

Time Bright, Time Clouded

A Novella

Doris Cowan

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Abstract

Time Bright, Time Clouded

Doris Cowan

This novella deals with changes in the lives and social expectations of men and women in the last decades of the 20th century. Geraldine Taylor, a young woman born just after the end of World War II, grows up in Toronto. Her widowed mother, Gwen, is outwardly rather Bohemian in style, but her rebellious daughter considers her a retrograde example of female subservience to received ideas. The time of the novella is in two parts; the first sketches Geraldine's childhood and then moves to a more expansive view of her life as a young woman in the year 1966. She is determined to live an unconventional life, including love, work, independence and children, but without legal marriage, which she sees as bondage. The second part of the novella begins twelve years later; Geraldine is now a scholar working on a dissertation about the novels of George Gissing. She has compromised with her earlier ideas and has married. She wants to have children, but her husband, an actor, refuses to consider the idea, protesting that it was never part of his idea of marriage. Ultimately their marriage ends and she becomes pregnant from a brief encounter with an old friend. She has decided that single parenthood is better than any of the other lives open to her. In this way a life that began with perhaps unrealistic hopes settles into a form of qualified happiness.

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ONE

“Oh, these women’s libbers,” said Gwen, and threw down the newspaper. Her voice was aggrieved at the stupid wickedness of it. But still she stood and looked down at the article, still reading as if against her will. Slowly she canted over till she was leaning on the table, her weight on one arm. Her shoulder was bunched up under her quilted satin dressing gown and her heavy breasts were askew under the thick fabric. She exhaled a sound of noisy exasperation that was half wheeze.

Her twenty-year-old daughter looked briefly at her, with delicate revulsion. When had Gwen started to breathe like that? Geraldine moved the open textbook she was reading away from her coffee cup and concentrated on the Anglo-Saxon verses she would have to translate in class, two hours from now. The words held her away the room’s depressing atmosphere.

“What have they done now? The women’s libbers?” Robin, Geraldine’s older brother, asked, ready to laugh at his mother. Amusement twitched around his lips and eyes. He was standing at the counter, his tall corpulent self gleaming with clean showered well-being, skin pink, shirt and tie perfect, jacket and trousers impeccable, his briefcase at his feet. At twenty-four he was already impersonating the man, the lawyer, the authority and father figure he intended to become. The outline was complete, ready to be filled in.

“Oh, it’s just a silly woman who’s written a silly book. They’re just going to ruin it for the rest of us,” said Gwen. She slouched down to sit at the table, folding the paper angrily.

“What are you worried about?” Robin asked, laughing. “You’ve got it made. Nobody will force equality on you. You should worry about these pathetic creatures, my

ward mates here.” Geraldine ignored him. Cathy, who was twelve, made a snarly face and said briefly, “Haw haw,” and went on reading the back of the cereal box.

“I know how fortunate I am,” Gwen said. “Don’t think I don’t know what it’s like to be hard up. But these women, I don’t think they know what they’re asking for. ... But what about you girls. What will it be like for you? I want you to make good marriages and be happy.”

“Haw...haw,” said Cathy loudly. “Never.”

Geraldine looked at her book.

“I,” said Robin, “hereby declare myself in favour of women’s lib. I will never support a woman. Let her look after herself. She can live with me but only if she has enough money to pay her half of everything. You and your people,” he continued, taking in all of the females present with a wave, “have been pampered too long. No more free ride.”

His mother looked at him in annoyance, rising slowly but inevitably to the bait. Turning red, she grumbled, “You’ll find out.”

“Just don’t pay any attention to him,” said Geraldine. She thought of the photograph of Gwen that hung in the hallway, and that image briefly superimposed itself over her mother as she was now. Gwen then had been a spectacularly pretty young woman, with shiny dark brown hair and an artful smile. At university she had starred in revues and musicals, and people thought she would become a professional performer. Instead she married the handsome but gloomy John Taylor, “breaking five hearts that I know of” she had bragged to her children, over and over. Now her hair was a mysterious dull black and in the white January snow-light that was filtering into the room through the high east-facing windows, her face looked heavy and careless.

There was hopelessness in the room, Geraldine thought. It was almost visible, like fog, a hanging cloud of gloomy ruin and resignation; it was her mother's mood, her mother's speciality. For three months now, ever since Gwen had "retired" from her position as head of a talent agency for children, the kitchen had been in a chaotic condition. Right after coming home from the Daisy Faces Children's Agency office for the last time, she had started in what she called "organizing the house." First, she took everything out of one of the tall cupboards on the north wall. It had been full of an enormous amount of stuff, some over thirty years old, even a few objects left behind by the previous owner, a doctor who had died in the house in 1944. Gwen had thrown away some of the cupboard contents, and some she was still deciding about. The paint to redo the inside of the cupboard was waiting on the floor, with brushes and cloths. Everything had now been sitting on the floor for three months. The baking and roasting pans had been used at Christmas and put back on the floor, the pitchers and decanters too.

Everything was getting very dirty and neglected-looking. The counters and walls were grimy and sticky. Basement spiders had found their way up the unvacuumed steps and were nesting in the corners. The cleaning woman, scornful Margie from Nova Scotia, had been cancelled, now that Gwen had decided to look after everything herself.

Geraldine had heard her mother on the phone explaining to her ancient friend, Merrill, whom she referred to as her "beau," that she hadn't *retired* retired, because after all she was only forty-eight. The truth, Geraldine knew—from her brother Doug, always the recipient of Gwen's confidences—was that her mother had found herself superfluous at the talent agency, soon after hiring an assistant. He was so efficient and so popular with the clients that Gwen had come home in a state of weepiness on several occasions. Soon he had offered to buy out the business and after a humiliating negotiation they

struck a deal, and Gwen retired from the agency she had founded and run by herself for almost ten years. She had accepted a token amount of cash for the transfer, though she implied to her children that it had been a tidy sum.

“Now I can devote myself to the house,” Gwen had told Merrill on the phone. It was true, Geraldine reflected, that Gwen apparently didn’t need to work. She was mysterious about money, even to Doug, but there never seemed to be a serious lack. Her late husband had left enough for all four of his children to be educated, and no doubt Gwen was well provided for too.

Geraldine looked over at Robin, who was pouring himself a quart or so of milk. As he stood there, a beam of sun hit him, falling like a spotlight on his glowing young male self-satisfaction. And Cathy, a pretty, dark-haired, boisterous little girl, who every year looked more like the picture of Gwen that hung in the hallway, was in a space all to herself too, cackling in secretive glee at something in her own head or outside the window.

The telephone rang at that moment and Cathy darted up and out of the room to grab it. Geraldine could feel her own separate circle outlining itself around her. She didn’t look like her mother at all. She was tallish and light-haired like her dead father, and she believed she had inherited from him the censorious sentimentality that she kept deeply hidden, as she knew he had.

But the most separate of them all was Doug, who had left home. He was her younger brother: they were only eleven months apart in age and had been born in the same year. As a child Doug had followed his sister around, dogging her as if it was his duty. He considered the two weeks after Christmas when they were nominally the same age a wonderful joke, and in those few days he liked to tell people that they were twins.

Two weeks ago he had announced he was moving downtown to a shared house with some people he knew, and within the day he was gone. She missed him.

Geraldine was going to leave too, as soon as she could, even before she graduated if she possibly could manage it. Robin said she was foolish. He had no desire to move out yet. It was economical, he said. Why struggle to pay the rent on some cruddy apartment downtown when free room and board was available here?

Geraldine couldn't think of a cruddy apartment downtown without longing to go there now, live there now.

"I won't be here for supper tonight, I'm going over to Doug's," she told her mother, who looked faintly displeased.

Se the byrnende biorgas seketh/ nacod nithdraca, nihtes fleogeth/ fyre befange, Geraldine read, and wrote "...encircled with fire" in the margin with a pencil that was too blunt. She remembered that there was an old pencil sharpener in the catch-all drawer beside the sink, with quantities of other old rubbish. She stood and went over to pull the drawer open with a sharp yank, because it stuck.

"If you're going to see Doug," her mother said, "ask him about the green chair."

Geraldine found the pencil sharpener and sat down at the table again. She avoided looking at her mother, but even with her peripheral vision she had no trouble recognizing the expression forming on Gwen's face. It had taken on an embarrassed, tense look, familiar to all her children, that combined pleading with stifled anger. Sometimes one eyelid would droop, as if in calculation. Geraldine thought the expression was deliberate, something her mother had learned from a book, designed to impress and intimidate whatever child she turned it on. Doug said no, it was involuntary, and she didn't know

she was doing it; he thought the anger was because she was insulted because she had to plead. Maybe he was right.

“I went over there with the green chair on Saturday, but he wasn’t there. I left it in the car so I can take it over whenever he says. When is the phone being put in?”

“He says he may not get a phone.”

“Oh, that’s nonsense. He’ll have to have a phone...I told him I’d pay for it.”

“He told me he doesn’t want the green chair,” said Geraldine.

“But why would he say that? He told me he did. He must have changed his mind since you talked to him, because he always liked that chair. It was Daddy’s chair, you know.”

“I know.”

“And it was very expensive. Of course it goes with the chesterfield and he could have that too if he has room, but I have to talk to him.”

Geraldine thought about Doug’s room. He had stripped and refinished the floor and painted the walls white. There was nothing in the room but a mattress on the floor, two black canvas director’s chairs, a hanging white paper lampshade and one low bookshelf made of a varnished plank and four white bricks. On the bookshelf were four books: something by Alan Watts, something by D.T. Suzuki and two P.G. Wodehouses.

Her mother was staring at her like a madwoman.

“I’ll mention it,” Geraldine said. She stood and began packing her books into a zippered binder. The pencil stub she had just sharpened was now almost too short to use. She picked up her coat from the chair beside her and, pulling it on, went over and looked into a jar of pencils and ballpoint pens on the counter. She took pencils out one by one. They were all broken.

Her mother was still going on about furniture. “If he doesn’t like the green I could get it recovered for him. And there are those end tables and the bedding.”

Geraldine tried sharpening another pencil with the little sharpener shaped like a mallard duck. The graphite was off-centre and no matter how much she shaved off it the point was nothing but wood. She threw it down on the counter.

“Doug doesn’t want the chair,” she said sharply. She felt as if she was going to cry and, grabbing her mittens and her books, she left the house.

Geraldine stepped outside into the bright sharp cold of January. Pulling the arms of her sweater out of her coat sleeves and over her mittened but chilled hands, she set off along the sidewalk past the dozen 1920s houses between her home and the bus stop. The sun shone from a parched blue height on the blackened ridges of salty slush and piled up frozen snow. Half a block from the house she stopped and waited on a desolate street corner for the bus.

Every time she left her mother’s house lately she felt a pang of mingled relief and foreboding excitement. Nothing had happened to her for a number of months, which meant it was now time for an event. Events occurred with a certain regularity, and so one must be coming. By an event she meant the approach or sighting of a man, a love interest. That was by far the most powerful notion in the confused contents of her mind these days, because she was convinced that a man was the answer. She had to leave home, and hoped that love would rescue her, although she considered it a weakness in herself to wait for such a sign or permission.

The bus appeared, its snub face approaching at speed from the end of the block. Barely managing to swoosh to a stop, it reminded her of the curving, sudden braking motion that boys on bicycles or skates had employed to express their panache and condescension, meant to flatter her, when love events had occurred in her early adolescence. The bus driver greeted her cheerily. He was an oaf. She dropped her ticket in the receptacle and made her way to the middle of the bus, where she always sat to avoid the swaying and lurching at the back.

Placing her notebook, her Anglo-Saxon dictionary and her purse in a precise stack on her lap, she opened the notebook and stared at her list of verbs. It was not clear to her why she was living this particular life, and she felt a certain anxiety about it; as if it might be a mistake, this particular life which sometimes seemed dishearteningly vague and general. Why this, me, here? was a current that ran under her thoughts more and more often, and it was hard, so hard, to concentrate on Beowulf, or the 18th-century novel, or the prospect of exams and graduation.

She thought about her virginity, of which she was ashamed, and the image of her Anglo-Saxon professor appeared, standing and reading the strange poetry aloud from a book that lay open on the low desk before him. He called out the lines in a theatrical lecture-hall voice, his elbows rising like wings as his hands vigorously clasped each other, his eyes downcast to the page in an attitude that showed off his lovely eyelashes and distracted her thoughts. Certain visions and fancies seized her now, in which she put her arms around his neck and pulled him down to her in some quiet place on some soft bed.

The bus window was smeared with long windblown spatters and streaks of frost. Two of the other girls in the class had chattered about Mr Abbott, which irritated

Geraldine. Her feelings were much less interesting if they were shared by Renee and Carol. Renee was an athletic little sexpot, given to crude speculations. She talked about her power over men, in a bored boast: “You can always get them. Some take a little bit longer than others, but they’re helpless in the end.” Geraldine felt like a disorganized, too tall and even slightly insane mess when she stood beside small, confident, show-offy Renee. She wasn’t really very tall, only five nine. But so often all the girls on campus, and all the women on Bloor Street seemed smaller than she was, neater and more definite, real personalities who knew what they wanted and expected to get it. Whereas she was so vague she sometimes felt she was only partially visible.

In a frigid wind, she trekked across Queen’s Park to the Medieval Studies building. The Beowulf class was poorly attended. Only six people were present instead of the usual ten or eleven. They wrote their translation test in silence, and then sat and listened glumly as Mr Abbott, who was somehow looking less pretty than usual, went on and on about Sutton Hoo. A boy across the table from Geraldine, a boy with a desperate, concentrated expression, had a terrible cold and only one Kleenex. Geraldine tried to listen with interest to Mr Abbott’s remarks about ship burial, but the boy dabbing at his nose with the now sopping tissue was distracting. Mr Thompson. She had no idea what his first name was. Miss Taylor. Mr Thompson. In class it was always formal; the pretence was that they were adults. She moved her eyes away and looked up and out through the window at the sky. Last year when she had had a Milton seminar in this room, there had been a tree there, but it was an elm, and alas, it died. Oh, elm, thou art sick, an invisible worm doth thy life destroy... how did that end? She couldn’t remember. She let her eyes touch briefly on Mr Thompson again. The annoying words of Milton in *Paradise Lost* came back to her —“He for God only, she for God in him”— Would she

ever see God in him? Not Mr Thompson, of course, but in “him”? Maybe. Maybe love would transform some man for her some day. But God was not in any male creature she knew. Why would she want God, anyway?

Now Mr Abbott was handing a book, open to some photographs, to the stolid girl, Miss Krisnecki, on his left. Everyone looked at the pictures of the ship and the gold ornaments that had been buried with the ancient king, and then the class ended. Geraldine spent the afternoon at the library, trying to read, but instead staring out the window and pulling angrily at the split ends of her hair.

The history of Geraldine’s parents’ marriage began in 1944, when John Taylor came home from Europe and went back to the profession he had entered before the war. He was a farm boy from Southwestern Ontario who had studied structural engineering, chiefly to escape the farm. He distinguished himself and was hired by a company that worked with the architectural firm of Fairfax and Sproule, two Englishmen who had come to the colonies and stayed, while remaining unimpressed by Canadians. John Taylor only just had time to realize that he should have been an architect, not an engineer, when the war intervened. Then he came home and marriage, with Fairfax's determined daughter Gwen, confounded him.

The young couple had moved into a house that had been built by Gwen’s father, for a doctor, in 1925 in the Arts and Crafts style. When the doctor died in 1944, just after Gwen became engaged, her father bought the house and offered it to them as a wedding

present. John had refused to accept it as an outright gift, and made payments to his father-in-law for years. They had almost quarrelled about it several times. John thought his wife's father was too proprietorial about the house after giving it to them. He would have liked to leave, but Gwen couldn't bear to. The carved mantel and staircase had been designed by J.E.H. MacDonald, who had been a good friend of her father's. A small painting of his, "Summer Storm," also a wedding present from Daddy, hung in the living room. She loved the house and the painting. How could they live anywhere else?

The first of their four children was a son born in 1946, and named Robin over the mildly voiced objections of John, who thought it sounded a little girly. He tried to insist the name on the birth certificate be Robert, but was overruled by his wife. Three years later, in January 1950, Geraldine appeared, also named by Gwen without reference to her husband's feelings. Eleven months later a second son was born on Boxing Day. Not-quite-one-year-old Geraldine insisted on being lifted up on the bed to see the baby, and then cried loudly because he was asleep. In the uproar, Gwen was too tired to object when John stated that the new baby's name would be Douglas after his grandfather, although she had favoured Simon or Ivor. By the time Cathy appeared, five years later, John was firmly in charge and was able to name his second daughter after his mother without encountering any serious resistance.

When Cathy was two, Gwen decided her time as a housewife had been served. Looking about for something suited to her talents, she seized upon the idea of teaching small children to sing, act and recite poetry, and so the Fairfax Academy of Speech and Drama for Children was established. The school was only sporadically a success, but it survived on the good will of Gwen's old friends for six years before dwindling into a part-time "talent agency," re-named Daisy Faces, supplying child models for magazine

and television advertising. Gwen's own children, each in turn, were briefly enthusiastic, happily dressing up as bumblebees or pixies and banging a tambourine, but one by one they rebelled, preferring to spend their after school hours otherwise. After a traumatic experience of stage fright at the age of five, Geraldine had refused to appear in any more of Gwen's pageants and pantomimes. Doug, quick to reject anything Geraldine disliked, soon followed her example. In this refusal, the children were backed up firmly by their father.

One memorable afternoon in their childhood, Geraldine and Doug, aged eight and seven, were standing on the second step of the veranda, wondering what to do. Winter had arrived but the snow was too sparse to suggest any kind of play. Doug tried to climb up on the railing, telling his sister he would walk along it if she would hold his hand. In her role as little mother Geraldine vetoed the plan. "You'll fall," she said firmly. Just then she noticed glass in a wooden frame, a storm window, lying on the veranda floor. "Walk around this," she said, and showed him how, stepping carefully along the painted frame, placing one foot after the other, holding her arms out for balance and chanting, "I won't fall through the ice, I won't fall through the ice."

Doug tried it but immediately lost his balance and put a foot heavily through the glass. "The ice broke," he said, looking up at her roguishly. At that moment a car door slammed and hell descended upon them as a shrieking mother.

Later that night, Geraldine and Doug were sent to bed early as punishment, and the dreadful unfairness of the sentence returned to Geraldine over and over in waves of sorrow and rage. She had intervened to protect her brother, cleverly diverting his attention from the veranda railing, and was this her reward? She fell asleep, briefly it seemed, then awoke and cried again at the injustice. Even her father had condemned her.

The cruelty was unspeakable. She wailed and then stopped short and held her breath when the door opened and her father appeared, a tall avenging dark god in the doorway.

"Now, Gerry, now, Gerry," he said in an awkward, abrupt way. She waited.

"Don't cry any more," he said and came over and sat on the bed. Gently he stroked her hair, over and over, as if she were a cat. She was appeased and lay delighted, afraid to move.

He cleared his throat, and said, sounding embarrassed, "I guess life isn't always fair. But you're getting to be a big girl, you'll have to learn to take things philosophically... with a grain of salt. Just don't let it bother you."

In silence, she considered that. He moved his hand away from her head. She grabbed it and pulled it back, whimpering a little to indicate that she was still crying, still needed to be petted.

He laughed then and said, "Feeling better? Would you like a book to read?"

"Yes," she said tentatively.

He rose and went out, returning in a minute with small blue book, like a library book, which he held out to her. He switched on her lamp. "This is an old book of mine from when I was in school," he said. "You read for a while, then turn out your light and go to sleep." He patted her head again, and left.

Sitting up, she began to read it immediately, gloating over her prize. It was a comic tale called *The Blunders of a Bashful Man*, and the date of publication was 1895. The young man fell in love with Blue Eyes, then was distracted by Brown Eyes. In the margins her father, when he was twelve or thirteen, had written, at strategic points, "And then there was a terrific crash!!!" , "Boom!" or "An unearthly howl rang out!" She was dazzled by his sophistication.

Children are men and women to each other. Like any small society marooned in a sea of strangers, a clan of children sees itself as the real people, memorable individuals, the basic human beings. Outsiders are unpredictable, alien and may be dangerous. Parents and other ungainly grown-ups are all alike in the lurking presence of their unspeakable sexual life, and their strange, dull obsession with routine and discipline.

When Geraldine was a child the men in her life were her older brother, Robin, a jeering, mocking, explosively energetic nuisance when he was around, but who for the most part ignored his younger siblings; her younger brother, Doug, and later Doug's best friend, Elliott. The women were her friends Phyllis, Bonnie and Lesley. Her best friend, Nicole, had been taken from her by the mysterious action of grown-ups. When they were ten, Nicole's parents had moved away, to another part of the city. Geraldine and Nicole had stayed in touch by telephone for several months, but one day when she phoned Nicole's mother had answered and said, "Nicole has new friends now. Please don't call her again." The house where she had lived was bought by a new family, whose youngest son turned out to be Elliott.

Until then Doug had been Geraldine's shadow, a silently amused companion who followed her around, hopeful and always ready to fall in with a plan, admiring and eager and shy. Sometimes she got sick of him and told him to leave her alone; he would be hurt for a while, but soon he'd be back. Then, after Elliott moved to the street, they were a group of three.

As they approached their teens, their friendship grew a little strained at times, but it always recovered. Elliott was an exuberant, boisterous child. He liked to sing songs he had learned at camp (where Geraldine and Doug had never been), with exaggerated emphasis:

"There once was a farmer who met a young miss

and said that he wanted to give her a

lecture

on horses and chickens and

eggs

and told her she had the most beautiful

manners

that suited a girl of her charms

a girl that he wanted to take in his

washing and ironing

and then if she did

they would get married and raise lots of

sweeet violets, sweeter than all the roses..."

Then he would do imitations of Marilyn Monroe, pouting and talking in a breathy voice with one hand on his hip and the other primping at his pretend blond hair. The girls in Geraldine's class thought he was a riot, and everybody asked him to do his routines over and over.

At about the age of nine, Geraldine had been taken to see a building her father had made. She didn't clearly understand whether he had been in charge of its creation, but she could see that he was proud of it. She remembered distinctly the way it looked as she stood holding her father's hand and looking up: like a dark cliff of giant windows framed in stone with a white cloudy sky above it. She remembered, too, the boom and clang of the traffic around them, the clean sooty smell of the air, the treble ringing of the streetcars and the city's basso hum.

Some years later she was in the habit of visiting the local library with him. Her brothers and her sister didn't want to go, but she usually did. One hot day when she was fourteen they were on the way to the library. He had parked the blue Nash Rambler some blocks away and they were walking. Perhaps it was beginning to feel like a chore, this outing to the library, to her and possibly to him. She looked up at her father's profile. He seemed preoccupied, cheerless, looking straight ahead, his head hunched forward as if he was straining to reach his destination, but his expression was impassive. As always, he was walking faster and faster. She skipped a step or two to keep up with his loping stride. "Daddy, slow, down," she begged.

He turned a cold face to her but immediately his features relaxed and he smiled, looking amused. "No, you speed up," he said, and exaggerated his fast pace, hurrying her along, laughing as she broke into a run.

"Daddy!"

Abruptly he stopped and seemed to gulp air as if he had skipped a breath. His look of concentration returned and he reached up and made a flapping motion, as if batting something away from his face. Then he fell, collapsing and turning his body so that first his knee hit the pavement, then his shoulder and last his head.

People stopped and stared.

Geraldine knelt beside him. "Daddy, get up," she said.

He looked at the sky, in the grip of whatever had seized him. "Get..."

Was he repeating her words?

"Get, get..." he repeated.

She thought he must be saying Get help. But someone was lifting her up and away from him. Some stranger. "Call a doctor! Call a doctor!" Geraldine shouted, into the woman's face. Just then a man in a pharmacist's coat appeared and said to the woman, "Ambulance is on its way. Take her inside."

A small crowd had gathered. The woman said to Geraldine, "Come inside the store here, and we'll call your mother." Inside, a woman behind the pharmacy counter pushed a telephone towards them and Geraldine told them the number. She turned away from them and looked out through the plate glass window at the people standing and discussing her father who lay on the sidewalk. Then she pulled her eyes and stared at a shelf of bottles and read Palmolive, Colgate, Tincture of Green Soap. Should she be outside with her father? But the pharmacist had told her to stay here. Like a child. And after all, she was only a child. But then a nasty voice jeered in her head: you're no child, fourteen isn't a child.

The siren of an ambulance suddenly blasted to a stop and Geraldine stood hesitating, peering through the glass door for a moment, then yanked it open and ran out just in time to see them lifting the stretcher into the ambulance. The doors closed on her father and they were gone.

The pharmacist's hand closed on her arm. "Don't worry," he said, "your mother is coming to get you." He was a thin bald man, and he talked kindly to her about school,

and other subjects he thought suitable for her age. After an interminable delay Gwen arrived to take her home. Later she told Geraldine that her father had died in the ambulance.

One day about four months after John's death, two of Geraldine's friends, Bonnie and Lesley, were with her in the kitchen. Gwen was ironing costumes in the sun porch, just around the corner. Lesley had made them all a treat that she claimed to eat daily, butter and brown sugar sandwiches, and Doug and Elliott had come in and Elliott was clowning for them. In the middle of his Betty Boop impersonation, there was an odd sound from the sun porch. Gwen had begun to weep loudly. They all fell silent, then Bonnie and Lesley quietly got up and went out, followed after an awkward moment, by Elliott. Doug and Geraldine sat at the table and listened to their mother crying... then Doug, too, escaped....

After a moment, as the sobs became wails, Geraldine went and stood in the doorway. Gwen, registering her presence, got up from the chair she had collapsed in and, taking a box of Kleenex from a shelf, stood half turned away while she blew her nose and wiped her eyes. "What am I supposed to do now with the four of you? I don't know how to bring up boys. And you girls, what's to become of you? I don't know."

"We don't need bringing up," said Geraldine. Her voice, which she'd tried to make reassuring, sounded awkward and complaining instead. "We're brought up. Robin isn't going to need bringing up. He's already decided he wants to be a lawyer."

"And there's Doug," said her mother in a hopeless monotone.

Geraldine thought about Doug. To her he seemed the most likely of them all to succeed in life. He was the most even-tempered, and worked diligently at school as if he liked it. He joined everything, always had fun. His father's death had, it seemed, only dampened his spirits for a week, or less, then his amused sunniness reasserted itself. Cathy who was only nine, had seemed bewildered at first, but now she never mentioned her father.

A frightening thought struck Geraldine. "Are we going to be poor?"

Her mother sighed, and looked away, out the window. "No. No. It's not that. John was careful about that." Then in a defeated voice she said, "Oh, Gerry."

By the time he was sixteen Doug had grown as tall as Robin but without the sweetly arrogant hypermasculinity of his older brother. He lived in a fog of introversion and sly jokes. His skin was badly afflicted with acne and he seemed uncomfortable, awkward, as if he were sore all over but trying to ignore it. When he and Geraldine were by themselves he would try to act bossy and grown up in imitation of Robin but instead of orating he would blare, then subside into quiet again with a knitted brow and a blind look, as if determined not to see what was around him. He and Elliott and Geraldine, and Geraldine's sulky friend Phyllis always sat together in the cafeteria. They were quite conscious of having banded together for protection. Elliot, who ostentatiously put on a very effeminate manner, was their leader in cruelties about the other, unsophisticated students, whom they called "gazonies" and by whom they were shunned.

Elliot told the others about the folkways of the boy gazoonies, warning them, he said. They talked about nothing but sex, ever, he claimed, although “They don’t need words to make double entendres,” he said. “Grunts and sniggers are enough. I won’t repeat what they say about you girls. Lately they have a new fad; they can’t say, or hear spoken the words *go* or *come*. In any context! Guffaws! Snorts and elbowings!”

Doug said, “Don’t *go* in my room!”

“We shall *overcome*!” Elliott said with a rising intonation.

They giggled uncontrollably.

Three years later, to his mother’s horror, Doug dropped out of the engineering course he had started at the university, accepted a full-time job in Eaton’s furniture department, and moved out.

That evening, when Geraldine arrived at the house Doug had moved into, she found Doug and Elliott in the kitchen. Doug stood at the counter, cutting vegetables . Yellow light fell over him from the paper lampshade he had hung from the ceiling. Smoke wafted up from the ashtray beside him.

Geraldine handed Elliott the bottle of wine she had brought and, sitting down at the table, asked Doug, “What are you going to do with all that garlic?”

Doug put down the knife and picked up his cigarette. Taking a quick puff, he blew smoke sideways. “You doubt me? Think I don’t know what I’m doing?”

“That’s a lot of garlic.”

Elliott poured wine into a glass and handed it to her. “Drink this wine and don’t annoy the chef.”

Geraldine said, “Guess who I saw last week? Phyllis, in the Yonge subway station.”

“Really? Syphillis herself?” Elliott said

“Yes. I think the last time I saw her was at that party we were at, you know the one. When the police came.”

“Did she get married? I heard she was going to get married to Ed Grey.”

Doug turned the tap on full blast and washed a lettuce, then, wrapping the leaves in a tea towel, he said, “Yes, I heard that too.”

Elliott said to Doug, “Well, that was a lucky escape. Last I heard, she was trying to get you in her clutches. She must have married Ed on the rebound.”

Doug, pouring olive oil into a small bowl, said carefully, “There can be no rebound when no bound existed to begin with.”

Geraldine looked at him. “Doug, how can you say that? There was something going on.”

“We were just buddies.”

“Oh, Doug, you were not. You were engaged.”

“That was all her idea.”

Elliott sang, “ She was a maid mad to marry.”

“—who would take double quick—” Geraldine joined in.

“—any Tom, Dick or Harry—” Elliott sang.

“—any Tom, Harry, or Dick,” they sang together.

Geraldine watched Doug mix the garlic with olive oil in a glass bowl, then, with a fork, painstakingly remove every shred of garlic and drop it in the garbage.

“She said you proposed.”

“So you claim she claimed. But we were babies. It was long ago.”

“Two years isn't that long ago.”

Doug put the glass bowl in the refrigerator and came out from behind the counter.

Sat down at the table. Picked up the bottle and splashed wine into his glass.

After a moment Geraldine looked around the kitchen for something to remark on. Dirty walls, yellowish. An uncurtained window, beyond which the deep gentian blue of winter dusk was rapidly darkening to black. Greenish light in the claustrophobic hallway.

“At least the kitchen is fairly big,” she said.

Elliott said, “Listen, my dears, next week there's going to be a party at Dorothy's. Doug must have told you about her, the Wicked Bitch of the North? None of us can decide whether she's actually a good director or just a grande society dame who's good at telling people to pull up their socks. Anyway, she's having this get-acquainted thing for us to mingle, become a coherent working group, et cetera. et cetera. Do you want to come along?”

“Sure.”

“It's next Friday. She lives in this modernistic mansion in Rosedale. It's fantastic. The husband is a big, big banker. Met him. So dull it's amazing.”

“I'll go to Rosedale...why not?”

“So, come by again about the same time as today. We'll have an aperitif. There'll be enormous amounts of food at the party.”

“I’m going to work for the group as stage manager,” Doug said to Geraldine in an awkward tone, as if he wasn’t at all sure about it.

“We are all just delighted that he’s joining us,” said Elliott emphatically, crushing his cigarette out mercilessly. “Someone sensible to keep us in line.”

“Doug, that’s great,” said Geraldine, “but...you’re not quitting your other job are you?”

“No, of course not. I’m not crazy. There’s no money in Elliott’s friends’ theatre games, but it could be fun.”

The door was pulled open by a short, roundish girl of about Geraldine’s age or maybe a little older, about twenty-one or two, who had absurdly rosy cheeks. “Welcome!” she sang. “Oh, look at the snow falling on your hair! It’s so pretty!”

“This is Mary Louise,” said Doug to Geraldine. It was an explanation rather than an introduction.

“Come in, come in! Elliott’s already here,” she said. Sounds of mirth came from inside, far away in what was, as Doug had promised, a huge house. They made their way to the kitchen. Beyond it, a big sunroom or breakfast room was full of people. Mary Louise preceded them into the room. “Drinks are over there,” she instructed, and darted away.

A boldly made-up woman across the room waved a gracious hand at Doug. She was perhaps forty-five...Geraldine could not tell a forty-year-old from a sixty-year-old. What did it matter? The tide of life had washed over them and left them behind. Feeling

very self-conscious, she went to look out at the narrow garden below the window. Snow in the dark. It was a mistake really to expect any events at a Doug party. She only really went as a spectator.

Bits of conversation flew around her ears.

“And then he went right into the speech from the fourth scene. So everybody had to follow along. The second and third scenes were just dumped into a hole. Of course , nobody noticed.”

“Then I found out that all the Americans in the company were getting free transportation and more money....”

“When I told my mother I was going to quit school to be an actress she dropped to the floor. Just like a stone. Fainted....”

“She tells everybody’s fortune in every production. Reads palms...”

There didn’t seem to be a conversation she could join in. Forgetting that she had already had two Cinzanos at Doug’s apartment, Geraldine poured herself a large glass of wine from a Quebec gallon bottle she found on the kitchen table. She had been a wallflower here long enough. Best see what else was going on at this party. Be a wallflower somewhere else. Edging around to the door she went out and followed the lure of music to a living room, where some people were sitting on the floor and smoking marijuana. This seemed surprising in view of the advanced age of the hostess, Dorothy. Geraldine looked around for Mr. Dorothy, the banker....would he approve of this use of his...living room? No, it wasn’t a living room, it was much grander. It was a library. There were books. Approaching the shelves, she squinted at them, finding it a little hard to see, and harder to concentrate. Maybe she should go get some food. Really, she was feeling a bit dizzy. “Anyone who had a heart....” Dionne Warwick fluted out of a speaker

set in the wall. Geraldine sat down on the floor and setting her glass on the shelf behind her, pulled an art book from the lower shelf. The song blared out above her. "... and love me too./ You couldn't really have a heart and hurt me/Like you hurt me and be so untrue..." It was loud. But somehow it seemed to go with the paintings she was looking at in the book.

"Oh, look at that," squealed Mary Louise, pushed close to Geraldine by the crush of bodies that were now dancing through the room. "What *is* that?" She was pointing down at the page.

"Matisse," said Geraldine.

"Oh, wow. Are you going to get into that?"

"Into what?"

"Batik."

Geraldine nodded. "Yes," she said, "yes, I am," as Mary Louise was borne away by the current.

After a while she put the Matisse volume back and reached up for Beckett's *The Unnamable*; she began to read and immediately forgot where she was.

A body flopped down beside her. "A reader, I see."

It was the man who had complained, in the kitchen, that American actors were being paid more than Canadians. "Yes," said Geraldine, but she closed the book.

"Jerry," said the man and reached across himself to hold out his hand, leaning against her unnecessarily as he did so.

Geraldine snorted with laughter and was immediately ashamed of her gaucherie.

"Sorry," she said, shaking his hand. "I'm Gerry too, Geraldine."

"Excellent," he said.

Nervously she twisted around to take her glass from the shelf behind her.

“That glass seems to be empty. Would you like me to get you another drink?”

“Oh, maybe not... but why not,” said Geraldine.

He lurched to his feet. “No, no, you stay there,” he said, putting a firm hand on her shoulder, though she hadn’t moved.

While he was in the kitchen she tried to remember what his face looked like. His hair was very dark and it hung over his forehead, though it wasn’t long, the way boys her age were wearing it now. He was definitely older than most of the people here; an adult, she classified him, but not as old as their hostess. Probably thirty, or even more. As he came back, holding two glasses, she saw that he was chunky, with burly arms and legs. If she had a type he wasn’t it.

“So, you’re not an actress,” he said, sitting back down beside her. “You seem too sensible.”

Geraldine felt offended on at least three levels. Her chief reaction was that she didn’t like being called sensible.

“How do I seem sensible?” she asked. “Is it the way I sit on the floor? Too sensible to bother with a chair?”

“Hey, you’re funny, too,” he said, with an aren’t-you-cute smile. Normally she hated that but there was something pleasant about his solid-feeling shoulder, which he was definitely pressing against her. She wasn’t sitting alone at a party any more. Now she had a shoulder to lean on. No matter that this man was obviously the wrong person in every way.

“No, I’m not an actress. I’m a student.”

“You could be an actress, though. You got the looks for it.”

Geraldine was pleased by that, and displeased with herself for it. But secretly she thought she was pretty. Her father had often told her so. But she'd only been a child then and lately her looks rarely seemed to be worth a mention by anybody.

"You think so?" Her voice sounded embarrassing childish. She looked away, feeling heat rising up her neck and into her cheeks.

"Look at me," Jerry said, commandingly. He reached for her head and turned her face toward him. "I know so," he said in a definite, bossy way, holding a hand on either side of her face. "Your face would be good on stage or even on film."

"I could never, ever, be an actress," said Geraldine with conviction. That much she knew for sure.

"Why not? You gotta have confidence in yourself. How old are you, anyway?"

"Twenty. One."

"Twenty-one. So you're what, an English student?"

"Is it so obvious?"

"Well, I saw you reading a book just now."

Could he really be as dumb as he sounded?

"So you'll probably be a teacher," he said, mapping out her future. "Get married, have a couple of kids."

Centuries of servitude opened up instantly in Geraldine's imagination. Generations of nothingness, multitudes of faceless and nameless women, living lives of generality with unspecific marriages, nobodies forever and ever.

"I sincerely hope not," she said.

“Sam Beckett,” he said, surprisingly. “I saw you reading Sam Beckett. Great playwright. Estragon.” He pointed to himself. “I played Estragon. You look at me, you think Pozzo, but I wanted to play one of the lost guys. It was a great production.”

“Will you be acting in Dorothy’s company?” Geraldine asked. He seemed too old. Everybody else was young. But maybe he was younger than she’d thought.

“Directing,” he said with pride. “Dorothy and I met doing the directing course in New York and she asked me up do a show here.” He seemed very content to talk about himself. He’d been living in New York for the last few years—“But I’m *from* here,” he said briefly without going into detail—and did Shakespeare in the Park. Shakespeare was his God, he said, along with Brando. Geraldine was only half listening. She should really think about going home. Where was Doug?

“Excuse me,” she said, interrupting him. She stood up. “Sorry,” she said. “I should...”

“No problem,” he said, standing up too.

In the kitchen, she found Doug and Elliott, surrounded by a laughing, shouting group. Elliott was in the middle of telling a story, so she wandered on back through the house, stood at the ravaged but still plentifully supplied buffet table for a while, eating grapes and cheese, poured herself more wine and moved on to a room where people were dancing. “Shake it up, baby, now,” howled John Lennon. Geraldine was beginning to feel quite drunk, and she danced by herself as the others were doing. The music seemed to change tone after a moment, shift into a dimension of hectic but pleasurable unreality, as if a dream had invaded it. Unless she was imagining it, a boy with curly brown hair across the room was looking at her and smiling. He looked nice. She closed her eyes and let the loud music blast away her thoughts.

Suddenly Doug's voice was in her ear. "I have to go now. Are you OK?" . She shook her head, and said, "I don't want to go yet."

"Elliott's still around here someplace."

"Is he? Well, I'm going to stay a few more minutes. Maybe I'll leave when he does."

"I really have to go."

"I know! So go, I'll be all right"

"Are you sure?"

She danced out into the hallway so she could hear him.

"I'm just going straight home," he said. "I have to work in the morning. You remember where the subway is from here?"

Why was he being so fussy and concerned? "Three blocks, then one block," she said, pointing right then left.

"Right. And don't forget it stops running at one o'clock."

"I won't!"

But after he left she wished she had gone with him. The brown-haired boy was dancing with Mary Louise, and she felt out of place. Elliott was nowhere to be seen, and she didn't know anybody else.

She went and found her boots in the hallway and sat on the stairs to pull them on . Her coat was under two others on the newel post. She was putting it on, feeling lonely, when New York Jerry looked around the door frame and did a pretend double take. "You're leaving? What's the matter, you look mad about something."

Geraldine said, "Mad? I'm not mad." She stood still, wondering whether she should bolt or take her coat back off.

“Do you need a lift? My car’s just outside.”

“... Okay.”

“Hey, don’t look so suspicious, I’ll get you home safe. It’s cold out there though, wrap yourself up. Just let me go grab my coat.”

“I’ll be out here,” said Geraldine, opening the door and stepping outside. The snow had ended and the almost full moon hung in a black sky. It was utterly quiet and the cold had sharpened.

Jerry came out and stood beside her. He seemed bulky in his short overcoat.

“Come on,” he said. “The car’s over there.”

They crossed the street and she stood tensed against the chill as he put his key in the driver’s side door. Suddenly he stopped, and said, “You know what, Gerry, I don’t think I should drive until I’ve had some coffee. I’ve had a bit too much to drink...normally I don’t drink much and I’m kind of not used to it. We could walk out to Bloor Street, get some coffee and find you a taxi.”

“Nothing will be open now.”

“Oh, right, right, I keep forgetting about this city... Listen, I could make us some coffee in the coach house if you want.”

“The coach house...?”

“Yeah, around the back, that’s where I’m staying. Dorothy’s got a kind of apartment there. Hey, you’re giving me that worried look again. Let’s just go find you a taxi.”

“No,” said Geraldine, turning to look. “Where is it? Back through there?” He lifted a hand, indicating a walkway that went to the left of the house. Not waiting for him

she stepped onto the snowy path and began to make her way in the direction he had pointed.

They went through a gate and passed between the tall brick sides of the house and its neighbour. In the small courtyard, the snow was glittering in the moonlight. The coach house with its steep, whitened roof, looked like the witch's house in a fairy tale.

Inside it was utilitarian... a small bed-sitting room, neat but unused looking like a place that was packed away from year to year. A faint mustiness in the air, and perhaps a ghostly trace of the smell of motor oil from vanished Buicks and Studebakers. Jerry switched on a light over a tiny kitchen counter. It was surprisingly warm. A Quebec heater was making a soft hissing noise. Drawn to the warmth, Geraldine looked at the full scuttle of coal beside it and asked. "Isn't this illegal? Isn't some fire regulation being broken here?"

"Shh," said Jerry, putting a finger to his lips. "Nobody knows about it. It's been here since the chauffeur used to stay here in the 1920s." He was filling a kettle with water from a jug.

"This stove's not that old." Geraldine said. "My grandmother out in the country has one like this."

While he filled the coffee percolator basket, Geraldine looked around for a place to sit. There were two kitchen chairs and one unappealing armchair and in the corner opposite the stove, a bed. She went over to the bed and sat.

She took her boots off.

Jerry was taking two cups from a shelf under the counter.

Geraldine flopped backwards onto the bed.

"Hey, don't fall asleep on me," said Jerry.

She pulled her legs up and curled on her side facing the wall. “Why not,” she said into a pillow. She listened, without moving, to the sounds of the coffee pot, the stove door being opened, the rattle of a scoop of coal. A smell of brewed coffee reached her nostrils, making her feel slightly sick. She waited.

After a few minutes the bed shifted as he sat. A hand descended on her shoulder. “Gerry,” he said. His hand rubbed up over her shoulder and down her arm.

She pretended to be asleep, and he lay down beside her. “Hey,” he said into her hair. She turned to him and draped one limp arm over his large chest. A distant sensation of alarm, and a nervous desire to run away, was making her breathe fast. Or was this feeling something else? She hoped it was.

He started to kiss her and to her surprise he did it quite well. She hadn’t counted on liking any part of this.

“Are you sure this is okay with you?” he said after a while.

“Yes,” she said, keeping her eyes tightly closed. “But could you turn off that light please?”

When he was across the room switching off the light, she said. “Maybe this isn’t all right. I might be getting my period.” As soon as she said it she was embarrassed. It was true but she was only saying it as an explanation in advance in case there was blood. But there wouldn’t be.

He was already back on the bed . Sounding pleased, he said, “That’s great...that’s the safest time.”

“Okay,” she said, but he was already pulling her clothes off. She helped him, and when she was naked she rolled into the bed, wrapping the blankets and sheets around her. He was taking his clothes off and in a moment he was enthusiastically unwrapping her.

“Oh, baby. Oh, baby,” he said into her neck, and she suddenly felt very remote and numb. He had his hand between her legs and she really didn’t like what he was doing. She thought regretfully of Norman Dodds, who had briefly been her boyfriend when she was sixteen. He had enlightened her about a number of sexual matters, though without ever forcing anything on her. He had assumed, as she had then, that there was a good reason for her to keep a grip on her virginity.

She pushed Jerry’s hand away with an involuntary impatient little gasp. He, apparently thinking her impatience was eagerness, rolled over on top of her and began pushing her legs apart. His penis nudged at her. It felt enormous. He rammed it inside her and she gasped again. It felt like a large foreign object, too large.

She had been afraid he would be able to tell she had never done this before, but she need not have worried. He was oblivious. She tried to accommodate herself to his movements so that it would be over soon. She felt no pleasure at all, which surprised and disappointed her. She knew very well what sexual pleasure was. Norm Dodds had been a very expert teacher. This was nothing like that. She tried to think about Mr Abbott, but his image only stood away from her, looking shocked. Of course he would not approve. Then it was over and he rolled off her.

After a moment, he said, “You OK?”

“Fine. I’m fine.”

He put a hand on her breast and kneaded it. “You sure? You didn’t make any of those loud noises you’re supposed to make.” Geraldine winced and pushed his hand away.

He pulled the blankets up and settled the pillow under his head. Closing his eyes, he gave a sigh, or rather an *ahh*, of satisfaction. “You know what the world needs, Gerry?”

“What?”

“It needs more girls like you.”

After a moment, Geraldine asked, “What kind of girl is that?”

“Girls who are out for ...a good time.” Then in seconds he was, apparently, asleep.

Geraldine lay wide awake. She didn’t want to sleep. She wanted to go home, but she would have missed the last bus and it was too cold to walk all the way from the end of the subway.

She had got rid of her virginity, as she had wanted to. She was now an adult, but she didn’t know what to feel about it. Her mind was agitated, but her feelings weren’t clear. But then somewhere in the back of her mind she identified a tiny note of something like jubilation. She began to want to laugh. It had been awful, but that part was over. Now she could face anything. Thank God, she said to herself, I won’t have to go through that with someone I actually love.

The man in the bed beside her snored lightly. Geraldine was happy to lie there and think about her changed position. After a while, perhaps hours, she was suddenly wide awake. Was there a faint grey lightening just beginning to appear in the small window? She was instantly seized by a panicky desire to get up, get out, get away. She pulled herself stealthily out from under the covers, and looked for the bathroom. It was a tiny little cubicle. She decided not to use it, and silently pulled on her clothes. She was trying to open the door without making any noise when his voice came from the bed. “Wait, where you going?”

“I have to be at ...a class,” she said. It wasn’t true, and anyway it was far too early for a class, so she added, “...and I have to go home first.”

“Just wait a minute, wait a minute and I’ll drive you.” He had picked up his watch and was peering at it. “I promised to get you home.” He sat on the side of the bed looking sleepy. She didn’t look as he stood up, but then peeked at him when he went into the bathroom. Nakedness seemed to be perfectly comfortable for him. It all felt very grown up....but she was all of a sudden desperate to get out of there.

While he was dressing she used the bathroom, and brushed her hair. Then as he drank a cup of coffee she sat tensely in the armchair, feeling grateful to him for his willingness to drive her home but impatient to be gone.

In the car, he seemed to have a lot to say about general topics. Maybe he was afraid she would try to get him to see her again. No chance of that, she said to him silently as he told her some involved story about his first car, his first fender-bender and on and on. If he was surprised at how far out in the suburbs she lived, he didn’t say so. It was still was about three-thirty in the morning and the lighted streets were empty, the snow swept from the street but still lying thick in the sidewalks.

“The next corner will be great, “ she said as they were getting close to her house. “If you could just drop me there.”

He stopped the car and said, “Well, it was great to meet you, Geraldine.”

This was more embarrassing than anything else.

He leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Unconsciously she recoiled a little. He didn’t notice.

“Well, good night,” he said. “Or I guess I should say, good morning.”

“Goodbye,” said Geraldine, and sprang out of the car without looking back. Hurrying away, she was aware of a keen note of something like melancholy, but mostly she felt lightheaded and almost euphoric. She was free.

A few days after the party, Doug and Geraldine went out to the movies and then to have a beer. Doug seemed to want to talk but also seemed to be brooding about something.

“There’s a person that I..”

Geraldine waited, then said, “A person that you—?”

Doug lit a cigarette and looked around the room.

Geraldine said, “A person that you like?”

“Yes. A person that I worked with, might work with again. And that I ...like. But the person, well...dances out of reach.”

“Is this serious?” She watched his face. Two glasses of beer on an empty stomach had made her feel that everything had lurched into close-up.

Doug shifted and sighed. “You never know.”

“But who is it?”

“I’d rather not say, unless—”

“Unless...? Doug, who or what are we talking about?”

“We’re talking about something that isn't going to happen.” He sat back and looked at her mockingly.

“You have a crush on somebody...”

“A crush?” He laughed a single, merry, embarrassed note.

“And for some reason, you and...this person, aren't, don't...”

“No, we aren't and we don't.”

“But there must be something going on...or a hope, or you wouldn't be telling me.”

“True, I guess.”

Geraldine was intensely curious, and wondered if Doug was going to tell her what she had often suspected. “Yes, and the sound of your voice tells me that you are in a state about this person. So I'm bound to find out sooner or later. What exactly is the problem?”

“Well, the problem is, in a word, is that the person doesn't know I'm alive.”

Geraldine, tired of “this person,” decided to pretend she thought it was a woman they were talking about. If he wouldn't say it, neither would she. She sighed and introduced a pronoun, just to have it over with. “So, she ignores you? Have you said or done anything to let her know how you feel?”

Doug stubbed out his cigarette energetically, shot a glance at her, and released into a flood of pronouns spoke rapidly and with exaggerated emphasis. “I asked her out, and she was busy! I'll ask again, though. She'll give in in the end! I'll wear down her resistance! Oh, who am I kidding....”

“I don't know. Who *are* you kidding?”

“Not you, I guess.”

During her four years at University College, Geraldine had acquired only one real friend. Pam O'Hara had moved downtown the previous year, away from her parents' suburban

house, and now lived in a rented house with four art college students. A few days after the event with New York Jerry, Geraldine and Pam were eating lunch in the JCR .

Leaning towards Pam to make herself heard over the lunchroom cacophony, Geraldine was explaining what had happened “I was really feeling that my”—here she dropped her voice and hissed the word into Pam’s ear—“*virginity* was like this ...thing, this useless object that I was carrying around with me. So, I used the guy the way a horse will try to rub a rider off against a tree. Or duck under low-hanging boughs to knock the weight off. It worked, of course, and no doubt he was using me too in his little masculine way. Anyway, it worked. And I galloped off, riderless.”

“Hurray!” said Pam. She had just wrapped the remains of a tuna sandwich in a tight waxed paper scrunch and now she whacked it with her fist for emphasis, then threw it neatly into a garbage container that stood nearby. “I did something similar. But, sorry, I beat you to it by two years.”

“I’m so glad that’s over,” said Geraldine. “But I’m not in a hurry to do it again.”

“You’re not?” said Pam. “Heh, I am.”

“I’d like a prescription for... birth control pills,” said Geraldine. Her voice came out wrong, sounding both forced and too quiet. She was blushing, she knew it. It was ludicrous, like a dream in which you have to shout to make yourself heard but are unable to make a sound.

The doctor looked at her angrily.

Geraldine had decided to walk into the first doctor's office she saw and ask for an appointment. This place was on the second floor of a huge old house on Spadina across from the Jewish Y. The receptionist had asked her to wait, then said she could go right in.

Dr. Spasojevic had a slight accent. "How old are you?" he asked, frowning.

His hostility was offensive. Geraldine began to feel indignant. Her head, which she realized had been bowed as if in apology, now rose up haughtily, and she drew in a deep breath. "Twenty-one."

"Are you married?"

Did he think he could intimidate her? "No," she said, and wondered if there was anything else she should say. But "No" seemed to cover it.

He seemed displeased. "Are you planning to be married?"

Oh, why not let him have that comfort? "Yes," she said. "My fiancé and I are going to get married right after graduation."

He still looked suspicious. She gazed past him at the diplomas on his wall. After a moment of rubbing his chin and darting serious looks at her, he wrote something down on his prescription pad, then slowly and with exaggerated movements tore it off and held it for a moment, fixing her with intent, truth-divining eyes.

He moved his hand toward her then stopped, withholding the paper. In a cold, scolding voice, he said "We don't want to contribute to prostitution."

Geraldine just looked at him. For a moment or two they stared at each other. Then, finally, he handed it over.

Later, when she had the circular pill pack in her hand she noticed that he had protected her reputation by identifying her to the pharmacist as MRS. Geraldine Taylor.

Over the next six months, Geraldine took her pills but there was never any opportunity for them to work. But the knowledge that she had them made her happy .

In a dream, Geraldine saw her father, who appeared as a white, sad-faced dead man. Though dead, he could see and speak to her. But he said nothing. He sat at the head of a table, and a strange woman sat opposite him. Her face was crumpled and her body seemed to be losing its outlines; it became a heap of old rags. Her father looked at the woman in pain and disgust. It was clear to the dreaming Geraldine that the woman was the cause of her father's sorrow and death. But it wasn't clear who she was.

Spring was approaching and Geraldine had to decide what she would do after she graduated and was sent out into whatever came next. Her plan to seize life by main force was not working. She went to parties with dramatic hopes, because now the stakes were so much higher. But no one with any wit or charm or depth seemed to exist. No one was good-looking. No one could even speak in sentences. No one paid any attention to her, or only attention of the crudest kind.

What she had envisioned was that someone would appear and would fall in love with her—and she with him—as a matter of course. It would be straightforward in every way, inevitable and satisfactory. There would be no calculation, no need for serious thought about the future, no conventional waiting around, no planning and especially, no wedding. Marriage was something that earlier generations had done, had been tricked into. They offered a cautionary example. Why should any young person of either sex overlook those bad examples, now, in these late decades of the twentieth century?

She sat in the library, looking at a page of a famous critic's explication of *Tristram Shandy*. The print on the page was invisible to her. The man she confidently expected would be unlike her father. Her poor father, distressed and disconsolate, had been absent in almost every way, even before he had absented himself by death. Geraldine's love, she knew, would be outstandingly *present*. Strong, confident, wise, he would be engaged on some work of enormous importance, and if he was sometimes physically absent, if it took him away from her for much of the time, that would be all right with Geraldine. Her work, though she couldn't imagine what it might consist of, would be as significant as his, so there could be no quarrel about that.

For the moment, there was nobody like that in the immediate circle of people she knew. The only person I know, Geraldine said to herself, who is trying to live by principles like that is me. But of course, that was how they would recognize each other.

And of course, he would be very good-looking, but not in a way everybody would agree on. She would see it, but others would not. He would be serious and very masculine, not handsome like Mr Abbott, in that almost pretty way, that almost childish, high-coloured way, with his dark, springy curls and his blue, or grey, eyes. There was an fleshiness about Mr Abbott that she didn't like, as if he would be fat when he was older. The man she was imagining for herself would never laugh in the high-pitched way Mr Abbott sometimes did, nervously, or look distracted and anxious.

The man she was imagining, however, was nowhere to be seen, and Mr Abbott, whatever his faults, showed up every Wednesday and Thursday. In class she had begun to feel a weakness in her hands and arms when she looked at him, and a shivery heat that seemed to attach her to his presence, as if their bodies were connected, chair to chair,

through her damp palms on the surface of the table they sat around, and through the floor under her nervous feet. It was ridiculous.

It was June, hot, brilliant green and blossoming all over the city. The exams were over, and Geraldine was at a loss. Officially she was considering her future and looking for a job of some kind. She moped around the house and thought she must be the most futile lump of flesh in the entire city. Suburb. "Garden suburb" they might call it, but it was a prison suburb. It was hot and outside the window lawn mowers were droning and a car radio in the next driveway was talking and singing loudly and stupidly to itself as the man next door, an old and overpaid and entirely uninteresting employee of the Ontario Liquor Board, washed his car. Robin was at the LCBO this summer, and he seemed not to mind it. Geraldine hoped she would not be reduced to getting a job there too. Come to think of it, were there any females working there? She thought not and pondered the phenomenon of being shut out of an organization you didn't want to be part of anyway.

Gasping in irritation she flung herself down the stairs, grabbed her keys and handbag and ran out of the house. Fortunately her mother was in the basement and didn't see her, or there would have been an inquisition.

She ran to the bus stop around the corner. She would do what she had done every day for four years. University was over, but she could still go and hang around in the library.

On her last day of class Mrs. Sinclair, her eighteenth-century novel tutor, had made a big pitch to her that she should apply to graduate school, telling her that she showed

real promise as a scholar. Geraldine found the idea tempting, in a weak way, but at the same time it made her want to cry. It would be so easy just to stay in the academic world and she knew Mrs. Sinclair was right. She could do it. She tried to explain to Mrs Sinclair that she wanted to do something real in the real world, but since she couldn't say what that might be she knew she didn't sound convincing. She had promised to think about it.

Maybe she would ask the demure ladies at the bookstore if they needed a clerk.

In the stacks, she pulled a novel off the shelf and sat on the floor to read it. After a quarter of an hour she decided to sign it out and go read it under a tree outside. As she was getting to her feet, Mr Abbott appeared at the end of the aisle and moved towards her, shadowed by centuries of literature. He wasn't looking at her, but up at the authors whose names began with G.

He looked different, somehow, now that he wasn't her Old English tutor any longer. She reached up to return the book she was holding to its place, disregarding the Do Not Reshelve Books directive. She wondered whether she could speak to him casually without making a fool of herself. She doubted it, but decided she should try.

When she turned back he was gone. Well, that's that, she thought and, sighing, she picked up her book bag. She felt drawn to see what he had been looking at and wandered down the aisle to where he had been standing. Galsworthy, Gaskell, Gissing... *The Odd Women*. That's me, she thought. She pulled it down and began to read it.

TWO

Twelve years later, in the summer of 1978, Geraldine was halfway through writing her doctoral dissertation on how late nineteenth-century English naturalist fiction had led to the development of modernism. She worked at the Robarts Library most days, and twice a week she went to a windowless seminar room in New College and gave a tutorial to first-year undergraduates on British authors.

From her carrel thirteen stories up she could see Lake Ontario. On this hot August afternoon it lay under tumbling masses of white clouds, a streak of blue light on the horizon, like a dream of escape. Open water, with white sails tiny in the distance. Geraldine had only been out in a sailboat once in her life but the brightness, the speed, the wind and glittering flying spray had stayed with her as an image of exhilaration that returned to mock her when she was stuck day after summer day in this penitential tower.

She couldn't work at home. It was too difficult to concentrate there. Her husband, Robert, was an actor. They had been married for eighteen months. When he wasn't working the place was too full of his exuberant energy and interruptions, or occasionally, and this was much worse, his morose black moods. But when he wasn't there, the emptiness of the apartment rattled her. When he was working he would be gone day and night, sometimes for weeks. Lately he had had a run of luck: a continuing part in a television series that was being shot in Toronto, not far from their apartment. So he had plenty of time in between, whole days off at times, which he spent reading and working out at the U of T gym. Lately he had been writing a play.

Geraldine's dissertation was still a mass of details with no clear pattern. She had

gathered the material slowly, trying to be patient and methodical, but the original inspiration seemed remote now. She still believed it was worth it, but her faith was tested daily. In any case, she couldn't quit now. But that didn't stop it feeling like a straitjacket.

She dropped her pen on her desk, leaned back and stretched. Her shoulders felt stiff and really it was time for a walk around the stacks. Occasionally—about once a week—she wrote a paragraph and put it into her serious dissertation-text file folder, but for the most part she was still reading, scribbling notes and reading again. Today she hadn't had anything like a new idea. She had just been elaborating on background material and it was tedious stuff.

Poor Gissing. He had written so much, with such industry, such bitterness and buried hope. Geraldine was fond of him, had started out with almost an across-the-century crush on him. His books were, she had to concede, not that brilliant as art. But they were such a heart-rending cry of pain about the horrors of sexuality, the awfulness of women and the struggles of marriage that she had read him, first with an addicted eagerness, then later with a clear, interested eye on how he, himself, as well as his fictional creatures, served to explain the history of men and women in the nineteenth century. Not to mention the twentieth.

In some ways she thought now that Gissing was the only man she had ever really understood. She had lived with Barry, her first boyfriend, a draft dodger from Tennessee, for six reasonably happy years. It had really started out as a sharing-space arrangement—as Barry had said, it was *tout à fait provisoire*, then later it became *la provisoire qui dure*. Geraldine had explained her opposition to marriage, and Barry had fallen in with her ideas, quite enthusiastically, called her his bluestocking, and seemed actually to find their

non-married state erotically interesting. *Ma femme est contre le mariage*, she had heard him tell someone, as if it was an amusing paradox, and she hadn't liked the possessiveness in the words. She had been doing her master's at the time; Barry was working on a doctorate in the Nouveau Roman and loved to chatter in French, especially when the other person didn't understand him. They had got along very well; he was fond of her, good-tempered and funny—in an arch way; all those puns! He was a bit dull, but Geraldine saw no reason to leave him. Then finally, about the time when she was thinking that really, there was nothing left between them at all but familiarity, and that truth to tell he bored her to death, he began to say it was about time they reproduced. She had fled.

She had fled the academic world as well. For several years she worked for a children's book publisher, and briefly at the box office of a theatre Doug was involved with. She thought she was in love three times, two of which came to nothing. The third time it was with a German who took her out in his sailboat and then after three months, went home to Germany to get married. She had decided at that point to go back into the graduate program and get serious about an academic career. Her adviser, Dr. Cattrall, had told her she could come back any time, and so she did.

Then, when she was nearly thirty, she had met Robert, and her whole life was knocked sideways for a time. Everything about him made her happy. She was reserved, rather shy, in most situations. He was extroverted, cheerful, even ebullient. His sexual confidence had first shocked, then delighted her. They were alike in their ambition and their single-minded hard work. Nobody but an artist, she thought, would ever have accepted her so completely. And he was so beautiful. How had she won such a prize?

Other men had been callous, or inhibited, or had hated affection. Robert had just seemed to *like* her so much. His warmth was contagious. Of course, she had adored him. This must be love, she had said to herself...because if it wasn't, what was?

“I crave domesticity,” he had told her after one of their very first nights together, and it was true. They found a beautiful big apartment on Major Street, and moved in together. He loved painting, fixing, arranging and rearranging: nest-making. In his happy phases, he would invite people over every night if he could, cook elaborate dinners and entertain the company. Geraldine, who until this point had been about as domestic as a wildcat, was impressed. And happy to be taught how to make French sauces and choose wines.

He had unhappy phases too, and at those times he became uncommunicative. Their first misunderstanding had been over marriage. After a few very short weeks he had wanted to get married and throw a huge party to celebrate. “Why not?” he had asked, as if it were nothing but a wonderful joke. She had assumed that he felt as she did on that subject, but it turned out his feelings were quite different. She explained her objections, and to her surprise he took it personally. He was hurt. And of course, she relented immediately. But his bad mood persisted, frightening her.

She had married him in a state close to panic, thinking that she must not look closely at what she was doing. If she did, she was afraid she would know it was a mistake. If she doubted, he would too. He might change his mind. Then she would lose him. And so, after resisting the whole business of marriage until the age of thirty, she had, in the space of five months, abandoned all her principles.

She knew this was a mistake she wanted to make.

From her carrel perch in the library, she saw that the sky had clouded over and it looked dark and thundery. She had to stop now, anyway. Twenty-three student papers on *Dombey and Son* were waiting to be marked, a dreary prospect though it sometimes had its moments...a laugh if nothing else. That she could do at home, and must, this evening. She shifted the heavy volume she had been reading away from her. Standing up, she closed it and hefted it to the top of the pile by the wall.

She and Robert had agreed that tonight they'd go out for dinner, but they had planned to go to the outdoor back deck of Kensington Kitchen. If it was raining he wasn't going to want to go out. Maybe they could just order a pizza. Or maybe Robert would cook.

She made it home before the downpour, but only just. She flung her satchel on the floor by the sofa and called, "Robert? Are you here?"

No answer. Why would he go out when they had plans? Maybe he'd been called to an audition. Or maybe he had forgotten—that had happened often enough lately for the thought to disconcert her. Tears of frustration threatened and she pinched her lips together to prevent herself from becoming seriously upset. After two years of this she really ought to be able to take it.

In the kitchen, his portable typewriter and versions of his play covered the table, along with three empty beer bottles, an ashtray with Rothman's and also...she picked up the ashtray and looked closer...Gitanes butts in it. That meant Marcus, an actor friend of Robert's, had been here. She was opening a beer for herself when she heard the front door. Robert appeared a moment later, drenched, with grocery bags, his hair plastered to his forehead.

“Pasta fresca!” he announced, thumping the bags down and pulling out fresh basil, pine nuts, Parmesan and a bottle of red wine.

After dinner he asked her about Gissing. That was unexpected. “I took a look at one of your books,” he said. “I was thinking that instead of the play I might write a novel. What is it you like about this guy?”

“Well...” She really didn’t know what to tell him. She wondered how to describe the peculiar fascination she found, or used to find, in the books. Robert had never shown any direct interest in her work before and it made her nervous. She felt like a witness in a trial who had been asked to explain a crime she has already confessed to. “I guess it’s the fact that he was trying to portray his time in a new way. He was writing about the class system and sexual politics...and about the decay of society and the destruction of the spirit by commerce, and ...”

“Sexual politics? He doesn’t seem to like women very much.”

“What book were you looking at?”

He went into the living room and came back holding up a dog-eared paperback of *In the Year of Jubilee*. “This one.” He sat down again. “I only read about twenty pages. It was all about three horrible bitches.”

“A gold digger, a swindler and a prostitute. No, he didn’t like those women, anyway.”

“So, how do you square this with your feminist principles?”

Cautiously, Geraldine asked, “Do I have to?”

“No, I guess not.”

“He tried to include a heroine, too, an ideal woman, but I think he found her hard to imagine. He wanted her to be submissive but independent, too, so she comes across as

rather vague.” Geraldine began to feel excited to be telling Robert all this, though she also had a strong sense that it would be wise to shut up. But she went on, “Gissing himself, the man, was pretty much helpless with women. He was deadly afraid of women of a higher social class, because he thought they would be too demanding. He married twice, both times to women he thought would be humble because they came from the lowest class. But instead he got, first, a hopeless drunk, and second, a shrew who screamed at him and beat his children.”

“Is that what this book is about, then?”

“Well, no, not really. It’s fiction.”

Robert looked up at her. “Sounds like his autobiography might be more interesting.”

“It might.”

He tossed it aside. “Well, it’s a pretty weird book..”

Geraldine laughed, but she felt a little offended on George’s behalf. “That book isn’t his best,” she said.

“Sorry. I know you’ve spent years with this guy but I guess it’s the historical side of things that interests you most.” He smiled at her teasingly. “I was thinking of writing something with dope smugglers and gunfights in international airports.”

“That would certainly sell better.”

Over the three years of their marriage Geraldine learned the limits of her influence, and learned what not to say, what subjects not to broach. She believed they

were becoming more dependent on each other in complex ways, indefinable ways that could last a long time. One day, he had said that without her he would have no centre: his life was unpredictable, unplannable. He wanted her steadiness to keep him sane. Sometimes he seemed unflatteringly devoted to her workaday qualities, her academic drudgery. He respected her, it seemed, for something she really wasn't, or didn't want to be. It seemed too complicated to try to defend herself.

But being married had not, as she'd feared, ruined everything. She was still herself, and he had not changed. She couldn't honestly say that she still loved him as she had in the beginning, without reservation, but she knew that kind of happiness could not last. She could only hope that it was still there, biding its time like a seed, waiting to blossom again.

There were explosions. She learned to fear his temper and to soften her words and step carefully. In his bitterest moods he had a juvenile way of teasing her. He would call her a "tough little mama," which she was not, and sneer at her, calling her "boss" and "dragon lady." If she reacted with annoyance he would push harder, stepping up his attacks until it was no longer teasing but something overtly hostile. If she was dismayed and hurt, he simply turned his back on her. After that he might not speak for days. Then, for no reason she could see, everything would suddenly be wonderful again. He'd be happy, seemingly extravagantly in love with her. She wondered which was the truth, the good Robert or the bad. She asked him once and he said, "Never believe a word I say and you'll be fine."

Robert was appearing in a play that was opening tonight ,and she had to go. Why did he want her there? “You have to come,” he had said, sounding almost angry, as if she was just being perverse, or childish, not to see the necessity of it. He had spent long hours at rehearsals for several weeks and had barely spoken to her in the last few days, not, it seemed, out of bad temper. He was just preoccupied.. She had been busy too, so she tried not to read things into his distant manner. But sometimes she couldn’t help it; suspicion burst in.

Geraldine hated the tension of opening night, the social expectations. She had told Robert that she preferred to go later in the run. “When the actors are enjoying themselves, and nobody will particularly notice me.” But he had insisted that he needed her there. That was a comforting thought in a way, it was nice to be needed, but she suspected it was more for form’s sake: he wanted a conventional supportive wifely presence. Well, that was all right too. If the situation were reversed, wouldn’t she want his support? Of course she would.

In the early days of their marriage Robert had done a lot of live theatre and she had loved going to see his plays, but gradually she came to dread going to openings alone. She made the effort, but her shyness embarrassed her, made her awkward. Opening nights always attracted a lot of theatre people, some of whom she had certainly met at parties with Robert, but she, studious drone, mute as a mole, was incapable of chatting with them. She never knew what to say. Taking the coward’s way out, she would sit and study her program. Once she had looked up and caught the speculative eye of a young actress fixed on her. What does he see in *her*? the look said, as loud as speech, to Geraldine’s blush as she turned away, pretending not to have noticed.

Fortunately she had a friend to go with her. Donna was expecting her at the co-op on Huron Street where she lived.

As Geraldine hurried up Huron Street the warmth and sunshine cheered her. Donna had said to come early, as there was some kind of birthday celebration for one of the residents. It was a nuisance in a way, because without it she could have gone home to make herself presentable. She was wearing a pair of black pants, which were fine for the theatre, but her shirt was rumpled and she feared that her old velveteen jacket was just gauche.

No matter. She would borrow Donna's bathroom and her make-up, and she would pass. Sometimes she thought of the usual comfortable academic crumpledness with longing and wished she didn't have a good-looking husband to keep up with. Then she could just relax and be dowdy and no one would ever look at her.

She hated to be looked at, and the whole business of dressing up worried her. It wasn't as if she was ugly, but she was no raving beauty either. Her hands and feet were too big and her shoulders were too boxy and square. Her face was round and blank, a doll's face, she thought, but one that might have been drawn by a careless cartoonist: two laughy little lines for the eyes, a triangle for the nose, and a dab of pink for the mouth. In high school her cruel friend Phyllis Benedetti had told her one day that she was gaining weight and she'd better watch it, because if she got fat she'd look like a piggy-wig with those little eyes. Geraldine had replied that that might be but she would always have long legs and not bow legs. The next day they had both apologized and taken it back, but Geraldine didn't believe a day had passed since then without some trace of that memory nudging at her consciousness, and she was fanatical about never gaining weight.

It was around the same time, when she was fifteen, that she'd decided to defy her mother and never get her hair cut again. It was still long, but she had given in and now had the ends trimmed regularly. Robert had once told her that, naked, she looked like a medieval Eve. After that she had worn her hair loose or in a braid for quite some time out of sheer vanity. But lately she usually kept it coiled in a knot at the nape of her neck.

“Oh, some English writers, Meredith, George Moore, Gissing... all about literary naturalism in the late nineteenth century, that kind of thing,” Geraldine explained to Brian, the tall gawky medical student whose birthday it was.

“Naturism?” he said, and gazed at her slyly, sucking on his beer bottle.

“That too,” she said, and wondered why on earth she was there. There were about twenty of Brian's friends there, drinking beer and eating pizza. Donna had gone upstairs. Loud music made it necessary to shout if you wanted to talk, but no one seemed to mind.

Donna reappeared at that moment. Donna's party behaviour had disconcerted Geraldine the first time she had experienced it. She was used to the Donna who sat and sighed and sighed over her research, as if too much air were imprisoned in her bulky body. But there was a party Donna too, ever hopeful, full of happy, clown-faced theatrical merriment and loud whoops of laughter. Now she was waving a bottle of wine at Geraldine and Brian. “Need some more wine?” she asked. Brian waved his beer in reply and went into the kitchen. Geraldine declined. “Well, I do,” said Donna, and

splashed Portuguese rose into her glass. “How’s the paper coming?” she asked with drunken politeness,

“Slowly,” said Geraldine

“Isn’t it horrible?” said Donna. “The writing is the hardest part, but we should pool our research,” she added, brightening. “I mean, it’s all on the same subject, isn’t it— marriage and money?”

“Sort of,” said Geraldine.

Donna was away now, in full cry. “*Jane* never married, now, but she didn’t have to. Her family had some money, not a lot, but enough for her to say no. Mrs Gaskell had to marry, of course, or she wouldn’t have been Mrs Gaskell—”

Someone turned the music up to top volume.

“But Charlotte Bronte—” Donna shouted, not pausing for breath, and beginning to laugh her huge cascading laugh “—Charlotte Bronte married, and it killed her!”

Brian’s voice could be heard now, protesting that it was his party and he wanted to hear Janis Joplin. There was a moment of silence and then Janis sang suddenly, in mid-verse, “...won’t you buy me a Mercedes-Benz...”

Donna was staring at Geraldine oddly, as if she saw something strange. She waved smoke away from her face. “Come on, let’s sit out here, I can’t breathe.” She pulled Geraldine out into the hallway and closed the glass doors to the living room. It was much quieter. Looking tired, Donna sat down on the bottom step of the stairs.

“Are you all right?”

Donna set her glass down on the floor. “I’d better not drink any more of this.” She passed her hand over her forehead and, making a fist, rubbed her knuckle between her eyes.

Geraldine asked, “What is it? What’s the matter?”

“Oh, a migraine is coming.”

Someone in the kitchen turned his head at that moment. A sandy-haired young man who looked familiar. Geraldine felt anxious for a moment, and disquiet at the evening to come flashed through her. There would be people she ought to remember, but would not. But then she remembered him. She had seen him with Donna in the library cafeteria several times.

“Geraldine,” said Donna, “I’m going to have to go and lie down in a dark room.”

This meant Geraldine would have to go to the theatre alone.

Upstairs, Donna lowered the blinds against a bright streetlight that was sending rippling leaf shadows across the wall. Unlike the bare and squalid rest of the house her room was decorated with knick-knacks and embroidered cushions, antique fans and perfume bottles. With a heavy sigh, Donna lay down on her big satiny bed and put a pillow over her face.

Geraldine hovered, then rolled the desk chair over to sit next to her. “Is there anything you can take?”

“Oh, ergot, but it doesn’t really work. Or you can shriek and moan and hurl yourself from side to side. That used to help me when I was younger, but it doesn’t seem to work so well now.”

The music downstairs suddenly ceased.

“Sorry about this,” said Donna. “Looks like I won’t make it to the play.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Oh, come on, Geraldine,” said Donna from under her pillow. “If you don’t want to talk to people, just snub them. You are married to the star of the show, after all.”

Geraldine sighed.

“What?” asked Donna.

“Oh, well, it’s kind of a ghost marriage at the moment. The expectations are still standing but there’s nobody home.”

There was a discreet knock at the door. A voice asked, “Tea, Donna?”

“Yes, please!” called Donna. “Tom treats me like a Victorian invalid when I get a headache,” she said. The door opened and the sandy-haired young man appeared, carrying a large mug of tea, very carefully, holding a paper napkin under it with his free hand.

“Have you met Tom? He’s just arrived from Swindon, Wiltshire. He’s here to research utopian cults in the archives of the United Church, if you can believe it. Tom, Geraldine.”

“Yes. How do you do,” said Tom stiffly. Without looking at Geraldine, he set the mug down carefully on Donna’s bedside table. He seemed acutely shy. Geraldine warmed to him immediately. “Is it very bad?” he asked Donna.

“Not yet, but all the signs are there. Unfortunately.”

“Well, I don’t want to be in the way.”

He had reached the door and was about to make his escape when Donna lifted the pillow into the air over her head and cried, “Wait! Would you like to see a play?”

Tom’s face, which had been pale, now turned red.

“Geraldine has to go to a play *alone*, Tom, because of me.”

He began to apologize. “I’d love to but truthfully I can’t. I have another commitment. I’m so terribly sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter, Donna, I’m perfectly happy going by myself.” Geraldine smiled at Tom, who instantly averted his eyes.

“Excuse me, then,” said Tom, and vanished, closing the door softly behind him.

“Oh, well, I tried,” said Donna from under her pillow. “What are you wearing tonight? Did you bring something to change into?”

“This is it,” said Geraldine. “I didn’t have time to change. It really doesn’t matter.”

Donna rolled over and scrutinized her. “I have a white silk shirt you can wear. It would look nice with that jacket.”

“Nobody will be looking at me. Please don’t bother about it.”

Donna started to get up.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting out the shirt and my iron for you.” Donna moved heavily over to the closet on her stockinged feet. Inside the closet door was a full-length mirror. She pulled a white shirt from its hanger. “Take it, it will make that jacket and pants look as if they were meant to go together. I mean it.”

“This really isn’t necessary—“

“Shut up, Geraldine. Your voice is hurting my head.” She cleared a pile of papers off the end of the desk and laid a folded sheet on it. “Your ironing board, madame, and here,” with a flourish she pulled open another door to reveal a tiny bathroom with a plastic shower stall, “is the ensuite.”

The early autumn dusk was falling as Geraldine walked to the theatre. She arrived just as the curtain was going up, and slipped into the auditorium in the dark. As she took her seat she felt unexpectedly happy, glad to be alone after all, remembering what a pleasure it had been, in the beginning, to watch Robert on stage. He loved to do live theatre, and he had been so pleased to be offered this part.

The play began. It was *The Good Woman of Setzuan*. Geraldine tried to remember the play, and as she watched the story came back to her. Robert was playing Yang Sun, the lover. The irresistible, faithless, callous, dishonest, flattering beloved. Why did Shen Te, the heroine, love him so much? Because he appeared in the nick of time....or because he vanished too soon?

After a while, Geraldine began to feel that the actress playing Shen Te was not very good. She was too young, and her acting was weak and thin, not convincing. Her constant wistfulness was irritating and she seemed too eager to be loveable. For some reason, though, it seemed to Geraldine that her love for Yang Sun was all too real. She realized she was watching not Brecht's characters, but Leona Davidson and Robert. And all at once it seemed very clear to her that Leona was in love with Robert.

No, that couldn't be. It was absurd.

Marcus Vanderleck, an old friend of Robert's, was playing the First God. Now he, if anyone, was the one to suspect of having affairs with actresses decades younger than himself. Geraldine, who had actually met him here and there through Doug's theatrical connections long before she knew Robert, had always thought of him as the liquid man, who flowed into any available space. With an air of paternal kindness he would always be touching, patting, stroking any nearby woman. She remembered how, soon after she

and Robert were married, he had come to a party they were giving and when he came over to congratulate them, had said, "What beautiful hair you have."

Then he had reached out to give it a light touch, right in front of Robert, who had made a joke of it, saying "Back off, swamp man."

But Marcus had just gone on looking at her with friendly, persistent eyes. She looked back at him blankly, annoyed. Later he had loomed up at her in the kitchen, and said, "I know you, you're Doug Taylor's sister...are you an actress?"

"No, a student," she had told him. "Or I was and will be soon again. I'm beginning a PhD this year."

"And what will you do with your degree...?" he asked, leaning closer.

"Teach and write," she had said, sending leave-me-alone signals as clearly as she could. He had seemed old to her then. Less so now, she thought.

After that, in the first year or so of his friendship with Robert, he had once or twice tried to kiss her in hallways or on balconies. Geraldine knew he was the same way with other women. Once he was sure she was sincere in her refusals, his affection only seemed to increase, but it became protective, almost fatherly, though he was only, what, twelve years older than she was. Through it all he stayed married to the same nice woman, Rita, who had a very responsible and powerful job in the Ontario civil service, and with whom he had two daughters.

Yet for all his faults he was the one of Robert's friends she found easiest to talk to. He was kind, always cheerful. Through one of Robert's spells of unemployment he and Marcus had been inseparable. Entertaining each other with boastful stories and sitting late at night at the kitchen table with a bottle of vodka or whisky, playing cards and doing elaborate comedy routines and jokes, they had reinforced each other's confidence.

Marcus really was talented, Geraldine thought, watching him now, as he moved across the stage. Meeting him offstage you would never imagine he possessed such a gift. This was the soft, liquid man's other aspect: he flowed into his part with an energy and warmth that filled the stark outlines of the character with memorable substance, with exact colour, gesture and depth. Robert, truth to tell, was nowhere near as good, but he was magnetic, forceful, and he had a buoyant charm that he could rely on when finer detailing eluded him. Where did those subtleties come from that Marcus incorporated so effortlessly into his performances? Offstage he was a joker, charmer, a flatterer, no more than that. Robert was the one for subtlety off stage.

No, Leona Davidson could not be in love with Robert. If she was, she was wasting her time. Robert always spoke with angry sarcasm about actors who had affairs with the young and vulnerable ("What about Marcus?" Geraldine had asked him once. "Doesn't he go in for that kind of thing?" "No, no," Robert had said, accepting no criticism of his friend, "he's all talk. He's just a nice, friendly guy.") Geraldine studied Leona's face, forgetting the play. She was just a little scrap of a thing, nothing special to look at, but the heightening effect of the stage changed her. When the elegant curved shapes of her cheek and jaw caught the light, she was startlingly pretty. And her acting was quite good, really. There was a gentle but effective precision in the gestures she made, as Shen Te. Geraldine felt she had been ungenerous.

In the darkness, Geraldine closed her eyes. She didn't want to see Robert any more. There was falseness in his smile, and in the exuberant tones of his voice. Was it the falseness of Yang Sun, or his own? Opening her eyes, she watched him again. He walked with boisterous energy, lifting himself on his toes at every step. There was something childish about the way he moved, Geraldine thought, and it was not something he had

invented for this part, it was just Robert himself. She had seen it a thousand times, in his maddening cheerful moods, in his rages, in his enthusiasms. Which lately included karate, weightlifting, photography, and celibacy.

No, she was not a fit person to take to the theatre. Apparently she could not tell reality from illusion, or keep her mind on the story.

The lights came up. It was intermission. Glancing around, she saw no one she recognized. People stood, made their way to the lobby where a hum of talk could soon be heard outside the doors. Glad to be out of it, Geraldine slid lower in the seat and let the tiredness of her long day at her desk relax her into peace. If only she could go home now, get into bed and read. The charged quiet of empty theatrical space descended, broken only by the voices of two or three others, who, like Geraldine, preferred their own company to the crush in the lobby.

Four rows ahead was someone she thought she recognized. The back of her head, her short dark hair, seemed familiar. On her right sat a child of twelve or so, her head on the woman's shoulder, and to her left an older girl, perhaps fifteen, was turned in her seat, her face in profile as her mother said something to her, laughing. Just then the woman turned her head. Rita Vanderleck. Geraldine hadn't seen her in a long time, three or four years, she guessed. The girls had been little children the last time she saw them.

Marcus was often away in Los Angeles now. He had become busier, more successful than Robert recently, making movies and television in far-off places. Geraldine wondered whether Rita still had her government job. She had supported Marcus and the children when he was out of work. And now he was always away. She must be lonely. Her life must be a bit like Geraldine's own, except that she had her children for company.

Now the older girl—June was her name, Geraldine remembered—was telling her mother some urgent, complicated story, rolling her eyes and making exaggerated faces. Rita, resting her head on the back of the seat, was laughing. The younger daughter tilted her head back against her mother's shoulder and looked up into the arched and fluted brickwork of the walls and high ceiling of the former gasworks, now reborn as a theatre.

Geraldine felt quite alone. The seats beside her were empty. Where were *her* children? She had never planned not to have children, and she still meant to, she thought. They, like love, were supposed to come along in the natural course of events. But it had never happened, and it occurred to her now that it might not happen at all. When she was twenty-five Barry had wanted her to have babies, but the idea of having children with him, children with his brow ridge and spidery hands, had filled her with complete horror. The idea had broken her out of the relationship quickly, finally and completely. Later, when her friends started to have babies, she missed the independent young women they had been. They seemed diminished, displaced, and boring shadows of their former selves. Their babies became children, grubby, grabby, sneering little creatures who often seemed almost satanic to Geraldine, with their knowing looks, their confident loudness. What could they possibly know and why were they so loud? She didn't really know any children.

Rita's daughters surprised her. Especially the older one whose face, turned toward her mother as she listened now, was so unguarded, so full of thought, so intent. The image of a son, an imaginary son, her own, at the age of about nineteen, suddenly appeared and occupied the seat next to her. That was the thing she hadn't considered about babies. They became people: possibly interesting, intelligent people who would look at you with that intent look.

When the play ended Geraldine went backstage, intending to make an appearance, then call a taxi and go home. There would be a party of some sort, but surely she could avoid it. The corridor behind the stage was full of friends and well wishers. In such a crowd, her presence or absence could make no difference.

She waited a few minutes, then went down the brown-painted hallway looking for Robert's name on a dressing room door. There it was, along with Marcus's. The door was ajar. She knocked gently.

"Enter at your own risk!" Robert's voice, exuberant. He and Marcus had both changed out of their costumes, and were taking off their makeup. It was Marcus who turned and rose, smiling, to greet her. "Geraldine," he said, wrapping her in a hug. "Missed you. Coming to the party?"

"I don't think so—"

"Of course she's coming to the party," said Robert, still not turning to look at her. She went over to the chair beside him and sat down. She watched him in the mirror.

"So, how did you like it?" His eyes which looked very dark and alert, remained fixed on his own face.

"It was wonderful, really, it was everything you said it would be." And it was true; it was a good production. She was just not a good audience. "You were both great."

"So, come to the party!" Robert bounced up out of his chair and went over to the sink in the corner, where he splashed water over his face, then put his whole head under the tap. Coming back rubbing his hair with a towel, he stood behind Geraldine and looked at her reflection.

"HMMMMM," he said, and tilted her head to one side, like a hairdresser. "How does this work?" he asked, fumbling with the clip and pulling at it. "Aha!" he said, pulling out

two hair pins. "That's better."

Geraldine closed her eyes and let him brush her hair out till it fell smoothly down her back. His hands on her head felt like a caress.

"Where did this little bit of frou-frou come from?" he asked, stroking the white silk on her shoulders.

"From Donna," said Geraldine, opening her eyes and letting them briefly meet his in the mirror.

"Oh," he said, and made a face. "Looks good on you." Then he bent down and said into her ear, "Just come to the party for half an hour."

"Oh, all right," said Geraldine. "Why not?"

The party turned out to be at Marcus and Rita's house in the Annex. It was an opening night celebration, but also a going-away party for Marcus and Rita and their two girls, who were moving to Los Angeles after the run of the show. That meant there were some non-theatre people there besides Geraldine.

The actors swarmed in like a flock of starlings and settled happily in the kitchen and the dining room. They perched by the buffet table and around the fridge. The kitchen had a little porch with a glider seat on it overlooking the small garden. Geraldine found Rita and the two girls ensconced there, like a cat with her two half-grown kittens curled up against her.

Geraldine asked her what she was going to do about her job, if she was leaving Toronto and if the move to L.A. was going to be permanent. "I have quit," said Rita, looking pleased with herself, "so it better be permanent. I've cashed in my pension fund,

and these two are going start school there in three weeks' time." The girls sighed with boredom at the mention of school.

"Let's go tomorrow, Mom," said the older girl, and yawned.

"What are you going to do in Los Angeles?" asked Geraldine.

"Me?" said Rita. "Do? Nothing at all. Go shopping with the girls. Sit in the garden with a drink in my hand."

Then she gathered up her half-asleep children and shooed them upstairs to bed.

For a while Geraldine sat and listened to a loud discussion of megamusicals. As always, she found herself reflecting that theatre was really a subculture all to itself, and a funny way for adults to make a living. Then she wandered upstairs looking at the framed prints that lined the wall of the staircase. She found the bathroom, which was small but had somehow been made to accommodate a number of potted tropical plants. Then she went down the hall to the bedroom where she had left her coat, thinking she might sneak away. In the bedroom she surprised Larry White, one of the actors, a tubby little man of sixty, in the act of brushing his comb-over, a longish brown drape of hair. At first she didn't realize what she was looking at but, "Hello, Geraldine," he said as he deftly flipped it over his bare pink scalp and coiled it in its place. "Ta-da," he said. "You're not planning to leave, are you?"

"I was thinking of it..."

"Oh, no, don't run away. I know you're not a party person. Neither am I, really. But we should both stay a little bit longer. Come on, we'll make an entrance together. I hate entering a room alone, don't you?"

As they went down the stairs together he confided that he'd heard about Robert's news and it was such a big break for him, but he deserved it, he really deserved it.

Geraldine pretended to know what he was talking about. She wondered if Robert had told her something she should have paid more attention to, or if he just hadn't told her. Both explanations were possible, but she thought the second was more likely. He had a way of keeping things to himself. She had noticed it often, but she could scarcely object because she often did that kind of thing herself.

Robert was talking to Marcus about agents. Geraldine came and stood by the antique couch where they were sitting. "Robert," she said, "I think—" He didn't answer, just reached for her hand and pulled her down to sit beside him. Then he went on with the story he was telling Marcus. Leona, who had been sitting in a wing chair listening to Robert's story and laughing, now got up and floated away.

The conversation flagged. Marcus stood and followed Leona over to the drinks table where they started a confidential chat. Geraldine noticed that Leona's eyes strayed over to the couch and Robert. She was definitely in love with him, Geraldine thought. But Robert had paid absolutely no attention to her, which was good, she supposed. It was too bad for Leona, but Geraldine was too tired to feel triumphant, or much of anything. She leaned against Robert, and putting her mouth by his ear, she murmured, "Big break? News? Did I miss something?"

Without looking at her he absentmindedly caressed her hand. "Yeah. Marcus's agent called me to audition for a part in this Rickman film, and Marcus just told me the guy says I'm going to be offered the part. So it's not a sure thing yet. But I feel pretty good about it. It's shooting in December in Vancouver."

As he told her about it, she contemplated his hand holding hers. He was saying that he wouldn't be gone long. It was a small part, but a really good one and the money was going to be great.

“That’s wonderful.” Then, leaning closer in to him she said, “I’m sorry, I really have to go home. You stay. I’ll just call a taxi. Really, I don’t mind going by myself.” He often stayed much longer than she did at parties.

Unexpectedly he stood up. “Nah,” he said. “Let’s just go flag one.”

On the street, as they waited for a taxi, he hugged her and then started to laugh. “See? You brought me good luck. You worked your magic and now I’ve had this fantastic stroke of luck! You witch, you!” In the taxi he kissed her with a sentimental amorousness that first surprised her, then overwhelmed her. Why had she been so suspicious of him? He was her love. “Thank God for you,” he breathed into her ear.

And so for once they went home to bed like any other married couple.

There was a loud knock at the carrel door, followed by an even louder continuous rapping, and Donna’s voice. “Geraldine! We know you’re in there! Come out and be taken to lunch.”

Geraldine flung the door open. Donna was standing there grinning. She had brought Tom Dunn with her and he was hanging back, looking sheepish. He had had his hair cut, Geraldine noticed, and it made him look very young. Or maybe he actually was very young.

“We’re sorry about last night and we’re here to take you out to lunch.”

“Sorry about what?”

“We sent you off to your doom all alone. We let you down.”

“It wasn’t as bad as all that. I’ll get my coat.” As she was putting it on she asked Donna, “How is your head today? Is your migraine all gone?”

“Yes. It was a short but horrible one. I think I like those better than the long, mildly bad ones. More dramatic.”

They walked along Harbord Street in the bright sunshine. In the restaurant, they ordered lunch and wine. Geraldine discovered that Tom, though deficient in small talk, had plenty to say on the subject of his research, which was utopian communities.

“Hippies of the 1840s,” Donna interjected, summing the matter up.

“Yes, in a way,” said Tom, and seemed about to say more, but Donna was looking piercingly at Geraldine and saying, “So, how was the play?”

“It was good. I’m ashamed of myself for being so neurotic. The play was good and the party was fine.”

“So, Robert was in a good mood, then.” She rolled her eyes. To Tom she said, “Robert, of course, is an artiste. His art is paramount and must be served, so his moods are her problem, not his.”

“Donna, please don’t—”

“Don’t worry, Tom knows all about it. I told him the whole sad story.” At this, Tom looked away as if wishing to be somewhere else. “And you’ve said yourself he’s a tyrant—”

“No, you said that.”

“...and that he treats your work as if it were just a boring reliable job that brings in money.”

“It doesn’t bring in much!”

“Anyway, he thinks it isn’t important except that it frees him to be unemployed.”

“Donna, he is not unemployed, he makes more money than I do. Now please stop it.”

Tom said, vehemently, “It doesn’t matter who makes more money.”

“Oh, Tom,” said Donna, practically patting him on the head, “you’re such a feminist!”

After lunch Tom went off to the bookstore while the two women walked back to the library.

“I’m sorry I’m so indiscreet,” said Donna. “No, actually, I’m not sorry at all, except I think I embarrassed Tom. Isn’t he a sweet guy? He’s so shy, though. He was billeted with some engineers when he first arrived and they shocked the life out of him. He’s much better off on Albany with us.”

“He seems young to be doing graduate work so far from home.”

“Young? He’s thirty. Don’t let his English schoolboy complexion fool you.”

“Donna, things are going really well with Robert right now. He’s just had some really good luck and he’s been wonderful. So please let’s not talk about him so much.”

“Oh?” said Donna. “All right. Fine. I won’t say another word.”

Robert came home in a joyful mood and told Geraldine that not only was the film part confirmed, he had a television gig that would fit in perfectly. It was in Calgary, in November, just before he had to go to Vancouver for the movie.

“You should come with me,” he said. “It’d be great. We could go stay up in the mountains at Christmas.”

Geraldine would be teaching Chaucer to three hundred undergraduates in November, but for the moment she pretended to think it might be possible. He was so happy she didn't have the heart to tell him.

Late that night, in bed, he was still in such good spirits that she gathered her courage and said to him, "Is it baby time yet? Just one small, tiny, barely noticeable baby?"

His reaction startled her. It was almost anger.

"There's plenty of time for that. Let's not think about that yet." Then in a wheedling soft voice he said, "Isn't it wonderful with just the two of us? Let's just keep it that way for now."

"But how long?"

He sighed and drew away from her. "Let's not talk about this now, OK?"

"Soon, though?"

"Sooner or later."

"I really meant it, you know," Geraldine said. "What I said. I really do want to have a baby."

Whatever expression it was that flashed across his face then, it disappeared too fast for her to read. It was replaced by a carefully blank one. "But it doesn't make any sense," he said.

“Why not? I’m thirty-three, after all, and we shouldn’t wait much longer...should we? I...I’m going to stop taking the pill. In fact, I have stopped, as of today.”

“What? Are you completely out of your mind?” He stared at her in silence for a moment. “What brought all this on?”

“Nothing ‘brought it on.’ I’ve just been thinking about it, on and off. I guess I was hoping you might like the idea, but I see I’m going to have to talk you into it.”

He looked half angry, half stunned. When he didn’t say anything, Geraldine reached out hesitantly and touched his hand. “Can’t we at least talk about it?”

There was another silence. Geraldine was powerfully conscious of his embarrassment, and of her own. Somehow, the other night, she had felt she had a right to ask for this...it had seemed to her that he would relent. But now it all seemed less clear. She wondered why she had started this. She was becoming the woman so deplored by men: demanding, uncomfortable, wanting communication, craving demonstrations of affection. Always *needing*. Needing—oh, most inconvenient of all!—to *give* to the unwilling recipient, who just wants to be left alone.

Realizing she could not go back, she forced herself to speak. “Can I at least say this? In the beginning, you did say you wanted to have children.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Not so very long,” Geraldine said, feeling at a loss.

“And you were the one who was against it then.”

“I guess I’ve changed my mind.”

He let out an irritated breath. “What would you do with a baby? You don’t even remember to turn off the stove when you leave the house. You can’t drive. You’re out at the library ten hours a day.”

“That’s completely unfair. I look after myself. I earn my own living. If I had a child to look after, I’d just do it, whatever it took. Besides, it would be your child, too.”

“Oh, so you’d want *me* to look after it.”

“Why can’t you be reasonable?”

“Me? You’re the one who isn’t reasonable.” He was standing at the door now. His body seemed to radiate violent energy. She couldn’t look at him. “You’re unhappy with your life, so what do you think of? You decide to give up, to turn into your mother.” He took his jacket off the hook by the door. “Just take a look at your mother! A child won’t solve your problems, it’ll just make them worse. I’m not going to pander to your neurosis.”

Then he left, closing the door behind him with a tight little slam.

“Don’t be an idiot,” said Donna. “Pay no attention to him. Throw away your pills. Get pregnant if you want to.”

“I did throw them away, last week. But since I told him he hasn’t touched me, not even accidentally, in bed or anywhere else.”

“Why, for God’s sake, did you tell him?”

“I had to. I couldn’t not tell him.”

Donna’s eyes were fixed on her like searchlights, and now they widened even more. Her eyebrows rose and her mouth dropped open. She leaned across the café table and said in a fierce whisper, “Geraldine. Yes, you could have not told him.”

Feeling beleaguered, Geraldine said, “No, no. You don’t understand. I couldn’t do that to him. Some kind of...shame would prevent me...”

“Shame?” Donna gave a brief snort of disgust. “Hmh! I’m through with shame.”

“But how can you be?”

“Shame,” said Donna crisply, “is just paranoia, a projection of the dislike you imagine other people feel for you. Really, other people care far less than you think.”

Geraldine shook her head in bewilderment. “I can hardly begin to tell you how wrong I think that is.”

Donna brushed this aside with a wave of her hand. “Oh, Robert would sulk for a while. Then pretty soon he’d start thinking it was all his idea. I guarantee it.”

“Robert—” Geraldine started to say. Then she had to pinch her lips together because they had begun to tremble and she felt tears welling up in her eyes. “Robert would never forgive me.”

“Listen,” Donna said, “you’re never going to please anyone else, so why even bother trying? Believe me, I know. This is bitter experience talking.”

Later that week Geraldine tried again to talk to Robert, but soon found that she had nothing to say, beyond what she had already tried to tell him. “You know how I feel,” she began awkwardly. They were sitting in the living room, he slouched on the sofa with his hands in his pockets, she curled up in the armchair.

“Haven’t you ever heard,” he said, “that the birth of children is the death of parents? Somebody said that. As soon as you have children, you consign yourself to the

older generation. You've given up on yourself, or you might as well have. Is that what you want?"

Geraldine felt a stirring of anger. "You still get old and wear out and die, anyway, with or without children," she said. Her voice sounded petulant even to her own ears, and she tried to control it, to sound reasonable. "The truth is—"

"The truth is," he interrupted her, "that you and I really haven't got much in common." He spoke neutrally, as if it were a matter of no importance.

"That's not true!" she said. "You know it isn't." She felt slightly sick.

Looking past her at the wall, he said, "At a certain age you can marry anybody. In fact, I could probably have married several of the women I've known. Then I would have got used to whoever it was and...fond of her. Just like I did with you."

Geraldine stared at him, appalled.

After a few moments he sighed and continued, "It doesn't really matter who it is, you know. That's why arranged marriages work."

She spoke suddenly, in a rush of words. "You mean, like marriages in the cultures where women laugh at men and men are contemptuous of women? Where the women are uneducated and the men are uncivilized?" She tried to speak as coldly, as deliberately, as he had, but her voice rose uncontrollably. "Where the sexes just make use of each other, and a wife or a husband is just a social convention and a body?"

"I mean," he said from his remoteness, "what I would call innocent marriage, where the parties accept what they get, and live their lives, and love because it's their nature to love."

“So I’m supposed to accept what I get even if it’s nothing? I’m supposed to believe you love me, and be content, just because you’re there?”

“It’s not a duty or an obligation,” he said. “It’s just a capacity. You either have it or you don’t...”

“And besides,” she interrupted, “shouldn’t this innocent, this instinctive marriage of yours innocently, instinctively include children? Wouldn’t that be its purpose?”

At last he looked at her. He paused as if he hadn’t heard, then shook his head briefly. “No,” he said. “No.”

Then he stood up and, without looking at her again, walked out of the room. She heard him leave the apartment.

A few hours later, she went to bed.

In the morning, she realized that Robert had not come home.

The apartment was hers until the end of December, because they had paid first and last month’s rent when they moved in three years before. She offered to give him back his half of the December rent, but he told her to forget it. “You can’t afford it,” he said.

They agreed that when she had found a place to move to, she would arrange to have his stuff shipped to a mini-storage. They sat together at the kitchen table and made a list of what was his. His coffee table, his chest of drawers, his Indian carpet, five boxes of books, a chair. Most of the furniture was hers. There were no disagreements or bitter remarks, although when she asked if he wanted her to look after some of the more valuable things herself—his guitar, his camera—he said no so abruptly and with such finality that she felt rebuked.

When the list was finished, he stood up and put on his coat. "I'd better get going," he said. "I have to catch a plane early tomorrow."

"Do you have a phone number where you can be reached in Calgary, just in case...?" she asked, for something to say.

"I'll let you know when I get there." That meant he wouldn't.

"I'll have to send you the key for the storage."

"Mail it to the theatre," he said, and wrote down the address at the top of the list of his possessions.

She had feared that moving out in the coldest part of the winter would be an ordeal, but finally, after much hesitation, she called Doug and asked if he could help.

"Don't say anything to Gwen," she warned him.

"Never."

Doug made it all easy. He came with his new boyfriend, Colin, and another friend, who pretended to touch his cap and said, "Jack and Mac the Movers, ma'am." They were all cheery and when all the furniture was moved in, Doug got a bottle of champagne from the car. "Well chilled from the big refrigerator," he said, and they christened her new home.

It was a nasty place, a bachelor apartment in an eight-storey block with strange smells in the corridors. Geraldine really didn't like it, but it was close to the university and cheap, a sublet with six months to go on the lease, and it gave her a base to operate from while she tried to figure out what to do next. The obvious thing to do was finish her dissertation and look around for a real teaching job. She would almost certainly have to

go to some other city. Saskatoon and Trent were both possibilities she had heard about, before her situation had changed.

She was free now, dreadfully free. She could go wherever she liked. But there was nowhere she wanted to go. She flung herself into her research with a concentration she had never achieved before. Gissing's gloom was more congenial than ever. He hated the nineteenth century. She hated the twentieth. She photocopied a picture of him from one of the biographies and pinned it up over the little IKEA table she used as a desk at home in her little bed sitting room. Her housekeeping descended to pitiful depths of mess and chaos.

One afternoon in February, in a drizzling chill, she was trudging along Spadina on her way home, burdened with her heavy book satchel hanging by its shoulder strap and two plastic bags of groceries looped over her other arm. She was surprised to hear someone call her name. "Geraldine!"

She turned, bewildered, to see a smiling face looking at her from a red car that had pulled up at the curb. It was Marcus Vanderleck. He put on his emergency flashers and jumped out of the car, leaving it in the traffic, and embraced her.

"Look at you, you're freezing, soaking wet," he said. "Let me take these. Come on. I'll give you a ride home."

She let him put her bags in the back seat of the car as other drivers honked and swerved around it. "I thought you were in California," she said.

"I am. I'm only here for another two days. Get in the car, woman, we're blocking traffic."

Once she was in, he closed the door, and drove to the lights. Waiting to turn left, he said. "I didn't think I'd see you. I was going to phone but then somebody told me