INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI®

Bell & Howell Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

METEORS

Ronald Schafrick

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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

September, 1997

ABSTRACT

Meteors

Ronald Schafrick

Meteors is a collection of five short stories, each of which illustrates a concern for those who are inarticulate and for that which goes unspoken in everyday speech, for the failure, in other words, of language to adequately communicate. The characters presented here either lack the words they need or are constrained from saying them; as a result, they live both in silence and powerlessness. The stories themselves, one might suggest, search for articulation, not only at the level of narrative, but also at the level of the text.

Now I no longer believe that people's secrets are defined and communicable, or their feelings full-blown and easy to recognize. I don't believe so.

Alice Munro
"The Stone in the Field"

CONTENTS

We Should Dance

Along both sides of the Welland Canal were long grassy hills on which scarcely any trees grew and no houses stood. Telephone poles ran up and down the far shore and their wires swooped from pole to pole. It was very hot and the air was still. I was with my friend Nick and we were lying on an old wooden dock, face to face. Nick was my best friend, though I liked him much more than that.

"Ship's coming," I said.

Between the hills, in the distance, I saw what might have been a tower, but the heat and the haze made it hard to tell.

"From which way?" Nick asked. He was lying on his stomach, reading Isherwood.

I pointed my chin in the direction of Lake Erie. "From the south," I said.

Nick was someone I'd met that summer, house painting. Neither one of us had to go in to work that day so we decided to lie out on the dock, go swimming, do nothing. I liked being with Nick. We got along easily and he made me laugh. He had a slim, lithe body, and all summer kept a good tan because he never wore a shirt when we painted outside. I always wore one because I felt shy around him. Sometimes, when we

would be putting down a fresh coat, I'd watch him when he didn't know it and sometimes when he did. Sometimes he painted little white circles or stars on his chest and once in a while he'd let me paint some on his back as well.

He turned and looked out onto the water. "You're right," he said.

"Of course I'm right," I said. "I'm always right."

He tapped my nose with the cover and smiled. He was wearing dark sunglasses that hid his eyes.

"How's the book?"

"It's all right," he said. "I'm where Sally asked him to write that article for her and she says that it's no good."

"Just wait. It gets better."

He bent the corner of the page and closed the book and laid it down on the wood. He removed his sunglasses and laid them down as well and yawned like a cat, squeezing his eyes tight and stretching his legs and arms. I could see the fillings in his teeth. Then he laid his head on his forearm and closed his eyes. I put the sunglasses on my own face and studied the beads of wet that ran above his lip and across his brow.

Then: "Mike?" he said.

"Yeah?"

"Are there any more nectarines left? I'd really like a nectarine if you don't mind."

I sat up and reached over to the plastic bag that we had filled with fruit and cans of Coke and from it took out two nectarines that were warm and wet and had become soft in the sun. I bit into one and in this way held it between my teeth and lay back down to face him. The

other I held to his lips, brushing them slightly. He smiled, then he opened his eyes and bit into it and took it from me.

"Hey," he said. "You're wearing my sunglasses."

"What do you think?"

"I like it," he said, and he winked at me. "They suit you."

We ate our nectarines, letting the juice run down our arms and drip onto the wood. The water gurgled beneath us. On the other side of the canal I watched a truck motor down the service road, raising a long cloud of dust behind it. Aside from the driver in the truck, there was no one else about.

"You know what we should do?" I said, but went no further than that.

When Nick finished the nectarine he tossed the stone into the water. He said, "I like it here. I like being here."

I said, "I like it here too."

I laid my head on my forearms and looked at Nick again, at the dark hair that was windblown and rough, and the freckles that the sun had brought out and which ran across his nose and cheekbones. I tried to imagine what he must have looked like when he was small, and I saw him exactly.

★

We saw the dog first, running down the grassy slope beside us. Then came the woman, slowly walking after it. The dog was blond and had black eyes and it ran to the end of the dock where we lay, and sniffed us. Its paws made a ticking sound on the wood.

"Hey boy," Nick said, rubbing the dog behind the ears.

"Buck," the woman called. She was carrying a fold-out lawn chair and a small canvas bag. She called the dog again: "Buck." This woman wore a long purple T-shirt with the number 80 printed across the front in bold white lettering. The length of the shirt made her look as if she wore nothing underneath. "Hope you like animals," she said, and we said that we did.

On the shore side of the dock the woman put down her bag and opened the lawn chair and sat down. I couldn't tell how old she was. She had graying blond hair tied back in a ponytail. She could have been twenty-five or she could have been forty-five. I wouldn't have been surprised either way.

"Buck, leave them alone," she said, and she pulled out a small sponge ball from her bag. She threw the ball into the water and the dog leapt after it. Water splashed onto the dock and it felt like cold pennies dropping onto our backs.

"Ships's coming," she said and we looked and saw how it had grown bigger. I could make out the red hull, a white tower, and three or four orange cranes. It was still about a mile or two away. It looked like something massive and terrible.

"You don't want to go swimming when a ship's passing by," she said.

"That's what we plan on doing," I said.

"That's dangerous. What do you boys want to do a thing like that for?"

"Because it's fun," Nick said. "You get pulled around all over the place."

"You get pulled into the propeller, that's where you get pulled."

"We don't go out too far."

"You don't have to for that to happen."

"We've done it before."

"Well don't make me have to rescue you. I don't want to be accused of pushing anybody."

The dog paddled to the shore with the ball in his mouth. When he got out of the water he dropped it, shook his coat, and sat under a willow. His pink tongue lolled; he breathed heavily.

"I once knew a man who got killed doing that," the woman said. "But he was crazy, that one. I wasn't altogether surprised when I heard about it."

She leaned forward a little and pulled out a tube of lotion from her bag and dabbed some of it onto her nose and knees and forearms. Then she sealed the tube, leaned back again and closed her eyes.

I took Nick's sunglasses off and laid down my head, closing my eyes as well. I could hear an airplane passing overhead. I think I must have drifted off for a minute or two.

Then the woman said, "You boys want a beer?"

I opened my eyes and looked at Nick.

"Sure," he said. "Mike?"

"Sure."

Nick rose and walked over to where the woman sat, and I watched how his body moved and how the light fell on his shoulders and back.

He said, "You can sit over by us if you want."

★

"You know what I heard this morning?" she said. She had left her chair where it was and sat on a towel beside us. Her skin was very dark and

it made her look older than what she probably was. We were drinking Blue out of cans.

"No, what?"

"What did you hear?"

"Did you hear about the girl who's lost?" she said. "She's lost in a forest, way up north. This little girl. Five or six, maybe. She's been lost for a few days now. So they've hired a hot-air balloon to try to find her. And off the sides of the basket — or whatever you call it — they've attached these loudspeakers. And all night and all day this balloon flies over the trees and over the rivers, playing the recorded voices of the little girl's mother and sister. 'Don't worry, honey,' the tape keeps saying. 'Everything's gonna be all right. Everything's gonna be all right, honey. We'll find you soon. Don't worry.'" She cleared her throat and took a swig of her beer. "Isn't that something?" she said. "Isn't it?"

"Have they found her yet?" Nick said.

"No. I don't know. I heard that this morning on the radio." A lock of hair had fallen from her elastic and lay alongside her ear. She brushed it back. "They probably won't, either. They never do when it's a little kid like that."

"I was lost once," Nick said. "When I was little."

I had never heard this story before. Until then, I believed I knew all there was to know about Nick. In some sense it felt like a small betrayal, though of course I knew it wasn't anything like that. The real betrayal wouldn't happen for several more years, though neither of us knew it then.

"I was two or three," he said, "and my father says that I got lost in this huge corn field. My father wanted to buy a lot of corn off this man to sell at the market, and he had taken me with him. He says that I somehow disappeared into the field and that they couldn't find me for a couple of hours. He says he was never so worried about me as he was then."

He stopped talking and took a drink from his beer.

"So you're father's a farmer?" she asked.

"Fruits and vegetables mostly."

She smiled. "I like farms," she said. "I've always wanted to grow up on a farm."

"I like it," he said.

A couple of seagulls had started to gather and squabbled over something they found at the top of the hill and from where the woman and the dog had come.

"How old are you?" she asked. "How old are you boys?"

"Nineteen," I said.

"Twenty," Nick said.

"Nineteen and twenty," she repeated, nodding her head slowly. She seemed to think it over for a minute. Then she looked at me and said, "How about you? What do your folks do?"

"They run a Ford dealership," I said.

She nodded, then took a swig of her beer.

"You?" I said. "What do you do?"

"I'm looking right now."

★

"You boys know a thing or two about love?" she asked. She reached into her bag and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and held it open. I shook my head, Nick accepted. We were on our second round.

"Yeah," Nick said, drawing on the flame she held out to him. "I know a few things."

"That's not what I meant," she said. She leaned forward a little, resting her elbows on her knees. "I *meant* have either of you boys ever *been* in love?"

"Yeah," Nick said. "I've been in love. A couple of times."

She took a minute and looked him over. "Were they pretty?" she said.

"They were pretty," he said.

"Do you still love them?" she said.

"Not any more," he said.

"No, neither do I," she said. "The men I loved, that is." She dragged on her cigarette and looked out onto the water. "But I once married a man I thought I loved. No, that's not right. I once married a man I did love. But I don't love him any more. He's left now. He said, 'Honey, I don't want this any more. I don't think I love you any more.' Then he left. He left a long time ago. It's still called love when you loved someone once and then no more, isn't it?"

She tucked the hair behind her ear again. She said, "All things come and go. You'll have to learn that."

★

She flipped the butt into the water and slapped her thigh and called the dog over to her side. "Isn't that right, Buck?" she said, rubbing the

dog's side and scratching him behind the ears. "Isn't that right, baby?"

I looked out onto the canal. The ship had grown in size, yet seemed perfectly still.

"Do you know where the ball is?" the woman said.

"The ball?" I said.

"Yeah, the ball I had for the dog."

"I think I saw him drop it over by the tree," Nick said.

"Would you mind getting it for me, sweetie? I don't want to forget about it when I leave."

★

We sat and looked at each other awkwardly and for a long time didn't say anything. I shot back the last of my beer and crushed the can. Nick was roaming in the grass, brushing aside the tall yellow stalks with his bare feet. I thought about Nick: how we'd grill hamburgers that night on the barbecue at my parents' place, then later we'd hop in his car and maybe catch a flick at the Towne, or maybe we would go for a long drive instead, down to Port Colborne and Nickel Beach and just talk a little. I thought about how we had never touched each other and probably never would. I pictured him dropping me off at home at the end of the night and seeing him again the next day at work. I felt all of this ebbing into the past before it had even occurred.

"You know what's the worst thing?" the woman said.

I turned to look at her. She was looking off into the distance, out across the water and in the direction of the ship, her hand shading her eyes.

"Regret," she said. "Regret and lost opportunity, though I suppose that's the same thing, isn't it?"

"I guess so," I said. I wasn't too sure what she was talking about.

"It's an awful thing to regret," she said. "To regret something you did or didn't do. Too often, at least for me, it's something I didn't do, didn't say. Know what I mean?"

"I think so." I tried thinking about what I had regretted and couldn't come up with anything really meaningful. I knew I should have said something more, but I couldn't think of what.

Then the woman gave me a strange look. It might have been mean or it might not have been. "I can tell you don't go out much with girls," she said. "You're one of those shy boys, aren't you?"

I felt the colour in my face.

"That's okay," she said. "My husband was a shy man as well. He was a lot like you."

I turned away. A jet I couldn't see was slowly tracing a thin white line overhead.

"Found it!" Nick shouted. He was standing in the grass, holding the chewed-up ball for us to see.

"But you can't live your life regretting," she said.

I turned to look at her. "But I don't regret anything," I said.

"I didn't say you did. I just thought I'd say it. I dunno, I guess my mind was just wandering."

For a while we sat and kept quiet. I heard a splash in the canal. I turned and saw a growing ring of ripples.

"I really like it here," she said. She put her hand on my knee and held it there for a moment. She whispered, "I like being here with you boys."

★

When Nick came back he gave her the ball and sat back down on the wood. We made a tight circle, our knees touched.

"Look at what I found," he said, and he opened his hand. A crumpled snake's skin sat in his palm. "Go ahead, touch it."

The three of us touched the dead skin and it felt like dried leaves or petals. It felt like nothing at all. I looked at her fingernails, the flecks of red polish. I looked at his and saw the places where the paint had not come off, the bitten-down nails. Like my own hands. Then he closed his hand again and hung it over the side of the dock and opened it. We watched the skin appear on the other side and float down the canal.

★

"We've brought music," I said, suddenly remembering. "Do you want to hear some music?"

"Sure," she said. "Play me what you got. I like all kinds."

I leaned over to where the radio was and popped in a tape and pressed a button. The music was slow and quiet, then a man began to sing in a low and steady voice. I fixed the volume.

"This is nice," she said. "I've never heard it before."

"It's new," Nick said.

The three of us sat like that for a while, not saying anything. Just listening. I looked at her and I looked at Nick and I watched her

watching him, seeking out his eyes. There was something in their faces that reminded me of black and white photos from years ago.

"You know what we should do?" she said. "We should dance."

But none of us got up or did anything. I looked out onto the canal and watched the ship. I began to sing softly to myself. Years from now, I thought, when we will no longer know each other, each of us will think of this time and this place whenever we'll hear this song being played.

★

The water was rising. It lapped the dock and threatened to spill over, though I knew it wouldn't. The ship was quite near. I could hear the soft rumble of its engines and I could see a tiny strand of black cloud from the smokestack. I watched how the ship cut the water and how high the water curved at the bow. The ship was immense. Men with dark arms rested their elbows against the railings. They stood in groups of twos and threes. A few of the men waved. I smiled and waved back. I turned to Nick. "Ready?"

"Ready."

"Wanna come?"

"Oh no," she said. "You boys go ahead. Don't go out too far."

★

At first the water was frigid and dark and my entire body ached with cold. When I rose to the surface, I took a deep breath and looked for the dock. When I found it I saw the woman standing on its edge, hugging her arms, and the dog next to her, wagging his tail and barking at the passing vessel. I waved but she didn't see me. She was already elsewhere.

The water looked flat and smooth and it shimmered in the sun, but at my feet I could feel its gentle tug. Tiny whirlpools swirled around me. I turned onto my back and kicked my feet. The ship moved faster than I would have guessed. When it had gone past I saw the words THE ASSINIBOINE written across the stern and beneath that, THUNDER BAY, ONT.

The waves came. I looked for Nick and found him not far away, riding the current to come closer. When he came up to me he touched my shoulder and pushed the hair out of his eyes. He smiled. "I'm glad we came here," he said.

I said, "Me too."

We rode the waves to their crests and down in between, shouting and laughing as loud as we could, at times losing sight of each other. When I saw him again I took his hand under the water. He looked at me, surprised, then smiled in return.

Ursula

When she sat down on the couch, Ursula felt what she believed was a slight tremor in her heart. She was short of breath, and beads of perspiration had broken out across her forehead. Her hands too, she noticed, had suddenly turned cold and damp. It may have been the third or fourth time this had happened to her, yet she had never mentioned it to anyone. She waited for the spell to pass, and when it did not, she took a small breath and without being completely aware of it broke into the middle of the conversation by asking for a glass of ginger ale. The bubbles, she believed, would do her some good.

They had been talking about Walter, one of Ingrid's sons, who had recently announced that, after two years, he and his girlfriend had decided to get engaged. Alfred, who was both Ingrid's and Ursula's brother, jokingly said that it was about time those two smartened up, and Irene, his Canadian-born wife, took Ingrid's hand and simply said that she must be very happy. Alfred and Irene had celebrated their own daughter's marriage two months earlier, in August, and the combination of joy and sadness that that occasion brought was still very much with them. Ingrid and Ursula spoke on the telephone nearly every day, and so the engagement was not news to Ursula.

The moment she asked for the ginger ale Ursula understood that she had committed an error. There was an awkward moment of silence, which was broken only when Alfred reminded her that the coffee was on its way.

"Oh no, Alfred, really. I had two cups this morning," she said, which was not true. "I couldn't have another. I'd be up all night." In some small way she felt that she had disappointed her brother. She greatly admired Alfred and would not have wanted him to think that of her. It was his birthday today, his fifty-third, and she did not wish to spoil it.

Irene stood up and said that she would get the ginger ale. "I think the coffee should be ready by now," she added, straightening out her skirt, and she stepped into the kitchen.

Ordinarily the three siblings did not exchange gifts with each other, no matter the occasion. They never had in their youth (they were too poor when they were still in Germany after the war), and once they immigrated to Canada, they considered themselves too old for that sort of thing. They also considered it unnecessary. As far as each other's children were concerned, the question of gifts was another matter. On Christmases and birthdays, toys and dolls were handed out when the children were small; at another age they received cards with twenty dollar bills enclosed. Presently, they were entering yet another period, one in which the gifts they received would be on the occasion of their weddings and showers. Altogether, there were six children to think of: Ingrid's three, Irene and Alfred's two, and Ursula's one. With the exception of Ursula's son, who was well into his thirties, the rest were in their twenties.

To celebrate Alfred's birthday, Ingrid and Ursula were invited for coffee and cake, the usual custom. It was a Sunday, the second in October, and the weather was glorious. On her way into Welland, Ursula had passed a nursery on Rice Road and decided to pull over (spontaneity was rare with her) and after a quick look around, purchased a house plant — a potted fern — for her brother. When Alfred later opened the door to his sister he looked pleasantly surprised by the plant, if not a little amused, and passed it on to his wife, who seemed to look it over as some kind of oddity or curiosity. She took it out to the dining room and made a spot for it on the buffet. An odd, tucked-away sort of place, Ursula thought.

"I thought she was going to plant it in the garden," Ingrid had whispered to her sister in German once Ursula settled herself next to her on the couch. Ursula looked to see if Alfred had heard, but he gave no sign. He was aware of the tension that existed between the three women but Ursula suspected that he had given up paying it any attention. It was then that Ursula started to feel the tremor in her chest.

"Are you sure you wouldn't want a cup of coffee?" asked Irene, returning to the living room with a tray on which were stacked cups and saucers, a pot of coffee, and an empty glass next to a perspiring can of Canada Dry. She set the tray down on the coffee table. Ursula said that she was sure, though she no longer felt short of breath, and accepted the glass her sister-in-law handed to her. Irene then proposed bringing out the cake and no one disagreed. Irene was the only one among them who did not speak a word of German — a situation Ingrid sometimes took advantage of — and which partly led to the great ebb and flow in the relationship between the three women.

Long ago, Ingrid's husband would have been here, so would Ursula's. That would have been at a time when all the cousins ran around outside or downstairs, chasing a dog or a cat, and would eat their cake at the breakfast table, where a little mess was permitted on special occasions. But Ingrid's husband had died of a stroke several years ago and Ursula's had gradually removed himself from nearly all human company — and might as well be dead; at least so ran the thought in Ursula's mind from time to time. Over the years of their marriage Gerhardt had become increasingly miserable and difficult to get along with, and with the exception of his wife, he saw no one, spoke only to bicker, went nowhere, and spent his solitary days either watching television in the winter or working in the garden in the summer — the only season he could be tolerable. (He had once owned a furniture store in town, but sold it several years ago when he retired.) When Karen, Alfred's daughter — Gerhardt's niece and godchild — married two months ago he refused to go. He didn't plan on going to Walter's or anyone else's wedding, either. He hated everyone. Alfred, he said, thought himself a big shot, Irene was always bragging, and Ingrid simply got on his nerves. "Funny little man," was something Ursula had overheard someone say at Karen's reception. In several of their private conversations, Alfred had sometimes asked why she simply didn't leave him, and at the time she had balked at the suggestion: she would never think of doing such a thing. Leaving a husband, she reasoned, was what *other* women did, younger and stronger women especially, women on television. And although, at the time, she would have said that it was something that she also didn't know how to go about doing — she feared an even greater solitude without the man she no longer loved — leaving

had grown into a vague possibility that slowly began to occupy the foreground of her thoughts.

"Should I bring them out?" Irene asked when they were part-way through the carrot cake. She was talking about Karen and Michael's wedding photos. Ursula had not been listening.

"Let us first finish eating," said Alfred. "Then we'll look at pictures."

He turned to Ursula and shook his head slightly, as if to say "Women" or "Wives," though of course she was both of these things. Ursula had a special bond with her brother that was not present between him and Ingrid, or even between her and Ingrid. She was able to confide most things to him: her troubles with Gerhardt in particular, her loneliness, for another. Sometimes she needed to come to him for a loan, which he easily lent her (he owned a gas station and a garage; his family wasn't poor) and which no one — not even Irene, Gerhardt, or Ingrid — ever found out about. Yet there were certain matters, certain doubts she had that she couldn't talk about with anyone, not even with Alfred, partly because she lacked the words, partly because she prevented herself from searching them out. Ingrid, on the other hand, was unapproachable in more personal issues. Although she considered herself close to her sister, Ingrid was as tight with her emotions as she was with most things in her life: calories and money especially. She was fifty-five, yet kept the figure of a woman half her age — a preoccupation that made no sense to Ursula. For whose benefit was this display, she sometimes wondered, though she already knew the answer. Ursula herself was no longer slim, neither was Irene — never had been in

fact — and Ingrid's obsession was another element of the rivalry that existed among the three women.

They talked about Karen and her brother Bill. Neither one could make it today. Karen was busy with the new house in Fonthill and Bill didn't feel like driving down from Toronto. He had called that morning to wish his father a happy birthday. Most of the children had settled close to home, between Welland and Toronto: an arm's length from each other. Only Ursula's son had gone as far as living on the West Coast: another planet as far as Ursula was concerned.

Alfred said that after Walter, Bill would probably be the next to marry: he had been living with his girlfriend for just over a year now; there was simply the matter of making it official. It wouldn't be long, he added, before there would be little Bills and Walters and Karens running around. Ursula didn't offer any such information about her own son because there wasn't any, and hardly anyone ever asked anymore. She scarcely heard from him either, and the last she did hear — half a year ago now? maybe more? — he called to say that he was working in a remote hotel in some mountainous region somewhere, not to worry. For the others, he became an avoided subject.

Ingrid then said that she couldn't eat another mouthful and laid a half-finished plate on the coffee table. Ursula couldn't finish her cake either: she was more intent on the soothing qualities of her ginger ale; and when everyone else had set their plates on the table and the cups of coffee had been topped up, Irene then asked her husband if it was *now* all right if she showed the pictures. "Okay, okay," Alfred said, but she was already at the buffet where she removed a thick photo album from a drawer. Irene, returning, made a place for herself between

the two sisters on the couch, and Alfred pulled his chair around to Ursula's side so that he could see as well, though he still had to twist his head somewhat.

"Aren't they lovely?" she said, pulling back the leather-bound cover, and there they were: Karen and Michael; she in flowing, billowing white, he in black tails and aquamarine bow tie — the two of them in front of a background that was white and heavenly. Ursula, in spite of seeing only faults in teeth and skin, agreed. Then came several shots (nearly all alike) of the bride sitting on a divan and the groom standing behind her, a hand on her shoulder. In another set of pictures he is kneeling before her, as though proposing, and she, ostensibly, accepting. The next shot was of the bride, alone and forlorn, in a garden in Queenston Heights (where the reception was held) and one of the groom, also alone, in the same garden, apparently searching for his bride. There were the shots of the bride with her bridesmaids (the latter all in shiny peach) and ones of the groom with his ushers (tall and short, wide and thin). There was a shot of bride and groom with the American Falls and its cloud of mist behind them; another of the Horseshoe Falls and its cloud of mist behind them. There were the shots of him with his family — a strangely pale, unhealthy-looking folk, ran Ursula's thoughts; the marriage will never last — and Karen with hers. It was this last picture that Ursula gazed at longest. There she was — Ursula — next to her glowing and slender sister, looking somewhat confused and uncertain of herself. Did she always bear that expression? In grey and mauve, she fit the description of a widow better than her sister, who wore bright yellow on that hot August Saturday. Death had liberated Ingrid, it seemed to Ursula, though she had never seemed

particularly unhappy while her husband was still alive. Yes, she had mourned his loss, and, yes, she had had a good life with him, but what seemed strange now was that Ingrid had lost any fear of being alone, in spite of the knowledge that her children were forging families of their own and would slowly leave her behind, her own son being the next in line. *The two little widows,* Ursula thought, and she imagined those words were already on the minds, if not the lips, of others. She caught a glimpse into the future and foresaw the day, once the last of Ingrid's children had married, when she would live with her sister in her 1960s bungalow on Eastdale Crescent. Then they truly would be widows, whether Ursula's husband had passed on or not. She felt the clarity of this vision with nervousness and trepidation and hope. Just as Irene was turning the page, Ursula caught a glimpse of Alfred and Irene, each with an arm around their daughter and appearing as though they couldn't have been any happier.

"Just wait," Irene was saying, touching Ingrid's arm. "Just wait until Walter and Carol get married." So much work, she seemed to be saying, so much work and money (they had completely financed their daughter's wedding) yet worth every bit of it. Of the three women, Irene was the last to have children, and for several years after she and Alfred got married there had been some doubt whether in fact they could. But now, she was the first to see one of her own children marry, the first well on the way to becoming a grandmother. There was no hiding her pride.

Ingrid complimented Irene on Karen's choice of wedding dress, and Irene asked if Carol had chosen hers, and if she and Walter had settled on the location of the reception. Yes and no were the respective

answers. The picture show paused a moment while Ingrid asked a question about invitations. Again, Irene laid a hand on Ingrid's arm and went into a long anecdote detailing her experience with invitations. Ursula looked up from a picture of Karen, stepping out of a white stretch limousine, to Alfred and smiled. *Like little girls,* she was thinking and wished that he could hear. *Like young brides themselves.*

"Remember this?" Irene asked, pointing at the next picture, one of Karen and Michael, hand on hand, together cutting the cake. She looked back at Ursula, for she had failed to respond.

"Yes, yes, I remember," said Ursula, suddenly wondering if she had shown a lack of enthusiasm for the photos. Irene turned to her and smiled. *Poor Ursula,* her smile said. *You will never know, will you?*

★

"Thank you, Alfred, Irene," said Ursula. She kissed her brother, then her sister-in-law. "It was lovely." Ursula was standing at the door, next to her sister. She was glad to be going: it was late in the afternoon and she was tired and wished to lie down for a little while, though she did not exactly look forward to going home. "And happy birthday, Alfred."

Alfred blinked. "I almost forgot," he said, and they all laughed a little. He thanked Ursula for the plant, and hearing him mention it she suddenly felt embarrassed, for she knew it was the wrong kind of gift to have given a man. As a joke, Alfred then said that he would see them again next year, though both he and Ursula knew that she would see him within the week when she would drop by the station to tank up for gas and to chat with him for a while. Ingrid, on the other hand, he

probably wouldn't see until Christmas, when they would all gather like this again.

Arm in arm, the two sisters led each other down the driveway and along the sidewalk to where they had parked their cars in the street — Ursula holding on a little tightly for she felt the tremor erupting in her heart again. Ingrid was saying how nice Irene had looked today and that she liked the colour of her hair; she would have to try something like that herself. Ursula nodded, though she hadn't noticed. When they reached the cars, one parked behind the other, Ingrid turned to her sister. "Tell me the truth," she said. "You're not jealous, are you?"

It was starting to get dark out and the wind had picked up a bit. A row of streetlights slowly flickered on. "Of course not," said Ursula, smiling reassuringly. "I'm happy for you." She gazed at her sister, searching for the words, then in German said, "You have no plans to sell the house, do you?"

For a moment Ingrid seemed confused, then, all at once, appeared to understand. "No," she said, smiling slightly. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason," said Ursula. "Just wondering."

They gave each other a peck on the cheek and each got into her car. Ursula pretended to busy herself behind the wheel then waved when her sister twice tooted her horn and drove around her. At the stop sign Ingrid signaled, turned the corner then disappeared. The wave of panic Ursula felt a moment ago was slowly leaving her. She rolled down the window and sat for a few minutes, breathing. She watched a couple of kids playing street hockey. No, she wasn't jealous. She might have been once, but not any longer. It was something else that she felt, and here again she was at a loss for words for what it really was, what it

really meant. Though still short of breath, she started the car and slowly pulled into the street. Tomorrow, she promised herself as she turned the corner, she would go to the doctor. Yes, she would make an appointment tomorrow.

Extraterrestrials

Dad and I were in the living room watching TV when it started.

Actually, I was lying on the floor under the coffee table going through an old stack of *MAD* magazines while Dad was snoozing in his La-Z-Boy. The TV only happened to be tuned in to some nature show on public television, something about the "Creatures of the Desert" — reptiles and insects mostly, strange and ugly creatures left over from another era. Mom and Dad tune in to that crap every night after the news and leave it there. Not that they *really* watch it, they just fall asleep to it. At least Mom has the common sense to go to bed once she starts drifting off, which is usually around eight, eight-thirty, the time she puts my retarded brother to bed. But Dad'll snore in front of the TV at least until the eleven o'clock news comes on, if not straight into the middle of the night — his bifocals sitting on the end of his nose the whole time. And if you try getting up to change the channel, he'll wake up right away and tell you he was watching that and to put it back to where it was. That night I wanted to watch *Blue Lagoon.* I'd seen in the *TV Guide* that it was going to be on the "Late Night Movie," on one of the American channels out of Buffalo. I was dying to see it. All I knew about it was that it was about a boy and girl stranded on a

deserted tropical island and that they were naked most of the time. One of my aunts had gone to see it and afterwards told Mom that she didn't know what all the fuss was about. But when I'd asked Mom if she'd take me to go see it, she said no, I was too young for that sort of thing. And it didn't look like there'd be a chance in hell I was going to see it then either — not with Dad in the living room, snoring or not.

Dad's a farmer — at least that's what he used to be, more or less. Now, he mostly just putters around. He used to raise pigs, and in the spring and summer he'd grow things: strawberries, say, or potatoes, onions, peppers, squash. He'd try things out. Some things worked, lots didn't. Either the potatoes got the blight, or the peppers didn't get enough rain. Everything got choked by the weeds. There was always something. But since the stroke, Dad's had to take it easy. He's had to quit the pigs and most of what he was growing and go on social assistance. He's let the fields get taken over. Now, just to keep himself busy, he putters around all day. Some farmer friend of his must have told him that rabbits were easy money, so he started fooling with rabbits. Rabbits and sometimes ducks, depending on the season. Rabbits are easy to keep and good for cash. So now he spends his days raising rabbits, feeding and watering them, petting them, and building special rabbit coops from whatever old tin and fencing and wood he can find from the scrap pile behind the barn. He says he's got enough junk out there to put together a greenhouse. That's going to be his next project — or so he says. Sometimes, when I have to go out there to call him in to dinner, I'll find him in one of those rabbit coops, sitting cross-legged in the straw, playing and talking to them like he was five years old, like he was retarded.

It must have been getting late, close to eleven or so, when I heard Mom up and wandering around. She often does this sort of thing: gets up once or twice during the night, checks up on my brother, heats up some milk, takes some pills she keeps on the window sill, then goes to the can. I don't even know what those pills are for. I've never asked, and she's never told me. I don't know if I even want to know. There's quite a few she's got there too. The funny thing is she's always saying she doesn't believe in medication, in pills, that they're bad for you and that they do more harm than good. She says that they can make you go sick in some places while making you go well in others. Mom even says that medication eats away at your brain and causes cancer. She says she heard that on the radio: that medication can cause cancer. She always hears crap like that off the radio — at least thinks she does. "It's true," she says when you try telling her she mustn't have heard right, that she didn't have her thinking cap on when she was listening to the radio. "It's true, that's what they said." But she's always taking the stuff anyway.

"Ben," she whispered down to me, trying not to wake Dad up. She came into the living room holding a cup of milk. She was barefoot and in her flannel night shirt. Her hair was down and you could see all the streaks of grey. I hate seeing her like that. It makes her look hideous, like a woman who once saw something terrible and it's affected her ever since. "Ben, there's someone outside."

Dad woke up right away.

"Gord, there's someone outside," she said.

"What do you mean there's someone outside?"

"I mean there's a car parked in front of the house, and I can see people inside."

Dad jumped up right away and followed Mom into the kitchen. I ran ahead and looked out the window, past the row of medicine bottles on the sill. There aren't any street lights out where we live and we've got a couple rows of apple trees on the lawn — something else Dad had started — so it was hard to see if anyone's out there or not, especially at night. It was dumb of Dad to have gotten into those trees. He's never sprayed them and he's never put guards up around the trunks. They hardly ever get picked, either. Sometimes, Mom picks a few, just enough for ourselves, but that's about it. The rest just fall and collect on the grass or in the driveway, where they stay to rot. We drive over the ones in the driveway. You can feel them squish under the tires. Dad's always saying he's going to put up a sign, PICK YOUR OWN, but he's never gotten around to it. I think he knows no one would want those crappy apples anyhow. All wormy and small and sour like that. It would mean he'd have to put some work into them first before anyone would actually pay money for those puny things.

From where I sat I couldn't make out any car at first. And when I did, hidden by one of the trees, is when it scared me. I probably wouldn't have noticed it either unless Mom had pointed it out. She was wrong, though. It wasn't a car but a blue Ford pick-up, and because of all the trees, I could only make out just the front half — the motor and the cab. Out where we live, we don't get too many cars going by, fewer still at night. So it was strange to see a car parked in front of our house for what seemed like no reason at all. Things like that — out of the ordinary things — get Mom and Dad nervous. 'Cause according to

them, no reason is just as good a bad one, and whenever there's a bad reason, it probably has something to do with young people, which Mom and Dad say are the worst kind of people nowadays, not counting myself of course. I stared at the truck, frozen for a minute, when I saw something, a shadow, move inside the cab. That was when I heard Mr. Toby, our German shepherd, barking out by the barn.

"Ben, not so close to the window," Dad said, and I lowered my head a little. "See anything?"

"Someone's out there all right."

"By golly, there's someone out there," he said when he took a look.

"What do you think they want?" Mom said. "Who are they?"

"Damn burglars, that's who they are." Dad started rolling up his shirt sleeves as if he were looking for a fight. "I betcha they're looking over the house to see what's the best way to break in. Kids probably. I betcha they're just a bunch of kids with baseball bats."

"Maybe it's the same kids who went smashing down all the mailboxes on the road in the spring," Mom said.

"Or I betcha they're out snooping around by the barn, looking for something to steal."

"What if they want to set the barn on fire?" Mom said. "They might want to set the barn on fire and kill all the rabbits. Maybe we should call the police."

"I'm not calling no police," Dad said, and he shook his head. "I don't need the police to get involved here. I'm gonna go out there myself and ask them what they think they're doing."

"What if they're dangerous?" Mom said. "What if they're waiting for us to fall asleep so they can kill us. I heard on the radio that they did that to an old couple out in Effingham. Didn't take anything either. Just broke in and killed this lovely old couple. Just for the hell of it."

Hearing that made me think of a movie I'd seen in which this woman, in the middle of the night, hears a noise outside her house, and in her nightgown slowly walks up to her picture-frame window to take a look outside. Then the window shatters and she falls back into a pool of blood and broken glass, and right in the middle of her chest is a big, gaping wound. I don't remember anything else about that movie, but I remember that. That's when I started getting scared myself.

"Oh dammit, woman," Dad said. "You're getting everybody worked up around here." Dad put his hand to his chin and thought about what to do. "Ben, I want you to go downstairs and make sure the basement door is good and locked, and all the windows too. Helen, go upstairs and hide away the cash box in a good safe spot. I'm gonna call the police."

"Oh dear God, oh dear God," Mom kept saying over and over again, wringing her hands. Except when Dad had his stroke, I've never seen Mom scared like that before. Back then, she couldn't even pick up the phone to dial the ambulance. I had to do it for her.

Just then my brother started making his noises. All the excitement must have woken him up. The way it is with him, he usually starts off slow, then after a while works himself up into a good, long holler.

"Go to his room," I said to Mom. I wanted to get my say in too. "Go to his room and keep him quiet. Once he starts to get going, they'll hear him out in the driveway."

"Maybe it's good that they hear him," Mom said. "They'll think 'retarded boy' and maybe they'll feel sorry for us and leave us alone."

I thought Mom actually had a point, but I didn't say that to her. Just the same, she knows how me and Dad are and how those noises get us all nervous and edgy, especially me. Sometimes none of us can sleep at night the way he goes on, sometimes hollering, sometimes making this humming sound, or sometimes just laughing that retarded laugh until four, five in the morning. I usually sleep with earplugs and often that's not even enough. So Mom has to give him these pills to calm him down, then take him into their bedroom so she can keep an eye on him and shush him if she has to, while Dad goes and sleeps on the couch. It doesn't bother Mom one bit, either. She can't sleep if it's howling or thundering out, but she can sleep right through his noises. Even when he starts hollering, she'll sleep right through it. She only gets edgy when me and Dad get edgy.

"I'll go and give him something," Mom said. "The doctor wrote out something for him that's not too strong. Only five milligrams."

★

I went downstairs like Dad had told me. It's funny: normally I don't like going downstairs without turning on all the lights. The basement's unfinished and full of a lot of old and dusty furniture and boxes. It's where Mom does her laundry and where Dad changes to go outside. It's always cold and damp down there. But that night I knew all of that was kid stuff. Whatever danger there was, it wasn't down in the basement.

I could hear my brother upstairs had started up with his hollering. Mom was trying to shush him and telling him to be quiet, but I knew it wasn't going to do any good. It would take him at least a few minutes to get all the hollering out of his system. It was a good thing I wasn't upstairs. I would have killed him at a time like this.

The door looked okay. Actually, there were two doors: a screen door with a latch on the outside and a big heavy door on the inside, which if you want to shut properly, you have to shove it with all your weight, then push in the deadbolt. There was no way I was going to unlock the deadbolt just to see if the screen was properly latched. I thought if I did, there'd be someone standing right there waiting to blow my head off. Putting my hand up to the steel lock, I pictured someone standing on the other side doing the exact same thing.

I went around the cellar checking all the windows. Usually, we keep them closed at night so we don't have to worry about frogs or crickets or even raccoons getting in, but we don't always keep them locked. So I slid along the walls, trying to make myself as small as possible, and under each window I reached up with one hand and felt around to make sure the latch was locked into place. It felt like the house was surrounded.

My brother had calmed down a bit — he was just making his humming sound — and I could hear Dad at the top of the stairs, telling someone over the phone how to find our place. It's not a particularly easy place to find, especially at night. The houses aren't numbered so the best thing to do is to count mailboxes. Depending on which way you're coming from, we're eight mailboxes from Brown's Line, two from

Concession Seven. I could hear Dad saying so, then getting all mixed up and having to start over again.

When I got to the window under the porch I knew I'd be able to look out and see the road. We've got a big sink under this window Mom uses when she's pickling beets or cleaning rabbits, so I climbed into it, stepped onto the rim, and eased myself up to the bottom of the window. Between the flowers, I could easily make out the truck. It seemed as though I could see it better this time, as if I were somehow closer. I could see the moon reflected off its hood and roof, and I could see the stars in the sky behind it. In the distance, a single light shone from a farmhouse across the field.

There were definitely two people inside the cab. I couldn't tell if they were men or women, nor how old they might have been. They were just shadows, moving ever so slightly, but just enough. Like signs of life. I knew they saw me. I knew they were watching me, just as I was watching them. I had this crazy thought just then: that whoever, or whatever, was out there wasn't human at all, but visitors from outer-space, extraterrestrials who'd come to silently observe us, possibly to take one of us away. Outside, I could hear the crickets chirping, the dog barking. Then a flame briefly flared inside the cab and a face — a man's — bent towards it. I could have crapped my pants right then. I ran upstairs.

★

I couldn't believe it. My brother had decided to make a mess and both him and Mom were locked up in the bathroom. "Come on, hurry up," I yelled, pounding on the door and jumping up and down. My brother's messes are the worst, stinking up the entire house for hours. Twenty

years old — old enough to see *Blue Lagoon* on his own if he had any brains in his head — and still in diapers. His bedroom smells like that too — like diapers and piss — permanently. I never go in there, and if I have to, I plug my nose. Mom can spend entire afternoons in there, even take naps on his bed, but not me. I knew the moment she'd open the door the stench would hit me, the same way the heat hits you when opening an oven. Still, I kept yelling for her to hurry up. I started kicking the door.

"For God's sake, will you wait a minute," Mom screamed from the other side. "It's always, Helen go upstairs, Helen go shut that boy up, Helen go clean up Bobby, open up the door, do this, do that. Everybody's always picking on me."

I knew she was crying in there just so that I'd feel sorry for her when they'd come out, but I wasn't going to put up with it. Not then. Not if our lives were in danger.

"Will you shut up you stupid woman and hurry up." I gave the door a good, solid kick, enough that I actually heard the wood splinter.

When the door finally opened, my fat and ugly brother came out, staring straight up at the ceiling and laughing that wicked laugh. Mom tried looking me in the eye so that I'd see she'd been crying, but I pretended not to see her. I held my breath and quickly slid past them.

"I know the bathroom's a mess," Mom said as I shut the door in her face. "So don't get angry at me. I'll go back in there as soon as you're done."

I unzipped myself, got on the toilet, and let go. But it wasn't much of a relief. Even with the fan running and the window wide, the

room still stunk like hell. Not even the barn, when we used to keep the pigs, stunk as bad as this.

Some of my brother's mess had somehow gotten onto the wall tiles and the counter top, like someone who'd been using finger-paints. There was even some on the shower curtain. I knew enough to expect this sort of thing, but I'd never seen the room before Mom had cleaned it up; only long afterwards, when I'm sitting on the can and concentrating, on the edge of the bath tub, say, would I notice the little places where she'd missed a spot.

I could hear my brother making that humming sound going down the hall. He had absolutely no idea what was going on, he couldn't care less what was going on. He had just relieved himself and that was all that mattered to him just then. For that alone I could have killed him.

★

When I was all done in the can, I wanted to checks things out in the kitchen where Dad was, but Mom was calling me. I went into her bedroom and found her and my brother lying side by side on top of the bed in the dark, like they were waiting for death to come and take them away. My brother had one hand over his mouth and was making a kind of waving gesture, opening and closing his hand over and over again while making this spitting, farting sound with his lips, then he'd laugh that wicked and stupid laugh of his.

"Come here, Ben," Mom said, tapping the bed beside her. Her hair was spread out across the pillow. "My little baby," she whispered. "Sit down."

I didn't want to sit down. I knew she wasn't going to like it, but I didn't want to get mixed up in this. I shook my head.

"You're not scared, are you?"

Again, I shook my head, even though I could feel the jitters coming back, but for completely different reasons.

"'Course you're not," she said. "You're a big boy now. You're practically a man."

She sighed and folded her hands across her stomach.

"Pretty soon, you'll be even taller than your mother, and I won't even recognize you anymore. You won't even have time for your mother then, you'll be all covered in girls. You'll want to do stuff with girls then, such a handsome man you're gonna turn out. Then it'll just be me and Bobby, and I'll be all alone."

I could hear a motorcycle gunning down the road, the TV going in the living room. I just wanted to get out of there. I wanted to see what Dad was doing.

"Ben," she said, "if I don't make it through tonight, I want you to know I've got some money saved up for you. Your father doesn't know about it, but I just want to tell you it's in that old purse at the top of my closet. You don't need to tell anyone about it, OK?"

"I gotta go downstairs," I said, but I didn't start moving right away.

"And don't worry about Bobby. He'd go to Aunt Vera."

That's when I headed for the door.

"And Ben, if none of us make it through — "

"Hush up," I said, and I stamped my foot on the floor. "Don't talk like that." I couldn't stand to hear any more of this and went back downstairs.

★

When I got in the kitchen, I found Dad crouched up against the wall in the dark. It looked like someone had kicked him in the stomach and left him there. An old baseball bat of mine lay beside him, as well as one of Mom's kitchen knives.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"Get over here and keep out of sight of the window."

I didn't listen. I stayed right where I was and looked straight at the window, where I could see my own reflection from the blue glow of the TV in the next room. When I re-focused my eyes I saw the truck off the side of the road. Two sparks briefly lit up inside the cab, then disappeared. Like shooting stars, I thought, burning up into nothing when nearing the earth. I knew then, somehow, that nothing was going to happen to us, not that night anyhow.

"Get over here," Dad yelled at me, though he'd whispered it.

I sat down on the floor next to him.

"Here, take this." He slid the knife across the floor to me. "You'll need it to defend yourself."

"Why are you crouched down like that?" I said.

"I'm letting them know we know they're there," he said, and he raised his arm, switched the overhead on and off a couple of times, then left it off.

"A lot of good that's gonna do," I said, picking up the knife. I felt its weight in my hand then laid it back down on the floor. "What did the police say?"

"That they'd be here in twenty minutes. That was five or ten minutes ago. Who knows how long it'll really take before they find this place." He reached up for the light switch and flicked it on and off.

"It was a good thing we called them too," he said. "We'll be good and prepared for when they get here."

I looked across the kitchen and into the living room. That nature show was still on the TV and the commentator was talking about the hunting tactics of some sub-Saharan insect, a spider of some kind. They showed it unexpectedly pop out of the sand from beneath a pebble, and, in one swoop, snag and devour its prey — some unsuspecting bug.

Dad said, "What's your mother doing?"

I said, "She's getting ready to die with Bobby" — just like that.

He nodded. "If you want, son, you can go upstairs and be with your mother. I'll stay here, keep guard."

"It's OK," I said. "I'll stay." I wanted to let Dad know there was nothing to worry about, that nothing was going to happen to us that night, but I knew it wouldn't have done any good. He wouldn't have listened. We'd have to do it his way and wait this whole thing out. I wanted to go back in the living room and read my magazines.

"Don't worry, Ben," he said. He gave me a gentle smile and clapped my knee. "We're going to be all right. We men are gonna protect this house." And he raised his arm again and flipped the light switch a couple times.

★

It must have been a good half hour, maybe more, before we heard the voices. They nearly scared the crap out of Dad, but I was ready. I knew they'd come. We stood up and looked out the window. A cruiser had pulled up alongside the truck, and a cop was leaning into the driver's window of the truck. He shined a flashlight into the cab. There was another man, a kid really, not much older than myself, standing beside

the truck and holding a ten-gallon container. Then the cop got back into the cruiser and the man got in the truck, and the two vehicles drove off in opposite directions. That's when the phone rang. Dad picked it up. "Hello?" he said. He nodded his head a few times, said thank you, and hung up. He turned on the overhead — for good this time — put his hands on his hips, and took a good long look out the window. "Well it's over," he said. "No need to worry now. They're gone."

"What happened?" I asked. I suddenly felt very tired and let out a big yawn.

"They ran out of gas on their way home. They live out in Effingham, some old couple and their grandson. They were gonna knock on our door to let us know, but they said they heard shouting coming from the house. Said they didn't want to interfere. So the boy walked all the way into town to get gas. The cop picked him up on his way out here. Can you believe that? Scaring us like that. Anyhow, they're gone now. That's the main thing."

I laid the knife back in the drawer. A different program was on TV now, a British sitcom from the seventies. I wanted to say "Knew it" or "Told you so," but of course I didn't. What I said instead was, "You going up to bed?"

Dad nodded his head, yawned. "You go on up to bed now too, OK?" He took a look at the baseball bat he was holding, as if only just realizing he was holding it, then put it in the closet. "You know what?" he said. "Starting tomorrow, we're gonna take down those apple trees, so that next time something like this happens we're not taken by surprise."

★

I lay in bed and waited till Dad had finished doing what he was doing in the bathroom and had gone upstairs before sneaking back into the living room. Mom had put Bobby back in his room and after that I could hear Mom and Dad up for a while talking about what had happened tonight. Then it got quiet and my heart started pounding again, but not like before. I went down into the living room and turned on the TV, keeping the volume down so low you practically couldn't hear it. *Blue Lagoon* was on and I hadn't missed too much. I sat right up close to the TV, and after my ears adjusted, I found I could turn the volume down even lower and still hear Brooke Shields and Christopher Atkins perfectly clear. In fact, I could hear everything perfectly clear: my pounding heart, my breathing, Mom and Dad snoring away upstairs, even my brother making his spitting noises — we were the only two still awake, the only two who didn't let the panic get to us, the only sane ones in the house. I watched the boy and girl on the screen, their slender and naked bodies crawl onto shore — he pressing his body down onto hers, she running a hand down his back, his buttocks. I removed my clothes, lay on a seat cushion, and watched.

Meteors

My husband looks pale and tired, and his face is unshaven. He's changed out of his coveralls into a clean pair of slacks, a flannel shirt and slippers. He was out in the greenhouse all afternoon putting up sheets of plastic insulation for the winter; now he's in the doorway to the kitchen. When I ask if he's feeling any better he shrugs, a gesture I take to mean that things are the same, if not worse.

"Supper's almost ready," I say.

Carl crosses the kitchen, parts the sheers and gazes out the window for a long minute. "I'm not hungry," he says.

It's getting darker out and the window is slowly turning into a mirror. One or two bright stars hang in the sky. When he notices me staring at his reflection he drops the sheers.

"Still, you should eat something," I say, turning up a knob on the stove. "Why don't you go in the living room? It's almost time for the news. I could bring it out to you."

He nods, takes down the breakfast tray from above the fridge and lays it on the counter. The whole time he's been in the kitchen he's avoided looking at me, as if looking would admit to something.

"Where's Peter?" he asks.

Peter is the younger of our two children. He's twenty-four, lives at home and is mongoloid — Down's as they say now. I tell Carl Peter's in the living room, watching TV.

"But I want to eat in the living room," he says, now turned to face me.

I expel some breath, then look away.

Six weeks ago Carl found blood in his stool. At first he didn't tell me about it. He ignored it, thinking it would go away, then he started getting stomach cramps. When he finally did tell me, he refused to see the doctor. I told him that if he didn't make an appointment, I would, which is exactly what ended up happening. Now the doctor thinks he may have colon cancer, though he can't be sure until more tests are run. "He's going to do a biopsy," Carl said on our way home from the doctor's yesterday afternoon. He held a slip of paper with an appointment for Monday morning and two empty plastic bottles with the word STERILE printed on a strip running over the seal. "I don't want you telling Robert about this, either," he added. "It's not something he needs to know." Robert, our other son, lives in Vancouver. Carl hasn't seen nor spoken to him in nearly five years. Last night, after I got the dishes cleaned up and put Peter to bed, I went into the sewing room — Robert's old bedroom — closed the door behind me, and wrote him all about it.

"Bon appétit," I now say to Carl, trying to be cheerful as I enter the living room. He is stretched out in the recliner and Peter is sitting cross-legged on the couch, his back to the TV. On the tray I'm carrying a plate of mashed potatoes, mixed greens and a thin slice of pork. "Hungry, Peter?"

Peter faces the wall, holding the back of his hand to his face, seeming to study it, while gently rocking back and forth. Close to two hundred pounds, he is a giant infant, not skilled enough to wield knife and fork, or to wash and dress himself. He's been in diapers all his life. He lacks the motor skills to run, or to climb a set of stairs without using all fours. He's incapable of speaking. Carl can't stand to eat in the same room as him: the little noises Peter makes; the little spitting, gurgling sounds. "Might as well go eat with the chickens and the pigs," he says, trying to joke, though we've never had chickens or pigs, and it's been a number of years since Carl gave up the dairy cows on account of a heart attack.

"Eh, sweetie? Hungry?"

"Gert, please. I'm trying to watch the news."

I lay the tray on the coffee table and linger a minute in case Carl should make some comment about the food or ask me to bring him something, perhaps to brew him a cup of tea. On the TV screen I watch the images of several men, dressed in plain blue uniforms and surrounded by flashing electronic instruments, floating in a crammed chamber high above the earth. They smile and wave into the camera; their voices sound distant. A man, not visible on the screen, reports on the health of the crew members, and the unique experiments they're performing.

"Come on, sweetie," I say, after a while, taking Peter by the hand. "Supper's on the table."

★

I have known Carl all my life. I don't remember a time when I didn't know him. We grew up together in the same village, in Holland, during the thirties and forties. In 1955, when I was twenty and Carl was

twenty-two, we married and came to Canada — a place we hadn't even heard of until our country was liberated a decade earlier. We settled in Welland, in southern Ontario, where Carl found work at the Iron and Brass Foundry and I changed sheets at the County General.

For many years we didn't think we could have children. I became depressed, I grew to hate this country, and I longed to return to Holland. Whatever brought us here no longer made sense to me. When I did become pregnant, it was nothing short of a miracle. By this time Carl had given up the foundry; we had bought land, built a tiny house, invested in dairy cattle and equipment. I was thirty-five. Two years later I became pregnant for the second time. But the past is no longer clear, and the years seem to have slipped past. I remember a boy playing in the sandbox behind the house, another in a playpen. The one boy grows up, the other doesn't — he stays in the playpen. Then, overnight it seems, the eldest, becomes quiet, sullen. He asks for an extra phone line to be installed in his bedroom, and when it is he holds long and whispered conversations behind a closed door. He moves out. He goes to school in Toronto, an hour's drive away, then in Montreal, an additional six. He studies one thing — I forget what — then something else. Now he works in an office in Vancouver where he punches numbers into a computer all day. It's not what he'd like to be doing, he says, and I'm not quite certain what he'd prefer. At the time he said he'd keep the job until something better came along. That was three years ago. On Sundays I can sometimes reach him, but only if his father is out of the house. Ordinarily, I write him: three, four, maybe five times a week — something Carl doesn't know anything about and would

definitely not approve. I can manage this secret because Robert doesn't write back.

Tonight, after I've put Peter to bed and while Carl is in the living room watching TV, I lie in bed, reading a medical pamphlet I slipped into my purse from the doctor's office. The treatment of colon cancer, it would appear, depends on the size of the tumour, its precise location, and if it has spread to other parts of the body — the liver, say, or the lungs. There's surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, or a combination of all three. If part or all of the lower colon needs to be removed, there is a procedure in which an incision — called a stoma — is made on the outside of the body and through which waste may pass and collect in a special bag.

I can read no further. I hide the pamphlet under a pile of magazines in the night stand drawer and switch off the light. Downstairs, in the living room, I can hear the TV: a man's voice telling one-liners, an accompanying laugh track. I imagine my husband snoozing in his chair, his bifocals on the edge of his nose. It's best he knows nothing of these things.

★

The next afternoon Peter and I are in the express line at the IGA in the mall, and the shopping cart belonging to the woman in front of me is overflowing. I know I could say something to her, but I decide against it. Besides, I'm in no hurry. Apart from a carton of milk, some candies for Halloween and a couple heads of iceberg that were marked down, there was little reason for me to have made a trip into town, even less for me to linger.

"How are you today, Mrs. Van Herck?" one of the checkout girls says to me when it's my turn. "How are you, Peter?"

The girls at the cash have come to recognize me and Peter, and always say hello. I like these girls, so young and full of promise. I never really get to know them, though. One by one they leave this place — they never stay long, a year or two at the most — to begin their bright futures elsewhere: Toronto for most of them, perhaps the U.S. for a lucky few. They recognize this time of their lives as temporary.

"Has the weather cleared up any?" this girl asks me now, and I tell her that it has, though for the life of me I can honestly not remember.

I love the bustle of this place. So many voices, so many chattering voices. With Peter in one hand, a bag of groceries in the other, we stroll from the supermarket into the mall. Many of the stores are decorated in orange and black for Halloween. Cardboard witches and skeletons are pasted to the store windows and bags of candy fill the bargain bins. The day after Halloween all of this will change to Christmas decoration and carols will be playing over the loudspeakers. Then the snow will come and so will the holidays and it will be a new year again.

After a while we go into a restaurant that I sometimes frequent, and are seated at a window that looks back into the mall. Judging by the number of young faces passing by, I realize that it's a Saturday and for some reason this makes me sad. "Are you warm, sweetie?" I say to Peter. "You must be hot with your coat on?" I pull his coat off and hang it onto the back of the chair. He faces the window, holding his fingers up to his face. He softly starts to giggle. "What's so funny,

sweetie? Eh? What's so funny?" I stroke his hair, pushing it off his forehead. "What do you see that's so funny?"

"Anh-anh-anh," he says, shaking his hand violently. These are his only words. "Anh-anh-anh."

"Is that right?"

His father always found it impossible to love him, so has Robert. We have never talked about this, but it's not difficult to see. Carl has seldom held Peter, and if he must touch him it's on the collar of his shirt or along the sleeve. Robert pretends he's not even there. He wouldn't dream of touching his brother.

"Ready to order?" a young waitress says.

"Peggy's not working today?" Peggy's the girl who usually works here and who I've come to know a little.

"No, she quit," says this new girl, and offers no further explanation. She is deliberately trying not to look at Peter. She's uncomfortable and I can feel myself growing angry with her. I want to ask if there's something the matter, but of course I don't. Instead, I stare at her name tag. ANGIE, it says. I think about leaving, then decide against it.

"Ready to order, ma'am?"

"Just a coffee, please."

She hurries off.

"And miss — " I call out after her. "I'd like a ginger ale for my son."

When she returns, I hold up the glass for Peter, a serviette under his chin. I tell him to be good and set the drink down in the far corner of the table, away from him in case he should suddenly decide to

knock it over. Out of my purse, I pull out a pad of writing paper, a ball-point pen, my reading glasses. I write:

Dear Robert,

I'm afraid I've got some good news and bad news. The good news is that your father asked about you today. He said, "Isn't Robert ever going to come back?" That's something, isn't it? I could hardly believe it myself. But I'm afraid, sweetheart, that I also have some bad news for you. The doctors have said that your father has cancer after all. We're still waiting for them to decide how severe it is and what will be the best way to treat it. Won't you please come home for Christmas?

Robert and his father have not spoken to each other since Robert came home one weekend in April five years ago and announced that he had something to tell us. The three of us were in the living room watching a special on TV about the Princess of Wales' visit to Niagara Falls. "There's something I have to tell you," he said.

I knew what was coming.

"What is it?" Carl said. He was more interested in Diana and her children boarding the *Maid o' the Mist*. He turned up the volume. I looked out the window, watched the wind pick up a few leaves.

He said it again: "There's something — "

What Robert had to tell us was that he wasn't ever going to get married and that his father and I would never see grandchildren — though that's not exactly the way he put it. I wasn't surprised when he told us. I always knew. For me, I think it actually came as some kind of

relief: the waiting, the guessing had finally come to an end. But it wasn't like that for my husband. I don't think he really knew what one was, and still doesn't. He changes the channel whenever that sort of thing comes on the news.

My husband had already sold off the cows and most of the equipment when all of this happened, and Robert had been away from home for several years. "It was living in Toronto," my husband later told me as we lay in bed that night. "It was going to school in Toronto that did it to him." After that night, nothing was the same again in our house. Not just between Robert and his father, but between me and his father as well. It wasn't long afterwards that Carl and I stopped sleeping together. That night my husband said something I will never forget:

"Take a good look around," he said to Robert, pointing a finger at him. "Take a good look around here, because you're never going to see it again."

It's long past six by the time I've posted the letter and pull back into the driveway. The sun has already set and a few stars have come out. I completely lost track of time. When I open the door I see my husband standing in the kitchen, his hands on his hips.

"What's for supper?"

I sit Peter down on the stairs so that I can remove his boots and gloves. He looks up at the ceiling, his hand to his face, and slowly starts to smile, as if something obscurely funny has just occurred to him.

"Leftovers," I say. "I'm going to heat up leftovers." I know he's not pleased about this — I didn't plan on it either — but we're not going to argue. "How do you feel?" I ask.

"Same."

I look up at him, see if there's something he's not telling me, but his face tells me nothing.

Later, in the middle of the night, I find myself lying fully awake in bed. This is not unusual. Sleep does not always come easily for me. The unusual thing is that my hands are folded behind my head, as if I'd been mulling something over, but I can't think of what it was, nor remember waking up. It's as if I suddenly became conscious.

Without turning on any lights, I get out of bed and quietly go down the hall. Peter is still awake. I like to leave his bedroom door open a touch so that he can get some air, and from the hall I can hear him making a gurgling sound, then a clicking of his tongue. I don't need to see him to know he's holding his hand up to his face.

I'm not surprised he's not sleeping: he hardly needs it. There is nothing that can possibly worry him, nothing that he does that could wear him out, physically or otherwise. He doesn't ever need to be up by a certain hour, and he doesn't need to get a certain number of hours per night. He spends his days in a dream. What does he need sleep for? When I open the door and poke my head inside, he suddenly falls silent, as if I'd caught him at something. "I love you, sweetheart," I whisper into the room.

I tiptoe downstairs and into the kitchen where I take a sleeping pill with a glass of water. I part the sheers and for a long time gaze out the window. The moon is bright tonight, the sky thick with stars. Above the trees, I catch a glimpse of a sudden streak of light, then another, and another. It takes me no time to make a wish. *Meteors*, I

think; one thing in the sky, another when striking the earth — isn't that how it works? Robert, I imagine, would know.

The door to the living room is shut and the TV is off. I hear my husband gently snoring in the next room. From the drawer under the counter I pull out a stash of paper and sit down at the kitchen table. *Things are much worse than we had imagined,* I write, without the aid of my glasses or the overhead. It hardly matters how these words may appear: I know they won't be read by anyone and that I will not write more tonight. I run the tips of my fingers across the words pressed into the page.

What lies ahead of us, I wonder. Who will take care of Peter when I'm too old to handle him? Not Carl, that's for sure; certainly not Robert. What if I'm the first to die? I've been told to start thinking about putting Peter in a home, but I hope it will never come down to that. Such children, the doctors say, don't usually live beyond their early thirties. Their bodies age quicker than ours, their organs more prone to fail. It's my secret hope that Peter should die before me.

When I start to feel myself drifting off, I quietly tear the sheet of paper from its pad, drop it in the garbage and tiptoe to the living room door. I turn the knob, peer inside. I can barely see my husband, the outline of his body. The sheets are twisted around him, the pillows at odd angles. Suddenly he stops snoring, then shifts in the bed. I'm afraid I might have awakened him and I get the feeling he's looking up at me, only not saying anything. I quickly close the door again.

★

The last time I saw Robert was just over three years ago. I'd saved money, told my husband that I planned on visiting Robert, and all he had

to say was, "Do what you want." Later, after he had some time to consider it, I suppose, he said, "You know they're going to feed you?"

I said, "Who? Who's going to feed me?"

He said, "Them. *The gays.*"

The morning of my trip I put on a skirt I hadn't worn in long time, a blouse I'd forgotten I still had, packed a suitcase, and got on a bus to Montreal. When I arrived I found Robert talkative and happy, in spite of what had happened between him and his father. In the days I was there, he introduced me to friends and roommates, men mostly, and there was something in each of their faces I recognized. One young man was introduced as someone he'd known for *eight* years, another as his "dearest friend in the whole world." These were words that sounded foreign coming from him, people I'd never heard him mention, people whose existence I couldn't have guessed at. Hearing them laugh together, one knew they were age-old friends. It had been years since I heard people laugh together like that.

Later, when we were alone in his apartment, he said he wanted us to get to know each other better. I was overwhelmed, my eyes began to water. I said I wanted nothing more. It was as if my son had just returned from a very long journey, from years out at sea, guided solely by the stars. That night, the first night I was there, we went out for dinner. He said, "Mom, there's something else I have to tell you."

We were in a restaurant where most people drank wine with their pizza and you were expected to cut it with a knife and fork. I glanced around the room and suddenly realized that most of the clientele was male.

"There's someone else I want you to meet," he said. "I have a friend who's become very important."

I knew what was coming, but I didn't plan on what came out of my mouth. It just slipped out, unbidden. I said, "Robert, I don't want to hear about it."

Robert laid down his knife and fork — we were half-way through dinner — and when the waiter asked if everything was all right, he simply asked for the cheque. The next day we hardly spoke at all and I met no more of his friends. The following morning I took a bus back home, a day earlier than I was supposed to. That was the last time I saw him. Now he lives in Vancouver. When I ask about his friends he simply says they're fine, nothing more.

★

Today is Sunday, the day I usually call Robert.

"Why do you keep looking up at the clock?" my husband says. We're having lunch: vegetable soup, rye bread, and a pot of tea. "You in a hurry to go somewhere?" he asks, though he knows perfectly well what I'm waiting for.

I say nothing. I stir the soup in my bowl, turn up the weather report on the radio.

"Carl," I say.

He looks at me over the rim of his mug.

"I've been thinking. I've been thinking about the cancer."

"We don't know for sure that it's cancer," he says.

"But that's just what I'm saying. Suppose it is cancer."

He lays his mug on the table.

"Suppose it is cancer. We're going to have to rely on each other, we're going to have to be there for each other."

He says nothing. He looks at the newspaper on the table, turns it toward him. I catch a glimpse of a headline about possible life on Mars, another about a public inquiry on tainted blood. I hardly care about these things. They say nothing to me.

"Carl," I say. "Have you finalized a will? You ought to start thinking about a will, maybe even giving up the greenhouse as well. There may be months of chemotherapy. There may be surgery. We're going to have to think about the future."

"What are you trying to say Gert?" he says. "Just exactly what are you trying to tell me?"

I cannot look at him. I look at the tea in our mugs instead.

"You want to see me dead? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"I'm just afraid, Carl."

When my husband goes out to the greenhouse it is nearly one o'clock — ten o'clock in Vancouver — and I figure that that's a decent time to be up on a Sunday morning. I never know with Robert: everything's a big secret with him.

When I call, the phone rings several times, then the answering machine picks up. I try again an hour later. Same thing. I decide to take out my note pad and begin writing:

Dear Robert,

I'm worried. The situation is worse than we imagined. It seems that your father will have to spend some time in the

hospital. There's to be an operation and your father has asked for you. He wants you by his side.

An hour later I try calling again.

"Yeah," someone answers, and at first I think I've dialed a wrong number. Then I realize I've woken him up.

"Hello, sweetheart. Did I wake you up?"

"No, it's OK," he says, then clears his throat. "No that's fine. I was just lying here."

"How are you sweetheart? What's new?"

"Nothing much."

There's some clicking and buzzing on the line and I can faintly hear someone else's conversation, though I cannot tell what they are saying.

"How's work?"

"Good," he says, and for some reason it suddenly occurs to me that he may not be alone.

"I guess you were out late last night?"

"Yeah, a little late."

I know better than to ask what he did or what time he came in: he knows I wouldn't like the answers. He'd say I was treating him like a child and that he was old enough to make his own decisions. I know, of course, that he's right. Yet I can't help it: I'm his mother; I worry; it's as simple as that. There's a vast portion of his life I know nothing of, that I'm excluded from, and as much as I want to know there's a part of me that would rather know nothing of it. Yet I continue to press for answers:

"I suppose you went out dancing last night?"

"No, there wasn't any dancing," he says.

I wait a moment, hoping he'll reveal something, and when he doesn't I go right into it: "I'm afraid I have some bad news, sweetheart," I say. "Your father's not doing too well." I expect him to say something, ask me something, anything. Instead he asks if he can call me back. "But Robert, I think this is serious. I think we should talk about it." I am overwhelmed with disappointment.

"Mom, I'm going to be late. I just realized I have to be somewhere soon."

"All right, sweetheart," I say. "Anyhow, I've written to you about it. You'll understand when you get the letters."

"I gotta go," he says, but I don't want to hang up just yet. There's something I want to ask while I still have him on the line, but I'm not sure what that may be. Instead I ask if he'll call back.

"Sure," he says.

"When?"

"I'll call tonight. If not tonight, then tomorrow."

"All right sweetheart," I say. "Please take care of yourself." And before I can add another word he's already hung up.

I put the receiver in its cradle and suddenly realize how quiet the house feels. I go upstairs to Peter's room where I find him lying on his bed, his hand held in front of his face. He's clicking his tongue. "Stop it," I say, pulling his hand away. He looks at me, annoyed, then raises it again. "Stop it." I tug his hand away again and again, until I find myself sitting on the edge of the bed, crying.

★

Robert doesn't call. I spend the evening watching TV with my husband. We watch the news, then a travel show afterwards. Carl hasn't mentioned his problem since yesterday, which would either mean it's not as bad as before, or, more likely, that it's gotten worse. Like this morning, he catches me eyeing the clock, but this time doesn't say anything. He knows what I'm waiting for. At nine o'clock I call it a night and turn in.

The next morning, Monday, my husband and I are having breakfast.

"How is it this morning?" I say, bent over him, about to pour coffee into his cup.

He shakes his head. "No coffee," he says.

I place the carafe onto the hot plate and sit back down. "Worse?"

He nods his head; his toast is untouched. I feel a wave of pity go out to him.

"You want me to make you some tea?"

He shakes his head.

"Some herbal tea, maybe? Camomile?"

He doesn't look at me.

"Does it hurt?"

"Gert, please," he says, and silently lays his palm on the table.

I look at the newspaper sitting in front of us, still rolled up in its elastic. It will go unread today as it has every day for months now, perhaps for the past year. I will call and cancel it, I think. I'll do that today.

"Have you spoken to Robert lately?" Carl asks. I turn to look at him, but he avoids my eyes.

"Yes, we spoke yesterday," I say. "We talked quite a bit, actually."

"You didn't tell him about this did you?"

"No," I say, shaking my head. I know he doesn't believe me, but what difference does it make?

I'm at the kitchen table, spoon-feeding Peter Rice Krispies, when my husband is about to leave the house. In his sports coat and slacks — clothes I bought him last Christmas — he looks stiff and uncomfortable. He still looks like a farmer going into town. I feel sorry for him. In his hands he clutches a lunch-size paper bag. I'm about to ask him about it when I remember the plastic bottles from the doctor's. I wish him good luck.

He nods his head, puts on his hat, his gloves. He is lost in worry. It occurs to me that it may not be a good idea for him to be behind the wheel.

"Do you want me to drive?"

"No, no. I'm fine."

Then: "Gert?" he says.

"Yes."

I watch him run his tongue over his teeth. "Nothing," he says, shaking his head. "Never mind."

He feels it too, this distance.

When my husband is out of the house, I take Peter's hand and wrap it around the spoon. "Go on, sweetheart," I say, guiding the spoon up to his mouth, "you can do it." I let Peter try feeding himself, something I've largely given up on, and go to the living room window where I watch Carl scrape the frost off the windshield, the exhaust

puffing smoke into the morning air. A minute later, he gets into the car and slowly backs out the drive.

★

I cannot explain what possesses me to do certain things, but later in the morning I pick up the phone and dial my son's number. I expect the answering machine, his familiar message — "no one is home right now, so please leave a message" — but someone else answers instead, a man.

"Hello," he says. "Hello?"

I am so taken by surprise that I quickly hang up before I say something I'll later regret. But then I convince myself that I've misdialed and half an hour later I call again. It's the same voice.

"May I speak to Mr. Robert Van Herck, please?"

"I'm afraid he's not here right now. May I take a message?"

"Do you know when you expect him back in?"

"He'll be in this evening. May I ask who's calling?"

"And who am I speaking to?"

He doesn't answer right away. "Who is this?" he says, suddenly suspicious. He knows who this is. "What is this all about?"

"Excuse me, sir," I say, "but what is your bu — "

For a moment I listen to the dial tone. I hang up, pick up the phone again, then punch in another number. A woman answers.

"Are you sure?" she asks. I can hear her typing something into a keyboard.

"Yes I'm sure."

"And may I ask for what reason?"

"I don't read the newspaper!" I yell into the receiver. "Plain and simple." My heart is pounding. I don't mean to be so brief.

"That's fine ma'am," she says, "you'll receive your credit cheque in the mail."

★

Later that afternoon, while Carl is still away and Peter is in the living room, I'm in the kitchen making a stew, trying to take my mind off things, when I hear the telephone ring.

"You were checking up on me?"

From the number of voices in the background on his end of the line, I assume he's calling from work, but I don't want to ask too many questions. "I was just calling," I say. "I was just going to leave a message on the machine."

"So what's the message?"

"I forget. Anyhow, it wasn't important." I know I sound unconvincing, but it hardly matters. "You never called back," I say. "What happened?"

"I was busy. I never got the chance."

I nod, wait for him to say something else, but of course he doesn't. So I ask him who it was. "Who answered the phone?"

"A friend."

I take a breath, glance out the window.

"Honey, is there something you're not telling me?"

I listen to the voices in the background, a woman's shrill laugh. The sounds are blended and confused. He takes a long time in answering.

★

When I think back upon my own life, it's as if I've been asleep the whole time and the world has sped right past me. When I watch the news, I'm constantly amazed that things I'd never heard of when I was a girl

are nowadays spoken of so easily and taken for granted. And what I once thought couldn't happen to our family, my son expects me to take as normal, as if the world has always been that way and always will. Children are meant to fulfill one's life, not complicate it. It shouldn't be like this. I'm sixty-one years old, my life should be settled by now. Instead, I worry constantly for my children; I'm still changing diapers. When I look at other women my age, in the mall, in waiting rooms, I see in their faces a certain amount of contentment with life, a certain amount of ease, acceptance. They may be sick, there may have been the death of a loved one, but there is something in their faces that says everything's in order now, the future will be taken care of, not to worry. They are not lonely, these women. They have children they are proud of, children who have children of their own, money set aside. They are living out their golden years. I know: they tell me so. They show me their photos as we sit together in the waiting rooms of doctors and specialists.

"And you? Any grandchildren?"

And I wonder: will anything ever change for me and Robert? for me and Carl? I try to imagine what is happening to my husband at this moment: a lit tube with a tiny camera and jaw-like scissors passes through his body, looking for an irregular growth of cells, signs of disease; then a sample of tissue is cut, removed, and put under a microscope where a team of specialists will get an even closer look. Perhaps they will enlarge the picture onto a television screen for watching medical students to contemplate. They will point things out, ask the students to describe what is typical about this picture, what is

atypical. They will nod their heads, then come to some sort of agreement.

If they find cancer, things will become harder, there's no doubt about that, and it will be like having another child to care for. I imagine Carl bedridden, his body without hair and in constant pain. I see myself feeding him, giving him medicine hourly, changing the bag attached to the stoma. The living room will become like a room in the hospital, taking on the odour of medicine, of bodily waste, and the rotting of flesh. I can see all of this very clearly, as if it is a process that has already begun. He will ask me to sit down and talk to him, spend hours with him, tell him things, anything, just as long as I am with him. But if there is no cancer, we will go on and on, just as we have, just as we do now, growing old together in this house, until we can go no further.

What my son had to tell me was that his friend, the young man who answered the phone — also named Robert; something I find hard to believe and somehow odd — was what he called his "partner." This came as no surprise. They have been living together for just over two months now. What did come as a surprise was the alien virus in his friend's body.

★

"What's the matter?" my husband says.

I'm in the bathroom, sitting on the edge of the tub. I'm giving Peter his bath and he's splashing water everywhere, making his sounds and rocking his body back and forth. He's excited by the water.

"Gert, what's the matter?"

I shake my head, wipe my eyes with my wrist. What Robert told me is something I can never tell Carl; I can hardly wrap my mind around it

myself. How can one be infected and the other not? That's not how it works — is it? Why would my son do this to himself, put himself in this position? Or is there something else he's not telling me, something else he's hiding from me?

"How did it go?" I ask.

Carl takes a step into the bathroom. "There isn't going to be any cancer," he says. I turn to look at him. He's leaning against the counter and holding a paper bag — a different one this time, one from the pharmacy. "The doctor said that it's an inflammation, an inflammation of the colon lining. It's treatable. You can take medication for it."

I can hear the enormous relief in his voice. There's even a certain youthfulness to his face. It's a look that will last a day or two at the most, then everything will go on, just as before. He smiles, then lets out a breath. I suddenly understand that it's not relief I feel, but something else.

"You heard me, Gert?" He jiggles the paper bag, as though snapping me out of something. I hear pills rattle inside. "There isn't going to be any cancer."

"That's wonderful, Carl," I say. "We were worried for nothing."

"You don't sound too happy."

"No, I am." I say, forcing a smile. "It's just that my mind was elsewhere."

Tonight, after supper, while Carl is in the living room watching TV, I'm in Peter's room, getting him ready for bed. There's a full moon out tonight, a harvest moon, amber in colour, and it lies heavy in the southern sky. Once, I used to believe that all of us, this whole

family, were like the earth and the moon — planets circling the sun — now I understand that we are more like meteors, bits of dust and other such debris whose paths have only briefly crossed.

"Stand still, sweetheart." I draw the curtains closed, then kneel in front of Peter to remove his diaper. With one hand, he grasps my shoulder, the other he holds to his face, wagging his fingers and making his spitting sounds. When I've fastened the clean diaper, I stand up again, slip his nightshirt over him, then get him under the covers. I can hear my husband laughing downstairs at something on TV.

"Goodnight, sweetheart," I say, stroking the hair off his forehead. But instead of turning out the light, I sit on the edge of the bed, and for a long moment watch him holding his hand above him, twiddling his fingers. He doesn't even see me, doesn't even know I'm here. I can feel the anger slowly rising. I take his hand and yank it away from his face, frightening him into looking at me. "That's not how it's supposed to work," I say, my voice at a level I can hardly control. "Is it?"

The Right Hand Man

My father didn't want to hire a man for the summer. At seventeen, he reasoned, I was old enough to quit free-loading and to start taking on a larger share of the work and responsibility that was expected of me. But because I didn't, and because I have always detested farmwork, I know that I caused my father considerable disappointment. My mother, though, saw my disinterest as a sign that I had set my sights on better things, and, I am certain, was secretly pleased.

They argued the first week of summer vacation. My father said that I was lazy, that I was good for nothing, and that if I did not learn the meaning of work, and learn it fast, he feared that I would wind up a failure. Collecting the eggs and feeding the chickens, said my mother, was no way for a boy to spend his summer. There was also the matter of my allergies to consider, she added, which happened to be to dust and feathers.

My father was an egg producer, and every summer, going back before I was born, he took on an employee to help him in the fields and in the barn. But because he had little money for wages, the only kind of labourer he attracted was usually an old widower or a retired apple grower – men who seldom pleased my father – and at some point during the

season were often let go. It was a practice, he said, that had run its course.

Then one morning, late in June, everything changed. I was beginning to believe I had been let off the hook for another summer when I discovered that the man my father had reluctantly hired was not a man at all, but Duane Bradley, and I found him sitting at the kitchen table, eating fried eggs and sausages with my parents.

"Jer," said my father, waving me into the room. Gerald is my real name — after my father — but most people called me Jerry, which I hate, or Jer, which I don't mind as much. "I want you to meet someone," he said.

I was still in my pajamas, the sight of which so late in the morning ordinarily angered my father, but it seemed to please him then, as though it served to illustrate a point.

"You know Duane?" asked my father. "Duane's going to be working for me this summer."

Duane was tall, fair, and broad-shouldered. He had sandy-brown hair cut the way many hockey players used to wear theirs: parted in the front, shorn on the sides, and just touching the collar in the back. He wore a dusty pair of jeans and a faded blue T-shirt. I went to school with Duane, but I had never spoken to him before: I disliked him and his band of thugs and had little to do with them. Instead, I spent lunches and breaks and nights at the movies with a girl named Ida Greene, a friendship that endured all kinds of idle and silly rumours, some of them completely contradictory.

"So Jer," said Duane, shaking my hand as if we had never seen each other before. "Your dad tells me you've got allergies."

★

Duane came to work every morning at six. He went home when my father told him to, which could be anywhere between three and five in the afternoon. Most mornings, when it was nice, he rode his bicycle — a thirty minute ride. Days that it rained, he caught a lift with his father and arrived later. Mid-morning, after they had collected the eggs and fed the chickens, Duane and my father came in for breakfast (fried eggs and toast, usually, a cup of coffee), then went back out again until noon. My mother didn't feed Duane lunch, nor was he invited into the house at that time: he was to bring his own, which he ate under one of the maples in the back yard. Duane's father, a customer of my father's at the farmer's market in Welland, had gotten his son the job.

My parents were nap-takers, and every day after lunch my father would step into the bedroom, shut the window, draw the curtains and sleep for half an hour or so. My mother often took naps while sitting in a lawn chair on the front porch. Duane was encouraged to sleep as well, and under the same tree where he ate, my mother set up a fold-out deck chair so that its feet and back were nearly as flat as a cot.

No one rose before my father. This was the law. When he did, he came down to the kitchen, put the kettle on and stood gazing out the window onto the road. Hearing the clatter of spoons and forks, the soft whistle of boiling water, my mother would join my father, cut the two of them a slice of rhubarb pie or poppyseed cake — whatever she had made fresh that morning — and which they would quietly eat between sips of coffee. After pressing the last of the crumbs onto the bottom of his fork, the coffee gone, my father would go down to the basement, change

into his work clothes and step out into the yard where he'd meet Duane, who would then be waking up and rubbing his eyes.

At first I avoided Duane and my father. I either came down for breakfast well before they did, which was rare, or, more likely, emerged from my bedroom only after they had gone back out into the yard. In the past I hadn't cared what my father's employees might have thought of me, the lazy son. I was also younger then and allowed to get away with more. But things were different this time: Duane and I were the same age; we went to the same school. It was impossible for me to stay home and *not* do anything. And so, every day after breakfast, I snuck out to the barn, got on my ten-speed, and rode into town where I would spend my days with Ida.

Ida shared an apartment with her mother on the first floor of a house on Aqueduct Street. Their place was small and tidy and had only one bedroom, which her mother occupied, while Ida slept on a day-bed in the living room. Sometimes we dawdled about her place, other times we walked around downtown, or lazed in a park along the Canal. It was Ida who told me what I already knew: that I couldn't keep this up all summer. "You know what's going to happen, don't you?" she asked. We were at the food court in the mall, eating hamburgers and sharing a plate of french fries. She was a heavy-set girl who wore her make-up generously. "In the fall," she said, "when we go back, Duane's probably not going to have too much good to say about you." The place was starting to fill up, and a boy and girl with trays of burgers and fries sat at the table next to us. "You ought to at least give it a try," said Ida, reaching for a fry. "At least once in a while."

My day-time disappearances sparked a new argument at home. My father demanded to know where I was and what I was doing and whose money I was throwing away. "Tell me something, Jer," he said one night at dinner. "Do you know what you're going to do with your life?"

While I could not of course say that I knew, I did have an idea: I wanted to become an actor. I had never mentioned this to my parents because my father, I imagine, would have laughed. He would have said that I was foolish and impractical and, above all, in pursuit of idleness. My mother, on the other hand, would have been disappointed, perhaps even somewhat confused. For although she was always certain that I would succeed, she was convinced that because I did well in school, I was destined to become a man of science or medicine. In fact, I had kept this secret to myself, not even telling Ida, for I did not wish to disappoint anyone but myself. Saying it, I believed, was tantamount to jinxing it, like saying aloud a wish after blowing out the candles on a birthday cake.

"I didn't think so," said my father when I hadn't answered. Then: "Do you know how hard I work around here?"

I looked down at my food, scraped my fork back and forth across the plate.

"I don't think you do," he said.

"Gerald," my mother said, gently touching his arm. "He's only a boy."

My father then began to speak as if I had left the room. He said that my behavior was shameful and that I brought him embarrassment by running away when there was work to be done. He said that he broke his back for me and my mother. Was this how I was going to repay him? He

asked her why I couldn't be more like Duane. *He* wasn't afraid of a little dirt. My mother reminded him of my allergies and told him to have patience. One day I would make a great man, she said. She promised him that.

★

The next morning, when I drew the curtains and looked out into the yard, I saw Duane, naked to the waist, standing at the wash basin beside the barn, washing his hands and face. I rubbed my eyes, reached for my glasses and leaned closer to the window. He had broad shoulders, thick, strong arms, a muscular back. He was magnificent to look at. Then he did something unexpected. He removed his boots, slipped off his jeans and socks, dipped a facecloth into the water, and began washing himself from head to toe. For some reason, though, I thought of my father opening the barn door and catching him doing this. But what of it? There was nothing punishable in what he was doing. If anything, it was me who was up to no good — at least as far as my father was concerned. It simply amazed me that Duane could stand practically naked in our back yard as cars drove by on the road and with absolutely no sense of shame. I decided then that this would be the morning I would go to work in the barn.

"Jerry, what's wrong?" my mother said when I came down the stairs. She was standing at the stove frying up some eggs and bacon. Duane and my father were sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee.

"He's all dressed up," said my father. "What's the occasion?"

I wasn't dressed up at all. I was wearing an old pair of jeans and a T-shirt I no longer wore. "I thought you might need a hand," I said.

"Well," said my father, laying both his hands on the table, as though bracing himself. "Finally."

★

Though I tried to pretend otherwise, it was very clear that Duane knew what he was doing and that I didn't — or rather, that there was a sharp distinction between the kinds of things I knew and the kinds of things he knew. For instance, Duane knew how to mix feed: what quantity of corn, shale, and stone went with what quantity of soy pellets. He knew how much mix went into each feeder (he frowned when I put in too much, added some when I put in too little) and that the pullets were given a different mix. He also had no difficulty in lifting and carrying the pails. "Did you want me to carry that?" he asked.

Duane was a natural; he even seemed to enjoy what he was doing. My experience, working with my father, was based solely on doing as I was told: *Put half a pail here. Put a full pail there.* I had never been expected to provide answers. What I did know, surprisingly, was where things were kept: *Where does your father keep the shovel? Where can I find another basket? Where does he put the empty bags? Where can I find a hammer? a screwdriver? a nail?*

I sneezed sometimes, but only when first stepping in the barn, which sent the chickens flying into the corners — like an explosion — shooting dust and tiny feathers into the air, causing me to sneeze at least once or twice more. There would be a momentary silence, then, all at once, the hens would start to cluck and evenly spread themselves throughout the room again, like a room slowly filling up with water. When we collected the eggs, Duane smirked if he caught me making a face when handling a soiled egg or if my hand was pecked while reaching under

a hen. "I can see why you hate doing this," he said. Except to answer or ask questions, I had hardly spoken to him all morning. When he said that, I gave up the notion of pretending to know what I was doing or that I did not hate doing it.

My father this whole time was out in the field picking beans. At lunch, he said that he was happy to see me finally doing some real work for a change and hoped he would see a lot more of it. My helping Duane out in the barn, he said, gave him the chance to look after things in the field. Latching on to what he thought was a commitment on my part, he said that this was a system he'd like to keep up. Then, as if to further entice me, he added that hard work could get me places, that I could become anything I wanted: a policeman, a school teacher, an accountant.

"Gerald," my mother said, clanking knife and fork down onto her plate. "He's going to become something far better."

After lunch everyone slept. My father took to his bedroom, my mother sat in her lawn chair, and Duane lay in the shade in the back yard. I went to my room and passed out. When I heard my father making noise in the kitchen, I got up and looked out the window. Duane was lying in the deck chair, his arms folded behind his head. He had removed his shirt and used it as a pillow. He looked like an ad for men's jeans or cologne. "Did you want coffee?" my mother asked, walking straight into my room without knocking. She carried an armful of fresh laundry. "There's some apple pie if you want." She stopped to look at me. I was kneeling on the bed, my elbows on the sill. "What are you doing?"

★

"You like doing this?" I asked Duane that afternoon. We were grading the eggs. How the egg grader worked was that one person — in this case, Duane — loaded the eggs that had been washed the day before onto a ramp that ran along one side of the machine. A gate at the foot of the ramp would drop to allow one egg at a time to roll onto a kind of mechanical arm. When the gate closed, the arm rose, taking the egg up with it. Then the arm shifted to the right, lowered and deposited the egg onto the first of five scales: Jumbos. If the egg didn't drop on the first scale, the arm scooped it up the second time it rose and passed it onto the next scale: Extra-Large. If it failed to drop here, it went on to Large, then Medium, and lastly, Small, for which there was no scale. At the foot of each scale the eggs collected, and it was the job of the second person — me — to pack the eggs in their respective flats, which were further sub-divided between whites and browns. "I mean in general," I said. "Do you like this line of work?"

"Are you kidding?" he said.

I was not prepared for this answer. He said that his father made him take the job because he thought it would be good for him and because he had never had a job before. The only reason he tolerated it was because it was a summer job and because he was getting paid. Then it would all be over and he wouldn't have to think about it again. He said that he had a different relationship to this kind of work than I had and that he didn't blame me for hating it.

We began to talk a lot more after that. In the days that followed he told me about his family. His father was an ear-eye-and-throat specialist who ran a private practice on King Street. His mother was an R.N. at the General. He hated his father and hardly saw his mother, he

said. They kept odd hours: she worked nights mostly, his father days. He had an older sister who had been married for six years and now lived in Mississauga, and a younger brother, Jason, whom he was very fond of and who would enter high school the following year. I imagined their home: a brown brick split-level, two-car garage, jet-black drive and a small enclosed yard in the Sherwood Forest subdivision. Jason, he said, was an amazingly talented young hockey player who would one day turn professional; he was sure of that. Duane played hockey himself, but what he was interested in pursuing, "career-wise," he said, was sports therapy or sports medicine. He asked me what I wanted to be.

At the time, I couldn't believe my own answer. But I later understood that my response had been part of a test — not just for Duane, but for myself as well.

"An actor," I said.

Duane neither laughed nor seemed surprised. He said he could see me doing that sort of thing. It was as if a door had suddenly burst open.

He told me about his adventures: Most nights, after work, he went out drinking with guys from school; boys with names like Mike, Paul, Drew, Bill. They went to parties on the beach, or on somebody's rooftop or back yard; sometimes on the Canal. He seemed to live on four or five hours of sleep a night. When nothing was going on, he and his friends crossed the border into Niagara Falls, New York, and with their false I.D.s went to a place where they could drink without getting caught. He spoke of his friends as if they were my friends too, or soon would be. I felt my life suddenly taking on new possibilities.

We talked about girlfriends. He asked me if I had one.

"No."

"What about Ida? She's not your girlfriend?"

"No. She's just a friend."

He said he didn't have a girlfriend either for the moment, though he had had plenty in the past. He described some of the things he looked for in girls — some of which were unspeakable — then asked me what I looked for. I said something about personality.

He said his father had a girlfriend, he was sure of it, perhaps even several. "Some dumb bitch on the side," was how he put it. Sometimes his father took long walks after dinner, he said; other times he went for mysterious drives in the middle of the night. He never told anyone where he was going nor what he had seen or done. He simply said he needed to get out, to think. This was all the proof Duane had; that and a leather glove he once found under the front seat of the car. It wasn't one he recognized his mother ever wearing, nor was it one of his father's, and so he threw it out onto the highway. He said he felt sorry for his mother and suspected that she knew but kept her mouth shut. In fact, he said, he had never talked about this to anybody — not even to his brother. He said he could tell me because I was so removed from the whole situation. I was flattered. "I'll tell you one thing, though," he said, but he never finished his sentence.

★

Sundays were Duane's day off. It was also the day my mother and I went to church. My father never went. He was entitled to one day of rest, he said, though he still got up just the same and went about the barn like any other day of the week. I loved the stillness driving into town on those mornings. The streets and parking lots, ordinarily full of

cars, were quiet and empty. A police cruiser sat in front of a Quickie Mart clocking what few motorists there were. Everything seemed deserted. Scraps of newspaper and yellow flyers lined the gutters. It was as if we floated into town, unseen, unheard.

Driving past the library, my mother talked to me about dreams. She wanted to know if I had any. "You don't plan on becoming a farmer, do you?" she asked, concerned about my sudden interest in farm work. I could feel her watching me, but I continued to gaze out the window. "Be honest, Jerry. What do you want to do with your life?"

I quickly glanced down at my dress pants, the neatly pressed crease. I fingered my tie. Parents always teach their children not to lie, but I do not believe that lying comes naturally to children. I think we slowly grow into liars. It's a skill, a talent we quietly practice and develop. What I said next was the first real lie I ever told, the first, in some some small way, that I didn't believe myself.

I said, "I want to pursue a career in medicine."

After church, my mother dropped me off at Ida's.

"I missed you," she said as we walked down to the Canal, just a couple of blocks away. We removed our shoes and socks and dipped our feet in the water. I left my tie and jacket on the grass. It was unbearably hot. Motor boats raced in front of us, dragging water-skiers behind them. I stared across the water at a group of shirtless boys jumping off a wooden dock on the other side. "So," she said. "Tell me."

The past week had not been bad at all, I said. I no longer minded the work, and had even grown to enjoy it somewhat. I also said that I had re-evaluated Duane and that I didn't know why I had ever disliked

him and his friends. He came from a troubled family, I added, as though that explained something. The moment I had said that I felt that I vaguely insulted Ida. Her own parents had separated a year earlier when her mother decided to move out of the house. What details existed beyond that, I scarcely knew. I never asked.

Ida had long dark hair that she kept tied back with a ribbon. She wore a T-shirt and an unflattering baggy pair of shorts. When I looked down at her hand and saw her bitten-down nails — something I had never noticed before — I admitted to myself what I had always known but prevented myself from thinking: that I was biding my time with Ida. Once my life would take on a new direction, as I felt certain it soon would, I would leave Ida behind without any sense of remorse or loss.

I said, "I can feel that things are changing."

★

I took to getting up at dawn. It was July, and my father went straight to the fields where he would spend the morning hoeing the pepper plants or picking beans before it got too hot out. I would sit on the porch and wait for Duane to appear on his ten-speed. The air those mornings was cool and the grass was damp. Across the road, a row of apple trees shone green and gold in the morning light. For a brief moment, the world seemed like a quiet and perfect and mysterious place. I had never known this before. When I spotted Duane I would step down from the porch and meet him in the driveway, all smiles.

"Hey," he'd say, shaking my hand in an unfamiliar and strangely masculine way.

"Hey."

Together, we would head out to the barn, and go through the routine — and by then it had become routine — of collecting the eggs, mixing the feed, feeding the chickens, then washing and grading the eggs. Sometimes, he would take his shirt off and hang it on a wooden peg. "Aren't you hot?" he'd ask.

I didn't much like my body then — I had skinny arms, narrow shoulders — and wouldn't dream of removing my shirt in front of Duane. I felt that if I did, he would privately disapprove of what he saw and we would no longer be friends — and by this time I firmly believed that that was indeed what we were.

Once, during an afternoon thundershower, I was asked to drive Duane home.

"Where did you go?" he asked as we got into town. "At the start of the summer, I mean. When I first started."

The rain was coming down hard. We passed a flowershop where two girls were standing under the awning, looking stranded and helpless as they waited for the storm to pass. "I went to Ida's," I said. "We hung out in the mall all day."

"You hated it that much, eh?" he said, letting out a small laugh. He looked out the window and wiped the glass with the heel of his hand. "Well I'm glad you're here now," he said, and that was all.

Duane's house was not at all what I had expected. He lived in an older part of town, among a row of respectable houses and century-old oak trees. One such tree stood on their lawn, towering over their house and allowing so little light to penetrate that the grass was thin and shabby-looking, which seemed to be a problem some of their neighbours also shared. But unlike their neighbours, their driveway was not made

of asphalt but of gravel, and their hedges and evergreens were neglected. The house itself, a two-storey Edwardian building, was in need of repair. Some of the shingles were missing; the paint was starting to peel.

"I'll see you tomorrow?" he said, his hand on the door handle.

The sky was starting to clear, though a light rain was still falling. I turned the control on the wipers from "Regular" to "Intermittent." I wanted to put my arm around him, teasingly punch his shoulder, tousle his hair, some such intimate gesture men sometimes share. But for some reason, none of these options seemed possible. Instead, I simply said, "You bet," and watched him dash across the wet yard and into his house.

I no longer slept at mid-day. I kneeled on my bed and through the window gazed at his sleeping body. When I heard my father getting up I ran downstairs, quickly raided the kitchen, then snuck outside, bearing gifts: slices of my mother's poppyseed cake, glazed orange squares, a handful of almond butter cookies; once, a piece of hazelnut torte.

"What's this for?" he said the first time I did it.

"I just thought you might like it."

We seldom spoke on these occasions — it would have been somehow inappropriate — though we did often split the goods. Sitting beside him, I would stare out at the field, at the neat and clean rows of tomato plants that my father was so proud of, the stark blue sky. I would think of the coming fall and foresaw a time of promise.

I relived this moment every day until my mother put a stop to it. "Where are you going with that, Jerry?" I was almost out the door with a fistful of chocolate pinwheels. "Did Duane ask you to bring him

something?" No. "Do you do this every day?" No. "Leave it here, then. It's enough that I feed him in the morning."

★

One evening, after we had just finished supper, Ida called. "I never hear from you anymore," she said. "What's going on?"

It was close to seven and Duane had gone home an hour earlier. We had spent part of the day engaged in a new task: cleaning out the barn. My mother was at the sink, gently scrubbing a casserole dish: a sure sign that she was pretending not to listen.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I've just been working a lot. I've been tired."

"You don't even come around on Sundays anymore."

This was true. I hadn't stopped by her place for weeks now, and I had no real explanation for it. Even my mother had commented on our way home from church. I began making up excuses: that she was busy, that she had found a job, that she went away for the weekend. I preferred to sit on the porch and read those afternoons. My father decided that if that was where I was going to be, he would set up the fruit and vegetable stand on the side of the road, so that I could at least do *something* useful while I read. "Kill two birds with one stone," was how he put it.

"I'm starting to get jealous," said Ida. "You spend all your time with him, never with me." There was an element to this conversation that had never occurred to me before. I blushed and turned away from my mother. "I'm starting to think you're in love with him," she said. "You're not, are you?"

"What?"

"In love with him."

"No."

I could feel my mother's presence in the room, and imagined her overhearing every word of our conversation. "Look," I whispered into the mouthpiece. "Can we talk about this later?"

"You are," she said. "Aren't you?"

"Ida."

"You know, I'm not at all surprised."

I hung up the phone.

Part of that evening I spent lying on my bed, staring up the ceiling and watching the room slowly turn grey. I thought about Duane. I saw myself kissing him with such straightforward and vivid clarity that I knew it was possible. We would be in the loft where the heat was stifling, throwing down bales of straw to be spread onto the barn floor. Drenched in sweat, he would remove his shirt, then seeing that that did little good, he would slip off his jeans, even his briefs. "Aren't you hot?" he'd ask, inviting me to do the same. We would then find ourselves lying next to each other, and he would let me run my hands and mouth across his body. I would be naked too, of course, but my body would be different somehow: the way I sometimes saw myself in dreams: shoulders and arms wider, chest toned.

When the room grew dim I went downstairs into the kitchen and poked around in the fridge.

"Is that you, Jerry?" my mother said — a voice through the screen door that led out onto the porch. "Come out here. I want to talk to you."

The sky was ablaze in the west: the promise of another hot, dry day. There hadn't been a good rain for weeks and my father was worried. At lunch he had said the plants were starting to shrivel up and that the cukes were looking undersized. When I stepped out onto the porch I saw my father standing in the field of yellow peppers beside the house. He held a long hose he had run from the house out to the field and to which he had added several extensions. Leaving a dark trail in the dirt behind him, he went from plant to plant, watering each by hand. Soon it would be completely dark and he would no longer be visible. It was only then that I understood how hard my father worked; for it became clear that in spite of all the effort my father had put in, and would continue to put in, he would never in his life come out ahead. He would always deceive himself that it is the struggle itself that is life's reward, not the outcome itself.

"You and Ida argued tonight," my mother stated. She was sitting in the lawn chair she napped in. Her feet were on the railing. "What about?"

"Nothing. It was stupid."

I turned and looked at the bulrushes in the ditch. A car with its headlights on passed on the road.

"Your father's very happy with you and Duane," she said. "But especially with you. He's surprised. He didn't think it would turn out this way."

Our neighbours across the road were out on their porch as well. I heard the clinking of bottles and their voices carried across the still air, though it was impossible to tell what they were saying. I pictured Duane and his friends were on some secluded spot on the Canal. I

imagined a bonfire, cases of beer, a portable radio. There were probably two or three girls.

"You like Duane quite a bit," she said, and in such a way that it had the quality of being both a question and a statement.

"Yeah, he's cool," I said, trying out a new word for the first time, and realizing, too late, that some words are not suited to some people.

My father was hardly visible then. For those plants he couldn't reach, he pressed his thumb over the end of the hose, casting the water another ten or twenty feet. Unless it rained, anything beyond these would simply wither.

"You know you can tell me anything, Jerry," she said. "I'm your mother."

"Yeah, I know."

"I wouldn't want you lying to me."

Resting my elbows on the railing, I looked out to the slowly disappearing orchard across the road. I could hear the crickets and toads in the ditch. Although I had no word for it, what I wanted more than anything, even beyond my wish to become an actor, was freedom. I wanted a life that was honest and true.

I said, "When have I ever lied?"

★

It was August, the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, and most of the pews were empty. There was no choir. The pastor stood at the pulpit, read a passage from the New Testament, then gestured for everyone to sit. Before we left the house, my father had half-jokingly said, "Ask God to bring us some rain." I didn't doubt my mother attended to that.

A few of the side panels in the stained glass windows were open — a rare sight — though it did little to alleviate the heat, and several women in the congregation fanned themselves with the paper bulletin. When the panels were closed, which was nearly every Sunday of the year, one only saw dark shapes behind the glass. Presently, I saw the tip of a branch, a couple of maple leaves. Concentrating on the leaves, I suddenly saw Duane, sleeping in his bed. I saw wallpaper depicting a hockey motif, trophies on a shelf, framed team photos. My vision seemed so real and precise that I knew it had to be so. I also had the sudden knowledge that my relationship with Duane was in trouble, and I silently asked God to bless our friendship. *May it last forever.*

"Pretty soon it's back to school," my mother said on our way back to the car. A few of the church's members had congregated on the sidewalk: somber-looking ties and jackets, pastel dresses and white hats and shoes. A tiny girl in a floral print ran down the sidewalk, tripped, then started to cry. Outside the parish, the pastor looked like a man in costume, like no one to take seriously. "Your father will be sad not to see you boys around the yard anymore," she added when she started the car.

That afternoon, a red Audi four-door pulled into our driveway. I was sitting on the porch, keeping an eye on the stand and reading a book I had borrowed from the library on method acting. At first I thought it was a customer, but when the window lowered I saw Duane in the driver's seat. He wore sunglasses and a navy polo shirt. He looked like a movie star. It would be the last time I saw him as an employee of my father's, though of course I didn't know that then.

"Hi Jer," he said, pushing his sunglasses onto his head. "Your dad around?"

When I came up to the car I saw four other guys I knew from school packed inside. A girl I didn't recognize was sprawled across the laps of two of them in the back. They wore shorts, sunglasses, baseball caps. Towels were laid out across the seats. They smelled of coconut. *Hi Jer,* some of them mimicked then laughed. *You live here? Fancy place. Let's see the chickens. Can I get a dozen eggs, Jer? Hey, Jer, how much for a dozen eggs?*

"I was wondering if your father had my pay ready," said Duane, over the noise.

I told him to wait a minute and went over to the cash box where my father had left an envelope he'd instructed me to pass on to Duane. "Oh! Crank it, crank it," I heard someone shout from inside the Audi. The air then filled with a pounding bass, and the car gently rocked back and forth. In the cashbox, the envelope lay under a pile of bills and receipts. It was thick — my father always paid his employees in cash — and unsealed. I licked it shut, took a pencil from the bottom of the box, and on the face wrote *To Duane Bradley* in my very neat and careful hand. I drew a line under his name, as though there were something official in that gesture, then another.

"Thanks, Jer," said Duane when I passed him the envelope.

"So what are you up to?"

"What?" He turned down the music.

"Where are you guys going?"

"Nickel Beach," he said.

I nodded and stared at him for a minute. His face was tanned, and freckles I'd not noticed before ran across his nose and cheekbones. It was as though I were seeing him for the first time.

"Let's go," someone said. "Come on."

"I'd ask you to come along," said Duane, "but, well, the car's kinda full."

I know I should have taken this remark for what it was, but at the time I saw it as part of that promise that I still believed was mine in coming.

"That's OK," I said. "I have to stay here anyways." I looked at the sign I had painted the summer before and which leaned against the stand. FARM FRESH FRUITS, VEGETABLES & EGGS, it read. For a long time the need to say something had been building up inside of me. I felt I needed to pay him some sort of compliment or simply to tell him that I liked him. What happened next changed everything. "Besides," I said, "I already know how amazing you look."

When I gaze back on this, I don't believe it was so much what I had said, but what was so plainly written on my face and what had become so apparent to everyone except myself, that the instant these words slipped out of my mouth I regretted them, and a long moment seemed to pass where all of them looked at me, uncomprehending. Then, once the facts had registered, an explosion occurred: *Whoa! Hear that, Duane? Jer thinks you look amazing. You look amazing, Duane. I think Jerry's got a crush on you.* They laughed and poked his shoulder.

"No. You know what I mean," I said, but no one was listening, and what I meant was perfectly clear. He lowered his sunglasses, rolled up the window, and backed out the drive. The next morning Duane called in

sick. I ran downstairs when I heard the phone but my mother had already hung up. A few days later, he spoke to her again, saying that he found another job. It wasn't long afterwards before I stopped working in the barn, too.

★

That September I went back to school, my last year. I saw Duane in the corridors, but we did not speak to each other. We turned our heads and looked away. Something else happened that fall: people I hardly knew asked me if it was true that I had tried putting my hand between Duane's legs, or that I would spy on him from my bedroom window, or that I had tried to rape him. Ridiculous things like that. The one good thing that came out of all this was that I rekindled my friendship with Ida, whom I'm still friends with to this day.

My father and mother, of course, drew a connection between my gloomy mood and Duane's sudden absence. "Did you boys fight?" my father asked. "You didn't catch him stealing, did you?" "You're not just trying to protect him, are you?" My mother never said a word. I imagine her silently relieved that this episode in our lives was over, even if my father didn't know what he had to be thankful for.

I did speak to Duane once more, though, years later. I was living in Ottawa at the time where I had come to study theatre. Instead of becoming the actor I had once hoped to be, I went into stage direction instead. I have since assembled a small company and try to put on a few shows every year, but I earn my living working in a housewares store on Dalhousie Street. My father says that I have become the failure he always feared — though his reasons do not entirely involve my choice of

career — and my mother, uncertain of whatever became of my medical aspirations, has silently taken his side.

It was at night, Canada Day, when I saw Duane again, and I was with Rahim, a man I'd met after a show I put on in the winter and whom I'd been slowly getting to know. The fireworks had just ended, and Rahim and I were shuffling with the crowd through the Byward Market on our way back to his place. "I think someone's trying to get your attention," he said.

"Jer!" I heard someone calling out — a name I'd almost forgotten, for by this time most people were calling me Gerald.

Duane emerged from the crowd, reached for my hand, and shook it. I nearly didn't recognize him. He had aged, of course, but not much. His face was coarse with stubble — the sight of which instantly coloured my memory of him — and his hair was shorn and slightly receded. He had put on weight. "How are you, Jer?" he said, sounding both exhausted and relieved. "It's been a long time."

Behind him was a woman and two small children who had red maple leaves painted on their cheeks. The six of us made an island that the crowd coursed their way around. I recognized the woman — whom he introduced as his wife, Vicki — as the girl who had sat in the back seat of his father's car the day he came to pick up his pay. If she recognized me, she gave no hint, and the two of us shook hands like strangers. I introduced them to Rahim; and Duane, pointing out two tired-looking boys, said, "And these are our sons, Jason and Kyle." He stooped down to his children and explained, "I used to work for this man's father," but they seemed uncomprehending and unimpressed. "Remember that, Jer?" he said, rising. He put his arm around my

shoulder and gave me a squeeze. "Remember that?" With his arm still around me, he turned to his wife and children, and with genuine fondness said, "I was this guy's right hand man."

He asked me what I was doing, how my parents were, then said what a strange coincidence it was that we were living in the same city. He said that his wife had gone back to school (he didn't mention for what) and that he was a software programmer with a well-known firm in the city's west end. His brother Jason, he said — the soon-to-be-famous hockey star — had died four years ago in a car accident (he was twenty-four), and when his wife became pregnant for the second time he named his son after him. His parents, he added, had separated.

That night, Rahim and I sat on the balcony of his Somerset Street apartment. Several parties were going on in the living rooms and balconies in the highrise directly opposite. Laughter and indecipherable conversations floated in the night air. In the street below a number of revellers drunkenly stumbled their way to parties or bars; kids, mostly, dressed in red and white, some draped in flags, whooping and shouting, others singing a slurred and melodiless *Oh Canada*. "Funny how people change," said Rahim after I had told him about Duane. He uncorked a bottle of wine and passed me a glass. "The people we grow into or out of," he said. He sat down beside me and we clinked glasses. Born in West Africa, Rahim had come to Canada with his parents when he was small; now he was twenty-nine and after spending several years working for the government had also decided to go back to school. He was completing a degree in journalism. I knew he wasn't someone I was always going to be with — we had different goals and dreams — but for the moment, perhaps for a while. In spite of this

knowledge, our relationship seemed to be entering a new stage that night, a good one. I could feel it. Without another word, we sat on the balcony and listened to the parties around us, to the celebratory honking of car horns in the distance, and to the music booming from a festively-lit roof-top terrace down the street.