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Lingua Franca and Other Stories

Claire Rothman

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
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ABSTRACT

Lingua Franca and Other Stories

Claire Rothman

This collection of eleven short stories focuses on the related themes of family, coming of age, and reconciliation with self and home. In certain stories the family is presented nostalgically as the source of an individual's inner peace and strength. In others, the family is fractured, the source of confusion and pain. Central characters try to make sense of their origins and of their present lives. The book is arranged as a passage from innocence to experience. Initial stories show young central characters or narrators grappling with the fundamental questions of love and life and death. Later stories deal with similar themes, but characters are older, and sometimes, but not always, wiser. Most of the stories are realistic, and are recounted from a single, privileged point of view. Oppositions such as male and female, English and French, and old age and youth, fuel the drama and provide necessary tension and form.

To Ann, for the poem she gave me.

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Lingua Franca

The man had slept there again last night. The little boy could always tell because his mother shut the bedroom door when the man slept with her. Before he started sleeping there, it was left open. The boy liked it that way, his door and his mother's wide open so that the same air, the same sounds, the same smells could pass through both their rooms. He could call to her or sing in his bed, and know that she would hear him. The man had slept in their apartment for so many nights that the little boy had a hard time remembering what it had been like without him.

His mother's bed was flat and very low, mounted on a platform raised slightly from the floor. The little boy stood at the foot of it gazing down at a sky blue quilt and at two sleeping figures. His mother was curled up like a cat in one corner. Her hair flowed out along the pillow slip in a long, rust-coloured tangle, half obscuring her face, which was pale and lightly freckled. The man called Ray lay on his back, his arms and legs flung out, forming ridges and gullies deep in the quilt. He breathed heavily, rhythmically, through a mouth that was slack and pulled down slightly at the edges. The little boy moved closer to his mother and stared through the hair to the half-hidden face. She stirred and opened her eyes.

"It's early to come visiting," she said and reached out to stroke his head. "What's up, Baby blue?"

He was not a baby. His mother called him this even though his real

name was Jacob. She lifted the quilt so it looked like the entrance to a dark cave, and he dove in. The smell of sleep and bodies was strong as he climbed over her and slid down the skin of her back into the bed's warm middle. He kicked his legs in the air, making the quilt rise up like a giant tent. It hovered above their bodies for an instant and then fell, graceful as a sigh.

The man groaned and turned his head away when he saw the boy. "Christ," he said. "You should train him not to do that." His voice was low and full of sleep. "It gives me the creeps having him in here, staring. He's old enough to understand."

Jacob lay perfectly still. He heard the man roll over and found himself on the floor again, his pyjama top dishevelled and twisted by the man's big hands.

"Go on," said the man, pushing him towards the door. "Go and play." It was a hard push, and it propelled Jacob forward across the floor. His feet made a light padding sound against the wood as he fled. He walked quickly, not daring to look back, imagining the man rising up out of the bed, towering higher and higher until his head grazed the ceiling, following him down the shadowy corridor.

Jacob's room was full of light. The thin ricepaper blind covering his window did not block out the morning; it let light filter in, diffusing it and splashing it on each wall. Jacob knelt down on the cool wood floor and pulled a drawer out from his clothes chest. His mother had said that because he was four he must put on his own socks.

He did not want his breakfast. His mother was up now and had prepared his favourite thing, and still he would not eat. Instead he watched bits of green marshmallow, cut into the shape of four leaf clovers, float in circles on the surface of the milk. The rest of his meal had sunk to the bottom of the bowl where it lay, soggy and inedible. He cupped his spoon over the marshmallow bits, trying to submerge them.

His mother left the room. Jacob had put her out of his mind when her voice came floating down the hall. It was a voice she used when she was angry. He could picture her, standing in her half-opened bathrobe, her hair all out of order and flying about her face. Her fists would be clenched tight and her eyes too, as if she wanted to shut the world out. She was yelling. A torrent of words, ugly, shrill things, was pouring through the apartment, like pins from her sewing box when he upset it. He hated her like this. The man was making noise too. He was shouting and things were falling and breaking. The boy kept trying to push down the green bits in his bowl. He pushed more and more recklessly, sending waves of milk up over the rim. Then, without understanding why, he swiped at it with his forearm sending it sliding along the milk-slippery table top and crashing onto the floor. It broke into sharp wedges, littering the kitchen with ceramic, and bits of soggy brown food.

The voices had stopped. His mother was crying now. She was moaning and every once in a while she screamed out in a wild, disturbing way. Jacob heard footsteps start down the corridor. They were too heavy, too widely spaced to be his mother's, and the floors trembled and

shook. It was the man. He had heard the crash, he knew somehow that the bowl was broken, and who the culprit was. Jacob slipped down from his chair to the floor. He crouched there, shivering, staring at a crack where dirt was forcing the tile to curl up and in on itself. Cracks worried him. It was possible that dark things lived under there and if he pried the tile loose, beetles would stare out at him. The steps came closer. Jacob clasped his knees tightly. He felt his insides shudder and heave, and then rush out, slippery, uncontrolled.

The steps passed the kitchen and receded down the hall to the front door. It slammed. For a long time Jacob did not move. He just crouched, shivering and staring at the dirt-lined crack with eyes that would not see.

His mother was being nice. He was in the bathtub now, with his red boat and a plastic banana that floated. His mother was taking the banana and rubbing it over his stomach, pretending it was eating him up. "Mmm," she said. "Baby blue's tender tummy. Mmmmm." She did not mind the mess. Did not say a word about the cereal or about his body covered with smelly dirt. She had picked him up, carried him to the bathroom, run a steaming, big bath, and begun to play. She did not look playful. Her lip was swollen and a cut with blood caked at its edges stared out from one of her cheeks. But still, she was being nice, and her voice was low and calm. He did not like the wash cloth. It was rough and prickly and scratched him. When his mother tried to wash him he squirmed away,

clutching his toys to his chest.

Outside, the cold made his skin feel parched and stretched. His mother had brought him to the little park across from their building, and asked some children to keep an eye on him. The children nodded solemnly, but as soon as she turned her back, they ran off down the street in a furious game of chase. Still, the park was not empty. The two girls and their sitter were there, as they often were in the morning. The big one was on top of the monkey bars watching him, letting her body hang upside down and swing. She was very strong and could flip over the bar with straight arms, and do tricks. The little one, who was just slightly older than Jacob, was very serious. She liked digging in the sand. But it was Genevieve whom Jacob liked most of all. She looked after them. She was reading a magazine on a bench in the sun. Her shoes lay abandoned by the sandbox, stuffed with red wool socks, and she stretched her toes in the yellowish dirt beneath the bench. Jacob walked over to the sandbox. The little girl was building a long wall around some mounds that he supposed were houses.

Genevieve looked up from her pages and saw him. She called out his name and some other things he could not understand. He loved it when she spoke. It was almost like singing, the way her voice rose and fell and the words blended one into the next.

The little girl let him have one of her shovels. He was helping with the wall, scooping the damp sand that lay just beneath the surface and patting it into a solid, connecting hump. The sides of his palms were

black and gritty and his hands were cold, but he did not mind because the village was huge and growing more beautiful. He had been crouching beside the girl for a long time and his legs were hurting. He stood up, holding the shovel, and rubbed an arm over his eyes. Grains of sand from the shovel rained down on him, falling in his face and he stumbled backwards, demolishing part of the wall that he himself had just finished and crushing a tower with a toothpick flag. The little girl flew at him and pushed him back off the wall. A torrent of words came from her lips, words that leapt and flowed like Genevieve's, but faster and shriller because she was angry and close to tears. She snatched the shovel away and left him in the cool sand where he had fallen, his hands stiffly out in front of him as if they still held it. He opened his mouth wide, stunned with outrage and shock, and bellowed like an infant.

Genevieve's feet were beside him on the grass, rubbing each other, twitching in their concern. She knelt down so that her knees cradled his shoulders and cooed with her strange, calming words. She addressed the girl, who was standing not far off, pouting at the sand. A second explosion of words came from the child. "I hate him," she said, this time in English so he would understand. "He's dumb! He broke a wall." Genevieve listened and rocked him gently. His wails had subsided into fierce hiccups which jerked his body, and his nose was running badly.

"Assez!" she said to the little girl, and from her tone Jacob knew that the little girl was wrong and mean, and that he might get the shovel back. The little girl pouted but did not dare talk back to Genevieve.

Eventually, on Genevieve's orders, she offered him his shovel.

Genevieve dug deep into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out a package of candies. "Wine jellies!" the little girl called, and her voice sailed across the park with its wonderful news. The older sister flipped down off her bar and came running. Genevieve gave three jellies to each of them. Jacob's were purple and the translucent green of peeled grapes. They glistened in his gritty palm, and looked almost too perfect to eat.

Genevieve bent over him and whispered in his ear. Her breath was moist and pleasantly sour, and to Jacob, her words were like the jellies themselves, exquisite, mouthwatering, full of comfort.

* * *

"Assez, assez," Jacob said, smiling at his mother as she ladled soup into a bowl for his supper. He made all sorts of other noises too, rushing melodious sounds like Genevieve made for him in the park.

"That's French," his mother said, looking at him intently. Jacob began a song of made-up words that had the same comforting ebb and flow.

"Don't sing at the table, kid," the man said. "We don't need a serenade."

Jacob's mother was standing by the man's chair and he stroked the back of her legs. Jacob kept humming, but silently, in his head. His cheeks were flushed and he could feel blood pulsing in steady, hot beats against the inside of his skull. His mother asked him if he wanted more and he did not look up. He slipped under the table with crayons and some

paper while his mother prepared dinner for the man. She was talking and her voice mixed with the man's, and the words slowly became vaguer and less distinct. It felt almost pleasant there, under the table, with the low backdrop of noise.

Later on he heard them laughing in the bedroom. The door was shut, but still he could hear her teasing the man, maybe telling him riddles, and laughing in that happy, breathy way she had. He went to sleep with this light sound in his ears and dreamt that she was leaning over him in the crib he had slept in as a baby. She was leaning over the bars, laughing with him, loving him.

In the morning the man whistled in the bathroom. He was shaving before he went to his office. They sat around the table and watched him eat a stack of toast. Jacob liked the way he spread the butter thickly on each piece so it soaked completely through. Pools of melted grease spotted his plate. After the butter he spooned on great amounts of cherry jam and ate the whole thing fast, before any of it oozed away. Jacob watched in awe. His mother always spread his thin. It looked meagre and uninteresting beside what the man called Ray was eating.

"Hey, kiddo!" Ray said through a mouthful of jam. He wiped his fingers and his golden moustache with the tip of a paper towel. "Got something for you." He reached up on top of the refrigerator and pulled down a red and blue baseball cap. "It's the Expos, kid. It's a lucky hat."

"It's really nice, Ray," his mother said, admiring it in Ray's hands. "What do you say, Baby blue?"

Jacob looked out the kitchen window. The tree in their front yard had burst into brilliant amber, the colour of the pumpkins they would gut for Hallowe'en.

"C'mon kiddo," the man said. He had squatted down, hooked his fingers through Jacob's beltloops, and pulled him between his knees. "It's a peace offering," he said. "Don't be so hard on an old man."

Jacob stared down at the floor. His arms and legs were limp and shivery. The crack between the tiles was still there, gaping like a dark smile at his feet. All the rest of the tiles were perfect. They had a black centre and white bars that fanned out like the blades of a propeller. When he stared too long, his eyes went swimmy and bars began to spin and whirl on the flat surface of the floor.

Ray's voice came across a great distance. It was as if he were standing on an open, extremely wide plain, and Ray was a tiny speck on the horizon. He felt dizzy thinking of the man and his mother so far away. Something landed heavily on his head. He put his hands up, as if he were shielding himself from a blow, and felt the stiff nylon meshing and the plastic rim. Ray relaxed his hold of the beltloops and Jacob slumped backwards against a chair.

* * *

In the park he sat alone in the spot where Genevieve usually sunned. A woman stood on the grass with a baby who was just learning to walk. She held out her hands and the child staggered towards her. He looked so

clumsy and small, it made Jacob want to laugh. Jacob removed the baseball cap from his head. He got on his hands and knees and began to scrape the sand with it. It was like a trowel, new and stiff enough that it gathered the grains of sand quite easily. He filled it full and then dropped it, bottom side up. Some of the sand spilled out and he scooped it back in with his hands. He pushed more sand on top and then patted sand walls up near the cap's sides. Soon the entire thing was covered. The only telltale sign was a small dune rising up in a shaded corner of the sandbox.

Jacob walked on the grass around the sandbox, contemplating the dune. He reached his cold soiled hands into his pants pockets and discovered jelly candies, forgotten and left over from yesterday. There were two of them, lime green, and he popped them both into his mouth at once. Sand was embedded in the sugary skins of the candy and when Jacob chewed it was as if cannons fired inside him. Each time his teeth closed on the sweet green meat, his head was filled with roaring explosions.

When he looked up from the sand, his mother was running across the grass towards him. Jacob was confused and thought that she had heard him all the way across the street, up in their apartment. She would be angry and tell him loudly, so the other woman would hear, that eating dirt was for babies, not for grown up boys of four years old. But when she reached the sandbox she did not pry open his mouth. She did not even ask to see what he was chewing on.

"Where are the other kids?" she asked, wetting her handkerchief with spittle and wiping his face and hands. "They were supposed to bring

you home half an hour ago. You could have come yourself. Aren't you hungry for your lunch?"

Jacob hung his head. He let her drag him across the park, down the street to their building, and up the stairs.

"You're one hell of a kid," she said, pulling off his billie boots outside their door. "One hell of a glum, mysterious kid."

In the afternoon his mother shut herself in the livingroom with a typewriter. The clicking of the machine and its periodic ring irritated him, and he could not concentrate on his toys. His mother did not look up when he walked out the door and into the corridor of the building. He decided to visit Mr. Mahoney down the hall. Mr. Mahoney was an old man. He stayed in his room all day watching television, and at night, ladies came with food to fix him supper. The apartment was very stuffy and dark and filled with a sweet, heavy medicinal smell. It was not a bad smell, just one that made Jacob dozey and apt to fall asleep. He slipped inside the door, which was unlatched for emergencies.

"Well, well," said Mr. Mahoney. "Look at what the cat brought in."

There was no cat. Mr. Mahoney always said this when Jacob came for a visit. It was his way of saying hello. He nodded from the sofa where he was watching a football game. Jacob lay down on his stomach in the middle of the rug. Usually he did not have to much to say to the old man, and sometimes he was so quiet that Mr. Mahoney forgot all about him and went to sleep. He lay like this for a while, watching the little men

run back and forth across the screen. Every once in a while Mr. Mahoney would rise up a little ways off the couch and shoot his fist into the air. He laughed and called out, "Ooh Nellie" or "That'll fix 'em good." He was not talking to Jacob when he said these things. He did not look towards the rug. He was just trying the words out, it seemed, for the pleasure of making a noise. Jacob understood this. *Ooh Nellie* must feel nice curling off your tongue, especially if you lingered and stretched it out the way Mr. Mahoney did.

Jacob went to Mr. Mahoney's kitchen and opened the low cupboard door. He knew exactly where to look; Mr. Mahoney had shown him the place. He took out the large square tin box and began to pry off the top. Inside were cookies. They were not his favourites. They did not have cream fillings or sugar coatings. Mr. Mahoney had simple tastes. He liked oatmeal, and something he called *fly biscuits* with squashed black raisins that looked like house flies. Jacob took a handful of oatmeal ones, with enough for Mr. Mahoney, and went back to the television room.

His mother was standing beside the sofa. "Jacob," she said when she saw him, "you will be the death of me." Her hair was half fallen as if she had been running. "He's so damn quiet," she was saying to Mr. Mahoney. "Never tells me he's wandering off. I go mad with worry." She bent over Jacob, whose fists were closed and full of cookies. "You must never, never sneak off like that again. Are you listening Jacob?" Her words fell about him like slivers of glass. "Why do you do it?" She squeezed his shoulders and shook him. Jacob said nothing. He poked his running shoe

into Mr. Mahoney's rug. His mother spoke for a while longer to Mr. Mahoney who was sitting straight up on the couch, drinking in the drama in his livingroom. He almost never received visitors in the afternoons, so this was an occasion. Then, without giving Jacob a chance to say goodbye, Jacob's mother took his arm and dragged him back towards their apartment. He could not keep a grip on all the cookies as she pulled him, and scattered a line of crumbs, like Gretel, all the way down the corridor, from Mr. Mahoney's door to theirs.

That night, the man came in early. He was wearing jeans, just like Jacob was, and while they sat in the kitchen, he kept throwing a can of chili into the air and catching it with one hand. The can made a pleasant slapping sound against his palm. He came over to where Jacob and his mother were sitting and passed his hand over the top of Jacob's head. "Hey, pardner," he said, "where's the hat?"

Jacob did not like the weight of the man's hand. He went limp in his mother's arms and slid out of reach down to the kitchen floor.

"It's weird the way he goes all soft and quiet," the man said. He knelt down in front of the little boy and shook him gently. "C'mon Jacob. Where is it?"

Jacob could hardly hear him. He kept his eyes low, staring at the floor. His stomach began to cramp and make ugly, frightened noises.

"Talk to me, Jacob. You lose it or something?". The man's hands loosened and Jacob slumped lower on the floor. "Christ!" the man said. He

stood up and began to toss the can from one hand to the other. "I give up. That kid of yours is weird, Gill.

"I'd like to know," he said, pulling open drawers and slamming them shut again, "just where the hell the can opener's got to."

His mother, who until then had watched quietly, perched on a tall wicker bar stool by the counter, made a worried, fluttering motion. "Forget the chili," she said. "Can't you see there's something wrong!" Her hands waved back and forth, like the wings of a bird, and she hurried her words as if she did not believe the man would listen. "He's terrified, Ray. You scare the wits right out of him."

The man had a funny, pained look on his face. "Don't start coming after me for all the kid's problems," he said. "I'm not the goddamn *father*." Then he spoke more gently. "Maybe it's just a stage he's passing through."

But she was shaking her head, shutting her eyes tight the way she did when she was very upset. "It's not a stage," she said, her voice defiant and straining against tears. "God, this is too awful."

The man put the unopened can of chili down on the counter. Then, without looking at either of them, he went out to the hall for his jacket. The door slammed hard, shaking the walls of the apartment.

Jacob's mother squatted on the floor, collapsing over him as if the strength had been wrung out of her. She was crying and her tears fell forward over his body making tiny, slapping noises against the black and white tiles. He squirmed around in her arms. Lines of black dripped from her eyes and she wept loudly, as if she did not feel him there.

"Assez," he said faintly, and stroked her hair. He said other things, mimicking the soothing tones and sounds of Genevieve, and thought of jelly candies, sour, dusted in sugar, gem-coloured, like the ones she gave him in the park.

His mother looked up, her eyes swimming with tears, the skin of her cheeks smudged with grey. She wiped her face, and suddenly began to laugh. "You're right," she said, "assez," but she started to cry again.

"Assez, assez," she said, her entire body shaking in his startled, childish arms.

The Bee Mistress

The summer I turned fourteen was a particularly wet one. I remember lounging around the house all through the months of June and July, peering out at the world through rain-streaked windows, and driving my mother mad. My sisters were sent to day camp, but I was too old for that, and about a year too young to get a job, so I had no choice but to lounge. Montreal had turned into a ghost town. Some days I walked over to the park near my house and stood around the tennis courts, waiting for someone to lob a ball over the fence. I helped retrieve stray tennis balls, and occasionally even got a nod from the attendant, who was older than me and very good looking. But the courts were flooded every second day, and in the end the park proved as lifeless and dull as anywhere else. Most of the time I stayed inside, read magazines, and moped.

In desperation, my mother telephoned her parents. Grampa Harold owned a summer house on a lake in southern Ontario. The cottage was only a two hour drive from their home in Toronto. It was in the middle of rolling pastureland, and working farms in the county greatly outnumbered the cottages.

My mother had always spoken fondly of the cottage. She spent summers there as a child. I had seen it once, when our family decided to drive down during one of my father's annual vacations. It was a long car ride and my sisters vomited copiously all over the back seat. I remember trying not to breathe for 300 miles. When we arrived, we were desperate

to go swimming. I was the first one down at the dock, but then I refused to go in because of the slippery, hairlike weeds that covered the lake bottom like a carpet. At night we spread sleeping bags on the living room floor because there weren't enough beds, and my grandmother said not to whisper or we would wake up the mice.

My mother wanted me to go back there. I would stay the month of August, she said. It would do me good.

I arrived at the bus depot in Bramlea, the town nearest my grandfather's lake, just as the sun was sinking. It had been hazy and uncertain all afternoon, and with darkness coming, the sky had turned a strange greyish yellow. Rain had followed me, my grandfather later observed, across the border all the way from Montreal.

Grampa Harold had grown up on a farm and loved to work. He dreamed up an endless series of tasks and set about doing them in a cheerful, resolute way. The day after I arrived, rain came down harder over Bramlea than it had all summer and Grampa Harold and my grandmother and I were forced to stay indoors. Before the breakfast dishes were dry, my grandfather had mixed a bowl full of a sticky, white substance and was recaulking the tiles in bathroom. My grandmother was less ambitious. She sat in a corner and flipped through her cookbooks. We had planned on a barbecue for dinner, but the rain meant we had to use the stove. I watched my grandfather work, helped my grandmother spice a meatloaf, and felt maddeningly cooped up all afternoon. The cottage had

no private corners, and there was even less space for lounging than in our house in Montreal.

Sun broke through the next day, and Grampa Harold asked if I would help him fix the road. "Fix the road?" I said, and he must have taken this to mean I wasn't interested, because he laced up his boots and started walking towards the shed in back of the house. I was still in my pyjamas, and by the time I had changed into shorts and a tee shirt and caught up with him, he was halfway up the road that linked his cottage to the highway. This road was dirt, about a half mile in length, and rose in periodic, gentle hills. My grandfather was wearing his stained work pants, and carried a heavy pail of sand in one hand, and a shovel in the other. He explained his plan with the pleasure of someone proposing a morning of golf, or a drive in the country. "We're going to fill in potholes, Iris," he told me. "That rain really cut up the road's surface."

My grandfather didn't own the road. It belonged to the county, and other cottagers and two farmers used it. Such facts seldom deterred Grampa Harold. It wasn't hard work, he said, and in the long run, life would be easier for everyone. I admired his earnestness, but at the same time, given my propensity for lounging, I found it peculiar. I spent the morning searching for holes, and filling them with bits of loose gravel and sand.

Several days after I arrived, my grandfather asked if I wanted to visit a nearby farm. He must have realized that potholes and caulking

couldn't keep an almost-fourteen-year-old girl happy indefinitely. The farm was owned by a woman called Gwendolyn. She was in her late fifties, which seemed old to me at the time, and her hair was short and silver white. Gwen was the county sheriff. When Grampa Harold told me this I pictured her with a pair of smoking six shooters and a Stetson, but it really meant that she sat on committee meetings and made decisions about zoning and the purchase of local property. Gwen used to own cows, but had sold off most of her pasture land. It was too much work, she said, and the returns were very small. Now all that was left of Gwen's farm was the vegetable garden, and an apiary. She was known in the area for her honey, and did good business.

Grampa Harold took me out to see the bees. He also wanted me to meet Lee, a young woman who lived on Gwen's farm and was the only person he knew in the area even remotely near my age.

A few days after the storm, we visited Gwen and Lee. We drove into their yard, and then stood rather awkwardly beside the car, hoping someone would look out the window of the farmhouse and see us. My grandfather was very careful about decorum. I think it embarrassed him to call on a woman who wasn't his wife or daughter. Whatever the reason, that afternoon he was at a bit of a loss.

He and Gwen had known each other for years. She knew everyone in the area and what they were up to, cottagers included, and made a big point of saying hello and catching up on news when she met people in

town or on the road. Grampa Harold liked Gwen's friendliness. He understood it and felt at home with it because of his own farming roots. My grandmother, who was a city woman, born and bred in Windsor, Ontario, couldn't stand it. "That nosy woman?" she would say whenever Gwen's name came up.

Gwen appeared on her front doorstep, wiping her hands on her jeans.

"Harold, you took us by surprise. We were just finishing the breakfast dishes." I was wondering about the we when a thin, childlike person with long black hair stepped out onto the porch. She would have been quite beautiful except that she had a harelip which skewed her face slightly to one side. She didn't say a word, just stared over Gwen's shoulder at us.

Grampa Harold got flustered and said he should have phoned first, but he thought they'd be out in the garden by now, or working with the bees. Gwen just laughed and said they'd slept in. The girl went back inside, still without saying anything, but Gwen didn't seem to notice. She came down the stairs for a chat.

"My what a change," she said, looking about her at the yard steeped in sunlight. "Thank God the Almanac says August will be dry." She smiled broadly at me, already knowing who I was, my age, address, and that I played percussion with the school band. "Lee plays bluegrass guitar," she told me. "We've got a bongo drum somewhere around, but neither of us knows how to make it sound good. You should come over some evening and

jam."

Since when did a woman older than my mother use the word *jam*? I was impressed. Gwen seemed young and old at the same time. She could talk about the state of the roads with my grandfather, and then turn around and share bluegrass and bongos with me.

She spent the morning giving us a tour of the farm. We started with the vegetables. The garden was immense and flourishing, surrounded by a mesh wire fence. Tomato plants, drooping under the weight of large, pale orange fruit, stood in rows like sentries. There was plenty of space between each plant, to maximize sunlight and make picking easier. Someone had organized the garden beautifully. From far off it looked like a patchwork quilt, with bright swatches of colour that began and ended abruptly in even lines. Pumpkins and gourds grew in one corner. Fiery nasturtiums covered the ground beside them. Gwen said she picked the buds and pickled them for capers. Gossamer fronds of asparagus plants waved delicately in the wind. I recognized various vegetables when I could find them, lying hidden beneath leaves and vines, but I was hopeless at identifying plants. Gwen said I was a city slicker and needed educating.

She told me that Lee was mistress of the garden. It was largely her design and inspiration. I wondered why Lee had disappeared so suddenly. Perhaps she was shy about the way she looked, or embarrassed by Gwen's praise of her work. Gwen told us that the girl had arrived two

years ago from the city, knowing as little as I did about the land, but with a book on organic farming strapped to her rucksack. She had stopped in Bramlea and asked for work. In the two years she had been with Gwen, she had revolutionized the garden. They no longer used chemical sprays, and Lee had started a compost heap for fertilizer. She planted new vegetables that Gwen would never have tried, like eggplant and soybeans. She also knew how to cook them.

Gwen let Lee have full rein in the garden because the girl was hopeless with bees. She had tried to train her. That had been the original idea, to get some steady help for the apiary, but it hadn't worked out. Every time Lee went near a hive she got stung, and she had horrible dreams at night that she was being eaten alive by insects. I felt secretly relieved to hear that Lee was fallible. I remember being more than a little awed by the garden, and by Gwen's account of Lee's horticultural skills.

Gwen told us that she was just the opposite of Lee. She had been working with bees since she was five years old and had never once been stung. She led us through a small field in back of the house. At the far end were the huts, as Gwen called them. We stopped several yards away.

"How are you with bees?" she asked solemnly.

I was nervous. One or two of the insects flew over to see what we were doing. My sweater was bright pink, and I had spritzed on cologne after breakfast, and they paid particular attention to me.

"They seem to like you," Gwen observed, when neither Grampa Harold nor I said a word. "If your smell pleases them, they'll be nice. Oh, and they hate getting their feet caught in wool. If I were you I'd remove that sweater."

I ripped off the sweater, rubbing behind my ears at the same time to rid myself of the sugary cologne.

"We'll come back another time," Gwen said, laughing. She seemed to enjoy seeing me humbled by the tiny, fuzzy creatures.

That visit was the first of many to Gwen's farm. She lent me an old bicycle so I could come and see her on my own, which I did almost every day. She seemed to understand that I needed a bit of freedom, and some time away from my family.

My grandparents thought I had struck up a friendship with Lee, and this was why I visited, but nothing could have been farther from the truth. On my first visit alone to the farm, Lee came out onto the porch while Gwen and I were drinking lemonade. She sat down on an old sun chair and began peeling flakes of paint off the armrest.

Gwen was explaining about bees: how the scouts did a dance to show the location of flowers and blossoms they had found. Gwen's scouts didn't have to work too hard. One of her neighbours kept an apple orchard, and another had a field of sweet clover. Both provided excellent pollen, she said, and her bees made plenty of top quality honey.

I watched Lee's hands, which were long and delicately boned. On

her left hand the nails were clipped short, but on her right, she had let them grow. Dirt was encrusted just below the point where the nail turned white and grew away from the fingertip. I was very intrigued by this manicure, but was too shy to ask Lee about it. Later, Gwen told me that Lee had to keep the nails of her right hand long to pluck her guitar. They looked bad because of all the gardening she did, but they made beautiful sounds.

That day, Lee said very little. She listened to our talk, and seemed to be making up her mind about me. Gwen all but ignored her. They seemed comfortable enough together to leave each other alone, and this also intrigued me. I wondered if they were friends and spoke easily when no one else was around. The alternative was that Gwen liked Lee's work in the garden, and appreciated her music on those long country nights.

Lee's face was long and thin, draped on either side by limp black hair which she wore straight down, or fastened back with an elastic. She wore no make-up. Her smile, which flashed at rare intervals and faded almost immediately into a bland, neutral look, was marred by surgical scars. She was small, with long limbs and toes and fingers. It was hard to pin an age on her. At thirteen, I was better developed than she was, and far more fleshy. She was skinny and lithe as a child, but I got the feeling she would always be like this. She'd been to university and dropped out. I guessed she was somewhere in her mid-twenties.

Gwen went on for a while about bees. I was pretty interested in

the stories she was telling. I loved being an armchair apiculturalist, it was when I had to face bees in the flesh that I got anxious. Lee was staring at a bank of clouds moving in across the fields, and she stood up abruptly. "Don't you let Gwen finagle you into beekeeping now," she said, and strode off to the kitchen.

In the ensuing weeks I did let Gwen initiate me into the apian world. After my first experience, I never wore perfume. I also dressed in a way I knew would please the bees. Gwen lent me gloves and a net to pull over my head when we went out to visit the hives. She herself only wore gloves. She worked on the hives without the help of smoke, in sleeveless cotton shirts and shorts. Her face and arms were always exposed, and she talked to me as she worked, sometimes even singing.

I was still nervous. Bees landed on my sleeves, crawled up my pant legs, and it was all I could do to keep from screaming and thrashing out at them. I prayed that fear wouldn't change my smell, which until then they had tolerated. Gwen showed me how to lift the tops off the hives and collect honey, and also how to fix damaged hives. She explained the different bee roles and their habits in great detail.

"Bees are marvellous," she said one day, as we were mending a hive. "You know, of course, that their colonies are ruled by a female?"

I laughed. By that time I knew about queen bees, about the lazy drones, and the workers, but I had never thought of hives in terms of politics and sex.

"The queen is the most powerful bee of all. She's mother to every bee in the hive, except for the occasional stray drone. Drones sit around all day and eat. They're basically sex objects. Their only role is to fertilize the queen, and that happens just once in her lifetime," Gwen said.

I loved to listen to Gwen. Her stories provoked such surprising images that I was barely aware of how much I was learning. She filled me full of questions. One time she told me that drones were fed as long as pollen was plentiful, but in the cold season the workers sometimes starved them and kicked them out of the hive.

"Do they ever revolt?" I asked.

"Oh they're pretty docile. The meek of the earth," she said.

"And what happens when the queen dies?"

"A new one's crowned. Sometimes a new queen is born before the old one dies. Then there's trouble. The old one has to leave. She takes about half the hive away with her. When you see a swarm travelling in the air, that's generally what's happened. One of the queens has left."

At night on the cot in my bedroom, I thought about bees. They even entered my dreams. When I first dreamt of them, I was wary. They were dangerous, and apt to chase me. But gradually they turned neutral, and within a couple of weeks I was dreaming of their beauty. I think all Gwen's talk about sexy queens helped.

In contrast to Gwen, my own grandmother seemed pale and somewhat dull. She and Gwen were only ten years apart in age, but while Gwen was active and always entertaining, Gramma sat at home all day worrying about lunches and suppers, and what time to expect me or Grampa Harold, who was off on any one of his countless tasks. She had always been secondary in her home. The needs and schedules of other people came first. I felt guilty running off to Gwen's farm every morning to learn the art of beekeeping. I was free. I had my life apart from her, which was very pleasing to me. Grampa Harold had his chores, which he enjoyed. Gwen had a passion for bees. It never occurred to Gramma to find some corner she could call her own.

Three weeks into August, I was having so much fun I had forgotten Montreal and my doubts about spending an entire month in Bramlea. Then my birthday came, a sign for me that summer was just about over. I remember anticipating it with mixed feelings. It called me back to the realities of school and the city, which I didn't want to think about, but it also meant I was a year older: a year farther from my childhood, and closer to entry into the elusive realm of adulthood.

The morning of my fourteenth birthday there was a festive feeling in our cottage. My grandmother made pancakes with wild blueberries. I had picked the day before, and set the table with fancy party napkins. She even put out those whistles that make the irritating noise and have tongues of paper that uncoil when you blow through them. I loved the

attention. In my own house, my birthday was overshadowed by those of my younger siblings. Some years I had to drop hints to remind my mother of the date.

We were sitting at the table finishing breakfast, talking about the barbecue we would have that night in my honour, when the telephone rang. It was a party line and my grandfather always let it ring a few times to make sure it was for us. Two shorts and a long was our code. I thought it was my mother, who had remembered, through some accident or miracle, what day it was. My grandfather picked up the receiver.

When he used the telephone at the cottage, my grandfather shouted. He stood stiffly at the wall where the telephone box was hooked up yelling loud hellos into the mouthpiece. He never trusted it would work, it seemed to me, or that a familiar voice would actually make it through the wires. My grandmother was even worse. She wouldn't touch it the few occasions on which it rang. She just ran out into the yard in a feverish search for Grampa Harold. She was also convinced that the other cottagers listened in on our conversations.

"Who?" my grandfather shouted. He was frowning deeply, as if it might be a crank call. Then his face relaxed. "Oh. Gwen. Didn't recognize you on the blower." Sometimes Grampa Harold slipped quaint expressions into his speech. He'd been a businessman in Toronto for so long that they didn't hang right. My grandmother used to wince when she heard him. When he thought something was funny, for instance, he called it a *corker*.

Now he was using the word *blower*. It was as if he were trying to go back to some place in his memory, but he'd forgotten his way. He had changed too much from the little farm boy he'd once been, and the words no longer fit.

He listened for a while, and said, "You want me to bring her over?" I felt a surge of happiness then, because I knew that they were talking about me. Gwen had not only remembered my birthday, she had planned something special.

After he got off the phone, checking the receiver twice to see that Gwen had hung up and everything was under control, he turned to us and explained. "Gwen just got a call about some runaway bees. She's going to drive out and try to catch them. She knows it's your birthday, and didn't want to disturb you, but she thought you might want to go along."

I jumped up from the table and began clearing away the dishes. My grandparents laughed and said I should go on. People weren't supposed to touch dishes on birthdays. I ran to my room, pulled on my tennis shoes without lacing them, and two minutes later was pedalling furiously along the highway to Gwen's farm.

She was loading things into the back of her station wagon when I arrived. "You're a sight," she said. I was sweating hard by that time, and my hair was tangled and windblown. "Go on into the house and freshen up while I finish this. We've got a good twenty mile drive ahead of us, and an hour or two of work."

It was still early, ten o'clock or so, and the stillness about Gwen's farm suggested that the day was just beginning. Lee was not yet in her garden, and the fields behind the house were filled with the lazy buzzing of cicadas. I slipped into the kitchen to use the sink, and suddenly a voice started singing. It was a beautiful voice, unadorned and simple as a boy's, and it echoed through the halls of the old farmhouse from an upper floor.

*Don't sing lovesongs, you'll wake my mother,
She's sleepin' here, right by my side,
And in her right hand, a silver dagger,
She says that I can't be your bride.*

It was Lee. I had never heard her play the guitar or sing before, and it caught me by surprise. Her voice was so pure, and the guitar so soft and perfect, it could almost have been the radio.

I didn't want to turn on the faucet. I just stood listening, and that's how Gwen found me when she came into the kitchen. "Not done yet?" she said. Then she heard Lee. "Oh," she said. "She's really something, isn't she?" We both stood in silence. Gwen's face looked wistful and strangely old as she listened, but I imagined that it was just the music. Lee's voice was haunting and her song was very melancholy.

We drove west along the highway to the far edge of the county. A man out there had seen the swarm resting in a deserted yard, and had phoned Gwen because he knew she kept bees. The law said that anyone

who captured a swarm on the wing could claim title, Gwen explained to me, as we turned onto a dirt road and sped past a field of splintered, harvested cornstalks. If we succeeded today, she said, it would mean one more hive, free of charge. We had to get there quickly. There was no telling when the bees would take flight again.

We found them just where the man had said they'd be, on a tree in back of the dilapidated remains of a farmhouse. The tree was small, and from far away the cluster of bees looked like a single, gigantic fruit dangling from an upper branch. All of a sudden I realized the enormity of the task before us. We had just driven twenty miles, a good part of which had been along bumpy country roads. We would have to capture this crawling, whining mass of life, put it into the station wagon, and sit beside it for at least a half an hour while Gwen drove home. I don't know what I had been imagining. I suppose I never expected we would find them.

Gwen told me that the queen was hidden deep in the middle of the cluster. "She alighted first, and then all the other bees grouped about her like a shield. Wherever she goes, they'll follow."

This last fact formed the basis for Gwen's strategy. She took a large white sheet out of the car and spread it under the branch on which the swarm was hanging. The bees hummed a little when she approached, but they didn't seem to mind. Then she took long pruning shears and deftly, in a single, swift motion, snapped the tree branch about a foot

above where the swarm had settled. It fell with a loud plop onto the centre of the sheet.

"So far so good," Gwen muttered. The bees made an angry, confused sound, and many of them flew up and buzzed around the tree and Gwen's head, but she stood perfectly still. I backed off, fearing the worst, but the bees soon quieted and returned to the severed branch and to their queen, who had not moved.

Gwen handed me the shears, and then delicately lifted a corner of the bedsheet and laid it over her prize. She repeated this procedure with each corner of the sheet until the bees were hidden from view. They still buzzed angrily, but the sound was muffled and the clean white sheet gave the illusion that the problem had disappeared.

We drove very slowly back to Gwen's farm, bees humming and wriggling inside their sheet on the seat just in back of ours. Occasionally, one crawled out to join us, and hung suspended in the hot air inside the car. Sometimes they bumped their heads against the windshield or side windows.

The evening before I left for Montreal, I pedalled over to Gwen's farm to say good-bye. I had been helping Grampa Harold close the cottage, and for two days I hadn't had a moment free to visit Gwen, or even to let her know that I was leaving.

I pulled into the yard and left my bicycle leaning against the side

of her car. The place was very quiet, and the house, dark and empty-looking. I was glad that the car was there, because it meant Gwen was in, and I ran up the porch steps calling her name. The door to the kitchen was unlatched. Through the screen I could see dishes and some papers on the table, as if someone had eaten and not bothered to clean up. I called again.

Silence. It was past eight, and the sky was turning a watery, pinkish brown. Maybe Gwen was off in the fields on a walk with Lee, or perhaps she had gone to check her bees. I decided she couldn't be far and that the best idea was to wait on the porch. Dusk was falling fast. I sat on one of Gwen's peeling wooden lawn chairs, tugging the sleeves of my sweater down over my hands. The night was chilly and clear and a harvest moon, cut in a crescent and grinning like the Cheshire Cat, hung low in the sky, just above the trees.


I sat for almost half an hour, feeling the air turn colder and damper, and thinking about Gwen. She spent winters in this house. Every autumn she watched the leaves fall, and then snow would blanket her fields and garden. I wondered how she had come to choose her isolated life. She liked to be with people, that was clear, but she seemed happy with her lot. Happier, in fact, than most of the women I knew. And yet she was so alone. Grampa Harold told me she had never married. She had no family, no children, even though she seemed a natural at mothering me.

I was chilled from sitting so long, and felt a sudden need to relieve

myself. The door was unlocked, and I slipped inside the dark kitchen, and wandered down the hall to the bathroom. The walls of the hallway were lined with maps, and watercolours, and old photographs in wooden frames. Distinguished gentlemen stared at me through round spectacles; women with their hair done up in bows smiled coquettishly. The boards beneath me creaked, and the further I progressed towards the interior of the old house, the stronger was my sense of trespassing; of entering the private sanctum of Gwen's life. I had been in the house many times before, but it seemed different that night, without Gwen beside me.

Gwen's bathroom was very large, decorated in simple white and black tiles. Beside the toilet was a three-tiered bamboo table crammed with magazines and paperbacks. The walls, like those of the hallway, were cluttered with framed photographs, only here the photographs were smaller, and seemed to consist primarily of Gwen at various ages. In one of them she was a child, clutching the hand of an austere, dark-suited man. Another showed Gwen and Lee standing arm and arm in the middle of a road. Lee was flashing one of her rare smiles, and Gwen's head was thrown back in laughter. I lingered in the bathroom, studying these fragments from Gwen's life, washing my hands in a sink that hadn't been cleaned for a while, drying them on a towel haphazardly flung over a stack of novels. The big, old house had a comfortable sense of disorder.

I flushed the toilet, and was just about to step out into the hall, when I heard feet pounding along the floorboards.



"Lee?" Gwen shouted in a loud, frightened voice. "Lee? Is that you?"

I opened the door and we stared at each other in the darkness. Gwen's face looked awful, chalky and swollen. At first I thought it was the lack of light, and that my eyes were playing tricks. Soon I realized she'd been crying, and what was more, she was drunk. A sour, yeasty smell came from her, and she swayed unsteadily. She stared at me for what seemed an eternity, unable to make sense of seeing me there in the darkness, in her house.

"It's you," she said.

I started talking then, saying whatever came into my head. I told her that I'd come to say good-bye. I rambled on about waiting and getting chilled, and then coming inside. I hoped she didn't mind. I hadn't meant to frighten her. In her face I watched an extraordinary struggle. She was trying to collect herself, trying desperately to recover some kind of dignity. I had never seen a person so exposed, and didn't know what to do. Like in a fairy tale, or in one of those horror movies that play on late night television, Gwen had changed suddenly into something unrecognizable. With her strange, wild face and the sour odour, I no longer knew her.

"It's Lee," she said finally, in a low, tired voice. "She's gone."

Now it was my turn to stare. It was like cold water in the face. A truth that I had somehow known, but never dared look at, never dared

articulate, had pushed through.

Strangely enough, it wasn't the fact that they were women that shocked me. It was the thought that Gwen had chosen Lee - sullen, tight-lipped Lee - to shower with her love.

I reached out to Gwen and hugged her, more to move around her and out into the corridor than anything else. I was too shaken to think straight, and too young to consider anything she might feel or need. It was an uneasy hug, clumsy and brief, and I backed away almost immediately.

"I'll be okay," Gwen said, smiling a little. "It's just rough right now."

Next thing I knew, I was running down the lightless corridor, through the kitchen and out into the night, slamming the door behind me. Trees threw sweeping shadows against the house and across the dirt yard. The bicycle was leaning against Gwen's car, exactly where I had left it, but I ran on, straight down to the highway. The only light came from the moon. It grinned down, huge, honey-coloured, mocking me and my childish fears.

Zaza's Stones

They lived in an enormous house in Montreal at the top of a very steep hill. Montreal has two hills that poke up from the island's centre. The biggest one, Mount Royal, is a dead volcano. Rachel's mother, Barbara, told Rachel about this when she was very small, and described in lurid detail the process of eruption. She said that lava moved so fast, it had been known to trap people in their beds and bury them alive. When it cooled, it sometimes formed a mold, and in other parts of the world rescue workers had dug up black replicas of children, small statues sleeping peacefully and obliviously.

Like most Montrealers, Rachel referred to Mount Royal as *the mountain*. It was only much later when she began to travel that she realized how proudly and innocently deluded this name was. Montreal's two mountains were hummocks, molehills next to the Rockies or the Alps.

Their house was on the smaller of the two inclines where many of the city's rich English families lived. The street was called Belvedere, and it was worthy of its name. From their living room window they could see the entire southern half of the city, the harbour, the black, snaking river where miniature ships moved slowly about their business, and beyond it to mountains across the American border, shimmering blue and unreal.

Before Belvedere they had lived in a red brick semi-detached beside Rachel's school. It was a strange looking place by anyone's standards. Their neighbours were an elderly man and his invalid wife who seldom

ventured out. One year, impetuously and quite unaccountably, they decided to paint the bricks on their half of the house white. They did not consult her father. He came home from work late one September evening to find the job almost done, and Rachel and her younger brother Marty, chewing gum the painters had given them.

"What's all this?" he had said, surveying the oddity that his house had become. "And what's that you've got?" he stormed at Marty, who was winding spitty wads of Doublemint around his fingers.

Theirs was the smaller section of the house, but the white paint made the neighbour's side seem even larger. Their house looked suddenly swamped, insignificant, like an addition and an afterthought.

Rachel loved that house. It was small and the back door was constantly swinging and slamming from the children. Rachel even liked it after the paint job. It was true it had changed. It did look slightly odd. The red brick on their side looked older and more neglected than ever in contrast with the shining, white exterior next door. But if anything, it made their house look more homey, more comfortable and welcoming. Her father, Saul, did not see it this way. The change was an embarrassment which glared out at him every night after work, when he parked his car in the little space in front of their bay window. Almost from the day the painters left, he spoke of looking for some place new.

In the middle of her last year of elementary school, the moving vans came. Saul's law practice was going well by then, and he finally had the means to move to a more dignified and larger house. It was

winter, she remembered, the winter she had grown five inches and blossomed into an early and quite unwanted womanhood. They stripped the old house bare, pulling down paintings and mirrors, leaving faded ovals and squares on the wallpaper, and holes from the nails Saul had hammered in years ago.

As a child, Rachel had been a squirmer, active and sure in her body. She had learned to walk at nine months; and even when she was very young had hated being held, hated enclosures. Before her first birthday, she was hoisting herself over the bars of her crib and dropping soundlessly to the floor. In school she enjoyed the reputation of being energetic and rather fearless.

All this changed in the winter of her eleventh year. All of a sudden she could not reach out an arm without some object tumbling and breaking. Her knees buckled on stairs and she tripped often, climbing up as well as down. Her mother would rush out from the kitchen to find her in a stunned, slightly bruised heap; grinning stupidly from the bottom of the main stairwell. Saul turned indifferent to her and cold as the crusted, dirt-flecked snow that covered his new yard, his balconies, his windowsills and roof. Rachel was conscious of disgrace, of a deep unease she was creating, but no matter how she prayed or wished, she could not reverse the changes. She kept on growing, smashing things, stumbling at the oddest moments.

At school, things were no better. The girls in her class were still breastless and skinny. In the locker room before gym class they would

huddle in groups and discuss who was shaving under their arms and graduating from the 'standard wear of' undershirts to brassieres. Fleeshy girls were looked on with disdain. Cruel jokes were made about menstruation. Rachel tried not to listen and kept her own chest hidden.

Barbara was no help at all. It was paradoxical. She could be frank about many things, and yet she became stiff and prickly when it came to her daughter. Rachel's father had all but disowned her, and she found herself suddenly alone and without allies in the strange, new house.

Rachel's new bedroom had a balcony that looked south, out over the river. It rested on a small roof which, she was soon to discover, was excellent for hiding and for secret sunbathing. From the balcony she watched storms. She had never seen storms start before, or spread out across the city. The best ones were like sheets of something solid, glass maybe or metal, and they swept through the sky with speed that took her breath away. From her perch, Rachel watched them come flying towards her, chasing the dry air out in front, engulfing the city street by street until finally they arrived, to swallow Rachel and the house in a torrent of driving snow or water.

Marty slept on the opposite side of the house, overlooking the road. One morning in January, not long after they had moved, he did something that went down in the family annals. It was a Sunday and everyone else was in bed. Marty was playing in his room when he heard the voice. He went to the window, and way down below in the snow, in the glaring, reflected light, he saw Zaza.

Zaza was Saul's dad. When Rachel was one year old, they had tried to teach her the Yiddish word *zeyda*, but all she could manage was Zaza, and it had stuck. He was a squat man with coarse grey hair on his back and hands and arms, and when she thought about it, the elegant, womanly-sounding name she had picked did not suit him at all. He never complained, but it really was a bad joke.

Zaza was waving a brown bag. Marty was no dummy; he knew exactly what Zaza wanted, and even what was in the bag, but he did not budge. His window was closed to keep out the winter air; so he could not make out Zaza's words, but still he knew. Zaza had brought bagels from St. Viateur Street, and wanted to be let in. He had knocked and pushed the bell, but the ring was feeble and no one had heard. He had started calling up to Marty's room. Marty appeared at the window and stood there for several minutes, Zaza later told them, gazing down at him, slowly shaking his head, refusing to let the old man in. Eventually Zaza had to get back into his car and drive away.

Saul was puzzled and a little angry when he found out about the episode. He scolded Marty and asked what on earth had come over him. Marty went shy and wordless, as he often did when he'd been bad, and would not say what was going through his head. But Rachel knew. She had known from the moment she heard the story. Marty had simply been executing his father's secret wish. Saul was ashamed of Zaza. Nothing was ever said openly on this subject. It was something you picked up without anyone putting it into words. Whenever Zaza visited, Saul tensed

up and said biting, sarcastic things.

Zaza and Rachel's grandmother, Babba, lived in a large house not far from their own. He was a very wealthy man, three, four times richer than Saul. Dinners at his home were elaborate. The table was beautifully set with candelabra and silver, and an immaculate, white table cloth. Zaza had a servant, a meek, elderly lady called either Mrs. Price or Mrs. Rice. Rachel never found out which. She was black and spoke with a thick Caribbean accent, and her eyes were always lowered and shyly darting. She would come into the dining room with steaming plates of red roast. Then she would pour wine and pass the silver gravy boat around. Zaza would direct her and yell out orders to the kitchen. He even had a bell, hidden underneath the rug at the head of the table, that he could step on and ring when he wanted her. Babba was secondary in all of this coming and going. It was Zaza who was anxious that everything be just right.

When the food arrived, he would pick up a spoon from the vast array of tools around his plate, and feed himself quickly and clumsily. Somehow, in spite of the candelabra, the fine bone china, the mornay sauce, Zaza was always awkward. Rachel and her family scorned him for this. It was the way he ate, but also the things he talked about. Zaza would say anything at the table. One evening, just after the family sat down to their soup, Zaza nodded at Saul and said, "Your daughter's almost a woman. Soon you'll be fending off the men." Rachel, who had just begun wearing her first brassiere, turned bright scarlet. After dinner Zaza made things worse by rubbing his big calloused hand down her back as if

he had noticed the brassiere and was proud. She could have died from shame.

Barbara said that Zaza didn't know any better. He had been poor and was uneducated. Zaza came over alone from Poland at the age of sixteen, speaking Yiddish and one or two words of English. He knew no Polish--that was for gentiles and educated people--but he had an instinct for the worth of things, and he knew the meaning of sweat and of long hours of labour. When Zaza landed in Halifax, he was still a boy, a card-carrying member of the communist party with a cumbersome, foreign-sounding name. Within three years, so the story went, he had burned his party card, dropped several syllables from the name, and started his own business. In the fifth year he declared a holy war on unions, and shortly thereafter, announced to the world that he had made his first million.

Zaza never managed to relax entirely in America. Decades after he arrived, his accent was still strong and he spoke with a heavy smacking of the lips. His children, who were born into wealth and sent to good schools, began to break away from him very early on. The family home, where Zaza still lived, was luxurious. It had a very steep driveway, the length of a short city block, which was treacherous in winter. Zaza did not mind it only because he spent the cold months in Florida.

There were three miniature plum trees on the lawn in front of Zaza's house. The fruit from these trees were small and darkly purple, and they were left on the ground to rot because Zaza could not eat them

all. Rachel and Marty waged wars with Zaza's plums every autumn. They positioned themselves behind hedges, or behind their grandfather's parked car and hurled the soft, dark fruit at each other. Zaza filled boxes with his produce and encouraged them to take it home. "Free fruit," he would say and when she and Marty shook their heads and stubbornly continued to play, he would mutter, "Kids have it easy today," and he would look sad, but only for a moment, until Barbara came up. Then he would try to press the fruit on her.

The plums were good for wars, but Rachel could not bring herself to eat them. The flesh inside was dry and somewhat mealy. Also, they looked like turds or testicles littering the fresh cut grass.

Eventually, Rachel got used to their new house on Belvedere. When she was fifteen she stopped growing and her limbs became her own again. She achieved a grace that was different from the rough, quick grace of her childhood, but was nonetheless pleasing, to her, and, it seemed, to many of the boys in her class. Zaza had been right about fending off men. Saul had to set curfews and limits on how late telephone calls could come through. Rachel was still uneasy with Saul. Some things in her life seemed to have altered for the worse forever. When he was in the room, she spoke too fast, or falsely, or fell into what he interpreted as glum silence. They fought every night, trapped together over dinner, and she often burst dramatically into tears and ran to her room. But at school it was better. Brassieres had become prestige items, busts were now in vogue.

In late September, just after Rachel started grade ten, Zaza came up from Florida to celebrate the new year. She was studying in her room when he dropped over, unannounced. From a distance he looked yellow. He stood in the centre of the living room wearing a watery turquoise pullover, and his skin almost glowed against the green. The rest of the family looked porcelain white beside him.

Rachel had recently begun to see Zaza in a new light. In history class that year she had been reading about Russia and Poland and life in the Jewish ghettos.

Zaza had never told them about his youth. As a rule, he did not like to look back, only forward to his goals. But Rachel was beginning to piece it together - how hard and poor his life must have been, how important his coming to America. A man like Zaza wouldn't have time to learn etiquette, or indulge in much conversation. He would learn the new language only well enough to work and trade with.

Zaza had crossed galaxies to reach the mansion on the summit of Mount Royal. For the first time in her life, Rachel was beginning to respect him.

Zaza gave Rachel a big, noisy kiss, and handed her an opaque plastic bag, wrinkled and knotted at the top, which had obviously made the journey with him from Florida. Marty moved in then, to see if there would be further presents, but Zaza, who was renowned for frugality and forgetfulness, just tousled Marty's hair and said it was too long for a boy, he should go and see a barber. Marty made a sour face and looked at the

bag.

Rachel finally got the knot untied. "They're from my garden," Zaza told her as she pulled out two enormous, dark green, warty avocados. Barbara began to coo that they were lovely, and how thoughtful, and what a green thumb Zaza had, but Rachel just stood there for several seconds, as if she had never seen an avocado before.

"Put the pits in earth," he said, "and you'll get trees. I had to smuggle them in," he added as if this would increase their value.

Rachel was disappointed. She didn't like the way he skimmed on gifts, no matter what kind of a past he'd had. At least he could have brought American chocolate or a make-up kit, or even the cheap plastic combs he had given her as a child.

Saul offered drinks and Zaza went for Dubonnet. He was not supposed to, he said. It was bad for his sugar. The doctors had him on a strict diet. Rachel, who was slumped on the velvet couch, her legs draped over one of the armrests, said she wanted some too.

"No way," Marty piped out immediately. He was playing with two antique pistols that hung on the wall for decoration. "If she gets some, so do I!" Saul looked at her angrily, as if she should have foreseen this, but eventually went to fix two shot glasses of the brown liquid diluted with water.

Barbara talked to fill the silence. It was a strange story about some Montreal man who had made fraudulent land deals in Florida and was kidnapped by bounty hunters on the sun porch of his home. Barbara did not

know the man, even though he lived just two streets away. "They caught him during breakfast, can you imagine? Half way through his waffles, and stuffed him in the trunk. Then they drove to Florida, crossed the border with him in the trunk!" There was outrage in her voice. "I certainly wouldn't want to live in a place where justice was so corrupt," she said to Zaza.

But Zaza wasn't going to be provoked. "Florida's all right," he said simply. "It's no different than the next place, and frankly," he said, pretending not to look at his son, "lawyers are the same all over. They've got one god, and that's mammon." He loved to needle Saul, bring him down a step.

In the family mythology it was the other way round. It was Zaza, and not Saul the lawyer, who loved money. The will was a good case in point. Saul had told the story two weeks ago, about Zaza changing it around. It was the tenth or eleventh time; he was constantly dreaming up new plans for the estate. The trouble was, Zaza did not want to pay for all his new ideas and changes. He hired a notary who was long-retired and who could be bought cheap because he'd never had much of a reputation, even when he was working. Saul was furious. He was convinced that when Zaza's will was finally unveiled, it would yield all kinds of mischief. Saul, the most likely executor, would be left with a legacy of headaches. But that, at least according to the family myth, was Zaza's style: he would live on, eternally causing headaches.

The Dubonnet and excitement soon took their toll and Zaza went off

to the toilet. He had to climb the stairs to get to it. It was surprising, but in their house, large and impressive as it was, they all shared a single toilet. There was no latch on the door and they were constantly walking in on each other. It was all right to do it to Barbara, everyone did. She would smile and begin conversations. Saul, however, was a completely different story. It was horrible. How often had she barged in on him in the morning, bleary-eyed, hunched over on the toilet in a cloud of incriminating smells? She would leap away as if the doorknob were on fire. When she used the bathroom, she always kept one foot braced firmly against intruders.

Zaza came back down the stairs, one at a time as old men do, laughing to himself for some reason. He walked into the middle of the room and turned slowly to each of them where they sat, as if he were a model on display. "It happens when you're old," he said, shrugging.

Rachel saw it then. A dark stain sneaking down Zaza's pantleg from the crotch to the knee. She did not understand at first, just stared at the stain, but Barbara began to laugh in loud, embarrassed peals, and Marty and even Saul joined her. Zaza had peed his pants. Tremulous waves began to shake her too, and soon the entire family was looking at poor Zaza through teary eyes, laughing guiltily, helplessly as school kids.

Barbara did not offer a change of clothes, or even a towel. After the laughter died, he sat down and talked for several more minutes. Rachel stared at the leg and imagined the way his skin must feel under the damp cloth. It would be clammy and slightly prickly from the acid. He

was talking about his sugar. He explained how when you were old it was hard. His doctor had warned that this might happen and told him to accept it. It was one of the many trials of ageing.

Barbara was still biting the insides of her cheeks. Saul was rubbing his eyes, which were wet with tears he had laughed so hard. Watching them, Rachel suddenly sobered and was painfully ashamed.

She was not ashamed of Zaza. He was dignified compared to the rest of them. She was ashamed that a spot of urine could throw her entire family into such a state.

The adults were still talking. Rachel did not know what to say. She wanted to let Zaza know that she was with him, that bodies were like that, unreliable, that she loved him and respected him anyway. She wanted to signal that she appreciated his life, and all the things he'd done for her. She thought of getting him a towel, but her thoughts were coming so fast; they had barely formed and suddenly he was on his feet, heading to the door, mussing Marty's hair, allowing Saul to help him on with his jacket.

Several weeks after the high holidays, the phone rang. It was a work day, quite early, and they were at breakfast. Saul's face went tight. It collapsed in on itself as he listened, and they all stopped eating and talking to watch. "What is it?" Barbara said, even though it was obvious Saul was not going to say. They could hear a woman's voice on the other end. It would be Babba, and she was crying. They could hear the

occasional word, even though Saul had the receiver glued to his ear. He calmed Babba down, hung up the phone and announced, in the small, strangled voice he usually reserved for fights, that his father was dead.

Rachel mourned. She remembered the date of Zaza's memorial service each year, and made a point of showing up at temple. She also salvaged the pits from Zaza's avocados. She soaked them in water until a white root split each stone, and then planted them several months after her grandfather's death. They grew sturdy and tall and she carted them around with her for over a decade, to Toronto when she moved away from her parents' house to study, to a ramshackle farm in eastern Quebec for a year, and finally back to Montreal and a series of uninteresting, urban flats.

Someone told her that in Canada the sun was too weak, she could never hope for avocados. But she did hope. She tended them carefully, with water, and plant food, and plenty of light, and they grew tall and graceful. And even though, in the end, they did not bear fruit, they filled her apartments with a wild, green, junglish beauty, and pleased her very much.

Salad Days

The town where she had her first love affair was not the most likely or romantic spot in all the world. It was nothing more spectacular than an uneven cluster of farms and houses strung out along a highway, but Chloe was sixteen, and at that stage of life it was easy to make even Saint Epiphane a place of beauty and intrigue.

Saint Epiphane was a farming town, and not particularly orderly or carefully kept. Smells from the pig farms and chicken hatcheries attracted thick clouds of flies each summer. Every house in the area was infested with them, not to mention the church, and the roadside diner where *poutine* and hot dogs were the main specialties. At the town's western tip a solitary street split off from the highway, climbed a hill, and frayed like an old piece of rope into a system of *rangs*, or small, unpaved, country roads.

When Chloe first arrived, the smallness of the place disconcerted her. There was very little to do. Everyone had porches and in the evening, they brought chairs out so they could watch the sun going down, and keep an eye on children who played a whisper away from the highway. They also watched the other balconies and called across to each other, or else talked among themselves, starting new rumours or pulling out and rehashing the old, familiar ones. Chloe was not used to the slow pace, or to everyone's having time to be into everyone else's business. Talk would stop as she walked by, and eyes would follow her. She never actually caught them looking, but she could feel it.

She was in Saint Epiphane that summer on a government program to learn French. There were twelve students staying in the town, living with local families to practice their second language and develop a taste for Quebec culture. Chloe, who was from Montréal, was the youngest of the group. She was also the only person from Quebec. The others were from places like Medicine Hat, Alberta, or the Kootenays. Many of them were teachers, some were in university. One man, Grant Tresham, who had just graduated and was going to teach French to high school kids out in British Columbia in the fall, chastised her for not being fluent. Grant loved French and spoke it every chance he got. In British Columbia, he said, the chances were dismally few. He envied Chloe, who could walk into any store or restaurant in Montreal and speak a foreign language.

Chloe had never regarded things in this light before. She did not mind French, but it was like any subject served up at school, just one more way to fill an afternoon. Her French teachers spoke with shrill, clipped accents, straight from Paris or some French colony in North Africa, and she was taught a brand of the language that was foreign and stilted in the context of her home.

Before that summer, Chloe had never found any use for French. She was afraid to admit this to Grant Tresham, who had such a hard time practicing it where he lived. It was difficult to explain. She lived in a French city, in the middle of an almost purely French province, but until her sixteenth year, French was just something she had to study, with as little value to her as trigonometry or the periodic table.

She lived in an English neighbourhood, and at the time, Montreal was divided into ghettos. The barriers were so deep that it was possible for a girl like her to grow for sixteen years and never have to utter a single French word. She resolved to work hard that summer, and show Grant Tresham that she was not the hopeless child he might think.

Learning French turned out to be relatively painless. Chloë had a head full of dormant grammar: verbs and sentence structures that had been drilled into her and stored away over the years. She got over her initial shyness with the new sounds and soon she was chattering away without thinking about it. She was staying with the family who owned the town grocery store and not one of them spoke English. Their name was Grondin. There were four girls, the eldest of whom, Gina, was just a bit younger than Chloë. They all helped with the store, and in the hottest month of summer, harvested strawberries on a farm just down the highway. Gina was dark and quiet like Madame Grondin. Marie, who was twelve, was loud and physical, and full of bad jokes like her father. The youngest two were hard to tell apart. They were both very skinny, with olive skin and round, protruding eyes.

When Madame Grondin first heard about the French course, she wanted nothing to do with it. She was very protective and did not want her daughters corrupted by strange, city people. Besides, several years ago, she and her husband had driven the entire family through Ontario in a rented trailer, and it had been a disaster. She told Chloë that she could not ask the simplest things, where the toilet was, for example, or how

much for a coke, without trouble and misunderstandings. No one west of the border went out of their way to help them, or addressed them in their own language. Ottawa was all right, she said, but even there, in the capital, there were many people who did not understand her. She was convinced that if she accepted a boarder either Gina would get seduced, or a full-scale language war would erupt. Finally, after weeks of leaning over her counter, talking with the town women, she decided it would not be so bad after all. She insisted though, for the sake of her girls, and especially for the sake of Gina, who was smart and was being groomed for further studies in the big town fifty kilometres west of her home, that her boarder be female, and the very youngest person in the group.

Chloe could not have been luckier. The family was good and gentle, and the parents were accustomed to girls. Food was always fresh because it was the Grondins' business. They ate beef from the vault-like freezer in the store, and fresh mushrooms that Madame Grondin fried in a pan with lots of garlic and sizzling butter. The store was also the hub of village life. Most rumours started there, with Madame Grondin disappearing behind the bread rack to whisper with her women friends, sending the little girls out into the sunshine, out of earshot, while the news was culled and sorted.

Chloe slept in a room with a big double bed. Her window looked out over a flat, grassy field that did not belong to the Grondins. An old man worked it early in the morning, with a mangy, starved-looking horse. The room was decorated with plastic and china ornaments of the kind found

in tea boxes, and in game booths at travelling fairs. A plastic cancan girl kicked up her heels on one corner of the dresser. Beside her, a collection of hens sat in a docile row. Tiny, gold-painted hens pecked the dresser's surface. Larger ones, with translucent porcelain feathers, sat complacently nearby. They were hollow creatures, with small bowls hidden inside, and their backs lifted easily, like pot covers. Besides being ornamental, one of the younger girls explained to Chloe, they could be used as dishes for eggs at breakfast. The hollow hens came in all manner of shapes and sizes. Someone had gone to considerable trouble collecting, placing them, and keeping them shiny and free from dust.

The thing in the room that impressed Chloe the most was the crucifix hanging at the foot of her bed. Its plastic face was bluish white and bloodless, as if it were dead or desperately ill. The head lolled forward under a cruel thorn crown, and lines of blood seeped down its cheeks, and its abdomen and thighs from a gash at its midriff. Chloe had never seen a crucifix close up before. She came from a family of non-believers and had only been inside a church on two occasions that she could remember.

The little girls came to her room each night before bed. They were extremely shy, and at first Chloe did not understand. She thought they just wanted to visit. But then the youngest got down on her knees in front of the icon and began to mumble prayers. The room belonged to the two youngest Grondins. It was they who collected the hens and cheap dolls, and they who pasted stickers and slogans in English all over their dresser

mirror. Some of the stickers glowed in the dark, and once when Chloe awoke late at night, she was startled by a three-pronged peace sign and the words *Flower Power* gleaming out at her. The two girls gave up the room happily. They were proud when she told them how big and comfortable it was, and they loved it when she read the stickers aloud to them in English. They trotted in each night to recite their prayers, and knelt down unabashedly, even if she were in the room, shutting their eyes tightly in front of the wall.

On her first Sunday in Saint Epiphane, the Grondins brought her to mass. Everyone in the family washed that morning and dressed up. Gina wore stockings, ignoring the sweltering heat, and uncomfortable-looking, shiny, heeled shoes. Even Marie changed from her usual garb of work shirts and overalls. They sat together in a pew several rows from the front. Madame Grondin was at the aisle and urged Chloe to sit beside her. Her girls assembled themselves in a line of decreasing height and age. First Gina, then Marie, then the young ones, and finally, at the far end of the pew, Monsieur Grondin, to control any giggling or fights. Gina sat quietly through the service, her dark eyes following the *curé* as he moved about the altar, and started his sermon. Two seats down, Marie could not keep still. She was craning her neck and making faces at a boy in the pew behind them. But Gina was serenity itself. She and Madame Grondin sat on either side of Chloe, as silent and immobile as pillars.

The sermon was on love. "Love," the *curé* intoned, is not love of the flesh." Chloe heard Marie snigger, and felt a sudden urge to lean over and

laugh with her. But Madame Grondin glanced up sharply. There was no room for jokes or whisperings in this cool, sombre place.

The service was laborious and endless. Chloe stared up at the rose and purple stained glass windows and tried to remember Bible stories. She could not imagine how the little Grondins kept from fidgeting. Every once in a while Monsieur Grondin popped peppermints into their mouths, but Chloe knew that candy alone was not enough. She was astonished at their cheerfulness and docility.

The *curé* spoke for almost an hour about generosity and helping people. Everyone, he said, made so much of the love between man and woman, but this was only the smallest bit of what love really was. The Grondins, with the exceptions of Marie and her father, listened attentively, drinking in the *curé's* words.

Every Sunday succeeding that first one, the Grondins washed and dressed and performed the ritual of walking down the dusty highway to church. Chloe learned quickly, and after her first experience always had a ready excuse to exempt her from this minor torture.

The river was only a few miles from town. Saint Epiphane was quite far east, near the gulf, and the water was so wide it was like the ocean washing against the shore in regular tides. The sand at its edge was draped with seaweed and bright green purslane that was turgid and tasted strongly of salt. On Sundays, when everyone was in church, and sometimes on weekdays after class, she walked down to the beaches. She loved it by the water. She had never been near an ocean before, and

the immensity and greyness of the water made her wistful and pensive, her heart going suddenly soft like some pulsing, yielding sea plant.

It was on the beaches that she liked to think about Grant Tresham. She did not dare show it in class, when they sat together every morning, and she would not have admitted it to anyone, but she had fallen in love. She turned inarticulate and red-faced when he walked into the room. And when he was not around, her mind was constantly picturing him, remembering things he said or did, conjecturing. She never dreamt for a moment that he would love her back. He was twenty-three, for one thing, at ease with himself and with the world. Everyone in the class looked up to him, and it was he who had all the ideas for their skits, and where they should take excursions, and when the class parties should be. It was also he who laid down the rule that they would speak nothing but French for the entire summer. He was from the west and was affable and outgoing. She, on the other hand, was just out of an eastern city high school, young, tongue-tied half of the time.

Every morning they read *Poussiere sur la Ville*. There were not enough copies to go around, and she and Grant had to share. It was just accident that made them reading partners, but Chloe felt that the fates had somehow granted the most secret wish of her heart. The novel was all about eastern Quebec and the cancer that kills off miners and their families working in asbestos towns in the region. Grant mentioned that one summer he had worked in a mine in British Columbia. She was so awed by this fact, this adventure from his past, that she forgot to ask

him what it was like, or why he did it, or what kind of mine it had been. She just stared at him and smiled stupidly and blushed. She had no idea what he thought of her.

One afternoon, on the pretext of wanting to read a chapter of *Poussiere sur la Ville*, she borrowed Marie's bicycle and went back up into the *rangs* behind the town. This was where Grant lived. He was staying on a farm where they fed him almost nothing but mashed potatoes and white bread. The people were not very friendly, he said, and he was getting hives from the starch. The farms up in this area were far from the road, connected to it by driveways that cut through fields. Chloe seldom met cars, but every farmhouse had a dog which came tearing down the long driveways, barking like mad as she passed. Each time she approached a farmhouse, she had to build up speed and pedal really hard to escape.

Grant's farm was guarded by a doberman. A fleshy lady came out of the house when Chloe arrived because of all the racket it was making. Chloe stood, rooted to the dusty gravel, clutching the handlebars of Marie's bicycle. The woman quieted the dog and then turned to stare at her. She did not apologize for the animal, or even ask what Chloe wanted. She was looking Chloe over when Grant came into the yard. Chloe almost burst into tears. He looked at the dog, then at Chloe, and rushed over to see if she were all right. Ordinarily, his face did not show much emotion. In class, when she looked at him and he smiled, she could not tell if he was mocking her or friendly. That afternoon was different. He was

surprised to see her and it was obvious that he felt bad about her reception. He told her not to mind the dog, and whispered that the same went for the woman, and she laughed shyly, admiring his calm. The woman watched them, but still did not say a word, so they left her and went into the fields behind the house, out of the view of her curious eyes, to walk and talk together. Chloe began to recover from the fright and her shyness and the strangeness of the lady. She chattered on about farm dogs and the thrill of cycling the roads around Grant's farm. Their language was fragmented and broken, at least Chloe felt hers was, but this made the walk somehow more magical and extraordinary. They crossed the stubbled, golden grass, climbing carefully through taut barbed wires set up between the lots of land, and for the first time, Grant seemed really pleased with her.

Two days later, in the Grondins' store, Chloe recognized the fleshy lady. Three loaves of the bland, white bread Grant complained of were piled in her shopping cart, and she was reaching for more. The bread was stacked on top of boxes of Shirriff's instant mashed, and an immense sack of dried animal meal. Chloe cursed her inwardly. How could she expect a man like Grant Tresham to survive on that? She got a stipend from the government for Grant's board, but by the looks of it she was spending it all on her dog.

Madame Grondin went to help her with the bread and soon the two of them were whispering furiously. The woman had not caught sight of Chloe, who was playing checkers with Marie near the cash.

"Looks like hot new gossip," Marie observed, motioning with her chin to where her mother and the woman huddled. Marie was only twelve, but she had a coolness about her much like her father's, and pretended she was above female chatter and concerns.

Madame Grondin's head appeared over the top of the rack and she glared at Chloe. The fleshy woman followed her gaze and seemed startled to see Chloe at the check-out counter, so near by. The discussion started up again with even more frenzy.

In the kitchen that evening, Chloe was helping Madame Grondin and Gina grate carrots for a salad. Madame Grondin had been strangely quiet all afternoon, and had avoided Chloe's eye. They worked in silence. The only noise was the low buzz from the television set which the Grondins left on in their living room, from dawn until they went to their rooms to sleep. Sometimes they would leave it on all night and Chloe would waken to the sound of canned laughter or music, echoing through the hallway.

"The other day, when you took Marie's bicycle, you didn't say you were going visiting," Madame Grondin said.

Chloe did not answer. She saw from Gina's face that this was serious, and that Madame Grondin was upset over something.

"You were up at the Vachons," Madame Grondin prompted. Gina, who knew the fleshy woman, and could not understand what on earth Chloe would want at the Vachon farm, turned to her, open-mouthed.

"You *were* there, weren't you?" Madame Grondin pressed her. She crushed the ends of two carrots against the rough, serrated metal, just

missing her thumb.

"Yes," Chloe said, finally.

"Madame Vachon was here, and told me." Madame Grondin let the grater slip from her hands, her fingers dyed orange and dripping with carrot juice. "She doesn't want girls coming to visit her boarders."

Chloe's cheeks grew hot. She was shy with Madame Grondin, but she felt feverish pride rising in her. The two women had actually bothered to discuss where she went. They seemed to care whom she visited. She had known from the start the fleshy woman was trouble.

"I know you're a good girl," Madame Grondin said kindly, mistaking Chloe's silence for shame. "But around here you have to be careful. People talk."

Chloe glared at her. Her chin quivered with rage, and she was afraid she might start crying. She had never heard of such a thing. At home she could come and go as she pleased. She could visit whomever she wanted. All of a sudden, she hated Saint Epiphane, hated its smallness, and the church-going women who gathered in the Grondin store to swap stories, and live vicariously through what they saw and overheard. She hated Gina, who sat quietly in church pews, learning a culture that would strangle her before she had even dared put a foot outside her door. That was how Chloe saw it then, amid the cooking smells and carrot peels in Madame Grondin's kitchen.

Life went on almost as normal after that talk in the kitchen. They ate supper as usual, and the next morning Chloe went off to school, but

she had lost her trust in the Grondin women. In her mind, she allied herself with Grant, who stoically withstood his lot up at the Vachon farm, and who continued to charm her and make her laugh each day in class. He had no time for gossip or spending his Sundays in church; his life was far too full and rich to waste.

One day the Grondins took her to a dance in a town not far away. The whole family went, even the little girls, dressed in skirts and white knee socks. The dance was in honour of the 150th anniversary of the town, and there was plenty of wine and a live band with an accordion. It was a damp night, cool and drizzling, and everyone crowded under a large green and white striped canvas tent where it was smokey and warm. Chloe was sipping wine and listening to Monsieur Grondin's jokes when Gina took her arm and pulled her out into the crowd. The dance floor was packed and they had to walk almost the width of the tent to find space. The band started playing a slow, waltzy tune and Gina turned to Chloe and drew her close, holding her as if she were a man. Chloe was deeply embarrassed. She laughed and tried to draw back, but Gina persisted. It was only then that she noticed they were not alone. Throughout the big canvas tent, girls and women were moving gently together.

Chloe thought about this as she danced. Where she was from, girls almost never danced together. They did sometimes in private when they were practicing for a party, and very occasionally, they might dance fast together in front of boys just to tease, to show them what they were missing, but Chloe had never embraced another girl alone, in a slow dance,

just for the pleasure of it. Gina seemed entirely comfortable with it, as if she did it all the time.

She was deep in thought over this when Grant walked up. She had not seen him arrive, although she had watched for him carefully for over an hour. He took her hand and without a word, brushed Gina away. Gina was so startled she tripped backwards, and Chloe saw her weaving her way back to the sidelines, to the spot where her sisters and mother stood intently watching.

When the dance ended, they walked out, Grant leading her through the swaying bodies, past the live band, under the dripping flaps of the carnival tent, and onto the bumpy tarmac. A broad circle of light lit up the parking lot, but a heavy mist had come up from the river making it very difficult to see. Grant swept her into the night, his cheek glued to hers, his feet doing a clownish tango step.

"Who needs Gina," he said so anyone could hear, "when you've got me?" Sweat streamed from his hairline. She could feel it, cool by the time it reached her, and pictured it soaking into the pores of her own skin. At the time, Grant's words made her deliriously happy. She forgot Gina and the Grondins, and felt only the enormous privilege of swirling in the arms of this mysterious man. She was blind to everything except the shimmering mists, the lines of sweat gleaming on her lover's skin.

They moved out of the light, into the private shadows of the tent. Grant touched her face, her neck, and began to kiss her. They stayed like this for what seemed like hours in the darkness, clinging to each other

like people in a wreck at sea.

When finally they re-emerged into the parking lot - Chloe straightening her shirt and grinning in a crazy, careless way - the music had stopped and many of the cars were gone. They searched for the Grondins, but someone told them that the family had left twenty minutes ago, or more. Chloe was scared when she heard this. Madame Grondin would worry. She would also be furious. But secretly Chloe was also happy. Gina could stay all night at the sidelines with her mother and dance shyly with other girls, but Chloe would not be caught dead with it.

Grant drove her home in his car. When they pulled up in the driveway, the sitting room was glaring like a search light. He offered to come in and help her explain, but she said she had better handle it alone. She stood for several minutes on the verandah, watching the soupy night swallow his tail lights, and gathering the courage to enter.

Madame Grondin was sitting in the livingroom in her nightgown, watching television. She was alone, and her face was stern and naked-looking with its make-up removed.

"Come and sit," she said quietly, when Chloe paused in the hallway.

Chloe was still in her jacket, and the cool night air followed her into the room. "I didn't dream you'd leave so soon," she blurted out, all in a rush. "I didn't mean to make you worry."

"Shh," Madame Grondin said. "The rest of them are asleep." She looked so all-suffering and resigned sitting in the glare from the television. She didn't seem angry, and for some reason, this irritated

Chloe.

"I was with a classmate," she said. "I was safe. He had a car."

"You were with that man again," Madame Grondin said. "He is seven, eight years older than you?"

"Look," she said, her voice softening and her face relaxing a little, "I don't know how it is in Montreal. Maybe the English let their girls go young; I'm not smart enough to say. But I know one thing. He's already a man, Chloe. He could push you, before you're ready."

Chloe could not believe Madame Grondin was saying it. She was probably jealous, for all Chloe knew, of Chloe's freedom and her youth. She thought of Gina, of her cramped little life in Saint Epiphane, and suddenly she lost control.

"I'm not a little girl," she shouted, "and he'd never push me. It's that damned *curé* that makes you say these things. He makes you afraid and teaches Gina to dance with girls. I hate the way it is here."

It was out before she could stop herself. Her words astonished her, and she closed her mouth with a snapping sound, as if she feared she might say more.

Madame Grondin reached for a cigarette, lit it, and the two of them watched smoke curl up towards the ceiling, twisting gracefully in the half darkness. Chloe was beginning to feel uncomfortable when the older woman finally spoke.

"Don't fool yourself, Chloe," she said in a low voice, heavy with thought. She spoke almost to herself, as if she knew that Chloe would not

listen. "Being with a man doesn't turn you into a woman, just like that. Give yourself time."

Chloe bit her cheeks. She would not say another word. Grant Tresham seemed to think she was woman enough, and what did Madame Grondin, in her little store way off in the middle of nowhere, know anyway? At last the woman finished her cigarette, and said that it was getting late. Chloe fled to the dark, silent bedroom where she could let out her rage alone and unseen.

From the following morning on, the love affair between Grant Tresham and Chloe was a public fact. The little Grondin girls and their friends giggled and pointed at them when they met them walking in the street. The students in Chloe's class knew. She and Grant inspired heated conversations behind the bread rack in the store, but Chloe had ceased to care. She walked with him openly through the town after their classes ended, sat with him in the overgrown graveyard behind the town church, went for drives down to the beach in his little car.

Summer was drawing to a close. The days were growing cooler and windy, and on many nights the sky shimmered with streaks of whitish light. Chloe had never seen the sky move like this before, but Monsieur Grondin explained that it was *un aurore boréal*, the first sure sign of autumn. Just before their last weekend, Grant suggested a trip. He had found an island ideal for camping, small, half-wild, with a few farms and even a store for provisions.

From the moment Grant suggested the island, Chloe desperately wanted to go. This trip would be different from others they had taken. The others were short drives, and she was usually home for supper, eating safely with the Grondins long before dusk. In the privacy of the Volkswagen, and on the wave swept shores of the St. Lawrence, she had grown familiar with Grant's body. She knew the way he moved, how he touched and spoke, and even what he liked from her. But they had never had a place where they were alone. This was in part because of their own reluctance. Had Chloe been older, it would have been easy to take hotels, or leave for whole weekends at a time. But it was also because they were living in a small town, among people who had adopted Chloe as their own, who would worry for her safety. Grant spoke of bringing his tent, and sleeping bags, and Chloe said that because it was the very last weekend, they just might get away with it.

She let the Grondins know two days before, in a casual way, through Gina. The Grondins were planning a trip to an uncle's farm that Saturday, and Gina had asked if she was coming.

"No," said Chloe. "Grant Tresham is taking me camping." She felt very pleased with how she had said it, so simply, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Gina dropped the cup she was rinsing in the sink and nearly broke it. "Did you tell Maman?" she said in an awed, hushed voice.

"Not yet," said Chloe, as nonchalantly as she could, as if it had just now crossed her mind.

Within an hour the news was out, and she could tell that no one was pleased. Madame Grondin watched her with large, worried eyes, but she did not say anything. This time there were no middle of the night parleys or pleas. Madame Grondin watched with mute solemnity as Chloe ate her dinner at the family table, or as she cleaned up with Gina and Marie after the meal was over.

When Grant arrived on Friday in his beat-up car, no one in the family went out to greet him. Madame Grondin was washing dishes in the kitchen and kept her eyes averted from the window in front of her. Grant kept the motor running while Chloe went to get her bag. He sat tensely, like a driver in a bank heist, until she climbed in beside him.

Ile Verte was a small farming island right in the middle of the St. Laurence River. It was only nine miles long, and quite a distance from the mainland. It jutted up out of the water in pastel greens and greys and, looking at it from the shore, Chloe thought of Greek islands and exotic places she had read about in books. They rented an old fishing trawler, which the islanders used to travel back and forth to the mainland and to bring in supplies. The boatman seemed starved for company and told them that in winter, farmers on the island were completely isolated. Except for the coldest months they couldn't trust the ice with skidoos or cars, so they stayed inside, eating food from cans, and moldy onions until the ice was good and solid. The younger men sometimes got impatient and made the trip too soon. It was as if the whiteness swallowed them up, the boatman said. Their bodies would be found months later in the spring

thaw, bloated, barely identifiable.

It was cool out on the water even though the sun was shining fiercely. Grant lay on his stomach on the roof of the pilot's cabin and watched Chloe down below on deck. He began to sing old, bawdy drinking songs which Chloe had never heard before. They were very funny, all about stealing kisses and pinching women's behinds.

The beach where the boatman let them off was wild and stretched up one side of the island. Huge, roundish rocks stood near the water like stacks of giant pancakes. The sand was golden brown and extended back to ragged cliffs of shale behind which were the fields. This part of Quebec was a strange mixture of the cultivated and the extremely wild. Orderly, carefully tended fields lay next to cliffs and the churning, wide grey river. Chloe had never in her life seen land so startling or so beautiful.

They found a sheltered spot and put down their towels. Grant had brought wine, and some bread and cheese, and they ate looking out on the water. That afternoon was the most lovely thing that had ever happened to Chloe. She got sleepy and drunk from the wine and she laughed and laughed at Grant's jokes, and at tales about his adventures on the west coast. She couldn't remember ever being so happy. The sun shone down fiercely, and all the wine she had drunk made the sand glitter and jump up at her with an odd, magnified reality. Grant led her down to the shoreline, where the water was dark, and so cold that slivers of pain shot through her legs and the hairs on her body stood on end. He took off his bathing

suit and knelt down in the waves. Chloe drew in her breath. His buttocks were white, so pale and sculpted, they looked like marble.

Later on, as the sun began to drop and the wine was wearing off, she realized she hadn't brought along enough warm clothes. She also realized she was scared. It was strange being alone with this man. She felt, all of a sudden, that she barely knew him, and that much of their intimacy had been mere play-acting.

They set up a tent on a bed of moss just above the high tide mark. The wind was rising and they were exposed, with no trees or rock to break its force, but the wildness of the place appealed to Chloe. It was a small tent, held up by string and aluminum poles, with a mosquito net door that had to be unzipped before you could crawl in. The nylon walls were red and wind pushed them in bellowing contractions. Lying on the tent floor, Chloe imagined she was trapped inside a live, beating organ.

Grant climbed in. The tent was barely big enough for one and with the wind buffeting its sides they were thrown together, as if someone were shaking them inside a giant paper bag. Chloe did not laugh or make small talk. To her embarrassment she went mute and shy as a child. This wasn't necking or touching in the shadows. He was naked in her arms, rubbing against her. She didn't have the courage to admit it was her first time, and frightened thoughts scattered and tumbled across the landscape of her mind. Years later, she realized that he would have known. He was probably very aware of how delicate and young she was. At the time all she knew was confusion, fear, her head pounding sharply

from too much wine and sun.

He slept that night, curled like a shell around her. One of his arms was flung heavily across her chest and she lay awake, feeling his weight and listening to waves break against the shore. She was miserable with cold. The sleeping bag was thin and not quite wide enough for two. She thought, surprisingly, not of her bed in Montreal, with the large down quilt and all the pillows, but of the double bed in Saint Epiphane, with the television buzzing softly down the hall, and the pale Christ hanging in the dark, watching her as she slept.

The next morning she woke up early. She dressed, unzipped the door and climbed out on the rocks. The light was brilliant off the water, and waves exploded in plumes of spray along the shore. She was glad to feel the air, to have room again to breathe. The tent had half collapsed in the early morning under a weight of dew. It had sunk down into the moss and glistened wet and red, shrunken from the night before, moving gently with the wind.

After that weekend, she and Grant did not have much time together. She had three more days in Saint Epiphane, and these were filled with farewell parties and scrambling to finish her term's work. The Grondin girls gave her a hand-painted card and told her they loved her. Monsieur Grondin even cried at lunch on the last day, after drinking a mug of cognac.

Madame Grondin was strangely quiet. She cooked a wonderful meal for her, steak and onions and fresh tomatoes from the garden, but she

remained in the background, looking on as Monsieur Grondin and Marie reminisced about the summer, and slapped her back and told jokes that they wanted her family back home to hear.

Grant left town two hours before she did. He packed up the Volkswagon and dropped by the Grondin house on his way down the highway. Chloe rushed into the yard when she saw the car and flung herself into his arms. She was crying and making promises to write, but he just smiled, a little taken aback by her outburst, and nodded at the family who stood watching through the screen door. After she had calmed down, he went into the store and shook Monsieur Grondin's hand. He told him it was a long drive and bought fruit and a large plastic bottle full of water. The little girls and Marie watched him from behind the counter. Their eyes were huge, and they watched solemnly as he paid his bill. Madame Grondin was nowhere to be seen.

* * *

Years later, when the name Grant Tresham was simply a memory, an image long ago assimilated into the story of her life, she bumped into him in an airport. It was late at night and she was dragging her feet with weariness and fatigue. They literally tripped over each other in the arrival area. It was clear that he recognized her, even though she knew she did not look at all like the person he had loved in Saint Epiphane. She was hugely pregnant with her second child, and she moved awkwardly, and very slowly at this time of night. He, on the other hand, looked smaller than she remembered, and his hair was fading and thin.

It was in Montreal. Chloe had just arrived home from a conference, and Grant was catching a connecting flight west from overseas. They spoke in English. His voice was nasal and did not fit at all with her memories. He was looking at her and he could not keep the wonder from his eyes. She realized how big and ungainly she must look. It was natural that he would want to salvage the slender child he had loved in Saint Epiphane. She looked back. He was still blond, still wore his small military moustache, but he seemed so nervous now. He shifted his feet back and forth, and they clicked in their pointed leather boots. He was in blue jeans and looked ill at ease in the flurry and noise and light of the urban airport centre. He told her he was still teaching, unmarried, living in a small town out on Vancouver Island.

Their words began to falter. It was late. He had to find out about departures, and Chloe was thinking of home, of the husband and small daughter waiting for her in the city.

As she watched him walk away down the neon airport corridor, the face of Madame Grondin flashed before her. Perhaps it was the late hour, or her exhaustion from being on her feet all day, and travelling, or maybe the strangeness of seeing a long-buried ghost, but all of a sudden she understood. She had not thought about Madame Grondin for a long time. It must have been so hard for her to watch Chloe, childish, sightless, still hard and green inside, plan her own seduction. Madame Grondin would have known that story only too well. It was such a common plot, so threadbare. But that summer, Chloe could not see it. To her, Grant was

bigger than life, the first love of her short sixteen years. She thought of what Madame Grondin had said. About youth, and the time it takes to ripen, and remembered with hot shame how she had pushed her away.

In the middle of Dorval airport, a line from Shakespeare came to her. In it, Cleopatra, the ageing queen, remembers a lover cherished long ago:

*My salad days
When I was green in judgment, cold in blood*

There was no way to go back and tell Madame Grondin. She wasn't sure it translated, anyway.

The Deep Blue Sea

Sun was seeping through cracks in the shutters, and a steady rhythmic thumping pushed Mavis into consciousness. She rolled over, not yet disengaged from her dream. For several seconds she could not imagine where she was or where the drummers were hiding. In her dream, she had been in the jungle. The drum beats were signals, greetings sent to her across miles of dense green forest.

She had overslept again. Slept right through Réal's getting up, the flush of the toilet and the rushing sound of water. She had slept through his pulling things from the closet, the hangers jangling and jumping, his creaking down the hall, the kitchen sounds, smell of Turkish coffee, syrupy and black as tar, and, at roughly half past eight, the noise of his key in the lock. All through September she had awakened with the sun high in the sky, alone in his bed. At night they did not sleep until the sky began to glimmer and lighten. They haunted cafés, wandered through the different quarters or else stayed in and read, listened to his tapes and to some new ones she had added to the collection. Sometimes Jasmine dropped by, or José and Françoise, who was seven months pregnant, and they spent the evening talking. Mavis always tried to make them stay.

She pulled on one of Réal's shirts and wandered to the bathroom. She was tawny and lean, her straight blondish hair bleached and whitened by summer. Paris sun could not have done this, it so rarely showed its drawn face; Crete and the Aegean were responsible. Mavis and Réal had

spent July touring Greece and then returned to an empty, overcast Paris in August.

She fastened the buttons on his shirt. He really was a big man. The shirt was tight on him, on her it flapped like an overcoat. She was tall for a woman and also slender. The streets of American and Canadian cities were filled with girls who looked like her - angular, boyish, plainly-dressed. In Paris, she stood out. She towered above most women and heads turned as she walked down the dim streets with her long, masculine strides. Réal found her exotic, like the tanned and light-haired beauties in Hollywood films.

Mavis, on her side, loved Réal's foreignness. He was French-speaking and Jewish, originally from Tunisia, and unlike any man she had ever met. He certainly was different from the ones she met at parties, in cafés and cinema lineups all over Paris. Réal was bigger, for one thing, muscled and heavy. His skin had the inevitable urban pallor, but his hair was wiry, longish and solidly black. He had none of the arrogance which had disturbed her so much when she first arrived. Réal was a listener; he also loved to laugh.

She splashed water on her face and rubbed her eyes. Her tan had faded to a diluted mustard colour. Soon there would be no trace left. She took a crayon from her half of the medicine cabinet and drew blue lines round each eye. The irises shone out like limpid seas. Better, she thought. A touch here, a touch there. It wasn't so bad.

In the kitchen Réal had left out bread and a pat of sweet butter. She had never gotten used to this delicacy, preferring the cruder, salty stuff of everyday America. Réal marvelled at her tastes. The French liked sauces and pulpy things that did not demand much of the teeth. Mavis loved to chew. She liked things raw and grainy with simple, bold strokes of flavour. She missed foods from home. Recently she had developed the habit of eating halva candy as a kind of ersatz peanut butter spread on slices of brown *complet* from the corner baker. No one in Paris ate brown bread. Even Réal was a purist.

The table was covered with crumbs. Mavis swept these into a pile and deposited them in the sink. Then she rinsed out the little metal coffee pot and filled it with water. Outside the kitchen window a woman was pounding away on her rugs. Clouds of dust hovered weightlessly in the soft morning light. The sound was comforting with its steady beat, but also disturbing. It broke the customary stillness of the courtyard.

She sat down with a half-full cup of coffee and pulled an envelope out from underneath the butter dish. It was torn and soiled with grease, but the backwards slanting hand was unmistakable. It was the first letter she had had from Hal in two months, ever since her announcement that she would not be going home. He was furious with her, she knew that, but distance muted his fury, robbed it of its power. She was safe with the Atlantic tossing cold and grey between them.

The tone of the letter was not angry. This had surprised her. Hal

was a busy man and he did not look well on anyone, least of all his own daughter, throwing away precious days of her life. Two months ago, just after she had returned from Greece, his voice had come across the wires, crackling, tight, sarcastic. The letter was different, calmer, asking about Réal, about her life with him. There were fragments of news about her sisters and a scribbled line from her mother, who wrote every couple of weeks in a hurried hand to remind her that Hal was sick with worry and that in any event she had to make up her mind, sooner or later, as to what she wanted to do with her life.

But Hal's letter, this first message, had a tone she did not recognize. A ring of sadness, almost of unsureness.

She had not written for a while now. Montreal, her family, her life of a year ago seemed impossibly distant. She had trouble making the link between this new Paris Mavis she had become and the younger, less worldly, more timid Mavis of the past. In Paris she spoke French, not the dull American English of her home. She had moved in with a man for the first time after her term at the Sorbonne had ended. She spent her days exploring odd corners of the city, chatting with people in cafés, reading de Beauvoir and Gertrude Stein.

When she first met Réal, she talked incessantly of Montreal. She described the stone house where her parents lived in the English section, half way up a mountain. Montreal had two mountains. They were not really mountains, she explained, not compared to the Alps or the

Pyrenées, but Montrealers called them this out of pride or perhaps out of ignorance. She told of the river, the inky black water choked with debris and weeds. If you followed it east there were cliffs and then the water turned salt and so blue and cold that whales came down from the Arctic. She told of snow and savage winds that kept children inside entire days in winter; of the breathless heat of summer. Réal had a vivid impression of her home. One time he told her she was like her city, a mingling of odd and startling contrasts. As the months rolled by and she settled into Paris, Mavis spoke less of Montreal, thought less about the past. Her sense of her home, her family, the Mavis she had been only the previous year grew somehow dimmer, like a dream fading as daylight pushes into a room.

She was supposed to meet Réal at noon. Mavis jumped up, still holding the letter, and ran to find a watch. It was almost eleven. Not worth eating breakfast. She knotted her hair into a loose chignon and slipped into a skirt and sweater. The days were less warm now, less predictable. In a Paris autumn, the cold crept in slowly. September and even October were filled with sultry, gentle days, but Mavis, who came from a climate which shifted violently with little warning, dressed warmly, sensing change in the air.

The café where they had arranged to meet had a large stepped terrace that swept up like a bandstand from the street. Americans liked to sit out over the broad avenues and watch the crowds pass by. Few

Parisians used these tables. They preferred to stand at the bar in the dusky gloom of the interior, even at midday, where coffee was cheaper and they could chat with the waiters. The terrace tables would come in soon, as soon as summer was indisputably over, but the café owners liked to keep them out as long as they could. They were like well-practiced hosts flattering a guest, cajoling, trying to convince the soft season that it should stay a while longer.

Mavis chose a table three rows up from the street and off to one side. The rest of the terrace was empty save for a table to her left with a young couple and a baby. The woman was chattering away in a familiar English. She and her husband could have been twins in their khaki shorts, flat sandals and sweatshirts. Even the child was in a sweatshirt. Bubblegum pink, and she was tearing apart a steaming croissant. Eastern seaboard, Mavis thought. New York, Pennsylvania, one of those states. The waiter was with them and they were trying to order milk for the child. The woman kept saying *leche, leche*, as if she could not keep straight what country she was in.

Mavis straightened her skirt. These days she would not be caught dead in shorts and sweatshirts. It was as bad as draping oneself in a flag with the word *America* painted all over it. When the waiter came to take her order, impatient, unsmiling, expecting perhaps that he would have to translate the menu or listen to a tortured and broken variant of his native tongue, Mavis opened her mouth and asked for an *alongé* in a clipped,

musical and near perfect French. She could feel the couple watching.

Réal was on the pavement, waving to her. He took the stairs two at a time up to her table. He was beautiful. It always startled her to see him at a distance. He was so dark, such a big man. At times like this she had to remind herself as if she were appreciating it for the first time, that this was Réal, her Réal of Paris, that he was hers, that they were linked and shared a world here. He came up to the table flushed, breathing hard, and hugged her. The waiter floated up from somewhere behind and smiled at Réal saying that they had picked the last nice day of the season to dine out of doors, while Réal ordered lavishly, carelessly, without looking at the menu, knowing her tastes.

"This day reminds me of Greece. Of holidays," he said, reaching under the table and stroking her thigh. "God how I wish I had days free to spend with you."

"You'd have to spend them in bed," Mavis said. "I've turned into such a sleeper. I sleep and sleep while you're at work." She remembered the drums that had awakened her that morning. In Paris she dreamed constantly and very vividly. But then, it made sense she should be so aware of dreams. What was her life now but longer and longer stretches of sleep?

"I'd make sure you wouldn't sleep. You need me for a cure." Réal laughed and slipped off his jacket. His shirt and pants were white and he looked striking, like an Arab, stretching back in his chair. "Tonight we

are seeing Dezzy and Jacob," he said. "You hadn't forgotten?"

Dezzy and Jacob were his parents. Réal was in his early thirties, more than a decade older than she was. The boys in his family had been brought up in Tunisia but had come to the University of Paris to study. Réal, the baby, was a journalist. Five years before, he had brought his parents across the sea to start a new life. Those were difficult times for Jews in Tunisia. One evening Jacob's business was gutted by bombs, and three days later a cousin was killed. Jacob and Dezzy dropped everything they had, the business, the houses, their friends, their books and paintings, and smuggled themselves out of the country to Paris.

"I knew. Is this skirt okay?" she said.

"Anything you do is *okay*," he said, mimicking the way she lingered over vowels. "Dezzy and Jacob love you. You could go naked and we'd still be happy. Happier even."

"They'd think I was just being foreign," she said and began to eat a salad which the waiter had laid down.

"They're happy that I'm happy," Réal said. "But more than that, they love you. They know I've got good taste."

"Did you see I got a letter from home?" Mavis said. "My father," she added when he shook his head. "He has a birthday in October, soon in fact. It's the second year I'm missing it."

Réal could not stay more than an hour. He kissed her, settled the bill and ran off to find his beat up Renault, which he usually parked in

alleyways or in the yards of schools or churches. Mavis, left with her glass of wine and some coffee, watched him hurry away. As he ran he struggled to put on his jacket, which was dull grey and nondescript, and blended easily with the other jackets of office clerks on the street. She cleared the round marble table top, piling plates, the bread basket, the ashtray and Réal's wineglass on the table next to hers. The American couple were getting up from their seats and climbing down the cluttered stairs to the street. The woman had slung the child on her back papoose-style and they looked vaguely like pioneers setting off. Now the terrace was completely empty. She reached into her purse and pulled out a card that she had bought the day before, just after she had received Hal's letter. It was royal blue. A blue sea with a pair of carmine lips curling into a smile and floating in its middle like a boat. A diminutive inky man with a gondolier's pole stood on the underlip patiently pushing his way through the water.

She took out her old fountain pen and shut her eyes. What could she say? Her Paris life was sleep. She had nothing to show, nothing to tell. She was just living. Marking time in the endless tugging forward that was life. She wished she could send the blank card, which was exquisite and perfect, and forget about words.

She stared at the floating lips and finally, without even removing the cap from her pen, inserted the card back into its envelope and slipped it into a pocket of her skirt. She would have to wait until the words

came.

"You mustn't say a word about how thin he is getting," Réal whispered in the elevator. "He's very sensitive about it."

Mavis nodded. Over the last months she had come to love Jacob and to understand his humours and his moods. "He's proud, your father," she whispered back. "It's good. At his age so many lose it."

The door to the apartment was partly open and a warm smell of chicken filled the corridor. Réal poked his head inside. "Dezzy?" he called. His mother came running from the kitchen holding a wooden spoon, a great lopsided smile on her face.

She stopped before them and beamed as if she could not quite believe it. "Jacob!" she cried. "Jacob, come! Your son is here." Réal bent to kiss her. In his parents' apartment he was enormous. The top of his head grazed Dezzy's low ceilings. Her cluttered rooms barely held him. They stood waiting silently until Jacob joined them. She was like that, always deferring to the men in the family. Jacob was so much frailer than she and twenty years older, but even so she spent her days in his shadow.

They went into the front room, which served as living and dining room both, and sat down. Dezzy had dragged a round table out from its usual spot in the corner. It was the sabbath and the wine and spices and bread were already laid out. Dezzy never sat before the meal. She

shuffled back and forth carrying things, mixing, basting, preparing. They had a while to wait until sundown. Réal settled on the worn couch beside Mavis. He stretched his big arms out behind her and his long legs under the table and all at once the apartment seemed to contract. Jacob sat on a swivel chair and smiled at them. "Dezzy," he shouted, "they need drinks. And something to stave off an appetite."

Dezzy appeared with beads of perspiration gleaming like gems on her forehead. "Fish," she said loudly. "Does she like fish?" *Fish* was Dezzy's word for a salty, blood red caviar that the family brought in from North Africa. Mavis and Réal ate it often. It came in a solid roll and you cut it with a knife. Mavis nodded her head vigorously. "Fish! She likes fish!" Dezzy said laughing and ran off to the kitchen. She returned minutes later with a heavy tray. She had mixed cloudy glasses of anise. There were plates with roasted cashews, fish and drooping artichokes with a dish of liquid yellow butter.

"This is dinner in itself," Mavis said but Dezzy had already disappeared.

"It is your second autumn here," Jacob said. "It must be almost like home now."

Mavis nodded. Jacob was a frail, shrunken man. The hands folded on his lap were spotted. Veins streaked them a dirty blue. "Autumn here is lovely," she said. "It's softer than in Montreal. It sneaks up more slowly. Back home it is a sudden burst of colour. Then winter comes and covers

everything in white."

"What is the name of that tree?" Réal asked. "The one that gives sugar?"

"That's cane you're thinking of, from the south," Jacob said.

"No," said Mavis. "In Canada there is a tree that gives a strong, very sweet sugar every spring. In autumn its leaves blaze like fire. *L'érable*," she pronounced. "It's on the flag."

"A tree that gives sugar, whose green leaves turn red. You are teaching things to an old man," Jacob said and laughed.

"You'd recognize it," Réal said. "It's on their flag. You've seen it, I'm sure." He turned to Mavis. "Why don't you draw it?"

Mavis took a pen out of her purse and began an outline on one of Dezzy's napkins. What she drew was roundish, lopsided, with tiny toothlike notches carved into its sides. "This isn't really it," she said, putting on the final touches. The leaf grinned like a spikey gourd and Mavis realized she had never looked at a maple leaf close up.

Jacob came and stood behind her. "I don't know this," he said, shrugging. "Looks like a cactus, or maybe one of those." He pointed at a soggy artichoke lying in a puddle of greenish water.

Dezzy came in then to say the food was ready. "We are talking about leaves," Jacob told her, and she smiled as she would have smiled if he had said philosophy or love or life or death. Talking was outside her arena. It was for men and for the modern girls her sons brought home to

dinner. This was so different from Mavis's home. Mavis came from a family of women, four daughters who loved to talk and argue and jostle for attention. Dinners were a free-for-all with many voices trying out opinions, talking of styles and politics, of movie stars, the weather, books read, conversations overheard on buses. Women in her family were strong and very voluble. "You should take Réal to Canada," Jacob said. The smile dropped from Dezzy's face and she stared at her husband. "To visit," Jacob added. "To see the trees with the marvellous colours."

They stood at their places at the table while Jacob began the blessings. Mavis had become adept at the sabbath rituals. She could recite most of the prayers in Hebrew even though she did not know what they meant. Jacob took a silver goblet filled to the brim with wine and said the *borucha*. He drank long and noisily and then passed the cup to his son, who did the same. The cup was passed to Dezzy, and finally to Mavis, who stumbled through the prayer with Réal's help. "Your fiancée is very good!" Dezzy cried when Mavis had finished. Réal looked at his mother aghast, and Mavis flushed red as the wine she had just brought to her lips. She and Réal hadn't spoken of marriage. Not once.

Jacob blessed the bread, dipped it in salt and handed it around. Then they sat down to dinner. Dezzy ladled out two immense helpings of cous cous and boiled chicken. She and Jacob had to be content with a greasy yellow broth. Once during the meal he reached out for a slice of caviar, but Dezzy slapped his hand back with the end of her spoon. "He

gets so tired of the 'diet," she sighed to no one in particular.

Mavis nibbled at the steaming mountain on her plate. The food was insipid, bulky. Réal was making a mighty effort to plough through his. It pleased Dezzy so much to watch him eat. Mavis thought of her own mother back in Montreal, a sharp-eyed, intense woman. Her mother often argued with Hal, with her daughters, just for the fun of it. She was irreverent. Odd, unexpected things came out of her mouth. She thought of Hal, ageing master of their house, the only male. It seemed to Mavis that the women engaged in a continuous ritualistic dance about him, like planets rotating about a sun. There was an unspoken pact that he was the focus of attention, and no male child had come to upset this delicate system. To be fair, Hal adored women. Perhaps the sheer force of numbers had drawn respect out of him.

Mavis put her spoon down. Réal and his father were talking about Israel, and its inflation and violence. "In spite of it all," Jacob was saying, "it is still God's country. The most beautiful spot ..." She stopped listening. She could do this with French. English always managed to filter through, regardless of the lengths she went to tune it out, but French she could turn off. Réal's voice faded to a hum, a backdrop for her thoughts.

What was she doing here in Paris, eating strange food, describing maple trees and autumns in Quebec to people who would never know them? Dezzy was beginning to regard her as a daughter. Jacob spoke of

Paris as her home. Yet Paris was so foreign. And Dezzy and Jacob would never be family. For the first time in months her thoughts turned to Hal and to Montreal.

In the street Réal took her in his arms. "They're crazy about you," he said, nuzzling the top of her head.

"They're crazy about *you*," she answered, but she was no longer really with him. Her mind was on her father, on the blue sea, and the words she would choose to tell him that she was coming home.

Jyoti

It suddenly dawned on Candice that someone was calling her. Two boys kneeling by a trench were grinning and waving their hands wildly in the air. After four months in Guyana, she still jumped when students called out to her. They called her "Miss", and it made her feel like laughing, like pulling faces and shouting that she was barely out of school herself, too young, too ordinary for such a precious name.

She waved across the weeds at them. Sun flooded the road, turning the dust at her feet a startling gold. She walked quickly towards the centre of town, a book by V.S. Naipaul clutched under one arm. Today had not been good. She'd been reading aloud to her class, something she was forced to do often because the school owned so few books, and she'd read *l.b.w.* as "pound weight", a term that must have come percolating up from some long-forgotten physics class. The boys had stared at her, then roared with delight. What a blunder. What an unforgiveable, alien blunder. The girls had been indignant, defending her in shrill voices.

"She from Canada, man. It not every person care about cricket. Stupid game is all."

The street narrowed and a sharp smell of burnt wood and manure came to her. A house was being built here, its yard full of stone and fresh cut timber. She inhaled, trying to keep the smell with her, to decipher it.

Up ahead was the worst part of the walk. The rum shop. Men slouched in the shade of the doorway, drinking beer and cheap liquor.

"You der!" A very thin man staggered into the street. Candice

hunched forward. "You der!" the man called again. She was almost even with the shop's gate, body tense, ready to break and run. "You na hear me, girl?"

Laughter erupted from the rum shop porch as the man stopped before her, swaying, arms outstretched. "Leave she be, man," someone yelled and then, all at once, the skies seemed to open. Whistles, catcalls rained down upon her, ricocheted through yards, split the stillness of the afternoon. Candice dodged the thin man who blocked her way, and broke into a sprint. Knees high, V.S. Naipaul pumping up and down, up and down to give her speed. What would they think, these men? Guyanese women never ran. Always kept their cool. Used their tongues and torrents of words to keep the men off. She would never learn. She wasn't even that pretty. Long, spidery limbs, hair in a golden braid. In their eyes she must look like an oversized schoolgirl. But she was white, and that seemed enough to interest the men at the rum shop.

Finally she made it to the Singhs' street, where she was staying for the term. The wire gate was swinging on its rusty hinges, welcoming her into the overgrown yard filled with rows of yellowed sheets hung out to dry. A chorus of sitars whined piteously, like crickets. Jyoti was home from work. Candice could always tell from the music when Jyoti was around.

Jyoti's hair was smudged with flour and her hands were plunged deep into a bowl of dough which she was pressing, kneading into a dull, greyish ball. She looked up at Candice and then back down at the dough.

Her face was serious as a child's, fat lips pouting.

"Roti?" Candice asked.

Jyoti nodded, still sombre, then ducked past Candice to change a tape. She sometimes moved like that, like an animal, like something wild. It was because of Blackburn. Jyoti had been raised out on the coast. Once she had told Candice all about her childhood. About riceflats stretching for mile after mud-black mile between the water ditches. As a child she'd had the run of the fields, swum in long, glassy trenches, driven donkeys to help her father at harvest time. Now her nails were painted, her feet jammed into clumsy platform shoes. But every once in a while, when she was tired or private in her home, she moved like that, fluid, beautiful.

Jyoti shook her hair so that it fell about her in a cloak of loose and careless curls, and turned up the volume. The sitars whined louder now, like cats. "Lord," she sighed, her voice rising and losing itself in the music, and burst into tears.

For many days Jyoti, or Judith as they called her at work, had been mooning about, missing meals, showing up hours after her shift at work had ended. Nathan had no patience for the girl. She was his youngest sister, moved down from the countryside to help with his son, Ravi, and with chores after his wife died. He had no time for her youth. He needed a woman in the house, not a second child. One night after she let a stew boil dry, he started screaming. "Jyoti girl. You na good!" He sucked hard on his teeth. "All you good for is to play dos tapes. You not wort de groun

you mother walk on."

Jyoti turned to Candice, making a nervous, birdlike motion with her arms. She tried to speak, choked, began again, gulping air. "Me na bleed dis month, Candice. Oh God, me na bleed."

At first Candice couldn't make her out. Sitar and tears blurred her words. Finally it hit her. Jyoti was pregnant. She was saying that she was pregnant.

Candice said nothing for several seconds and just stared at Jyoti. The girl was so young. Candice had to keep reminding herself that she was twenty, just a year younger than Candice was herself. She had no life of her own outside of the Singh house. She never went anywhere, except to work, without Nathan or Ravi. She still had girlfriends from high school whom she visited very occasionally with Nathan's permission, but in all the weeks Candice had lived with her, there hadn't been even a whisper about a man.

"De man who done it na be good," Jyoti sobbed. "Him sweetboy. Talk sweet to all de girl."

Candice knew him vaguely. She'd seen him at the market leaning over a stall for sunglasses. He was a heavy set man, and not particularly attractive. Candice tried to picture small, round-faced Jyoti embracing him.

Several weeks ago when Candice and Jyoti had cycled past the sports club, he had slipped out to greet them. Jyoti, perched on the back carrier, had begged Candice to stop. The merchant, who looked as if he

had just woken up, with a ragged beard and sleepy, large-lidded eyes, had reached into a pocket and pulled out a tape, neatly wrapped in plastic with a Bombay film star singing on the front. Jyoti had held out both hands, laughing.

"He's older," Candice said. "Married."

Jyoti's face darkened, swelled like a sponge in water. She threw herself on Candice's neck and wailed, "Natan, he goin to kill me."

Candice tried to quiet her, but Jyoti was shaking too hard. She wondered why Jyoti was telling her, the white woman. She wondered if the merchant knew.

The front door banged. Jyoti fled to the back porch just as Ravi came in, his jacket streaked with dust, blood caked on his lip. "You cookin?" he said casually to Candice. "Where be Judit?"

He launched into a complicated story about a fight he'd won at school. "Dat fatboy, dat Balky. Tink he some great gif to dis earth jus because he fadder a lawyer." In Creole, lawyers were called liars, and Ravi loved the pun. "He so stupid and proud dat one."

Then Ravi remembered his aunt again. "But where be Judit?" She wash dis before my fadder get home and get vex." Candice tried to distract him, but the porch door opened. Jyoti stood framed in the doorway, her hair wild and powdered white. Ravi puffed his chest. "What you mean bein outside?" he asked in a harsh voice, sensing that something was very wrong. Jyoti's eyes were full of pain and hatred. "You so smart wit all you secrets. Up to no good, girl, I sure of it."

They waited three more days before doing anything. Candice came home early after school to help with the chores. Jyoti seemed drugged with fear. She was not eating, and Candice would find her sitting in her room in silence, staring at nothing. The house was sombre and still.

Jyoti didn't want anyone to know, not Nathan, not her family, no friend, not even the merchant. She begged Candice not to tell. Her life was over, she said. Her only hope was to get rid of the child in secret. Candice tried to comfort her, but in bed alone at night, she cried and felt very lost. Jyoti knew next to nothing about sex, about how to care for her body or protect it. She had never been taught. Now there was a child inside her. She would pay for innocence.

On the fourth day, Candice and Jyoti walked in the hard sunlight to the office of Doctor Malik. The doctor's gate, fronting a makeshift verandah waiting room, was blistered and peeling. Beyond it at least twenty women crouched, some alone and wretched-looking, others big-bellied and smiling, accompanied by chattering female family. Jyoti shrank under their shifting eyes. She sat at the edge of the verandah and stared at cloud banks gathering for the afternoon rain. Over an hour later her name was called by a large woman with blue eyes and skin as milky as Candice's.

Jyoti sat in a hard-backed wicker chair while the woman questioned her. Name? Jyoti Singh. Age? Twenty. Married?

She's single, Candice answered.

The nurse glanced up. Reason for visit? Jyoti stared straight

ahead at nothing. She looked hunted and distracted. Reason for visit? the nurse said again.

She drew Candice aside. "Illicit child?" Candice nodded. The woman paused and then said. "Lives with a brother?"

Candice told about Nathan, about Ravi. She described how Jyoti had been brought down from Blackburn after Ravi's mother had died. The woman watched her closely, listening, nodding, scribbling words in a pad.

"And you?" she said after Candice had stopped.

Candice went silent then. "Canadian," she finally mumbled. "I live with them. Teach at the school. She's like a sister."

"It won't be easy," the woman said, almost to herself.

Candice retreated outside and sat with her face to the street, leaning against a cement wall. The three women still on the verandah were wide-bellied and watched her discreetly, wordlessly.

Eventually Jyoti came out on the arm of the nurse, her skin blanched the colour of milky tea, great pouches of blood ringing her eyes. The nurse released her and she slumped to the bench, half conscious. Everyone stared. They had seen her go in young, strong, and now barely half an hour later she was sick, faint, stinking of ether.

Jyoti tried to rouse herself. She didn't want to seem ill in front of the women. They would talk, she later told Candice. But the drugs and the trauma were too strong for her. Candice had to carry her to a taxi and lay her down on the back seat to bring her home.

Mid-afternoon sun licked at the walls of Candice's room. The mosquito netting swayed and sighed with the steady push of wind. Candice could just make out Jyoti's face through the delicate meshing, pale and brown as a coffee stain against the pillowcase.

Jyoti took a few days off work. Her colour returned, and soon she was eating rice and sitting up to talk. On the third day she gathered together all the pillows she could find and read movie magazines, and ate salted chickpeas in bed. The house began to resonate once more with sitar and song.

Nathan accepted the illness without complaining or even asking Jyoti what was wrong. He came home early in the afternoons, prepared Ravi's supper and vanished back into town. When he emerged from his bedroom in the morning, his face was puffed and sullen and he smelled of rum. He scowled, but kept his peace. Candice found his lack of prying strange. He probably figured Jyoti had some women's ailment, and left it at that, but the way he had suddenly taken to drink made her uneasy. It was as if he had some private, heavy trouble of his own.

Ravi was being very good. He helped Candice wash his father's shirts, and once she came home to find him sitting in front of a long line of scuff-marked shoes, forearms smeared with black, buffing and shining as if his little life depended on it. Nathan barely noticed. He came in, heated food for the boy and left.

Several days after the operation, Jyoti dressed to return to work. She was still thin, but was looking like her old self. She hummed and

sang while she fixed breakfast.

"Why you wearin dat, girl?" Nathan thundered when she put his food down before him. Jyoti shifted nervously in a low-cut emerald dress. "Me be strong now," she said sweetly.

"To show youself off is why," Nathan screamed. "Strut around so all de men can have a look." Candice stared at him, but his smooth, fleshy face betrayed no secrets.

In a dull, breathless voice he started to talk about Blackburn. They would go there this weekend for a visit, he said. As he spoke he worked with his fork deboning a small grey fish. His brow was furrowed as if he were fitting together a puzzle.

"Mara will lend me he van," he said studying the skeleton, "an I'll hunt wild fowl like in de olden day." Ravi let out a cheer. Nathan turned to him, his eyes red and filmy from drink. "You want to hunt wit me?" he asked. "All right. We hunt, man. Candice and Judit, dey fend for demself."

Jyoti stared at her brother. "Blackburn be a nowhere place, man," she said low and sullen, and began to slap dirty dishes one on top of the other.

"You trow my china around like it dirt! I've had it up to here, girl," Nathan hissed, cutting at his throat with a flat palm. They had forgotten about Candice. She had never heard them so full of hatred, and she stared at them, confusion rising in her in tepid waves. She was out of her depth. She couldn't say how they had come to this point, or when.

Candice had never seen the Singh house in Blackburn before. It was girded with a hedge of hibiscus that stood taller than a man and bore purple blossoms the size of human faces. Pistils shot out from their centres, scattering dust in the wind. Mrs. Singh was pruning when they arrived in the van.

"Marnin Nathan, marnin," she called, arms and shears waving like an old windmill. She was a squat woman but her limbs were long and slender. Her shirt was cut low, exposing a proud neck and the muscled shoulders of a farmwoman. A beat-up hat veiled her face in shadow.

The estate was meticulous. Candice thought of the disorderly jungle of Nathan's yard in town. Nothing superfluous lay in Mrs. Singh's yard. No children's toys or tools. Pots in the bakehouse gleamed in sunlight. The woodstove's ash was spooned out each evening, the counters scrubbed and polished. Bushes were trimmed flat and square, and flowers had been planted in sharp swatches of colour. Even laundry flapping in the breeze was arranged with method.

Ravi sprinted over to his grandmother and buried his face in her skirts. Jyoti, pale in a splashy, patterned dress, climbed carefully from the car. Mrs. Singh did not kiss or hug her, she merely nodded as if the girl were an acquaintance on a busy city street. She led them to the patio where she had laid out soft drinks and fruit. Jyoti sat apart from the rest of her family, quietly sipping an ice-filled glass.

"Miss Candice," the old woman said. "How you keepin? Me tink you

tinner dese days. Natan na feedin you right?"

Nathan scowled when she said this, and after a few minutes, interrupted to announce that he was leaving to hunt. He, his old father, and Ravi disappeared into the green.

The three women sat for a while longer and then decided to take a walk in the rice fields. They followed the trench behind the house single file, Mrs. Singh's splay-toed feet padding softly over ruts from farmers' carts. Mud smooth as soap oozed up between Candice's toes and she marvelled that the old woman's feet remained so pink and dry. Mrs. Singh showed them flocks of tall white birds feeding in the grassy areas beside the trench. These were the birds that Nathan had gone to hunt. He had done it as a boy, she said, and back then they had eaten game almost every week. Now the birds were scarcer, and of course, they had no sons left to do the hunting.

About a half hour later they came to a large tree whose bark had been gouged and slashed by a machete, and hung about it in loose tatters. Mrs. Singh motioned that they should stop. Jyoti slumped down, feverish, Candice noticed, sweating hard, and trying desperately to keep up pretenses. Candice too was tired. She leaned heavily against the enormous flayed trunk.

"It's beautiful here," Candice said, trying to draw the old woman's eyes away from her daughter. "Jyoti's told me stories from her childhood in the fields. She often says she misses it."

The old woman's face darkened. She rubbed a finger along the clean

pink of her sole. "Jyoti home be Blackburn now. She never go away no more."

Jyoti didn't flinch. Her eyes blinked just once and then she rose to follow the old woman back to the house. Candice walked behind them, tripping sometimes, clumsy on the rutted donkey path.

They knew. Jyoti was being brought home. She had failed in the city, disgraced the Singhs. Nathan was only partly to blame as brother and protector. Jyoti's sentence was Blackburn, a life of spinsterhood and solitude. She would live out her life tending ageing parents until they died, and even then the shame would follow her. As Candice walked back to the house under the relentless sun, she felt the brutality of Jyoti's fate, the waste.

That night at dinner, Candice sat across from Jyoti, but the girl refused to look at her. Her eyes were so heavy she couldn't lift them to meet another human face. They were eating a curry made from the birds Nathan had caught, birds that had been alive a few hours ago. The meat was so smokey and fresh that Candice could barely swallow it. She kept thinking of the flocks she had seen out on the rice fields, rising in a chorus of sound and motion above the blistering, sun-beaten land.

All through the strained, silent meal she tried to send signals, messages of support, but Jyoti refused to see. Her fate had been sealed. No one could reach her now.

A Sense of Danger

Mira sat on one end of the sofa stroking her large, angora cat. She was an ample, comfortable-looking woman in her late forties with thick brown hair graying at the temples. "Gerry left," she said. "Something about a meeting, but I think he didn't want to watch us. He's horrible about things like this," she explained when her guest looked up sharply. "He's a Taurus. They're so practical."

The girl's hair shimmered in the afternoon light. She had pale skin and striking, cold, grey eyes which she trained on Mira.

"Your chart's fascinating," Mira went on, slightly put out by her guest's gaze. "Everything's in Scorpio."

Mira did not know the girl well. They had met only twice, at her husband's office parties, but Gerry had talked about her, about how good her work was, and how already, at twenty-three, she was attracting important clients. She had clinched deals that even senior partners envied. Gerry was a senior partner at Lybratt Inc. For years now Mira had watched him struggle up the endless rungs of his firm's ladder.

At the last party he introduced the girl, and Mira, who had just downed two Bloody Caesars, let slip her passion for horoscopes. Some time during the evening she had promised the girl a chart. She had even boasted something about predicting the future.

The girl tossed her head. Her looped earrings moved and gleamed.

"You're very mysterious," Mira said quickly. The silence was

beginning to weigh on her. She wondered how the girl was able to do so well in business without uttering a word. Maybe it was a test. Maybe she didn't want to give Mira a scrap of information that would help her.

Whatever the reason, it threw Mira completely off guard.

"Men love you, but you're restless," Mira said, out of the blue. She had not intended to begin with love, and for some reason, tripped over her words and started to stutter. "The type you fall for," she went on in spite of herself, "is older, generous with you. You like a sense of danger when you love."

Mira stopped. She stared at the girl. But the planets never lied.

Remembering the Dead

Maude sits alone, completely clothed in black and sipping wine. The wine is white. Yellow really, from green grapes, but called white. Warm and sour going down. Warm as summer, making her head light and swimmy.

She sits on a deserted terrace, elbows on cold marble. It's November although you'd never know it. A pale sun washes the streets. It has been so soft this year, caressing, lulling her. Her favourite season in Montreal. Usually filled with violent shifts, strong winds. This one so gentle, golden all through October, November.

A group of people are standing in a park underneath a bronze angel. The angel hovers above a soldier, green hand upon his cheek. A great amplified voice says, For those who have died. The words are caught up by the wind and brought to Maude across the empty terrace. A microphone squeals and Maude thinks of death. So many boys died far from home, the voice says, left to rot in fields of clay.

Ceux qui sont morts. Death in two tongues. All tongues go suddenly still, heads bow. From where she sits, Maude can see stains of red on their lapels. Bleeding hearts. As if the pins holding their poppies had pierced right through.

Two figures stand wiping at their eyes. Two mothers weeping. Old, white-haired. They look on beside rows of men in uniforms, stiff, reverential in the thin November light. The drums start like drops of

rain. They build slowly, filling the street until the noise is huge, like gunfire. The men's feet start. Someone shouts and the cadets surge forward in one body lifting hard black boots. Rat-a-tat. Girls in dark green, arms swinging, hips bulging, march stiff as dolls, as wooden puppets. They are so ugly, faces long, breasts and buttocks bursting the seams of their men's clothing.

Around the statue they march, past the terrace. The crowd breaks up, drifts off now to march with the cadets. Old ones with ribbons, badges, knees up, chests out, bleary-eyed, still keeping time. They push their faces forward. Chins up, stern. Rigid limbs. Rat-a-tat. Limbs in time. Rat-a-tat.

The two old women follow. One hides her face in a dark veil. Her legs are like the legs of a bird. Thin and brittle. Snap like twigs when you get that old. She looks at Maude and whispers. *Chuchotement*. A dried leaf flies up and hits Maude in the cheek. She jumps flailing all alone out on the terrace. The women stare and frown and Maude sits again, sheepish, and pulls her glass towards her over the smooth stone table top.

Maude!

Bob, his hair white and streaming, is half running towards her across the street. He is dragging someone by the elbow. A big man with yellowish hair. *Merde*. He always brings his friends, beer-swigging with all their opinions.

You're all in black, Bob says, breathing hard. Remembering the dead? The two men laugh.

He is right. She is all in black. Maude thinks of black panties that Bob cannot possibly see. Black stockings, tight black jeans, dark boots, a large black sweater that swamps her small frame. No bra. Her face is pale as a moon ringed with a rust halo of hair.

He does not kiss her but as he sits down, reaches under the table. Warm hand on her thigh. He smiles, eyes shifting quickly from her, and introduces the friend.

Arnold has greased hair the colour of a car's headlights: white with yellow streaks. Stained fingers and teeth, small filmy irises. He is a columnist for an English newspaper, and might be in his sixties. He lights a cigarette and even before it burns down is lighting another.

Maude is glad they are on a terrace. The smoke drifts aimlessly and spills onto the street. Their words scatter with the smoke. Scatter like so much seed, or dust. She must not think of it. Her breasts are swollen, full and ripe.

The mayor's too old now, Bob says. It's just as well he's stepping down. A bent old man. Have you seen him lately?

Arnold nods his great streaked head. Twenty-nine years in office, he says. Long time for anyone. I bet that's more years than you've been alive, he says to Maude.

Keep talking and you'll lose me a girlfriend, Bob says and laughs his

big, man's laugh. She's our side of thirty.

Maude sips at her wine and tilts her head back into the sun. Orange globes swirl on her eyelids and summer slips deep down inside of her. First mouth, then throat, then belly. Bellyful of warmth. If she kept it, she'd swear off drink, swear off bars and blustering men breathing smoke.

More beers. Bob's colour rises. He's a Scot who loves his scotch. He's a drunk, Bob says. Spineless too. Shifts like a weathervane. Christ, you breathe and the man changes direction.

Careless talk. Maude doesn't know who they're attacking. Arnold tosses his head, his long teeth grinding peanuts.

Bob loves to talk. When liquor's in his blood he has no shame. He'll say anything. It cost him his marriage. A job. When they first met, months ago, it had thrilled her. Now she knows it's not him, not courage, just drink.

Bob speaks French when he's drunk. It forks his tongue and turns him loose and wild. He loves women. All French except for the wife who was a Scot like him, and a lousy cook. But the mistresses are French. Bob the hedonist. French women, French food. Loves and eats.

His family is grown now. The children are scattered here and there. English kids are like that. Catch onto any wind that blows through the city; touch down in Toronto, New York, wherever. That's where they are. The wife and her youngest are in Toronto, the eldest is an actor in New York. Maude has never met them. She just hears their voices when they

call, and she's seen photographs of children posing in a park.

Bob never speaks about his children. Once he said he should have stayed single.

Montreal's an old whore, Arnold says. A speck of nut flies from his lip onto the table. A warm old whore that everyone loves. No matter who runs her she'll always be the same.

What would you know about whores? Bob says, laughing.

Maude breathes. Her breasts shift slightly, heavy on her chest. She has never felt so full. She thinks of seed pods, milkweed pushing to burst. Brown husks with white spidery fibres inside. Silk hiding seed, exploding silently in the fields. She wants to see it grow, this fullness in her belly.

The city runs itself, Arnold says, and wipes froth from his fine lip hairs. Has for years, he continues. Men just like to flatter themselves they have a say.

Maude's eyes meet Arnold's. His words are wise. Too bad about his looks.

Take this so-called new government, Arnold says. New men with so-called new ideas. Just watch and see in ten years if anything has changed.

But things do change! Maude thinks. They do. She never would have thought she'd feel it so strongly. Before, when she was young, she'd loved carelessly, so many men. And once before, when she was twenty, this

thing had happened. It had been in summer with that boy Germain. When she'd told him he had cried and cried, spilling tears. She'd had to hold him one entire night. She'd been strong then, and determined. Then it was nothing. She hadn't wanted it. Simple as burning off a wart.

Hey, Bob says to her. You still there? You still with us?

Maude nods and stares at her black lap. She is thirty-three now. Thirteen years since the last time. Unlucky. Strange how this would pain her. She could feel it already. Like ripping out part of herself. Killing herself. Bob wouldn't cry. No, he wouldn't even want to know.

The sun is dropping. Long shadows fall across the street, striping it in black. A mess of bottles clutters the table. Saucers spill ash and broken butts. Bob tries to light a cigarette in the wind. Fails.

Geez, Bob says. Can't even light a goddamn cigarette. He is drunk. It's late, he says. Let's go. He puts dollars under a saucer and Arnold slips a large bill under a glass. They get up unsteadily and navigate through the tables, Bob clutching at the backs of chairs. Maude follows him. He is an athletic man and by the time they reach the street, is walking fine.

Hey you, Bob says, slipping his arm around her shoulders. You're a beauty when you're glum. Arnold looks away. They walk up the middle of a deserted street, three abreast, little Maude all in black, flanked by two tall, white-haired men.

At an intersection, they stop. All three together, as if

choreographed. There are no cars, but they are creatures of the city, creatures of habit. Maude looks down into a sewer. In the garbage and the leaves a fleck of red catches her eye. It is a poppy stuck in the grating, its pin and black centre fallen off. Bright bloom in the fading light.

Wing-beat

She was not the type of woman to fall into a panic over small things. She was too old for that, had seen too much. She had, for instance, brought four sons into the world and watched them change from tiny, mewling beings to sombre men who towered above her and made weighty pronouncements about government and foreign wars and whether the stock market was likely to dip or rise. She worked in the heart of the city, and even though it was in a library, she managed to see quite a bit. At one time, libraries were protected, quiet places with a predictable clientele. Nowadays you could never tell who would walk in. People with nowhere to sleep warmed themselves in the great, echoing halls on the coldest days in winter. Aged, downy-haired women flocked together in the stacks and reading areas to talk and lay down for a while their burdens of loneliness. Children wandered in, and people with no money to spare for a newspaper. She was not someone who constantly brought fingers to her lips and demanded silence. On the contrary, she loved to listen, and over the years, had learned much more from them than from the silent books she sorted and stacked each day.

And yet, when she made the discovery that night, stepping from bath to bathmat, her skin a heated rosy shade, she let out a piercing, girlish shriek. In all her years of motherhood and work she had never seen anything like it.

The mirror above the sink was clouded with steam, but even so, she could make them out, shrivelled, black as soot, one sprouting on each

shoulder blade. She reached an arm up behind herself and poked. The webbing was delicate and fine as the skeletons of leaves and curled inwards at her touch.

A voice came through the locked bathroom door. It was her youngest son needing to get in. The voice came again, surly this time, impatient.

They had one small bathroom which they were all forced to share. This was fine for the men in the family. They burst in on each other and shut the doors with two, three of them shaving and bathing all at the same time. She would hear the low humming of their talk mixed with electric razor sounds and splashing. The bathroom was like something you might find at the YMCA. A peculiar, very masculine odour of aftershave mingled with sweat hung about it, and no matter how she scrubbed, or what quantities of disinfectant she poured over it, the smell remained.

Only her youngest son lived with them now. She had developed a habit of luxuriating in her baths, something she had not been able to do for at least twenty-five years. She bought oils and scents, and gradually, the bathroom had begun to change.

She checked her back again. You really could not tell with the robe draped over, unless you knew.

In the beginning, when the bumps first appeared, she thought they were insect bites. She scratched them, and wondered that there were two and so evenly spaced, but she did not pay much attention. While she

ignored them, they swelled. Only this morning they had grown to the size of small eggs, hens' eggs implanted just beneath the skin. Now, in the early evening, they seemed to have transformed into wings, black and webby like those of a bat. She couldn't think what her husband would say when he discovered them. Will was a family doctor and took a great, if somewhat clinical, interest in her body. He prided himself on being observant, his large, manicured hands ferreting out the subtlest changes in her weight, the appearance of pimples, moles, new body hairs. If her latest protrusions had escaped him, it was only because he was suffering from a head cold, and was more than usually tired.

She pushed the bathroom door open a crack and peered out. Her son was no longer waiting, and the house was completely still. He had probably left in a fury and shut himself in his room. She walked through the hall, the floor beneath her creaking reassuringly as it had throughout the many years of her marriage.

Her husband was lying on their large, olive green couch. He had swathed his neck with an ascot to comfort his aching glands, and was sipping a mug of tea, reading scientific journals. He didn't look up as she came in.

"How's the throat?" she asked, knowing he would not be pleased with the interruption. He made a grunting noise and went on reading. Will was not a man who liked to acknowledge illness. It was like giving in, he had told her many times, bowing down to a rebellious and ever complaining body. "I can make more tea," she tried, but he waved her off,

keeping his eyes on the page.

"There's something you must see," she said, and began to loosen the belt of her robe. Her husband looked up, visibly startled, then hurried a glance in back of her, checking for sons or other people who might, for some reason, be stalking the corridors at just that moment.

The robe slipped down around her shoulders, and she gathered it about her like a cape. Then she knelt beside the sofa, baring her back and neck.

"What is it?" he whispered, and dry, tentative fingers began to palpate her.

Doctor with the healing hands. It had been a while since they had touched. She could picture the long fingers with their groomed nails rubbed and sanded so as not to catch, the whites at their base peering up like tired moons, making preliminary explorations. He poked and prodded, fingering the fine black webbing while she crouched obediently, patiently, her skin cooling in the night air. They stayed like this a long while, and he seemed to have forgotten her when finally, in a voice much lower and graver than his own, he asked when the warts had first pushed through.

Warts. That was the word he used.

Later that night, she heard him describe her predicament over the phone. He whispered so as not to upset her, but his voice was raspy, coarse from the head cold, and she heard the words *tumour*, and *malignancy*. Much later, when they were in bed, he made her lie on her side, the warts, limp now and folded, facing him. "I'll keep an eye on

them," he said reassuringly, the doctor with his patient, but he made no move to embrace her before sleep carried her off.

She awoke to sun flooding through their thin rice paper blind and the sensation that someone was watching her, and without thinking, rolled over on her back.

"You've crushed them!" she heard, and then saw Will's wide eyes. He made her sit on the bed with sheets and blankets strewn around them and examined her, kneeling behind her out of sight so that only through her skin could she sense what he was doing. Again the fingers prodded, traced the contours of blades, ribs, spinal column, deftly, softly.

"They grew in the night," he said finally. "Today they're horny, like a reptile's skin."

He described how mysterious warts could be. How they could spring up for no reason it seemed, at any age, without warning. How the roots often went very deep, and how difficult they were to remove. He used long Latin words and spoke of ablation, and of using nitroglycerine to blast down to the wart's core. She tried to follow what he was saying, but she couldn't see him and without seeing him, she found she could not concentrate.

A wave of self disgust filled her. Will was frightened. He talked in the same calm, even tones that he reserved for his most hopeless cases at work. He could do this, separate the scientific from the human. If she were the doctor, she would constantly be crying with people, touching them, unable to stem the pain that would overtake her in the most

common, unprofessional way. Will knew this. He said it was the one great difference between them. He was disciplined, she was emotional and rather scattered in her forces. Even in a library, which he imagined to be the driest and duller of places, he was struck by how she sniffed out and found the hints of pain.

Black warts on her back. She was mortified. How could he even touch her? All of a sudden she imagined long, hair-like roots winding through her ribs, stretching eager tentacles out to clasp soft, hidden organs.

Will was behind her, poking at her back, and his voice floated up in waves, disembodied in the light-filled room. In the patches of silence between each of her husband's observations, her mind began to wander. She thought of a strange, very long and involving dream she had dreamt at dawn, just before waking. It seemed so real that she lay there exhausted for many minutes, unable to move, aching from the night's exertions.

The air was like water and she was running through it, down hills of yellow grass. The hills were not steep, but big enough to give her momentum, and she moved her arms in front of her in slow arcs, like a swimmer. At the base of one of the hills, when her speed was particularly great, her feet lifted from the ground. It was so unexpected, yet familiar somehow, as if she had done it often at some time, long ago, in a life only dimly remembered. Her clumsy fleshy limbs were weightless now, like helium balloons, only more graceful, more purposeful against the wind. She was no longer running, but gliding low in

the air, pulling herself along with an odd, breast-stroking motion. At first the flight was uneven, and she dipped and rose like a kite on a string, but she pulled hard at the air, and climbed until she could coast on gusts of wind. Gravity stopped at the tops of trees, and above them the air currents were strong. Wind and her own momentum propelled her, and she looked down at the shrinking earth with a strange calm and wonder.

Will's voice brought her back to earth. He was in front of her looking very glum and saying she must not think of going to work.

"I had the strangest dream," she said, thinking that perhaps it was the one bright spot in this whole affair, that it might distract him for a moment.

Will just stared at her as if she did not see the point at all. He continued where he left off before she interrupted. She must phone in sick, rest as much as she could until they decided what to do. One of his colleagues, a man called Brais whom she had met at a hospital party and only vaguely remembered, would have a look at her. They needed a surgeon's opinion, and no one was more qualified in all the city than Brais.

She nodded and tried to seem interested. Will was taking charge. He was rallying forces where she would have scattered them. He would figure things out, and it would be all right. But strangely, deep in her heart, she did not care. A great, warm lassitude was seeping through her, and she could not summon the energy even to worry. Will's face seemed comically peaked and white next to her own sense of calm.

Doctor Brais's office was on the top floor of the sprawling, concrete St. Agnes Hospital. He was a nervous and very tall young man who seldom smiled. His eyes shone like bits of coal and he seemed to take in her body in a single, sweeping glance, filing details, storing what he saw for future deliberations. He was ill at ease with Will standing in the corner, observing. Will insisted on accompanying her and attending the examination. He had never seen warts shaped like wings before, and had been unable to find anything even remotely resembling the things on his wife's back in his medical books. He presented her to Brais as a phenomenon, a prize specimen in which he had at least a partial claim.

She hunched forward on the vinyl table, cradling her breasts. It was strange to be sitting there half naked in front of the men. Sometimes when she was in a doctor's office, she forgot about her body. It became extraneous, like a coat that could be tossed aside and studied quite impassively. She and the doctor would discuss the body together, as if her thoughts were something apart from the carcass on the table. But with her husband there, she could not manage it. She saw her breasts through his eyes, as the familiar flesh that had given him pleasure, that he had seen each day for years, that had brought their sons their first rich tastes of love and life. She was ashamed to expose this intimacy before another man. She knew she looked old. Fleshy, lumpy, with wide stretch marks down the sides of each breast. For this too, she was ashamed.

She must look helpless, she thought to herself, with Brais behind

her, poking at the wings, turning her this way and that, pushing her arms out and back to determine whether her shoulders and arm movement had been affected.

She thought again of her dream. She must have felt the warts in her sleep and transformed them into wings. Whatever had inspired it, the images were strikingly clear today. When she shut her eyes a vision of herself, weightless, strong, soaring high above trees appeared as if it had been burnt into the retina.

After the examination, she spent two hours with hospital technicians who worked on her with a kind of dogged efficiency. Her husband had to leave for work, and Brais remained in his office, so she was alone with the men in white laboratory coats, who ordered her to strip from the waist up, who photographed her, x-rayed her, extracted blood and urine samples, gave her forms to fill out on allergies and diseases in her family line, on whether she had ever, to her knowledge, been exposed to high levels of radiation. Damp hands kneaded her back, touching her only when it was necessary, to examine how the warts were grafted to the skin or to perfect an angle for a photograph. She abandoned herself to them, hardly paying attention until, without warning her, they clipped off the tips of each wart, dabbed the stinging blood with cotton, and placed the amputated bits into a large and clearly labelled white envelope.

She was stunned when she saw the small black pieces. One of the technicians held them up to the light between the prongs of a pair of

long, steel tweezers and all of a sudden she was outraged. She had not known cutting would be necessary. No one had consulted her or even mentioned this might happen. Perhaps, she thought, she had not until then had strong feelings either way. Perhaps Will and the expert doctor Brais had assumed quiescence because she had shown nothing else. The amputation jolted her awake. She had not felt so resistant for years. It was her skin that the warts had chosen. Her body Brais would blast into to get at the roots. The warts were part of her. To her husband and Brais and everyone else, it seemed, they were merely a strange growth, a curiosity for study. She jumped up from the low bench and left the men in the lab coats standing in a consultative circle around the tweezers, watching her as if she were a madwoman. She hurried out, her long hair flying, clutching her half-buttoned blouse to her chest.

She was completely exhausted, and grimy with the contact of so many hands. When she reached the house, the front hall was dark and empty, and she went straight for the bathroom to comfort herself with a long and very hot soak. Her torso was wrapped with long strips of gauze, above and below her breasts, and she looked something like a buried Egyptian queen who had started to unravel. She unwrapped herself delicately with all the tenderness she could muster after her handling at the hospital, and her body began to emerge, soft, vulnerable from under the bandages. As the last strip came off, she heard rustling. Something fell to the floor and she jumped away from it, off the bathmat, thinking with a mixture of relief and fear that it must be a wart dropping. Perhaps

they were deciduous, like leaves or the horns of deer. Or maybe the taping had damaged them, cut off the blood supply or broken their fragile cores. It was too small for a wing and too light. She swivelled to the mirror and what she saw there made her swear aloud, her voice losing itself in the thunder of water pouring into the bath.

The warts had grown. They were now as big as the wings of a blackbird and feathers had sprouted. This was the black that had fallen so weightlessly to the ground; she was shedding feathers. The warts were so different now. When she first discovered them they had fascinated her, but there had been something repulsive about them. Their webbiness and the suggestion of bats and reptiles had filled her with ambivalence. But they now looked almost beautiful. She reached to stroke them with a tenderness and care she had not felt since her sons were small. They were so different from the bat's wings, covered with a blanket of blue-black plumes and gleaming like some precious stone, even in the dull bathroom light.

She was in the bathtub experimenting with her new body when Will returned. The wings were far more solid than they looked. Their feathers were shiny and waterproof, and she dipped them in the water, much like birds did in the park, and flapped them gently out to dry. She had no trouble flapping. It was as if she had two sets of arms, one at the side and one invisible to her, but ever present, which she could move or shake with ease. She was waving one wing in regular beats and holding the other perfectly still when Will walked in.

"Look at me!" she said, and gave a playful splash.

His face, normally stern, expressive, turned strangely soft when he saw her, with a hint of grey, like uncooked dough.

That night, with Will vigilantly watching her backside, she dreamed again of wings. The dream came easily the moment she shut her eyes, as if it had been hovering somewhere near all through the day, biding its time before sleep. It was natural, a capacity that had been in her always, lying dormant, waiting for release. She grew daring as the night wore on, gliding high above the trees, flipping upside down, engraving like a looping daredevil pilot, her name on a cloudless sky.

In the morning she was exhausted, her limbs so heavy with fatigue that she could not stir from bed. The wings had grown larger and were now speckled with white, like those of a young sea gull. Will, his face even greyer than the night before, made frenzied phone calls, then hurried from the house as though it were on fire. "We'll do something," he told her, trying to convince them both that things were still under control, that he, the doctor, was in charge. He left promising to arrange things and to call her from the hospital.

When she finally pulled herself out of bed she was startled at the change in herself. She had somehow grown terribly thin. Ribs jutted out from her sides and her breasts drooped sadly. She felt faint and vertiginous and staggered when she tried to walk. Her centre of gravity had shifted. Her body was wasting away from exertion, and all the time the wings were growing, sucking the energy and life right out of her.

She climbed back into bed and lay on her side, foetally, tucking her wings in so as not to disturb the feathers. Beside her bed a window was open and the normal sounds of a city morning filled the room. Swish of tires on wet pavement, the intermittent blasts of horns, sounds of trucks straining into gear. On days like this in early summer, the green of the trees was startling. It had something to do with clouds. When the clouds were low and the sun was strong behind them, the colour of the city changed. Greens that most days blended uncomplainingly with sky sprang out sharply. They were doing this today. She couldn't take her eyes off them. Branches heavy with green waved to her softly, a hair's breadth away.

She felt very sad and tired. Obviously she could not go on like this. She was worn out, bled dry. Her dreams seemed to be taking her over, invading her each night, sweeping her away to unknown skies. She had aged, lost weight. Each morning she felt as if years had passed. She was obsessed with sky and with the dizzying, spiralling feeling of flight. It filled her at night and now, during the day, her mind returned to it again and again. It was bleeding her, sapping her strength.

Her ordinary daytime life was so different, so irreconcilable with this new dream life. She could not think what would become of her if the wings continued to grow, if her dreams of flight continued.

She was glad that the house was empty. When Will or her son was there she felt like an invalid. Like something maimed, deformed. She couldn't share the things unfolding inside of her. Alone in her bed it was

better. She could linger over her dreams, call back the weightlessness, the speed, the boundless sense of freedom. She slipped her hand under the bed sheets and fingered the beautiful feathers.

Will arrived home to find her in bed, crouched on her knees, exhausted, pale as stone and letting out thin moans as if she were in pain. Her wings were enormous, pewter coloured like a heron's, like the wings of a Durer angel. He threw himself to her side, weeping, mumbling words intended to comfort, to show his love. Everything was taken care of. Brais had reserved a room for surgery the next day, and had promised to work on her first thing in the morning.

She nodded vaguely, knowing that he loved her, that he was trying to reach her, but she felt so sleepy, so unutterably exhausted. Her eyelids shut and she did not have the energy to open them again. Will's words came to her in gusts, as if he were far away, calling across a wide, windswept plain.

When she awoke, the first thing she heard was singing. All around her voices echoed in greeting, reverberating through the thick, blanketed woods. Light filtered through thick bunches of leaves, dancing on rough bark surfaces, or crept silently to warm the steaming, damp, black earth.

She must have left through the window. She could not recall. Somehow she had come to this place filled with singing, winged creatures who looked no different from herself, who watched her now from the surrounding trees. She no longer had a body. She was all bird - sleek,

whitish grey with immense wings and talons sharp enough to cut through flesh.

She knew somehow that this was no dream. She would end her days here and never return to her home in the city. It did not sadden her. Perhaps sadness never occurred to birds. And although her memory eventually grew dim, she never entirely forgot Will, or her sons, or her life as a woman. Each day she rose early with the sun, half hoping, wondering if Will would ever think to look for her in the leafy, overgrown ravine.

Wild

The stretch of highway between Montreal and Quebec City was flat and characterless. Stella had never liked it. That day she felt the monotony of the drive more keenly than usual because Maude was with her, lying on the back seat, humming along with her Sony Walkman. Stella could hear the little machine buzzing a steady, two-step beat. Maude was only half in tune, and every so often she made a noise that sounded like a moan. When that happened, Stella whipped her head around, but invariably Maude was all right, staring back with blank, hostile eyes.

"My name is Luca," Maude sang out suddenly in a loud voice.

In the mirror Stella saw that she had unhooked her earphones. She took this as a sign that Maude was bored and wanted to communicate.

"New song?" she asked.

"It's *the* biggest hit all over," Maude said. Her voice was low and irritated, as if Stella should know the song and its importance. "It's about this girl who keeps falling into things and being clumsy. She meets this man in her building who asks how she is, and she can't say, because her family beats her up and she doesn't want anyone to know."

"That's sad," Stella said, slowing the car without realizing it. Someone behind her honked. "What a sad story for a song."

She stole a glance in the rearview mirror. Her granddaughter's face was puckered into what Stella was coming to realize was a habitual frown. Stella had never spent much time with the girl and did not know

her moods or the way she saw the world. She regretted that. When her daughters were still quite young, they had moved far away. Maddy, the mother of Maude, now lived in Calgary, and Anna, in Nova Scotia. Stella had lived all her life in Montreal. She was rooted in the city. She had watched her husband move away, just after their divorce, and then the daughters, one following the other. For Stella, migration made no sense. Montreal was her anchor, it held her down and was one of the few things that gave her peace. Over the years, the distances had proven troublesome and she often missed her family, but never once did she dream of moving. She tried to make trips at least twice a year to visit her daughters and the grandchildren.

Maude had just turned fourteen. She was blonde, with fine, straight hair and translucent skin that tanned well in summer. It was the end of August and she was deeply brown. She was also lean and athletic-looking like her father. She did not bear the faintest resemblance to Maddy or Stella. Maddy was a young version of Stella, with wiry black hair, just beginning to fleck with grey. They were both solid, squat women, not particularly tall or graceful. It was lucky for the girl, Stella reflected, that the father's genes had won out. It was as if Nathan had taken Maude and stamped her entirely as his own. Nathan was part of an immense western clan and everyone in it was identical. He had six or seven brothers and sisters and they all had children. A regular tribe of them lived in Edmonton, all blond, limpid-eyed and long-limbed.

Maude could no longer be called a child. She towered over Stella and was beginning to show the subtle but unmistakable signs of womanhood. Two years ago the photographs that Maddy had sent showed a small Maude, with an open gaze and fleshy, childish features. Last winter she had grown five inches. All of a sudden she had become awkward, Maddy had reported from the west, falling into things and tripping as if her limbs were not her own. She was too large for a child, and yet she still had all of her childish gestures and ways. This year, the change was startling. Her layer of baby fat had melted away. In her face Stella could now make out the delicate hardness of the adult she would become.

She guided the old Citroën into the right hand lane. The ramp leading to the Grande Allée and their hotel would come up very soon. She had booked a room at the Chateau Frontenac, a big, castle-like edifice overlooking the river. The Frontenac was touristy, but it was regal and luxurious, and it was right next to a boardwalk where they could look out on the water. It also was not far from the Plaines d'Abraham, where the French had lost Quebec to General Wolfe and the English troops. Stella wanted to take Maude and tell her some of the history. She loved to walk on the plains. Sometimes she felt a strange melancholy there, as if the souls of dead men were calling to her from their early graves.

Maude was sitting up and looking out of the car window. "Is this it?" she asked indifferently.

They were off the ramp and climbing a steep hill past the

government buildings. A couple of turns and they would be in the old city, where the houses lining the narrow streets were solidly majestic, many dating back to the seventeenth century. Maude was still looking out of her window. "Wicked for traffic jams," she said, watching cars squeeze by each other in stubborn attempts to pass.

Stella remembered the first time she visited Calgary. It had seemed huge and uniformly grey to her. All cement skyscrapers and recently built, cheap-looking bungalows. The roads were wide and treeless. She wrote a postcard to a friend back in Montreal observing that Calgary was the new side of town, all over town.

It was drizzling when they pulled up in front of the hotel. A bellhop took their bags, and another boy took care of the car. Maude followed Stella with her head down, as if she were embarrassed at the lavishness and all the attention. She was wearing jeans, ripped carefully in a horizontal slash above each knee, and a large black wool sweater. Maddy wrote that she was rebelling. She hated to dress and wore the same sombre clothes day in, day out. Maddy was tolerant because she said it was a hard time for the girl. Fourteen was such an in between age, and things were not easy at home.

Things were rotten at home. That was, in fact, why Maude had come east. Stella had not realized how bad they were until she got the plea from Maddy to take the girl until classes started in September. Maddy had hinted in letters that she and Nathan were drifting apart. She wrote of

fights and sometimes, between the lines on Maude, or the garden, or how her work was going, she slipped in the name of a man Stella had never heard before. Maddy was a potter, and taught at the local arts college. She would write things like "Joseph Crane, a fellow potter, introduced me to Thai cooking last night." In itself, it was innocent, but the name kept cropping up.

Stella smelled the warning signals, but she thought it was just Maddy reassessing, beginning the inexorable move into her second decade of marriage. She and Nathan were good together, from what Stella could make out. They were friendly and shared the same tastes and ambitions. Nathan was a photographer and part-time teacher. He was soft-spoken and usually let Maddy do the talking.

When Maddy phoned to say they were splitting up, the news caught Stella completely off guard. It stunned her and filled her with guilt.

Her husband had left when Maddy was just about fifteen. Stella was ashamed to think back. She had been so dismally young then, so blind with herself, with her husband, and worst of all, with Maddy and Anna. For a few years the girls had tried to prop her up, but eventually they realized that the marriage was unsalvageable and that they did not have the strength to patch Stella's punctured life. So they left, travelled as far as they could from Montreal and from Stella, who was spending her days in darkened rooms, sedated or drunk, sometimes both.

Eventually she emerged from that time, but she had never made it

up to her daughters. Maddy knew Stella had pulled herself out from the mire. She was proud that her mother had built a life again after the years of neglect. But she did not know how deeply Stella had changed.

Now it was as if an old film reel had been fished out of the dust pile and put back on the projector. The same scenes were playing, but this time with different characters. Maddy, in the role Stella had once starred in, would be terrified of the breaking and despair she felt. That was where Stella's life had been when she left home. No other memory would be as fresh. It was all jumbled in Stella's mind, but she knew that she was strong now. She would make it up to her children.

Maude shuffled through the elegant carpeted halls like a prisoner. They took the elevator, with the bellhop, to the fifth floor. A large double bed and a television took up most of the space in the master bedroom and there was a cot for Maude in the adjoining room. Stella tipped the bellhop and shut the door. The place became their own.

Maude turned on the television and watched American soap operas. At five or so, she said she was hungry. The weather was dismal, so they decided to order room service. Maude pored over the menu, which included wild game and all sorts of delicacies with fancy names and sauces, and announced that she felt like hamburgers. Stella ordered two, with plenty of sweet relish and side orders of fries. Half an hour later, a young man knocked on the door and wheeled in a table with a white table cloth. He lifted round silver covers off of the plates and underneath were two

lonely meat patties decorated with sprigs of green parsley. They looked comic and out of place amid all the elegance.

Stella and Maude lay on fresh starched sheets in front of the television and ate their suppers. Maude hated advertisements and zapped the sound by remote control every time one came on. "You die," she would say, cutting the volume, or sometimes, "You're history!" The show they were watching was sponsored by a diaper company and they kept seeing pantomimes of some poor woman pouring blue liquid onto a white cloth, and then picking up a smiling baby. They laughed and laughed because it was so absurd without the sound, and for the first time, Stella sensed the girl warming to her.

The next morning, sunlight woke Stella. It was pouring in her window, dusting everything in hazy yellow. Gulls were circling high above the boardwalk, crying in their lonely, plangent way. The cliffs of Lévis were dark as ink against the soft blue, steaming river.

Stella poked her head into Maude's room. The curtains were drawn tightly and Maude breathed evenly, her head nestled down, hidden by covers.

She dressed and packed, and when she checked again, Maude still had not moved. Stella tried to rouse her, and finally told her she was going out on the boardwalk to get some air and maybe a newspaper.

She was leaning over the wire railing, watching the last bits of

steam evaporate off the water when someone brushed against her. It was Maude, in the torn jeans and black sweater that seemed to be her uniform, but she had added a pair of round, purple framed sunglasses. The lenses over her eyes were mirrored so Stella could never tell exactly where her gaze was falling.

"Chic," Stella said.

Maude did not smile, so Stella decided not to bother with the river, or how the leaves were changing. She was not sure, in any event, just how much Maude could see through those smoky lenses. One look at her sombre face convinced Stella to forget the Plaines d'Abraham, and any notion of walking to the Citadel.

The road east from Quebec was a challenge. Stella followed the north shore where the highway was narrow and snaked through tiny towns. The slower speed limit suited her old car, and she got a chance to look at fields and farmhouses and at the water stretching wide and blue, like an ocean, beneath them. The girl lay on the back seat, her feet propped up against the window, reading a magazine. She did not raise her eyes or talk to Stella.

They arrived at the inn early in the afternoon. It was a converted farmhouse very close to the water, with a fresh, damp wind blowing in over the lawns. Their room looked out on the river. The wood walls were painted bluish white, and the quilts and rugs were the colour of robins'

eggs. There were two beds in the room. One double in a corner, and a single one pushed against the wall with the windows and the view. The smaller bed would be Maude's. Stella wondered how the girl would take to sharing so intimate a space. She was such a private creature, and so uncommunicative.

Stella had booked the room for three nights. She thought they could drive the old Citroën through the countryside, and maybe walk and explore. There were craft shows, and cliffs from which you could watch ocean liners passing, blowing black smoke into the air. Sometimes seals and dolphins played off the coast. Stella wanted to share these things with Maude. But Maude said she did not care for crafts or outings. Scenery bored her. She seemed to like sleeping during the day, watching movies, and sometimes painting her fingernails.

The morning after they arrived, Maude was sitting on her bed with four small bottles propped up against her pillow. A strong chemical smell filled the room. Stella wanted to go for a walk, but Maude told her she had just started the nails on her right hand. Her nails were beautiful and strange-looking to Stella, painted in oranges and pinks with sun and star motifs. Maude rubbed the colour off and repainted them whenever the mood hit her.

"A bit of air would do you good," Stella said.

"I can't walk out half done," Maude snapped, waving her fingers.

"There's plenty of air here anyway."

Maude often said harsh things. Stella felt like spanking her, only it would have looked too ridiculous. Maude was twice her size and could easily overpower her. It would also widen the rift that already lay between them. Maude resented everything. She was brusque and sarcastic most of the time.

She left the girl and went into town, walking along a narrow street where raspberry and rose bushes pushed through peeling white washed fences. It was Sunday and the town was deserted. She walked until the mainstreet turned into highway. Beyond it lay the water. The tide was receding, leaving a stretch of muddy sand littered with rocks and debris and weeds. Stella stood at the guard rail, breathing in the close, salty air, and thinking of Maude.

When she returned to the room a couple of hours later, it was quiet and dark as night. Maude had drawn all the curtains and climbed back into bed. Stella could just make out a slight rise under the sheets.

"Maude?" she called into the blackness.

Maude's face was a pale colour that matched the quilt draped over her. The eyes were puffy and half closed. Stella sat down on the end of the bed. She bent over and felt the girl's forehead. It was cool and there was no sign of fever. Maude opened her eyes and Stella saw that the pupils were huge. They gleamed up at her like shallow pools.

"I'm okay," she said faintly. "I just want to sleep." Then she rolled over and began to breathe evenly.

Hours later as the sky was beginning to darken, Maude came down the spiralled wooden staircase of the old house. She shuffled through the oak wood hall and over to the chair where Stella had sat all afternoon, phoning doctors and hospitals and worrying with the innkeeper, Monsieur Dionne.

"We going to eat?" she asked.

Stella studied her. The black wool sweater made her face look bleached and sad. Her eyes were tired, ringed with dark circles, but the pupils had shrunk back to size. Now they seemed extraordinarily active, as if they could no longer adapt to light. They widened and contracted in spasms, like a pulsing heart.

"I feel good now," Maude said sheepishly. "Hungry."

Stella hugged her. "Maude," she said, nuzzling the soft golden hairs on her grandchild's head, "You frightened me so much. I phoned every hospital within a hundred miles." The girl did not say anything. Stella was puzzled. She stared at Maude as if the answer were somewhere in that pale, closed face. She had never seen a sickness hit so suddenly and vanish like that.

The next day Maude's colour was better. They went down to breakfast and Monsieur Dionne waved and told Maude in a halting English that she was looking well. Stella had made friends with him the day before when she had needed hospital numbers. Monsieur Dionne was a

squat man, with a black moustache which he waxed, and liked to twirl between his fingers. He was very kind and fatherly to Stella even though she suspected she was older than he was. When he heard Maude was from Calgary he said, "Then of course you must take her out on the water to hunt for whales." People from the west were always very impressed, he assured her.

Stella watched Maude carefully as they ate breakfast.

"What's the matter?" Maude said, looking up. She had put on her sunglasses and was spreading peanut butter from a little plastic container on a warm slice of bread.

"I'm seeing how you are," Stella said.

"Fine," Maude said. "I'm eating, aren't I?" She paused. "You stare just like Maddy."

"I happen to love you," Stella said. "Maddy loves you too."

Stella could not tell what Maude's eyes were doing. All she could see was her own worried reflection, miniaturized and distorted, staring back at her.

"I know I've been sent away," Maude said suddenly, in a cold and very adult voice. "They didn't have to do that." She bit into a slice of toast. Peanut butter coated the fine blond hairs above her lip. "It's not as if I don't know."

"They're doing all they can," Stella said somewhat lamely.

"Shipping me off here? It's worse than Alcatraz."

Stella flushed and steadied herself. "They love you, Maude."

"You use that word too much," Maude muttered. "Maddy used to say it all the time too." She chewed on a piece of toast and stared out the window.

Stella ate slowly. She did use it freely. She had not always believed in it. She remembered when she was younger, just about Maude's age, hating the way other girls spoke of it so lightly, mixing it with talk of lipstick shades and styles of clothes. It was only as she grew older that she began to talk of love. She really believed in it too. Even after her marriage and the strings of women her ex-husband had barely bothered to conceal. Even now, with Maddy and Nathan splitting up, she believed. She could not explain it to Maude. It was part of something that had come with age, and could not really be shown.

Outside the window, Monsieur Dionne was raking leaves. He raked them away from the porch and into a big uneven pile in the centre of the lawn.

"Monsieur Dionne told me there are boats that take you to look for whales," Stella said.

"Whales?" Maude said. "Where?"

"On the river. The water's cold enough for them."

Maude thought about this. "Do you actually see them?"

"Sure," Stella said. "The boats take you right up close."

Maude turned back to her peanut butter. She licked the sides of the

little plastic container clean. Nothing, it seemed, could interest her.

After breakfast Stella somehow got Maude into the car, and drove out to Baie Sainte Catherine, where the whaling boats were moored. Stella chose the biggest and newest cruiser of the lot. It was called *Magdalene* and was white fiberglass, with an open deck on top, and an area below enclosed by sheets of plastic. Maude had on every piece of clothing she owned. She wore an oversized man's wool jacket on top of her black sweater, and Stella had bought her mittens the colour of chewed bubblegum from a craft shop near the inn. Before they boarded, Stella took a photograph of Maude standing on the quay. She had her sunglasses on, and she stuck both mittened hands up near her face and waved them like windshield wipers. The picture would be very funny. Maude's pale, serious face would look swamped by the smoky glasses and by her layers of dark wool. But then these two pink mittens would be waving incongruously in front of her.

The guide spoke in French. When the boat started, Maude and Stella were seated on a hard bench on deck. The wind was cool and steady, and Maude's hair blew out in back of her like the threads of shredded ribbons. The engines started and a voice announced over the loudspeaker that it would be very cold out on the water. There was a twenty minute ride to the first sighting ground, and people should conserve their heat and strength by staying below in the sheltered areas.

The boat picked up speed and Stella told Maude what the man had

said. The wind was fierce and ice cold against their faces. It stung the skin, and made them turn so that its force was on their backs.

"It's like winter," Stella said. "It's a different season out here."

They climbed into the interior of the boat and sat in a crowd of people. Maude's lips were blue and her glasses had fogged up. When she took them off Stella noticed that the rims of her eyes were red. "I'll get us coffee," she said, "and we can rent rain ponchos to cut the wind."

When she got back to their seats, the guide was beginning a lecture on whales. Stella and Maude slipped into the raincoats, which were bright red and flapped in the wind, and drank their hot drinks.

Whales were the biggest mammals in the world, the voice said, and although they breathed air, they could not survive on land. Stella translated this for Maude.

"He says the water here is five degrees centigrade. Right around the freezing mark. Whales have a layer of blubber up to a foot thick to protect them from the cold. Their body temperature's the same as ours, can you imagine?

"They have small eyes to withstand pressure when they dive, and they shed tears, he says, great oily tears to help them see down deep. They also give birth to a single calf and it nurses off the mother's milk."

"Nathan says whales are like humans," Maude said. "Only they don't bother anyone and they're perfectly in tune with their surroundings."

"He may have something there," Stella said, and rubbed Maude's back

to warm her.

At the first sighting ground they were unlucky. Stella and Maude climbed up to the deck and squinted into the glare off the water. The wind was damp and very strong. Both Maude and Stella clung to the handrail and tried to turn their backs to the wind. They drifted for two or three minutes and then the voice announced that the whales were in hiding. They would go on to the next site another fifteen or twenty minutes down the river.

Stella and Maude followed the crowds of people back into the cabin. It was starting to get really cold. "Winter," Maude yelled above the engine sounds. She was smiling. "I wish I was a beluga with a foot of fat!"

"This isn't the best cure for the flu," Stella yelled back, frowning.

Maude paused. "Wasn't flu."

"No, it wasn't," Stella said.

Maude looked at her. Her eyes were nervous but defiant. Neither she nor Stella spoke.

"It was a drug," Stella said after a long while.

Maude nodded. She looked suddenly like a small child, as if Stella's words had torn away some of the tough skin of adolescence.

"Christ, Maude," Stella said. "You're too good for that." She put her arm around the girl, and wondered if Maddy had ever told her about her own long, wasted years.

The boat was slowing. A man sitting in front of them pulled his

wife up and led her towards the deck. She walked slowly because she was cold and said she did not believe there would be whales at this site either.

The voice came over the loudspeaker and told them that if they looked out over the bow of the boat, they would see their first whale of the day. It was a finback, the voice said, and young. People rushed from their seats and began to stream up the stairs to the deck. Maude, who had not understood what was said, but knew what the commotion meant, jumped up and pulled on Stella's sleeve.

On deck the wind was still bitterly cold. They stood at the railing and Maude began to point. "Look!" she said. "Out there near the rear," and she was right. A dark back was sloping out of the water and blowing great clouds of steam straight up into the air.

The voice told them where to look, but Maude ignored it. It compared the boat to a clock. The bow was twelve o'clock, centre starboard was three, the stern was six, and port was nine. In this way the voice could tell people very quickly where the whales were. Maude did not need the voice. She was pointing and running back and forth across the deck like a child. "Stella! There!" she said. Three big black whales surfaced right next to the boat's side.

"Stella!" the girl kept crying and pointing so the old woman would see each of the beautiful smooth black backs. Stella's name was tossed and thrown by the wind, over people's heads as they bent to scan the

water. She kept turning and turning round the points of the clock, following the girl's darting figure, and her own name which jumped out from all sides.

The boat was in the middle of a great circling pod of whales. It seemed to Stella that the whales were watching them, come to see these strange, shivering humans hiding out in the little white barge. They surrounded the boat, rearing up out of the water, magnificent, sleekly black, sending huge waves slapping against the hull. Stella was transfixed. She watched them dive and billow up again at the surface, bursting with hot steam.

A big one swam to the stern, near the spot where she was standing, and at one point it seemed to roll on its side. She had no time to call Maude. All she could do was look. A round eye stared up at her through the waves. For several seconds she stared back, and then the whale must have submerged because all she could see were black shadows, stirred and distorted by waves.

Maude came over to the metal rail where Stella was standing. Her face was chapped and wet. She wiped the salt water away with her sleeve, and grinned. "Wild," she said and hugged Stella hard, as she had as a child. The thick rubber of their ponchos squeaked with the contact.

"They're beautiful! Beautiful!" Maude cried out as loudly as she could. The wind lifted her words above the heads of all the people and sent them spiralling, shrill and weightless, out over the water.

Xanadu

The boat's name was Xanadu. Her father, Mortimer, had owned in slow succession over the years Xanadu I, Xanadu II, and Xanadu III, three sleek white yachts which he kept moored in the weed-filled basin off the southern rim of Montreal. In the summers he and Jacqueline, her mother, took the boat to the Thousand Islands in Ontario, where the water was wide and much cleaner. This was where she was headed right now, in fact had just about arrived. She eased the car into second and turned down a narrow dirt track beside the marina sign post. The track crossed a field of wild grass and chicory, then plummeted down a tree-lined hill, and Jan saw water.

It was overcast and hot. Jan's legs, in the loose beige shorts stolen from Lenny's cupboard before she left, stuck to the vinyl seat. When she moved, thin streams of sweat, freed from the backs of her knees, dribbled down each calf. She had to peel herself out of the car.

Through all the years of her childhood, Mortimer had dragged his family out to sail. Actually, Jacqueline was quite compliant when it came to Mortimer's hobbies and did not need dragging. She liked the boat and her role as mate, and got busy organizing things. Martha, the youngest daughter, had her own trick: She crawled onto the nearest bunk and fell asleep. Sustained motion did it. Jan had travelled with her many times on planes, in trains and cars, and within minutes of boarding Martha was always heavy-lidded and nodding. Jan, the aloof, eldest child, had no tricks. From the age of ten or eleven she used to hole herself up in the

cramped and stuffy bow of the boat and read. This, of course, was a guaranteed ticket to nausea and foul humour as her parents never tired of reminding her. Even now, so many years later, the sight of the glassy lake and the rows of masts made her feel vaguely ill.

"Jan!"

She squinted into the glare, across a closely cropped lawn and a gravel quay. An old man wearing electric blue bermuda shorts and running shoes, his torso naked, was waving at her. Mortimer. For a second she hadn't recognized him. It was true, he was stouter now. The hair on his head had bleached completely white and he had let it grow long to sweep up over the balding areas. He was stiffer, slightly more wooden and hesitant than she remembered, but these, in the end, were small changes.

Jan had spent the last six years in a town in Nova Scotia. She had gone away to college there and dropped out in second year. Her boyfriend, Lenny, ran a café just off campus where she got work as a cook. As a token of love, Lenny changed the café's name to *Jan's Place*, and last winter they put out a book of her recipes, illustrated in pen and ink with peppers and avocados and dancing shivas in the curry section. The years had gone by fast. Faster than she ever would have predicted. Recently, on visits back to Montreal, it was as if everything had shifted very subtly, shifted by a matter of a degree, maybe two, but sufficiently so that things were still familiar, yet somehow not quite recognizable.

"No trouble with the car, or my directions?" Mortimer asked, picking up her bag. She had driven her mother's car from Montreal. She

needed it to return to the city to catch an early Sunday flight home. Lenny couldn't last much longer without her. He'd been running the place, single-handedly all week and he told her this morning on the phone that he was closing it for the weekend, until she got back.

"Didn't recognize you in the shorts," she said, smiling.

"These?" he said. "My trunks, you mean?" Mortimer always used the word *trunks* instead of bathing suit. It made Jan think of casks of treasure sunk deep beneath the sea. "They're old. Bought them last summer to show Jacqueline I still had some life yet." Mortimer's face changed as he said this, collapsed in on itself like a punctured inner tube. He took Jan's bag and they began walking in the direction of the boats. "The place is deserted," he said. "There's not a breath of wind. I've never seen it so still."

Water stretched out before them like an immense sheet of glass. Boats sat immobile in their slots, their masts poking up like needles. The sky was silver, so bright and uniform that Jan could not look at it straight on. There seemed no clear division between it and the watery horizon.

She followed him down, across the lawn, over a marshy spot with a makeshift plank bridge to the wharf. Mortimer's weight made the wharf creak and sway, and she slowed down, feeling old, familiar sensations of being on water. Mid-way down the dock a man about her age was on his knees, scrubbing the side of a boat. His skin was the rich colour of coffee and he half turned but did not say hello. Just beyond him on an older,

scuff-marked boat with the name *Rednose* stamped on her stern, two other men sat under a canopy playing cards. Mortimer waved and they stopped their game to squint at Jan.

They would have seen Martha already. Martha was dark, like Mortimer had been, short like him and stocky. Jan was tall and blonde and thin. She had Jacqueline's eyes, steel grey and widely spaced like a cat's. Both she and Martha looked young, far too young to be offspring of the old man in the crazy shorts. Mortimer had been well into his forties when Jan was conceived and Jan's earliest memories of her father were of someone old. When he took her out in her pram people thought he was a grandfather. Mortimer had always been the parent who needed attention, lots of care. Jan remembered a family story of herself at five announcing that when she grew up she would be a doctor, to look after him in his old age. That was before she left, before the failed courses, before Lenny and the café.

When she was still quite small, seven or so, she went through a phase where she would imagine his death. She remembered one night at a rented cottage in the Laurentians. It was summer and she was lying with all the covers kicked off on a cot beside Martha's bed. The room was small and the sisters had dragged the cot close so they could whisper. Jan was lying there thinking about Mortimer, and all of a sudden sadness came up out of nowhere, like waves do on the ocean. It was the image of Mortimer alone, hating the aloneness, maybe even afraid, and way beyond their reach that made her cry. She sobbed hard for a long time that night,

alarming Martha, but she did not know what it was, could not find words to explain. All she said was, "He could die, you know. Father could die."

In the boat's cockpit, Martha was lying perfectly still, her oval face turned upwards, as if for a kiss. Jan wondered if she remembered that night, the first time either of them had sensed the finality, the first time she had mourned. It was all fictional, of course. In the end no one had died and there was no reason to get worked up. Mortimer had lived on, fought and quarrelled with all his paternal vigour for two succeeding decades.

Everyone in their family lived for ages. Jacqueline's parents were still going strong, the aunts and uncles were all healthy. Mortimer's parents were dead, but they had died years ago, before Jan could talk or form memories, so they did not count. Jan and Martha grew up remarkably death-free. That was why this one still hadn't sunken in. It was so novel. It also came from the wrong corner. Mortimer was still alive and kicking; it was Jacqueline, strong, physical, health-conscious Jacqueline, just turned fifty-five, who had gone down. Nobody could quite believe it.

"Jan," Martha said, opening her eyes. "You made it. Mortimer was threatening to push me in and make me tow all by myself."

That was Martha. She always knew the things to say to make Mortimer laugh, to loosen up the mood. She was tanned a deep brown and her teeth flashed brilliantly. She had just returned from Spain where she was studying languages. Mortimer stood on the dock, smiling at the image Martha conjured up.

Mortimer was known as a tough-driving, shrewd bargainer. He worked in the fur business, and in Montreal and London, and even in New York, he was respected and a little feared. Only his daughters and Jacqueline (although it was pretty evident to Jan that Jacqueline had been seduced, at least partially, by the hard exterior) knew how vulnerable he was. Before she and Martha left Montreal, when Jacqueline was still alive, the three of them were constantly engaged in an intricate and very intimate dance, protecting, pleasing the sole man of their house.

It was their first free time together since the funeral. Many of Mortimer's friends had come around and taken them for meals, for coffee, or come to the house to chat. That had been exhausting, but good in a way, because it kept them all busy in the first days of shock.

Mortimer wept a lot in the beginning. He looked awful, like he wasn't sleeping, and in the middle of conversations his face went ashen and limp. The last two or three days had been better. He was speaking more, acting his old self. Neither Jan nor Martha had cried yet. Jan knew that if it had been Mortimer in the coffin she would have gone wild with grief, wept whole days without shame. Not because she loved him more, or loved Jacqueline any less, but because with Jacqueline death was different. Jacqueline had wide, veiny hands. Her nails were short, often with a thin line of dirt near the cuticle from all the gardening she did. Jacqueline would be fine in the earth. It wouldn't frighten her. Mortimer, on the other hand, would be inconsolable. He would hammer at the coffin until his fists were bloody and raw, scream until he was hoarse. Jan

went crazy imagining it.

Jan was not sure about this trip to the boat. She thought it would stir up all the grief again. But Mortimer said he wanted to get out of the city, it was time to get the wind in his sails again. Besides, the girls had never seen Xanadu III. It was a foot longer than the last one and even faster.

Jacqueline had died here. The way Mortimer told it, she had felt ill in the afternoon and complained of a headache after a particularly long and gusty day of sailing. In the middle of the night she sat bolt upright and shouted out obscenities. Mortimer did not tell this part immediately. He was shy to admit that his wife's last words were angry, dirty things, flung out in her bewilderment and pain. The autopsy showed a blood clot to the brain and a massive internal haemorrhage, as if a bomb had exploded inside the skull.

"Climb aboard," Mortimer said and swung himself up over the wire railing. He went forward to open the front hatch and make sure the anchor and all the lines were in order. Jan climbed into the cockpit and sat down beside her sister. They smiled at each other almost guiltily and then turned to stare at the glassy water.

"He's so up," Jan said.

"Yeah," said Martha, screwing her eyes in the glare. "He's still swinging."

"What'll happen when we go, Martha?"

A whistled refrain came from below. Jan cocked her head.

"Remember that?" She began to sing.

*What shall we do with the drunken sailor,
What shall we do with the drunken sailor,
What shall we do with the drunken sailor,
Ear-lie in the morning?*

Mortimer had taught it to them. It was an old drinking song, and Jan had always felt extremely sad about the sailor who was thrown into the scuppers, doused with sea water, and finally keel-hauled, all for taking a drink. When she was young and Mortimer got loud or sullen from too much scotch, the rhyme and its long list of punishments would come to her.

"I'm staying," Martha said.

Jan looked at her. She had offered first, as effortlessly as breathing. Martha the martyr, Jan thought, feeling mean and small even as she formed the words; always doing things right. Jan wasn't generous enough by half, she somehow lacked the instincts to tend to her father.

"What the hell. I can't live in Barcelona forever."

"But you're almost through," Jan protested, thinking of the degree. Martha would have a master's if she finished in Spain, like Mortimer, who had one from Boston. "You can't give that up. He wouldn't want it."

"I'd die to think he was alone," she said and raised her eyebrows because Mortimer was coming back towards the cockpit.

* * *

Mortimer took them a long way out, nearly an hour's motor away.

The boat sliced easily through the heat and the water, which was turquoise, almost like sea, except that there wasn't a wave around. Lower down the Saint Lawrence, near Montreal, the water was black and foul-smelling. Mortimer kept his boat there in the off season, and spent weekends floating on urban waste.

He turned into a small bay where half a dozen boats were bobbing lazily. They resembled big white birds feeding in a sheltered corner. Mortimer cut the engine. "Well, go on," he shouted at Jan, who was perched on the roof of the cabin, daydreaming and staring at a picnic party on a neighbouring yacht. His voice was shrill and hung nakedly in the hushed noon air. "We'll drift right into them if you don't get to it!"

Jan jumped towards the bow and began to fumble with the coil of rope for the anchor. She wasn't used to this. It had been Jacqueline's job. Jacqueline lowered anchors and bumpers, raised sails, took them down again, folded, stored. Year after year she packed lunches, unpacked them, found the plates and things to serve them on, gathered up the garbage, mopped up spills. Jacqueline alone knew how to flush the little chemical toilet hidden in one corner of the bow. She never shared her knowledge, never delegated.

She got the anchor down, and Mortimer smiled at her. She knew at base she was very much like her mother, sturdy, strong, unafraid. She did not mind the tilt of boats in a high wind, had capsized smaller boats and righted herself many times when she was young. She loved to dive off the stern and could swim kilometres without tiring. She didn't know what

Mortimer would do with the boat now that Jacqueline was gone. He could not manage it himself, that much was certain. His balance was bad. Each time he moved up along the decks Jan drew in her breath and said prayers.

They decided to swim before lunch. The wind was beginning to pick up but the air was heavy and very hot. Jan moved through the water as easily as the pale, sleek boats owned by her father. She loved the gliding feeling when she built up speed and a steady rhythm. Waves nudged her and rolled off her back into a streaming wake. She and Martha swam far out, side by side, towards the next yacht.

"We should go back," Martha yelled to her. "Swim with Mortimer."

They were with the wind and came up to the boat in no time. There was no sign of him. Jan's chest went tight as she scanned the water's surface. She heard Martha's voice, small, terrified, calling his name. "Oh," Martha gasped. "It's okay. He's here."

Jan passed behind the stern to the other side. The metal taste of fear filled her mouth. Mortimer was treading water almost underneath the hull. He was in trouble. He kept flailing one arm up, causing his face to submerge in the gentle roll of waves.

Then she saw the pink shape in his hand. A sponge.

She and Martha raced towards him. "Here, Mortimer, let us." A thin film had grown at the boat's waterline and he was trying to scrub it off. Mortimer jabbed at the stains a few times and then handed her the sponge. She took it without a break in her stroke, like a relay runner receiving a baton. The easiest way to do it was to drag the sponge along the boat's

side with her left hand while the right swung in broad, freestyle strokes. She did the entire circumference in under two minutes while Martha helped Mortimer back onto the boat to get lunch.

Lunch was an uncomplicated affair of potato salad, bought ready to eat at a Montreal deli, smoked meat and beer. Martha, who had been relegated to the position of cook, stuck her head out of the cabin at one point and announced that they had forgotten plates. Mortimer laughed and said they would have to make do, eat out of containers like he had done in his bachelor days. Jan licked at the peppercorns embedded in a bluish layer of fat on her meat, and thought of Jacqueline. She would have made carrot sticks, brought fruit. Jacqueline would have hated this meal.

Wind was teasing the river, goading its surface into small, lapping waves. Mortimer started the engine and set his daughters to work. He stood at a thin rimmed wheel shouting orders. Jan took the huge frontsail out of a bag. The sail had been meticulously pleated and stowed and it struck her that the last person to touch it was probably her mother. She partially unfurled it and attached the clips to the front stay. Martha, meanwhile, was fastening sheets and readying everything for hoisting. They tried to pull the anchor, but it seemed to have stuck on something. Jan had to tug and tug, and finally it came ripping through the blue-green in an explosion of mud and weed. Great clots of brown stuck to it and Martha dirtied her shirt, her shoe, and tracked it back to the cockpit. Jan was left to do the sails.

The engine droned and the deck beneath her feet began to vibrate.

She felt the boat swing around. Mortimer yelled that she could pull any time, and all at once she was surrounded by slapping sail, huge, shining, blown loudly by the wind. It was like standing between the legs of roaring giants or in the middle of a howling storm. Xanadu lurched to the right, her winches screaming as the sails were pulled tight. The boat began to heel and suddenly there was silence. Jan hung to the guard rail and listened to the trapped silence of wind embraced by sail.

They sailed long into the afternoon. Mortimer was so pleased to have wind, so happy to be out on his boat again, that he became daring and insisted on forging further and further on. The sun glared down from a strange whitish sky making Jan think of naked lightbulbs.

Towards four o'clock the sky above them suddenly seemed to slip. It was not a momentous change by any means, and Jan was not sure at first that anything had really happened. The clouds were still luminous and hazy, but there was something threatening in the way they now hung over the water. Mortimer continued their course. He did not say a thing, but his eyes had narrowed and he watched with a new concentration. Then, without explanation, he told Jan to lower the sails.

Their silence was masked by engine sounds. Mortimer had turned the boat around and was racing dark, and heavy clouds that gathered behind them. Jan sat with her feet braced against the opposite seat, watching a spider. It was trying to climb a slippery, sheer white surface and kept tumbling back to its starting point. She did not want to kill it. Spiders got rid of flies, and besides, Jacqueline had once told her that killing one

meant rain. Slowly, without knowing how long she had been listening to it, Jan became aware that the motor was sounding different. Mortimer shifted into high gear and it strained loudly, but they were barely moving. He began fiddling with the gear lever, pushing it into reverse, then forward again, but still the boat did not budge. "Damn," he said, and cut the engine. Drops of water had begun to fall, heavy drops, but intermittently. The antenna at the top of the mast buzzed like an angry insect.

Martha and Jan exchanged looks. Jan felt suddenly tired out. Her stomach was queasy from the heavy lunch and the constant rocking of the boat. She had no more patience for water and began to want urgently to get back to land.

Mortimer removed his shoes. "Propellor's jammed," he said, and before they really understood, he let down the ladder and was in the water.

She and Martha hung over the side, watching. Martha was ripping at the buttons of her shirt. "He shouldn't," she began. Waves knocked Mortimer close to the hull. He clung to the ladder, which shifted with the rocking of the boat, scraping against its side. Jan could not speak. She hated seeing him helpless. She should be down there, not him. What if he drowned? Lightning might strike. Mortimer gulped at the air and disappeared beneath the roiling blackish waters.

The rain grew steadier, soundlessly marking the water in an intricate pattern of welts. The boat rocked and drifted closer in towards

the shoreline. Seconds went by and Mortimer did not reappear. "We shouldn't have let him," Martha said. She was in her shorts and bathing suit top and began to cry. Jan watched her. It was all happening so fast and yet so unutterably slowly. Her brain was no help to her. She kept imagining she saw his face, ghostly, bloated, resurfacing on the water. She made silent pacts, wishing half-coherently. She would move home. She would never, ever fight with him again. She would go back to school, leave the café, leave Lenny, anything if only he would come up safe. If only he were all right.

There was a splash and Mortimer emerged, fists full of long green weed. Waves slapped the side of the boat and rebounded, tossing him away. Jan could not move. She wanted to call out to him, to scream, but her voice failed her, she could not get the sounds out. Martha was waving, sobbing to him, but the wind was too strong and Mortimer did not hear her. He dove again, disappearing below the dark, tossing surface.

A spot of blue appeared below the waves, shimmering and glowing with muted light. Mortimer's shorts, Jan realized. They were barely recognizable, transformed by the water into something eerily beautiful. He emerged just as she was thinking this, spluttering, shaking his head, waving a fresh handful of weed. He had dislodged great chunks of it. Long, hairlike strands were streaming out behind the boat only to be sucked down and to disappear into the swirling eddies. Mortimer climbed back on deck, his torso draped in green, hair plastered across his forehead and cheek.

Martha handed him a towel. She and Jan were suddenly like children, reverent, closely watching. They started the motor and the boat moved forward as if a giant hand had reached down and pushed. "You did it," Martha cried out, laughing, and hugged him hard.

The rain was coming faster and behind them, a stick of lightning fell through the sky. Mortimer's hair stood upright from the static, making him look dishevelled, odd, like a shipwrecked hero. Jan loved him at that instant, and in later years would return to it again and again, Mortimer staring out at the horizon, rain falling all about him, a proud old man in a pair of unexpected, electric blue shorts, guiding them back to shore.