Shadows

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ABSTRACT

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Shadows is a collection of short fiction comprised of a novella and related short stories, each of which revolve around a central character's obsession with the past which interferes with her life in the present. Memory and flash-back interweave with present action. The point of view in each piece is limited to the central character, and although the style is conventional, the narrative becomes fragmented at times depending on the character's fixation on the past and degree of psychological disturbance. This disturbance ranges from depression to delusions, but in each case the character is constrained by the past and haunted by the death of a significant person. The goal of the author is to probe the psychological/emotional problems of these characters--how they came to be oppressed, and how or whether they manage to escape the "shadows" of their pasts. The outcomes vary widely from embracing life to resigning oneself to death, with the resultant tones ranging from hope to despair. The theme that links the various pieces is the difficulty of breaking out of the trappings of the past and taking responsibility for one's own life. The collection is intended to show that change is not possible without coming to terms with the past and then putting it aside in order to move ahead. The stories are short, intense revelations of this theme, while the novella, in four parts, explores the problems of its central character in greater detail.

" . . . to be free, at last, to enter with abandon the land of mourning and shadows and memory."

Elizabeth Spencer
"First Dark"

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SARAH'S GIFT

Madame Tranché leaned over to peer into the oven window. She had forgotten to set the timer again. The cookies had risen and spread into ordered rows of perfect little islands, but they had not yet turned a crispy golden-brown. She gazed idly at the mounds of shortbread set to cool on the counter and drifted to a chair at the kitchen table.

She held her small frame upright--back rigid, ankles locked, hands folded neatly in her lap. Only her head drooped, her eyes resting on her clasped hands. A tiny sigh escaped her as she blinked back the tears. She tried to pin her mind on Monsieur Boucher, the brusque little corner grocer whose funeral turnout would be such a pitifully small one, but it was no use. It never failed. Whenever she had to serve at these receptions, her own grief would assail her with a blow as keen and stinging as the first. She found herself praying yet again for her

daughters, asking for the Lord's mercy on two lambs who had gone astray, who hadn't even had the decency to grieve at their own father's funeral. Her veined lids began to quiver as she squeezed shut her eyes. Her thin lips, pinched inside a ring of deeply etched lines, began to work.

> Agneau de Dieu, qui enlèves le péché du monde,
> prends pitié de nous.
> Agneau de Dieu, qui enlèves le péché du monde,
> prends pité de nous.
> Agneau de Dieu, qui enlèves le péché du monde,
> donne-nous la paix.

Her eyes fluttered open and widened for an instant. She could still see her husband as vividly as ever--drained white with death.

Madame Tranché hastily tucked in an errant strand of hair. She smoothed the folds of her black silk dress with the white lace collar and suddenly thought with disdain of the other ladies of the auxiliary. They had no thought at all for the bereaved, but insisted on flaunting their brightly colored knits and polyester prints. And that Madame Ducette with that hideous, fluttery garment that made her look like one great big beaming sunflower! Herself, she had always worn the same simple frock. No frills and ruffles for her except, of course, the fine lace collar she had sewn on in memory of her dear Pierre. What did they think it was? A party? Even if they did scurry about, serving little jelly rolls and finger sandwiches, macaroons and sugar cookies, and pot after pot of steaming coffee, one had to remember the dignity of the occasion, the

solemnity, and not break into radiant smiles at the slightest compliment or flit about like swarms of gaudy butterflies. One had to show respect for those left behind. She remembered only too well the sting of glimpsed smiles, however discrete, when her own dear, sweet Pierre was soon to be lying six feet-- O mon Dieu, donne-nous la paix. Madame Tranché hastily crossed herself.

No, she musn't think of him. The pasty, rouged face that looked nothing like his. The sunken cheeks, the sagging skin. The white, cakey film that dusted his face, his silent, clasped hands, and the hollow of his neck. She shivered as she recalled the violent chill that had shook her when she had first glimpsed the open coffin and her shock when she had peered inside. No, this wasn't him. There must have been a mistake. This white, shriveled shell was not her sweet Pierre with the expressive hands constantly in motion, with the hearty crimson that would creep up from the nape of his neck and swell to his animated face, ripening to the very tips of his large, fuzzy ears. How could he be so full of color and life one minute, railing exuberantly against the high cost of food, and the next minute down on his back on the kitchen tiles, not even coughing or sputtering, not even flailing his arms?

Of course, he had been awfully hard on the girls. He would lash out at them for the smallest transgression--the little bit of lipstick Marie once tried on, the date Bernadette accepted at only fifteen years of age. Still,

you have to keep after young girls. No telling what they might do. And even after all that church and convent life instilled in them, look at them now. One married to a juif and living in Côte St. Luc (Pierre never did set foot in that house) and the other . . . Seigneur, prends pitié. At least, Pierre never knew about the letter. How could she have told him? She had stood squinting in the dimly lit hallway, poring over the same part again and again until its meaning became clear: "Maman, I'm pregnant. What should I do?" It was an affront to her upbringing, a crime against God! Her daughter had been wild and irresponsible and now she must pay the price. So Madame Tranché had calmly reasoned to herself as she stooped over the fireplace, one hand supporting her back, and watched the letter crumple to ashes.

She crossed herself once more and thanked le Bon Dieu that Pierre hadn't lived to see his own funeral. Oh, where had her daughters been when she needed them? Where were her life supports, one on either side, propping up a hunched, stricken old woman? Of course, Marie had come, for what it was worth--dry-eyed, consulting her watch, yearning to be back on Miami Beach with the rest of her Jewish people; while Bernadette was somewhere "out West," probably singing for quarters on a street corner, an infant slung on her back and a guitar case open at her feet.

Madame Tranché squeezed her burning eyes and was about to launch into one final chorus of the Agneau de Dieu, when

her nose started twitching. She hurried to the stove but it was too late. There was nothing to do but scrape the charred remains into the garbage and open a window.

* * *

She was pinning on her black pillbox hat and wondering what the ladies would say <u>this</u> time, when the buzzer rang. It was too late for the mailman and too early for that nosy Madame Leduc who always came snooping at teatime. She approached the front door cautiously, steadying her hat on her head. Through the diamond of rippled glass, she could discern a single figure which seemed to bulge oddly on one side. She opened the door a crack, peering around its edge, ready to slam it shut if need be.

"Allo, Maman."

Madame Tranché hugged the door for support. She felt the wind knocked out of her as though she had been butted hard in the stomach.

"Can we come in?"

She stared at the apparition before her. Bernadette was supposed to be far away, doing penance in another land, yet here she was on this very stoop balancing a little Indian, dark as night, on her hip.

"I don't know," she managed to breathe. She couldn't take her eyes off the baby. "I was just . . . " She

swallowed hard. "The ladies' auxiliary, you see--a Monsieur Boucher, Dieu donne le repos à son âme--and I am late even now. It don't know what they would say if-- "

"If you'd rather we come back another time-- "

"No!" Her face jerked to her daughter's. "You can come in. I was just . . . " Her eyes were riveted to the baby. She automatically stepped aside to let them pass.

Bernadette turned to her in the dim, narrow hallway and smiled timidly. "I-I hope you don't mind us barging in like this. It's been so long, I wasn't sure whether to come. But it's good to see you, Maman. Tell me, how have you been?"

Madame Tranché slowly focused on her daughter and met such a piercing look of pity, she had to turn away. "We cannot talk here. Come in. Sit down." She couldn't throw out her own daughter, could she? Of course, it was unheard of, letting her in with that, that . . . What would Pierre say?

Bernadette alighted upon a frail accent chair in the salon, the baby on her knee. Madame Tranché sat at a distance, her slight figure dwarfed by the swooping lines of the wing sofa. The room was dark and musty, the light blotted out by heavy, velveteen drapes. Above the fireplace a gilt-framed picture of Pierre--smiling ferociously, his red hair flaming--hung slightly crooked among yellowing portraits of grim ancestors. Sweat broke out on Madame

Tranché's pinched upper lip as the baby stared back at her with large, impassive black eyes.

Bernadette spoke rapidly in a high, bright voice that verged on hysteria. Her hands fluttered around the baby's dangling bare legs, fingering the flounced hem of the little yellow sundress, picking at the tiny, leather sandals.

"We were going to go straight to Marie's from the airport, but I got this sudden urge to come home first and see the old place. I-I guess I just couldn't wait to see you again. It's been so long. Marie said not to surprise you in person--she'd phone you first--but to tell you the truth, I was so afraid you wouldn't want to see us, I had to find out for sure right away. Oh, by the way, I left my bags out on the stoop."

Bernadette caught her breath sharply and looked up from her shaking hands to her mother. Madame Tranché, her lips silently moving, was staring at Sarah. Bernadette bowed her head, submerging her face in darkness.

"I-I wanted to tell you, Maman, how sorry I am that I couldn't come to the funeral."

Madame Tranché gazed at her daughter's tousled mass of sandy curls. The old pain twisted its blade through her heart. Her stinging eyes frantically sought her dearly departed husband, rested on his shining face with relief. Her laced fingers were clasped tightly in her lap. Her sore heart beat into her ribs, making it difficult to breathe.

"When you didn't answer my letter, I thought maybe Papa had found it and turned you against me--like when we were teen-agers and you would always side with him, even though later, when you tucked us in, you would kiss us and tell us, never mind; it's just the way he is. Well, I thought maybe something like that had happened and that sooner or later, you'd write me back."

Madame Tranché glanced over at her daughter's questioning eyes, then stared down at her own clasped hands.

"And then when Marie cabled from Miami that Papa had passed away and how she was taking the next flight back, I was eight months with Sarah, and at first, I didn't know what to do. I wasn't sure whether you'd want me with you or not. I thought maybe it'd be O.K., like it used to be, once we were alone together. But then I thought, no, it wouldn't have been right. I mean, he wouldn't have wanted me there."

Madame Tranché looked up with startled eyes. "How can you say that? Your father, he loved you, he-- "

"Oh, Maman, you don't know, you just-- Do you really think he would have wanted me, with her, in front of all those people?"

She had forgotten about the child, still studying her steadily, relentlessly, with eyes that missed nothing. "I don't know. . . . He never knew."

"But he must have seen the letter, found it somehow . . . "

Madame Tranché focused on her knotted fingers, clasping them tighter until they hurt. "The letter, I burned it, so he would never know."

"Then it was you?" she heard her daughter breathe. "You didn't want to answer me?"

"No! It was your father. You don't know. How could I write? It would be going against him, don't you see?" She glanced up to catch the bewilderment in her daughter's face. She couldn't squeeze her hands hard enough. "Your father. At the funeral . . . I thought I would die too. How could I go on, without him?" She bit back the tears and heard her daughter's voice, suddenly grown cold.

"I'm sorry. It must have been hard on you. That's why I didn't write much after the funeral. I didn't want to burden you with my own problems. But things haven't been easy for me either. The commune thing didn't work out, and then my roommate went and got married, and I lost my job and had to go on welfare since I hadn't been working long enough to collect unemployment . . . "

Madame Tranché felt her head spinning in the airless room. It was unbearably hot. She tried to catch her balance by focusing on her husband's picture, but felt dizzier still. Pierre began to swim before her bleary eyes in a rippling wave of heat. The hot day, his fiery hair, his rages--she could almost feel the flames, crackling and spitting and licking ever closer. His anger, sweltering

and terrible. *O Christ, prends pitié*. She had to find the children, warn them, tell them to run while they still had the chance. She could see them, still so young, cowering in the dark corner. But to her horror, their images, like wax, began to blur and melt into one, shimmering and lopsided, dripping down the legs of the chair. It was too late for her to reach out and save them.

"So after a while, I started thinking, wouldn't it be nice to settle down, give Sarah something stable for a change, maybe go back to school? Marie said she'd be only too glad to take us in for a few days, but after that--well, of course, she has her hands full with the three boys, and there isn't that much room. So then I thought of you, all alone, and that maybe, once you saw Sarah . . . ."

Madame Tranché stared at her daughter in alarm. Beneath her dress, cold sweat trickled down her side. She thought with a jolt of the flock of ladies waiting for her in the parish hall, clucking over her eternal tardiness. Her eyes flitted back to the baby who blinked drowsily at her under long, black lashes.

"Oh, my dear, I'd like to help, you know I would, but I just don't see how it can be done. I have my work with the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Paroisse de Sacre Coeur and twice a week I do envelopes for Centraide, and then there's poor Madame Tremblay. I make for her chicken soup or take her out for a walk every second Friday."

"I guess I shouldn't have expected anything. I should have known when you didn't answer my letter. And of course, there's the neighbors. I know you're worried what people would say. But I thought if it were just for a little while, until I get us back on our feet? I could brush up on my skills, maybe take a typing course, and then pay you back once I find a steady job . . . "

A sliver of sunlight had squeezed through a chink in the drapes, casting a diffused glow about Bernadette's unruly locks. Her uplifted face was wan and sweet with its light spattering of freckles and delicate, quivering nose. How one so young and frail--look at her in that gay, floral peasant dress--could bear a child, not to mention raise it all alone, was beyond Madame Tranché. Yet it had been her daughter's own choice. She had asked for her own perdition, and now she must suffer the consequences. Madame Tranché bowed her head beneath her husband's fiery gaze. Seigneur, prends pitié. It was not the responsibility of the elders to take on the sins of the young.

"But I can see things more clearly now. I'm sorry, Maman, I really am, but if you can't, you can't. I understand. I really do. We'll just have to manage on our own, eh, Sarah?"

The light hovered above Bernadette as she stroked the soft, dark cheek of the baby. Its sleepy head lolled heavily on her bosom, bobbing up and down with her breathing.

Madame Tranché composed herself in the deep sofa at the far end of the room and mentally formed the words she would say. No, my dear, I'm afraid it is out of the question. You and your . . . child are simply not welcome in this house. Your father, God rest his soul, would turn in his grave. . . .

* * *

Sarah sat on the kitchen tiles, her dimpled legs splayed before her. Madame Tranché drank her morning tea as calmly as possible. Her stomach had been nervous for a whole week now, particularly around teatime when she had to bar that nosy Madame Leduc at the side door. She could just imagine her choking on a butter tart when Sarah came toddling around the hall corner. Bernie, as she now asked to be called, had said the baby was almost a full eighteen months and would be no bother at all. She would just sit quietly in front of the television. But each morning, within five minutes of leaving her to Captain Kangaroo, the child had tottered out to the kitchen and plopped down on the floor, staring at her with large, expectant eyes. What did she want? What was she waiting for? Surely not to be tossed about some more. As if yesterday at the bus stop on the way to the supermarket were not enough. And in front of all those people! Bernie did the most distressing

things with her baby. She would throw her up in the air and catch her, hang her upside down by the feet and swing her like a pendulum, spin like a top until they were both dizzy, the baby all the while shrieking with joy. Madame Tranché could barely bring herself to watch these dangerous gymnastics when the most she had ever done with her girls was to jiggle them gently on her knee, and then in the sanctity of her own home. But here was the baby waiting for her to do something, to entertain her, and Madame Tranché had no idea what to do. Bernie had not brought a single toy.

Madame Tranché frowned down at the little girl. She did not even look like Bernie. She had her mother's curls, but they were a thick, glossy black. And those eyes! Large and luminous, deep pools of inky blackness. She could almost see a red dot between them, but scolded herself for such wild imaginings. Still, she couldn't help wondering about the father. Was he Buddhist? Hindu? Moslem maybe. She shuddered, picturing Pierre's reaction--the bulging eyes, the flaring nostrils. How that man's veins would swell, tortured and blue, on his forehead. But how, he would demand, did Bernie meet up with such a man in the first place, and where was he now? She herself had almost asked her as Bernie bent over the school syllabus, ticking off courses, but the words had stuck in her throat. And Bernie was so excited to be back at school again--not

just studying typing, but "psychology" and "sociology" and something called "humanities." Of course, the college program was much longer than she had expected, possibly even two years, but with Father Lamoureux's wise and holy counseling, Madame Tranché had finally consented to help her daughter out.

She remembered how the echo of his hushed voice had rustled in the air. She saw herself once more twisting the lace hankerchief in the stuffy confessional, waiting for the sealed grating to open up to her. Of course, he was rather young. Some said he was too modern for a community such as theirs, so set in its ways. And then there were those things Pierre had fiercely muttered under his breath during mass--"Hérétique! Traitre!"--whenever Father Lamoureux tried something new: the brightly colored felt chalice suspended above the altar; the young folk-singers with their long hair and guitars. Of course, the Father was young too. Like Bernadette. Perhaps he did know what was best.

"Take pity on her. She is your child. And her child is a lamb of God." Madame Tranché bowed her head in the kitchen. "Agneau de Dieu," she whispered. "You are a good woman," he had murmured. "You are sorry for having turned your back on your own daughter when she wrote to you out of need for love and guidance. Now is your chance for absolution. Open up your heart to them. We are all

brothers and sisters under the same God." After all, Madame Tranché continued to reason, a child's future was at stake. A Lamb of God. It was the only Christian thing to do. Surely Pierre would see it that way?

Madame Tranché sighed and suddenly remembered that Sarah was still there, staring at her. She looked at the dark moon face and wondered once more what to do. What had her girls played with at that age? It was so long ago, and yet, as fresh as yesterday. Marie had liked to drag things around: stuffed animals by their torn ears and tails, their innards trailing behind them; that funny rag doll by one striped foot, its yarn braids streaming along the floor. And Bernadette. She always had to watch her on their walks or she'd topple into the nearest puddle--the muddier, the better--and gleefully slap her hands up and down, making it all but impossible to rescue her. And the commotion she'd create with a couple of pots and pans: Of course, her cookware was of the newest kind now, coated with teflon. Perfectly stickproof, but no match for small, frantic hands intent on scratching and denting in no time at all.

Madame Tranché started. Sarah stood before her, patting her clasped hands with sticky, encrusted fingers. She had not even seen the child approach. The little girl gravely held up the remains of a digestive biscuit that she must have had clutched in her palm for the last ten minutes.

Madame Tranché smiled uncertainly and said, "Very nice." Sarah kept her arm extended, her face a solemn study, until Madame Tranché slowly opened her hand to accept the gooey offering. Sarah's eyes brightened, her face breaking into a smile. She promptly clutched her grandmother's good black dress with her soiled hands and tugged, one fat little leg trying to straddle her lap. Madame Tranché's hands hovered in the air, unsure where to land. Sarah puffed and grunted until they settled on her plastic bottom, giving her one good boost up onto her lap.

What now? She was closer to the dark face than ever before. Sarah's eyes were bright and shining. She gurgled and gingerly touched the tip of her grandmother's nose. Madame Tranché snorted before she could stop herself, and Sarah squealed with delight. With delicious anticipation, Sarah again pressed the magic button which, to her glee, produced the same miraculous response. Madame Tranché chuckled in spite of herself as the morning sun flooded the room through the slats of the venetian blinds. "Hoot! Hoot!" cried Sarah, as she tugged her grandmother's drooping ear lobes. "Blub, blub," she chanted, as she strummed the thin, dry lips.

* * *

"Maman, it's crazy what you're doing, you know. Davy, get your fingers out of the mashed potatoes." Marie lodged

the knife and fork back into the little boy's suddenly clenched fists. "The way I look at it, she made her own bed, let her lie in it. Herb, you know what Maman's been doing with her hard-earned pension?"

Herb looked up, chewing and nodding noncommitally.

"Buying the kid presents," Marie continued. "You can bet Bernie didn't get them for her. And where's the father, I'd like to know?"

"Just a few little things," Madame Tranché protested. "Crayola crayons and play dough. They hardly cost any-- "

"And a doll that's bigger than she is. And she's such a strange child, Herb. You should have seen her when I brought Davy over-- Stewart, for the last time, will you clean up those peas! She just stared and stared at him for the longest time. Looks like one of those Biafran kids in the commercials. I don't know why you're doing it, Maman. I mean, what did Bernie ever do for you? At least I got married."

Herb glared at Marie through his horn-rimmed glasses and attacked his steak.

"O.K.," Marie snapped. "I'll shut up. I'll just shut up."

Madame Tranché patted her mouth with her napkin and wondered why she kept coming to these Sunday night dinners. Marie did nothing but bicker and nag, while Herb sawed through his food and swallowed his bitterness. Perhaps they shouldn't have married after all. They were so young

then; perhaps they weren't ready. But what other choice had they? Thank the good Lord that the head parish priest had managed to talk some sense into her daughter. What could she have been thinking, to actually want to go to one of those-- Seigneur, prends pitié. And with her upbringing. Why, just look at her sons. They were cute enough with their little round Jewish noses and sleepy eyes. "Les petits youpins," Pierre had spat, after once setting eyes on them on the street. Madame Tranché shifted uncomfortably in her chair and glanced over the boys, near duplicates of each other in assorted sizes--three squirming little boys with perpetually running noses and whining voices. Yes, that's all they were to her despite these weekly dinners and those infernally hot and cranky shopping trips. Even when one of them (usually Davy, the smallest) approached her all bright-eyed and freshly scrubbed for a goodnight kiss . . . No sooner had he clasped his arms around her neck, than Marie would break through the circle, shrilly admonishing, "Careful! You musn't be rough with Grandmaman. You might hurt her."

It was different with Sarah. No one to stop her from poking and kneading the old lady's "brittle" flesh. No one to keep stodgy "Grandmaman" from hugging the daylights out of the little mite. She was all hers. Even when Bernie was there, she merely sat on the sidelines smiling as "Gwam" (Sarah's pet name for her) told stories passed down from her own mother: Le Petit Chaperon Rouge, Cendrillon,

Blanche Neige. Madame Tranché could barely remember them now, but it didn't matter; she made them up as she went along. And Sarah, her heavy head pressed against her grandmother's chest, lulled by the lilt of the French words, smelling of Arrow Root cookies and warm milk. No different than her own babies really. No difference at all.

"And another thing." Marie roughly cupped Mark's chin to scrub the food off his face. "How do you know Bernie's really going to that fancy college of hers? Don't look at me like that!"

Herb rolled his eyes and, slapping down his napkin, left the table.

"It's been over two months now," Marie shouted, shaking the dishcloth at her mother, "and she hasn't brought home a single mark, not even a class test or paper, and it seems like any time I drop in at night, she's not home studying like she should be, and don't tell me she's at the library. I'll bet she's made tons of friends, she always did, and is having the time of her life while good 'ol Mom stays home and minds the baby."

Madame Tranché watched her daughter, noting the angry lines forming around her set lips, though she was barely thirty. She noticed, too, the weight Marie was putting on. Most unbecoming on a small build which was meant to be kept delicate and petite like Bernie's. Instead, Marie looked slovenly, the fat, puffy and unhealthy, padding her fine bones. She remembered, not long ago, when Herb, after

one glass of wine too many, had dared to whack Marie's ample backside as she bent over a spilled glass of milk. "In appreciation of a fine specimen of womanhood!" Not so surprisingly, they didn't talk to each other for the rest of the evening.

"But I don't mind. She . . . keeps me busy. It will work out. Don't worry. Once Bernie settles down, she'll be fine. Besides, I really don't mind at all."

And she didn't. For the first time Madame Tranché admitted to herself how much she was really enjoying this arrangement--staying home and taking care of Sarah while Bernie went to school. Or wherever she went. It really didn't matter. No more gloomy afternoons with the ladies--patting their tight, blue curls, expelling their sour breath. Or with poor Madame Tremblay, barely able to walk to the washroom unaided, still mourning, after forty years, the tragic stillbirth of her twelfth child. No more long, dreary days filled only by the hollow ticking of the hall clock. Nothing to do then but think and remember. The satin lined casket. Well-meaning strangers. The white, queerly rouged face, drained of its pulsing blood. All this behind her. There was only Sarah now. Sarah and her.

"Maman, are you listening to me?" Marie's furrowed brow blotted out the image of Sarah's sweet face. "Well, never mind. Just don't say I didn't warn you. It's your funeral."

* * *

Bernie leaned across the kitchen table, her chin digging into her arm. She was staring at them, her fine brows lifted into a knot of perplexity. Madame Tranché, watching Bernie from the corner of her eye, coaxed some more strained turnip into Sarah. Bernie released a still greater sigh and suddenly sat up straight.

"Maman, I don't know how to tell you this."

Madame Tranché leaned closer to Sarah, intent on prying her mouth open with the spoon. "Voyons, Sarah," she said, nudging the clenched lips.

"It-it's just that school's not going so well. I can't seem to get the hang of taking notes again and doing all that studying. I've been away so long."

"Six years is not so long. Why, that Madame Lacoste's son--she always wears the most ridiculous hats in church--he went back to school in his thirties and-- "

"Mid-terms are next week. I'm not going to make it."

Sarah fretted as the spoon slipped, smearing her cheek with turnip. Madame Tranché searched her pockets for Kleenex while Sarah pulled faces, then wiped the soft cheek with the palm of her hand.

"So I was thinking . . . " Bernie ran her fingers through her tangled curls. "Maybe it would be best if I quit now before I get into any more debt. I already owe

you one term's tuition, not to mention books, and room and board-- "

"Don't you worry about the money." Madame Tranché returned from the sink. Sarah watched in deep concentration as she wiped each tiny, spread finger with a wet face cloth. "You are young. You have lots of time to pay me back. What is important now is a good education. Why, once you finish college, you could even go on to university. I have some money put away--your father, Dieu donne le repos à son âme, left me well provided for--and you could always work part-time and, of course, I'll be here to take care of Sarah." Madame Tranché folded the cloth and pictured Sarah sprouting up like a young colt, long-legged and ungainly. That lovely, innocent time between toddler and teenager. She steadied the plastic tumbler which Sarah awkwardly clasped between her hands. Milk for strong, healthy bones.

"Maman, I withdrew today. It's official."

Sarah coughed and sputtered as milk went up her nose and trickled down her chin. "Oh, vois ce que j'ai fait!" Madame Tranché exclaimed in despair, sponging up the puddle of milk. The initial surprise over, Sarah began to cry, a pathetic little hiccough which pierced Madame Tranché to the heart. She scooped the sobbing child up in her arms with "Tiens, tiens, chérie. Gwam's sorry," but Sarah would not be consoled.

"I hated to do it, but I guess I'm just not cut out

for college. I'm sorry, Maman, I tried, but-- Oh, I don't know what's wrong with me. I keep starting and stopping things. I can never stick to anything. Or anyone. Maybe I should go back out West and look up some friends. I don't know. I just can't seem to make it on my own."

Madame Tranché sat holding Sarah tightly, not noticing as the child, rubbing her eyes with her fists, fussed in her lap. Bernie held her head bent, the curls spilling down her cheeks. Madame Tranché waited, barely breathing. Could it be true? Would she really leave Sarah to go out West? Sarah and her. All alone. A warm flush swept over her body. She could feel her heart beating against her soft little granddaughter.

Bernie looked up, cupping her face in her hands. Sarah started to whine in little spurts. Madame Tranché held her tighter still.

"Here, I'll take her. She's too heavy for you."

Bernie hoisted Sarah into the air, pretended she was going to drop her, then caught her just in time. Sarah laughed and clung onto her mother's neck as Bernie swung her onto her lap. "Sawah's cwoss and tired, isn't she?" Bernie buried her head in Sarah's throat. "To tell you the truth," she said, fingering Sarah's curls, "I don't know what I'd do without my little girl. Sometimes I feel she's too much to handle alone, like when I came back here, but you know, she's the one constant in my life, the one thing that gives it meaning. It's like she was . . . a gift,

sent down to make me happy. My very own special little girl."

Madame Tranché's temples pounded as she watched the gentle kiss on the forehead. "Maybe you could look for a job here and and I could still---"

"Oh, it's so cold here in winter. And all my friends are out West now. I hate to leave you, Maman. I really do. I know how much you'll miss Sarah, but . . . we're ready to go back home."

Madame Tranché's eyelids fluttered as she tried to blink away the tears. Bernie reached for her hand across the table.

"Oh, Maman, I can't tell you how much it's meant to me--you're taking us in like this. I know how hard it must have been for you--he never would have stood for it--but I needed you, and you were there. I don't know how to thank you for that. But don't you worry. I'll make it up to you, every penny. And it wasn't a waste. I had time to think things out and you . . Well, it isn't as though I'm taking Sarah away forever. We'll be back to visit. I promise. And now that you've had a breather, a change of routine, you'll be able to pick up your work again, right where you left off."

Madame Tranché looked at her daughter with dry eyes. She was empty inside, no room for tears or pain or love. What about my need? she thought, watching Bernie soothe Sarah to sleep. What about me?

* * *

Sarah clung onto Madame Tranché's index finger as they walked to the park. Only three blocks away was a corner lot paved with gravel. Wrapped within a green wire fence, it housed a set of swings and a few benches. They had come every week now for the last two months, Sarah chirping all the way, pointing out all the little miracles Madame Tranché had never before noted: "See doggie . . . House there . . . Big car." Today Sarah was clutching her Holly Hobbie doll by the head, determined to let her have a ride on the swing too.

Madame Tranché's long, gnarled finger curled around the tight little fist. She swallowed painfully and did not look down. Would Sarah remember her? Would she remember the days in the park, safe on her grandmother's lap, the two of them gently rocking in the breeze? Would she remember the giant chocolate chip cookies, the funny gingerbread men, the doughy mess and clapped clouds of flour as she "helped Gwam" bake? Would she remember where the large, cuddly doll with the pullable braids and string bonnet came from? Madame Tranché frowned. What did she remember at that age? Nothing but a blank until the age of five or six when she'd started school. Of course, it wasn't as though she'd never see her again. But would she?

"All gone ride," Sarah announced grimly, pointing to the empty swing frame. There was a cold snap in the air which made Madame Tranché shiver. Not much longer now and they would have snow. Of course, it was time to take the swings down. Madame Tranché bent down to secure Sarah's coat collar. The dark eyes were fixed on the ghostly frame. A plaintive wisp of "All gone" hung in the air as Madame Tranché straightened and felt Sarah's tug on her limp index finger.

* * *

Madame Tranché was hunched over, her tiny figure consumed by the enormous roll-top desk in the salon. She was chewing on the end of her fountain pen and peering yet again at Bernie's letter. She shook her head when she came to the part about the boyfriend--"He's cuter than the last one, but he can't handle kids!"--then skimmed down to the part about Bernie's new job--"I'm teaching aerobic dance now. It's the latest thing, but I don't think I'll last long--too much jumping around." Madame Tranché paused to jot down a note of encouragement: "As for all this jumping around, don't you worry. You are young. You have plenty of time. Experience everything life has to offer. Enjoy each day as it comes. You will settle down when you are ready."

Madame Tranché rested her pen in a slotted groove of

the desk and squeezed the bridge of her long, hooked nose. Who was she to talk? Had she herself lived each day to the fullest? Half a lifetime tied down to a narrow-minded, ill-tempered husband. She shook her head, trying to banish the thought, but it was too late. She had said it, just as she had felt it for over thirty years. Why, she realized with a start, she hardly even missed him anymore.

She sorted the papers on the desk, moving Bernie's cheque to one side--she could buy a nice spring hat with that--and sliding the crayon drawing towards her. She smiled as she gazed down at the big purple heart with her name--"GWAM"--pinned to its center. Sarah was much better now at coloring within the lines, and both Bernie and herself were amazed at how she could copy block letters (although the "W" needed work) at only three years of age. Madame Tranché thrilled to think of the day when Sarah would be able to write her grandmother herself--long letters in a round, looping child's hand, all about school and summer holidays and those terrors of the world--boys.

"Sarah talks about you all the time." Madame Tranché's eyes swelled with joy as she flipped through the pages of the letter to savor the last part again.

> You can't stop her talking now. Not for a minute. She wants to know when we'll see you, and I tell her, soon. I'm learning how to save money, Maman, just so we can come out and visit. But this time, we'll pay our own way.
>
> Hugs and kisses,
>
> Bernie and Sarah

* * *

Madame Tranché sat drumming the kitchen table with her fingers, waiting for the cookies to brown. Today's would be an especially large reception, nearly one hundred people. It was important that nothing go wrong. It wasn't often that they were "departed by" a leading figure of the community. She pictured Monsieur Beaupré, their beloved school commissioner, round and jovial with rosy winter cheeks and moist red lips. He had lived a full life; and what better time to go than during the middle of an eight-course meal?

Glancing at the timer, she went to the hall mirror to be sure she looked her best. Her heart gave a little jump as she once more caught sight of the fresh new perm. She looked so much younger now with light brown hair, and she was sure her lips didn't pinch so badly anymore. The lines were hardly noticeable with just a touch of "Second Début." She adjusted the lace collar of her paisley print and moistened her lips. Satisfied, she returned to the kitchen and waited in front of the stove. She breathed in the warm, delicious odor and smiled. Imagine if she snuck in a whole troop of gingerbread men, all lined up like little toy soldiers with raison eyes and frosted buttons. What a scandal <u>that</u> would be! Wide-eyed guests bursting into fits of rage or giggles (depending on their ages), while the

ladies . . . Surely, they would find a "safe" place for her in the annual bazaar, knitting socks and crotcheting doilies.

The shortbread came out in fancy shapes, fat and golden, just perfect. She slid them onto plates to cool and looked once more at Sarah's new drawing, taped to the fridge. Amid a flutter of happy stick people and eight-legged dogs was a crayon picture of a lady (you could tell by the purse) with a little girl on her lap (or in her stomach, depending on how you looked at it), sitting on (because it couldn't have been anything else) a swing. Bernie had said Sarah was doing just fine in day-care, while she was enjoying her job in a natural health foods store. And, she wasn't sure now, but there was also a possibility, a good one, that Sarah would soon have a new daddy and that they would all come out to see her this summer. Madame Tranché smiled at this, then suddenly felt a stab of guilt. No, it was true. If Pierre had still been alive, he would have slammed the door in their faces. She would never have even met her own granddaughter. Her own flesh; her own blood. And his.

Madame Tranché bowed her head to pray for her husband. "<u>Agneau de Dieu</u> . . . "

THE RIVER

She is teetering, her arms circling backwards, straining to push back the heavy air. She is falling, scratching at the dark, the swirling water looming below. She opens her mouth to scream, but the sound freezes in her throat, and all she can hear are the footfalls of the dog, singly and clearly, the thuds slowly fading.

It is here she always wakes, her body twitching, her throat aching, the man beside her breathing softly, evenly. She rises and, tapping the bed, makes her way around to the dresser. She doesn't want to wake him, but she has to look. Circles of light spring up around her face which takes on a pink glow--soft, subdued. She hits the mirror's daylight button and leans closer. She fingers the tiny lines beginning to crack her face: they are imbedded in her forehead, squeezed into the corners of her eyes, pinched around her lips. She turns to the young face in

the framed photo beside the mirror--a black-and-white shot of her and the dog. They are set in a frozen clearing against a backdrop of spiky black woods. She is bent over in a dark maxi-coat, pounding the side of the dog like a drum. She is smiling; her face is clear, smooth, sharply in focus. She remembers that smile; she had just left home--free at last! She remembers feeling the thud of her mittens against the solid weight of the dog. She remembers feeling young, eternal; they would stay this way forever. She looks at the dog lying near her side of the bed, his muzzle nestled between his paws. As solid as ever, unchanged, ageless.

"What are you doing?" He is propped up on one elbow, shielding his eyes from the light.

"Nothing. Go back to sleep," she says, and plunges them both into darkness.

She sits on the window seat in the living room, breathing deeply, waiting for the night to pass. The dog burrows his chin into her lap until her hand comes to rest on his head. She inhales the dank river smell wafting up to the fourteenth floor, cocks an ear to the distant clamor of the amusement park, and opens her eyes. The river is still there, as always, the lights on its shore feebly twinkling.

The little girl slams head first against the wind,

shrieks of joy and terror ringing in her ears. She is leaning forward so she can see better; the wooden slats fly beneath her like a speeded-up movie. Her father holds her tightly between his knees. He didn't want to go on in the first place. He's afraid she'll fall out. She reins in the car as it swerves round a bend and cries, "Whoa!" as it rattles to a stop. Her father unfolds one long leg from the car and is about to disengage the other. "Once more," she says, clutching the safety bar. He leans over her, his face a dark warning, then rises to his feet. He looms high against the starry night. He exhales through his teeth as she smiles sweetly up at him. After all, he promised. Any rides she wanted. It was her birthday. He pays the man, who smiles and shakes his head. As he lowers himself into the car, he says evenly, "This is the last time." She feels him stiffen behind her as the machine rumbles to life. He doesn't like the roller coaster. He says it is old and rickety and that one day it will fall apart. Her heart jumps as the car jerks forward, and they are off once more.

Then, it happens. They stall on the highest summit, just before the final downward plunge, and now they sit there in the first car (which she insisted on), teetering over the rickety edge. "I knew it, I knew it," her father mutters. Little men are running around the controls, motioning up to them to stay put. "Don't look down," he whispers. But it's too late. The world has caught fire.

Like zillions of sparklers, sizzling in the night. Only she can't catch them in her hands. She can only hold her breath and watch them dance for that moment, dizzying prisms of light. And as she turns her head, she can see the sparks thrown off along the river, twinkling all along the shore. She closes her eyes and smiles, as through closed lids she sees the lights still flickering. But then, they begin to burn out, like dying embers, until there is nothing but blackness, heavy and deep.

The dog sighs, then pulls himself up with a grunt and a shudder and pads away into the corner. Her eyes snap open as the man touches her shoulders. He lifts the fine hair like a veil of lace and kisses the nape of her neck. "Happy birthday, babe." She smiles and catches his wrists as he buries his head beneath the folds of her robe. Her thumbs press down on his arteries where she feels his throbbing pulse.

The dog watches from the corner, his eyes gleaming red in the dark, and waits for the man to go home.

He leads her into the bedroom, takes her up, higher and higher, until she is soaring, gliding, the wind singing in her ears. She clings to his neck and tells him not to stop, not yet, once more, it's her birthday. He is tired, spent, he has to work today. He rolls over onto his side of the bed. She starts to cry; she can't help it. It's her birthday, her day, to spend as she likes, he said.

He turns to her once more.

She throws back her head and rides him, forgetting everything, leaving it all below, feeling only the hot, wet, pulsating rhythm of the night.

They have a sunny breakfast overlooking the still river strewn with the first leaves of fall. She sits on her lover's lap and plays with his tie and asks what he got for her birthday.

"Have you been a good girl?"

She bites his ear and he laughs into his coffee and tells her she'll have to wait until tonight. Something extra special. Does she think she can wait that long?

"I'll just have to, won't I?" she murmurs, nibbling at his ear.

He carries her into the bedroom and lies her down, pinning her between his arms. "We'll go even higher tonight, babe." He shakes his finger at her and smiles. "You stay right there 'til I get back. Hear?"

The dog's ears flatten in the wind as they bear down the expressway in the sporty TR7. She turns up the old Steppenwolf tape full blast and sings along, her head thrown back, until her lungs feel like bursting.

Like a true nature's child,
We were born, born to be wild.
We can climb so high,
I never wanna di-i-ie.

She parks by the lake and stops to look. The water is still, as always, unreal, like dried flowers pressed under glass. It's a man-made lake: sculpted in graceful curves, bordered by the long, winding sidewalk and grass carpeting.

"Artificial," her mother says on a rare family outing many years ago.

And her own surprise when she gets close enough to see. "Look, you can see the bottom." And it's true--flat slabs of rock, rainbows of funny little scurrying fish who can rest on the bottom when they get tired--and her arm suddenly hurting, being pulled away.

"I told you not to go near the edge," her mother warns, shaking her by the arm. "You'll fall in."

"But I want to see the fish," she says, squirming to free herself, but that just makes her arm twist. "Don't real lakes have fish? And waves, real waves that knock you down? Why can't we go to a <u>real</u> lake sometime?"

"Talk to your daughter," her mother says, exasperated. She drops her arm and walks away.

"C'mon," says her father, smiling down at her with sad eyes. "Let's leave your mother alone for a few minutes. We can look at the fish if you hold my hand."

The fish blur into globules of color that quiver for an instant and then dart out of view. "Why can't we ever have fun?" she blurts out, wiping tears from her cheek with

the back of her hand.

The leaves flicker in the sun like tiny flames. She strolls down the mountain path from the lake. The leaves sigh and twirl to the ground, collect in the gutters. She can remember wading through them as a child, kicking up a storm, beating her father back with armfuls of leaves, winning the race to the top. She'd laugh when he'd feign exhuastion at the final bend, staggering on long, wobbly legs, letting her sprint ahead to the look-out by herself. Then would come her moment of triumph--bounces of joy, shaking her fists in the air. But when she sprang forward to lean over the stone parapet, he was always close behind. He would stand there as still as the columns themselves, the whole world spread out at his feet: the fat clumps of bush below, the sharp angles of the city beyond, and the river beyond that--a haze of blue melting into the remote blur of pencil-thin mountains. She could bring it all into focus when he fed quarters to the telescope: a rooftop, a bird in flight, a cloud.

"I used to come up here at night with your mother. A long time ago. Before you kids were born."

She swivels the telescope's black face around to her father, stares at him through the two round, unblinking eyes with the hooded lids. The corner of his mouth is curled gently upward. She wonders what it was like, before she and her brother were born. His cheek muscles flinch

as he lifts his gaze to the river beyond, then turns to her with wet eyes.

The woods are swarming with squirrels, madly foraging while there's still time. They are a plague, a blight on the landscape: sagging from trees, littering the path. And they keep startling her, cracking the stillness of the forest: snapping twigs, rustling branches, scuffling in the dense interior. She doesn't know where to turn, where to look. And the dog, in a frenzy, bounding from tree to tree, waiting patiently under one, only to be cruelly lured to another. She lifts her collar and folds her arms, hugging herself, quickening her step, anxious to get out.

The dog patters ahead, looking back up at her every few minutes as they descend the crumbling stone steps to the hospital. It is the same rambling, medieval fortress whose turrets and pinnacles delighted her from a distance when she was little, until she got closer. Then she was frightened.

"Is she locked up in that tower?"

"Don't be silly," her father says, squeezing her hand.

"Will they scream when we go in?"

"That's only in the movies. I told you, this is a quiet place. That's why she's here. For a rest."

"But why does she need a rest?"

"She's tired."

"But why?"

He unclasps her hand and looks down at her. She studies her sneakers and waits for the answer, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, not knowing whether to run or stay.

"You ask too many questions," he says, shaking his head, and forges up the drive, leaving her far behind.

And not so long afterwards (or so it seemed), he himself is immured within--only a different ward, more modern, with whiter walls and stronger disinfectant--rotting before her eyes in the sterile room.

"Why aren't you fighting?" she demands, leaning over him as he turns his face to the wall. He won't listen.

"But he's going too fast," she insists, catching the doctor's sleeve. "Can't you stop him?"

The doctor--pink-cheeked, immaculate in white--lays one steady hand on her shoulder. "He's tired. He's had enough."

"Maybe I should stop coming," she says quietly.

"What makes you say that?"

"I don't know. He's not getting any better, and I'm not . . . I upset him."

"My dear, you've got nothing to do with it. All you can do now is to wait with him."

She returns to his side and squeezes his arm. He looks at her with frightened eyes.

"Daddy," she whispers. "Don't leave me."

Her mother waits in the lobby: small, hunched over in the chair, bundled up for her walk. She gathers her mother up and nods at the smiling receptionist who wishes her a happy birthday.

"You don't have to tell the whole world."

"Why not? You don't turn thirty every day. Why, that's when I had your brother." Her mother smiles up at her. "It's something to be proud of--my only child's birthday."

She stiffens, tightening her grip on her mother. "I've got you for the whole afternoon. We're going to make it to the top today."

"I don't think I can."

"Sure you can. We'll go slowly, take lots of rests; there's no rush. I'm parked up by the lake so we can drive back. Besides, it's my birthday, remember?"

Her mother shakes her head solemnly. "You always <u>were</u> stubborn."

The dog greets them at the base of the mountain. He sniffs her mother's dangling hand, then scampers up the stairs as she reaches out to pat him. They take the stairs slowly--two, three at a time--resting in between.

"Don't look down," her mother says. And later, "I can't go much higher."

"Take your time. This is the hard part. We're almost there."

At the top of the stairs they turn to look. Her mother loosens her scarf, undoes her top button.

"See? You're in better shape than you thought. Even your doctor says so. He told me you've been making progress."

"Progress, yes. I've stopped hoarding pills."

"That's good, that's-- "

"They wait until I swallow them now. I have to open my mouth and stick out my tongue."

A delicate web of plastic tubes pin him down. The hollow suction parches his throat, but his eyes--pinpoints of light in the deep sockets--scream at her, implore her: LET ME GO. She knows now he will leave soon; there is nothing she can do to stop him. She must release him, tell him it will be all right to go. She takes in on long breath and says she is sorry. "I should have come home more to help you with her. It's just that I was always so busy."

("A job like yours," she remembers her mother saying. "Such flexible hours. You'd think it would be a simple thing to visit from time to time." And suddenly, she would wish she were back at her cluttered drafting table instead of here, with this woman who wouldn't get out of bed.)

"Don't worry, Dad," she tells him feeling his grip on

her arm slacken. "I'll take care of her."

He settles back, closes his eyes, and slips away.

"That's better. I like solid ground beneath my feet," her mother says, as they crush the bruised leaves that lie mangled on the mountain path. She looks old in the stark light of day. It is a brutal light, a steady glare that slashes into the deep lines etched into her face. She grips her mother's elbow, propelling her, as they slowly wind their way to the top.

"He told me we'd go together, you know. He wouldn't leave without me. And here I am . . . still waiting."

"Don't, Mother. Don't talk like that."

"All right, I won't . . . if you don't want to hear."

Her mother teeters over the edge of her father's grave. Her eyes are shut like the dead; they do not clench or quiver. Only her body sways slightly from side to side. They have to hold her down or she will fly away like a spirit. With the first clatter of earth, her eyes snap open, and she is looking at the coffin as though for the first time. Then, before they realize what is happening, she breaks away and tries to throw herself upon the grave. They carry her away as her daughter stands frozen, staring in disbelief; she is flailing her black limbs like some huge, struggling insect and crying out in a hoarse whisper that is choked, not even human: LET ME IN.

And later, turning a bend, they pass beneath an archway of flaming leaves, not yet beaten to the ground, not yet extinguished with blue plumes of smoke drifting to the sky.

"Are you and this one getting married?"

"Maybe . . . I don't know."

"Your father never liked it. All these men. What are you waiting for?"

"Nothing. What's the big rush?"

"Well, don't wait too long." (And the old refrain.) "I could at least have grandchildren."

She was their last chance. She didn't remember her brother. She'd been too young--swaddled in white, safe and snug in the wicker hamper back at the cottage. But she'd seen the yellow newspaper clipping, spied it peering out from her mother's top drawer: MOTHER SCOURS BEACH FOR SON. And she'd pictured her stumbling along the beach--a madwoman, with thunder clouds rolling in like balls of fire. And she saw her screaming his name, hands cupping her mouth, yelling herself hoarse against the roar of the surf. The paper said she'd tried to run right into it. Some neighbors found her crumpled to her knees at the water's edge. When she saw them coming, she wrestled to her feet and flung herself into the crashing waves, pounding the water with her fists, plunging deeper and deeper to where they couldn't reach her and snatch her away.

It's standing on its haunches, its tiny hands dangling, waiting for a handout.

"Oh, look," says her mother, stopping in its path. "Where do they all come from?" The squirrel eyes her, its nose twitching in anticipation. "They're smart. Always thinking ahead. It takes planning. Planning and thinking ahead."

"Don't touch them. They bite," she tells her mother and whistles for the dog.

He slinks away from his post beneath a tree, only to see yet another one at their feet, and shoots ahead like a bullet.

She looks like a madwoman in the movies--hair standing on end, clothes torn and wet, face dirty. Her father sits her down gently, carefully, as though she'd break. "That's the last time. It's got to stop," he says. "I'm not running out to the river every time you get one of your whims." And her mother, staring at nothing, a strange, haunted look on her face: "He wasn't there. I couldn't find him."

The dog shuffles ahead, tracking a scent. He wiggles from behind, and she smiles, picturing his nostrils and jowls fiercely quivering.

"We're almost there," she says as her mother stops to catch her breath, one hand pressed against the hollow of

her neck.

"You shouldn't take me so high," her mother says. "It's bad for my heart."

They stand and watch the light of the city break through a clearing in the woods. A jogger plods by, checking his stopwatch. His T-shirt sticks to the small of his back; his feet scrape the gravel as he pushes on.

"Where are they all running to?" her mother asks, and smiles when her daughter laughs.

The artificial lake glistens at the foot of the rolling green carpet. They stop for a rest, watching the smooth, shiny surface.

"I should have watched him more closely. You were crying. I took my eyes off him for one second, no more, and he was gone."

She turns to see her mother staring like a stone at the water.

"You were wet. I had to change you. He was watching from the hall. I put you down on the kitchen table--it only took a second--and when I turned around, he was gone." Her mother turns to her with bewildered eyes, desperately searching her own for some answer, some explanation. "He wasn't there anymore."

"Why tell me that? You make it sound like it's my fault." She looks away, her eyes stinging, imagines stumbling all the way down the bank to the lake, leaving her

mother far behind--a speck on the horizon. She tries to steady herself, feels a pressure on her arm.

"I've tried to make up for being careless. I was careful . . . with you."

She focuses on the lake--its surface unruffled, unreal. Oh, she was careful all right--shutting herself away for weeks at a time, or breathing down her neck, mercilessly stalking her: "Where are you going? . . . Be careful. You might get hurt. . . . If anything ever happened to you, I couldn't live with myself." She waits for the echoes to fade.

"I don't know," her mother breaks in, her voice quavering. "I've done the best I could. If it was wrong, I . . . I only wanted to protect you, not drive you away." Her heart catches as she hears this strange voice, throbbing with emotion, suddenly break.

It is the first time she has seen tears in her mother's eyes, welling up now with all the pain and guilt she has suffered for so many years. She had always been a stranger before, like some alien being--unfeeling or half-crazed. Yet here she is, the tears streaming down her face, begging for her daughter's forgiveness. She squeezes her mother's hand and tries to tell her with her eyes, she understands.

The clearing breaks open before them, an expanse of brilliant blue sky that dazzles in the white sun. The dog

is galloping back and forth along the wall, his tongue flapping. She laughs with her mother, enfolding her shrunken frame with one arm. They stand on the look-out, high above the white sheen of the city.

"How did you know?" her mother asks, the sun warming her face.

"He told me once--how you used to come up here together, before we were born."

"He did?" She turns to her daughter and for a moment, looks bewildered. Then memory sweeps over her, softening her face, making her look young again. "To think he remembered. It was so long ago." She closes her eyes and tilts her smiling face toward the sun, drinking in its warmth.

The little girl insists that he take her to the look-out. She wants to see it for herself--at night. "Just this once," he says, heaving himself up from his chair. She dances on her feet like a horse at the starting gate, but he reins her in, squeezing her mittened hand. He lets go when she struggles, but stands right behind her as she wedges her red, rubber boots between the columns and leans over the top of the wall. She wants to get closer to the bright galaxy of stars bursting out of the city's black heart. She tries to swing a leg over, then feels her head snapped back. Her father has snatched her away by the hood of her snowsuit. His face is dark, angry, high up in

the pitch night. "What did I tell you? Why do you think they call it a 'look-out'?" He shakes her by the hood and, keeping a firm hold, drags her back to the car.

She saw a picture of her brother once. It was peeking out from her father's open wallet on the dresser. He was squinting in the sun, his hand shielding his eyes. He had a striped T-shirt on and freckles and a toothy smile and was sort of goofy looking. He looked a lot like her.

Her mother fumbles in her coat pocket. She unfolds a wad of Kleenex, her fingers trembling, while her daughter braces herself. She wonders if she can do it--wrap both arms around her, tell her she too is sorry, more sorry than she can say; but instead of crying, her mother holds the spread Kleenex aloft on her open palms, guiding it to her as if bearing the crown jewels on a pillow of red velvet. Within the nest of white is perched the cameo ring that belonged to her own mother.

"Happy birthday."

She turns the ring in the air, the gold band glinting in the sun. She brings the coral face close to her own and sees that it's lost its features; they are smudged, unrecognizable, worn down with age.

Her mother points out the little girl's grandmother. She is the one wreathed in black, bowing her head,

wearing the family heirloom which will one day be hers. But the little girl doesn't want to see all these grim old people assembled in school-picture rows--heads fading into the light or blurred like dabs of paint smeared by some careless thumb.

"Where are the children?"

"There aren't many. But look. Here."

The pictures catch at her heart; they are so much closer and clearer. Children are laughing in the sun, in twos and threes, hugging each other by the neck. Children are mugging for the camera: the boys flexing their muscles, the girls posing as beauty queens.

"Which one is you?"

Her mother gropes at these yellowing snapshots, reading them with her index finger. The photographer's shadow shoots up into some of them, and in one--"Here I am!"--shades the figure of her mother, a young girl like herself. She seems to be smiling, but it's hard to tell. Her face is clouded over, obscured. The picture has that washed-out, stippled effect of old photographs.

Her mother pats her on the shoulder and returns to the kitchen, telling her to have fun. The little girl flicks through the pages fast and furiously, watching the murky yellows and browns sharpen into blacks and whites slashed with the gaping dark holes where her brother once was. She scratches out one of the white corners that once held him in place and wonders where he's gone. She asked her father

once. He said that her brother had never been found and was probably sound asleep on the deep, dark sea bed where nothing would ever wake him. She could see him there, laid out in his striped T-shirt--no sun to dazzle his eyes, no wind to ruffle his hair, nothing but a hard bed of pebbles and clay. She looks down at the empty black square and pictures her and her brother together, all freckles and toothy smiles, hooking their elbows onto each other's necks and laughing in the sun.

The flush of the late afternoon sun softens the angles of the city below. She holds the dog up so he can see. He struggles at first, but then is quiet, his paws resting on the wall, as though the orange sun had melted away his resistance.

"Such a shame to leave," her mother says, as they start back down, the dry twigs snapping like bones beneath their feet.

Her mother holds the stack of missing pictures like a deck of cards, close to her face, scrutinizing the top one as if studying her next move. She lies it face down on the faceless pile on the kitchen table and peers into the next one. Slowly, the rigid line of her mouth curves into a smile and she looks up dreamily, only to see the little girl smiling along with her. She snatches up the cards, her face hardening once more into clay. She looks directly

at her daughter as she buries the pictures deep into the folds of her dress. "You shouldn't dwell on death. You're too young."

Her mother stands at the car door. She is facing the street, clutching the door handle. "I want to see him. It's so near. Let me go."

She looks toward the cemetery across from the parking lot. "I don't know. Your doctor said-- "

"To say goodbye," her mother says, smiling sweetly.

She pauses. "All right," she says, skipping ahead to catch her mother's arm. "But just for a minute."

The stone is black, imprinted only with the stark, square facts: her brother--1949-1954; her father--1910-1983; her mother--1919- . She had refused to have her own name engraved, chiselled in stone before its time. The mason had nodded, respecting her wishes--it could always be added later; but he had refused her mother's final demand, his face blanching a little when her mother showed him the note: REUNITED IN DEATH. He would, however, consent to REUNITED IN GOD, so her mother had compromised; she'd let him have his god.

The trees are bare, the ground thick with rotting leaves. The pale sun slants through the branches, cuts across the tops of the tombstones, throwing shadows along

the ground. A chill suddenly runs through her as she turns to check on her mother. She is gazing at the black stone and smiling.

"So, what'd you do all day?" he asks, trying to brighten the mood. She has been quiet all through dinner. He prepared it all himself--painstakingly chopping and dicing, stirring it around in the electric wok. She stares at the pink smears of icing on her plate. It's all that's left of her birthday, except for his present--a small silver offering she tries not to notice.

"Nothing much," she says, toying with her fork. She wishes the candlelight were even dimmer, draping her in darkness.

"I called. There was no answer." His voice is low, hesitant. They've been through this before. How come she never talks about her family? He wants to know everything about her.

"I had to visit my mother. She was expecting me." The tines of her fork prick her thumb. "She always remembers my birthday," she says smiling. She studies the impression of tiny hole in her thumb and says nothing more. She knows he won't press her.

She startles when he reaches for her hand. She looks up to see the candlelight quiver, its blue heart writhing on the wick. He is smiling in the reflected glow--a wash of red features drowning in black.

"Hurry up and open it."

It sits there shining in the light--a miniature box of tooled sterling silver, tied up in golden thread.

"Aren't you going to open it?"

She fingers the gilded loops, feeling her stomach knot.

"No."

"No?"

"I don't want it."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not ready, I-- "

"Why? Is there someone else? Is that it?"

She misses his smile, twists the ribbon tightly around her finger. "No! I-I'm not ready, that's all."

"But what are we waiting for? Don't you want to settle down, start a family-- "

"I'm not ready!" She knocks her chair over as she backs away.

He rises from the table, teetering on the tips of his spread fingers. His voice shakes. "Listen, I know this is sudden. You're a little surprised, that's all. You keep it. For when you change your mind. I can wait." She can barely make his face out from where it hangs in the shadow. "I'm not going to let you go."

She lets it ring ten times before it dies. She had stopped him again and again from coming over--"No, I'm busy. . . . Sorry, I was just going out"--and now she is

tired of even answering the phone. But there is nothing she can do to shut out the cheery voice of the past week: "How you doin'? . . . Miss you. . . . No, keep it. It was my mother's, you know. . . . Call you later." She opens and snaps shut the hinged silver lid, rolls the diamond in her palm, holds it up to the light. The sun catches it; it glints and winks and beckons her to the future. She cannot picture herself settling down. A wife and mother. Children. She saw what it did to her mother. The doctor had explained it all to her last year, after her father's death.

He'd been pleased she was trying to fill in for her father, especially since her mother's condition had deteriorated once more to the point of hospitalization. Her visits would mean a lot, he said. But he was reluctant to discuss her mother's case in detail, would only say that yes, her mother had quite an extensive history. It was only when she pressed him about her brother, that he leaned forward on his desk and looked directly into her eyes.

"Well, yes, of course his death was hard on her, but . . . it wasn't just that. You see, your mother suffered such severe post-partum depression with both you and your brother, she had to be put on medication indefinitely. Now the right medication can do wonders with these patients, but it's tricky since each case is individual. That's not to say there's no-- "

"What about me? Could I get it too?"

It had slipped out, all in one breath, before she could stop it. The doctor's eyes widened slightly. She didn't care. She held his gaze until his eyes fell and fastened on his laced fingers.

"There can be a genetic component." He looked up quickly. "But I wouldn't worry if I were you. With all you've been through, I'd say you've managed to cope very well."

"Then it does run in the family?"

He leaned back, removed his glasses, measured his words as he fondled the wire frames. "Well sure, there's a tendency for depression to run in the family. It's like any of the big diseases--cancer, heart disease, diabetes. Of course, you can't just sit around and wait for it to strike."

She remembers the doctor looking up at her uneasily, as if to see if she were doing just that. But no, it wouldn't happen to her. She was sure of that now. She smiled and shook hands, drove home, and went on believing what she had known all along. If she can love a man for a little while and then let him go, it is all she can hope for. But she misses her lover--misses the smell and warmth of him, misses him taking her high up into the throbbing night.

The dog trots into the living room where she is lying on the rug and flops beside her. She holds the ring up to his muzzle; he sniffs it and looks away. "What's this?"

she asks, flashing it before his eyes as he shakes his head. "C'mon, don't you know?" He gets up, annoyed, pads to the front door, and looks back at her. She slides on the ring. It jams at the knuckle, then slips into place. She holds out her hand, admires the setting. The dog whines softly, catches her eye, then nudges the door with his nose. She wrestles with the ring until it pulls loose and shuts it away in its white satin bedding.

She plays a game down by the river--warming the smooth, flat pebbles in her hand, seeing how many times she can make them skip across the water. She spies one glowing like black ember in a puddle. She plucks it out, her hand dripping, and feels its perfect smoothness, its raw cold. She warms it in her hand until it burns like coal, then flings it, watching it smolder, two, three times across the water's edge. She waits for it to spark again.

The dog pokes her with his cold, wet nose. He doesn't like the river, refuses to go near it. A little longer and he will be shivering, ears laid back, like before a storm when he roots out the safest corner and sits facing it, shuddering, waiting for the windows to stop rattling. Even her lover never liked her to come here. "Why do you do it? You're always so quiet when you come back."

"Once more," she says, and crouches low.

The pebble, rubbed white hot between both hands,

flickers over the water, two, three times, then sinks. She sighs and cups her chin in her palms. She wipes a tear and bends forward to peer into the water, but sees only a slick coating of green slime. She lowers a twig and begins to stir, watching the deposits scatter. The dog circles behind her, breathing hot against her ear. She stirs faster, her heart thumping time, until the water is clear, clean, transparent. The dog whines softly, edging away from her. She stops breathing as she glimpses something. The dog yelps once as she tilts closer to the water. It is only her own reflection staring back at her. She catches her breath and stands, wiping her hands on her pants. The dog lolls his tongue and grins at her, glad to get going.

Her heart jumps as she sees him standing there--waiting at her door, his hair wind-swept, bits of leaves clinging to his bulky sweater.

"Look. I want to know what's going on."

She starts to turn, but hears him breathe her name and feels her heart pull. She fumbles with her keys as she briskly crosses the hallway, the dog softly padding behind her. He bristles when the man takes her arms, growls low in his throat as he backs her against the door.

"I can't take this anymore. Either you want me or you don't. Make up your mind. Now."

She glares at him with cat's eyes, hunching up her

shoulders, gathering her body tightly together. His hands slide down her arms, drop limply to his sides.

"I just want to know why," he says softly.

"You'd be sorry, that's all."

"What do you mean? How can you say that?"

She has seen those eyes before--other men's eyes--searching, pleading, asking for more than she can give. She starts to speak--to warn him, frighten him away--but something else, painful and unexpected, slips out before she can stop it.

"Why me?"

He clasps her shoulders as her voice catches--his eyes steady now, fixed on her own. "You make me feel alive."

She laughs abruptly, turns aside her head.

"It's true," he breathes, stroking her arm. "Only I can't take it when you're like this--so far away-- "

"Listen," she says, brushing away his hand. "You're better off without me. You don't know."

"Don't know what?"

"Never mind. Just do me a favor and go."

She bolts the door and leans her ear against it. The padded carpet cushions his step, but not the whir of the elevator as it grinds to a halt. She is just about to peek out her door to see if he's still there, watching for her, when the phone rings.

Shaken, she cradles she receiver. She stares at the phone. She snatches up the receiver and drops it, her hand still burning. She rises unsteadily, tipping over the chair, frantically scans the room for someplace to hide. The doctor's voice pursues her as she reels around the room, patting the furniture, rearranging objects. "I'm sorry. There was nothing we could do." He had chosen his words carefully; he had never seen "such a determined woman" as her mother: forging a pass, telling the staff her daughter was taking her for a walk, waiting in the lobby for the receptionist to look away, just for a minute. Her heart leaps as she pictures her mother diving from the bridge, hurtling straight down into the river below. She runs for the phone and dials without thinking, wanting only to hide in his arms.

She sits slumped in the stiff leather chair, idly watching the doctor riffle through his files. She thinks of the long night before: huddled against her lover's chest, sobbing that she and her brother should never have been born. Had she really told him everything? When she was little, she used to imagine her brother in his striped T-shirt curled up like a fetus on his deep, dark bed. Sometimes at night she dreamed of diving into the crashing waves of the sea to go looking for him. She knew she had only to touch his shoulder; he would wake up and grab her

hand, and they would both sprout magnificent gold tail fins and swim away together like creatures of the sea. But she could never find him. It was too dark and there was too much tangled seaweed; she would thrash beneath her twisted bed sheets until she finally woke up, dripping. And then, when she left home at eighteen to study design, she ended up avoiding her family for the longest time; there was so much work to do (more when she went into freelancing) and so many men. For the first time in her life she felt young and alive. She thought that at last she was free of her mother, but something dogged her, a pursuing shadow close at her heels. When her father was dying, she feared it'd close right in on her and carry her away. She begged him to stay, not to leave her, but then she was alone with her mother and had to fight to keep the shadow at bay or it would consume them both.

It was then that this new lover appeared who made her laugh and took her up so high into the night. She could leave it all behind when she was with him: her mother's accusing eyes--"Why can't they let me be?"; the nurse sadly shaking her head--"No, she doesn't want to see you today." Yes, she had told him everything: the chill that had seized her in the cemetery; the coal-black stone still glowing vividly before her eyes--ready to consume all that it embraced; and her mother gazing at it--longingly, lovingly.

She feels drained now. No shock, no pain, just weary relief that it is finally over. Like when her father died. "He'd suffered enough." And her lover--listening to it all, not breathing a word, just stroking her arm, her hair, her cheek, staying up with her all night.

"I wanted to talk to you," the doctor says, retrieving a file from the cabinet. "See how you're feeling."

She smiles lamely. "I'm pretty tired."

"That's understandable. You've been through a lot."

She gazes out the tiny window overlooking the mountain. The sleet has washed away the vibrant colors, drowning them in pools of slush.

"Your visit last week meant a lot to her, you know."

She nods, seeing the two of them poised on the mountain's summit in the blazing sun, wondering if she'd been thinking about it even then.

"She told me all about it--how she'd made it to the top. She was quite proud of herself. You know, it was the only time I ever saw her smile? For just that one moment she felt alive again, and she has you to thank for that."

She sees the doctor for the first time now, leaning over his desk as he peers into her eyes with concern. And she smiles, thinking of how her mother had turned her face toward the sun for just that moment, like a flower thirsty for light. Perhaps she <u>had</u> given her mother something after all, however fragile. It <u>had</u> been hers, if only for a brief moment.

"I wanted to tell you how sorry we all are," he says softly. "We did everything we could for her, but . . . "

She watches him thumb through her mother's thick file, feels the weight settling back upon her chest.

"I don't think you realize just how far back this goes," he says, flipping through the file.

"Well, yes. You told me about the post-partum depression. And then, of course, she never did get better; she was always in and out of the hospital. I guess I was afraid something like this might happen all along, but it's still a bit of a shock, you know, when it finally does."

"Yes, of course. It must have been very hard on you, but actually . . . she'd suffered severe bouts of depression long before you and brother came along."

"What do you mean?"

"It's right here."

She slides forward on the chair, perches on its edge, watching as he runs his finger down the page.

"Nineteen thirty-seven--when she was first hospitalized for depression."

"Nineteen thirty-seven? Are you sure?"

"Yes, she was just eighteen, but according to this, she'd already attempted suicide twice. So you see, having children, although it may have exacerbated her condition, probably wouldn't have made that much difference in the long run."

"I never knew." She stares ahead, seeing herself at

eighteen: smiling triumphantly, pounding the side of the dog, announcing her freedom to the world!

The doctor unhooks his glasses and rubs his eyes. "Perhaps I should have told you before." He looks down at her mother's file. "Your mother tried to take her life many times since then. She never wanted you to know. She was afraid you'd dwell on it." He meets her fixed eyes. "So, you see, in a sense, it <u>was</u> just a matter of time before this happened. These chronic cases are difficult, sometimes impossible to deal with. How your father managed for so many years, I'll never know. He was quite a man."

She nods. Taking her up there despite it all--"Don't tell your mother"--squeezing her hard between his knees on the rickety coaster, trembling behind her as they dangled in mid-air, while she caught her breath and marveled at all the dazzling wonders below. And yet, he had married her mother in the first place--but why?--and in the end, he'd given up--beaten down, old beyond his years--leaving the daughter to carry on.

And what of her brother? Hadn't he given up too? She wonders with a start how she could not have seen it before: her mother stalking him, watching his every move; her brother driven into the surf, tripping down to the sea the first chance he had, racing with the moving mass of black clouds; and herself, a wailing baby, piercing the thunder that drowned out his cries, wracking her mother's frail frame with her shrill demands: <u>MY</u> LIFE! ME! ALIVE! She

wanted to live, to fly, to soar! She wouldn't give up. She wouldn't rush headlong into death.

"I know this won't be much comfort." The doctor is watching her with raw, exposed eyes. "But your mother did finally get what she wanted."

And it is a comfort; she does not even cry. Not now. Her mother had made her choice a long time ago.

She is teetering, her arms circling backwards, falling, falling, only this time she doesn't wake. She strains to open her eyes, but she is too busy thrashing her arms and legs in the swirling water. It pulls her in circles, catches her in a whirlpool, spins her mercilessly around. She opens her mouth to scream LET ME GO, and somehow the sound emerges in wavering echoes, and then, instead of finding herself rushing headlong to the bottom, she is above the water, bone dry, looking down, trying to see. She knows she's down there--she just fell in--but she can't see; the water clouds over, filling with smoke, until there is nothing to see at all.

She feels the dog's nose, warm and moist, pressed against the palm of her hand. She looks over at the man sleeping peacefully beside her. The sun streams through the slats of the venetian blinds, striping his pale face. She sits up, hugging her knees, and stares down at him. It is as if she is seeing him for the first time: the

tiny pulse beating in his throat, his soft, full lips, his dark, quivering eyelids. She'd never known him to be as gentle as he was last night. Even then, it was almost more than she could bear: the brush of his fingertips, the graze of his lips, the faint whispers--"It's O.K. You've got me now." He cradled her in his arms the whole night long as though she were something fragile and precious.

She thinks of waking him up for work, but decides to give him a few more minutes--he looks so serene. She smiles and stretches, looks down at the dog with the leash in his mouth. He is gazing at her with large, mournful eyes. She pulls on her jeans, rummages in the dresser drawer, and softly closes the door.

She probes her pocket for her mother's cameo ring. She rubs the ravaged coral face with her thumb and imagines it melting, dripping from the heat, then hurls it into the river. The black pool sucks it up in one gulp. She lifts the silver lid of the little box to see the diamond nestled within, extracts it from the satin, and holds it up to the sun. It glitters as she turns it, catching and refracting the light into a shimmering rainbow. It is not too late. She could still pitch it deep into the black night, make it swirl in the murky depths until it settled with a puff of silt beside its brother--snuggling on the deep, dark sea bed amid the pebbles and clay. She stares

at it in alarm. No. She squeezes it in her hand and feels how hard it is, how strong; it cannot melt. The ring glides effortlessly onto her finger. The dog bounds to her side gleefully as she slaps her thigh and turns her back on the river. She has survived them all.

IN EXILE

They are just standing there looking at each other--cheeks aflame, breath streaming in the bright cold--standing on the flat tar roof dusted with snow. Below them the wind whips through the boarded-up factory windows. The young woman reaches up and clasps her hands behind his neck. She can see a fine dew glistening on his long, blond lashes and along the curve of his cheeks where the snowflakes are melting. He smiles teasingly at her, his bright blue eyes catching at her heart, and Anna smiles back, the blood prickling beneath her cheeks. She lowers her eyes, savoring the warmth of his smile, relishing the almost painful sensation of his own eyes upon her--only her.

They are leaning together now, touching foreheads. Anna laughs as he carefully secures the kerchief knot beneath her chin and lifts her collar. Then, cupping her face in his mittens, he kisses her softly and tenderly on the lips; but when she closes her eyes, darkness intrudes,

and all she can see are the stars blinking in the heavens and the fumes rising from the factories below, like ghosts in the night.

When Anna lifted her eyes, everything looked cloudy. She narrowed her vision, then widened it, hoping the fog would clear. She tried to remember where she was, what she'd been doing, but the world was too grey, too murky, for her to get her bearings. A twinge of pain reminded her of her hands: poor, swollen things splayed on her lap, like twisted branches, gnarled and hideous. She'd wait. Slowly, it would come back to her.

His long, slender fingers--so smooth and delicate like a woman's--extend towards her, reach for her hair now that it is loose and streaming. He combs his fingers through the long, wavy strands, stroking her scalp, caressing her nape, sending tingles down her spine. She shivers as he runs his fingers down her body, gently stroking its contours, drawing out such intensity that she cries out in pain and joy; then falling back down with her, a cascade of notes trickling into a stream, quiet now, flowing with the steady current of love.

She breathed in deeply, but it was no use; she was as stranded as ever, the fog refusing to lift and release her. She made out a purse a few inches away and snatching it up,

rummaged inside, groping for something that would make it all clear. Her hand trembled over wads of Kleenex, a broken comb, a tiny pot of rouge, a phial that rattled with pills. She pried open a magnifying glass, but when she turned to the kitchen table and a large, mysterious box with wide open flaps loomed into view, she laid aside the glass and dove back into the purse. Her hand rested on a compact engraved with fine filigree. Slowly, she extracted it from the soft suede interior.

In the mirror her babushka was a reassuring sight--a bright paisley with yellow border. Was someone stopping by for her? Would she soon be stepping out into the sharp, fresh air of a sunny winter's day? She tilted the mirror down to her face. A wave of nausea rushed over her. But what had happened? She looked so white, as if a heavy frost had settled on her overnight--hair, skin, brows, lashes--white, ash white, fossilized. Even her eyes, once a lustrous black, were sealed over with a milky film that kept the sun out.

She could still see her young man and herself high up on their roof in the glint of sunlight--the tar sparkling beneath them like bits of broken glass--brushing the soot from their clothes and hair, laughing into the sun, gazing at each other with eyes as clear and bright as the day.

"How does it feel to be out in the sun again?"

"Yes," Anna says, lifting her face towards the sun,

turning like a flower to the radiating warmth. She has escaped once more from the stuffy drawing room which hems her in on all sides: stern ancestors eyeing her disapprovingly from the walls, stiffly seated guests openly inspecting her, and her parents waiting for her to perform, to win their "honored guests" over with some Haydn or Mozart. She could still see her mother swathed in her best black tafetta, perched on the edge of her chair, wringing her hands; and her father stroking his white goatee, his nose up in the air as if sniffing out just the right moment, then nodding for her to begin. She would play the music they wanted to hear with crystalline clarity and bow her head to their polite applause; but she would offer no more--not a single smile or note that sings. They cannot have that part of her; it belongs to someone else.

"What is it, Anna?"

She is reaching for the sun with her pale face, but there is something in the way, like a thick pane of glass. She cannot feel the heat.

"Sometimes I wonder," she whispers, "what would happen if they found out?"

He tugs on one long braid, makes her laugh, then starts to unravel it, strand by strand.

"I'll never let you go, Anna. As soon as things are

settled here, you must run away with me--not go back to your parents. What kind of people try to marry off their daughter for money?"

Anna giggles and turns to cover his mouth. He kisses the moist center of her palm, holds her hand against his lips as he looks into her eyes. She compares his lean, delicate features to the long line of "opportunities" her parents continued to line up for her with their smug, fleshy faces and pink, dimpled hands. One by one, she turned her heel on them, fleeing upstairs, dreading the touch of their moist lips, their plump hands. A murmur of voices below, the angry clumping on the stairs, her parents towering over her bed where she huddled under the counterpane. What were they staring at? Couldn't they see she was already spoken for? She could hear them even now.

"Anna, this cannot go on."

"Money is scarce now. You can't be choosy."

"A girl your age. You should be grateful they're still interested."

"It's not natural."

"No, we won't have it."

"This next one-- "

"His father's own foundry!"

"A very good match."

She smiles up at his intense blue eyes and sighs. "They want a 'good match' for me."

"And I am not?" he murmurs into her hand.

She laughs as he slides his face free and wheels her around to face the sun. Her heart beats faster as he raises the second braid and begins to unwind it.

"I could always introduce you to them. 'Mother, Father, this is Jan. He works in munitions, on an assembly line.'" She can just see them. Mother, touching her pinched, white lips with two fingers, and Father, turning a nasty shade of purple, the veins popping out on his forehead. "'No,'" she mimics. "'This will not do. It simply will not do.'"

They laugh and she turns to face him, shaking her hair free, the sun streaming down like golden rain from on high. "Yes," she says. "You are right. I will run away with you." And they scurry down the iron factory fire escape and duck in through a window. In the dusty room, they shed their garments and nestle on the hard pallet beneath the coarse, heavy blanket, hearts and limbs entwined.

Anna was dabbing on rouge, trying to rouse her sleeping blood, trying not to notice the brown cardboard box waiting for her with open flaps on the kitchen table. What was it doing here? And why was she afraid to peer inside? It did no good to fret so over things that did not concern her. It was time to get ready. He would soon be here. But when she'd pinched her cheeks and bit her lips and snapped the compact shut, the box continued to drift in the corner of her eye--floating in a sea of fog, daring

her to peer within. . . .

She knew if she tried hard enough it would come back to her--who all these people were; they looked so familiar. She stared at the stark black-and-white photograph of two little girls backed up against a brick wall, refusing to look at her--heads bowed, faces dark, cloudy, inscrutable. Yet she can feel their scorn, see the reproach in their lowered eyes. Why? What did she ever do to them? And here's one in color--all grown up now?--still looking down, but smiling this time at the infant cradled in her arms, the two of them poised against a backdrop of twisted palms in some distant sunny clime. Here was a whole platoon of them--big ones and small ones laughing and waving, knee-high in the tall grass; most unkempt--hair and clothes flying in the wind as if they'd just blown in from another planet. Who were they? What were they all doing in the same box?

Anna waded through the wreckage--masses of pictures, letters, clippings--searching with the magnifying glass for an answer, some clue. A long, creased face with sad, wet eyes, like a bloodhound's, called to her to pull him out, but she didn't remember him. What did he have to be so sad about? She flung him over, angry now that she couldn't find what she was looking for. She plunged deep into the box for one last try and emerged with a clutch of curled photos, brittle and brown, about to crumble. The stiffly posed figures--a scowling woman in black, a solemn man with

a white goatee--made her angrier still, and she was about to seal the box once and for all, submerging its strange inhabitants into eternal darkness, when her hand, trembling now, lighted on the fading portrait of a young woman.

Hands folded primly in her lap, head inclined, she was peeking playfully at the camera, trying not to smile, but she was happy--that was plain. Her happiness surged through her veins, threatened to gush right out of the frame; she had to hold it back, dam it up, or they would know.

Anna stared at the shining crown of plaited hair. She could still feel the stabbing of the pins which had secured the thick coils to her scalp: her mother--a stiff rustle of black--looming above her, frowning, a mouth full of bobby pins. And she could still feel the solid weight of those braids as they flopped to her shoulders, and the gentle tickling at her nape as he slowly unwound them; and then, when her hair fanned in ripples across the pallet, the huge release that would flow in rushes from her whole body as he sprinkled her hair with kisses, now that it was free.

Her hand tingles as he rubs it warm. He gets up to stuff the rags around the window where the air seeps in and thinly whines. She shivers where she lies blanketed on the hard pallet to see his tender nakedness exposed to the bitter draft. It is as if she herself is crouched by the

window ledge, her raw skin prickling. She waits for him to return to her so they can snuggle beneath the scratchy old blanket and keep each other warm, at least for a little while, until it is time to hurry home, back to their families. Only the stars, pulsing with the beat of life, look down on them through the cracked skylight. And the stars will never tell.

They are running in the fresh spring air, shoes dancing by their laces, bare feet slapping against the cold cobblestone. There's no time to lose. The sun is rising, the pale yellow slanting through the night, casting a feeble glow on the dingy factories and rowhouses. He hoists her to her open window, blows her a kiss, and saunters off into the dawn, his slung work boots bobbing at his back.

Anna plunged into the box, clawing through the rubble, coughing as the dust collected in her lungs. There was no time to lose; he was in there--somewhere. Her hands clenched into fists, crumpling pictures--the stranger's sad eyes, the children's long, dark faces. They were in the way; couldn't they see that? What if he were suffocating, buried in some dark niche where she couldn't root him out? She felt the tears bite at the back of her eyes, tried to shake away the image of his blackened face, his burning blue eyes. She stumbled onto a lace hankerchief, yellow with age, rolled into a tight, little ball. Panting, she

squeezed it in her palm and clenched her eyes, waited for her breathing to become regular.

They stand on the roof of the abandoned factory. Ribbons of smoke rise from below like ghostly vapors. She hears his words, but does not want to hear. She nestles deeper into the warmth of his arms, rubs her cheeks against the rough grain of his coat. "Look at it, Anna. It is ours." He spreads his arms over the rows of factories, the blocks of flats, and gazes at the old walled city on the far bank of the Vistula. "It is all there--our Royal Castle and palaces, our churches, our museums and libraries--all our past splendors preserved, for us to cherish and protect." The streams of smoke billow and merge until there are no more factories, no more castles and churches; nothing to fight for. They ride the waves of smoke, just the two of them--alone; the streets below are burnt out, obliterated. He speaks of duty and honor and of his love for her. She grips the arms which enfold her, wrapping them tightly around her trembling body. "Jan," she whispers. "Don't leave me."

"I <u>have</u> to go," he later tells her as she lies sobbing on the pallet, hugging her knees and hiding her face in the scratchy blanket. "Anna, it is my <u>duty</u> to join. My own father fought against the Russians in the Polish Army and died for his country. Anna, listen to me."

"Don't go. Don't leave me."

"You can't pretend it will go away if you ignore it. Hitler must be stopped. We must not yield to his demands."

"I'll run away with you."

"Anna, don't you see? Gdansk is only the beginning. We must stop them now before they go any further--drive out foreign powers once and for all. It is our only hope to preserve the independence our fathers fought so hard for."

"I will, I'll-- "

"Anna," he murmurs, stroking her hair.

"But they will take you away," she chokes into the blanket.

"You don't know that. I told you, these are just meetings, talk-- "

"And I'll never see you again!" Her sobbing is uncontrollable now.

"No! Anna," he pleads. He burrows into the blanket, finds her wet face, and smothers it with kisses. "I'll come back," he whispers, holding her close.

Anna's eyes fluttered open, her chest heaving. Rouge streamed down her cheeks, drying like caked blood. She felt a pounding in her palm and, turning her hand, slowly unfurled her fingers. The yellowed ball of lace called to her to unwrap it. She gently eased it onto the table and began to pry at the lace, plucking at it with her aching

fingers. She felt sure that the secret lay within--the answer to all her questions.

"You don't want to go! Why not say it?"

It is their last night together. He has brought his father's old army rifle. It lies ready by the door; his heavy work boots are resting there too, gathering strength for their long trek through the mud to Gdansk. She kneels beside him on the pallet, searching desperately for the magic string that will pull him back to her.

"Jan," she moans, sinking down on her haunches. "Why don't you look at me?"

"All right!" A shock of tears swells to his eyes. "I don't want to go. I'm afraid. Does that make you happy? Are you happy now?" The fierce blue eyes glisten--daring her to touch them now that she has exposed his fear, daring her to soothe away the pain.

"Then don't go," she says softly, bracing her arms at her sides. "Stay here with me. We'll hide from them all. They'll never find us."

His shining eyes penetrate her own--a startling blue, piercing and intense, no longer veiled, no longer shielded from her. He no longer seeks to hide his tears.

"Anna, it can't be stopped now. Hitler has broken the treaty with Poland. Don't you see? It is starting at last. First they take over Gdansk, then they will seize the border, and then they will advance, move steadily inland

to the very heart of our great country--to Warsaw herself! We must fight for what is ours! There is no other way!"

He breaks down, sobbing, his head in his hands. She fights against touching him, gathering him to her breast. Her longing to envelop him in her arms is overwhelming, and she is just about to yield when he suddenly flings back his head and wipes his eyes. He probes his shirt pocket, slowly lifts his sore, reddened eyes, and takes her hands, lodging a band of gold between them.

"You will wait for me?"

Anna gazed at the shiny gold band she had unwrapped. It lay poised on the wrinkled lace. Yes, she would wait for him, an eternity if she had to. She turned back to the photograph of her young self. She smiled down at the beaming black eyes, imagined the bent figure, stiff from posing, throw back her head and laugh out loud. She watched her rise, slowly like a queen, the plaited crown magically unwinding, drifting in waves to her shoulders, down the long curve of her back, as the clothes, dark and binding, fell away, melting in pools at her feet, leaving her standing, naked and free. Radiant.

Anna leaned over the phonograph, steadying the tone arm, afraid to let go. It was hard to judge the distance, harder still to feel her way into such a delicate operation with a hand as useless as a fuzzy mitten. She held her

breath and dropped the needle--was relieved that it bounced only once--then groped her way to her favorite armchair to let her favorite music wash over her once more.

"Chopin was a national hero. A spokesman for the people!" He swings up her arm, pointing their clenched hands towards the stars.

She is afraid to look at his face--to see the fervor glowing in his eyes. "No. He was a poet. A lover." Her hand goes numb as he tightens his grip. She fastens on the stars, watching them burn.

"You are wrong. He was a hero. A revolutionary!" He strains her up towards the sky, pulling her higher and higher. Their arms tremble against each other in the night.

"Warsaw will not fall!" Anna has risen from her armchair, her fist raised, the "Revolutionary Etude" on the phonograph seizing her heart. Vividly to her still, they are running out of food, water, ammunition, the shelling is relentless, they are surrounded; but the great Etude persists on the radio, its opening strains rallying again and again, and they hold their ground for ten long days, until finally the lights go out, the radio falls dead.

Anna clasped her throbbing hands and collapsed in her armchair. The music was over. The sudden silence beat in her head. She could still see her and her parents

crouched beneath the stairs. They join hands and listen to the eerie sounds of marching troops and rolling tanks. When they emerge from their dark haven, they blink at each other in the dusty light of the drawing room as if staring at strangers. It takes her a few minutes to remember, but then her unfocused eyes fall on the piano, and she is gripped by one thought and one thought only--where can he be?

She leaves the cries of her parents behind and stumbles down the blackened streets, past gutted buildings whose chalky entrails rumble to the ground, rising in clouds of dust. Their own section has not been touched, but the city is in scattered ruins, and she loses her bearings and cannot find her way to the factory. She rushes on blindly, snatching at figures that brush against her--"Have you seen him? . . . Can you tell me where he is?"--until finally, she collides with someone--"Wait! Hold on there." She feels the solid grip on her shoulders, looks up into dark, limpid eyes. "No! You're not him!" she cries, beating against his chest; but she answers his soothing, questioning voice and soon finds herself, crumpled and weary, on her parents' doorstep.

She won't turn around; she won't listen to them. She will play what she pleases, in spite of it all. She doesn't care if she's reported. "Sshh! Someone might hear," her mother whispers, peering out the drawn drapes.

And her father, frowning by the door--brows knotted, nervously fingering the gold pocket watch that dangles from his waist. "Why don't you play something else?"

She can't help it. Chopin is her whole life now; he can lift her up in a frenzy of passion, suspend her in one sheer moment of exquisite agony, then let her fall ever so gently, the two of them swooning together. It is what she needs, now more than ever. Her parents keep a close watch on her; they are like shadows during the day, and at night they lock her bedroom door and window from the outside--"It is for your own good, Anna. War makes us do crazy things." She hears them talking in hushed whispers: "What's wrong with her?" "It's too much, that's all." "We'll have to take turns watching." So they are afraid for her. She cannot go looking for him. He could be anywhere by now. If only she could pass by his district; perhaps a neighbor would know where he is. But she is a prisoner in her own house. All she can do is to wait for him to return and release her. And so, she listens for the ping of the single pebble against her window, lying rigid in bed, straining to pick out his features in the dark. And she looks to Chopin to bring him back to her; perhaps he will hear--wherever he is--the stirring polonaises (although it is difficult not to trip over the soaring octaves, the flourishes of arpeggios), the gentle mazurkas with their charming little grace notes and trills. Perhaps he will lift his head and smile, follow the notes home.

Sometimes she looks up from the soft parts, thinking she hears something. She sits with her head turned to one side, hands poised above the keyboard, the pendulum in the hall thumping time, when suddenly her parents materialize in the doorway and stare at her like two wraiths across a mist.

It is better to play than to stop. So she calls on her beloved Chopin--caressing and pounding the keyboard, trying not to make too many mistakes--while her parents float behind her, clucking their tongues and shaking their heads.

She knows now that their love is alive and growing inside her. She must find some way to protect it before her parents find out. She must find someone to take care of her and the little one until Jan's safe return. Yet she resists even more the dull young men her parents force upon her. She has only to look into their slumbrous eyes, and she knows without asking, they will not ~~help~~ her; they cannot understand.

So she shuts her ears to her parents' pleas: "Anna, don't you see? He has money, connections!" They are frightened, desperate to get away. She watches their faces pale, their eyes shift as they hurry past boarded up schools, libraries, churches. She listens to their muffled voices as they breathe rumors of mass deportations, forced labor camps, and as they wonder about the townspeople--

mostly Jews and university professors--who have disappeared mysteriously into the night. "It is only the Jews they want. We are safe," their neighbors say, but her parents feel differently. "We are all in this together," her father insists. "Poles have always been an oppressed and persecuted people, Jews and Catholics alike." Her father says that the Nazis and Soviets are fighting over all of them like a pack of hungry dogs, that their only hope is escape, then looks at her with pleading eyes. Her mother implores her to think of them--how can she be so selfish?--but she refuses to submit to their demands. She must stand her ground, wait for him to return. If she ran away, Jan might never find her.

She is bolted in place on the drawing room carpet, her father barring the door, her mother posted at the foot of the stairs. Someone was asking after her, wanted to be introduced. "His own textile factory!" her mother exclaimed with tears in her eyes. Anna squeezes her fists, yearning to batter the faceless figure before her. But when she looks up into the large, sympathetic eyes of an older man, he smiles at her as if he knows. And then she remembers, even before her parents remind her: the tender expression in his eyes, the lilting tone of his voice, the sure grip of his hands as he guided and steered her home with a gentle pressure. Yes, she thinks, smiling back at him. Perhaps he can help her; perhaps if she explains it

all to him--how she has no one else to turn to--he will understand.

Jozef listens to her story in silence as they walk along the crumbling streets of the city. She hugs her stomach, protecting the life within her, as she averts her eyes from Jan's district. She never knew which flat was his, but it doesn't matter; there is nothing left now but dust and debris. If only their factory were still standing; it would be a sign that Jan was all right, that one day they'd be together again. She hurries her pace to get there, and Jozef is right behind her, touching her shoulders, as she falls to her knees at the foot of the rubble.

"Anna," he whispers, kneeling beside her. He lifts her chin, caresses her wet cheek. "I too have no one to turn to. I am all alone in this world--no family or friends, only business acquaintances. All my life I've been looking for someone--someone special. That first day I saw you running and calling his name, I felt such pity for you, such awe for the depth of your love. I couldn't get you out of my mind. I wondered what happened, whether you ever found him. And then, months later, when I got up my nerve to be introduced, and you looked up and smiled back at me, I thought maybe I had a chance. And now, it has been only a few short weeks, but I am sure of what I feel for you. If I only thought I could have just a small part of what you feel for him . . . "

Anna closes her weary eyes and leans her head on his shoulder. He rubs her back in little circles, easing away the sobs that still swell in her chest.

"Don't worry," he murmurs in her ear. "I'll take care of you both. I'll protect you. And I promise not to take you away until you're ready, until you've come to know me."

It is a relief to leave her parents, only she cannot forget the shocked looks on their faces, the fury in their voices.

"You are staying in Poland? It can't be true!"

"Why? He has money for papers. Why stay when we can all escape?"

Jozef glances at Anna, looks down at the floor. "It is not so easy. We must all be patient. Besides, there is no danger for the time being. We have nothing to fear."

"It's bad enough now. Why wait any longer?"

"Later will be too late."

"Anna, why rush into this if he won't help us?"

"There are lots of other men to marry."

"Men with foresight, common sense."

"A little compassion!"

"Anna, listen to us!"

Her heart wrenches as she turns her back on them, but she has no other choice. Jozef will make a good father and provider for the time being, and she is safe with him;

he never speaks of running away. Even after they are married, he agrees to respect her condition--she must preserve herself. But one night he comes to her gently, quietly--there are tears in his eyes--and she forgets for a minute; she thinks it is Jan--his touch is so soft. Then it is too late and she weeps over her betrayal, prays Jan will understand.

She waits out her term, waits for the day when she and the father of her child will be reunited. She knows now why he hasn't come to her. He has joined the Resistance movement. She is sure of it. She never saw the messenger's face, but she felt him brush against her on the street and thrust the note firmly into her hand. She keeps it hidden beneath her camisole and takes it out when Jozef isn't looking.

January, 1940.

Anna,

I am alive and well in Warsaw. I can't see you now. It isn't safe. Hold on. We will soon be together.

All my love,
Jan

She had known he'd returned all along, of course. He would never give up Warsaw--the heart of their great country--without a valiant struggle. He must stay underground. It is dangerous work. Her heart contracts each time she hears of yet another piece of sabotage--a truckload of German supplies overturned, a flagrant halt in

labor production. There is even talk of an underground build-up of weapons, of armed struggle in the streets. She tries not to think of these things; it is bad for the child. And her parents just make things worse--searching her face with desperate eyes, speaking of the child in anguished tones: "There is no future for him here. . . . How can you think of bringing him into such a world?" Anna begins to wish that they had gone away for just a little while, like her parents had wanted. But it is too late now. The baby is due soon; she shouldn't be moved in her condition. She waits for Jozef to return from work and looks at him in such despair that he drops to his knees, rubs her aching back, her swollen feet, and tells her not to worry; it will soon be over.

She refuses to look at Jozef. It is his fault the child has died inside her--was never given a chance to emerge, pure and whole, a testament of love. He has poisoned her love for Jan; she will never forgive him. For the first time he speaks of leaving while there's still time, leaving it all behind. She looks at him in horror, thinks of her beloved Jan cowering in a dark basement, surrounded by crates of weapons, looking up at her with pleading eyes.

"Go then!" she cries, turning aside her face. "Leave me all alone!" She will continue to scan the leaflets that cry out "Resistance! Revolution!", to dream of Jan

shaking his fist in the air. She will continue to support him in his cause. How can she run away to another land--distant, safe--when she should be at his side? How can she leave him when he needs her?

"No," Jozef says softly, taking her hand in his. "I'll never leave you."

She surrenders herself to him; it helps to ease the pain, the grief. She can pretend she is back in Jan's arms once more, before this all started, when she was still young, still innocent. She shuts out the voices of her neighbors--"At least they're getting rid of the Jews"--and the unbelievable news of walled Jewish ghettos, death camps, mass executions; she rallies for the Resistance in her heart and finds tenderness in Jozef's arms. And then she is given a second chance. New life kicks within her, announces its presence to the world. At times her heart is lifted high with hope, but then she remembers, it is not Jan's; she remembers the war and his lonely struggles underground and almost wishes it would never see the light of day.

Anna knew who the pictures were of now--that man with the sad eyes, those two dark-faced little girls who never smiled. They had given her comfort during the long wait for Jan's return. She had clung to them tightly, more so during the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto. She knew that

the Resistance, like so many other Poles, scorned the Jews, but not Jan. He felt like her father did; they were all in this together. He would fight for the oppressed, no matter what race or religion, with his last drop of blood. And so she couldn't help picturing him trapped within the Jewish ghetto walls, warding off invaders with make-shift weapons. How could she have survived without Jozef's kind words and caresses, without the warm embraces of her little girls? But she never thought they would take her away to a foreign land.

"It is all arranged. We are leaving." Jozef looks down at her with dark, menacing eyes.

"No. What are you saying?" She starts to rise; he grabs her wrists.

"Anna, listen to me. There is nothing left for us here. Our food is rationed. It is dangerous to walk in the street. I can't even conduct my own business in peace. The Germans have taken over everything. We are nothing more than their slaves--slaves to the 'master race'! Is that what you want for the children?"

Anna struggles to raise her arms, cover her ears, but Jozef tightens his grip.

"No! You are going to listen. We have waited long enough. We cannot wait anymore. The city is dying. It is our last chance to escape. If you won't think of yourself, at least think of the children!"

"Go then! Take them and go!" She wrestles in his arms, winces at the twisting pain in her wrists.

"Anna, stop this nonsense! What's wrong with you?"

She is surprised to hear him shout. She freezes, stares at him. His face is clenched like a fist, pale with anger.

"Don't you see?" she pleads. "He's here in Warsaw! Fighting for the Resistance." She retrieves the crumpled note from beneath her camisole, opens it up so he can see.

Jozef bends forward, holding the note by one corner. His eyes widen; he glances up at Anna, then reads the message through once more. He straightens up; his voice turns cold. "This was written over four years ago--before our daughters were even born."

Anna stares blankly at the note that dangles at the end of her outstretched arm. Was it four years already?

"Have you heard from him since?" Jozef asks quietly.

"No, but-- " She looks up to see Jozef sadly shaking his head. "It wouldn't be safe," she insists. "He has to stay underground."

"Anna, listen to me. Four years is a long time. Anything could have happened."

"No! I won't leave him! I promised I'd wait."

"Fine! Wait for him then! We'll go by ourselves!"

Anna stares in shock as Jozef marches towards the door. "Wait!" she cries, holding her heart.

Jozef stops, one hand on the doorjamb, and turns to

her with beseeching eyes.

"All right," she sighs, feeling her body go slack, limp. "But only if you promise to return . . . once it's all over."

"Of course," Jozef says. "Once it's all over."

It's true he had saved her--her and the little ones who clung to her skirt as she stood at the bow, watching the boiling surge of the ocean. The papers had worked and they were safe. She knew it was for the best--she had the children to think of. But when she thought she saw a hand emerge from the churning waters--the smooth, pale hand she knew so well--and when she leaned over to take it, to follow him no matter what, her family had stopped her--grasping her wrists and knees, clamping all the more tightly as she squirmed and twisted.

"No, Anna! It's over now!" Jozef pleads to her with anguished eyes, an anguish that would never die. "Don't you see? We are safe."

She thrashes against his breast, her heart flailing. She doesn't want to be safe, not anymore. She feels the spray of the water splashing up on deck and yearns to throw herself into the lashing waves.

"No! Let me go! Let me go!"

"Anna, stop! I know. It is torture to leave your poor parents behind, but there was no other way. You must believe me. You don't think I would have saved them too

if I could?"

She stops beating the wall before her and holds herself very still. Coldness clamps her heart; she can feel it creeping up into her voice. "If you were half the man he was, you would stay--stay and fight!"

A child at her feet begins to wail, and then another joins in, their swelling sobs rising in Anna's breast. She sees nothing but the two of them now--howling into the wind, their faces red and angry, like hungry orphans left out in the cold. Anna gathers them to her, smothers their heart-rending cries in her skirt, looks to Jozef for help. His head is bent; he runs his sleeve across his eyes. He suddenly looks so old, so beaten. Why had she never seen it before?

"Anna," he sighs, too tired even to lift his eyes. "I know how hard it is to leave your homeland, the place where you were born and raised. But you've got to pull yourself together." He looks up quickly. "We've got to make the best of it. For the children, Anna; think of the children."

Yes, he is right. She will make the best of it; she will. Anna holds her babies close and looks out over the spuming foam, watching the last glimpse of land recede in the distance.

Anna squeezed her fists against her temples. How could her family drag her away like that, against her will, and then leave her here, stranded, washed up on a foreign

shore? How could they leave her so all alone? She peered into the box and pulled out a thick pile of yellowed newspaper clippings. Maybe it was written up somewhere, some news of what had happened to them.

Her heart jolted as she stared through the trembling magnifying glass at the top of the pile. Warsaw, Sept., 1944: sixty-three days of desperate fighting, fierce Polish youths pounding the back streets, waving leaflets and gasoline bombs; she could see him, charging from cellar to cellar, his eyes blazing. All this over, crushed by the Nazis: streets leveled, buildings blown up--the ancient Royal Castle!--burned to the ground--the palaces and churches, the blocks of flats! Was this what she'd wanted--empty ruins with nothing to fight for, the two of them safe and alone in their abandoned factory? No! She wanted Him! Only him! She should have have stayed by his side, fought with him in the streets, been there to dress his wounds, hold him close, instead of here, living in exile with an old, worn-out man and two squalling children!

The way Jozef slaved to rebuild his business as though it were some noble cause; was money all he thought of? The way he would touch her shoulder when she was doubled over, weeping in pain.

"Leave me alone! Go away!"

His eyes widen for an instant as he withdraws his hand. "Anna, this must stop." He looks at her pleadingly. "It is a terrible thing that has happened, but we must put

it behind us. Your poor parents are at rest now. It is over. We still have each other and the children. You must think of the children. It does them no good to see you like this always. Life must go on--if only for them."

"You don't know. You don't understand."

"How can you say that? It is your grief speaking."

She watches him bow his head and strike away a tear. "You don't know," she says evenly, observing his reddened eyes. "You were never in love."

Anna raced through the lurid headlines of Warsaw's evacuation: the mass murders of insurgents, the deportations to concentration camps. No, she wouldn't think of it. She knew he must have escaped--crawled through the sewers to safety, like the other survivors. Perhaps he would even cross over and find her. But later, when she'd read of the postwar reconstruction--the foundries and steelworks, the medieval Market Square, the Royal Castle, all rising from the ashes like shiny new coins--she was convinced Jan had returned and was waiting for her. But Jozef, like a brick wall, would not even listen.

"Anna, it is not possible. How can you even think it?"

"They have rebuilt the whole city, just as it used to be! We can go home, back to the life we once knew."

"You don't understand. It is a police state now, run by the Soviet army. There are mass arrests, deportations

to Siberia, widespread persecution-- "

"No!"

"You've read it yourself. They've seized control of the entire country--the army, the police, the press and radio." His eyes frighten her; she has never seen them so black, so stormy. "There is no freedom! No one can speak out. Dissidents are severely punished. Even those heroes who fought in the Resistance-- "

"No! You're making it worse than it is! You promised we'd go back!"

He catches her arm as she turns, his eyes once more gentle, beseeching. "Anna, we are free here. Life is good. What more do you want?"

"I don't believe you," she sobs, melting into his arms. "It can't be true. It can't be!"

She shook her head at the news photos of food lines: rows of heads bowed beneath the steady, grey drizzle; waiting endlessly for a bit of herring and stale bread. Jozef never missed a chance to point these things out to her, sighing over how lucky they were. She was angry at first, refused to admit there was anything to be thankful for in a land so concerned with material things, a land without culture or history, without a soul. But when she began to read of the demonstrations--the cries for "bread and freedom" ringing in her ears--and of the Soviet troops stamping each scattered uprising like so many ants, her heart ached

for her people. She wished she could give them something, something of her own good fortune. Jozef was right. They were lucky; life was good. They had a split-level house, two cars, a television. . . . Yet night would still find her crying into her ruffled pillow, dreaming of her lost youth, reaching out for Jan's perfect features, only to wake suddenly, clutching at darkness.

The doctor Jozef sent her to convinced her to join The Polish Ladies' Church Auxiliary which organized raffles and charity bazaars and collected boxes of canned goods and winter clothes to be shipped overseas. Jozef was proud of her--she no longer sat around the house feeling sorry for herself--and she was less irritable with the children; they even helped her sometimes, collecting tins of soup and warm woolen socks from their classmates. They didn't show much interest, though, in the newspaper articles Anna carefully clipped out with large stainless steel scissors and added to her collection of family mementoes. What was Poland to them? Nothing but food lines and funny names. They hardly even spoke Polish at home anymore. How could they have known what these clippings meant to her? She couldn't tell them that her parents never wrote her back after she left them behind and that the clippings were like the letters from home that never came. But she <u>could</u> tell them about Jan; only how could she explain it all so they would understand? "My first love," she would begin, looking far beyond the two wide-eyed little girls to a

distant shore. "He was a hero, a revolutionary, a man of courage and conviction. Who knows? Perhaps he's still there . . . fighting for our homeland. Wouldn't you like to go there someday, see what your <u>real</u> home looks like?" But when she had wiped her eyes and held her arms open to her daughters, they were nowhere to be seen.

At least she'd had the other Polish ladies to talk to. Who else was there? Her daughters didn't understand her. Her husband was always at work, forever rebuilding his business. Joining the ladies' church auxiliary was the best thing she could have done. It gave her back her sanity, her sense of belonging. Mornings she could hardly wait to see her family off--waving merrily at them from the kitchen window--so she could hurry back to the meetings in the church basement. She loved to sit in the circle of hard folding chairs and listen to their familiar, excitable voices reverberate in the spacious hall--plotting schemes to raise funds, reminiscing about the "old country." The other ladies, having emigrated long before the war, were older than Anna, and they looked to her as a living link to their lost homeland. They would listen endlessly to her stories about Jan--"A Polish hero!"--tilting forward on their chairs, hugging their ample bosoms, sighing and exclaiming. And when Anna reached the part about their tragic separation and the subsequent occupation of Warsaw, the ladies would share her tears, swaying in their chairs, dabbing at their swollen eyes with lace hankerchiefs.

"Don't you worry," they would tell her. "Poland will rise again." And they would speak proudly of their own war which had ended in Poland's hard-won independence and a constitution of her own. If only reconstruction had not been so difficult, if there had been enough jobs to go around, they would never have left. But they had their children to think of, and their husbands had insisted that things would be better once they crossed over. The new land had been good to them, it was true, but it was still hard to get used to after all these years.

Anna squeezed her weary eyes with trembling fingers as she thought of her dear old friends. They had been so close to her heart, like a family, and it was hard to watch them age and see them go, one by one. For thirty years the dwindling circle had continued to meet in the church basement until finally, The Polish Ladies' Church Auxiliary was no more. They were all gone now. Anna was the only one left.

Anna's hand shook as she balanced the magnifying glass over a newspaper photo from the sixties. Long-haired youths were being dragged by the limbs off a university campus. Which campus, she didn't know. There were so many student demonstrations going on all over the world. Even her own daughters had left home young--too young--to hitch-hike to some campus out in California. They too wore blue jeans and long hair and joined sit-ins and peace marches.

Anna tried not to think of them--what if they got hurt?

She scanned each student, but the tiny faces were mere smudges, blurs of yellow dots. She froze on one figure with raised fist, his ankles being pulled by two stooped soldiers bowing at his feet, and tears sprung to her eyes. Of course! This was Warsaw. She could almost hear his shouts of "Independence! Freedom of speech!", could almost feel his feverish brow, the trembling of his iron fist. She should have stood by him, believed in his cause. All she could do now was to wait for mere glimpses.

Anna wandered through the clippings, seeing the photos spring to life, remembering the T.V. images that had drawn her so close to the screen. She had felt so alone, once her daughters had gone and left her. Still, she had the ladies to turn to at their weekly meetings, and she knew they were watching with her, seeing Jan's fighting spirit in every angry young Pole. They saw him marching with placards at the factories, mines, and shipyards. They saw him seizing the hands of old, kerchiefed women in the food lines, railing against shortages and soaring prices. They saw him in the largest uprising of all: the widespread workers' strike with bold demands for higher wages and cheaper food, trade unions and the right to strike. Anna trembled once more to think that perhaps the struggle could be won. Perhaps they really would win their freedom, and then she could return, back to his waiting arms. She could throw herself against his breast and beg his forgiveness, tell

him how she had suffered, plead with him to understand, that it wasn't her fault, she'd been dragged away, against her will. But never mind, here she was, in his arms once again, and nothing would ever take her away.

Anna turned to the next clipping, quivering with anticipation, and could barely contain her joy as she read of the new independent trade union--Solidarity--ten million strong! How thrilled the ladies would be! To think that Poland would rise once more--autonomous and free! She lingered lovingly on the headlines and pictures announcing bold, frequent strikes, government concessions, the demand for a referendum on communist rule. She closed her eyes, savoring a dream come true--returning at last to his waiting arms, feeling his cool hand brush against her burning cheek.

But what had happened? She gripped the next clipping, holding it up to the glass, reading once more of military rule, the detainment of the Solidarity leaders. No! It couldn't be. They had worked so hard, so long. She riffled through the clippings, moving forwards in time; she was starting to feel weak, her heart fluttering, the gloomy headlines dimming, when her searching eyes fell to the side on a bundle of cards and letters bound with red ribbon. Of course, he had written--it had just slipped her mind--telling her to be patient, to hold on a little longer; it would soon be safe for her to return. They were gathering strength, waiting for the right moment. Soon

they would rise--mighty, indestructable--to reclaim their freedom and independence, the honor and glory that was once theirs.

Anna tore off the ribbon and plunged into the top envelope. She pulled out a card, graced with an ivy-green wreath set aglow with a halo of candles. She held her breath and looked inside.

Dear Mother and Dad,

Merry Christmas! You're lucky to have snow. It's strange having my first green Christmas. Daddy, are you still stringing up all that ivy and those colored bulbs? Be careful not to fall. I miss you and will try to make it home for spring break. I'll write soon.

Happy New Year!

Maria

Anna snatched up the following postcard, a panorama of surf and sand. She turned the card over and leaned closer, the hasty scrawl swimming under glass.

Dear Mother,

How are you? The baby is colicky and has been keeping me up all night. He looks a lot like Dad.

Love,

Eva

She flung the card aside and tore through the other cards and letters. There was no sign of Jan anywhere, only curt messages on store-bought cards or postcards or ragged note paper with always a word to "Dad" who got his own long letters--pages of them--over which he'd linger and chuckle

and wipe a tear; and when he caught her staring, he'd look up and pass her a picture of yet another baby and say, "Eva says hello." Anna riffled through the pile of envelopes, searching for a different hand, one that would stand out from the rest. She stopped to check the last letter, just in case, and after a quick glance, was about to toss it with the others, when the words suddenly leaped out and stabbed her in the heart.

> Dear Mother,
>
> We're sorry. There's no getting through to you. We'll leave you alone, if that's what you want. But remember, it's <u>you</u> who turned your back on us.
>
> Your daughters,
> Maria and Eva

How could they talk like that? What had she ever done to them? Selfish girls--that's what they were; they thought only of themselves, not of their poor old mother, all alone. Oh, how could they leave her so all alone? Anna struggled to make out the rest of the letter through a veil of tears.

> P.S. Don't worry about the will. Daddy always took good care of you. Our lawyer will be in touch.

Then it came back to her in one horrible flash: the rich mahogany casket sinking into the cold, wet earth; the weights pressing on her arms, pinning her to the ground; the cry that issued from the very depths of her being as

she watched him plunge beyond her grasp, beyond her touch: "JAN!" She stood alone, suddenly unshackled, her arms light, free. She felt about to lose her balance and tipping round to one side, saw them retreating from her: one daughter sobbing uncontrollably into her black gloves; the other staring her squarely in the eye with malice such as she had never seen. And when this other one, the elder, had deposited her trembling body in the car for the long ride back to an empty house, she leaned through the open window and breathed hotly into her mother's ear: "He gave you everything--all he had; he worked himself to death to make you happy. But did you ever think of <u>him</u>? Did you ever think of anything but your blessed newspaper clippings? It was always Poland and Jan. What a hero he was. Well, Father was a hero too. He fought for your love, only he never saw, like we did, that it was a losing battle!"

"No!" Anna cried in the kitchen, covering her ears. She tried to push from her mind the image of their spacious house--suddenly empty, cavernous. She'd kept looking for Jozef, waiting for him to come home to ease the aching hollowness inside. Oh, she'd had such hopes for Jan, all starry-eyed, waiting for him to rise, to reveal himself. When they'd first heard the shocking news of martial law, the banning of Solidarity, Jozef had shared her tears, held her hand, stroked her cheek. But where was he now that she was losing all hope for her motherland, now that she needed him more than ever? She couldn't stand anymore. Once

alone, she'd immediately unplugged the television, cancelled the newspaper. What was the point when she could barely see anyway?

Perhaps she should have gone out West with her daughters as they'd wanted, but how could she leave her home of forty years to run off to a strange and foreign land? Besides, she had to be here when Jozef returned. She would have to talk to him about these business trips; he was killing himself with work. She had refused to listen to her daughters--"The house is too big for you. . . . It's dangerous by yourself"--had even yelled at them to go away and leave her alone. How could they talk about their father as though he were dead and gone? But she agreed to have someone look in on her from time to time; it was the only way to get them to go home. He was nice enough--he brought her groceries and took her out for the occasional walk--but it wasn't like having Jozef by her side, squeezing her hand reassuringly, keeping her warm in bed. Where was that man? Why didn't he come home where he belonged?

When she finally started to lose patience and shamed herself by crying helplessly in front of the stranger who came to visit, he patted her hand and offered to read her daughters' letter--"Look. It just came." It wasn't until he had read, "Our lawyer will be in touch," and Anna had looked up with eyes as bewildered as a child's, that a terrible, blind fury was unleashed within her. She chased the stranger right out of

her house--"Go on! I don't need you!"--then bound this last letter with the others. She buried them at the bottom of the box and flung the whole thing into the closet, kicking at it until it would budge no more. She paced the silent halls, warding off her daughters' cruel words, pushing away the painful memory of Jozef. When the stranger returned to visit, she begged him to find her another place to live--the house was too big for her; she was too old, crippled with arthritis. He said she'd have to wait, but they'd find a place for her; in the meantime, he'd come round more often. But she hardly noticed him, so immersed was she in the world of her youth--a world of love and peace and utter perfection.

But now she had awoken, as if after a long sleep. She knew where she was, where she was going. She was leaving for the "home," leaving all her things behind, and suddenly, she didn't want to go anymore. She wouldn't know anyone there. No one would come to visit her. She had no one, no one to spend the rest of her days with. If only she had supported Jan; then she wouldn't have lost him. If only she could go back, start over; if only she could touch his face once more.

Anna closed her eyes, but to her amazement, she could not see him, not a single feature. Her face crinkled as her eyes squeezed tighter, but all she could see were weird maze-like patterns. She opened her eyes, frightened now, and glimpsing her wedding band on a bed of lace, reached

for it. Her hands trembled as she carefully guided it to its rightful place, but it jammed at the first swollen joint. She stared at the extended fingers, disfigured with age, and threw down the ring, hearing it clatter across the table. The other rings--a diamond floral cluster nestled against a shiny gold band--were firmly encased within flesh, were part of the flesh itself. Her weary eyes fell shut, and she saw Jozef looking at her with sad, dark eyes.

The last time she saw him alive, she was poring over the newspaper, spread out on the kitchen table. He had clumped up the side stairs and was waiting on the dull linoleum for her to look up--an old, stooped man, cradling an armload of leaf lettuce.

"Look, Anna. Fresh from the garden."

How many times had she seen him back there--dappled in twilight shadows, unearthing carrots and shallots, brushing aside tangled leaves in search of the perfect tomato, the juiciest strawberry? "Jozef, that's enough," she would tell him. "How can we eat it all?"

And now, seeing him clutching the lettuce to his heart, she was suddenly angry. "The crisper is already full. What's wrong with you? Is that all you think of, your stomach? Don't you know what's going on? It says here that martial law will not end until Solidarity affirms in writing its support of communism!"

Jozef set the lettuce on the counter and turned to look at her. There were tears in his eyes. "Yes," he agreed. "It is sad, very sad. I will wash these later," he added, patting the lettuce. He went to lie down for his afternoon nap and never got up.

Anna shook her head and pictured him years earlier, when she used to watch for him from their bedroom window. He was pulling up the flagstone drive in a flood of moonlight. She'd wait a few minutes and then, not hearing a sound, she would tip-toe downstairs and peer over the bannister, and there he was, lit up by the moon: fast asleep in his arm chair, his heavy head tilted to one side--still wearing his suit and tie.

She remembered him as a still younger man sitting in that same chair, telling stories to the two little girls nestled in his lap; while she sat across the room where the light was better, frantically scanning the English paper for a few familiar words, desperately searching for some sign that Jan was still alive, still fighting underground. She never even noticed when he carried them off to bed. They never said good-night.

"Mrs. Pellowski . . . Are you all right?"

Anna's cheek felt cold. She realized it was wet. "Yes," she said haltingly. "Is foolish." She wiped her face with the flat of her hand. "Old woman." She looked down at her lap to see her daughters' last letter, blotched

with tears. She folded it over and looked up to see a vaguely familiar shape.

"Believe me, Mrs. Pellowski, it's for the best." She felt a fleeting pat on the hand. "Sorry I'm so late. I was tied up at the office and the traffic was murder. Are you all ready then? I see you've been into that box. Find anything interesting?"

It was the same cheery, disembodied voice that was always so concerned about her color, her hands, her digestive system. There was no one else coming. No one at all.

"I found it yesterday--at the foot of your closet, way at the back. I thought maybe you'd like to take it with you. Must contain a lot of secrets, hm? Love letters maybe?"

"Love, yes," Anna croaked, a trickle of bile burning her throat. She coughed into a Kleenex and dabbed at her eyes.

"That's O.K., Mrs. Pellowski. You go right ahead. I know how difficult it is for the one left behind. You must miss him very much."

Anna gazed at her wedding rings through bleary eyes, watching them shimmer, wondering how it was that she had never noticed their beauty before.

"Look at the time; we've got to get going. Here, give me your hand. No, no. I'll take that. It's too heavy for you. There. On your feet now. Are you ready?"

One hand resting on the box, the other clutching a

tattered Kleenex, Anna allowed the stranger to escort her to the door. As she inched her way down the front steps, Anna lifted her head and breathed in the chill air. She saw herself marching out alone into the dusk, her tears flowing freely now, grieving for all she'd lost.

THE LONG WAIT

Part I: 1927-1941

The grim little girl in the starched grey pinafore averted her gaze from the camera's eye, as did her elders assembled in the picture. A solemn bunch draped in black, they stared resolutely ahead--their faces sallow and elongated, their mouths set in hard, straight lines. The women sat rigidly on a long, wooden bench, their hands folded in their laps. The men, erect as columns, loomed above them against the stone wall of the church. Hélène stood at the side of Tante Marie, her tiny figure just reaching the top of her aunt's head. It was all so long ago. And yet . . .

Hélène dislodged the faded brown photograph from the bureau's framed mirror and examined the young girl she had once been. Her face was thin and white, twisted into a scowl, her lower lip puffed up with disgust. How often Tante Marie had scolded her on the way home for the faces she'd made. But she couldn't help it. She'd hated these

funerals--no, she wouldn't even think of that now--and she'd hated having to pay her respects. She remembered trailing behind her aunt, her insides knotting, as she was whisked along yet another walk and up the steps to the front porch. At the door, impaled with its black wreath, Tante Marie would briskly remove her black gloves and fix the ribbon in Hélène's hair. She would tell her not to make faces and to remember to pray for the repose of their dear uncle's (or aunt's) soul. And then, just for an instant, she would stroke Hélène's cheek and smile pityingly at her because she knew how they frightened her--these wretched old people: reaching out with trembling fingers, wanting to touch her--to brush her cheek, smooth her hair--to draw something from her, take it away with them. In her dreams Hélène slapped them back, but in their sitting rooms she waited patiently for them to let go and wondered when she would next see those grasping hands lying quiet, folded on their hearts.

Oh, how she had dreaded those Sunday visits in their dark, stuffy houses studded with crucifixes and bleeding hearts. She could feel herself once again practically choking on the musty odor, pulling back as her cheeks were grazed or shoulders pinched with claw-like fingers. She could still see her relatives, bleached with age, gliding above her in circles as they dabbed their milky eyes and spoke in undertones; and herself, waiting for the moment when one of them would swoop down and carry her away to

the open casket. "Look how peaceful. . . . So natural. . . . Beautiful." But they weren't. They were horrible. She stiffened against the arms that pushed her, the voices that coaxed her: "Go on now. He's waiting for your kiss." She felt like her head was being shoved under water. She closed her eyes and held her nose, but still would shudder as her lips came in contact with the clammy surface.

Hélène shivered slightly and returned her gaze to the photo. With her hunched up shoulders and twisted hands, the little girl seemed to be holding her breath. Yes, she had been waiting even then, waiting and wondering who would be next. First it had been her great Oncle Rodolphe and, with this snapshot, Oncle Philippe, and then . . . Hélène surveyed the photo. She saw it spring to life--the stone figures stiffly turning and advancing out of the frame. She could see them filing out--the men leading the way--in one long, black procession towards death. And she was there too at the end of the line, close on the heels of her poor, sweet Tante Marie.

Was it one year already since her aunt had died? Her eyes settled on the strained, sympathetic face in the photo and quickly swelled with tears. Her aunt was looking at something far off--her fine brows slightly raised, her thin lips pinched into a sad little smile. Her palms lay open on her lap as if she were sorry for all this, that it couldn't be helped. She accepted God's will without question: "There was nothing you could do but carry on,

endure the pain in your heart without anger or bitterness; then God would reward you."

Hélène remembered the first time she'd heard Tante Marie speak these words. It was a sunny Saturday afternoon and her aunt had just come into the parlor, pressing an envelope against her chest. Hélène looked up from the carpeted floor where she had been wrestling with sums (long lists of jumbled numbers that she took great joy in untangling). Tante Marie asked her to leave her work for a minute and come sit beside her on the settee. She had something very important to tell her. She was a big girl now, all of seven years, and was old enough to know.

Hélène looked at the envelope lying face down between them as her aunt unclipped the velvet bow from Hélène's hair, brushed back a few strands above her ear, and snapped the bow back on. She was peering into Hélène's face now, smiling with that little pained look that would bunch her forehead. Her eyes looked red, and Hélène worried once more that she was working too hard.

"You remember that big blue house in the country where your Oncle Gonzague lives?"

Hélène nodded, remembering how you had to knock on the screened back door and how you had to breathe through your mouth because of the stink of manure (did they ever get used to it?) and how you had to step around all the rocking chairs and cats (and watch where you sat!).

Tante Marie gathered Hélène's hands in her own and

continued, looking earnestly into her face. "This same house is the Duprés family homestead built by our ancestors in 1840. I was born there and my father and his father too and all my brothers. And you were born there too!"

Hélène wondered why her aunt was holding her hands so tightly. "But wasn't I born here in this house?" It seemed she had been here forever, such a long, long time. It made her tired just to think about it: the towering hall clock that ruled with a steady tick, the stale, choked air, the rows of ancestors and saints staring down at her from the papered walls.

"No, chérie. I'm getting to that part. Now just before you were born, my parents and four younger brothers all lived in the big blue house and worked on the farm. I had married by then and lived here in town with your uncle. Now one of my brothers--the youngest, Jean-Luc Duprés--had started a family of his own, and with two little ones and one more on the way, there was no more room for him on the farm. He didn't have money for a farm of his own, so when the railway men came from Northern Ontario, he decided to go work up there since the pay was good and he could look after his family himself. But first he had to wait for the baby, and do you know who this baby was?"

"No," Hélène said, drifting back to the letter.

"It was you, chérie!"

Hélène stared up at her aunt. "Why wasn't I with you?"

Tante Marie breathed in deeply, and Hélène felt her

hands squeezed even tighter. "Your mother, Rose Duprés, had a hard time with you when you were born. Her blood was poisoned, and she was not expected to live."

"How did her blood get poisoned?"

Tante Marie folded Hélène's hands on her own lap and smoothed out the creases in her apron. "That is a long story. I will tell you when you're older."

Hélène's heart was beating fast now. She hadn't known how babies were born. All she knew was that first the mother was fat, and then she wasn't, and somehow the baby had gotten from the inside to the outside. But how had she made her mother so sick? Then an awful thought occurred to her.

"Did she die?"

"No, chérie! I'm just getting there. My mother agreed that <u>if</u> Rose Duprés should die, as was expected, she would raise the two little ones--your older sisters--herself. By then, they were like her own, but a little baby would be too much for her. Now your Oncle Émile and I had always wanted children, but <u>le Bon Dieu</u> in his infinite wisdom and glory did not grant us any. Sometimes I thought my heart would break-- " Tante Marie crumpled up her apron and dabbed the corner of one eye. "But I never complained. We must accept God's will. It is all part of His Divine plan. There was nothing to do but carry on, endure the pain in your heart without anger or bitterness; then God would reward you."

Tante Marie turned to Hélène and smiled. "And then you came along--my blessed gift, my reward from heaven for all the years of suffering. I could not imagine ever giving you up. With the help of Monsieur le curé and the consent of your parents, it was arranged that we would look after you on the condition that you would remain with us always. A few months later when your mother miraculously got better and it was time to leave for the railroad, it was hard for her to leave you behind, but she had your two sisters, a family of her own. We pleaded with her not to take you away, told her how much you meant to us--you were all we had--but she wouldn't listen. It was only when the curé talked to her, reminded her of our agreement, that she saw the right thing to do. Only she insisted that you keep the Duprés name, that you call us aunt and uncle, and that one day when you were old enough, we would tell you the entire story. And now that day has come."

Tante Marie was looking at her with beseeching eyes, pleading with her to understand, but Hélène felt no pity, only a vague disgust.

"Then you're really not my mother."

Her aunt tried to reach for her hands. Hélène backed away, clenching her fists at her sides.

"Oh, but I am. It is the same. I brought you up."

"My real mother is up North where all the trains are?" Hélène was looking off into space now. She was hearing once more the lonely wail of the train whistle, seeing

herself lying in bed, staring at the low, planked ceiling, wondering where it was that all the trains went to.

"Yes, chérie, with a family of her own."

Hélène heard the rustle of paper and watched as her aunt retrieved a photograph from the envelope she now held to her breast.

"Your mother wanted me to give you this now that you are a big girl and are going to school. Soon you will be able to read, and she will write you letters-- "

She heard her aunt's voice break, but all she could do was stare at the picture her aunt had given her. In the centre was a pretty lady, fat in the middle, with a round flushed face framed by loose hairs dancing in the breeze. Hélène didn't look like her; she looked more like her aunt--tall and bony, the face long and narrow, eyes too close together. And she didn't look like the hoard of children squeezed around their mother in the open field: the little ones wiping their noses on their mother's skirt; the older ones elbowing each other's stomachs, grabbing each other by the scruff of the neck. Why, they looked just like the children at school--"les petits sauvages" as her aunt called them--who flocked from the outlying farms to the one-room schoolhouse in town. She could just imagine how dirty their necks and ears must be, how greasy the locks of hair that fell in their eyes.

They frightened her, the children at school. She was different from them, and it frightened her when they

swarmed around her, picking at her ribbons, rifling through her little red school bag. Once they even dumped her exercise books and colored crayons all over the ground--pink and green, yellow and blue, strewn among the weeds and dandelions. For the longest time she kept hoping that someone would smile at her and whisk her into a warm little circle of friends. But when she stood watching them huddled together, they would glance at her sideways and whisper in each other's ears, and sometimes they would chase her right out of the schoolyard. It was like when she went visiting on Oncle Gonzague's farm, full of joyful expectations, thrilled to be able to throw a handful of grain to the hens. But when they came storming towards her, beady eyes on her outstretched hand, she would drop the food and run, convinced they were going to stampede and peck her to death.

Her aunt always warned her not to go near the children at school--they were dirty and rough; she might get hurt. But she couldn't help watching them wistfully from behind the fence, wondering when she would be let back in; and when the four o'clock bell rang, she would find herself lingering at the front door of the schoolhouse, watching them race away in a cloud of dust up the dirt road that led to the farms. In winter, when it was very cold and only a few showed up, she would watch them pile into a big wooden sledge pulled by an old hump-backed mare, and long after the bells and laughter had stopped ringing in the

air, she would still be standing there, staring at the tracks in the snow. Then she would walk home--alone, as usual--stretching out the seven blocks, making the arduous journey along mountain drifts through the arctic blizzard, and wondering what games they got to play once they were home.

She didn't mind the homework. She liked practising her letters until she got them right, and she liked to add the long columns of numbers. The longer the better. When she got the right answer (and she usually did), it was like coming out of a thick forest into the light. It was the other work she didn't much like: washing and drying dishes, peeling potatoes and carrots, dusting the furniture and all the gilt-framed pictures of relatives and saints. She tried not to look at her ancestors' faces when she dusted them; they looked so mean. But sometimes she took a moment to gaze into the eyes of Jesus, his left hand unveiling his bleeding heart, or of Mary, her palms turned outward to gather her in, and she would feel like she was drowning in their liquid eyes ringed with sorrow. It was harder then for her to get her work done. The ceilings of their little house (even as a child it had felt small) seemed lower, the grandfather clock boomed louder in her head, even the air was thicker, making it hard to breathe. Sometimes she thought the whole house was closing in on her, and she would run to the front door to gulp in the fresh air and wish she could go out to play with someone

for just a little while.

She never complained though. She had only to look at her aunt coming in at suppertime after having worked all day in someone else's house: slowly unpinning her hat and hanging up her coat on a wooden hanger, slowly tying the apron around her waist and installing herself in front of the large cast-iron stove while they waited for her to serve up their meal, which she did without a word. How could she complain when she thought of her aunt on her afternoon off: on her knees scrubbing the kitchen floor, the sun streaming through the shirred curtains, or in the basement, wringing clothes through the washer in the half light? Evenings she would be hunched over the ironing, the steam hissing in her red face, or nodding off in her straight-back rocker, knitting needles poised in her lap.

She wasn't sure what her Oncle Emile did. He never looked weary and wrung out like Tante Marie. He always looked ready to have his picture taken with his beaming red face, his waxed mustache neatly curled, and his black hair slicked down and parted in the middle. Sometimes on her way home from school, she glimpsed him on a side street--carting a load of groceries or newspapers in her little red wagon, or stooped over in front of someone's house, shovelling snow or raking up dead leaves. She would walk on quickly, pretending not to see him ever since that time she had called his name and he had looked up at her from Madame Leduc's flower bed with such scorn

in his narrowed eyes that she had run home. But more often she would spy the rake or wagon lying on somebody's lawn, and there he would be, out on the stoop with some old man, the two of them drinking from brown bottles and shouting words her aunt forbade in the house. Sometimes the wagon wouldn't even make it that far, but would be sitting in their own front yard, laden with newspapers or circulars. She knew where he would be as she crept up to the staircase that led to her room: slouched back in his easy chair by the picture window, the brown bottles lined up beside him, reading the newspaper and shouting "Câlice!" and "Les maudits anglais!" all by himself. She would try not to make a sound, but just when her hand touched the bannister, she would jump at the sound of her name, and she knew that her homework would have to wait.

"You're just the person I wanted to see." He was smiling at her, his face glowing. She didn't like to get too close to him because of the smell that came from the brown bottles. It clung to him like heavy perfume, even when the bottles were nowhere in sight.

"And how was your day at school?"

She nodded, wishing he would hurry up and get it over with. If only she had made it upstairs; she would be safely hidden in a maze of numbers right now.

"Your uncle is tired." He smoothed back the slick hair. "It's been a long day, but I think I'm onto something

this time. It's just a question of finding the right stock to invest in. But look!" He shook the newspaper at her. "I'm not even finished the business section, and I still have all those circulars to deliver for Monsieur Gauthier. Why he bothers me with such piddling chores! As if it isn't enough that I deliver his cursed groceries whenever the boy calls in sick or that I wash his filthy windows when my back is sore. Thinks he can order me around anytime he feels like it. Well I've had enough, I tell you! Emile Bolduc does not have to take dirt from anyone!"

Hélène stared down at her shiny blue oxfords. She hated to see him clutching the arms of his chair, his knuckles turning all red and white.

"So how would you like to do your tired old uncle a favor?"

Hélène nodded and turned to go.

"That's a good girl. Make sure you're back in time to peel the potatoes. And remember, this is our little secret."

She didn't mind hauling the heavy wagon behind her and breathing in the fresh air. But she hated going up to their front doors and watching the ladies shake their heads or click their tongues at her as though she'd done something wrong. Then one day, when she'd been staring at the "Welcome" mat, waiting for Madame Dupont to return with her forty cents for that week's newspaper delivery, she

looked up with surprise to see her aproned aunt, arms crossed, planted behind the screen. The next thing she knew, Tante Marie had grabbed her elbow with one hand and her wagon with the other, had marched her home, snatched her bag of coins, and told her with great control to go up to her room. Then the yelling started--"She does more than her share!" "And I don't?" She heard the coins clatter on the kitchen table and her uncle exclaim, "Look! She makes more tips!" Then the coins were tinkling across the linoleum and her uncle was sobbing that it wasn't his fault he couldn't hold a job. Then everything was quiet. Her uncle never asked her for anymore favors after that.

It was the only time Hélène had ever heard them argue, and it frightened her because she'd never heard Tante Marie raise her voice before. She'd heard her clank the brown bottles into cartons when her uncle had a sore head, or mumble about his "get-rich-quick schemes" behind his back, or even mutter when he was in earshot about how God would punish those who never went to visit Him in church, but she had never seen her as angry as she had been that day.

Sunday was the only day when no one worked. Tante Marie insisted that Sunday was a day of rest, a day to pay your respects to God and your elders. Oncle Emile would screw up his face when she talked like this and tell them to go and enjoy themselves--"But leave me out of it." Hélène hated Sundays worst of all. It wasn't so much

church. She even liked dressing up in ruffled dresses and white lace gloves with pearl buttons--one hand clutching her gilt-edged missal, the other snuggly encased in her aunt's gloved hand. It was the only time Tante Marie looked pretty: fresh and smiling in her long flowery dress and trimmed bonnet; playfully cocking an ear to the chorus of bells and crying out, "Listen! Can't you hear what they're saying? 'Come to church! Come to church!'"

Hélène didn't listen to the words much once they got there or look around at all the people, most of whom were too old to be interesting. Sometimes she would glimpse one of the children from school--pulling at his starched collar, scratching beneath the gathered sleeves of her dress--but when they caught her looking, they would stick their tongues out at her and she would turn away. She would fasten her eyes on the ornate gold dome of the church that looked like the inside of a crown or flip through her prayer book and smile at the pictures of baby Jesus and the Virgin Mary and all the gentle creatures of the forest. Her favorite picture was of Jesus as a handsome young carpenter in a long white robe. Little children, clean as snow, were scrambling around his sandaled feet and climbing onto his lap; and she was there too. She was the one with the golden curls and cherry lips, her dimpled arms flung around his neck.

"Ecoute," her aunt would whisper, and she'd wake up and brace herself for the long list of names: members of

the *paroisse* who were now in God's hands, having quietly passed on at seventy-six, eighty-two, ninety years of age. Hélène would hold her breath and cross her fingers on both hands and wait for the moment to pass. If she were lucky, the curé would move on to the short list of marriages and baptisms without her Tante Marie leaning over and whispering in her ear, "That was your great Oncle Eduoard, *Dieu donne le repos à son âme*." But when her aunt's hot breath swept over her, Hélène's whole body would sag, like Jesus on the cross, as she thought of what would follow: another long Sunday afternoon seated on a hard kitchen chair, closeted in a tiny parlor with the drapes drawn; a teary old woman in black kneading Hélène's arm, murmuring, "*Si jeune, si douce*," while Tante Marie nodded approvingly on the other side. She tried not to feel anything, but sometimes she would look at the gnarled hand digging into her flesh and imagine it springing up and shaking in the air and falling dead on its back like a spider, the fingers curled inward. It was all she could do to choke down her finger sandwich. She wouldn't even think of what waited for her at the other end of the room. If she sat very still and quiet, perhaps they would all rise and float towards it and forget all about her, leaving her far behind. But someone always remembered: a pat on the shoulder and she would look up to see the sickly smile and hear the dreaded words--"It's time to say good-bye." Her shoulder steered by pinching fingers, she would inch along the

flowered carpet and get ready to hold her breath.

At least she had been spared some of the funerals. They often fell on a school day, and all Hélène had to do was quiver her chin over missing school and Tante Marie would give in. She couldn't understand it, though; she'd thought Hélène would be happy to have a holiday. She didn't realize that to Hélène the funerals were the worst of all. It wasn't the church part so much. She was used to old people in black sniffling around her; but when it was time to go outside, her stomach would start to churn and panic would rise to her throat. She'd wish she could break away from them all and run--somewhere they couldn't find her, somewhere she could breathe. Instead, she'd find herself rooted in the graveyard, counting each shallow breath, scraping the heels of her patent leather shoes along the stony ground. She'd try to shut out the sobbing, refuse to look beyond the black skirts flapping in the wind. But then silence fell and Hélène would stiffen. She stood like the others--long, dark pillars clutching their collars--and braced herself at the sound of slow, painful creaking. She knew that soon she would have to stand in line, file past the gaping wound in the earth, drop a handful of freshly dug dirt on the waiting casket. She never looked down, but she heard all too clearly the hollow thud of the clump of dirt. And then, as she turned away, wiping her hands clean, she would hear it--the widow's cries slicing the still air: "Non! Laisse-moi pas! Mon Dieu!"

Hélène stared down in horror at the scowling little girl in the old photograph. She clenched her eyes and pressed two fingers to her forehead. No, she wouldn't think of it; she mustn't. But the vision of her recent tortuous nights closed in on her once more. It was pitch dark, but she could hear the steady creaking of rope and feel herself being swung down--thumping against the sides, sinking deeper and deeper. But where was she? She strained her eyes open, searching in vain for a chink of light. She raised her arms, banging them against something hard, wooden. There was wood all around--top, sides, and bottom--wooden planks nailed together. She checked again to make sure, then again, faster this time, and didn't stop until she realized there was no way out.

Her head was pounding now, like a hammer driving in a nail. Hélène stared hard at the little girl in the photo: the short, limp hair yanked back with a bow, the pale, narrowed eyes, the angry mouth. She looked so old, like the others, only smaller. She remembered trying to fit herself into that other picture of her pretty mother pressed in by her lively brood. She'd kept it with her, close to her heart, for months, memorizing every detail--their bare feet, the way they smiled, the sprinkling of wildflowers--trying to imagine herself with them. But she didn't fit in--she was too stiff, too solemn--and finally, the picture became so soiled and wrinkled that she could

barely make them out anymore.

But then more pictures had come, and cards and letters. It was all Hélène could do not to snatch her mail away from Tante Marie--she hung on so tightly, looking desperately into Hélène's eager eyes, only to slowly relinquish the envelope that was pressed to her heart. Hélène could read now, most words anyway, and the letters were addressed to her--"Mlle. Hélène Duprés . . . Chére Hélène"--and came from faraway places with English names like Carrie, Nicholson, Girdwood. Her mother wrote to her in big block letters, and sometimes she even heard from one of her sisters. Whenever Hélène had a moment to spare, she would throw herself under the shade of the maple tree (or the covers of her bed) and propped up on her elbows, spread out the letters and photographs into an exotic fan.

Then she would lose herself in a dream world with her real family, imagining she was up there too: fishing for pike and pickerel in the limpid streams, gazing at the glistening fish thrash in the air, shedding silver droplets of water; crouching in blueberry bushes, popping the berries in each other's mouths, the blue juice streaming down their chins. And in winter: skimming along the crunchy snow, sleigh bells jingling, jostling against each other beneath the heavy bear skin; skating on a frozen pond, hands linked in a giant circle, whirling through the crystal air. She could almost place herself in these pictures--her hair long and loose, her face soft and smiling. Wasn't

that her--the older sister squeezed in by the little ones beside the railroad tracks, one small child wrapped around her bare leg, another balanced on her hip? Couldn't that be her peeking out from an igloo crowned with a little flag that announced "Chapleau Winter Carnival, Feb. 1-3"? Surely that was her and her sister (and best friend) perched up on either side of engine # 5339. And there she was again, encompassed by all her brothers and sisters, laughing and standing in the snowy wilderness in only shirtsleeves and dresses.

But no, that couldn't be her. She was always so cold--bundled up in thick, woolen stockings and three sweaters, given a place of honor beside the pot-bellied stove in school (for aptitude and deportment)--and still, she was cold. Even when she was in bed, buried under layers of wool blankets, smothered by a heavy patchwork quilt, she couldn't stop shivering. She'd close her eyes and listen for the train to pass by. She could almost picture it winding its way through the bush, heading up North, calling her to come and play with all her brothers and sisters.

Hélène clutched the old photo of the funeral gathering and watched a tear spill onto one of the somber faces. How could her family have left her behind with people like this? They had abandoned her for a better life and left her here, saddled with a bunch of old people in a dead-end town. But no, how could think such thoughts? Her aunt

and uncle had always been good to her. She had truly loved them and had been grateful for their love. Besides, she hadn't been abandoned. If she hadn't almost killed her mother at birth, she would never have been handed over to strangers, no matter how badly they wanted a child. How could anyone have known that Maman would go on to bear one child after another without complications until they were all one big happy family? One big happy family . . . What was the use? She'd been through it all before.

The pain, which had subsided for a while, intensified again. Hélène placed her hand to her temple and closed her eyes. There was nothing to do but to see Dr. Marchand and find out how much time she had left. The final results of the tests were in, and he had assured her that there was nothing to worry about, but he'd like to see her in his office just the same. She knew he wouldn't give the dreaded news over the phone.

Hélène tucked the photo under the white, scalloped frame and straightened her hat in the mirror. Her drawn, pinched face stared back at her. Tante Marie had warned her that if she were not careful, some day her face would stay that way, and sure enough, the scowl, locked in by two long creases, had become a permanent fixture. It was as much a part of her as the white French Provincial bedroom suite with gold trim which had been lavishly bestowed upon her almost forty years ago--on her eighteenth birthday. How could she trade it in when it had meant so much to her

aunt? She could still see her proudly showing it off to visiting relatives--"The prettiest bedroom in La Porte-du-Ciel!"--long after the glossy white paint had yellowed and cracked.

Hélène leaned closer to the mirror and examined the sunken eyes oddly magnified in the thick lenses, the pale, puffy flesh sagging from the gaunt cheeks, the thin lips curled in around the perfect false teeth. She snatched the rouge from her purse and smeared some on, but that just made it worse. The red just hung there on top in lurid contrast to the white skin. Hélène wiped off all traces of the rouge with Kleenex and turned hastily away.

Part II: 1941-1945

The doctor's appointment was for two o'clock. She'd have to hurry if she wanted to get there early. She'd need the time to compose herself in the waiting room--to get ready to accept the verdict with calm and dignity. Hélène crept down the stairs and was almost out the front door when Yvette called her back. Hélène briefly shut her eyes. She then turned around, knowing what to expect: the messy layered mane of yellow hair (the black roots showing), the smudged black eye liner and bright red lipstick, the too short, too tight uniform. Even a cigarette, its long ash smoldering, was dangling from her lips. Yvette blew smoke up in the air and lost no time in assaulting Hélène with her usual barrage of problems and complaints.

"I tell you, Hélène, I'm at my wit's end with that Madame Charpentier. Each time she comes, she complains that she's tired of the same old hairstyle, but if I do one lock differently, she storms out claiming that I've ruined

her hair. She's in there now, insisting on seeing you--doesn't care who runs the place now. And then the other day, with Madame Lamarre. She comes in wanting a rinse, not a dye, God forbid, just a rinse to give her back her own natural color, she says. So I get rid of the grey, and she demands a refund, insists that I dyed her hair. I tell you, they're never satisfied. I don't know what-- "

"Look what she's done!" shrieked Madame Charpentier, donning a long plastic bib. She had left her chair in the salon and was marching straight towards them in the hall, like a crazed sleepwalker. The medication she was on lent her a wild-eyed look and a stiff, mechanical walk. Her hair, once a tightly fitted cap of blue curls, was straight and square, the front an even line of blue bangs.

"Come now, Madame Charpentier. Let's see what we can do." Hélène gently steered the old lady back to the salon and, tucking in her bib, positioned her in front of the mirror. The hairdo did seem to be an improvement. It made her look younger--about six years old to be exact, especially with that small, oval face wrinkled up in distaste. But then Yvette didn't understand these little old ladies. She didn't know what they wanted. They had fiercely clung to the same old hairstyle for the past twenty years and, despite their assertions to the contrary, weren't about to change now. The trick was not to give in to their demands for "a change," but to give them the same hairdo each time they came and let them think you've made some change.

She'd told Yvette often enough, not that she ever listened. "Tell them it's 'the new you,' let them admire your marvelous handywork in the mirror, and then send them off, happy, satisfied customers." It was a simple enough thing to please them. Why could Yvette never learn? God help her, she would never have handed over the business a year ago to such an imbécile if she herself hadn't been so distraught at the time. The image of her aunt, still and lifeless, bizarrely made up, flashed through her mind. No, she wouldn't think of that now.

Madame Charpentier was looking at Hélène's hands in the mirror--poised like a halo above the old lady's head--waiting for them to perform a miracle.

"Yes, Madame Charpentier, I have just the look for you." Hélène adjusted a towel around her customer's neck. "You'll see. Just like before, only younger." She picked up a plastic bottle and sprayed the blue hair, then dipped into a small plastic basin and began to carefully roll up the wet strands in tiny curlers.

Madame Charpentier was smiling at her now, pleased to be in such competent hands. "I don't know what I'd do without you," she sighed, and started murmuring about all the pills she had to take.

Hélène watched the tendons pull at the back of the old lady's neck as she strung up the delicate strands and thought of how she'd spent her whole life soothing and placating these little old ladies with their tightly

curled, blue tinted hair. She would listen to their problems--how they missed their long-dead husbands, how their children never came to visit--all the while patting and arranging and smoothing each lock into place. She supposed she had served some purpose in life. Who else could these old ladies talk to? Oh, they had each other, but only to compete with, not to listen to. You could see them lined up in their rocking chairs along their gabled porches, hear the din of shrill voices and fierce creaking. When they were with their own private coiffeuse, they knew that they had her undivided attention. After all, they were paying for it.

Oh, but would she have gone into it, had she known what lay ahead? Had she any other choice? She remembered the warm spring day her aunt had called her from the kitchen window. She had been resting against the trunk of the maple tree in the front yard, gazing up at the patterned ceiling of lime green and sky blue. She would soon be graduating from the one-room schoolhouse (she had made it all the way up to grade eight) and was dreaming of the high school in Québec City. None of the farm children were going, but she knew that she had done her aunt and uncle proud, that they would want her to further her education. Tante Marie always said so. "Look at this, Emile," she would chirp, beaming with satisfaction, as she handed over Hélène's report card. "A little genius in our own house!" And Oncle Emile would glance down at the straight "A"s and

grunt his approval before snapping open his newspaper. "You see how proud he is?" Tante Marie would whisper, squeezing Hélène's elbow.

And then, when Hélène had confided in her aunt her dream of high school, Tante Marie had looked at her with her sad little smile as if she were sorry that she too could never live such an adventure. Oh, but she would belong there with the other city youths. She could just picture them with their rosy cheeks and tilted berets, all dressed up in their pleated pinafores, crisp white blouses, and cable-stitch knee socks. Their nails would be clean and shiny, and their teeth would be white, and they wouldn't smell bad. They wouldn't laugh at her round, wire-rimmed glasses or three-ring binders with the colored separater for each subject. It would be a chance to start over, a chance to make friends and to find out what she wanted to be when she grew up. She knew that her aunt and uncle hadn't the money to send her this year--Tante Marie had told her again and again: "Chérie, if only we could." But she figured if she worked hard (she could even take over some of her uncle's jobs) and saved her allowance and didn't ask for anything, maybe there would be enough for next year.

Hélène jumped up when she heard that her aunt and uncle had exciting news for her and hastily brushed off the bits of grass. Her heart beating fast, she ran in through the screened side door and plunked down at the

kitchen table.

Oncle Emile was stroking his waxy black mustache and studying her face. "Your aunt and I have discussed it, Hélène, and we feel that now that you are graduating, it is time for you to settle on a career."

Hélène nodded, glanced at her aunt's warm smile, and fastened her eyes on her uncle's mouth. Would they really be sending her off to Québec after all?

"Now your Tante Marie and myself, we're not getting any younger, you know. It's too much now to ask your aunt to continue toiling long hours in other people's homes. We've been good to you, taking you in when you were not our own-- "

"Emile," Tante Marie warned, pressing his hand where it lay spread out on the checkered oilcloth.

Oncle Emile straightened up, leaning his palms on his thighs. "And we feel this way, you would have a chance to pay us back, show us your gratitude."

"Bon Dieu!" exclaimed Tante Marie, flinging her arms up in the air.

"What do you want me to do?" Hélène said quietly, her eyes falling on her folded hands.

"It's very simple," Oncle Emile assured her. "And hardly any work at all. Remember how you used to love going to the salon with your Tante Marie?"

Hélène nodded slowly, recalling how she used to trot off with her aunt on Saturday mornings--"Allons-y, chérie!

Time to get our hair done!" It had felt so good to step out into the morning sun--no work awaiting her, no unpleasant duties or responsibilities, only an amusing spectacle put on, so it seemed, for her sole benefit. If only the ladies could see how silly they looked: their hair, once a prim bonnet of tiny curls, now wet and straggly, jiggling with rollers, plastered down with heavy dyes. She'd try not to laugh, but sometimes all she could think of was a scurrying flock of clucking, wet hens, and she'd have to clap her hand to her mouth before a giggle broke loose.

"And how you used to fix my hair for me once we got home?" Tante Marie added, her eyes sparkling.

It was true. Hélène had done a much better job than the salon--Tante Marie always said so. She used to get so excited when Hélène would insist on playing "hairdresser"--fussily brushing her aunt's hair and rearranging it, "<u>comme une vraie petite coiffeuse</u>!"

"Well," Oncle Emile continued, "here's your chance to do the real thing. All you have to do is give that old lady who runs Chez Mimi a hand."

Hélène looked up uneasily. "That salon down on the corner?"

"That's the one," he said, his eyes brightening. "It doesn't pay much to start, only five dollars a month, but-- "

"But no one ever goes there," Hélène protested. "They go to all the other salons. Tante Marie said so. She said Mademoiselle Mimi keeps forgetting things. She leaves

ladies under the driers too long and forgets to take the rollers out. One lady even lost all her hair because she left in the permanent solution too long."

"Now Hélène," murmured Tante Marie. "I never said all her hair."

"And it's dirty. She doesn't keep the place up. You said so," Hélène moaned, turning on her aunt.

"That's why she needs a hand!" Oncle Emile urged. "Hélène, think of it. Here's your chance to learn the business from the ground up. We all know she's getting too old to run the place herself and that she's too stingy to hire help. Sooo, with a little persuasive charm on my part, I convinced her what a bargain you'd be--you know, what a fast learner you are and how you'd bring in more business. But what she doesn't know is that once you build a clientele of your own--say, in another year or so--she'll have to cough up a lot more if she wants to hang on to you. Why, we could even split the profits right down the middle! Then, if you're a good, hard worker, it's just a question of time--a few short years--before we take over the business--maybe sooner, remember she won't be around forever--and then we won't have to take orders from anyone anymore!"

Oncle Emile slapped the table triumphantly with the flats of his hands, but Hélène was still peering at her aunt. Tante Marie would not look back; she was too busy smoothing out the folds in her apron.

"Well?" Oncle Emile demanded.

Tante Marie looked up at Hélène with imploring eyes. Hélène bit her lip and looked down.

"Just think, Hélène!" she heard her aunt exclaim brightly. "Just what you always wanted! A career as coiffeuse. That's quite an accomplishment for a young lady. You wait and see! You'll learn in no time at all, and before you know it, you'll be the best coiffeuse in all of La Porte-du-Ciel! Besides," she continued, her voice softening, "this way we can all stay together. You don't <u>really</u> want to go way off to that school in Québec, do you? Think of all the terrible things that could happen to you so far away from home."

Hélène wiped a tear that was struggling to escape.

"Look what happens," she heard her uncle say. "You give her a big opportunity like this and what does she do? That's the thanks you get. You bring her up out of the goodness of your heart, give her the shirt off your back, and this is how she repays you. We should have left her alone--see how she'd like living in the bush."

"<u>C't'assez</u>!" snapped Tante Marie. "She just has to get used to the idea. She'll come round. Eh, chérie?"

Hélène had never worked so hard in all her life. The first weeks she spent cleaning every inch of the large shuttered house. It was dark and dank like a cellar; cobwebs clung to the ceiling corners; dust lay like a shroud over everything. She shook it from the heavy brocaded

drapes and beat it out of the thick Persian carpets, watching it rise in clouds. She chased it from under the spindly legs of antiques and waved it away, coughing, each time she opened a door or cupboard. She scrubbed it out of the floors, the walls, the ceilings, and tried not to think of her aunt, like herself, down on her knees, wringing dirty water into a pail.

When the house was finally aired and shiny, Hélène moved on to the salon in the basement. As Mlle. Mimi, squinting in the half light, stooped over the occasional customer, Hélène worked around them--waxing the dull linoleum, scouring the sinks, polishing the mirrors until the whole room gleamed. Sometimes she even took out the curlers and rang up the bill when Mlle. Mimi went up for her morning tea and forgot to come back down. Soon she was washing hair too and combing it out and rolling it up in tiny blue and yellow curlers for permanents--tissue, curler, wrap, pin--sometimes she thought it would never end! And the smell! At first it made her dizzy, and she wished she could run outside for just a minute and drink in some fresh air; but then she got used to it, hardly noticed it anymore, and even forgot there was an outside to run to. Without windows, day and night were as one under the single 60 watt bulb of light. All she thought of now was how soon to rinse out the permanent solution before any damage was done (she read the back of the package carefully three times) and how to keep the customers from wondering what happened to Mlle. Mimi when

she went up for her afternoon nap.

In her spare time, Hélène would swivel on the black leather chairs and memorize all the beauty tips in the ten-year-old back issues of Charme and A la Mode. Soon she was cutting hair too and painting on color--"to bring back the youthful you!"--not to mention offering manicures and facials which were not so hard to do when you followed the "ten easy steps." At fifteen she even had her own key to the side door. Sometimes she would go the whole twelve hours without seeing Mlle. Mimi once until she came down at eight p.m. sharp to check the appointment book and cash register. By this time, Hélène would be so exhausted, she could barely stand on her feet, and it was all she could do to stumble the three blocks home, lean on the kitchen table as her uncle bombarded her with questions--"Yes, nineteen customers today, more than yesterday"--then drop into bed, her feet and back aching. She was too tired to think of high school now; it seemed so far away like some island in the Pacific. And she rarely thought about her family up North. Her sisters had stopped writing once the novelty had worn off, and she hardly heard from her mother anymore. It all seemed like a dream when she used to spend lazy summer afternoons stretched out on her stomach on the cool grass, gazing at pictures and letters from family she'd never met.

She could hardly believe her eyes, then, when one hectic Saturday she staggered in from work to find her

mother waiting for her. She was sprawled on the settee in the parlor--a short, plump woman, huge and bulging in the middle with thick, swollen legs spread out before her. Tante Marie was perched upright at her side, looking thin and dry like a hollow reed. She was nervously picking at her apron and telling Hélène to come and meet her mother--"Don't make her get up." But her mother had already hoisted herself up, and Hélène was now eye-level with her round, florid face. She breathed in her rich, warm odor as her mother pressed her to her heaving bosom and planted soggy kisses on both cheeks. Hélène felt dizzy like she sometimes was on the farm when the smell was so overwhelming, she just had to sit down. She was sitting down now, feeling her mother's small, rough hands on her own, watching Tante Marie (now seated on a chair at her side) out of the corner of her eye.

"Eh bien," her mother sighed hoarsely, as she fondled Hélène's hands. "Here we are, together at last. It's hard to believe." She laughed and wiped the corner of each eye. "Of course, we saw that picture of you a few Christmases ago, holding that big fat orange. You should have heard your sisters: 'Oh, but she must be rich!'" Her mother laughed again and squeezed Hélène's hands tighter. "How you've grown since then, chérie," she said, her brown eyes watering once more. "But tell me, Marie, hasn't she been eating?"

Tante Marie stiffened and dusted off her apron. "She

eats nothing but the best--choice quality meats, fruits and vegetables always in season-- "

"Of course, we eat simple foods," broke in Hélène's mother. "Right from our own back yard--lettuce, carrots, shallots. There's a fishing stream close-by where we get the fattest trout and pike you ever saw--you should taste them rolled in flour and fried in butter. And the blueberries and wild strawberries! Why sometimes, I make twelve pies at a time!"

Hélène's eyes widened. She could just see a whole row of pies, steam rising from their latticed tops, set by the window to cool.

"Of course, the winters must be difficult for you," Tante Marie said. Hélène could feel her aunt's eyes on her, but kept her own eyes fixed on her mother. "You're so isolated up there. You can't just walk down to the corner store for a loaf of bread."

"Bread we bake by the dozen. And there's the train to bring us our daily order--always half a cow or pig. And have you ever tasted freshly snared rabbit cooked up in a stew in the middle of winter?"

Hélène screwed up her face.

"Such a delicacy!" her mother sighed, folding her hands in her lap. "Yes, we eat well enough. The children may not get oranges and candies for Christmas, but they're healthy and well-fed. We would have loved to have had you up for a visit, chérie--we could have fattened you up a

little. I waited until you were old enough to leave home, but when I asked your aunt . . . "

Hélène watched in astonishment as her mother glanced at Tante Marie, now perched on the edge of her chair.

"Oh, but that would have been too much bother," Tante Marie protested, searching Hélène's dark face with pleading eyes. "Such a large family to take care of, so many mouths to feed, while Hélène . . . she's all we've ever had." Tante Marie, her face suddenly pinched and angry, swung round to her guest. "You never needed her like we did; you had your arms full already. What did you want her to come up there for? To take her away from us when you already had so many? Don't you see she's everything to us? We'd have nothing without her!"

Hélène's throat ached as she watched her aunt wipe her eyes with the corner of her apron. She'd never realized just how much she meant to them. How could her mother try to steal her away when she was all they had? She wanted to fall into her aunt's arms, tell her it was all right, she understood now; only how could she with her mother, this stranger, watching her every move?

"It would only have been for a short visit," her mother said quietly, her eyes lowered. "And now, of course, my health is not so good. That is why, Hélène, I haven't been able to write much. The last few births have not been easy. The doctor said it was time to stop. 'Madame Duprés,' he said, 'you're getting too old for this business.

It's time you retire!'" She raised her head, wiped an eye, and laughed heartily. "Why, I used to drop them like kittens-- "

"Rose," warned Tante Marie, shaking her head.

"Perhaps he was right," her mother sighed. "This one has been more trouble than all the rest put together." She patted her enormous stomach as Hélène stared. "Morning sickness from the very first day, pain, fatigue-- "

"Is your blood poisoned?" Hélène blurted out.

"Hélène!" cried Tante Marie.

"That's all right," laughed her mother. She looked into Hélène's eyes. "There's nothing to worry about. I'm having this last baby--my twelfth, you know--in the hospital in Québec City where nothing can go wrong. I have family there who will take care of me. I haven't been back in years. . . . " She looked off at something, then drifted back to Hélène. "You'd like Québec, Hélène--so pretty, like a picture book, with winding cobblestone streets, gas street lamps, old stone houses. They have one street that is the oldest in North America. You must go there sometime. My relatives would love to have you."

— "They would?" Hélène breathed, seeking her aunt's eyes for some explanation. Why couldn't she have stayed with <u>them</u> while she went to high school? She could see herself on the way to school--linking elbows with her best friend, skipping along the winding cobblestone streets. But Tante Marie wouldn't look at her--her eyes were fixed on her

apron--and Hélène suddenly felt a lash of anger. They were selfish, wanting to keep her all to themselves, never thinking about what she wanted. The gas street lamps of Québec City shone so brightly in her mind, she could almost reach out and touch them. But no, that wasn't right; after all, she was all they had.

"Mais voyons," her mother suddenly exclaimed. "You must tell me all about yourself, Hélène."

Tante Marie raised her head and patted Hélène's arm. "Ah, but we have une vraie coiffeuse in the family now. In just one year's time she has gone from washing floors and polishing sinks to doing all the hair, nails, and faces herself. Such a hard worker! We hardly ever see her. You should see the customers she is stealing from the other salons. It's just a matter of time before Hélène takes over the business altogether. Emile always says so."

Tante Marie squeezed Hélène's arm and smiled at her, her pale blue eyes brimming with pride. Yes, Hélène thought. She was all they had.

The next day they visited the surviving Duprés relations. Hélène still found it hard to breathe properly around her mother; she looked so fleshy and ripe, like she was ready to burst any minute. And her voice and laughter seemed to boom in the dim little rooms where people always spoke in hushed undertones. Hélène found herself edging away from her mother whenever she saw their hostesses purse their lips in forced tolerance. She even heard one

of them mutter to Tante Marie when her mother had just excused herself: "Vraiment! You think she would stay in bed in her last month. What's she running around for in that condition?" And Tante Marie had nodded and whispered, "That's the way they are up there. At least she won't be here much longer." When her mother came in moaning about having to go to the bathroom all the time, Hélène looked down, feeling her cheeks burn hot with shame.

Her mother left the next morning. Hélène was dressed in her white smock, ready for work. Her mother leaned over and kissed her on each cheek, and Hélène was suddenly touched to see the tears in her eyes. "I-I have to go now. I'll be late," Hélène stammered. She lingered outside the screen door a minute and heard her aunt say, "Tiens, chérie. She's just not used to you."

Hélène was relieved to see her mother go. She'd made her feel strange, uncomfortable; there was something unclean about her. She felt the same way a few months later when, after the initial alarm at finding blood in the toilet bowl, she was reminded by her aunt of the story of Adam and Eve. It was the cross she'd have to bear for being a woman. There was nothing she could do about it; it was God's will. She prayed to God to make it go away--she wasn't bad, she hadn't given Adam the apple--but God wouldn't change His mind.

He listened, though, when she asked Him to make the farm boys go away. It wasn't that she wished them any

harm, and she certainly agreed with what people said--that the French race must be protected and that the place for their young men was home with their families, not in the middle of some war that had nothing to do with them. But she was relieved just the same when conscription looked like a sure thing and all the farm boys flocked to the recruiting centre to snap up the best positions. They'd made her feel so funny the way they were beginning to look at her when she went to Sunday market with her aunt. She'd be stuffing turnips or potatoes into a burlap sack and then suddenly look up to see their narrowed eyes measuring her from head to toe. Or she'd be walking home from work on a Friday night when she'd see a knot of them near the brasserie on the other side of the street; and they'd hoot and whistle while she lowered her eyes and quickened her step. She knew they were dangerous; her aunt had warned her about them: "Don't go near them. They'll have their way with you. Fais attention. It takes only once." She wasn't sure what it was they'd do to her, but she kept her distance, since it took only once.

She felt bad, though, when she heard the roster of names and dates announced in church--eighteen and nineteen year olds who'd been unexpectedly called overseas and were now resting peacefully in God's loving hands. She knew it hadn't really been her fault--that God would do what He willed--but she couldn't help wondering what would have happened had she not prayed so desperately for them to go

away and leave her alone.

Oncle Emile was incensed at the loss of French blood. He cursed "les anglais" and banged his fist on the kitchen table, rattling the brown bottles: "Blasted English! Always telling us what to do! Bad enough that they had their way in the first war. I was lucky to get out alive; I came this close." (He'd roll up his pants leg to reveal the tiny scar on his calf where a bullet had grazed some thirty years before.) "We won't stand for it any longer! Let them fight their own wars!" For three long years he did nothing but drink and rail about the English trying to kill them all off. At first Tante Marie tried to get him interested in Hélène--"She's the talk of the town, Emile! Just look at all the customers she's bringing in!" But he always snapped back--"Oh, so she thinks she's a big shot, does she?"--and went right on flailing his arms over "les maudits anglais!" When Tante Marie changed tactics and began to whisper to Hélène, "We'll just leave him alone, chérie," Hélène was only too glad to stay out of his way. Why should she care about him when he paid no attention to them? He never seemed to notice Hélène's long hours or meagre raises or Tante Marie's strained face now that her job (without Hélène's help at home) was becoming too much for her. She'd just avoid him, that's all, pretend he wasn't even there.

Then one day, the war was over and their boys were coming home. Oncle Emile suddenly awoke, as if from a

long sleep. Hélène and Tante Marie were just on their way to church when Oncle Emile called out after them, "Cheer up! Our luck's about to change!"

After their round of afternoon visits, they came home to find Oncle Emile seated at the kitchen table strewn with empty bottles, his face white and clenched. Tante Marie ran to his side and felt his forehead.

"Emile, what is it?"

He looked at Hélène, his dark eyes narrowing. Hélène squeezed the back of the chair she'd been holding for support.

"I saw your Mlle. Mimi today," he said evenly as Tante Marie backed away. "Paid her a little social visit. 'How are you today?' I ask her. 'Lovely day, isn't it? Been doing pretty good business, haven't you?' 'Oh yes,' she says. 'Business has never been better.' 'And why is that?' I ask. And you know what she says?"

Hélène shook her head, bracing herself for the answer.

"Fluorescent lights!" he yelled, pounding the table. "Ever since she put in fluorescent lighting two years ago, business has picked up. Well, that was it!" He looked up at Tante Marie and waved his finger. "'In the first place,' I say, 'new lighting was Hélène's idea. And in the second, you and I both know that without Hélène, your business would be nothing--a miserable hole in the wall like it was before. Now there's only one way I'll let Hélène stay on. Either you hand over the business and we'll give you a

generous cut of the profits, or Hélène quits and starts a business of her own.'"

Tante Marie slapped her hand over her mouth.

"'Well,'" Oncle Emile mimicked. "'I will permit Hélène to rent the salon, but I will manage the profits as I always have, and we'll see about whether I intend to pass on my business to Hélène or not. I'm not dead yet, you know.' And you know what I said before I slammed the door behind me?" Oncle Emile beamed with satisfaction at the shocked faces of Tante Marie and Hélène. "'Eh bien! What are you waiting for?'"

"Mon Dieu," Tante Marie moaned, sinking to a chair. "What will we do now?"

"Don't worry," said Oncle Emile, smiling at Hélène. "I have it all worked out. It won't be easy at first, but we're going to work for ourselves at last."

Hélène circled the chair she'd been gripping and sat down with a heavy thud.

"Now Hélène has been working at this business long enough," Oncle Emile continued, leaning his laced fingers on the table. "She knows the trade inside out. All it'll take for us to set up our own business is a permit and a little investment. Now that Hélène is almost eighteen, the permit will be no problem. All she has to do is take a two-week course in Quebec City and pass the practical and written exams." He turned to meet Tante Marie's questioning look. "I looked into it before, but she was

too young then." He turned back to Hélène, fixing her with narrowed eyes. "Now the financial part is not so simple. We have enough to pay your way to Québec, but we'll have to take out a loan to set up the salon. And the only thing we have as collateral is the house."

"Emile, no!" cried Tante Marie.

"Don't worry." Oncle Emile's eyes had narrowed into cat slits. "Hélène won't let us down. She knows this is costing us a lot of money--everything we have. You won't let us down, will you, Hélène?"

Hélène tried to pin her mind on the cobblestone streets and old stone houses, but all she could think about was the calamity that would befall them all should she fail the exams.

When the day came to leave, she thought she was going to throw up right on the train platform. It was her first time away from La Porte-du-Ciel, and Tante Marie kept making sure her coat collar was secure and asking her if she'd brought along enough to eat. Her aunt had packed home-made butter tarts and date squares, tins of tuna and sardines, small jars of peanut butter and jelly, and packets of crackers, so she wouldn't "starve." Hélène tried not to think of the food rolling around in her suitcase and tried not to listen when her aunt leaned over to Oncle Emile to whisper, "I don't know, Emile. She looks so pale." The train finally pulled in, clanging and steaming and hissing so that she could hardly hear Tante Marie as she

held onto her arm and cried out all kinds of warnings. But she heard her uncle all too clearly as he swung up her suitcase and handed her over to the porter: "Remember, Hélène, we're counting on you."

She never did get to see the oldest street in North America. She missed the tour of the Lower Town. In fact, she didn't go out much at all. When she wasn't in the classroom or "practice" salon, she was in her tiny private room in the university residence, poring over the class manuals: Problems of the Scalp, The Right Cut, Beauty and Business. At night she would look up from the pool of light spilling from the study lamp and hear doors clicking shut and muffled laughter in the hallway. They left her alone now, but at first they would rap on her door too and ask her along. She would look down at an illustrated hair-do, bite her lip, and before she could find the words to explain--she was only here for two weeks and there was so much to study, so much she didn't know--they were gone. She wondered how they expected to pass. She'd never heard of so many hairstyles and scalp problems in her life.

She did go on one Sunday outing with the others--along the boardwalk flanking the Chateau Frontenac. One of the girls--Thérèse, from Rivière Bleue, a small town near her own--had come alone to her door and asked her--"You are coming, aren't you? It would do you good, you know"--and to Hélène's surprise, had slipped a caramel into her hand before leaving her to her studies. And Thérèse had been

right. It did do her good to get out. They had sat together on the bus all the way over--trading small town gossip, taking turns by the window--and had strolled side by side along the boardwalk, exclaiming at all the marvelous sights. By the time Hélène had paused to lean against the ornate iron railing and gaze down at the river, she had forgotten all about the manuals waiting for her on her desk. She had to shade her eyes against the bright sun, but she saw it all clearly enough: the colorful ferry strung with flags and streamers, the sailboats bobbing in the wind, the coral roofs of the old stone buildings below, the silver church steeples glistening on the other side. But when she turned her head, she noticed she was standing alone. Thérèse had walked on with the other girls for several yards where they were all gathered up into a tight little knot, laughing and pointing below, their backs turned to Hélène. Then Thérèse looked back at her and smiled, motioned with her head to come and join them. Hélène was about to smile back when suddenly, she remembered how several of these same girls had giggled on the way to class about their resident "bookworm": "No wonder she's so white and skinny." "Do you think she ever goes out at all?" "Only in the dead of night with the other ghouls!" They had tried to swallow their giggles when they noticed Hélène turn the corner behind them, but it was too late; she had heard it all.

Hélène now felt such a pang of bitterness--she was

sure they were still laughing at her--that she turned away, scowling, and wished she were back home. As she fastened her bleary eyes on the river scene below, she saw herself being transported to the quay, built up by boulders, in La Porte-du-Ciel. Hélène loved to walk along it whenever she had the chance and listen to the water slapping the sides or trickling through the mud. At home the river was low in the morning--all mud and rock with seaweed and tufts of grass breaking through. Seagulls and boats would be perched like ghosts on the white, cragged floor, but by afternoon the fog had cleared and the water had risen, buoying the little boats to the surface. She would walk all the way to the end of the quay and face the St. Lawrence--a clear, blue, vast expanse broken by a thin pencil of land. You could take a ferry to the other side--they even had whaling expeditions. Sometimes Hélène wondered what would happen if she jumped on the next ferry (they stopped every hour) and never came back. Then she would turn around and see the church spires reaching up to the heavens, and she knew she'd have to hurry home before they started to worry. Now as she gazed at this other ferry with the colored streamers and at all the silver steeples, she felt the mighty tug of the St. Lawrence towards home. She never even noticed that the others had moved on without her, until long after she found herself alone and waiting for them to return. All she could think of on the lonely bus ride back to the residence was one thing: one

more week and she would be home.

Before she knew it, her train was pulling into La Porte-du-Ciel and she was waving through the window at her aunt and uncle. She had phoned them from the university right after the results came in to give them the good news, but she left out the part about how she'd almost fainted. The room had started swaying before she'd even turned over the three-hour written exam, and she thought she and her desk would tilt right over until she pictured herself being carried out, her limp body dangling. She also left out the part about how she'd actually cried once she'd brought her diploma back to her seat. The other girls thought she was crying because she was so happy--she'd got what she wanted--but she was really imagining the gold-lettered scroll to be a high school diploma instead.

When Hélène stepped off the train, Tante Marie covered her face with kisses and Oncle Emile patted her once on the back and to her surprise murmured, "Good girl." All the way home, her aunt and uncle were excited and said that they had a big surprise for her--"Just wait until you see it!" And then they were standing in front of their small white house. Hélène had never seen it looking so shiny and new. The white clapboard was freshly painted, even the latticed woodwork under the balcony which was so "tricky" to get at (so her uncle would grumble whenever her aunt wanted it repaired). The black wrought iron railing, which had been peeling and rusted, now gleamed in the sun. And flowers--

yellow petunias and purple pansies (Hélène's favorites)--bordered the house in what had once been a plain trough of dirt.

Hélène looked at her aunt in wonder. Tante Marie nodded over to Oncle Emile who was standing akimbo under the maple tree in the middle of the yard. "He did it all himself," she whispered.

"Come here, Hélène," called Oncle Emile. Hélène approached her uncle from behind, thinking of how she would thank him, when she suddenly stopped short. Nailed to the eaves of the balcony in the shade of the maple tree was a small white sign with black lettering: "Salon Elégant. Mlle. H. Duprés. Coiffeuse."

Hélène was still holding her breath as she stood inside, gazing at the parlor which had been completely done over. Gone were the lacy curtains and the worn furniture that you could sink right into. In their place were venetian blinds and mirrors, stainless steel sinks and chrome counters. "The chairs haven't come yet," said Oncle Emile. "But look at this." In the corner was a metal stand housing tiny bottles of perming lotions, shampoos and conditioners, packets of clips, pins, and elastics, topped with a pink plastic statue of the Virgin Mary, her palms spread and pointing to heaven.

"Wait, that's not all," said Tante Marie, and she had grabbed her hand and they were running upstairs together. Hélèn's bedroom, once sparsely furnished with cast-off

relics, was now adorned with gold-trimmed French Provincial furniture, frilly curtains, and a pink chenille bedspread. Hélène had always wanted such fancy things as a child and had pointed them out to Tante Marie in each new Sears catalogue, to which her aunt would respond with a sigh, "Some day." But now she suddenly missed her tattered patchwork quilt and the rough splintered pine.

She was struggling to hold in her tears when her uncle breathed from behind, "Well, what do you think? We shouldn't have, but your aunt insisted."

Hélène turned to face her aunt and saw there were tears in her eyes. "Happy birthday, Hélène," she said softly with outstretched arms.

Hélène fell into her aunt's arms and burst out crying. "It's too much," she murmured. "Too much."

" . . . too much," Hélène continued to mutter in the salon, not noticing the old lady, buried in pin curlers, looking up at her in alarm.

"Oh! Do you really think so?"

Hélène stared down at the mass of tiny curlers and quickly recovered herself. "Why, yes. If we just take out a few," she said, unravelling curlers, "the style will be looser, more natural. There. That's better."

"Oh, yes," beamed Madame Charpentier, admiring her withered face in the harsh light. "Much better."

Hélène shook out her customer's towel and unfastened

her bib. "Yvette will be with you in a minute." All she wanted now was to get away.

She hurried out the salon before Madame Charpentier could utter a word and saw Yvette across the hall seated at the kitchen table. She was sipping her coffee (two creams, five sugars:) and bouncing her crossed leg to the piped-in FM station.

Yvette looked up at Hélène in the doorway and snapped her fingers twice. "Haven't you got anything more lively?"

"She's ready for you," Hélène said, pulling on her black gloves. "You can take over now." She turned to leave.

"Attends-minute la:"

Hélène paused, keeping her back turned. Her head was starting to throb.

"I'm sorry you got stuck with her," Yvette whined, "but you always seem to know how to handle them. With me, they're never satisfied. They keep asking for you. I don't know what it is you do that's so special."

Hélène sighed and turned. She would simply have to tell Yvette what she always told her and then get on with the business at hand. "Stop trying to turn them into something they're not. That's all. That's the magic formula. It works every time if you'd only give it a chance. But look, we've been through this all before. They're your customers. You do it your way, but don't come complaining to me. I'm sorry, Yvette. I have to go now or I'll be

late."

"Wait, before you go."

Hélène's head was splitting. What could she want now?

"Have you had any word yet?"

Selfish girl. Hélène had told her she was leaving the business to her--after all, Yvette had worked here for ten years, longer than any of the others--and now it seemed she couldn't wait to inherit it. The haughty tone crept into Hélène's voice. "That is the purpose for my departure if you will be so kind as to let me go."

"Oh, je vous en prie," Yvette snapped back, turning on her heel. Hélène watched the frumpy figure storm off, trailing a fringe of red slip behind her.

Part III: 1945-1967

In the waiting room, Hélène could barely contain the pain that now gripped like a vise. Of course, Yvette didn't deserve her estate; she'd never worked hard like her--always running off on dates and giggling and gossiping with the other girls. She herself had never had time for such nonsense--not the first few years anyway. They hadn't the money to hire help, and Oncle Emile (who took care of the books) refused to turn away a single customer, no matter how long Hélène had been on her feet. "You don't want to give business away to the competition, do you?" he'd demand, gripping Hélène's shoulders. After all, there were four other salons in town, not counting Chez Mimi whose sign still hung from two chains above the front door, although the house had been shuttered tight and admitted no visitors.

Hélène's respectably large clientele had been waiting for her upon her return from Québec, but Oncle Emile had taken extra precautions. He had printed up flyers of

opening specials and hired a country boy (at a dollar a wagon) to deliver them after school. Hélène was a little overwhelmed, then, but hardly surprised when even the young farm wives came flocking to the overcrowded salon. They wanted to "look right" for their men who were coming home from the war. Hélène felt funny perming their hair, watching it puff out in the wild, frizzy style of the day. She tried not to think of the hands that would touch it--were they still rough and calloused, still black beneath the square nails? She could picture these big blunt hands clumsily stroking the hair she was preparing for them, then thrusting her customer's head back and . . . She tried not to think this way; it made her a little ill. Besides, she hadn't time for such thoughts. Their business was at stake, not to mention her aunt's health.

Hélène had felt bad that her aunt still had to work long hours as a domestic at her age (she was over fifty now). There was nothing she could do about it, though; they were heavily in debt. Tante Marie never complained, but she looked so much older now, and the work sapped her strength. Hélène could still see her moving slowly, cautiously around the house, as though she were afraid of breaking something; and there she was again in the kitchen on her day off--balanced on her haunches, wiping her arm across her forehead, squeezing a sponge out into a pail of soapy water. And there sat Oncle Emile astride his throne at the kitchen table, nibbling on a pencil as he composed

the weekly specials and pored over the accounts. Once, when Hélène came in for a glass of water, he looked up at her questioningly as if trying to figure out what she was doing there. "How are we doing?" he asked, as she stepped carefully over to the tap where she leaned against the counter, cradling her glass of water. When she'd given him a full account of her day, he stared at her--his pencil poised in the air--while she sipped her water and stretched her back. She glanced down at the floor to meet her aunt's sympathetic smile, looked back at her waiting uncle, and, putting the half-empty glass on the counter, returned to her customers. It wasn't for <u>him</u> that she was returning, she insisted to herself as she marched back to the salon; it was only for her aunt--to make her life a little easier.

Within two years, the loan on the salon was repaid in full and Tante Marie was able to retire. Oncle Emile was reluctant at first to part with the extra income, but agreed, under Hélène's prodding, that his wife's health was more important than money. Besides, he wanted someone strong enough to take care of them, didn't he? Within another year, Hélène was earning enough to hire an assistant. She couldn't wait to be relieved of some of the drudgery and the constant stooping. Trying to play down her excitement, she casually broached the subject with her uncle--"Just someone to sweep up and wash hair." His firm "Out of the question!" and refusal to discuss it further convinced her to take the situation into her own hands. He would get

used to the idea once he had no choice in the matter. She wasn't ready, however, for what happened the day he discovered a young freckled stranger cleaning out his sinks.

Hélène had been waiting for his daily inspection all day--"How's our Hélène doing, Madame? Any complaints? Just bring them to the attention of the management?" he would chuckle. She had almost forgotten about him as she was spraying on "highlights" for an excited old woman, when she suddenly felt a tug at her elbow.

"I'll be right back!" she called out to her bewildered customer as her uncle yanked her away.

"Who is <u>that</u>!" Oncle Emile demanded in the kitchen. He was squeezing the life out of her elbow, but Hélène pretended not to notice.

"Oh, that's Madame Lamarre," she said sweetly. "She thought she'd try something new today."

"You know who I'm talking about, Hélène." He shook her elbow and let it drop.

"Oh, you mean my new assistant?"

Oncle Emile's eyes widened; his mouth went tight.

"That's the young Vachon girl," Hélène continued, "from the farm on the <u>troisiéme rang</u>. I was talking to her mother just the other day-- You know, the farm wives have been a real boon to business. They may come only once a month, but their visits add up--there are so many of them. And it's nice having someone closer to my own age to talk to."

"Get on with it!" Oncle Emile blurted out.

"As I was saying . . . " Hélène looked down at her clasped hands. "Madame Vachon was telling me how she was looking for work in town for her daughter now that Carmen has finished school. They could use the extra money, and Carmen wasn't too happy about working on the farm. They have enough kids to do that anyway--nine in all, would you believe? Madame Vachon looks so young!" Hélène caught her breath and looked up quickly. Her uncle's eyes had narorwed into menacing little slits. "Besides, the change would do Carmen good," she said softly, her eyes falling. "Since, as you know, I was looking for someone to help out in the salon, I thought, why not Carmen? She's young and sturdy--has a good back--and this way she could work in town, although after a while . . . she might not find it as exciting as she'd dreamed." Hélène released her shaky breath and looked squarely at her uncle. "I told Madame Vachon we couldn't pay much, and before I knew it, here was Carmen at the side door, mop and bucket in hand. Why, she could even help out Tante Marie. She shouldn't be washing walls and ceilings at her age."

"I won't hear of it." His voice was low and even; his hands clenched at his sides. "She's got to go."

"But why?"

"We haven't got that kind of money to give away."

"We're making plenty now, more than enough to keep us going. And I need the help. I'm the one who does all the

work, and it's getting to be too much for me."

"At twenty years old?"

"It's ruining my back! If you don't want me to start turning customers away, you'll let me take on some help." Her voice was shaking now. This was her last chance. "Besides, we could always raise the rates."

"Raise the rates?" Oncle Emile unclenched one hand and fingered his mustache. "Yes, I suppose we could do that--it's been a few months since the last time--not that it would pay her way. But far be it from me to interfere. You're the one who does all the work around here."

With a triumphant flourish, he turned his back on Hélène and seated himself regally at the kitchen table. Hélène just stood there watching as he scribbled calculations at the back of his leather-bound ledger.

Hélène didn't raise the rates for the farm women. They didn't have accounts, so she just adjusted the figures for her uncle's book until the sums came out right. Sometimes she even paid the difference herself. She enjoyed talking to them. They never spoke of their "dearly departed" husbands or the perfect little grave site under the apple tree that was waiting for them. After the war was over and all the talk of their martyred young soldiers (always someone else's husband), they never spoke of death at all. They wanted to know which store was the best for lingerie (not that they could ever afford any) and had Hélène read about that young Yves Montand in the latest

issue of Vedettes and who was Hélène seeing now? How could she tell them she was almost twenty-one and had never been on a single date? She would smile mysteriously and murmur, "Oh, no one is particular," and pray that the old ladies wouldn't give her away. They were always clutching at her sleeve and assaulting her ears with their shrill demands: Why didn't she get out more? Didn't she realize people were beginning to talk? How about that nice young man who ran his father's funeral home? After all, time has a way of sneaking up on you, although they wouldn't speak of her being an "old maid" just yet.

One warm spring evening, Hélène approached her aunt and uncle who were out rocking on the tiny balcony. They paused while she let herself out the front door and squeezed past them, then picked up the steady creaking as she sat down, with her back to them, on the top step.

"Oh, by the way," Hélène began, struggling to control her breath. "I just thought I would tell you. I'm going out on a date this coming Saturday night.". The creaking suddenly stopped. She could picture their feet squarely planted on the concrete floor. "Madame Vachon just happened to mention the other week that she had a cousin coming in from Trois-Rivières, and how nice it would be if he had a date for the spring dance." She remembered how Carmen's mother had paused and exchanged glances with her daughter who was hovering over a head of suds, then asked

if Hélène knew of anyone who might help him out. Without thinking twice, Hélène had surprised herself by saying she could always accompany him herself. It was so early that no one had asked her yet.

"What do you want to go on a _date_ for?"

Hélène turned to see her uncle leaning forward on his arms, his face soured with distaste.

"_Viens ici_, Hélène." Her aunt reached for her hand. "Let's go inside and have a little talk."

Tante Marie busily arranged her long, dark skirt around her on the settee in her bedroom, then looked straight into Hélène's face. "Now remember. Stay with the others. Don't get caught alone."

"Why? What do you mean?"

"Men will take whatever they can get, and it is up to you to preserve your innocence."

"Ma tante, it's only a first date!" Hélène exclaimed.

"Never mind. You can't be too careful. Remember what happened to that Lavoie girl."

Hélène looked down, her face sad and flushed. How could her aunt even compare her to that barefoot country girl who used to strut around town, her bulging stomach in the air, oblivious to all the turned heads? The ladies in the salon had had _un grand jour_ with that one. They were always whispering behind their hands about "shotgun weddings," babies born out-of-wedlock, and miscarriages; and then there were those two brazen kids who came down from

the farms to do it right in the church cemetery. She had seen them herself once, in broad daylight, their heads pushed up against a tombstone, not moving a muscle, just moaning; and when they turned and caught her staring over the iron railing, they had smiled wickedly at her and started moaning even louder. She could still see their smug faces--streaked with hair and dirt--and hear the intense moans which ran right through her as she hurried away.

"I'll be careful," Hélène said quietly.

Tante Marie straightened up and looked down at her folded hands. "Of course, once you are married, it is your duty under God to submit to your husband."

Hélène suddenly remembered with a sinking in her stomach how her uncle would bellow "Marie!" at night from their bedroom--this very room!--while her aunt slowly rose from her chair in the parlor to answer his call.

"But there is lots of time for you to marry. Don't rush into it. In the meantime, remember, God is watching. Keep a tight rein on your feelings. Don't make a mistake now that you will regret later and for the rest of your life." Tante Marie was grasping Hélène's arms and staring at her beseechingly.

"But I already bought the dress," Hélène murmured, her chin quivering.

Hélène could still remember that dress and its matching bolero--midnight blue tafetta, trimmed with velvet. How could she not have noticed how strange it looked with

her glasses' square black frames and the broad metal watch band that weighted her wrist? She still had that picture somewhere--stiffly seated in front of a mirror in the salon, her thin arms crossed against her flat chest. Her collar bones had stuck out awkwardly, as did the rest of her under the full-skirted dress--nothing but hard angles and sharp bones. And teeth! Gleaming from ear to ear! All teeth and bones and glasses.

She remembered, too, the feel of the stiff silk as she spewed all her supper into the toilet bowl before leaving--something she had been holding inside all week since her aunt's "little talk." She'd never thought she'd have to worry about such things on a first date. But later she merely laughed to herself as she wondered what all the fuss had been about. Her date had been much shorter than she. He'd done nothing but dance at arm's length and shake hands at the end of the stone walk leading up to her door. So when another customer--this time a sweet old lady--offered her nice young grandson from Gaspé who was just stopping over on his way to Montréal, Hélène accepted without a worry. But this one was ruggedly handsome, and he tried to kiss her in his car, pinning her against the door as she struggled with the lock. Once more she found herself teetering over the toilet bowl, purging herself of his touch--his moist lips on her throat, the hard thrust against her pelvis--and his breathless voice--"C'mon. You want it too. Don't fight it."

Hélène was more careful after that. Tante Marie had been alarmed when she wouldn't eat for three whole days, and once Hélène had sobbingly confessed to the attack, it was agreed she would only go out on dates arranged by her aunt: usually with a cousin, once or twice removed, or one of her aunt's friend's visiting nephews, although there was also the town chiropractor--a confirmed bachelor ---and the not-so-young man who ran his father's funeral home. Nothing much happened on these dates. Usually they would go for walks along the main street which, Hélène always noted but never pointed out, was named after her great-grandfather, Jean Duprés. They would walk slowly, arms accidentally bumping, stealing glances at their watches, nodding at the passers-by with their knowing little smiles. Hélène always made a point of being seen--perhaps the ladies at the salon would leave her alone now --and sometimes would pause for the longest time in front of the store-front windows of the little clapboard houses. There was Vogue (where Hélène had bought the dress, now banished to her closet) and Canada Paint and Foyer de la Chaussures (specializing in orthopedic shoes). There were the stores named after distant relatives--Ameublement B. L. Duprés, Bijouterie C. H. Duprés, even a Quincaillerie Louis Duprés where Hélène would stand the longest, gazing at the town's only television set as she tried to imagine what would come out of it. But it was only for show. La Porte-du-Ciel hadn't the equipment yet to receive signals from

the rest of the world.

There wasn't much else to do in town on a Saturday night. There were no movie houses, and Hélène refused to go for drives (pleading car-sickness) and shook her head at dinner (she really couldn't eat a thing). She would agree, however, to accompany her dates to the Café Paris and try not to watch as they wolfed down entire tourtières, double orders of greasy patates frites, and countless pieces of tartes au sucre. It was all she could do to sip down her tea. Her doctor called it a "nervous stomach" and said there was nothing she could do about it; it was just the way she was made. But she got tired of retching into the toilet before each date, running the taps so her aunt and uncle wouldn't hear; and she got tired of drawing her body up tightly so these strange men wouldn't touch her, and staying in the light, and watching to make sure there were always people around. When she got home, she'd be exhausted--too tired even to cry over yet another night that had been so long and nerve-wracking. All she could do was to run more hot water into the bath and lie there, watching the steam rise, dreading the next time she would have to go through it all over again. She'd thought it would keep the ladies quiet at the salon, that they wouldn't bother her anymore about not getting out. But instead they badgered her more than ever--wasn't that Madame Michaud's nice young nephew she went out with last Saturday?--imploring her with their hungry eyes to tell them everything.

She finally decided she'd had enough. Let people talk. She didn't care anymore. Her aunt and uncle never asked why she'd stopped going out Saturday nights, although sometimes Tante Marie would look up from her knitting and smile at her from across the salon where Hélène was embroidering pillow cases or table cloths. "You're young. There's plenty of time," her aunt would murmur. But at twenty-six Hélène didn't feel young. She felt old, like she had lived forever. She hadn't expected it to affect her this way. She didn't even like dating. But when she thought about spending the rest of her days--how much longer? forty, fifty years?--curling hair and crocheting doilies in the same room in the same house, she would stop eating for days at a time and burst out crying for no apparent reason. Her aunt and uncle simply didn't know what to do with her.

One afternoon when Hélène had slept in, too tired even to get up for work that morning, she heard the curtains rattling and the pull-blinds snapping open.

"Time to get up, Hélène," sang Tante Marie. "We have an appointment with Monsieur le curé this afternoon."

Before she knew what had happened, Hélène, still rubbing the sleep from her eyes, was seated across the large oak desk of the fat curé who liked to shake his fist at his congregation.

"Your aunt tells me you have been inordinately distressed lately. Now why is that?" he demanded, pressing

the tips of his pudgy fingers together and staring straight at Hélène from under fierce, bushy brows.

Hélène bowed her head, feeling like a naughty child hauled into the principal's office. She wished she could just turn her back on him and walk away. What business of it was his, anyway?

"You must think of your poor aunt and uncle, my child," he said, his voice softening. "Think of the grief you are causing them."

Hélène looked up, her eyes brimming.

The curé coughed in his fist and folded his hands on the desk. "As a young Christian woman your path of duty is clear: first, to your aunt and uncle who took you in out of the goodness of their hearts; second, to a husband and family of your own if God sees this as a right and fitting vocation for you."

Hélène widened her eyes so the tears wouldn't spill down her face.

"But remember," the curé continued, "not all women are made for marriage and motherhood. If your calling is not of a religious nature-- "

Hélène swallowed and shook her head.

" --it may well be that your resistance to men lies in your heartfelt obligation to your aunt and uncle. If so, follow your heart; God does not lie in these matters. Now you must stop spreading gloom all about you, and go and carry out your Christian duty. Pray for strength and

guidance, and ask for God's forgiveness for what is, I am sure, a momentary weakness on your part."

Hélène went home and raced through her prayers. She bowed her head and spit out as many Aves and Paters as she had strength for, striking away her tears and mumbling fiercely to herself in the dark. What had she to mope about anyway? She had a good home, a good job, an aunt and uncle who truly loved her. If God had given her all these gifts, who was she to feel sorry for herself? She was ungrateful, that's all, and it would have to stop. The next day she rose at seven, put on her white smock, and went down to her customers as though she'd never left them.

At least the ladies in the salon left her alone now. They stopped asking their nosy questions and no longer teased her when they caught her rocking on her tiny front porch: "Attention, ma belle. You know what they say about young girls who rock. They're bound to become old maids!" Now it was just, "Belle journée. And how are your dear aunt and uncle?" as Hélène went right on rocking in the clear light of day.

The looks of pity were harder to endure--the strained little smiles of passers-by as she went for walks with her aging aunt leaning on her one arm. In time, though, she learned to live with it. And she learned to live with the cruelty of the many girls who came under her employ. None had ever measured up to young Carmen, even if she had been

with her for only a few short years before she married and left town. She had been a quiet girl, a hard worker--never caused her any trouble--and it had broken Hélène's heart to see her go. She had bought her a beautiful blue crystal vase for her wedding in Montréal, had even been invited, but couldn't bring herself to go. She never could believe that Carmen had married so young; she'd looked so sweet, so innocent, with that light spattering of freckles and those wide green eyes.

At least Hélène was earning enough now to hire as she saw fit (her uncle, as he put it, left the "personnel department" to her), and sometimes on week-ends, she had as many as four girls working at one time. They had names like Nanette, Margot, Brigitte, and at one time, they all wore bee-hive hairdos, trying to outdo each other by piling the glazed black hair higher and higher. It was a wonder they didn't topple right over. Saturdays it was all Hélène could do to keep them occupied with their work, so excited were they to be running off to the Rialto movie house or to Au Coin de Feu for ladies' night--three drinks for the price of two. Hélène never said what she thought of these expeditions, but sometimes when she ordered them to stop chattering and get back to work, they seemed to read her disapproval of their social lives in her face and would smile at her mockingly or whisper under their breath, "You wouldn't know." There was even one--expertly teasing hair with one hand, puffing from her cigarette holder with the

other--who, when Hélène asked her to wait for her break to smoke, turned and blew smoke right in her face. Needless to say, she was fired on the spot. There wasn't much Hélène could do, however, about them giggling behind her back. Once, she picked up enough nerve to walk right up to them where they were huddled by the far sink, holding their stomachs and wiping their eyes. "What's so funny?" she demanded. They just looked at her with empty eyes, and one of them said, "Time to get back to work." Hélène was left standing there, tight-lipped with anger, as they scattered in silence.

Hélène pressed both hands against her throbbing temples in the doctor's waiting room. So who else could she have left the house to? Yvette wasn't any better than the rest of them; she'd just been around longer. She was rude and irresponsible, but who else was there? None of Hélène's family would want to leave their exciting lives in Sudbury, Toronto, Montréal. . . . Besides, it went with the salon. At least it was all taken care of, that, and the plot which had been arranged so long ago near Tante Marie and Oncle Emile. The plot. . . . No, she mustn't. Not again. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't move. Someone would get her out, would realize that it was all a mistake. But what if they didn't? What if no one found out, and they left her here to . . . She began to claw on the lid, then faster, frantically, until her

fingers started bleeding. The earth bore down on her. She was suffocating. She was dying. "Let me out! Mon Dieu! Help me! Please, God, help-- "

"Mademoiselle Duprés . . . Mademoiselle Duprés . . . "

Hélène looked up, startled to see the young receptionist peering solicitously into her face.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. The doctor will see you now. Are you all right?"

"Oh . . . Oh, yes. Thank you." Had she cried aloud? Panic-stricken, she scanned her neighbors. All eyes were lowered, fastened on magazines. No, she couldn't have. She was more careful than that. She had just taken a while to answer, that's all. Her eyes darted back to the receptionist who was hovering near her desk, still watching her with that worried look. Hélène smiled self-consciously and rose unsteadily to her feet.

Dr. Marchand greeted her warmly across the desk and told her to have a seat. Hélène cooly regarded the wizened old face, the mottled skin, the grey watery eyes. The only man in her life.

"Well, Hélène," he began brightly, "as I told you over the phone, I have some very good news for you. All of the tests came back negative, and I can assure you that there is no possibility whatsoever of there being a tumor in your brain."

Hélène knew that doctors never told the whole truth right away, but wasn't he being a bit too evasive? "Dr.

Marchand, I think I'm entitled to know the truth. After all, I am a grown woman, and if there is anything-- "

"I assure you, Hélène, we found nothing, and that's using the most advanced equipment the hospital has to offer. Believe me, if there was anything at all suspicious, it would have turned up on-- "

Hélène sprang forward. "But aren't there other tests I could take? Maybe there's been a mistake. Maybe-- "

"Hélène, listen to me." The doctor reached over for her hand. "I know that you've been under a lot of stress lately. For most people waiting is the hardest part. But it's all over now; do you hear me? The waiting is over. You have taken every test modern medicine has to offer, and you have passed, my dear, with flying colors. You're in the clear."

Hélène withdrew her hand. "So that's it then. There's nothing wrong with me," she stated flatly, looking straight ahead.

"I didn't say that." The doctor fingered a pen lying on his desk. Hélène fixed her eyes on his lowered face as he spoke slowly and deliberately. "There's nothing <u>physically</u> wrong with you. You see, when symptoms are as frequent and severe as yours--the headaches, the nightmares, the choking sensations--and when there are no underlying physical causes, then the problem may be an emotional or psychological one." The doctor looked Hélène squarely in the face. "Do you understand what I am saying, Hélène?"

Hélène answered unknowingly with a scowl.

The doctor returned to his pen. "Now it's not my place to ask you all kinds of personal questions, but I know that you've been under a great deal of strain in the past year, what with your dear old aunt passing away, God rest her soul, and you having to give up your work. That wouldn't be easy on anyone. But the thing is, your symptoms intensified during this time to an extreme degree, and if we have to point the finger, well, we could say that . . . "

The doctor's words whirled round in Hélène's mind, the white figure itself becoming a blur. Hélène's head felt as though it would crack right open. Sure, she had her problems. Who didn't? But what was he saying? That it was all in her head? That she was making it all up? But the pain was real. She could feel it right now--wracking her brain, ready to explode any minute. The pressure was unbearable, like the weight of the earth clamped down upon the lid, so that no matter how much she clawed or pounded her fists, it wouldn't open. It was jammed shut. She was stuck. She had to get out. Someone had to help her--dig through the dirt and open the lid and--

"Hélène, are you listening?" The doctor had her by the arm. Hélène regarded him as she would a stranger. The pain was too much. She couldn't think straight.

"I must be losing my sex appeal," he teased. "You're

the third woman I've put to sleep today."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Marchand. I was just-- "

"No, no, my dear," he murmured, patting her hand. "I know how trying all this has been for you. But believe me, the worst is over. One day you will wake up and remember it all as a bad dream. Now there are two things I want you to do for me. The first is to fill this prescription for a little something to quiet your nerves. It should help just as much, if not more, than those painkillers you've been taking. The second is to call up a colleague of mine, a Dr. Beaulieu. Here's his card. He's a specialist who is trained to deal with precisely these kinds of problems, and, I might add, without putting his patients to sleep, although I daresay the reverse happens occasionally."

A specialist, Hélène thought, taking no notice of the doctor's chuckles. So there <u>is</u> something after all.

"All kidding aside, Hélène. I think this doctor would do you a world of good if you'd just give him a chance."

"Is he a brain specialist then?" Hélène asked, perched on the edge of her chair.

"Yes," Dr. Marchand replied hesitantly. "You might say that. . . . You really haven't been listening, have you, Hélène?" He placed his hand over hers. "He's a psychiatrist, Hélène."

Hélène stared at the doctor dumbly. His hand slid up her arm to grasp her elbow and help her rise. Steering her to the door, he spoke in a soft undertone. "Look at it

this way, Hélène. You know you are going to live now, so your biggest worry is behind you. Now it's up to you, with Dr. Beaulieu's help, to make sure that you live your life to its fullest. Look at it as a new lease on life. Yes, that's it. A new lease on life." He opened the door for her. "Good luck, my dear. And if there's anything else I can do for you, don't hesitate to call."

Part IV: 1967-1984

Psychiatrist! The stinging accusation resounded in her skull, cutting deep into the worsening pain. So it had come to this. She wasn't sick, just sick in the head. Hélène leaned her hot brow against the cool window pane as the bus pulled to a stop. Oh, he was a "brain specialist" all right. Only he would probe her brain deeper than any scalpel could until he ferreted out all her deep dark secrets--the pain, the guilt, the dreams, the lonely nights in bed with nothing to do but-- But it was so cold! Even with the thermastat on high and the pile of heavy blankets, <u>still</u> she shivered. She did it purely for medicinal purposes. It kept her warm, got her blood flowing, helped her not to notice the low sloping ceiling--the wooden planks closing in on her like-- No! It was none of his business! She'd be damned if she would spread herself out on his couch so he could probe, dissect, and analyze her until there was nothing left.

What was the point anyway? What had she left to live for? She hadn't realized just how attached she'd been to her aunt until she'd gone and left her, although she remembered the panic that had seized her years ago when her uncle died and she realized her aunt might follow in his steps. Hélène's own parents had died that same year, one after the other. It was the year of Expo '67, and she remembered waiting, barely hoping, for one of her sisters in Montréal to invite her to the world's fair--"Do come, Hélène. We have plenty of room." After all, they used to write her all the time, bursting with news and pictures of husbands and babies. But their letters had dwindled with the years, and the only word she received was a telegram: "Mother just died. Father wants to have the funeral in La Porte-du-Ciel."

And there Hélène was, standing dry-eyed in the shadow of the grieving knot of children, high up on the grassy plain of the new cemetery. They'd run out of room in the old church graveyard with its massive, crumbling tombstones huddled together and choked by vines. Here the few isolated stones were evenly spaced out--small and square, their faces neatly whitewashed. Hélène remembered the breeze catching at her skirt and rippling the grass as she watched the children pull apart at the end of the ceremony, revealing a tall, angular stranger that was her father. As they led him to her, she could see him clutching their arms like an invalid, staring straight ahead at nothing. "Papa,

Voici Hélène--*Hélène*, remember?" She held her breath as he squinted at her with eerie, light blue eyes. Would he recognize her from her pictures? "Hélène?" he whispered, straightening up, searching her eyes as though he'd find her there. "Hélène, Hélène," he chanted hoarsely, groping for her face like a blind man. His children sadly shook their heads at her and led him away. Although Hélène had never spoken to him, so immersed was he in grief, she too cried at his funeral a few months later where, it was said, he had died of "a broken heart" on the eve of his retirement.

When her uncle died yet a few months later, Hélène was surprised to find that she could not shed a single tear. He had become so angry and bitter in his last years, accusing her of laziness and snarling "Big shot!" whenever she walked by. She'd thought he would be happy now that she was supervisor of a thriving business of her own. Her aunt said not to listen--"It's just his rheumatism talking." But when he looked at her--his eyes narrowed with hatred--and beat off her hands when she tried to tuck him in his wheelchair, she almost wished he would die. She even prayed for his suffering to end, and when his time finally came, she felt no remorse, only gratitude. "It's for the best," she told Tante Marie upon breaking the news, only her aunt would not be consoled. In *her* mind, her husband had suffered the worst possible fate--to die alone in the middle of the night in a hospital bed. Hélène tried to

soothe her--"How could we have known? He went so fast. There was no time to call us!"--and was shocked when her aunt, clutching at her arm, whispered, "Don't let me die alone." Would Tante Marie die too of a "broken heart," leaving Hélène all alone?

Hélène went right out and bought a shiny new Chrysler and a lovely little summer chalet nestled in the hills near the river. She'd never have thought she could have afforded such things (had she really so much money?), but she knew she'd have to keep her aunt active if she didn't want her to pine away. She needn't have worried. Tante Marie went on to live right up until the age of ninety. For years after her husband's death, she was able to get around, accompanying Hélène on her walks or going for drives like a happy child in Hélène's "nice new car": up North into the country, climbing past telephone lines and mesh-wire fences which plateaued into the grassy cemetery, then opened up into the new super-highway--miles of lush, sectioned farmland and shiny barn roofs; or south along the river, clattering across the railroad tracks, then dipping down to the water where they'd skim along its shore, past the little boats and wood chalets, past the elegant colonial and Spanish-style houses of the developers in the area, deeper into the woods until they hit a gravel road. Then, if it were a sunny week-end between la fête de St. Jean Baptiste and l'Action de grâces, they'd be bumping along the stretch of gravel that rose up to their summer cottage.

It was only an hour's drive, but once they were there, rocking on the porch that ran all around the tiny chalet, Hélène felt she was in another world. It was like being lifted high up in the mountains with nothing but bush all around. Sometimes she even slept right outside in a sleeping bag rigged up with netting and would be lulled to sleep by the steady chant of crickets. During the day, if it were chilly, they'd stay inside and drink tea and gaze out the large picture windows. When it was warm, they'd slap on mosquito repellent and walk down to the river where there was always a cool breeze coming off the water (which opened up into the gulf) and a salty tinge in the air. And they took pictures of each other with an old Brownie instamatic that still worked. There was one of Hélène--standing by the river, smiling and waving, looking like a zebra in her long striped shorts; and another of her--sitting on the grass in a little clearing by the chalet, her girlish dress swirled around her. There was one of her aunt--reclining in a deck chair, pointing playfully at the lawn ornament by her side. Hélène would never forget that flat wooden figure--like a giant cut-out doll--that she and her aunt had picked out at the hardware store. Propped up at the back by a rod, the little girl with the blond ringlets and puffy party dress was perched up on her toes, balancing a robin on each forefinger. And she would never forget the last time she drove by--the ornament face down in the weeds, the chalet boarded up. She hadn't the heart to go

back since. What was the point when there was no one to share it with?

She tried to push it from her mind--how it had all started some ten years before--her long walks alone, her aunt snuggly blanketed in her rocking chair: "Go ahead. I'll be all right." She kept feeling she should turn back, that something might happen, but Tante Marie insisted she take her daily walk without her and tell her all about it when she returned. Hélène would push herself along Rue Jean Duprés, glancing at the tiny shoes imported from France and Italy, lingering in front of the hardware store with its glittering array of silver and chrome: Sony, AIWA, Panasonic. She'd take the main street all the way down to the railroad crossing and stop for a minute, trying to decide whether to continue. She never crossed the tracks when she was little--she'd been strictly forbidden--and so would find herself gazing up at the sign crossing which read Rimouski one way, Rivière de Loup the other, and wondering, which way? Once she'd decided, off she would go, jerkily balancing on a steel rail, only to stop, decide the other way might be better, and hurry back to make up for lost time. Now, some forty years later, she'd feel that same twinge of indecision, especially since she knew that once she crossed over, she'd forget all about her aunt.

The pull of the quay usually proved the stronger, and soon she would be down by the water, smiling at the sign that forbade shark fishing and leaning against the railing

once she reached the end of the quay. She felt transported to the Maritimes when she looked down at the chalets and boats dotted along the shore, like a picture postcard of a cozy little fishing village. And she could almost believe that she was breathing in sea air when she gazed out at the stretch of water immersed in the fog which obscured the land on the other side. She tried not to yield, though, to the soothing caress of the fog, since if she weren't careful, a sense of foreboding would begin to creep up on her and slowly wrap itself around her neck, and suddenly, she would start to choke. She would place her hand on her throat and try to breathe, but no air would get in, and then it hit her and she would be running. What if something had happened to Tante Marie?

She tried not to think this way, and at her aunt's prodding, went out more and more on her own, taking courses in pottery and ceramics until you couldn't turn around in the house without knocking over an ashtray or figurine. Hélène thought her efforts to be crude, unprofessional, but her business practically ran itself now, and there wasn't much else to do when her aunt took her interminably long naps. It was almost with relief, then, that she accepted the mortician's offer to replace the old coiffeuse who had just passed away. She could put her talents to use, serve some purpose in life.

Someone had to do it, she firmly told herself as her breath caught at the sight before her. And there she was,

expected to bring the brittle white strands of hair to life, just as they had stubbornly rouged and powdered the sunken cheeks. She reminded herself it was just another corpse--she had seen so many in her time. She exhaled steeply through her mouth and went to work. In time, she came to view the pasty corpses simply as so much raw material from which to mold a reasonable facsimile of life. They even began to hold a strange attraction for her as she bent over them, almost lovingly, giving the final last touches, much as an artist cherishes his finished product before passing it into the hands of strangers.

She was almost sorry when she had to stop, but her aunt couldn't be left alone anymore. She was bedridden now, only she slept fitfully and would call Hélène's name out at any moment. Sometimes when Hélène came running, Tante Marie would already be flinging her covers aside and struggling to her feet, and Hélène would have to remind her what the doctor had said: "No, ma tante, you're not to get up alone. You might hurt yourself." Her aunt would look up at her and smile and grab onto her arm, and they would walk to the bathroom or up and down the hallway a few times, taking each step slowly, carefully. Dr. Marchand had said these walks were important to ease the pain in Tante Marie's joints and that whenever her aunt showed the least interest in getting up, Hélène should rush to her aid. "You should be glad she's not fighting to stay in bed," he had said. "You should see some of

these old folks--just waiting for the good Lord to come and get them. Not your aunt. There's a lot of life in the old girl yet."

One night, Hélène was roused from a light sleep by a thud in the next room. She ran, feeling her heart would burst, and switched on the light in her aunt's room. Tante Marie was lying sideways on the braided rug by the bed and smiling up at her.

"Ma tante!" Hélène clapped her hand to her mouth.

"Oh, bonjour, Hélène," Tante Marie said sweetly.

Hélène hurried across the room. "Are you all right?" She crouched down and nervously patted her aunt's arms and legs. "Can you move?"

Tante Marie rose up on one elbow. She wasn't smiling now. "I called. You didn't come."

"No, you musn't do that again," said Hélène, helping her aunt to her feet. "Where did you think you were going?"

"I was all alone," said Tante Marie, swaying on the edge of the bed. "I was frightened. I wanted to make sure you were still here."

Hélène tucked her aunt in, assuring her she would never leave her, and pulled up an armchair. Deep into the night, she watched her sleep peacefully, her bony fingers rising and falling on her chest. She tried to pray for her, plead for God's mercy. If only He would spare her a little longer; Tante Marie was all she had. But once she thought of her aunt leaving her behind, it was as though a

hand had clamped her throat, and she stumbled to the open window to drink in tiny sips of air. And as she looked out at the black starless sky, she felt so alone, like no one was there at all. But no, she wouldn't think like that; of course He was listening. Hélène seized her aunt's rosary from the bedside table and, clutching the pearly beads in her trembling hands, tried to steady her breath. The first ray of dawn found her lightly snoring in the armchair--one hand clasping the rosary in her lap, the other poised on her throat.

After the next thud in the night, Hélène moved two chairs together and dozed at her aunt's side, waiting for her to call out. Somehow Tante Marie always managed to make it to the bedroom door or halfway down the hall before Hélène would wake with a start to see the empty bed. Once Tante Marie even made it to the head of the stairs, one hand balanced on the banister. When Hélène told Dr. Marchand, he shook his head and murmured perhaps the time had come.

"There are facilities, you know, to look after the elderly." He toyed with the pen on his desk. His hands were threaded with knobby blue veins and splotched with liver spots. He's old himself, Hélène thought. How would he like to be committed to an institution?

"No! I couldn't!" Hélène leaned forward, clutching her purse to her chest.

Dr. Marchand looked up at her resignedly with his

watery eyes. "Hélène, you can't be expected to watch over her day and night. What if she'd fallen down those stairs? All it takes, you know, is a broken hip."

"I'll watch her more carefully. I'll-- "

"You'd have to restrain her."

"Yes, of course. I'll stop her before she even gets up. I'll listen more carefully."

"Listen to me, Hélène." Dr. Marchand leaned over his laced fingers. "It would mean tying her in bed whenever you're not right there by her side and wide awake."

"Oh no." Hélène looked at him in wonder. "I couldn't do that."

Dr. Marchand wet his lips. "You wouldn't <u>have</u> to with the excellent twenty-four hour a day care she would get in a modern facility."

Hélène stared at him in horror.

He lowered his voice. "It isn't the money, is it, Hélène?"

"No! I'd do anything for her. She's like my very own mother, don't you see?" Hélène trapped a tear with the back of her hand. "I don't know what I'll do when she-- "

"Leave it to me, my dear," said Dr. Marchand, jotting a note on a pad of paper. "Believe me, it's for the best."

Tante Marie could not see it Dr. Marchand's way. Even after Hélène had patiently explained to her about the solid professional care she would be getting and how she would visit her every day, Tante Marie did not understand.

All she could do was to hold on to Hélène's sleeve and beg her not to leave her all alone to die.

When Hélène first came to visit at two o'clock every day, Tante Marie would stare out the window overlooking the manicured grounds. Hélène would ask in vain how she was feeling; did she need anything, was there anything she could do for her? Only once, when she was leaving and had paused at the doorway to look back, did her aunt turn to her, her eyes filled with tears. "I'll see you tomorrow, ma tante," Hélène had choked out before hurrying from the room. She stumbled down the hall, sidestepping wheelchairs and robed, ghost-like figures shuffling about in slippers; all she wanted was to reach the parking lot and the safety of her car.

It was then, on the way home, that she'd made a sudden detour to a town where no one knew her. Bottle of wine in hand, she couldn't bring herself to meet the eyes of the cashier, but fumbled in her purse for the exact change, and, snatching up the brown paper bag, flew out through the turnstile. Like her aunt, Hélène had always disapproved of liquor, although both had enjoyed the odd glass of wine or sherry on special occasions. Now she needed that release more than ever--that melting warmth that would suffuse her whole body and float to her head--only she found that the wine didn't act fast enough and that its sweetness made her queasy after just a few glasses. So the next time, she took a chance on the gin--she recognized the bottle in the

store from her uncle's old empties--and once home, as soon as she'd put down her keys and purse, she poured out a quarter of a glass in the kitchen. Then she closed her eyes, swallowed the biting liquid in three gulps, and sat down and waited. In no time at all, the headache which had assailed her in the car, pursuing her all the way home, released its grip, so that her head felt quite light and airy. Later, though, it would sometimes take another dose or two of the strong medicine to dissolve the pain, and then she would forget all about supper and head straight upstairs to bed.

One afternoon, as Hélène was entering her aunt's room, Tante Marie looked straight at her in such agony that Hélène rushed to her side. She was shocked to find her aunt's tiny wrists tied with strips of linen to the side bars of the bed. When she interrupted an interview to demand of the director a full explanation, he excused himself from a bewildered middle-aged couple, swept her out into the hall, and asked her to keep her voice down.

"Now what seems to be the problem?" He glanced at his watch.

"There is no excuse," Hélène insisted, her voice quavering. "No excuse for such behavior."

"Mademoiselle Duprés, please get to the point. I have several consultations lined up and a meeting at three."

"Why have you tied up my aunt like a prisoner? Bars on her bed is one thing-- "

"All the patients have side rails. It is for their own protection, so they won't fall out of bed."

"Yes, but-- "

"As for the restraints, there are times when your aunt will simply not lie still. She has these episodes, you see, not uncommon in old people, but they often hurt themselves when they move about so."

Hélène stared at the director, who was straightening his tie. "What does she do?"

"Well, if you must know, apparently she calls for you and starts banging against the bars. Often a nurse will come and hold her hand for a while and that seems to quiet her, but of course, there isn't always enough staff available and-- " The director looked pleadingly at Hélène. "Really, Mademoiselle Duprés, I must go back in. They're waiting."

"Why wasn't I informed?" Hélène asked quietly.

"We don't like to worry our clients unnecessarily. You pay good money to entrust your dear ones to our care, and frankly, sometimes there are things you're just better off not knowing about."

"I see," Hélène murmured. "Someone must have forgotten to untie her before I came. Is that it?"

"Excuse me," said the director, rushing back into his office. When Hélène returned to her aunt, the restraints had been removed and Tante Marie was staring out the window.

Hélène started coming at ten a.m. now, as soon as the doors were opened to visitors. She had considered bringing her aunt back home where she belonged, but when they told her about the tumor in her aunt's stomach and about the complexities of pain management, Hélène resigned herself to her day-long visits. Sometimes Tante Marie would let her hold her hand and would doze quietly, or she might gaze out the window, smiling dreamily. But other times, Hélène and a nurse would have to hold her down as she fought them off with amazing strength, spitting out venomous names: Enemy! Torturer! Murderer! Hélène would weep each time she came home now, her aunt's accusations pounding her brain until she thought it would split right open. She wanted to cry out loud--what had she done to deserve such punishment?--but who was she to argue with God's will? There was nothing to do but carry on without anger or bitterness. The gin helped to relieve the pain--Hélène was careful not to drink too much of it--only it couldn't banish an image that kept curling up wistfully in the corner of her mind: Tante Marie resting quietly, her folded hands rising and falling with each breath, a look of serenity adorning her wasted face.

For months Hélène watched the tumor consume her aunt until there was nothing left but bones held together by a transparent film of skin. She watched her breathing become more labored, rattling in her chest, and sometimes would rush from the room, choking, convinced that she herself was

breathing her last. They all said it was a wonder the old girl could hang on for so long. In the end Hélène fed her drops of water that she squeezed from the tip of a sponge onto her dry, caked lips. Her aunt had crumpled up into the fetal position, and there was nothing they could do to get her knees down. She died like that, the froth bubbling at the corners of her mouth and smiling at Hélène the way she used to--in love and pity.

Hélène didn't recognize her in her casket. She looked like a piece of porcelain, a brittle shell with an ill-fitting wig covering the few loose strands of hair. Hélène thought with repulsion of the corpses she used to work on and her pathetic attempts to simulate life. She looked up in shock at the little old ladies who came to pay their respects--the walking corpses who made up the bulk of her business--and determined right then and there to give it all up. Let Yvette carry it on. She had had enough.

She'd thought she'd be relieved now that her aunt was finally at rest. They'd both suffered enough; God's will had been done. But it was as though it had never ended. She still felt weighed down with the clinging presence of death, could still smell the sickening mixture of decay and disinfectant that had permeated every corner of the nursing home. Only now, with no place to go, nothing to do, she was more at the mercy of her headaches than ever. They cornered her in the kitchen where she sat ready with a bottle to fend them off and stalked her upstairs as she ran

to her room, slamming the door behind her. Sleep brought no relief because of the nightmares which plunged her deep into the cold, dark earth and left her quaking in bed, her hands on her throat.

It was only on one of her recent visits to the cemetery that she'd realized what was wrong. She'd been standing on the rolling carpet of green grass, watching the setting sun bathe the town and river below in golden warmth. The light was rapidly fading from the cemetery, but for a moment, she almost felt she too was basking in the orange sun. She had only to stretch out her arms to feel it. As she closed her eyes--a smile pressed to her lips--and slowly lifted her arms, she was surprised to find herself shivering. Frowning, she stooped down to pick up the sweater which had been draped on her shoulders. Brushing off the bits of grass, she looked around at the neat, orderly rows of tombstones leaning on their shadows like canes. Her eyes settled on the family stone and taking two steps towards it, she crouched to read the inscriptions she knew so well: "Jean-Luc Duprés--1902-1967, épouse de Rose Duprés --1901-1967; Emile Bolduc--1886-1967, épouse de Marie Bolduc--1893-1983; Hélène Duprés--1927- ." Her eyes widened when she saw her own name and the open date as though for the first time--waiting for her to join them. She wouldn't be left behind after all. It was all part of His Divine plan to bring them together. It was all clear now--just how ill she was, the ever increasing pain in her head no doubt due

to a tumor, still growing, even now. It was just a question of seeing Dr. Marchand to have her worst suspicions confirmed, and that would be the end of it. There was nothing more she could do.

The rattle of the pane against her forehead jolted Hélène into straightening up. The bus was careening alongside the St. Lawrence River, and her tired eyes took in the gentle lap of its waters. Suddenly, it hit her. She was going to live. That was it. Death sentence remanded. There was no tumor, no malignancy, no cancer. She could forget about chemotherapy, losing her hair, wasting away. She saw the poor, sweet, emaciated face of Tante Marie turning to her with her final smile.

Her heart quickened as the bus turned up the drive, swinging into view a row of pink, blue, and white clapboard houses with little picket fences and blossoming trees and shrubs. The lush greenery and candy-colored homes were off-set by a bright blue sky punctuated by the odd wisp of a cloud. Was it possible? Would she finally live to see God's glories unfold before her like the petals of a rose? She could open up the chalet again, go for walks along the moss-strewn paths, breathe in the sea air. She could take that expedition to see the whales--were they really blue? Or why not go further? She had always wanted to travel, to see what lay behind the wrought-iron gates of La Porte-du-Ciel. She could even visit her sisters; years ago they

used to write and ask her all the time: "Come up and see the baby. . . . You'll be just in time for Josée's first communion. . . . Why don't you get away for a little while? The change would do you good." But she had always been so busy, and even when she'd broached the subject with her aunt and uncle, they would look at each other as though she were asking for the moon. Now it was different. There was nothing to stop her but her health. Fifty-seven wasn't so old. Maybe it wasn't too late. Maybe that doctor could help her. Maybe he could give her, what Dr. Marchand had called it, a new lease on life. Hélène continued to marvel at the sights passing by. They looked like Kodacolor snapshots of perfect summer days.

Yvette had locked up for the day. Hélène rummaged in her purse for her little black phone book. She dropped the purse and the bag of pills she'd had filled at the pharmacy on the kitchen table and snatched the receiver from the wall phone. Who should she tell first? It was such good news she should call each brother and sister individually, even if it were long distance, if only to hear herself say, "It's all right! I'm going to live!" again and again. It would be well worth the monster phone bill at the end of the month. Her heart pounding, she was about to dial the first number when she suddenly remembered. No one knew. They hardly ever kept in touch anymore, and she wasn't about to burden them with her little problems when they

were so busy as it was. They'd long since given up on her, only dropping off the occasional rushed note or Christmas card out of family duty. No one even visited anymore.

Hélène remembered the few times, so long ago, when her sisters had stopped by, always on their way to somewhere else. They had seemed so much younger than herself with their childish chatter and giddiness. It tired her out just to watch them. Even at twenty she'd felt like some hoary great aunt who couldn't take too much excitement; just a pat on the hand, and she'd be happy. She used to carry their suitcases up the steps of the salon and agree to pose for pictures with them no matter how awkward she felt. They would stand on the balcony or in front of the flower bed as Tante Marie pointed the camera at them and sang out, "Stand closer, that's it, squeeze in together, and smile!" They always looked so different from each other: Hélène, tall and rectangular with her two-piece suits and sweaters buttoned to the throat, her sensible laced shoes and thick hose that wrinkled at the knees and ankles; her sisters, petite and chic with their sheer stockings, floating perms, and flower-sprigged dresses. She remembered when one giggling sister had stuck a petunia in Hélène's hair. Hélène knew it would look odd with her winged glasses and cropped hair, but she had smiled for the camera even while bristling at her sister's shrill laughter.

What was she to <u>them</u>, after all? Some pinched old maid in a dead-end town. Her sisters had come to visit

only once or twice, then mailed her a steady stream of glossy pictures--glowing brides and gurgling babies--which trickled all too soon to the odd shot of some child's ballet recital or hockey game. Her brothers, she'd met only briefly at their parents' funerals. They'd stayed up in Northern Ontario to work for the CPR as section men or roadmasters, and only rarely did one of their wives drop her a curt note (usually one of condolence). What did they know of her, any of them? As far as they were concerned, she was ignorantly blissful in this little town. After all, she had her pottery and ceramics, didn't she? They knew nothing of the imagined tumor, nothing of the unbearable pain. There was always Yvette to give the news to, of course, but no sense in ruining her day. Besides, they weren't really her family. Her real family was . . . Hélène stared at the receiver dangling in her limp hand and hung it up.

All was silence except for the brutal beating of the clock. The headache was back with a vengeance. She <u>knew</u> what was wrong, no matter what the doctor said. He thought he was sparing her, but she knew. The tumor had spread and engulfed her, and there was little she could do now except ease the pain with her medication. She reached for another pill and the glass of gin which would help it to go down. Of course, she'd call the brain specialist in the morning. Maybe it wouldn't be malignant, after all. Maybe it would

be good news and she could call her family and . . . Hélène's bleary eyes wandered to the beckoning stone figures in the photograph. They were looking directly at her now, fearlessly meeting the camera's gaze head on. The grim little girl continued to hold her breath. Hélène groped for the last pill in the bottle. She would be all right now. The pain would pass. She folded her hands in her lap and waited.