

**The Order of Things: Short Stories**

**Kathleen Mullin**

**A Thesis**

**in**

**The Department**

**of**

**English**

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

**February 2004**

**© Kathleen Mullin, 2004**



National Library  
of Canada

Bibliothèque nationale  
du Canada

Acquisitions and  
Bibliographic Services

Acquisitions et  
services bibliographiques

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file    Votre référence*

*ISBN: 0-612-91092-X*

*Our file    Notre référence*

*ISBN: 0-612-91092-X*

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

---

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this dissertation.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de ce manuscrit.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the dissertation.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

**Canada**



## ABSTRACT

### The Order of Things: Short Stories

Kathleen Mullin

The four fictional pieces in this thesis are intended to reflect the author's interest in various types of narrative voice. The distance between narrator and character in "Influence" functions as a way of understanding the distance the characters experience between each other and from themselves. The second story, "The Order of Things", explores similar themes of alienation and miscommunication through a more intimate alignment of character and narrative voice. The final two pieces, "Hamowego" and "Ceremony", are told in an autobiographical style by a first-person narrator recounting events of her early teenage years. These two last stories are linked through chronology, narrative voice, and characterization, but are intended as stories complete in themselves. They are part of a longer work currently in progress.

## Table of Contents

<i>Influence</i>	.....	<i>1</i>
<i>The Order of Things</i>	.....	<i>10</i>
<i>Hamowego</i>	.....	<i>26</i>
<i>Ceremony</i>	.....	<i>45</i>

The two girls face one another in the schoolyard after the bell has rung and the other children have trickled into line outside the doors. It is a city schoolyard, surrounded by a high fence and beyond that the traffic of midmorning, which is unhurried and scarce.

"You're a bad influence," says the smaller girl, whose name is Elaine. She is wearing a pink-and-white striped hat with matching scarf and mittens, a stiff grey wool coat, all new. Her hair springs out from underneath the hat in blunt, freshly-cut chunks. Her eyes are pale grey and far apart, the space between them a desert of indifference. There are freckles on her nose, fading, left over from the summer.

The other girl, Stacey, does not respond. She does not know what influence means. The word that sticks in her mind is *bad*, and so *influence* cannot be good, and the unknowingness causes a slimy, churning, desperate feeling in her stomach.

"I'm not," Stacey finally says, without conviction. She is bigger than Elaine but she looks deflated, unravelled, like the mittens that hang from her coat sleeves by a string.

The other girl drops her head to one side, giving a look that is limp and impatient and very grown-up, as though she has had it up to here with all this nonsense. Then she smiles. It is a smile Stacey will always remember, because up until this point smiling has been a sign of reconciliation. Her father smiled up at her from a shining white bed, high off the floor; it meant that everything was forgiven, and it also asked for forgiveness. Her mother smiled when all the boxes and suitcases were packed and she said, "Are we ready?"

Elaine's smile doesn't try to hide itself: it is mean.

"Stacey and Elaine, get in line!"

A far-away voice from across the asphalt courtyard: Miss Beaulieu, the new Grade Three teacher, signalling to them with a red mitten as thick as a boxing glove. Little puffs of breath escape in the air around her head. The sky is hard, uniform, cold. It has begun to snow.

"What does *influence* mean?"

"Why?"

"Just what does it mean?"

Rita, the girl's mother, stands at the kitchen sink scrubbing a lasagna pan with a pad of steel wool. Stacey is standing behind her. Rita can see her daughter's reflection in the darkened window above the sink, transparent and spangled with lights from the city outside. They moved to the city two months ago; they have not gotten used to the lights, the sky that is never really black but rather a bruised, hazy orange.

Stacey explains. "Elaine said her mother thinks I'm a bad influence. I'm not allowed to go to her house anymore. I can't even talk to her at school."

Rita's hands drop into the sink. She looks up with her mouth slightly open: the expression of a person who has just received a flash of last night's dream.

"Why would Elaine's mother say a thing like that?"

The end of the sentence is muffled as she turns her attention back to the lasagna pan, frowning and scrubbing. Stacey waits to see if her mother has an answer; she understands that there are things that come without explanations, and that if you push for

explanations you only get excuses (she doesn't think of them as excuses, which is another word she doesn't know, but as lies). She withdraws into the living room to finish her homework.

Later, after the eleven o'clock news, Rita goes into her daughter's room. The girl's breath is shallow and measured, as though she were floating at the surface of sleep. Her mouth has fallen slack around her wet and wrinkled thumb, and her closed eyelids are curved and smooth, like polished river stones. Rita sits beside the bed in a child-size rocking chair, watching her daughter by the glow of a nightlight. The nightlight was a gift from Stacey's father; shaped like a clown, with a black bowler hat and polka-dot bloomers and a sad-happy marshmallow face. Rita didn't know how many of such things should be kept in full view, how many thrown away.

Why bad influence?

She knows the effect an unknown word has on a child's mind; she remembers it, the vacuum space it becomes, where all kinds of images and associations rush in to fill the gap. She has a memory of her aunt walking into a store to buy cigarettes, and asking her if she would like some silly-putty to play with. *Putty*: the thick steaks her father liked to eat, the inside part, pink and tender and bleeding when you pressed down on it with a fork. She'd said no, thank you. What might *influence* sound like? Something malevolent and uncatchable: an evil puff of smoke escaping through a crack in the floor.

The next morning Rita and Stacey eat their cereal in a hurry, dress for the cold, and leave the apartment in time for the bus that wheezes to a halt at the corner. Sitting across from them on the bus is a woman with a little boy next to her, close to Stacey's



age. They are both silent, cocooned in their separate thoughts. Finally the woman addresses the boy; her voice is flinty, loud enough for everyone around them to hear.

"I'm so excited to see your sister," she says. "She'll be so happy to see her Mummy, won't she?"

"And her big brother, too," says the boy, with a firm, enthusiastic nod.

The mother's tone drops in gravity. She pushes out her lower jaw, like a pouting and frustrated child. "I told you, *you're* not going to see her, you'll have to stay in the waiting room. She's had a very serious operation. I don't want that image of her to stick with you for the rest of your life."

The woman looks across at Rita who is eavesdropping openly. "My little girl just had a major operation," she explains. She is leaning forward. Her huge octagonal glasses exaggerate the size of her eyes, which appear to be without lashes, a flat brown color, as unintelligent as a rabbit's. On her head is a fuzzy beret that has shed cat-like hairs on her shoulders. Rita thinks she smells a faint reek of cat urine as the woman leans forward. "A brain operation," the woman continues. "They shaved her entire head. They cut her open all the way down to between her shoulder blades. That scar will last forever. I get to see her for the first time today."

Rita looks at Stacey, who is watching the boy. The boy is staring above Stacey's head, out the window that is spattered with fat wet snowflakes. His mouth is open, his whole expression pitched on the edge of a bottomless question. The bus lurches to a stop in front of the school.

"Good luck to your daughter," mumbles Rita as she and Stacey get off.

“Poor kid,” Rita says, meaning the daughter. She guides Stacey around a slushy puddle to the sidewalk.

“He’s in my class,” says Stacey.

“Who is? The boy?”

Stacey nods.

“Why didn’t you say hello to him?”

The girl shrugs. They are at the gate of the school. Children are shrieking and playing in the yard. Snowflakes melt into the asphalt, landing with a soft hiss Rita thinks she might hear, if only the children were quiet. Teachers line the brick wall of the school on both sides of its massive wooden doors, talking, their hands wrapped around steaming styrofoam cups. Below the windows the brick is darker, streaked with dampness. If you close your eyes and ignore the cold and only choose to listen, it sounds like a beach in summer.

Rita adjusts Stacey’s hat and scarf, stalling, waiting to see if Elaine will run up to them out of the flock of children. Quarrels are forgotten at that age. The bell rings and shakes the air with its fateful metallic clang; the sound of a grey day in winter. “Off you go then,” she says brightly. She kisses her daughter on the forehead, gives her a little pat on the bum, and the girl half jogs, half walks to the line forming in front of the cathedral doors.

Rita walks to the end of the block, then stops, and slowly paces back toward the gate. The procession of children is being swallowed into the school, and she cannot see Stacey or Elaine among those who are left. She decides to wait for Elaine and her mother who are perhaps late.

*Why bad influence?* Since yesterday the blank space of that question has multiplied in her mind like the spaces between words on a page, both separating and linking one thought and another. She has been looking at Stacey, thinking this question, and nothing about Stacey provides her with an answer.

Perhaps Elaine's mother can explain what she meant.

Rita waits in the snow that is slowly turning to rain, the soft patter on the dome of her umbrella making her feel drowsy and peaceful. She should be looking for work; it has already been two months. Buses splash by on the street with fewer and fewer passengers, and the leisure of the hour steals upon her like a photograph gradually exposed: to be out in midmorning on a weekday, in the city, shedding all the day's responsibilities like a heavy cloak falling to the floor. Beyond the downtown buildings, halfway up a hill, the lighted cross of the hospital glows in the fog.

By ten o'clock Elaine and her mother have not come. Rita realizes that her hands and feet are numb; her fingernails are blue. Perhaps Elaine wasn't late after all. She might have been there the entire time, playing and shrieking among the bright multitude of children. Stacey would have seen her, and kept her distance. She is like that. The recess bell clangs again across the cold air and children spill out from the gnashing doors. Shielding her face with her umbrella, Rita disappears into the next bus, and goes home.

At a quarter to four Stacey's key rattles in the lock. Rita is on the couch with a blanket over her legs. She has been watching soap operas all afternoon, wrapped in a clandestine cloud of shelter and release. Once this mood comes over her there is little she can do about it; what she needs is a whole new day, and she can set herself in motion again. A

half-eaten package of Oreos lies on the floor next to her, and a glass in which a sip of apple juice swirls into melted ice cubes.

Stacey halts on the floor mat inside the door. Her eyebrows register a thin twitch of alarm, which settles quickly into ordinary surprise.

"I came home from work early so I could spend time with my munchkin!" says Rita, smiling, holding out her arms.

Stacey struggles out of her coat, sits on the floor to pull off her boots. The toes of her wool tights drag on the linoleum as she slides across the kitchen to the living room. Rita makes a space for her on the couch and the girl sits, instantly hypnotized by the television. Blindly her hand reaches into the package of Oreos.

"How was your day?" Rita asks her. "How was school?"

Stacey shrugs. "Fine."

"Did you see Elaine?"

The girl shakes her head.

"You mean you didn't talk to her or she wasn't there?"

"She wasn't there. Her mom is dead."

"*What?*"

"Her mom is dead. That's why she didn't come to school today."

"Who told you that?"

"Miss Beaulieu. She told the whole class."

"What did she say, exactly?"

“She said Elaine’s mom had an accident last night and died, and Elaine won’t be coming to school for a while, and that next time we see Elaine we should be extra nice to her.”

“What kind of accident?”

The girl wipes Oreo crumbs from her lip with the back of her hand.

“I don’t know. The same kind Daddy had.”

At night Rita does not sleep. A light from one of the downtown buildings slides across her ceiling, goes round, slides across again. She remembers a classmate who died on a beautiful spring day, when she was in the third grade. She retains a perfect image of her teacher, Sister St-John, storming into the classroom on her white sausage legs and her thick-soled nun’s shoes, announcing the death of Dennis Peterson. He had skipped school, gone out for a ride on his bicycle, got hit by a truck. This is what happens when you skip school, Sister St-John warned triumphantly. Rita forced herself to look at the empty desk at the back of the classroom, forced herself to realize that the person who had sat there all year was suddenly *not*. As much as she tried it was impossible, like thinking of the universe before anything existed, when a lonely formless God filled the Big Nothing.

“Was it dark, before the world was created?” Rita had once asked Sister St-John. It was a day when Sister St-John invited her pupils to ask her anything—anything at all—and she would give an answer.

“No,” Sister St-John said, with a satisfied smile. “Not even darkness existed.”

The snow and rain have ceased during the night. The sun is low and full in a sky growing solid with the hours, illuminating leaves still clinging to trees like frail gold chips. Rita is

awake and feeling jet-lagged. While Stacey eats her oatmeal, blowing on each hot spoonful, Rita goes into her bedroom and quietly phones the school.

But she is mistaken, according to the bored, barely confused voice on the other end. There has been no accident, no death. Elaine Stroja's mother dropped her little girl off at school early yesterday morning. Like she does every morning.

They are there again on the bus: the rabbit-eyed woman and the little boy. They must be there every morning, then, and Rita has never noticed, because Stacey has never said hello to the boy who is in her class. None of the children on this bus are talking to one another. They will not acknowledge each other out of context, as though their existence outside of school is too private and inconvenient a thing to admit. But they are watching each other, Stacey and the boy. How is it possible? The boy is sucking on a lollypop, rolling it around in his mouth, the cardboard stick tracing figure-eights in the air in front of his face. His mother is wearing the same cat-hair beret and appears to recognize Rita, who does not feel like talking.

Marcus and Samir had headed out to the prison in Rabat with their uncle; the uncle's brother-in-law had been jailed a year before, for vague and ostensibly unfounded financial reasons. Charlotte and Brenda stayed behind at the uncle's apartment, washing their clothing by hand in the basins upstairs and hanging it to dry on the roof. They had been doing this throughout the trip: staying behind, indoors, washing things. Their hands were raw from the harsh soap, their clothes stretched out of shape from being dragged across washboards and wrung out. The view from the roof, on which they presently emerged carrying the laundry basket between them, was a sun-bleached mosaic of other rooftops, white and beige and pale blue; there was the ancient wall of the medina, and the dusty tops of eucalyptus trees, and the ocean flashing far beyond. This rooftop view more than anything reminded Brenda that she was not in her own country. The feeling it gave her was one of pleasant surrender, and vertigo.

Their conversation, which each of them privately found superficial though for different reasons, had turned to polygamy; Charlotte insisted it was rampant in this part of the world.

"I don't think the modern ones do that anymore, do they?" Brenda inquired. She spoke in the way she thought Charlotte was used to. Labels, differences. She mocked herself inwardly: *modern ones!*

"It still happens," said Charlotte. She had known the family much longer than Brenda, who had been married to Samir for six months. "You heard their uncle this

morning. His own wife is looking for another woman for him! I don't know how she can stand it."

"I'm sure he was only teasing. But of course, I would go out of my mind."

The laundry basket empty, they stepped back to appraise their morning's work: a rusted metal wire festooned with clothing not found on any other rooftop in Morocco. Brenda contemplated Charlotte's underwear—wide, white, and comfortable—with a kind of pity.

"It will all be dry in ten minutes, in this heat."

The thought of multiple wives did not offend Brenda as much as she pretended to Charlotte. She could see how a new wife might be a welcome relief to a woman, a chance to seal off certain cares that held her captive. Brenda did not like to speak too openly, or say anything that could be considered an opinion around Charlotte, who was alert to details. Brenda's views changed constantly depending on who she was talking to, and she generally avoided people who paid too much attention to things. The trick, she told herself, was to always ask questions and answer them as vaguely as possible.

Brenda was thirty, Charlotte twenty-six. They were both *Québécoises* (Charlotte's French was fluent, Brenda's choppy), married to Canadian-Moroccan cousins, living in Montreal. They were on holiday, visiting their husbands' family spread between Rabat and Casablanca and Khenifra; it was Brenda's first visit, Charlotte's third.

Brenda had been shocked by Charlotte when the two had first met. Charlotte would criticize the girls on Ste-Catherine street who wore mini-skirts and breast-baring tops in summer; sex on television made her bristle; she insisted that Marcus call her twice a day from his office. She talked openly about her desire to have babies—in fact she



walked as though she were pregnant already, and discussed bodily functions, and nagged about dishes. Brenda concluded that Charlotte must have known herself unusually well from childhood, which explained why her doll-house thinking had remained intact. Brenda had successfully rooted out such attitudes until they became alien and unforgivable. She watched Marcus for signs of contempt, but saw none.

To pass the time while everyone was out they decided to shower, and descended from the blazing rooftop into the dimness of the apartment. They took turns in the tiled bathroom, glancing around for cockroaches, straddling the Turkish toilet and spraying water everywhere with the hand-held showerhead. Brenda aimlessly paced the sitting room wrapped in a towel, shouting to Charlotte through a mouthful of toothpaste.

"What do you think we should wear to the wedding tonight?"

"I have no idea," came Charlotte's voice from the bathroom's open ceiling. "We could borrow some *djellabas* from Fatima."

"We'll be awfully hot," Brenda said, out loud but to herself. She had noticed through the window a clutch of teenage boys down in the medina, staring at her in baffled delight. She moved to the window, placidly looking back at them with the toothbrush in her mouth, and closed the shutters.

The night before, a steady train of women had come up the stairs and into the apartment, overtaking the kitchen and tea tables in the sitting room to prepare sweets for the wedding. Brenda had no idea who these women were, and not many of them spoke French; there was such a flurry of activity that it was impossible to get introductions across. Friends of Fatima's, obviously, or relatives of the bride. The bride wandered in now and again to check on progress. Like most Moroccan women past the age of twenty

she was juicily fat beneath her form-concealing *djellaba*; her hair was a viscous black, her dark eyes liquid. *Gazelle* was what men said to compliment a woman, and the bride's eyes made Brenda think of this.

The groom, an oil-baron's son from the Emirates, would be coming to the apartment tonight, waiting out time until his scheduled appearance at the wedding. The ceremony was to take place at the other end of the medina, in a house Brenda had visited two days earlier but which she could not remember the way to. The medina was a tangled maze of streets and alleys, doors and shops and people; when they went out Brenda simply allowed herself to be swept along, taking no responsibility for directions.

Charlotte emerged from the bathroom dressed in slacks and a turquoise blouse, her hair twisted into a damp knot.

"You closed the shutters? There's a nice breeze that comes from there."

"*Il y avait des garçons*," Brenda said casually. Her towel had come loose under the armpits. She lounged on the cushioned benches that lined the wall, her legs crossed and her arms behind her head, one foot tracing idle circles in the air. It was lucky they would never live here, Charlotte thought; Brenda would never adapt.

"The men will be back any second, I suppose," Charlotte said.

"Yes. I suppose they will."

They heard the rusty scrape of the lock at street level, then heavy steps disturbing the dust on the stairs. Brenda pushed herself off the cushions with a sigh and stepped behind the curtain into the next room.

"Close the shutters!" Charlotte called after her, her voice full of cheer and disapproval.

Charlotte did have opinions concerning every person she knew and met, but she was careful not to openly dislike anybody. She was sociable, polite, observant, and mindful of barriers. She was *proper*. Brenda, she felt, was none of these things. What Charlotte thought of when she looked at Brenda was the word *loose*. Not in the sexual sense, though she had her ideas about this too, derived from carelessly dropped hints; but watching Brenda one had an impression of indiscriminate cravings, of disastrous fluidity, like red wine spilled from a glass. What Brenda suffered from was a wish—no, a compulsion—to establish some kind of bond, at almost any price. Was it approval she wanted? Whatever it was, she would try with anyone, though Charlotte was sure it was unconscious behaviour for the most part. Still, it meant Brenda was more like a teenage sister than a woman, and could not be trusted to make the right decisions.

The men entered through the arched doorway—Samir, Marcus, and their uncle.

"No good news," the uncle announced to Charlotte in French. "My brother-in-law is wasting away in that prison. They continue to postpone his trial."

"Ah!" exclaimed Charlotte.

"Where is Fatima?"

"I believe she has gone to help with the wedding."

"The wedding, yes. Then I will make the tea."

While the uncle busied himself in the kitchen the cousins rested in the sitting room. Brenda emerged from behind the curtain, wearing a sleeveless top and gauzy linen pants. She bent down to kiss Samir and then sat beside him on the sofa, tucking her bare feet under her. To Marcus she gave an unhurried look, which he returned with half a glance and half a nod.

Brenda had met Samir in a Latin dance class two years before. He was six years younger than she was. She had never known anyone so uncomplicated and straight, so clear of mind and purpose. He did not drink or smoke; he had never experimented with drugs; he did not value emotional independence, abstract arguments, or the recoiling need for space that had soured so many of Brenda's love affairs. The two relationships he had had before Brenda ended for logical, painless reasons; he remained on excellent terms with both girls, who e-mailed him regularly with news about their lives.

"No *baggage*," was what Brenda said to her friends about him, her eyes dilating with gratitude and disbelief.

At the time, Samir was completing his business education, which he managed in perfect sequence, without interruption or hesitation, and which would lead effortlessly into a career. Every decision he had ever made had been the right one. He benefited from a faith in himself, and in the way things ought to be done, that Brenda found extraordinary, admirable, and at times infuriating. The more she and Samir talked in those early days, the more Brenda felt the weight of her past errors in judgement, like threads of tar pulling her down. He was remarkably incurious concerning her history.

"Don't you want to know about my ex-boyfriends?" she had asked him, once she was certain this was the kind of knowledge he found inconvenient and disagreeable.

"Don't you want to know how many men I've slept with?"

His expression was like a wall of kindness. "What's important to me is who you are now."

Brenda was afraid she might pollute him, but of course it was his influence that took over, not hers.

The uncle brought in the tray of mint tea and sweets, and set it on a round table in the middle of the room.

"It's so nice to have a break from travelling," Charlotte sighed, gazing down at the sweets. "My diarrhoea has completely gone away since we stopped eating street food."

"When do we get back on the road?" Brenda asked Marcus. Such questions always went to Marcus.

His black eyebrows drew together. "In three days. Three more days in Rabat, and then we head for the desert."

There were cousins in the desert whom Marcus and Samir had never met. Once on the road, nothing was wasted; it had been this way since the beginning of the trip. They had paid for plane tickets, for the rental of the van, for fuel and food. Marcus would bleed the most out of everything; they would take in every possible sight, visit every last relative, all at breakneck speed.

It seemed to Brenda that Marcus's life might have been larger, more varied—more like hers, though different in quality—had he not met Charlotte so soon. They had been married five years, and had met five years before that, at a summer camp in the Laurentians. He showed signs of curiosity, certainly of recklessness, kept in check by what Brenda considered to be an unhealthy degree of self-control. He might have been some kind of monk, she thought, starving and whipping himself into a higher state; he might have been a fiercely dedicated drug-addict, or womanizer, or criminal, had he not simply chosen to go the other way. Marcus's decisions were final.

"Oh, the desert!" Charlotte groaned. "It's fifty degrees in the desert. My headaches will be unbearable."

The uncle settled himself on the sofa, expelling a puff of smoke from his cigarette, nodding ruefully. "The desert will tear the air from your lungs," he said. It was known he did not approve of the relatives who lived there—in their low black tents, with their thorny goat-pens and starving dogs. "You have been to Morocco before," he said again to Charlotte, "but you have never been *there*."

For this reason Brenda particularly appreciated Charlotte: she expressed freely what Brenda would not admit to thinking. It was Charlotte who convinced Marcus to rent hotel rooms rather than drive through the night; Charlotte who insisted on air-conditioned restaurants, when they were available; Charlotte who had begged for the camel ride on the burning dunes to last two hours rather than two days. Brenda could pretend she was impervious to discomfort, and thereby inch her way into Marcus's esteem. She was convinced of his attraction to her, but she was equally convinced of his aversion, which disturbed her. The attraction was of course physical; Marcus would rationalize his way out of it easily, accepting it as he would a disease he was bound to live with, like plantar's warts. He despised her weaknesses: though he differed with everyone on principle, he respected firm opinions, but Brenda was firm about nothing. Any sensible argument could convert her. She would mould herself into any shape that was called for at any given time. Marcus expressed no surprise or admiration at what she considered to be her accomplishments—her talent for music and painting and poetry, her travels, her knowledge of history and religion and literature. He would think it normal to do and to know many things, when you didn't know yourself.

Over time Brenda had become convinced of Marcus's love for Charlotte, in spite of what she perceived to be Charlotte's frailties. If Charlotte burst into tears because she

twisted her ankle on a hiking trail, Marcus commended her courage for walking; her weaker nature was more admirable for enduring what normal or strong constitutions took in stride. Marcus had chosen her, and so she was nothing if not the best. Charlotte operated safely within this firewall of obstinacy, with her imperfections and caprices and narrow views. Nothing would change.

Fatima arrived at eight o'clock in the evening, leading the oil-baron's son by the arm. She introduced him to her husband, her two nephews, and their Canadian wives.

Accompanying them was a young Berber girl Brenda had seen before, helping out with chores. She had heard Fatima mention the girl was apprenticing to be a midwife; she spoke neither French nor Arab, only her mountain language. Her eyes were unexpectedly green, the hair that escaped from her scarf coarse and bronzed by the sun, the palms of her hands scarlet with henna. There was a quality about the girl that Brenda could not make up her mind about at first, but which she now decided was foxy, and feral. She looked as though she would learn to deliver babies in perfect silence, then snatch them away in the night. Like a fairy.

"Berber girls make the best wives," Brenda had often heard Marcus say. It was his way of teasing Charlotte, who only rolled her eyes at him. "They're strong as bulls. They walk for days carrying one child on their backs, another in front, and a sack of flour on their heads. The husband rides the donkey."

The oil-baron's son shook hands with everyone and appeared quite at ease with himself; he took his place between Marcus and the uncle in the sitting room. Brenda sat opposite, between Samir and Charlotte, while Fatima and the Berber girl knelt on a

couple of leather pillows. The groom spoke perfect, beautiful English, which Brenda was happy to hear. Thinking in French was beginning to exhaust her; English made her feel sociable. He wore a dark, expensive-looking suit, and leaned forward comfortably with his elbows on his knees, his fine clean fingers loosely interlaced.

"And how did you meet your lovely bride?" Brenda asked cordially, after everyone's congratulations had been offered. She could not remember the bride's name.

"Amina worked in my father's house," said the young gentleman. His gaze was gentle and unapologetic. "She was a laundrywoman."

Brenda felt Charlotte stiffen beside her, and knew the look on her face—or what it would be, if they had been alone: raised eyebrows, a glance down and to the side, a tiny bite on the lower lip. She would have her ideas about this, too.

"Really!" exclaimed Brenda, with defensive enthusiasm.

The oil-baron's son smiled; he made no pretence. "Yes, the circumstances were unusual. But I loved her instantly. She would not have me, at first."

"A handsome man like you? I don't believe it." Speaking English was making her reckless. Samir would never accuse her of flirting; Marcus would think she was being stupid and very occidental.

"It is the truth," the groom insisted. "I wrote her many letters declaring my love for her. I had her promoted to the third floor so that I might have occasion to see her more often. She returned my letters unopened. She refused to look at me, to speak to me."

"What! You must have done *something* to win her over."



He inclined his head to one side, examining her, amused. She was being indiscreet. "I contacted her parents. Her mother talked her out of her—" he hesitated, "her shyness."

Shyness. Was that what it was?

The groom's family would not be at the wedding, though he said nothing to indicate that they opposed the marriage. He was to bring his bride to his father's house after the three days of ceremonies.

"She will be a mistress where she once was a maid," Brenda observed aloud. No one responded.

There were footsteps on the stairs, then two women appeared one behind the other in the doorway. Their faces shone with excitement and oily ivory makeup. Looking at the groom they burst into laughter and beckoned to him, exclaiming warmly in Arab. The oil-baron's son rose; he bowed slightly to Brenda, and generally to everyone else. "If you will excuse me. I look forward to seeing you at the ceremony."

The women bore him away, their festive ululations echoing in the stairwell, and then in the streets of the medina.

"*Alors, les filles!*" Fatima rose and clapped her hands smartly. It was time to dress. Charlotte and Brenda and the girl followed Fatima into the bedroom, where she produced *ghandouras* and *djellabas* of all kinds, spreading them out on the bed. Charlotte chose something in green, tastefully embroidered with gold thread. Brenda, who was tall, was harder to fit, but eventually a robe of rich, dark red velvet was found for her—insufferably hot, and beautiful.

The Berber girl stood in a corner of the room, watching with her eyes full of furtive green light. Brenda smiled and held the velvet robe out toward her, an inquisitive gesture meaning "Will you be dressing as well?"

The girl misinterpreted the unspoken question. She advanced toward Brenda and took the robe from her, turning it around and holding it so that Brenda might slip into it.

"Oh..." Brenda began, but the robe was already over her head.

The girl took Brenda's shoulders and lightly turned her toward the mirror. Brenda was already beginning to steam beneath the heavy fabric. Her hair was sticking frizzily to her neck; it would have to be braided. Her forehead and chin were shiny. The girl took Brenda's wrists and raised her arms parallel to the floor, motioning for her to wait while she retrieved a long embroidered cloth from the pile of things on the bed. Brenda held her arms out steadily, watching as the girl wrapped her midriff in broad, tight layers, fastened by an inaccessible knot at the back.

"*Shoukran*," Brenda smiled and nodded. The girl smiled back and nodded graciously, with a trace, Brenda thought, of condescension. What must she look like to this girl, playing dress-up? She thought of Marcus again. This was the kind of woman he would have, in another life—Samir too, perhaps, if this was the kind of woman he had happened to meet.

Out in the street, they could hear the music from the wedding coming from the other side of the medina. They walked in pairs, one behind the other, the uncle and Fatima leading the way. The Berber girl had come down the stairs with them but was no longer to be seen. Charlotte watched Brenda from behind and decided she looked queenly, with her hair coiled in a braid around her head and her dark robe sweeping the

dust; she glided next to Samir with her spine erect, shoulders square and hips steady. She could spring into action any second, and be off like a spooked cat.

"You've never been to a Moroccan wedding," Samir said, linking Brenda's arm in his. "It's something else."

"Maybe we should have gotten married here instead of in Canada," said Brenda. She felt tall and breathless, wound inside her cloth.

Charlotte laughed. "You'll change your mind about that. The bride has to make an appearance every hour wearing a completely different outfit. This goes on all night for three days in a row. And the music! Well, you'll see."

The music was already ear-splitting by the time they reached the house where the wedding was taking place. Apparently the screech of overburdened speakers, installed throughout the house, was no barrier to its enjoyment. Indoors the heat tripled in intensity. They were greeted by a number of laughing bejeweled women and ushered into a sitting room, where space was made for them on the crowded sofas. Food was everywhere: steaming lentil soup, lamb couscous, chicken *tajin*, bowls of olives, round loaves of bread like golden bellies.

Brenda dabbed at the sweat dribbling down her temples with her sleeve. She leaned in and shouted to Charlotte over the music. "Will they think I'm rude? I can't eat!"

"Just pretend!" Charlotte screamed.

There was an almost constant stream of women entering and exiting the kitchen, bearing full and empty bowls. Young girls were huddled in corners, trying to talk without raising their voices, glancing timidly around the room. There were concentrated groups of men, like ships in a choppy ocean; smoking cigarettes, holding one another around the

neck, slapping palms in praise of each other's jokes. Some were clearly drunk, though of course there was no alcohol to be seen, only tea and Coca-Cola. Brenda sat upright, her face open and pale; to Charlotte she looked as though she were receiving everything in an unfiltered flood of impressions.

Brenda picked at the salty olives, sucking them in an agony of nausea and spitting them back into her hand, concealed in a fist under her sleeve. She was relieved when someone announced that the bride would be making her appearance on the rooftop, in the open air. Would this be her first appearance? Her second, third? Why the rooftop?

They followed a train of revellers up three narrow flights of steps. The roof was in fact a vast terrace, strewn with kaleidoscopic carpets and draped with strings of light. Massive round tables and chairs had been brought up, and potted cacti. Spotlights that reminded Brenda of a baseball field at night glared down on everyone present. She took her seat next to Samir at a table with a giant cactus beside it. The roof was where the music originated, the orchestra playing tirelessly on a raised platform in one corner. At the opposite corner was a kind of marquee, decorated with silk and sequins and miniature mirrors; within were a pair of gilded thrones. The oil-baron's son presently emerged from an unlit corner of the rooftop and took his place in the marquee, where he and his bride would spend the entire ceremony contemplating the jubilation of their guests.

The music took a different turn, becoming rather ominous, full of throaty string instruments. The bride was coming up the stairs; she emerged onto the roof attended by four women, who held and spread out the train of her robe and veils. She was painted like a Burmese puppet, enormous in her finery, smiling, clearly exhausted.

Brenda looked across the table at Charlotte, who she realized had been observing her. Charlotte raised her eyebrows. *What did I tell you?* the look said. Brenda felt a surge of anger. What could Charlotte possibly know? Full of judgement, devoid of experience that might have allowed her to discern the endless variety of motives that must inevitably result in decision. Brenda transferred her gaze purposefully to Marcus, who was watching the bridal procession with wilful tranquility.

After their first date outside of dance class, Brenda had gone up to Samir's apartment. He immediately began to kiss her, rotating his tongue mechanically in her mouth, undressing her in the harsh bare-bulb light of his bedroom. Her idea of him sexually had been of a shy Mediterranean island boy, with melting regretful looks and hesitant fingers. But she was used to men's pushiness and her own, to one-night stands and hopeful, disappointing sex. Still, this was something different: an instant and unshakable assurance that they now belonged to each other, skipping all the unnecessary steps in between. This she realized afterward.

"Why did you jump into bed with me on the first night?" she had asked him, a few weeks later. The only women he had ever slept with before Brenda were his two previous girlfriends.

She asked him again now, shouting in his ear over the din of the wedding orchestra. The bride had made her think of it, the way she took her place with such reticent ceremony next to her husband. Who could tell what they knew about each other?

She could not hear Samir's answer, but knew what it was. It was always the same.

"Because it was right. I just knew."

(He never said it *felt* right.)

"But you *didn't* know," she said, suddenly overcome by the paralytic frustration that always accompanied this conversation. She could not think of a way to extract the true meaning of each word, and present it in a way he had never considered before.

What good would it do to tell him that *she* had not known it was right, that in fact she had not even considered going back to him afterward? At the time she'd been obsessed with another man, a philosophy professor who was in the process of breaking off with her. Had things gone just a little differently, Samir would have been wrong. Brenda ached to scream it out loud. But she could not be responsible for uprooting his idea of the way things stood, and neither could she withstand the blow if it didn't.

After the bride had taken her place, Fatima rose to dance. She made the round of tables, recruiting women, most of whom came willingly to the centre of the rooftop. Charlotte joined them, good-naturedly. Brenda sank back in the shadow of the cactus. The women stepped and swayed with their generous bottoms jiggling, hands fluttering gracefully in the air. Their earrings flashed in the terrible light.

"You couldn't *know*," Brenda said again.

"But I did."

Samir took his wife's hand under the table, smiling at her lack of faith in the order of things. He found her penchant for chaos endearing, and superfluous, and tragic; he was forever preserving her against it. She was always asking the same questions, trying to trick him. He understood that this was a habit, left over from a period of her life when people's answers changed depending on what was at stake. But he was a patient man. He would not satisfy her: he would not let her down.

My mother had always told me that no matter what could be said about my father—and plenty could be said—the fact was, he had class. "Class" was something she evaluated in everyone, from people she worked with to my school friends; it had nothing to do with wealth or status and, strangely, was independent of virtues like kindness or honesty. I had trouble understanding exactly what this quality was, but happy to be convinced my father had it, just the same.

Every so often, as I was growing up, I would ask her what her first memory of my father was.

"I met him at a party," was her disappointingly simple answer to this, when I was a child. As I grew older her answers expanded in detail, as though the passage of time allowed her memories to unfold rather than recede.

"My very first memory of your father," she might say later on, closing her eyes briefly, "is of him removing his big, black army boots in the foyer of my friend's house."

"The same friend who was having the party?"

"Yes. Well, François was more than a friend. In fact, if your father hadn't come along I might have married him!"

They stood just outside the foyer in François' house, my mother and a couple of other girls from her Collège, their arms folded against the chill that whistled in through the half open door. They were watching the spectacle of a drunk American who had come out of nowhere, arriving at the party late and alone. This would be my father. Not an American, as it turned out, though he had just graduated from Marine boot camp in

Washington D.C. and would be leaving for Vietnam in two weeks. He was home—in Sherbrooke, Quebec—for the Christmas holidays. His head was shaved clean beneath a winter cap, and he was banging his boots together to get the snow off, declaring that no one would leave the party until he was ready to go.

"I said in French to the girl standing next to me—I had no idea your father spoke French—I said, 'Who does this asshole think he is?' My God. The way he looked at me when I said that. I thought he was going to kill me."

There was a time, after they were married, that my father believed *she* was going to kill *him*—the time she levelled a hunting rifle at his head, when he broke into his own house at four in the morning after a night out with a girl. They were living in the country, ten miles outside the town of Elmer on McTavish Road. She thought he was a burglar. He, staring down the shaking barrel of his own gun, thought she had finally cracked.

My mother laughed as she told this story, remembering how petrified they had both been, how weak with relief afterward; everything that had come between them by that point temporarily forgotten in the euphoria of aftershock.

"How long after you'd been married did that happen?" I asked her. I'd had boyfriends and lovers by this time. Ripe with experience (I thought), I appreciated the irony of the situation, although, oddly, there was no irony at all in the way my mother told it.

She said breezily, "Oh, maybe five years."

So I would have been two, and my brother Mitchell huge in my mother's belly, both of us present at that moment of explosive chemistry.



They divorced three years after that. My mother kept us, and the house on McTavish Road, and my father rented an apartment in Elmer. Mitchell and I visited him on weekends. He had a girlfriend, Vivian (possibly the last straw as far as my parents' marriage was concerned) who sometimes lived with him and sometimes not. She was a petite, silent creature who hardly spoke to us beyond "Hi" when we arrived and "Bye" when we left. Her presence was resentful, catlike, uncomfortable in the extreme, and any sentence that did emerge from her pointed face was inevitably barbed.

"I have a couple of blouses I don't wear that I thought might look nice on you, Jen. Though I can see you'll be too big for them soon."

I welcomed any opportunity to get away from her, and she, no doubt returning my feelings, often declined to accompany us on holidays.

In summer we went to Old Orchard Beach across the border in Maine, which I loved, or camping at Island Pond, which I didn't. I dreaded camping, not because I disliked the outdoors or the bugs and dirt and rain, but because in such surroundings I seemed to blunder more than usual, in ways that magnified my inadequacy in my father's eyes. For example: once, after having coated myself from head to toe with mosquito repellent, I thoughtlessly popped my thumb into my mouth—a habit I enjoyed long after most children gave it up. A horrible chemical tang filled my mouth and throat, and, convinced I had poisoned myself with DEET, I began to shriek in blind hysteria. My father was in a foul mood already because of Mitchell, who had walked all over the inside of our tent with rubber boots caked in dog shit. Witnessing my gaffe from a few feet away, inflamed by my clumsiness and hysteria and high-pitched screaming, he grabbed one of the camping mugs off the picnic table: unable to crush it with his hands,

he succeeded in smashing it against his forehead. (*Unbreakable!* boasted the label on the bottom of the mug.)

We spent quite a lot of time outdoors in winter as well. This was the season for demonstrating the worst of my athletic ability, getting my snowshoes or skis miserably tangled together, skating on my ankles, falling, weeping from shame and frustration. My father fumed with his own frustration, watching me thwart any expectations he might have had of me in that direction.

"Bert Davis's kids can skate," he might say, by way of motivation (surely if I saw myself in relation to others I would do better). Or, "Kyla Davis is in Junior Girls basketball and she's only in grade eight!"

That I could draw exceptionally well, or that I'd received the Excellence in Vocabulary Award at school was a show of admirable talent, yes. But where would it get me? My father had been an athlete in high school and beyond. True prowess belonged to the body, coordination the only real measure of intelligence.

"No one survives in the woods on art," he pronounced with finality. I pictured myself lost in the woods behind our house on McTavish Road, painting on trees to leave a record of my lonely attempts at survival, until I eventually died brush in hand.

There was another side to my father—the exact opposite of this, in fact, which was the side I had decided at some point to focus on and celebrate, to guard like a vase about to topple over the edge of a table. He could be jovial and generous, entertaining, screamingly funny. My mother acknowledged this easily. "Your father could be so *charming!* He was the life of the party, always."

(The same party he'd crashed at Christmas time, all those years ago? The same man who, I would hear later from other sources, had come back from the war and destroyed a Vietnamese restaurant with a baseball bat?)

He gave huge, warm, enveloping hugs and lifted both Mitchell and I off the ground, swinging us around and around until we were dizzy with delight. He sang to us before bed when we spent the weekend with him—heartening, raucous songs that ended in bursts of tickling and laughter, keeping us awake and giddy for hours. We might sit on his lap in front of the television, watching football, sharing popcorn out of an enormous glass bowl while Vivian sulked in their bedroom reading romance novels. Any little thing he thought might please us—an ice-cream cone, dinner at McDonald's, a movie, fancy pens from the insurance company he worked for—I received with shining gratitude. I wanted him to be happy, to stay happy. Mitchell, on the other hand, was as sensitive to my father's moods as he was to changes in barometric pressure; he tossed small gifts aside without compunction, and invited wrath, I believed, with agonizing indifference.

Between these two extremes in my father's behaviour was something else. We might be driving, or walking in the woods, or playing Frisbee, and he would suddenly stop. Unmoving, staring at Mitchell and me as though we were visitors from outer space, he might dissolve into laughter and shake his head, resuming our activity; or walk away angry, or simply press the heels of his hands against his eyes. These fits were rare, and as impossible to read as a white smudge on an old photograph. But to me they were more elemental than his temperament or the problematic notion of class could ever be. Thinking of this, a single distressing phrase would leap up in my mind.

*He has regrets.*

The words were spoken in a clear voice I did not recognize, though I believed I had heard my mother say it. *Regrets* took on a meaning besides what I logically knew it to be. It was something you contracted and could not get rid of, a disease by which you might die, and that must be prevented at all costs from manifesting itself.

Shortly after my eleventh birthday, we packed up my father's car and headed out to his hunting camp in Belle Rivière, where we would fish and spend the night. It was one of my favourite things to do—no camping involved, and I was rather good at fishing—and which we did every year in the spring. We drove far beyond Elmer, bypassing Sherbrooke, plunging into a landscape of fields and cattle, solitary farms and silos, past highway towns that boasted nothing beyond a gas station, a *dépanneur*, and a church. "Peppertowns", he called them. He despised anything francophone, which baffled me: he was half *Québécois* (his mother was born in Trois Pistoles), and my mother was *pure laine*. While my father was away in Vietnam she had learned English, to please him, but he continued to speak with her in French.

"He said I wasn't the same person when I spoke English," she said. "Isn't that funny?"

We eventually quit the highway, making left and right turns onto progressively disintegrating roads, until we found ourselves bumping slowly along the dirt track that was burned in my memory year after year, overgrown with tall tangled grass and treacherously rutted. It emerged into a clearing and there was the camp: a clapboard lodge painted burgundy red, its tin roof scattered with dry pine needles and pinecones and bird droppings. Clumps of peppery, granular snow still clung to the dark roots of trees, deep in the woods behind.

Mitchell and I sprang from the car and raced each other to the porch, waiting for our father to come unlock the door. The interior was as present in my vision as though I'd stepped through the wall: the great communal foyer with its bare rafters and splintery wood floor; the yawning cave of a fireplace, the bristly bear-hide rug worn down to the skin in some places. Next to the fireplace was a little shelf with books in it, paperbacks with cracked spines and frayed corners. The back cover of one of them (I knew, I remembered) described a man named Duplessis who had "*ruled with an iron hand*." I believed in this iron hand literally, more marvellous and grotesque than a pirate's hook; but every time I attempted to read the book the iron hand eluded me, lost in a mire of tedious adult jargon. I would read it this year. Surely I was old enough now to understand, to decipher an explanation for this deformity.

My father unlocked the door and we stepped into the smell—a chilly, closed, burnt-wood smell, with traces of mothballs and bacon grease. We took our bags of food into the kitchen. There was a wood stove with a box of kindling next to it, a string and clothespins and somebody's forgotten socks hanging above. In the middle of the room was a table of the kind Vikings might have used—hewn from a single mammoth tree, mounted on logs, scarred and burned and immovable. Above this table hung the centrepiece, the thing that symbolized the camp in all its exotic and familiar glory: the gargantuan head of a moose mounted high on the wall, its eyes gazing balefully into eternity, its antlers spread out like dark primordial wings. The moose inspired a terror and fascination in me that, to my mingled relief and regret, lessened with every passing year.

My father was cheerful when we arrived at the camp. We had left Elmer at dawn so that we could cook breakfast here, frying the bacon on the wood stove and cracking

the eggs into the grease, toasting bread over the open flames. He became animated by these departures from ordinary ease; our presence here felt clandestine and exclusive, a suspended release from normal life.

While my father kindled the stove, Mitchell and I toured the rest of the lodge. Other people stayed here but we ignored this, and grandly wandered in and out of bedrooms as though they were ours alone—and they usually were, since my father avoided coming when he knew others might be around to spoil the atmosphere. The rooms were furnished with bare bunk beds, straight-backed wooden chairs scarred with initials, the occasional dresser or bedside table whose drawers stuck and squeaked when we opened them. My brother and I searched each drawer, every closet; we had found a girl's break-up letter to her boyfriend once, which I kept; another time, a dirty magazine featuring a very grown-up Alice in Wonderland. We claimed our bunks, but would change our minds about where to sleep half a dozen times before the end of the day.

My father called us for breakfast and we thundered down the stairs, through the foyer and into the kitchen, fragrant and warm now with cooking and wood smoke. We ate off a set of plastic dishes kept year after year in the curtained cupboards. Even these objects, familiar and forgotten and rediscovered, delighted me. My father had grilled a mound of bacon, fried potatoes and onions, blackened toast with lumps of cold butter.

"And... *hamowego*," he said brightly, doling out our portions of scrambled eggs with cubes of green pepper and ham.

"What's *hamowego* again?" I asked, receiving my plate. I knew perfectly well what it meant, but I liked to hear him tell the story.

My father had gone to Vietnam back when Canadians could still join the Marines. He had travelled to places that had nothing to do with Vietnam—Spain and Portugal, the Canary Islands, Venezuela, Madagascar—but while he was stationed in Saigon during the war there was a particular café he liked to go to for breakfast.

"What was it called?"

"Pho."

"And what does Pho mean?"

"It's their word for soup. Every place over there was called Pho."

My father, having had it up to there with noodle soup and rice for breakfast, one day marched into Pho's kitchen and taught the cook to make a western omelette.

"They had eggs, they had peppers, they had onions..."

"They had ham!"

He laughed. "Well it was pork, anyway."

Everyone at Pho's gathered round to watch the giant blond American (so they took him to be) expertly mixing ingredients in a Saigon kitchen, shocking everyone with his comical arrogance. I pictured it like a movie, like *Good Morning Vietnam*. The omelette, a huge success, became the signature dish of the café. People came from miles around to eat it, packing themselves under the awnings, spilling out onto the sidewalks, using overturned rice baskets for tables. *Hamowego*, they called it, for they could not pronounce "ham and eggs". The waitresses—I pictured them too: their mischievous, alien, slanting eyes, their waists smaller than my thigh, their exotic spare-boned loveliness—advertised by painting HAMOWEGO in red on every available surface. Red for good luck.

In a different Vietnam story, my father was trapped in a foxhole with some other soldiers. They were being bombarded, blindly it seemed, the inky jungle blackness lighting up like a photo negative with every explosion.

"We didn't know which way was up or down, and I don't think the other side did either."

The soldier next to him, frightened out of his wits, lit a cigarette to calm himself; the enemy must have seen the light from his match, because a split second later my father was hit in the helmet with a bullet, which knocked him out cold.

There existed only a handful of photographs from this part of my father's life, all of which were mounted in a huge metal frame that was gathering dust behind a shelf in his apartment. Among them, a black-and-white group snapshot of about a hundred uniformed men standing in rows, mostly unattractive and scrawny, not at all what I thought soldiers should look like. I scanned this picture often, looking for my father but not being able to identify him in the rows of tiny, shorn, capped heads, until I asked him to point himself out. There was a photo of him taken at night, his profile ghostly blue in the light of the flash, taking a drink from a canteen among wet and oppressive-looking vegetation. Another one, incongruous, but my favourite: my father on a bright hazy beach, climbing a palm tree in a pair of cut-off jean shorts, his hair grown out and bleached by the sun.

I was fascinated by anything my father could tell me about the war—*his* war, as I imagined it. He neither brought up the subject nor did he avoid it; he related his memories casually, without sentiment, so I did not feel as though the telling pained him in any way. His stories would never expand as my mother's did, but stayed exactly the



same, like the photographs, which could reveal nothing more than what was there. I wished for something beyond this, which I could not draw out of him: a shadow of connection with this past that must lay somewhere in the space between details. I did not want this war to be just another stage in his life, like high school or marriage to my mother. I imagined him embroiled in something inaccessibly foreign, prehistoric, steamy and tangled in myth and heroism; a horrible but necessary phase the world had to go through to become what it was today and in which he had had a part. Surely, surely it had marked him in some way. But I could not find it, nor could I bring myself to ask the question, *Did you ever kill anyone?* Of course he did. He must have.

I had a memory of my own that I thought might resemble what I could not get at in his stories. I was sitting at the kitchen table at our house on McTavish Road with a bowl of raspberry jello in front of me; my father stood shirtless at the kitchen sink with a razor blade in his hand—the old-fashioned kind, which he might have inherited from my grandfather. "I'm shaving my head," he tells my mother in the memory, and his voice is not his own, which frightens me. My mother has just come in from outdoors with a rabbit she had skinned for dinner. She drops the rabbit and covers her face, wailing and sobbing in a way I have never seen. I start to cry, and so she wipes her face and calmly tells me to eat my jello, which I later vomit onto the floor.

I believed in this memory for a long time, until I finally asked my mother about it.

"Good lord, how gruesome," she would say. "No, that never happened."

After breakfast my father gathered the fishing rods, the earthy-fishy-smelling basket that he wore over one shoulder, the tin can of dirt and worms, and we made our way through

the woods down to the river. The air was cool around our legs as our rubber boots squelched through the mud, the sun hot in our hair. I was glad to see those first flowers of summer, purple trilliums pushing up out of the sodden ground; also yellow flowers that grew in swampy ditches and that I imagined to be unique to this place. Blackflies swirled around our heads. The sound of rushing water came to us suddenly.

"That's the river calling us," said my father. "The fish are waiting!"

Mitchell and I galloped toward it, bursting out of the woods into the clearing, where the river ran swift and ice-cold and dazzlingly bright. We crouched on the pebbled bank, spreading our fingers in the water until they were numb with pain.

Only my father fished in the river. Mitchell and I would fish later, at the pond that was stocked with trout. We helped him impale the worms on the hook, and giggled at the rubber boots that went all the way up to his waist, held with suspenders. I stood by the edge of the river and whispered a kind of prayer to it, asking it to yield its fish.

Though we saw them leaping out of the water, silvery commas flashing in the sunlight, the fish would not bite. My father cast out patiently, the line unravelling with a competent *whizz*, dragging back up the current without a fish and sometimes without the worm. Mitchell had wandered further upstream to launch rocks into the water—doing it on purpose, no doubt, to scare away the trout. Although he maintained a semblance of his original buoyancy I could tell my father was hardening, darkening, and I wanted desperately to get to the pond where I knew we would all catch the limit of fish. What was the difference between catching fish in this noisy unyielding river or in the pond, as long as fish were caught?

"We'll catch fish at the pond, Dad," I shouted to him from the bank.

His voice came back thin, part of it snatched away by the noise of the current. "It's not the same thing."

He frowned, and waded slowly toward the bank, the water damming up briefly against his boots. Mitchell had reached a bend in the river and was skipping stones, idling provokingly when we called him to go.

"Mitch, get over here!" my father finally barked, the words sharp and separate as gunshots ringing through the trees.

I offered to carry the empty fish basket over my shoulder, and one of the fishing rods. We climbed up the bank, and followed a path through the woods that led eventually to a road formed by tire tracks.

A distant chatter floated toward us as we drew closer to the pond. Gaps in the trees revealed the metallic glint of cars and pickup trucks. There were people standing on the edge of the pond, bantering with one another over the motionless black water, their fishing rods arching lazily overhead. The feeling, emerging out of the woods and into the clearing, was of a charm being broken, like finding your way home after being lost for hours.

"Heh-hey!" somebody yelled as we approached.

"Hi there!" my father called back, with an explosion of enthusiasm.

The man calling to him was Holland Greer, who ran the hardware store in Elmer. I was friends, on and off, with his daughter Kyla—we went to different schools: I to the French Catholic school, she to the English school across the street. We only ever acknowledged each other on neutral ground. I spotted her on the far side of the pond but was too far away to call out.

Holland marched toward us, pudgy and bow-legged in his rubber boots. He slapped my father on the shoulder, and they shook hands aggressively.

"The ex saddled you with the offspring, eh!" Holland shouted, casting a droll, suspicious glance in my direction. There was something about Mitchell and me—I could never be sure what—that brought out this particular expression on the faces of my father's friends.

"No rest for the wicked," my father returned, with equal volume.

I should not say "friends"; acquaintances would be more accurate. My father consistently defined himself as antisocial. Yet everywhere we went—the grocery store, the movies, even out here in the middle of the woods, even at Old Orchard Beach—he knew somebody. He greeted people with a fervour that confounded me, because he would come away vilifying the person he had just laughed with, whom he had shaken hands with so heartily. So-and-so was a jerk, this other was a liar, another an idiot, a backstabber, a hypocrite. He had said these very things about Holland Greer. No one, it seemed, could be trusted.

I would hear such slurs against my father too, later on, and I believed them. That is, I believed this is how people saw him.

Bert Davis, whose children were star athletes though they would never pick up a book in their lives, walked over to join Holland and my father among fresh bursts of hilarity. My father's voice and language were different around these men; he swore in a way he never did around us, said things like "yous" and "chrissakes". Even his accent changed, into one I associated with the people my mother called rifferaff. Their conversation reminded me of the improvisation skits we did at school, with everyone

shouting above each other in an effort to score points for jokes. There was a lot of boisterous laughter that I was convinced was at my expense. No doubt people like Holland and Bert were aware of my shortcomings, as I was aware of theirs. Their jokes went over my head entirely. Perhaps they were making fun of me, or of my father because of me, secretly pitying him, glutting themselves on their cheap superiority.

Watching them, I was struck by a clear impression—not of what my mother meant by "class", but the absence of it, which was more easily recognized. She claimed it was something you were born with and that stayed with you regardless of what you said or did, what choices you made. But no. It was possible to have class and then to be rid of it, intentionally, for a purpose I could not fathom.

My father directed Mitchell and I to our favourite spot, near a little waterfall that fed into the pond. We baited our hooks, launched them into the water. Every so often a car would leave or another would pull into the clearing, and my father would be off to join in a fresh round of angry-sounding repartee. I caught trout after speckled trout, taking their slim slimy bodies into my hands and banging their heads as hard as I could on rocks. Mitchell quickly lost interest in fishing, and wandered off in the woods with some of the other boys who had come with their fathers.

There was only one woman present, Ron Bissiker's wife Sheila. She sat in the passenger seat of a station wagon, examining her makeup in the rearview mirror, listening to the radio, smoking cigarettes. I could not picture my mother doing this; she would have fished. I thought of her in the garden behind our house: her dirt-black gardening gloves and rubber boots, the battered sombrero her bother had brought back

from a holiday in Mexico. I felt a pang of sorrow for her, inexplicably, wishing myself back at home.

I waved to Kyla Greer, who was fishing across the pond from me with an older boy I did not know. She wore a bleach-splotched jean jacket and tight jeans stretched over her fattening bum. Her hair was cut in a shaggy, rock-star style that I knew was cheap-looking, but envied anyway.

We hiked back to the lodge at the end of the afternoon, through the prickly pine forest, our basket filled with stunned, bleary-eyed fish. When we reached the camp some other cars had already arrived. From the trunk of their station wagon the Bissikers dragged a great ice-box packed with meat. Ribs and chops and steaks were slapped onto the barbecue grill outside, which somebody had fired up in our absence, next to the bonfire pit. But my father, his mood revived by the pressure of company, insisted we eat the fish we caught.

"It's not every day you get fresh trout for supper."

"But I want a hamburger!" Mitchell yelled, his forehead puckering with outrage.

I slammed my fist into his thigh. "Shut *up*!"

We ate on picnic tables amid a clutter of paper plates and napkins, blackened tinfoil, cans of beer and Coke. As soon as the sun dipped below the treeline the air grew chill and blue, and after a while I could see everyone's breath escaping in swift clouds as they talked.

After supper we retreated indoors. Sheila Bissiker and Kyla and I took care of the dinner rubbish first, sweeping everything into a tin garbage can, placing a rock on the lid to keep out the raccoons. Holland, Ron, Bert, and my father sat at the table beneath the

giant moose head, drinking beer and carrying on an increasingly hilarious conversation. Mitchell and Darren Greer stayed outside to play war games, and could be heard screaming in the woods, so that if something terrible really did happen to them no one would pay attention.

Kyla had wanted me to stay in her father's car with her, listening to the radio and her gushing over the boy she'd spent the afternoon with; but I was not in the mood. I sat instead on the bearskin rug in front of the huge fireplace, now blazing with heat and light, reading the Duplessis book. Sheila was near me, sitting on a stool with her legs crossed and her elbows leaning on her thighs. She gazed dismally into the fire, smoking one cigarette after another.

"What are you reading there, Jenny?" she finally said, squinting at my book.

I told her about the iron hand, and asked her—it was a shot in the dark—whether she knew anything about it.

She laughed, and then looked at me with a suddenly soft expression that for some reason brought me to the edge of tears.

"Honey, he didn't have a *real* iron hand. It's just a figure of speech. All it means is he was a tough guy."

"Goodbye, old moose!"

"Goodbye trees!"

"Goodbye camp!"

Mitchell and I did this every year as we were leaving. It was our ritual in other places too, like Old Orchard Beach: "Goodbye, sand! Goodbye, waves! Goodbye, Webfoot Inn!"

The Bissikers and Bert Davis had left sometime during the night, though Holland stayed because Kyla and Darren had fallen asleep in the bunk beds upstairs. I had not slept, but lay above the kitchen in my bunk, listening to their talk, trying to make out my father's voice among them. I rose early. The sky outside the window was clear but without colour. I liked being up before everyone else, roaming in the unconsciousness of an enchanted hour, feeling privileged and half-lost. The floorboards squeaked beneath my cold bare feet as I made my way down the stairs. In the foyer the fire had gone out except for a pinkish glow of embers beneath the ashes; an ashtray next to the bearskin rug bristled with Sheila Bissiker's cigarette butts. How long had she stayed there, staring into the fire, after I'd gone to bed? The air stank of the smoke she had made.

My father was up, wearing the same clothes as the day before. I was startled by his presence when I entered the kitchen. Usually he was not shy about making noise. The kitchen, which the night before had become a mess of beer bottles and chip bags and peanut shells, was spotless now. My father had his back to me, and was running a rag over the ceramic sink. He did not jump when he turned and saw me. Nothing ever startled him.

"Well, good morning," he said. His voice and expression reminded me of a winter sunshine, cheerful and hopeful and sad at once.



I took a glass from the curtained shelf, and poured myself some orange juice from the carton on the table. The moose head was directly above me, the underside of its long royal neck, its ponderous drooping snout, a monument of indifference.

"Did you have a good time yesterday?" I asked my father. "With your friends?"

He moved toward the massive table with the rag in his hand. The bleary light faded from his features and he stared vacantly, scrubbing at burn marks and ancient stains. *Regrets*. I knew, or thought I knew, what it felt like now. I knew from that smallest of tastes how bottomless, how eroding, it could become, and it was a power I did not want.

Laurette, who was my mother, decided she would move away from Elmer as soon as I turned twelve. Why twelve? It seemed to be a milestone age in her mind. I would start to pluck my eyebrows and wear makeup, she said (only mascara; eyeliner and lipstick would come later). I would shave my legs and cut my hair. I would get my period. Predicting this, her eyes glistened with an anticipation I did not in the least understand, let alone share. She seemed to look back on her own twelfth year as a time of maturity, forbearance, blossoming—and indeed, when she showed me pictures of herself at that age, she looked very much the same as she did now: older and more capable than I would ever feel.

Her reason for moving away to Montreal—it was only a three-hour drive, really—was that she wanted to go to university, to get a degree in translation. She had worked as a secretary for sloppy intellectuals and arrogant professors since the dawn of time; she wanted to work for herself, *she* wanted to be that intellectual. As soon as she established her new self in the city, my brother Mitchell and I would join her. "Eventually" was the word that scared us, a sentiment we all ignored with a certain degree of success.

"What do you think about living in the city?" she asked us, her eyes wide with enthusiasm and, I thought, panic. "Imagine all there is to do, all the different kinds of people everywhere!"

The idea of people everywhere secretly terrified me, but I was willing to invest in this dream, imagining all kinds of metamorphoses. I would become a city girl, stylish and street-smart, with an entourage of city boys. Perhaps I would smoke.

In the meantime, Laurette reasoned, it would be a good experience for us to live with our father. She sold him the house we lived in outside of Elmer, on McTavish Road. So Mitchell and I continued to live on there—only without our mother and all her things, our old furniture, the absence of which cast a desolate pall over the whole experience no matter what we tried to make of it.

My father was very different to live with. We had expected that. The furniture that had looked normal in his various apartments in town felt provisional and depressing when transplanted into our house. His temperament was the usual roller-coaster of congeniality, irritability, and remorse for his outbursts. He was entirely unsuited to life with children—which made his efforts to adjust to us all the more pitiful and endearing, in my mind. I showed him how to make our lunches and said nothing when he forgot to slice the sandwiches down the middle, though Mitchell could always be counted on to complain. He in turn said nothing when I wore my summer dresses to school in winter. Laurette had always forbidden it, saying it made me look poor.

My father's rather humiliating rules still applied: no closing of bedroom doors, no private phone conversations, no sleepovers with friends. Anything that hinted at secretive intimacy, no matter how remotely, he held in black contempt. The inconvenient assortment of bodily functions seemed to me to belong to this category. When I finally began menstruating I flushed my stained underwear down the toilet in a panic, praying that it would not cause a total breakdown of the septic system. Fortunately Laurette had provided me with supplies against this event. I rolled up my used sanitary napkins, mummified them with toilet paper, and stuffed them into a plastic bag at the bottom of my closet. I dumped them into the garbage at school, but for that couple of hours in

between I lived in fear of them tumbling out of my school bag: no lie I could come up with would explain such a thing.

Mitchell and I visited our mother on weekends. Our knowledge of the city had up until this point been limited to rumour and imagination. We silently prayed she would be at the bus station ahead of time, in case drug-crazed bums tried to kidnap us while we waited. She was always there when we arrived, soft and welcoming, greeting us with her familiar mixed scent of perfume and deodorant and peppermint gum. I missed her terribly. I was dismayed but also grudgingly impressed by her new apartment: the gleaming hardwood floors, the lofty ceilings and pristine walls, the freedom from furniture—an atmosphere of irresponsibility and detachment, which my mother reflected the instant she walked into it.

"Where did all our stuff go?"

She flicked her hand in the air, "Oh, it's in storage for now."

She coolly tossed her keys on a nearby table, something I had never seen her do before. This simple gesture—and the bare, unfamiliar table, the metallic echo of keys—separated her from me irrevocably.

It was September, still hot and sunny and humid in spite of the maple-leaf motifs everywhere, the back-to-school displays in storefront windows. My mother brought us to the Saint Joseph Oratory, close to where she lived. There were people climbing the white-hot stone steps on their knees, a peculiarity that I associated with city life: only here could people be driven to perform such taxing rituals, in full view of the public. We wandered around the Old Port, swarming with American and French tourists, horses and mimes, artists on every corner displaying sketches of Madonna and Brian Mulroney.

*Montreal*, I repeated inwardly, grounding myself in realization, stumbling on cobblestones in the crooked shade of old buildings. I was amazed by the amount of tramps and crazies about, who were apparently indiscriminate when it came to location. Talking or shouting to themselves, appealing brazenly to other pedestrians for change or attention, clutching bottles in paper bags, singing themselves hoarse. No one stared, no one tried to stop them. You could come to the city and be anyone; people would put up with you.

I felt bold and liberated here. It was a fake boldness, of course, but the advantage was that no one would know the difference. I took to walking far ahead of my mother and Mitchell, or falling behind, getting lost in crowds. Anyone watching me would think I was alone. I wanted to be approached, though not sure by whom, or for what purpose—it was a self-destructive kind of longing, and no doubt if someone had approached me I would have bolted. After a while my mother would come striding toward me out of the crowd, a baffled and aggrieved look on her face.

"Oh, Laurette, *seriously!*" I would sigh, rolling my eyes, reluctantly allowing myself to be towed along.

"Since when do you call me Laurette, anyway? Stop it. I hate it."

Laurette returned to Elmer in the spring, after a long strange winter. She hated studying translation, she said: semantics and semiotics, signs and signifiers, things that made ordinary speech as dull as engine parts, or as malicious and tangled as a pit of snakes. My father stayed on at the house and we left it, and him, just like that. We had never lived in town before. I liked the economical neatness of the new apartment, the

sophisticated hush created by wall-to-wall carpets. From my window, our old house—my father's house—was a flat, remote clump of trees.

I sat on our third-floor balcony in early June, reading *The Thorn Birds*. It had run as a special series on television in the winter, but the American channels barely came in on McTavish Road, so far outside of town. Laurette sat beside me with her bare feet up on a kitchen chair, reading another one of her indescribably dull books. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Often the titles sounded promising, and I would give them a try, only to be defeated and annoyed by the content every time.

Our building was the newest to have been built in Elmer, high on Bolton Hill above the town's stately centennial homes and shade trees. More construction was going on now, at a little distance: a section of the pine forest that marked the town's frontier had been cleared to make way for a crescent road, along which several foundations were being dug. The view from our balcony was of this: the parking lot, the tall scratchy grass and brush beyond, the pine woods, the soon-to-be houses. Laurette sighed, irritated, as a full-size U-Haul truck struggled around the corner of our street, adding to the noise of heavy machinery. The truck was aiming unsuccessfully for the parking lot, reversing and lurching forward again. Finally it ploughed over part of the lawn, knocked over some garbage cans, and shuddered to a halt in front of a ground floor apartment.

"My God," Laurette said, peering disapprovingly through the rails. "How much junk can they fit into one little apartment?" Since her move to the city and back she had become intolerant of excess, of high maintenance, and possessions in general.

We watched as two movers heaved an endless parade of furniture down the truck's sagging plank and in through the patio doors, their faces bursting with effort. A woman stood by giving directions, making a great show of exhaustion. She was dressed like a person in a movie about moving. Faded jeans, a red bandana bleached pink by seasons of cleaning and housewifery, a Toronto Maple Leafs jersey with a peeling logo. Two boys had scrambled out of the truck (had they ridden in back, with the furniture?) and were now racing without much direction around the parking lot. There was a girl close to my age, tall and cartoonishly lanky, her dark-blond hair cut short in the current mushroom style. She was leaning against the side of the truck, sucking on a candy necklace and shouting to the movers.

"Quit lollygagging, now."

"Pull up those pants, I can see the crack of dawn!"

"Oops—don't fall, that's my chamber pot you're carrying!"

The woman in the red bandana dropped her head back and exhaled. "Jewel! Guys, just ignore her."

The girl lazily pushed herself off the truck. She turned her back on the movers and flung her hands in the air. "Ignore *moi*? Impossible!"

She ambled across the lawn, her limbs swinging like spaghetti in the sun, and stopped below the balcony where we sat looking down at her. Shading her eyes with a long, tapered hand, she looked up. "Well howdy there!"

A few minutes of chitchat were exchanged, chiefly between the girl and Laurette, who was always pleased at the prospect of a new friend for me.

"How wonderful that you and Jenny are the same age!" she cried, as though there were a shortage of thirteen-year-olds to be paired up in the world. Her eagerness caused me to shrink peevishly into the shadow of the porch, as I would not have done if I were left alone; but finally I agreed to meet the girl in the parking lot. I first changed out of my clothes; someone with a name like *Jewel* could not be met in an old T-shirt and a pair of bike shorts. I changed into the yellow sundress a cousin had handed down to me, which Laurette hated because it made me look too sexy. "Old" was the word she used.

"I'm Jewel," the girl announced, as I emerged from the building.

"Yes, I know."

Jewel held out her hand. I had never shaken hands with someone my own age before. It felt as ridiculous as bowing.

Most of the furniture had been stuffed into the apartment, though some of it spilled out on the lawn among boxes and a jungle of potted plants. I could see the movers through the screen door, resting against a table, drinking Cokes.

"So what's there to do around here?" Jewel folded her arms, gazing around her critically. Again like a movie: an after-school special, where thugs on motorcycles rumbled into town and made fun of everything.

"I don't know," I shrugged. "There's a store on the corner."

Jewel ran to the screen and shouted through it. "Mu-u-um! Money-money-money!" The woman's silhouette appeared. Jewel slid the screen open, snatched something from her mother's hand, and loped back toward me. I thought she looked extremely clumsy and sure of herself all at once. As though she would knock everything over in a china shop, and be proud of it.



At the corner store we selected jujubes and jawbreakers, and some poisonously tart candy Jewel said she loved. She plunked her money down on the counter with one hand and held the other one out for the change.

"*Y t' manque treize cennes*," said the man at the cash.

"What did he say?" Jewel turned and squinted at me.

"We're missing thirteen cents," I said. "Take away some jawbreakers, maybe."

She looked at the man behind the counter and exhaled loudly, then dashed out the door. I felt like an idiot, standing there gaping after her, but she soon returned with two empty pop bottles with scraps of garbage sticking to them, which she cashed in.

"There! You can let me go for *trois* cents, *non*?"

We walked back toward our building, passing the sticky paper bags back and forth between us.

"I guess you'll want to know who I am," said Jewel, with an air of great importance. I turned to look at her, expecting the revelation of a shocking secret identity. Was she famous? In a witness protection program? Running from something, someone? But she stopped there, and carelessly continued to pop sour jujubes into her mouth.

"Well?" I prompted. "Yes?"

With the same air of importance she proceeded to tell me the most mundane facts about her family, which unbalanced me: either I was too dim to appreciate how special the Cormans were, or she enjoyed a sense of pride that I was not fortunate enough to feel about myself, and my own family. There was something I was missing out on.

The Cormans belonged to the Pentecostal Church, which I had only vaguely heard of before, and of which I now retained an impression of exclusivity. They had moved into

"this crappy old building", as Jewel called it, because her parents had separated for the third time and had finally sold their house—a mansion, from the description she gave of it. I listened as she checked off a mental list of all the things they'd owned and had been forced to part with: a circus trampoline, a matching pair of Palomino ponies, an indoor swimming pool, a giant bubble-gum machine that worked with pennies.

I seized a pause in her ramble to turn the conversation back to her parents.

"Why separated?" I asked. "Why not divorced?"

I was curious about these grey areas in which some parents seemed to relate. My own parents' divorce existed at the periphery of my memory, as primordial and absolute as an abyss left by an earthquake. What else was there, other than marriage?

Jewel sighed, and sucked back a corner of her mouth regretfully. "They're separated because my dad isn't saved. He won't join the church. And my mom doesn't believe in divorce."

"*Saved?* From what?"

"From hell. Saved by the Blood of the Lamb—you know, Jesus?" she added impatiently.

Saved. Hell. Blood. I watched her face for signs of grief. Did she truly believe this? Could she go on in this blithe impatient way she had, believing her own father was lost to hell?

She invited me into her apartment. The movers had left, and her mother, whose name was Meredith, was spinning dejectedly in the living room. "Where do I *begin*?" she moaned. She looked at me and tilted her head, smiling apologetically, my presence not at all exceptional to her. Jewel's brothers were still outdoors. The younger one was Daniel,

the older one Sylvan. I was shocked to learn that Sylvan was older than Jewel and me, because he was so short. Jewel informed me that he had a rare hormonal disease, which would prevent him from ever growing to a normal size.

"I won't have that problem, as you can see," she said. "I'm a beanpole."

She led me into the room that would be her mother's.

"Jewel, I forbid you to touch anything!" Meredith's voice floated despairingly down the hall.

The room was a fortress of boxes. They had been packed in no discernible order, filled to the point where they could not be closed: silk scarves and plastic mixing bowls, books on organic cooking, plants, and jewellery-making; decorative baskets, dried flowers, cleaning products, sofa cushions, jars of loose change, boxes of tampons. I watched Jewel dump several of their contents onto the floor before she found what she was looking for.

I sat beside her on a bare mattress as she cracked open a photo album. "My mom was a model back in the sixties," she said by way of introduction. The yellowing adhesive pages were pasted with advertisements for shampoo, nylon stockings, hair dye, and suntan lotion. Meredith's face appeared on each of them, glowing with pancake uniformity, her hair parted in the middle and falling in perfect cardboard wings over her shoulders; her eyes sleepy with makeup, lips pale and frosty like the inside of a seashell.

"Wow," I said. I had been told my own mother was beautiful, but I had only ever seen her—or anyone else I knew, for that matter—in real life. To have one's beauty legitimized by advertisements was another thing entirely.

"I know," Jewel shivered proudly. "That's where I get my looks. When you meet my dad you'll see how Danny and Sylvan look more like him."

Jewel announced her own plan for becoming a model. After more rummaging she produced another album featuring what she called headshots. They were not only of her head but of the whole gangling length of her: dressed in oversize cotton jumpers, tights, knee-length button-down shirts cinched together with the enormous belt that had lately come into style. As she turned the pages I squirmed with discomfort. The cutesy, playful poses and mock-dreamy expressions embarrassed me. They were stupid. Jewel's serious, satisfied approach to all this was upsetting my idea of things.

I did not find Jewel particularly pretty. She was what Laurette would call "plain". Gap-toothed and squinty-eyed, her nose like a ski jump. But the very existence of these headshots—that, and Jewel's vanity, mulish and breezy and enviable—was evidence of another kind. I suddenly, intensely, wanted such photographs of myself; though I felt sure I would never show them to anyone, if I had them.

In my bedroom at the end of the day, I wrote in my journal. It had been given to me on my thirteenth birthday, by the same cousin who'd passed down the busty yellow sundress. Days and dates were already printed on the pages, so if I missed a day I would have to go back, writing in the present, predicting the future I already knew.

*Tomorrow I will meet a girl named Jewel Corman. She is a Pentecostal Christian, extremely pretty and talented in many things. Aside from being a model she is also a singer. She sings "solos" in her church, with a guy named Dane Somebody who plays guitar. She sang a hymn for me as a sample, called "Amazing Grace", which is a beautiful sad song. I said I would love to learn it so she taught it to me, and she seemed*

*surprised and delighted that I could sing "harmony" (although I'm not sure what that means). Her parents are separated, not divorced, because according to God they must get back together some day. It's all very sad, and very confusing. Her older brother is cute but too short for me.*

There was never enough room in a day's worth of pages. Writing in my journal was an activity I loved, though I had doubts concerning precision. I would have liked to describe everything in detail, knowing, at the same time, that it did not come close to explaining how things really stood. How to describe the stew of awe and jealousy, suspicion and admiration, I felt about Jewel? I could say only that she was a friend, and spiral outward from there.

The first couple of weeks of our friendship were spent in much the same way as the first days. Jewel thought of things she would desperately want to show me, and turned the apartment upside down to find them. She produced, among other treasures, two glittering silk costumes trimmed with sequins and feathers.

"From my dancing days," she said nostalgically. She held the dresses at arm's length in front of her, like an aged actress contemplating her old, lost self.

We tried the costumes on. "I can't believe this old thing still *fits*!" she exclaimed, cranking her neck backward toward the mirror. I had squeezed into the purple counterpart of the green dress she wore. The bodice constricted my ribcage so that I could not draw in a full breath, the extra flesh of my chest pushed up into my armpits. From her closet Jewel pulled out an impressive wealth of clothing which her father had bought her, as well as photographs of a little sister who had died five years before of leukemia, and a

collection of porcelain dolls ensconced in their velvet cases. "You can never be too old for these dolls—they're rare collectibles."

Meredith would come around and lament the chaos Jewel created in the apartment. Jewel waved Meredith away, or sang out witty little insults I could not help laughing at, planting noisy kisses on her mother's cheek and lightly shoving her out of the room. "Meredith the martyr," she whispered hoarsely, making faces that were like rubber.

The atmosphere at Jewel's was riotous, warm, and scrambled, as though there were not four but eight people living there. No one person appeared to be in control. Attempts at arranging and storing possessions had been haphazard; nothing seemed anchored in a place of its own. Meredith was the kind of parent who did not truly believe in discipline, but relied on sympathy and guilt in order to move things in a general direction. Jewel had never been spanked or yelled at, ever; though there were plenty of things she was not allowed to do. Uncharacteristically, this seemed acceptable and reasonable to her. There were certain TV shows she could not watch, certain books she could not read, and if I happened to mention something from either category in Meredith's hearing I would receive a look of embarrassed disapproval.

There were clothes Jewel could not have, and ways she could not wear the clothes she did have. Envious of her collection of leggings, I had persuaded my father to take me shopping and acquired a pair of my own, which I wore with a short cotton T-shirt. I pranced into Jewel's apartment, intending to show off my new outfit, and was greeted by everyone—her brothers included—with a silent aversion of stares. I went to the toilet, examining myself in the mirror, bewildered. Sylvan cornered me on my way out.

"You look like a slut in those tight pants," he whispered gleefully.

Jewel pulled me into her room and looked at me sadly. "I always wear a long blouse over my leggings," she said with painful tact.

You could say *Oh my goodness* in Jewel's house, but not *Oh my God*, which slipped out of my mouth with pathological frequency.

"Please don't take the Lord's name in vain," Meredith calmly admonished me.

*Vein?* I pictured myself taking God's name as a drug or a medicine, plunging a needle into my arm. Whatever this meant, it sounded despicable.

Religious images were prohibited, even the cross, even (especially!) the Virgin Mary. They listened to some Johnny Cash albums but not others—some Bob Dylan albums, but not others.

All this reminded me of a game I had played once at a summer camp, at which I had been miserably inept: walking into a room where everyone had decided who you were, and you had to guess.

Laurette did not invite the new neighbours for supper or tea. Overtures on her own behalf did not occur to her naturally. She did, however, accept Meredith's invitation to come down to them, once they had settled in. ("They certainly don't *look* settled in," she said later, taken aback by the mess. Laurette had always been scrupulously neat.)

I led the way to the Cormans' door ahead of her and Mitchell. Laurette had put on makeup, and carried a bottle of wine that I liked the look of, as though it had been retrieved from the bottom of the sea.

Meredith opened the door. At the sight of the wine, she winced apologetically.

"I'm afraid we don't allow alcohol in the house."

"Oh—should I leave it outside the door?"

"Well. No."

Laurette laughed and shrugged, placing the bottle on the floor next to a pile of sandals.

"Go ahead and keep your shoes on, though," Meredith said. She was wearing a long jean skirt, an embroidered peasant blouse, and moccasins too large for her feet. Her hair was piled onto her head like an afterthought, dark-blond wisps fastened with a painted leather barrette.

I made my way into the steamy kitchen. I felt an unusual, aggressive pride about knowing my way around already, and began chopping vegetables on the cafeteria tray that served as a cutting board. Making myself useful. It pleased me that no one commented or even said thank you, as though my toiling presence were a given here. Meredith led Laurette to the dining table and they chatted over glasses of lemonade. Small talk was a ritual I knew Laurette disliked; she had said so often enough. "It's much nicer to come away from a conversation having *learned* something."

Jewel eventually wandered into the kitchen. She leaned against the counter, giving me and the vegetables a limp glance.

"Oh, please. Quit showing off."

I helped carry food out to the dining room. Meredith set the table with massive pottery dishes of unequal size, sloppily glazed in blue and white.

"How charming!" Laurette exclaimed. "So rustic!"

"Thank you, I made them," said Meredith. "I had my own kiln back at the old place."



The water jug was as big as a ceremonial urn, nearly impossible to lift. My wrist shook painfully as I splashed water into each mug. An overhead lamp cast a charmless light onto our assembled faces, and I cringed when Laurette suggested we light candles.

Sylvan shook his head. "Nope, no candles. Mum is against fire."

"No wine, no fire, no fun!" Jewel declared with a bang of her fist on the table.

Perhaps they were joking. Or perhaps candles were in league with all the other unpredictable objections Meredith had. You never knew.

We ate the spinach salad and lemon-basil chicken, and drank the water, which tasted cooler and more healthful in the lumpy clay mugs. The boys devoured their food and migrated to the living room to play a video game. Over dinner our mothers' conversation had drifted to their ex-husbands.

"What Richard has yet to accept," Meredith said, "is that I am married to God, first and foremost."

Jewel and I listened, feigning boredom, twirling our forks in our plates.

"And if he never accepts it? You will have to move on," my mother concluded.

Meredith shook her head, looking weary and resolute. "No. Richard and I were married in God's eyes and that bond can't be broken. To move on, as you say, would be adultery."

"Adultery! But Meredith. You're an attractive woman. You're still young. To believe in God is fine and good, but what about human contact?"

Meredith sighed, and gazed down at her plate with its withered scraps of lettuce and chicken bones. Then she squared her shoulders and rolled her eyes upward, like a teenager enduring a lecture. "Oh, human contact," she said.

"A woman in reduced circumstances," Laurette said of Meredith the next morning at breakfast.

"What does that mean?"

"She's rich—or at least she was rich."

I thought of Meredith's harried cheerfulness, her sloppy hair, the swarming hive of an apartment. No one rich would live like that.

"She'll never have to work, anyway," my mother shrugged, taking a big bite of pancake.

"She works," I said defensively. "She runs the kids' summer camp."

But Meredith did not get paid for that. It was a volunteer project, something to do with the church. I was going there today with Jewel. Jewel was responsible for putting on puppet shows that promoted Christian values, but was getting bored of doing it alone, and could not carry out her plans with a single voice. She asked me if I would like to help.

After lunch we walked down Bolton Hill into the centre of town. It was hot; the sun blanched the sky and the tops of trees and the air was thick with the shrill of heat bugs. We came to the single set of traffic lights, where in spite of Elmer's tiny population there was a constant congestion of traffic, going to and coming from other towns. At one corner of the intersection was the Catholic church, built in a style that was no doubt considered fresh in the 60's: huge, hideous, and austere, with wide flecked-concrete steps and a forbidding spike of a bell-tower. I had been there four times in my life: at my baptism (which I could not remember), the funeral of a distant aunt, my first communion, and my confirmation—these last two as per program at the French elementary school I

had attended. Opposite the church was the Green Giant pub my father frequented, with its narrow terrace giving onto the dusty street, pots of pink and white geraniums hanging outside darkened windows. Then there was the town library, and a general store that was being torn down for a Tim Horton's. We walked past the Catholic church to the town hall, where the kids' day camp was.

I had never had a reason to go into the town hall before. Girls I knew from school came here for Brownies and Girl Guide meetings, but I'd never been inspired to join them. The merit badges, the tedious earning of rank and recognition, discouraged me. The building was grandiose on the outside, built of red brick with vines growing thick and purple along one wall, its entranceway framed by imposing cream-coloured pillars. The front lawn sprouted vigorous flowerbeds, a World War II cannon, and a small obelisk monument to fallen soldiers. An air-raid siren blared every day at noon from a small tower, except on Sundays. Once inside, it was rather disappointingly like a school. There were a couple of first-floor offices with scarred wooden desks, typewriters, stacks of paper. We climbed a wide staircase along which hung black-and-white photographs of the town in the past—a dreary, rainy-looking past, when there seemed to be no trees and the town hall was by far the tallest building on the solitary street.

The day camp was in a room at the top of the stairs. I had pictured something outdoors, in the back yard perhaps, activities that involved rolling on the ground and getting rashes from the heat and the grass, which I had not looked forward to. Twenty or so children were sitting in a circle on the floor when we entered, snacking on muffins and grape Kool-Aid. Tall grimy windows that looked out onto the street had been opened only a few inches. A few adults were seated on plastic chairs along the wall, fanning

themselves with flyers and chatting to one another. Apart from them, standing with arms folded, looking out the window, was a man I recognized as one of the movers. His face had been hot with effort when I'd first seen him and it appeared to have stayed that way, red and long and impatient in expression, topped with a bristle of dark hair. He glanced at Jewel, scowled, and looked back onto the street.

Meredith was in a far corner, deep in conversation with a big-bellied, jovially imposing man with a head of copper curls. She spotted us and pranced toward us through the circle of children. "Hi girls!" she squeaked. The man followed her, more sedately. "Jen, I'd like you to meet our pastor. This is Donald Gregory."

He looked like a king, offering his large dry hand for me to shake. I wiped my sweaty palm on my shorts before presenting it to him, and quickly withdrew it. I was hideously self-conscious about perspiration lately, which only seemed to make it worse. Pastor Gregory beamed down at me, golden-bearded, paternal.

"So you're our guest star actress today!"

I smiled back. A good feeling you got from this man, cozy and reassuring.

"Don't get any ideas now," Jewel bantered loudly. "I'm still the prize pony in this parade."

I spun around to look at her, appalled that she would address her own pastor this way. Surely she could be banished, or excommunicated? But Pastor Gregory only chuckled—it was the first time I heard a sound that actually resembled that word, *chuckle*—and Jewel widened her eyes at me, a mocking reflection of my own face. She seized me by the wrist and led me to the window where the moving man stood.

Looking up into his face, on tiptoe, she pointed gingerly at his chin. "You've got a zit—right there."

He averted his face. "Hello to you too."

"This is my new friend Jen. She lives in my building and no, she is not going to fall hopelessly in love with you, you're too ugly. Jen, this is Great Dane."

Dane looked down at me with an expression that had never before been directed at me, and which I could not identify—something like curiosity, mixed with regret. I would come to realize this was his usual expression, and could mean any number of things, but at this point I felt the sweeping heat of an attention I had never before received. Something about him struck me as aggressive and wounded: his severe outdoorsman's face punished by a girl's ridicule. I wanted badly to show him I was on his side.

"Just Dane, actually," he said. Again a hand to shake, and I shook it firmly, once I felt the dampness of his palm in mine. Unexpectedly he smiled, displaying a row of shockingly white teeth. "It's nice to meet you."

"Great Dane just got his *braces* off, can you believe it? At his age! But aren't his teeth just gorgeous?"

I said yes, blushing furiously. I hated being implicated in Jewel's tactless inspections. Who was she anyway—to speak so flippantly to her own pastor, to approach this Dane as an equal, to eclipse everybody with her show-off familiarity? I was painfully aware of my own body's shifting language: standing tall in an imitation of confidence one moment, slouching like a tame circus beast the next; hands clasping and unclasping, plunging into my pockets, planting themselves on my hips.

Most of the adults in the room had gone by the time we were ready to put on the puppet skit, with the exception of Dane and Meredith and Pastor Gregory. Why was Dane hanging around? It didn't seem to have anything to do with the children, whose presence he barely acknowledged.

"Dane follows Pastor Gregory around like a puppy-dog," Jewel whispered behind the puppet stage, rolling her eyes. "He wants to be a pastor when he grows up."

Our skit about turning the other cheek went well. The children screamed with laughter over Jewel's imaginative insults, though in this respect I found my puppet's role to be rather dull. Toward the end of the afternoon parents trickled in to pick up the children. Pastor Gregory and Meredith were still deep in conversation once everyone had gone; they seemed to be planning something out which needed a lot of chin-holding silences, frowns, eyes widened in sudden inspiration, Meredith's head visibly swirling with projects half-finished.

Jewel and I put away the puppets and the toys children had strewn across the floor. Dane sat in a corner and watched us, though his mind appeared to be on other things.

"What are *you* staring at?" Jewel threw a ball of Play-Doh that struck him squarely in the forehead. "Take a picture, it'll last longer!"

Stunned by the Play-Doh, Dane looked rather stupid. I turned away.

"Don't flatter yourselves," I heard him say.

*Yourselves*. So he lumped me into this, two silly girls who wanted to be flattered. How maddening! Jewel continued throwing things at Dane but I ignored them both, moving soberly about the room in an effort to appear mature. They were in some kind of

scuffle now, Dane trying to trip Jewel, pinning her arm behind her back like a chicken wing.

"Surrender!"

He hadn't given the impression of someone capable of jokes and teasing. I continued to disregard them, burning with envy and disapproval. I looked toward Pastor Gregory and Meredith to see their reaction, but they were absorbed by the information on a clipboard they held between them. Jewel shrieked in delight as Dane lifted her from behind, squeezing her ribcage in his arms, making as though he would throw her down the stairs.

"Not down the stairs!" she cried, laughing breathlessly. "I'll lose the baby!"

Meredith glanced up from the clipboard.

"Jewel, that's enough."

Every Saturday afternoon for the next few weeks we spent at the day camp, our puppet skits increasing in splendour and absurdity until Meredith warned against confusing the children and offending Pastor Gregory. Pastor Gregory did not come all that often, and neither did Dane, as a result.

On other afternoons, or in the evenings when the sun sank and it became cooler, Jewel and I walked Elmer's grid of streets that trailed off into crumbly, unlit dead ends at the edges of town. Bolton Hill descended into the older properties—the great houses with bedroom balconies and wrap-around porches, turrets and stained-glass upper windows. We liked looking into their lit interiors as it grew dark outside. Young French-speaking families from Sherbrooke were buying up the houses of people who had died or gone into old-age homes. Lace curtains were replaced with Venetian blinds, chandeliers with what

looked like stage lights; walls were stripped of paper and painted over in mint green, peach, and pink. Stately, seldom-seen old ladies had once tended the flower gardens and the lawns, now overrun by children and their plastic toys.

Once in a while we crossed paths with Mitchell and Jewel's brothers and some other boys. They were always on some kind of rampage, ridiculously decked out in camouflage, their faces smeared with black and green paint. Private property meant nothing to them: they mapped out people's back yards for places to hide, to set up ambushes and stage battles. They plunged into swimming pools in their underwear, retreating with whoops of excitement if the owners came out to scold them.

The town was mapped out in my mind too, according to a childhood notion of danger spots and places of refuge. I looked for Block Parent signs in windows, a habit left over from when I would walk to different babysitters' houses after school. "A Block Parent will always help you, no matter what," the teachers had insisted, their warnings about kidnappings and molesters inspiring terror as much as caution. What about the houses without Block Parent signs? Would they turn you away, slam the door in your face, or haul you in and inflict further misery? I brought Jewel on a tour of the dangerous spots. There was an abandoned garage on the corner of Scotia and Lattimore streets once run by Sean Finucan, who for years had been the only man to go to in Elmer to fill your tank and fix whatever needed fixing. Sean's wife had shot herself—she had gone out and bought a new dress to shoot herself in, had even put on makeup and perfume. The twisted tragedy of it had the opposite effect on Sean than it should have had; rather than sympathy, the general feeling for him grew into one of suspicion and distaste. As far I



knew he still lived above the garage, making furtive appearances in town when he happened to be out of beer or food, his existence as dark and tender as a bad tooth.

Once Bolton Hill crossed Queen Street the town deteriorated into ramshackle plywood bungalows and cheap apartment housing, which increased in dilapidation the closer you got to the river. I would never have walked along these streets before, but I felt more secure now—taller, older, wiser.

"This is where all the inbreds live," I informed Jewel, as we passed a low, flat-roofed apartment building leaning hazardously to one side. The landlady, Peggy Rose, weighed over four-hundred pounds, and never left her apartment. "She can't get *out* of her apartment, that's why. She even has her groceries brought up to her. She just keeps getting bigger and bigger." Peggy was reported to have had over twenty children, some of them with her own sons. Glen Monk, who raved aloud to himself and whom everyone avoided on the street if they could, lived nearby in what looked more like a garage than a house. He had been a doctor in the Yukon, back in his lucid days; the dried, preserved tapeworms of his patients still hung as trophies in his kitchen window. The origins of this information were as inaccessible to me as anything else I'd known since I was born—certainly I had never come near entering Glen Monk's apartment; how did I know about the tapeworms, or Peggy's twenty children? This knowledge (for I believed it without question) was more repugnant, more precious to me than any filthy magazine. There was always the threat that you might somehow be drawn in, tainted by the unspeakable freakishness that existed on the other side of normal life. From a position of safety, fright and denial were free to transform into relish and curiosity.

"Come on!" Jewel protested. "As if anybody would do it with their own son."

"It happens in the Bible," I said accusingly, unsure of how accurate this was.

"How do you think the whole human race came from *two people*? What about Noah and his family, after the flood?"

"Oh, shut up. That happened before Jesus' time. They had it all wrong then."

At dark dead-end streets Jewel and I turned back with excited, horrified shivers, walking briskly past the bushes strewn with garbage and beer cans, the sidewalks that had disintegrated into dirt and gravel. Back to Queen Street and Bolton Hill, the candy halos of lights at the intersection.

*Saved, unsaved.* The words did not sound to me like an act of one's own will. I pictured souls drowning in a lake. Who would choose not to be saved? Some grave perversion was attached to such a choice; a spirit like an ingrown toenail, bent on its own perdition.

At the day camp I soon became familiar with the children and who their parents were. Most of them belonged to the Pentecostal church, while others were unsaved, as Jewel put it, although they must have shown a glimmer of interest in salvation else they would not be here. There were others whom Jewel referred to as "backsliders", continually vacillating between a life of Christ and a life of the world. A backslider sounded like a dangerous thing to be—dark and irretrievable, a body sliding backwards down a laundry chute, hands outstretched, eyes imploring.

The Pentecostal church stood on a small hill on the outskirts of Elmer, between the new Indian restaurant and the fenced-in headquarters of a motorcycle gang. I had passed it often enough on the way to Sherbrooke but had never taken much notice of it. It

was tall and rectangular, wooden, painted white, without a steeple or bell. We pulled into the parking lot behind Meredith's old Volvo, and parked within the semi-circle of other cars on a patch of dirt and dry grass. We were just barely late. Meredith led the way up the stairs to the large open doorway, through which I heard a quiet buzz of conversation and preparatory shuffling. I hoped there would be room for us at the back, but Meredith shimmied her way into the middle with the rest of us in tow.

The church's interior was as plain as the outside was. Bare white walls, windows that looked out onto the parking lot (no stained glass), a soaring featureless ceiling with two dusty fans clattering ominously overhead. It was terribly disappointing. How could any sense of God be worked up in a place like this? Instead of pews there were rows of metal-framed chairs, locked together and arranged squarely in the middle. Jewel assured me that these could be parted to form an aisle, if ever someone got married.

On an elevated platform at the front of the church Pastor Gregory stood behind a pulpit, looking regal in a burgundy suit and gold-striped tie. There was a door behind him, leading to some other part of the church—an office, or dressing room? Beside him, near the corner, his wife plinked gingerly on an upright piano.

Our arrival had not gone unnoticed. To my horror the service began with a spotlight on the newcomers. With a gesture of his hand Pastor Gregory invited us to rise. Meredith introduced us to the congregation in a clear voice that reminded me of a kindergarten teacher. Hands were suddenly extended from every direction to be shaken, encouraging murmurs of "Welcome" and "God bless you" to be answered on every side.

"You're blushing!" Jewel squeaked as I took my seat again. "You're *so* red!"

"I am not!" I hissed. What a childish thing to say. I was burning. I had chosen the outfit most appropriate, I had thought, for attending a religious service: a forest-green dress of crushed velvet, ridiculous in this heat. No one else was dressed like this. I'd even noticed, on my way in, a young man in a T-shirt and jeans with holes at the knees. Jewel wore a peach summer blouse and white cotton slacks, smelling of a citrus perfume, her light-boned unobtrusive body enviable now more than ever. My head was swimming, the periphery of my vision darkening. I looked to the front of the church, forcing my face into an expression of benign anticipation.

Mrs. Gregory began pounding more vigorously on the piano. Pastor Gregory plucked the microphone from its stand on the pulpit, and led the congregation into song. Everyone stood. Someone in the front row was in charge of a projector, and the words to the songs appeared in a square of light on the wall in bold script.

*Oh we've got joy, joy, joy, joy*

*Down in our hearts*

*Down in our hearts to-day!*

I breathed deeply to keep from fainting and followed along, straining to emulate the zest that beamed out from the faces around me. The songs were cheery, simple, humiliating beyond imagination. Everyone, adults and elderly included, participated in the charade of gestures that accompanied the lyrics. This all seemed horribly undignified, even profane.

I was having trouble standing. It was too hot, too bright. I sat down and lowered my head onto my knees, praying no one would notice. Jewel's legs swayed in their citrus-scented cotton next to my face. She joined in the juvenile singing, clapping her hands and waving them in the air, without a shadow of derision.

We lingered in the parking lot after the service was over, making acquaintances and answering questions in the blazing mid-day heat. I recognized several people whose children came to the day camp, and was introduced to others I had never met.

"Are you feeling alright?" someone asked me. "You looked a little off-colour in there."

"Oh, she gets a bit light-headed," my mother interjected. It seemed she always wanted to get across as much information about me as possible. "A blood-sugar thing, I think. She passed right out in her sex education class once! Do you remember, Jen?"

*Oh my God!*

"No."

(Yes. The teacher had been explaining old-fashioned abortion methods, from coat hangers to broken bottles. The girl next to me thought I'd gone down to retrieve a pencil from under the table.)

Mrs. Gregory introduced us to the Selseys, Dane's family. They lived in a farmhouse in Belle Rivière, an hour and a half from Elmer. Every Sunday morning and evening, every Wednesday night, they made the drive in with their falling-apart station wagon. There were six Selsey children but only the youngest daughter, Amber Joan, still lived at home. There was another daughter, Maureen, whom I would later hear people mention in self-consciously offhand ways. She was among the unsaved, and lived in the city with a man who was not her husband. Before that she had lived in another city, with another man. Who knew what city, what man, would come next.

Dane was nowhere to be seen.

"He's gone to a workshop in Kingston, Ontario," I heard someone say. Workshop. It sounded like a place you would go to cleanse yourself with heavy labour. Chopping wood, hauling water, sweating out your sins.

"Well," my mother said in the car on the way home, "that certainly was refreshing!"

My head was halfway out the window as I tried to revive myself with the lukewarm breeze.

"Unassuming" she continued, with great satisfaction. "That's what these people are. Their idea of religion seems so simple, doesn't it? A close, personal relationship with God. That's what I always thought religion should be. The Catholics have got it all wrong; too many complicated rules, too many politics. They hang on to tradition even though it means nothing to anybody today. This seems so much more *real*."

Real? Such a casual treatment of God? As though God were a buddy, as though a plain white hall and some kindergarten singing were appropriate means of worship! I thought again of the fellow with torn jeans—a college friend of one of the Selsey brothers, as it turned out. How could any kind of reverence be expected, any ceremony of the heart? I had not been raised in a consciously religious way. Still, I had read Old Testament stories written for children, which in my mind were on an equal footing with fairy tales; an uncle had given me an encyclopedia of Greek gods and goddesses. I had often mourned being born in a century stripped of ritual and sacrifice and mystery. That a church would deny itself any of this was incomprehensible, insulting.

Nevertheless, we continued to accompany the Cormans to church over the summer. It soon became clear that the morning services I found so unsatisfactory were

merely an introduction, easing the shift from real life to worship. You emerged from morning services feeling uplifted and neighbourly and with a big appetite for lunch. Evening services were of a different quality altogether. Pastor Gregory called God's presence down into the dimmed lights and it remained there, hovering like a thick red velvet blanket, descending slowly until it enveloped all of us in its heat. His sermons were masterpieces of sympathy and reproach, gratefulness and remorse. Near the end—of the sermon, not of the service, which would last long into the night—coherent speech trailed off into cacophony of private singing, of prayers both whispered and shouted.

Inevitably, we were invited up to the front to pray. A prickly sensation spread through me each time this happened. Should I go? Why would I? The front was the designated sanctuary of those with "Special Burdens", as Pastor Gregory expressed it: I pictured a donkey, splayfooted beneath the weight of an enormous treasure chest strapped to its back. I watched people trickle out of their seats one by one. Men and women who had appeared normal that very morning were now kneeling on the worn beige carpet, hunched over, clutching at a despair the rest of us could only guess at. Those who looked like spiritual drifters—gamblers maybe, or loose women—you could easily imagine *their* private shame, their regrets. But Mrs. Andrews, the mousy piano teacher? What could her special burden possibly be? Or Amber Joan, so reserved and studious and upright. Or Dane.

Dane's special burdens fascinated me most of all. I ached with curiosity as he stepped up to the front with his public and hidden secret, like an Oriental bride in her curtained palanquin. There he was with his closed eyes, his shuddering breath, his look of concentrated remorse. In my dreams of him I pictured the same look on his face as he

bent down to kiss me; I preferred this to an expression of bliss, which did not seem to belong to true desire. It made me want a special burden of my own, but nothing in my life was weighty enough.

My father stood in the doorway of our apartment, talking with my mother. He rarely came in when he dropped us off; if he did he stood in the hallway, leaning against the wall so he could complain to my mother about something—usually to do with Mitchell or me. I had gone into my bedroom and was lying on my bed with my head hanging upside down off the edge, listening to the usual argument between my parents these days.

"You should keep her in that French school," my father was saying. "She needs rules. She gets lazy without rules."

"It's too far. She spends an hour and a half on the bus there and back. They make her play sports. She doesn't like sports."

"Doesn't like sports!" Preposterous, his voice was saying. Preposterous and disappointing.

"They make her play on Sundays."

A mistake, to have said that.

My father's voice turned acidic. "That fucking sect is going to keep her from having a normal life."

"It's not a *sect*, David."

I knew what he meant by a normal life. Group activities, giggling clutches of girlfriends and trips to the mall, dates with boys. I wanted this for myself, but it wasn't happening, and I had no notion of where to start. I had started the eighth grade, or



*secondaire deux*, at a French school in Sherbrooke, where everyone knew each other already from *secondaire un*. I was not actively excluded from anything, but my friendships were flimsy, accidental, and rarely extended beyond school. My real social life was with the church. I endured Pastor Gregory's sermons and looked forward to pot-luck suppers, corn roasts, bowling parties, weekend retreats. There were too few teenagers for us to form a group unto ourselves, and so Jewel and Amber Joan Selsey and I were lumped in with the young adults. The College and Careers group, it was called, which met every Wednesday night for bible study at someone's apartment. These meetings were merry and informal; there was a lot of good-natured laughter, and only a brief prayer at the beginning and the end. There was also quite a lot of discussion about sex, and how to avoid it. Afterward we played games, cards or Pictionary or Trivial Pursuit.

The best thing for me, my mother had decided, would be to enroll in the Elmer Regional High School after Christmas—the only English high school left in the area, with students coming from as far as Shelton and Beebe Plain. Fifteen hundred students all, a far greater number than I was used to. Elmer High School was a sprawling brick compound outside of town that appeared to be sinking, its enormous grounds marked off with a high wire fence from the corn fields that surrounded it. I had heard stories about girls being raped in the hallways by the older students, some of whom were nearly in their twenties. Drugs were smoked openly in the courtyards, other kinds were slipped into your food at lunch. There were savage and bloody fights that somehow, unfailingly, drew the innocent into their orbit. There was no telling when or how you might be mangled, violated, ridiculed. I said nothing to my mother about any of this. Like menstruation and

divorce and the weather, my education seemed to belong to that category of things beyond my control.

It was the end of November. The days darkened early and it had not yet snowed; everything looked wet and sooty. Jewel and I walked down Bolton Hill, following Queen Street out of town until we reached the church. We did this every Thursday and Saturday night, meeting with Dane to practice our songs. Dane and Jewel had been asked to sing at a crusade scheduled for the Christmas season, the first revival meeting ever held in Elmer. The speaker was an American, well-known for his infectious zeal and his ability to make crowds fall backward in great waves of salvation. I had agreed to join them—the songs Dane had chosen sounded best with three-part harmony—although the thought of performing in public caused my heart to drop into my stomach. I had heard of crusades, but had not yet been to one. They sounded sinister and bloody: hooded men thundering in on horseback and driving everyone into one pious, obedient, awe-stricken herd. Could I open my mouth to sing at such an event? No matter. It would be gotten through. The rewards were far greater than the punishment.

We waited on the church steps, hopping in the damp cold and huddling inside our scarves. Only Dane had keys to the church, besides Pastor Gregory and the Lewis family who was in charge of the cleaning. We saw him approaching at last, a rangy silhouette with a guitar case banging against him at every step.

"Here comes our Great Lord and Master!" Jewel shouted. It was her favourite nickname for him lately. As the date of the crusade approached Dane was becoming more focused on the perfection of our act, which entailed being intolerant and overbearing. Rehearsals were no longer the lighthearted joke sessions they had been at the beginning,

with Dane playfully insulting us and making us laugh, poking us in the ribs and underarms. Snapping our brassieres.

It had stunned me when he'd first done this. Was it right? "What do you need this for?" he had teased, catching the straps barely visible through Jewel's fashionable blouses. Was he like this with other people—women? No. With other women he was polite and sincere and bashful; this last was something ladies particularly adored about him. Dane occasionally gave sermons in Pastor Gregory's place and I had heard women—my own mother especially—whisper about how compelling he was. His face above the pulpit was mournful, his eyes flashing like fishing lures in deep water. I tried to calculate his layers of meaning by matching what he said to who he was looking at while saying it. Surely he had intentions hidden even from himself—my mother had taught me about Freudian slips. Once I imagined he was looking directly at me for a blissful agony of seconds. He was quoting something, not from the bible but from a writer.

“ ‘You find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it: and Christ, because he was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means—the only complete realist!’ ”

But then his eyes did flash over me, briefly, and I realized he had been looking elsewhere.

It was obvious Dane was in a foul mood tonight. I could feel Jewel bristling in anticipation, and I felt an intoxicating giddiness—I always did, when Jewel put herself out on the line. He greeted us irritably and moved past us to unlock the church door. It was cold inside, the heat had been turned off. Dane flicked on the lights and immediately began setting up the microphones and amplifiers, dragging out the chair he would sit on to play guitar. Jewel and I took our places standing on either side of him. We had agreed to wear colour-coordinated outfits for the actual performance, which Dane would try to match as long as we did not wear pink.

Jewel started as soon as Dane struck the first chords on his guitar. Singing off-tune, changing the words, pulling faces that caused secret laughter to bubble inside me like volcanic eruptions on the ocean floor. He ignored Jewel, at first, but I could see the back of his neck stiffening and turning red, his jaw working with determination not to be provoked. I clamped a hand over my mouth, forcing laughter out of my nose in a painful burst. Dane's strumming ceased, his hand slapping down hard on the strings.

"Jewel," he said. He did not turn toward her. He closed his eyes, the way I had seen him do in prayer. Jewel's name boomed out through the amplifiers, echoing into the empty space of the church. She lifted her eyes to the ceiling. "Yes, God?"

Dane twisted to the side and looked at her for what seemed like minutes before he spoke. He had his back to me. All I had for a reference was Jewel's challenging pointed face, her mouth twitching with delight.

"Your problem is that you are a skinny, empty-headed little whore with no respect," Dane finally said. "Do you think I asked you to sing with me so that I could be mocked by you? Don't you have any sense of honor, at all?"

*Whore!* Such an ugly word, so filthy, like a big, black, rotten cavity. What an awful, impossible word for Jewel! I was surprised by my own silence, the readiness with which I accepted her disgrace. I was watching Dane's brutality and it did not cause one shudder of revulsion; it made me feel privileged, smug, righteous.

Jewel stared back at Dane with all the force of her small, scornful eyes.

"Excuse me?"

"You can go."

"I don't want to go."

"If you're not going to take this seriously, I don't want you. I don't want you," he repeated, suddenly triumphant and spiteful. "You're an embarrassment to me. Jen and I will do this alone."

Jewel's face retreated into itself. It was ugly and sad, as uncomfortable for me to watch as her modeling photos had been, long ago. Only this time the discomfort was different; a sudden warm shiver, invigorating, destructive.

Jewel shrugged. "You suck anyway. You sound like a horse on crack."

She flung her scarf around her neck and sauntered to the back of the church, where she let herself out the door without even slamming it.

Was that all? Was this all it took for Jewel to be dismissed?

Would I have taken her side if I'd been called upon? But the argument had not included me. It was *my* laughter that had finally set Dane off, but he had turned to *her*—the source of the disturbance, the uncontrollable element.

Throughout the rest of the rehearsal I threw myself ardently into the signing, clasping my hands behind my back in attention and nodding gravely when Dane stopped

to give instructions. Now that Jewel was out of the picture, adjustments would have to be made. I could not stop shaking—with fear or cold or excitement, it was hard to tell.

When rehearsal was over we walked together toward the traffic lights. A rare opportunity, this being alone with him. Something needed to be said, some conversation opened up that would keep us lingering at the intersection in the cold. But my mind was frantically blank. Dane had a habit of asking me what I was thinking, whenever he caught me with a thoughtful expression on my face. I had lately begun wearing this expression on purpose. "Nothing," I would reply (which was usually true), but in a way that was deliberately mysterious, troubled, wistful. What did I hope he would infer from these sad, vague responses?

He did not seem interested in what I was thinking now. We parted at the traffic lights as usual. I slowly made my way up the hill in the cold, my face bathed in the cloud of my own breath. *Jen and Dane are doing it alone.* I imagined the words coming from people's mouths when they found out. "Jewel had it coming," they would say. "That mouth of hers will get her into a lot of trouble some day." But while they tried to sound disapproving, the corners of their eyes would crinkle with affection and applause. So there was that knowledge, too, poking at me from somewhere although I tried to shrug it off: a show of goodness and obedience was inferior, and would only be despised in the end. Even Dane would despise it.

My badness was not like Jewel's: not the entertaining kind. It came from a dim, tangled place that I would not for a minute admit to anyone. I faked speaking in tongues, for one thing. Awful! The nonsensical words tumbled freely from my mouth, a cascade of vowels and lisps and ululations, tossed together by my brain milliseconds before they

gushed out. Could this be the language of the angels, this terrifying babble that felt so fraudulent and insane, that had scared me out of my wits when I'd first heard it shrieked aloud? I knew, after my brief moment of self-deception, that this could not be real—and yet I could hardly stop, could I, after everyone within earshot had heard me, had blessed and congratulated me afterward? Dane had taken me aside for a talk. He felt it was his responsibility to explain to me what was going on. I put on the show again and again, along with everyone else, when Pastor Gregory's evening services reached their inevitable pitch. And who could tell whose tongues were true, or whose minds crackled with doubt as they unleashed their feverish praise?

I had tested myself. To my dismay I found I could do it anywhere, anytime: on the bus going to school, staring out at the yellowing cornfields; over the kitchen sink as I mixed a batch of macaroni and cheese; even in those self-disclaiming, surprising, unstoppable moments at night when I reached down into my pajamas and withdrew my hand afterward, relieved and sickened. My kind of badness—hypocritical, skulking—could never be anything like Jewel's.

She was waiting for me when I reached our apartment building, standing at the bottom of the stairs by the mailboxes with her coat still on, her scarf and mittens bundled and stuffed into pockets. She had not gone home, and had no doubt expected me much earlier—on her heels. She watched me grimly from the other side of the glass as I unlocked the door, and stepped inside.

"Well?" Her voice echoed up the flights of stairs.

"Well what?"

"You quit on him?"

"No."

She stared into my face, squinting suspiciously, saying nothing. She could not be upset—not with *me*. What had *I* done? But the wave of excitement I'd felt earlier was washing back over me and I welcomed the force of her anger with perverse glee. I faked a look of extreme boredom, rolling my eyes as I had so often seen her do.

"I can't just quit on him. You were the one acting stupid. I had nothing to do with it."

There existed a code of ethics between female friends that I would discover in stages over the next few years, not without a lot of confusion, frustration, and damage. Most of it revolved around boys, then men, and there were countless, unpredictable ways in which you could go wrong. But this, with Jewel, was the first inkling I would get of it. As far as I had given friendships a thought, I imagined them to be effortless and adaptable, rolling and stretching without strain along with every shifting aspect of life; they could be dropped and renewed, or left to simmer. The idea that they required as much maintenance as other relationships was ridiculous.

Still staring, eyes narrowed in venomous incredulity, Jewel shook her head. "You're—*betraying* me!" She pronounced the word as though it had popped into her mouth by divine inspiration and she was stunned to hear herself say it. In my nervous excitement I could barely contain my smile, and then burst into uncontrollable laughter. Betraying! Like a soap opera! Could she be any more melodramatic?

I thundered up the stairs, supercharged with guilt and gratification, leaving Jewel down by the mailboxes in the wreckage of her burst bubble.



I stayed awake in bed for hours, reveling in my disgrace, planning out things I would say the next time Dane and I practiced together. I would talk to him about Elmer High School; this was a legitimate burden on my soul. He would see me in the light of all the dangers that awaited me there. Surely this made me interesting. If I spoke the word "rape" would he picture it? Would this be taking things too far?

The following Thursday I waited for Dane on the church steps as usual. I had not seen him all week—even on Sunday he'd been away for a reason I hadn't discovered in any roundabout way. The ground was cold and dry, the remains of gritty slush from the first snowfall had hardened. Stars were fierce overhead. I sat on one of the steps with my chin in my hands, so that I would appear lost in thought when Dane arrived. I heard his steps crunching in the distance, and pretended not to notice him until his boots stepped into my vision.

"Hello Jen."

His tone was disappointing. Formal, with a hint of repressed irritation. I looked up and smiled faintly. "Oh, hi."

He stepped past me to unlock the door. It stuck for a moment and he wrenched it open, stepping into the dark interior. I followed him with an air of detached resignation, of which he took no notice. Someone had forgotten to turn down the thermostat and it was terribly hot inside. Dane flicked on the lights and arranged the microphones and amplifiers, mumbling to himself, performing every action as though he were alone.

With a sigh I took my place beside him, waiting for his instructions.

He turned to me. "This isn't going to work."

"What isn't?"

"The *songs* are not going to work. We need Jewel for the three-part harmony. We sound flat and empty without her."

Flat? Empty? I could not think what to say. This was like cold water thrown in my face.

"But you don't know," I finally said, lowering my eyes and raising them to his again. "We've only practiced once without her."

"It doesn't matter. The songs need three-part harmony. Can you sing two voices at once? I know I can't."

"Besides," he said, after a pause in which he absently tuned the strings of his guitar, "not that you don't have a good voice—you have a lovely voice—but Jewel's is much stronger, it carries yours. It's just a question of experience."

I grabbed fistfuls of my skirt to keep from shaking.

"Well give me experience then!" I shouted.

It amazed me, afterward, how strong a voice could get when it was fueled by rage and jealousy and desperation. Even so, I knew my singing had simply gotten louder, and lacked the full, viscous body of a voice powered by self-satisfaction. But Dane seemed not to notice the difference. He congratulated me after a few run-throughs, and said we would give it a shot—without Jewel—after all.

The singing had dried up my mouth, and air began to rush into my lungs before I could make room for it. It was too hot in the church. A familiar brightness took over my vision and then darkened at the edges, and I sank down onto the floor with an embarrassing thud.

"What is it?" Dane said, his voice flat, annoyed. "What's the matter?"

"I'm O.K."

I raised myself to a sitting position with one arm, which shook violently inside the elbow. With the other hand I pulled at the collar of my turtleneck sweater. *Idiot!* I chided myself. But it was a faint, after all—and genuine, unlike the woeful expressions I so often counterfeited. I could turn this to my advantage. I began with a few halting sighs and half-sentences, designed to pique his concern and curiosity. I hadn't been eating much lately, I told him (which was hardly true); I was prone to dizzy spells when I experienced stress. I gave him a deluge of details about the new school I would be sent to. I could not, finally, say the word "rape". It was too brutal, too humiliating. Instead I said, "Guys will want to *try things* with me. So I hear."

Dane watched me from above, hands planted on his hips, eyes darkened by the shadow of his eyebrows. When I was finished he sat on the floor beside me.

"Listen. All your life guys will want to have sex with you."

The delicious equation of me with sex in his mind, spoken in his out-loud voice, caused a hot jolt to spread through me like a drop of dye in water. I closed my eyes and imagined a highway running straight into the horizon with men standing all along it, some making obscene gestures, others waving brightly, unrelenting in their efforts. *All your life*. It occurred to me that this might be a curse, a string of exhausting disappointments revealed in advance. It made me feel tired.

"Men have prayer to hold them back and keep them steady in the Lord," Dane continued, raising his voice as though addressing an invisible congregation. "You have prayer to fight them off." He stared at me, quizzically. "Haven't you been paying attention?"

Suddenly he shifted and got up on one knee. I did the same, feeling rather sick, thinking we were getting up to leave. Instead he reached out to the back of my neck and pulled me toward him, planting a hard, dry kiss in the middle of my forehead. My head was snapped back at a painful angle between his hand and the force of his lips, neither of which were letting go. His breath erupted in hot blasts on the top of my head. Was he crying? All I could see before me was his raw, shaven neck, the Adam's apple sliding pitifully like a pain never gulped down.

He released me. "Time to go," he said, and stood, dusting off his knees.

Jewel was making me listen to a song on the radio she had next to her bed.

*We'll live forever  
Knowing together  
That we did it all for the glory of love.*

"I picture Enzo and me singing this as a duet," she said smiling matter-of-factly, not as though she were sharing a daydream but announcing a future project.

Enzo was an Italian boy at her French-immersion school, who could barely speak a word of English or French. Devastatingly handsome, she insisted. She showed me a picture from an old yearbook and I had to agree. Tall, with dark hair flopping over his eyes like a Japanese cartoon. He drove his own car, and had a pet ferret, which he had named after her.

"You mean it didn't have a name before he met you?" I asked her, annoyed.

"Who cares if it did? That's not the point."

She had not spoken to me for two weeks after the episode with Dane, staying far away from both of us at church and other events. And then suddenly, barging into my

apartment after a cursory knock, she plunked herself down beside me on the couch where I had been watching music videos.

"Alright already," she said. "This fight is boring."

*What fight?* I wanted to say, but didn't. It did not surprise me, and it was somehow disappointing, that the rift was so easily mended. It was possible for us to go on as before. Fights, insults, words, kisses, had no power to change life or even to turn it around a little. You gained nothing by them, beyond something tantalizing to write about in a journal. The rest would have to be invented.

The ultra-romantic Enzo was not saved, she was saying now—he was probably Catholic, and so their romance could only go so far. Jewel had been baptized in October, in the Selseys' swimming pool, along with three others: Laurette, a college friend of Andrew Selsey's, and a woman named Judy whose husband beat her. The day had started out sunny and warm, but once everyone had assembled at the Selseys' the sky grew bruised with clouds, and it began to drizzle. The four people to be baptized wore their bathing suits, which I thought was too bad—I had imagined flowing white robes, and a ceremonial walk down to the river rather than a clumsy scramble into an above-ground swimming pool.

That my mother was being baptized touched and alarmed and embarrassed me. I wanted to tell her to wait, although there was no reason for me to say this—wait, as though she had decided to move to a foreign country on a whim, without me. She, too, had received the gift of tongues. She had come to my room in the middle of the night. I woke to find her standing over me in the dark, whispering in tongues, one feverish hand

on my forehead and the other raised high in the air. The next morning she said she had never felt such joy. I did not tell her I had never been so terrified.

Jewel abruptly switched off the radio, and we went for a walk in the darkening December afternoon. It was two days before Christmas but no snow had remained. The sky was a rich velvet blue, everything still and sharp and bracing for frost. The smell of burning wood drifted from the houses down the hill that had chimneys.

We made our way to the group of houses under construction at the very top of the hill, past our apartment building and the others around it. Beyond this was the forest, where no one ever bothered to walk or play—it was all pine and spruce, prickly and choked and uninviting. Jewel and I had visited the site regularly over the summer and fall, after the basements had been gouged out of the earth, the concrete poured in and hardened, the frames erected, the staircases and floors and walls put in place. They were beginning to resemble real homes now, although the holes left by future windows and doorways made them look gutted and desolate. We liked to come here after the workers had gone home and wander through the rooms, furnishing them either tastefully or outrageously depending on our mood, imagining the people who would live in them.

“Who lives here again? Oh yes, the Jumbleberrys.”

“Terry Jumbleberry is bouncing on his bed like a kid.”

“Mary Jumbleberry is screaming at him to get off. She’s crying because he’s finally gone insane.”

“She’s screaming because he’s jumping on *her*! The dirty old bugger!”

“How many kids will Mary have?”

“One every day for a year: Sherry, Perry, Kerry...”

“Dairy, Fairy, Baudelairy...”

We sang. We loved the echo off the blank boards and walls, the fact that we could sit in the middle of a skeleton house and fill all its promising darkening space.

Dane and I had finally performed at the revival. It had gone well enough, though I'd been paralyzed with stage fright, my voice making its miraculous escape from rigid lungs. Jewel came to watch and evaluate. She told me afterward I'd looked like a puppet hung on a wall. The assembly was enormous, from the Pentecostal church to the Baptists from Doverville to the Uniteds and Unitarians. As I sang, my throat aching with unnatural volume, I searched the audience for familiar faces. I found them nodding in encouragement, straining forward as though they expected me to topple off the stage and break. Even my father had come, proud beyond recognition to see me up there.

Over the past weeks Dane had moodily retreated into himself until he became nothing but a voice I had pledged to accompany, something I needed to do and get over with. Already things were falling away from me—Dane, the church, God, even Jewel—layers of my life that I could not imagine replacing with anything else. It made me feel hard, hollow, and careless. I told Jewel about the kiss, though I could hardly call it that, not even in my own mind. Spoken aloud it no longer felt like a story; it was neither upsetting nor amusing nor unusual, and I promised myself I would never utter such things again. Speaking broke spells. Jewel only rolled her eyes, and moved on to something else.