her apron. Then she smoothed her apron down against her flower print dress. "—and I like to make sure it's something worth being thankful for, along with all the other things we have to be thankful for."

"I'm sure it will be," June said.

"Come on." Shaun tugged at the back of her jacket. He opened the door again. The warm smells of food suddenly disappeared.

"Bye, Mrs. Renaud."

"Bye now. Don't you get lost now, Shaun."

Shaun mumbled something as he walked out. June followed him and closed the door.

Outside the family dog barked loudly at June. It frightened her for a moment, then she saw that the dog was tied to a maple tree.

"It's not that cold," Shaun said and breathed in deeply. They were walking down the crushed stone path to the road out front.

"Brrr," June answered smiling. "That's what you say.

It's a lot different for a city slicker like me."

"Oh, come on, June!" Shaun stopped and stood with his back turned to her. His body stiffened. He thrust his hands deeply into his jacket pockets, his legs apart, straight, his feet firmly planted in the crushed stone. "You don't <u>really</u> think it's all that cold, do you? Then let's forget about it. Let's go back in and sit by the fire. We'll play chess or something."

"Shaun, I was <u>only</u> joking. I don't think it's that cold. You take everything so seriously. I'm Canadian—I'm used to the cold. Anyway, it was your idea to show me the log cabin. So let's go."

Shaun started down the path again and turned onto the road without saying anything else. June watched him as he walked away, then pulled up her jacket collar and followed. Somewhere in the trees behind Shaun's house she could hear a bird's hollow trilling through the crisp air.

She caught up to Shaun and walked behind him in silence. He walked at his usual brisk pace. At times she had to run a little to keep up with him and she wanted to tell him to slow down, but decided not to. She hated when he told her she was weak. Weak mind. Weak body. It was as if only he could be strong. She put her gloved hands into her jacket pockets and tried to keep up.

They walked silently for awhile. They passed brick house after brick house, each different, yet after awhile

they all looked the same. If one house had a comfortable swing, the kind three or four people could enjoy at the same time, then the next house would have a neatly stacked pile of wood for an evening fire. Each house was landscaped with mature trees and carefully trimmed shrubs. They passed a few houses that had round above-ground swimming pools, and at one such house June saw a little girl standing beside a pool throwing small stones into the water.

The street on which Shaun's family lived curved towards its end and led to woods. At the end of the road June could see the looming line of trees—a wall that separated houses and civilization from nature and what lay beyond.

From a porch of one of the last houses on the street, someone called Shaun's name. Shaun stopped and looked in that direction, then smiled and called back, "How you doing, Mr. Wallis? Getting your gardening done?"

The man Shaun was talking to was grey haired with a slightly stooped back, the way someone looks when they are about to pick something up then change their mind. He had a large pair of gardening shears and was trimming a rose bush that hugged the railing around the porch.

"Got to do it before the snow falls. Want my roses to look nice next spring." As he spoke the shears flashed out and cut off one of the brown dead roses. It fell to the ground where there was already a semicircle of dead flowers.

June thought it was unusual for there to be so many un-

picked flowers on the bush. Most people would have cut them when they were in bloom to bring inside.

"Mr. Wallis," Shaun called up to the man. "I'd like you to meet June Simon. She's visiting with me from the city."

"How do you do, young lady?" Mr. Wallis said to her. And to Shaun he said: "I thought I'd seen you with a young woman. Got yourself some plans?"

The old man's eyes sparkled. He crossed his arms, still holding the shears, and grinned at June and Shaun.

Shaun sort of smiled back and said, "Never know now, do you?"

"Do you like roses, young lady?" The old man started cutting again.

"Yes, I do."

"Guess I haven't met a woman yet who doesn't. Got me some of the best blood-reddish roses around. Damn beautiful. You'll never see a darker shade of red. But I've got to cut them down when they die. Every fall I've got to cut them down."

"Excuse me," June said. "But don't you cut them during the summer and bring them in?"

"Nope. Never do. I just let them grow on their own, let them grow for as long as they like. It looks nicer on the bush I think. I just wait till they die, then I cut them down."

"How's your back, Mr. Wallis?" Shaun said. He unzipped his jacket a little and reached in for the package of cigarettes in his shirt pocket.

"Doing okay, I guess. Doctor says it'll hold me for awhile longer. Kind've use it more and more now that Miriam's not here. Lots of work to do."

"Oh," Shaun's voice went solemn. His hands jumped from pocket to pocket looking for his lighter. "I heard about Mrs. Wallis. I'm sorry. I hope she gets well soon. Are you expecting her home shortly?"

"No."

Mr. Wallis said it so softly that they barely heard the word. He cut off another dead rose.

"I think she's going to die on me," he said. "Don't think she'll ever see outside that hospital again. Doesn't look that way at least."

They were all silent for a long while. The only sound was the shears cutting at the roses and the wind rustling the orange-yellow leaves in the surrounding trees. Shaun slowly puffed at his cigarette. He watched the man at his work. June looked down at Patty's boots which were beginning to pinch her around the toes.

"Well. . . ." Shaun cleared his throat. "We have to be going, Mr. Wallis. It's been nice talking with you. I'll come back and see you next time I'm in town. We'll talk again."

"You be good now, boy. Nice meeting you, young lady."

He continued cutting the rose bush as June and Shaun started down the road again.

"Great man!" Shaun said absently, out loud, but to himself. Then he said to her: "He was like a father. I know that's insane because I have a father already, but we never talked much. But Old Man Wallis—he'd listen to me. I should really go visit him."

"You never told me about him. His wife's sick?"

"She's not doing too well. Cancer. I think that's what Mom said. Some woman's thing. You know."

They came to the end of the road and stopped as abruptly as the road itself. For another twenty feet there was a gravel continuation, then a small dirt path that led to the woods across a field of beige-coloured grass.

A tiger-striped kitten sulked past them and into the tall grass.

"Is it far?" June asked.

"No, about ten minutes. Come on."

Their feet crunched on the gravel, then made solid padding sounds as they walked along the dirt path. It had rained the night before. Shaun's mother had said that she heard on the radio that it might snow. But the path was dry except for the few spots where the rain had gathered into small puddles. They walked around them. Shaun led the way.

"You never told me much about your family, Shaun. I

like them."

Shaun shrugged and flicked his cigarette butt into one of the puddles. It hissed for the slightest moment as she walked by.

"I don't have much to say about them. They're my family. That's all."

"They've been very nice to me. They make me feel welcome. Your sister showed me some of the work she's been doing in art class at school. I told her about my job at the museum. She seemed impressed, even if I'm a secretary and not the head curator. We really should let her come to the city and stay with us. I'd love to show her around. She's bright and her work is quite good for someone in high school. She showed me some of the poetry she's been writing, too. Oh, I don't know if she'd have wanted me to tell you that. It was pretty personal stuff. We had a great talk."

"Oh?" Shaun stopped to pluck a long, dried weed and stuck it in his mouth to chew on. "About what?"

"Nothing much. About your family mostly. I told her how I thought she was lucky to live in a house out here and have a family as nice as yours. I told her a little bit about my—"

"About your not having a family. Right?"

June didn't answer. Shaun's tone showed he was bored with the subject. She was all too familiar with that tone.

She didn't feel he had reason to be bored; they had only talked about her childhood once, twice at the most. She knew she had this thing about families and family life. It was natural, she never had one. But Shaun didn't see it that way. So June remained silent.

They reached the beginning of the woods. It seemed darker now than it was before. More clouds had formed in the sky, and the woods, with all the thickly clustered trees, was darker still. The branches above them squeaked and strained in the wind like un-oiled parts of a huge machine.

"We continue along this path," Shaun told her. "If you look at some of these trees along here, like that one there—" He pointed. "—you can see where my friends and I carved arrows to mark the trail. It wasn't really necessary. It's kind of hard to get lost as long as you follow the path, but it was something to do back then. We used to spend all our time in these woods when we were young."

"When did you make the log cabin?" she said and nearly tripped over a tree root.

"We were about fourteen. No. Fifteen. It was the summer right after grade nine. It took us the whole summer and we, well, you'll see it when we get there. We used to hunt, too. Shoot at birds and squirrels, things like that."

"Oh, Shaun. How could you?"

"It was fun. We were young then."

Shaun stopped to bend over and tie the lace of one of his boots. June sat down on a nearby log to rest. At least he was walking slower now. But the path through the woods wasn't easy to walk on; it turned and rolled every which way. There were embedded rocks and tree roots and puddles. They had to walk over and around these things, and sometimes obstacles were camouflaged under the autumn-coloured leaves. It was difficult not to trip and she stumbled quite often, never falling, but coming close. She realized she had to watch every step she took. Shaun, though, took to the path naturally, having walked it many times before.

"Tired?" he asked.

"No. Just thought I'd rest my feet a little. These boots are killing me, they're about a size too small."

"We can go back if you want."

"No. It's okay."

Shaun finished with his lace and stood up. He took the piece of dried weed out of his mouth and tossed it into the bushes alongside the path and started walking again.

June quickly stood up and followed him.

"What did my mother say to you last night?" he said.

"Nothing. Should she have said something?"

"No. I just wanted to know what you two talked about. You seemed to hit it off quite well. You left for a while."

"She showed me her sewing room. She wanted me to see the rug she was hooking. It's very nice. Did you see it?

She wants to put it on your father's side of the bed when it's finished. Oh, she told me about you when you were young. She said she spoiled you rotten."

"Did she say anything about our living together?"

"No. Why would she? You're twenty-three. I'm sure she knows you're old enough to do what you want." She paused, then said, "She did want to know if we were going to get married, though."

"And?"

"I told her you never asked me." June laughed slightly.

Shaun didn't say anything. He continued to walk along the dirt path. Suddenly he stopped short.

"Look there." He pointed up ahead. She looked, but couldn't see what he was pointing at. He could make things out better than she could through the blur of autumn colours. Shaun quietly directed her vision. Only then did she see a long fat snake contorting itself over a flat rock beside the path, then quickly disappear into the thick underbrush.

"There's lots of snakes in here. We used to catch them when we were small. They come out on a hot day and sun on the rocks. Don't know what that one was doing out today. Must be screwed up. We used to look for frogs, too."

Shaun looked around.

"Wait. I think it's over here."

He moved off the path to a cleared area.

"Yeah," he said. "It's over here. Come see."

June walked off the path and joined Shaun. He stood beside a tree stump.

"This is one of the places we cut our logs. That's why there's so many stumps around here. The trees were just right. Big and straight. Danny Dixon cut a finger off with an axe right here." Shaun looked down at the tree stump with what seemed like admiration.

"That's terrible, Shaun. Why did you want to show me this?"

Shaun looked straight at her, his intense face suddenly thrust toward her.

"Shit, June! He was my best friend. We did everything together when we were young. I thought you were interested in all this personal crap. You always want me to tell you about it."

"I'm not interested in people cutting their fingers off. How does that affect us? It's gross—stupid!"

Shaun brushed past her and went back to the path.

June ran to catch up to him.

"I'm sorry, Shaun. I didn't mean it that way."

"It's okay." He continued along the path, walking briskly. "You're right. It's stupid. I don't know why I told you. It just seemed important when we were young, that's all. It was a big thing when he cut his finger like

that. We were kids then."

"Where's he now?"

Shaun didn't answer. Then he said, "We're no longer friends. We stopped hanging around each other when I started law school. He was going a different way than I was."

"Do you miss him?"

They came to a fork in the path. Without hesitating, Shaun took the path to the right.

"The log cabin's up here," he said, and he turned from the path and walked through the underbrush. June was right behind him. "Can you see it? It's over there."

She looked and saw the box-like form of the log cabin. Shaun moved more quickly than she did through the bushes. She had to carefully push back branches, some with thorns, before she could reach the log cabin. Then she couldn't see Shaun.

The cabin was about ten by ten and about five feet high. It didn't have a roof. Just four walls made out of thick tree trunks.

She called Shaun's name.

"I'm right here." His head popped up from the inside of the log cabin, over the wall nearest her. "The door's on the other side."

She walked around the cabin. It wasn't exactly a door, it was more a window. She had to lift her leg and duck down at the same time to squeeze through. Once inside she looked

around. The floor was made of matted grass clippings which had long ago turned black and white in places. There were concrete blocks for chairs. On the log walls she saw initials and words carved in the wood. Things like B.D. X S.R. FOREVER and SAMMY IS BEST. There were other things, too, mostly the kind teenage boys wrote on bathroom walls. But that made the place strangely comfortable—people had been there.

"Look how we even notched the logs so that they'd fit into one another," Shaun said, like a museum guide, from one of the corners. He turned and looked at her. "When you go outside after, you'll be able to see them better. It was hard work."

He went to the centre of the floor where there was a shallow charcoal-black hole dug in the ground. He gathered some twigs and placed them there.

"I'll go out and gather some wood. We'll have a fire."

He went through the window-door and she could hear him as his feet crunched on the dead leaves.

She sat down on one of the concrete blocks. It was cold and hard. She unzipped her jacket and took out the brown paper bag and opened it. She put it on another concrete block beside here and started arranging the food.

Shaun came back carrying sticks. He dropped them beside the centre hole and bent over to make the fire.

"This won't take long," he told her.

"I'm fixing up the things your mother gave us. Hungry?"

"No. Not really. But you can eat if you want. I'm saving myself for supper."

After a few flicks of his lighter, there was a fire. He carefully placed stick after stick on the initial flames until the fire grew. June already could feel some warmth.

"I should really get some bigger pieces of wood," he told her. "But we won't be here that long."

He sat down on a block across the fire from her.

"We should have brought some wine," she said. "It could be romantic."

Shaun tossed a few more sticks into the fire and they were consumed almost immediately. June offered him the food on the brown paper bag. He shook his head. She put it back on the block beside her and took a slice of cheese.

"Why didn't you make a roof?"

"Didn't have the time. We had a hell of a time just making the walls. We never got around to finishing it before winter came. And by the next summer we weren't really interested in finishing it anymore. You know how kids are."

"It's nice. I can see you put a lot of work into it."

"We dragged logs here from all over these woods. We wanted just the right ones. And these blocks! Shit! They weigh about sixty or seventy pounds each. We ripped them off from a construction site near our house. We had to use

Danny Dixon's brother's wagon to bring them here. One at a time, one a night. The wagon finally collapsed and Danny's old man beat him because his brother wanted his wagon back."

June took a few green grapes and slowly ate them as she listened.

"Why did you build it?"

Shaun thought for a moment then said: "At first I guess we wanted to live here. When you're fifteen you want to live anywhere but at your own home. We slept here a few nights. It was great. Without a roof you could see all the stars. But by the next summer we only came here to bash on weekends. Sometimes there would be fifty people jammed in here." He waved his hand at the walls. "Notice the art-work. Everyone wanted to leave a part of themselves."

They were silent as they watched the fire begin to die. Shaun threw in some more pieces of wood and the fire crackled and popped contently. June could hear the wind in the trees above. A bird would caw every so often.

Shaun laughed softly to himself, then smiled at her.

"Had my first lay here." He looked back at the fire. "I took one of my girlfriends here, just about this time of year, too. She kept saying how cold she was but I was shaking so much you'd have thought I was the one who was freezing. When it was over, I couldn't believe how great it was and how much I was in love with her. It was just after the summer I stopped hunting and took up girls. That's the

main reason this place isn't finished. We were too busy. After that first time I used this place pretty regularly for the rest of high school. My friends started using it too. We probably would have knocked the roof off if it had one, anyway."

Shaun stood up.

"Have to get some more wood."

He went out again. June took a last grape and began to put the food back into the paper bag. She kept it on the block beside her and waited for Shaun to return.

She had told him about her first time right after their first time together. They were in his apartment which he kept telling her was too expensive for him to keep, even if he was going to be a lawyer. So they had moved in together, or, rather, a week later he had moved into her flat. Her first time was just another tale of the backseat of a car and a good-looking jock. And she had been young enough to have imagined love there. She was no better now, she felt, at discerning that emotion. Shaun never told her personal things. But she had always been open with him. That was her way. He never said anything about friends or lovers or family. For the nine months she had known him, she felt she knew more about his school and the law firm he worked his ass off for part-time than she did about him. She was sure she knew every detail about the Kruger defense case he had been helping to prepare for the last three months. Mrs.

Kruger had drugged, then electrocuted her husband by wrapping him in anything and everything electrical she could find in the house, plugging it in, then throwing a bucket of water on the man.

June never knew what Shaun liked or disliked. He never told her. She could figure out some things herself: it was obvious how he picked at his food when she made him turnips or sausages that he didn't like either. But those were minor things. She had been so ready to explore his life with him when they first started living together, past, present, and future, just as she had been ready to have him help her explore her own. But he never wanted to. She would get as far as telling him how she had been brought up by foster parents, how she had met her mother only once when she was thirteen, how she couldn't remember anything about her childhood before the age of ten save for a few incidents, how even those slight fragments seem to be fading. And Shaun would stop her. She didn't know why, and that just made her want to tell him more, making her want to force him to confront the reality of her past as she attempted to confront it herself. She feared losing what tenuous grip she still held—she had to reclaim those lost years or who would she be? Couldn't he see that? But it only served to distance him from her. She knew there no longer was love between them, only a facsimile was left, a familiarity, a feeble obligation that came from sharing the

same roof. Little else.

Shaun came back with a few more sticks.

"This should be enough. We're going to leave in a few minutes."

He put them all on the fire and it sprang back to a warm life. The heat reached June and she took her gloved hands out of her jacket pockets and held them up to the fire.

Shaun sat down again.

"I have something to tell you."

He looked straight into the fire when he said it. His voice was grave. She looked at him. He looked up at her for a moment, then looked back down at the fire. With his boot he nudged a branch that wasn't totally in the fire, back into the flames.

"I've been thinking, and I think it's time I moved out."

June looked into the fire and shoved her hands back into her pockets.

"I don't want to hurt you," he continued. "But it was going to happen anyway. You knew that before you came out here. I figure I'll move out the day after tomorrow when we get back to the city."

"You found another place?"

He nodded.

"It's near school. It'll be easier that way. You're

not mad at me, are you? I don't want you to be mad about this."

"Of course I am. I'm angry and I'm hurt. How do you feel?"

Shaun looked away.

June reached up and pushed the tuque down on her hair. She re-tucked some of the strands that had fallen out.

"Carol?" She asked after awhile, knowing as she said it, that it wasn't that.

"No. You know I don't see her anymore. That was over long ago. It was only one of those things. You know all there is to know about Carol and me."

"No. I don't. You never told me anything about it. You only said you were sleeping with her when I asked."

"Well, there wasn't much else to say. We slept together. That's all."

He stood up and went to one of the walls and looked at the carvings.

"Didn't you ever sleep with someone behind my back? You always told me how everyone down at the museum is so creative and open. You make it sound as if they'd be into sleeping around."

"No. Never."

"Well, maybe you should have. It would have been easier. That's the kind of person you need, anyway. An artist. Someone drowning in emotion."

"Don't tell me what I need."

Shaun's finger traced some of the letters carved into the logs.

"These are my initials. I carved them right after that first time. I thought then that I'd love her forever. I was pretty naive. Once someone told me that there were a pack of wild dogs in these woods, dogs that no one else wanted, so they came here. I believed that, too. They were supposed to jump you as you walked along and tear you apart until there was nothing left. It was Danny Dixon's uncle who told us that. He said when the dogs had puppies, they'd eat them, bite their heads right off. He said that's what happened in the woods, that's what it was like. He was an alcoholic. Now that I think back, he was the sort of guy who liked little boys. Couldn't keep his hands off us when he talked."

June stood up and picked up the paper bag. She unzipped her jacket and began to put the bag in the inside pocket.

"You don't have to bring that back," he said. "Here."

He quickly came over and took the bag from her and threw it into the fire. The flames folded around the bag. Then it was gone..

June zipped up her jacket.

Shaun stomped on the fire, leaving it smoking.

"Let's go."

They left the log cabin and started back to the path. Shaun held the branches so that they wouldn't swing back and hit June. On the path, she walked ahead of him.

"Did you think you'd love me forever?" she said over her shoulder to him.

"No. There's no one I could love forever."

They continued to walk. Her feet no longer hurt her; they had gone numb and beyond the point of pain. She was able to walk quite fast. She was even surprised. She had gotten the knack of walking through the woods. And she no longer stumbled.

She knew what Shaun said was true for him—love was unfathomable, and he had long ago given up trying to comprehend it. But that wasn't her.

"Look." She stopped and pointed off the path to a thick, round bush. Shaun stopped behind her. She whispered, "Over there."

Under the bush they saw a rabbit's upturned nose twitching in the air. The rabbit was soft and furry. Beside it were four, no, five small babies huddled close for warmth. They didn't seem to notice June and Shaun were there.

June and Shaun looked for awhile, then slowly and quietly walked away. When they were far enough away to talk, June asked, "Does your family know?"

"No. I haven't told them."

"I like your family, Shaun. I like them a lot. Please don't tell them till after. Next week sometime. Okay?"

"Sure, I wasn't going to tell them until later, anyway. At least we'll be having a nice family Thanksgiving together."

They walked in silence until they reached the end of the woods. There June stopped and turned back to Shaun.

"I want to thank you."

He looked at her perplexed, embarrassed. "Why? What for?" He stumbled over a tree root. "Damn! Damn! Damn!" he yelled as he picked himself up from the ground. She reached out to help him, but he wouldn't take her hand.

She should have known by now he wouldn't understand. Sometimes it seemed there was so little he did understand. She wished he'd open his eyes for once—look around him—truly see those standing close to him. She knew in part the wish was selfish—she wanted him to see her standing there, too. But it would also be for his own good. There was nothing wrong with caring—it wasn't a weakness.

"Why did you say that?" Shaun repeated.

"Thanking you? I'm glad, I guess, that I got to meet your family even though—this." She motioned towards the woods. "And for once I felt I knew you—that you let me see a part of yourself. I've wanted that for a long time."

"I'm sorry," he said, unsure, still not understanding.

They went along the path through the field to the gra-

vel, then to the road.

"It might snow tonight," he said.

"No. I don't think so," she said.

At the road she linked arms with him, both keeping their hands in their pockets.

"You should talk to your father, Shaun."

He turned and looked at her, then looked down the road again. They both looked straight ahead as they walked.

"I know." he sighed. "I always mean to; but school and work keep me busy. I should go talk to Old Man Wallis, too. And visit his wife in the hospital. I should do a lot of things."

"And Patty and your mom. Talk to them, too."

"There never seems to be time."

They stopped outside Shaun's house and turned to face each other.

"I know I hurt you, June. I am sorry." After a long pause he added: "I wasn't fair to you."

"It does hurt. But maybe I can learn to handle that, too. At least I hope I can. I'll try." She looked up at Shaun's house. "You have a great family, Shaun. And they love you. I can tell by the way they talk about you, the way they look at you, it shows. I understand, whether it matters to you or not."

"You'll be alone."

"I've been alone before. That's okay, too."

She looked back at him. He stood apart from her, more like a small, lost child than she would have thought possible in someone she loved. For a moment the pain was gone. She could see that the things she never had, but cherished, were more valuable than what he had, but never knew.

He looked at her and tried to smile.

"Shall we go in for dinner?"

"Yes. I'd like that."

THE END

THE ADVENTURES OF TOM FINN

My best friend's name is Tom Finn. No, he's not a character out of a book—he's not at all like either Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn. I know that with a name like Tom Finn you'd kind of expect him to be a mix of both. But he's not.

Even though all along I thought he should be.

I told him that but he wasn't impressed. I doubt he even knows who Tom and Huck are except names that people always bug him with—like Clark's English teacher.

Clark's my older brother and goes to high school. Last week when we were all at the shopping centre, Clark, Tom and me, we ran into Miss Garnett. We weren't there to buy any of the neat stuff in the stores like you were supposed to—Clark wouldn't let us. He only wanted to walk up and down the mall and look at the girls that hung out there 'cause it

was air-conditioned, it being summer and all. I hate that love stuff. I never bother with it if I can help it. Clark doesn't mind Tom and me tagging along as long as we get lost when he finds a girl and starts talking to her.

Miss Garnett was doing her grocery shopping and stopped to talk to Clark. She's just new—it's her first year teaching at the high school. She took the place of old Mrs. Ampleman who died from something to do with blood in her brain. I guess that's sad and everything, but I really didn't know her much except to look at and say, "There's old Mrs. Ampleman," and from the things Clark said about her at the supper table, which weren't very nice, but are a lot nicer now that she's dead. When old Mrs. Ampleman was buried, both schools in town got a holiday so that everybody could go. Clark went, but I didn't. I went fishing instead.

Miss Garnett's the youngest and most beautiful teacher in the high school. In the whole town for that matter. At least that's what Clark says. He tells me he knows a lot about girls, so I guess he's right. Everytime I see Miss Garnett around I see a lot of people looking at her real careful, but I always thought people were curious about her 'cause she was new in town. I told that to Clark and he laughed and said, "Ya, mostly <u>male</u> people."

When she talked to Clark she asked him how he was enjoying the summer vacation, even though school had only been

out a week. He said that the summer "held interesting and provocative opportunities," which I thought was real funny 'cause I never heard him talk like that before, and I'm his brother. He must have felt super dumb saying that with Tom and me standing right there.

He turned and introduced us saying, "This is my sibling, Kevin, and this is our next-door neighbour, Tom Finn, the doctor's son."

That's the way everybody introduces Tom: "The doctor's son." It's a real pain for him. Once, Mrs. Buggy who runs the five and ten cent store even asked him advice about her sinuses just 'cause he was the doctor's son, which was real dumb because Tom's only ten years old and doesn't even like watching doctors on TV. But he's used to it.

I'd never been called a "sibling" before. I wasn't sure if it was good or bad, but from the sound of it I didn't like it one bit.

Miss Garnett looked right at Tom in a funny way, and then she smiled at him as if she were pleased at something. I knew straight away that it must be his name since she was an English teacher.

"The doctor's son?" she said. "With a name like yours, your father must like Mark Twain. I suppose Huckleberry would have been too obvious."

Tom didn't say anything. He just looked down at the ground, like I knew he would, feeling all embarrassed to be

the centre of attention. I spoke up and told her I had read both Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn and was only going into the sixth grade. She asked me if I liked the books, and I said that I sure did, even though I didn't understand everything in them, like mostly some of the words, but I didn't say that part.

I hate to admit it, but she was pretty to look at. She smiled real nice like she meant it, even if we were just kids. I knew she was taking a liking to Tom like most ladies did 'cause of the way Tom makes them want to be his mother. He has these big blue eyes and curly brown hair that make ladies want to hug him all the time. I'm glad I'm not like that. They never hug me because I won't let them. His face always looks pale, even at the end of the summer when my ma is always joking about me not washing—I'm so dark. But Tom never gets a tan. Everyone calls him frail, but I don't really see that in him, being his best friend and all. I just think it's something people say to keep him from having fun. Like mostly his ma.

Miss Garnett looked straight at Tom for awhile more. Tom just kept looking down at his shoes. Then she said to him, "Nice meeting you, Tom Finn." Exactly that way. Then she leaned forward towards him, and I thought for a moment she was going to shake his hand or something. But she didn't. She said good-bye to Clark and me and left.

When she was gone, I told Tom he should have read Tom

Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn instead of reading The Incredible Journey, which was just a dumb story about a dog and a cat and some other animal, I think, who try to find their way home.

"That's kid stuff," I told him.

But I guess that wasn't his fault. Even though Tom and me were in the same class, we were in different reading groups. I was in "The Bluejays," which was a real dumb name that Melissa Burke made up and the teacher said right away was "just fine." Tom's group was called "The Snoopies," which is a better name, but isn't too great, either. I thought we should have names like "The Buccaneers" or "The Gravediggers," adventuring names, names that Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn would like.

I tried to tell Tom what the books were about, but he didn't want to listen. He doesn't like exciting things. He mostly prefers sad things like what happens to animals when they're lost. That kind of stuff.

I once heard someone on TV say that some people were boring like white bread. That made me think of Tom. Tom's problem is that he never does anything you'd call exciting. He's ten years old, almost eleven, and he's never even been fishing or camping or anything like that!

Tom's an only kid. He's small for ten, the smallest boy in the whole fifth grade, even smaller than some of the girls. So I have to protect him if he gets into a fight or

something. But he almost never gets into a fight 'cause he's absent from school a lot. He's never there long enough so other kids can get to know him and start to hate him and want to beat him up.

I think Tom's real problem's his ma and pa.

Tom's pa's the only doctor in town— he's an important man and everybody knows him. It seems like everywhere you look, there's Doc Finn. That's what my pa always says. Doc Finn has something to do with the mayor and laws and making taxes. My pa says it's bitter medicine one way or another with Doc Finn. But the medicine he gave me once wasn't that bad. He's also the head of the school board and gets to decide what teachers we have and what books we read. That surprised me 'cause Tom doesn't like school much.

Tom hates it when I call his pa "Doc." But he's not the kind of kid who'll say anything about it until you ask him straight out. I try not to use it too much around Tom. But I still think it's a real neat way to call a doctor.

I think Tom's pa has a pretty exciting job as far as jobs go. Even if he isn't a pirate or a bank robber, he gets to see dead people and murdered people, though I'm not sure Dernon ever had a murder. My pa just works at the factory like nearly everybody's pa, only he works in the office, which isn't interesting at all. You don't want to hear about him.

I guess it's good having a doctor living right next

door in case anybody gets sick, but I don't think it does Tom much good having a doctor right in the same house. Tom's always sick. I think it's directly 'cause his pa's a doctor and can see more diseases. My ma only keeps me home when I have the kind of diseases that everybody knows, like colds or the mumps I had last winter. But Tom's pa can see diseases in Tom that normal people can't—like malaria which is real bad to get—and tells Tom's ma who keeps Tom home in bed, even in the summer when nobody's sick. Maybe I get those diseases, too, but without a doctor in the house to point them out, I never know, so I'm never sick.

So I guess you can see what I was faced with in a friend like Tom Finn. It sure was a challenge. But now that summer was here and there was nothing to do except go swimming (I do the swimming and Tom just looks), or watch Clark run after girls, I decided to make it my special mission to bring excitement and adventure into Tom's life.

Oh, I haven't told you yet, but my name's Kevin Viau. I know it's not as good a name as Tom Finn and that there probably isn't a name like mine in books anywhere, but I think that's okay as long as I do exciting and adventurous things, even though it still bugs me a little. Not having a good name that is.

Just so you'll know, our town isn't very big. It's just big enough so you don't know everybody by name even though you've probably seen them around before. There's a

river that runs right through Dernon, except that it isn't at all like the Mississippi. I've never been to the Mississippi except for reading about it, but I don't figure that it's small and polluted with car tires and old refrigerators that people throw there when they don't want them anymore.

The day after we saw Miss Garnett at the shopping centre, I told Tom my idea of how we could have an exciting adventure. Tom and me were in his backyard. Tom's ma had sent him out there so he'd get some June sun. His ma was always worring about his health. She said the sun would help him considerably, but of course she told him he couldn't stay out there too long or do anything too rough. It was just like her. When she says "rough" she always looks right at me meaning I shouldn't fight or anything with Tom, which I never do anyway.

Tom was sitting on the grass and I was lying across his ma's strawberry patch 'cause I like the way the strawberries squash and make red marks all over my clothes like I've been shot. Tom kept looking up at his house, nervous that his ma would see me lying on her strawberries, but I told him not to worry—she'd never know it was me.

That's when I told him that this summer we were going to have an adventure. He looked at me like I was from somewhere else and wasn't speaking English. I told him he'd get it all later.

"First thing," I said, "is to find the right place for

an adventure."

Tom asked why we couldn't have it in his backyard.

"Whoever heard of something exciting happening in your own backyard? We need the right place. Somewhere that already comes complete with an adventure would be neat. Think!" I told him. It was dumb to say that 'cause I'm sure he didn't know what to think about, not knowing anything about what's exciting.

I thought about building a raft and floating it down the Dernon River, except I called it "the Mississippi" and Tom said "What?" and that I was talking real funny nowadays and nobody else talked that way with all those "pa's" and "ma's" and things. I guess I couldn't expect more from someone who didn't know Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn like I did. Anyway, Tom said he got real sick on boats, and I suppose it would have been a lot of work to build a raft, 'specially when I didn't really know how.

There were no caves around anywhere, as far as I knew, so that was out, too.

We sat there thinking for a long time. At least I did. Tom pretended he was thinking 'cause I had told him to.

Then it came to me.

"The cemetery!" I said. "It's just right! It's a real neat place for an adventure. It's mysterious and scary and we've never gone there before."

Tom said he had never gone there before 'cause he

wasn't allowed to. I just ignored that, hoping he'd forget it like he sometimes did, and said, "Yup, the cemetery's just perfect. It's creepy with all those dead people there, and it's dangerous, too. Any minute we could get shot at by that guy who lives out there. You know, that guy who takes care of the place. Clark told me he shoots at people with a rifle."

"Then why do we want to go there?" Tom said. I sighed and told him that's what adventuring is about.

I thought some more and said, "We should really go out there at night, though."

Tom said right away that he wasn't allowed out after supper. He was only ten and that's the way his parents were with him and it couldn't be changed. I told him he could sneak out and they wouldn't know, but he said he wouldn't do it even if I was his best friend and asked him to. I was ten years old, too, but my ma and pa didn't care one bit if I snuck out at night and they never found out. But I knew there was no way I could make Tom do it, so we planned to go to the cemetery during the day. The very next day.

"And when we get there," I told Tom, "we're going to have to stand on a fresh-dug grave. Dead people don't like you standing on them, so we might run into a ghost or two, even if it is daytime. And there's the guy with the rifle, so one way or another we'll have ourselves an adventure."

* * *

I was surprised when I called on Tom the next day and he was all ready to go to the cemetery with me. I thought for sure he'd find some way not to go, and I'd have to do a lot of convincing just to get him to change his mind. When his ma asked us where we were going, I told her Tom and me were going down to the park where there's all these swings and slides for little kids. And she believed me.

"Scared?" I asked Tom as we walked through the fields to the cemetery.

"No," he said, but I could tell he was.

"Wanna go back?"

"No. It's okay."

"Sure?"

"I'm sure."

That's just the kind of friend Tom is to me. When we were little kids, I asked him to eat a caterpillar, and he was going to do it, except I stopped him 'cause I knew it wasn't something nice to make your best friend do. It's just nice to know he'd do it if you asked.

When we got to the gates of the cemetery, Tom stopped and I knew he was having second doubts about going. But when he saw that I wasn't stopping for anything, he followed right away.

I found us a grave that had just been dug. It was easy. I just looked for a mound of dirt with no grass growing on it yet. I walked over to it and stood right in

the middle. I had to convince Tom to step on the grave, but finally he did. I thought he was going to be sick when he felt his feet sinking in the soft dirt.

Tom and me stood there for a good twenty minutes, I think, though I'm not so sure 'cause I don't have a watch that works. It was a long time, though. But nothing happened. I started telling Tom scary stories that Clark used to tell me when I was a little kid, thinking that maybe that would make a ghost appear, but it didn't help. I yelled and screamed at the top of my lungs hoping the guy with the rifle would come chasing after us, but that never happened, either.

Finally we just went home.

"What went wrong?" Tom asked me.

"I don't know," I said. "It's probably 'cause it isn't dark out. I don't think any ghost worth spit comes out before nine or ten, at least."

Tom said he had to admit that he was glad nothing happened. He didn't think it was too good an idea to mess around with dead people, or living people with rifles. I told him that probably was why nothing happened.

"It's your attitude," I said. "It's just not good for adventuring."

"I don't like this whole thing, anyway."

"Well, I told you we were going to have an adventure, so's that's what we're going to have. You don't want to

make me a liar, do you? When you've had an adventure, you'll see, you'll love it."

"You've had one?"

"Well," I began and had to think about that a little. "No . . . not exactly. But I've read all about adventuring in Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. And if they can do it, so can we. Remember, you've got the name for it, and I've got the brains."

I hoped I didn't hurt him none, the part about me having the brains, but I needed strong words to convince him his life was boring if it didn't have any adventure to it. Tom's the kind of kid who sits at home playing with plasticine or watching TV, even when there's nothing exciting on, or does nothing at all and doesn't think it's any different from doing something.

Me, I have to always be doing something or I'd feel like I was dead. I told Tom that and asked him if he wanted me, his best friend, to be dead.

"No," he said right away.

"Then let's find something exciting to do. We've got to think like adventurers. Think about something real exciting."

We thought again for awhile. Tom said he thought maybe climbing a tree might be exciting. I know climbing a tree might be exciting for him 'cause his ma never lets him do things like that, but I've climbed trees hundreds of

times and there's no excitement left in it for me.

"Climbing a mountain's exciting," I told Tom. "Like Mount Everest and those kind of mountains. But not climbing a tree you can find anywhere."

"There's no mountains in Dernon," he said.

Then I got this idea that was as good as mountain climbing, but probably a lot more dangerous.

"We can climb a building," I said. "I saw someone do it on TV. They do it to practice for mountains, and since we don't have any mountains close by . . . Now, <u>that's</u> exciting."

Tom didn't say anything. I guess he was in shock at the idea since he never even climbed a tree before.

"What building?" he finally said.

"The tallest, of course."

That was the Royal Bank building right near the shopping centre. It was two stories high. I told Tom we should really go to the city where there were buildings a lot taller, but I knew that if his ma wouldn't let him go out at night or climb a tree, she probably wouldn't let him go to the city, even if it was for an adventure.

That afternoon we stood outside the bank. Tom and me looked up at the roof, and it looked an awful long way up, I hated to admit.

"How're we going to do it?" I said to myself out loud.

"We could take the stairs," Tom said.

Right then I told him I wasn't going to stand for any more of this down-to-earth-against-adventuring talk. The next time he said something like that I told him I'd strangle him even if it meant me getting the electric chair and my ma and pa being forever shamed.

"Do you think we'll be allowed to do it?" he asked me, looking up at the roof again.

"Of course," I told him. "I've got two dollars and thirteen cents in this bank. How much you got?"

He said he had a bit more than three dollars. I told him that with over five dollars between us we had all the right in the world to climb the building.

We stood there for a good half hour. People were coming and going and sometimes someone we knew would stop and look up at the roof, like we were doing, and ask us what was up there.

Tom always wanted to tell them our plan, but I made him promise not to tell anyone what we did as far as adventuring went. "It's top secret," I said.

I told the people who asked what we were looking at, that we had seen a bird fly up there with a broken wing, which didn't make much sense, I guess, but they believed it anyway. They'd say things like how they were sorry things like that happened to poor animals and how it was nice Tom and me were so concerned. By the time we left the bank (I

decided that climbing it wasn't so hot an idea), I even had Tom believing it too. He thought we should come back with his pa and a ladder and help the poor thing out.

I slept that night tossing and turning and trying to think of at least one good idea to get some excitement into Tom's life. I couldn't sleep at all, so I got up and decided to practice sneaking out of the house in case later one of our adventures needed me doing that—I was already pretty good at sneaking around the house at night without being heard. But first I looked out of the front room window to see if the coast was clear. Part of adventuring was not getting caught at it.

It was all clear until I saw Doc Finn back out of his driveway and drive down the street real fast. It sort of surprised me Doc Finn would drive like that. I thought a bit. Suppose he wasn't going to see someone sick. Suppose he was running away 'cause he had some dark secret. . . . Then it hit me! Our adventure was to find the solution to the mystery of Doc Finn. It would be something Tom could get interested in since it was his pa and all. There was something strange about someone who was up at all hours of the night.

The next day I told Tom that. Right away Tom said, "He's a doctor! People don't get sick just during the day, you know."

"Tom Finn!" I said, getting real mad, "I told you I

wasn't going to listen to any of this down-to-earth stuff. Sure he's a doctor, and sure he goes out at night to take care of sick and dying and murdered people, and you can think that's all it is if you don't want to have anything to do with adventuring. But if we're going to have an adventure, we've got to look at things different. Did you ever think your pa could be going out at night 'cause he was a spy or something?"

"No."

"There you go again! You're supposed to say, 'Yes, of course he's a spy.' Look at everybody else in this town. Who else could be a spy around here? No one. But look at your pa. Besides me, he's the only one in Dernon smart enough to do spying. Don't you see?"

I waited for Tom to answer. He wasn't sure whether to say yes or no, I could tell. So I nodded my head up and down so he'd know what to say.

"Yes?" he said real unsure.

I decided we'd have to follow his pa to get more information about what exactly he was doing. Tom didn't like that at all, but I convinced him it was the only way. I told him if we didn't do it I was thinking about going back to my idea of building a raft and floating down the river right out to the ocean. And then . . . well, who knows where we'd go?

Tom said he'd follow his pa.

* * *

Doc Finn's office was on the main street right across from the shopping centre and down from the bank. As we walked past the bank, Tom said he wondered how the bird on the roof was doing. He looked so sad about it. I had to tell him there was no bird and I didn't know how he got that idea and it was only something we said to people who wondered what we'd been doing there.

He said "Oh!" like he knew it all along, but he still looked kind of sad. But I didn't let that worry me, he always looks that way.

We waited across the street from Doc Finn's office until lunchtime. We sat on a bench outside Dandee Do-nuts. Nothing much was happening. While we were there the only thing that happened that was even a bit exciting was when Melissa Burke rode by on her new bike and fell off. I laughed real loud so she'd hear 'cause she was a big show-off. Tom wanted to go over and help her but I stopped him. She wasn't hurt anyway.

At twelve o'clock the church bells rang and Tom said he'd have to be getting home for his lunch. The smells coming from Dandee Do-nuts were making me feel hungry, too, but I told him to wait just a bit more.

"Does your pa go home for lunch?" I asked.

"No," Tom said, and added that I knew that already.

"Then," I asked quickly, "where does he go?"

Tom gave out a little sigh. He was silent for awhile, then he said puzzled, "Gee, I don't know."

I looked over and saw the door to Doc Finn's office open just like it had been doing all morning, but this time it was Doc Finn who stepped out instead of some sick person. Quickly I pulled Tom behind a bush beside the bench and we watched Doc Finn walk down the street.

"I wonder where he's going?" I asked myself out loud.

Tom said, "Why don't we go over and ask him?"

I gave him one of my looks.

"What should we do then?" he asked.

"Follow him!"

From behind the bush next to the bench, I ran to a nearby parked car. I had to look back and call Tom before he'd follow. When he reached the parked car, I was already looking through the car windows, keeping my eyes on Doc Finn as he walked. Tom told me again that he had to get home for lunch.

"Don't worry," I said. "You can miss it. As soon as we can we'll phone your ma and say you've stayed over for lunch at my house." I knew his ma wouldn't like that much: she thinks we only eat peanut butter sandwiches at my place. But I was prepared for adventuring. I had a dime in my pocket for the phone. It was all that was left from the fifty cents Clark gave me to keep my mouth shut about the girl I saw him kissing in our garage. I'd spent the rest on

ice cream for Tom and me the day before, even though Tom was afraid to eat it at first 'cause he thought it would spoil his supper.

Two blocks away I could see Doc Finn turn off the main street and start down the street to the high school. Tom and me followed closely behind.

By going from parked car to tree to bush to parked car, we made our way, keeping Doc Finn in sight all the time. And he never knew we were following him even when Tom fell once and almost started to cry.

When Doc Finn reached the high school and went inside, we stopped. Tom asked what we were going to do now. "Wait till he comes out," I said. So we waited. A few minutes later he came out with Miss Garnett.

"That's it!" I said. "Your pa's having a secret meeting with Miss Garnett 'cause . . ." and I stopped to watch them as they climbed into a small car, ". . . 'cause she's a double agent."

Tom asked me why.

"She's new in town, isn't she? It's perfect. The enemy sends her here to act like she's a teacher when really she's here to get secrets only your pa knows."

"My dad's on the school board," Tom said, " and she's a teacher. They could be talking about school things." Again I had to give Tom one of my warning looks.

Doc Finn and Miss Garnett drove away, so there was no

use trying to follow them anymore.

When we got back to Tom's house, Tom got into trouble for not coming home for lunch. His ma kept him in for the rest of the afternoon and most of the next day, so I had time to plan what we'd do next as far as our adventure went. I knew we'd have to find some evidence to prove Doc Finn was selling secrets to a double agent, or, 'cause Doc Finn's Tom's pa and all, find the evidence that would clear his pa before the police came to arrest him.

I was pretty set on breaking into Doc Finn's office, but I knew that wouldn't be too easy since he had a secretary that Clark once told me was a lady wrestler until she beat up a midget and felt so bad about it she decided that for the rest of her life she'd help the world. That's why she came to town and works for Doc Finn helping sick people. She's real big and looks awfully strong, but she's real nice to everybody, so I guess she's truly sorry for what she did.

I saw Tom again only the next afternoon, so there wasn't much time to do any adventuring that day. Anyway, I could tell that Tom wasn't much in the mood to do anything except sit around and say nothing.

I asked him why he was so quiet and he opened his mouth a bit to say something, but then he closed it. I knew he wouldn't say anything else. Something was bugging him.

I started cheering him up by telling him what Clark said at the supper table the night before about this girl he

used to like and how she's going to have a baby. I asked Clark if he was going to have a baby, too, since from the things he always says I thought it was something you do all the time in high school, and he nearly choked on his food. My ma told me to finish eating and go out and play. The reason I told Tom was 'cause he's the kind of kid who likes little kids, so I thought it would interest him hearing about babies. But it didn't. He looked even more sad after I brought it up.

So that's about the way we spent the rest of the afternoon.

When I left him to go and eat supper, I asked him if he was going to come out after he ate, which is something his ma never lets him do. But I thought it would be nice of me to ask anyway.

Of course he said no. He went into his house leaving me standing there to think that I just had to do something for the kid or else he'd go through the rest of his life just like that: looking sad all the time.

I ate my supper quickly as usual, only slowing down long enough to hear Clark telling my ma and pa how the Landau kids were caught drinking their pa's liquor and Steve Landau threw up all over their living room carpet. Steve is one of Clark's friends and he always looks to me just like the type of kid who'd throw up no matter what. I don't like

him at all since he once called me "pip-squeak," when I don't even know what it means, but coming from Steve Landau's mouth I know it couldn't be good.

I was trying to figure a way to get another fifty cents from Clark so I could buy something for Tom to cheer him up and maybe get him to like adventuring more, when the front doorbell rang, and there was Tom. He was all white, even more than usual, and kind of shaky. So right away I asked him if he saw a ghost or something. He said no, so I knew there was nothing more for me to say about that.

"What are you doing out after supper?" I said. It had to be the first time I could remember that Tom was allowed out this late without his ma and pa.

"My mother said I could go out."

I knew how strange that was and asked him why.

"She's talking to my dad, so they said I could go out."

"Yeah?" I brightened up right away. It must be something to do with this double agent thing. "What are they talking about?"

"I don't know. Something about people finding out things. My mom doesn't want them to know. Things like that. Anyway, how should I know? I'm here."

I thought about it and knew Tom was on to something even if he probably didn't know it.

With all my ideas about breaking into Doc Finn's office, I had forgotten that the easiest place to break into

was right next door—Tom's house.

Right away Tom said, "No way!"

"Don't you want to know what your ma and pa are talking about?"

"No I don't." He thought a bit, then said, "Anyway, they'll catch us."

"No, they'll never know. This'll be a breeze. Come on."

He thought a bit more, then slowly nodded.

I knew he still didn't like it much, but I could see he sort of wanted to know what his ma and pa were talking about, even though I knew he really didn't think it had much to do with double agents.

The only place we could have gotten into Tom's house was through a basement window. I tried one, but it must have been locked, 'cause as hard as I tried, it just wouldn't open. It got to the point where I picked up a rock out of Tom's ma's garden and was about to throw it through the glass, but Tom stopped me just by the way he looked at me, which was a real look of horror.

Tom and me went around the house trying all the basement windows, until finally I found one that opened.

I looked at Tom and smiled. Now that the window was open, I told him we were going in.

"Where are your ma and pa?" I asked.

Tom said they were in the kitchen, which was good

'cause the kitchen was at the opposite side of the house from the window.

Carefully I pushed open the window and put my head inside. I could hear someone talking upstairs, but I couldn't tell who it was. I pulled my head back out.

"Well, here goes," I said.

"Are you sure we should do this?" Tom asked. "I want to know, but . . . " He was afraid. "Come on, I'll be with you," I said, and went ahead and climbed in. It wasn't something that was hard for me to do, I practice climbing in and out of windows all the time. It comes in handy. Once inside, though, I knew it would be hard for Tom to do the same thing, so I had to help. Tom was so afraid by now, having time to think about it, that I almost had to pull him in and lower him down. But that wasn't hard either, though it left me a bit out of breath. Tom's pretty light.

I looked around. Tom's basement was mostly a storage area for winter things and neat things Doc Finn picks up here and there. But Tom's ma won't let them upstairs because she says they're old and dirty. Like this wooden chest that smells funny inside and once I told Tom it was 'cause fourteen kittens had died in there. That made him cry, of course. It was real mean for me to have said that, but I was a lot younger then, and I never say things like that anymore knowing how he feels about animals.

We made our way past cardboard boxes and past the

bicycle Doc Finn had bought for Tom, but is too big for him. As we moved across the basement, the sounds from upstairs became clearer. I could hear Doc Finn's voice. But I still didn't know what he was saying.

I was real proud of the way Tom and me were being extra quiet just like we were supposed to. And Tom kept right up with me, not making any sound except for the little breathing noises he makes when he's scared.

The stairs were on the far side of the basement. They led up to the kitchen—it was the perfect place to listen to what was going on up there. Tom was right behind me, and when I stopped to listen, he moved real close to me and tightly held onto my arm near the elbow.

I listened real hard and heard Doc Finn say, "Margaret, Margaret" over a few times. Margaret's Tom's ma. He said it in a soothing voice like you'd use with little kids.

Then I heard this funny sound and right away I knew Tom's ma was crying.

"I don't know what to say, Margaret. I wish you'd stop crying. It's not going to help."

"Why are you doing this?"

"There aren't any reasons. I've said everything I can. It just happened."

"And what about Tom?"

Hearing all that I knew it had nothing to do with double agents, or adventuring, or anything like that. It

wasn't exciting to listen to your ma and pa fight—that's everyday stuff. This wasn't any kind of an adventure for Tom.

Tom's grip on my arm got tighter and tighter till it started hurting me. I was real surprised Tom had so much strength in him. I pulled off his hand and started leading him back towards the window. He followed willingly. I could tell he was crying.

Outside I asked him if he was okay, but he didn't say anything. I told him I was sorry the adventure didn't turn out but I'd think of something better next time, something more exciting, and this time it would work.

Tom looked straight at me like he was mad at me or something and said, "No! I don't want to. Look what's happened. I hate you!"

Then he ran into his house.

The next day Tom and his ma left to go away for awhile. I asked my ma how long, but she said she really didn't know and couldn't really say. And though Tom's not the kind of kid who's easy to have an adventure with, it's not his fault. I guess it was stupid to think his pa was involved with double agents and all that other stuff.

Just tonight at the supper table Clark said how much he hated Doc Finn and Miss Garnett and what they had done, and my pa told him to keep his mouth shut about it.

So I'm waiting for Tom to come back so I can do something he'd like to do. No more adventuring stuff if he doesn't want to.

Tom Finn's my best friend and I miss him.

Even if he isn't like a real-life book character.

THE END

THE EMPTY SEAT

It was the first cold night of Autumn. The temperature had dropped dramatically in the late afternoon, and now, as he stood at the bus stop in the cold evening air, Arthur Lewis could feel winter closing in. And he shivered.

He resented having had to work late, being forced to be out in the cold hours after his regular dinner hour. He was already coming down with something. He certainly didn't need this.

But William E. Convey, Arthur's immediate supervisor, manager of the Eastern region, His Majesty, had told Arthur only minutes before five that he'd have to stay late and finish a report. As if it couldn't wait. He was about to tell Convey he wouldn't stay, but Convey, no doubt sensing this, dared him with a big, bold smile. "I want to see it first thing in the morning, Arthur. First thing." The "or

else" didn't need to be said.

So Arthur stayed. He phoned his lift and told him not to wait, he'd be taking a bus. Then he made a quick call to his wife to tell her he'd be home late. All this because of Convey. Convey was a man who loved titles and awards. His office wall was covered with every plaque and certificate he had ever been awarded at an endless string of ten-dollar-a-plate chicken dinners. Only one was missing—the one Arthur would gladly give him, adding to the man's collection of titles—The Officious Bastard.

Two other people were waiting at the bus stop for the trip home: a teenager with some books clamped tightly under his arm, and a bored-looking woman in her early thirties. The woman was dressed in a long suede coat, and every so often would cough into a leather-gloved fist. A secretary, Arthur thought. When the woman started hiccuping, Arthur figured she had been out for a drink or two. Probably with the other girls in her office, or—and Arthur thought this was the more likely of the two—out for a drink with her boss. He had seen how that worked at his own office. Those who wanted to get ahead became cloying yes-men, and some of the women—well, they'd make it clear they held no qualms about taking work home with them, boss and all.

He suddenly disliked the woman. He didn't know her, but he couldn't help but feel she was just like those women at his office. The hen-house bitches, he called them.

Always complaining. Always gossiping. Always watching to see if someone else was getting something they weren't, then telling on them if they did. He'd hear them nag incessantly at subordinates to the point where they'd usually quit. Someone else would be hired in their place—an endless stream of filing clerks and office boys. And the nagging would continue with a new-found intensity, almost as if the bitches were invigorated by the introduction of fresh blood.

He looked at his watch. Damn! The bus was late as usual. It was always late when he had to take it. The driver didn't show up for work, or there was some union gripe about something or another. No matter how cold it was, how late, how wet, they were treated shamelessly. Like cattle. As it was, the bus passed only once every two hours. If it came at all. It was the curse of living in the suburbs. You were expected to own a car. At one time Arthur was going to buy one, but there were always other things more important: his children's education for one. The only reason he had moved to the suburbs to a house which he could barely afford was for the children. He thought it was a good place for them to grow up. When the kids had gone out on their own, he had thought again about buying a car. But the recession made that thought frivolous. And the way work was going . . . well, it was wiser to save for the rainy day he knew was close at hand. He really didn't need a car, anyway. He had gotten by all these years with-

out one.

It would be wonderful to have a car, though, and drive places on the weekend, get away and travel wherever he desired, free to come and go as he pleased, dependent on no one. He knew his wife would love a car and he remembered how it had always been one of his dreams to surprise her with one some day.

He looked down the street. The tall buildings lined it like the walls of a deep canyon. The headlights of passing cars blurred into harsh, brilliant stars. He couldn't see the bus anywhere. A sudden, chill wind blew fiercely down the street. Arthur pushed his collar up close to his face and plunged his hands deeper into his coat pockets. He was only wearing a raincoat. He was thankful for the gloves he had found in his desk drawer. He had left them behind the past winter, forgotten them, actually. Whichever, he was just grateful to have them now.

Among the many lights passing on the street, Arthur could distinguish an occasional taxi. He was debating whether to hail one when he saw the bus crawling up the street. It stopped for two red lights before it finally reached him.

The secretary was the first on the bus when its doors opened. She produced a twenty dollar bill and an argument ensued between her and the bus driver. Arthur wanted to tell her to let the others pass if she didn't have the exact

fare, but just before he decided to do it, the bus driver gave in and made change.

Arthur paid for his ticket and walked to the back of the bus where he spotted two empty seats side-by-side. He sat by the window next to the heater hoping to find warmth, but the heater either didn't work or hadn't been turned on. It was almost as cold inside as it was out.

He looked around. The bus was not quite full. He knew that at the next stop most of the seats, if not all of them, would be taken; it was the last downtown stop and many people waited there. He wondered why no one complained to the driver about the heaters.

He felt at that moment as if this entire evening had been planned that way. His having to stay late. His having to wait in the cold. And now his having to take this damn, cold bus home. The Officious Bastard had probably known it would be like this. Damn him! He should have told him to shove his damn report, shove the job, shove himself up himself for that matter. But he hadn't. Three more years, Arthur had reminded himself; only three more years and then he could take early retirement. He had worked for the company for thirty-five years for all that meant. He didn't want to lose his pension, so he had stayed and written the damn report, a report he knew The Officious Bastard would never read since it contained information he already knew. Arthur had written the same kind of report the week before.

He had found it, later, lying in the wastepaper basket beside The Officious Bastard's desk. It was right there for him to see, right on top. They're testing me again, he thought. It's part of their plan. It had been like that for the last three months. Nitpicking about the tiniest of things, not telling him important details he needed to know to do his job then blaming him for not knowing, giving him work with impossible deadlines. It was all part of the not-so-gentle heave-ho. Even if he worked his ass off and completed the work in the designated time, they'd tell him it was all wrong or they no longer needed it. Anything just to see how much more he would take, hoping he'd blow his top and quit, or rage at them, giving them a reason to fire him. But he wasn't about to do either. He'd make sure, no matter what it took, not to give them a reason. And no matter what, he wouldn't lose his temper. He wouldn't give them the satisfaction. Even if The Officious Bastard made him write a hundred reports. A thousand. It didn't matter. He wouldn't give in.

At the next stop six people boarded the bus. As each person walked down the aisle to the few remaining seats at the back, Arthur hoped no one would sit beside him. He purposely took up all the room on both his own seat and the one beside him, looked out the window when anyone seemed about to ask him to move over, and tried to appear oblivious to the diminishing seat supply. But no one confronted him,

demanding to be allowed to sit there.

The last two people to enter the bus were an old woman and an Asian-looking man. Arthur watched the old lady as she made her way down the aisle looking for an empty seat, obviously dreading the prospect of having to stand. She was bent over, and looked as though she was about to fall down. Arthur wondered why in hell she was taking the bus at all. She should stay at home, he thought, where she belongs. What if she dropped dead in the middle of the road, or right here on the bus? There wouldn't be anyone to help her except total strangers. And what would they care? The woman found a seat two rows in front of him.

The Asian followed the old woman down the aisle, also looking for a seat. Arthur felt for sure the man would sit beside him. But just as it seemed the man was about to ask Arthur to move over (Arthur having already turned to look out the window, yet still expecting to hear the man's voice), the man passed the seat in favour of one at the very back of the bus.

As the bus started to pull away from the curb, Arthur looked around and saw the only seats left were the one beside him and one up front beside a woman with a baby. Every so often the baby would give out a jagged cry that filled the bus. It was obvious why no one wanted to sit there.

Arthur knew there was talk going around at work about him being demoted. No one had said anything outright, but

he knew it was only a matter of time. They couldn't fire him, not after thirty-five years, not without a good reason. But they were working on it. In the meantime they could make it as hard as possible for him. Like what they did to Simmons a few months before. A demotion, then a transfer to a pissant town out West. The choice was to either take the transfer or quit. Simmons had chosen the former. Arthur wondered if he would have done the same. He doubted it. Maybe that was what it would take to make him lose his temper. Yes, that most certainly would be the last straw. How could they have forced a man like Simmons, a man who had worked for the company a good forty years ever since high school, as Arthur had, leave the home in which he had raised his children for some hell-hole? But what choice was there, really? They'd squeeze you dry and throw you out without regret. You were just another economic consideration in these hard times. One of many figures on a balance sheet.

The bus was now going at a good speed, having left downtown, and was making its way through the industrial outskirts before it would reach the highway leading to the suburbs.

Arthur looked out the window at the endless rows of factories and warehouses. Inside he knew people were being wrung dry everyday, waiting until that day when they, too, would be thrown aside. Every so often he'd see a cheap restaurant/ bar or a row of seedy motels. Both were strate-

gically placed for the workers' after hours entertainment —places to forget how much they hated their work.

The bus slowed as it approached another stop, this one outside a brooding, abandoned factory. Arthur looked over the heads of the people in front of him and out the windshield. There was no one waiting there, either. The bus started to pick up speed again, when a figure suddenly stepped out from the factory's darkly shadowed doorway and casually waved down the bus.

The bus driver didn't seem to notice. When it looked as though the bus was going to keep going, a woman in a front row seat told the driver to stop, that there was someone there. The passengers lurched forward as the driver abruptly put on the brakes.

The figure turned out to be a young man, about twenty-five. Arthur could see him more clearly as he boarded the bus. He was wearing a jean jacket and jeans. His hair was long and oily. Strings of it hung in his face, and he had to push the hair aside, pressing it back with one hand as though he hoped it would stick to his head, while he plunged the other hand into his jeans looking for money.

After he paid the driver he started down the aisle. The bus driver called him back, but he didn't hear. A man half way down the bus stopped him to tell him the driver wanted him. He made his way back to the front. Arthur could see that the young man was drunk. He had almost no coordination

as he maneuvered his way back to the driver, and the bus wasn't even moving. The driver handed him a ticket telling him he needed it to show he had paid. The young man absently took the ticket and started walking down the aisle again.

Arthur quickly looked out the window. He didn't want that punk sitting beside him. Sit by the baby, he said to himself. Don't sit by me. He repeated this over to himself three or four times, each time more quickly than the last. It became a prayer, it took on that sort of fervency. But the prayer went unanswered. The young man brusquely sat next to Arthur, pushing him rudely without saying a word of apology.

Arthur continued to look out the window. The young man leaned sloppily against him as the bus started moving again. Arthur looked at the young man, hoping a pointed glare would straighten him up. But the young man was intent on meticulously rolling a cigarette, taking a little tobacco at a time from a small leather pouch he had on his belt. At least Arthur assumed it was tobacco. It crossed his mind it could be drugs.

Arthur readjusted himself in his seat as best he could now that the young man was taking more than his share of room. The young man's legs were spread wide, forcing Arthur to move closer to the window and to keep his own legs close together. Arthur decidedly pulled the lower part of his raincoat about him, yanking it from under the young man's

legs. The young man looked right at Arthur. Arthur looked back with what he hoped was a very obvious look of disgust. But the young man only made a crazed smile, slow in forming but accentuated by a demented look in his steel-blue eyes. Arthur focused on a huge scar across the young man's right cheek. No, not quite a scar, but more of a gouge. As though it had been carved carefully with a knife. Or as though something had steadily and patiently started to eat his face away. The gouge gaped long and deep, darkly shadowed even in the bright bus lighting. It had been made a long time ago, Arthur guessed, and had never healed properly. But however it had happened, there was definitely a piece of the young man's face missing from just under his right cheekbone.

Arthur quickly looked away, back out the window. He heard the young man's low chuckle. The young man continued rolling the cigarette. Arthur was sure he was sitting beside someone who had just been released from prison. Or had escaped. He wondered why the young man was on the bus at all. Certainly he didn't live in the suburbs near him. But things had changed. His neighbourhood had seemed to follow the economy's downward slide. No one seemed to be working anymore. The young man beside him was most likely among the growing number of unemployed. There were no jobs for anyone, least of all the young. Arthur felt pity for the young man. It was too bad things had to come to this.

The young man burped loudly. The pig! A middle aged woman directly in front of him turned around and Arthur was sure she was about to make a "Tsk" sound, but abruptly stopped as she looked into the young man's face. She quickly turned away. Arthur knew it was those demented eyes. The young man burped again.

Arthur started thinking about the anxiety and frustration he felt about his job, hoping to divert himself from the young man's obnoxious presence for the fifteen minutes it would take until he arrived at his stop. Then a five minute walk and he'd be home. The bus started up the on-ramp to the highway. Arthur could see the others on the bus stir in relief that they, too, were almost home. He could see the looks of resentment on the faces of those sitting near the baby who was now bawling at high-pitch. Arthur wished it would stop. He almost wanted to scream at it to shut up. He had a headache. The baby's crying stabbed through his head.

The baby had served temporarily to distract him from the young man. As much as possible, Arthur tried not to turn from the window. When he did, it was only to cast quick glances when he felt the young man was not looking. But he was jarringly reminded of the young man's presence when smoke wafted leisurely into Arthur's face. Again Arthur turned to look at him. And again the young man smiled at Arthur.

Arthur firmly decided to look out the window and not turn back. Soon he'd be home. But just as he was thinking of things other than the bus and the person sitting next to him, smoke blew in his face again. Arthur would not look, but he knew the young man was doing it on purpose. More smoke blew Arthur's way. But again he fought the growing desire to turn to his seat companion and . . . He didn't know what. Why was this happening? Why did these things always happen to him?

But Arthur endured, forcing himself away from the point where he was certain he could kill if pushed one inch further. Or break down. Just recently he had realized he couldn't handle much more. Everything. Life itself at times. Everyone in it. Maybe they did have the better of him, had bested him at last. He wondered if he had already lost. They were winning, he knew that. He wasn't sure there was anything left in him with which to resist, for that's all it was now, resistance.

The young man finally finished the cigarette, a cigarette that by now Arthur was sure must contain drugs. The young man sat back in his seat, shifting from left to right trying to make himself comfortable. He started mumbling something incoherently. Arthur continued to stare out the window attempting to make himself oblivious to the young man. Again he was almost successful. But again the young man began moving in his seat as though searching for more

comfort. This time, though, he jabbed Arthur forcefully in the side with his elbow.

He's baiting me. He'd love me to start something, the drunken bastard. Blowing smoke in my face, pushing me around as though he was the only one with the right to sit here. I hate him. I hate him with everything in me. I wish he was dead.

Arthur gritted his teeth to the point of pain.

The young man suddenly laughed loudly. Arthur shivered. It was as though this person next to him had read his mind. Others on the bus turned to look, hearing the wild laughter. Arthur didn't have to turn from his rigid position; he knew they were looking. He could feel it. He stared out the window, but saw nothing. No matter how fast the bus was travelling on the highway towards his home, it seemed to Arthur the slowest speed possible. A crawl. And he cursed the driver for his slowness; the Officious Bastard for having made him stay late; the young man for cruelly taunting him; everyone who made his life a wretched, miserable existence; and mostly himself for being unable to do anything about it.

He wasn't a bad person. Why was this happening to him? He had always tried to be fair in his dealing with others. There had been a time when he had truly cared for the well-being of those around him. But what did that amount to? It was difficult to give a damn when no one else did.

Finally the bus slowed as it made its turn from the highway into the suburb that was its destination. Arthur's heart suddenly jumped joyfully as he felt himself only moments from being delivered from this hell. His stop was next. He'd be free. He'd stand up, walk to the front of the bus, give his ticket to the driver, then disembark. And they could all continue on their way to Hell itself for all he cared.

But first he'd have to get by the young man who sat as immovable as prison bars must seem to a prisoner. This thought erased all his elation, sinking his heart into panic. He knew I'd have to pass by him. This is what he's waiting for. The Confrontation. His drugged, drunken mind weaving more torture, more humiliation. Arthur had seen the faces of the other passengers. They had seen his face, too. A face trapped between a demon and the bus window. Their faces reflected the disgust he deserved. He was a weak, intimidated puppy at the mercy of this cruel mastiff. And he knew the young man sensed his weakness—his fear. Arthur reeked of it. It would be obvious, he felt, to anyone.

Others started moving towards the front of the bus as it neared the stop. A middle aged man. A young woman with shopping bags from a department store. The student he had seen waiting for the bus. They moved towards the front with ease, no doubt relieved <u>they</u> had not been trapped and harassed by the Devil himself.

As the bus slowed to make the stop, Arthur quickly stood up and said in a strained voice, "Excuse me. This is my stop."

Before the young man knew what was happening, Arthur pushed by him, nearly leaping over his legs. Just as quickly, Arthur made his way to the front where the doors were opening.

He didn't dare look behind him. He was convinced the young man would be at his heels. He heard noises behind him, the sounds of people standing up and moving to the front for their stop, the next one being only a few blocks up the street. But he didn't look to see who they were. He merely left the bus with the others, feeling secure in their group. He even smiled at the student. But then he turned and walked rapidly towards the street that led to the one on which he lived.

When he had walked, at times almost run, down the length of this street and rounded the corner, he slowed to catch his breath. His heart was racing at a rate he could not remember having felt in recent times. He stopped, suddenly afraid he'd have a heart attack. Yes, that's just what would happen. He could die right there, a victim of his own fears. He regained his breath slowly, moderating his heart beat back to a near-normal pace as though by pure willpower.

He started walking again. He suddenly noticed the air.

It was still cold, but fresh. Much better than the stale smoke blown in his face by that punk on the bus. All at once Arthur felt much better. He was almost home. The street was deserted, but he could feel the warming presence of families inside each of the houses. And his wife was waiting. She had, no doubt, kept one of her delicious suppers waiting for him, as warm as though she had just made it.

Suddenly he felt an overwhelming feeling of love mixed with sadness for the woman he had married. He knew he oftentimes neglected her, took her for granted, vented his frustrations and anxieties on her as though she were their cause. She was, in reality, anything but the bane of his life. If anything, she was one of the few sources for him of true pleasure. She and their two children. They were what he lived for. They were the real reason he didn't lose his temper at work, quit, or just take off and smash The Officious Bastard in his officious mouth. He had a family to take care of. And though the children were grown now, he still felt a strong sense of responsibility towards them. He knew he would most likely feel that way about them no matter how far away their travels took them.

And he knew that when he walked into his house his wife would try so hard to make him happy, a happiness that he felt she deserved far more than he did. She never gave up trying to talk to him, even when he outright ignored her. He

didn't mean to be cold—he was preoccupied. Work haunted him.

His wife was always there when he needed someone. A few words. Some affection. That's all it took. Like magic she was able to bring him back from wherever anger or depression or pain had driven him. He felt unworthy of her love.

He knew exactly what she would say about the bus ride.

"You worry about nothing, Arthur. You have to stop making yourself sick over everything."

"But, Ellen," Arthur would say, "you don't know what it was like."

"Even if it was that bad," she'd tell him, "you can't change the world and everyone in it. You can only try to change what you're feeling. And that's exactly what you have to do, Arthur. Stop letting everything affect you like this."

How could he have forgotten how much he deeply loved her? Just thinking about the concern his wife felt for him made him feel better than he had felt for a long time.

As he looked up the street he could see the front porch light of his house. She always kept it on when he wasn't there. He often wondered why, but now, for the first time, he understood. It was a candle burning, lighting his way back to her. She was waiting, and he wanted to run, just break into the fastest pace he could manage. He knew he

couldn't reach home fast enough.

Then he heard footsteps behind him. Footsteps that were quicker and more youthful than his own. Their sound moved closer.

Arthur knew who it was, he didn't have to turn around and look. It's that punk—he's coming after me. He's going to rob me. He thinks because I'm wearing a suit I have money. But Arthur had less than twenty dollars on him. He'd give his wallet to the young man and end this torment. As long as he left Arthur alone, he could have the money.

No, damn it! He won't even get that from me. No more! I won't be threatened by that disgusting hoodlum.

Arthur took his hands out of his raincoat pockets, steeling himself to defend himself if necessary.

It was then he realized he had forgotten his gloves in his haste to get off the bus. Just as suddenly it occurred to him his fears had grown to monstrous and unreasonable proportions. Ellen was right. He worried over nothing. Surely if it was the young man following him, all he wanted was to return his missing gloves. Now, wouldn't that be something—the young man not a menacing ogre, but, rather, as good a Samaritan as Arthur wished all people to be?

"You get yourself so upset sometimes, Arthur," he could hear Ellen say when he told her. They'd be sitting at the supper table, Arthur just finishing his meal. The gloves would be lying beside his plate as a reminder to his

foolishness. His wife would shake her head good-naturedly, and Arthur would have to admit how comical it all had become.

Arthur began to laugh as the footsteps moved swiftly towards him.

What a foolish old man I am! I allow myself to be worried sick. I'm afraid of my own shadow.

Arthur started turning around, smiling, ready to greet the young man, his hands held out expecting the gloves.

He turned to see the gouge-faced young man, empty-handed and smiling at him in that madly delighted way.

THE END

AMERICIUM'S NEW FLAG

The first thing Diana saw as she stepped from the transtrain was Americium's new flag. She had just returned from visiting a medic in the city—Ogden hadn't had one since the old-style doctor had died the year before—and the new flag seemed to her a startling innovation in Ogden's landscape. It flew over the town's small transtrain station, an old-fashioned wooden building. The platform squeaked and vibrated as the passengers disembarked—a reminder of the inefficiency of wood.

People had gathered under the flagpole and were looking up to where the flag whip-cracked in the late summer wind. Diana stopped and looked, too. The new flag, she thought, wasn't much different from the old one. No one would have tolerated a severe alteration in something as sacred as the flag; there had been enough trouble over the changing of a

few words in the national anthem. It was only when the country realized how important the few changes were, that they grudgingly allowed them to be made. The only real difference in the flag was a large star superimposed at the centre of the original design. The star contained three profiled figures: an industry worker, a scientist, and a soldier. The figures were looking up at— Diana couldn't quite see what as the wind died and the flag collapsed around the flagpole. The wind picked up again and lifted the flag so she could see the three figures looking up at a flagpole flying the new flag.

For a moment the effect of the flag within a flag reminded her of an old music box that had been her most prized possession as a child. She hadn't thought about it for years—but suddenly and vividly she remembered the music box. On the top was an almost completely faded picture of a little girl with a music box pressed against one of her rosy cheeks. Diana had stared at it for hours, and eventually she had made out that the picture on the little girl's music box was the same one as on hers. Diana was sure it continued on and on like that, picture within picture within picture. Many times she had pressed the music box against her own cheek, becoming a part of the effect. She wondered whatever became of that music box. It had been in the family for years.

A woman beside her with red hair and wearing a red zip-

suit quietly said, "It's beautiful." An old woman in a brown zip-suit said, "I wish my Pete was here to see this. He'd take his cap off and hold it over his heart and sing the anthem out loud, right here, new one or not." Another woman who wore a green zip-suit that was too small for her (Diana had seen her a couple of times at the foodatron), said, "It makes you proud. It really does." And still another woman who was wearing a light green zip-suit said straight to Diana, "Do you think they'll be giving us a flag like this to replace the ones we have? I still have the flag they gave us when my father died in the old war."

Diana said she didn't know, but she supposed it would be nice if they did.

The woman turned to the woman in the darker green zip-suit and Diana heard her say, "We'll have to change all the flags outside our houses. I hope President Martin considered that." And the other woman replied, "Oh, I'm sure he did."

It was President Martin who had stressed that this addition to the flag was necessary to concretize the present and the future in their minds. "This," he had told them in his inner-state address on the teladvisor, "represents our three fundamentals: Industry, Science, and the Military." And, as dictated by Americium's democratic essence, the people had voted through their teladvisors and had approved the president's request, despite a last minute campaign to

include a bureaucracy worker or an agriculturist among the trio. But when President Martin had explained there weren't many of those people left, the notion had been promptly dropped. "Everyone in Americium," President Martin said, "now falls under at least one of these great symbols."

A Civil Guard, who Diana recognized as Old Man Crawley, approached the women and asked them for their sixcards. Everyone knew him, he was such a common sight around town. He was an elderly man who always looked sickly, but was apparently well enough to carry out his Civil Guard duties with the necessary devotion.

Ogden only had three Civil Guards; there wasn't need for more. Besides Old Man Crawley, there was Art Fisher, who was even older and more sickly-looking than Old Man Crawley and who limped down Ogden's main street, which was his usual patrol, although he could occasionally be found at the consumacenter on Hatley picking up his bottle of Alco-40; and Becky Seers, who was an athletically-built woman about thirty and the head of Ogden's Civil Guard force. Diana heard she carried out her duties with a fanatical passion. Becky Seers thought nothing of using her Civil Guard electro-prod on anyone—even pregnant women.

Diana took out her sixcard and held the plastic firmly in the palm of her hand, showing it to the Civil Guard. Old Man Crawley looked at the card, punched Diana's number into the I-D-fier strapped to his wrist, and said: "O.K. Move

on."

Diana didn't bother to say anything in return; she knew the man was completely deaf. She had tried to speak to him the first few times he had stopped her, but he merely looked straight at her as though she wasn't there, repeating, "Move on." He didn't even seem to appreciate her effort.

Diana walked down the platform to the parking area. She was wearing the new blue zip-suit she had ordered the day before through the teladvisor, and had picked up at the consumacenter before going to Nuclide City that morning. She felt she looked very smart in it. The zip-suit's dark blue sheen went just perfectly with her long blond hair and her green eyes. She remembered back to the old-style school when she had been eleven or twelve and had thought no one would ever find her beautiful. She had been the tallest and skinniest girl in the eighth level. But with time, her body had filled out and rounded, became both soft and firm, all as it should—in her case, perfectly. When she was older she met Brian. They were married a year later, a year and a half ago.

At the car Diana pushed her sixcard into its slot on the door and the door slid open and she got in. She pushed the button on the panel in front of her and the door shut, ejecting the sixcard onto a tray cavity on the door's inside. She took the sixcard and inserted it into another slot on the front panel. The panel lit up. She pushed a

button that indicated DESTINATION - HOME. The car backed out of the parking space and started towards the road.

It had been two months since Ogden had installed Auto-Roadways. Nuclide City had been using the system for over three years now; it had been one of the first places in Americium to change over. When Diana had first moved to Ogden a year ago, she had found it a nuisance to drive manually. She didn't like having to go back to the old ways once she had become used to new ones. But Ogden was small and slow to change. Even the town's name was unchanged—Ogden. Hardly a name for the future. It was a throwback to the last decade. Someday soon they'd change that, too.

The car stopped, then turned onto the street where Diana lived. She smiled to herself. The medic in Nuclide City had informed her it was going to be a boy. She was in her first month.

She only wished Brian could be there to share the news with her.

She hadn't been home for two minutes when she heard a knock on the back door. Ogden had yet to install the Six-card Entry System. Had she still been in Nuclide City, she would have known exactly who was at the door the moment that person inserted their sixcard—the teladvisor would have told her. The system checked to see if the person was Class A (entry at will), Class B (entry at occupant's discretion),

or Class C (entry prohibited—authorities notified). Doors opened or stayed closed accordingly. It was so much easier. But in Ogden you still had to do most things yourself. It would be a while longer before the town had completed its sixcard changeover.

"Who's there?"

"It's me, Sandra."

Diana recognized her next door neighbour's voice and opened the door.

"Hi," Diana said. "How was your day?"

Sandra came into the kitchen smiling broadly.

"My day? What about your day?"

Diana closed the door and went to the kitchen table and sat down. She pushed out a chair and motioned for Sandra to sit, too.

"Not until you tell me. Is it a boy or a girl? I bet it's a boy. Damn it! I know it is. Right? It's a boy?"

Sandra continued smiling, waiting for Diana's confirmation. She was older than Diana, almost twice Diana's twenty years. She was the first person Diana had met when she had moved to Ogden. Sandra had lived here all her life.

"Well?" Sandra prompted impatiently. "Are you going to tell me?"

"It's a boy."

"That's fantastic!" she screamed.

She came over to Diana and squeezed her in an all-

encompassing hug.

"I knew it was a boy," Sandra repeated excitedly. "You and Brian are so damn lucky."

Diana smiled, too.

"I feel lucky," she said. "For a while I didn't think I'd—"

"You've got it down pat," Sandra said, and sat down. "What did the medic say?"

"He thinks I'll be able to have six or seven more and they might just all be boys. I'm going to start on number two right after this one." Then Diana's voice went soft. "That's if Brian can get home."

"Oh, don't worry. You know the men always come home in time for that."

"But—" and the rest of Diana's words faded. She didn't need to say more. Sandra understood.

"Just don't think about it," Sandra reassured. "Brian's only on Internal, and my Bob's there to keep an eye on him—keep him out of trouble." She reached out and touched Diana's hand. "Just like I'm watching out for you. So don't worry. Be glad they're not on External."

Both women were silent for a few minutes. Diana thought how much she wanted Brian to be there with her. She was worried something would happen to him. But, as Sandra said, she should be grateful he wasn't on External. Diana shuddered. She quickly stood and asked Sandra, "Do you want

some coffee? I have the new kind that stays the same temperature no matter how long you leave it, you know, 'Thermo Heat, the coffee you just can't beat.'"

They both laughed.

"Sure," Sandra said, "although we should be drinking some Alco-40 to celebrate. But I'll try the coffee. I saw it on the teladvisor, too."

Diana went to the cupboard and took out a small package. "I don't think I'll ever get used to a kitchen where a sixcard isn't much good."

"I know," Sandra said. "But it won't be long, now."

"But that's what The Struggle is about," she reminded Diana. "Like they say on the teladvisor : 'We have to keep our Way of Life and our Standard of Living.' Life wouldn't be worth living otherwise."

Sandra told Diana it had been quite a chore during the twenty years of her marriage to do things that hadn't changed much since the early seventies. But sixcards had revolutionized everything. Diana knew the woman took great satisfaction from emphasizing how hard life had been back then. It was, by now, an all-too-familiar speech. Sandra told Diana, as she often did, how glad she was that President Martin had got them into Romm.

"They should have had all this when I was first married," she said. "Back then all that was new was microwaves." She nodded her head towards Diana's microwave. "I

hardly consider that a housework saver."

Diana laughed.

"I saw the new flag today," she told Sandra.

"Oh, is it nice? I haven't seen it yet."

"Yes. Beautiful. All the women thought so." Diana continued preparing the coffee.

"Oh, guess what?" Sandra's voice rose excitedly, then lowered to a secretive tone. "Marge O'Brien on the next street wants to leave Ogden. She says she's going to move closer to her little Stevie. Flo Cushing told me. She says Marge wants to be there so she can take care of him herself. Can you believe that? In times like this? She hasn't been herself since her husband died."

Diana had seen the O'Brien woman once before. About a month ago. Sandra had pointed her out at the consumacenter, right after the woman's husband had died. He had been killed while on External. Diana had thought the woman looked mentally unstable even back then. Sandra had wanted to go over and talk to her, but Diana said she didn't want to. It frightened her to be so close to someone who lost her husband like that. She knew it wasn't right to feel that way with so many people dying, but she couldn't help think if she went near the O'Brien woman something would happen to her own husband. As though it were contagious.

"What good will being with Stevie do?" Diana asked. She brought two steaming cups to the table. "I bought the

extra hot kind," she said to Sandra in apology. "I didn't know what kind to order. Next time I think I'll just buy the plain hot."

"It's okay," Sandra said as she took the cup and carefully sipped at the coffee. "I like it real hot, anyway." After she had taken the first taste, she continued: "Marge knows she won't be able to see her son any more than she already does. She should be happy she has a girl to keep at home with her." She took another sip of coffee and said, "This is good, but you're right, it is a bit too hot." She chuckled, then, leaning towards Diana, said in a low voice, "I heard Marge wants to take Stevie out of his cluster. Flo Cushing said she even wants to turn off her teladvisor and not do Duty."

Sandra sat back in her chair and took a long sip. "She's talking like a Subversive. Next she'll throw away her sixcard and be wanting to take us all back to the Seventies or something. And I wouldn't be a bit surprised if she starts running around like some of those other Subversives telling us we've sold our souls to the Devil himself. She always was religious, you know. She just better hang on to her sixcard and use those prayers of hers to ask that they don't come and take it away from her. Then she'll see what her life will be like."

Diana stood and went to the refrigerator. She opened the door and looked in.

"Don't you think," she said, "that it's, well, hard for her not having her son around now that her husband's dead?"

"Diana, you've got to understand. Stevie is fighting for us, too, just like his father did. In his own way. We all have our part to do. It's not like before with only the men fighting. They still fight, but the children have their clusters, and we have Duty. It all helps. We no longer have to sit at home knitting socks, as if that was our only contribution. We don't just send off our men and our boys and sit watching the fighting. We can do more now."

"I know, but he's only a child."

"And that's why he's in a cluster, so he can learn. You know that, Diana. What are you talking about?"

Sandra looked at Diana strangely, almost suspiciously.

"I don't know," Diana said. She turned and stared absentmindedly into the refrigerator again. "I'm worried about my baby. It's my first, and it's a boy, and—"

"And you should be proud of that. You're doing something for Americium." Sandra's voice was gilded with patriotism. Then, all of a sudden, it weakened. "I only wish I could have done as much. Bob and I tried, but the medics, doctors in those days, couldn't help. Science can do a lot, but not for my problem." Her voice regained its ardor. "But you can have all the babies you want. That Americium needs. Be proud our children can go off to their clusters to learn to be scientists and workers and soldiers and—"

She paused to regain her breath. "I don't know what else. But you know they'll be placed in the right cluster where they'll grow up and do what's right for us all. It'll help us win, everything we do will help. And when it's over, we'll live in peace. Forever."

Sandra paused to weigh the effects of her words on Diana. Diana stood with the refrigerator door still open, listening to what Sandra had to say even if she had heard it all before. Each passing day seemed to intensify Sandra's fervour. Diana didn't want to hear it anymore, but she knew it wouldn't be right not to listen. She knew what Sandra was saying was important. It was just that it seemed the only thing Diana heard these days. From Sandra. From the teladvisor. From everyone. A part of her wanted to escape from it—but a bigger part of her barely allowed her to think things like that. She knew she had to listen.

"Can you believe that?" Sandra continued, amazed at an idea she just remembered. "This is the first time in history where we can say that permanent peace is at hand. Remember, 'Peace through Romm' and 'Sixcards Insure Happiness.' They aren't just slogans. They're our only chance. I don't ever want to have to go through another war like that last one. Ever. I lost too many friends and family that way. Romm and sixcards are giving us the chance for peace. And I, for one, believe in them."

Diana thought about Romm. She had seen him on the

teladvisor, a compelling, intense man. A brilliant man. A genius. He was the one who had brought the world the six-cards which made life so much easier for everyone. Simpler. Free from many of the troubles that had previously plagued humanity.

Diana also remembered the wars. Horrible, bloody things. Millions were killed. The Eighties had brought the first nuclear war. They had all seen a part of Hell. It wasn't that long ago; only ten years. Even though she had only been a child, Diana could remember it as clearly as if it had been only a moment ago. Romm was the one who had ended that war. Blessed are the peacemakers. The world had hailed the ending of the war as a miracle. In the darkest hour, so close to that prophesied annihilation, Romm had found a way to make peace. Afterwards, for the first time, every country, every leader, every man, woman, and child had agreed on one thing—there should never be another war like that. The Universal Accord. When Romm first spoke of it, everyone had listened willingly. Unity for a Tomorrow. One World United to Live On Together. Slogans that brought the world to peace under Romm. But now, Diana didn't know why, there was a growing faction that opposed Romm, the Universal Accord, and sixcards. Romm had tolerated this discord for awhile. He had shown patience in trying to bring these dissenters around to his way of thinking. Then, when it seemed peace itself was being threatened by Romm's oppo-

nents, Romm told the world there had to be one last war against all who opposed his plan. The Struggle.

"I don't know what to have for dinner tonight," Diana said and finally closed the refrigerator door.

"They can take my fridge and oven away anytime," Sandra said. "Flo said she teladvised the town council yesterday to ask when they were going to sixcard here completely, and they said they were going to start house by house next week. Flo told them she better be the first house because she couldn't wait any longer and had already started to rip out half the old-style appliances."

The two women laughed. Sandra looked at the clock on the kitchen wall. "Have to go," she said and stood up. "Did you have Duty today?"

"No," Diana said. "I have it tomorrow night."

"I'm only being called up once a week now," Sandra told her. "I don't expect any of us in Ogden will do a Task; we're too small a town. But you never know. How's your schedule?"

"I have Duty three times a week now. It's kind of a lot."

"Well, they keep changing it anyway. One week you seem to have Duty all the time. The next week you're never called upon. I heard Bernice, you know Bernice Woods, she came to the Quox game at my house last month?"

Diana nodded that she remembered Bernice. She didn't

know many people in Ogden, she stayed mostly to herself. It was through Sandra she had met the few people she did know.

"Anyway," Sandra continued, "Bernice told me she once had Duty nine times in one week. She was all sure and nervous and told everyone she thought she was going to be chosen for a Task and that finally someone from Ogden would have the chance to serve Americium in that way. But nothing happened. It ended up she was back to two Duties the next week, and down to one the week after."

With a light wave of her hand, Sandra said, "I'll come over later. Bye."

That night Diana sat in front of the teladvisor watching the thin horizontal white line across the screen's blue background. The teladvisor was always on, showing the same thing over and over, only changing for inter-communications, public addresses, or Duty. It was the teladvisor that brought the Struggle into every home—keeping them informed. Sometimes there was mass entertainment to keep their spirits up. But most of the time it was only the thin horizontal white line. She didn't know why, but she found it soothing to sit and watch that repetitious pattern. It made her feel better. Sandra had said the same thing when Diana had mentioned it. They all watched it. Every night. Diana didn't know what else there was to do.

Suddenly the white line oscillated. Diana heard a

clear bell followed by, "Inter-communication—Diana King." The teladvisor rattled off her sixcard number and told her to display her sixcard for verification and subsequent reception of the inter-communication.

Diana took out her sixcard and held it to her forehead.

"Verification positive. Stand by for inter-communication."

The screen changed from the white line that undulated when the teladvisor's smooth voice spoke, to the image of her husband.

"Brian!" Her voice cracked with surprise and pleasure.

"How are you Diana?" He spoke in a forced, level tone that instantly disturbed her.

"What's wrong, Brian? You sound funny."

He looked straight at her without emotion.

"How are things there?" he asked.

"Fine. Everything here's fine."

"I miss you," he told her.

"I miss you, too," she said. Her voice rose. "I'm so happy you called. I've got great news! I'm pregnant, Brian. It's going to be a boy."

She smiled, waiting for his expression of joy. But it never came. He continued to look at her from the teladvisor, without emotion.

"Brian, what's wrong? Aren't you happy? A baby, Brian. It's what we wanted so much. He'll be just like

you. He'll go off to his cluster and he'll make us so proud—"

"No! Diana! Listen to me!"

He moved closer to her in the teladvisor. She could see his face was pale and drawn, and, for a moment, she thought she was looking into the face of an old man.

Suddenly he spoke softly. "I was promised this was a private circuit, but . . . I don't know. They could be monitoring. But listen to me, Diana. Don't let them get our son, whatever you do. Run away. Hide. Anything. I can't take any more of this. I want to be back with you. I can't damn well—" his voice grew loud and angry "—stand it. I won't kill for sixcards anymore. They lied to us. It's not for our good; it's for them. It's all for Romm. We're in his power. We kill for his—"

The teladvisor returned to its white line/blue background picture.

"This inter-communication has been terminated," it told her.

Diana continued to stare at the screen. What had he been trying to tell her? It didn't make any sense. He—

She quickly stood up and left the teladvisor room. What if it knew what she was thinking?

In the kitchen she stood with her back against the clean white wall. She had to face what had happened—the truth. Brian had become a Subversive. He was speaking out

against sixcards and Romm and Americium. What had happened? She had never seen him so upset. And he had been monitored. She was frightened.

Brian had always believed in the right things, in his country. He had been the one who decided they would move to Ogden from Nuclide City. All because President Martin said they should. It was part of Romm's urban decentralization plan. Brian believed in Romm. Romm and the sixcard would bring them peace and prosperity. Didn't he still believe in those things? No, it couldn't be. That would never happen. Brian couldn't be a Subversive. He was just tired—he missed being home. Surely they would understand . . .

There was a sudden knock at the kitchen door. Sandra peered in through the door's window. Diana motioned for her to come in.

Diana was still standing, back against the wall.

"What's wrong?" Sandra asked.

Diana looked at Sandra, then quickly went over to a cupboard and opened it for no other apparent reason than to close it again.

"What do you mean?" she said, not daring to look directly at the woman.

"Are you looking for something in particular?"

Diana wanted to tell Sandra, was almost about to, but when she finally looked at her, the expression on the woman's face made her stop cold. Sandra looked as though she

had just seen something she didn't like—as though Diana had all of a sudden sprouted numerous tentacles.

"I'm so absent-minded," Diana said in explanation.

"Are you sure nothing's wrong?"

"No," Diana said. "You just frightened me."

Diana tried to look straight at Sandra, hoping to reinforce her statement. But she turned away again when she saw that Sandra didn't believe her.

Sandra continued to look at Diana without saying anything, her face suddenly devoid of compassion just when Diana most needed someone to talk to.

A few moments later, without a word, Sandra left.

Diana thought about going to see Sandra. One minute she wanted to explain, tell Sandra everything; the next she wanted to act as though nothing had happened. But no matter how many times she resolved to do one or the other, when it came down to actually having to face Sandra, she couldn't. She didn't know if she could make Sandra understand. There was something about the woman Diana found disturbing; an unknown that lay behind Sandra's look of suspicion.

Diana spent the next day trying to make sense of what had happened. Thoughts came to mind that frightened her: maybe Brian <u>was</u> a Subversive; maybe the teladvisor was monitoring <u>her</u>; maybe Sandra thought <u>she</u> was a Subversive and was going to report her. But as hard as she tried, she

could not discern any pattern in the events which had taken place. She was at a loss to find reason in what had happened.

Soon it was evening. Diana had Duty. She dreaded having to go near the teladvisor. She hadn't been near the thing since the inner-communication from Brian.

Brian! Her heart ached again as it had thousands of times since his message.

Suddenly she decided not to do Duty. That thought quickly gave way to one of fear: how could she think something so . . . She searched for a word. Only one came to her. Subversive.

She couldn't just not do it. Just like that. She had an obligation. Despite what had happened, until she could decide what to do, she'd carry on as though nothing had happened.

At least she's try to carry on.

She walked resolutely into the teladvisor room, her new-found composure only momentarily pierced when she thought she saw the teladvisor's white line oscillate. No, it had to be her imagination. It hadn't moved.

When it was time for Duty, she held up her sixcard for identification. The teladvisor screen changed to display a blank screen. An authoritative voice welcomed Diana to Duty. It explained what was expected from her: to be ready to perform a Task; to perform that Task if called upon; to,

above all, aid in The Struggle against Americium's and Homm's enemies. Diana had heard the exact same thing each time she had had Duty. And although Diana had often had Duty, she had never been called upon to perform a Task. She didn't know anyone who had. Tasks took on a mythical quality; it would be a great honour to be asked to perform one, to help so actively in The Struggle.

As the teladvisor continued speaking, pictures began to bombard the screen. No matter how many times Diana had Duty, she never tired of what she saw. The images, the colours, the way one scene followed another or slowly faded into another—they fascinated her. Americium's history flowed before her eyes, a kaleidoscope of the most amazing sights. Three-dimensional images seemed to reach out and gently lead Diana back into themselves, letting her explore their depths as though she moved among them.

At the bottom of the screen, statistics flashed: a chronicle of Americium's struggles.

Suddenly a loud bell sounded. Diana's heart raced; adrenaline coursed through her veins.

President Martin appeared on the teladvisor screen. He smiled, then began to speak. His voice was smooth, melodious, comforting. He was a very charismatic man. A man impossible not to trust.

"Come closer, Diana."

Diana slowly moved a bit closer, unable to believe the

President was speaking to her.

"No, right to the screen."

She did as instructed.

"You have been entrusted with a very important Task, Diana. As you know, we have almost won The Struggle. I know it pains you, as it does me, as it does all of us, that there still are so many dying. But once we've won, once all the world learns to live in peace with Romm, there won't be any more suffering. Romm has found the perfect way to happiness, a technology that makes our lives so much easier, for all people, all of us. If we return to the old ways, we will not survive. Romm brings us together—he unites us in peace."

He paused to reinforce his words with an overwhelming smile.

"Isn't that what we all want?"

President Martin's image slowly faded, his white teeth the only remnant as the screen went black.

Red numbers began to scroll across the screen.

10 . . . 9 . . . 8 . . . 7 . . .

A square on top of the teladvisor slowly rose, exposing a slot.

6 . . . 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1. . . .

The words: INSERT SIXCARD prompted Diana to insert her sixcard into the slot. The screen displayed two sets of numbers. One, highlighted by Americium's new flag, repre-

sented those lost in The Struggle; the price of the forthcoming peace.

The other set gave the toll for those opposing.

As Diana watched, that number changed.

Diana had tried to sleep, but gave up the attempt after hours of tossing and turning. Finally she stopped trying and lay still, staring up at the bedroom ceiling.

What had she done?

She had been seduced. That's how it felt, even though she knew all too well exactly what she had done.

But what could she do now? Do as Brian said? Run? Hide? But where? If only she could speak to him again. Maybe it had all been a mistake—he hadn't meant what he had said against Romm.

All she had wanted was to have Brian back—to live again without fear—to have her baby.

The teladvisor. President Martin. Romm. What did they want?

She cried again. Without meaning to, she found herself reciting a prayer from her childhood.

When she heard the teladvisor's shrill bell, she immediately thought of Brian.

The bell continued until she arrived in front of the teladvisor and held up her sixcard.

President Martin's image appeared again. She could

hear Americium's anthem in the background.

Solemnly he told her Brian was dead.

"Unfortunately," he told her, "there was no honour in his death."

He went on to thank her for her patriotism.

THE END

THUMBING MY WAY

I was thumbing my way to Mexico when I decided to stop off and see Craig's mother. I had thought about it a lot —it was something I couldn't shake no matter how I tried. One minute I resolved to return there; the next I decided just as firmly not to. Still, all along I knew, given the chance, I had to go back.

My ride since Denver was a Texan named Jules Milner who told me first thing that he didn't know "why the hell" his "ma" had called him Jules (he pronounced it "jewels"), but that everyone in Denver called him Tex and I should do the same.

He was average looking—the kind of person with a face you're almost sure you've seen before, although you can't remember where. It was probably in the street or on a bus— it almost had to be some place public—it was that common.

He wore jeans that had gone dirty grey at the front of the legs just above the knees as though he always rubbed his hands there and had worn away the blue dye. His shirt was western style, red, embroidered around the shoulders with cactuses and cowboy hats, guitars and boots. But a pair of old beat-up running shoes spoiled the image.

He said he sold used cars. He liked talking about himself which was fine with me because I didn't. I told him, when he asked, that I was twenty-two, and he said he was "on the shady side of twenty-nine." I thought he looked older than that.

His face was red-rough as though he worked out in the sun. It was wrinkled more than I thought a man of thirty should have. His hair was sparse on top. He combed it so that no one would notice, covering his bald spot with the longer pieces of hair at the sides. But after driving all night, most of the time with the window open so he wouldn't fall asleep, what he had wanted to conceal was now obvious. He didn't seem to notice. Never once did I see him look at himself in the rearview mirror or glide a hand over the top of his head to check. I guess I was wrong—it didn't matter to him at all.

It must have been the alcohol that made him look older. During the night he kept taking shots from a mickey he kept under his seat. He told me I should get some sleep, but I was worried he was going to kill us with drinking and driv-

ing together, so I stayed awake. I didn't know how my being awake could have prevented an accident, but at the time it seemed like the smart thing to do. His drinking stopped at sunrise and I never saw him take another drink after that. When we stopped at the side of the road to "tie shoelaces" (that was what Tex called urinating), I thought he could have taken another drink then, but I didn't see him take the mickey.

He had left Texas about a year ago, he said, partly because he couldn't find work there, and partly because he had "banged up" his girl and she had been pressing him to marry her. She was still in high school and he told me she had said, "Make me legal or make me rich" (I didn't believe she would have said it quite like that—that sounded more like Tex), and he said to me, "Since I didn't want any gold 'round my finger and I didn't have any money to get her and her folks off my back, I took off out of there."

Tex's car rattled down the two-lane highway and we were making good time even with Tex driving fast one minute then slow the next. "Got to nurse this baby if we're goan' to make L.A.," he said and unwrapped a stick of Wrigley's and offered me a piece. Now that he didn't seem to be drinking anymore, he chewed gum stick after stick. I said, "No, thanks," and he shrugged and, folding the gum like an accordion, pushed it into his mouth.

I had waited nearly two hours outside the House of

Pancakes at the edge of Denver before Tex had come along. Everybody else who had stopped said they were only going as far as the next town or two. But Tex said he was going "straight on through to L.A.," so I hopped in. I didn't expect anyone to be going "straight on through" to Mexico.

Tex kept the car radio playing loud. It was on a country music station that Tex said was in Alburquerque and it had come in clear during the night, but now that the sun had risen it faded in and out depending on which way the car was turning on the road. But Tex didn't mind. He whistled and thumped the steering wheel with the palms of his hands in time with the music as he drove.

He said he was going to L.A. to see a friend of his who was making a record as soon as he could find a record company to sign him. His friend had already struck out in Nashville.

"Like country music?" Tex asked me.

I said that I hadn't heard much of it and that it was mostly rock that I listened to, people like Dylan, Baez, Joni Mitchell, and Neil Young, groups like the Beatles and the Doors, even though I wasn't old enough to have been very aware of them when they were first popular. But I didn't tell him that, I just said I listened to rock.

"Then you're really missin' something," he said. "You got Kenny Rogers and Willie Nelson. And then there's Dolly Parton." He put his fingers in his mouth and gave out a

loud whistle and said, "Greatest set this side of the Rockies," then he gave me a great big smile.

"Out to see America?" he asked right after.

I said that I suppose I was seeing it but that I was really on my way to Mexico.

"Gonna stop off in L.A.?"

"Maybe," I answered.

Tex leaned forward to turn up the radio. Loretta Lynn was singing about her man not loving her anymore, and when she finished the DJ said wasn't that a "purty" song and wasn't it too bad Loretta was "so sickly" she couldn't make as many concert tours as she used to.

"Betcha got a girl waiting there," he smiled at me again, "and you're trying to keep it quiet, huh? I know how that's like—if ya keep all the levees to yourself, ya won't get caught dry. Right?"

"No. Wrong. I don't know anyone there." Only Craig's mother. But I wasn't going to tell him. He'd want to know about her, then about Craig, then about what happened. I wasn't ready for that. I couldn't talk about it to anyone, least of all him.

Tex didn't have much to say after that, so we drove for awhile without talking.

"Can't wait 'til Reagan gets in," Tex said out of nowhere. "Nope, can't wait 'til November." He said it like that month held some mystical charm.

There was a hell of a lot I could have said right then, but it was still awhile before we'd be reaching L.A. He looked at me wanting me to say something about the election, expecting me to say, no doubt, something so liberal he'd want to vomit. But all I said was that I suppose he was right that he'd have to wait.

"Carter's been screwing us up," he went on, "but Ronnie will change that." He laughed with a small burst, adding, "And Iran better watch out."

I didn't say anything to that, either. I just sat quietly waiting for the inevitable remark about nuking Iran into a parking lot or some tirade involving blacks or immigrants causing all America's problems. I just waited for him to say one thing like that, but he didn't. We rode for awhile with the only sounds coming from the car and the radio.

Tex rolled down his window and spat his gum out then rolled the window up again. He took out another stick of gum, but this time he didn't offer me any.

After a long time he said, "You ain't American, are ya?"

I said "No," and told him I was from Léry, a small town outside Montreal. When he didn't say anything I added, "Montreal, Quebec."

"Montreal, Canada?"

I said, "Yes, Montreal." I told him that I went to

university there and smiled.

Then he said, "French up there," in a way I wasn't sure was a statement or a question.

"Yes," I said, "foreigners. And we don't 'talk American' either."

From then on we couldn't have said more than a dozen words to each other until we reached L.A.

I knew he no longer liked me being in his car. Although I tried telling myself that I didn't exactly know what it was he didn't like, I knew damn well what it was. No doubt I didn't pass his dyed-in-wool, bigoted, redneck litmus test. Or maybe I had been completely disqualified because I wasn't an American. But I didn't give a damn. I had known I'd find this in America. That was the risk you took coming here. And even though I detested his closed KKK mind, it was a ride, and I wasn't about to waste my time trying to argue with his ignorance, even though I felt I should have and felt bad that I hadn't. Doesn't silence imply agreement?

I thought right away how Craig would have handled himself in the same situation. Even though he was an American he would have told Tex what he could do with his McCarthy-era, close-minded ideas. He would have said Tex's blind patriotic sentiments deserved an indecent burial in the nearest cesspool. But why argue? People like Tex couldn't be changed. Anyway, I needed as much quiet above

the radio that his not talking could afford me.

I had a lot to think about. Even now I was debating whether or not I'd really stop in L.A., or (and this seemed increasingly more attractive as we approached L.A.) continue on to Mexico. I wasn't sure what I'd say to Craig's mother. Even though she was my aunt, it had been over nine years since I'd last seen her.

So much had happened since then. Her husband had died from cancer a year ago. Everyone suspected it was from the twenty-five years he had worked in a chemical plant, but no one could prove it. As if there was any doubt.

And then there was Craig.

There was so much to talk about to my aunt, but little to say. The words festered inside me, waiting to be expressed. But they were not yet ready to be spoken.

I had stayed with my aunt and uncle for one summer—the summer of 1971. It was the first time I had been away from home by myself for any length of time, my parents thinking that at thirteen it was time for me to make that break from them. They had worried I would become too dependent on them, a notion they had found in some child-rearing bible on parenting an only child. I had never met my aunt and uncle before, with us living in Quebec, and them so far away in California. And it was the first time I had met my cousin Craig.

He was seventeen then, and I knew almost as soon as I arrived that he didn't like the idea one bit of having to share his room with me for a summer.

They were waiting for me at the airport. I had worried all the way there that they wouldn't be waiting, or, even if they were, that they wouldn't recognize me, because I certainly didn't know how I was going to recognize them. I thought for sure I'd be left stranded. All I could think about was my mother repeating "be careful" to me and my father making a special point of warning me (three times) not to talk to strangers "no matter what." This had confused me since that's exactly how I thought of my aunt and uncle.

I don't know how they found me among all the people at the airport, but I suppose I must have been the only thirteen-year-old there who looked like he was ready to turn and run if anyone said a word to him.

Craig's father was the first to find me and all he did was come up to me and say, "Davey? Davey Ross?"

He led me over to where Aunt Gracie and Craig were waiting. My aunt looked at me, then hugged me, then held me out at arm's length and said I had my father's hair and my mother's complexion. Then she hugged me again.

Craig's father told him to help me find my baggage. Craig mumbled something to himself that I couldn't make out as the two of us walked over to the baggage area to find my

things.

During the car ride to their house, Craig's mother and father pointed out various sites along the way. Beside me on the back seat, Craig looked out the window and didn't say anything except for a few "yeah's" and "naw's." Aunt Gracie did most of the talking, telling me all the things she thought I'd like to do in California, suggesting I'd most likely want to do the things Craig did. I doubted that. First I didn't think Craig would go for it, and second I didn't think we'd have anything in common, him being older than me.

One of the things Aunt Gracie said was how Craig took after her, but I really didn't think he looked like her at all. She had dark hair and was small while Craig had blond hair and was tall. The only thing I thought Craig had in common with his mother were her dark blue eyes. I noticed them for the first time when Craig's father told him he should bring me around to meet his friends and he turned from the window to give the back of his father's head a look as if to say sarcastically, "Yeah. Sure."

At their house Craig's father told him to bring my things to his room, and again he mumbled something to himself. This time his father heard him and said, "Speak up, boy, if you have something to say." But Craig didn't say anything else. He just took my bags into the house.

By then my first excitement had faded. I'd have to

live with these people for two months, I thought, and didn't know them at all.

That night when I was in Craig's room getting changed for bed, Craig came in and said, "If we're going to have to share this room, you better keep your hands off my things. That means my stereo and my records. Understand?" I looked over at the stereo which seemed to me nothing more than a square box made of a kind of yellow wood I had never seen before. Elegantly scrolled silver letters on the front stated "Hi-Fi Fidelity." I didn't see what was so great about it, but I said I understood.

I slipped into the folding bed that they had put in Craig's room for me to sleep in. Craig undressed, then turned out the lights. In the quiet I heard him walk to his bed, pull down the covers, climb in, then pull up the covers around himself.

It must have been over an hour before I finally fell asleep that night. I could hear every breath Craig took, a sound I never heard from anyone in the noise of day. Being an only child, I had spent my whole childhood without ever hearing those sounds, the sounds of someone else's life. Craig breathed with a soft intake of air followed by a fragile exhaling that made the slightest whispering noise. I had thought, until then, that only I could hear my own breathing. But, of course, if I could hear him, he could hear me. I wondered if this was as amazing to him as it was

to me. But I doubted it. At thirteen I found everything amazing. Later, at his age, seventeen, I wondered if I'd ever find anything amazing again. When his pattern of breathing changed I knew he had falleh asleep.

At the breakfast table, Aunt Gracie asked Craig to take me around the neighbourhood. His father had gone to work, and Craig started to protest.

"I don't want to. I have better things to do with my time than to take some kid—"

"Your father said you're to do it, so you'll do it. And that's that."

It made me feel uncomfortable to be forced on him. I looked down at the pancakes my aunt had made for breakfast and pretended I was more intent on soaking up the maple syrup with the piece on my fork than I was in their conversation.

After breakfast Craig and I both dressed in jeans. His were straight-legged like all the Americans wore, while mine were flared at the bottom, the way the kids back home had to have them. He pulled on a light blue t-shirt while I rummaged in my unpacked bags for anything other than a t-shirt, and found a flannel shirt that was too big for me, not to mention too warm for L.A. But I put it on anyway. I didn't want Craig to think I was copying him. Craig wore white tennis shoes. I wore my blue-striped Adidas.

Outside, with a defeated sigh, Craig asked me where I

wanted to go.

"Doesn't matter to me," I said. I was about to suggest going to some star's house, but I was afraid he'd think I was a bug-eyed tourist.

He didn't say anything for awhile, then he asked, "Do you want to come with me to a record store? That's where I was going, anyway, before I had to show you around."

Having him remind me he was chained to me made me feel more guilty than ever. I said "Sure," and that it sounded "neat."

At the record store Craig went straight to the section marked "Popular" and started looking through the records. It was a small store and there was only one other person there, a girl about Craig's age with long blond hair. She was standing behind the counter changing a record on the turntable. Suddenly music filled the store, and I saw Craig lift his head to listen, then leave the record stacks and go over to the counter. I followed.

"Excuse me," he said to the girl, "but where can I find that record?"

She pointed to a sign that said "New Releases." I followed him over there, too, and he picked out an album and began to examine it carefully.

"Is that the record?" I asked, not knowing what to talk to him about.

He mumbled something without looking at me, then said,

"Yeah." He went back to the counter and bought the record.

As we walked back home I tried talking to him again, asking questions about his school and life in California and telling him how things were for me back home. But he only said as much as was necessary, I suppose, so he could tell his parents he had done his part. But at least he was talking to me. As soon as I knew my way around I planned to find some kids my own age to hang around with.

Aunt Gracie cooked a special meal for me that night. As we ate, Craig's father asked me how my tour of the neighbourhood had gone and if Craig was being a good host.

I looked over at Craig who acted as though he didn't hear.

"Sure," I said. "It went fine." Then when I felt I was expected to say more than that, added: "I think it's going to be really neat to stay here for a whole summer."

What a lie! Even though I tried not to put stress on the word "whole," it came out sounding like I thought the summer was going to be twice as long as forever.

After supper I watched television with Craig's parents, and when it was finally time to go to bed, my aunt kissed me and hugged me good-night and Craig's father shook my hand. God! I thought, I hope this doesn't become a ritual—it was embarrassing. I quickly went down the hallway to Craig's room.

Craig was lying on his bed listening to his stereo in

the dark. He looked up as I walked in, then got up to turn off the stereo.

"It's okay," I told him, "I don't mind." But that didn't stop him. He carefully put the record back into its cover, then undressed and got into bed.

I took off my clothes and neatly folded them, putting them on the straight back chair that was between Craig's bed and mine. His room was simply furnished: Craig's bed and a fold-away for me, the chair, a bureau against the wall nearest my bed, and the stereo on a little table next to the wall near Craig's bed. The walls were dark blue and there were only two pictures on them: one was of the Beatles, the other was of the ocean at sunset.

I climbed into bed. After lying there for awhile I asked him why he hated me. It came out just like that—"Why do you hate me?" The moment I said it I thought it was the stupidest thing I had ever said in my life. But I felt I had to ask. I knew saying it would be a lot better than spending the summer wondering and worrying until I made something of it that was probably worse than what it really was. Anyway, I didn't think I had much to lose as far as Craig went. But still he didn't say anything. I didn't really think he would. Just as I was going over in my mind how stupid I had been to have said anything at all, he said that he didn't hate me.

"Well," I said, "you don't exactly like me."

"I'm sorry," he said, then paused before going on. "I really don't mean anything by it. It's something else."

When I asked him what it was he said, "Nothing."

"I'm sorry I have to share this room with you," I told him. "If I'd known, I wouldn't have come, no matter what my parents said. I know it's your room, so don't let my being here change things. Like don't stop listening to your music if that's what you want to do. I don't mind."

I went on to say I had noticed all the records he had (they were stacked under the stereo table) and that he must really like music. I asked him what the name of the record was he bought that day.

"It's called Tapestry," he said.

I asked him who it was by, except I said "What group?" like I knew so much about music and that was the question to ask.

"It isn't by a group. It's by Carole King. Have you heard of her?"

"No."

"Well, the album's just new." Then he added, "It's really good. That's why I wanted to buy it."

"What other records do you have?" I didn't know much about records. I liked music, but the only songs I ever heard were on the radio and I could never remember any of the titles or who sung them. But I figured this was something I could talk to Craig about. He seemed to enjoy

talking about it, which was okay with me. It was better than silence.

He started telling me about all the records he had. He spoke slowly at first, stopping every so often as if he was deciding whether or not to go on. I waited, and soon enough he would continue until finally the words flowed from him. He had a gentle way of saying things that made me think of the way he breathed at night.

He told me about Neil Young and Joni Mitchell, telling me they were from Canada. I said surprised, "Hey, that's where I'm from," and he laughed and said he knew, that's why he mentioned it. He said he had some Beatles albums but wanted more now that they had broken up. Although I had heard of the Beatles, I didn't know they had broken up. But I didn't tell him that. I didn't say much of anything. I didn't have to. Craig now talked so freely, I was happy just to listen. He smiled at me and joked and made me feel comfortable for the first time since I had arrived.

He said he liked Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, telling me they were one of his favourite groups and that it was the group Neil Young was in, and the Rolling Stones, and the Doors, and . . . he went on and on and I listened to every word, taking in everything he said, and marvelling at the way he said it. He spoke in a way that showed how much he cared about those things. I never heard anyone speak that way before.

He asked me if I'd like to listen to his new album and I said, "Sure."

"We'll have to be quiet, though. My parents don't like me playing music at all hours of the night—especially my father. He never understands."

Light from the street came in through the bedroom window, and I could see Craig as he stood by his stereo, carefully taking the record out and putting it on the turntable. His body was long and thin in silhouette against the wall. It made me feel self-conscious about the way I looked. At thirteen I was only slightly over five feet five, and, although I wasn't fat, I didn't look at all like Craig. Craig was filling out, his muscles had developed and he was quickly losing the last marks of childhood. I, on the other hand, still looked like a kid. But I wanted to look just like Craig—I already had his blue eyes. I hoped if I stayed in California long enough my brown hair would turn blond like his.

When he turned on the stereo a small light on the console illuminated his face. A moment later there was music. He motioned for me to come closer so I could hear better. We both sat at the side of his bed and listened.

The song was quietly sung. A piano underscored how simple it was. But the emotions overwhelmed me. It was about friendship, and the singer sang with such peace, I could tell she believed strongly in the words she was sing-

ing. I believed those words, too. Whenever you needed someone, your friend would be there. All you had to do was call.

After it had finished, Craig asked me if I wanted to hear more. We spent the rest of the night listening to that record and others, with Craig telling me about each one and what he liked about it.

The music created its own world—attracting me to it as I was sure it had attracted Craig. A peaceful world. A happy and harmonious world. A golden world. It was the place I most wanted to be; I was young enough to believe that it existed. It had to exist.

When it began to get bright outside and we could hear his father moving around, getting ready for work, Craig turned off the stereo and I went back to my bed. I was tired by then, but I couldn't sleep. I lay in bed and listened to Craig's breathing. I felt secure, safe knowing he was there. When I thought he was about to fall asleep, I said "Thanks," and thought again how stupid I was. All he said in return was, "Get some sleep. You must be tired."

The gum Tex chewed cracked like a rifle shot. I jumped only slightly, but enough to please Tex who smiled at me like a fool. He continued chewing like the damn, ignorant asshole he was. He started to ask me something about French

"chicks," but I cut him off telling him I was tired and didn't want to talk. It wiped the grin off his stupid face. I expected him to slam on the brakes and tell me to get out, right there. But he didn't. Instead, he gave the pickup more gas and it backfired twice.

A while later Tex asked me if I wanted to stop for something to eat. We were coming up to another of the numerous look-alike roadside diners every small town seemed to have. Tex's voice was now pleasant.

"No," I said, and pretended to be falling asleep, hating every minute I had to breath the same air he did.

"We shouldn't go on like two mean dogs in the same house. Why don't we stop and eat something and try to be neighbourly?"

I didn't answer. I hoped he would think I had fallen asleep and would leave me alone. I didn't want to be his friend. He was everything I hated about America.

Craig and I spent a lot of time together after that night. He gave me the neighbourhood tour he was supposed to have given me the first day, but it went much better now that he wanted to do it. He told me he didn't have many friends. I said I really didn't have any, either. He told me all about this girl, Cathy, he was sort of going out with, but she had gone away for the summer and he didn't know how she'd feel when she got back. I could see it

worried him. All in all I didn't figure he was that outgoing. Neither am I, so I understood.

During the day he acted as a tour guide of sorts, taking me to tourist attractions like Hollywood and places that had huge mansions. On weekends we usually went sightseeing with his parents, and I found he changed then, growing silent, sullen in their presence. I noticed he rarely spoke to his father, his father very rarely to him, and Aunt Gracie took it upon herself to be the link between the two, telling one what the other had said or had done. Though Craig retreated into a shell when near his father, he'd burst out again when we were alone. But, as much as I tried to find out, he'd never tell me what was wrong.

At night we would listen to his records before falling asleep. We'd talk about almost everything we could think of. About ourselves, about how we felt about things, about our dreams. Craig said he didn't know exactly what it was he would do, but he wanted it to move people, just like that record moved him. And I told him things I never told any one else. Thoughts I had. Feelings. We told each other similar things and I felt very close to him. It was great we were so much alike.

But sometimes, seemingly out of nowhere, differences would become sharply apparent. One night he told me he was going to turn eighteen the following January, and it reminded me how much older he was. I wondered if that was what

made it so difficult for him to tell me some things. I always knew when he was thinking about those things: he'd become quiet and distant and even looked older than he was. Maybe they were things I couldn't have understood at thirteen. Suddenly I'd feel alone again.

He said he might have to go to war when he was eighteen. I said, "What war?" and he didn't say anything for a few moments. I supposed he wasn't sure whether or not I was serious, then he said, "Vietnam."

Of course I'd heard about Vietnam. But living in Canada, being thirteen, it wasn't as much a part of my everyday life as it must have been for him. I didn't know anyone who had gone to war, let alone died in one. No one in my family had. War to me was the minute they made you stand at school on Remembrance Day to think about the dead from World War II. But who were they?. I always thought about something else. All I knew about Vietnam was that people were dying there. And that no one wanted to go.

"When I'm eighteen," Craig said again, "I just might have to go."

I asked if they'd let him out of school since he already had told me he had one more year. He laughed and said, "No problem," in a funny way that I didn't understand then. "Not if I want to go."

"Do you want to?"

"I wish I didn't have to, that there wasn't any war,

that things were different. But . . . I don't know. Anyway, I can always stay in school." He drifted into silence.

I waited for him to say something else about Vietnam, but he never did. I wanted him to go on, to tell me more. I felt there was something he wanted to say. I had a sudden flash of war. It was just like a movie I had seen on TV with Germans killing people, but I couldn't picture Craig there. It just didn't fit together, and I put it out of my mind.

I could see he wasn't going to say anything else. He looked down at the floor, his mouth tightly closed, determined, I thought, to say no more. When the record finished he went over and turned off the stereo—he wanted to go to sleep.

As usual I lay awake for awhile listening. Craig's breath sounded more fragile than ever before. I thought he must be crying. It frightened me and I wanted to ask him what was wrong. But I didn't. I stayed awake listening for a long time. Craig didn't seem to fall asleep, either. I thought about what he had said and tried to think what Vietnam and war would be like, but I couldn't. If I had been able to wish for anything and have it come true, I would have wished that whatever had Craig so worried would go away. It was almost morning when I finally fell asleep. I half knew as I was dozing off that Craig was probably still awake.

We spent a lot of time that summer at the beach, where Craig taught me to swim, and, later, to surf. A few times I came close to what I thought was drowning, but Craig was always there and would laugh and tell me if I had drowned I'd have been the first to know it. He was like the big brother I never had, watching out for me, helping me. At the same time he was my best friend.

Towards the end of the summer we had pretty much exhausted ourselves exploring the vast city, and after awhile it seemed we were also pretty exhausted with each other. We spent less and less time together. It wasn't really a parting of ways, I knew that. We had grown too close to allow that to happen. It was just that Craig seemed to need friends his own age. It hurt, but he never once made me feel he had forgotten about me, so it wouldn't hurt for very long.

Craig started hanging around with someone he said he didn't really like that much, but whose sister was one of Cathy's best friends and was writing her. He thought it was a good way to find out what Cathy was up to, maybe find out what she was feeling.

When Craig wasn't around, I tried to find someone in the neighbourhood to be with, but all the kids I saw that were my age seemed to be firmly in their own groups, behind walls I was too shy to scale. I spent most of my time in Craig's room listening to his records, which he didn't mind

me doing now. And sometimes I'd feel sad he wasn't there and I would luxuriate in the fantasy of being just like him.

The night before I was to return home, I heard Craig come into the house as I lay in bed. His father was waiting for him. Craig had been coming home later and later each night and it was no secret his father was angry about it.

I heard them argue, but only a few words came clearly through the dense buzz of their sharp sentences. I heard my uncle say "Vietnam" and I went cold. I wanted to go to the door and listen. I was afraid of being caught by Craig and losing what there was between us, but I had to know. Quietly I went to the door.

"You don't understand," I heard Craig say to his father. "You never understand."

"No, <u>you</u> don't understand. It's about time you wake up. You can't keep hiding in your room listening to records. You have to grow up. You have to learn that you have a responsibility—"

"What responsibility? I'll do what I want to do. So leave me alone. I'll decide for myself whether I'm going."

"Damn it! You <u>can't</u> decide for yourself. At least listen to what I have to say. I only want you to—"

"Be like you. Right? Well I won't do what you want me to do if <u>I don't want to</u>. I'm not you."

There was a long silence, then Craig's father came down the hallway and slammed his bedroom door closed.

I quickly went back to bed.

A few moments later Craig came down the hallway. He quietly opened the door, came into the room, then closed it. He started undressing. I pretended I was asleep, but I wanted to ask him what had happened. He had talked to me about Vietnam before. Maybe he would again.

But I didn't say anything. That subject, I realized, was the source of friction between Craig and his father. I didn't dare risk that happening between us.

Sometimes when Craig and I listened to the radio together, and the news came on about the war, always about that damned war, Craig would change the station, searching for some music. It showed me how much he hated war—he didn't even want to hear about it. He only wanted to return to a world where there were no wars. Only peace and quiet.

Craig slipped into his bed. I listened to his breathing. It would be the last time I'd hear it; I was leaving the next day. I thought about the argument, trying to put the pieces together. Craig was going to be eighteen and eighteen was the age you went to Vietnam. But Craig would never go. As I listened to his breathing and thought of how peaceful it sounded, I was sure he'd have nothing to do with war.

The next day they took me to the airport to say goodbye.

When the loudspeaker announced my flight was boarding,

Craig took me aside and handed me the record he had bought that first day.

"It's yours," he said.

"But," I protested, "it's your fav—"

"I want you to have it. We had a pretty good summer. I'm glad you came." He paused for a moment, then said, "If you ever need me, remember, just call. I'll be there."

He put his hand out to me.

"Friend."

I reached out to shake his hand, and Craig pulled me close and hugged me.

I didn't know what to say. I began to thank him for everything, my words stumbling out, but stopped. We stood looking at each other, neither of us seemed able to say anything else.

Craig's father came over and said, "I think you better get on board, Davey. You don't want to walk home, now do you?"

My aunt gave me a big hug and told me to come back again, soon, next summer even.

I turned back to Craig.

"You should come visit us," I said.

He smiled and said he would "for sure."

"Next summer?" I asked hopefully.

"Sure. Next Summer."

* * *

I suspected Tex had a gun. I was sure he had one. But he never pulled it on me, and I thought how paranoid I was, half laughed at myself, and even thanked the bastard when he let me out about a half mile past the road sign that said "Los Angeles City Limits." I was surprised he hadn't stopped at least a half mile sooner.

My thoughts about that summer had disoriented me. I stood, unsure of where I was going, at the side of the freeway, cars whistling by me. With my knapsack on my back, I started walking down the off-ramp. I had suppressed most thoughts of that summer for a long time, although not always successfully. I couldn't stop myself from thinking about it; those feelings always returned. Even now I felt aimless and weakened by the intense surge of hatred and anger I hadn't let myself feel for so long.

Craig died on June 17, 1972 in Vietnam.

I hated them all. My anger rested on America as a whole, but, it was also directed. While all of them shared in the blame, I could fault no individual more than Craig's father. He had made Craig go: I knew it.

I had returned home after that summer with Craig to the drudgery of school. One of the only things held in front of me was the possibility that the next summer Craig would come and stay with us. I listened to the record he had given me over and over again. It became my favourite. I bought

other records, with my allowance, records I knew Craig already had or would like, and started learning as much about music as I could. Sometimes I even did something or said something that struck me as being exactly like what Craig would have said or done. I admired him more than anyone I had ever met in my life.

I had no other friends: I didn't want any. When things went wrong, or I felt lonely, I thought of Craig. I knew if things ever got too much for me to handle, I had Craig's promise he'd be there for me. I knew Craig would always be there.

Craig and I never wrote to each other. It wasn't necessary. There was the sense that all that happened was being stored until we next saw each other, ready to be shared when we met again. It was my mother who told me Craig was in the army and had been sent to Vietnam.

From then on I read and watched everything I could about the war. I thought it would somehow ensure Craig's safety if I kept a vigil. I followed the daily death count, praying they would remain only numbers to me, as selfish as that was. I heard every argument made for and against Vietnam. All I hoped was it would end or Craig would come home before something happened to him.

When I saw my mother waiting for me on my last day of school before summer vacation, she didn't have to say anything. I knew. And when I cried in my room that night

listening to the record Craig had ~~given me,~~ I thought that their war was the most damned thing in the world. Their country. Their people. All of them.

Tex was gone now. No doubt vowing never to pick up another hitchhiker unless he was wearing the stars and stripes. Preferably over his heart. But Tex was no longer important. I had decided to go see my aunt. I took a bus out to Craig's house. I sat alone in the back, my thoughts rambling like the route the bus was taking. Recognition of buildings and neighbourhoods slowly returned. It was night when I stood outside that house again.

It hadn't changed much from the way I remembered it. There were no lights on inside. I should have phoned first and told her I was coming. But up to the last minute I still wasn't completely sure I would go. Maybe it would be enough just to see the house again. Maybe that's all I needed—a reassurance that it still existed. I didn't know what I would say to my aunt.

My parents hadn't allowed me to go to Craig's funeral. They said it wasn't something they wanted me to see at fourteen. They knew how close I had been to him. My parents contained all the contradictions of all parents—their child must be "sheltered" from some things, "exposed" to others. Often, at different times, to the very same things. I suppose they felt I had become much too serious from

watching the news all the time, paying special attention to whatever was said about Vietnam. They thought that the funeral, especially since it was Craig's, would be too much for me. They always said I was too impressionable.

With determination I went to the front door and pushed the doorbell. After a few minutes, just as I had decided to turn around and leave, the front porch light was turned on. The door slowly opened. A tiny grey-haired woman stood there blinking at me. I thought this couldn't be the person I remembered; she didn't seem to recognize me either. We stood looking at each other in silence until recognition came to her face and she said, "Davey," and without another word she opened the door wide and motioned me inside.

In the living room she turned on a lamp and sat in the armchair beside it. I sat across from her on the couch. I couldn't recognize anything of the aunt I remembered in the woman that sat before me. I looked at her eyes, but I couldn't tell if they were the same blue eyes. The dim light cast a shadow over her face. She didn't try to hug me. I suppose it was no longer like her.

I asked how she was.

She took a long, hollow breath and said, "This house is too big for me. I think I'll have to move, but I don't know where to go."

She wanted to know how everyone was. We talked for a while about my family. She asked me what I was doing now,

saying how much I had grown, no longer a boy. I told her I was on my way to Mexico. When she asked why, I thought how that was exactly the way my parents and my girlfriend had asked that same question, the same total lack of comprehension. I might as well have said I wanted to go to the moon. But it didn't matter, because, for some reason, I no longer felt much of anything for them. I tried, but I couldn't. I told her there was nothing more than my feeling I had to go somewhere, and Mexico was somewhere—I just wanted to travel.

She told me she missed her husband and didn't think she would ever get over his death. His death had been long and drawn out, she said, and though they knew he was dying, she still found it hard to believe, even now, that he was gone.

I couldn't say anything, so I let her talk, and when she was through we sat in silence.

She started talking again. This time about Craig. She spoke of him in a way that I thought was unbearably cold. We both had had eight years to come to terms with his death, but I could never have spoken of him the way she did—she used the past tense with a casualness that cut through me. She probably no longer noticed, the death of her husband being more recent, more important in time.

"Craig and you became such good friends, remember?" she said.

I said I did remember, I remembered very well.

She smiled absently. We were silent again. I took the opportunity to look around the room, but didn't recognize anything. I looked down the hallway and wondered if his room would still be the same, if his stereo was still there, if his records were waiting to be played again.

I turned and looked back at her. She was lost in her own thoughts. I didn't know what else to say, so I stood up to leave. She looked up abruptly. She was surprised that I was going. I could see I had hurt her, she didn't want me to leave yet, so I sat down again.

"I have something for you," she said. She stood up and started down the hallway, vanishing into its darkness. I waited. Shortly she returned holding a package wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. Standing in front of me, she held the package out.

"I thought you might have come to your uncle's funeral," she said. "I wanted to give it to you then."

I started to make an excuse for not going, but I didn't know what to say to make her understand, something that wouldn't hurt her. I couldn't think of anything like that, so I stopped. I took the package from her instead.

"It's Craig's," she said.

The brown paper made sharp crinkling noises. The package wasn't big. It was square and light and had an indefinite shape that made me think there was something like clothes inside. I looked up at her, not sure what it was.

"It's Craig's flag," she said. "It was on his coffin. They gave it to me after he was buried. I've had it long enough. I thought you would want it. I didn't know what else I could give you."

As she said that I wanted to drop the package. I felt sick. I didn't want it. I wanted to tell her to take it back. How could she give this to me? I felt anger and disgust holding the symbol of everything I hated so strongly; that flag was a banner of hate, violence, and death. All this raged through my head. I wanted her to hear it. I wanted to tell her everything I felt. But all I could say was "Why?" It came out a choking sound. I knew she didn't hear it properly. But I didn't say it again.

She asked me what was wrong. Didn't I want it?

"Don't you feel any . . . ?" I searched for something that would tell her how I felt. There was only one word: hate.

"How could you have just stood by and let Craig go to that war?" My voice rose as I went on. "How could you? Against his will. They . . . they killed him. They sent him there just to die. Your government, his own father, forcing him to go."

She looked at me more confused than ever.

"No," she began, "you're wrong. Craig wasn't forced. We tried to stop him. His father and I begged him not to go. We wanted him to do anything he could to stay out of the

war. We wanted him to go to Canada and live with you so he wouldn't go." She looked me straight in the eyes. She was starting to cry. Her words came out in a rush. "Craig was determined to go. He was the one. Not us. He signed up on his birthday. He said he had to go. He babbled on and on about 'his duty' and that girl, Cathy, and he made us so sick of it all that . . . Your uncle tried to talk to him, he tried to make Craig understand that his responsibility lay with us, his family. To himself, to stay alive. But he wouldn't listen. Craig's mind was made up. He was eighteen. We couldn't stop him."

I quickly stood up to leave.

"That's a lie," I told her. "Why would he go? He wouldn't—you know that. He'd never go! How can you say that? I won't believe that about Craig. Never!"

She shook her head. "I don't know why Craig went. I wish I did. I wish I knew then so I could have stopped him. I've tried thousands of times to figure it out. I know your uncle tried even more. Was it something that happened between Craig and that girl he liked? Was it something he felt about his duty? I don't know. It's no use. We could never figure it out. He was so emotional—so foolish. All those romantic ideas of what was noble, what was right and what was wrong. He kept so much inside. Sometimes I think it was all just an elaborate way for him to commit suicide. Maybe that's all war ever is."

She wiped her eyes, and after a long silence quietly said I should stay the night. But I wanted to get away from there as fast as I could. I wanted to get away from her. How could she lie like that about Craig? I felt if I stayed a moment longer she'd even go as far as to offer me Craig's room. As if it was just another room, without meaning.

At the front door she said, "Maybe he felt some patriotism. I don't know. It doesn't matter, now. All that matters is he didn't come back. And we'll always miss him."

She told me to take care of myself. I quickly said good-bye. Then I was out in the night again.

It was too much for me to comprehend. Why would Craig <u>want</u> to go? That didn't make sense. So much was whirling around inside me. My thoughts came quick, strong with emotion, and confused. I hated everything that was Vietnam. I hated the country that sent Craig to his death. I hated his father who I had thought for so long had forced him to go. I still felt Craig wouldn't have gone on his own. He just couldn't have. I knew Craig. We <u>both</u> hated war.

I was just like him.

I wanted to throw the flag away.

But I kept the package, not knowing where to throw it. And though I hated what was inside, I couldn't help but think of it draped, this piece of cloth, across Craig's coffin like the bedsheets that lay so peacefully across his chest that summer when I was amazed by the music of his

breathing.

I stuffed the package into my knapsack just before I got onto the bus. I was heading towards Mexico, though I no longer knew why I was going there.

THE END