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Close Calls: A Collection of Short Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Close Calls: A Collection of Short Fiction

Patricia A. Stone

Close Calls is a collection of four short stories:

"The Best Part of Summer," "Living on the Lake," "A Trip For One," and "Close Calls." Each story shares a setting of southern Ontario, but the central characters and their points of view are unique from one story to the next.

The four pieces that make up this collection are linked by the issues and themes implied by the title, Close Calls. In one story, the close call involves a brush with death; in others; the conflicts are physical, spiritual, emotional or psychic. The stories are arranged chronologically, according to the age of each story's central female character.

Close Calls is about people dealing with complex psychological elements in themselves and in others. All four stories are about individuals who discover essential aspects about life as a result of an event that brings them close to being damaged in some way, and in one case, to ruin. The stories do not necessarily end on optimistic notes, but in each case the character emerges from his/her ordeal with increased understanding.

The Best Part of Summer

For Maude, the best part of summer is sitting on the dock at Corky Cottage. Looking into the water, she can see the wooden beams, wrapped in soft green fur and running down to the sand--a universe of water spiders and darting insects. Occasionally, she spies a fish in one of the shadows, hideous with its dazed eyes and speckled skin, but shining like a rainbow.

Maude doesn't swim in the lake. She is afraid that a fish might graze her leg; or worse, her feet might become fatally tangled with the weeds.

Her younger brother, Gerry, likes to swim beneath the dock itself. He brings back stories of rusty tins and broken beer bottles. Maude has to imagine what these things look like. Imagining comes easy--it is something she does all the time. No one in the family can dream the way Maude does.

The sunken beer bottles probably belong to Uncle Larratt. Corky Cottage--like every cottage along this part of the lake--belongs to Maude's uncle, because of an inheritance. "I'd give my eye-teeth to have been left this resort," her mother always says. "If only someone could talk Larratt into lifting a paint brush instead of a bottle for a change."

For a long time, Maude has thought her mother would give her eyes and her teeth to own Corky Cottage. She imagines her mother trailing across the wide lawn of the lodge or standing sternly like a queen on the main dock, her gums bleeding, dark holes beneath her eyebrows.

It's true that the cottages need a coat of white paint.

Still, everyone likes Uncle Larratt. Especially Maude, though he frightens her when she is least expecting it. It's hard to believe that Uncle Larratt and Mother are brother and sister. Maude has noticed people become watchful when her mother enters a room. But Uncle Larratt's arrival anywhere marks the beginning of laughter.

Uncle Larratt spends every day of the summer limping about his property, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. He's a big man, tall, with arms the size of most people's legs. White brows fringe his blue eyes and his face is blustering and strong.

His voice is one of the deepest Maude has ever heard, the colour of red earth and shaped like a barrel. And when he breaks the silence of the day and bellows across the lawn, pickerel leap out of the lake. Maude doesn't mind the smell of beer on his breath; it is pungent and inviting. But her mother thinks it's a shame to have the Americans notice. The twenty-acre lodge is distinguished because Americans drive up from faraway southern states to stay and spend their money.

"So why have a drunk for a proprietor and ruin the whole idea?" Mother asks each summer.

Something in her voice takes the colour out of things. Maude looks at her uncle and wonders how her mother can feel so disgusted.

It's the middle of July and too hot to sit on the wooden planks of the dock. These days, Lovesick Lake lies beneath a silky, wavering heat that presses everything into silence. No

one knows what anyone is doing--not like at home where every day is a straight, taut line: Mother in the kitchen, and Father at work, and Gerry in the basement playing with his guns and trains.

Taking her runners off, Maude starts to walk in the direction of the lodge along the dirt road that winds around the lake. The earth underfoot is soft like the chamois cloth her teacher uses to wipe the blackboard. There are bullrushes and fox-gloves on either side, and water-lilies growing out of thick ugly stems just beyond the shore, impossible to reach. Now and then she hears a noise in the forest. She thinks it might be a rattlesnake, an owl surveying her movements, or a hungry mountain lion down from the hills; sometimes, a sly, lethal stranger.

Up at the main lodge where the American guests stay, it's cooler than on the road because a breeze blows in from the water. From a patio chair, Maude can see the lake and observe the guests taking the flagstone steps down to a high stone wall that surrounds the property. The big dock begins at the foot of the steps, blocked the last two summers by a gate that is kept locked because of Anson, Uncle Larratt and Vicki's new baby.

"Maude, come on over here and keep score for us fellas," Uncle Larratt calls when he sees that she's alone on the patio chair.

She shakes her head no and sits and watches for muskies to jump in the air beyond the gate and main dock; or else she

looks at her legs, which are skinny and beginning to grow a layer of fine blond hair. And when Americans emerge from the large white lodge, she studies them, envious of how they must float carelessly from room to room, smoking, drinking, feeling glad to be in such a beautiful place.

"The furniture in that lodge is worth an arm and a leg," Mother often says.

Maude listens and imagines her mother with one arm only, one leg, a one-sided woman wheelchairs at a terrifying speed down the dirt road from Corky Cottage.

"Maude, come on over here, Uncle Larratt calls across the lawn. "Get out of those shadows and into the sun. Keep score for us fellas while we play a game of horseshoes."

Maude feels herself shrinking: is he demanding that she play horseshoes with him? She slouches into the patio chair.

He keeps insisting. "Come on, I don't like to see anyone as pretty as you not enjoying herself."

She is grateful that Uncle Larratt pretends she is pretty. He thinks Maude is a smart cookie too--and tells her so; gives her riddles that can't be solved just to watch her squirm. She enjoys this as well--any attention from Uncle Larratt is worth its cost.

He plays horseshoes for a while each day with some other men who hang about the resort. They have known Uncle Larratt for many summers. The sound of metal clanging in the powdery silt makes the grass quiver and brings up goosebumps on Maude's spine. She likes that feeling. Her skin tingles as

though something invisible is in the air or in her mind. This is the way it should be forever and never end: the metal ringing and the yellow dust falling on the grass, the lake beside the lawn, Uncle Larratt so big and funny.

Not everything is perfect at Uncle Larratt's lodge. There are his three older daughters who have been allowed to run wild, as Maude's mother puts it. Maude waits for the day when she might see one of them racing down the road away from the lodge, her arms flailing and her face wild like an animal's. And then there is Uncle Larratt's wife, Vicki--not Aunt Vicki, just Vicki.

"Your Uncle Larratt was a finer person before he married Vicki," Mother often says to Maude. "He didn't drink the way he does now."

The story is engraved on Maude's mind like initials inside a locket. But just in case, she wants to hear it again and let her heart swell at the terrible things possible in a person's life. Her mother is in a good mood when Maude appears interested.

"Larratt was never the same after he had to marry Vicki. The only good thing she ever did was have Anson when she was practically old enough to get the pension. It's not in your aunt's nature to be helpful at a place like this--she's not what you'd call a real worker."

As far as Maude has observed, Vicki never does anything but work. She is never idle, always cooking, sweeping, scrubbing, hanging clothes out to dry. At the end of the day,

she must throw herself down, still dressed, onto the bed to sleep.

There are other stories about her--how at Christmas one year Mother told Vicki she wanted silk underwear from someone, and Vicki passed it on to every possible relative so that Mother got only silk underwear, twenty pairs at least, and not another thing. And that Vicki, when she opens her Christmas present, every year, holds it up and tells the others in the room watching, "I don't know what I'd ever do with a thing like this," no matter what it is.

But Maude doesn't mind Vicki, despite the stories about Christmas and her high-pitched voice and her skin, which is the colour of porridge. There are times when she is quite friendly and reassuring, though you can't be sure she isn't thinking what a pest you are.

So it's a surprise when, on Tuesday night--after the last motorboat has faded into silence--Mother suggests, "Let's walk up to the lodge and see what people are doing up there."

Maude's father stays in Corky Cottage, reading a book by the yellow lamplight.

"You can barely see your hand in front of your face," Mother says, a dark sturdy figure walking ahead of Maude and Gerry.

Then they are standing in Vicki's kitchen. She is still wearing her day-time cotton dress. She keeps rubbing her forehead and tiny white flakes of skin fall off and float away. When she talks, her mouth clacks. She mentions Uncle

Larratt and Maude stiffens. Vicki is shaking her head and looking through the kitchen floor. Mother nods and makes a sorrowful sound in the depths of her throat. Maude keeps her face averted as her mother and Vicki go on talking like best friends.

"It's a crying shame," her mother says.

"What sort of example has he ever set for the girls?" Vicki asks. "And what sort of a life is it for me?"

It would be a special treat to see Uncle Larratt. But the house behind Vicki is silent. The baby must be in bed by now. The older sisters are nowhere to be seen.

On the way back to Corky Cottage, Maude asks about Uncle Larratt's absence.

"He's in town getting soused," her mother mutters.

Uncle Larratt must be in the nearby village at this minute, throwing his head back at someone's joke, making everyone laugh with him. Maude wonders whether her own father does that when he leaves the house to go to work--throw his head back and laugh at a remark. For some reason, she and Gerry have not made their father light-hearted and funny.

You can't tell whether Anson takes after Vicki or Uncle Larratt yet. Mother has pictures of him--blond, smug, toddling carelessly across the lawn. And one of Anson on Uncle Larratt's knee.

You often see Uncle Larratt with his son like that, his boy on his lap--a bottle in one hand and Anson steadied with the other. People who stroll across the lawn and say "Isn't

he cute?" bewilder Maude. Babies are ugly and helpless. And there is no worse sound in the world than a baby screaming.

At least Anson has some hair this year. He's only two and roams about the resort being fed tidbits like a puppy. The Americans give him popcorn and chocolate chip cookies and cups of Freshie, which he spills down his terrycloth suit. He is a favourite topic of conversation: a definite shape and sound in Uncle Larratt's voice.

After lunch on Wednesday, when no one is watching, Maude picks Anson up on the patio chair. She studies his face carefully and he stares back at her in amazement. His eyes are blue like Uncle Larratt's, and his skin is pink. It feels like the soft yellow dust of the lake road or a lily pad warming in the sun when you run your hand across his cheeks and fat little arms.

Maude studies him and thinks about his being Uncle Larratt's. She thinks about how easy it is to dislike someone who is loved just for being himself, just for being alive. She wishes Anson hadn't been born. Uncle Larratt has been less interested in other things since he got a son, and when people pay attention to Anson, Maude feels small and uneasy. Someday, the entire resort will be Anson's.

Anson becomes restless. Maude is glad to let him down. Away he goes, falling and getting up and going off. Perhaps an hour will go by and you won't be able to find him anywhere, unless he's left a trail of plastic boats and animals behind him. Maude watches him toddle across the lawn and sees Pam

coming to catch him.

Pam is the youngest of Uncle Larratt and Vicki's three grown-up daughters. It was a surprise to everyone when Anson came along. Maude doesn't see her girl cousins very often. There is Marnie who has left for Toronto to be a legal secretary--"The only one who's made anything of her life," Maude's mother says; Geraldine, who has taken up with a Puerto Rican in Canada illegally; and lastly, Pam, who waits on people at the lodge dining room.

They are sullen girls who wear low tops and too much lipstick. Over the years, as one has succeeded the next in the dining room, they have done nothing but gripe about living so far from town, away from the dances and the boys. Once last summer, Maude watched as Pam lifted Anson out of his stroller and hit his bottom with a ping-pong paddle. She is cranky and white-skinned like her mother, the last daughter at home, preoccupied, mystifying.

But it's hard to imagine what it would be like having a father whose voice is deeper than the lake and whose breath smells of sweet, strong beer. Something must have made Pam so bad-tempered. At breakfast, she sets the plate of bacon and eggs onto the table in front of you and gives it a little shove so that for a minute it looks as if the plate may skid right onto your lap. The dining room is small and if she can bump into your elbow, she will--but she would never do that to an American. Maybe she hopes one of them will turn into an admirer, whisk her away from her father's summer resort and

off to Florida forever.

Maude wonders about Uncle Larratt and his daughters and how they don't have anything to do with each other. Maude's father is quieter, more earnest and gentlemanly than Uncle Larratt, who keeps pictures of Jayne Mansfield on his boathouse walls. Maude is very proud and shy of her father. Uncle Larratt, she likes in a different way. He is the overseer of her favourite place in the world: the lord of summer--a fragile week once a year when Maude is finally free and she can dream without being interrupted.

* * * *

On Thursday, it is overcast. Corky Cottage is a dreary place to be. Maude, Gerry and Father play Cribbage and Scrabble. They eat chips and cheesies, drink orange pop from bottles. Mother is lying down, trying to sleep through the occasional rumble of thunder. Maude watches through the window and prays for the sun. All day, the cottage feels like a small, unhappy cave.

When the rain stops at suppertime, the sky looks wild. It's hard to tell whether the storm is retreating or gathering force. On the horizon, the sky is black and blue. A shining strip of silver separates it from the lake. A scent of firecrackers lingers about the cabin. Up at the lodge, the guests will be feeling sticky. The crickets chirp cautiously under the dripping ferns. It is dark and quiet.

Gerry and Maude go outside and run through the trees around the cottage, celebrating the night--and the day behind

them that they have lived and won't see again. The tension of the long afternoon hangs stiffly over the lake and in the spaces between the pine trees.

Maude realizes she is feeling close to her brother. Sometimes, he is easy to dismay, and it's tempting to be mean with someone who is secretly weak or frightened. For a moment, Maude believes that her existence is faultless after all, linked by things as strong and vast as the earth underfoot, the trees like brave spirits all around. She knows that Gerry is experiencing the same sudden feeling and that she will always, at least, have her brother.

Behind the cottage where the rocks are covered with moist, glistening moss, Maude slips and her knee lands on a nail in a board. With the blood trickling down her leg, she hobbles back to the cabin, pushing Gerry out of the way when, stricken, he tries to stop and help.

Facecloths and dishes of warm water are brought into the living room. Maude's mother and father kneel to examine the injury and Maude's breath is cut short when "the nearest hospital" is mentioned. Till this, her parents' concern has made her feel rare and fussed over. She feels dizzy and ill suddenly. An old joke rings in her ears: "There must have been a mistake at the hospital. A switch. I couldn't have had a child like you."

"What do we have here?" Uncle Larratt's voice booms through the open screen--'awakening the dead', as Mother puts it later. Maude's parents on their knees, and Gerry, pale and

silent on the sofa, grieving for a lost moment, look up to see Uncle Larratt standing barefoot on the porch. He is conducting his nightly check on things. His face is beer-red and, in the lamplight, moths and mosquitoes circle above his head like a wild halo.

"She'll be all right, Larratt. She fell on something--a nail or something. It's such a mess at the back of these cottages," Mother says as Uncle Larratt comes through the door. She stands up. Maude looks past her as Uncle Larratt lurches into the room.

"Oh, Larratt," Mother says under her breath.

He winks at Maude and her brother and digs his hand into his pocket, peering down at the wounded knee as he draws out a Lovesick Lake souvenir jackknife. The blade gleams and smells of worms and fish.

He inspects the cut, glancing up at Maude from beneath the jungle of his white eyebrows. After a long silent moment, he leans back: "I do believe this knee will have to come off," he says.

Maude tries to keep from crying. Too late, she sees his teasing, triumphant grin, and she knows that everyone else has caught on and is laughing. Uncle Larratt never says "sorry."

Maude's knee is bound in strips from an old bed-sheet and Uncle Larratt sits down for a while in Corky Cottage and accepts a cup of coffee.

"We can't sleep in this heat anyhow," Mother says.

"It's the humidity--like this every July," Father agrees.

The grown-ups sit down to talk. Gerry, anxious to please, spreads the game of Snakes and Ladders on the card-table. Maude does not want to play. She is moved by the smarting of the antiseptic cream on her knee, the deepening hour, and by Uncle Larratt's presence in the cabin. She rolls the dice unthinkingly and moves the wrong man.

In a voice that is like a cavern in the moist night air, Uncle Larratt talks on into the evening. The black lake outside the screen is alive, slapping against the rocks. The evening would be perfect, but they are talking about Anson.

"That one's getting smarter every day," Uncle Larratt pronounces as he waves his cup, letting some drops fall on the table. "Did you hear what he did today? Got into my truck."

"But how could he?" Mother demands.

"He scrambled up the fence and popped onto the front seat."

"How is a two-and-a-half year old going to open the. . ."
Mother begins.

"He didn't," Uncle Larratt grins and slaps his knee. "I left the door open. When I got back, the little bugger was on the front seat. Isn't that something?"

Mother shakes her head and lights a cigarette. The smoke curls up to the rafters. "You're careless, Larratt. You keep him fenced in with the stone wall but you've still got to watch him better. There'll be hell to pay if he gets into the guests' rooms."

Father sets his cup down. "I don't think so--Anson is

everybody's pet. They'll take a story back to the States about how Larratt's kid got into their things this year. That's how family legends get started."

"That talk's for women!" Uncle Larratt raps his hand on the table and laughs. "It's a great thing having a son," he says, slowly nodding his head. "You've got someone to leave it all to. If I didn't have a son, I'd just sell the whole damned thing."

"All my family heirlooms go to Gerry because he keeps up the name," Mother says firmly, proudly. "But everything will be split evenly--we keep things even," she adds quickly.

Maude looks up at Gerry. He is engrossed in the game.

* * * *

Early in the morning, the storm has dissolved. Taking one of the lifejackets, Maude slips out of the cottage. At the dock, she gets into the old Corky Cottage rowboat, placing her lunch-bag beside her and a fishing rod at her feet.

The water ripples and makes a sucking sound as Maude rows. A voice coming from the cottage makes her stiffen with alarm for a moment. Then, she recognizes it as Mother, saying, "Roll over." The exasperation in her voice carries across the water like an echo. Father's snores are very faint in the distance. When they get out of bed, they will find Maude's note, 'Gone fishing,' Here at the lake, things are easier, freer, than at home.

Maude begins to row again. Many feet from shore, she is still able to see her horse figurines and transistor radio in

the window of her room: possessions she brings to Corky Cottage to make it feel like home.

Hatch Bay is a ways off. To get there, Maude must row past the lodge and main dock--and hope that the Americans aren't up yet.

"Where are you off to so early?" one of them might ask as Maude rows past.

"Hatch Bay."

"Where's that? Might make good fishing. . ." they'd say to one another and her secret spot might be taken away-- something which must never happen.

She passes the silent dock and rows with renewed vigor. The power boats rise and fall in unison. Her knee stings beneath its bandaids and gauze as she rocks back and forth on the rowboat seat.

It takes twenty minutes to row to Hatch Bay; then she must maneuver the boat beneath a bridge. On the other side, the lake floats over land that was once a farmer's field. Here, an immersed jungle sways beneath the boat. Weeds that could be snakes reach toward the surface. Maude rows in circles whenever she spies fish hiding in the wilderness below. They see her and dart away. As she rows, she watches for half-sunken logs, waiting like icebergs to gouge the boat.

Imagine draining the marsh--even better, draining the whole lake. People's questions would be answered; mysteries would be solved: the hulls of boats, some that went down in storms, others smashed up by drunken cottagers; fishing rods

crisscrossing the lake bed like pick-up sticks; snowmobiles that plunged through the ice in winter; the skeletons of snapping turtles and fish with red and yellow flies snagged in their mouths. Other skeletons.

Maude imagines the dancing, whispering lake dried up. But it will never happen and she is glad of that. Even in school during the winter, the mysteriousness of the lake and the feeling of Uncle Larratt's presence are part of her. To think about him and Corky Cottage is a comfort if something goes wrong or gets frightening during the day, which it sometimes does because Maude dreams.

"If you keep dreaming so much, someday you'll get stuck and never wake up," her mother threatens when stories filter home from Maude's teachers.

A treasured dream is that she, Maude, becomes Uncle Larratt's favourite and that, by some enchanting twist, the lodge is left to her.

* * * * *

She must be asleep. Maude tries to lift her head and knows then that she is having a dream. The sun seems to have cut through her body like something made of metal.

The boat has drifted over to the east side of the marsh. It is after lunch; the sun is behind the trees. Maude sits up. And then she hears it: some sort of commotion, voices calling.

"They're searching for me," Maude thinks.

She feels herself shrivel at the possibility that they

know where Hatch Bay is--that she has fooled herself into believing they don't. There are many voices, some dangerously near the marsh. Feeling sick, Maude begins to row. Once she has steered the boat through the tunnel onto the open water, she moves more quickly. The smell of firecrackers hangs in the air again, as though lightning has struck or is about to.

At the main dock, Maude ties her boat up. Still dazed from the sun and her dream-filled sleep, she goes through the gate and up the flagstone steps to a circle of adults gathered on the lawn to learn the news: Anson is missing.

Unnoticed, Maude walks among the guests. She wonders about Anson and tries to listen to what people are saying. He often trots off like this--but they say he's been gone all morning. Mother is wandering toward the boathouse, her hand cupped to her mouth, and Gerry is trailing behind her. Vicki and Uncle Larratt, their voices separated by the woods and the cottages, call out for their son. Pam walks by, not speaking, her eyes squinting in the late afternoon sun. Father must be in the woods behind the lodge.

"Anson!"

The voices fly out of the woods and get tangled in the slapping noise of the Canadian flag, fluttering in the breeze.

"Anson!"

Surely he can hear--unless he is really in trouble or has strayed too far. He must have fallen asleep somewhere.

Maude feels the urge to squeal out loud or kick her heels in mid-air and laugh. Different feelings prick at her back.

She'll be a hero--a heroine--if she is the one to find him.

He may have wandered down by Corky Cottage--bet no one thought of looking there, or even supposed he could walk that far. Or he may have climbed into a guest's bed in the lodge.

The Americans look bewildered, put off maybe that again today a meal is being held up for the sake of the kid: too many things can go wrong in this Ontario wilderness. Maude wants to stick her tongue out at them and say, "Yes, that's right!"

The old men sit in the lawn chairs by the horseshoe pits, holding their beer bottles but not drinking, and they talk softly--they're too old and short-sighted to help. The American tourists walk carefully around them and don't say "Hello." They walk down to the high fieldstone wall that lines the shore and toward the boathouse, calling, carrying their dripping glasses of liquor.

Maude walks down to the main dock to row back to Corky Cottage. She will eat something, search the cottage for the baby, and then walk along the dirt road to see if he has gotten lost in the bushes. Uncle Larratt will like her even more for this. If only she could be the one to find Anson. Everyone would feel differently about her.

The large motor-boats whine as they scrape each other's sides, bobbing in the water. As she crouches to untie the rowboat, an uneasiness creeps into Maude's stomach. She stands up and walks to the edge of the dock.

In the smooth black water, her face distorts. Far below

her, with the slippery green ferns and rocks, the baby face of Anson stares up, his eyes unmoving black beads.

Shocked, she stares out over the lake to let the moment wash over her. She doesn't look a second time at her drowned cousin, afraid of the dark roaring pull. Her legs are bending; they are so light she feels she may float in the air, or pitch forward into the blackness with Anson.

"You drowned," she thinks. She trembles with the impulse to laugh out loud in horror.

The calls continue to echo around the grounds. Maude stares over her shoulder at the lodge. Someone has checked the dock too quickly or not at all, she thinks. Afraid to look here. Leaving the worst till the last.

They might think she has pushed Anson off the dock and watched him drown. She wonders if anyone has noticed her yet, hesitating, frozen white on the edge of the water.

A solution takes form in her mind. She could snag his overalls with the fishing rod and drag him back to settle on the jungle floor of Hatch Bay. Otherwise, things will never be the same for Uncle Larratt. She pictures herself rowing back to Hatch Bay, towing the baby's body. Someone might see what she is doing. And Anson will be too heavy, water-logged.

Maude's legs take her stiffly along the dock and up the flagstone steps. She sits on the patio chair to wait and to hold the secret knowledge a few minutes longer. She watches people pass the patio, guests, Pam and Vicki, her own father-- his brow contorting the way it has in the past when he's been

angry with Maude.

Then Uncle Larratt comes out of the main entrance to the white lodge. His face is red, about to burst--as if his face has had something hurtled at it: a fistful of gravel or scalding liquid. Maude can see the perspiration shining on his forehead and above his mouth. He limps across the lawn, rapidly, stumbling like a blind man toward Vicki whose face turns hard and hateful as she stares at Uncle Larratt and turns her back on him.

Maude ducks her head, embarrassed at having witnessed such a thing. She wonders if Anson has drowned because of Uncle Larratt's big, easy-going happiness. She has been the first one to see the baby in the lake--she is sure of that. It will take some time for Uncle Larratt to get over this, but when he does, Maude will be his favourite.

"I'm ahead of them," Maude realizes. She glances up as Uncle Larratt and Vicki gaze at the dock, the unlocked accordion-style gate. A hush settles over the grounds. It is a strange sensation knowing what is about to happen to people.

At the last moment, Uncle Larratt seems to notice Maude sitting alone on the patio, but immediately he is distracted. He looks at her face without expression; his eyes slip away. He doesn't see Maude lift her arm to point her finger toward the dock. She is invisible, someone else's child, someone to tease perhaps.

More people stop to stare down the flagstone steps to the open gate and the long dock where the boats are bobbing.

Maude can't see the looks on their faces. She can hear people's voices, "Oh, God", or maybe it's just the breeze rustling through the leaves that are baked dry in the summer heat.

She gets up to walk back to Corky Cottage. The shadows of branches and the long arms of trees move on the dirt road like lacy curtains. She feels herself moving away from everyone else, their voices rising in the distance stretching behind her. There is a long afternoon ahead of her and no one knows where anyone is.

Living on the Lake

On the first day of spring, Lilah waited in the school playground for Suzette. They were in different grades, since Lilah was two years younger. Suzette's Grade 8 class was serving a ten-minute detention for throwing spit balls.

A number of bikes were lined up beside the school, their plastic streamers were snapping in the breeze. Lilah could hear the city, its electric, smoky roar, several miles to the west. Thinking about the people who lived in the city made her feel impatient. Even this--seeing the coloured strips of plastic flap in the air and waiting for Suzette--filled her with an unbearable restlessness.

Suzette finally emerged from the school and they began to walk home.

"Look who's waiting for us," Lilah said, once they had left the school grounds and were walking along the sidewalk.

Suzette peered along the sidewalk. Her eyes narrowed and she nudged Lilah. "Do you want to?"

Further along, Mr. Sherman was trimming the cedar bush that bordered the sidewalk. He scissored the air with the garden shears as he spied the two girls coming toward him. His pale whiskered face brightened and he waved.

Looking beyond him, Lilah could see the lake on the horizon, as still as the backdrop in an old movie, an unwrinkled robin's egg blue. She began to imagine situations--adventures where she might be forced to row across it as a matter of life or death.

Suzette cut into her thoughts. "Don't start laughing."

"I won't. Don't forget--you only see him at his house. I have to be an actress on Sundays."

Lilah went to church with her mother. Every Sunday, they entered the yellow foyer, and Mr. Sherman, in his suit and tie and V05-slicked hair, escorted her mother to a pew near the front. It was difficult for Lilah not to glance at him and start to smirk. She enjoyed the possibility of being caught sending such a look in Sherman's direction.

Three pews ahead, Mrs. Sherman always sat waiting for her husband to finish his tasks in the church foyer and join her for the service. She was a fat, dwarf-like woman with bow legs and a churchwoman's bosom that rested on her protruding stomach. Every Sunday, she pivoted in her seat and looked through her watery, vague glasses to see who was at church. Then she'd see Lilah and Mrs. Arliss and give them a wan smile.

It was hard to say how much she knew.

Suzette's parents never went to church. They fought a lot. Even worse, Mrs. Braun had to work, a situation considered suspect by the other neighbourhood women.

"Do you ever see Suzette's father?" Mrs. Arliss had asked Lilah once.

"Sometimes."

"Don't ever go into his and Mrs. Braun's bedroom or lie down on their bed. Not for any reason," Mrs. Arliss said.

"Why?"

Mrs. Arliss had pursed her lips and looked at the wall

beside the kitchen table. "There's a gun under his pillow. He keeps it because of something that happened years ago."

Lilah struggled not to appear over-anxious. "What?"

"He was in love with some girl and her family wouldn't let them marry. So they agreed to die together and Dick Braun drove his car over a cliff down at the lake. Only the girl died and he didn't. Her brothers swore they'd kill Dick Braun for it. So he sleeps with a gun under his pillow."

Lilah wished she had the nerve to slip into the Braun's bedroom some time and look under both pillows--or the nerve to ask Suzette if the story was true. But what if it wasn't?

The Brauns lived in a way that was unpredictable, but carefree, energetic. Lilah liked to visit such disorderliness. Someone was always coming or going; there was always trouble or laughter.

"Come in for a glass of milk," Mr. Sherman said when Lilah and Suzette were closer on the sidewalk. "Or for a cup of tea," he added.

A sly trick. Lilah was not allowed to drink tea at home and he knew it. Suzette could do anything she liked because her mother worked. She was the middle of five sisters--all blond, blue-eyed girls--and she wasn't scrutinized the way Lilah was, an only child whose mother stayed at home.

The girls unhooked arms. Suzette spoke in the aggressive voice she had recently started to cultivate. "'We'll take tea. We can't stay long. Is Mrs. Sherman at home?'"

Lilah glanced at her, flushing. Suzette was direct about

what she wanted.

Mr. Sherman winked. "Shopping. You can say hello when she gets back."

He led them up the side stairs to the kitchen door. They followed him inside and Lilah started to tremble with a pleasurable mix of reluctance and excitement.

As usual, an odour permeated the house, as if a wet dog had run through it. But the Shermans no longer kept pets--not since their two daughters had gone off with men to have their own children. Evidently, they had owned a parakeet once, but now the cage sat beside Mrs. Sherman's purple velvet armchair with a Boston fern growing out of it. The house was stuffy. Nothing looked overly clean. At home, Lilah could see her reflection in the yellow paint of her mother's kitchen cupboards.

At the kitchen table, Mr. Sherman sat down on a chair and Suzette and Lilah got up on his lap, one on each broad knee. Suzette turned the pages of the magazine so that he could keep one hand beneath each of them, balancing them. The pictures in the magazine depicted women with black bands painted over the photograph to conceal their eyes. They had enormous breasts and thin strips of white fabric stretched tautly between their legs.

After a few minutes, Lilah could feel Mr. Sherman's fingers pressing up between her legs. No one said anything. It irritated her that he thought she and Suzette didn't realize what he was doing, but other times, she wished he

would be dirtier, more dangerous--actually touch her skin instead of push through her underwear. She wondered what would take place if Mrs. Sherman walked in and saw the look on her husband's face.

After they had looked at the pictures of women tied with ropes, or leaning toward the camera with their breasts hugged together, he fixed them a cup of tea.

"You won't tell Mrs. Sherman, will you?" he said, as they left by the side door. He was confident of their loyalty--or of their stupidity. Lilah couldn't be sure which.

She and Suzette walked to the playhouse in Lilah's back yard. Originally, it had been a shed for Mr. Arliss's lawnmower. Now, it consisted of a table and two chairs, a square piece of linoleum, and a small rug. Their supplies included a flashlight, which Lilah had found as the prize in a box of popcorn, a package of dates and bottles of Orange Crush. They had made curtains and put up pictures of Joanne Woodward and Angie Dickenson wearing black-net nylons and lacy bathing suits. The door had a lock on it.

They kept their mothers' cast-off dresses here, as well: taffeta evening dresses, and a glamorous blue satin gown that Suzette's mother had given them--all with crinolines and fancy cloth-covered buttons. Lilah often pictured Suzette's mother in that fairytale blue dress. Maybe she had been wearing it the night Mr. Braun fell in love with her.

Some days, if they got bored, they put these dresses on and took pictures of each other. On Lilah, the dresses looked

like housecoats. The strapless ones slipped to her waist. On Suzette, who was fifty pounds heavier, a few dresses were tight and she had trouble getting the zippers done up. Sometimes, she split an entire seam. But in most of the dresses, she looked like a woman.

"Let's go to Toronto on the train," Suzette said as Lilah counted the money they had saved and tapped it into a neat bundle on the playhouse floor. "We can take the subway to Yorkville and get into a bar."

Lilah leaned against the playhouse wall and thought about that. The truth was, she didn't care about getting into bars. She liked to think about taking a bus to Niagara Falls and listening to the thunder, and walking through the Chamber of Horrors at the wax museum where there was a display of Charles Blondin riding his bicycle over the treacherous gorge.

"You know what I'd really like to do--save this and wait until Nancy Sinatra's new movie comes."

"I'll take my half and go to Yorkville alone," Suzette grumbled.

* * * *

When the weekend came, Lilah walked over to Suzette's. Along the way, she thought about Mrs. Braun who was always laughing and who, for years, had made the best Freshie and the best popcorn in the neighbourhood for whoever happened to drop in to see one of her daughters. She was always tanned and happy.

"Don't get married!" she always laughed. "Just go out

with boys."

"What about having children?" Lilah asked her once.

"Don't ever have children."

The Brauns lived on the shore of Lake Ontario in a large white house with green shutters. One of the stairways inside was blocked off by boards. Lilah often wondered why this had been done--and who had nailed the boards up like that? Boxes sat everywhere, unpacked since the Brauns had moved in five years earlier. The walls in many rooms were half-wallpapered, with bright modern paper ending where the old pattern remained, faded and water-stained.

As Lilah walked up the driveway, she looked at the mist-enveloped lake in front of the house and thought about Rochester and the rest of New York State, mysterious and foreign on the opposite side. Water meant all sorts of things: marauding pirates, yachts and millionaires, journeys, drowning, mermaids, monsters, submarines that were silent and lethal. Oysters with pearls inside.

Two years before, on April 1, the local paper had published a picture of a monster like Godzilla rising out of the lake. On page 2, they had printed, "Happy April Fool's Day." Lilah had felt disappointed. She liked to think that if she watched the lake closely and often enough, a real monster, like the one in Loch Ness, might reveal itself. She was glad that someone she knew lived on the water.

Angela, the youngest Braun, was lying on the hammock in the long, green yard. Her caramel-coloured hair tumbled over

the side of the canvas. She saw Lilah, yawned, and didn't speak. Another sister, Annie, was in the kitchen cooking french fries in a pot that was smoking and hissing. The house smelled like a chip truck.

"Come on up, Lilah," Suzette called from upstairs.

In the living room, a sofa and three chairs were covered with white sheets. In front of the fireplace, a large picture leaned against the bricks. Lilah stopped to look at it each time she visited--a photograph taken years ago of the five Braun girls, each sister like a blond, blue-eyed princess in a fairy tale with their creamy faces and pale pink smocked dresses, ribbons and lace at their necks and wrists.

On the way upstairs, Lilah passed the oldest sister, Maria, who was sixteen. She was going on dates now and wore lipstick that smelled like pink candy floss. In her drawers, there were lacy push-up bras with rose sachets inside the cups. Her current boyfriend was much older; he aspired to be like Bob Dylan. He had long curly hair, smoked, didn't say anything, scowled, played a guitar.

Maria looked at Lilah warily and said "hello" as if it were beneath her, but the cultured thing to do.

"What took you so long?" Suzette said at her bedroom door. Once Lilah was inside, she pushed the knob in to lock the door.

"I had to wash the cellar stairs. It's one of my new chores."

Suzette made a face and shrugged. "Come on," she said,

bouncing on her double bed as she kicked off her slippers.

Lilah lay down on the bed and took her clothes off. She watched Suzette undress. Under the bedspread, they started to wrestle, laughing when one got too rough. Sometimes, they stopped to kiss each other's neck. Lilah breathed in the honey and rose scent of Suzette's new round breasts. She arched her back and moaned, pressing her head into the pillow as Suzette explored with her fingers.

"Do you want to use something?" Suzette asked.

Over the past few years, they had used a feather, a carrot, and a ruler.

A rap at the door startled them. Lilah stared at Suzette.

"What are you two doing in there?" Maria demanded from the hall.

"We're doing what's none of your god-damned business," Suzette said loudly, narrow-eyed.

"Open this door!" Maria rattled the knob.

"Eat shit!"

Maria pounded on the door and Lilah sat up, quickly pulling her jeans on. Suzette lay back on the bed, laughing. She stared tauntingly at the door and laughed like crazy.

They listened as Maria stomped downstairs.

Suzette looked at Lilah. "Don't get dressed. Let's go for a swim. I'll lend you a suit."

Lilah considered. "What if your mother hears that we've been in the lake?"

"She won't. She's not home for two hours yet."

"Maria will tell her," Lilah pointed out, but she had already taken her blouse off again.

"She wouldn't dare. I'll tell Mum that she sleeps around and that she keeps safes in her purse."

The water was cold. Lilah went in up to her knees and stopped. She was terrified of getting caught by the strong undertow that tugged at her ankles like a stranger's hands. She stood in anxious amazement and watched Suzette, who kept disappearing behind the waves and bobbing up again.

* * * *

When she got home, Lilah's mother was making a stew at the stove. "I don't like your going to the Brauns when neither of those parents are ever at home," she said as soon as Lilah had hung her jacket up.

Lilah's heart began to beat faster. Another freedom was about to be taken away--another escape was about to be sealed off and she would be pushed further into the strenuous place of lying convincingly, into taking even greater risks.

"Mrs. Braun always calls to see if anyone needs anything," she lied.

Mrs. Arliss looked up from the steaming pot. "Did she today?"

"She phoned before I arrived--Annie said so." She always left herself a way out.

"If I ever hear that you go near the lake, I'll forbid you to even see Suzette. I don't understand why the Brauns

bought that place, what they could have been thinking of. Typical of those two, though."

"We don't go near the lake."

"Well, don't. What do you do over there?" Mrs. Arliss asked more congenially.

"The same sort of thing we do in the playhouse. . . ."

All evening, Lilah worried that Suzette's mother would call. She lay awake worrying and planning after she had gone to bed. She was not much of a sleeper anyway, because she imagined too much. The direction her life was taking and the remote world of being an adult were the two things that kept her awake wondering.

Long after midnight, she was often still awake, listening to her transistor radio. One night, under her blanket, she had heard Skeeter Davis sing, "The End of the World." Lilah kept hearing the song in her memory. She hoped she would never be as hopeless and lonely as Skeeter Davis sounded.

Tonight, lying awake listening to her transistor, Lilah heard Nancy Sinatra singing, "These Boots Are Made For Walking." Sitting up in bed, Lilah listened to it. She wished she could be in the song, or the one singing it. She envisioned herself dressed like Nancy--in white go-go boots and a tight white and black mini dress. After the song had ended, Lilah sat up in her dark bedroom, holding on to the sense of power the music gave her.

The next morning at breakfast, keeping her voice even, Lilah announced to her mother that she planned to buy the

record.

"I don't like the Sinatras--they're tied up with organized crime. It's a fact," Mrs. Arliss said. "Anyway, I don't want you buying records--there's plenty of time for that. Save your money."

"It's my money," Lilah said, feeling herself heading toward a red, dangerous anger.

She sold Regal Christmas cards and every January ended up with a box of one and two dollar bills. She had an allowance too and occasionally she took extra change from her mother's purse when sent to the store. Having money set aside gave her a greater sense of safety.

"Save it--you can buy me a nice Christmas present," Mrs. Arliss joked.

"The same thing happened when I wanted to buy 'Blame It On the Bossa Nova'."

"That's an adult song and you're not going to buy adult records," Mrs. Arliss said, flying into her own red fury.

They eyed each other warily. Any moment something uncomfortable and awful might be said. Lilah would say "I hate you" in a strangled voice. Her mother would threaten to ship Lilah off to a private girls school where no privileges were granted at all. The same argument had taken place over a Christmas record, "Winter Wonderland," because the singer and his girl were "conspiring" by the fire. That time, Lilah bought the record anyway, but it was a pointless purchase because she couldn't very well play it. The record was buried

in thick plastic in the backyard behind the playhouse. Many things were buried there.

Once, when she was upset over something, Lilah had collected the jewelry she had received at Christmas and birthdays, plus a few things from her mother's dresser. She put the necklaces, bracelets, and earrings into a plastic bag and left it on the back porch while she went down to her father's work room for a shovel. She liked the idea of buried treasure. It was a secret over which she would have complete control. She began to plan a cryptic map that people would discover hundreds of years in the future. When she came upstairs, the bag was gone from the back porch.

Two years ago, she came across one of the bracelets lying in the spring mud at the foot of a tree in the backyard. She wondered sometimes whether she had buried the treasure that day after all and just forgot. It surprised her that her mother never noticed the missing items.

* * * *

Lilah and Suzette were sitting in the playhouse. It was August now. Through the window, the sky looked humid and grey. They were putting in the hours. The movie with Nancy Sinatra was playing downtown.

"These Boots Are Made For Walking" came on the transistor radio and Lilah turned it up.

"Do you like it?" she asked Suzette.

"It's all right," Suzette said. "I like 'Sally, Go Round the Roses' better."

"As though Sally would go through the roses," Lilah said darkly.

Suzette laughed. She wanted to go back to talking about how to kiss someone. "After you kiss a guy, you're supposed to keep your eyes closed for ten seconds to look romantic."

"And to get your bearings," Lilah added.

"Well, I don't know," Suzette said doubtfully. She studied her fingernails.

Earlier that morning, they had gone to Mr. Sherman's. His wife was at home, sitting in her chair sewing buttons. Telling her that he was going out to show the girls his vegetable garden, he took Lilah and Suzette to the hot, dusty loft over his garage. The three of them sat in the yellow straw and he gave them a calendar with a photo of a woman wearing a cowboy hat and a low-cut top, a Macaw perched on her arm.

"It's for the playhouse I keep hearing about," he told them.

"What a colourful bird," Suzette said coyly, darting a look at Lilah.

Mr. Sherman laughed at her. "You like more than the bird."

Under the straw, in one corner of the loft, he had hidden a stack of magazines. He got one out and sat on the straw-covered floor. Lilah and Suzette arranged themselves on his lap and Lilah turned the pages, her fingers trembling as Mr. Sherman's fingers curled under the tight crotch of her

underwear and began to stroke the damp skin. A deep, urgent feeling came over her. She felt her underpants grow warm and wet. She flashed a look at him. He looked back at her in a pleased, knowing way. She realized, glancing then at Suzette's face, that this was how Suzette had been responding all along. At that moment, Suzette dropped the magazine and slapped her hand tightly over his, pressing against herself. Lilah sat consumed with heat and a moan trapped in her throat as the old man pushed his finger all the way up. When they left the garage, she avoided his eyes and watched Suzette instead, who punched Mr. Sherman's arm in a light, familiar way and chattered on about seeing him again.

Lilah lay on her back on the playhouse floor and looked up at the calendar, thumbtacked alongside a picture of Marilyn Monroe, who had recently killed herself. She thought about Mr. Sherman and how much she disliked him for laughing at Suzette, for thinking that they were too innocent, too stupid, to know what was going on. His marriage and his life could be ruined by just one breath of the truth to Mrs. Arliss. He'd no longer be standing in the church foyer on Sunday mornings.

Suzette took a bottle of nail polish from the shelf. She began to apply the enamel to her nails. For two weeks, they had been talking about how they might possibly get into the restricted Nancy Sinatra movie.

Several days before, they had taken a bus downtown. In Woolworths, they bought pink nailpolish, two pairs of fishnet nylons, two kerchiefs that looked like bits of cirrus cloud,

and garter belts for the nylons. From their mothers' bathrooms, they borrowed circles of rouge and pressed powder. And they each had a blue, Empire-waistline dress to wear.

* * * *

After dinner, they walked downtown, carrying the makeup, hairspray and their outfits in plastic bags. It was light out till late now. At the dinner table, Lilah had told her parents she was playing baseball at the park--a risky story, because sometimes her father got it into his head to walk down and watch her.

"Do you really think this is going to work?" Lilah asked Suzette on their way downtown.

"It will."

"No matter how much makeup we put on, anyone will see how young we are up close."

Suzette laughed and slapped her plastic bag against her leg. "Men like young girls," she said. She looked away--at nothing, but at something she had seen or heard before.

Lilah was silent for several blocks. Suzette was not afraid of men. For Lilah, they were vaguely threatening, unpredictable.

"A man can't stop himself if you let him get past a certain point," Mrs. Arliss often pointed out. And she told Lilah, "A woman never enjoys sex as much as a man."

Men had no control over their bodies or their minds, Mrs. Arliss said. But Mr. Sherman wasn't letting things go too far--although he probably imagined it. And Lilah was sure

that Mrs. Braun enjoyed sex. There was that cheerfulness and pink, plump prettiness about her that made Lilah feel this had to be the truth. And she had given birth to the five daughters.

At one of the hotels along the main street, Suzette and Lilah changed their clothes in the women's washroom. A dispenser produced a vial of Paris cologne for twenty-five cents. They dabbed some on and made their faces up, hiding in the cubicles each time the door opened and a woman came in. When they were finished, they checked themselves in the mirror over the sinks, standing on toilet seats with the doors held back to see as much as possible of their legs. With the face powder and tight dresses, they looked older.

"I bet we could even get into a bar," Suzette said confidently.

Lilah rolled her eyes. That would be pushing things too far.

They had taken two pairs of Maria's high-heeled shoes, and as they emerged from the hotel, Lilah felt herself teetering ridiculously. Her feet were long and narrow, and Maria's shoes were for plump short feet like Suzette's. Like Mrs. Braun's. And anyway, Lilah had never worn heels before.

"Now what?" Lilah asked nervously.

"Let's just wait here like I said," Suzette said. She leaned against the hotel wall with her arms folded. "Guys go driving around--someone will stop and ask what we're doing." She wasn't nervous, but her voice sounded edgy and sarcastic.

"We have to be careful." Lilah leaned against the wall with her arms behind her. The brick felt warm and smooth.

"You're always so frightened." The makeup made Suzette's nose and chin, even her eyelids, look sharp and pale. A film of powder dusted her lashes.

"I am not," Lilah said. She resolved not to be visibly afraid and ruin their chances of being escorted into the restricted movie.

"What can happen?" Suzette went on. "We're going to meet a couple of guys, go to your stupid movie--then go home."

"Imagine if Sherman saw us here," Lilah said. "He'd figure it's all right to finger us."

"He already thinks it's OK," Suzette observed.

Lilah flashed a look sideways. "He does not."

They were quiet for a moment. Lilah felt bewildered by the sudden strain. "Imagine doing this for real," she said.

Suzette sounded really irritated. "We are doing it for real."

Lilah struggled. "I mean being sixteen."

She felt as if she were losing some sort of control. She didn't feel liked suddenly, not on even footing. She remembered her mother's warning that Suzette would go to highschool in the fall and, that after that, they wouldn't really be friends.

"Look at Maria--who wants to be sixteen?" Suzette said, glowering down the street toward a line of cars that had started up as the lights turned green. "I told her and her

boyfriend last night that it's a miracle she isn't pregnant yet."

"You said that in front of him?" Lilah demanded. There was something vivid and truthful about the open anger between the Brauns that she liked.

Suzette smiled and took a tube of lipstick from her purse. She regarded her reflection in a compact mirror, the lipstick poised over her lips. "They both wanted to kill me. It's probably already true."

She snapped the compact shut. Lilah pulled her eyes from Suzette's face and followed her gaze to a car pulling up at the curb. In it were two men with short-sleeved shirts, short hair. The man driving leaned out the window. "Want to go for a ride?"

"Can't. We're taking in a movie. Want to come?" Suzette smiled.

The two men spoke to each other and one of the laughed. Lilah felt her stomach flip-flop.

"Hold on," the driver said, winking at them.

They parked their car at the gas station across the street. When they got out, Suzette began to sputter. "Look at them!"

The men were wearing plaid Bermuda shorts, athletic ankle socks, and sneakers. When they jogged across the intersection, they looked like conservative older men. Like teachers.

"When they get up close, they'll see how young we are,"

Lilah whispered.

"Just keep your mouth shut and they'll never know," Suzette instructed. "They'll get us into your movie--that's what you want, isn't it?"

At the ticket booth, Lilah hung back and tried to make her face wear an older girl's expression. She remembered coming here with Suzette a year ago to see Walt Disney's "The Nine Lives of Thomasina." While everyone else in the theatre had cried at the cat's funeral, Suzette had laughed so hard she was practically screaming.

The tickets were purchased through the wicket, no questions asked. In the foyer, Bob, who had been driving and who was clearly going to be Suzette's boyfriend tonight, drew out a pack of cigarettes. Everyone took one. When Lilah inhaled for the first time, she felt her body wanting to slump to the floor to go to sleep.

The posters for "The Wild Angels" showed Peter Fonda and Nancy Sinatra on motorcycles, with Nancy in her mini-skirt and high-heeled boots. The ads reminded Lilah of the local motorcycle gang--a dirty, dangerous-looking mob of men who were half-ridiculous, half-terrifying. There were even some older men who had never gotten free of being like boys or thugs, who still wore the jackets, rode the bikes, and lived in falling-down cottages on the outskirts of town.

Lilah felt tired suddenly. She knew that if things got very bad, desperate, she could always call her father and face the music. She realized that Suzette was much more on her

own--she both had to and could afford to be as reckless as she pleased. Lilah pictured her father walking to the park at this moment and seeing there was no baseball practice. Suppose he decided to drive through town looking for her.

Suzette was holding hands with Bob, the driver. The second man, Glenn, was sullen. He studied the posters of Nancy and Peter, and looked at Lilah as if she were an idiot when she asked him, "Have you heard her sing?" He and Lilah avoided looking at each other after that, even when he had to hand her a bottle of orange crush and a box of popcorn that Bob had bought. She realized he knew he'd been tricked. She felt ashamed for him. They walked down the aisle of the theatre in silence behind Suzette, who now had her arm through Bob's. Lilah felt like reaching forward and pinching her.

The movie began and Lilah tried to concentrate. She wondered what it was that she had expected from the movie. The black leather boots made Nancy look tough and sexy, but she didn't seem able to stand up straight in them. She and Peter Fonda danced and smoked marijuana at a funeral with their dead motorcycle friend propped against a wall, a lit cigarette in his mouth. Even after he had hit her, Nancy went on loving Peter Fonda.

Lilah shifted uneasily in her seat. The garter belt was biting into her flesh and the high heels were cutting off the circulation in her feet. She wondered how well she was going to adapt to fashion. She fought the impulse to nudge Suzette and ask questions about the movie's plot, which was muddled

and perplexing.

Suzette had missed most of the show. She was turned in her seat, kissing Bob. Lilah could tell by the pauses that Suzette was keeping her eyes closed for ten seconds after each kiss. Glenn leaned toward the aisle with his chin in his hand. Once, he let out a furious sigh. Lilah's face darkened in confusion. There was nothing she could say to him. It occurred to her that the movie would be soon over, and she would be maneuvered by Suzette's looks into the back seat of Bob's car with the surly Glenn.

Her eyes fell on a couple several rows ahead. From behind, with her curling blond hair and pink, fleshy arm stretched along the back of the seat and cradling the man's shoulder, the woman looked like Suzette. Lilah blinked and stared as the woman moved her head slightly. It was Maria and her boyfriend, who looked like Bob Dylan. Maria shifted in her seat slightly to make some space and her boyfriend slipped his hand into her blouse. He glanced at the rows of seats behind him--not secretively or suspiciously, but as if to confirm that he and Maria were being observed. That was what he cared about.

Panic rustled through Lilah's body. She stood up and slid past Glenn's knees without a word. Looking back, she saw that Suzette hadn't noticed she was leaving. Or maybe she had but it wasn't important compared to necking with Bob.

In the theatre's washroom, Lilah splashed water on her face and removed the nylons and garter belt. Immediately, she

felt safer. She put her runners on and combed the teasing out of her hair. Through the walls, she heard the soundtrack of the movie rising in pitch.

It was dusk. The streetlights were flickering. Lilah felt a surge of triumph. She wouldn't have to call her father for a ride. No difficult explanations--just this experience and now home. It wasn't so bad doing a thing alone.

On the sidewalk, Lilah kept her head bowed and hoped that no one would drive by and recognize her in a dress and running shoes. She imagined Mr. Sherman driving past and spotting her. Somehow, things would shift--he would be the one in control then. It was important to go on fooling him.

As she walked, Lilah began to feel a bit sick at the reckless thing she had just done--at the idea of losing Suzette and not being able to visit her again at the house on the lake. She wondered at herself doing a thing like this to someone who was supposed to be her best friend. But Suzette would handle the situation. She was becoming very skilled.

Lilah wondered what the two men would do. She pictured the way they would try not to look at each other.

She heard the running footsteps but didn't have time to whirl before a thump landed on her back. Speechless, mortified, Lilah spun and faced Suzette. Some colour had come back into Suzette's face, and she was grinning as if events had gone exactly as planned.

"Why didn't you give me a signal that you were making the getaway! Let's beat it before they're on to us."

"I didn't know that you'd want to--" Lilah stuttered.

She wondered if Suzette had misunderstood, or not seen how she had been abandoned. Or maybe the rules of allegiance shifted when men were involved. Lilah struggled to say something that would save their friendship after all, and then stopped, seeing that it wasn't necessary to explain herself or to apologize. Suzette was already running ahead, her high heels clicking hard and rhythmically down the sidewalk.

A Trip For One

Mac tapped his pipe against the barn door and watched the ashes fall to the ground. Reaching into his shirt pocket, he drew out a fresh clump of tobacco and stuffed it into the bowl. Blue smoke swirled behind him as he crossed the yard to lean against a gatepost. Elinor had been gone for more than two hours. She must have left the ranch to ride along the road.

Resting his elbows on the fence, Mac puffed slowly on his pipe. The woods at the end of the pasture waved in a solid, sultry motion in the wind. Beyond them, the drumlins reminded him of Exmoor when he was ten years old and riding his pony in local hunts--the only son in a family of daughters, the apple of everyone's eye. Mac looked away from the distant hills.

He wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. The air was humid--as if the wind were blowing in rain. He studied the trees below, willing the foliage to open like a curtain and reveal Elinor and his horse as they emerged from the woods to canter up the field. It made him nervous to have her gone this long. There had been some close calls over the past year. Once, when she had been galloping the horse around the track, Galahad had shied at something and Eleanor had hurtled through the air, brushing across the top of a post. When Mac raced to her side and pulled up her shirt, her stomach looked as if it had been combed with something sharp--tiny beads of blood forming in rows.

Another time, her foot had been caught in the stirrup when she tried to dismount. Instead of bolting, Galahad had

demonstrated his police-horse training by stopping. Mac had felt proud of his horse that night. Still, it could be a dangerous sport, and she was just a kid, a novice. She knew that he liked her to check in regularly.

I'll give her what-for when she gets back, Mac thought. Something painful throbbed in his right temple. He sucked in his breath and let the air out in a long angry whistle. I won't call her for a few nights, teach her a lesson.

Being invisible for a stretch might be wise anyway. He sensed that Elinor's parents were becoming disenchanted with him. Her mother sounded abrupt the last time he called to say he'd be taking Elinor to the ranch. At first the woman had been all agog over him, especially when he came around in his uniform. They remembered that he and Nadine had rented the Johnston's upstairs apartment years earlier. They were sympathetic about his divorce, impressed when he told them that he was writing a book of short stories. And wasn't it great that Elinor had a horse to ride. They even asked him about various laws, treating him like a lawyer, a professional. But suddenly they seemed to think less of him. Maybe the rumours were filtering through town now; maybe Elinor's mother had heard one of them. His supervisors had approached him about a few things; he was likely under their scrutiny now.

Mac watched Van Felt's horses grazing in the field-- thoroughbreds, quarter horses, two Arabians. Van Felt had invested too much too fast; he was in over his head. Still

Mac could sympathize with the desire to own horses like these and be the overseer of a large ranch. Horses always gave him the same feeling--of power, richness, beauty. He regretted not riding much anymore. Too much weight and a hint of arthritis made riding uncomfortable. The best days of his life had been when he and Nadine were newly married, newly emigrated, and he was riding Galahad on the police beat through the parks along the edge of Lake Ontario. At least he was getting a kick out of teaching Elinor how to groom Galahad, how to lift the horse's hooves and clean out the day's accumulation of dirt and grass, how to polish the leather saddle.

He had a dim memory of seeing Elinor when she was about eight--a thin, pale girl playing with a hula hoop on the front lawn of the house where he and Nadine were renting the top floor. They had been through another wild one that afternoon--a fight that had almost come to blows. Not caring that the Johnstons were listening in their living room downstairs, Mac had slammed the bedroom door and stood by a hall window that overlooked the lawn where the neighbourhood kids were making exaggerated motions to spin the hoops around their waists, and his eyes had fallen on Elinor's clear, open face and silky brown hair.

Funny he had crossed paths with her again after six years. He believed in the significance of such coincidences.

He had always loved kids. Nadine hadn't wanted to get pregnant. She hadn't wanted to do much of anything towards

the end.

As Mac began to walk toward the barn, his face tightened into a frown. Now that he was facing south, he could see that a storm was definitely moving in. If Elinor were much longer, he'd have to go and hunt for her. Mac muttered out loud, "You'll see me coming and know you're in for it."

She had mentioned something once about members of a motorcycle gang living at the foot of the hill. "Someone told me that Satan's Choice live along here," she had said to Mac one morning as they drove up the gravel road.

She had stopped abruptly to stare at the woods they were passing--as if she were looking for something. Mac had glanced at the silver birch and ironweed trees and then at the row of small wooden houses they were passing. A boy with long hair and a suede coat with fringes was standing on one of the lawns. The lawn was a mess of truck tires, toys, and dandelions. The hippies had bought up these shacks the past few years.

"Just a story at school," Elinor had said quickly. "Somebody must have been teasing me."

"Maybe you shouldn't ride down here. What's the matter with the track where I'm handy if something happens?"

"Galahad could outrun any of them. Anyway, they'd never try anything--not in daylight."

"Well, don't worry about it."

"I wouldn't be scared," Elinor had announced.

"Nothing scares you, right?" Mac had grinned at her in a

challenging, meaningful way. He swerved the car to tease her, to make her slide across the seat up against him. "You just tell them your old man is a cop; they'll leave you alone."

"Old man? You?"

"I'm putting you on!" He reached over to nudge her. He felt irritated that she had missed his joke.

She had been silent for a second. Then, she smiled at him and tossed her head. "I know."

It always surprised him when she spoke as if she were an adult. It was one of the things that drew him to her. She had the quickness, the ability to adopt the reaction--a womanly one--that he expected of her.

Mac stopped in the yard and gazed at nothing, thinking. If she was riding along the road and she believed the bikers were there. . . . He laughed aloud at his own thoughts. He had checked some files at the station and, although one or two bikers had lived around here a few years ago, there was no record of that now. Anyway, Elinor wasn't a girl who'd set out to tempt fate. Mac grinned. Sometimes, he wished she would be a little slyer.

Meeting her here at Van Felt's ranch a year ago, he had thought of her as a niece, even as a daughter. Her father had been with her, cautious and watchful, trying to find a place for Eleanor to do some riding. After a few weeks, Mac realized the girl was slipping into his thoughts, his daydreams. She had a way of moving, of grooming the horse and putting him through his paces, that was unstudied yet

graceful. Mac fantasized about having her turn sixteen. He liked the idea of being her mentor, a Svengali. There were plenty of instances throughout history of relationships like that. Ageing kings and their very young brides--so young that sometimes consummation of the marriage had to be postponed. He had even tried to write a story about that--about marrying a girl as young as Eleanor, sweeping her off to a lavish honeymoon in England, guiding her through the landmarks and moments of his own boyhood.

His Oldsmobile was parked beside the hay bin. On his way past, Mac noticed that Elinor's side hadn't been locked. He opened the car door to check the glove compartment. On the passenger seat, in a bed of tissue, lay the mirror, brush and comb set. The mirror had a quilted yellow satin back.

"Oh thank you," Elinor had breathed when she unwrapped his gift on the way out this morning. "They're beautiful."

Training his gaze straight ahead along the gravel road, he had sensed something unusual: She didn't know what else to say. She was embarrassed. She had run the comb through her hair with an air of reluctance. And the whole time, she had looked out the window at the passing farms. He couldn't understand what had gotten into her: he knew that she liked the present. He didn't understand why she had flinched like that, drawn back.

He almost regretted buying her the comb set. At first, his surprises had pleased her. In the spring, he had gone to Police School in Aylmer for a two-week conference. During his

absence, he wrote letters to Elinor. When he returned, he brought her a pair of riding boots, jodhpurs, and a hard hat. "If she's going to ride my thoroughbred, she's going to have to look the part," he joked with her parents. Everyone was pleased. For her birthday, he bought a pink jewelry box that had velvet compartments for bracelets. On a small mirror, a miniature ballerina with dark hair and a white lace costume twirled as long as the box was open.

Elinor had asked him once, "Did you buy your wife presents?"

"Now and then."

"Why did your wife want to go back to England?"

"Who knows. I hear she's shacked up with some guy over there. He can have her--all she did was bitch and cry. Whew! Could she fight!" Mac laughed. Sometimes, he got the feeling that she used Nadine as a topic of conversation. She used it to steer him away from talking about other things.

Occasionally, he saw Elinor when he was doing the sidewalk beat downtown with another officer. She never came near him. She knew not to. He wondered what he would do if she ever approached him downtown. The way pressure was mounting at headquarters these days, it could be awkward if he was observed. Once, she and two of her girlfriends walked past him at the four corners. He had felt disconnected--as if she belonged to a different universe, a different life altogether. He realized he felt jealous, possessive of her--the way he had over girls in his single days.

Mac kept his pistol in the glove compartment on days off. Peering inside, he lifted out maps, a pair of sunglasses, and a package of Chiclets to uncover the gun. He checked the chambers and stroked the polished black handle. Looks as if I may be turning you in soon, he muttered. The throbbing in his temple began to ache again.

He set the gun down and ran his finger over the yellow satin back of the mirror. He turned it over suddenly to reflect his face. For a moment, he studied his mouth, then his eyes. He wondered what was in his face that he himself couldn't see. Men he had worked alongside for years, fellow officers that he counted on as friends, had been filing complaints about him. Reports had been written.

The biggest damned frame since Mona Lisa, he said aloud.

He rubbed his finger across his chin and stared at his reflection. His lips were still as red as they had been when he was a boy, and his teeth were very small.

Replacing the gun in the glove compartment, Mac slammed the car door and leaned over to glance at himself in the side mirror. His hair hadn't started to grey yet; but his face was deepening, falling into lines and looseness. He straightened and stepped back to look at his car, admiring the wax job. It had been an impulsive buy, this car--but owning such a powerful vehicle made him feel good.

He began to walk back into the gloom of the barn, thinking. If the force let him go, he wouldn't have many options--not at forty-four. He could go back to England.

Nadine had gone back five years ago. He hated to think of the satisfaction it would give her to hear that he was jobless, crawling back. He'd lie of course. Couldn't stand one more Canadian winter. . . . But what about his car? Galahad? Elinor?

In the airy arena that separated the stalls from the feed and tack rooms, a group of regulars were gathered around the Coke machine. Mac walked toward them. One day, they were friendly and the next, they weren't. He knew they raised their eyebrows and speculated now that he was coming to the barn with Elinor. It entertained him to keep them guessing, wondering what it was that attracted a young girl like Elinor who could easily spend her time with boys her own age if she wanted to. It was the kind of thing people laughed about, but were secretly enthralled by.

One of the group, Van Felt, the red-faced, hard-bodied man who owned the ranch, turned to face Mac. "Good morning." He put his hand out.

Mac shook it, bemused. Normally, Van Felt muttered and turned his head away when he saw Mac.

"I got a legal question to ask you."

Mac looked at the squinting, dusty face of the rancher. He reached into his pocket and began to refill his pipe.

"That so?"

"Someone's trying to sue me over the second mortgage I took on this place," Van Felt told him. "I wondered if you could stall things for a while--till I get hold of some money.

Provincial Police may be here this weekend to serve me a summons. Maybe not. I don't think I could be forced to give this place up." The rancher shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

Mac felt everyone watching him. A sensation he had almost forgotten, of pride and importance, swelled in his chest. "I'll be over to the house to use your phone in a while--I'll talk about it then if you want; maybe we can work out an arrangement."

He winked at the others and walked away, feeling pleased. That would change their tune for a while. He felt a sudden camaraderie with Van Felt. He knew what it was like to be in trouble where debts were concerned.

In the tack room, Mac took down one of Galahad's bridles, a tin of polish, and a rag, aromatic and black from use. Sitting on the bench, he began to polish the chin strap and reins of the bridle. His pipe had gone out so he removed it from his mouth and set it on the overturned crate beside him. He heard a pinging noise overhead and realized the rain had started. His head grew warm with a slow anger. Where the hell was she? He tried to think about something else--his writing, a collection of his stories that he planned to call "A Trip for One." He was almost finished a piece about a married woman who was followed home by a large, handsome, but menacing, stranger who turned out to be her long-lost brother-in-law, Mac himself.

The group of regulars had moved further down the arena to

the tuck shop where Van Felt stocked bags of chips and peanuts. Their laughter was shrill and penetrating. It'd never cross their minds to invite Mac to join them. He put his weight into the task of polishing the bridle's leather straps.

He began to think about an incident a week earlier that kept rankling him. He had been leaning against the gatepost one afternoon when Elinor galloped up from the woods, her shoulder-length, light brown hair moving like a flag in the wind. He had watched her landing rhythmically against the saddle. When she had slowed to a trot and began to post, he had thought she pressed herself against the leather saddle longer than she had to.

She had stopped Galahad near the gate, and Mac tapped his pipe against the fence, looking at her closely.

"Are you wearing a bra?"

She had laughed lightly. "Of course I am."

He had continued, winking at her. "The way you were bouncing out there, I wouldn't have bet on it."

"Why do you call it 'braaa'?"

"How do you pronounce it?"

Instead of answering, she had turned her head away.

"So you like Galahad and me," Mac said, drawing his arm up and around his horse's neck.

"I love him." Elinor leaned forward along the saddle to encircle the horse's thick neck with her arms. She looked at Mac through the wisps of mane veiling her face and smiled. "I

do love him," she said, burying her face in the horse's hair.

Mac had grinned. She means me, he thought. "And you like riding him, don't you?"

"You know I do." She had looked over her shoulder at the woods.

"But why do you like to ride?"

She had looked squarely at him, her head tilted, and shrugged. "I just like it."

She had been warm in her offhand girlish fashion on the way home. He had pulled her across the seat and let her drive, leaning against him, her arms stretched across his chest to steer the wheel of the big Olds--a sport that he knew entertained her. Her shoulder and thigh had felt firm and warm against his own. He had his arm around her, his hand dangling, occasionally brushing up against her breast. Each time he accelerated, she laughed loudly, excitedly.

"I want you to see my place tonight," Mac had told her.

She had slid over to her side of the car again. "You want me to see it," she repeated.

He lived in a high-rise on the outskirts of town. They had taken an elevator to the 14th floor and Mac let Elinor walk ahead of him into the apartment before switching the light on behind her. He had been dizzy with anticipation. He had been entertaining a vague dream, a dim picture of what might take place.

He owned hardly any furniture--an enormous television, a couch, coffee table, regulation drapery. The furnishings of a

man without a woman. He had showed her the first room and then his office, which had nothing in it but a writing desk, brass floor lamp, and a reclining chair.

"My reading chair," he had said. "Want to try it out?"

She had sat on the edge, her feet dangling. He had stood over her, waiting for her to lie back, trying to will her to lie down just by standing over her. But she had kept her head bowed. He had been tempted to touch her shoulder--a little pressure to start her moving backward.

"How would you like to hear one of my stories? You just sit there and I'll read it to you."

He had read her a clever, amusing story about a man who brought "her" home, shapely and smooth; caressed and admired "her"--and then announced in the last sentence that "she" was a "damned fine bottle of scotch!" When he had finished, he looked up, grinning, and Eleanor laughed and clapped her hands and looked down at her lap again.

He had crossed the room to his desk to take out a book he had bought for her, "The World of Horses."

"These are really nice pictures," she said.

A reproachful and expectant silence had filled the room--just the sound of Elinor flipping pages and studying the photographs, stalling. Mac remained standing beside the reclining chair. Every few pages, she uttered a sigh or a remark about a picture. She turned over the final page slowly and then firmly shut the book.

"Wow, thank you." She had looked up at him then with an

expression on her face that he hadn't seen before: pleading, hopeful, miserable. It had occurred to him that she was going along with things to please him. He was frightening her. He had felt ashamed, impatient, furious. He had stared at her and she returned his gaze, but not with the gentle, seductive warmth he was used to in her. A look in her eye flickered--he couldn't put a name to it. Finally, he had stepped back. "Time to get you home, I guess."

He wasn't good at analyzing things; he couldn't really say what had happened that evening. His understanding of events tended to form without words. He wasn't stupid, he was sure--but he was deliberate. And it was in this wordless way that he felt things slipping--his life, career, marriage, pride, security. He had allowed people to trick him. Somehow, even Elinor had tricked him.

She wants to ride the horse, that's all, he thought.

He envied her suddenly--her youth, her spiritedness. She had something he lacked, something he wanted. He felt defeated imagining the possibilities that still lay ahead of her, the kind of woman she'd turn out to be.

He pressed the blackened cloth into the tin of polish and leaned over the bridle.

She must have learned something about him recently that he hadn't meant to reveal--or that he didn't even know about himself. Mac couldn't force his mind to shape things any more clearly than that. Without a doubt though, it had been a mistake taking her to the apartment. She had been unable to

disguise her uneasiness. And she had been awkward about the brush and comb set today. Nothing like the possibilities he had imagined.

What I'd give for a good stiff shot of scotch right now, Mac thought. He wished he could leave the ranch and drive to his apartment, lie down on the reclining chair and have a scotch. Maybe call a woman he had met in a bar two weeks ago. But he had let too much time slip past; she had probably forgotten who he was. There was something about women his own age that left him cold now.

The rain was pelting the tin roof overhead. Mac threw the cloth back on the shelf and put the bridle over a nail in the wall. The arena was illuminated by lamps in the high ceiling. The light seemed too dim, as if the low-hanging, wet clouds had forced their way inside the barn. The rain slapped the tin roof.

My saddle is going to be ruined, he realized, looking out the open barn door to the yard where the earth, dried and gutted with hoofprints, was turning to mud again. He had paid too much for the English saddle in the first place, and now she was letting the rain soak it. He stopped and stared dully at a set of headlights that were pulling into the yard from the driveway. She wasn't riding at all--she was with somebody, in one of those houses at the foot of the hill, or in the woods. She couldn't be riding in this downpour.

He looked up and saw Van Felt stride across the arena. The headlights in the yard switched off and a car door

slammed. An OPP officer got out and started to walk toward the barn door where Van Felt was waiting, his legs astride, hands on his hips. Mac walked toward the entrance.

He grinned in a way that he knew was showing his respectability, his membership in this young guy's club. "Can we help you out? Mac Roberston. With the City Force." He extended his hand to the OPP officer. "And you are?"

The OPP officer took Mac's outstretched hand and turned back to Van Felt. "I'm looking for the owner of this ranch-- Hans Van Felt. He's defaulted on a second mortgage."

Van Felt crossed his arms. "He's left for the day--won't be back till the first of the week."

Mac saw from the corner of his eye that Elinor had returned. A damp wind was still gusting through the barnyard. Hair blew in the girl's eyes as she dismounted and walked toward the crowd that had gathered in the yard by the open barn door.

Mac looked pointedly at his watch and then back at the OPP officer facing him--a young man, his chin rosy in places where the razor had scraped his skin. The officer dug the heel of his boot into the wet soil. He looked grimly at Mac who was still grinning, tapping his pipe into the palm of his hand. "It doesn't matter--I've got to serve this summons. If you'll just tell me where I can find the owner of this place," the officer said. He glanced at Elinor and away.

"Look, I told you," Mac said. "I'm saving you valuable time. Why don't you just take the summons and head off? Come

back in a week, maybe." He winked at the officer, who darkened perceptibly and ducked his head. "Now here's my horse and my girlfriend," Mac joked. "Just in time for dinner. Come on girl, we've got to get that saddle off before the rain gets worse."

Mac watched as Elinor led Galahad down the arena to the stall. He saw her remove the wet saddle and blanket and walk quickly across the arena to deposit them in the tack room. The blanket was dripping. When he turned back, the OPP officer was heading in the direction of his cruiser.

In the open barn door, Van Felt shook Mac's hand.

"Thanks for covering up for me out there. And don't worry--I'll get things straightened out on Monday."

"You do that." Mac said. "Now, about our arrangement: let's say fifty bucks less a month for the stall?"

Van Felt screwed up his face and avoided looking at Mac. "That'll have to do," he said.

In Galahad's stall, Elinor was working with the fork, rustling the straw and rearranging it the way Mac had taught her.

"Sorry," she said as Mac entered the stall. "It was raining so hard that I took cover under some trees."

Mac took the pitchfork from her hands and in silence began to fork out the straw. She started to groom Galahad's broad, gleaming body, gently yanking the tangles from his mane and tail with a thick-bristled brush. She pulled the brush across his back and followed with her hand, caressing the

horse's hair. Mac watched her standing behind the horse and putting her weight against his flanks, confident that he would never kick her.

"Let's go," he said.

In the car, Eleanor avoided catching his glances. He wondered how much she had overheard--and suddenly he saw what had taken place at the ranch as if he were looking through Eleanor's eyes, through her parents' eyes. He had made a fool of himself. A sick feeling rose in his throat. Before the day was over, that OPP guy would report what had taken place at the ranch: obstruction of justice--and by a fellow policeman.

Mac's fingers tightened on the leather cover of the wheel. A sudden, unbidden picture formed in his mind--the reports filed about his brutality with drunks who spent nights in the cell; and worse, the night last month when he touched a sixteen-year old girl where he shouldn't have. But she had been a little vixen, real jail-bait, in on a vagrancy charge. And now this afternoon's episode with the OPP. They'll have all the evidence they need to get me off the Force, he thought. Hands down. The heavy sensation, dark and leaden, settled in his body. He felt his face draining of blood.

Elinor sat beside him on the front seat and drew her fingers through the silky bristles of the yellow brush.

It had stopped raining. The birch trees on both sides were vibrating and brilliant. Elinor kept her eyes lowered.

As they approached the row of box-shaped houses along the

road, a figure appeared at the edge of a lawn. Mac tapped his foot on the brake and the Oldsmobile slowed a little. A boy raised his hand half-way, a kind of salute or wave. Mac pressed the brake further. It was the kid with the fringed coat.

Eleanor cried out, "Don't stop--I don't want to talk to him." She stared at Mac.

"That your boyfriend?"

"No. I know him from school. I don't even like him," she added hastily.

"Have you been meeting him down here?"

"Sometimes I see him when I'm riding."

"That so?" Mac gave a laugh. His eyes jerked down to her legs and took in the jodhpurs, how soaked they were. Grass stains.

On the highway, he passed the diner where they usually stopped for french fries. They both started to say something.

"I was going to ask you about the other policeman," Elinor blurted out. "Does it matter that he left the ranch so angry?" Mac could hear her struggling to steady her voice, not to reveal how frightened she was. He muttered, "Not much."

He looked out his window, although it was almost dark now and the glass was wet. His mind kept forming a picture of Elinor kissing that baby-faced boy. Why hadn't he guessed that she was meeting someone in the woods?

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "I hope you haven't done anything foolish with him."

"No," Elinor replied lightly.

He heard the effort in her voice to conceal something, to have one over on him. I'm thirty years older than she is, Mac thought. He had made himself look unethical, ridiculous in front of that young cop. There was no one to blame but himself. I've botched my life, No time to start over.

He turned sharply and swung the Oldsmobile onto a different road.

Elinor said breathily, "Where are we going?"

"Christ knows," Mac said. He gave a slight laugh and glanced down at the glove compartment. "I want to show you something--to prove how safe you always are with me."

He pulled over and flicked on the overhead car light. Unlatching the glove compartment, he fumbled for the gun in front of Elinor's knees, keeping his eyes on her face. She stared at him, and at his hands, and then out the car window.

He pulled the gun out and balanced it in one palm in front of her.

"I'm leaving the City Force," he said. With his free hand, he slapped the steering wheel. "I won't be around for you any longer. I wanted you to see this--to know about it. All the time we've been going out to ride, I've had this handy."

He stared down at the pistol and briefly imagined turning it on her, pressing against her pale, uncomplicated forehead and squeezing the trigger. But that was impossible. He couldn't begin to see it, to imagine it. He loved her. And

he wasn't one to turn a gun on somebody. For a fleeting moment, he pictured training the gun on himself.

"Where will you go?" she stammered.

"Now why would that question occur to you?"

He studied the gun in his hand, his thumb curling over the handle, pressing it until he felt his wrist ache. He could do it: press the trigger and blast her head open. Stop her in her tracks. Save her from having to grow up. The unsettling ache in his gut twisted his lips into a thin smile. He looked up at Elinor. Her skin was bleached white with fear. He could see her chest moving rapidly. His smile relaxed, widened. Alarm was forcing her to respect him. He had wanted to see that. He bounced the pistol in the palm of his hand and grinned at the girl.

He replaced his gun in the glove compartment and pressed the gas pedal until the engine was roaring. Putting the car into gear, he swung away from the shoulder and sped down the uneven, wet country road to town. He felt her distancing herself, pressing against the car door. He looked at the evening ahead of him, the tunnel of hours to put in by himself. He thought bleakly about his writing project, about the sheaf of blank pages lying on his writing desk. Maybe, it was time for a break--a holiday back to Cornwall. He could get some writing done there. Look up some old friends. He felt himself growing more relaxed, pleased with himself for having arrived at a solution so easily.

When the familiar homes and trees of Elinor's

neighbourhood came into view, Mac slowed down. He realized how much it had been bothering him to drive into this part of town for the past year. Without turning, he reached out and gave Elinor one of his playful shoves.

"Will I see you next week?" she asked him in a soft, artificially high voice.

She was wearing that expression on her face again--forlorn, wistful. Relieved. He looked at her sharply, taken aback suddenly by the sympathy he saw in her eyes. She felt sorry for him. He didn't want her to leave the car yet. This wasn't how he wanted things to end. A movement in the kitchen window drew his attention--Elinor's mother was leaning over, peering through the darkening night to his car.

"Goodnight," Mac said.

As Elinor got out and shut his car door, fumbling with the brush set in her haste, he kept his eyes looking straight ahead into the backyard of her parent's property--a black, drenched expanse of grass and maple trees. He waited to see if she would stop to wave before going into the house, but she didn't. Looking over his shoulder, Mac backed the Oldsmobile out of the driveway and began to plan his trip back home.

Close Calls

The last August Wendy spent at her uncle's cottage in Haliburton she saw that the poster of Stephanie Baker was gone. She walked through the general store, past the shelves of cottage amusements, and stared at the bulletin board. The square of cork where Stephanie's picture had hung was a deeper brown than the faded corkboard framing it. Everything else on the board looked untouched from the summer before--packages of fishing lures, hooks, lethal-looking sparkling flies, traps, rubber worms.

Wendy glanced around the store; maybe the poster had been moved to another spot. Or a new one put up to replace the old one, which had looked more yellow and torn each year.

She went back to the cash register. Her mother was buying things to take to their uncle's cottage: eggs, bread, bacon, orange juice, bags of chips to eat while they played euchre. "You know that girl Stephanie Baker? Her poster's down," Wendy said. She looked at the store owner, ringing up the purchase. She wanted to come right out and accuse him of removing the poster. Of giving up, losing faith. She felt as if someone had stolen, or she herself had lost, something precious. She hadn't expected this. The week in Haliburton and the poster of Stephanie Baker's disappearance went together. She felt cheated, as if time were moving along too fast. She hadn't been given a chance.

She had been daydreaming about Stephanie Baker for years. By the poster's description, Wendy knew they were the same age, but Stephanie had long straight blond hair and a sweet,

even-tempered, smiling face. She had not been frozen at ten years old. She had grown into her teens with Wendy, a perfect friend that Wendy met and rescued from Northern Ontario lake-pirates or kidnapers looking for ransom. A favourite fantasy involved white-slave traders. Stephanie had been stolen for her blond beauty, her virginity. She was drugged and being kept--where? Sometimes in a winterized, but isolated cottage; sometimes in a cave or in the back of a van. She was always unharmed whenever Wendy found her--except in one or two daydreams which got stretched too far and Stephanie's spirit was deadened by the time Wendy arrived. Her wish to live had dried up. Her beautiful hair and face were grey and withered like an old woman's. She might have been beaten or tortured. The horror of these things was not imaginable in a real way.

In every dream, Wendy risked her life to save Stephanie. Once, she even died rescuing Stephanie.

"Did they find that girl?" Mrs. Seldon asked, lifting her eyebrows doubtfully at the store owner.

He shook his head, which was over-sized and nearly bald, tufted by grey hair at the crown of his head. He punched the keys on the cash register. "Only leave a reward notice up for five years or so." He did not look at them. When Wendy's father came into the store each summer, this man had a joke to share, always a smile. Even with Bill, two years younger than Wendy, he'd have a few words and a wink. Women didn't quite measure up. Each summer, he pretended never to have seen Wendy or her mother before.

Wendy stared at the man and realized that he would, from here on in, figure in her daydreams as a culprit.

"She might still show up," Wendy said to her mother weakly.

"Whatever you do, don't be as stupid as that poor foolish little girl," Mrs. Seldon said as she reached out a ten-dollar bill.

Wendy tried to carry the memory of Stephanie Baker's photograph in front of her eyes, but after a few months it began to fade. She felt that she was betraying a trustworthy, constant friend, a central figure in her girlhood dreams. But she wasn't dreaming that kind of dream much anymore. She couldn't look directly at Stephanie in her mind now.

By Christmas, Wendy's hair, which she had been growing out for a long time, was to her waist. She ironed it to make it gleam and hang even straighter. Her brother's was shoulder-length. The fights between him and their parents were becoming fierce. Wendy and her girlfriend Gloria wore short skirts, eye shadow by Yardley, and earrings shaped like hearts from Kresges. Each night before turning the light out, Wendy sat in her bedroom and raised the hems on her dresses and skirts. Every afternoon, when she returned home from highschool, her mother had let the hems back down. Not a word was ever said.

She had started to go out on dates--and with older guys. It disappointed her to discover that they were not as smart, not as smooth or relaxed as she had expected. She met John, a

law student in his early twenties, who drove a red convertible sports car. His parents were well-to-do and owned a large grocery store in town so the Seldons allowed Wendy to go out with him, despite the fact he was eight years older. He was in law school at Osgoode Hall, which impressed Wendy's parents.

One night near Christmas he drove Wendy up to Toronto to the house of another law student. It might have been where he stayed while going to classes. There was a Christmas tree decorated with lights and icicles in the living room.

"I'll leave you two alone," the other guy said. He winked at John. She felt sorry that he was leaving the room since he was handsome, more so than John, and in a way that resembled the man she had begun to fantasize marrying some day. But she felt he was a bit silly--he had underestimated her by winking like that.

John pretended to conduct an interview with her. They sat on the floor by the Christmas tree, drinking and smoking a joint. He leaned forward, holding an imaginary microphone, and asked her questions.

"And what do you think of sex?" he asked finally into his fistled hand before stretching it across to Wendy's mouth.

She had been stumped by that. The answer--that she was a virgin and terrified--wasn't something she had the nerve to reveal. What she knew was that the act he was putting on made him transparent. She felt above him suddenly, furious that he and the winking law-school friend dismissed her as small and

unimportant. When he loomed over her and pressed her backward onto the shag carpet, pulling at her clothes and burying his face in her neck, she felt only the slightest fear. Although she was quite drunk and stoned, and his weight on her was suffocating, two facts remained clear in her head: he was in law school and there was another man in the house to hear her if she screamed. She announced it was time he took her home.

She had an image of herself as a whirling solitary figure, moving through dazzling events. She liked the belief that no one knew the real Wendy--and that she had dipped only a toe into the vastness of her life.

One night, when she came in from being downtown at the Globe restaurant with Gloria, eating shoestrings and gravy and drinking coke, Wendy found a letter from her mother lying on her pillow. The blankets and sheets had been pulled back as if the bed had been prepared for a hotel guest.

In the letter, Mrs. Seldon said she had always loved Wendy and that she had always wanted a baby girl and how thrilled she had been when Wendy was born. She wondered what had gone wrong. Wendy could hear her mother's careful, deliberate, ferocious tone in the letter. It ended with an announcement: No socializing on weeknights, and a curfew of midnight on Fridays and Saturdays.

"But I have to go out on weeknights," she said to her mother the next morning at the breakfast table. "Everyone else goes out. Anyway, I'm the one who gets the high marks."

"If you stayed home, your marks would be even higher,"

her father said.

"Look at what happened to that girl in the poster, what was her name--" her mother began.

"Stephanie."

"Look at what happened to her."

But Wendy, who had carried Stephanie around like a favourite character in a book--perhaps Mary in The Secret Garden or one of the pony-riding girls in an English novel--could not see what had happened. There was nowhere to look. When she looked at all, she saw beautiful Stephanie Baker with her blond hair fanned out over a plot of deep rich grass in spring, her eyes closed as if asleep. Or her hair rising underwater like the petals of a sunflower, her eyes closed and her lips open, iridescent bubbles rising past sunken treasure to the surface.

Mrs. Seldon shook her head and set her mouth as if she were gritting her teeth to clamp down on a wave of nausea. She shook her head and looked away from Wendy at the kitchen wall. "Don't you ever. . . ." She stopped short.

It was unusual, because generally Wendy could rely on her mother to provide a graphic portrait of any person's tragedy. When Wendy had first tried waterskiing at the Haliburton cottage and had not known to let go of the line as she neared the dock, Mrs. Seldon had been walking to the shore with her Instamatic. She happened to snap a picture just as Wendy was about to be sliced in half by the jutting diving board. The photograph turned out to be a blur of Wendy contorting

sideways at the last minute, a red smear of blood where the diving board grazed her waist as she flew past.

Afterwards Mrs. Seldon relished showing the photograph to people, and shivering and rolling her eyes. She always related a story to go with the photograph--of a boy who had waterskiied at a high speed into a face of granite cliff bordering a lake. When he arrived dead at a nearby hospital, nothing but pulp and blood, the emergency nurse was his own sister.

In January, there was an ad in the paper for part-time sales clerks at Simpsons. Wendy applied and got a position in the young women's clothing department. In the mall, she met Gary, who worked as a sales clerk in a men's wear store. He was even older than John. Wendy felt that it was best to lie about his age to her parents. One night, he drove her to Toronto. They went to Yorkville first and walked up and down the streets looking at the hippies. They bought two marijuana cigarettes and drove out to the airport and smoked them in the car. They went inside the terminal to buy chips and pop and sat eating in silence, paralyzed by the drugs and the screaming chaos of a group of Italians who had just gotten off a plane. He told Wendy, in a sad, old-man's voice, about his first love--a girl he had finally given up on when she told him at the top of a ski hill in Collingwood, "I've still got you wrapped around my little finger." The next day, Wendy couldn't remember driving home from the airport.

"You mean he doesn't go to school! I thought you knew

him from school," Mrs. Seldon said after pressing for information one night at dinner and discovering that he worked full-time in the men's wear store.

"How old is this fellow?" Wendy's father said, his face compressing and creasing as if she had just announced she was fatally ill.

Revised guidelines were imposed: Wendy was to date boys, not men. Nineteen was the cut-off age.

Wendy's parents had not gone to school long, and they wanted their children to do well. They were self-taught. Each weekend they lugged home books from the library in order to keep abreast of changes. All anyone talked about was the rate at which the world was expanding. Every morning, Wendy and her family listened to the radio's litany of murder, political dishonour, and human cruelty. Most of the events were staged in small, unheard-of towns in the States that became landmarks overnight, because of mass murders or appalling tornadoes--something Wendy thought she would like to experience just as Dorothy had in Kansas with Toto. She'd like to see that twister crossing the Kansas farm fields--a black, soul-shaking funnel of dust and terror.

Mrs. Seldon often sighed after putting down a newspaper. "It'll be the last straw when we have to lock our doors before going to bed at night."

Things were happening in broad daylight--assassinations, muggings, armed bank hold-ups. It seemed impossible for journalists to get clear photographs of the people who

committed the most horrible crimes--as if the criminals were missing some parts. Their pictures in the paper and on television were blurred and indistinct like the ones of Lee Harvey Oswald, Albert de Salvo. As if there were less than a full human life for the camera to capture.

In February, everyone was amused when one of the neighbours--a woman notorious for looking through her curtains and observing everyone's activities during the day--peered out her window in the middle of the night and saw a dark figure stalking through an adjoining yard. The woman called the police, who were quickly on the scene, shining their flashlights into the snow-covered backyards, finally revealing the culprit--a snowman that some children had made during the day.

"Never you mind," Mrs. Seldon said after she had told Wendy and Bill the story and they sat around the dinner table snickering at the neighbour's foolishness. "Doesn't it make you feel good to know she had the gumption to call the police?"

Mr. Seldon agreed. "In this case she was wrong, but what if it had been a prowler? We're lucky to have good neighbours."

Bill scoffed. "Who's going to prowl in February?"

The conversation switched to a girl at school who had gotten pregnant. At one time, she had come to the house to take piano lessons from Mrs. Seldon.

"Poor, foolish girl," Mr. Seldon said soberly, shaking

his head and staring at his coffee cup.

This comment was directed at Wendy. She knew it and so did her brother. She glanced at him and caught the smug expression on his face.

"I've got to get going." Wendy said, looking at the clock on the wall. "The meeting starts at seven."

"I'll drive you," Mr. Seldon announced.

"I can take the bus."

After Christmas--and after getting the letter from her mother that restricted the number of nights she could be out--Wendy had joined The Leo Club. It was the junior chapter of the Lions Club and the man who was a manager at Simpsons had encouraged Wendy and the other young girls at the store to join. She was appointed secretary. A girl Wendy's age with an advanced, sophisticated manner was appointed president.

"Why won't you let me drive you?" Mr. Seldon said.

Wendy shrugged. She pulled on her mittens and wrapped a long purple scarf around her neck. "Maybe I'll call you to come and get me."

Her father looked offended.

It was a sharp winter night. At a dip in the road, the woods and the houses of a more distant neighbourhood were silhouetted against the twilight sky. It was only six and already the street was quiet. It was the season when people made excuses to stay in.

Shifting from one foot to the other, Wendy played with the snow about the bus stop, scooping it into a small mound

and running her boot heel down the sides so that the melting snow would re-freeze into ice. Balancing on the slippery, gleaming sides, she could look down and make out the layers of water freezing as each surface turned to ice. Across the street, the light from a kitchen lit up the snow of a back yard and its now famous lopsided snowman, a dark scarf draped about its peculiar, neckless torso. A hockey rink in the next yard was strung with yellow lights.

The cold passed through Wendy's ski jacket and chilled her unbearably. She pressed her mittens to her face and felt her pinched white skin. She tightened the scarf about her neck and hugged her coat to her body, hands thrust into her pockets. She was tempted to walk home, give up the idea of going to the Leo Club meeting. But they were going to the Globe restaurant afterwards for shoestrings and gravy. At home, her father's pipe smoke and the roar of the hockey game would filter through the walls to Wendy's bedroom. And her parents would seize the opportunity to continue their harangue about homework, Wendy's choice of friends, the length of her skirts.

The cold was freezing the air that she breathed and making her gulp. In the winter, the bus was often late, held up by traffic toward the town line where the network of factories began or by a snowplow, or a block in the road. Sometimes, the driver stopped at the city limits for a coffee in the bowling alley behind the gas station--and a ten-minute talk with the fat, made-up waitress who served donuts and

coffee in styrofoam cups. The bowling alley was a seedy place with coke-and-hamburger ads thumbtacked against a dull green wall. Sometimes, fights broke out in the parking lot.

"I don't want to hear that you've been hanging around that place," Mrs. Seldon told Wendy more than once, darkly. "It'll be all anyone can talk about. Once people decide something, it's hard to change their minds."

Wendy and Bill were somehow diplomatic representatives to the world, the guardians of their parents' reputation.

Each time the bowling-alley conversation ensued, Wendy turned her face away so that her mother wouldn't guess she had already, out of curiosity, ventured into the place. Her daydreams about Stephanie Baker had given her a sense of what it was to disappear and be a poster on a fading bulletin board. She wanted to make her life chock-full of things-happened, just in case. She wanted to have more experiences than she could remember. It would be no good to disappear like Stephanie--be imprisoned somewhere and have a lot of wide open space in her heart and head where memory and sensation could have vibrated instead.

She continued to massage the pyramid of ice, feeling in the darkness that each side was as smooth as the next. Over the roofs of the houses, Orion was clearly a Greek god ready to hunt. The beam of headlights illuminated the sky over the crest of the hill and headed toward her.

Just in time, Wendy thought. She had been on the verge of turning back. She fumbled in her pocket for the fare and

groaned as she realized that the lights weren't those of the bus.

A station wagon slowed down for the corner, its tires slipping on patches of snow missed by the grader. The driver looked in both directions and began to pull away. Then, he hesitated and glanced out of the car at Wendy. He waved as if he recognized her. Leaning forward, she peered through the darkness. A muffled tune from the radio trembled against the windows of the car, which was jerking as if the motor were about to stall.

It was too dark to see. The door swung open and the heat of the car's interior flowed into the night air. The driver withdrew his hand. "Heading downtown. Want a lift?"

Wendy pictured the bus driver with his hand in his pocket, leaning comfortably on the counter, the waitress with sugar donuts on tea-cup saucers, resting her elbows on the counter near him.

He'll notice that I'm hesitating, Wendy realized. She felt embarrassed. If she had to wait much longer for the bus, she would be late for the meeting. "That would be great!"

"Hop in then."

She slid onto the seat and leaned back awkwardly when the driver reached in front of her to pull the door shut. They started away and Wendy turned and smiled at him. She wondered whether she should tell him something about herself--what school she attended or why she was going downtown. He was bound to think she was ungrateful or rude if she sat without

talking. She thought these things drowsily. The warm air rushing from the vents was affecting her like warm milk or flannelette sheets.

"Thank you for stopping," she said. Her teeth clicked like hard sharp pieces of marble. "I'm going downtown to a Leo Club meeting." This fact tended to impress adults. Maybe she went to school with one of this man's kids.

"Fine." He nodded and continued to drive in silence.

She had never come across anyone who didn't ask what the Leo Club was.

He's not interested in talking, she thought. Relieved to be out of the winter night and on her way, she settled back and let the familiarity of passing homes mark the route. In the gully between the church and Conlin's store she saw some girls from school--Gloria among them--with skates across their shoulders. She waved and then realized they wouldn't recognize the car.

"Friends of mine," Wendy said.

She tried to look over her shoulder at her girlfriends but the window was fogged over. Gloria was having the same problems at home that Wendy was having. The two of them left school each day at lunch with Ted, a boy in their class who had his own car, a silver-grey Camaro. They drove to Dines restaurant at the mall and ordered hamburgers, onion rings, and milkshakes. They always smoked a joint on the way over and ended up stuffing the food into their mouths like wadding.

Wendy had been in trouble over this. She had been

selected to act as a prefect in the cafeteria at lunch during certain days of the week. The vice-principal had made a production of giving her a school sweater with the school's colours--gold, brown and white--on the arms. But it had been reported that she kept missing her prefect duty, and he had called her in.

She had never been called into a principal's office before. This man had a savage reputation.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked her.

He was a man with a permanently exasperated face. He asked her this in a fatherly way and she felt taken aback. She had expected him to be harsh. Her eyes filled with tears because she thought maybe he was right and something was wrong with her. She shook her head and shrugged her shoulders, trembling. Suddenly, she recognized his strategy. He was manipulating her, figuring out the best way, the quickest and cleanest, to get at her.

She had handed in her prefect sweater and only felt badly once or twice when she and Gloria went to Dine's in Ted's Camaro.

She took her mittens off and resisted the urge to rub the window clear of fog. People didn't like that because it streaked the glass. Wendy had not gotten over her childhood enjoyment of writing her initials with great style and flourish on steamy windows. The radio was playing country and western music but it was distorted by interference, too much treble. The lights of downtown began to brighten the sky

ahead and Wendy thought lethargically how reluctant she was to have to step outside again.

Snapping out of a daze, she saw they had taken a turn onto a street which headed north for some ways and eventually led out of town. She looked around to orient herself: a different neighbourhood, but a familiar one. Her grandmother lived three blocks from here.

The driver's expression had not changed. With one hand on the wheel, he continued at the same speed. It seemed more polite not to point out that this was an unusual route to town. He could be taking a different way. Who am I to know all the roads? Wendy thought. But she felt uncertain. He had created a barrier, an odd feeling in the car, by refusing to speak.

The houses were getting shabbier as they neared the edge of town. Driveways were cluttered with snowy bed springs, old motors, broken chairs, tires, and cords of wood. Wendy recognized a house where she had attended a birthday party years earlier--a girl from her Grade three class, from a poor, ill-fated family, who nevertheless had had a wonderful birthday party. The mother had led a noisy, foot-kicking bunny hop around the living room.

They continued northwards in tight, constrained silence. Wider spaces between houses. No-one was walking along the road.

Wendy realized she had to speak. She tried to think of something courteous to say. She forced the words past her

lips. "Are you going downtown?"

"I'm going up ahead a ways," the man said, lifting his hand from the steering wheel to gesture.

She stared at his hand which was enormous, a fleshy baseball mitt.

"I have to pick up a friend who works with me on the night shift," he added, without looking at Wendy.

He was forty, she thought, maybe fifty. When he had pulled up at the bus stop, she had assumed he was somebody's father, a neighbour, someone whose house she had visited on Halloween nights. Not many people drove down her street at six o'clock unless they lived in the neighbourhood.

As the landscape slipped by, Wendy pretended to be watching it. What he had said could easily be true. The factories in town did have night shifts. She looked sideways and saw that his lips were pursed to whistle but nothing was coming out. With a jolt, she knew that something was wrong. She looked ahead again and began to pull at bits of fluff-- tiny balls of wool on the mittens that her mother had knit. Wendy cleared her throat.

"Where is it that you work?"

The Leo Club meeting would already be started. She could walk in late--but what if one of them was trying to call her at home right now? "Mrs. Seldon, we're wondering why Wendy is late." Her parents would be helpless, beside themselves.

A knot tightened in her stomach.

The stranger named a factory in the city which produced

sheet metal. His voice rose naturally.

He'll turn around and go back before long, Wendy assured herself. But where will the other man sit?

The prospect of a second silent and menacing stranger in the car made her dizzy.

From the corner of her eye, Wendy looked at the driver. Above the fur collar of his dark green parka rose his featureless face, double-chinned and shadowy. Wendy's face twitched. Her left eye fluttered for the first time in years. She touched it with her finger. A feeling of panic, painful and trembling, gripped her heart. She tried to calm herself: Tell him to stop if he isn't going to drive straight downtown, she rehearsed. Tell him to let me out, thank you, and I can walk from here.

The words kept dying in her mouth.

Trusting, waiting things out, felt safer, easier. He would turn back. Or he would meet his friend and then drive back to town.

They passed another patch of houses. The scratchy radio music was being drowned out as the road became rougher, making the paint-spattered ladders and tools clang in the rear. Wendy turned in her seat to look at them and, lifting her eyes, saw through the back window that the city's lights were disappearing into the distance. She faced ahead again.

"Where does this friend of yours live? I don't want to be late and I probably already am." Wendy bit her lip. Was that too anxious? Too rude? She didn't want him to know how

frightened she was. Somehow, her safety lay in concealing that.

"He lives close to here."

She waited as they rushed into the darkness. Every mile or so, a farmhouse appeared, set back in a field, aglow with lights. Wendy was struck by an image of her parents relaxing in the overly warm living room at home, reading, watching TV. Her father would still be feeling annoyed that she had insisted on going out on a weeknight, even if it was for a Leo Club meeting. Through a farmhouse window, Wendy saw people moving through their evening rituals, unaware of what was racing past them. A sensation passed through her chest--she had been lifted outside of normal life; she was on the other side of a screen, apart from what was safe, knowable.

She sat stiffly on the seat, waiting for this strange, unbelievable moment to end. After another space of silence had passed, she said loudly, "Where are you going?" She felt her heart racing, partly from the belief that she was insulting this man, a good Samaritan who had stopped to give her a lift on a freezing winter night. This had to be awkward for him. She had the odd feeling that it might be her job to protect him from feeling awkward--or from picking up on her own tension.

She stared hard at the driver's face, then at the road, and back again at his face, trying to will him to look at her, to stop the car from heading into the depths of the countryside, taking her with it. The night was suddenly a

place she hadn't known existed.

This time, the man remained silent.

She decided to throw herself from the car as soon as he began to slow down.

Even if he doesn't slow down, she thought, I'll throw myself out. It would be better to land in a ditch of snow-- better even to be hurt in the fall. In a quick succession of blurred images, she imagined being run over by the car, dying from exposure once she began to search her way back to town, being pursued in a field, tackled.

She reached down in the darkness of the station wagon to touch the handle. A sick feeling vibrated through her body. She stared down through the green pallor cast by the dashboard and saw that the handles had been broken off the knobs.

She put her mittens back on, took them off, plucked at the wool. Her heart bolted inside her chest.

He would turn to face her. What would he say? What would she do? This can't be happening, she said to herself. This can't happen. Her life was something that was too real for this to happen. What did he want? She had never had to fight with a man. He'll rape me, Wendy thought. She could not visualize it further than that: just the word itself dangling in the blackness inside her head. But rape was often followed by murder. He wouldn't want her to be able to identify him. . . . None of this would happen. None of it could happen. Not to me, Wendy thought.

They were now miles from the neighbourhood where she had

waited for the bus. She thought suddenly of Stephanie Baker. The pressure and chill of nausea swelled in her throat. Maybe the girl had just run away. But not for six years. She might have gone through the thoughts Wendy was thinking now. Maybe she had been knocked unconscious first and then killed. Wendy had never considered her own death before. Not as something this close. Death was an old woman in a narrow bed, gaunt and leather-faced, hands folded, yellow lace, ready to pass on.

She looked out the car window. There were no street lights now, no fences. It was scarcely a road that they were on. She had no idea where they were. She knew only that they were heading north, away from town. The stars were behind them.

The car came slowly to a stop and the engine shuddered. A fallen fence lay across the path--or maybe he had driven down a dead-end country lane. He turned on the seat to face her.

Unable to stop herself, she said, "What?"

He stared, unblinking, at her. "Is it worth a kiss to get back home?"

Wendy stared back at him. "No, I can't." Her voice no longer belonged to her. "No!" she cried as he moved his hand along the back of the seat toward her head.

He leaned against his door. "Isn't it worth a kiss to get back?"

Somewhere, Wendy heard the sound of doubt. He was unsure. He had never done something like this before. She

would do it. She would lean across the seat and kiss him-- quickly, the completion of an agreement, an arrangement. She would kiss him and then back away and he would keep the promise he had made. But what if he didn't. The voices in her body were drowning each other out, but the deepest one, the judging one, was a bass humming noise, the strongest voice there, something close and essential speaking to her, calling.

If I kiss him, I'm dead, Wendy heard herself thinking.

He would take the kiss as a sign of weakness, of encouragement. She remained frozen, the round door knobs pressing into her jacket. She let the voice deep in her throat that was desperate and shrewd have its way--she began to plead with him. She twisted the mittens in her hands.

"Take me home--I promise I'll never tell anyone a word of this. I'll never describe you. Just take me home."

She explored his face with her eyes and pleaded.

In the darkness of the car, his face changed expression. He smirked. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen." Should have said fourteen, thirteen, the voice in the back of her head said.

"You're awfully foolish to have taken a ride with me."

"Yes," Wendy said, barely audible. She felt a quick fury at his fatherly, reprimanding tone of voice.

His arm shot out. Wendy screamed and realized that he had tried to scare her back into muteness, passivity.

"Let me go, I'll find my own way home. Leave me here," she begged him. Maybe she was going to be all right. He

wasn't going to carry out some dimly formed plan in his head after all.

"Get out of here, then," he said. He reached in front of her and she shrank against the car seat. He grasped the knob and wrenched it around.

The car door flew open, and the winter night cut its way into the car. As he leaned forward and grabbed her purple scarf, Wendy rolled past the open door onto the snow. She felt the scarf tightening around her neck. Twisting, she released a faint scream and whirled dizzily so that the scarf unwrapped and the stranger was left tightening it in his grip.

In great awkward leaps, she floundered through snow drifts. A fence post rose ahead of her, a foot above the snow. She pinned her eyes to the wood that someone's safe, methodical hand had lowered into the ground.

He's after me, Wendy thought wildly. He would catch her. She tasted something strong in her mouth. Any minute, he would bury her in the snow beneath his weight. She listened past her heaving breath to catch him behind her and, in mid-motion, shot a look back. The tail lights of the car were moving up the laneway, already a half-mile into the deep darkness of the countryside.

She kept fighting her way through the snow, falling and gasping from the exertion. She scanned the eerie blue-black night. She would call Ted. She would give directions. He would drive to get her in his Camaro. He would drive her home and she would never tell her parents what had happened.

A light flashed in the distance and Wendy saw a farm's yellow windows through a stand of trees. She stopped to rest her heart and catch her breath and wonder at still being alive. She felt the sudden, strange triumph of having escaped something inescapable--of knowing what others had known, but never lived to tell. She thought of Stephanie's poster and tried to see beyond it to a vast twisted darkness until the image evaporated in her mind.