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Sorrow's Family

A Novella

Mary Hagey

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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

July 1994

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ISBN 0-315-97694-2

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ABSTRACT

Sorrow's Family

Mary Hagey

This novella deals with the struggle of a young woman to become autonomous, having grown up in a household whose power structure was determined, in part, by her parents' bitter experiences during World War II. In coming to terms with the break-up of her marriage and her mother's suicide, Miranda discovers that her life--lived essentially in the role of child--runs dangerously parallel to that of her mother.

Through the first person narration, the reader comes to understand that the character's glibness--a trait that helps her cope with her situation--deflects the pain behind the truth she so prizes, and may prove an obstacle in finally establishing her own identity and building a rewarding relationship with her sister.

For Kim and Steve

Sorrow's Family

ONE. I was fourteen when I learned I had my mother's legs. Mom and I were shopping in Durand's and I'd just killed the beauty of a particularly charming dress by putting it on. It had fairly sizzled with promise when I'd pulled it over my head; then it sought out my contours, clinging here, sagging there, causing the little hairs on my arms to stand high in alarm. The clerk, Cordelia Blain, gushed that the dress was darling. My mother told her, "Nonsense Luv. It makes 'er look all thighs." She kissed and ruffled my hair. "You've got me legs I'm afraid," she said, then slapped her thighs, almost dropping her purse, and pointed a toe in the direction of the mirror where she regarded the length and shape of one stockinged leg.

This same pose was captured in a photograph that occupied a central position on her dresser until her recent death, when I had the opportunity to claim it. Mom, a singer, dancer, comedian's foil in London during the war, is surrounded by servicemen in uniform--one of them my father: a vibrant little flame amid a cluster of moths. (Between the photo and its backing, I found a hand-drawn map of Alberta that shows where the Ellison homestead is located and its relationship to Roselm, Dayton-Bridge, and Calgary. At the bottom, in my father's fluid handwriting, it reads, Only an hour from Calgary, but a girl can find almost anything

her heart desires in Roselm. The only other feature indicated is the Peace River, which must have held as much promise as an engagement ring to a seventeen-year-old girl long abandoned by her father, and whose mother had died in an air raid.)

"I 'ave slim ankles at least," Mom sighed. My own seemed to bulge out before my very eyes.

Mom searched the racks for another dress while Mrs Blain, who'd recently had to sell her house and move with her children into a small apartment because of debts her husband left behind, tried too hard to assure me my legs were to be envied, that she herself would be happy to trade. (Her husband, a cattle breeder like my father but, according to my father, without the head for it, had been known for his binges. About a year earlier, he'd slammed into a large tree on the only dangerous curve for miles around. I attributed Mrs Blain's nervous helpfulness and twitchy movements to the rumour everyone knew to be true, that there'd been no skid marks. Neither my mother nor I dreamt we might be the source of her agitation, that a Dear John letter from Cordelia to my father lay packed in a box in our attic with his uniform. We were accustomed to attentive service. As Millicent and Miranda Ellison, wife and daughter of Lorne Ellison, our patronage was sought and valued.)

Zippering me into a sensible turtleneck shift, my mother confided directly in my ear that working on commission was making poor Cordelia pathetically ingratiating. I complained

bitterly about the dress. "Shush now," she whispered. "Remember, it's me who'll catch it if you come 'ome lookin' like you've stepped off some ruddy chorus line."

One of the many rules in our family was that there was to be no whispering, no secrets. It was a rule my mother endorsed, but she was always breaking it. When Celia or I broke it, something precious was taken from us and not returned.

"Is the dress for any particular occasion?" Mrs Blain wondered, most likely just trying to be helpful, but possibly ferreting out some tidbit to pass on to her next customer.

"Oh the usual, Mom said. "School dances, church socials." Then, being hopeful, or working on my image, she added, "Dates." I doubt if she had any idea why we were buying out Durand's that day; certainly I didn't at the time. Only since her death have I made the connection between the occurrence of disturbing events and her shopping sprees--like when her pen pal, her only link to England, died of cancer. (That's when she bought the dishwasher, and my sister got, among other things, an expensive riding habit in Calgary.) Or when her chiropractor and three of his four children were killed at a train crossing. (I think that's when we got the swivel rocker and cable-stitch sweaters for the entire family.) A few days prior to our descent upon Durand's, Kennedy--referred to by my father as a politician with guts, or balls, depending whether there were ladies visibly present or not, and described by my

mother as a dream--had been assassinated. Earthquakes, airline disasters, anything that seemed to spell the beginning of the end, sent my mother either into her darkened bedroom, or shopping.

Mrs Blain ignored the mother of a cheerleader who shifted from foot to foot behind her. "It has classic lines," she assured us. "Very versatile."

My mother brushed away imaginary dandruff from my shoulders, tugged at the sleeves, smoothed, arranged... I felt like a piece of furniture getting a new dust cover. The shock of learning about my legs had numbed me. For a precious fifteen minutes each gym class, I'd been practicing basic ballet steps, and in all but my arabesque I excelled. It was not easy to stretch open one's arms--or "embrace the world" as Miss Ryan urged us--while balancing on one leg. Still, whenever we went through the positions, I pictured myself swathed in a gauzy creation on a dimly lit stage in any town bigger than Roselm.

I tried on dress after miserable dress, aware all the while that anyone in Durand's could see my thick ankles beneath the short curtain. The one my mother finally chose was an aqua thing that made my yellowish skin look vegetable green, the colour I wanted least to be. Not all that long beforehand, I'd overheard a "disagreement" between my parents--my mother liked to pretend that they never fought--and my father had brought the dispute to a sudden halt in his usual way. "God, but you can be ugly," he said

in an indifferent, almost friendly tone. "Look at yourself; your face looks like a split cabbage."

I took a keen interest in cablages thereafter, whenever one was being made into coleslaw, because for as long as I could remember everyone had said I had my mother's features, which I regarded an extreme kindness bordering on falsehood. My mother, it had been noted by my friends, resembled Jackie Bouvier Kennedy but was not so stuck-up looking, or cow-eyed. (Bouvier was the name I planned to assume one day, in the more exciting life that awaited me.) In my study of cabbages, I found them to be quite remarkably void of any distinctive characteristics.

"'E doesn't mean it," Mom had claimed when I told her she was prettier than anyone else's mother, to reassure her so she wouldn't fall into one of her depressions. It was because of the war my father seemed mean, just as it was because of the war that our neighbour was so forgetful his wife had to hold the purse strings. Carol and Corrine's father had a steel plate in his head, a wonderful thing to imagine when you're a kid having supper away from home, hunched over an impossible helping of lima beans. What did my father have? What wound, what loss?

"Where is your sense of humour?" my mother would ask him sometimes, neither expecting nor getting a response.

"There," he would say derisively, pointing to some French town on a map, on occasions when I ventured to inquire about the war. "There is where I lost my sense of humour."

In which town? Between towns perhaps, in some vast field? How? Best to wait for another, better chance to ask.

"What do you suppose a split cabbage looks like?" I once wondered aloud when he was preoccupied with admiring his cattle.

"Think," he said, chewing intently on a long stem of alfalfa. He removed the stetson and ran his fingers through his hair while squinting into the distant herd. The hat, whose band was black and shiny with oil and sweat, had belonged to my grandfather, who'd made a game of having his boys try it on for size. When they grew up, the rim still settled low over my uncle's eyes but fit Dad perfectly. Which was why Dad eventually took over the farm, and the hat, according to my uncle's story.

"I don't know," I said, wishing I hadn't brought it up. Whenever he told me to think, my mind went either blank or off in another direction.

"To a cabbage farmer," Dad said, making me feel rather tricked, "a split cabbage looks like a dead loss." He settled his hat back on his head. "Not a total loss I guess. There's always some small-time hog or cattle farmer out scavenging. Your Uncle for instance." He smiled his smile that's meant to make you hate him.

When we got home from Durand's, Mom urged me to put on the dress so my dad could see where his money had gone, and I was to let on it had cost less than it had. This was a ritual I loathed, but I removed the tags and hastened

into the thing, the sooner to be out of it.

My younger sister, Celia, excelled at modelling clothes. At twelve, she wore a 34B bra. She always lifted the skirt or dress in a suspended curtsy, then she'd spin a perfect little spin as if it was she, not I, who studied dance steps and pored over our mother's biographies of famous dancers, intoxicated by the mystique. As if she was born to dance or skate or just make me green with envy.

I checked myself in the mirror, tested a few Isadora Duncan leaps, executed a splendid divertissement I could never hope to repeat, and felt that, perhaps, out of the citreous lights of Durand's I looked not green and cabbage-like but rather sea-swept and possibly, from a distance, lovely except for my thick ankles. Miss Ryan strode into my mind wearing her sturdy brown oxfords. "Nonsense," she said firmly. "A dancer needs good strong ankles." I went downstairs and tip-toed into the living room.

My father stood, pipe in hand, in an attitude of anticipated repose. He said, "Where are your shoes?"

I supposed people asked Isadora Duncan that too at first, before they understood how creative she was to dance barefoot. I turned to get mine.

"Never mind, never mind," my father said, pointing with his pipe the route I ought to take in this little charade.

I walked gingerly around the circumference of the room. Does a heifer dream of becoming a gazelle while circling

the ring, of simply dazzling the judges? I finished with a subdued relevé, digging my toes into the carpet.

My father frowned at where excess fabric crumpled over my chest. He tapped the pipe in the ashtray. "How much was it?" he wanted to know, pinching the exact amount of tobacco into the bowl of the pipe, working it to his liking, an art that had fascinated me when I had been younger. It grieved me to recall how I used to follow him like a puppy, fetching his slippers, his pipe, his matches.

My mother called from the kitchen that the dress had been marked down, and he should guess the price--as though he didn't have better things to do after a hard day's work. He asked me if it was itchy, and, remembering just in time not to shrug, I said no. He told me to stop scratching then, and to stop scowling for godsakes.

Feeling I might be dismissed, I moved tentatively toward the stairs.

He struck a match, drew the flame down into the fragrant tobacco in short deep drags. No more did I beg to have the honour of blowing it out. Smoke stung one eye. He raised the brow on the other that spied me escaping, and told me to straighten up, no daughter of his was going to be seen slouching around--what was the matter, did I have no backbone?

I reminded myself that for all Celia's grace and beauty, my father's responses to her were still less than enthusiastic. At best he'd say, "Yes, yes. Very nice, very

nice," and forego asking the cost. My mother would appeal to him on Celia's behalf. "Isn't she just stunnin'. Isn't she absolutely divine? Oh," she'd cry, "and no one to see 'er." No one being everyone in Roselm. Compliments or insults, it mattered little one way the other to Celia. She'd perform and disappear.

Celia's skin, inherited from our Spanish-born maternal grandfather, was what my mother called tawny. Her legs were long and slim, her hands and feet small and dainty, her teeth straight and white. From the time she was six or so, everyone said she was destined to break hearts--as though it was something to aspire to. I ennobled myself to myself by vowing to mend any broken hearts I might stumble upon. This goodness, or possibility for goodness, I sensed, was not my own, but my grandmother's. Kindness reincarnated. I tended to romanticize her tragic death in Coventry for lack of actual details. I always pictured her running, burning walls crumbling all around her. Then, pausing on the brink of oblivion she would turn, gaze into her lost future, and catch a glimpse of me.

"Why don't cher ev'a wear the nice aquamarine dress?" my mother asked week after week. I'd tell her I would, always meaning it at the time. Was it my fault it kept getting pushed to the back of the wardrobe? When I sought it out, my desire to please her by wearing it shrivelled like some delicate fabric pressed by a hot iron--my father had thought it a waste. How hopeful and daring I felt when I finally

put it on for my Uncle Jack's birthday celebration. "Wow!" my uncle exclaimed. "You is not Adora Duncan; you Isadora Bull."

TWO. Less than a week after my mother's funeral, my father told Celia and me we could take whatever we wanted of our mother's possessions. I wished her things could just stay where they were till I put my marriage out of its misery and rescued my teaching job, which, at the time, seemed threatened. He told us he'd put everything in the spare bedroom and gave us a week. One could almost see an open pit and hear a bulldozer idling, though I'm sure he simply planned to call the Women's Auxiliary to cart it all away for their next sale. I thought there might be something useful for my new apartment that I'd rather have around than the things I'd shared with Peter. A table, a lamp, a stool--any of Mom's great little finds that my father had berated at the time of purchase. But there were just clothes, her jewelry, and odds and ends he referred to as trumpery. Celia said to help myself, and anything left over we could store in the attic--he needn't know--her place being not only far away, but suddenly very small.

Besides the wartime photograph of Mom and her admirers, I took her collection of dress scraps--six by six-inch squares of material cut from her favourite dresses, including squares from Celia's and my dresses too--that she intended

to make into a memory quilt to warm her in her old age. There were no swatches from the dresses I was most interested in: the dress in the wartime picture--a satin, off-the-shoulder affair--or the dress she arrived in Canada in. The satin dress had been borrowed and the dress she arrived in Canada in had been, she maintained, an utter rag.

For someone hoarding bits of clothing from the past, my mother was not very forthright about her history. She responded to Celia's and my questions with deep sighs, excuses or complaints, or by shifting into an impression of British upper crust: "Mya De'as," she'd say with her nose high in the air, "'tis eva-so unseemly to be inquisitif," only to drop, with a certain aplomb, small shards of her life story into conversations at dinner parties--like the time she blurted out that her father had been totally illiterate and signed his name with an "X"--which left guests enchanted, if a trifle surprised, and Dad annoyed. He believed people of our social standing should talk of current events, not chatter about our personal lives, and certainly not tout ignorance as something nifty. There was nothing for him to do though, but offer more wine all around.

Knowledge was revered in our family. That is, my father revered it. Celia and I were loath to ask a question we had not yet looked up in The World Book.

"It is okay to be a plumber," my father would say in

a way that suggested it might not be okay, "so long as you are a knowledgeable plumber." He once used Cordelia Blain as an example, stating it was a poor reflection on the town of Roselm when all it had to offer an intelligent woman in a time of crisis was a position attending to spoiled, bored housewives. Mrs Blain, he felt, brought class to Durand's that all the designer clothes in the world could not impart. This was news to us. His unbridled praise had the same embarrassing effect as Rev. Dobrinski's heavy belch after overindulging in Mom's peach torte.

Imagination is more important than knowledge my father pulled from a fortune cookie on a rare occasion in a Chinese restaurant, wisdom that angered him and gave us all indigestion. "Dreamt up by some know-nothing," he fumed.

Unlike me, Celia did not find questions about life or the world pressing enough to inspire her to seek the answers in the handsome red volumes that dominated the walnut bookcase. In fact, she rarely entered the living room that had been the parlour before our mother had slowly but surely citified it, preferring solitude in the attic doing dearknowswhat, unalarmed by the bats whose odour and ominous scratchings deterred my intrusion beyond a timid, "Celie, are you there?"

I'd follow our father's example and extract an encyclopaedia from the shelf just to peruse, and sprawl on the floor at his feet like a mature, dignified, purebred man's best daughter--it was a kind of consolation prize

for him not having had any sons to take over the farm, a misfortune he bemoaned regularly in conversation with a neighbour possessing four boys who, in my opinion, lacked knowledge for want of brains. They trudged around the barns whacking cattle's backsides, spitting and guffawing away the opportunity to marry Celia or me and fall under the tutelage of our father until death they would, presumably, part.

Sometimes during these studious moments with my father, I'd work in a question or two about the war. Both he and my Uncle Jack seemed almost as reticent to discuss the subject as Mom was. I think my uncle was annoyed that he'd had to stay home to help my grandfather run the farm, and I think my father did not want me to discover that a captain was not a rank to be reckoned with. (It's not like in baseball or football, my uncle had told me. Even if you were a general in the Canadian Army--a long way up from captain--you were still second fiddle to British and American leaders, "Monty" and "Ike.") It was hard to imagine how my father could have tolerated such a situation. "What was the worst part of the war for you," I asked once, expecting to be rebuffed but hoping for a soul-wrenching battle description to outdo the inert bodies lying face down in the mud that illustrated accounts I'd read. "The waiting," he replied in his company halt voice. (My uncle later explained that my father had done little other than twiddle his thumbs in England for almost a year before he saw any action.)

"Were you in Dieppe, Dad?" I once wondered aloud. "I took part in Operation Overlord," my father reported. "You can find it recorded anywhere." Operation Overlord; this was a nugget. I mentally drew a red pencil through Dieppe. I sensed that had I been a boy I would not have had to press him for details. He'd have been down on the floor with me, explaining the differences between a corps and a division and a unit and a brigade, saving me the tedium of looking each up in the dictionary.

"A son is a son 'til 'e takes 'im a wife, but a daughter's a daughter fer all of yer life," my mother reminded Dad once, without mentioning any longing she might have to know her own father's whereabouts.

My father responded, "Our Polly is a sad slut, nor heeds what we have taught her. I wonder any man alive will ever rear a daughter," quoting a vaguely familiar line that snapped suddenly to life. It was from an updated version of The Beggar's Opera, the latest production of the Roselm Community Arts Centre, a musical comedy my mother had resisted because she felt it too ambitious.

I remember, my mother looked worriedly from him to me and back again, which made my father smile. "Sad sack," she corrected, slapping at something invisible buzzing among the three of us. "The ladies 'ave Roselmed it," she said, adding that perhaps it wasn't a bad idea after all.

Slut, the dictionary informed me, was a slatterly woman. Slatterly was a slovenly woman. Slovenly was a

habitually untidy, unclean woman. Well I was not untidy or unclean, and for quite some time I kept my bedroom door open so it would be duly noted.

"There's a smart miss," my mother'd say when she saw me poring over some book. She'd tell me she never was one for facts herself but they would not likely kill me and there'd be no need for me to trip around some stage till all hours night after night to earn my keep if I ever had to. Frowning at the fading port wine stain shaped, she claimed, like a tiny, upside down England on my forehead, she'd bend to arrange my bangs like so and like so, and remind me that hair could be trained, which I silently doubted. She'd ask what I was reading and I'd begin to tell her all about some interesting detail in history or nature only to be cut short to be informed before it slipped her mind that the tulips were up, or that the eggs in such and such a nest had hatched, or that she'd observed in the evening sky the exact colour of a dress she had some eons ago. Once safely off the topic of my reading material, she would proceed to tell me how Mia Farrow could iron her hair all she wanted, she'd never play opposite Clark Gable as her mother had. Or that Gig Young was the father of Elizabeth Montgomery, the star of Bewitched, and if she herself had magical powers as did Samantha in the TV program, she'd twitch her nose and make the wall between the dining room and living room disappear--twitch it twice and, poof, my father would smile like Dick York, call her honey, and

wouldn't that be something. Then I'd set aside the books and discover the nubby green beginnings of flowers, or the wide open beaks of hungry hatchlings, or the most vibrant shade of midnight blue I'd ever seen, and realize that, yes, the wall not only served as a place to hang my mother's assiduous needlepoint, it boxed us in.

"Remember this?" she'd ask, showing me a square from a dress. I'd associate it with an occasion; she'd focus more on the memory of the dress itself. The darling heart-shaped pockets, the saucy back pleat, the daring décolletage, the gumdrop buttons. When I told her she needn't keep the scrap from the aquamarine dress, she said, "Tha' luvly wool challis wi' the flared skirt?"

Mom stored the scraps in a pleasing, old, octagonal hatbox given to her by my uncle, which may have inspired her to peruse the contents more frequently initially, and after his departure, abandon the project, for the most recent addition to the box was a dressmaker's remnant from my wedding dress, not even trimmed to the proper dimensions.

As for that lovely wool challis, it would always represent the day I started to let go of the idea of ever becoming a dancer, and conjure up memories of Kennedy's death, the image of Jackie, her face a shadow through her black veil, leading her two children as in a trance.

THREE. I was almost twenty-one when I married, and had

dated exactly three boys. Men I guess I'll call them for lack of a more accurate word--though it makes me sound more worldly than I was. Guys would suggest a lightheartedness I was no more capable of than touching the floor in front of me with the palms of my hands--an exercise my mother liked to perform while waiting for the sink to fill when doing dishes, just to keep her figure she said. Besides my husband, Peter, there was Derrick Dobrinski, the minister's son, and Bill somebody, an Agriculture student who wouldn't count as a date were the numbers not so meagre, because we did not go out. My father had invited him to the house for dinner, instructing my mother beforehand to get me to look my best. The times I'd spent with Derrick--and the ones he'd spent with me--were not actually dates either, but part of a tacit agreement that helped us both participate in the local teen scene. Bill and I never got off the ground as a couple because Jackie Bouvier Kennedy chose that particular day to become Jackie Bouvier Kennedy Onassis, and the outrageousness of the deed gave my mother and me the giggles. Celia had been sent away, of course, so as not to distract Bill from my intelligence.

"'E was wearin' elevator shoes, poor midge," my mother said of Onassis, setting down her very finest fare for the fellow she'd later refer to as Buffalo Bill because he'd turned his appetite loose on the meat only.

Elevator shoes had me doubled over. I pictured the diminutive shipping magnate slowly levitating to where kisses

could be planted upon his hirsute brow. I laughed 'til my mother and I wept. Some words should not be allowed to stand nose to shoulder.

"Guess who designed the wedding dress?" asked my mother, having regained composure, though my father had downed his milk and raised his empty glass urgently--a clear sign that a refill and meaningful conversation had better appear fast. "Begins with a 'V,'" she added courageously, scurrying to the fridge for the milk.

"Valentino?" I guessed, proud on such occasions to have a mother who knew designers' names. My poor friends had mothers who seemed very uninformed. (I could not imagine being stuck with a mother who couldn't share in the thrill of the lovely word and colour, chartreuse, or had no idea what an eggplant was, let alone where to buy it and how to prepare it.)

My response was correct, though I'm sure both Bill and my father wished I'd had no idea. They embarked on a sobering discussion of corn smut which I followed with one ear as my mother filled the other with her wonder and worry over Jackie and Ari, the tots, incomprehensible amounts of money, and the possibility, however improbable given the likelihood of lawsuits, that one cannot believe everything one hears.

Anyway, bringing Peter, my husband, in from the cold then and now, we met on a winter's day in 1969 at Teacher's College in Dayton-Bridge, a community about thirty miles

away, after a Child Growth and Development class. I'd crossed the snow-covered campus and was about to enter the dorm when I was first yoo-hooed then gripped by the arm. Having been accosted previously by the maintenance supervisor for disregarding his sign instructing one and all to sweep their boots, snow-encrusted or not, I was surprised to be handed something other than the broom. It was my very own scarf, and this fellow claimed it had been trailing the entire distance and had fallen exactly where he had picked it up: at the feet of Queen Victoria, our building's frozen sentinel.

I told him I'd been disconcerted and distracted by the professor who had used the phrase "moulding the child," and that I for one had no intention of following the plaster of Paris teaching method.

He doubted the professor had meant anything by using the term and told me he admired my restraint in having said nothing that I might regret. And poor miserable little creature that I was, never having had my restraint admired by anyone in my life, I invited him in for tea. As soon as he took his cap off revealing his brush cut--this during an era when even my father would probably have let his hair down an inch were he not lending moral and financial support to his barber--I recognized him as the fellow in the first row who always uttered, "Yes, yes, exactly," after the teacher made the most pedestrian comments. He was from Roselm, the son of people my parents knew. (I confirmed

with my mother at a later date that it was indeed his mother whose culinary skills reminded her of war-time rationing and the kind of improvisation destitution inspires: Trench Meat Pudding, Mock Oyster Stew, Oatmeal Sausages, Siege Soup--offerings to the Women's Institute's potluck dinners that later had my mother rummaging to the back of the medicine chest for Raleigh's Pleasant Relief and muttering a ditty I'd make her repeat: "Sing a song of blitzkrieg/
Deutschland full of troops/ Roots and sticks and acorns/
Made into soups/ When der lid was lifted/ Der Soup was strong and thick/ Der Führer tried a spoonful/ And, Mein Gott, was he sick!")

Lines dividing the county into zones had prevented Peter and me from attending the same elementary and high schools. Had his family not switched from United to Presbyterian some years back, we'd have at least suffered Sunday mornings together which makes the youth of any parish kin of a sort.

"Lots of cream, one sugar," he instructed with intensity, as though it was something I should know forever. And I'm sure I will.

We dated again and again, attending lectures on the fun of watching your money grow; and the convenience of letting some recommended trustworthy person attached to a respectable agency have the anxiety of seeing to it that your money grows faster than other people's money put in the sticky hands of other less competent agencies; and

lectures on being overbearingly positive regardless of adversity and making being positive pay off in a crass but not entirely socially unacceptable way. We also went to movies Peter felt were neither phoney nor, like Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, of questionable taste. He apologized for being principled, implying the trait might have benefits a mature young woman would value, which only made me feel immature and possibly unworthy.

I had been too young to see Cat On A Hot Tin Roof when it first came out, but I remembered the advertisement in the entertainment pages, Elizabeth Taylor wearing only a slip. My mother always liked to walk around scantily clad. Not just at home, but backstage at the civic centre where the other players bundled themselves up in bathrobes. I remember my mother telling me that Taylor was actually a Brit--born a Brit, always a Brit--and me thinking with the logic of an eight or nine year old that, had my mother tried, she could have been a star too, perhaps a bigger one as she could play the piano by ear, juggle, twirl a baton, and knew, but wouldn't tell, the secret moves magicians used.

Elizabeth Taylor, in Peter's opinion, was a tramp. I ventured to suggest that she might be a tragic person unable to make wise choices in her personal life but still capable of giving a solid performance to the benefit of millions of people. He would not waste his breath on her and preferred to focus on Burl Ives's terrible judgement

in placing himself in such company.

Having been weaned on the intricacies of show business, I explained to him that poor Mr Ives may have been contracted to the studio and been more or less forced to participate in the film adaptation of Tennessee Williams's award-winning play with Taylor and Newman. I successfully restored Burl Ives's honour, but I didn't get to see the film until it appeared on our local station this past summer--though I had toyed with the idea of slipping in to a matinee on my own. Wha's the 'arm in it, Pet? was the question whose answer could not be found in The World Book. Perhaps it was better seeing it when I did, on the heels of my mother's death. It was not Elizabeth Taylor I saw playing Maggie, rather Elizabeth Taylor playing Millicent Ellison. "I feel all the time like a cat on a hot tin roof," she cried, pacing like my mother, restlessly like something about to explode. In the final scene with Brick, her words seem not for him but rather for herself: "Oh you weak, beautiful people who give up with such grace. What you need is someone to take hold of you--gently, with love, and hand your life back to you..." Yes, I thought, wouldn't it be nice to have someone do that. That very day, I'd finally worked up the courage to rent a van, drive to the little cottage I'd shared with Peter and pick up some of the furnishings, insisting on--or, more accurately, requesting--the bigger of the two TV's, as he was keeping all the gardening tools.

The winter of my courtship with Peter was bitterly cold and seemed endless. He may never have proposed had public lectures not dried up from exam time until mid-January. "Shall we tie the knot?" he said, tightening my scarf that had brought us together and kissing me lightly on the nose. We'd been watching skaters on the pond, and my regret at having left my skates at home cut neat figure-eights in my mind. My heart did not leap. It was weighed down by my feet which were encased in high-topped, thick-soled Frankenstein boots. (When my mother dragged them from the back of a closet years later, and presented them to me as a reminder of fashions past, we reeled around the house together, each wearing one, and humming the theme from the old Munsters program until we fell exhausted onto the sofa. "Gor Mirander, wha' a larf," she sighed, adding wistfully that she wished I didn't live so far away. I pointed out it was only five miles. "Ten when I'm wearin' yer platform galosh," she asserted, raising her skirt slightly, trying for the cheesecake pose which was impossible in such a boot. "We musta bin daft, Luv, to fall fer such a fad.")

Daft as I was, I did not say yes to Peter right away. Personally, I would have preferred just trying sex, which had come highly recommended to me through the dorm walls by girls who, in the light of day, looked as quiet and studious as myself. But the more I snuggled and pressed against Peter the more he talked of marriage, which pleased

me in that it made me think he must like me a lot more than he seemed to. And it followed that once the rites of the church uncorked all his bottled-up emotion, life would, or might anyway, start to sparkle. I did have a single requirement of a husband and I raised the subject on one of our the-best-things-in-life-are-free dates in the park watching those with fifty cents to squander scuttle across the pond in pedal boats.

I told Peter that having read The World Book from A to W-X-Y-Z, I'd concluded that to not experience the world would be like reading about Zabaglione and eating Jello pudding, or reading about Fun See Chinese vegetables and opening a can of Alymer's Mixed, or reading about Kofta Curry and opting for a hamburger patty, or reading... He interrupted my mouth-watering explanation with, "Yes, yes, exactly!"

He told me he'd been reading about animals of the North and could scarcely wait to show them to me. Perhaps he would hint to his parents that he'd like binoculars for Christmas.

To prove I found him interesting, I added what I remembered of moose: that the European species was referred to as an elk; that the American elk was different in some way I could not recall, but its name, wapiti, sounded to me like a smaller animal. I expected he would then tell me how the American elk differed from a European elk, but he didn't. He looked at me as though I had suddenly grown antlers, and asked me if I knew how to cook regular food.

We're 'avin a bird, wha'else? My mother's response to the question of What's for dinner? at Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving ... I could hear the oven door slam shut in my mind. No fandangle, my father liked to remind her, which ruled out driving all the way to Calgary for sun-dried tomatoes or garam masala and having a gadabout's day in the shops just feeding her senses piqued by a childhood diet of the three P's: potatoes, puddings, and pancakes.

I assured Peter I could cook up a mean shepherd's pie, imagining for a moment the delightful ingredients a mean shepherd might fling in, and bit my tongue to keep from telling him that moose were so Canadian they made me yawn. I surmised that moose tomorrow held the promise of camels just around the corner. Still, it was not naiveté that induced me to close my eyes and plunge into life's deep end.

"Marriage is a very big step," began a magazine article I came upon by accident or providence in the dorm lounge. It was a quiz really, designed to determine whether the reader was Ready. Question #1: Are you ready to commit yourself to another person?

I pondered this for some time only to arrive with any confidence at the conclusion that I was merely responsible and punctual, traits I doubted deserved more than seven out of the ten points allocated for the first prerequisite. An unacceptable score in anything.

I started to wonder if I even knew the meaning of the

word commit. Looking it up in the worn and friendly dictionary I still keep close at hand, I found as follows: "commit (kə'mit) vb. -mits, -mitting, -mitted 1. to hand over, as for safekeeping; charge; entrust: to commit a child to the care of its aunt. 2. to confine officially or take into custody: to commit someone to prison. 3. to perform (a crime, error, etc.); do; perpetrate. 4. to surrender, especially for destruction: she committed the letter to the fire."

Damned if I can recall why, after not even being able to commit myself to the ten-question quiz, I told my mother that Peter and I were thinking about maybe getting married.

I was stuffing my face at the time. I always went home ravenous on weekends, and on this occasion my mother had put together a delicious pasta dish she insisted was not as good as it could have been if she'd had whatever it was she didn't have and couldn't get in Roselm. There was no dessert, a bad sign as were her puffy eyes. Generally, as her less-troublesome child, I enjoyed the full treatment of being in her favour and home at last after five long days. (Celia had become a saucy, perplexing misfit, skipping school, ignoring curfews.) I sat on the arm of the sofa, plate in hand, relishing a second helping. (My father, out briefing college students on the importance of careful breeding and the keeping of pedigree records, forbade eating in the living room. I kept my ear perked for the sound of the high-pressure hose blasting the manure from his rubber

boots in the scrub room beyond the kitchen.) My mother, weary in her rocker, held a yellow accent cushion in her arms, having just discovered its seams distintegrating. I mumbled the possibility of marriage absentmindedly, as an idea to kick around, a subject of no more importance than our earlier decision to rearrange the furniture the next day if her neck had uncrinked itself. She tossed aside the despair that deepened each winter as the snow piled up and the roads to town narrowed. Leaping to her feet she hugged me and insisted I join her in a glass of sherry. She'd had one and a bit already. Deep within the house the plumbing groaned as it tried to meet the sudden demand for water. "Shhh..." she said, grasping my arm and standing absolutely still. "Do we tell 'im?"

"No!" I said emphatically. "No. There's nothing to tell."

"'E might be pleased," she said, not very convincingly. "'E approves of the Murrays." She lowered her voice and warned me that if he had his way he'd have me claimed at the altar by one of his "barny-lads" and I'd find myself living at the end of some bleeding long lane all my life.

"No!" I said again as the kitchen door opened and closed, admitting my father, who peered in at us and disappeared to prepare his nightly Postum.

"Where's Celia?" he called.

I'd sensed he'd been doing a head count a moment earlier.

"She'll be in shortly, Luv," Mom answered, recapping the sherry. "I believe the ideer was to potter 'bout town 'til ten." She looked at her watch and did a nip-and-tuck job on her story: Perhaps ten-thirty had been the time they'd agreed upon. She reminded my father that it was not a school night so it made little difference. This last thought was a terrible mistake.

My father leaned into the doorframe and explained that the difference was between obeying him or not obeying him. Celia had been told to be home at ten and it was now six past. If she ever learned to come in on time, she'd be allowed to stay out later. He was not about to let anyone spoil the family name, which began with breaking guidelines and ended the-devil-knows-where. If she had a mother who was a real mother and not an accomplice, things would be the better for all.

The speech quite effectively removed my mother's attention from Peter and me. I excused myself, said good-night and went up to bed where I lay waiting for Celia's return, willing her not to be stupid. At ten forty-two, I heard the crunch of gravel and her singing bye to someone.

The row began as usual with our father laying down the laws of his house again and again, which elicited from beyond how many closed doors such a baleful response from Celia. Then mother appealed to them both for the love of God, and each of them begged her to please keep out, shut

up, and mother threatened to leave and find a quiet place for good, and if they killed one another, well, so be it, and they said go, go, go, no one would stop her. It was the way it always was: I had escaped not to be out of it, but to feel less excluded than if I'd attempted to offer my emotionally-ravaged common sense. I tried estimating the number of green medallions on the wallpaper--which in the moonlight resembled sea turtles--by counting across and down and multiplying, allowing for doors and windows. Eventually, I just drew myself under the blankets into comforting darkness, and waited.

I waited for silence as I had waited for Celia, knowing that it had to come eventually. It came followed by footsteps on the stairs, followed by shame--such a bad penny--followed by gratitude that our nearest neighbours were more likely to be wakened by mice than by the Ellisons' determining the guidelines that would ensure the conservation of their good name. It was not followed by sleep. All night I lay there, awake in a body in a bed in a room in a house that stood apart from the rest of the world of busy, smiling people: a band of gypsies dancing in a pastoral landscape outside Budapest; a mother in Ghana swatting chaff from thin bundles of wheat, naked pot-bellied children drawing with sticks in the dirt next to her; ruddy-faced Russian peasant women wearing babushkas and making sweet cakes.

I longed for dessert. My mother had apologized at supper that there was not even ice cream.

Not even ice cream. What a household.

My mind was scrummaging about in kitchen cupboards, imagining the discovery of my mother's latest ingenious hiding place for the chocolate chips, when I heard her light quick steps in the hallway, then the creaking of the stairs. It was five-fifteen.

Because my room was directly off the landing, I was accustomed to hearing the flutter of my mother's night clothes at an early hour. If I rose and leaned over the bannister I could confirm her phone conversation with my Uncle Jack, who began his chores at five-thirty whereas my father started his at six, but I would only discern low mumbling and quiet laughter and the occasional "Oh Jack," which would make me just dying to know what my dear and wonderful uncle had said.

One of the few times my mother ever spanked me was when I'd been drawn by her secretive activity to leave my room to linger by the doorway for her return. Growing tired, I sat down and dangled my legs through the balusters--it's hard to believe now, that they could ever have been so thin. I gripped the wrought iron and pressed my face against its cold surface prisoner-like. So lost in the weariness of waiting was I, that she surprised me with her sudden appearance. I was an imp, a nosybody, she said. What had I heard?

She accused me of eavestroughing, which greatly confused me. I protested that I had not even been outside, but I

was to be spanked for eavestroughing nonetheless as soon as Daddy was finished sleeping.

I crawled back into bed and eventually heard my father get dressed and leave for the barn. I was both scared and hopeful because my mother often threatened to punish Celia or me and then seemed to forget. Though I'd crossed my fingers, arms, legs and eyes, I still got my spanking, which greatly astonished Celia as well. Mom simply entered our room, took me from my bed, slapped my behind thrice, and put me back tucking the covers under my chin rather firmly.

Celia got out of her bed and crawled into mine to ask what I'd done. I didn't have a chance to stop snuffling and share the theory I'd worked out--that someone other than myself must have moved the tile from where the water ran off the roof and the cellar must have flooded. Our mother swished in and out again, taking with her our new yo-yos as punishment for whispering, placing us in the humbling position of having to ask friends for turns on theirs. Little wonder we never learned to walk the dog or make the baby sleep. Celia said, "When I grow up I'm going to get everything back." Her feet churned the covers like something cocoon-bound. I told her it would all be long gone by then, not knowing it was true.

So, no longer a child but a grown woman, having heard my mother descend the stairs, I rolled up my bedroom rug and and put my ear to the floor--a trick so obvious I'm almost ashamed to admit I didn't learn it 'til college--and

heard her clearly below, telling my uncle the good news of my marriage. While the words themselves were onerous, her voice held the impression of butterflies, of her piano improvisation: sound tinkling, rippling in the still of morning as enchanting as the sound of the chimes that hung from a bough above the picnic table in summer. Such a contrast to the dull and lifeless voice that had wondered if the sofa would be okay along the wall where the piano was, so the sun wouldn't fade the pattern on the upholstery, then the piano moved to where the TV was. Maybe. Or maybe not. She always claimed not to be depressed, but just tired. Then she'd list all the things she'd done to make her feel that way. It was something we all wanted to believe, but we didn't really. As children, Celia and I played where we could keep an eye on the bedroom door, waiting for it to open as though we actually believed it might not ever again.

My mother admitted to Uncle Jack that Peter was a little dull but so dependable. Bookish like me. The type to stay in Alberta, not make off for Ontario as many do, which would absolutely kill her.

Four. Peter and I were married July 18, 1970, exactly one year after Mary Jo Kopechne's drowning, an event that ended our family's fascination and admiration for the Kennedy clan. Philandering was one thing, but to drive a pretty

girl off a bridge and leave her body in a tidal pool for even a brief period of time was something no Ellison, or any decent family, could condone. Money may buy you a suspended sentence but it can't erase the memories of millions of people. Over dinner on the day the news of the tragedy first broke, my father gave such a long list of things money can't buy--character, integrity, talent etc. etc.--it could've killed a young person's ambition. These things, he felt, were bred into a person, and he used the opportunity to remind my sister and me that caution was required in choosing a mate, and that a mistake made in a reckless moment can dog you for life. My mother blotted her mouth with her napkin and took not another bite, as though waiting for the line that, thankfully, didn't come: You can take the girl out of the dance hall, but you can't take the dance hall out of the girl. Celia, sinking low in her chair and mumbling inaudably, was told by our father to sit straight and speak up. She drew herself up in an exaggerated manner and began to eat.

"You had a comment?" Dad persisted.

"Never mind," Celia groaned. "God..."

"Never mind God, say what you have to say."

Celia took her time chewing and swallowing, then staring into her plate said, "I merely suggested that Edward Kennedy wasn't the only... coward... to try to wriggle away from the truth."

I got up to tighten the tap that was drip, drip,

dripping water into the sink, and was ordered to sit, as though I was guilty of something too. Glaring at Celia, he very quietly told her to go to her room to consider where her next meal was coming from, leaving my mother and me to wonder who she'd been referring to, and why my father would care to defend a coward when he'd spent a lifetime denouncing them.

The marriage date, however, was not chosen to commemorate the unfortunate incident of the previous year that had so absorbed us. In fact, I'd forgotten all about Chappaquiddick until my wedding night. After Peter and I had consummated what God had joined together and what no man dare put asunder, for want of something to do we watched TV. The news feature, Looking Back, gave Peter the opportunity to reaffirm his vows of fidelity and excoriate the poor haggard Senator from beyond the border.

We were married in July rather than sticking to tradition because the church was to undergo renovations in May, which probably meant June, and my mother thought for the sake of the photographs we ought to wait. Mid-July seemed safe. Still, three days before the wedding, someone whose name was safeguarded by the minister refinished the pews without stirring the lacquer first. The day before the wedding, Rev. Dobrinski notified us that the seats were still tacky.

My mother told everyone she did not believe in omens, that of course the wedding would proceed, and proceed it

did. In fact, she made alternate arrangements better than the original plan. The ceremony took place on the church lawn. There were yellow canopies and chairs in a semi-circle, and it was like any outdoor wedding you ever saw featured in a bridal magazine up until a plane made a forced-landing in the field just beyond the graveyard.

There had been a droning heavenward beyond the pines we'd all ignored with some effort during the vows, and then a terrible apprehension that my mother's party was about to disintegrate. At day's end, when Peter and I were at Wayfarer's Stop-Inn getting ready for bed, I recalled the exact moment the engine had cut out: I had just rattled off my pledge of commitment when everything became amazingly still, like the whole world had stopped breathing. Fragments of my mother's stories--running for bomb shelters, leaving things behind, getting separated and hopelessly lost--preceeded the THUD, thud, thud as the plane struck the earth and bumped to a halt.

Everyone rose to their feet. The minister, instead of making the final pronouncement, uttered "God almighty" in a voice laced with doom. Then there was a collective surge toward the field with Peter and me straggling behind in a sort of mobile kiss. Some of the men climbed the fence, mindful of their suits, to greet the pilot after he picked himself up from where he'd tumbled. Many were reminded of times they, too, had been almost killed, so there was no shortage of conversation later during the reception.

Peter and I stood with his parents, away from the commotion. Mrs Murray's mouth was pursed tightly as though she disapproved of the carnival her son's wedding had become. I could almost feel myself becoming a Presbyterian. (Peter had consented to be married at my church, but we would, thenceforth, partake of religion less watered down.) The pilot, I thought, resembled Troy Donahue, my teenage heart throb. How like the Troy of my dreams to attempt a timely abduction. He glanced in my direction and smiled apologetically like a knight in shining armor having accidentally entangled his Excalibur in his horse's legs thus leaving the fairly fair damsel to rescue herself. I felt my face doing its best to respond appropriately.

By and by Mr Murray nodded toward the plane and said "Cessna." The word hung there in the silence like a girl's name spoken in his sleep. Cessna was a type of plane I supposed, and turned to Peter for confirmation, but his attention had been captivated by a large bubble being pensively blown by an usher's girlfriend who wore a strapless flowered dress. The vibrant pink blooms matched her gum exactly. Just as the bubble was sure to burst, she drew the air back into her lungs, deeper, deeper...

This was the first time I had known Peter to look at another woman. Even the raccoon waits until he's guaranteed another generation of raccoons before turning his attention from his mate. I dug my elbow into Peter's ribs and smiled in a hopefully-teasing manner. He said ouch and frowned.

Most of that day was lost to me for years. But then I'd recall something and one memory seemed to beckon another. The women carried food up from the church basement to decorated tables along an outer wall. My mother, coiffed and manicured and as effervescent as a prom queen, oversaw everything. She ushered the pilot into the church as though it were her phone she was lending, and afterward invited him to help himself to the food. The incident was no doubt responsible for her singing in a hushed voice for the remainder of the day and even many months afterward: "Those magnificent men in their flyin' machines/ They go up diddley-up-up, they go down diddly- down-down." Obviously, there'd been nothing about the pilot to suggest to her the stealthful Luftwaffe. Uncle Jack had joined the RCAF after the war years--from what I had gathered, to escape the battle of trying to work with my father on the farm they'd jointly inherited when my grandparents died, just months apart, before I was born. I felt his absence from my wedding so keenly, it gave me pleasure to imagine him handsomely uniformed, practising manoeuvres in my mother's mind.

I think having the sky fall in on my wedding may also have had some bearing on my bungling of the bouquet-throwing custom. I closed my eyes, not wanting to appear to favour one cousin over another. Not until Peter and I returned from Banff did I learn which one had found a stick long enough to retrieve the prize from the pine's clutches.

Had Celia been there, she'd have caught the bouquet--

effortlessly, without tearing the maid of honour gown as did cousin Janis. That spring, Celia had taken off to the States with the first of her many loves. Beautiful Celia. At the time I thought her absence may have been her gift to me. It allowed me to star in my own wedding.

In my wedding pictures I am as lovely as anyone present --even the pink bosomy girl, whose eyes turned out pink too. (The dozens of photographs where I looked worried, frightened, or simply goofy I destroyed.) Did I resemble Isadora Duncan? Not remotely. The spare-no-expense-within-reason dress was a no-nonsense creation because I was marrying Peter Murray and the Murray family were as much no-nonsense people as my father. The fabric had the body of organdy, but was not organdy. It was something French and difficult to pronounce even when roughly translated which, of course, my mother had attempted to do for my father when explaining the bill. It had an empire waistline so my legs would seem longer, and my bust would look bigger--but a high neck because it would be indecent for people to be confronted with what they all must have known: that I had no real cleavage to cleave to. Helping me into it, my mother had said, "Come, come Miranda me luv. Compared wi'what I 'ad, it's right smashin'." (What she'd had, she told me during a fitting, was a dress made of net curtains. "At least they weren't blackout curtains," she'd joked. Her dress for my wedding was a simple belted shift with cap sleeves. Linen in delicate lime, a shade not just anyone

could wear.) Peter's comment on my gown, once he had a chance to make one was, "So this is what all the fuss was about? How could you think it ugly? A long white dress is a long white dress. Why you women carry on and on over something you're only going to wear one day..."

What I needed was the reassurance I could always count on from Uncle Jack. "He won't be there," my father had announced the day before at breakfast. A cry almost escaped me but I swallowed it back. "Some woman trouble," he added, dipping his knife in the marmalade. My mother had turned away abruptly, rising to fidget with canisters, scrubbing imaginary grime. "You wouldn't..." she said finally. "It's settled," was his almost sweet reply. Feeling some of Celia's boldness seep into me, I stared at him as he ate, but he ignored me. I knew if I were to say anything my mother would side with him as long as he was present. Then afterward she'd remind me of his rights as a breadwinner. However, if I were to leave, she might continue our plea. I excused myself, let the screen door bang shut, but did not go sulk on the outdoor cot as was my habit in such situations. From where I pressed my spine to the wall, I heard them take up "the discussion." "Bad enough he covets his brother's wife," my father said flatly. "I'll not give him the opportunity to shove it in the face of the public." That last night in my parent's house Mom's response kept poking holes in my sleep--not the words so much as the pain and mourning they drifted upon: "It's not as if yer want me

yerself," she'd cried.

"You make a lovely bride," my father said with self-conscious formality when he offered his arm to lead me to Peter and the minister. During rehearsals, Wally Bilkin, an elderly bachelor with allergies and former church caretaker, filled in for him. Wally had coughed and wheezed and joked that maybe he wouldn't give me away; I was the best daughter he'd ever had. "Never gave me a moment's trouble," he claimed smiling warmly. His arms were not much thicker than a broom handle. The unfamiliar sinewy firmness of my father's arm unnerved me.

"Now we're one," Peter said that night from his shaky position on top of me. He was pleased we'd put sex off until we were really entitled to it; he'd been able to look my father in the eye. I remembered the moment of the big payoff when my father approached him and said, "Well Peter, I expect she'll do us proud and be a good wife to you. She may resemble her mother, but she's a damn sight more sensible." I had scanned the crowd for my mother then, and found her chatting with the pilot and another fellow whose wife seemed to be staying at the periphery of the conversation much the way Derrick Dobrinski had hung around the edges of the whole occasion, hungry for a scrap of attention. (I had worried about Derrick feeling left out, but was more worried about Peter sensing I was worried—he had not wanted to invite him in the first place. I was relieved to note Derrick had brought Chekov with him, and didn't realize until he

straggled up to greet all of us in the reception line that it was my book, and of course my marriage meant he must give up every vestige of me. I insisted he keep it, but he made the mistake of looking timorously in Peter's direction. Peter took the paperback and stuffed it in the pocket of his tuxedo.)

After the historic eye contact between Peter and my father, my father downed his punch and shook Peter's hand which I knew he'd find uncalloused and limp. It embarrassed me more than my momentary nakedness that night when I hastened into my seductive mail-order peignoir. As for Peter's honour in waiting until we were married, I half expected he was harbouring a skin disorder or some disfigurement because he had once snapped at me in an extreme manner for an off-hand comment I'd made about someone's blackheads. Instead of arguing that I saved my compassion for those whose afflictions were not easily curable with soap and water, I prepared myself for being the most benevolent wife a man could discover himself fortunate to have smiling upon his imperfections. But, alas, my chance to prove my most prized virtue was denied me. There was no sign of eczema or psoriasis let alone whatever it was The Elephant Man had. He was just your average man who, of course, needed to be loved by someone up to the task. I raised my hopefully-sensuous lips and kissed his perspiring brow. Despite my fatigue, I willed myself to be thrilled being one with him. I cooed and nuzzled and told him the

sweetness of the words "Mrs Peter Murray." It took every ounce of breath I had. I pushed at him so he'd know to get off. When he asked, "What's the matter?" I told him he was heftier than I'd thought. He was pleased.

Looking back, I doubt if I ever felt as passionate for Peter as I did for the idea that we'd both be teachers, and every summer we'd travel to places other teachers only pointed to on maps. Certainly, I did not feel as excited as when I'd had a crush on Uncle Jack. That love was dangerous and impossible, the stuff of fantasy, civilization in decline. My love for Peter was as sensible as closing the barn door or installing lightning rods. The fact that Peter's father was a high school principal also seemed to indicate my choice was an intelligent one. In the back of my mind, though, was the knowledge that all I had to offer anyone was the "good head on my shoulders," and considering it resembled a cabbage, a split one at that, there could be no messing about waiting for a rugged poet, a sensitive adventurer, or even a charismatic intellectual. Peter, at the age of twenty-three going on twenty-four, had his foot in the door at Roselm Elementary, and knew someone who knew someone willing to sell their tent-trailer for a song.

FIVE. After five years of marriage, teaching, and camping, I had my first "case of nerves," and checked myself into Dayton-Bridge's "sixth floor." If I had turned to Peter

or my parents, they'd have regarded my bouncing bundle of anxiety with great displeasure. My father would've blamed my mother for having set a bad example, and she'd have taken to lying about in darkened rooms--seeking, perhaps, the coziness she'd shared with her dear mother as they'd waited each night for the arrival of the next day in their own flat rather than in the crowded, smelly shelters, alert in their sleep to the possibility of bombs. Peter would've been petulant until I smartened up. And I could hardly have gone begging to be taken in by a colleague. Had I gone to a hotel "just to get away" the whole thing would have resulted in another argument about money--though I don't recall ever having reasoned this out. I went straight from school on a Friday, the eve of Thanksgiving weekend, with the intention of checking myself in no matter how resistant doctors were to the idea of a healthy person using up a bed. Imagine my surprise to find myself in the hospital lobby, teary-eyed, hyperventilating, my explanation compressed in my chest, a sound coming from my throat like when a water main is closed but the faucet's turned on. After being assured I could stay the night, I permitted them to notify Peter who arrived home later than usual because he'd walked the two miles from school to avoid admitting to anyone he'd been left behind.

By the time he arrived at the hospital, by bus, I was nicely sedated. He prowled the room, watched by the hawkish old woman in the bed next to mine, and wondered aloud if

I'd be up to our end-of-season canoeing trip, or if he should cancel. He reminded me how cold it would be even by the next weekend. I felt as comfy as a squirrel with one eye already closed to winter. Go away, I thought. But wait. My fish. I'd recently bought an aquarium and several goldfish. I pictured them frantically biting at the water's surface in search of food. How could I have abandoned them? Perhaps Peter was right; perhaps I was not very maternal.

"Would you please feed my fish?" I asked groggily, well aware of the size of the imposition. He did not like my fish. He'd sent me to the store for putty and I'd returned with putty and cold, slimey, mindless, nuisances. Besides, he found it disgusting when people just went out and got pets on a whim, though he intended to, one day, work up to owning a dog, the noble creature that comes and sits and stays. "Swim," he'd say to my fish, mocking them, taunting me.

"Do you know where the putty is?" I'd said to a man, a fellow customer in the hardware store. "Sure," he'd responded amicably, delivering me to the putty a few aisles away. In one hand he held a water-filled plastic bag and swimming in it were goldfish. "Oh," I'd said, "what lovely fish!" And he held them up, the sun glancing off his smile to ignite with life three flame-coloured comets. We stood together surrounded by caulking, weather stripping and all kinds of adhesive tape, admiring this Wonder, then the man said good-bye and sauntered away, his construction

boots--foot-loosely laced--scraping the floor rhythmically. There was a swagger to his gait he'd earned by building whatever it was he'd built besides the muscles contained snugly within his shirt and packed into his jeans. Riderware, said the disappearing leather pocket label. I remembered the bake shop was next door, but I ignored the beckoning of éclairs and marched determinedly in the other direction to the pet shop where the playful antics of kittens and puppies, and the clever words of birds, and the tanks of fishes moving serenely staved off my sudden hunger.

My poor orphaned fish. I reminded Peter that after feeding them, he must scoop out any food they don't eat. I felt a bit ashamed that now, having remembered my fish, I was more concerned for their well-being than that of my husband. I told him of the casseroles in the freezer, made from recipes I'd received as a gift from his mother.

Even in my foggy state, I could picture him going home, his admiring reflection staring back at him from the hallway mirror, him keeping busy until bedtime when he'd sit on the edge of the bed and absently massage his toes while plotting the next day. No doubt he'd give a silent prayer of thanks that I'd driven the distance from Roselm to Dayton-Bridge. (I'd have had to have been insane to go to Roselm Community Hospital; the receptionist at the main entrance was a member of the school board.)

I had a vague desire to be a wise wife and offer Peter a hug before he left, but my arms simply wouldn't move.

He asked for the car keys and someone's voice other than my own assured him that my belongings were at the nurses' station. One part of me wanted to retrieve my belongings and tuck them under my pillow, but another part or two or three didn't care at all. So I closed my eyes and waited for Peter to maybe plant a kiss upon my forehead, a gesture he withheld or overlooked.

The following morning after breakfast, and after Birdie, my roommate--not a nickname, she assured me, and common enough in Britain--left with her Export "A"'s, a Dr. Macauley came around to check my blood pressure. He wondered if I knew what had led to my anxiety attack. I didn't know, but supposed that perhaps it was my marriage. I supposed, too, that I ought not complain, I had a lot to be thankful for. (My mother was always quick to remind me that I could certainly have done a lot worse than Peter Murray.) Dr Macauley wondered what might be wrong, in particular, and I gave him a very long complaint about camping in neighbouring provincial parks instead of real travelling, which had been, more or less, the basis of our marriage plan. I told him how Peter divided all our expenses into two, and how I didn't see the point in the division if everything left over got taken away from me to be invested. The Doctor nodded and said, "Very good." I think he meant my blood pressure. He sighed deeply, checked his watch, and sat down on the chair meant for visitors. He asked me what travel represented to me.

I thought, listen you fool, are you on your coffee break or what? It represents seeing the world first-hand; what else could it represent? But since he was obviously looking for something more complex, I said I didn't know for sure, that maybe it was because as a child I'd suffered from motion sickness and everyone said I'd have to spend my life in Roselm. Then I thought, Gee, maybe that's it. Dr Macauley looked unimpressed. He asked me why I chose to let my husband handle my money.

This was a long story so I settled myself back into my pillows. I told him how, when Peter and I were first married, Peter had confided that if there had been one concern in marrying me, it had been over money. He said his parents, because of his father's sound money management, would retire early and live in comfort for the rest of their lives. He felt that my mother was frivolous (his mother had noted that my mother had far more clothes than any country woman needed), and had my father not taken firm hold on the reins the farm could've fallen into the hands of bankers like so many others we'd read about. He said I was bright to be sure, and probably or at least hopefully not like my mother, but still, he felt his aptitude for accounting was greater, and since too many cooks spoil the broth, he would stay out of the kitchen and busy himself making us as rich as possible considering neither of us was a doctor or lawyer.

I had felt quite alarmed at the news he'd had doubts

about marrying me, and hastened to reassure him that my money was our money, and for the longest time I signed my cheques over to him with not a qualm. We had a joint account for all our personal needs, so what did it matter who paid the bills, who bought the bonds? I set to work to become a fine Lone Cook and cheerfully answered all queries with regard to the costliness of purchases, for a time. For instance, I could well understand how a lettuce dryer might look like a toy with its buzz-saw cord and whizzing basket, so carefully explained its hygenic merits, its efficiency at preventing soggy salads. My discontent began, I believe, when I felt the need to offer to return the yogurt maker he'd found so contemptibly American. But in the end, he couldn't bear the prospect of me going to my mother's to make yogurt with her machine. It was a shallow victory. I felt resentful that I'd not only had to defend such an obviously wonderful investment as the yogurt maker but the virtues of yogurt itself. Then one day, Peter said to me, "I know twenty-three dollars, and thirty-six dollars, and forty-two dollars are all small amounts, but you'd be surprised to know, as I was, that added up they total over one hundred dollars--this for kitchen trinkets!"

I told him I wanted my own bank account. He wondered if I'd been talking with my mother. He wondered if I had stopped trusting him. He wondered if it was a good idea for me, as a married woman, to report to my mother more than once a week. He thought not. In fact, he felt hurt.

We were supposed to be a team, but his partner had obviously lost confidence in him. I assured Peter it was not a question of confidence or trust, and admitted that my desire for money of my very own was quite inexplicable, and I told Dr Macauley all this hoping he would tell me in no uncertain terms that my need was perfectly normal. He was not of the mollycoddling school. Instead, he asked if we had any children and I explained that Peter needed to feel fully established first and there was some question as to whether a woman who chooses fish for friends had what it takes to mind anything so important as a brood of miniature Murrays. I didn't actually refer to the children as "a brood of miniature Murrays," but whenever I imagine Peter's progeny I picture them lined up like Mrs. Murray's cutesy china collection she keeps on the window sills. Of course, there'd be nothing Peter could do to keep my genes out of the pool. His children would be my children, and that would be their saving grace--though they'd still probably get swooshed about in a sink of suds and polished and arranged and cooed at and displayed to each and every member of the PWO--the Presbyterian Women's Organization of which Mrs M. was second vice-president.

The doctor wondered how I got on with my parents. I pictured the approaching Thanksgiving festivities, the turkey in the centre of the dining room table, all the empty chairs, my mother--always lively when outsiders were present--reliving grander events, more elaborate menus, the

compliments important people had paid her, pressing a pea or two onto her fork, nibbling on a wing; my father searching through the dressing for chunks of heart, filling himself fuller and fuller, dispensing an acknowledgement of my mother's superb cooking as though to make room for a piece of pie. This was the first family gathering I had arranged to miss. I supposed to the doctor that we got on better than most families, that there were certainly worse parents in the world.

The doctor asked me what one word might describe my mother. It couldn't be done. When berated by my father she sometimes argued that others saw her as a featha in his cap. The softness of the word described her well. Despite her age, she had a waif-like quality that set her apart and perhaps saved her from the resentment many British war brides suffered having "stolen" the heart of a Canadian soldier. I might have described her as hungry. She had a way of extracting compliments from people, then savouring, hoarding them against insults and indifference. It was easier for her to enthrall a dozen children at a church picnic than to oversee a family celebration. Especially after Uncle Jack sold his farm--keeping the house, such as it was, and enough land for an airstrip. He'd bought a bush plane and spent much of the year in the Yukon or the Northwest Territories. ("I'll take you up one day," he'd tell me. Maybe he knew I'd get an argument from Peter, who'd described my uncle's plane as "just about what you'd expect.") If

our family was inadequate, then what was Roselm compared with London, or Coventry, where Mom had grown up? Still, when offered a tour of the British Isles for her twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, she declined. She'd been ecstatic initially, then grew anxious as the departure date approached. "Best leave it rest," she said finally, and opted for a sundeck off the kitchen.

"Resigned," I said to the doctor. "Resigned when she's not trying valiantly to be happy."

Resigned to what exactly, I wondered fleetingly.

The good doctor made notes on an amazingly small and insignificant-looking pad he pulled from his breast pocket. He asked me then to describe my father, and I thought, cruel, but that would be an awful thing to say about my father so I said "patient," for he could be when all the iron supplements known to Ben the pharmacist could not beat Mom's fatigue. Or was he just stoic? Without a dictionary I was uncertain if we could be stoic and at the same time bitter and critical. "Critical," I said, two or three times, knowing I'd found the perfect descriptive word but feeling rather critical myself.

I could hear my mother defending him: "Yer da's a perfectionist, Mirander; that's 'ow 'e's become a top breeda. Lorne Ellison is knòwn yer know."

I wondered if she ever felt as I did: that had we been born something other than human while Lorne Ellison was in charge, we'd have not been allowed to draw a second

breath. Before we'd have known what hit us, we'd have been pet food or fertilizer.

The doctor asked if I had brothers or sisters, and I volunteered that my sister was promiscuous. I felt rather crumby when he wrote it down. (Although, for all I knew, he may simply have written Milk, Butter, Potatoes...) Poor dear Celia. I wanted to say something nice about her but couldn't zero in on anything--her interests all seemed so incredibly self-centred. And besides, she tortured Mom by not responding to letters for ages. Sometimes we found what was happening in Celia's life from other people. How terrible to have to stand face to face with a mere acquaintance nodding yes, yes in an offhand manner when you were really thinking well I'll be damned throughout the course of the conversation. When Celia did finally write in her huge round script, the tone of the letter would be reminiscent of her past homework assignments: "Quit that job I had with the crumby agency. Got one I'll tell you about when I have more time. Sorry the pen ran out. Found this pencil, hope you can read my writing. Saw a movie you might like (Mom, Miranda--Dad you'd hate it) Cabaret. You might not want to wait for it to come to Roselm. Anyway it's worth a drive. (It's been out for ages here.) Gave that cat to the guy I told you about--the one I met at the depot and gave five dollars to (thanks Mom for the five dollars, cat food and book on cats)--anyway, gave it to a guy in my building who loves cats. It was cute but driving

me crazy all night, prowling and crying. I seem to be running out of paper. Love C." If I received the letter, I was expected to pass it along to Mom and Dad, and vice versa. The envelopes would be grubby having been toted for weeks before being posted. Still, I told Dr Macauley that when I imagined myself old some day, I also imagined Celia and me being close. I didn't really blame him for not finding it noteworthy.

Dr. Macauley then asked how my marital relations were. His eyes did not blink; his pose did not change. If this was the big one he seemed prepared to let it get away. I felt like a student wakened and pressed for proof that I'd been involved in the subject at hand. My imagination nosed the painfully small and painfully transparent confines of my mind. I asked him if he ever went fishing. He seemed taken aback, but said yes although not in a long while. I asked if he caught his own bait, and he said no, he always bought it. I told him how, if you go out while it's still dark, lift a plank or a rock and cast a strong beam of light down onto the earth, the worms will just crawl up to the surface--they don't have any power to resist such a trick. I told him sex was like that for me with Peter. I realized immediately that, as an analogy, it was full of holes. For one thing, it suggested that Peter was irresistible when what I'd been trying to convey was that sex, under certain circumstances, was inevitable. I mumbled something about there being no light in our case and that the whole bait

thing made no sense.

The doctor looked at me impassively, his tiny note-pad cupped in his hand. I pictured him on a log waiting for a strike, refusing to don hip rubber boots.

A warm rush of blood struck my face and seeped through the rest of my body. Earthworms for godsakes: blind, groping, spineless, hermaphroditic Lumbricidae mating in the dark.

"What?" the doctor asked.

I shook my head. After you've admitted being, sexually, a subterranean nonentity, what more is there to say? I could have told him I wanted to be womanly, seductive... "Do you find me sexy," I had given in to asking Peter in our early days of marriage, reaching for reassurance and clumsily dropping my pride. "Sexy women are more trouble than they're worth," he said, suggesting he might even have first-hand knowledge of such a thing.

"You were remembering something?" the doctor prodded.

I shook my head again. Why couldn't he be content with the tip on catching bait? Then I started to doubt the method. Was it light you used, or did you strike the ground and the vibrations drove the worms up? My uncle had some trick he swore by. I could just picture the doctor sitting in the dark with his flashlight, sending the worms into hiding, cursing my name. I doubted he'd remember my name.

He wrote one short sentence I'd have given anything to read, and asked me if I got along with Peter's family. I was glad he asked because on Celia's last visit home I'd

tried to express to her my feelings towards the Murrays only to have them brushed aside. "Why do you take them seriously?" she whined. "When they're being prim and silent, just picture them naked--or maybe let Mrs Murray wear only her apron and Mr Murray his tartan knee socks from whatever clan he's supposed to be from." Since then I'd thought a lot about why I hated my visits to the Murrays. I told Dr. Macauley that whenever they opened the door to me I could hear another one slam shut. That no matter whether they led me into the kitchen, living room, or den, I felt I never left the foyer. I was forever waiting to be let in, then waiting to be let out so I could stop waiting to be let in. He said, "Very good," and I must say, I thought so too--though afterward I wished I'd told him how my mother'd felt the same way with Dad's parents. In photographs they were solid, buttoned-up-looking people, not the type I'd have had the nerve to call "Gran and Gramps." Apparently, when they met my mother they were very polite but she'd not yet left the room and one--I can't recall which--said to the other, "Lando'Goshen, our poor dear Lauren."

Birdie came back, smelling as though she'd been marinated in a tobacco brine, thus ending the session. Before leaving, the doctor asked if I had trouble expressing my feelings and needs to my husband, and I said yes, sometimes. He asked if I'd like him to recommend a therapist. I thought how nice it had been, really, to have someone listening, and said I would. He said if I was up to it, I could leave

the next day. I wasn't sure I wanted to be up to it since there was no school until Tuesday, but I acknowledged the possibility, retrieved my clothes and got dressed as he suggested.

Feeling a little dull and puffy-eyed, but, I suppose, looking no more unattractive than usual, I eventually dawdled down to the solarium where I discovered Derrick Dobrinski, wearing ministerial black, slumped on a dingy blue sofa reading the collected works of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Having spent my college years in Dayton-Bridge, I rather expected to run in to someone who might look familiar. However, I didn't expect to meet someone I knew in the psych ward, least of all from Roselm. I felt lucky it was just Derrick. I had not seen him for some time--Peter's dislike of him separated and embarrassed us both. (Peter always suspected Derrick of having tried to sabotage the wedding with the tacky lacquer, but Rev. Dobrinski would never have entrusted Derrick with such a physical task, nor would he have protected him.)

I knew Derrick had married someone he'd met at the seminary; whether he, she, or both had been ordained would be a question I could ask, which I did after we'd both expressed our surprise at seeing one another. He was looking thinner than I'd remembered, and as wan as ever. I felt his eyes taking in the twenty-odd pounds I'd gained in all the wrong places. My self-consciousness about my weight subsided when I recalled that Cordelia Blain had let it

slip that Derrick's wife took a size sixteen, which meant I was still comparatively dainty. Derrick stammered over his confession that, unlike his wife, he'd not been ordained yet, had some misgivings, but nonetheless was at the hospital doing visitations. He'd had trouble with his car on the way there, and now was stalling his return. (He never paid any mind to his unintentional punning, for fear, I suppose, of encouraging it.) He wondered who I was visiting, and I told him the truth, dwelling, as I had with the doctor, on my frustration with camping grounds and my longing to see the world.

Derrick refused to believe I could be anything but how he remembered me, lively, spontaneous, happy-go-lucky. He assured me I was out of place on the sixth floor. He, on the other hand, was at home administering poems to those troubled, as he was, by God's mysterious ways. He said he should have followed Hopkins's example and not married. Fondling the book, he went off on a passionate discourse on Hopkins, resting finally on the question I'd seen coming, "Do you know his work?"

I admitted to having forgotten most of what I'd learned in a course I'd taken six or seven years earlier. In truth, even then I was a dragonfly skimming the surface of Hopkins's poetry, only occasionally drawing flame from the more subtle contrivances. I was, frankly, annoyed by his obsession with God, but could hardly tell Derrick that, so said rather that Hopkins had been sandwiched between Shaw and Wilde,

which was probably not to his advantage. Then I wondered, Why am I making excuses for that mousey Hopkins?, and verbally pummelled the pathetically pious and passive little poet, leaving him deader, I feared, than before he'd been rescued from obscurity. It left me trembling like a murderer caught with the weapon. Derrick stood, poised to comfort and beaming with compassion.

I apologized immediately, and explained rather helplessly that I would never understand how he, Hopkins, could go on and on about the uniqueness, the beauty of each individual, and at the same time choose to live a life of self-denial within the confines of the Jesuit order. Derrick said, "Miranda. Dear, dear Miranda," prescribed rest, and promised to return the next day. I forgot to tell him I'd most likely be going home.

After lunch and a rest, I sat trying to empty my head of Derrick, Hopkins, Peter, my parents, Peter's parents, Birdie's snoring, and to simply concentrate on what it was I wanted. Peter arrived with the crossword puzzle from the Saturday paper--which would, to an outsider, seem not nearly so nice as, say, a bouquet of fragrant freesias, but was, to me, a show of affection, albeit carefully measured. He rolled it up like a diploma and left it on the night table where I could either claim it or not. He also brought the good news that only half our deposit on the canoeing trip would be lost. Only half. I wondered if some woman had fallen under his spell. Yes, this was something I had not discussed

with the doctor: how I had married a skinny, bespeckled toad who had, as Hopkins might have put it, broken our unspoken toad's code, and was now totally transformed. A determined beard hid the sporadic blemishes, flesh filled out his face, vanity expanded his chest, he alternated between wearing designer glasses and contact lenses. All this I would have loved if only he'd have used his charm on me--held my hand, said my name. But such behavior he reserved for special occasions only, and he bestowed his most flirtatious smiles on strangers. The doctor had forgotten to ask me to find a word to describe myself. Jealous would be one. Don'cher worry 'bout Pete Merander, it's just the way they are 'ere. They laugh and wink and carry yer sack o' doughnuts to the car and talk yer ear off about the weatha an' crops. But when the'a wives call "rib steak" it's toodle-oo an' see yer later. Still, yer might try not to be so clever all the time. It could put 'im off.

Jealousy, I learned, is not a primary emotion, just as orange, green, and purple are not primary colours. When I read this bit of lore I tried drawing how I felt using just secondary colours, and what a jumbled mess I made. ("The trouble with modern art," Peter had said in passing, "is that it encourages just anyone to imagine himself an artist." I told him I imagined myself neither an artist nor an "himself," a comment he found disconcertingly "women's libby.") I decided that of the three primary emotions, fear,

anger, and love, probably only fear and anger were involved in my particular jealousy. I gave up trying to make sense of it, but before doing so, I made a note of this passage taken from a library text in which is embedded another word I could use to describe myself: "When the individual is kept from doing what he wants to do or gaining what he wants, he is thwarted or frustrated--which he reacts to with anger or fear or hate." Thwarted was a fine word you could press against your teeth and expel in the general direction of someone if you had the nerve. I was sure that if I were ever to end up on the street, wrecked and fierce, I'd spew it left and right should anyone dare to get close enough to get it in the ear. Etched into my mind around that same time was a verse of William Blake's: "Cruelty has a human heart/ And Jealousy a human face/ Terror the human form divine/ And Secrecy the human dress."

Peter sat at the foot of the bed. He looked over at Birdie, who seemed to be waking, and lowered his voice. His expression was one he donned for students serving detentions. "Look," he said to me, "I've been thinking. This doesn't have to be the end of the world for you. Nobody needs to know." He told me how he'd covered for me when my mother called that morning to wish us a good safe trip. He'd told her I was loading the car and would call her back, leaving her to imagine that I'd either forgotten or was purposely ignoring her. He would not, of course, answer the phone until my return.

He had to know this would be very upsetting to my mother and to me so I sat rock still, almost calm in the knowledge that I could call as soon as he left and say what?, that, yes, we'd made good time and were setting up camp and would avoid the rapids? I did hate to lie to my mother. She deserved better. I told Peter I didn't care if people knew, meaning I simply wasn't prepared to go to great lengths to keep them from finding out--forgetting, momentarily, my long drive out of Roselm to Dayton-Bridge. I taunted him with the fact that, anyway, Derrick Dobrinski knew; he'd been there doing visitations.

Peter scoffed at me for being so gullible. "If Derrick was here," he said, "it's because he is here; the guy's a royal nut-case. Come to an agreement. Get him to give his word."

I asked Peter what he was planning to have for supper. He seemed vague and famished so I reminded him about our stockpile of casseroles in the freezer.

It was only mid-afternoon but Birdie's consciousness stirred at the mention of food. She watched Peter and listened to us for a bit, then whispered loudly to me, "Is this your brother?"

She was not the first to ask me that question. "Husband," I forced myself to whisper, thinking as always of my mother: "Wha's this then? Secrets from yer mum?" (I asked my mother, once, what became of all the treasures she took from Celia and me when she imagined us to be in

collusion. "Treasures? Treasures were they?" she laughed. I spoiled yers rotten, so a bit 'ere and the'a fo' the Sally Army...")

Peter said he'd been informed at the desk that I'd be ready to leave the following day. He pointed out how senseless it would be for him to drive to the hospital to get me when the bus stopped right at the main entrance and would deposit me a block from home. His time would be better spent raking leaves, and, seeing how the morning would likely be gone by the time I got home, he would do my share. I said I'd really appreciate it, that more than anything I felt exhausted.

Of course, it was hard to understand how I could be tired having done nothing thus far that day. But that was not why Peter was scowling. I would learn soon enough that he was holding back all he wanted to say until we were on home turf. He gave me a brusque kiss good-bye and left, after which I made the call home. My mother must have been sitting right by the phone; its ring was clipped. "Mirander, no need to tell me I'm barmy, but yers worried me sick."

The next morning I got myself officially signed out, then lingered in the solarium for Derrick. I knew that to abandon him would be to pitch him into deeper gloom. The sun poured through the large, dirt-streaked windows. Visitors or patients, we were a desolate little group huddled at the end of the hall watching the elevator doors open and close. I had not given in to Peter's suspicion and peeped

into rooms in search of "Derrick the royal nut-case." After all, I had spent four years with Derrick in Y.F.C. where he excelled at holiness and the truthfulness that sometimes comes with it. Still, when the elevator went gong for the fifty-second time, and out he came like pale toast, I approached him with senses peaked. He did not smell like a man who'd walked down a flight of steps and taken the elevator up; he smelled like autumn leaves and gas fumes. I told him I was about to leave (to which he responded with some surprise) and suggested we find the coffee shop down on one of the normal floors. He felt the solarium would do, and led me to a corner arrangement of lounge chairs where he took my hand briefly, then, probably remembering we were both married, set it down awkwardly on the marred and grimy table between us. He wondered who but me could he turn to?

Derrick sighed deeply and confessed that he did not love his wife. He took it back. He did love her, it was just that he worried he didn't love her enough. He felt drawn more to God, nature, literature... Also, he sensed his wife growing more and more indifferent to him. What kind of situation was this to bring children into, he wondered.

I studied the sensitivity in his features and asked myself why I had never taken Derrick seriously as a suitor, some eons back when I pretended to study the bible with him and we were going to movies and sharing french fries

and ketchup at the A&W. Did I sense he might be gay, as Celia claims he is? (When I asked her how she knew, she just groaned.) Such a gentle man, intelligent, and, really, a few nourishing meals on a regular basis and he'd have been a looker, as my mother might say. I decided it was, in fact, partly my mother's doing that I'd passed him up for Peter. She'd begin by saying he was nice and that she was glad I had a friend, then she'd wonder if he locked himself away in a dark place, why he seemed so morose, why he always wore black, if his mother owned a pressing cloth and if so why didn't she use it so her son wouldn't shine more than Christ himself. She wondered what could possibly become of him; would he end up on a street corner with his hand out?

I asked Derrick if he wanted children, and he said he couldn't picture it. The vulnerability of children, particularly babies, literally took his breath away. And the world was a wretched place if you thought about it, and he couldn't not think about it. "Oh no, children..." he said, taking up my hand again, "though my father expects them you know."

I wondered why so many men seemed afraid of having children. ("So many" being, of course, Peter and Derrick.) I traced the thin blue veins that disappeared into a turbulent ridge of knuckles. Then I pointed to the spider plant doomed to live its life in the psychiatric ward of Dayton-Bridge Hospital. "Look," I said, "see how it sends

out hopeful shoots."

I could hear my grade twos saying, "Yeah, but Mrs Murray, lookit the brown spots, lookit the bugs, look how nobody's watering it. It smells mouldy, eh; it's gonna die, eh, Mrs Murray?"

Derrick smiled and squeezed my hand like an old friend --which he was, and is. He hoped I'd get away, see the world, if that was what I wanted.

We walked each other to the parking lot where we said our good-byes and went our separate ways. That was the last I saw or heard from him until almost a year later when he wrote from England to tell me what I'd already heard, that he'd left his wife and was no longer on good terms with his father. He thanked me for "that enlightening hour," and told me that simply eating one's lunch on the Cambridge campus held more excitement for him than anything he'd ever experienced in Canada, my fine company excepted. Of course, there had been no need to exact promises of discretion about my stay on "the sixth floor."

Peter did not seem to share Derrick's enthusiasm for my company. When I arrived home from the hospital, he was seated on the porch steps reading yet another science fiction paperback. He had, as he'd promised, raked my half of the leaves. His leaves and my leaves were in two huge piles on the lawn. I was halfway up the walk before he raised his head. Searching his face for some sign of welcome I

found annoyance on his brow, scorn around his mouth. And what was that in his steel-grey eyes, I asked myself? The reflection of my own retaliatory contempt. His eyes are not at all metallic, but rather a faded-blue, unlike so many of the mean-spirited aliens in his inferior reading material.

"Is there some reason to feel smug?" he asked by way of hello.

No response seemed my safest bet.

"Then get rid of your stuff," he said, meaning my purse and briefcase. "We've got work to do."

I set my things down and tucked my arms into the bags, making a wide secure opening. Peter filled two, packing them tightly, before saying, "That was some little stunt you pulled." He filled another. "Making a mountain out of a mole-hill, as usual. Did you ever consider the risk?"

So many leaves, I thought. My arms were tired already.

"What about Derrick? Did you talk to him?"

I said I had.

Peter packed down the leaves in another bag and secured the twist-tie. I imagined the bags bursting, flinging leaves back to the far corners of the yard, Peter furious. "How do you think I felt?" he asked. "I go out to the parking lot after a grueling day, and the car's gone. No message with the secretary; nothing. I walk all the way home, then get this call from some stranger who's telling me my wife's fifty miles away in a psycho-ward crying and carrying on

like a lunatic."

"It's only thirty miles," I said. I wondered how they'd really described me to him, and recalled with some embarrassment my breathless arrival. "I'm sorry," I added. "I thought you'd get a ride." (This was true. After all, we'd both had lifts with other people whenever either of us was held up with students or parents.) I suggested we finish the leaves later. My high heels kept sinking into the earth, and I felt that at any moment I might lose my balance.

Peter hooked the next bag around my elbows and hands and when it was filled, another, until the only leaves left were the ones the trees had yet to give up. We went in to a silent lunch, then over canned fruit cocktail, his mother's idea of a luxury dessert, I told him that from now on things would likely be okay because I'd been given the name of a therapist. I said I was sure all I needed was to get some things off my chest. I reached for Peter's hand and had mine taken and compressed in both of his. "I think," he said, "you should get things off your chest here, with your husband. Or, considering the cost of a psychiatrist or psychologist and how much you could hope to get out of it, we could save our money and you could conduct your yakkity-yak to a sack of potatoes."

I kind of laughed, thinking it a joke, but he claimed to know someone who'd been helped greatly by talking to potatoes. I asked who and was told it was someone I'd never

met. I asked if it was a man or woman and he returned my hand, pushing it toward me as though it was inferior merchandise and he expected a refund.

I told him that with a doctor's referral we needn't pay, and he responded that he'd rather pay than have his wife referred, and that for what we'd end up paying for a year's costly voluntary shrinking we could probably fly to Mexico or Thailand... Peru.

Making Peter my therapist was out of the question, but into my tropical dream landscape slouched a silent, benevolent sack of potatoes.

"Set 'im on tha' chair there, Luv.... Ah, very distinguished. Now, yer gotta go first. Tell 'im yer troubles."

"I'm not... ready."

"Me neitha. I feel 'e's at a disadvantage. I know 'im inside out. 'Ad 'im in me sandwiches, in me plum puddin'. Gor, Mirander, swivel 'im 'round quick. I swear if I looka 'im anotha minute I'll piddle me drawers."

SIX. By the time Grace Larkin set foot on my barren little patch of turf, I'd long since given up thinking of potatoes as anything other than edible tubers, a source of nutrition best adorned with butter and/or sour cream or gravy. Had I a therapist, even a conventional one you couldn't scallop, I doubt I could have admitted my jealousy

of Grace. She was neither a brain nor a sophisticated beauty. She was, in fact, rather pitiable. Imagine being from a place so small it's called something-or-other Station. A place so insignificant that when you tell people where you're from, they forget the name as you speak it, holding in their minds an image of a few scrappy buildings, a yellow light at a crossroads blinking, blinking, like your wide-with-wonder-eyes blinking.

Imagine setting out on your teaching career, finding a cheap room with a nice but noisy family on the outskirts of Roselm (not far from a smelly turkey farm) rather than an apartment downtown (where you can drive a nail in the wall without having to get permission), so you can send money home and the folks can hang on to the doomed dry goods store. Imagine too, being sweeter to absolutely everyone than even your granny ever thought possible and, still, a rather pleasant man's wife takes an instant dislike to you so that even soaking in the tub for an hour each night after the nice family has finally retired cannot relax you, and in no time at all you are jumpy and forgetful and unconsciously searching for someone to notice you, give you compliments and flowers.

"Poor Grace," Peter said after Grace Larkin had been at Roselm Elementary only two or three days. He'd been yumming and Mmm-Mmming over dessert.

I'd substituted cherries for prunes in a whipped and jellied compote and served it with a custard sauce, a

delightful concoction that obviously reminded him of the new teacher.

I'd been introduced to the woman replacing Bertha Thorson, whose diabetes had run amok, and we had since exchanged benign smiles in the halls. While I waited for Peter that very afternoon I'd observed her in conversation with a monitor and simultaneously moistening her contact lenses in a rather horrific manner. She sort of popped the lenses out of her eyes deftly into her cupped hand where she spit upon them and slathered them around. Then, presto, flicked them back into her eyes, blink, blink--all the while chatting about turkeys, unusually hot May nights, maddening wind currents and her preference for chicken anyway.

She was wearing a loose sleeveless dress, no stockings and matronly sandals. Her red hair was the type to go berserk in the heat. With so little else on my mind, I thought of the irony should Basil Vance, the owner of the turkey farm, win her heart someday. She could do worse, thought I.

"Grace?" I asked Peter quizzically, her name in my mouth like the cherry pit I'd been on the lookout for.

You know," he said, "the girl from up beyond Maddox Center taking over for the old bloodsucker."

He ran a pinky around the inside of the dessert dish, then sucked it deliciously the way Bertha supposedly did after taking a blood sample for a sugar count. Putting a finger in his mouth was quite out of character for Peter so I was to know that he was being wickedly funny about

someone he viewed as my chum.

Peter and several others had felt uncomfortable in the presence of Bertha's medical tests in the teachers' lounge--actually she had the most up-to-date equipment ordered from American medical journals. As teachers, how could they not be interested?

My impression was that, near sixty, widowed and childless, she may have been looking for a little sympathy. No doubt she felt her health was threatened by her job, while, in fact, it was more endangered by her worrying about her health being threatened. She had a fretful nature that encompassed everyone, even Peter: "Land sakes, not another committee! Dear, dear, he's following in his father's footsteps. I knew his father as a boy; so many irons in the fire even then. Work 'til they drop... like my husband. Mercy sakes, and I do know you try to slow him."

As a matter of fact, I didn't try to slow him. His full agenda left me many evenings to relax with my travelogues and gaze into my fish tank without being accused of being hopelessly escapist and incapable of getting down to the brass tacks of living.

"Oh, Grace Larkspur, uh Larkin," I said, poisonous larkspur being a worry for local cattle farmers. Then I told Peter the contact lens travesty I'd witnessed. He was so meticulous about his own lenses, kept them in special solutions in a special container at night, scrubbed like a surgeon before inserting them, my account was sure to

leave a bitter aftertaste to the cherry treat. But no, he sat with his arms folded, a smug smile on his face as he watched me clear the table. (During moments such as these, I quite hated him. I could picture him dead, by the hand of fate, not my own, and me having to pretend being sorry.) I had ignored his reference to Grace as "poor," but could bite my tongue no longer. Perhaps Bertha had had a miraculous recovery and Grace would be sent back to wherever.

No such luck. Grace was "poor" simply because her bedroom was right next to that of the Robson twins, two of my most hyper students.

I really couldn't imagine how a woman in a casual conversation with a man she hardly knew got around so quickly to the location of her bedroom. I pursed my lips so my thoughts could not escape, rinsed the dishes and put them in the dishwasher all the while under Peter's anticipatory gaze. I excused myself to call my mother, who'd had a terrible day, seen spots floating before her eyes. No, that had been a few weeks earlier. This time she'd heard ringing in her ears; not constant, but intermittent ding-donging, which foretold, she claimed, either marriage or death. And considering she was already married...

She asked me if I could come over, and I told her Peter was home that night, both of us understanding the need to keep peace by arranging visits when he had meetings to attend. She asked if I ever just forgot to breathe, and said that she was dizzy from not breathing. She said she

wanted to remember to breathe, but that it was like trying to count sheep with a lot of other things on your mind. I didn't want to get onto the subject of sleep because the topic exhausted me. She could sleep twelve hours a night and still be tired. She had been to doctors. Hadn't she tried every remedy suggested by them, by me? Couldn't I try to understand why she had to take sleeping pills? Couldn't I stop harping?

I told her someone would likely offer yoga instruction in the fall and I'd be willing to try meditation again if she wanted company. I had been through two seasons of yoga given by the fairly attractive swami Rahul, whom I'd previously known as Bob Stoltz. Back when Rahul was Bob, he used to get erections whenever called upon to stand and respond to questions posed by our grade nine teacher--a phenomenon noted by all, as was his embarrassment. As a quasi-swami, he wore loose apparel that kept everything including imaginations well under wrap. It was interesting to note that the literature he toted with him in a cotton canvas sack and dug out to distribute freely, promoted not just the eating of raw vegetables, fruit and nuts in vast quantities, but celibacy.

Perhaps celibacy = edginess. When I complained to him of my difficulty in drawing enough air in to fill my lungs as quickly as the others, he told me in a dismissive manner that I probably had a deviated septum and that I should just do the best I could. I was the only one in the group

to accomplish the lotus position; but instead of pleasing him, I seemed to annoy him. Still, I would have been willing to try yoga again, even with Rahul, for my mother's sake. (For myself, I had bought a bigger aquarium and exotic fish.) She said she just couldn't believe I didn't hear the ringing; it was so loud. I held my tongue a moment, then suggested it might be a side-effect of the sedatives she was taking. She said she thought Celia was keeping some secret from her and asked if I knew what it was. I assured her that Celia had not been confiding in me behind her back.

The following morning I awoke not to the alarm, whose gentle tones suggest a sonar device and invariably remind me of Jacques Cousteau, but to the sounds of a walrus floundering around on the hard flat surfaces of my dream. Such heaving and flopping and huff-tusking--I could not make out what Celia was whispering in my ear. There was nothing to do but discard Celia and my mental deciphering and see what the hell was going on. I drew myself to the far side of the king-size bed--a gift from ourselves to ourselves on our fifth anniversary which allowed us to sleep at arm's length--and peered down at Peter who told me he was doing push-ups. Actually, what he said was "Forty-nine, fifty." I could see it was push-ups he was attempting. Nineteen, twenty, I said to myself, watching his biceps tremble like the hands of an eager lover in a foreign film. I sar it on the TV. Yer just take the rollin' pin and pass it up an' down yer thighs like so, an yer cellulite is

history if yer keep at it long enough. Tha's the trouble
wi' yer Mirander; yer give up.

After breakfast, while I was packing lunches, Peter announced he would jog to school, placed his briefcase next to mine by the door, and departed. He had gone two thirds of the way when I caught up in the car. I was fairly impressed and did not, as he later suggested, doubt his endurance. I simply slowed to see if he wanted a lift so as to arrive with his usual dignity. He waved me on stubbornly.

I had just parked the car and was scrutinizing the sky for clouds when the Robson stationwagon pulled up and out ricocheted the twins. Grace Larkin withdrew herself from the front seat, thanked Mrs Robson, and was about to greet me, I'm sure, when the boys struck her dumb by running rings around me yelping and laughing.

"That's it," I cried, "get it out of your systems now."

Grace sighed. Perspiration already darkened the underarms of her blue ruffle-trimmed dress.

"Come," I called to the boys. "Help me with my briefcases."

"I wouldn't..." Grace began. But the boys each snatched one and ran ahead.

"They're very responsible," I said loudly so they could hear, and they slowed until they got to the steps where they commenced to swing the briefcases at one another, and then Clarence, perhaps accidentally, dropped Peter's down

into the dense shrubbery.

Grace squealed her disapproval, then smiled, shrugging. After all, it had nothing to do with her. She suggested that the scenario had been pretty easy to predict, then stood on her tip-toes gazing out toward the street expectantly.

"Better get it," I said to Clarence, but he didn't want to get all scratchy.

I told him Mr Murray had received the briefcase as a Christmas present from his parents and he would not be amused to see it down in the dogwood bushes.

The boys thought that dogwood was a very funny name and began to bark and howl like coyotes. I sensed Peter moments away so put down the lunch bags and pressed myself along the stairs to where they met the foundation, and groped under the wicked branches until I could almost touch the handle. Prodding with my foot, I only succeeded in nudging the briefcase further from me.

"Hello Grace," I heard Peter say. "Boys," he added.

Grace murmured something. "Hi sir," the boys responded in unison.

Then I felt Peter's attention and the full weight of his surprise fall upon me. (Think fast, kids say to one another, hurling objects through the air.)

"What are you doing in there?" he wanted to know.

"Look," I said to the boys. "What does the surface of these branches resemble?"

After a long moment Terry said, "Bark."

"Dog bark," Clarence added, snickering until Terry peered apprehensively back at Peter, who was, I thought, looking ten years younger. (If not ten years younger than himself of a week ago, then ten years younger than his wife of the moment.)

"How about alligator skin?" I offered in a scientist's cool, objective, please-God-don't-anyone-get-upset voice.

"What are you doing in those bushes," Peter repeated in that mock-friendly tone I'd come to think of as my father's.

"Your briefcase dropped down here," I said, letting go of my scientific subject matter, which snapped back in my face. The twins stood watching as quiet as quiet.

"It just dropped with no help from you?" he asked.

"That's right; it fell. It was an accident," I added.

"A likely story," Peter said dryly. "I'll be in the staff room. Grace?" he beckoned, opening the door gallantly, holding it as she passed through smiling. He followed close behind. "A becoming dress," I heard him say. "Brings out the blue of your eyes," he added, letting the door slap closed.

The boys behaved beautifully in Math that day, and when the class was over lingered behind the others. "Are you in trouble?" Clarence asked.

"In trouble?" I laughed. "Heavens, no Luv."

That evening Peter accused me of haunting the house.

He told me to snap out of it--"it" being the trance I moved in--that I could not count on him becoming a martyr to my sulky moods as my father had to my mother's. I stirred around the kitchen until dinner appeared, which amazed us both I think. He boasted about his running time when he first sat down to supper, but then he, too, grew preoccupied and silent. He helped clear the table--something he did from time to time, I must admit--and afterward took the stairs by twos up to the den. When I thought I heard him talking on the phone, I lifted the receiver. I could apologize for intruding and claim to be calling my mother.

Hearing the lonely sound of the dial tone, I thought I would call my mother just to see how she was doing. Celia, on a short visit home, had greatly upset her by showing her the letter to Dad from Cordelia Blain who was then Cordelia Cunningham. The Dear John letter forwarded from Caen to Trun, towns whose names I recognized from my reading binges--futile efforts to follow the action of the third division, second corps, who, despite marvelous diagrams with arrows to point the direction of movement and swastikas to denote the enemy, got hopelessly mired in military jargon. Celia had found the letter, many years earlier, torn neatly in four, tucked in a diary she left behind in the attic. (What had she read in the diary? "Nothing," she said. Just boring old war stuff she couldn't remember.) Of course my mother and I quickly overcame our aversion to bats and stormed the attic, only to find the trunk with Dad's uniform,

backpack and all the contents Celia could list, gone. Celia said she could guess when he cleared it out, but refused to elaborate. The letter, easily pieced together, was quite formal. Cordelia had hoped it found him well. She appreciated hearing from him and admired his courage more than she could say. She felt that, though he had never actually stated that his future plans might include her, they'd shared a certain closeness over the years. She did not want him to learn second-hand that she was to marry Edward Blain. She assured him of many fond memories and hoped when he returned, as she felt sure he would very soon, they could remain friends and enjoy many good and happy times that awaited the cessation of the "rude intruder," war. In the meantime, he would remain in her prayers. She signed herself Cordially, Cordelia. Celia pointed out in a voice heavy with sarcasm, that this was Dad's great war wound. Not a bullet lodged where it couldn't be dug out, but losing out to the likes of the late and none-too-great Eddie Blain. I told her there could have been more to his grief than that, and chided her for having abandoned the evidence. Mom couldn't get over that Uncle Jack had never mentioned anything about Cordelia Blain and our father. It was this point she kept mulling over.

Brrringgg, Brrringgg, Brrringgg she begged before even answering. I hung up quickly, realizing I had no strength for her to draw upon, and best not to run the chance of babbling about Grace Larkin. Since learning of Dad's past

romance with Cordelia, she fretted over Peter and me. She was convinced I was determined to blow my marriage, and invariably tried to infect me with her sense of panic. Panic was no stranger to me, of course, but how could someone as vigilant as myself be the enemy?

My real enemy. Grace, continued to threaten me in subtle ways. For instance, the Robson twins informed me I need not bother to correct their Math homework because Miss Larkin said it was perfect. They showed me the yellow happy faces in the left hand corner of their assignments. I could scarcely believe the nerve, but smiled my happy-face smile at them and said I'd double-check their answers to prevent my becoming lazy. When I ran into Grace at the water fountain, I wondered very firmly why she would correct another teacher's students' work.

Forever chalk-dusty anyway, Grace blanched as she ran a nervous hand across her wet chin. She said she didn't grade it, she'd simply approved it because she was there at the time and Terry had asked for help. Then gaining confidence she added, "Surely you cannot object to a happy-face?"

Whenever anyone suggests I am unreasonable I always suspect, at least for a moment, that they are probably right. So in that moment I changed the subject to the stuffy reading room I always inherited from her. Could she not open a window?

Grace folded her arms and said she'd been keeping the heat out, but if I preferred a hot room to a stuffy one, she would ask one of the boys to open the windows before they left for lunch.

I informed her that the girls at Roselm Elementary were as capable of opening windows as boys anywhere. I walked away in triumph of the sort that undergoes an almost immediate metamorphosis and crawls shame-facedly into any crack I might have in my self-defence. Still, a few days later, a Thursday evening during a miserly repast because I had forgotten to take something from the freezer and the microwave had been loaned for a Women's Institute catering job via Peter's mother, Grace Larkin called and I passed up the opportunity to make amends and merely handed the phone over to Peter, the person she was calling, of course.

Peter kept his back turned to me as he talked, fiddling with the cord so that the coil became kinked every which way, though he spoke only briefly. When he sat down he was like a stale muffin reheated. "That was Grace Larkin," he said. "She's sure a breath of fresh air after Bertha. Youthful enthusiasm. You have to admit that Mizzzzz Thorson was downright lethargic."

The sarcastic Mizzzzz was in reference to my having recently received various pieces of mail addressed to Ms Murray, rather than Mrs Murray and the likelihood, despite my truthful denial, that the change in salutation was done by my request. I let it pass and told him that, as far as

Grace was concerned, I was under the impression that, apart from himself, staff judged her to be tiresomely eager and at the same time... cabbaggy.

He tucked his tongue in his cheek pensively, swirled it around seeking out dinner's debris, cleared his throat, pushed himself from the table, and offered a fairly convincing rendition of an innocent man walking away from a bitch. "Grow up," he said as he left for the meeting Grace would lend youthful enthusiasm to.

I did not wait up for Peter. I went to bed planning the new me. I would stand straighter; walk and talk with confidence; I would, without malice, let Grace be as enthusiastic as her youth dictated, knowing that, if nothing else, I was liked by my students and if Peter left me I would not be destitute, I would in fact, have the freedom to teach in Mozambique if I cared to. I would, however, make a nice dinner the next night.

I got out of bed and transferred some rib steaks from the freezer to the fridge where I'd be bound to see them in the morning, and wrote on the magnetized notepad on the fridge door: broccoli, Parmesan cheese, green onions. At six in the morning my consciousness ventured forward with what I needed most in the world: Dainty Rice.

SEVEN. "Nov. 15, 1980. Dear Celia, Did you realize it is forty years since our grandmother failed to make it to

the shelter. And almost six months now since Mommy did?"

That opening won't do. Celia doesn't want me dredging up history. She doesn't even want to know how weird it feels to encounter Peter at school and pass by with the briefest of pedagogical pleasantries. (Funny how now that I'm free to teach anywhere I want, Mozambique is not necessary or even appealing. Though perhaps Calgary would be worth looking into.) What Celia wants to know is if I've booked my tickets to Seattle to see her yet (I have); if I've had my hair cut (I have, but not quite in the style she recommended); if our father has, perchance, fallen under the heavy wheels of a cement truck (the anvil missed him as well). She doesn't want to hear I'm feeling sorry for myself. That I cling to my sorrow like memories threatening to abandon me. It has been one hundred and fifty-eight days now, Celia.

Whenever I think of myself that Friday morning last May, I invariably think of another morning: of my grandmother and my mother, November 15, 1940. How did they begin their day other than in ignorance. Or had they been warned? Had they their ears to the radio? ("Oh, don't let's," my mother'd say if pressed for details.) Did they linger over breakfast as I did. Not likely. Besides working at a corset factory that had been converted to produce parachutes, my grandmother belonged to the WVS, a women's volunteer service that helped those who'd been bombed out. Were they as cheerful as I? Probably. "Your image, your cheerfulness, your resolution, WILL BRING US VICTORY" was the official advice.

The new me heard my husband darning and double-darning over a knot in his shoelace. "Have a good run," I called.

Two hundred tons of German bombs fell on Coventry that November day. That's 200 x 2,000 lbs. Had it been only 100 x 2,000 lbs. everything might have been different in my mother's life. I don't know. I remember, my father had dismissed the figures of the German bombardment given in the World Book. Looking into my eyes that were undoubtedly as round as the zeros in all those numbers, he told me that, really, two hundred tons was not so very much. By the end of the war the Allies had dropped over 300 x 200 x 2,000 lbs. of bombs on Berlin alone. And that, meine Kinder, is enough to ruin the plans of a lot of grossmudders.

But, May, '80 in the life of Mrs/Ms Miranda Murray: The classroom was as quiet as a hot cell with twenty-eight working and roaming minds could be. The assignment was meant to keep the children busy up to the bell so I could choose a story for the afternoon. I was intent upon my pleasant task when a soft tap on the door rattled the frosted glass window and Miss Sophie entered, not smiling at the children as she approached my desk. A serious Miss Sophie was quite inconceivable. "There's a call for you, Miranda," she whispered. "I'll stay here if you like."

I really couldn't imagine...

I hurried, but swooped down on the water fountain for a quick slurp, then continued on to the front office.

It was my father telling me to come right away and

to bring Peter.

Come where?

I imagined Peter's and my house burning, my father unable after all to bring the flames under control. "Where?" I asked.

"Home," he said.

Home?

"It's your mother, for God's sake. Just get here."

In trying to fathom how I got from standing in the school office to standing in the doorway of my parents' bedroom, I imagine film footage of a nature program. Flooding of an ant colony, for example. At the very moment some ants are being swept away, their little antennae and legs waving helplessly, others begin to repair the damage. Always, the camera stays with the colony which busies itself with chaotic efficiency. What happens to those swept away? Does it matter when there are so many ants? The ant that finds herself alive a few hundred yards away takes in her new surroundings, wondering why it all seems so very strange and yet so very familiar.

"Mommy," I said. And Peter, standing behind me, put his hand on my shoulder, drawing me back against him, restraining me. "No," I heard myself say, as though it was the answer to the only question that ever mattered. "No."

"Don't," Peter said, gently.

My mother was still in her nightie, the new grey striped

sheet she'd described as smart drawn up to her chest with terrible hands. (She must have died during the night. My father must have gotten up and dressed without noticing she was dead.) Her face was set in an expression she had when caught just absently staring into space or through a window. That vague look of anyone else's mother--not my own. Not Melisenda Alvarado. (Daughter of a charming, Spanish-born autoworker, perhaps still alive somewhere.) Not Millie Walker. (Daughter of a British abandoned-but-determined wife/mother/machine operator.) Not Millicent Ellison. (Wife of a prominent Canadian cattle breeder.)

Cloud Nines was the pet name my mother gave to her most potent sleeping pills, capsules filled with blue powdered magic. "Poof," she'd say, snapping her fingers. "Gone." Perhaps it was an accident, actually being.

Gorblimey, was that one I took or ten?

How many mg x how many mg x how many mg did it take to make her disappear?

My father sat slumped on the linen chest at the foot of the bed. He looked so small. "Do you know where Celia is?" he asked.

I could have reminded him of Celia's visit; how she'd told him, with her mouth full, all about her loft in Seattle where she'd lived a record 1.2 years. "I'll call her," I said.

"Will you call Jack too?" he asked, his voice breaking. "The Yellowknife number, I guess."

"Uncle Jack; sure. Sure, I can do that," (Why didn't she open her eyes and save me: Lorne, Luv, let the kids get on. I'll phone the lot, they've better things to do.)

"Dad?" I said.

"Go. Go and make the calls. I'll take care of things here."

"Come," Peter whispered. Then he gave my father his nod of assurance and told him we'd return that afternoon.

Back at our place, my uncharacteristic calm disappeared instantly, so Peter made the calls. I couldn't hear what he told people, the noise of the aquarium's air pump rushed in my head. My little confidant, the Lyretail, lingered near the glass, frail fins undulating, undulating, mouth working as if to shape a message. I have never heard anything you've ever said to me, you foolish woman, it seemed to say. So I didn't bother to tell it about my mother.

"Lie down," Peter said. "I'll bring you some tea."

I thanked him and appreciated him, if not sincerely --which in retrospect I suspect was the case--then out of respect for my mother. I guess I'd be a fool to imagine that among the calls he made that morning there wasn't one to Grace Larkin.

EIGHT. When you gather together the friends and family of Millicent Ellison and place them under the sombre direction of Rev Dobrinski and his well-meaning wife on

yet another hot May day, you are lucky if no one else kills herself. It was all wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

I had begged them to keep it reasonably light-spirited regardless of the circumstances. I had said no potted yellow chrysanthemums. ("Aren't they absolutely vulgar," Mom had said of them once, and I had laughed at the thought of vulgar flowers, as opposed to people's vulgar taste in flowers.) I requested fresh flowers only, please, in the chapel: pink roses, white freesias, babies'-breath. Chrysanthemums and dreadful wreaths sent by those unfortunates who weren't acquainted with my mother well enough to know better could be placed among the shrubs outside.

But there they were in the chapel, the very vulgar bloody potted McNeil's Nursery Specials! And wreaths with cheap ribbon and silver lettering. "Get them out," I said.

Generally, it is hard to feel anything but kindly toward Mrs Dobrinski. She is short and stout with fuzzy gold hair and little arms that she gathers over her tummy and she is of such limited intelligence (and, after all, Derrick's mother), that, in the midst of a misunderstanding, one usually tends to think, Oh Pooh, never mind.

But not this time. "Get these weeds out of here," I repeated, shocking the woman who had been so charitable when imagining the reason for my mother's self-inflicted death.

"This weather," she had said, "has been merciless. I've always wondered how people not born here ever adjust

to the bitter cold winters and the unpredictable and so often simply insufferable summers."

I might have reminded her that my mother had been in Canada since her teens, but I didn't think of it at the time, and later when I did, I pictured Derrick, still in England and for all I knew reasonably happy, perched on a thirty-second story window ledge having written home that he'd had quite enough drizzle. Such a tidy explanation, such a comfort; such a pity should such an event ever take place that no one would ask, "Mrs Dobrinski, whyever did he do it?" giving her the opportunity to say, "Unfortunately, it was the drizzle." Instead they would say vague things like, "Why I just got a postcard from him last Tuesday", or "We had no idea..."

I don't remember what else I may have said to Mrs Dobrinski. Eventually I just squeezed past her to where the casket was. I slipped my arms through a few wreaths as though donning gaudy Christmas bracelets, and picked up two of the largest potted plants and started back down the aisle.

"It will look as though she had no friends," she called after me.

I did not get far before being stopped up short by my father. Friends and community members had begun to arrive and were speaking with Celia, who'd flown in that morning and was picked up at the airport by the very willing Peter, the two of them returning to my father's considerably later

than expected and smelling of gin. (Peter had needed to fill her in on things, he said, and the airport lounge was handy, and he was not a drinker, and anyway it was her idea.)

"What's the problem here?" my father asked, looking at Mrs Dobrinski, then me, expecting a prompt reply.

Mrs Dobrinski beat me to it: she explained that everything had been in order up until a moment earlier when I had become upset and started to dismantle her display.

My father assured her that he would tend to me if she would release me from any task preventing me from taking my place with the family. He turned to indicate a family group, which, with Mother out of the picture and Uncle Jack not there yet, left Celia in her black cocktail dress, and Peter ushering as efficiently as he would had he liked my mother.

It was odd how rage turned to relief as I gave up the goods to Mrs Dobrinski. Thwarted as my efforts were, I had tried and I sensed my mother, who never expected to win an argument and always backed away from confrontation, would still be reeling from my victory over my father concerning what dress she'd wear for now and forever. He had chosen what my mother called her Roselm Rosie suit, and I insisted on what I knew to be her favourite: a pale yellow linen dress--she loved linen--with paisley trim. Flowers did not a service make, I told myself, swallowing hard on my doubts and yet filled with hope for success on other fronts, for I had given Rev Dobrinski an opening passage to base his

eulogy on, a list of suggestions on how to proceed, and a fact sheet. I took in the crowd and smiled an understandably meager but all-encompassing smile of acknowledgment and appreciation that was, hopefully, all anyone would expect of me. Had the casket been open I'd have been somewhat less composed, for, as I learned days later, the dresses had been switched. I'd been humoured at the time, for my own good.

My father cleared his throat as if to speak, but merely motioned to Celia to come and take her place, which was where it always had been: three rows from the front, left off the left aisle next to the window. He slid in next to her, and I next to him, but I shifted right a bit, sitting partly where my mother would have been seated and partly in my old place before I accompanied Peter to the heartier religious fare served up for edification at the Presbyterian Church.

"What's keeping Uncle Jack?" I wondered quietly to my father, and watched a muscle tighten in his jaw.

Uncle Jack had called early that morning to say he'd made it in from the North. He was by nature unpredictable, arriving for occasions whenever he got there, and blowing in to non-occasions out of the blue, much to my father's annoyance. But to be late for my mother's funeral...? He loved my mother.

I was thinking about that, how my uncle loved my mother, when Rev Dobrinski took the pulpit and boomed: "She hath

given up the ghost; her sun has gone down while it was yet day."

This was not my opening. I waited as did everyone. His pauses were more meaningful to himself and required patience. I waited for the real opening.

"We grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if we had no eyes..."

This, too, was not my choice.

"...we stumble at noon as in the night," he intoned, "We are in desolate places as dead men." Then he abandoned Jeremiah and Isaiah and laid Dobrinski The Mundane upon us as though it were a blessing: the desperation of mankind; the weight of the world that falls upon the shoulders of God's sheep, the loss of one of his own... it was a nightmare, a nightmare.

It was to begin like this, from Ecclesiasticus: "Some there be, which have no memorial; who are perished, as though they had never been; and are become as though they had never been born; and their children after them..." and then he was to say that such was not Millie Ellison. He was to tell of her loss of her mother, of how she dared to set off on her own at the age of fifteen. It was, in fact, my favourite story in all the world made from bits and pieces my mother grudgingly parted with, and fleshed out by hand-me-down details she'd shared with Uncle Jack. (After my grandmother was killed, my mother was to have been evacuated. There'd been talk of America but then the Atlantic was deemed too

dangerous. She had hated her first evacuation experience, when she'd been taken from her mother and, with only a small bag of belongings and her gas mask, was shipped off to the country with thousands of other city-dwellers. She was not one of those lucky enough to find themselves with poor cottagers who generally welcomed evacuees. Rather, she was delivered to a "posh" home and was refused at the door. Taken to another, she was sent around to the back and admitted by the maid who was not pleased to have to share her quarters. She ate in the kitchen alone until she was joined by another evacuee. The two of them had their cots moved out to an old carriage shed and had their heads checked regularly for lice and nits. When the bombs did not fall as expected, she joined the wave of the disenchanted back to the city to take their chances. Eventually orphaned, and uncertain of where she'd be sent, knowing only that her future was being sponsored by the Salvation Army, my mother slipped away from the group transported to London from Coventry, and, opening a door off an alleyway, found a new means of survival. "Come in Luv and close the door," a lady wearing a very glamorous gown said to her cheerfully. Others, similarly clad, peered at her through a haze of smoke and smiled. "Lookin' to be a dancer then are yer? A tad shy of the minimum I'll betcher, but then, so are some of the lads.") I did not expect Rev. Dobrinski to be eloquent. I hoped he was capable of giving a basic overview of my mother's youth and then invite people to share their

memories of her. And in case everyone was too timid I provided him with a long list of events my mother had participated or starred in with which to prompt them: banquets, community plays, musicals. ("Casting baubles before bunnies," Mom called her performances after being assured and reassured she was good, great even, given her understandably limiting situation.) Why I even made photocopies of some of her culinary secrets to be distributed. I mean, I said for him to feel free to make alterations because he'd made such a fuss about having conducted many many funerals and knowing how to pay tribute, but it was understood it was to be within my framework.

I felt myself weeping bitterly and bowed my head, closed my eyes, and let the thing proceed outside myself.

By and by someone squeezed my hand. It was Uncle Jack. He looked as though he'd worn his suit to bed the night before. His hands were dirty, his knuckles skinned and bloody. "Car didn't want to start," he whispered. (Not surprising. It sat for weeks, sometimes months, unprotected from the elements.) Then Peter appeared, so we all shifted over and he quietly took a place at the end of the pew where he could easily slip out just prior to the conclusion of the service. This was our row, complete now. Sorrow, with her family of Sighs, Shelley remarked from deep within me.

Our complete row was incomplete without a hat.

My mother's love of hats was not, as some may have thought, a vanity, but the result of having been left as

a child in the care of a milliner while my grandmother worked.

"Feel this then," she said, offering me a hat that had seen better days. "I betchyer neva touched anythin' so luvly in yer life? It's beava felt yer know," she said with pride. Pride of knowing, not of owning. "Could do wi' a new featha, poor luv." She stroked it as though it were alive.

"What grade did you get to?" I asked her once.

"It's all the same bumf and bletha back 'ome as 'ere, but in a different packet so I can't really tell yer," she said. "Me grades were good, though; I was no slacker. Now go on..."

Suddenly I became aware that I was standing. Flanked by my father and uncle and encased in a hymn, I gripped the pew in front of me for further support. I listened a moment: the lyrics were actually comprehensible and, yes, Mrs Dobrinski carried the alto alone, a bulky irregular objective indeed that, luckily, could be mangled and dropped with no apparent harm to the song as a whole if she stood apart--which she did--so as to not throw the congregation over the edge of the tune they wavered bravely along. "Hushed are the sheep-bells afar on the moorland/ O'er the still meadows the night breezes sweep/ Faint fall the footsteps in city and hamlet/ Safely the children are folded in sleep."

I say, I could hear my mother muttering, won't cher please belt up so's I can keep count o'me bleedin' sheep.

With no resistance, my attention was drawn from the music to the strange sensation of standing between the Ellison brothers. The decade that separated them was clearly visible in their hands that, like mine, clutched the pew in front. But grief seemed to have totally erased my uncle's youthful countenance and had drawn lines on his face as though tracing my father's bitter example. And there were more similarities: the way they stood, the way their shoulders slumped, the way they breathed, cleared their throats and shifted from foot to foot... they seemed like two halves of a single person. How could this be when all my life I'd seen them as opposites in every respect: my father rigid in body and mind; my uncle generous, free in limbs and spirit, creative--everything I wished my father could be.

"If Mommy had married you instead of my father..." I'd said to Uncle Jack when I was very little, and lord knows what else I might have said had my father not appeared to tell us gruffly that supper was ready. Uncle Jack lifted me heave-ho, up-we-go from the love seat on the veranda, and squeezed my hand as we went in to dine.

"Why did you marry Dad?" I asked my mother when I was older, after he'd said something cruel. "Thought I'd cheer 'im up," she replied half joking.

"Really." I wanted to know.

She told me he looked as though he'd lost the war, so the girls sent her over to his table to ask him to dance.

She said maybe it was Gwen's fault. She'd called her back, took a tissue and wiped the lipstick from my mother's mouth. "More 'is type," she'd said, and she'd been right.

The war was winding down. Soldiers were marrying British girls like mad. While over 42,000 Canadians had been killed, of those who survived over 43,000 returned home with a bride or a bride-to-be--which, my mother explained, was why it was so hard in Canada for a widow or divorcée her age to get a date.

"The girls were so 'appy for me," she said, getting misty-eyed as always when remembering "the girls." Gwen, who drove an ambulance when she wasn't dancing with "the boys," made the dress from the curtains contributed by the others. I never had the nerve to ask my mother why she couldn't have gotten a divorce and married someone else--maybe even Uncle Jack--somewhere far from Roselm.

By the time I was a teenager, I was quite smitten with Uncle Jack myself, my dreams fed by the affection he showed me when I went to his place for a few days each summer to clean up his bachelor's sty (his expression) for a princely sum (my mother's claim because he paid me considerably more than what she did to tidy up at home, undermining her reputation as big-hearted). It was on the first day of my first visit there that I came upon a photo, tucked in a volume of Hemingway short stories, of Uncle Jack and my mother. Perhaps in their mid-twenties, they were leaning against the trunk of a huge tree, not touching but bending

toward one another, my mother glancing up the way only she could as if to toss her attention, and Uncle Jack catching it, holding it, prizing it so openly that to look upon them even years after the fact felt like peeping. You couldn't help but feel uncomfortable for whoever took the picture.

"Ever read Hemingway?" he asked me that evening. I felt my face flush and thought he'd found out somehow, in the mysterious way grownups do, that I'd been snooping. But no. We were fishing at the time and he had been reminded of a story which he read to me later, "Big Two-Hearted River." I remember imagining him as the story's character, Nick, and feeling so much in love. I thought of him as Nick as I continued to clean his house. Nick was not my uncle; he was someone I could marry. He was someone to go fishing with, with or without tackle, for sometimes we just gazed down into the stream that cut through his property and watched the trout holding their own against the current. Looking back, I know I was impatient with the fish for always hanging around under the bridge instead of traveling up stream to where it met the river and beyond. Once, when I lifted a rock with the intention of dropping it to scare them into action, Uncle Jack stopped me from doing it, and I admired his gentle words, "Don't disrupt their little world."

These were Hemingway fish, big silent mysterious beautiful fish. Nick's fish. My fish.

"Your mother..." he'd begin in a prayerful tone, then

he'd reveal some biographical knowledge which hung in the atmosphere like the green pastures and still waters of the twenty-third psalm--a passage I'd included in my program for my mother's funeral service that didn't materialize.

"Your mother..." whispered Uncle Jack--we were seated again, Rev Dobrinski kneeled in prayer at the altar--"Your mother would like this..." he said, meaning the soft organ background to the minister's blessed silence.

Ah, at last a contribution of mine: "Nearer My God To Thee," the hymn by Sarah Flower Adams whose acting career was felled by illness. My mother used to hum it frequently, singing the lyrics sweetly, if a bit raggedly: "Though like the wandera/ The sun gone down/ Da da da da da de/ My rest a stone/ Yet in my dreams I'd be/ da de da da da de..." She liked it, she said, because it was the song that was played on board the Titanic as it sank, calming many who sang even as the water took them to their deaths. Watery graves is how she put it for the sake of heightening a child's imagination.

Rev Dobrinski stood, flung out his arms and boomed his dismissal of those not wishing to stay for the final phase at the graveside. "My peace I give unto you... Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." I supposed the words were quite reassuring when Christ said them, but coming from a man who chewed his nails to the quick they fell like boulders into bog.

Peering past Uncle Jack to assure myself that Peter

had noticed his cue, I discovered him already gone. But he was not at the portal opposite the other usher. Rather, his dark silhouette in the doorway leaned outward into the sunlight where Grace Larkin tried to decide between a rose bouquet or a clump of chrysanthemums. And who wouldn't reach for the roses?

"No!" I cried, and pushed past Uncle Jack, scurried down the aisle to the door, and saved my mother's very nicest arrangement from falling into the wrong hands.

Such a fuss.

Better to remember Celia and me, our fingers intertwined like those of schoolgirls, straggling at the tail of the procession to the cemetery. Cordelia Blain, a novice with crutches, hobbled silently, awkwardly alongside. (After years on her feet at Durand's, she'd had surgery for her varicose veins and had developed a troublesome inflammation her doctor simply could not explain.)

"You'll see to your sister," Rev Dobrinski said to Celia when the service was over, placing a fatherly hand on her shoulder.

How dare he, I thought. How dare he put Celia in charge of me. I was, if nothing else in the world, the eldest.

To me he said, "'Nearer My God To Thee' is my standard closing. I was so glad it was one you requested." He took a folded handkerchief from his breast pocket and blotted his forehead. "The rest of your suggestions I'm afraid..." He cleared his throat and pushed something unpleasant on

his tongue to where it could be discreetly deposited into the hankie with a perfected quick and slick gesture. "The rest of your, uh, suggestions," he repeated, "uh, I'm afraid... of course I checked with your father and he assured me, uh, we should remain entirely, uh, traditional for his... his wife's funeral."

There had been a tremor in my limbs during most of the graveside rites, but now I shook violently, my teeth chattered, the minister's face melted like lard in an iron skillet.

"Manda!"

My name seemed to fall from a great height into a dangerous hush, due to some clumsiness on Celia's part. She hovered over me, a distraught black and white damsel in a silent technicolor movie. The hero apparent, Peter, scanned the crowd, undoubtedly looking for my father, but it was Uncle Jack who moved into the picture and whose arms raised me to my feet and held me close.

I'm sure all I needed was to go home to bed, but Peter insisted I be taken to Roselm emergency clinic. "This is not her first breakdown," he said by way of explanation to one and all as though falling down = breaking down. This was in such contrast to his attitude toward my rest in Dayton-Bridge that he had to be up to something. I protested, of course, but no one believes a woman who fights over flowers, kicks at a colleague and her very own husband, and calls the minister a pompous poop. Let that be a lesson

to yer, Luv.

Uncle Jack looked to my father for consent to accompany Celia in taking me to the hospital clinic to get a prescription for a sedative. "The less fuss the better," my father said, drawing Uncle Jack back from the cluster of concerned standersby.

The clinic was plugged with people who had trimmed their toes with lawn mowers or fallen off ladders or just felt terrible and were frightened they'd caught something somebody they knew had. Blood or vomit was respected and helped qualify you for one of the five beds in emergency. Tears got me sent to the East Wing, which greatly annoyed my father when Celia called with the news. "This is not to be dragged out," he told me when I took the phone. "Things are bad enough." I assured him it was just for the night.

The doctor had felt that, given my state of agitation and the fact that my mother was a suicide, I needed observation. I told him it had nothing to do with my mother. I told him my marriage was to blame, that my husband was a rat. There were rather a large number of descriptive adjectives, too, I used to describe Peter, which may have had some bearing on the decision to admit me.

NINE. My first thoughts upon waking (not on the day following my mother's funeral as I supposed at the time, for I slept through that day, but the second day,

mid-morning) were not, as one might imagine, thoughts of my mother being underground forever, or generous thoughts of concern for other members of my family that would encourage me to believe that I deserved to be loved by someone other than Peter. Nor did I dwell immediately on how I had made a spectacle of myself that would be remembered and talked about for as long as I walked the earth no matter how many new leaves I turned over. Rather, I felt terribly annoyed at how noisy the sanctuary was for people under duress. Rattle-rattle-rattle up the hall, rattle-rattle-rattle down the hall, over and over 'til I swore I would wring the neck of the guilty party.

I waited with anticipation for the sound to reoccur and when it did I rose woozily and stumbled to the doorway where I saw a woman of about one hundred and six wearing a blue hospital gown and paper slippers, her intervenous contraption trailing alongside as though it were a tall ailing friend in need of a helping hand. She smiled sweetly at me, though I'm sure I looked like a frothing dog. "My morning constitutional," she said. Nice doggie, I shall not intrude on your territory. She shuffled and rattled past and I slunk back undercover, the impulse to murder annihilated for the time being.

There simply were not many people in Roselm willing to admit to mental instability let alone willing to be admitted to an institution whose intention it was to dwell on something so adaptable to secrecy, so only the tip of

the East Wing was comprised of psychiatric patients, six little rooms--where the primary feathers would be if one were to think of a wounded bird's wing instead of a hospital wing. The bulk of the wing where the secondary feathers, tertials and wing coverts would be, well, the hospital equivalent was filled with geriatric patients.

I felt so caged, I imagined myself telling my fish.

Was the room bigger than 36 gallons? they'd respond.

"They will so give you your clothes," Celia said with her new-found authority. "After you've been seen by a doctor."

She had returned from the cafeteria where she claimed she'd been living for two days when not by my side. She smoothed the blankets around me and patted my arm and pointed to a note from Peter propped up against the bouquet I'd fought for and won.

My mind returned to murder.

I pictured Peter exiting a building at some distance and me in the foreground behind a nondescript cover with a rifle which I had been lucky enough to find, loaded, as there is far too much red tape in buying one, even in an imaginary scenario. And, I had apparently inherited my father's marksman skills. I squeezed the trigger, took a breather to give the bullet enough time to travel across a nondescript space, then watched him drop out of sight.

Such a contrast to how I murdered him when I was first admitted. In that episode I shot him point-blank, which

witnesses to murder will tell you is not like on TV. Still, I think Peter flew apart into more pieces than is likely in real life. God, his arteries were tangled in my hair! And there were kidneys, lymph nodes, eyeballs, his newly developed gluteus maximus--you name it--not tidy like our wipe-clean snap-together man in the science lab, but oozing blood and draped over our living room furniture like Time in a Dali painting.

"None of this has been easy on Peter," Celia said. She responded to my deep sigh by admitting he was a little schmucky. "He tries in his way," she added.

"Have you talked to him?" I asked. "Has he said anything about our marriage?"

"Oh," Celia said, squinting at the ceiling, "...something about his feeling he's let Dad down... but Miranda, I need to talk to you about something important before I return to Seattle."

So much for Peter and our marriage; into the dustbin.

That was fine with me. Thinking of Peter made me want to kill, which tired and shamed me. I was a teacher after all, someone small children looked up to. So you see, my innocents, when you are playing in the park and trip over a loaded gun, turn it over to the authorities. Do not give it to your parents; they may be waiting for just such a miracle.

What I wanted was to leave Peter, just as soon as someone could please fetch me my clothes, at bare minimum

my underwear. Only my shoes remained in my custody--Italian leather T-straps my mother had reluctantly given up when her union refused to be impressed by the price she'd paid.

"There is something I think you ought to know," Celia said, lowering her voice. For one paranoid moment I felt this statement synonymous with her old accusation that I thought I knew everything but didn't. I turned it over in my mind and realized that my sister was about to confide in me.

"What?" I asked, attentive as I'll ever be.

Celia walked to the window and propped herself on the sill. She was wearing jeans and a plain black T-shirt. The last time she'd visited home she'd sported a shirt that read, Let's talk software! She'd been doing trade shows for a computer company. When Dad ordered her to put on something decent, she told him point-blank that it was not her fault he associated the word software with her breasts. He blushed and retreated. By supper, though, Celia had changed tops for Mommy's sake. And still, hostility was so palpable even Peter detected it and wondered later what it was all about. There, on the hospital window ledge, the sun highlighted Celia's lovely features while hinting at the underlying truth of the transience of youth, if not beauty. She waited for the back-up beeper of a garbage truck out on a side street to cease. She took a breath and was about to speak when someone's head poked in through the

half-closed door, looked at us and disappeared. It occurred to me that I hadn't seen anyone remotely official since waking. A voice in the hall said, "She is awake now, but she has a visitor, her sister." I wondered who it could be. Peter wouldn't dare make an appearance, my father would not linger waiting to be admitted.

"See if it's Uncle Jack," I urged Celia.

"Can't be," she said. "He had to leave. He was here yesterday watching you sleep, though. I sensed she took a little pleasure in telling me he'd taken off so soon.

I wondered if I'd felt his presence, for I'd dreamt of him. In the dream I asked him what Lt-General Crerar of the First Canadian Army meant when he wrote to his troops that Canadians inherited military characteristics which had been feared by the enemy in World War I, and would be still more feared before the end of World War II. It was something I'd read in some book or other long ago. Uncle Jack just smiled and said, "Crazy. Crazy Canucks." My father was a little crazy, a little dangerous, I thought in the dream, a revelation to explain the insanity I felt. I then asked Uncle Jack about Dad's role in Operation Overlord and he said, "Oh, he just helped keep the enemy worried and made the Americans look good."

But it wasn't a dream, really. It was a memory.

I figured the visitor to be someone from the school. Bertha most likely. She'd been well enough to attend the funeral.

A card from members of the staff was on the table next to my withering roses. I hadn't actually looked at it yet but the cover said "From all of us," so inside would be the various signatures and the not-so-various comments: hurry back, have faith, hope you're feeling better, we're thinking of you, you're in my prayers... There'd be no funny ones, under these circumstances. The only reason to open the card would be to confirm that Grace had signed, discreetly in a corner, and that Peter would have used the opportunity to show everyone how noble he was. I let whoever might still be in the hall, my only friend, decide to leave or wait because Celia seemed annoyed by my distraction and finally said, "You know, I've been kind of waiting to talk to you here."

I told her to please proceed, and watched her bite her lip.

"Mommy called the night before she died," she said. "She wanted to know what it was I wasn't telling her. So, I, like, told her." She fiddled with the cord to the window shade, twirling this smaller version of an old menace, her skipping rope that she'd whorl to a high pitch.

"Which was exactly..." I knew it would be connected with the torn letter, with Celia's on-going battle with Dad. I could have taken that cord and strangled her.

"Which was that Dad's been seeing Cordelia for years."

There was a dull thud in the back of my brain, like the sound of furniture falling over in the dead of night,

waking me. "You told her that?" I said, not entirely disbelieving.

"I refuse to feel guilty," Celia said. "First of all, she asked. Secondly, it made me sick to see her knock herself out tending Dad and his house and his business friends when he's pretending to go to meetings and seeing someone else. Why shouldn't she see someone else? You know?" She took up the damned cord again. It was like when she used to come into my room to talk, then fiddle with stuff from my dresser and desk, sniffing perfume, peering into my jewelry box, testing pens by doodling on the palms of her hands till I'd wish she'd just go away.

"What did she say?" I wondered, picturing my mother in a scene where she'd played this woman who was speechless and overwrought upon learning the death of her husband and then, rather gratuitously I thought, took her own life. Mom had defended the character's action by asking what the woman had to look forward to.

"Mom said not to tell you. That you have enough troubles. That she'd never forgive me if I were to tell." She peered from the window, taking up the study of pigeons and garbage bins.

"So how do you come to be so sure about Dad and Cordelia?" I queried, hoping it didn't sound too much like the comments I used to make on her compositions. "You have to back up your statements; give examples, find corroboration from other sources, etc., etc."

Celia gave me a long-ago story. One in which she was fourteen and out with Clifford Myers, who got fresh when they were sort of necking in his dad's car out off the township road where the hunters park. Celia had slapped him and he'd gotten mad enough to just gun the car back out onto the road without looking. They'd almost "got creamed" by a pick-up driven by none other than Dad. And who was beside him but none other than Cordelia Blain. "Funny," Celia said, "how Cordelia, in the dark, looked like Mommy." But she knew it couldn't be our mother because she was home in bed with a sick headache.

There was a tap at the door and a stocky woman in white entered briskly with a lovely pot of begonias.

"Didn't want to disturb you... the lady who stopped by to see you," she said. "But," she added plumping the leaves and straightening the ribbon, "lunch will be by shortly." She moved the table into place, hustle-bustling, her bangles and charms jingling. She reminded me of a pony we'd had that pulled us in a sleigh, so eager when out of the barn and into its harness. I checked my watch and figured my students would be on break. I hoped my substitute would not be useless at reviewing. The final tests were not long off.

"Thank you Luella," said Celia, proving she'd been around long enough to become familiar with staff and that she was willing to lend manners to her neglectful sister.

I chimed in with my gratitude catching Luella's back,

and reached for the note tucked among the begonias to confirm Bertha's generosity. I also scanned the card from school for yes, Grace's calligraphic Grace a. Larkin, and Peter's message: "Nothing must stand in the way of your health and our happiness." Talk about an ambiguous endearment. My stomach grumbled its hunger. Bertha, I thought, admiring the flowers, I could give her my fish if I were to go away somewhere. (Where?) She would tend them and talk to them and love all the gadgetry as my mother had when Peter and I'd taken our vacations.

"You're really something, you know?" Celia said, not taking her eyes off whatever they'd fastened upon outdoors. "Our mother has killed herself. You're here. And I can tell you're just waiting, thinking that once you get your clothes and can get out, then everything will be okay. It's like you didn't hear a word I said before. I feel like I'm Mom talking to Dad."

That stung. And it wasn't fair of her to align herself with Mom and stick me in Dad's camp. She was deaf to Mommy most of the time herself. This was just a manoeuver meant to distract me from her role in Mom's death. She had not wanted to enlighten Mom; she had wanted to score one against Dad.

"Celia," I said, let's face it, you and Dad..."

"That's it," she interrupted. "Let's face it." Let's face that mommy was sick for a reason; that she didn't face it. You have always seemed to regard her as some kind of

misplaced celebrity, refusing to acknowledge that she was just, well... pathetic."

The sun moved behind a cloud and the light fell from Celia so dramatically it was as though Mommy had heard us, reached in and flicked off the switch. "Tha's it, me luvs. Nightie night and no whisperin'."

I turned the word pathetic over in my mind. It seemed at first hard and ugly like something our father would hurl. But its pebble-like quality also made it seem smooth and small, something to warm in my uncle's hand. "What about Mom and Uncle Jack," I offered in what sounded like defence of my father. "Suppose they all had some sort of agreement?"

"Mom wasn't that stupid," Celia said flatly. "Think of where Uncle Jack lives, of the way he is." She'd obviously not heard our mother's morning calls to him. I felt proud having kept them secret. But then I wondered if maybe Mom's relationship with our uncle might have been innocent after all--a notion I'd given up in adulthood. I remembered coming home one night and seeing my uncle's car in the lane, and peering in the window before announcing my arrival. It was like watching TV with the sound off. Mommy was playing a role I'd never seen her play before, and it took a long moment to realize it was probably herself. They were sitting at the kitchen table, reading tea leaves, something Mom had learned from one of the girls. They were like kids at recess, she and my uncle, when time for the bell to ring is still a long way off.

"Anyway," I said, greatly fatigued, "I think it's good you didn't carry this around inside yourself."

Surprisingly, tears sprang to her eyes, a tiny, delightful hairline crack in the tough exterior she inherited from our father.

I tried to remember when I'd last seen Celia cry. It had been years. Back when she first left home and said good-bye to Chumly. (Spatz, the cat, afraid of Herman's exhaust-sputtering Beetle, stayed on the veranda with Mom. Dad was not around.) Having stayed at the fringes of Celia's rebelliousness, offering to tutor her, echoing our father's warnings of the perils of dropping out of college, I simply watched her departure from my bedroom window, opened it and called her name, waving, feeling the lovely fresh warmth on my face that day, the spring of the year I was married. How could I have known she'd never really return? The house was silent then for a long while, and I was just about to go and check that Mom wasn't drinking, when I heard her torturing the piano. Though Mommy could play beautifully by ear, she'd come to regard it as second-rate and rather futilely tried to learn the "propa" way. "There'll be luv... there'll be luv and laughta/ and.... and peace eva afta/ to...mor, morrow...." she sang, remembering E natural too late.

"I think Mom would forgive you for telling me," I told Celia, wanting to be kind to my sister.

She snuffled, and fidgeted. "I guess maybe I'll forgive

her too," she said, pulling the blind down quickly, tugging, and letting it zip to the top with a horrible clatter.

It seemed a bit inappropriate to say just two days after the funeral. And curious.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Everything," she whined, and went into an account of how she'd retrieved from someone's garbage her long-lost Snidely Whiplash tumbler. How horrid it had felt to turn it over and find her name scratched out. Just a few traces of purple marker to make a positive identification. How elated she'd felt to reclaim it.

I did not need Professor Peabody and his boy Sherman to activate my own inner Way-Back Machine and review Celia's youth. She'd gone through a phase where she put her name on almost everything she owned. Property of... This belongs to... C. Ellison, Celia Gwendelyn Ellison, C.G. Ellison Esq. She had to have been at least eleven and perhaps even a teenager when our mother did the dastardly deed of relieving her of her Snidely Whiplash tumbler. I pointed this fact out to her and she argued that her age was irrelevant, it had been her property. In the silence that followed my mind drifted to the happy days of Rocky and Bullwinkle. I wondered if a few hours in a quiet room watching them try to pull a rabbit out of a hat might not be better medicine than anything I'd likely have prescribed for me by a doctor. Tell me when Dudley Doright comes on, girls, and I'll join yers, Mom used to say. Mom used to

say. That's what our mother used to say.

"What else?" I asked Celia, sensing this particular sin of our mother's was not what she'd been referring to.

"What else might you forgive her for?"

"Well," she said, examining her cuticles for what seemed forever, "pushing us in the wrong directions. I mean, there you were out flitting around the backyard dressed in the old living room drapes like what's her name... Mom's dance idol...and she urged me to take dance lessons. Said she'd go to bat for me with Dad. Did I want acting lessons? Music lessons?"

This was news.

"What about Miranda, I asked her," Celia said, imitating herself as a teen. "Know what she said? Hmm? She said 'Merander'd never make it. Show business is too competitive.' So even though I didn't do what she wanted me to, it was hard to shake the feeling that I had nothing to offer but my looks."

The wheels on the food trolley rumbled like gutter balls by my door. I expected Luella, but some other woman in zoo-keeper green came in and wordlessly slid the tray in front of me and left. I lifted the metal lids.

"I chose it," Celia said. "You were out like a light yesterday when the list came around. I think the choice was Ghastly Chicken Macaroni or Loathsome Salisbury Steak, or maybe it was the other way around. I flipped a coin. What was it you won?"

"Loathsome," I answered with a solemn glibness. "...with instant potatoes and protracted peas."

"Mommy," Celia said, taking up her list of complaints, "was obsessed with appearances. Remember how she used to fuss over your birthmark, rubbing it with the corner of her apron... How could you stand there and let her do it?"

I couldn't answer; I had to chew on the so-called steak. The fact was I hadn't really minded the birthmark. And when it faded and disappeared, I never considered it gone. It was there just under the skin, my little seahorse, my upside-down England. I was relieved, though, that my mother could no longer see it.

"You want me to go, don't you?" Celia said, stretching, shaking her hair and smoothing it back, her nails red and perfect against the glossy black tresses.

"No," I said, negotiating a gaggle of peas onto my fork. While communication had degenerated to the prickly state we generally part at, we could put up with one another, at least until after my miserable lunch and the doctor's perfunctory visit. I wondered if perhaps I had reached a point where becoming friends with Celia might be worth a try. I felt that old. I pushed aside the tray and began to put on the shoes so I'd be one step closer to leaving-- though I had no clear idea where I'd go.

"You could start all over," Celia said. "It's not like you're old. I could help you do something about your hair and clothes, if you like." She made a disparaging snort.

"Poor Mommy," she said. She thought anything made of Italian leather had to be good."

"They match my navy dress," I said, dreading the fact that I'd have to walk out of there in my funeral garb. You'd have thought a sister might think to bring some other clothes. And defending my mother's taste, I added, "They looked good on Mom. She was mad about T-straps."

"You've got her legs," Celia said. Mommy had not bad legs."

"Cordelia Blain would be happy to trade, I'm sure," I responded ruefully, reaching back in my memory to a day in Durand's, Nov. 1963. Then it came to me, the terrible recollection of how Cordelia had joined the inner circle at the graveside service, how our father had taken her by the elbow and told her he was grateful for her presence, all of us sharing in his realization that after a decent length of time the two of them could take up the courtship "the rude intruder, war," had interrupted.

"Hey," Celia said, reaching out her hand to me. "What's this; you're trembling." She gently pushed me back onto the bed and smoothed my hair from my face, assuring me she would stay if I'd like her to. She could stay in Roselm till the end of the week. Would I like that? She arranged my pillows and blankets and would have removed my shoes had I let her. "You know," she said, "its going to be all right. Just don't look too far ahead," she warned, without apology. Next I expected one day at a time, but she spared

me. She took up my hand again and whispered comfortingly, "Just say to yourself: Six months from now I'm going to be all right."

I smiled accommodatingly, wondering how long I was going to let her play parent/nurse/guardian angel.

"Are you saying it?" she prodded.

"Gorblimey, yes," I assured her. "You say it too," I advised, remembering her tears of a moment earlier, and felt her bristle. She sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Your lunch..." she wondered aloud. "I'm so famished... Is it as bad as it looks?"

"Sing a song of blitzkrieg..." I said, contracting a yawn into a grimace as Mommy might have done. "Deutschland full of troops," I added, plugging my nose.

"Boots and bricks and... How did it go?" she asked.

"Roots and sticks and acorns," I prompted, "made into soups."

Then together, the Ellison sisters, the elder of them leading the way: "When der lid was lifted/ Der soup was strong and thick/ The Führer tried a spoonful..."

And, Mein Gott, there had probably been a knock at the door we hadn't heard, for there before us stood a bewildered doctor confronted with merriment he was at a loss to deal with. He checked his clip board and peered over his spectacles at the room number then back to us. "Mrs Murray?" he wondered.

"Miranda," I corrected. "And this is my sister, Celia,

who's come to take me... somewhere... Where are we going,
Celie?"