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TENT BY THE SEA

Brian Bartlett

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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ABSTRACT

TENT BY THE SEA

Brian Bartlett

The ten short stories in this collection are unified first and foremost by the land in which they are rooted--central and southern (mainly southwestern) New Brunswick.

Pulls toward and away from family and ancestry, the dual nature of home as both bond and bind, are felt throughout the collection. A broad spectrum of human relationships, often at the brink of crisis, are explored: mother and son ("Son"), son and father ("The Death of a Church"), brother and brother ("To The Station"), man and woman ("Woman on Hill"), middle-class child and lower-class child ("Night of New Asphalt"), adult authority and adolescent ("Civics and Hypnotism"), boy and girl ("Tent by the Sea"), girl-friend and grandson and grandparents ("Journeys to Battles"), grandnephew and great-aunt ("So Long As It Doesn't Thunder"), nephew and uncle and friend ("College Jacket").

Especially in each of the four interrelated stories (the first two and last two in the book) the central character is bound to or searching for "a place of his (or her) own," a tent by the sea.

CONTENTS

SON

When William was born he did not cry as she knew he should. With her back aching against the kitchen table and the smell of her own blood in the air, she turned her head on the blanket and saw dusty light hit the jug of molasses on the floor. Ann's red apron appeared in her face and she heard one word: son. Already she knew his name, wondering when he would grow teeth to eat cookies. Somewhere Russell asked shakily, "Isn't it supposed to cry?"

Voices chased voices. The words in her head were clearest. The first one the quiet one of the family. He was in the doctor's hands, legs kicking, arms kicking. "Stubborn little gremlin, won't let out a peep," said the doctor. Russell asked, "Doesn't it feel anything?" and nudging him Ann whispered, "Beautiful eyes." The doctor smelling of cigarettes held William closer and she saw them, the eyes that made her fingers clutch. They were not dark yet they were like the eyes of calves, wandering. Weeping she said, "His eyes."

After slipping off her red apron Ann wiped Eileen's eyes with a corner. "Now don't be silly," she said. The doctor rasped, "Fine. . .fine," hesitating and clearing his throat. Farther away Russell moved his hands up and down

the shoulder-straps of his pants because, she feared, he wanted to hold his child but neither dared nor knew how to ask.

Cooing, only cooing--for years that was his sound. Whenever Eileen tickled the bottoms of his feet, even once he had learned to walk, he would only coo differently. His rare crying was ~~like~~ hope entering her ears. His cheeks shone white, fine black hair thickened on his head. When he made no sounds only his calf eyes and crooked walk made visitors look twice.

Again and again Ann's husband drove over in his '33 Dodge and helped take William to the town hospital for a few days; in Eileen's lap in the front seat William did not make a sound. Once each summer they drove him all the way to Saint John for longer observation and treatment, and there she stayed in a pale-walled hotel. By the time he was three several doctors had said no more could be done, everything had been tried. She found other doctors, giving them all her faith, biting her knuckles outside their offices.

Sometimes when his son cooed loudly Russell held his hands over his ears and muttered, "Mournful." Even when the cooing slowly rose and fell it was not mournful to her, it was his sort of singing or speaking. He learned to make abrupt surprised-sounding coos or snap the braces holding up his pants, which meant one thing. She did not always get him to the pot on time; often his smells lingered on rugs

and furniture.

To pay for the doctor bills Russell planted more of the back field with corn. Leaving nearly all care of William to her, he spent all day in the fields or the barn and complained of exhaustion in the evening, slumped in his armchair reading his Zane Grey books. He went days without speaking to his son or patting his head; then he went weeks. One night when his son was four Russell turned to him in the kitchen with an open weary look she saw as hatred, nothing more nor less. She moved from the sink to put an arm around William who was sitting loose-limbed upon a pillow in a chair. "Don't look at him that way," she said. "He knows you."

That night Russell's legs ached as he sat on the edge of the bed almost too weak to undress. Her legs ached too but she moved as if they didn't, stooping to straighten a rug in the doorway, her cheap white nightgown rising to her knees. He said, "We could send him, ya know, we could . . . ." Turning she stood and swerved her eyes to his back. She did not complete or answer his words. Over his shoulder the mirror framed him: the skin around his eyes pinched, his waist widening, his hair thinning.

When William turned six she abandoned the doctors but imagined there somewhere lived the doctor for him. In her mind this man lived outside a small town in a white house like hers, had a bright face like William, and did not smoke cigarettes like so many doctors. Soon William would

talk, slide down the bannister, play the accordion like her, collect eggs in the coop, walk through the woods to school. No not school, not there, his big eyes, they would laugh, they would say owl. Once when playing her small accordion in the parlour she thought a miracle where is the doctor with a miracle and stopped a hymn in the middle, swallowing with shame. Asking for miracles was what Catholics did. She promised herself to forget bright-faced doctors and looked out the window: William was on his rope on his hands and knees, chewing grass.

Walking home from church the next morning--it was Russell's turn to stay with William--she sunburned her nose as she had on the day a decade ago her eyes first fixed on Russell. He and his brother had invited her and Ann for horse rides on the richest farm nearby, 10¢ an hour. She first thought wife husband wife husband when he climbed onto a horse, his long limbs gripping and swinging clumsily, his bony elbows held too high. In school he had been called "Bagabones" but now in summer with full clouds floating by (close enough to touch from a horse, she felt) awkwardness was gracefulness to her. As the four of them circled through a woods trail she smiled when he pretended to brush a hornet her way, laughed about his sore rear-end, or tipped his straw hat down over his forehead, black hair curling on the back of his neck.

Now they kept to their own sides of the bed. Now it was only every few months when he drew his leg over her leg

and moved his hands roughly until she felt his climax like a slap to all her body and fell from him, wanting only sleep. That Sunday night long after walking from church she felt his breath against her neck and inched farther towards the edge of the bed. Asleep she dreamed of riding a horse with a white-shirted doctor, holding him tightly from behind, her cheek against his back, her fingers over his ribs and stomach. She kissed his shoulder through his shirt. In the morning when she woke she was almost hanging over the edge of the bed.

For his fifteenth birthday she decided to buy him a dog. Already he had grown as tall as Russell who now refused to be left alone on the farm with him. Driving his first car Russell did all the shopping and public worship for the family. Soon she forgot what it was to walk through the doors of the general store and the church.

Once each season Ann, her only sister or brother who talked to and touched William, would babysit him for an afternoon. Eileen and Russell would visit one of her brothers or sisters, see a motion picture in town, or shop across the border in Maine. Those rare days cheered her but she never felt fully present in them, her mind straying from flickering faces on a screen to thoughts of whether Ann had cut William's meat into small pieces, watched out that he didn't knock over lamps, or put him to bed on time. Toys in stores made her remember gifts, a stuffed bear and a spinning

top, William had dropped or kicked away; children's clothes reminded her there was no reason for him to wear nice clothes, a bow tie and a striped sweater, except on his birthday.

Russell found a cocker spaniel in the town kennels as she had asked him to. When she heard the car break through ice and snow back into the yard, William was sitting in a chair in the kitchen, swaying his head in time with his moaning. "We have a new friend for you," she said, combing his hair with her fingers. "A friend." He stopped moaning and his head fell to one side.

She lifted a whiskbroom from a hook on the wall and carried it out into the doorway. "Yes, yes, it's a lovely dog," she said, brushing snow off its tangled golden fur while Russell stood with it struggling in his arms and stamped his boots. "Won't you clean me off too?" Russell laughed, so she ran the broom over his heavy coat, knocked his leather cap onto the floor.

Though the spaniel was three years old, no pup, she quickly carried it into the kitchen and carefully set it at William's feet. He was looking the other way towards the parlour where the grandfather clock was chiming. She turned his head so he looked down into the dog's eyes, which she saw were wide and dark like his.

As he backed up, chair legs squealed on the floor and the spaniel barked. Waving his arms he stood, then shuffled up against the wall while the spaniel licked his

shoe and nuzzled his pants. His fingers raked his striped sweater up and down. "Willy, he's your friend," she said, reaching for his hand. He slid around the wall and staggered toward the parlour, cooing. Russell dropped his boots by the stove and said, "He's never seen a dog before. I told you it'd happen."

For two weeks Willaim needed coaxing to come downstairs and did not eat as he should. Several times when the clock chimed he went up to it and touched the glass face as if it would explain to him the beast with wide eyes. Then she was watching Russell through the kitchen window shaking his brother's hand in a snowstorm, selling the spaniel.

In spring she sat on the back steps cleaning rugs with a brush and a bowl of sudsy water. She paused and watched William crouched in the grass at the side of the house, straining on his rope while looking toward the road. Often he sat on his basketball for hours, rocking back and forth, smiling and cooing. Every few weeks he threw or rolled the basketball out of reach so it followed the driveway ruts out to the road.

She dropped the brush into the bowl and began walking towards him, calling in a singsong, "William, William, won't you ever learn?" Now she saw: no basketball, but a porcupine. He was close enough that if he reached out either hand he would touch the barbs.

Hardly breathing she ran to the nearest part of the rope and tugged firmly. As the rope tightened around the

belt-loops of his pants he stood, turning toward her. His chin dropped. He twisted his mouth at her, resisting the tugging. Turning back he tried to reach down to touch the porcupine, but she pulled harder.

Slowly he stumbled backwards toward her.

She had a grandnephew named Peter. All the years he was growing up his family drove from the city to visit her once each summer. In the car Peter and his younger brother argued whether she didn't know how to make fudge or just stored it away year after year. In her parlour or on her front porch they were served rock-hard fudge, choking back laughter because of the fudge and because they were trying not to think of him.

Russell had built a big pen with a high wire fence all around and a maple tree older than himself inside. A swing hung from one of the branches. Every time Peter saw William he was in the swing, a big man gripping the ropes like a girl and cooing, cooing with sounds that made Peter want to get back in the car and slam the door.

If the day was rainy and cold the family would sit in the parlour and hear nothing for ten or fifteen minutes. Then there would be a moaning or a thump thump thump from upstairs, and Eileen would say, "Oh dear, I'll be back in two shakes. Help yourself to the fudge." If the day was warm and William was in the pen, while greetings or good-byes were said in the driveway Peter would try not to look

at the pen, afraid Aunt Eileen or Uncle Russell would see him looking. He couldn't help it, his eyes were always pulled toward the cooing as Aunt Eileen laughed at one of his father's anecdotes and Uncle Russell squinted his heavy-lidded eyes.

Peter did not know much about his great-aunt except that she hadn't liked him being named Peter. His parents, his aunts and uncles had laughed many times that after his birth Aunt Eileen had said "Peter" was too Catholic a name. By the time Peter started studying to be a doctor there was another story about her repeated among his relatives. Uncle Russell had bought a TV, which she thought "sinful." Then she started watching soap operas, and remained faithful to them for a few months until she turned on an American channel that had liquor ads. After that she only watched religious programs.

Above her, apple blossoms heavy and thick as snow fluttered on branches. Behind the blossoms full clouds turned in the sky like other blossoms.

In the middle of the orchard she stood smelling the heavy scent. She had walked from the kitchen to the mailbox back past the barn through the field into the orchard. The envelope that held her pension cheque bent as she tucked it into her apron pocket.

Blossoms in her eyes, blossoms at her feet. She tore some from the nearest branch attached to their twigs.

That afternoon she would give them to Ann to scatter over Russell's grave. Days before and days after his death she had gathered apples; each time she had bitten into one in the following year she had seen his white face and shut eyes. "Extra burden in life," the minister said at the funeral speaking of William she knew, and she hated him calling William an extra burden like a load of potatoes or a sack of salt. Close to the mourners a feeding meadowlark flopped in the grass. The machine began lowering the casket, softly humming. Wasn't no father wasn't no father wasn't made strong like me. They led her to the car saying senseless supposedly comforting things, opened the door. Blinded by light reflecting off the windshield, she saw him mumbling in the hospital as the last arteries tightened around his heart, "That--that boy's still healthy, eh? Is he gonna live forever, forever?"

She walked out of the orchard with her apron brimming with blossoms. He was at the end of his rope leaning toward the sack face of the scarecrow, touching it with his nose. It was the last scarecrow Russell had made: his own checked red shirt, black pants and dented black hat. William picked up one of the frayed sleeves of the shirt and inspected it perhaps searching for a hand while she walked along the edge of the field toward the house, slowing down as she watched him. His face was both surprised and serene.

She waved, smiling. He made a glad garbled sound for her.

When she turned at the house and looked back he was hitting and clawing the blank face of the scarecrow.

Drinking tea and eating hard fudge in his great-aunt's parlour soon after his internship, Peter sat alone with her explaining why William should be taken to Saint John for lengthy tests and treatment. His grandmother had asked him to do this though he hadn't seen Aunt Eileen since his high school years. Ann said her sister would listen to him since he was a doctor; yes, Eileen distrusted doctors, but he was from the clan.

"They've made lots of--of discoveries since then," he said, stumbling when he noticed her coldly eyeing his beard.

"Yesss." Her hand trembled at her throat.

"It's a chance for you to see the big city for the first time in, what, a dog's age. When were you there last?" The tea was bitter or he was queasy, asking himself why he wasn't home with his wife and little daughter.

"Don't know. Thirty, forty years." She looked indifferently from his beard to his eyes.

The hands of the grandfather clock swept around an hour before she gave him a final answer. When she said yes her face seemed about to collapse. He drank the rest of his tea and said, "It'll make things a lot easier for you."

"I'm not doing it for me." Anger gathered her face back together. "I'm doing it for him."

"That's--that's what I mean," he said, coughing, making no sense.

As he stood by his car about to leave he saw grass had grown over much of the driveway. She folded her arms and asked, "Will they lock him up like a crazy man?"

"No no, the psychiatric ward's just like a home." A bloody lie he thought, taking out his car keys; though he touched sick bodies day after day, he felt cold whenever he imagined touching someone like William. Saying, "Bye. It's always nice to visit," he tried not to look toward the pen where William was swinging.

So in the fall mother and son were separated for three weeks. They sat together in the back seat when Peter drove them to Saint John. She said little on the way and even less after they had left William. She turned down his offer to take her to a shopping mall. As they drove through hectic city traffic she shut her eyes. They had hot chicken sandwiches in a downtown restaurant before driving the sixty miles back to the farm.

Several nights in the next three weeks she jerked awake, feeling herself falling through an empty house. More often than necessary she dusted the house. One day she over-fried an egg, another day she overbaked a potato. She cleaned the attic; the television was buried deep and spider webs clung to Russell's Zane Grey books. Playing the accordion she stopped in the middle of hymns. Outdoors she heard wind twisting the swing in the tree, the door of the pen

knocking. Indoors she mistook wind in the eaves for William's cooing.

When the three weeks were over Peter drove her back to Saint John. She kept readjusting her navy blue hat crowned with plastic pink flowers. She spoke about her neighbour two miles up the road digging a well, which she feared would ruin her well. As they drove into the city Peter saw her out of the corner of his eye take a mirror from her handbag and brush her thinning grey hair for a moment. He even thought she was putting on lipstick, which no one had ever known her to touch, but when he next faced her fully he saw he had only imagined it.

Before they could meet William they had to sit in an office with an elderly administrator who had red rouge on her cheeks. Eileen was asked for her signature to sign him out. A doctor not much older than Peter, clean-shaven and dressed in a light blue shirt, entered the room in soundless shoes and sat on the edge of the desk. "Yessir, Willy's made progress," he said. "But we'll have to warn you. . . not a lot more can be done." William had all but mastered dressing himself though the doctor said she would have to keep tying knots for him. He'd learned to feed himself with a spoon, even to butter bread with a knife, though sharp knives were still to be kept from him. And, at the age of forty-one, he had been toilet-trained.

Holding her handbag in her lap she stared at the turquoise carpet. She hated the doctor calling him "Willy"

as if they were brothers. When the doctor asked, "Well what does the Mother think?" she said, "He'll be happy to go home." The doctor replied, "Sure he will," then with a gallant almost flamboyant air he took her elbow and escorted her to meet William, while Peter, thinking he'd only be an intruder at the reunion, settled in the lobby with a newspaper.

She hugged William.

She cried.

When they returned to the lobby the doctor was carrying William's battered brown suitcase. He whispered to Peter, "Those shoes he was wearing when he came here--they were a size too small. We gave him new ones." William's zippered jacket was also too small, crawling up past his waist. He seemed to be pouting, tugging from her. She was walking slowly, smiling and holding his arm.

Brushing by the doctor she led William straight to the door. He craned his head around and looked past Peter toward the area of the building where he had been. "Look at that, he doesn't want to go!" the doctor said, smiling. "He'll miss his new home!" Peter thanked him and hurried to open the door, carrying the suitcase which was so light there seemed to be nothing in it. She unlocked her arm from William's and took him by the hand to lead him outside. Cold air from the sea hit them.

When they reached the top cement step William stopped. Again he turned and looked back. "We're going home," she said. "That makes us happy, doesn't it?" Peter

was at the bottom of the steps, watching her tug William's arm so he made it to the second step, only to halt again. "Those stupid shoes they gave us, they hurt our feet, don't they?" she said. "We'll put our real shoes on soon as we get in the car." For a third time William looked back at the grey stone hospital, and her eyes, wide with fear, met Peter's eyes.

Swinging the suitcase in one hand he ran up the steps and gripped William's other hand. William began cooing faintly as if his voice were coming out of the fog up from the harbour. Slowly they led him down to the sidewalk. "It's those stupid shoes they gave him," she cried, her voice trembling, her nose filling. "They stuck on the steps. It's those clodhoppers, don't you see? It's those clod-hoppers."

Before they reached the car William bumped against her knocking her pink and blue hat onto the asphalt. As she stooped to pick it up he turned once more toward the shining windows and the broad steps.

THE DEATH OF A CHURCH

Thurston walked by the barn to the brook in early light, sniffing a smell that had made one of his neighbours drive over to the lake and find the first beaver dam of that year. Under poplars by the brook he glanced up at the small falls, hearing only a trickle. Below the falls the water had run so low for a week, revealing bare crumbling banks, the Littles had not been swimming. "We'll take care a that," he mumbled to himself, lighting a cigarette. And take care a that he thought more hesitantly, realizing why he'd already nervously lit his first cigarette--today he would tell his father nothing could save their church, where his mother played pump organ and his great-great-great-grandmother had played a piano brought by her Loyalist parents on a ship from Boston. Now seeming to see the portrait of that square-jawed lady in his father's attic he feared It'll kill him.

Walking back past the barn hearing chickens he ran a hand under his shirt over his faded ulcer scar. Halfway between his house and his father's house, the barn was his father's. Swallows dove around him until he swung open the back door of his house. "Hurry now if you wanna see us bust up the dam," he said to Wheeler and Malcolm who were still

at the table eating cereal.

With the cigarette stuck in his mouth he picked up two empty buckets off the counter. Before going out to fill them he detoured to a closed door in a corner of the kitchen and nudged it open: Ginger had curled across the space he'd vacated, and when he glimpsed a rosy-nippled breast through a rip in her nightie he wanted to be back there with her. Crossing the kitchen and lurching back outside he looked down at his boots which glistened with dew by the time he reached the well.

Water gurgled from behind the well, a wooden barrel with a hose connecting in back. Leaves and seeds floated over a reflection of his face, his eyebrows oddly thick below his short hair, all his face pale except his large tanned nose. Within his face he saw the reflection of the barn, red shingles with bald black spots, that always hit his eyes like some secret photograph; in it drifted the morning shortly before his wedding when he had sat with his father in the family parlour, the only one of six brothers and sisters left in Rigby, and knew he would stay for his father's sake. As he pushed the bucket down into the well the barn swayed, shattered, drowned.

"How're we gonna do it?" The voice was so sudden he jerked around wildly, looking from the water to his son's face. "How're we gonna bust the dam?" Malcolm asked.

"Oh that." He set down a bucket of water into the grass. "With rakes and shovels. But 'member; you're just

gonna watch on shore." Once he had lifted another full bucket from the well he moved it toward Malcolm. "Here, shorty, take this in and tell Wheeler to get out here for the other, and get the rakes and shovels. C'mon, hop to it!" he finished, giving the back of his son's pants a pat.

So far he had not decided the moment he would speak to his father about the church, but loping toward his father's house--a white house twice the size of his, blue shutters around all the windows--he knew it would not be before they reached the lake. On the steps rising to the back door he dropped his cigarette over the railing. Just as he put his hand on the knob, the door pushed open against him and his father stepped out. Though Steven Little was nearly a foot shorter than his son his dark complexion, heavily-fleshed face and bushy silver hair always made him look more robust than Thurston. Now carrying a shovel he said, "Mornin," his face clear of all sleepiness and his glasses shining. First thing each day he polished his glasses with a handkerchief.

Down on the lawn Steven started in a straight line towards his pickup truck parked beside the barn closer to them than Thurston's car. "Mother get up and have breakfast with you?" Thurston asked as he stepped ahead of Steven, pulled off his jacket and continued toward his black wide-finned Buick.

"Naw, Ann's in there snoring away."

"Thought we'd take my car." Scratching his ear

Thurston thought He'll act like he didn't hear.

"We'll take the truck. The kids can sit in the back on those tires." Steven slid the shovel into the back of his truck along coiled fence wire while the boys hobbled over in high green boots, both carrying a shovel and a rake. "You fellas like to sit in the back in the open?"

"Hot idea, Grampie!" Wheeler cried as Thurston took the shovel from him and violently threw it into the truck so it fell clanging over Steven's shovel.

Once the boys were settled onto the tires Thurston flung the tailgate shut, climbed into the passenger seat and looked out through the cracked windshield down at the lonely black back of his car. Steven started whistling and stepped on the accelerator so hard the old truck made a sound like an animal's cry. "Hope we're back early this afternoon," he said, picking up a small flower catalogue from the dash and glancing at yellow blossoms on the cover. "I wanna get into town to pick up those forms for the flower show."

As the truck began bumping over ruts toward the small bridge crossing the brook, Thurston leaned his head against the side window and shut his eyes. Whenever the truck jolted, his head jumped but he kept resting back against the window, his arms folded and his feet already hot. When he opened his eyes and rolled down the window a twisty half mile had passed and they were approaching the small white church, a squat peaked roof serving as a steeple

above cream white translucent windows. "Looks like the church could stand a paint job. Haveta see about it this summer," Steven said as they sped by so fast Thurston tasted but didn't see dust from under the tires drift in through the window.

The membership of the Rigby United Baptist Church had never risen above forty or fallen below twenty until the previous year when the last of Thurston's cousins farming in Rigby had moved into town. Dr. Saunders served several churches in the county, alternating the times, so Thurston and his neighbours needed to check the town newspaper each week for their hours. There had been two services every Sunday until the end of evening services last winter, Dr. Saunders speaking of his "spreading territory"; everyone knew the real reason was all their empty pews.

On the Sunday morning three days before the men broke the beaver dam Thurston had watched the back of his father's head a few pews away, how it never nodded while Steven holding the hymn book moved his lips soundlessly to hymns or joined in the Responsive Reading. A spider was crawling on the floor near Thurston's brown leather shoe. Jane's little hand was hooked through his arm, her feet swinging high off the floor, and beyond Ginger his two sons shifted on the hard bare pew. Between hymns his mother at the pump organ slipped off her blue-framed glasses and held them in her lap.

The spider climbed onto his shoe but he didn't shake his foot, watching it even when Dr. Saunders began a prayer and everyone else closed their eyes. To Thurston a bird or insect, or his own hands toughened from cleaning tractor tires and pulling up carrots, was more real than God, whoever or whatever that was; Steven was the one who took seriously everything said within those walls though outside he seldom spoke of Bible things.

Suddenly Jane let out a stifled scream and pounded her frilly pink dress, the spider fell to the floor and scurried until Wheeler crushed it with a slap of his shoe that rang against the floorboards. ". . .and in the weeks ahead, Lord. Amen," Dr. Saunders finished. Then the six or seven neighbours in the pews glanced aside or behind at Thurston's family. Even Steven's head turned half way, the line at one corner of his mouth saying Can't you keep those kids quiet for one hour on Sunday? Jane was quietly giggling and Thurston wanted to say aloud for everywhere to hear Giggle all you want, come hell or high water.

After the service Steven came up to him at the back and said, "Where's that can of bug killer? Drop by here sometime next week and give all the windows a good dose, o'kay?"

"Wouldn't wanna do that," Thurston said, and putting his hand down on Jane's shoulder he laughed, "Shorty here likes bugs."

On the way out they passed the bronze wall plaque

that said: BENJAMIN LITTLE (1761-1838), A NATIVE OF HANOVER, MASSACHUSETTS, LED THE FIRST SERVICE ON THIS LAND, APRIL 1, 1790. "WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED TOGETHER IN MY NAME, THERE AM I IN THE MIDST OF THEM" MATTHEW 18:20. (Only a couple of years ago Thurston passing the plaque had noticed the date of the first service and said, "That's funny, d'you know this church started on April Fool's Day?" and Steven had replied, "Just what d'you mean by that, saying that?")

When they reached the car by a stand or spruce Wheeler lifted his foot and showed Malcolm the squashed spider stuck to the bottom of his shoe. While Thurston unbuttoned his dark brown suit and reached into his pocket for the car keys, Ginger came over holding a record album. "Look what Dot Smythe just lent me. It should sound lovely on your mother's hi-fi." Sunlight glanced off the plastic wrapper obscuring the words so Thurston looked at it from another angle. MORMON TABERNACLE CHOIR SINGS YOUR FAVOURITE HYMNS. At least a hundred open-mouthed faces looked out from the blue record jacket, shouting something at him. "Would I ever love to sing with them," Ginger said, and lowering her voice she added, "Rather than the bunch of bullfrogs we've got."

"We could always go into town on Sundays," he said, unlocking the door. "They've prob'ly got a choir there nearly good as that Mormon one."

"It's about time you suggested that." She held the

album right under her chin reading the write-up on the back, sunlight flickering on the freckles above her breasts.

On their way to the pickup truck Steven and Ann stopped by the car. His black suit still buttoned up, Steven looked at the record jacket. "Real monster of a choir there." He chuckled, "Play that record and all the chickens'll stop laying eggs."

Driving home Thurston recalled Ginger saying About time you suggested that as if he had been ailing her for years. While his children in the back seat squabbled over comic books he felt an invisible tow-rope tugging him out of Rigby and his father's shadow to the church in town. Then he seemed to see ladders propped against the Rigby church, trucks parked all around, pews piled by the road. . .a chain-saw ripping up the roof. . .an axe falling from the roof toward Steven's head. It'll kill him. . . .But haven't I dumped my whole damn life at his doorstep? Beside him Ginger said, "Y'know, I've never belonged to a church that had a choir."

Later that afternoon waves of voices from the Mormon Tabernacle Choir rolled through his father's house, a sea of sound rising around the furniture, dishes, mirrors, clocks, lamp shades and wall hangings. Everyone except Steven liked the record; he muttered, "You can't pick out a voice, not one voice from all that," and shut himself in his bedroom for a nap. Tone deaf, Thurston liked the music not so much for itself as for the way it seemed to sweep him far from

all he had ever known. As he sat in an armchair reading a recent Family Herald his feet on a footstool swayed vaguely with the music.

When they strolled back over to the house for supper Ginger said to him, "Now that's a choir."

"I betcha I know why they're such good singers." He started to laugh. "It's all the marryin those Mormons do."

"Thurston!"

Branches cracked and mud crumbled under his boots as he swung the rake. Nearby hid the beavers that were making six men and two boys fill the forest with sounds of shovels, rakes, axes, voices, and hands slapping black flies. On the edge of the dam Wheeler sat wringing out his socks into the lake. As Thurston turned he saw Malcolm up by the road sitting on a tree stump, picking at lichen.

"If my glads don't get first prize again this year I'll be real surprised," Steven said, pushing a shovel blade into mud.

"Sure you'll win." Branches dropped from the rake as Thurston shook it over the edge of the dam, silver minnows scattering. "You always win." Squinting toward the other end of the dam, he saw Larry Smythe brushing a loud chain-saw against tangled surface branches. "I'd like to try Smythe's saw, mighty slow work scratching away like this."

"You've never handled one a those. You just might drop it in the water."

"You've never laid a finger on one either, far as I know." Thurston fiercely swung the rake claws into the dam.

"Son, don't get all worked-up over nothin."

"What's this, a fight, a grown-up fight?" Wheeler laughed, approaching his father and grandfather with a rake taller than himself.

None of the other men on the dam were talking and now the Littles joined them in silence so the only voices were those of redwing blackbirds cackling in the reeds inshore from a patch of floating yellow lilies.

After another half hour when Wheeler had run up to join Malcolm and the lake was starting to edge through the middle of the dam, Thurston lit a cigarette and turned toward his father. This was no place to talk about the church yet it would be easier squinting in the sunlight here than sitting face to face with Steven in the leather chairs in the family parlour. "Dynamite would do it," Thurston said.

"What's that?"

"Dynamite would bust this in no time." Because his father usually replied to anything he said he was surprised Steven now said nothing; figuring Steven was hardly listening he looked over at Wheeler and Malcolm on shore running around the dented pickup truck. Smythe's chain-saw roaring harshly seemed to give Thurston strength to talk. "That

paint job on the church, I don't know whether we'll need it."

"Sure we will, the paint's all peelin."

"Yeah the paint's pretty bad."

"You're making about as much sense as. . . ."

"So few a us left, hardly seems worth it."

"How many cigarettes you had today?" Steven asked, his voice suddenly dry because he had not wanted to hear what his son had said.

"The kids'd like that young minister in town too, the kids. . . ."

"What's wrong with Dr. Saunders? He's younger'n me, I'll have you remember." Steven started working more quickly with the shovel while Thurston stood motionless resting his eyes on the floating lilies. "Did that Mormon whatever record put some big ideas in your head?" As Smythe's saw stopped, Steven glared over at his son's boots. "Just 'cause you had the ulcer don't think you haveta give me one too!"

"Hey Little, stop draggin your ass!" Smythe shouted. Thurston waved, threw his cigarette into the lake and pulled up a shovel stuck blade-down in the mud. Spitting a black fly away from his mouth he silently swore You aren't wrecking my plans this time, you won't be boss this time and by keeping those words inside he felt more the master of himself. With his back to his father he heaved shovelfuls of mud and sticks into the lake where the mud would disintegrate and the sticks would break apart and drift towards shore.

Now water was rushing through the middle of the dam loud and full enough that he heard a splashing, and the lake itself pushed aside mud and branches in its path.

The next Saturday Steven won the gold ribbon and three blue ribbons for his gladioli. That triumph made it both easier and harder for Thurston to drive his family into town the next morning--easier since memories of the flower show could comfort Steven, harder since Thurston knew his break from the church would cloud his father's memories. In a cushioned pew in the crowded church listening to a powerful pipe organ, he noticed a stained glass window of flowers in a field and for a moment those flowers became Steven's glads and wilted, wilted because now he was not sitting in his father's church.

On the way home Ginger and the children talked about the high dizzying ceiling, the young minister's amusing Children's Story and the purple-robed choir. Driving by the small squat-roofed building in Rigby the children already called it "Grampie's church," something divorced from them. Thurston thought the bunch a you chattering like squirrels but when Jane said "Let's go every week" and Wheeler piped in "Hot idea, Dad" and Ginger touched his leg, he felt less haunted by that square-jawed lady ancestor.

Hours later after supper he sat in his father's parlour while Steven flipped through magazines and rubbed the pulled-in muscles around his mouth, saying nothing about

it, answering curtly whenever Thurston tried to end the silence. Steven was still reading a Family Herald when Thurston stood and said "G'night," scratching his ear and almost adding Then act like a kid if you want, a sixty-five-year-old kid.

At first he planned to attend the Rigby church now and then but soon he sensed that would open healing wounds. By the end of summer in the town church Ginger was singing in the choir, the boys were Cubs, and Thurston had become an usher after buying Hushpuppies and a lime green suit. Yet he felt the harvest of all the change was lean--not much more than a gold or blue ribbon--for each morning when he woke the farm was not his and would not be until Steven died, or even when Steven died. Fool, to have ever thought one morning a week was freedom!

In the Rigby church in September Dr. Saunders announced the church would shut down in a month and encouraged the members to travel into town on Sundays; instead Steven and Ann listened to services through the static of their old wooden cabinet radio. Ann told her son one night, "I'd go, I'd like to go, but Steven'd never forgive me." On Christmas Day, relieved that his parents had not joined the town church--that would have made the church less his--he gave them a huge portable radio with a tall pull-out aerial that could pick up stations from hundreds of miles around. One afternoon a week later when everyone but him and Steven were in town he fetched a frozen side of beef

from the barn, dropped by the house and saw his father sitting in the parlour listening to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Steven looked up from the leather chair, flinching as if he had been caught at some shameful act. "Not a bad choir," he said.

TO THE STATION

After supper the two men pulled on their boots in the back doorway, crowding and bumping into one another. Ashley asked Snowman where he was going though he already knew the answer. "To the station," his brother said, tugging a striped tasseled hat over his curly hair. That hat made him look like a pudgy kid despite his thirty years.

"Make yourself useful," Ashley said, "and put your arse on the track to stop the trains."

"Let him be." In the kitchen May was wiping off the tablecloth.

"Very funny." Snowman pushed the door open.

Lightly-falling snow was gathering onto dark green trees in the back yard. While they walked along the house and out the driveway Ashley thought for a moment of asking his brother to come along and help put up the new letters in the store window. No--chances were Snowman would wrinkle and crack the letters or get all the adhesive stuck to his fingers or mix up the words so the window would say not RIDE-OUT'S HARDWARE but something like RIDOEUT'S HRADWARE.

Out front a sidewalk plow was taking care of last weekend's snowfall, shaking and roaring as it hit heavy ice. "'bout time," Ashley said, heading along the sidewalk in the

direction that had already been cleared. Snowman waved at the driver of the plow and walked springily the opposite way, starting out along the street.

The bald front of Ashley's head soon felt chilled. A dog's tracks zigzagged along the snow on the sidewalk. He asked himself what good a dog would be unless you were a bird-hunter, but who but a fool could think birds were good game? Deer and moose would good game, real game. And after you'd shot a bear, a beauty of a black rug now in your hall, duck or woodcock could never be anything. He coughed and straightened his glasses, feeling his arms ache for a rifle.

It was only a couple of blocks to the store. Then he was on a stepladder in the window with a razor blade in his hand, a rag around his neck and a pail of hot water on the ladder, scraping away frayed remnants of the letters his grandfather had stuck there. New letters that spelled the same two words were in the plastic envelope on the floor; his father, an embittered abandoned husband dead now for twenty years, had hardly kept the business going and never put up new letters. Hearing the step under him creak as his weight shifted, Ashley fleetingly saw Snowman on the ladder clumsily swing one foot in the air, fall against the window clutching the razor blade, blood running down the window. That's what would happen, sure as hell. Taking the rag from around his neck he tried not to think of his brother. "Don't get yourself all worked up," he said aloud.

With his hands clutched together between his knees Snowman sat forward on the wooden bench watching slush melt off his boots into a puddle. Through the windows of the station he watched a train starting to move, yet it seemed the room rather than the train was moving. When the windows stopped vibrating with its noise, he glanced at the girl sitting next to him and asked, "You ain't from here, eh?"

Her long black hair hid her face from him. She pushed her mittens into the pockets of her pale green ski-jacket, read the ticket resting on her knee and looked toward the clock at the other end of the room. On the bench under the clock an old woman was coughing into a plaid handkerchief and a thin-moustached boy about the girl's age was staring over at her. She quickly looked back at the ticket.

"You must be pretty rich," Snowman said, seeing out of the corner of his eye her strawberry-red suitcase.

"Rich? Not me," she said wearily.

"That makes two a us." He sat back and moved his feet out beyond the puddle. "I can't get rich 'cause the only job I've got is doin the floors here on the weekend. When I worked in my brother's store the money always mixed me up. In school I was no good in Arithmetic. You good in Arithmetic?"

"Math, you mean. Not very." She put part of the

ticket into her mouth.

"You're like me then. Numbers always mixed me up. The guy over behind the glass you bought your ticket from, I went to school with him. He and Ashley're friends though Ashley's a lot older'n Hugh. They go huntin and sometimes--you like to hear a secret?"

"Not especially." She was flipping the ticket in her hand. He noticed her look at the thin-moustached boy and the boy raise his eyebrows.

"Ashley even shot a bear once," he went on, picking his chapped lips. "There's a big bear rug in the hall--he gets madder'n hell if you stand on it with dirty boots. He and Hugh hunt outa season sometimes. They shot a deer at night round this time last year. Next mornin May told me Ashley'd just been out visitin Hugh, but in the night I'd looked out the window and seen him and Hugh gettin in the car with flashlights and a rifle. I knew there wasn't no meat left from his legal huntin in October 'cause I'd just been lookin in the freezer that day--thought I'd give the cat some fish. I like to treat the cat once in a while but May don't think too much a that. Anyhow when we started having mince pies and things again I asked May where she got it, thought we'd used up all the deer. 'Naw, it's amazin how far ya can stretch it,' she said. 'Aint it?' I said. They think I'm dumb."

"Can I buy cigarettes here?" asked the girl.

He looked at her hair, long and dark against her

green jacket. "Oh no, 'fraid not. If I was runnin the station I'd put a cigarette machine here for you."

"It's o'kay."

"I could ask Hugh for a cigarette. Look, he's smokin away there now."

"Don't bother."

"I could run to the store."

"Please--don't," the girl said, turning to him and shutting her eyes half way.

The woman with the plaid handkerchief was standing by the glass, speaking to Hugh and pointing at the clock over her head. The boy's head was against the wall, his arms folded and his eyes shut.

"Am I borin you? I don't wanna bore you."

She folded her arms and shut her eyes.

He slid his arm absentmindedly along the back of the bench, then when his hand brushed the girl's shoulder, slid it back. "I'm glad he fired me. I never liked workin in his store. Everyone gave me funny looks if I didn't find what they wanted in two seconds flat. What good was it to know all the names of thiggermajigs? It just mixed me up. That's a nice thing on your arm there."

The sleeve of the girl's jacket had crept up almost to her elbow. Opening her eyes she pulled it back down over her wrist. "It's just a bracelet."

"Real gold?"

"You crazy?"

"Who gave it to you? Lemme guess--your boy friend." For the first time he smiled at her, crookedly, tightly.

"Mister, you're awfully nosey."

"I'll go if you want me to."

"Yes."

When she put a stick of bubblegum into her mouth he took that as a sign for him to stay and said, "I knew a girl who wore a lot a bracelets. You like to hear a secret?"

She chewed the bubblegum slowly, her jaws moving up and down.

"I saw Margaret Wright last year in the K Mart in the city. Way back in school I sorta took a shine to her and one day after school I asked her out for a ice cream. You know what she said? She said--" he tried to laugh but couldn't "--she said, 'I haveta go home and feed my gold-fish.'" Then he did let out a brief laugh. "Now when I go into the city I'm scared I'll bump into her again. That other time she walked right by me. She was some good-lookin--like you, miss."

"Would you lay off for a while?"

Outside, the whistle of a train split the winter air. At the other end of the room passengers began moving toward the door. "Thank God," the girl said, standing.

"I'll take your suitcase for you."

"Go away, just go away."

"It must be too heavy for you." He picked it up and lifted it as high as his waist. "What d'you have in it?"

"Mister, would you mind your own fucking business?"

When he set it down gently she grabbed the handle and began walking briskly toward the door.

The thin-moustached boy held the door open for her. As passengers carried luggage to the edge of the pavement near the tracks Snowman sauntered outside and crouched on the pavement under the station windows. He took out his hat and tugged it down over his ears. When the train stopped, drowning out all voices beyond him, the girl was the first to climb onto it. The boy followed, carrying his nondescript suitcase in one hand and her strawberry-red suitcase in the other. Snowman's mouth felt dry.

With the train rumbling into the distance he walked home along the tracks, train heat still floating over the rails, pressing against his pants. He passed Hugh's field where he had once seen a bear at this hour running fast like a big dog toward thick trees. After Hugh's field there came the yellowed back of the bowling alley and the snowed-in lot of the town's used-car dealer. Taking extra long and extra short steps to keep from tripping on cross-ties, he thought of what he had once seen in a dream: Ashley kneeling in the hall before bedtime kissing his bear rug. That made him smile, even made the stars seem to glitter more intensely above the dark trees, but he couldn't laugh, he couldn't cry. The train heat was gone, the air over the tracks cold against his legs.

Ashley carried a bottle of beer into the den and saw his wife in the armchair. Aching from all his reaching on the ladder, he lifted his shoulders and breathed in deep. The scene on TV flashed between a smiling fiddler and dancers in checked dresses and shirts. The man calling the dances was clapping his hands. In the armchair May said, "Let me watch the end of this before you switch over to that stupid spy show."

He pulled off his shoes and stretched out on the couch. The cat was lying on a pillow beyond his feet, wide yellow eyes staring. "Want some fish, you fat thing?" he asked.

"Don't you start giving it fish too."

As he stroked the cat's neck with his toes he said to it, "Think you're the Queen, the goddamn Queen, eh?" The cat turned its head but as soon as he pulled his foot away it started staring at him again. Thumping, banging sounds came from the back doorway. "He gettin home now?"

"Who else could it be?"

He raised the pillow under his head, glad Snowman was home to watch the show with him. The Man From U. N. C. L. E. was one of the few things in life they both liked.

"Where'd he go tonight?" she asked, picking up her tea cup.

"To the station, where else? Stop staring at me," he said to the cat. "I wish Hugh would tell him he can't go there anymore just to loaf. There's gotta be better ways for him to spend his time."

"Like what?" The girl dancers were being tossed in the air, their dresses billowing.

"I don't know. There's gotta be something."

"Don't worry about him so much," she whispered as Snowman walked into the den, flushed from the cold.

The next night Ashley and May in matching red bowling shirts bowled a game while waiting for Snowman. Sitting in the chair attached to the score desk she said, "Don't bawl him out just because you've got that headache."

Panting, Snowman arrived, dropped a pair of black bowling shoes onto the floor and struggled out of his coat. Ashley looked at his watch then at his brother, back at his watch then at his brother, but he said nothing. "Looks like I'm a bit late," Snowman said, sitting on the bench beyond the score desk.

"More like a lot," Ashley said. He slumped onto the bench and watched Snowman beside him pulling off his boots. Stroking the bald front of his head he asked, "Goin around again talking to girls, making fools of us?"

"He doesn't just talk to girls," May said, touching Snowman's knee. "I've seen him talk to old men and all sorts too."

"Sure, when there aren't any sweet young things around, then he talks to old men."

"You talk in the store alla time," Snowman said, lacing up a bowling shoe.

"They're my customers and friends. I wouldn't talk to someone I don't know from Adam--unless I had business with 'em." Ashley stood and pressed his knuckles against his temples. "Soon as I have a leak we're gonna start that game." As he turned toward the bathroom they saw blotches of sweat staining the back of his red shirt.

"He's in a sweet mood tonight," May said.

Snowman looked into her eyes and squinted. "Ashley hates my guts."

Over her shoulder he saw an old couple several lanes down starting a game. The woman bowled a ball, the man jumped from his seat, they hugged.

"He just gets snappy when he has those headaches. Don't pay any attention to him." Grey hairs May always tried to keep combed under had fallen onto her forehead. She brushed them back with her fingers. "Don't forget, it was Ashley who twisted Hugh's arm to get you the cleaning job."

Snowman looked at the floor. "He hates my guts."

She watched him picking his chapped lips.

Before leaving the bathroom Ashley splashed water over his face. Outside the bathroom he stopped at the Coke machine and felt in his pocket for change. If he was a idiot a honest-to-God idiot he thought if it was that bad it would

be better and if I could just hit him if I could ever hit him it would be better. As the first Coke rumbled down through the machine he wondered if his father had ever hit a man, maybe in one of the afternoons he had spent drinking in the Legion beer hall leaving the store to Ashley and the man clerk. When his father disappeared the clerk would ask, "Where'd your Pop take off to?" and Ashley would say, "Wasn't feeling too good, wasn't feeling too good," and the clerk would say, "Beats me why he doesn't just forget your Mom after all this time." Another Coke banged down through the machine. He looked down the lanes and saw Snowman on the bench staring at the floor; he asked himself if all Snowman recalled of their father was a man in a kitchen late at night mumbling at a bare table.

Balancing three bottles of Coke in his hands as he approached the lane, Ashley called, "Any bets who'll win tonight?"

"Bet I lose," Snowman said.

"That's too sure a win." After sliding a Coke along the score table by May, Ashley sat back beside Snowman and pushed a Coke into his hand. "Try something less sure to happen."

"I bet Ashley'll shut up," May said, "and leave Snowman alone for five minutes."

Snowman was watching the old couple several lanes down. The woman was arguing with the man, held the score sheet off the table and pointed at it. Snowman said, "Could

I go with you next time you hunt bears?"

"Christ, your mind jumps around. Well we'll see."

"He's not gonna get another bear. That was just luck before," May said.

"Luck? You didn't say that at the time. You were pretty proud of me. Seems our memories are going around here." Ashley shook his head, frowning with mock sadness.

"When I saw that bear in Hugh's field I wasn't a bit scared,"Snowman said.

"Prob'ly you were just imaginin."

"You never believe me." Snowman's pudgy fingers ruffled his hair. "Well I know some things you don't."

"Like?"

"Don't tell him. They're your secrets," May said.

"D'you tell the sweet young things about some shack off in the woods?"

May angrily banged her Coke down on the score table.

"What great secrets d'you tell 'em?"

"More'n you'll ever know, more'n you'll ever know."

"Secrets, my arse. Come on, let's bowl." Ashley reached for the pencil.

The girl's blonde hair, sunny where it touched the collar of her long black coat, was cut short and curled tightly. She seemed older than the girl in the green ski-jacket Snowman had sat beside two nights earlier. An open

paperback book rested in her lap.

He put a finger in his mouth to pick out a piece of food from between his teeth. "I'm hired to talk to you guys."

The girl's voice was soft like that voice of a younger girl. "They hired you to. . . ?"

"The guy over there you bought your ticket from, he's in charge here. But don't ask him. He don't know I've been hired."

"He's in charge. . .he doesn't know you were hired?" Her blue eyes turned to Snowman.

He looked away. "He's pretty dumb. He's like Ashley."

"Who's Ashley? What're you talking about?" She fingered one of her ear-rings, shut the paperback book and kept it resting in her lap. Snowman saw a castle and a running woman on the cover.

"They don't know anything," he said.

The girl picked up the book and slipped it into the leather shoulderbag slumped next to her on the bench. When she glanced at her slender watch, Snowman saw it sparkling.

"Don't you believe me?"

"Believe what?"

"I'm hired to talk to you."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You read books?" He reached over and touched her leather shoulderbag.

"I think I'll go sit somewhere else."

Against her black coat her fingers fidgetted, smooth pale fingers, pink polish on the long nails. He shifted his boots and looked away.

Just inside the door Ashley was stamping snow off his boots. "Car's outside if you want a drive!" he called. "She's snowing like a bitch out there!"

"I'm busy right now!" Snowman replied.

"Get a move on!" Ashley raked snow off his hair and threw it onto the floor.

"I'm goin home later!"

"You want to end up buried in a snowbank?" Ashley started walking toward Snowman and the girl, taking off his steamed-up glasses.

"He hates my guts," Snowman said to the girl.

When Ashley reached them he took hold of Snowman's shoulder and said, "O'kay come on." He pulled a handkerchief from his pants pocket and wiped his glasses with it. "Is he bugging you,miss?" he asked, squinting at the girl. "Don't believe everything he's told you. He's full of tall tales."

"Very funny," Snowman said.

"I hope my train gets here soon," the girl said.

Shoving the handkerchief back into his pocket, Ashley asked Snowman, "Do I haveta drag you out?"

"Go on, leave me alone."

With a strong hand Ashley gripped Snowman's shoulder and pulled him forward.

"Piss off, piss off."

"No hat tonight? You'll be hacking and coughing tomorrow." Ashley pulled his brother to his feet with one arm wrapped around his back, while Snowman tried to push his hands into his brother's face. They nearly fell onto the girl; clucking her tongue she stood and walked toward the bathroom glancing over her shoulder at them. By the time she disappeared Ashley had pushed Snowman half way to the door holding onto the back of Snowman's coat. He tightened his grip and said, "Quit thrashin around or you'll rip your coat." They nearly bumped into a woman holding a baby dressed in a blue hooded snowsuit. "You're making a goddamn fool of the both of us," Ashley said lowly.

"I don't care who I make a fool of. I've got my job to do." Squirming, Snowman dragged his feet.

"Your job? On a Thursday night? If you don't straighten up and walk with me through that door. . . .That's more like it, Brother." He thumped Snowman lightly on the back.

During the night fresh snow had covered all the man and bird tracks and spruce needles in the back yard. Ashley turned from the window in his pajamas and saw May in bed stretching her arms over her head, her knuckles knocking on the headboard. "I'll get Snowman up so he can start shovelling."

"Go put the coffee on first," she said.

"D'you hear him last night? Seemed he went into the

bathroom every five minutes."

"He was some down-in-the-mouth before bed." Throwing off the blankets she swung her feet onto the floor. On the edge of the bed she stayed sitting; she had slept with curlers in her hair. "He was really fuming about you picking him up at the station. He didn't say a word but I could tell." She began pulling the curlers out of her hair, dropping them into a basket on the bedside table. "He only drank half his glass of milk."

"He didn't have a hat. He would've caught a cold walking home."

"I'd sure like that coffee."

He walked to the closet, pulled his bathrobe off its hook and slipped it on.

Out in the hall the cat tried to wrap itself around his legs. "Good Morning, Your Majesty."

On the kitchen table store bills and orders he had been looking at late last night were scattered about. He gathered them together and dumped them into a paper bag on the chair. The clock over the stove told him he had an hour before opening the store.

He switched on a burner and began the coffee, took a can of cat food from the cupboard, opened it and scooped the food into the cat's dish. "You'd starve if it wasn't for me," he told the cat. "You know that? You'd goddamn well starve."

From the fridge he took a can of tomato juice, then

he tipped it to his mouth and drank. Shoving it back into the fridge he saw a half-full glass of milk lower down, a curve of dried milk near the rim.

The kitchen floor was cold on his bare feet so he walked back to the bedroom to dress for work. Just as he entered the room he heard something bang against the back door. "You hear that?" she asked, dropping another curler into the basket.

"Who the hell could it be? Snowman's never up this early." He lifted his pants off the back of a chair.

"You didn't forget to lock up last night? Maybe wind got hold of the door."

"Doesn't sound like wind to me."

They heard heavy boots on the back steps. In his pants he walked to the window and pressed his face against the glass to look sideways. "Hey it is him!"

She pulled the last curler from her hair and shook her head several times.

"What? That's my rug he's got there!" Ashley threw back the lock and pushed the window up. Putting his head out the window he shouted, "Snowman, what the hell d'you think. . . .What the. . . ? He's got the garden rake!"

"You'd better shut the window. Do your yelling out by the door."

"What the fuck? He's hitting my rug with the rake!"

Now she was beside him, leaning forward the edging her head out the window. Snowman's face was fiery red. He

swung the rake so hard they could hear it hitting the rug. "I told you he was down-in-the-mouth," May said as Ashley ran back to the chair and began slipping on a shirt. She stayed with her head partly out the window, shivering.

While Ashley buttoned up his shirt he heard Snowman's voice far off. He cried, "You know how much that rug's worth? What's he saying, what's he saying?"

"He said, 'Ashley can't drag me out of my job.'" She pushed down and locked the window.

"That happened five years ago!" Ashley cried, pulling on a sweater and stepping into his slippers at the same time.

Muttering he ran through the hall and kitchen, knocked over a bag of garbage and stepped on the cat's tail. The cat screamed and ran under the table.

He didn't stop for his coat or boots. The light hurt his eyes as he barged out the door. Within seconds his slippers felt wet. Nearly slipping he rushed down the snowy steps and shouted, "I'll kill you, you hear? I'll kill you!"

Wading toward his brother he stumbled through snow. Snowman stood by the rug whipping it with the rake. The tassel of his hat danced. Tufts of bear fur blew across the snow.

Ashley grabbed his hands from behind and twisted until the rake dropped. When his brother turned around Ashley glared at him, gripping his shoulders. Then he dropped his hands, went backward a step and rammed Snowman in the

face with a fist. Snowman staggered backward. "You gone crazy?" Ashley asked, crouching to drag the rug out of the snow. He threw one arm around his face when he felt a boot kick his forehead.

Snowman backed up and put his mitten to his nose. Tears and blood--he had never known they tasted so good.

Behind the glass of the screen door May stood in her nightgown with a cup of coffee in her hand and looked out at the two brothers. The sunlight slanting through the door was so bright she couldn't see until she shaded her eyes with her free hand.

WOMAN ON HILL

I

Whenever she told people where he worked they said, "Isn't that nice. I s'pose he travels a lot," and she had to answer no, he had all his work in the station and never travelled on the trains. Each noon in a restaurant she forgot the soup tureens, figurines and teapots she sold at Wickman's and Ward's and pictured him in the CNR basement opening his black lunchbox, touching sandwiches she had touched. Each night washing that lunchbox in hot water ("Mandy, once a week'd be enough"; "Now Roderick, who knows what fumes and things're in the air over there?") she dug the dishcloth into each corner as if searching for a piece of the station. Yet his worked remained far from her even when she smelled his blackened grey shirt. He helped repair trains; that was all she knew for sure, though she pictured monstrous wrenches and vats of oily fluids.

Their house sat half way up a steep street. Beyond the foot of the street tracks ran stretching away to join other tracks in a windswept barrenness that led to docks, storage towers and fog-obscured ships. Whereas her neighbours likely considered the harbour and the river the foundation of their city, the city of her feelings was less a port than a hilly fastness fastened to the earth by steel rails.

From above the tracks were ribs shaping and guarding the insides of the earth. Roderick's ribs; some days she loved him so much the city was his body, the blows of his hammer almost reaching her from far beyond the other side of the harbour as she walked down to catch the bus, tracks below half invisible in the fog.

The other women at Wickman's and Ward's gave her a burnished brass teapot when she left after working there all during her last decade at home and her first five childless years of marriage. Only a week after Stuart's birth Roderick in his scratchy uniform kissed her and chucked his infant son under the chin before leaving to climb onto a ship with other conscripted soldiers. Though she then cried herself to sleep many nights, Stuart's birth made his father seem less absent; he had Roderick's large-ridged ears and his faintly-haired round head was almost comically like his balding father's.

In the following months she tremulously refused to read newspaper reports about the War and felt nothing unusual about being a new mother at the age of thirty-six except when, riding on the bus with Stuart in her arms, she saw younger army wives with babies in their arms. She thought kindly of them until a pimpled girl mother rocking a baby on her knee said to Stuart, "Nice to have Grammie care for you?" Back at home she saw in the bedroom mirror that though she had always looked beyond her age without an extra ounce of flesh on her face, now that flesh was shrinking further, crow's feet cornering her eyes and a single crease deepening across

her forehead. Her skin no longer shone.

Stuart's first birthday was still months away when she noticed the red splotches on his stomach. For a day she thought it was only a rash and rubbed lotion over him but when the splotches spread to his neck and arms she called the doctor. Her knees weakened when he said measles. As they took Stuart from her at the hospital she gently tugged his ear as she often had Roderick's. The next day his eyes were feverishly puffed; underneath a face-mask her lips trembled and made kissing movements to him. Before the end of the week his fever suddenly stopped and his eyes shut forever. Staying at her mother's during the week following the funeral she felt like a baby herself whenever Aunt Jess on the couch held an arm around her shoulders.

Her letters to Roderick said nothing about the measles though one mentioned she was clerking again at Wickman's and Ward's, which she expected would puzzle him. The night he returned nearly two years after leaving, her eyes dropped when he asked for Stuart and he started walking through all the apartment, then ran bumping against doorways and even looked down into the cellar as if she might've hidden Stuart there. Catching up to him in the kitchen she threw her arms around his back while he murmured, "Is there a picture of him, a picture I can keep?" Ignoring his tea he sat staring at the small picture between his hands on the tablecloth while she wanted to sit on his knee and feel his hands under her dress so fiercely her hand shook near the

brass teapot. When they were finally in bed he did not turn to her though she knew he was lying on his back awake. She fell asleep disappointed and ashamed of her disappointment.

After a week he still had not touched her in bed and she feared it was more than his mourning for Stuart that held him back, so she rubbed more rouge into her cheeks, brushed on brighter lipstick and combed her hair down over the crease across her forehead. Then she lifted to the back of the closet all vertically-striped clothes that might exaggerate her thinness, and the next day wore a horizontally-striped dress that gave her a wider look. Changing clothes again after work she stood near him in just her underthings laughing giddily at nothing; when she looked around he blushed and turned away.

Hours later she woke in the darkness with him squeezing her breasts and mumbling, "She. . .no one, no one." His hand fell away and he droned unintelligibly in his sleep. "She. . .no one," when those words surfaced again she ran her fingers over his face and punched his shoulder until he woke. "Who's no one?" she whispered, starting to whimper. "Am I no one, that what you think of me now?"

"Oh Mandy no," he said, putting his mouth against her shoulder.

"You were dreaming about me, saying those things!" she cried, no longer whispering.

"Not you. . . ."

"Who else, who else'd you be dreaming about?" she

cried, pulling away from him.

"It wasn't a nice dream, it was a nightmare. . .that woman."

"What woman?" Her fingers dug into his shoulder and began shaking him. "You had somebody there?"

He laid his hand over her closest hand. "She doesn't matter--she didn't even speak English."

"Who doesn't matter, who? You had a girlfriend there?"

"No," he laughed faintly.

Lifting away his hand he rolled on his side away from her. "Who, who was it?" she cried, lurching toward him and striking one foot against the backs of his knees.

"Stop kicking and I'll tell you. . . .Just a girl we paid for one night--that always happens in the army." Rolling back toward her he reached out his arms saying, "It's a terrible secret for a man to keep from his wife. I--"

Sweat broke out over her face and her legs began moving under the blankets. In the darkness she flung her feet over the side of the bed, stumbled to the lamp and gropingly found the switch. One of his arms hung down toward the floor, every hair now an ugly bristle to her. At her dresser she pulled open drawers until she found the letters he had written from Europe, then she rushed to the bed and began tearing them apart and throwing them at him crying, "I was as lonely as you, I could've brought a man here!" As he burrowed his face into the pillow white and blue bits

of letters scattered over the bed and his dotted pajama back. When all the letters were torn apart she pulled blankets from the closet and wandered out to the livingroom couch, feeling her way along the walls.

In the morning she woke to sounds of a lighter tearing: someone rolling off pieces of Scotch tape, gentle tearing sounds. Passing the bedroom she saw him sitting crosslegged on the floor taping together all the letters spread across the carpet. Her eyes softened until he looked up smiling, then she recalled all he had said the night before and fled to the bathroom telling herself Two beds, now we need two beds.

II

Now she washed his lunchbox once a week rather than every night and cut his sandwiches into halves rather than four triangles. As she walked down for the bus the tracks below were not lines of strength but crushed ribs, weeds flourishing and a stray dog now and then sniffing the rails. Each time he sat on the edge of her bed she thought of the woman he had paid for and turned to the wall saying, "Do I have to sleep on the couch, do you want me to freeze out there?" Sometimes when he groaned in sleep she felt sorry for him yet only drew her legs up tighter toward herself. After a year he gave up asking for more than a good-night peck on her cheek; soon he did not even bother with that.

Their separate beds were seven years old in the

spring she left Wickman's and Ward's for the final time, so dizzy in her last month she'd dropped a box of Wedgwood from a ladder shattering the glass case below. She blamed her dizziness on irritating customers who tut-tutted the prices and never knew what they wanted. After her resignation her head still spun and only when she, Roderick and two of his Legion friends were watching the Coronation on the Television did she finally realize Maybe this's it, what they say happens to all women, even the Queen. No one had told her what to expect. The next afternoon she visited a doctor who gave her a booklet called A Change of Life, which she hid in her dresser and did not read until the morning when Roderick was at work. Afterward she tore the booklet apart, dropped the pieces into the toilet and pushed the flush.

A week before the Coronation was on Roderick had bought the Television, the first on their street though they were no richer than anyone else. "That's sure a clever little thing," he said and she said, "If it's so clever why does it just buzz half the time?" She grew angry at the foreign box as if it were the cause of her dizziness. However, by summer her head no longer spun and even when she cut her finger poking a needle through cloth or peeling potatoes she wanted to see water rather than blood flow from the cut. Some days she felt like one of the gulls drifting effortlessly and soundlessly around the field above the bus-stop.

There was a hill on the hill of their street, flat-

topped and ending in cliffs. During that first summer of the Television she began taking regular walks there. She would head a few houses up the street into a dirt road between the church lawn and the field of yellow straw, then start up the field passing a Union Jack on a tall pole and a black-headed air-raid siren. The flat top of the hill stretched like this: straw; straw with patches of sand; sand alone; sand with flat rocks; flat rocks alone; the edge, the sheer empty air. She would go beyond the straw but not beyond the sand.

Below the cliffs lay the anthills where her father had landed after his fall. The hill had been forbidden territory to her, then only four. He had been out walking alone and minutes after the fall a stranger spotted him below on his back in the sand, jerking his legs like an insect's. The last month of his life he spent in a hospital, paralyzed and speechless. In the following years Mother told Mandy almost nothing about him, but often when Mother was out of the house Aunt Jess--a spinster who'd always lived with her sister--showed Mandy photographs of him in his Boer War uniform shaking Lord Roberts' hand, on the deck of a ship clowning with a life-preserver around his head, in a garden with his arm around Aunt Jess. "Oh look, their wedding pictures!" Mandy would exclaim and her aunt would flip the page saying, "We don't want to look at those." Sometimes Aunt Jess just sat talking almost to herself while young Mandy listened, gripping her braids. Towards the end, she learned, her parents had argued heatedly about whether to move out of the

city to Mispec; days before Father's accident Mother had moved into the back room with Mandy, leaving him alone in the room next to Aunt Jess. "She called him a monster just because. . .he needed comfort from me," Aunt Jess said to herself behind a lifted teacup. Years passed before the girl with long braids first suspected what might have (might have, might have, but prob'ly hadn't) happened in the week before Father's accident.

On the hill wind would blow around Mandy tugging at her kerchief until her cheeks flushed and her eyes watered so the dark green and dark brown houses below blurred and jiggled. When she would think jumped she would frantically add might have, only might have.

Before heading back out the dirt road she would turn and look at the grey stone church, the steeple stained and blotched in the foggy air. Though never a religious man Father had faithfully attended church alone saying, "If you don't go, the minister might take it into his mind not to bury you when your time comes"--one of his jokes, said Aunt Jess. Ever since Roderick's return from War Mandy had sat in the church many Sunday mornings, accompanied by him only at Christmas and Easter. She went for the lofty ceiling and light trickling in through coloured windows, but most of all for the walk over and the walk back. Nothing seemed lonelier to her than a man leaving church with nobody by his side.

III

Walks on the hill were the luckiest discovery of her fourth decade, secondhand books the same for her fifth decade.

Roderick and she did not often take the bus together but that Friday night when he decided to have his fringe of hair trimmed, she said she'd like to visit Wickman's and Ward's for the first time in years. Across the bridge they stopped off the bus by King Square where a Santa Claus stood on the sidewalk ringing a bell beside a sign saying HELP UNFORTUNATE CHILDREN. After Roderick threw a quarter into the money-pot she said, "None of that money prob'ly ever gets near children," bitter with the Santa Claus because Stuart had not lived to celebrate the season. "I'll do what I want with my money," he said, starting across the street to the barber-shop while she continued along the side of the square.

Snow fell erratically through the yellow glow of street-lamps and melted over the muskrat fur of her old coat. Though she had not really wanted to visit Wickman's and Ward's, only needing an excuse to go downtown, now she went through the revolving doors anyway and weaved around the familiar glass cases. Every so often she glanced at young lady clerks whose eyes said <u>You don't belong here</u>. As she leaned against an open counter a small cake of snow slid off her handbag onto a sparkling china saucer. "Hey! Be more careful," scolded a clerk. Blindly Mandy hurried toward the door, then just before pushing outside she turned and said to the whole room, "I know more about this place than you, than

any of you!" and almost laughed when several bewildered faces turned.

Wandering and ignoring most store windows she heard a muffled swishing of snow in the sky. The moment a man with gift-wrapped parcels under both arms bumped her she almost kicked him, hating those stores and streets, wanting to rise off the sidewalk and merge with that drifting swishing above. In her ears her heart made the same sound as the snow.

HUCK'S said curly letters burned into wood high over a store front. Despite having seen the place all her life she had never entered it. She did not know why she now turned the knob and pushed the door open.

Old things everywhere: china, flat-irons, a pair of snowshoes, lamps, lanterns, a stuffed owl, footstools, paintings, frames, a pile of faded postcards, a statue of an Egyptian pharaoh. In the air hung a heavy smell, a smell not of decay but of exotic secrets. Slowly she moved to the back of the room, smiling at and touching the head of the stuffed owl, not staying long over anything before the back. There a long shelf of books ran the length of the room.

Golden designs spiralled over the green cover of the book in her hands. The golden edging of the pages had faded yet somehow even in the dim light it shone, however dirty its shine. As she opened the book it crackled, a cry of gladness for being opened at last. From the title she realized the spiralling designs were shaped like C's. But neither title nor author mattered.

Near the door the man behind a glass counter seemed to be sleeping. In front of him she knocked the snap of her handbag on the counter and asked how much. "Three dollars, ma'am. Hmmm, you read poetry?" "No," she said, hugging the book.

They were on the bus lifting back onto the bridge before she told Roderick. "What d'you want with a smelly old book?" he mumbled.

"You're a good one to talk, all those stinky things the barber dumps on your head." Holding the opened book to her nose she breathed in with deep satisfaction, then she lifted it over to his face. "Tell me if that isn't a nice smell,"

"Don't, don't. You're acting like somebody in one of those dens--opium dens. Are you going to read it?"

"Read?"

Saturday morning she was up early, dragging an empty bookcase from the back room into the livingroom. The bookcase was so heavy she stopped several times to catch her breath. As she reached the entrance to the livingroom Roderick appeared in his pajamas, scratching his stomach and saying, "Are you crazy? A bookcase with one book in it will look like hell."

"I guess you're right. So I'll have to buy more books."

But first she bought sandpaper and varnish, and for two days in the kitchen gave the bookcase a perfect smoothness

and a deep glow, her body sweating and her arms aching.

Over the following months and years the bookcase slowly filled in. Oddly no smell was added to the livingroom. However, she only had to bring one of the books to her face and open it for that smell to be released, that fresh antique smell whose freshness still rolled out, even as gold in the faded edgings of pages still shone out.

Over a game of checkers one day her friend Lily asked, "Are you ever going to read any of those books?"

"Read?"

IV

She did not think of Father's crushed legs and Roderick's crushed legs at the same time until she stood behind the glass watching doctors' gloved hands move over Roderick. Already people from the station had told her of his boot sticking in a rail, his arms waving until he lurched over to save the upper half of his body seconds before the train hit him. Even if it had been on a dark night with no witnesses she still would've known his boot had stuck under a rail (no <u>might have, might have</u> plaguing her) yet behind the glass she saw his legs and Father's legs piled together, broken by unforgiving hearts. Reliving the day she demanded he buy two beds she cried silently <u>I'm the monster</u>. When a nurse tugged at her arm saying, "Mrs. Bancroft, sit down and rest for a while," she pulled away snapping, "Go away, mind your own business," wanting to smash through the glass with her

hands and rush over to lie with him on the table letting him do all he wanted with her (now nearly seventy she shocked herself) until his body healed.

During the first week he did not feel much like talking. Then the doctors took off his right leg, keeping on his left leg though in x-rays they showed her nearly every bone looked shattered. His left leg encrusted in a cast and raised in a sling, colour crept back into his narrowed round face while she watched from a chair at the head of the bed. Sitting inches away from a long tube that ran from his side draining murky fluids, she felt sick as if the fluids were poisons she had given him. Usually his hands were under the sheets and even when they were above, fingernails white and knuckle gaps hollow, she did not hold his hand; their hands had not joined in so many years all reaching seemed unbearably difficult.

On Monday afternoon of the third week before leaving for the hospital she picked a book at random from her bookcase and dropped it into her handbag. On the bus hearing passengers talk about the current heat-wave she slipped out the book, The Poems of Whittier, opened it to about the middle and began reading here and there. Though she knew most of the words the poem seemed in a foreign language. When she reached a long section about snow she wondered if Roderick would like to hear about snow in the heat-wave. Might even cool him down she guessed, then almost giggled at herself for thinking so foolishly.

The bus jolted up onto the bridge. Wishing snow would come down and cover her in her sleeveless dress she looked up, not to the passengers but to the sky and harbour through the windows. Cautiously she glanced across the bus to two silent teenagers, a girl on the knee of a boy. The girl was holding a tennis racket pressing her nose against the webbing; the boy blew on her neck, long strands of hair lifting. A smell of young sweat started rolling over Mandy so she fanned herself with the book.

For once the hospital was cooler than outdoors yet when conversation with Roderick became awkward she pulled out the book and found the poem about snow. "I've got a surprise for you. I'm going to read from this--this smelly old book." He chuckled. Under the book her knees shook as she haltingly read:

> With mittened hands, and caps drawn low,
> To guard our necks and ears from snow,
> We cut the solid whiteness through.
> And, where the drift was deepest, made
> A tunnel walled and overlaid
> With dazzling crystal. . . .

She had read for less than a minute when she looked at his cast and said, "I thought this would make you feel cooler." She glanced at his face, saw he didn't understand. "I'm--I'm sorry, Roderick, I thought you'd like to hear about snow in this hot weather."

"Oh that's why the snow!" he said, smiling. "I'm so stupid. It's nice, Mandy, nice. Go on."

It was hard to continue reading for Roderick's last words confused her, he had been comforting her. When she saw

herself in the bed with a cast around her leg and him sitting in the chair dressed in his Legion jacket and good shoes, she swallowed in the middle of a word. "I'll never like poems," she said, snapping the book shut. "It's all silly."

"No no I like it."

"It's all silly," she repeated, dropping the book into her handbag.

A nurse entered the room, followed by Thomas Who Laughs and Wendall Who Smiles, the only men from the station Mandy had ever met. She thought of them as Thomas Who Laughs and Wendall Who Smiles because whenever she pictured Thomas who ran the station magazine shop he was laughing yellow-toothed, and whenever she pictured Wendall he was smiling fat-lipped. Wendall Who Smiles mopped his brow with a handkerchief and said, "She's a scorcher all right. I told Tom here, 'Too hot to work today. Let's go see ol' Rod.'"

They sat in two chairs beyond the foot of the bed. Soon she felt she was back on the bus, silent, keeping her eyes away from everyone around her, holding her bare thin arms close to herself. She couldn't talk to Wendall Who Smiles because he had almost admitted they just wanted an afternoon off work rather than cared about Roderick, she couldn't talk to Thomas Who Laughs because a smell of liquor drifted off him. During the fifteen minutes they stayed she didn't look at them once; she looked at them only when they stood to leave, and seeing them smile and laugh she concluded they'd been smiling and laughing the entire

time.

Wendall Who Smiles was out in the hall when Thomas Who Laughs lingered in the doorway and shouted to Roderick, "What a vacation! You lucky dog, take it easy! You lucky dog!"

Blood beat in her temples as the door hissed shut behind Thomas who Laughs, who had said vacation hinting Roderick had planned the accident. "I could boot that man in the rear," she said, clutching her dress at the knees. "Imagine saying 'you lucky dog'!"

"That's just how my friends talk."

"Two silly clowns."

"You're calling my friends clowns?" His voice cut at her for the first time since before the accident. Then her hands uncontrollably jammed together and he said more softly, "Now now." Smiling he lifted one hand her way but her hands, she felt with horror, were locked together and would not move toward him.

V

On the bus the next afternoon Lily sitting beside Mandy held the checkerboard and plastic bag of checkers on her lap. In the hospital Roderick played the first game with his wife, his head propped up by pillows and the checkerboard on a tray where his right leg had been. All three of them laughed at Mandy's absentmindedness; whenever she made an illegal move Roderick lightly slapped the back of her hand,

the quick pressure of his fingers making her even more absentminded.

She had lost the game and moved to one of the chairs beyond the foot of the bed with Lily now in the chair beside Roderick, when Mr. Cornwall the young minister arrived and sat beside her. Glancing over she saw nothing but a fine blond mustache and a stiff collar. When Roderick introduced Lily and Mr. Cornwall to one another Lily pushed her glasses back up her nose and said, "Howdy doody." That howdy doody startled Mandy, and she was further surprised when the checkers game continued and Mr. Cornwall began telling her he'd always preferred crokinoles. "Used to wear my fingers raw, just raw playing it all the time." Finally he stretched out one arm with his black sleeve sliding up, snapped two fingers loudly at an imaginary crokinole, and chuckled in her face.

Baffled that this was the man she heard speaking from the pulpit on Sundays, she did not chuckle. As he began talking across to Roderick and Lily she felt that she was not in the room; that when they spoke to her they were parents turning to an ignored child; that Lily kept her hair dyed brown just to brag she was ten years younger; that, worst of all, Lily was Roderick's wife sitting over there beside him. While Lily and Mr. Cornwall talked like old friends Mandy thought And she a Catholic, sure Lily wouldn't have said howdy doody or gone on playing checkers if Mr. Cornwall had been a priest. He both pleased her by not talking about God

and Jesus and annoyed her by acting so ordinary, saying yes when Lily suggested he play a game. "Roderick," Mandy suddenly said, "you aren't getting tired, are you?"

Mr. Cornwall patted Mandy's arm and said, "Lily, you and me should be ashamed of ourselves. Mandy's the only soul here thinking of Roderick."

"I'm raring to go," Roderick said.

"Now you listen to your wife there," Lily said.

"I'm raring to go."

"You sure?" Mr. Cornwall asked.

"He's beat us both," Lily said to Mandy. "Let's see if he can beat Mr. Cornwall too."

There was one more game. To make room for Lily, Mandy moved to the second chair beyond the foot of the bed, to the side farthest from the chair by Roderick, feeling this was one more stage in a journey and the next stage would be to sit on the floor or go out the door. The nerve of Lily for bullying Roderick into a game so he said yes only to please them all, standing over them as they lay in three white beds.

"They do marvellous things," Mr. Cornwall was saying. "Balanced up there like people in a trapeze."

Gathering he was talking about men hanging a new bell in the church steeple, she watched Roderick's toes wiggle beyond the end of his cast and noticed she was now too far from him to see the pale freckles on his bald head. "Those bell-hangers must get awfully dizzy up there," she said,

feeling dizzy herself.

Then it was Sunday morning and she was waking in bed hearing a train whistle below the street. Awake she forgave those tracks for what they had done to Roderick. She was still staring into the whiteness of her pillow when the church bell began ringing, oddly resonant until she recalled Mr. Cornwall talking about a new bell. She felt the bell had been put up for Roderick, slipped from bed and dressed quickly into a long-sleeved dress now the heat-wave was over. Never before had she gone to church without any breakfast in her stomach.

Nor had she ever walked into church late. Under shadows she sat in the very back pew, soon relieved to be at the back for in his long prayer Mr. Cornwall talked in front of everyone about Roderick. Those words, "And Roderick Bancroft, your servant," jolted her, but she had heard nothing before them and went deaf again after them. A gurgle coiled up through her empty stomach. When she rose with everyone for a hymn and listened to them without moving her lips, all she heard was disharmony, discord, a babble of voices.

Rushing back home across the hill so nobody could stop her and ask about Roderick, she pressed her forehead and felt that crease growing deeper. Wind hummed against the dead black-headed air-raid siren, which she expected to start wailing any moment <u>at her</u>. Back home even before taking off

her coat she stalked to her bookcase, lifted up an old book and buried her face in it. "Books," she whispered. As the book fell to the floor she held up her hands, parting all her fingers at once. Stumbling on the rug she crossed the hall to the bedroom, where she started searching through Roderick's chest-of-crawers and threw things out onto the floor until she found the bundle of letters. On the edge of his bed still in her coat she opened one of the mended envelopes and unfolded a mended letter. The yellowed Scotch tape was so brittle it broke off into her hands. As the letter fell apart she wept and let it drift to the floor onto the pile of his socks, underwear, bottles of after-shave, belts, handkerchiefs, tax receipts, staples, cuff-links and braces.

NIGHT OF NEW ASPHALT

That Friday on my way home from school a workman stopped me and asked, "Where can us fellas get some water? Gad, we're parched." I pedalled past a few houses to our house, threw my Word Mastery Speller 6 in the hall, filled a milk bottle with water and holding it in my parcel-carrier rode shakily back to the workman. He drank deeply, his Adam's apple driving up and down above his dirty T-shirt, his throat going glug glug glug. As he gave the bottle to another workman he asked me, "What happened to your arm there? Looks like ya fell real bad."

"Not real bad," I said, sitting on my bicycle seat.

The other man handed me the empty bottle and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His blackened fingers had left sweaty prints on the bottle. The first man said, "That's a mean-looking scab." His companion nodded indifferently and turned back toward the long flat asphalt machine.

With the bottle I rode away, my bicycle swerving. The scab on my elbow itched while I tried to forget how I had fallen off the bike on Wednesday. Turning into our driveway, I wondered if my mother would want to use the bottle now that two workmen had drunk from it. As I swung off my bike the

bottle popped from my hand and smashed over our cement steps. Sunlight glanced off the wet pieces of glass.

The asphalt machine crept past our house during supper. While Topher and I shovelled down potatoes and peas, our mother cried we'd make ourselves sick and Bethie called us pigs. The moment we finished our tapioca we hurried outside to our bikes. On the hot asphalt we weaved around, our tires coasting as smoothly as skates over fresh glistening ice.

Now though it was past eight o'clock on a Friday night men and machines were still out there. If he hadn't been out of town at a school principals' convention, my father--who always complained about the City Works Department--would have watched out the front window glued to his seat as if a miracle were taking place. "No more of that darn dust," he would've said, "getting in our throats every darn time we open the door."

Wheeling in wide ellipses Topher and I didn't sink into the asphalt. It wasn't like cement, in which I'd left my foot-high initials here and there beyond our neighbourhood, one white sin I could keep from my parents forever. I broke the orbit and started along the street, feeling heat flow out of the asphalt up through my front tire, steering column, bent parcel-carrier, smashed buzzer, handle-grips, through my hands and me and out my bum into the seat springs, tail-end fender and wobbly reflector.

I braked. The asphalt was spread no farther.

Topher pulled up beside me and said, "I betcha Roger Bailey sure wishes he had a bike now." Over the bulldozed old surface we pushed out bikes, happy the dusty rocky era of our street was almost over. The man who had asked for the bottle was leaning against a truck wiping his eyes with a rag. Sitting barechested on the high seat of a steamroller, the other man who had drunk from the bottle called down, "Hey you, don't get too close!"

I looked up the machine, its tanks nothing like the threadspools I'd used in making toy steamrollers. "We aren't, mister!"

"Just keep outa the way!"

"Outa what way?" I shouted. Nobody was going to boss me around on my own street, especially not someone who had forgotten my face over a few hours.

"Kid, don't sass, just get lost!"

"Who's this, the Burchill boys?" hoarsely asked a workman walking towards us. I hadn't seen him or I would have hopped onto my bike and swiftly pedalled back toward home. It was Roger Bailey's father, wearing a tar-blotched T-shirt and frayed braces that made him look even thinner than he was. "Jay Burchill and his little brother--good kids!" he shouted at the man on the steamroller.

"If <u>they're</u> good kids I wouldn't wanna meet real brats!" called the man. Topher stuck out his tongue but the man, backing his machine away from us, wasn't looking.

"How are ya, Jay?" Mr. Bailey asked me. As he dug

his fingers under his T-shirt and scratched his armpit, I looked at the netted skin around his eyes. "Arm o'kay now?" he asked. There were red threads in his eyes and his breath smelled as bad as Roger's.

"I'm o'kay now, Mr. Bailey."

"Yeah, yeah. But it's my son that done it and I says to him, Roj, ya shouldn'ta done that. Throwin things at someone on a bike--mean thing. And Roj says yeah, he knows, he's sorry. It's the honest truth, he was sick after he near killed ya. He--"

"He didn't near kill me." I tried to laugh but only a cough came out. Mr. Bailey scratched his armpit so deeply I heard hairs rasping. "I just fell off and felt nothing," I said, though I wanted to say YOU pay to have my bent parcel-carrier and smashed buzzer fixed!

"Well your elbow don't look too good, and there's that band-aid on your face. Anyway so long's ya know how Roj felt. He really did puke from all his worry. I'll be damned, my son puke for something he's done." Mr. Bailey took his hand from his armpit, walked to the nearest truck and sat garbage-man style on the back, his legs hanging down over mudflaps. "All done! Now the street's yours!" he called. As the truck pulled away he waved his pale hand at us. Topher waved back but I didn't.

Once all the workmen were gone Topher and I pedalled the small distance to the end of Gable Street then stood off our seats and turned up unpaved rocky Barbour. We bore down,

gritting our teeth and lowering our heads. Topher's legs went up and down slowly and stiffly. I felt a twinge in my side, jumped off my bike and began pushing it up the hill. For a minute Topher didn't realize that I'd fallen behind. Like a motorcyclist in a movie he craned his head around, threw out one leg and did a fast turn-around. "What'sa matter, weakling?" he asked, beginning to push his bike beside mine.

"Side's killing me."

"Appendix! Appendix!"

"Shut up, I just ate supper too fast."

A car was rumbling towards us spitting up rocks so we moved from the centre of the street to the side. "Look--they've got the sign up now," I said, pointing. Against the horizon there rotated a tilted red K of a K Mart shopping centre that was to open later in the summer. "Let's drive onto Priestly," I said.

"O'kay, but we've gotta get back to hear Coven at nine."

" Coven Theatre, " we said together, assuming our deepest voices. "'Brought to you each Friday night by Max's Delicatessen.'"

The ground had levelled off. For a ways there were no houses, only ragged spruces on the left and a tangled field on the right. Beyond the field the Bailey house was a small blotch of faded pink. Plumbing being installed along Priestly, sewer pipes piled on one side, we stopped

our bikes at lit kerosene pots lining a pit. A steamshovel, which I couldn't imagine being genial like the one in Mike Mulligan and his Steamshovel, reared up in the twilight.

"There's the Baileys' dump," Topher said. There was a rumour the K Mart construction people had asked Mr. Bailey to clean up his property but he hadn't done anything yet. Green cardboard of a detergent box patched one of the windows of the house. Bushes were burying an abandoned car, a split tire sitting on the hood. An outhouse huddled against fireweed--the outhouse from which, Billy Hamilton said to Roger one recess, came the boom of a jet breaking the sound barrier. Billy got a bloody nose for the joke and I got a twisted arm for laughing.

Topher turned and stood on his pedals, sped away pumping powerfully, sat and coasted back down the hill with his hair flying out at the sides. Mosquitoes buzzed about my ears. Slapping at them I started riding off Priestly onto Barbour. My bike went faster and faster with the street's slope, the parcel-carrier rattling and the straw of the tangled field blurring by. Straw, dry and tall and swaying in the wind so it seemed small animals were fighting near the ground, was the last thing I had seen before the accident. . . .

Wednesday afternoon moments after the final bell Susan Dunstan had come to my desk for my Social Studies book. Jim Palmer poked me in the ribs and said, "Susan

likes getting sick so she can borrow Jay's books." I gave him a fierce look. Shoving the notebook into her hand, I tried not to look at her smooth arms or the rainbow-coloured bow in her hair or to recall the three valentines she had once dropped into the heart-shaped envelope hanging from my desk.

"I would've let ya have my book--if you'd wanted it," Roger Bailey said as he lurchingly walked up to Susan and grinned, dried tomato sauce in the corners of his mouth cracking. He had longer hair than any other boy in the class and having flunked three years he was even taller than the teacher. "Suzy Snowflake, Suzy Snowflake," he laughed, whirling around once and heading for the door laughing.

"That ratty old shirt he's always got on," Susan said, " looks like he's been wearing it since he was born." By my desk she stood already flipping over the notes, her long hair brushing over my book. Without saying bye to her Jim and I walked to the door grinding our sneakers squeaking into the tiles. I would have lent her all my books if we'd been alone in a room, but whenever anyone else was around (always) I only wanted her to go away so my face wouldn't burn.

After dropping our books into our parcel-carriers Jim and I pulled our bikes out from the racks. We accelerated out to the pot-holed street and past a tide of kids that swept along the sidewalk. We were starting to coast down the hill weaving out of the way of potholes when I

noticed Roger Bailey running near us. Over his head he waved a fist, roaring a long lionish roar. As I passed him even his rust-coloured hair shook like a lion's.

Then I was lying barechested on a couch at home and my mother was cleaning dirt from a stinging scrape on my elbow. Before I figured out what had happened I heard two sounds: water splashing into water whenever she wrung out the cloth, and dirt dropping into water after she had scraped it off my elbow or face and flicked it into the pan.

There was a cold dark stain all the way down one leg of my pants. "Don't worry, you just peed yourself when that boy's books hit your head," my mother said. "You're sure lucky the man who drove you home didn't run you over--he said he had to swerve. Can you sit up now?" Slowly I swung my legs off the couch, then she helped take off my pants and underpants. Though she hadn't helped me undress in many years I felt too weak to tell her I'd do it myself.

When I was completely naked, sitting on the edge of the couch with my stomach and thighs pale against the dark blue blanket under me, she briskly wiped off my leg. Hunched over, I was sure I had just lost twenty pounds. Through the picture window the sky was still bright blue, making me feel I was sitting naked out in the street. "Those toenails need to be cut," said my mother.

Finally I spoke. "But not now, not now." I shivered at the rough rubbing of the cloth and asked myself how many kids--twenty-five, fifty, a hundred?--had

seen me sprawled near my bike with that stain spreading down my pants. Susan Dunstan, even she, must have seen me in my shame. Bethie stood in the livingroom entrance holding up her wide-eyed doll and said, "Bare naked boy!"

Under the blue blanket I was lying in my pajamas when my father came home from his school. Before pulling off his tie or setting down his briefcase he hurried into the livingroom and asked, "How is our big hero?" Looking into the tired eyes behind his thick glasses, I wondered how anyone who thought my accident had been heroic could be smart enough to be a principal.

Potato scallop and fruit salad on a tray. . . . Supper had never tasted better and afterward as I lay back with my hands behind my head watching Sea Hunt only one thing annoyed me: I would never know how it had felt to fall off. My mother brought in ice cream topped with butterscotch sauce. Just as I was licking the sauce off my lips, starting to be happy I'd been knocked-out, the phone rang in the hall behind me.

Over the sound of Sea Hunt I heard my mother: "Just a little shook up, that's all. . . .Yes, Mr. Bailey. . . .Threw up? . . .Oh dear, well tell him not to worry." "Tell him not to worry"? Whose side are you on? I wanted to yell at my mother, but I stared at Sea Hunt and saw gangly hawk-nosed Roger, Roger who bragged Susan had dropped fifty valentines into his envelope while she wailed she hadn't given him one, Roger whose father had rotten teeth and whose

mother was dead (what kind of witch had she been?), Roger puking into the weeds outside his house, Roger laughing at me with puke in the corners of his mouth, Roger hooting next morning at recess, "Holy ol Jesus, you shoulda seen what Burchill did! Pissed hisself, pissed hisself like a pig!"

"If you want to hear that monster program you'd better get upstairs right now," my mother knitting in an armchair said as I passed the livingroom. "Your sneakers aren't all black from the street, are they?"

"Course not."

Upstairs I yelled at Topher through the bathroom door to make it snappy, barged past him and quickly brushed my teeth, slid in sock feet into the bedroom, put on my pajamas, closed the curtains, climbed the bunk ladder with the radio and slipped under one sheet. Bouncing up and down in the bottom bunk, he was squeaking the springs. "Toph, quit it!" I said, turning the station dial. "I can't hear what I'm getting."

Our mother looked in. "I wish you boys would get ready this fast on school nights." She kissed Topher goodnight and fluffed up his pillow. "Now don't fall asleep with that on," she said to me. As she left the room she switched off the light. Cymbals and bassoon rumbled. It began. Coven Theatre, tales of the mysterious and the macabre, through to you each Friday night by Max's Delica-

tessen.

That night I didn't listen or even wonder why I had hurried to get ready.

I was looking at the ceiling or where darkness enfolded the ceiling, I was walking on it. The chest-of-drawers, the chairs, the desk, the lamp and the globe were above me, I was walking with the fan-shaped light at my feet. It was like new asphalt, nobody had been on it before. I was riding my bicycle around the ceiling, pure white asphalt, making 8's around the light--

up a path leading to a Dracula castle I pushed my bike, across the bridge from which the madman of last week's Theatre saw a drowning face in every wave I pushed my bike--

darkness pouring into my eyes, Roger Bailey was crawling across the ceiling toward my locked bike, twisting my spokes with a stick and slashing my tires with a knife. Even when I saw him merely touch the handle-bars I felt sick, knowing his smell I would cling to my bike forever--

then, dropping down Barbour Street down through the night. A flock of birds was released in your head when your bike breezed down onto that new asphalt--rainbows of wings flew out of the pupils of your eyes--ears buffetted by wind, feet off earth--

all the birds in my head, they fluttered out and swooped around, then bats joined them, bats rumoured to nest in the eaves of the Bailey house--

"Say something, you jughead," Topher broke in.

"Whaaaaa?"

"Turn off that dumb radio or say something. It's not fun scary this way, it's just scary."

But there was nothing to say. I fingered the scab on my elbow and the band-aid on my cheek, sure that Roger Bailey's smell was somewhere in the room--sure that when I fell asleep his books, punishing me for I knew not what, would fly out of the dark and hit me again.

CIVICS AND HYPNOTISM

Everyone called Miss McDermott "Miss McDoormat" because they could walk all over her. She gripped her open Civics book so tightly it seemed stuck to her hand and though thin and bony she had the red cheeks of a chubby doll. Often her wide eyes flicked as if wires hidden under her dress gave her electric shocks, surprise shocks (noted Eric Dawkins) rather than those demonstrated in Shop when he and the other guys stood in a circle holding a wire, foreknowing and braced.

Since Civics started after other subjects she had first peeked around the door of 7C, clutching books to herself, when the term and her teaching career were a week old. It only took two or three classes to tell she was no taskmaster. Soon Todd Brown blew chalk dust at Mary Thomas, Al Creaghan unscrewed a desk leg and lifted it over his head like a Legislature mace, Lydia Tucker murmured elephant jokes to Audrey Holyoke, Billy Hamilton did fake farts with his armpit, and Eric Dawkins announced Miss McDermott's new name.

Early in October one morning Dawkins looked at her short limp hair and flushed face, sensing she knew that of the three subjects given no mark on report cards--Music,

Art, Civics--Civics was taken least seriously. Civics? What's that? he could hear some parent ask. None of the boys except Whizz Wilbur answered many of her questions but now Dawkins put up his hand and gave the date of Confederation. A smile jerked in the corners of her mouth as she said, "Very good, Eric," in a voice that sounded like two sticks rubbed together. A wave of hand movement swept toward him under desks until a note from Hamilton fell into his lap. Dawkins--you got the hots for McDoormat?

For the rest of class Dawkins kept his hand down, afraid Hamilton's faith in him for renaming McDermott had faded. While she copied a chart of the Federal Cabinet onto the board he threw eraser bits at Hamilton three rows away and Hamilton fired spitballs nonchalantly as if the most eagle-eyed teacher in the world could never catch him. Though Dawkins was a veteran of eraser wars he had never been a spitball-thrower. To spew over, ball up and fling shredded paper was almost like spitting in someone's face, which in The Three Musketeers would've led to a duel. Now after a spitball sharply hit his cheek he tore paper from a notebook and rolled it against his teeth with his tongue; but when the paper felt ready he dropped it onto the floor, fearing he would never have the boldness to be a spitball-thrower.

Three a. m. that Friday Dr. Dawkins answered the phone in the bedroom, dressed quickly and felt his knees

buckle at the foot of the stairs. His wife heard a heavy stumbling and found him slumped below the bannister. After she helped him back into bed he phoned Dr. Holyoke and asked him to fill in for the emergency.

She told Eric about it when he reached the kitchen. While he picked sleep-seed out of his eyes his little sister chattered, seemingly finding it funny a doctor about his business had fallen sick. Wincing he wanted to hit her and wanted to hit his mother when she said, "You always put too much sugar on your cereal." Now it would be useless to ask if he could have his allowance to see Tuvache the hypnotist that night. Yesterday she'd said, Hypnotists are crackpots. I don't want you giving money to crackpots.

Against the wood and cement of the school where everyone waited for the bell, he stood kicking rocks and pine cones around. Todd Brown asked, "Ya going to Tuvish tonight?"

"Naw."

"Parents won't let you?" asked Jim Palmer. "Neither will mine."

"Can't afford it."

"One measly ticket?" asked Brown. "Your old man's a doctor. Doctors are loaded."

"And we've got relatives coming." Dawkins lined up a pine cone for a tremendous kick.

"Your cousins from Mars?" asked Hamilton. "Ya know, McDoormat should get Tuvack to find her a guy. She's

flat as a ironing board. I bet no guy's ever felt her tits. Tuvack should get her on stage with some bozo, hypnotize them and day, 'Thees eeez a booteful lady, she eez dying for you ta feel her up.' But I bet it'd be like squeezing a skinny punching bag."

For a second Eric laughed with everyone but when he looked into Hamilton's darting black eyes and saw Brown and Hamilton sitting on the moonlit riverbank watching Tuvache, he kicked a cone against the school and pushed a door open without waiting for the bell.

First class Friday was Civics. As McDoormat's hollow voice explained the duties of aldermen and her hand plucked at the shoulder of her loose brown sweater, he drew nonsensical designs on a notebook cover and recalled the page of Chinese writing he had cut out of LIFE, all those words each like a drawing. Glancing up he noticed Hamilton's eyes daring him to do something. Pass a note? Closer to him Audrey Holyoke tossed back her brown hair, making a wave of goosebumps cross the back of his scalp. Before grade seven he had miniature-bowled with her at O'dell Park at a picnic of doctors' families. The green blackboard turned into the trees of the park.

McDoormat stooped to the floor. It was the first time all year she had dropped the book. Under a front row desk it lay, papers spilling everywhere, more papers than he'd ever imagined were tucked inside. A note glided into his mind like a paper airplaine. Yeah! Anything but the

boredom. As McDoormat started writing notes about the City Council on the board, her sweater flopping about her, he scribbled a note.

Hamilton had just read the note and caught hold of his nose when chalk screamed and flew from her hand. She did a perfect pivot like a star basketball player. For that moment she was graceful, her skirt swirling. Then her heels rang against the tiles all the way back to Hamilton. The note shook in her hand as she began reading it silently, her eyes moving like the eyes of a dummy on the knee of a ventriloquist in the most frightening episode of Alfred Hitchcock Eric had ever seen--at the end you learned the ventriloquist was wood and straw, the dummy was alive.

The ink of the duplicating machine was purple, the ink of Mr. Corey's pen red. NOTICE OF MISBEHAVIOUR We are not punishing Eric this time but we do suggest that you, as parents, speak to him. Below was a line for a parent's signature. Stapled to the form was a crinkled note: Even falsies wouldn't do any good for McD.'s molehills. Reading those words she had let out a soft broken cry.

Though he usually walked home at noon with Palmer, today he had been late getting out of Mr. Corey's office and now the streets were almost deserted. A cat dove into a mound of leaves, wind tugged at all the doors in sight, the sun blinked drowsily. Out in the open he saw it was trees and houses momentarily screening the sun yet he liked think-

ing the sun blinked. In Art classes at the Y his suns had always turned out ludicrous, round lemons or yellow beach-balls. The sun blinked and the wind jested, ballooning his windbreaker at his chest so he grew big there like a girl.

Around a telephone pole at a street corner a large poster was glued, THE UNFORGETTABLE TUVACHE at the top and BLOW YOUR MIND ON HYPNOTISM at the bottom. A shadowy face floating in black peered from the poster out at Eric. Bitterly he pulled his eyes from Tuvache, slipped the big note from his shirt pocket and looked at the little crinkled note stapled to it. He could hardly remember scribbling those words, which had made her moan like an old woman he'd heard once at a funeral. Wasn't the handwriting more jagged and slanted than his? It was almost more like Hamilton's writing. Looking up from the note he felt those were Hamilton's eyes staring out at him from the poster.

Dragging himself home, he took none of the usual short-cuts.

When he walked into the kitchen he smelled waffles. His father was wearing a purple bathrobe, his elbows on the table.

Butter melted over his waffles. "What in heaven's name kept you?" asked his mother, working at the breadboard.

"Dawdling along the way?" suggested his father.

"As you can see Dad just needs rest," his mother went on. "Don't I always say doctors keep worse care of their health than anyone else?" His father listening to the

news on the radio shushed her.

A waffle sluggishly moved around inside his mouth. Once he had thought teachers with glasses had slender mirrors along their lenses to spy behind their backs, but she didn't wear glasses. How had she seen him with those flicking eyes, eyes empty and dry until he had watched pain rush into them? His hand patted his shirt pocket, the folded form peeking out.

"That a test for us to sign?" his father asked as the news finished.

"Naw, something else." Though the note had been like a brick in his pocket he threw it across the table.

Dr. Dawkins looked bland, a master of ceremonies about to read a name drawn from a hat. He twiddled his ear. Something rose in his throat. He started laughing. He pounded the table. "Mother," he said. "My God, Mother, see what we have here!" His laugh became a roar. She came over and read the note that said Even falsies wouldn't do any good for McD.'s molehills, squinted and smiled.

Leaving his last waffle he ran up to his room.

That afternoon he stayed home so there seemed to be two sick bodies in the house. "Those good marks of yours'll drop if you start skipping school for no reason, no real reason I can tell," his mother said behind the door. Once her footsteps had faded he hurried down the back stairs to the den and played pingpong with the wall, swinging the

paddle, slapping their faces: his parents who had merely laughed, Mr. Corey who had pounded the stapler with a heavy fist, and above all Hamilton and every other spitball-thrower and hypnotist.

That night he carried the H-I volume of the encyclopedia up to his room and in bed skimmed the entry Hypnotism. White gloves seemed to float before his eyes while he tried not to stare too long at the book, the bed post, his baseball glove on the floor or his Wind in the Willows poster on the wall--anything might hypnotize him. He felt so threatened reading about a hypnotist's power, a power not to transform a man but to find a man's real desires as a bucket brings water up from a deep well said the encyclopedia, that he dropped the book under the bed and fell asleep with the overhead light burning.

Waking up too late for breakfast he left the book under the bed. Saturday was usually his favourite day. Just before lunch he went out to the garage and dug his old Y paintings from the shaky chest-of-drawers in the back corner. Stiff and curling, they crackled in his hands; here was his Mexican women, here his Laura Secord, here his Mary in snarled straw by saucer-eyed cows. All of them now looked grotesque, cube-bodied and flat-chested.

When chipped rock crunched outside he pushed up the door of the garage and ducked under, shading his eyes with his hand. "Dawkins Sawkins Rawkins," said Bobby Heustis the paperboy, younger than Eric but long-legged enough to sit

on his bike with both feet in the rock.

"How's the teacher this year?" Eric asked, taking the paper from Bobby. Sitting on the splintery steps he turned the front page, searching.

"A old bag and a old hag."

"Here it is--WHO IS TUVACHE?" Last night several citizens angrily walked out of a show given here by the hypnotist Tuvache. "We went expecting a good show, and what we got was scum," said Mrs. Ellen Johnson of Scully Street.

"Tuvitch? Did you see Tuvitch?" asked Bobby. "I didn't see ya there."

"No, I was sick yesterday." Members of the audience first left after Tuvache had hypnotized a respected local businessman into thinking he was a dog. The man obeyed "the call of nature" like any normal dog, and went home with a wet pair of pants.

"Go, you gotta go! Mom and Dad dragged me out 'cause they didn't like it but it's the spookiest thing you've ever seen. He made one guy think he was Bugs Bunny, the guy chomped like he was chewing a carrot and said, 'What's up, doc?' That Tuvitch could make anyone think they're Bugs Bunny!"

It was also reported a female college student under hypnotism performed a dance that shocked many members of the audience. "Bumps and grinds are Cinderella stuff compared to what she was doing," said an observer who asked his name be withheld. Despite the protest of several citizens

Tuvache is scheduled to appear again tonight. Eric noisily folded the paper and replied, "Yeah, but I read last night you'll only do things you really want to when you're hypnotized."

"Who told you that? Mom said Tuvitch could tell you to strangle someone and you'd do it."

"Your mom's wrong, she's wrong." Then Bobby kicked chipped rock at him and laughed, eyes shining and widening. Rocks flew so high he lifted the folded newspaper guarding his face. Running he rolled the paper into a club to smash those eyes but Bobby kept laughing and pedalled away fast out to the smooth street.

Back in the house he scurried into the den, shut the door behind him and dialed Jim Palmer's number. "You have any luck twisting your parents' arm into letting you go to Tuvache?" he asked as soon as Jim answered.

"Yeah but it nearly caused World War III."

"Have an extra buck you could lend me?"

"Sure. You going to Tuvase tonight?"

"You bet. Even if it kills me."

"Your mom and day say o'kay?"

"They can go and croak."

On the doorstep unshaven Dr. Dawkins stood in his purple bathrobe. "That man's a shyster, a shyster from what the paper said! If you want to see a hypnotist sometime I'll take you to a real one!"

"Don't turn around, just keep walking," Eric said to Jim as they reached the foot of the driveway, echoing a movie line he'd always wanted to use.

". . .worry your mom!"

"Keep walking." However long his father called or high his voice rose, he would not run out to the street and stop him--not any more. At supper watching his father rub his faintly-bearded cheeks and heavy eyelids Eric had felt he'd caused his father's collapse and two days away from the hospital, yet nothing would keep him from seeing Tuvache. On the mile down to the river he and Jim had brief pine cone fights, laughing and ducking, almost always missing one another. Downtown where elm trees dominated the streets they stopped their cone fights and walked more quickly, detouring into Mazucca's for toffee.

By the river across the street from the Legislature a large area was fenced in with ropes on six-foot poles, fluttering black and white curtains hanging from the ropes to the grass. Near the entrance a silver sign said in luminous black paint HYPNOTISM UNDER THE STARS. Joining the line-up Eric and Jim opened their packages of toffee. In an opening in the curtains a black-haired young woman wearing a long black dress and a money box belted at her waist smiled each time she was paid. Even ten or twelve people from the front, Eric saw her eye make-up was both silver and blue. When he paid; silver fingernails grazed his palm.

Inside, long purple carpets covered the grass.

Another smiling girl with silver fingernails swept an arm toward the crowd sitting on the carpets, signalling Eric and Jim forward. At the far end a purple-draped stage stood at the six-foot level of the curtains, lit by the moon and bare except for a wooden table and two chairs all painted purple; the audience was enclosed by the curtains whereas Tuvache would be up in the open air.

They had hardly settled onto a carpet when a hand gripped Eric's shoulder, a large firm hand he felt could only be that of Tuvache. "Why weren't ya at school Friday aft? Corey expell you?"

After being certain all evening that Hamilton had gone to Tuvache Friday night and would not turn up tonight, Eric bit his lip as Hamilton sat beside him. "No but he kicked me out for the afternoon."

"When I read your note I wanted to laugh so bad I nearly broke a Jesus blood vessel. Hey, you see those broads that work for this guy? The tits on that one by the door, wouldn't I like to play windshield-wipers with 'em. If it's the same tonight as last night he'll say these broads are his daughters. Now don't be dumb kids about it, Dawkins and Palmer. You really think he'd be travelling around the country with daughters like that?"

"Prob'ly not," Eric said, already convinced by Hamilton. Still feeling those fingernails on his palm he now had another reason to see Tuvache--to know what a man who had two wives (two whatever) looked like. If he himself

travelled around with two women one would be Audrey Holyoke.

A sound of a van stopping outside the curtains behind them rose over the hubbub of fifty or sixty voices. A minute later over his shoulder Eric saw one of the women reaching an upper rung of a rope ladder on the side of the van. After he turned back around a spotlight streamed over their heads, hit the front rows and jumped around as if the girl operating it on top of the van were losing her balance. Finally the light settled on the purple stage. Shifting his legs under himself to sit higher Eric saw a tree outlined up in darkness beyond the curtains, two pigeons roosting near the trunk, stars filling the sky behind. Hamilton, Palmer and he swatted mosquitoes.

There must have been stairs in back of the stage but Tuvache seemed simply to appear out of air, tall and ghostly, dressed in a dark suit with the shirt collar open below his hollow-cheeked face. "All you wonderful people, the weather digs us again, the stars dig us," he said, pointing a cane at the sky, his clear deep voice ringing from a loudspeaker in the tree scaring away the pigeons. His hair was longer than in the shadowy poster, sweeping down to his shoulders but tightly combed back at both sides, unlike hair of any other middle-aged man Eric had ever seen. "Wonderful people, hypnotism is a wilder trip than mere magic, mere card-playing and sawing juicy ladies in half because in hypnotism you, beautiful audience, can't just sit on your fat a--can't just <u>watch</u>. If none of you walk up here onto

stage our show, our show goes poof. I don't saw juicy ladies in half--I saw you in half. But hey, wonderful people, don't let that scare your little hearts."

Crushing a mosquito on his arm Eric was waiting for it all to change, to frighten or amaze him. Only that first moment of Tuvache's appearance had been mysterious or elegant. Two bare-armed high school girls walked up onto stage giggling and Tuvache announced, "So here's two brave lucky ladies." During the hypnotism of the girls Eric went on waiting for a change. Nothing surprised him: a watch was swung before their eyes and "You're getting tired, very tired" repeated from movies and TV, the girls chatted back and forth like two Bugs Bunnys. While Eric laughed with the rest of the audience he took another stick of toffee, disappointment spreading through him. Hamilton whispered, "This stuff's just for kids, the good stuff's coming up. Last night he told one guy he was a dog and whadded the guy do? right, lifted up his leg and pissed on stage."

As the high school girls left stage giggling and an old man and his wife were hypnotized to believe they were back on their honeymoon, Hamilton's words began haunting Eric more than anything he was watching. Would a man deep down want to act like a dog and even do that? Not that I wanna SEE anyone do that Eric told himself. But I DO yeah I DO.

Suddenly Hamilton was clutching his arm saying,

"Mama Mia, you see what I see? Is that her up there in living technicolour with that football bozo?" A laughing wide-shouldered guy in a red college jacket was pulling a skinny woman onto stage. "Just like I said the other morning, remember? Jeez, I should go into business reading a crystal ball or something. Oh hold it, it's not her. Sure looks like her but--"

But Eric was not listening to Hamilton. On his feet now, he stared desperately toward stage seeing the college guy lead her struggling over to a chair, push her down by her shoulders and kiss the top of her head. She was not wearing a dress as she always had in class, but jeans and a white turtleneck. The turtleneck met her chin like a cast, making her head look cut off from the rest of her body as she kept it away from the spotlight, her back to the audience. "They can't do that," Eric said, looking down at Jim. Voices behind him said, "Hey sit down!", "Quit blocking the view, kid!" and Jim whispered, "Whadder you doing? Siddown!"

"How nice, our young lady is helping us after all," said the voice in the tree.

"You can't do that to her!"

"Seems a young man in the audience doesn't like our show."

"Leave her alone!"

"Who's that noisy kid down there?" asked the voice in the tree.

Then two things happened so quickly Eric couldn't

tell which was first: he realized the woman was not Miss McDermott and a blue-uniformed man, the grey-haired chief of police, appeared out of air at the back of stage just as Tuvache had, took the hypnotist by the shoulder and began speaking to him lowly. On all sides the curtains collapsed and four other policemen stood on the edge of the crowd. Now everyone was standing, murmuring or shouting or laughing. Hamilton cried, "The fuzz! Yipee, looks like our boring old town might have a riot at last!" The spotlight went out. Behind Eric a policeman was climbing down the rope ladder of the van followed by one of the "daughters." In front of him beyond all the bodies blocking his view a brown-uniformed RCMP man was leading Tuvache down the back stairs.

A new firm voice came from the tree: "This is your Police Chief speaking. Quiet, please, so I can explain. . . .Last night the man who just left stage gave one of his, his performances here and I'm only sorry we couldn't stop him before you people came tonight. But we'll do all we can to get you back your money--watch the paper for news on this matter. This man may know a few things about hypnotism but he needs a lesson or two about the law. Well it isn't at my liberty yet to say too much about that." (Behind Eric someone whispered, "LSD.") "Maybe you read in today's paper what this so-called Tuvache made one poor man do last night" ("Jeez, that's what I came here to see again," said Hamilton) "and who knows what he might've done to the young lady standing below me if we hadn't put an end to his, his shenan-

igans. This man must learn we have a clean city here, a clean decent city that won't put up with his likes. Please drive carefully on the way home."

Even before the talk was over the crowd had begun dispersing though this spontaneous speech was the longest their police chief had given them in a decade of service. Pushed along between Palmer and Hamilton, Eric felt that despite murmurings against Tuvache all the citizens around him--the kid tugging a loose front tooth, the young woman holding a baby against her shoulder, the old man adjusting his hearing-aid--held within themselves secret desires that hypnotic eyes could easily draw out. The police chief, what a hoodwinked old dope! "Next Civics class woulda been a riot if that'd really been McDoormat and she saw you yelling like a loonie," Hamilton said.

If the woman with jeans and a white turtleneck had spoken on stage, Eric suspected, her voice would have sounded wooden and faraway. Made to dance she would've kept a blank face while her arms and legs recklessly fluttered and throbbed; her eyes would've swung around and her breath heaved in her frail chest only when Tuvache snapped his fingers in her face.

Crossing purple carpets strewn with dead mosquitoes Eric wondered how he would ever sit through another Civics class.

TENT BY THE SEA

As soon as his father's car disappeared in a cloud of dust, Henry dropped his folded puptent onto the grass and looked through shadows of trees past a bank down over the long pale beach to waves breaking onto the sand. The grey-green ocean was just close enough that he heard it murmuring. Even when he hit his thumb while pounding a peg into the ground, he kept smiling. Dropping the rock he shook his hand, thinking as if the skinned knuckle were someone else's, Blood--what a nuisance. Sparrows scrambled under the trees at his back. Quickly he picked up the rock and drove in the other pegs, which sank smoothly into the rich-smelling earth. Inside the tent he emptied a knapsack throwing his cans of stew and beans, frying pan, flashlight and grey paperback along one wall. Having picked a site with no other campers either way for two sites, he heard nothing but sparrows stepping on leaves as he changed into his bathing suit.

Hot sand flowed over his bare feet as he walked towards shore, the sound of the ocean like a slow enormous beast coming closer. Across the half mile afternoon sunbathers were scattered rather than mobbed, Thank God. A few yards from the sea he stretched out his towel, buried his glasses in sand and lifted his arms over his head. He began

running and tried not to howl as the Fundy cold hit his ankles, then his knees, then his stomach, then his chest. Submerged he soon felt warmer, his long hair floating back so freely it felt like a crown of fine sea grass.

When he broke surface he drifted on his back, blinking at the cloudless sky. Even salt water trickling into his mouth tasted good, tasted even better when the past week flashed by his eyes: writing grade 11 Departmentals in a humid packed gym he he had stabbed his hand with a compass point to stop dreaming about the beach, and promised himself. A weekend by myself, away from all this. Now waves lifted him high and low, wrestling and embracing him. Though he was half blind without his glasses he saw drenched kaleidoscopic patterns wink all around him where sunlight and water met.

Only when he headed back to his tent did the cut sting again, so he sucked it to clean away the salt. Back in his T-shirt and cut-off corduroys he walked jauntily through a stand of spruce to the canteen, where a man wearing a baseball cap was turning a hamburger on a grill. Resting his arms on the counter Henry asked, "Got a box of bandaids?"

The man reached into a shelf and tossed a white box onto the counter. "Tentin here with friends?" he asked, chewing bubblegum.

"Naw--by myself." Noting the price scribbled on the box, Henry pulled change out of his pocket.

"Come to check out the honeys by the sea, huh?" the man asked, taking the money. One of his front teeth was missing. "I see lotsa guys like you all summer--come here and try to start up somethin with every honey in the campgrounds."

"I--huh, I hadn't thought of that."

"Sure you hadn't, sure you hadn't." As Henry clutched the box of bandaids and left, the man called, "Good huntin!"

The rocks of the parking lot under his sneakers made sounds as harsh as his anger. That man was like his father's friend who always asked how many girls' names and numbers he had in "the little black book," as if everyone in high school worried about nothing but messy kisses in back seats of cars and had never heard of the gods Poseidon and Triton. His father's friend and Gaptooth back there didn't know a damn thing about pitching your own tent for the first time, all the shackles that threw off. As he reached the path the noise of gravel stopped and again he walked silently over spruce needles.

Back by his tent he sat on a tree stump and put a bandaid on his thumb, piled together newspaper from his knapsack and sticks from under the trees, started a fire in the cooking pit of his site and twisted open a can of Irish stew. Within minutes the stew bubbled and spat in the frying pan. Hunched on the stump watching sand lolling down to the sea and the sea lapping up over sand, he ate stew and a

grape jam sandwich. Insects fell onto his skin and clothes and he looked at them closely before calmly brushing them away.

By 7:30 he was thirsty. When he reached the canteen the man was off duty and to his relief a woman--Gaptooth's wife?--served him without speaking. Holding a box of chocolate milk he passed through the trailer park, glad his parents had never dragged him around in one of those miniature wheeled suburban houses. Trailers! He wanted to throw rocks at them and run away, laughing.

Beyond the campgrounds a tall young woman in a peach-coloured bikini was strolling along the edge of the forest, her sleek black hair dripping and her rounded hips gently swinging. She seemed to be talking to something held up in her hand; he stared, seeing it was a large dried starfish. If there weren't a legend about a girl communing with starfish, there should be. Maybe he would write it.

It took an hour to figure out the intricate forest trails. All hidden, ovenbirds and spring peepers chanted tirelessly. More campers than he'd expected were taking walks, especially young couples, the trails so narrow only two campers could walk abreast on them; whenever he met a couple coming arm-in-arm or hand-in-hand he stepped down and pressed against trees, as if backing against the wall of a narrow hall, to let them pass. Giggling or whispering or silent, they all seemed to him unaware and blundering.

One trail led to the river, which was no wider than

a brook that close to the sea. After the deepening darkness of the trails, by the river the purples of violets, oranges of dead ferns and whites of bunchberry blossoms almost stunned him. He rubbed his hands in them until his palms were lightly painted. If I was a dog I'd roll around in these colours. It was hard following the river down the rest of the way without a trail and with scratchy trees interlocked everywhere. Now the woods were almost too dark for him to see his feet, but after crashing through the last branches and sliding down onto shore he clearly saw his dirty white sneakers in the clean white sand.

Around a bend from the swimming beach, here stones and boulders were more plentiful than sand. Starting back towards the swimming beach he climbed onto a rise of copper-coloured rock. A slender yellow-legged shorebird flew by with a fish in its bill. When he reached the highest level of the rock he walked to the edge, threw his fists in the air and let out the happy yell that had built up all afternoon. Ah-ah-ah-ayeeeee!

In his tent he ate a devilled egg and crawled into his sleeping bag, keeping on his shirt to stop shivering. With the flashlight beamed on his book he started reading, struggling to care that Jack Durbeyfield discovered his family was once illustrious. Yet he liked the girls and women on their "club-marching" festival marching through town with willow wands and white flowers; he could almost hear Tess's dress swishing outside his tent though to almost

everybody she was a fine and picturesque country girl, and no more. Somehow she got mixed-up with the round-hipped girl holding the starfish, and his eyelids dragged. Once the flashlight was off he forgot both girls and felt he was back in the sea riding with the waves.

"Danny, don't you dare take fig-bars for breakfast!"

A woman's sharp voice somewhere outside. The top of the tent paler green, more in light, than the bottom. Tess and his glasses at his side. Tugging on his sneakers, hearing New York accents in those voices.

"Dad, the tent's crooked!" called a boy.

"Don, give me a hand here!" shouted a man.

Squatting, he shuffled out of his tent. Square on all sides, their tent was as big as a trailer and partly blocked the sun. "Great," he muttered, turning toward the public outhouses. He heard the father shout, "Don, you can unpack later!" and saw a girl in sky blue shorts and blouse step out of the tent. Don? Dawn. Before hearing her speak he hurried away, knowing from experience girls his age always brought out the worst in any accent.

After eating a can of pears he changed into long pants and pulled on a sweater, and again walked through the trailer park and forest to the dead end by the river, down along the river breaking branches and pushing aside boulders, out to the sea and the rock and around the beach where he

watched gulls picking at corn cobs left from a beach picnic. Already he felt that walk in his bones as he'd felt other walks: from his family's home on the hill to favourite haunts downtown--the library, the movie theatre, the rink--back to home.

Four lawn chairs now sat outside the large tent, the girl in the one farthest away--a sweep of light brown hair and a foot in a sandal. Crawling into his tent he heard the father say, "No film at that canteen. You'd think they haven't discovered photography in this part of the world." The girl still hadn't spoken. Maybe she's mute, maybe she's retarded he thought, pulling on his bathing suit. Good--then she prob'ly won't bug me. A girl's voice said, "Danny, quit picking your nose or I'll. . . ." It was softer that the other voices; he'd made out only half the words but already heard music in that voice. No no I'm not here for that.

Her voice stayed with him until he splashed into the sea, shouting as the cold hit him. It seemed not Fundy cold but Arctic cold and he became warmer only when a jellyfish floated by his face, a simple and almost translucent blob. Rocking in the waves he felt almost that simple himself.

At the canteen the man with the baseball cap chuckled, "Found any mermaids?"

In his damp bathing suit he ate a cheeseburger on the stump outside his tent, then strolled along the beach

almost as far as the copper-coloured rock. Here he could see no one except in the distance. On his towel he lay on his back serene and drugged by the sun, caressed by heat rising off the sand. When a cool breeze rippled over him he shivered and recalled how in some movie he'd seen on the late show a Medieval man--crusader or monk--had stripped to a loin cloth, stretched out by the sea and testing his fortitude let icy waves lap over him. Seeing himself huddled in his puptent trying not to hear the New Yorkers, he decided he must find out how it felt to be that monk/crusader and pushed on his glasses.

On the shore he crouched where, when a wave reached that far, it scattered between but not over his toes. Lifting off his glasses he lay flat on his back, his feet farthest out so the waves would reach his face last. The first waves curled along the edges of his body and seeped under his legs. Soon waves rose to the fronts of his legs and when one swept over his bathing suit he jerked, groaned and curled up his toes tighter. What he was doing was so crazy he felt like laughing. A wave splashed all the way over him but he forgot to hold his breath and water rushed into his mouth and nose. He lifted and shook his head, coughing. Then something pulled at his hair.

Rolling over he sat up, coughing. "Oh My God!" she cried. "I thought you'd drowned! What're you doing?"

Turned around, he shaded his eyes with his hand. Her eyes were grey and wisps of brown hair sticking from

under her bathing cap shook as she bent toward him. "Try--trying an experiment," he said, pushing hair out of his eyes. "Freezing. . . .have to get back to my towel."

They seemed exactly the same height as they walked up to his towel. She was carrying a sandal in both hands, jiggling them by the thongs. In the sand he huddled under his towel. "I--I saw this movie once, where a monk of something did that."

"I thought you'd drowned!" she said, starting to laugh.

"Sit down if you wanna." He tried to laugh but coughed, salt water stinging his throat. While she sat and crossed her legs, her drab one-piece bathing suit black against the sand, he dried his glasses with the towel. "Well thanks for checking on me. If most people saw a. . .a corpse, they'd be gone like a bat out of hell."

"Guess I'm not a bat out of hell," she laughed lightly. She slapped one of her sandals against her feet, knocking sand from between her toes.

"Your accent. New York--Noo Yawk--is it?"

"Now don't make fun of my accent or I'll never rescue you again."

"D'you come here every summer?"

"Oh no it's my first time out of the country." Not wanting her to call the States the country, he wanted to peel off that bathing cap which made her look bald. "Oh no, here comes the Tasmanian Devil," she said, dropping the

sandal. "Let's go in the water before he gets here." Over her shoulder her brother was approaching, swinging his arms high, a popsicle in one of his hands.

Swimming with her was not like swimming alone. Even when he couldn't see her he sensed where she was, how close or distant, above or under water. Even when he knew she was yards away she seemed right next to him; a wave could have been her arm around him, a trickle of water her fingers. Paddling on her back she called, "Why're you camping by yourself?"

"Cause I hate people!" he called with mock fierceness.

She flickered near the surface of the water. "Am I people?"

"You're Dawn!"

"How'd you know. . ? . .been spying on us?"

"You Yanks talk so loud!"

". . .hiding in the trees spying on us!"

As they walked back up the beach she tugged off her bathing cap, releasing her wavy springy hair. Their shadows fell across the sand, one shadow nearly touching the other. Watching her blue-veined feet he recalled girls he had taken to movies, how he'd dropped the ticket before passing it to them or forgotten at the canteen what candy they'd wanted. If Dawn had been the girl those times she would have laughed, not stared at him glumly to pick up the ticket or said What's that? I don't like coconut. Their shadows touched on the

sand, she was laughing; it seemed he had never heard a girl laugh before.

Outside her tent she introduced him to her mother, who sipped ice tea in a lawn chair and said, "Isn't that nice, a local boy." Blushing under his sunburn he laughed weakly to cover his sudden anger. A local boy. Back in his tent he hurriedly dressed into his T-shirt and cut-offs and smiled when he remembered the mother, not Dawn, had said A local boy.

She was wearing her sky blue blouse and shorts. As they walked to the canteen and drank Cokes on a ridge above the parking lot her New York accent seemed as natural as the ovenbird voices last night. "I had a crazy nightmare in the car," she said as they sat in the grass. Her legs and arms were browner than his; her hair rose like a thicket framing her face but didn't touch her high brown forehead. "I was inside a giant washing machine--Dad runs a laundromat on Amsterdam Avenue, did I tell you? Whenever I saw someone I knew, they just whooshed by and disappeared in the suds."

"I wish I had dreams like that. Mine are usually real boring, like about putting my shoes on the wrong feet."

"Putting your shoes on the wrong feet! I'd rather have funny dreams like that than washing machine nightmares."

They walked out to the hot black highway and started along the weedy roadside, careful not to brush against one another. While they watched dragonflies swerving over the floating logs of a swamp he asked after a long silence, "You

ever read much Hardy?"

"Oh Hardy, I like him but he gets to be a fatalistic old bastard. I tell you what I really love--something like As You Like It. I played Rosalind in a school production we put on."

"Yeah? Hardy's o'kay. For a fatalist."

"Well I can't stand fatalists."

"I'm not one," he said, not sure what one was. Throwing a stick into the swamp, he felt she was attacking his choice of books and maybe bragging a little about the Shakespeare acting. But when they were leaning on a rotted fence at a farm beyond the swamp, she pointed at his hand gripping the fence and asked, "How'd you bang up your thumb?" and he thought Those other girls wouldn'tve asked what happened if I took them to a movie with a cast around my neck!

Back at the campgrounds she was limping. He was both afraid she had blistered her feet and excited she might have blistered them to be with him. As she hopped off the gravel up onto the grass he said, "You shouldn'ta walked all the way in those sandals."

Among the spruces the young woman in a peach-coloured bikini passed them, murmuring to a starfish in her hand. Dawn whispered, "The Starfish Lady, she seems to be everywhere. The guy at the canteen told Dad she's a real nut-case, but wouldn't hurt a flea."

"I didn't know she was that. I thought. . . ." He couldn't say the woman had seemed beautiful to him.

By the rope he had tied between two trees outside his tent, they stopped. "Hey, your bathing suit fell in the grass," she said, looking down. She picked it up by the string and handed it to him.

"Crappy clothesline," he laughed. Draping it back over the rope he still saw her fingers on the string.

"Listen, ah, we're going to King Kong vs. Godzilla at the drive-in tonight," she said, fingering a button of her blouse. "You like to come? You might feel kinda dumb, sitting there with my mom and dad and kid brother. My mom wanted me to ask you."

While he made his supper he couldn't stop thinking, "My mom wanted me to ask you"--I bet she made that up.

"O'kay, you guys sit here in front. My little lady and I'll take the back," Mr. Owen announced, putting his arm around his wife. Henry opened the door at his side and moved up into the driver's seat, high beams from other cars at the drive-in sweeping across his face like search lights. On the other side Danny raced up ahead of Dawn and she grabbed his arm trying to squeeze ahead until Mr. Owen called over, "Dan, you take the middle for this half, but Dawn has if for the second."

"You scared of monsters?" Danny asked Henry once they were seated.

"Only monsters like you," Henry said, grinning uncomfortably.

Garbled sounds crackled from the speaker hung on the half-opened window near his ear. Soon across the screen buildings collapsed and mouths opened screaming, black and red colours ran and coagulated, the creatures thrashed around. Now and then Mr. Owen reached over the seat and sneaked his hand under Danny's chin, going "Rarrrrrrrr!" Henry was afraid Mr. Owen would do the same thing to him. Though Dawn was at the other end of the seat she seemed so close he almost believed his arm could encircle her, the space between them was nothing, Danny was nothing.

Half way through the movie he volunteered to buy snacks and Mr. Owen handed him a $5. bill over the seat saying, "Good Canadian dough." As they walked back to the canteen over dusty ground he was finally beside her, breathing deeply as if fumes had been leaking in the car. Danny fell behind, walking backwards watching the screen. "It's funny."

"Yeah, but Danny thinks it's scary."

"I mean it's funny--sitting there with your family."

"I told you so," she laughed, the sleeves of her white windbreaker flashing in the dark.

Having folded the bill into the size of a stamp, he now began unfolding it and tried not to think of what a classmate of his had said the morning after taking a girl to the drive-in: Sure had a good time, man, but I didn't see any of the fuckin movie. Bumping into her he said,

"I'd rather be with just you."

"Hey you guys!" Danny cried. "Look what Godzilla just did!"

She said, "Yeah, families can be a drag."

Both his hands folded the bill again. She hadn't understood him. He hadn't been talking about her family, he had been talking about her!

Through the second half of the movie she sat beside him. When he held up his ketchup-splattered hands she handed him a kleenex, their fingers touching. Then he was afraid to move, afraid if he merely brushed her arm or leg he would throw himself against her. A few times Mr. and Mrs. Owen murmured and Henry heard sounds of a light kiss or two. He imagined Mr. Owen lying on top of Mrs. Owen on the back seat, both of them half naked. Dawn turned to him and said, "Good Hollywood culture for you." Noticing the keys still in the ignition he figured he should switch on the engine and speed away letting the cord of the speaker rip from its post. If he had a gun, he was sure, he would turn to all of them--the father, the mother, the brother--and blow out their brains, to be alone with her.

Their hair was wet from a late morning swim with her family. The man at the canteen eyed the two and said to Henry, "Well well well, lookee here." On the ridge above the parking lot they sprawled in the grass, ate cheese-burgers and laughed about King Kong vs. Godzilla and other

bad movies. After wiping their fingers in the grass they walked out to the highway, Saturday's traffic even heavier than Friday's. Whenever silence grew between them he stared at her sneakers or kicked rocks or poked at his clip-on sunglasses, she whistled almost imperceptibly or felt her ear or picked a piece of straw and nibbled it.

By the farm as they sat on the fence he asked her for her birth date. "April 26 1953," she said. "A. D."

"Hey, that's only two weeks before me!" The fence swayed under them as he turned to her. "We could have a birthday bash together. The Bash of the Century."

"Then that's a date for next year. At whose house?"

No don't laugh I mean it he almost shouted as she jumped off the fence.

From the window of a passing car a grinning man waved at them--or only at her. "Lemme get on the outside. Better a car knock off my block than yours," Henry said, dodging around her closer to the pavement and nudging her toward the roadside weeds.

"Big hero!" she laughed. "Like one of my friends back in New York. Once in a big crowd he pushed me ahead of him to get on the subway, then the doors closed before he got in."

A subway. He had never seen a subway, let alone been on one. Poking at his sunglasses he heard A local boy and tried to picture her riding on rattling subways with grizzled winos and Puerto Ricans with tennis shoes bumping

against her. But that vision slid away and the only New York he could feel was that of Miracle on 42nd Street, a merry city in winter; he saw her in twenty-floor department stores steering herself through crowds with such a frank calm face all the clerks waited on her first.

At the swamp where dragonflies hunted silently, she lifted her blouse out at her neck and blew under it saying, "Phewww, I'm dying for a swim." Her blowing on herself made him stop feeling all the miles, six hundred, seven hundred, stretching between their homes. I'll cool you like that if you like.

Minutes later when they were in the sea he knew: swimming alone with her was not like swimming with her family. They pulled themselves underwater repeatedly until the cold became bearable. Floating on his back he saw her blur of arms, legs and bathing suit. "I saw a jellyfish here yesterday!" he called. "96% water!"

"What?" She swam so close her toes grazed his stomach.

"A jellyfish is 96% water. Sounds like a lot, except we're 70%."

"Where'd you hear that crap?"

"Not crap, it's true!"

"There's a giant jellyfish in the aquarium back home."

Back home. "I'll have to see it sometime."

"You--" She said more but a wave rose between them.

Dressed again outside her tent he watched her come out in a yellow T-shirt and black shorts, slipping on her windbreaker. The crest of the windbreaker included the letters NY. "Look at the sky," she said, pointing up at dusky clouds rolling over them. "Now show me that path you were talking about."

"I hope you're not expecting something special, it's really nothing special. If it rains at least the woods'll cover us."

At her side walking through the forest he felt thirsty and wished he had detoured to a water fountain. If he kissed her by the river he would make a joke first, call her bumblebee because of her yellow and black clothes. A bushy-moustached man came from the other direction and stepped onto a log to let them pass but nobody else appeared on their way to the end of the trail. The river was darker than before, the sun now behind a cloud. Colours he had seen, of violets and dead ferns and bunchberry blossoms, seemed to have disappeared. Ugly grey bracken grew all over the side of a tree. He would kiss her by the sea instead. "It's a lot nicer when the sun's out."

"It's o'kay. Look at those rapids."

"I should wade in to see how deep it is."

She touched his arm. "No you don't. You'd drown, you blockhead. I might not rescue you again."

As he touched her arm her white windbreaker felt soft, sliding smoothly under his fingers. Like panties he

suspected, shaking. "O'kay, there's no path the rest of the way. Just watch where I step." Now she was behind rather than beside him. They walked slowly, halted and stumbled. Suddenly he realized she was looking at him from a foot or so away, at the back of his head, neck and shoulders. He tried to straighten his shoulders but a thin branch stung across his face. Whenever she said "Ouch" he was stricken with guilt and imagined her covered with scratches, bleeding all down her arms and legs.

Brushing needles off their clothes they walked onto the copper-coloured rock and up to its highest level. Waves beat heavily, bits of water flying in the air beyond them. "Good, it's not going to rain," she said.

Turning, he looked sadly into the sun. "I kinda hoped it would rain." He laughed, "I saw us running through a storm." She was watching a gull riding on the air, hardly moving its wings. There was a tiny hook-shaped scratch on one of her legs. "Maybe it'll rain tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," she began, then she bent to tie her sneaker lace as if it hurt her to speak, "tomorrow Dad wants to drive back through Maine by suppertime."

He looked from her to the gull.

"I'd just as soon stay but he's the boss."

"Yeah. Yeah." Hard sunlight glanced off the rocks, clawing his face. More gulls flew by, cackling.

"I have to help Mom with supper," she said, standing.

"Yeah."

"You look mad at someone."

"Mad? No." If he had put his hand over her right breast it would've covered the crest saying NY. Instead he grasped and squeezed her shoulder.

"Promise to visit me when you're down our way?" she asked.

"New York--when the hell am I ever going to be in New York?" His grip on her shoulder tightened. "You would have to be from some place like New York, wouldn't you?"

"Whaddo you mean? What's the matter with my city?" she asked, pushing his hand away.

"It's far from here," he accused her.

"Well don't get mad at me."

Jamming his hands into his pants pockets, he began walking over the rest of the rock toward the swimming beach. "We're toasting marshmallows tonight," she said, following him. "That'll cheer us up."

"Toasting marshmallows won't cheer me up."

"I said don't get mad at me."

They talked no more as they climbed off the rock and headed up the beach, hands in pockets. Their shadows, long and lurching, moved farther apart the closer they came to their tents. Two laughing young men in bathing suits were chasing a screaming young woman in a tight white top and shorts. She went on screaming and tossing as they carried her, one by the arms and the other by the legs,

towards the sea.

Waking, he felt without looking outside that the site beside his was empty. Yes he had heard them talking, canvas thudding and a car starting, and sluggishly drifted back to sleep. Now he reached over to his jeans and felt in the back pocket for the scrap of cardboard she had given him at the quiet marshmallow toasting. On his back he slipped on his glasses and read the pencil-scrawled address; one number could've been either 9 or 7 and he was afraid a mistake in a New York address could be fatal to a letter. When he noticed Tess at his side he almost laughed recalling A picturesque country girl.

Walking to the canteen he heard girls' voices and all of them sounded flat and common. At the canteen he leaned on the counter and waited for the man to make his toast. "You had any luck with the mermaids this weekend?" the man asked. "Saw ya with one here yesterday."

Henry turned and looked toward the trees.

"She was pretty cute," the man said behind him, pushing down a stiff toaster lever. "Now there's one sure way of figurin out the honeys here." The man's voice came closer until he was standing behind the counter. Henry turn turned and stared at him stonily. "You mosey over to any of 'em smokin cigarettes on the beach and you start talkin and, you know how they like blowin big smoke rings. Well you sit close to one so's when you're talkin casual-like you

reach up your finger thisa way--" the man made a circle with the thumb and finger of one hand, and lifted a finger of the other hand "--and stick it through the smoke ring." The finger jammed into the circle. "If she laughs that means she'll go down for you, sure thing."

"If she laughs. . . ." Henry said aloud to himself.

"Yeah," said the man, grinning.

". . .sandwich in my tent."

"Hey!" called the man holding onto his baseball cap, when Henry was already out in the gravel. "You can't get me to make toast, then just run off like that!"

"Eat the toast yourself!" Henry called, then he mumbled, "And choke on it for all I care" and broke into a run. Crossing the parking lot he was thinking <u>If I write if she writes so what it will end</u> then he wanted to laugh wildly at the man's startled face then he was thinking <u>A batch of letters nothing but a batch of letters</u>. Along the path sweat gathered under his arms and the sunburn on his legs itched.

Outside his tent he pulled the scrap of cardboard from his back pocket, held it up in both hands and hesitated before letting it drop into the cooking pit. He hesitated again before falling on his knees, picking the cardboard out from among the ashes and sliding it back into his pocket. Below the sand water sprawled invitingly but he doubted if he would swim before his father arrived. The sea, he feared, would feel empty without her.

JOURNEYS TO BATTLES

Until this week I'd never slaved away with a shovel six days in a row, one reason why I'm lying on my bed in the middle of Saturday afternoon trying to ignore a tight pain in my legs and arms. . ..All we found during the dig was a pewter uniform button, too worn to tell us a regiment number, or name. Our history teacher says he'll get provincial experts to identify the button. Probably he won't do that in the end, and even if he does I bet those men--how many experts on military artifacts are there in a province this small?--will get a laugh out of him treasuring such a dinky little artifact. . . .No need to be a stick in the mud about it, I guess. The truth is yesterday when Barbara held the button up into the sunlight just when we were going to shovel the piles of earth back into the neat square pits, I was as happy as anyone that finally we had something to show besides dog bones and pieces of glass. I was even proud--at least until my fight with her after the find--that she'd found it, that everybody knew about her and me, had whistled and yelled they'd push us once when we kissed on the edge of a pit. . . .

The only one downstairs I can't hear is Grammie, whose voice grows lower and thinner each year. When everything's silent I figure she must be the one talking. . . .I

haven't heard any cups tapping on saucers but Mom must've served tea by now. I can recognize Mom's voice, Dad's, Gramp's--whew, his laugh just exploded!--and Aunt June's. I recognize them but that's all, so I'm hanging in mid-air hearing rumbles of voices with no clear words. Switch over onto my back, free both ears from the pillow. . . .And I still can't hear. Eavesdropping, one of the trickier arts for sure. . . .Sometimes I want to step outside a conversation, not because it bores me but because my role in it bores me. Would that I was still stealthy like when I was a kid, tiptoed to the head of the stairs and listened in on downstairs conversations. I must've been a ridiculous kid crouched like that, my heart pounding with the hope of hearing something not for my ears. . . .And how little I ever heard. My mother telling a neighbour about a rash on my ass. My father feeling sorry about having spanked me. My sister lying that I'd bought illegal firecrackers (first wrestlings with monsters like betrayal, forgiveness, whatever). Now anything I overhear at home is accidental, like when soon after I started going out with Barbara last month I heard Dad say in the kitchen, "She's lively enough all right, but I never thought Jeff would go for the opinionated type". . . . Back then at the head of the stairs I was so madly in love with words about myself I put up with God knows how many hours of familiar talk, small talk, neither-hide-nor-tail talk and silence. Now that I know there's lots more to hear than tidbits about Jeff Jamieson I feel held back by age,

weight, creaking floor tiles and fuzzy feelings of etiquette, and I stay where the words are out of ear-shot. . . .

Silence. Grammie's time to talk, in the Yankee accent that fifty years in Canada hasn't buried. . . .A dozen years ago when my family was visiting her and Gramp in Saint John they went with us to the first film I saw, Westward the Wagons, and afterward she asked if I'd liked the "hosses." I said yes but didn't know what she'd meant. . . .Today's big event, her and Gramp coming upriver with Aunt June, isn't an annual affair anymore--her arthritus cruelly twisting her. Earlier this afternoon the dig and my recent essay on New Brunswick/Maine relations before Confederation were good topics for talking to her. She still lights up when anyone mentions Maine. . . .That button (tossed up in my mind each time I move and feel my muscles bind), I like thinking it's from the 104th Regiment of Foot, whose march during the War of 1812 every kid in this province heard about in his earliest History classes. In the past week I've been with the Regiment and their spaniel when mercury in thermometers freezes, snowshoeing the 700 miles from Fredericton to Kingston, discovering at the end my uniform is missing a button. I told Grammie my fantasy and when she repeated, "Prob'ly is, prob'ly is," I couldn't let her down by saying no, the button definitely isn't from that march. . . .Journeys to battles have always grabbed my interest more than battles themselves. Maybe it started on the muddy spring day my grade six class paraded a mile to the stone and bronze monu-

ment that honours the march of the 104th. I wanted to walk farther than that with a quiet girl who had the brightest skin, darkest eyes and yellowest boots in the class. . . . Last week when I told Barbara all that in her family's den she laughed I'm "Sir Starry-Eyed Romantic"who looks for personal things everywhere in history. I pointed out she takes ballet lessons, which is pretty romantic in another way. "O'kay, I'll be the wood nymph and you be the clown," she laughed, grabbing my leg. . . .She's got more political brains than I'll ever muster. She decided after three days of the dig that archaeology is the "baby" side of history. My weakness for history as story makes her squirm. "I can't help it," I've said. "It's my grandmother's fault". . . . Which isn't to say Grammie thinks like I do--probably I make more of these things that she ever would. Her own history is one root of what Barbara calls my "storybookiness." A year or two after Westward the Wagons I asked Mom about Grammie's funny pronunciations, and then I first heard about Maine, the Aroostook War and my hapless ancestor. The only fatality of the so-called Aroostook War of 1839 between New Brunswick and Maine was Grammie's great-grandfather, a farmer in Fort Fairfield struck by a bullet that had ricochetted from a rock during a peace celebration. . . .During Centennial weekend three years ago Grammie heaved a sigh at the sound of fireworks and laughed, "Wait till '76 and I'll show you a real party." She said what the Queen needed most was to get down on her hands and knees and scrub a floor, and Gramp--who

thinks the Limies are descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel--began arguing, growing more serious while she grew more lighthearted. . . .You could say there's a legendary shape to her life. The birth and early years of our heroine in one country, near the sources of an international river, the St. John. Her tour with her family across the border, meeting the same river and tracing it down to its mouth and its namesake city where she meets our hero in his tailoring shop. Her return home and their hesitant drawn-out courting. Her marriage to him and moving to the mouth of the river whose sources she knew as a child. You could say the river belongs to her. . . .Or the river belongs to me, for having stood, sat, rested, read, what else, carried a canoe, what else, and squeezed Barbara's breasts on its banks. And for sensing its lanquid curving course, picturing all its reaches and the sources I've never seen. If I can't explore it all I at least imagine it all. . . .Say the same thing of Barbara's body! . . .I won't join the Young Socialists Club like her because I haven't read enough Marx, and I won't get all anti-American like her because I can't shake off my old sense, drummed in by my reading of Hawthorne, Longfellow and Irving, my cheering for the Redsox, and--if this isn't too high-falutin'--the mysterious pull of the seaboard, that New England's a part of me. . . .One night sitting on the riverbank Barbara said, "You can't read all Marx or anyone before you choose. Sir Wishy-Washy, you haveta choose with what you've got." "Sure, sure," I said, reaching over and strok-

ing her bare knee. "Still, the world wasn't made in six days. C'mon closer, let's not talk about that now". . . .

Gramp has thrown back his head and his laugh has exploded through the livingroom ceiling and my bedroom floor . . . .Despite the clumsy sounds he always makes--clattering of pans to fry an egg, hurricane in turning newspaper pages, jangling of twenty hangers just to get one coat--he was a tailor until he retired. I never saw him at his business but somehow I have to picture him doing delicate work, squinting, silent. . . .Within an hour after arriving today he launched into an argument about capital punishment, noisily sucking his pipe, throwing the match into an ashtray and blowing blue smoke out at me. "They shot sons-of-bitches like that in the War--why not now?" Finally I only smiled in my serene golden rules and in the impossibility of seeing myself on a battlefield. My mind even strains to remember he fought in Europe in 1916. It is easier to see the tailor. . . .His laughter blows apart his rage. Grammie's quieter rage, I haven't seen it at all in the last few years. On a beach long ago an older boy took a toy of mine and while Gramp slept in a lawnchair with a handkerchief draped over his bald head, Grammie leapt to her feet (even then the leap must've hurt her joints), hurried over to the boy, grabbed him by the air, and told his mother she should buy him a toy instead of lying there letting her body burn up. . . .Will Barbara and I get to the beach together this summer? . . .

One Saturday early in spring our class had a car wash to help

pay for the dig. Off and on we all threw water at each other and Barbara threw and got more water than anyone else, her old grey sweatshirt clinging to her in all the right ways. . . .In class I'd seen hints of her jolliness but only then did I tell myself I couldn't stall any longer. That night I phoned her for the first time and we went swimming at the Y, I like a dog out of its element, she supple as the water itself. . . .Now I dry my sweaty palms on the bedspread and press my temples while that button turns and turns inside my head as if my grandparents' faces (clear) were on one side and Barbara's face (blurred) on the other. . . .Barbara threw the button into the grass after holding it up into the sunlight and I'm scared that she threw more than the button down, that when we start college this fall we'll--she'll fall for some wind-and-shit-bag Marxist. When everyone scrambled and screamed for the button she'd thrown in the grass, she shook her dark hair and said it was all a "dirty sweaty waste of time," I said she didn't have to be a killjoy, she dropped her shovel and left early, I picked her old white sun hat up off the grass and felt like tossing it into the nearest pit. . . .The phone's just a room away but I'm not ready to call her. Her hat sits over on my desk, squat, its top squashed. I stare over at it. . . .The dig <u>was</u> dirty and sweaty. Did she--oh God, it could be, I remember her limping one afternoon after the dig, I see dirt smeared on her face--did she work the six days <u>because I wanted her to?</u> . . .

Who says I've lost the stealth I had as a kid? Here I am at the end of the hall floor, elbows on knees and chin in hands, feet lowered onto the top step. . . .Vietnam. Would that Barbara were down there and Gramp might've met his match. I've heard all this before, his explanation of the Domino Theory as if it were his own invention. So what. I listen for a new twist to the argument, the measliest new twist. . . . But he's raving, you'd think he's on a soapbox. Why doesn't someone throw a pillow at him? . . .Closer voices draw me in, voices from the foot of the stairs and the hallway. . . .

MOM: Leave the crutches here, Mom. Now get hold of the bannister. I'll hold you on this side.

GRAMMIE: . . .so helpless. . .

MOM (laughing uneasily): I hope you don't have to go real bad. It might take a while to get up there.

WHAT AM I DOING HERE WITH MY CHIN IN MY HANDS--HOW WOULD I EXPLAIN SITTING STARING INTO SPACE LIKE A DODO? Back to my room on my hands and knees. . . .Crawling. . . .My second childhood already. . . .Sweaty palms sticking to the tiles. . . .My room, my beloved room. . . .My feet on the pillow and, there, my head at the foot of the bed near the door and the updrifting voices. . . .My heart drumming so hard it seems to be in my ears. . . .

GRAMMIE: It's good I'm light as a feather. Whew, brother!

MOM: An elevator would sure come in handy.

GRAMMIE: What I need's a magic carpet.

(A magic carpet! I see her on it, cross-legged in her crimson and golden slippers, her joints healed.)

MOM: Whaaaa! We'll both go down!

GRAMMIE: You calm down, just calm down! Whew, brother!

I start shaking and seem to see her falling, tumbling over the steel edges of the stairs. Are her slippers slippery? I can hardly breathe or move a muscle. No sounds but the squeaking of the bannister screws and the scudding of shoes. . . .They loudly sigh with relief at the top. Grammie says, "Whew, brother," once more, slower, her voice almost breaking in pain. I too want to shout Whew, brother! She tries to laugh, "That was harder on you than me," and Mom laughs in agreement, her voice shaking. . . .I too shake and feel the tightness in my legs and arms return. Is arthritus hereditary? Right now I want a magic carpet to get me away from the stumbling sound of her feet, from digs and long marches and eavesdropping. Yet there aren't any magic carpets, so what can I do but listen? . . .Here they come. I'll roll over on one side and shut my eyes, pretend I'm asleep when they pass the room. . . .

Fake sleep turned into real sleep and Gramp bellowed

upstairs to wake me for supper. Here at the diningroom table, surrounded by all these familiar faces, I--

"Jeff, you look serious as a judge," says Mom.

"Prob'ly had a scrap with his woman," says Dad.

My mouth's full of food so I say nothing. Passing cranberry across the table to Grammie I try to remember a dream from minutes ago, but nothing comes back except that Barbara was in it. In the past week she may have done something good enough to make me almost cry, but even if she didn't--even if she continued at the dig for some other reason than me--I know what to do now, for now. . . .After supper I'll walk to her house with her hat in my hand and pull the hat down onto my head before she comes to the door. Maybe she'll grab the hat off my head, call me a clown and ask what I want. If so, she's bitchier than I'd ever imagined. . . .Maybe she'll smile and open her arms. Or maybe she'll hesitate, her hands on her hips, and a few moments will pass before we touch.

SO LONG AS IT DOESN'T THUNDER

Delivering newspapers in a snowstorm when I was ten, I was ransacking my brains for proof that God existed. Since my face was bitten by cold and snow was slipping down a hole in one of my boots, I was not conceiving any precocious version of the Argument from Design. No, as I thumped ice from a mailbox and dropped a newspaper in, I was thinking of mothers and spinsters. Women who are married have babies, I told myself, and Great Aunt Laura who isn't married has never had a baby. What keeps spinsters from having babies? It couldn't be even the wildest luck so it must be God! In the blinding cold I felt like a walking fire and the load of papers on my shoulder seemed to lighten.

In a few weeks I came upon a chapter about the human body in my sister's Biology text and Great Aunt Laura ceased to be proof of God. Tonight I am not sure if she was proof of anything as I bounce my son on my knee at the diningroom table, making duck-like sounds in his ear now and then, and look through this splitting envelope of poems and sayings she copied out with a black fountain pen. When my grandmother gave me the envelope last night she said, "I don't know if there's anything left for you. Maybe you'd like these."

There was no elevator so we would trudge up to the top floor of the apartment house that had once been a furniture factory, up long flights of broad, dimly-lit, eerily quiet stairs. I clung close to my father's side. Then came the years I liked being frightened, glancing over the bannister to shadowy corners expecting to see a man-size spider or a grinning skeleton. The stairs and halls were not just dustless but bare of all signs of life, so you could hardly believe anyone lived there. "I'd go nuts if I spent a night here," Sally or Shirley once said. "Shhh. You don't want Aunt Laura to hear you say that," my mother whispered.

My father would tug a cord over the door, ringing a row of bells. Before we saw her we would blink as light streamed over us through the opened door. The window with white curtains in the far side of the room stretched from the floor half way to the ceiling. Over the floor lay a thick white carpet with purple designs, triangles in squares, stars in circles.

The first summer she showed us the black leather book I tried to reach the cord over the door but couldn't until my father lifted me. The bells jingled, startling after the dead quiet of the stairs, then she stood before us nodding not just her head but all her body. Her eyes were small but she was big, her head low between her shoulders as if she had

no neck. She laughed softly, "Why what a surprise!" though my father had phoned that morning from my grandfather's farm where we were spending the week.

"The weatherman was on our side until this afternoon," my father said, pulling off his wet jacket.

"Just so long as it doesn't thunder," she said, still laughing nervously. She pursed her lips crookedly and looked down at me, her small eyes bright behind wire-framed glasses. "I put my hands over my ears if it thunders. I bet you do too."

"I'm not scared of thunder," I said. My parents laughed and she pursed her lips again, seemed to frown.

After piling all the jackets into their arms she and my mother headed back toward the kitchen. Sally and Shirley laughed silently and pointed at me; there's no time you hate having identical twin sisters more than when they laugh at you identically. As soon as I sat in one of the folding metal chairs I was tempted to switch into one of the huge leather chairs. However, as my mother returned to the room she settled into one and Aunt Laura said to my father, "The other big chair, that's for you." She paid no attention to his protests and sat in a metal chair like my sisters and me. The chair looked too small for her.

Her usual recipe card of questions was curled in one of her hands; she peeked down at it, trying to keep it covered with her other hand. "Now how're your legs holding out?" she asked my father, glancing up from her card. "I

never could figure out how you mailmen walk all those miles every blessed day of life." I hardly listened to the usual updating of our health, family life, church life and school life. Soon I felt so awkward sitting up straight, my sisters with their hands neatly folded smirking at me, that I stood and walked over to the tall window.

It was still raining but even the dirty white sky lit up the room. Since the window started at the floor I could watch my feet and the street below almost at the same time. Four floors down a limping bareheaded man picked up a king-size pop bottle off the sidewalk. I saw myself buying a king-size 7-Up, swigging it in one of the leather chairs and loudly burping. Across the room, I remembered, hung a framed picture--later I learned a Currier and Ives print--illustrating the fate of a drunkard, shabby clothes and black sunken eyes.

Through the window I saw the small white Customs building with a Red Ensign and a Stars and Stripes flapping wetly side by side, gulls wheeling in the rain above the bridge. Behind me Aunt Laura said, "I'll go get the box of things for Bernie." I didn't turn around until she left the room.

My father was walking toward me so I turned back to the window. He put his hands on my shoulders saying, "You be careful, one step out there and you're gone. See that white building, that's where she worked--like the men in uniforms when we went to Calais."

"I know, you told me yesterday." A day earlier Calais had seemed a more adventurous world that St. Stephen despite the similarity of the two towns' houses and streets; over grocery stores there were beer signs that had made my father shake his head, in the post office there were wanted criminal posters I'd seen before only in cowboy movies.

The grocery box of toys was wide in Aunt Laura's arms so she almost waddled. "Here, Bernie, don't let us old fogies keep you from having fun!" she called. I would rather have stayed by myself watching the gulls in the rain and walking around inspecting pictures on the walls, but I followed my father back to the family.

Squatting on the carpet in the midst of the chairs, I reached into the box for the plastic bag of dominoes. Aunt Laura's recipe card questions were over. Now she and my parents talked randomly about our relatives. I had about forty-five cousins on that side of the family, a lot of Littles to talk about. I started building a domino fort in the snow of the white carpet. Sally and Shirley sat straight as if there were in school with the district superintendant visiting; their red socks were pillars of fire beyond my domino fort.

Finally my father said, "Bernie was wondering about your work at Customs."

"Now what would you like to know?" Aunt Laura asked me, looking down so her glasses slipped on her short nose and her deeply-creased jowls sagged. My mother smiled. I

wanted to throw a domino in my father's face.

"You checked cars like the guys do now, didja?" I blurted.

"I checked folks coming here, I checked folks leaving here," she began while I stared at my fort. "One time my boss wanted me to do just office work but I argued him out of it, he was scared for me, it was in the Prohibition. Then I--the Prohibition, you can ask your father about that--then I had to watch out for queer humps in the seats, they would tear out stuffing and hide liquor inside. Once there was a paper bag in a back window, they said it was string-beans but it looked queer for that. Things always looked queer, not just in the Prohibition, I'd know all sorts of evil things were crossing the border. But most the time I just waved them by, 'How much did you buy, folks?' I'd say and they'd say, 'Oh nothing but this tub of ice cream.' I wasn't going to ask to see the inside of every tub of ice cream, though poison or anything could've been hid in them."

She looked from face to face searching for something more to say, then cried, "What d'you say, time for treats?" While she and my mother started toward the kitchen for the usual gingersnaps and juice glasses of milk, I knocked over the dominoes, dropped them into the plastic bag and sat back in the metal chair.

All of us except her were sipping milk and trying to trap gingersnap crumbs in our napkins when she clapped her

hands and said, "I almost forgot, there's a book I thought you all would like to see, a little leather book in the toy-box."

"You find it, Bernie," my mother said. I put the rest of a gingersnap into my mouth, went down on my hands and knees and rifled through tiddlywinks and magnets and snakes-and-ladders until I held up a small black book.

"Oh a New Testament," said Shirley.

"No it looks like a diary," said Sally.

The cover was leather with gold lettering: FAMOUS NUDES. Not knowing what nudes were, I opened the book.

I threw down the book and yelped. Her laughter rang around me. "That's not a book!" I cried, flexing my fingers, bits of gingersnap flying from my mouth.

Puzzled, my mother and sisters bent forward in their chairs. My father picked up the book and opened it; he too yelped but kept the book open. Guffawing he showed the inside to everyone, and everyone except me laughed. Inside the book there were no pages, only the bottom of a box, a set of wires and two small batteries.

Two summers later came the afternoon my parents, attending a funeral in town, left my sisters and me at Aunt Laura's. The FAMOUS NUDES joke had not changed my feeling the apartment house was more intriguing than Aunt Laura herself, for the joke had been at my expense and wounded my pride. It wasn't until that other afternoon I began to

feel she was the freest spirit among my relatives.

I was standing in front of her glass and walnut bookcase by the rain-blurred window. In the centre of the room Sally and Shirley were flipping through the Royal Family scrapbook, which was so heavy they sat on their knees on the floor with it opened across the carpet. "See what a nice young man Prince Phillip was," Aunt Laura said, standing over them with her arms folded. "And Bernie, I see you're looking at my books." Unfolding her arms she started toward me in her heavy leather shoes. I gulped down the rest of my milk, feeling cheated and thinking juice glasses are only for juice. "See all my polar exploration books," she said as she reached me. "I always wanted to be a polar explorer." She swung open the doors of the bookcase, lifted out a small plaque map of P.E.I. and set it on the top between two pots of African violets.

Land of the Long Day. The Outpost of the Lost. The Friendly Arctic. The Heart of the Antarctic. Little America. Ten Thousand Miles with a Dogsled. Heroes of the Farthest North and the Farthest South. On the Top of the World.

Surprised, I put my empty glass between the pots of African violets. I had never imagined she cared about anything like polar exploration. "This is one of the saddest," she said, hauling out an emerald green book. "See, Scott's Last Expedition. Mr. Scott was an Englishman who just missed being first to the South Pole--poor man, he never

came back. There's lots of good stories about the North Pole, too. Did you hear about the folks who tried to go there in a big balloon? After a few days they got weighed down by ice and started walking home. We never would've known much about their trip except years later they were found buried in snow in tents, with picture negatives."

I was thinking of the back yard of our neighbours who ran a refrigeration service; whenever a baseball was slugged in among the abandoned fridges and freezers and I was playing outfield, I walked gingerly among the white hulks expecting a door to spring open revealing a blue frozen child.

"Now this is another case," she said, holding up a book whose spine said simply The North Pole. "Robert Peary wrote it so I don't know why I keep it. Bernie, let me ask you something--who first reached the North Pole?"

I said, "That guy, Peary," though I wasn't sure.

"As I was afraid," she said, looking away from me down at the dark book. I stepped away from the bookcase. My sisters had set aside the scrapbook, Sally now leafing through yellowed sheet music on the piano Aunt Laura had never learned to play, Shirley peering closely at Currier and Ives prints on the walls. "Sally," Aunt Laura called to Shirley so both girls turned. "Tell me, who reached the North Pole first?"

Since Aunt Laura was addressing Shirley, Sally hiding a smile spun back around on the piano stool and

began banging out a new Top Twenty tune. Shirley took a gingersnap from the coffee table and said, "Who discovered the North Pole? Ah, I think Peary.".

Still holding The North Pole Aunt Laura slowly walked over to one of the leather chairs, settled into it and sighed deeply. With the book in her lap she stretched her short arms along the armrests. "As I was afraid," she said again. "Listen, children, I keep this book even though it's full of lies. That worries me, if you keep enough books of lies you're sure to start lying." Shirley shrugged at me and sat in one of the metal chairs. Sally stopped playing the piano and swung around to face us. I shrugged at her and began walking over to sit, at last, in one of the leather chairs. "You folks think Peary did it because everyone told you so, but he didn't, Frederick Cook did a year before. Everyone thought Peary did because he was the proudest man you've ever seen. Mr. Cook was different, no liar or bragger, only a bit of money from his own pocket. Peary had all he wanted from the National Geographic and their likes. And do you know what Peary's ship was called? The Roosevelt. And Roosevelt was President then, indeed."

"I thought Roosevelt was President in World War II," Sally broke in, squeaking the stool.

Under and around me the chair was soft but sturdy, as relaxing as I had hoped. I put my arms up on the armrests and drummed my fingers lightly on the leather.

"There's two of those Roosevelts, the first was the one who was buddy-buddy with Peary, the second was the one you mean. He wasn't much better, he fought with his wife and she was actually the smart one. But Peary, after Peary got back one of his Eskimo friends joked the devil must've had trouble with Mrs. Devil because the trip back was almost too fast to believe. Well it was too fast to believe, and the devil wasn't having trouble with his wife, the devil was there all along helping that Peary."

"The devil?" I asked, no longer believing in the devil any more than in Santa Claus. But it was the only part of her story I questioned.

"I first learned of the whole business when I got the National Geographics with the first reports by Peary and Mr. Cook. I knew Mr. Cook was truer than true, just the way he wrote told you so, so I felt awful when the scientists said he was lying. I threw that Geographic, and all the others, in the stove."

My fingers stopped drumming the leather. Already I knew I would repeat her stories to my friends and preface them by saying I have this neat great-aunt who wanted to be a polar explorer once. That Mr. Cook, I was sure, was closer to her than Prince Phillip. I tipped my head up toward her and said, "That Peary sounds dumb. I bet you're right."

She smiled weakly. "You're a smart boy. Maybe you'll make our family famous as a missionary or something like

that--maybe even a explorer." Her brief smile died. "Your sisters look like they think Peary's the one. They must think I'm a old nut."

"Oh no, oh no!" they cried.

Much I learned about her, of course, I learned secondhand.

A family reunion was held on my grandfather's farm when I was thirteen, an age when such occasions are something of an embarrassment. With boy cousins you no longer have hay fights or float sticks down the brook or frig with the radio dial for Redsox games. You can no longer be indifferent to girl cousins, your eyes landing on the top buttons of their blouses; when you itch to pull off those buttons you turn away sheepishly, knowing you aren't supposed to have such thoughts about your cousins.

My cousin Phyllis wearing a thin pink blouse was standing by the barbecue, bobbing the ice cubes in her lemonade with a straw. My cousin Clarence came up to me, cracked a crooked grin and asked, "Whatcha lookin at?"

"Nothin. Nothin." I turned my back on Clarence and walked to the bowl of potato chips on a card table set up in the grass. Staying by the table I began gobbling down chips. Behind me a circle of my aunts in lawnchairs were talking.

"She brought us milk and gingersnaps," pregnant Aunt Eunice was saying in her scratchy voice, "then she got

talking about the reunion today. 'You call it a family reunion,' she said, 'and I understand by "family" you mean Ann and Mr. Little and their children and grandchildren. I understand that. But what about the great-aunts? There's Beulah and Eileen and me, we'd like a picnic with all you folks, a Great Aunts' Day.' That's what she said, 'Great Aunts' Day'! I had to cover my mouth to keep from laughing!"

Aunts Eunice, Gloria, Ginger and Margaret laughed. I licked my salty fingers, glad to get my mind off my cousin Phyllis' blouse.

"I'll have to tell you about last Christmas," Aunt Ginger, laughing already. "She sent us a box of chocolates like usual, but this time it was a different box with a kind of ballroom picture on it. A woman in the picture had a skimpy gown on, with her. . .her cleavage I guess they call it, showing a lot, and sure enough Aunt Laura had stuck a Christmas seal over the woman!"

I took a swig of lemonade and glanced around the yard at my girl cousins, amusing myself wondering which ones would become spinsters. I was at an age when old women, even Aunt Laura after she had shown me her passion for polar exploration, were nothing but old ladies; with their flower-print dresses, stiff walks and failing memories, they were neither girls nor women. No anecdotes could belittle them. My cousin Doris was sitting under a tree, sweat making her short spiky hair spikier; maybe she would be the spinster.

Behind me Aunt Gloria was talking excitedly as if

she were drunk, though I knew none of my aunts or uncles drank. "You just won't believe me but I could call Gary over, he'll vouch for me--where is he, over getting the barbecue going? You see; we gave her supper and afterward Gary tried to think of a game she might like to play--not bridge, knowing she thinks playing cards are only fit for saloons. So he thought of what other card games we had, and before he knew it he'd asked her if she'd like to play Old Maid! She snapped, 'What've I done to deserve that?' and no matter what we said she still thought he'd insulted her on purpose!"

I let out a laugh like a bark. I left the bowl of chips and started searching for a tree to sit under, pressed on all sides by a blur of cousins and aunts and uncles. If I had thought of it I would've envied Aunt Laura alone in her apartment. My cousin Clarence came back up to me and said, "Pink lemonade, pink blouse, not bad."

The next morning Uncle Thurston invited me to St. Andrews to see the migrating geese and brant by the sea. He did not tell me we were driving into St. Stephen first to pick up Aunt Laura. However, I sat in the back and she sat in the front wearing a blue hat shaped like a cake tin so I didn't have to answer questions from her. The sick sound of Uncle Thurston's car was so loud I couldn't hear him and Aunt Laura talking.

Uncle Thurston was my only uncle who smoked and as we drove past his and my grandfather's farm, then past

Great Aunt Eileen's farm, he instructed me over his shoulder to handroll a cigarette for him. When I leaned over the seat Aunt Laura was talking about a letter she had written to the Telegraph about the cruelty of loghauling contests. "Blueberry picking!" she said. "Someone was foolish enough to write back it's no worse than blueberry picking!"

"Oh it don't hurt the horses any," Uncle Thurston said.

"What I'd like to see sometime is the horses making the men pull the logs. Bernie, don't pick up your uncle's bad habits, one smoker in the family's more than enough."

After handing Uncle Thurston a skinny cigarette I sat back into silence. I couldn't make out her words again until the car stopped by the sea near flocks of geese and brant, bobbing blobs of black, grey and white in the grey water.

Because the wind was strong, bending tall grasses beyond the car and moaning against the windshield, we stayed in the car with the windows up. "These are better than any binoculars you can get," she said, taking an old pair of opera glasses from her purse. "Lovely, lovely, just look at them all," she said with the opera glasses pressed against her glasses. "Just think how far they're going to fly."

With my chin in my arms I leaned over the seat and after a minute she handed the glasses back to me. When I squinted through them all I saw were flecks of dead flies

on the windshield. "Can I take these outside for a minute?" I asked.

"Yes it's too windy for me," she said. "But you go out."

Wind whipped at my shirt as I walked beyond the car, through tall grasses and up onto large flat black rocks. This time looking through the glasses I focussed them by spinning the knobs. Though nobody would've caught me dead using Aunt Laura's words lovely, lovely my blood seemed to warm and my body lighten while I watched the hundreds of geese and brant, close enough you could see eyes like shiny black beads. The sea made a steady lapping sound and honks and cries of birds drifted in the wind. I wanted to cling to the back of a goose and be carried into the sky down the seaboard, pointed at by strangers as a hump on the back of a goose in a high moving V. Turning back to the car I saw Aunt Laura's face behind the windshield distorted by light. She had led me to the geese yet she was shut inside a car and I was out in the open, wind pushing at my back as I climbed off the black rocks.

In my first year of high school I asked for and received a pair of snowshoes for Christmas. Through January and February I trekked at least once a week through the woods behind the city over fresh soft snow, loose crystalline snow and glazed crusted snow. Ever since a girl had snubbed me in the fall nothing had helped me bear

my certainty I would end up a crotchety bachelor more than those winter walks; I revelled in their loneliness. Through that winter and the next summer I read Gerald Durrell on his explorations in Paraguay, Australia and the Cameroons, Jacques Cousteau on his deepsea probes, and Thor Heyerdahl on his Kon-Tiki and Aku-Aku expeditions, imagining books by Bernie Little would one day rest beside theirs.

Then in the second year of high school I started seeing a lot of Judy, the girl next door. We had lived side by side all our lives yet never talked to one another much until we did a joint project on Cousteau for Geography class. The first night I kissed her, pressing her up against the thorny hedge between our houses after we'd been working on Cousteau, I whispered I wanted to be alone with her in a submarine at the bottom of the sea. "Ouch" was all she said.

We had been going together for nearly a school year when Aunt Laura came to Fredericton by bus on a blistering day in June. Judy and I had been watching volleyball at the school when my father picked us up on his way to the S.M.T. station. I hardly recognized her walking out of the station except for her blue hat. She had on a long grey coat that couldn't hide how much weight she had lost, and a new larger pair of glasses that made her eyes look even smaller. Despite the heat I rolled up the window at my side; my father had warned us the windows would go up since Aunt Laura believed the least draught in a car will give you

"the chills."

The car heaved as my father backed away from the station. While Aunt Laura in the front seat began asking about the family, "How're the girls liking college?" Judy put her lips against my ear and whispered, "That trick nudes book--is she the one?" I nodded and smiled.

Sunlight falling over her face, Aunt Laura tried to adjust the visor. "The bus was grand, there was green in the windows to take care of the light. The driver was a real gentlemen, more than you can say sometimes. I was in the front seat, you know how my legs are now."

Judy tugged her tight T-shirt and whispered, "Hot as hell!"

"Well we don't want to talk about my legs." She started laughing. "You know what I want for dessert tonight. Ice cream, ice cream is always what Aunt Laura likes!"

As a fire engine drove up behind us, the siren screaming, she put her hands over her ears. My father pulled the car over to the curb. Even with the windows shut the sound rang around us. Secretly I watched Judy as she watched the fire engine. A trickle of sweat slipped around her collar bone and, oh, between her breasts.

Aunt Laura kept her hands over her ears even when the siren sound was beyond us. Only when the car jerked back into the street did she drop her hands and say to my father, "There's too many fires these days, isn't there? And everyone goes to watch and just gets in the way, though they have

no business on earth being there. Don't tell anyone, but a long time ago I watched a fire from my window and when I asked myself, 'Are you enjoying that?' I felt awful and turned away."

My father swung the car into our driveway more slowly than usual. "Bernie, you take the suitcase in," he said, opening his door. Outside the car Judy and Aunt Laura stood side by side, Judy with sunlight in her drifting black hair, Aunt Laura with a black purse hung over one arm and her hat hiding most of her hair. "Thanks for the drive, Mister Chaffeur," Judy said. "And have a good visit, Aunt Laura. That's a beautiful old suitcase you have."

"Oh. Yes." Aunt Laura looked startled, turning to Judy. I ran my hand up Judy's back a moment before she started along the thorny hedge to her house. I was sure Aunt Laura had forgotten Judy had been in the car, so I carried the suitcase somewhat begrudgingly, swinging it so carelessly to the house it struck a corner of the doorway.

At supper my father stumbled over grace, he had not said it for so long. As we started passing dishes around the table he said, "Bernie here became quite the snowshoer a couple of winters ago, off to the woods every weekend. One time he really misjudged how long his walk would take, and we were just phoning the Mounties when he stumbled in the door out of the dark."

"I was stupid, that's all."

"Agreed," Sally said. At last she and Shirley looked

a little different, her hair still long but Shirley's cut short.

"But Bernie didn't do much snowshoeing last winter," my mother said. "He and Judy are thick as thieves."

"I'd like to see the Arctic by airplane but you know I've never flown," Aunt Laura said. "I'd be scared out of my wits in a airplane. Every family needs a polar explorer but I'm a little old for that."

"You going to P.E.I. again this summer?" asked Shirley.

"Good meat loaf," said my father.

"No, my legs. . . .It's hard to get around these days," Aunt Laura said, looking down at her plate so I saw a bald spot in the centre of her head.

It was then our cat Cleopatra started scratching at the back screen door. I left the table and the diningroom and let Cleopatra in. Before I could grab her with the dead bird in her mouth she scurried through the kitchen into the diningroom and stopped by Aunt Laura, dropping the limp bird at her feet.

When Aunt Laura's fork fell from her hand it rang against the side of her plate. She pushed her chair back and stood up, cried out and put one of her thick-veined hands over her mouth. "Cleo brought you a present," my mother said.

Returning to the table and nearly bumping into Aunt Laura, I looked into her eyes. They seemed to widen as she

glared down at Cleo. "That's a bad cat, a evil cat," she said, her eyes so cold and unforgiving they startled me. I pushed Cleo out of the diningroom with the toe of my sneaker. My father picked up the dead bird in a napkin and headed outdoors to the garbage.

"I don't know why she does it," Sally said. "We feed her plenty." Aunt Laura stood motionless by her chair, looking down at the tile where the bird had been. Bent over with a napkin I wiped a string of blood off the floor. Slowly Aunt Laura sat back down, her face pale and her lips trembling. She had lost her appetite, and even ice cream didn't completely cheer her up.

Moments ago Judy lifted The Little One off my knee to take him into his crib, and I finished reading the pieces of paper strewn here over the diningroom table--white paper, blue paper, lined paper, unlined paper, backs of cut-up Christmas cards. On half of them Aunt Laura printed out poems by Patience Strong, R. McCann and Edna Jacques about cooking, duties, daughters, spring sales and spring. Have I any right to say whether she was a happy woman? That question's a thorn in me when I read a thing like this, "Career Woman":

> Coming home to the radio
> And a room with a rosy light,
> Quiet and clean and filled with peace,
> Safe from the troubled night.
>
> A gleaming window across the street
> Gay as a Christmas tree

And a little chair with a pleated frill
Waitin' there for me.

Even replacing the little frilled chair with a big leather chair, I wonder how often she could have found comfort in those words before they rang false, false, false in her ears.

With the crass curiosity of a movie magazine reader I hoped tonight to find some hint of a man in her life. The only time I've heard the subject raised was the day after I watched the geese and brant, when my father said to my mother, "She always wanted someone special, Mother says. Would never settle for anyone less that what she read about in books." Among these pieces of paper I found the words, E. P. has helped me improve my conversation and Since E. P. I have had better manners on the back of a tattered booklet, and imagined a Mr. E. P. who courted her at one time, a Mr. E. P. who perhaps played her piano; then I flipped the booklet over and saw the title Effective Phrases for All Occasions.

Among all the sayings she copied down (eg. an idle brain is the devil's workshop) one caught my eye. At least one daughter in every generation ought to remain unmarried, said someone named John H. Holmes, to raise the profession of auntship to a fine art. Maybe when she first read those words she felt a crown drop upon her head or a sword upon her shoulder; maybe a week later she laughed bitterly. How could she raise auntship to a fine art when she saw all of us so seldom? Who wouldn't laugh at the idea of marking Great Aunts' Day on calendars?

As for me, my Kon-Tiki is this spacious old apartment in the city where I was born. Judy and I were History majors in college here when we were married, our friends scrawling GIRL NEXT DOOR HOOKS BOY NEXT DOOR in lipstick on our wed- ding car; now there are moments when I recall that lipstick scrawl like an uneasy dream and feel that Judy--my wise warm woman I would die without, but never a dreamer--did hook me, all-too-willing me. Soon The Little One was on his way (The Little One! Sometimes that punning nickname seems silly), Judy became a clerk in the antiques shop down the street and I became a researcher/writer for the Department of Tourism, extolling the glories and wonders (barf, barf) of the "Picture Province." The boy who snowshoed in the woods shakes his fist at me mockingly. I shout back at him, Easy for you to have big schemes! but I feel nothing can hide a cowardice in those words.

After Aunt Laura's visit on the blistering June day I didn't see her again for six years. My parents continued to call on her once each summer but my sisters and I were always busy with summer jobs or summer school. She moved into an Old Folks' Home and travelling became too hard for her to show up at the wedding, though she sent us Richard Halliburton's Seven League Boots as a gift.

During the Christmas holidays last winter Judy and I were at my grandparents' for the day when Aunt Laura called the farm. My grandmother signalled me from across the room and for the first and last time I heard Aunt Laura over a

phone, her voice wispier than I remembered: "I have a old pair of curtains, would you and. . .what's her name? you two like--like to have them?" By her halting way of talking I knew she merely wanted visitors; she would've used the curtains as bait for anyone who happened to be at the farm.

As we drove into the parking lot of the Old Folks' Home we saw a stocky stone house, on one side a tall chimney, on the other side a long red fire escape. Judy took my arm as we walked over ice to the varnished front door. A blue-jay hunching in a birch tree screamed. "Bluejays and what else, starlings and shrikes," I said, "are the devils of the bird world to Aunt Laura. Hey, it just struck me--I've never seen her in winter."

"Was she getting lonely in her old apartment, or what?" Judy asked, her breath pouring out.

"After all those years? I doubt it."

"After all those years--all the more reason, you cad," Judy said as the jay screamed and flew to the top of the house, clawing at the eaves.

There was a swishing sound of air as the door swung open. Unexpectedly it was Aunt Laura already; she must've been waiting in the lobby. "Come in, children," she said, laughing softly. I could hardly mumble a few words when I saw fallen shoulders and a lengthened neck and a white wig with ridiculous bobbed curls on the sides.

Just as I was about to make introductions she turned to Judy and said, "You met me once before, I remember, Alice.

Don't worry about your rubbers, they're not too snowy and if they are,fine, the janitor here could stand more work. Now let me show you my room." Up the short winding staircase she walked more slowly that she talked. The vermillion carpet put spots in our eyes after miles of snow. A dazzling silver chandelier hung from the ceiling. The vermillion ended at the top of the stairs where we started down a tiled hall.

Her room was smaller than the kitchen of her old apartment. I saw no familiar furniture except the two bulish leather chairs. "Oh dear there's not enough chairs, I'll sit on the footstool," she said. Judy and I protested together. After dropping our coats onto the bed covered with a patchwork quilt, I sat on the window ledge between dark half-closed curtains and the two women settled into the chairs. She looked ashamed I had driven into town to sit on a window ledge. When she began staring at Judy's loose dress I said, "Did you know, Judy's expecting?"

"Seems to me I did hear. Gets hard to keep track of them, all the children you folks have."

"All the children?" Judy laughed, her dark eyebrows lifting. You folks had meant me and all my cousins, not just us two as Judy thought.

On a chair beyond the bed there was a small grey TV, as far as I knew the first she had ever owned. "Haven't I missed Ed Sullivan a lot since they took him off," she said when she saw me noting the TV. "What I liked best were the

live stunts. Don't tell anyone, but I always hoped someone would make a mistake, like a juggler getting all the balls mixed-up. But if it happened I felt sorry for them and ashamed for having wished it. Once I even had the awful thought that my wishing it made it happen."

Judy pointed at a pile of bright matching paperbacks on a shelf behind the TV and asked, "Is that The Forsythe Saga? One of my friends decorated her room to look like a Galsworthy setting."

"Yes, I tried to read them but my eyes aren't what they used to be. But I saw them all on TV and weren't they grand!"

I had never even heard the word "TV" on her lips before that afternoon. Glaring at the blank screen I wanted her to elude every shopworn predictable image of living in an Old Folks' Home.

"Now that Queen Elizabeth series, did you see that?"

"The BBC production. We saw a couple, thought they were great," I said, wanting to throw the TV out the window.

"She was one of our best Queens, for one thing she proved your don't have to marry to be a good ruler. That Trudeau married just to have better chances in the next election, that's plain as plain. I don't think he's ever read English history. I should send him a book about Elizabeth."

"But Elizabeth never had to worry about the next election," Judy said, smiling.

"She was one of our best Queens but those shows were a mess. They made her pasty-faced and cranky-voiced. And they were too nice to the Queen of Scots."

There were no books out in the room except the Galsworthy set. I was afraid to ask about the polar exploration books. They could've been packed away in a box but more likely (this turned out to be true) she had sold them along with furniture and rugs when she'd moved out of her apartment. Instead I mentioned a cousin about to be married, and we started a half hour of talk about Littles and Littlekin. At least it kept us away from TV.

Behind my back there grew a sound of snow collecting in the corners of the window. I turned and saw a white whirling among the trees in the back yard. Just outside her window the bluejay, or another bluejay, was flapping about knocking snow off branches. "In case the roads get bad. . . ." I said to Judy. She nodded, I thought thankfully.

Aunt Laura stood more slowly than Judy, straightened herself and said, "Oh I almost forgot what you came here for." She shuffled over to the TV chair and lifted a long grey box from behind it. "The curtains are in here. Light came through them in the morning and woke me, so I bought those dark ones. These white ones are good for youngsters like you who have to get up early in the morning."

We slipped on our coats and were led out of the room along the tiled hall down the staircase to the lobby where the red carpet dully burned our eyes and the chandelier

shone. A man in a blue bathrobe walked past, his mouth wide open and his breath rasping. In the doorway Aunt Laura said quietly, "I'm the youngest here, did you know? Sometimes I feel frisky as a colt."

"That's a gorgeous chandelier. I'd like to find out when it was made," Judy said, pulling her hat from her pocket. "This is such a nice place I wouldn't mind living here myself."

And have to sell nearly everything you've got to your name? I felt like asking.

"They only let me have ice cream once a month here." Her wig was slipping up one one side, exposing bare skin over her ear. "Maybe sometime I'll get you to--to smuggle me in some good kind," she laughed. And those words, except for her goodbye as I opened the door and saw her shiver when cold air rushed in, were the last words of hers I heard.

We had driven out of town when Judy opened the long box across her lap and said, "We aren't going to use these, are we? They're all yellowed."

"Prob'ly not," I said. "We can hang onto them anyway, Alice." I glanced over at Judy, cleared my throat and asked, "Hey, who first reached the North Pole?"

"Don't you know that? Robert Peary."

I shook my head saying, "As I was afraid, as I was afraid," and when she begged me to explain myself I smiled slyly and said nothing. Snow was wisping across the road, making sharp wet sounds against the windshield. Wrapped in

heavy furs and standing on a dogsled, Aunt Laura seemed to slide rapidly by the front of the car. Then the vision broke and she was standing in my family's diningroom, her face pale and her lips trembling, while the cat fled to another corner of the house.

It's time to pile these pieces of paper back into the brown envelope and find a place in the closet for them. Through the window Judy is reading a novel out on the porch, moths circling the light bulb above her head. In that very chair last night I sat reading a travel book about Chile, felt how far I am from Chile and covered my face with my hands. It's so quiet I can almost hear our son breathing in the bedroom down the hall. Who knows, maybe he will be the explorer, though now he does not kick or cry out in the night.

COLLEGE JACKET

I

After six months at the canning factory Wheeler was sick of the stink of fish. Each night when his father picked him up and drove back to the farm he still seemed surrounded by tin cans flowing off conveyer belts. Only when he stepped into the kitchen to smells of beef stew or cooked cabbage and threw off his coat did he feel miles away from the cement walls. In the last year of school he had bitten his fingernails waiting for graduation yet there he had been able to slump in his seat or make eyes at girls; at the factory he worked standing and most women were heavy-hipped mothers of many children.

At least Morris his only friend worked beside him at the factory, pushing empty cans from one belt across a table of rollers to another belt. During that last year of school they had often screeched their tires up and down streets in town and yowled like cats at girls on the sidewalk. Though sometimes they passed a carload of classmates who raced with bottles of liquor flashing, they themselves--sons of teetotallers--had never drunk anything stronger than ginger ale. Once when Wheeler took three of his city cousins on a spin with Morris, by the wharves his cousin Bernie in the back said, "Don't show off, Wheeler, you'll get us all

killed," and blushing he mumbled, "College creep."

Now that Morris spent most evenings with the Algonquin's youngest chambermaid the two friends met less often. All fall in the factory cafeteria Wheeler had been eyeing a girl who worked somewhere in the building, her bare stomach brown below rolled-up knotted blouses--a clue she worked in one of the hotter rooms? At lunch one early winter day an older woman came over to him and Morris with a giant card and said, "You two sign this. That girl over by the cash register's marrying some fella from Grand Manan." Only she was by the cash register, her stomach likely warm to touch; rather than betray himself by writing Wheeler Little he shakily signed Paul McCartney, recalling how people always said he looked like the Beatle with his round slight features and jagged bangs.

At the factory in the first week of January the stink of fish was welcome after the smelless snow of the Christmas holidays, the noises of machines welcome after the empty fields and the squabbling of his brother and sister. But by Friday the clattering chattering cans again vibrated nunbness through his fingers. He was hunched in the cafeteria eating chowder when Morris said, "Well big news, my boy--I'm gettin outa here this fall and going to college."

"You go to college?" Wheeler grinned. "What'll you take?"

"Oh jeez, I don't know, clothes and stuff."

"No, take, take. What'll you study."

"I dunno. Not Math though. God I hated Math. Engineering, might take Engineering."

Something ticked against Wheeler's teeth, he picked out a fish bone and mumbled, "Those cooks're gonna choke me yet," thinking less of the fish bone than of the bald man who had come to their school a year earlier and talked about college. The man had handed out stapled information sheets, then at home Wheeler had balled up his and thrown them into the stove. Pulling out a cigarette he saw a world beyond the chattering cans and snow fields, and tightened his lips in anger that those sheets were now ashes among ashes buried behind the barn.

Rather than wait for Morris' mail he sat on the edge of his bed that night with a piece of his mother's lilac-coloured letter paper over a car magazine and wrote to the university. Once the envelope was sealed he set it on top of his high stack of magazines and returned to the bed with a Hockey News. When Malcolm barged in grinning, "What's this about you going to college? You gotta be kidding!" he charged at him and his brother ran out laughing. Pressing his nose against his small window he saw nothing in the dark except moonlight on ice-coated poplars but there you wouldn't have to drive ten or fifteen miles for everything, there stores, pool halls, movie theatres, girls and friends were within a walking mile. Already his hand could feel the key to his own apartment, friends crowding on the steps at his back.

After making sure his school marks were high enough for college--just high enough--he painstakingly filled in forms that had arrived in the mail with a red-covered book of course descriptions. Through the summer he withstood five days a week by the empty cans only because he knew he would touch them for the last time in August. Saving nearly all his money he watched TV even more than before and did not often drive into town to Darrel's Pool Hall. His only setback came the night his mother said, "Your father and I've talked to Uncle Harold and he says you can board in his extra room this fall."

"Thought I'd get my own apartment." A soldier on TV crawled along a muddy trench.

"Uncle Harold won't charge you much. Anybody else'd rob you blind, rob you blind."

Lying on the couch seemingly asleep his father suddenly asked, "What you got against your Uncle Harold?"

"Nothin. It's just--"

"Three or four a your cousins've boarded there and they liked it," his father went on, sitting up. "I already told him you'd be glad to stay with him. He prob'ly gets lonely living by hisself like that."

An exasperated spluttering sound broke from his lips, spittle flying. "O'kay o'kay but this's the last

time you're making up my mind for me," he said, turning toward the stairs and bumping against his father's legs.

Towards the end of summer Morris became a bellboy in the Algonquin to work near his fiancee and shortly before moving to the city Wheeler was best man at the wedding. A few days before the ceremony, at a party of the groom's friends Morris squatted on the floor beside him and laughed, "What'sa use a college now I've got myself a nice little wife? Good times every night a life, eh?"

II

Uncle Harold was an insurance salesman whose wife had died of leukemia before Wheeler's birth, he knew as his father drove him the seventy miles to the city with a suitcase and boxes on the back seet. At the supper table while the two brothers talked, Wheeler eating in silence noticed his uncle's silver sideburns were longer than his father's black ones, his uncle's blue checked pants thinner than his father's mud-coloured ones. Over their shoulders photos of overseas trips hung on the kitchen wall.

"What're you looking at, this one?" Uncle Harold asked, touching a photograph of himself sitting on a camel with a wide smile, sunglasses and a white hat. "That's me somewhere near Egypt on my trip to the Holy Land. Not nearly comfortable as cars, those camels!" he laughed, the tic on one side of his face jerking. Nothing now interested

Wheeler except his new room so once he had finished the bread pudding he stood and said, "Great supper. Now I haveta unpack," and saw his father's brow wrinkle at him.

Down the hall the walls of his room were freshly painted beige matching the wall-to-wall carpet--a carpet!--which he rubbed with his sock feet. He opened the closet door, tossed his suitcase onto the bed and threw back the buckles. Light from the window streamed into the closet, no plugged mouse-holes of protruding nails inside. Never before had he emptied a suitcase or filled a whole rack of empty hangers.

Just as he finished hanging up his clothes his father stood in the doorway saying, "I'll be seeing ya. Haveta make that drive back tonight," then looked away from Wheeler's eyes and began scratching his head. "You can call up your cousin Bernie tonight if you'd like him to show you around the city," his father went on, holding the doorframe with both hands. For once feeling no awkwardness Wheeler stuck out his hand; his father's fidgetting stopped and for the first time--they had never slept under different roofs--they shook hands. "I'll see you out to the car," Wheeler said, the firmness of his own handshake rising up his arm like a power over his father.

The first two mornings he slept in almost until noon and lunched on the luxury of sugared grapefruit, the house seemingly his while his uncle worked downtown. In

the kitchen window listening to hit parade songs on the radio he looked down over a thousand small roofs of the city and felt awake with everyone under those roofs. Wandering all afternoon until his feet ached he bought red and black college notebooks and a red and black college jacket which felt smooth and smelled fresh.

On the third morning he woke earlier and walked a mile down the hill to the rink for course registration, thinking of speeding up to join other students on the sidewalk and introduce himself, instead staying behind looking at his sneakers or the ridge across the river where no houses stood amidst the solid green of trees. In the rink long tables were joined to make longer tables where professors sat waving their hands and pointing at small cards. All the longest line-ups seemed to string back from tables he needed to reach. Licking his lips and clenching his fist he joined a line, sweat trickling out of his armpit down his side.

When he left the rink in mid-afternoon his feet felt so heavy he glanced down to make sure he had on sneakers rather than boots. Before heading up to campus he sat under a tree and pulled from his wallet the still-warm I. D. card, for which he'd lined-up the longest time. On it his face was hardly recognizable: hair sweat-twisted, one eyebrow kinked up, mouth hanging open like a dog's. As he stuck the I. D. back into his wallet he hoped nobody would ever gaze at the picture, that face looking beaten-up except

there were no bruises.

Crisscrossing the hillside campus he watched out for one of his high school classmates though he didn't know of any who had come to college. By a tall brick residence he nearly ran up to a familiar-looking bearded student flying a kite before he saw it was a stranger. Above the residences he entered the library for a drink of water and briskly explored the five floors, monotony hanging over long full shelves. A green-uniformed commissionaire on a swivel chair down by the exit grasped his arm saying, "Hold it, sonny, you got something there?" and he spread out his folded jacket for the man. "'k," the commissionaire said, turning away. Sons-a-bitches! Already calling me a crook he thought, pushing the glass doors open.

At the cafeteria in the Student Union Building he ate a couple of cold Sloppy Joes which reminded him his uncle was a skilled cook despite his tic, his golf, the liver spots on his hands, the boxes of Gideon Bibles he distributed. Beyond his booth an oxen-shouldered man ate a tub of ice cream, a tiny girl brushed on nail polish, African students told jokes and laughed pounding the table. He wanted to speak with someone but not with any of them.

Classes were spread through the day rather than crammed together, you picked your seat rather than take an assigned seat, you could sit through class keeping on your jacket and even smoking. Otherwise college resembled school

more than he'd imagined, professors like teachers speaking to anyone in the room other than him while he held his pen helplessly against a notebook not knowing what was important and what wasn't. At the end of Anthropology lectures he seemed to crawl from under a pile of bones; in French whenever he stumbled the salt-and-pepper-haired professor waving her glasses in her hands chanted vite, vite; in English a long-haired young man slouching over a podium picked apart old poems while Wheeler drew a beard on Queen Elizabeth I on the cover of his text.

One Saturday he tore the September page off the calendar in his room, listening to his Byrds record from the livingroom. Suddenly the music lowered and he rushed out to the stereo, saw Uncle Harold returning to the kitchen and the volume dial turned back. Later that afternoon renting a locker in the S. U. B. basement he wished he'd roared the music back up. He forgot all that, throwing his books into the locker, feeling with a pang he needed a friend even more than a girl.

From beyond the room rang familiar sounds, pool balls breaking apart and sliding across a table. As he turned a corner the green of tables met his eyes like patches of grass in winter. "Wanna game, Jack?" a redhead asked. Without answering he dropped his jacket onto the floor and in three steps was at the table, where he touched the green felt surface, picked up a cue and rubbed the tip against a resin block.

Though he hadn't played in over a month he shot confidently, staying silent while his opponent kept turning around talking to friends at the shuffleboards. "Do you come from. . ." he started but the redhead wasn't listening. Upon winning he grinned, lifted his hands in the air and kept pumping his arms up and down until the stranger said, "Quit showing off, you jerk--think you'd won the fucking Olympics or something." While Wheeler slowly lowered his arms the redhead grabbed books off the floor and followed his friends out the door.

A guy wearing a small brown knit hat and shooting balls around at the next table said, "Don't listen to that asshole. He always says you're showing off if he doesn't win." This brown-hatted stranger was stocky like Morris but had a ruddier face, longer hair and hoarser voice. "That asshole's in my residence so I know. You in residence or what?"

"No, I'm--I'm saying with my uncle." Wheeler slid the cue into a rack on the wall.

"Residence is a real circus. I should show you some of the animal life there sometime."

"Animal life?" Then suddenly understanding, Wheeler laughed. This stranger already seemed his friend as they went upstairs to drink coffee and play the jukebox.

One morning in the next week to shoot pool with Gerry he skipped his first class.

"A dove landed on that rock a moment after I took

the slide," Uncle Harold said over the whirr of the projector while Wheeler sat in darkness on the couch. On the screen a man with sunburned arms stood in front of a river and a half-submerged white rock. "Quite a thrill, a dove on the Jordan River! That's Dr. Gibson, the pastor who was our guide on all the trip. How's that for tonight? Maybe some other time I'll show you my ones from England and Scotland."

Wheeler reached to the lamp on the end table and rubbed his eyes. "Thanks. You take good pictures," he said flatly.

His uncle and he had never argued openly even about his record on the stereo. Suspecting that like him Uncle Harold had been called the quiet type as a kid, Wheeler doubted if they would ever fight despite the tightness he felt in his throat whenever he had supper in the house and was asked how his studies were coming, whether he'd heard Bernie had a big scholarship, whether his profs said un-Christian things, what his mother had written in her last letter. As much as he felt crowded by the questions he always answered calmly but tersely. This Sunday for the first time he had slept in rather than go to church and even then his uncle had said nothing; he sensed he was now free, could sleep in every Sunday and his uncle's tic but never his words would show baffled chagrin.

When Wheeler came back from his room changed into clean jeans Uncle Harold hadn't moved out of the metal chair, the projector still humming and trays of slides scattered

over the floor. Side-on he saw his uncle staring across the room to the mantelpiece and the beige-tinted photograph of his wife, a soft-faced woman with a weak smile and a white ribbon in her hair. "I'm meeting a friend on campus." Turning, Uncle Harold glanced toward but not at him and merely nodded, his hands lying like dead things on his legs. Wheeler had never seen that distracted look on his uncle's face and outside he started hurrying over crackling leaves telling himself he could do nothing for his uncle, he was busy going to college.

Now he skipped classes more often than not, sleeping in late or smoking alone in the coffee shop. Everything on campus was souring. After weeks of daily pool he walked down to the games rooms less often; it was not like driving to Darrel's Pool Hall no more than twice a week without ever tiring of the game. When after one History class he asked a shaggy-haired girl to a movie she said she had "a hundred essays to do." Gerry was busy much of the time with friends from the residence. Library commissionaires still eyed him suspiciously, the periodicals room had stopped keeping Playboy because pages and issues were disappearing (though he hadn't carried away an entire issue a pale dark-nippled woman curled her tongue at him from inside his locker).

The day he was given D for an English essay, at suppertime the only half-empty booth was where a girl was eating a bowl of salad with her fingers--one of his own

habits. Not until sliding into the booth did he recognize her because at the factory he had always seen her from a distance, his eyes drawn to that brown stomach.

She nibbled a slice of tomato and looked around the cafeteria over his head, her eyebrows the thinnest he'd ever seen but pencilled dark. Though those eyebrows were like an older woman's her cheeks were full, almost chubby. "The Greenland Special," she said as he pushed the Sloppy Joe around with his fork. "I call that the Greenland Special 'cause it's always so cold."

She smiled shaking her shoulder-length hair when he laughed and he liked her for that--for smiling not so much at her own joke as at his laugh. "That's pretty good. You got any others?"

Holding up limp lettuce she announced, "My Grandmother's Dishrag."

"Or your husband's."

"My husband? Shit, I'm not <u>married</u>."

"Yes you are. I gave you a wedding card once, with a lot of other names on it. At the fish factory, remember me?"

"<u>That's</u> who you are--the guy who looked like Paul McCartney. But that was the cashier who got married, not me."

"But--but you left right after that and she didn't."

"I had a new job as a waitress in St. Stephen."

"Oh." Her face seemed to change; now he did not

see those mature eyebrows so much as those rolling lips red with lipstick. "You always wore your blouses tied-up kinda."

"I had to, the heat was awful where I worked next to the furnace room."

"That's what I thought--I thought you worked in one of the hotter rooms." His fingers ran under the collar of his shirt. "I always eat salad with my fingers too."

The tips of her fingers were wet with dressing. "Most other girls think I'm a pig for doing it."

"T'hell with them."

Quickly she licked the tips of her fingers, lifted one finger in an obscene gesture and laughed, "Right, up theirs. We know how to eat salad." We, that word like a touch high up his leg. "Forgot my Blue Glue Pie," she said, standing and starting across the cafeteria with her short skirt twitching, nothing plump except her lips, cheeks and breasts. Seeing Bernie or someone who resembled Bernie rise from another booth, Wheeler slumped to keep hidden. By her tray a notebook said Cindy in big letters, and lifting it he uncovered the English text also used in his class; she had drawn square glasses on Queen Elizabeth I.

Back at the booth with a piece of blueberry pie she picked up a fork then set it down, grinned and picked up the pie. "You going to that pub this weekend," he asked, "or d'you have a hundred essays to do?"

"Essays? Essays never keep me from doing anything--though my girl friends always use them as an excuse. Like

they don't want to go to the pub."

"Well," he said smiling, "we can't let ya go alone."

III

The first beer tasted bitter but he didn't make faces. Between beers he danced with Cindy. The second went down more easily; he guzzled the third, his throat feeling wet and warm. Trying not to grin giddily he lifted his arms off the table and squeezed her knee, but she turned to speak with Gerry's thin-necked girl. Proud she was the better-looking girl with her hip-clinging jeans and beaded smock, he figured she'd moved her knee away because he was getting drunk--little did she know, for the first time. "Chug-a-lug," Gerry said from across the table, and he and Wheeler drank up.

Over tides of clapping between songs Cindy said to Gerry's girl, "Shit, is this Octopus ever a good group!"

As he slid his hand above the collar of her smock her murky perfume rushed over him. "Wannaanother beer?"

"Not right now. Hey they're doing 'Skindiver'!"

"Wanna Skindiver? What kinda drink is that?" he laughed.

"Shhhh. It's one of their best songs."

When she didn't even smile at his joke he pulled his lips, stood and waved at Gerry to come alone. By the time they both had bought two beer out in the hall and

returned to the dark room ("I haven't been drunk for a long time," Wheeler said) Cindy was out on the dance floor among all the swinging hair and shaking legs and pumping arms. "The guy who asked her's about ten feet tall," Jill said. Gerry adjusted his brown hat, which he kept on even while dancing, and shrugged at Wheeler. Starting on another beer Wheeler thought So that's that.

When he tired of trying to see a tall son-of-a-bitch among the dancers, he turned and watched the drummer on stage, feeling what a release it would be to spin and thump those drumsticks making loud rhythms. He was beating his fingers on the table in time with the music when Cindy sat back in her chair and wiped her sweating forehead with her hand. Not looking at her, he stopped drumming and drank up one of his beers. Touching his knee she said, "You look like you just shit your pants. C'mon, this song's good for dancing," and she picked up his other beer and drank half. Out among the whirling bodies he soon felt he could dance with her until their twisting feet and bodies burned through the floor.

When the band took their next break he rushed out to the bathroom and in the hall bought two more beer (get her drunk enough he'd end up in her apartment, the bedroom stinking with a thousand perfumes) then just inside the dark room he slowed down, seeing her seat was empty--and her coat gone. "Tough luck, pal," Gerry said. "She must like daddy-long-legs types."

At that moment what was left of Wheeler's autumn seemed to crack apart. Yet as he drank the two beer and watched the frantic drummer and even danced with Jill though she had a skinny neck and oily complexion, he slowly forgot Cindy and even felt triumphant over her (no bitch like that can hurt me) while a feeling of a wider cheat rushed through him. "I shouldn'ta wasted two cents on this!" he shouted at Gerry over the vibrating music.

"Beer? Waste money on beer?"

"No--this, all this." The sweep of his arm included all the buildings on campus that stood beyond the walls of the pub room, all the walkways, lawns, bookshelves and lecture rooms. "Useless bullshit!" he yelled at Gerry. As the music roared around him that girl Cindy had less and less to do with the turmoil within him. Gerry bought him another beer and slouching in his seat he held the plastic glass against his chest watching the dim coloured lights on the ceiling. When Gerry and Jill left the table hand-in-hand for another dance he quickly drank up and started toward the bathroom again, slightly staggering.

Before he reached the hall a hand gripped his arm and a voice asked, "That you, Wheeler?" Sticking his face almost against the stranger's, he looked into the eyes of his cousin Bernie.

"Yeah it's me. Some pub eh?" he managed to say, folding his arms and licking his dry lips. Bernie's blue eyes were bright but clear with no flinching around his

thin mouth, his thin arms relaxed at his sides, one hand holding a beer from the top.

Handing Wheeler the beer Bernie said, "Have a sip. So how's Uncle Harold?"

As Wheeler drank, beer spilled over his lips down the front of his shirt. "Poor son-of-a-bitch."

"Yeah?" A fat guy bumped into Bernie trying to get past.

"His woman there on the mantelpiece. . .travel, travel, travel, a hunnerd thousand slides. . . ."

"Yeah? Listen, I've gotta run but come over to our table in the last set. We're at the back there, Judy and me." A small girl pushed by and hissed, "Quit blocking traffic!"

"Your beer!" Wheeler called as his cousin slipped away.

"Yours!" was all he heard.

"A drink to the Littles, all the Littles!" he shouted, then standing in the doorway he shut his eyes until the last of it burned down his throat.

For most of the last set Gerry sat with his feet in cowboy boots up on the table and Wheeler stared at the bottoms of those boots.

Outdoors after the pub cold air against his face felt cleansing as he ran past the dead lawn and down cement steps, then bent his head far back looking up and blowing his breath at the streaked jumping stars. Almost forgetting

the others he rushed down to another set of steps swinging his arms high, lifted one leg up over the black railing and began sliding down. Behind him the boots of the others clicked and knocked and Jill called, "What're you showing off for?"

At those words halfway down the railing every muscle in his body went rigid and he stopped. Slowly loosening he dropped his feet onto the steps, facing her as she was about to pass. "Why d'you say that?" he cried, reaching out for her shoulder but missing as she ducked by. "Why d'you all say that?" His voice was about to break, tremors ran up through his stomach. Leaning over the railing he coughed and a sour liquid warmth pumped up through his mouth out onto leaves blown against the steps, Gerry thumping his back and saying, "Get it all out of you, pal."

"Thanks, pal. I'm quittin college."

"Hey don't let that bitch Cindy get you down."

"Who?"

While Jill hurried ahead Gerry stayed at his side clacking his teeth at the cold. "Jill'll warm me up later," Gerry laughed. "I'm spendin the night at her place across the river. Hubba, hubba."

When they caught up with her Wheeler said, "Like me to walk you guys home?"

"Whaaa?" the girl asked.

"Yeah I'll walk you guys home." He started laughing.

"All the way? You're in for a long walk," Gerry said, shrugging at the girl. Looking up at the three-quarter moon made milky by a cloud, Wheeler began trailing Gerry and his girl down the hill towards the campus gates.

Downtown everything was so quiet, the streets deserted except for an occasional taxi, their voices echoed whenever they spoke loudly. Along Queen Street he clicked each parking meter and rapped his knuckles at mannequins, food, boots and shoes in store windows. As he swung open and banged shut a mailbox the girl said, ". . .like he's hounding us." "I'm a hound?" he laughed, and throwing his head back he bayed. When they started across the old city bridge Gerry said, "I don't believe it, he's gonna follow us all the way," then drew his arm from the girl's and waited. "Just don't go alla way with us, eh?" he laughed. "Though you'll go alla way with her, eh?" Wheeler laughed as Gerry trotted back to the girl. Their boots drummed on worn wooden boards, the top of the bridge creaked in wind so harshly he feared it would all collapse under him. Wind seemed to blow through him as he suddenly felt not only had the campus nothing to give him, he had nothing to give--to give anyone. Halfway across his jacket made sucking sounds against him and he called, "Hey wait up, don't leave me alone!" but neither of them turned until he reached their backs, pulled off his jacket and started swinging it by one of the cuffs. Before they could stop him he had flung it free and stepped against the railing watching it collapse in

air, fall swiftly, hit the black water far below and disappear.

"Christ! You're drunker'n I thought," Gerry said, the girl clinging to his arm.

"Well if I'm quittin college," he yelled laughing, "whaddo I need a college jacket for?"

IV

Two weeks later when he moved into a small apartment on George Street his throat was still sore and his nose stuffed from a cold he'd caught walking home jacketless the night of the pub. For a week he had cast away his wild plans of the night, gone to every class and tried to work in the library longer hours than all year. Then one morning in French lab he tore off the ear phones and walked out of the room and out of college, not stopping until he reached downtown where in a restaurant he searched through a list of vacant apartments in the newspaper and spotted an ad for a second-hand set of drums.

A letter on lilac-coloured paper from his mother arrived while he was waiting for the taxi to carry his suitcases and boxes to the apartment. Sitting on his uncle's couch in his torn-sleeved coat he read: Glad to hear you like college alright and think uncle Harold is a good cook. . . .Your father's working at the factory now ½ days and really enjoys the change--says he might do it each winter. . . .We all look forward to see you at Xmas. . . .Your grand-

father thinks you should've stayed here--he can't understand you've got other things in mind. Stuffing the envelope into his coat pocket he murmured, "'Other things in mind'?"

Uncle Harold came in from putting the lunch dishes into the washer and drying his hands with a towel said, "It's. . . .You sure you'll be all right?" Nodding, Wheeler stared at the floor. "That student who's going to move in seems like a nice quiet fellow. We'll have to have you up to supper sometimes." Now when Wheeler looked up, the tic in his uncle's face was leaping and the towel swinging in his hand. "Or maybe there wouldn't be any sense in that," Uncle Harold went on, his voice starting to shake. "Did you know I painted that room especially for you, you who never sat down and talked with me except at supper? Just once, just once you could've sat down and talked with me but no, no it would've killed you." Wheeler reached to his suitcase on the floor and, shamed but tongue-tied, checked a buckle that didn't need checking. "I'm getting drums tomorrow--they might've bugged you," he said as his uncle left the room.

There were no rugs on the scarred floor of the apartment but it was his place. The first phone call that night was from one of his other uncles, Bernie's father, telling him they needed new sorters at the post office where he worked and would be sure to give him a job if they let him know he was a Little. Gerry dropped by just before midnight to see the apartment, and when Wheeler cleaning

fungus out of the fridge with an SOS pad said he was applying for work at the post office Gerry asked, "Where'd ja hear about that?"

"Friend a mine," Wheeler said and he blew his nose before adding, "If I drop his name I'm bound to get the job."