

The Shapes of Things

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ABSTRACT

The Shapes of Things

Erica James

Looking at the ways that hope can be both self-sustaining and self-defeating, the stories in this collection focus on characters divided within relationships or situations over which they have no control. In each story, the character is challenged to choose between honouring her self (her perceptions, needs, desires) and honouring her need for safety and connection with others. That these are always antithetical positions forms the basis of tension and conflict in this work.

Many thanks to Sandy Brown, Louise Hinton and Mikhail Iossel

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Rainbow Day

Chrisolm and Lidya came to set up their teepee during the heat wave. They were healers, Krissa'd told Becca, and should be treated accordingly, but when they finally arrived up the lane in their old white Dodge, Becca felt disappointed at how hesitant they looked in the glaring sun of the field. Immediately, Krissa rushed out to meet them, a hand going up to keep her hair smooth, the scarf she'd made waving behind her in its colourful blurriness, while Becca trailed behind in the shadows of the two big maples that filled their yard, hugging her t-shirt down over her bathing suit, the still-damp earth cool under her bare feet.

“Hello, hello!” Krissa cried.

They embraced – she and Chrisolm did – and then Geroge emerged from the shed and introduced himself and there was a pause as Becca joined them and they all stood out together in the cropped yellowing summer grass, looking out over the Barne's one field of waving wheat and the great green mountains stretching out all around and up behind it.

George cleared his throat after a moment and gestured with an expansive arm that drew in the blue of the sky. “Well welcome,” he said, squinting at them through all the light. “Welcome to our land.”

“Thanks,” Chrislom said. He had long orange hair and, pecking through the top of his shirt, the glint of a gold medallion. He bowed to them and then turning said “And this” – letting his arm rest on her shoulder and pulling her in – “this is Lidya.

But at that moment Lidya closed her eyes, as though meeting the Barne's could be done more easily blind, as though all that light required some darkness. So at first, bringing up a hand to wave at them, she looked like a child playing a game with herself, waving at a family in her imagination. She was tall and angular and there was something stained yellow about her, as though she'd been dipped in a layer of wax. Her voice was so breathy Becca could barely hear her when she said hello.

But then she opened her eyes and Becca, at fourteen, experienced one of her first thrills of admiration. For Lidya and for Lidya's eyes. They were punched in and tired looking, but moving with such an intensity that Becca felt a surge of it move through her, as though Lidya had suddenly kissed her or hit her with her fist somehow. She went up to Lidya then and put out her hand.

"I'm Becca," she said, still moving with the dizzy force that had sprung into her body.

And Lidya took her hand into both of hers with all her silver rings flashing in and around her fingers. "Well," she said, still barely audible, still under her breath, "well, what a nice surprise."

It was Krissa they'd come for, to perform the healing. At first only Krissa and Chrisolm talked, while the rest of them stood around in the heat swatting at flies. Finally, Krissa shook her head and said "Where are my manners? Why don't you come in? – and they all slowly pivoted as one long arm up to the cabin, Krissa and Chrisolm talking side by side with their heads bowed, Becca at Lidya's heels

watching her patchwork skirt spill over the lawn, George by himself at the rear by the fence. Down the road, their neighbour's old lab barking.

The inside of the cabin was cooler and dark. "Sit, sit everyone, while I get your drinks," Krissa said, fanning herself. She was full of energy as she laughed at something Chrisolm said, her face shiny and animated. From the kitchen then, calling, singing "Let's have some music, George!" – while they stood in a hesitant circle in the living room with not much to say.

George put on Krissa's album of harp and lute music and then sat back in his armchair, his face obscured to Becca by the light coming in from the window. Becca took the macramé chair and rocked herself back and forth while she watched Lidya toss off her sandals and curl her feet up on their couch, her arms over her head and an expression of studied haughtiness on her face, as though she were being photographed to sell something bland. She had a tattoo of a giant green eye gazing out of a flower's petals on her shoulder and a blue butterfly on her chest. Her dirty blonde hair fell straight down to past her shoulders, cutting her face in angles.

"Nice tattoos," Becca called out over the tinkling of harps and the sound of a trickling waterfall that now entered the room from the right

Lidya turned her eyes full onto Becca's face and didn't say anything. It was Becca who looked away first, as though it was a staring contest she'd lost.

"Don't mind Lidya," said Chrisolm, "she lives by her own rules." And then he got up and bent over her, his long orange hair spilling onto hers as he kissed her forehead. "Right, my darling?"

Still Lidya only stared, in defiance, Becca thought, of everything.

Eventually Krissa walked in balancing glasses of beer and a tea pot on the tray she'd made last summer out of birch bark and green willow. "Refreshments are here!" she said while Chrisolm rushed over and lifted the tray from her hands. "Here we are, come to help you, and it's you who are doing all the work," he said. He set the tray clinking and wobbling down onto the coffee table and then bowed to her so that his prayer beads fell dangling out of his shirt, his hands folded up near his face where they trembled slightly. "I smile at the flowering lotus in you, Krissa," he said. He reached out towards Krissa's hands then and held them near her heart while he brushed her cheek with his finger in a way that seemed like something from a play, Becca thought, a result of the harp and lutes clear and high and soaring, the lushness of the running stream, the spider plants multiplying at the window.

Then, as Becca watched, Krissa's face became the soft pink of the lotus in bloom, her eyes and lips opening up, Chrisolm smiling back, until suddenly George was streaking up towards them as if up a stream, saying oddly "Sit, Krissa, I'll serve," the music still sounding clear and high. The day dimming and getting brighter at the same time.

After their drinks, they went back outside. All of them together in a small swarm like a knot. Their eyes hurt at first it was so bright, the heat making static waving lines in the air, the sky still unbearably blue. "Not a cloud," George remarked to no one in particular.

When they reached the car, Lidya snapped a cassette into the stereo and rock pounded out so loudly, it pushed along with the heat and the grasses against Becca's skin so that she moved with each beat although she didn't really want to, the music changing the familiar lines of the forest and the field. She watched as Lidya swayed with her eyes closed in seeming communion with the earth, her arms stretched upwards and her heels punching into the ground. Fluid and totally free, Becca thought, with a stirring of wanting to be Lidya so badly the envy felt like a balloon in her chest, a wide helium pushing.

Chrisolm gazed around at everything, holding out his hands as if to say "Oh this beauty, oh this glory" and then went off to the bushes to pee, while George began unloading the backseat of the car, removing pole after pole and setting them down on the grass so carefully that soon Krissa erupted with the impatience of the quick and messy – "Just pull them out, George, for Christ's sake. It's not like it matters!"

George set one more pole down and then turned to her with such a pained expression that Krissa stamped over to stand by herself near some alders. They did this more and more often these days – it seemed sometimes to Becca like hate.

But then Chrisolm returned smiling, and Krissa again grew serene and flowing, while George took two poles and walked out by himself to the field.

They'd decided to put the teepee beside the wheat field where the land curved out into a leavened place, like the top of a loaf of bread. Becca watched as they carried out the tarp and poles and sleeping bags – multicoloured Lidya beside

Krissa in blue, Chrisolm with his orange hair, and George way ahead of them now – each of them dotted with shadows as they crossed under the maple trees and sumacs – all of them really separate in a way that made her want to burst out crying for no reason.

It was the same pinch of that morning, when Becca'd woken in a heat trap, her body underneath the covers as though submerged in a pool of tepid water, her limbs pinned flat, hair sticky on her neck. Dazed, she'd tripped downstairs to lie in the cool of the living room, lazily counting the collection of cow bells George had hung over the fireplace. She'd blown on the inside of her wrist then, which she'd found suddenly up close by her mouth in the way her arms and legs had acquired recently of falling into place differently, of not being quite her own. She was almost back asleep this way, the night air soothing her skin, when she'd heard George and Krissa arguing, and then Krissa crying again.

This brought back her worry – and partly to comfort herself now, Becca picked up a sleeping bag from the backseat. It stank like the car did, like Chrisolm and Lidya actually, although she wouldn't have said it out loud, a pungent smell of tobacco and vinyl and something that must have been human hair hitting her the moment she reached in. All the same, the car's brown interior was dazzling to her – a pink prism dangling from the mirror, Aztec blankets in golds and blues over the bench seat, a duffel bag more thrilling than any she'd ever seen.

Turning, she bumped into Chrisolm who'd come back for another load.

“Wanna see something special?” he asked. His eyes were full of something Becca wasn't sure she'd ever seen, pushy eyes and at the same time soft. They

fell to her t-shirt which was faded melon in colour and read Disco is Alive in glittering bubble letters. She flip flopped around to the back of the car with him and there in the trunk was a soft grey blanket he moved away before reaching in to pick up a long ceremonial sword. The brass hilt was engraved with an ornate flowery design, the blade itself unsteady and wobbly in the air.

“The sword of rebirth,” he said.

“Cool,” she breathed out, wishing her friend Skyla was there so they could both laugh and laugh at the weirdo Krissa’d brought over, laugh hysterically, and then go swimming. Instead she dared herself to lean in a little closer, looking at the swords in rows wrapped up like dolls, remembering this for Skyla, what a baby Chrisolm was.

“I collect them, for our tradition,” he began.

“Wow!” She smiled her biggest smile, shins burning against the hot metal of the car, long field grasses itching against her legs like bugs.

Krissa came, wiping the sweat off her face. “Oh wondrous beings! What are you doing?” she asked – such a show off – while Becca moved out from there fast and Chrisolm shut the trunk with a click.

“Won’t you let me see?” Krissa asked again, pouting. And then before Chrisolm could answer her – “Hey, pssst, Becca. You’re wearing too much makeup!”

“No. I’m not,” Becca said hotly, picking up the sleeping bag again. “God, what’s your problem?” She blinked exaggeratedly, her eyelashes like crow’s wings in front of her eyes.

“She’s a good kid,” Chrisolm said. As he said it, she could detect no hint of condescension in his eyes. He takes me seriously, thought Becca, and she stood a little taller in front of her mother. See? she wanted to say.

Krissa’d gone to an ash ram and it was there she’d reacquainted herself with Chrisolm, whom she’d lived with once, a long time ago, and who could now heal people with the laying on of his hands. Krissa came home from that weekend radiating joy and fresh peace. “I love you,” she told Becca and George repeatedly then. “Let me tell you how much I love you.” Her eyes had been brimming with liquid light. “You’re like stoned, Mom, eww,” Becca had said and Krissa had admitted it. “I’m high on love!” Back then it had been a relief to see her happy.

Earlier that year, she’d gotten sick. Although she’d stopped smoking pot, although she grew ivy on the kitchen window where the sun poured through the prisms she’d hung to make rainbows, although she drank special teas and meditated with a special tape, and said mantras to herself and sang – none of those things had stopped her sickness.

“What the fuck?” she’d cried when she got home from the hospital the first time.

The pills Krissa took had made her gain weight so that her eyes were shrunken in her face and her once spiky artist’s body, so often drawn in art classes, was round and skirted, and her feather earrings, in comparison, seemed tiny and lost in her hair.

She began spending more time at the Sri Chivory Centre.

“But why do you go there so much?” Becca asked Krissa. While once Krissa had abhorred makeup, she’d begun wearing green eyeliner and eyeshadow. “Happiness, of course,” she said. Her eyelids were blue. Her tests were better that month.

While Krissa was getting high on life, Becca would watch TV with George who suddenly looked older and greyer to her. She’d watch him walk in his stoop shouldered way to get something from the kitchen and feel a twinge of guilt-ridden sympathy. When Krissa first hooked up with him – only for a night, she’d said, only for another night – she’d told everyone how she could barely handle it, how straight he was with his clean hair and practicality. He was quiet and spoke to his parents who lived in a Florida condominium. He was a photographer and mounted on velvet in his studio’s front window, he displayed the heavily framed portraits which brought in the weddings and confirmations, the new babies and anniversaries, the well dressed families all lined up in rows and shot together, smiling.

“Catering to the bourgeoisie,” Krissa called it.

“A trade,” George said.

Becca liked George. She didn’t want to lose him.

So when Krissa gathered Becca and George to say Chrisolm was coming and asking them to be there for her, Becca said no.

“But Becca, don’t you believe in me?” Krissa asked. Eventually, she began crying, but Becca wasn’t moved at first. “Even though I’m getting better, I need your support.”

“You’re changing everything about our entire lives,” Becca said.

“Hey, you’re changing too. Becoming a teenager. Don’t blame it all on me.”

“But you’re never home.”

“I’m home right now, asking you to do something with me.”

“But you’re, like, all different now.”

“I’m happy, Becca. Is it too much to ask that you support me?”

Becca gave in finally. “Okay, okay, but don’t expect me to like it.”

“Embrace change,” Krissa told Becca. “If you do, it can’t ever hurt you.”

Behind Krissa, George smiled on sympathetically.

There they all were then, gathered to pull apart the canvas top, each taking an edge and walking backwards until the whole roundness of the teepee’s design was laid out before them, landed, in fact, in its roundness, like a flying saucer in the field. The colours on the canvas were vividly primary – reds, yellows and oranges, set against black, colours brighter than birds even, or flowers, it wasn’t what Becca had expected. There was a picture of a great tomahawk, or at least that’s what she thought it was, a double sided axe, with a flashy rainbow twirling down one side and an eagle landing with its talons extended on the other. Becca gasped.

“It’s a war teepee,” Chrisolm explained. Lidya stood beside him now and took his hand. “You see folks, you don’t know this but we’re actually declaring war on you,” he said. He laughed and they all did, except George.

“Did you paint it yourselves?” asked Becca.

“No,” said Chrisolm. “We bought it. This is the real thing.”

“C’mon,” George interjected, “this looks like something right out of Harley Davidson.”

“George!” said Krissa.

Chrisolm paused for a moment, significantly, and then said “Chill, man. Be in the moment. Enjoy the mystery.”

“So are you, like, Indians?” Becca asked.

They laughed, embarrassing her. “Nah, kid,” said Chrisolm. “We’re not, but we should be. And so should you.”

They lit incense, then Chrisolm bent his head saying “Let us gather the energy,” and held up his arms – “May nothingness enter us now.” He began a slow, deep “ohm,” a low note he held and held while Lidya joined in with one sustained higher, making harmony, and then so did Krissa, holding her own in the middle register, all facing the sun, all their hands to the sky.

And Becca began to feel swimmy and bored. She turned to George and was relieved to find him staring blankly at the trees, a sheen of sweat on his face. She caught his eye and he nodded. Above his head in the distance, a hawk flew high over the mountain in slow gliding circles.

Finally, Chrisolm said “Ho!” and the singers let their notes die out

Then there was nothing but the sounds of the field. Becca started to say something, but Krissa shushed her hurriedly, a finger at her lips.

Lidya left the circle and walked around picking the daisies and the goldenrod from the field.

“To nothingness,” Lidya proclaimed when she rejoined them, her long silver earrings like fishing lures flashing in the sun, her face haughty. She walked around the circle clockwise, kissing them on their cheeks and handing each a flower. At her approach, Becca became increasingly nervous – what if she fainted, what if she giggled – but by the time Lidya was kissing her, Becca didn’t feel anything at all. The kiss was quick against her cheek, the daisy thrust into her hand. Again though, the whirl of something unnamed through her.

“Now throw your flowers into the centre of the teepee and wish for emptiness,” Lydia called out. “May nothingness return,” Chrisolm added.

Chrisolm threw in his flower first, then Lidya. “For emptiness,” they each said. Krissa, eyes closed, tossed in her daisy repeating “Emptiness,” while George said nothing at all. “Lidya,” wished Becca, although not out loud, and threw her daisy in.

By three in the afternoon, the teepee was finally mounted onto its skeleton of poles like a newly arrived, strangely colourful animal. Krissa was tired, and George went up to her and said “Krissa, it’s time to go home.” Surprisingly to Becca, she followed him, her hand on his arm, her scarf trailing over her arm. So it was left to Becca to lead Chrisolm and Lidya down the old road and then into the blinding darkness of the pines, the drop in temperature and light so sudden it was like entering a different world. The way to go swimming.

“Far out,” Lidya said

“Ya it’s cool,” said Becca, when she could see to move forwards again, her pupils having finally dilated and Lidya and Chrisolm quite visible standing behind her on the path. They walked inwards a bit, their feet falling on the softness of the pine needles on the forest floor.

“Let’s stop,” Chrisolm said and they squatted down in the coolness, Chrisolm rolling a cigarette, Lidya perching on a rock.

“So Becca,” said Lidya, “have you been eaten?”

Becca laughed “Like no, I haven’t.” She was nervous, and she sounded that way to her own ears, young and scared. Lidya looked tough again, her punched in look heightened by the dim light of the forest and her narrowed eyes. “What does that mean?” asked Becca.

Lidya took out a leather pouch from her skirt. “Oh it means nothing,” she said, “it means zero, it means emptiness.”

“To rid yourself of yourself,” Chrisolm added, “is the greatest nirvana there is.” He smiled at Becca and she felt his easiness, his charm. He’s not so weird, he respects me, she thought as he bowed to her and then picked up her hand, which he rubbed back and forth in his own, traveling over her knuckles.

“Want to try it?” Lidya asked. From her pouch she’d taken out a small square mirror and then a small yellow pill, the smallest pill Becca had ever seen.

“I don’t know, is that acid?” she asked in a squeak.

“A tiny bit,” Lidya said, “nothing to get worried about. Just enough to make what we do later more interesting.”

Chrisolm said, "Drugs can enhance religious experience." He sounded like Andrew from her school, who went around saying "Drugs can enhance sex, drugs can enhance geography."

"My mother is into natural highs," Becca said.

"To each his own. Give her half," he said, and Lidya cut the pill with a Swiss army knife and passed the grain of it to her, stuck at the end of her finger. "Eat," she said. "Slowly dissolve."

Nothing happened. Becca wanted to laugh as she walked along the forest path, at the absurdity of it all, the craziness of the day. Her own crazy mother and now her own daring – dazzling to her – with her mother's friends. They were approaching the end of the forest, the sun light streaming in and she suddenly wanted to be out of there more badly than anything so she began to run, faster and faster, her gangly legs gaining speed until she'd burst out of the tunnel back into the afternoon, the hot sun world beating down, everything bright and alive, Chrisolm and Lidya invisible in the forest as she turned for one instant, back again.

The swimming hole was not much bigger than a duck pond, the water murky and cold. Still she could taste its coolness. She kicked off her flip flops and ran around the water's edge, the grass intensely green, the water reflecting the intensity of the blue and green sky, and then out onto the wharf which wobbled as she ran to its edge, leaning her hands on her legs and staring down into the wet as

she stood for a second, catching her breath. When she raised her head, Lidya and Chrisolm were just emerging from the forest and she called out to them happily.

Then she scissor kicked off the wharf's edge, breaking her fall into the water with the flatness of her hands timed with the precise coming together of her legs, executing it so perfectly that when she broke the water's surface her hair was barely wet. The water was thrillingly cool and she kicked out into it in a great splashy display of the front crawl, tucking her head under and breathing out to the side as she'd learned for awhile, and then, when she got tired, flopping on her back and floating, thinking of nothing, letting herself get lost in the sky.

At one point she noticed Chrisolm swimming beside her, and later, it seemed, she noticed Lidya. Her face though, had become stuck on the water's surface, and suddenly, she realized that she could not get out. "Help me," she said, through the slit that had become her mouth, her feet strange and rectangular, herself feeling invisible. I'm becoming a mirror, she thought, and she tried again, unsuccessfully, to ask for help.

It seemed like there was nothing for a long time, and then finally she felt hands pulling her by her shoulders through the water and then finally out onto the grass, where she lay on her back, shivering. "Becca, Becca," she heard, "where are you?" It was Lidya's voice, and she opened her eyes. "Are you eaten yet?" asked Lidya and laughed. Becca felt a punch on her arm.

Becca sat up and looked around. The pond was still the same. But she could not see her own hand.

"This is weird," said Becca.

Lidya rubbed Becca's back, her eyes great big blue worlds that Becca felt herself hovering towards, much as she had done with the sky. Chrisolm now sat on the other side of her, water droplets falling off of him like shiny beads. He lit another cigarette and the smoke was beautiful around his fingers, grey and liquid as it snaked up around his face.

"Hello, Becca!" boomed Chrisolm and he laughed so hard it seemed she could look right into his mouth, see the movement of his tongue behind his teeth and silver fillings.

"What are we doing?" Becca asked.

"We're losing ourselves." They said it together with more laughter, rocking back on the grass, tilting. The sun also tilted into her eyes and Becca squinted, shutting them.

"Will you tell me what to do?" she asked, eyes closed, afraid, her body still shaking.

"Let yourself go," said Lydia. "You are nothing, you are eaten, don't be afraid."

"You must join the sky," Chrisolm said, "Go on, you can do it."

She peeled open her eyes. The sky was a giant wet gulp, a friendly wave pouring over her, laughing. More brilliant than she could possibly contain inside. More blue.

"I can't."

“You can,” Lidya said now, forcefully, her eyes challenging her, wet and darkening. Her hand moved down Becca’s back, her thumb pressing into her spine, three different places.

“Let yourself dissolve, Beautiful” Chrisolm said, peacefully, softly, “and you can be anything, anything at all your heart desires.”

His hair was a brilliant orange swathe, long and falling over his eyes. Becca moved her hand up near his face, wanting to swipe at the orange so it moved from his eyes, wanting a piece of it also to stay behind in her hand. She touched his hair and then his forehead. Chrisolm closed his eyes.

Lidya, on the other side of her, giggled.

“Do you think Chrisolm’s cute?” she asked, but Becca didn’t say anything. The light was moving against her, making large shadows as she tried to concentrate on catching something around Chrisolm’s face, his orange light, she thought of it now, and his gold – was that it? She couldn’t wholly remember. The day swam.

Chrisolm put his hand on her knee. “Your knee is like a butterfly,” he said. Lidya put her hand on top of Chrisolm’s making a sandwich over her knee cap, leaning her weight against it. Becca turned to her, stretching out her hand to touch Lidya’s cheek, wanting to hold herself there forever. Her cheek was soft and soft and soft, the slurp from the sky poured into skin, made into the shape of a woman. Becca put her head on Lidya’s shoulder and closed her eyes.

“What will we do with her?” From far away she heard Lidya ask.

Then there was a feeling of real damp on her forehead, a sliding tongue, and lips covering her eyes and then nose, and Becca started to feel like she was falling. This can't be happening, she thought, though it was beautiful and her heart was beating louder than it ever had and she felt she might almost move somewhere. But then there was a tongue pouring into her mouth and she tried to get up, she did, catching herself before she fell, breaking out of legs and arms and up from lips until she was standing dizzily by herself near the water. Looking down at Chrisolm and Lidya who were still lying on the grass, their hands and feet mixing together, great open mouthed kisses of the world.

Then as she watched, the sky upturned like a boat and Becca ran to a tree where she pressed her head against the bark and spun over and over, helplessly.

Eventually, she decided to return to the cabin by herself, from tree to tree, she had left her shoes and she had to be careful, from rock to rock through the whole pine forest and then out again into the field where the teepee in all its crazy colours jumped into her eyes.

She swam through the grass, away and around the teepee, sliding her feet along although they were sore, although she got worried about stepping on bees or caterpillars which she might squish, splat, with her foot. There were no signs of either Krissa or George and Becca was glad and sad, glad and sad, as a heaving homesickness clung to the edges of her and then departed, clung and departed, leaving her ship wrecked after awhile, sick. The rocking motion was too much and she vomited into some the bushes.

When she had spit several times, she said “I’m lonely” out loud and thrilled herself with the sound of her whispering voice as it emerged and reverberated off the grasses in the sibilant language of bugs, she thought, the six eyed fly, the eight legged beetle, the intricate ladybug’s smile. “Don’t worry,” she said, “I’m here now.” She made her hands into a beetle’s hoofs and traveled that way for awhile, her feet still too big but she herself beyond caring.

She went faster, trying to get to the cabin, hoping she would be able to get to her room without being seen, spinning out the scenario: enter, go straight upstairs, do not stop for anything, repeat. The cabin loomed large ahead of her. “Go, Becca, go,” she whispered to herself and the field. She remembered Lidya saying “let go, Becca” and she wondered, could it be the same thing?

When she opened the back door, there was no sound of people moving and she crept in making no noise, her feet soundless over the vinyl floor which slipped and turned in all sorts of crazy directions.

So she was almost at the stairs when Krissa called out to her from the porch, “Becca, is that you?” Becca froze and then heaved her lips into a great assembly of words that said, “Yes, mother. I’m going upstairs.” And she climbed up two steps.

“Where are Chrisolm and Lidya?” Krissa asked.

Becca hugged the second step, her hand on the banister. “The pond!” she said. She was brilliant, dazzling at answering questions, she was Becca, Becca, Queen of the World, climbing steps, two at a time, two times two, two times one, until

she was finally upstairs on her bed, gasping in relief that the world had not ended after all.

When Becca peered out from the cave of her dreamless sleep later, her room was almost dark. She listened to the quietness of the house. Her mouth tasted bitter and she ached. As she looked down over the edge of her bed, her head fell down crashing against the rug in her room and then, miraculously, bounced back. She got up and brushed her teeth.

A note on the counter read: "Saw you sleeping. We're at the teepee. Join us please, I'd really appreciate that. Love, Krissa." Becca's stomach turned and she leaned against the refrigerator, its cool metal surface shoring up her back. "I will go," she thought, "I will go and see." She felt scared though, when she put on her jeans and runners.

The teepee was all lit up so she could see it from far away, smoke rising from its top and the people inside forming large shadowy figures against the walls. Who's who? Becca wondered, but she couldn't really tell. There was chanting as she approached, and then silence, and then a stirring again of people being led into song, like amateurs in a church congregation.

When she entered, George and Lidya were sitting cross legged on the floor around Krissa who lay on her back while Chrisolm knelt over her, his hands raised to the roof. "Peace – " he was saying, and then stopped, and they all turned towards her, Krissa sitting up and Lidya rushing over, her arm outstretched to take hold of her hand. So she was pulled in to the ceremony while everyone smiled,

including George, Kissa saying “I was hoping you’d come.” Greetings sliding around her face like wind from a fan, cooling her mind.

Then Chrisolm stood up near the fire and bowed in her direction. “Welcome, Becca,” he boomed out. She remembered his hair then, she remembered his teeth. “We’re just in the middle, please join in.” He knelt back down by her mother and closed his eyes. “Peace,” he said again and then raised his lips to a silver cup which he drank from and then passed on to Lidya. She took a sip and passed it back, the flames from the fire lighting them up in glorious colour, even the wine, which spilled a little, lit in ruby droplets as it fell against her mother’s hand. Krissa closed her eyes. Chrisolm began chanting, his hands held out over her mother’s body.

Becca saw the ornate design on the metal cup and it was then she remembered the swords. She looked around but couldn’t see them, although she remembered the sword wobbling in the air in Chrisolm’s hands, and she again felt Lidya’s cheek, when she’d touched it by the pond, and how it had felt so soft. Briefly, Krissa opened her eyes and they seemed full of flickers to Becca that she didn’t want her mother to have.

It came into her mouth first and then spread out like the force of a rushing river. So when Chrisolm bent down, his lips hovering over Krissa’s, Becca began to scream “No!” as loudly as she could over and over again while everyone stared and their stares came into her like rocks which she found, while screaming, that she could step around.

Then Krissa got up and stood before her. “Becca, I want you to stop. Becca sit down. Sit down now, Becca,” she said.

And suddenly the change was all around her, stretching out. There was nothing she could do. Becca turned and got dizzy, and then she sat.

Smoke and Fire

The Dion's lit up house frowned at them in the night. It was up on a hill and appeared through the trees from time to time as they drove around bends in the country road. Each time she saw it, Karen felt more nervous. "If only someone would turn on a light in the middle, the house would have a nose," she joked. The fabric of her skirt was warm and dry and crinkly, and she smoothed it over her legs which she crossed, wanting to light a cigarette. "It's a beautiful place, you'll see," Dave said. His voice had a soothing quality and Karen relaxed into it slightly. He was a doctor and she could imagine exactly how he spoke to his patients and how they in turn felt safer for it, as though he were driving them up and down and around bends on a complicated country road. People confided in him.

The banquet that night, as a case in point, was being held in his honour by a former patient. Although Dave was a general practitioner, he'd recently discovered the benefits of an alternative medicine called Noni, and when Raymonde went into remission three months after taking it aggressively, he'd jumped for joy. Tonight was a celebration of her ongoing health and an expression of her gratitude to him. "Body, mind and spirit, Kar, we have to look at the whole. Our medical system is so limited. A non-synthetic, 100% natural treatment. Any wonder at all that it works better?" Karen loved the passion Dave brought to things, although sometimes it drove her crazy too. Noni juice was especially fraught for her. "It cleans your system, you live longer, what's the matter with that?" Dave'd asked her. It was something they fought over. And

while she obligingly drank the thick, grassy liquid every morning, she herself had yet to heal.

The looming house drew ever nearer. “Ray and Patrick spent a million dollars on it in renovations,” Dave said. They had the habit of impressing each other with the cost of things. In particular, they liked to single out the price tags of the rich and famous.

“My God, really?” Karen said.

“Yeah, Ray told me.”

He said it with finality, as though Ray’s word on this was the ultimate authority. The unmistakable reverence in his voice made Karen flinch slightly.

“Wow, it must be quite the palace,” she said.

“Well, no, a million dollars is nothing these days,” Dave said, reasonably, and Karen turned to the window and tried not to feel hurt by this although she did. Then she pressed her head hard against the back of the seat and imagined exactly how she would haul on a cigarette and expel the smoke out of a crack in the window from her lips, and how it would stream from the car in a tiny ghostly whisp.

There were no dogs barking when they got out of the car, and the silence of the night seemed eerie. The driveway was paved with tiny glittering stones that looked swept off an island of white sands and eternal heat. Under the lamps, they shone so that Karen and Dave were bathed in a brilliantly cold light as they crunched up to the house. “This is a terrible mockery of all things tropical,”

Karen said with a shudder, and Dave cast a look at her. "Be careful. This is serious," his look said. And Karen felt a lump in her throat and only wanted to crawl back into the car by herself, to snuggle into its rankness and dirty crumb-filled crevices, and to ransack it for old time, forgotten cigarettes. Instead she called out, "Coming doctor dear!" with a sarcasm she immediately regretted letting out. "Sorry about that," she murmured. She smoothed her dress then and ran her fingers in her hair and fell in line beside him as they walked up the front steps.

It was Raymonde herself who greeted them. "Dave!" she cried and flung her arms out. Both Ray and Dave were now distributors of Noni and they'd become friends, close. They hugged in a way that showed how carefully and gently they cared for one another and Karen felt uncomfortable beside them. But then hugs came with the territory, she reasoned, Dave was, after all, a healer.

So while they hugged, Karen stood to the side and took in the golden light from the chandelier and the colourful rugs of good Indian cotton and the Inuit etchings on the wall of a fisherman (she guessed) and a polar bear and ran her tongue over the roof of her mouth and felt full of longing for something to restore, anything, saw herself casually emerging with a carton from a *depanneur*, the satiny quality of the paper in her hands, her fingers anxiously examining for the little red string to pull and ten packs of DuMaurier Light finally falling...

"Karen!" Ray exclaimed. "How nice to see you! How are you?" They kissed and Karen caught the quick soft scent of her perfume, like something liltling that grew on an island of salty, white-capped water. She was wearing a mustard

yellow apron inflected with pink, and a caftan that looked like it was made in a village in Middle Earth somewhere. All this was off-set by diamond tears that shone out beneath her straight blonde hair.

“I’m well,” Karen said and licked her lips. She was perpetually awkward around Ray who seemed so perfect that Karen often felt – only diminished beside her – a frumpy, bumpy imitation of the real.

“How’s the – ?” Ray began, but Dave interceded.

“God, don’t ask her,” he said with a groan.

“Karen?”

And Karen shook her head and smiled with sealed lips.

“Well I’ll show you your room first, and then you can join us downstairs,” Ray said and Karen paused as Dave and Ray went on ahead to get out a sweet piece of gum from her purse which she threw into her mouth and chewed without relief.

In the bedroom upstairs, antique blues played over the double quilt and spilled up onto the walls and curtains and over the blanket-soft carpet that lay beside the four poster bed. “We’ll have fun tonight,” Dave said to her as Karen brushed some more rouge on her cheeks. “Yes of course,” she said, checking herself. Ray had gone on back downstairs to let them get settled. There was a glass dish that looked like an ashtray on the corner of the lady’s writing desk (for that was the only way to describe its dainty wooden feet) and Karen removed it to a drawer hewn by pioneers in another century she supposed while Dave smiled ruefully. “Now what’s that doing here?” he asked, scratching his head. He was energetic and turned a small pirouette. He was a clown...

“Okay I’m ready,” she said.

Surprisingly then, he took hold of her hand and kissed her first before heading back downstairs. “Thanks for coming,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” she said, pleased, and took a deep breath.

It was Dave who’d wanted to go to the party of course. “It’s a husband and wife event,” he’d said. “Besides, it’ll do you good.” He’d said it with doctorly care, once again prescribing something for her condition. But he’d smiled at the face she’d made and the adamant way she’d shaken her head. “I’m just not the Noni type,” she’d said, although it was more than that. She didn’t understand Ray. She fully understood her husband’s infatuation with her. And honestly, she despised the juice.

“C’mon, Kar, we’ve got to do something. It’s getting away from us,” Dave had replied to her then, so gruffly she’d understood he meant their love but was saying it in his careful way so that he could take it back if he needed to, later. She appreciated the gesture so much tears of love had sprung into her eyes, but she’d held herself back from crying. He’d made it clear he was sick of that. “Come on,” he’d repeated. “Come with me.” He was putting clothes into their dresser, a collection of dark socks held pinned to his side which he matched, carefully. “Alright,” she’d said, taking a big breath. “I’ll do it.”

And it had felt good to say yes, finally. After the silences between them, the extra work Dave had taken on with the Noni thing, his shifts at the clinic, her decision to continue her leave from work, the crying she did he no longer

respected or understood. They'd had a rough time of it, she often told other people, euphemistically. Since, after, following the death of their baby. It was still a hard thing to say. Yes, they'd named her April. She'd died the day she was born. Eventually she'd say, "Well, Dave and I are doing – alright." But they weren't at all. That was a lie.

At first they'd grieved together, in shock, dumb struck. There was nothing in her whole life, Karen thought, that would ever be as intense as those days. But then Dave had gone back to work while Karen remained at home. He'd asked her questions then, a lot, trying to encourage her. "What should I pick up for supper tonight?" "What do you think about that?" Unfortunately she didn't know. Her skin had become as dry as shelving paper and her hair split up all the ends. She began smoking. She watched TV as much as she could, anything. She stood in the backyard and watched the changing sky. She cried.

Then one day, Dave came home with Noni juice. "Try this," he said; the liquid was green and tasted of lintel nuts and grass. It was made from the Tahitian citro morinda fruit. "Hmm," she said, but drank. After that there was a cup of Noni juice for them both everyday at breakfast. "How sweet," she said. The benefits of Noni have been known to native communities since time immemorial, the label said. It was said to help every possible condition, including depression. "Great," Karen said.

Soon Dave became a distributor of Noni, and filled the washer-dryer space in the bathroom with cases of the brown thick-glassed bottles. "Well gosh, we'll live forever now," Karen muttered. He drove around making his deliveries after

his shift at the clinic. There were brochures: Noni and pregnancy, Noni and cancer, Noni and you. Glossy coloured photos, testimonials, a guide for distributors entitled Spread the Love. He grew a mustache which he combed in the mornings. He wore Old Spice.

He came home talking about valiant patients at the clinic, the possibilities of alternate treatments, the wonders of Noni, Raymonde. In a way she completely understood. He was a doctor and the medical system had failed him. “What about me, us?” she finally got around to asking when it seemed too late. He said “We’re alright, Karen.”

So she took to watching old reruns of Dallas waiting for him to come home. “Oooh, I just hate that JR!” she said to Dave when he’d finally arrive, smelling of Trident mints and cooking smells – the unfamiliar livingrooms of the sick, of other sufferers. “My you’re such a doctor now,” she said one night trying to please him. “Yeah,” he said to the wall. Watching him undress, she saw how the ribbing of his socks pressed the skin of his ankles. “We need to get you some new socks,” she said. “Wha – ?” he asked. His eyes took a moment to focus on her as he climbed into bed. When they did, there was no joy in them at finding her the object of their gaze. “They bite your ankles. Right here,” she said, and reached down to brush that particular patch of hair and skin. As she did, the ankle traveled swiftly to the end of the bed. “Oh sure. Right.”

“Have another,” people said. “It gets better.”

If she were to get pregnant again, Karen would have to take a drug that would thin her blood so that it would no longer coagulate if she cut herself. She thought

about the risk, the cost, the millions of babies born around the world. She didn't want another. She wanted the one she'd had.

So Dave sold Noni and created miracles, while Karen stayed at home and wept. And Dave told her about Raymonde who was, in comparison she understood, a paragon of healing and light.

Downstairs the party was spread between the kitchen and the large living room off to its side. The kitchen had its original hardwood beams and a collection of copper pots hanging over an island in the middle, a view of the lake by day, and blue, the rarest blue available, according to Ray who'd searched like crazy with her designer, for the borders and the tiles. It was a perfect room and Karen felt herself soften into its appeal. Behind a screen, a fire in the hearth hissed and the hissing sound filled her up with the memory of burning so much that she felt simultaneously soothed and lulled and more full of want. There were glasses of wine and cheeses and pink meats on trays all over the counters and Karen took up a long thin stem of red and sipped. She put an oval cracker into her mouth – the sharp blue cheese face down on her tongue burned like a small fire. “Dave, Dave!” someone to their right said, and Dave was soon in conversation with a blonde woman in a glittering orange dress while Karen stared at her, mesmerized.

“Hello, Karen, I'm Patrick, Ray's husband. Do you remember me?”

She shook her head to focus herself and smiled at him. “Of course I do! How nice.” They kissed each other on the lips. It was the custom here, like the hugs.

Patrick was tall and thin, he looked like he cross country skied a lot. “Karen, I’d love you to meet Madeleine,” he said, “And Bernice.”

“Hello, hello,” she said, a bit dully, she’d not been in crowds for awhile, had not wanted, really, to meet... “What do you do, Karen?” Bernice asked her.

“I’m unemployed at the moment,” she stated, she hoped, without shame.

“And before that?”

“I was a librarian.”

“That’s lovely. My niece is a librarian. At an elementary school.”

“That’s nice.” She was not really up for making conversation. The room wavered in front of her, people making a vari-coloured, flickering light...she ate more crackers and the thin slices of pink meat... “And how do you know Ray? Isn’t it wonderful about her health?” people asked her. “And such a beautiful house!” they said and Karen said those things back. She talked and made conversation. It had been a long time since she’d been to a party. At one point she tried to look out the window but could see nothing but themselves in oblong blobs reflected back to them from the night.

But the whole time she was aware of Dave in what seemed to be the exact proportion he seemed no longer aware of her. Soon after they’d entered the room, he’d left her to drift after him or not, as she liked. He was out in the middle of the action, laughing and listening, telling his old stories and jokes as if he’d come up with them on the spot. He spent a good deal of time with Ray discussing ways of working with Noni, how they could change the medical system by introducing a new model of the self, one not limited to the body only. It made sense. As Karen

listened to him she felt touched by his brilliance, his articulate idealism. She trailed after him, wishing he'd stay close. He raised his eyebrows at her a few times in passing, but there was no intimacy in it, no story for later, no wait and see. "So how's it going?" she asked him twice, wanting to engage him. She out of all these people had this claim, she thought. But his smile was polite. "I'm good," he said, briefly. Too brief. He didn't need her here, it seemed. She wanted to tell people then what he was really like. "I've heard that one, a thousand times. He's only telling you that to impress you. He contradicts himself." She'd never realized before how jealousy felt exactly or how ugly.

There was a talk about spirit. It's healing. People wearing beads and feathers. "When the spirit and emotional bodies get cloudy, the body gets sick." Karen believed in this. She got colds when she was run down or stressed, everyone did. But there was something wrong with its too easy logic. Its idea of punishment. Her body had expelled her baby like a blood clot before she was due and because of that she'd died. Surely that had not been all her fault? While she had failings, she couldn't accept a universe that would punish her for them. No, not like that. Fever, as she'd experienced after the birth, came back to her then and all over her skin, thin longing shimmered out. Bereft. "I wanted you so much," she said to her baby's spirit, wherever it was. "You can't control death." This is what she'd come to, this terrifying, she didn't know what to call it, result. Dramatically, then, she looked up expecting some repercussion. But of course there wasn't any. She was just a person.

On her fourth, she thought, glass of wine, she ran into Patrick again. By this time she was admittedly drunk, philosophical. Dave was sitting in a group by the piano, she could hear him laughing heartily and slapping his knee, a habit he'd acquired recently (pretense!, she thought bitterly, the real Dave didn't do that, not the Dave she knew.) Ray was with him and Karen felt uncomfortably aware of how beautiful they looked. Happy. People of the light.

She latched onto Patrick almost sloppily. "So Patrick, tell me about yourself." He too seemed suddenly confused, out of place. He described in detail how he and Ray had bought the old estate and how the fields had been all grown over with adolescent saplings and Sumac trees and blackberry bushes that went climbing up into the forest. They'd had to get a backhoe in to clean things up and to dig out a new pool and a pond for ducks, to redo the tennis courts. He scratched his head. "We needed a change." The sentence, offered out of a kind of drunk intimacy, gave her hope.

"Yes, Dave and I did too," she replied. She felt hungry for more, a kind of confession. "What do you really think of Noni juice?" she asked.

"Oh I love it, it saved Ray's life. That and the changes we've made. Moving here from the city." He flipped a hand around the room

"Oh." She was disappointed.

"Ray told me what happened to you. I'm sorry."

"Thanks."

"Sometimes these hard experiences come so that we can learn things."

"Like what?"

“How to better ourselves.”

He looked sad for a moment. “Oh sheesh, you couldn’t have been all that bad before,” she said, trying to bring him out.

“It’s not a question of bad, it’s an issue of toxins, cleaning up.”

Karen shrugged.

“You have to see the darkness to see the light,” he told her.

She twisted her hands through the laces on the bodice of her dress, letting the shiny synthetic material console her fingers and their ache. “Right now all I do is crave light,” she said. “Or is it the dark?” She mimed smoking a cigarette and he laughed ruefully.

“Take care,” he called after her as she excused herself. “Be well.” His hand was on his heart.

She went to the kitchen to get some ice to suck, holding her breath, squeezing her hands tight. Lemons too, she thought, might help. “I won’t cry,” she said. Outside, it had to have warmed up and freezing rain was pelting down against the windows. “Pathetic fallacy,” said a man coming up to her with a laugh. She hadn’t met him yet. The laugh was dry and improved, the kind someone might learn in the theatre.

“You look glum, chum,” he said.

“No I’m doing alright, I’m just...tired I guess.” She didn’t want to tell anyone anything. No confiding. It was more superstition than anything else. She wobbled around on her heels, realizing how much she’d drunk. There was a

gizmo on the fridge for the ice which lit up her glass with a tiny light. The ice cubes clunked down with a whirr, and then a rattle.

“Hey, it gets better,” the man said, touching her arm.

“What does?” But when she turned, he’d already moved on ahead and soon he was back in the living room. She watched him bump elbows with another man, then join a circle of dazzlers smiling about something. It made her feel forlorn. She’d find Dave and then their room. She’d make him come, she thought.

But Dave wasn’t anywhere. She walked through an icy feeling parlor, creepy with gold hands praying up to the Holy Ghost. They were Catholic, she thought, and very old. They made a desk lamp. She checked the bathroom and then the bright living room again where someone had started playing Chopsticks on the piano. The mood was festive, bright. A woman in a gauzy dress was singing along to the uneven dull tapping with her own words, something about the stars and night. In the kitchen, people had revived the food. There was intimate whispering and laughing. Dave wasn’t there.

Karen walked up the stairs and began to move slowly down the hall, listening for sounds at closed doors, feeling predatory. She could see Ray and Dave together, heads bent, recognizing in each other’s eyes their new found spiritual connection. In her imagination they were up high and looking down – they’d left her behind really. She was, after all, sick. Jealousy burned through her at the thought. She reached the bedroom she and Dave were to share and entered it frantically. His bag was still there. She stood over it, panting. He had not left her after all, not yet, not entirely.

She recognized completely that she was projecting. "Come on, none of this is real," she said out loud. "Get a grip." She went back downstairs slowly, though, expecting the worst.

Dave was back in the living room in an armchair near the buffet. He was talking to Ray who was laughing about something, her head thrown back, happy. Karen paused before going in to watch them. "You can have that life," she told herself. "You just have to ... get over yourself, get with the program." It was torture. It burned.

At her approach, both Dave and Ray looked up.

"Hi there."

"How's the not smoking going?" Ray asked. "I feel bad saying the word since I don't want to jinx you, but I did want to ask," she said with a laugh. It seemed worse somehow, Ray being nice to her.

"Oh I'm dying, I am so dying," Karen said. She leaned down so that her hair fell over Dave and then straightened up again. "I love you," she said, rubbing his back. It was a trite kind of manipulation that made her feel humiliated. She wanted him to leap up then and comfort her though. Come back, she thought. Come back, come back.

He gave her arm a small squeeze and laughed. Then he returned to his conversation while Karen remained leaning against his chair back, still uncertain at the exclusion.

"We're talking about building a Noni centre with counselors to help with the healing," Ray said, after Dave had paused. "Will you join us?"

“No, that’s alright. I think ...I need some air.”

At that Dave turned and looked up. “Not the death wish, I hope,” he said seriously, ever the doctor.

“No not that kind.”

He gave her the thumbs up. “Alright!” he said. It was not what she wanted from him.

“You can do it, Karen!” Ray chimed in.

Karen gave a small wave, the child sent to bed with a pat on her head.

Back through the kitchen and down the long front hall, her whole body burned with jealousy and longing. She reached the closet and fumbled into her boots and coat. “I just want to go home,” she thought and wiped at her nose and face because she’d started crying. “Well damnit,” she thought.

Outside the rain had stopped. A sharp wind blew into her coat, giving her skin a kind of damp shivering clack. Tomorrow, when they drove home, there would be ice everywhere.

The driveway still threw off its eerie light. She crunched down it in her boots, dodging liquid ice. The clouds had moved on and the moon was as a sliver in the sky.

When she reached the end of the drive, a car was going by very slowly. It stopped. “Help we’re lost,” said the driver. The passenger handed over a map and Karen attempted to locate them on it but she couldn’t. “We’re looking for Dubois St,” they said but she shook her head. “Sorry, I’m not from around here.” The driver paused to light a cigarette and Karen’s pulse raced out and her hands

shook. "Would I be able to bum one?" she asked. Acid remembrance flooded her mouth and throat. "Filthy habit," the diver said as she lit up.

"Yes."

When the searing smoke entered her lungs, it hurt her at first and she coughed. Then she exhaled a long stream of smoke and it rose up, pure and white as spirit.

A Lake

The lake was at the top of a mountain in a steep, sharp gully – the water so cold and clear, it was probably one of the few places left in the world where you could still drink from safely. Around one side, a beach had been made out of fine silt-like sand, while on the other, green trees stretched up, their heads making bright green reflections in the water. It was never crowded, and while the lake bottom itself was frighteningly muddy and rocky, Lana still looked forward to going each year although their children were grown and Stan didn't want to.

That year in particular, he'd been particularly vehement about it. He'd wanted to go swimming in his club's chlorinated pool instead and to have drinks in the air conditioned bar, playing video games as he did, every so often now, and eating peanuts from a little paper cup. Who is this man? Lana occasionally thought. "But you don't even like that lake, Lana," he'd said. "God, sometimes you don't even swim in it! Lots of driving, that's what I think, for nothing." The last 30 kilometers were up a dirt road and it's true that it was hard on the car. It was also true that she had a hard time explaining what about that lake in particular was so important to her. But in the end, that didn't matter – on some things, she could be resolute. "I want to go," she'd said. And so like every year, they did.

There was a threat of rain as they set out, but Lana made that small in her mind. In fact, that morning her mind that morning was hardly on the trip at all as she lay out the cooler and picnic basket and towels and blankets for Stan to take to the car. The phone rang then and she jumped. It rang seven times more before the answering machine finally picked it up and then the person hung up. Oh honestly!

At that moment, Stan walked back into the house. “Okay, the car’s gassed up. Are we all set?”

“Yes, we are,” she said. She felt a pang of guilt for not mentioning the call, but then decided they were better for it. She’d made a promise to herself that she’d leave their troubles behind today. “Don’t give it another thought,” she murmured. Deliberately, that’s what she wanted – one whole, worry free day. Things had been difficult. Just last night – but then she cut herself off, none of that, no, thank you.

She squirted a round quarter of tanning lotion onto her hand and rubbed it into her forearms and then up onto her shoulders and neck, the smell of the coconut and paba oil soothing to her. She picked up a magazine to fan herself. There’d been a heat wave all week and here it was again – nine in the morning but already as hot as noon.

The trip went smoothly until they got to the gravel road, turning off the highway right behind a small convoy so that they became fourth in a line of cars going slowly up the mountain road. Because their air conditioning was broken, Lana refused to close her window and her hair went streaming out into the cloud of dust from the cars up ahead of them. It was irritating. Not another irritation in this week of terrible heat! she thought. She turned then, to hunt for her scarf.

“Look Lana please, I’ve asked you before not to do that when I’m driving!”

She kept rummaging until she found and fixed the scarf around her head and then snapped her crisp vanity open to check her reflection. Nice, she thought – her lipstick had stayed too. Her nails, painted red to match, were also still in good condition, their surfaces smooth and elegant, no sharp edges. Very nice job that girl

had done for her – they were practical these days those young girls, and fashionable too. She drummed her fingernails against the door frame, testing and admiring their plastic resiliency. The Dentyne she was chewing tasted of fiery sorbytol and cinnamon and that, too, gave her an energetic, hopeful feeling.

However, the sun was still obnoxiously hot as it beat down on her thighs splayed out on the front seat. Fat, blue veined and spotty, they reminded her of two trout laid out on their sides, wrinkling up under an unforgiving sun. Some thighs. She slapped at them a couple of times, watching her sticky flesh wobble. So yes, this was getting old. She put on her sunglasses and the over-bright world became muted, her thighs golden now. Small comforts for those who age with their mother's body, she thought. This was not a real worry for her, but more something that she felt comfortable worrying about. "Not much escape for an old broad, is there Stan?" she murmured then, her eyes on her reflection in her vanity.

"Mmmph," he said. He was listening to a show on the radio about the space shuttle which had crashed and killed that school teacher this year. Very sad. The air coming in from her window lifted his gelled hair up so that it waved in stiff, straight lines, and for some reason this reminded her of another car trip long ago where they'd held hands and listened to Barry Manilow and Lana wished that he would comfort her more sometimes. Wouldn't it be nice, she thought, if right now he turned and told me I was pretty?

It was not Stan but the road that turned and then twisted back, continuously. It hadn't been graded in awhile and there were difficult ruts in places and a lot of dust.

She gave the air a squirt of freshener and a winsome floral she'd bought recently mingled briefly with the dust, a combination of oranges and lavender.

Then she turned back to her flesh and compared herself not so unfavorably to Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York. I mean if you could be a princess these days with extra body weight, there was hope for us all. "What do you think of the new Princess, Stan?" she asked.

But he said nothing as he unwrapped and began to chew slowly on a toothpick he'd removed from his left breast pocket. Stan was the office manager of a company that sold machined parts for heavy duty drilling equipment and over the years, he'd developed certain ways of establishing his authority. So Lana waited.

"She's not a princess, she's a civilian." he said finally, smugly of course, she thought. "She'll never be royal, no matter whom she marries."

Oh yes, it could be frustrating to be married to such purely satisfied knowing! "Yes but I just meant Sarah herself, the way she looks. Don't you think she's pretty?" She'd taped the wedding on their VCR and had watched it the other day. She glanced over at Stan sharply, watching the frown in his profile intent on the road and caught up in the show on the radio.

"Eh, Stan? What do you think?"

But he wasn't interested enough and didn't answer. Well. She turned back to her window and looked out at the great puffy clouds that were emerging. The sky itself was not yet blue – too humid – but the possibility of blue was certainly there, and despite Stan's silence, Lana felt a surge of optimism as she settled back against the illusion of cool in the metallic blue upholstery of her seat.

They were about half way up the gravel road when the cars ahead of them finally turned off, but then the radio failed so completely that silence replaced even the static, causing Stan to turn it off abruptly and angrily. "Car antenna – what a damn cheap thing!" he said.

He'd been in a bad mood all day really. Stop! Lana called to him in her head as she ran her tongue over the ridges of her teeth – she certainly didn't want him wrecking her day. She crossed her legs first to the right and then left as she thought about what she could do. "Let's take a break, Stan. At the store that's coming up. We'll buy ourselves a treat and I'll freshen up in the bathroom." She patted his knee and smiled. He nodded curtly, his leg warm and immobile under her fingers.

Oh, it was strange to get old in a marriage – neither Oprah nor Donahue had ever done it justice. Here they were successfully living parallel lives – she ironed his shirts and cooked meals, he duly deposited money into her account every week as he had done for 38 years. They had children and solid hopes for grandchildren. "I was a bride once. Your father and I were so in love" is a story she often tells her grownup daughters. "Our cake was a six-tier Queen Elizabeth and we had boiled frosting, a real luxury in those days, let me tell you. The days before I discovered Jello." Lana had gone through a Jello phase in her life and for awhile had had her own business. She'd made Jello sculptures out of all the primary flavours for children's birthday parties and elaborate, swirling Jello desserts for weddings. She still has all the moulds in her kitchen – flowers and cows and cats and sheep, Disney, Anne of Green Gables. For their 35th wedding anniversary, her children had made her and Stan a replica of their original wedding cake with drop flowers

everywhere in white and pink frosting. Lovely. Lana has a framed 8x10 picture of herself and Stan as they were caught together in the backyard that day – their faces revealed by some sudden sunlight as being both happy and kind. She stares at it often as she passes it in their front hall – such a perfect picture to be remembered by, she thinks. You see there are good times, there are good times going round and round every second and the trick is just to catch them as they come. That was all there was to it. There was no use at all in regretting the past – her parish priest Paul Barret had said that to her when she went to him – and she was so used to repeating it now she didn't have to think it at all. The thought slipped into her mind automatically – a cup of perfectly brewed advice to get her around her blues. She'd steeled herself this way, grown less hungry. Often happy – now who could ask for more than that?

The store was part of a small campground named Patty's which they passed every year. As they got closer to where she thought it would be, Lana sat up more alertly in her seat. "Slow down Stan, we're almost here. I'm certain it's around this curve."

They rounded the curve but there was only more brush on either side of the road, more dust.

"Damn!" said Lana, all the more alert now. Stan was driving so fast. If only he'd slow down they'd be able to better find it, or maybe they'd gone past it already – the thought leapt into her head with an accompanying misery that made the whole

trip and all her effort seem suddenly unbearable. Oh she'd so wanted it to be fun!

"Oh stop!" she cried. "I think we've missed it!"

Stan shook his head. "C'mon Lana, I know what I'm doing. I've been driving this road for so many years, I'm sure as heck I can do it again this time."

"I don't know. Stan, I think --" she began, thinking it had been awfully hard yesterday.

But he cut her off. "Lana! Stop it! Let me drive, alright?"

She made a clicking sound with her tongue and sucked some air between her teeth. Testy, testy. She honestly didn't know what to do with him.

The business with Manny came back to her then, despite all the ways she'd tried not to think about it. There had been an episode with their middle son Emanuel and the police yesterday, but Stan had no right to take that out on her. A son of theirs caught stealing – how could that be? Worry came over her again, heavily. She shrank back from it and pulled a thread from her top.

"Oh Manny," she murmured.

"It's in the hands of the lawyers Lana, there's nothing we can do."

"At least show some sympathy!"

"He was caught stealing."

"So they say! But how do we know? Besides we're his parents."

Oh she hadn't wanted to think about it, not today.

"He was caught in the act, Lana."

"So? We can't judge him yet. We're his parents, Stan!"

There was a pause.

“You always avoid things,” he said, reproachfully.

They’d had this conversation before. He thought her weak because of it.

“No I don’t,” she said. The words came out automatically.

She turned to the window then and examined the rubber sealant. She reached up and lay her finger into its soft black spine.

“It’s all going to work out,” she said softly.

From his side of the car, Stan snorted. “Ha!” he said.

For most of her life, Lana’d preferred to believe in the goodness in people and situations, she’d always had. It was a choice she’d made sometime back, she couldn’t remember when.

But she’d never learned how to defend herself in it.

“Tut-tut,” she said to shame him. Inside her mind, the right words flew up.

“How I worked, how hard, how I held back...” She couldn’t let them come. They flared and then flickered out. It’s all going to work out, she repeated to herself.

The sun now came directly through her window. It was hot, too bright.

“I’m going to have a nap,” she said.

Stan said something else but Lana ignored it. She closed her eyes and yellow and red and violet shapes danced up under her eyelids, instead of the usual dark. Too bright. She opened her eyes again and somehow, in the angle of the light, the spruce trees all looked like one solid green lump flying past her so quickly. Her breath sped up. Too hot. Up the never ending hill, the car revved in exhaustion. Then an irritated blinking began in one of her eyes, like a camera’s red light of warning, and suddenly sweat poured out of her and she was sailing, helpless to stop

herself. She never knew where she was going in a hot flash exactly, except that it was always dark and wet, as though it were a tunnel going underwater. There were fish, she thought. Frightening, too many of them. But before she could look, the panic set in and she yanked herself back, panting.

“Alright?” Stan asked.

She caught her breath before answering as the blood seeped from her face. “Of course,” she said. Thank God, there weren’t to be many more of these episodes! she thought. It was odd, the doctor said, that she was still having them at all, at her age.

So she lay her head back against the seat, recovering. She remembered practicing cartwheels and singing along with the piano when she was a girl. Had it really been that long? Her thoughts came in a jumble. There were her children with their beautiful names – Elyssa, Emanuel, Christopher, Joan – and a young Stan waving up to her. She fast forwarded and suddenly her neighbour was in the picture, the buckles on his shoes sparkling, and there was Stan now frowning and making a face at her, staring. Oh she hadn’t thought of that for so long, had laid it to rest, finally. Still it rose and rose in front of her so that she blushed slightly. Why was it coming now? she wondered. It took her a moment to understand.

There had been that once, when she’d been tempted to have an affair, briefly. It was with a neighbour, a younger trombonist from Belgium who taught children after school and played in the orchestra. The National Orchestra, Lana had been proud to tell her friends. They’d had coffee a few times, friendly chat, gardening and culture, it was certainly entertaining. There had been that one day though,

when he'd moved his patio chair so close to hers his knee had touched the inside of her thigh, not too far above her knee but enough. She'd experienced the contact with a keen and disturbing alarm which made the air around her buzzy and alive in a swoon of flustered anticipation. He'd begun hitting his spoon against the sides of his glass then in a rhythm so intriguing it had been difficult not to look up at him. The pressure of his knee against her leg grew stronger and an embarrassing warmth had sprung into her cheeks and down her arms. Her aerobic top had seemed inadequate and she'd put an arm crosswise against her chest where red would be creeping out of her bosom like a dead giveaway, while he kept on ringing his spoon against the sides of his frosted glass and the cicada cries flew through the great calm that is high summer on a weekday in suburbia and she'd remained there looking down, unable to tell him to leave because this was not what she wanted because she did. Only after the longest time did he finally stop, the silence such a reprieve she'd tasted the relief of it, looking down at her lap while she heard him put his spoon down with a final ping and scrape back his chair. Finally, she'd dared look up after him, watching a small circle of wet on the small of his back as he went away down the steps and beside her trellis of morning glories out the back fence. He'd not looked back. She'd gone through the patio doors into the coolness of her house then and lain on the living room rug breathing and breathing. He'd never come calling again and after all these years only nodded to her now as she did to him – faultless, courteous. And after that first burst which had lasted for a bit – a few months, maybe – she'd never wondered what it might have been like, not really – she was a good woman, a good wife, a mother.

That night though as she lay in her queen size bed in her nylon nightie, she hadn't pulled the blankets over her body as she listened to Stan brushing his teeth. Again the breathing had come back to her and she'd breathed in and out in great bursts – like bubbles of air in water, it seemed that space was entering her, filling her up with new capacity. It was exciting and delicious, like carbonation, like champagne. When Stan climbed under the blankets beside her in his blue drawstring pajamas, she'd turned to him with the space filling her eyes. “Something wonderful is happening to me, Stan!” She felt like she was floating, losing gravity, gaining possibility. He'd smiled at her and she'd nestled her head into the hollow place on his chest which she equated with his centre, somehow, really who he was. But this was not enough. Oh no, not nearly! For the first time, Lana desired her husband with an immediacy that compelled her into action. Hesitantly at first, but steadily, she began making advances with her fingers up his back and then with more forward kisses along his chest that grew in intensity and length, her breathing faster now, the space widening. He was her husband after all, and she a modern woman! But then he'd sat up, wary. “Lana,” he'd asked, quite tiredly and patiently, “what are you doing?” And that had almost stopped her, but not quite. The space was so wide suddenly and such a relief that she'd giggled as she said “I'm making love to my husband.” Laughing out. Instantly though, he'd pulled back from her, disapproval on his face lit up by the lamp on his bedside table. But not even this stopped her and she'd continued. Her fingers itching for that drawstring, she'd slid her fingers around and around his waist until finally, finally he had responded to her.

In the morning, he was dressing when the alarm woke her. He had his leg on the footstool and was doing up the laces on his good, black shoes. The moment he saw her, he'd frowned over his reading glasses, which were perched at the end of his nose, so that the first thing Lana saw were his magnified grey blue eyes, disapproving of her. Still the sunlight was streaming into their bedroom, as bright and clear to Lana as new water in a vase and she'd thrilled to see Stan standing before her, unexpectedly beautiful, as ruffled as he was.

"Lots of women do, Stan," Lana said before he could speak, feeling pleased with herself, her daring.

He flushed.

"And we are married, after all."

"Still, I'm an old-fashioned man," he said, clearing his throat. He'd given her a look that seemed to summarize the entire side of his conversation and then had turned smartly on his heels and gone to get breakfast while Lana lay back against the pillows in her bedroom of light, strangely beyond caring, and smiled.

And continued making advances towards Stan, despite his stern looks and rebuffs, certainly in spite of all that she had learned from her church or her mother. That feeling of space and adventure made her run out to buy lacy briefs and underwire bras and a shocking pink bodysuit she could not stop wearing night after night although it revealed her flaws, of course it did, she'd been well over forty by then. Both she and Stan had been born between the two world wars – enough to feel the hurt of the first and to almost participate in the second. There had been no play, at least not for Lana, no question of it. This then, this most shocking thing,

became a game between them, or so Lana thought, a night game of seduction which sometimes sent her self-righteous husband down to the couch in the living room while Lana stayed in bed, laughing from upstairs!

It had gone on and on – Lana unwilling to stop herself, Stan lagging behind her for once with his “ruffled feathers” as she called them. At the time, she thought she loved him more in his confusion than she ever had before, teasing him openly when their children weren’t around, trying to neck with him in the grocery store. While he admonished her constantly, all of this “vulnerability” in him only made her want him more.

Everything had changed that one night in November though. It was their annual month- before-Christmas get together with the Davidsons and Christophs from Stan’s work. Joannie, their youngest, seventeen at the time, had been there with her new boyfriend whose name Lana can no longer remember and everything had gone without a hitch until well into dinner. She’d served something melting and delicious in wine sauce and people had been scraping their plates when the conversation had turned to the new secretary their firm had hired. The men had all shaken their heads at her behaviour. Jim Davidson – he no longer worked with Stan and Lana was glad – said “She’s hot for a man. It’s pitiful.” Then he’d winked at Lana. They were all drinking wine, except for Joannie and her beau who were leaving after supper. Lana’s cheeks had been flushed from the wine but they’d flushed again when she heard that as a bloom of anxiety stuck. It was something she’d never considered before – what, if anything, Stan had told other people. The men worked together and the wives, the other wives, were not really her friends, not

really. Lara was a teacher at a private girl's school; Emanuelle was a weaver who hung her creations in cafes around the city. They were younger and far more modern than Lana – feminists, she imagined, who probably looked down on her for her homemaking. Lana was wearing a caftan that night, cotton with loosely gathered sleeves and a square bodice, a bit low in the front. Suddenly it felt breezy and loose and she'd tried to adjust it by reaching around and pulling the fabric down at the back.

Then Jim had spilled his wine. Lana got up gratefully and went for some cloths in the kitchen. Secure in her hostess position, she'd pooh poohed his apologies, waving away offers of help. Slightly unsteady from the wine, she'd dropped one of the cloths as she was leaving and, crouching down to pick it up, had happened to glance under the table. There they'd been– although her glance had been so quick she'd really only gathered a guilty impression – all the feet sprawled or tucked messily on the rungs of chairs, turned lazily and uncaringly, so different from the impression on the other side of the table. She can still see that image in her mind, their shoes all stretched out so imperfectly, that in itself a betrayal. And then she saw Stan's foot in his good leather – unmistakable she'd thought at the time, she'd polished them – and Lara's slim small feet in their nylons perched so comfortably on top, right where his toes would be. She'd risen immediately, scarcely a second having passed, desperate that no one should know, had even managed to say whoops as she stood to convince everyone there was nothing wrong and to laugh very lightly. She'd then proceeded quickly to the kitchen where she'd stood trembling.

But Joannie was leaving, she'd forgotten. She and her boyfriend were waiting for her in the front hall, their jackets on. Lana had tottered towards them.

"Goodbye." The words had slid off her face. Dutifully, then, she produced a smile.

Still they waited.

"It was nice meeting you, Eddie," she finally, belatedly, remembered to say.

Joannie glared at her.

"Thanks, Mrs. Sterling."

They turned to go. Ineptly, her hands on a cloth, she'd called out to Joannie who was already past the steps, was in fact disappearing. "Goodbye, honey. Have a good time!"

Back in the kitchen, tears had begun as she worked on preparing the dessert things, touching a dry cloth over the forks, automatically recounting the crystal bowls. When Stan had come in her heart gave a dry hard heave.

"Need some help?"

"Not really," she said coolly. "Things are under control." She'd barely looked at him, unable to, the slim small nylon feet slipping, sliding, whirling.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, of course I am," she said.

"Lana – "

But she turned away.

"Shall we serve then?" she asked, her voice brittle and bright.

"Of course."

They'd worked together. Dessert was a torte made with gelatine and rum, the set fruit golden against the heavy cream in her mother's crystal bowl, Stan's hands golden by the light over the kitchen sink as he loaded the tray, everything organized perfectly. The kettle on the stove boiled too soon and with the tea and coffee poured they proceeded to their guests in the dining room. Everyone had exclaimed over the torte, their spoons softly clinking, the torte like a masterpiece on her best linen, while Lana sat there and from far away gathered the imperfections of that evening in her mind – the bowl uncentered, chairs askew, the wet mark of wine on the tablecloth, their feet under the table. And all along she'd heard a whirring sound, a wheel turning, one interlocking spoke in another. The shearing for a moment had been deafening, unbearable, a wheel spinning in another realm. Then something solid had returned to her, a fixed place in her mind, and having come to this resolve – *having chosen*, as she later said – she stopped thinking about it and had eaten her cake as the party, with its inevitable hums and ohs and pauses, the lipstick mouths, the precision of the tea being poured, with all of its symmetries that she understood and knew, proceeded on in its inevitable speed towards the comfort of the living room.

She'd kept the sexy clothes in the bottom of her bulky sweater drawer, although she never looked at them now. They were in a white plastic bag and sometimes the plastic would move when she was getting something and remind her they were there.

She wore beige nightgowns made of flannel or nylon, and she wore socks to bed more often than not in the winters – protective, not sure but guarding anyways, humble white flags.

When they reached the space where the campground lay, Stan made a slow turn into a parking spot under the branches of a birch offering scanty shade and they unfolded themselves from the car together, stiff legged and bent.

There were no indoor facilities at the campground store, even though they seemed to have plumbing and electricity, and the shelves had more gaps than anything – a few canned goods and some dusty chocolate bars. The man behind the counter was watching a soap opera on a tiny black and white TV. "Bathroom?" he shook his head. "Outhouse - just down the path to your right."

"Is there no place to freshen up?"

The man shook his head. Lana shook hers too in sudden disappointment. She'd wanted – but no, never mind. She distracted herself by looking at the fish hooks for sale beside the cash. Stan paid for a Drumstick. Lana wanted one too but changed her mind at the last minute because she was dieting.

"I'll wait for you here," Stan said, biting into his chocolate cone.

So Lana walked along alone, her shoes sinking into the fine dust along the path and her legs brushing by blueberry bushes that had been pretty well picked clean. Lana stopped when she thought she saw blue. The berries were small and tasted sour but they were wild and there was nothing like wild fruit.

Eventually she found and used the facilities.

The shade was nice in the forest.

“Lana!” Stan called. “Let’s get going.”

It took her a long time to hear him.

There are footsteps, like going into the murkiness of a lake where there is no certainty – the bottom sinking under your toes as you go forwards, gingerly afraid of leeches, or slimy fish, of disturbing a turtle or even a beaver who might be frightened somehow into lashing out at the human being absorbing its light at the surface. Lakes were dangerous places in Lana’s mind, cool, unpredictable. Anything could lurk down there under the surface. It was amazing that Lana swam at all but sometimes she did – moving through her discomfort as the cool lake water surrounded her and she set out, limb after limb, pushing herself forwards through her fear. Looking up at the white sky, it would seem that only when she died would someone look down and appreciate the depths of her courage, the lengths she’d gone to survive. For a second, when you get far enough out, you look back to shore at the speck of a towel or at the person who is waiting for you there. And then you turn and decide you’ve come out ahead after all.

The Shapes of Things

Audrina wakes up to the sound of the circus and for awhile she lies very still, sliding up and down on the slopes of her breathing, up and down, up and down – the music beside her, soaring. When she is finally more awake, she reaches for her diary and writes: “It was so fun I loved it!” And she presses her head down, kisses the page in sealed strawberry lips, signs her name underneath in elaborate letters. She lies back against her pillow then and tucks herself in. At this moment, she is in love with the world.

In the swirl from the strange waking up time today, even her room looks different. She doesn't know how to explain exactly – the sun falling in two oblong squares, her collection of stickers at the window, mess of tangled jewelry and clothing everywhere, but still, something different – a shining out. A snowplow goes by outside, its bell high and summoning. Oh everything is different now! The circus music accompanies her. Everything is good, she thinks. Good is everywhere.

She gets out of bed and goes into the hall. In the darkness, all the music begins to fall, and she is the long trombone wobbling and the clarinet arcing and she is a dancing girl too, but no, not just ... she is rich and famous and beautiful. She enters the bathroom where the fan whirls and the bulbs around the mirror move her on. “I am Brigitte the Swedish model. Watch me while I brush my teeth.” The taps in her hands are silver, the water in the sink a flowing pool.

Afterwards then, lingering in the mirror, she draws out the whispered words: “Extra...Sensasse...Merveilleuse...” There is a moment of looking – at her eyes,

strange, unblinking, unknown. Then she is gone from herself and back out in the hall, rushing to the banister and down – an octagon spinning, a square thundering through the air.

Her landing on bare feet is perfectly square. And then she stops. Carl is sitting on the couch with his long arm flung out over her mother's mushroom pillow, the one Audrina's cuddled with since second grade. Orange flecks dot the window sill, the living room is as it always is except that he's here and suddenly it all seems strange. The music strains in her head.

But the ceramic cat still winks at her from the ledge, and there's her clay pot on the coffee table beside the butterscotch candies, an amber glow today in the green coloured glass bowl. There is the sun, everywhere.

"Carl!" she sings, trying to cast away doubt. Still there is something very wrong with him being here so early with his old cologne smell and smelly breath and his long legs and yellow toes spread way out onto the rectangles of their parquet floor. Her mother has told her he's a friend, an architect she knows.

"Morning Kid," he says. And Audrina hates it when he calls her that – as if she has no personality of her own.

She looks around and can't see the pile of sheets and blankets that meant he slept on the couch and for a moment her heart pounds so fast she can't see. But then there they are on the chair they never use in the corner, a not un-neat pile.

"You slept over," she says.

"Yeah."

His hair is messy. Why don't comb your head? she thinks in her own head which is also uncombed. Yeah but I just got up, she thinks. Yeah but so did he! A giggle bursts out nervously. For Audrina suspects – because bad things go on in her mind that should never be revealed – that her mom and Carl are having sex. The weight of the thought makes her cringe.

“What's so funny?” Carl asks.

Audrina shakes her head. Oh nothing. No. He lives in a building that doesn't allow children. Not really a kid person, her mother has said. Audrina can't imagine.

“I crashed here last night.”

She nods. “Yes,” she says. Her eyes fall to the floor and she moves to go off into the kitchen. But then she can't help herself and she looks up again, searching. But no, again, everything's the same. The Christmas cactus is in bloom and dangling heavily with pink flowers. The books on the shelf are all slanted. It's almost like a game: Find the difference, win a prize! It's what the circus criers say and suddenly she is back in last night, voices calling “Step right up, step right up!,” she and Angie tumbling into each other in the pressing crowds, the balloons going pop, the plush curve of a stuffed panther's back.

But it is not a game. It is not a game. Her mother Ann takes things very seriously. Since the divorce especially, she has sat Audrina down many times for one of her talks. “I would never have sex, Audrina, without being married,” she has told her. “I have never, nor would I ever, try drugs. I never drink to get drunk. This is what's important to me. Are you listening?” So that by now,

Audrina's heard those lectures forever it seems. But there are also moments that don't add up, puzzle pieces in the wrong box – her mother falling against the banister once while she was climbing the stairs, some loud blurry laughing from the kitchen, and worst of all, certain sounds, not just rustling, but real sound, at night.

So she moves down the hall, heavy and light, and into the kitchen where Ann is spooning butter into the frying pan on the stove. Her mother is in her blue bathrobe, a cigarette in the ashtray, her sleek, eggplant coloured hair pinned high. "I would never do anything to hurt you," she has also said. It's true, Audrina thinks, soaring.

But then there's Carl and Audrina coughs and slouches into a chair saying nothing.

"What's he doing here?" she asks.

Her mother turns. "Well good morning to you too, Audrina! We have company! When we have company, we keep our grumpy selves to ourselves!"

And Ann drags on her cigarette and all the smoke swirls around her face in the sun, and the praying ivy leaves are all open hanging down from the counter and around the toaster, an ant, crumbs. Briefly, Audrina considers her reflection in the toaster's surface.

"Mom, are you and Carl having sex?" she asks. It's not her normal self that says this – it's her dream with its great ski slopes coming into her mouth.

"Oh Audrina! Of course we're not! You know how I feel about that!" Ann says. At the stove, the frying pan spits and she has turned so that Audrina can't

see her face. The words feel good though. I don't know, Audrina will tell her mother later, she imagines, in apology. Something weird got into me when I said that.

But again then, her uncertainty grows. At school, she learned pioneers sent birds down to check the safety of their wells. The thought arrives suddenly.

"If your words were a well, and I sent a bird down to see if you were lying or not, would the bird live or die?"

"Oh Audrina, stop being so intense!" her mother says, turning around now and looking at her steadily. And Audrina flushes slightly. But still.

Carl arrives then. "Ann, what's wrong?" he asks.

"Oh, it's nothing," Ann says with a laugh, her hand at her head.

But it's not. Oh Mom, you are poisoning me, Audrina thinks, the day all tangled up.

"You didn't answer the question," she says then, relentlessly.

"Oh for Christ's sakes, Audrina, it's early in the morning." But Ann is flustered and briefly Audrina feels the thrill of a victory – she's hit something.

"What is it?" Carl asks. "What? What?"

"We'll talk about this later, Audrina. If you can't do that, you are more than welcome to leave."

But there is no prize and Audrina is plummeting and the octagon is turning, so fast she can't locate her position anymore. Briefly, she imagines herself as a real bird outside of her house in the sun filled world taking in the shapes of things and for one exhilarating moment, before the knowledge hurts her and she turns to

leave, she is very alive. But then bitterness fills her mouth. The kitchen is small. There are hardly any windows. The day will be long. What on earth was she thinking? Was there ever even a circus, she wonders then, was there ever a circus at all?

Bird

At the tea place, flowers emerge from the tea ball into the water. They float to the surface and hover, and this is what I will myself to do also although dust is falling through a shaft of light onto the white paper on my table and for a second, knowing that I am breathing in that sheer number of moving particles, I wonder if I will drown here in the air. But no, I need to get to Brian as soon as possible. I'm in a town three quarters of the way up to the cottage where he and the kids are staying with his mother. Because of the snow I've lost some time, but I still have over an hour until we are to meet in a café, just the two of us, to talk things over. "You need to choose," Brian said before he left three weeks ago with the kids. Such a long time ago now. I'm nervous so I leave the cookie on the plate, but take up the piece of paper which reads: Your future is as boundless as the sky! A good omen. Then I wash my hands and put my gloves on carefully before buttoning up. "Good luck out there," the waitress calls as I open the door, and I feel no hesitation at all in smiling back at her.

Outside, the snow is coming down heavily. I'm wading around in it trying to clean the car when a man and a woman come rushing by and the woman slips. She's not wearing a hat or gloves and she falls against the white on a parked car, leaving an imprint. And then it's her hair that I notice, and then the particular lean in her body as she rights herself. They are quick impressions and when she and the man continue moving towards the mall, I almost turn away and forget about them. But I don't quite. Instead, here I am standing in the snow-flooded world with old impressions. It's her, I think. Bird. God, maybe this time I've

found her. And even knowing I've been mistaken before, and knowing that I need to meet Brian soon and knowing exactly what he'd have to say about it, I still turn off the car and follow.

Once inside the mall though, I can't find her. There are Christmas shoppers circulating everywhere, almost wall to wall. I ask at the information booth and the lady at the counter shrugs her shoulders up high. "No idea," she says. But then, as I'm turning to leave, she asks me where I'm headed, an eye on my shirt that says Cornwall.

"Up to Gregoryville," I say.

"Well you better sit tight for awhile," she tells me. "Sounds like they're closing down the highways out there." Behind her, tinny music emerges from a small transistor radio.

"You sure about that?"

"I'm sure."

I turn tail.

Five minutes later, I've installed myself on a bench with a coffee and am watching the door where I came in, waiting for Bird, if it is her, to return, or for the snow to stop, whichever comes first. My hands tremble and I burrow them into my coat protectively, away from the intensity of the shoppers who throng around me on both sides, sneezing and coughing and spitting and laughing. To relax, I take a deep breath and examine my options. Ideally, I need to forget all about Bird and get on the road as soon as possible. I go over the speech I composed to Brian this morning so carefully. Imagining him and the girls up

there in the mountains missing me, I make a promise that this will be the last time I ever look for Bird again, no matter what it costs me. But then just thinking about the fact that this last time is still up in front of me, the promise in the possibility that Bird is alive fills me up with so much hope again. But I don't jump up frantically. No, I know too much for that, and so I sit back and watch the traffic and sip my coffee. For someone who so recently had no time at all, suddenly it seems as though I have all the time in the world.

I saw Bird for the first time in years this summer. When I think about it now it seems as though I really must have known she'd come back into my life. All summer I'd been feeling on the edge of something, and that day in particular, I was so sensitive that by the time I was ready to leave, I'd cleaned my hands four times in a rush. It was dusk and the lush grass of our lawns shimmered in the lingering light, the trellises sagged with weight, and all around everything about our neighbourhood seemed as calm on the surface as a lake. But underneath there was a frantic quality about it too, hovering like a hand up too close to my face. I'd felt it that afternoon when I'd taken the girls to another end of summer birthday party – the fear in the too bright exclamations of the adults in Sue Grafter's kitchen, the recklessness I'd suddenly caught in her eyes. And for days it had been building in the backyard through the sheer busyness of our neighbours who sat out, night after night, letting their kids roam late while they barbecued and poured drinks and stayed huddled by their pool sides. It was late-August and everyone was doing summer with such renewed intensity that I felt uneasy.

But it was the kind of summer that went fast. Mornings were unusually cool, and earlier and earlier, a family of grey bats would swoop above us soundlessly in the August light. Brian and I would watch them after the girls were in bed while he held and stroked my hands. I hadn't been out of the hospital then for very long. Every once in awhile, we'd hear someone shriek out about the bats from some other backyard and Brian and I would look at each other and laugh. "Sheesh, nothing to be afraid of," Brian would say, and I'd squeeze his hand tight and take a deep breath. "No. Nothing," I'd say. I was still fragile then. No, not about the bats, but about myself and my surroundings. I was especially sensitive to fear. "Oh can't you feel it?" I asked on a particularly busy night. "Their franticness?" To me, it was always slightly menacing, like wasps buzzing in a hedge. God how we hate change, I'd thought then. Oh how we fear death! But Brian shrugged and cleared his throat and I never brought it up again. I still felt it however, and by that night late in the season, the underlying fear behind the calm in our neighbourhood was as real to me as a building storm, billowing and blue and sharp with electricity.

"Goodbye my Darlings," I called out, but Brian was giving the kids a bath and I don't think they heard me.

I was on my way to my support group at the hospital. The group was part of a larger network of support activities I'd undertaken to manage my stress better. I had two children under the age of five and I'd been home with them for their entire lives. Two girls. I'd become afraid.

I remember the exact moment my fear arrived in much the same way you remember falling in love or have a car accident. Brian's mother was over for an afternoon visit before she left for Florida and she was talking about infectious diseases. While I listened, I saw the walls turn to buff and a spider climb out of a crack. It was creeping up the wall. When I looked back, just like in a movie, everything was different after that.

My own mother used to tell the story of a famous murderess who believed she couldn't get her victim's blood off her dress. While she was never charged, that spot haunted her for the rest of her life. My mother always made fun of people who were noticeably crazy and she'd laugh and roll her eyes after encountering one of them on the street or in the drugstore. That's the way she would tell the story, full of her wrath. Anyways, despite her presentiments, that's what happened to me – like the murderess, I tried to out the spot, and the more I tried the worse and more noticeable it got.

I became afraid of germs, first those on letters coming through the mail, and then, more generally, having become aware of how germs could be carried, I became invested in stopping them from spreading through our house. Anti-bacterial soaps, Lysol 3 in 1, disposable gloves. What started out as habit quickly turned to fright. At first it was the germs outside I was afraid of, but then somehow, through my dreams, I began to see myself as a source of contamination and my new task became protecting others from me.

Through this whole time I dreamt about things multiplying – gerbils, worms, ants. I was infested in my dreams, burdened with the responsibility of stopping

the unstoppable progression of things, of burning the known into dust and starting over, of defying equations. I was frantic in my sleep, taken over. This is why I tried so hard to stay awake. Night after night I lay in bed, fighting the steadiness of my own breathing.

We tried everything, Brian and me, bargains, arguments, medicine, mitts. Finally I was hospitalized with temporary psychosis. After that Brian cut down his hours at work and the kids went to daycare while I learned to take care of myself again. But I was following this course of treatment not because it helped me so much, but because it was the formula for getting better, and my investment in formula, my belief that if I followed the right course of action everything would go back to normal, nagged at me.

That night, I was driving very slowly. At the outskirts of our neighbourhood, a group of kids went screaming into the road in a fight. I slammed on my brakes and pressed the horn loudly at them. For an instant they froze, looking at me through the fuzzy half light, wide eyed and guilty. Then they separated to let me pass, their bodies quick in motion again, smirking at each other as I drove on between them, shaking.

Back then, I was so afraid of everything!

When I reached the hospital, I felt almost limp and stayed in the car for a few minutes to compose myself. Getting out, I ran into June, who was also late, and we walked together through the parking lot quickly, the shiny black heels on her boots echoing. June had nursed her left arm for three years like a baby so that her arms were of different weights, the left one small and deformed while her right

was strong, tough, capable. “Hey,” we said to each other. As we were nearing the entrance, she paused briefly to light a cigarette and it was at that moment, while admiring her dexterity out of the corner of my eye, that I saw Bird.

She was leaning against the door of the Emergency, her hair sticking up in matts. It was wheat coloured and mongrel-like, a coat of many colours like a summer fox. At first I hardly recognized her, thrown off by her aged skin and the wideness of her mouth. But when she swayed out and her head tilted back, I recognized her immediately. It was as simple as that.

What was it like to have someone I thought was dead come back to life? At first I went numb inside, frozen as I gazed at her turning away and walking back inside. Then waves of recognition washed over me. You see the Bird I’d known had always had a way of moving that was like a trademark and there it was again after all these years – that waft of gentle, pliant possibilities still surrounding her. As a teenager whenever she’d moved, a bunch of sloping, sexy songs had somehow leaked out, so that there was always another level of revelation around her – about her skin and the swaying motion of a truck, about her hand and the weight of a pear, or the way the edge of a brand new record felt pressed up against her neck, or about her leg and the heat of a boy’s hand as it crept up.

Seeing her then something in me opened up and suddenly the time and distance I’d put between her and me and then and now collapsed and I saw, very briefly, my old self running under an old blue sky and felt a terrible sense of franticness.

But rationality intervened. She was dead and I turned away from where she'd been and turned it off.

"You okay?" June asked in her tough voice and I nodded and made my shaky legs go forwards in a march. "Sure," I said. I was casually calm and my voice was soft.

But as we went up, I held the handrails in the hall and turned the doorknob without flinching. It was so unusual for me that when I sat down in the circle of plastic chairs, I held my hands to my face to check them out.

We were slightly late. A few people grudgingly cleared their throats and shuffled slightly. While it was an outpatient group for anyone connected to the psych ward, we were all of us survivors of one form or another of pain, is what I thought, and under the watching eyes of Dr. Jane we looked the worse for it, like broken examples of human beings, the junk refuse of scrap. Though I often wore good clothes when I went there, under the lights in that room their brand names didn't have any value and I imagined myself looking much like the rest, sadly cast over, full of hopeful, and therefore somehow all the more pitiful, despair. Irrationally, because all I wanted to do was go home, I also felt proud that I fit in there, that I too had pain.

As usual that night, Ted started us off with the newest installment of his personal saga with his roommate. These were slightly pornographic tales that involved a woman from his group home showing him her x-rays. She had a condition, Ted informed us, but beyond that it was possible that she was coming onto him. It was confusing, he wasn't sure. However, according to him, the x-

rays revealed more than just bones, the ones of her torso that week had revealed her underwear and her pubic hair, and somehow, through the penetrating gaze of radiation, the recesses of her vagina. She was haunting him. She was obscene. As he talked about her, some of us giggled at his indignation, including me. "I will always love you," I thought then, although in another world I would have been embarrassed to hang out with him. But nonetheless, I felt touched by his shy obsession, his inability to develop the callousness about sex that most adults have, the belief that it should be easy.

When it was my turn, I also began a story. This was the story about Bird, but I didn't say it that way but rather that, like Ted, I too was now being haunted by someone. I described the small town where we grew up in – the intensity of its beauty and its violence that was ordinary. Then I described Bird and how we'd hung out and her beauty. A sense of calm spread over me just saying her name. Then across the room, Thelma jumped and broke the spell – I jumped back.

"Were you jealous of her?" Dr Jane asked. I scanned his face, looking for approval. While I mostly tried to stay away from him, he was nonetheless the guy with all the answers, hypothetically speaking, and I always referred to him the way the hands of a clock stay glued to the face's centre. When he smiled at something I said, I felt unaccountably happy. And when he omitted me from his general hello or goodbye, I could, at times, feel slighted. How silly, but back then I persisted in believing that he was aware of a master plan for my recovery, that I had only to follow his recipe for things to improve.

So I spent some time considering his question. "Well, maybe," I said, hesitantly. This was the kind of answer he liked, one that opened into grey complexity. "I often felt scared about it," I said finally and suddenly there she was again, not Bird but me, running, I could see my legs pumping and pumping and my franticness filling the whole sky. But it was a franticness I could almost touch, and whereas for months franticness had dogged my steps, here it was contained, like a small dot in front of me.

"Why was that?" Dr Jane asked.

"Because she died," I said, and then I began to cry. Someone passed me a Kleenex and I blew my nose and wiped at my face. There was a small consensus of concerned silence around me. Dr. Jane nodded and smiled. "Well done. This is the most you've shared with us yet," he said before turning to the next person and at that moment I suddenly realized that, no matter how well meaning, I was also a touchdown for him, a kind of clinical victory. And because I suddenly felt hollow then and somehow ashamed, I absolutely hated him.

Later Ted came up to me. This was during the time we all milled around after group, a slow circulation through the room that involved hugs, which I avoided, and an exchange of slogans of support. "Go Violet go!" "Number one this week, Billy! Number one!" "Great decision, Elizabeth." We sounded a lot like a baseball team. Several people thronged around Dr Jane making jokes and asking relevant, self affirming questions, but I ignored them.

"You cried today."

"Un huh," I said.

“And now someone is haunting you.”

“Yup.”

“Just like me.”

“Well yes, except that in my case the woman is dead, so she’s more like a ghost,” I said and this is when it hit me that my whole episode with Bird was probably a hallucination. How sad this made me. I realized I should go talk to Dr Jane but the idea filled me up with despair. Maybe the condition was selective, I reasoned. I remembered the euphoria I’d felt on seeing Bird and how I’d held the handrail on the stairs so triumphantly. I knew then that my vision of her, if that’s what it was, couldn’t have been such a bad thing. So it was that the idea Bird really had survived stayed with me, a swell just below the surface like a waking dream.

“Well, better watch you don’t go loony,” Ted told me.

“You too.”

“I touched the doorknob today,” I said.

“That’s good.”

Then we stood there together, quietly.

“Hey, this week we’re going to kick ass, don’t you think?” he asked, as he always did.

“Lots of ass,” I replied and we moved on with the resiliency people develop after bouts of apparent incurability.

Happily, I have my bottle of hand sanitizer with me now which I get out and use copiously, feeling relieved. I'm not one for lingering in public spaces usually. And so I wait, sitting so quietly I feel like an imposter. Since when in a mall does a person sit so quietly, I wonder.

For many days after that night, I considered the possibility that Bird was alive without saying a word to anyone. This was during a heat wave and the lawnmowers revved and the cicadas screamed. My hands itched and sweat and swelled with soreness. "You're getting worse," Brian said one night while we were watching TV. My hands couldn't stop moving. I shut my eyes and covered my face.

"Brian something's happened to me," I finally said.

I'd never once mentioned Bird or her death to him, or the circumstances in which it had occurred, or my part. In front of us, the girls were playing a game with multi-coloured blocks and Jenny put one into her mouth and I shut my eyes and clenched my teeth to prevent myself from yelling at her.

"What's wrong?" Brian asked.

"I saw someone from my past," I said.

"Oh?"

"Yes, her name is Bird."

"You met a bird?" he asked.

I felt impatience radiate out of him.

I tried to laugh. "Please don't be angry." I said.

I told him about the spread of fear in our neighbourhood, and about Bird and how moved I'd been at seeing her, and how I'd thought she was dead and now believed more and more strongly in the possibility that she was alive. When I finished, Brian cupped his hands around my face and held them there and looked into my eyes for a long time, frowning.

I shook my head free from his hands and laid mine on his shoulders.

"It makes sense, Brian," I said. "If you think about it."

He didn't say anything. "Oh Brian, it's okay, it's okay," I murmured then. In front of us, Caitlin tripped and interlocking blocks tumbled and fell to the carpet and Jennie began to cry. I wanted to say something reassuring to him but couldn't think of anything, so instead I put my head on his lap and soon Jennie came, and then Caitlin leaned in, and Brian was holding us all.

"Fuck," he said, softly.

I nodded slightly then and didn't say anything at all.

Shortly after that, my prescription changed, and I began taking long green pills that resembled tiny aching men, and the franticness I'd felt receded, either because of the pills, or because it was finally fall and in the crisp short raking and leaf blowing outside I perceived less fear about what was to come. I don't exactly know. But while I was less fearful, I didn't stop thinking about Bird for hours and hours, night and day. Such was the impact the possibility she was alive had on me. So I sat outside in the crisp mornings and marveled that the hydrangea bush

was still as anything, that the sound of the neighbour's mower and the wasps and brown flowers dying were all as they were, their destinations unchanging.

And the more I thought about her, the more I grew in the certainty that she was alive. You see, her body was never found. It was only her clothes up on the bridge that morning in their small heap, as though they'd been moved from the floor of her room and plopped down there onto the concrete. A cry of alarm went out in our town as soon as they were discovered and men began trolling the river. It was August and the water was warm. I touched it with my finger.

I had a boring job that year as a cashier but had cancelled my shift that day. I knew some of what had happened to Bird and I was sick with guilt and apprehension. When the cops showed up to take me to the station, I wasn't surprised.

All of us girls implicated in the scandal were questioned and, like a choir that has been separated, we each sang out our part. Leon was arrested briefly and then released. No charges were ever laid. Two weeks later the search for Bird was called off and a memorial service was eventually held in her honour.

My parents were devastated, not so much by Bird's apparent suicide, but by my own betrayal. I was sent to the city for my last year of school, and then to work to pay off the money they'd lent me, which I eventually did.

This is when I began inventing my fiction about myself.

In my fiction, I'd been encased in the country for only as long as it took me to encounter my true self as a girl from the city. So that it seemed like I'd only ever owned stylish shoes that fell apart in mud and rain almost instantly. It's certain

that I lied convincingly, because when I told Brian I could drive an ATV he gave me a look. And when I told him the particulars of Bird's death, he looked away.

I'm looking out the window now at the snow piling higher and higher on the cars in the parking lot. There's nothing to be done for it. People move to the doors and then pull back to wait. Because of that, the smells of wet boots and wet carpet get stronger and stronger and I wish I was somewhere cleaner than where I am. But I don't want to get up, not even for a minute. Not yet. I take a deep calming breath. There are too many chances that I'll miss Bird coming back.

While I wasn't under lock and key, it took me until late October to get out of the house to look for Bird properly. Finally one free afternoon arrived and I drove to the hospital quickly and spent some time around the door to the Emergency. I was looking for a clue, anything really, that would help me confirm her identity, but there was nothing to be seen and all the people eyed me indifferently. The lingerers were out in full force that day in the thin fall sun – the sick in various guises of dress taking air or smoking, the nurses and interns and orderlies on their smoke breaks hunched along the curbs drinking coffee, holding sandwiches or grapes, talking on their phones or staring into the sky distantly, all their eyes hung with the same shadow. They scared me and I wanted to turn back, but just in time I remembered the smallness of my house where I'd been cooped up too often lately.

So I entered the hospital, my hands in my gloves. On the 7th floor, I was met immediately with two sets of double locked doors and the plexi-glass of the nurse's station. Annie was on duty. "What are you doing here?" she asked in surprise. I reached into my bag and took out the flowers I'd clipped so carefully from my yard. "Visiting," I said and she buzzed me in.

On the other side of the doors, the smells of antiseptic and human distress hit me in a way that made me feel dizzy.

"Not back for good, I hope," Annie said with a frown as she looked at me.

"No, no, nothing like that," I said. I held up my flowers carefully. I was clever, I must say that. "I'm looking for a friend." I described Bird the way I saw her last, her hair and her rag-like body. "I called her Bird," I said, "but --"

Annie nodded comprehendingly. "Come on in and take a look."

Now how I moved from interest in the possibility to a place where all my hopes rested on my certainty that Bird was alive I don't know, but on the ward I looked for her in as many rooms as possible, white walls and white hospital issue clashing with people's personal belongings, people looking up at me questioningly. But no face or hair or limbs were Bird's, and I moved more and more quickly, willing her always into the next room in front of me.

I was half-way through the second wing when I bumped into Tessa. She was one of my roommates when I was on the ward, and she was blonde and pretty but for her hard glossed over eyes which went here and there disarmingly. "Look Ray, it's Laurie. Hi Laurie," she said to me. Her hair was long; she was very popular. I pretended not to recognize her and that made her walk even closer, my

disdain like a magnet drawing her to me. "Laurie, Laurie!" she screamed. She was wearing lipstick and eye shadow and several gold chains that shone around her neck. While she looked happier than she had been, I was afraid of her.

"Don't touch me," I hissed. "Leave me." I tried to move around her. As I did, Ray also drew nearer. He was Tessa's boyfriend. "I would ask you out, but I'm going out with Tessy," he'd always say to all the women on the floor constantly. "Laurie!" he called me loudly. But I didn't want them near me. I'd gotten scared and I drew back because they seemed trapped and I was glad then that Bird wasn't there after all. I wanted no part in it. They had not escaped anything.

"How are you any different?" my shrink asked me later when I eventually told him about it. "But I am," I said. If there's anything that knowing Bird's alive has given me, it's hope. "There's a new way," I said then and I still believe it to this day. "A different kind of logic."

The story of Bird and me and part of what happened had a very specific logic. How things began and continued on. How in some ways, Bird and I became part of something that we couldn't, eventually, get away from. This was back in our town when we were girls for whom the trail to womanhood is very narrow, so that despite the space of the land, there was little holding us in one place and much holding us in another which meant that by the time we were 14, it was more than cool to be into danger. We did Pam and sniffed glue out in a shack on a man named Leon's property, his radio shack, he called it, because that's where he kept his transistor. Leon was in his thirties and was into sci-fi and D&D. The shack became our hangout where we would later go on to smoke pot and hash, and what

passed for cocaine in our small town. Bird got her name out there because she would get stoned and stand on the back of an ATV all alone for hours with her arms stretched out to the sky. She would beg us to drive her in circles sometimes and we would in Leon's fields. Laugh, fall down, teenager things.

There were the usual dares and one night there were four of us hanging out on the highway, dark, the end of summer. We were decked out in the trappings of womanhood we hoped – makeup and dresses with straps. Three men stopped in a truck and asked would we like to go for a ride heh heh and we giggled to the moon it was such a thrill to be asked so we all squeezed into the truck and one of the men put his hand on my thigh which was no big deal since that had already happened to me before and so I squirmed and ignored it. You are such beautiful girls, the driver said, and we laughed some more and rolled our eyes at each other it was such a scream to be driving fast through the village with men we didn't know. We have beer in the back, is there anyplace we can go? they ask, so of course we bring them out to Leon's Radio Shack at the back of his property, and they do have beer so we drink and it's a thrill – free beer! – we think. Leon shows up and some other kids – it's a party! – I am happy, falling up, falling down. The man from the truck puts his arm around my shoulder and around my waist. He touches, touches everywhere and tries to pull me into the forest but I say no I want to stay with my friends.

They offer us money – just me, Bird and Rhonda off to the side – and we find this hysterical and I can't stop laughing it's so crazy to be wanted this much. They offer us 20 dollars each which comes out to 60 total but Bird says no, we want a

100. She's really tough the way she speaks up to these adult men and I am deeply impressed, her strength something I want to reproduce somehow in my own body. They say no 75 dollars is the most they will pay but we up it to 80 and then we three girls go off to consult.

I am giggling but underneath I'm scared now too. It's not that I've never done this before but Adam was my age and I thought I was in love. We giggle, we discuss, I'm the most scared but we think of all that money, it's sooo much, and this will take about 5 minutes which is nothing. Do we dare? Do we dare? We do our special handshake, three taps, open palm slide, entwine, squeeze our fingers, and go back.

I lead my guy – I think his name was Chris – into the pines and we lie down on his sweater. He takes out his thing which I've been feeling for hours but when I am face to face with it I don't know if I can anymore – it's wide and there's so much hair, Adam's wasn't like that, his was smaller and pinkish – so I run from the forest back to the party. I am not giggling anymore.

This is how it began. There were other nights later, when I had grown breasts and learned how to cross my legs, when other men offered and I did dare. We all did. Leon became our manager and, increasingly, we became working girls. I went to the edge of who I was – and pushed off.

I was still a girl when I had sex for money, and I had a girl's dreams of being found by a prince, except in my dreams this would be the one man who would see I was too beautiful to be used for sex. It would be the usual scenario but before we really even got started, he would look into my eyes and see something in me

which no else ever had. I dreamt about this over and over again. Such innocence frightens me now, but I am not a girl anymore. But back then though, ensnared by that logic, they mostly forgot that we were girls who played volleyball and did math homework. We were bitches, sluts, prostitutes, whores. We were bad. I want to tell you that inside the body of every whore there is a soft place and that it's just the same as everybody else's. This is what it seemed like nobody could even dare imagine.

I went searching and searching for Bird everywhere.

“Stop searching!” Brian told me. “This is completely unrealistic.” I told Brian again about how I'd touched the railing after seeing Bird the first time. See, finally, not afraid of death. But he said I had to let her go. And finally, because I kept searching (for how could I not?), he said I had to choose which life I wanted to live. “Your choice – the past or the present.” That was three weeks ago. And now here I am.

I stroll over to the muffin place and buy myself something to eat while keeping my eye out. I'm worried now. Where is she? Back at the bench, I get antsy and I rub my hands over and over not knowing at all what to do. I will be late for Brian. I need to be vigilant. I must find Bird. I eat my muffin. Finally I can't take it anymore and I get up and walk around.

It's later now and the mall is filthy, overflowing with people who must have just gotten off work. I look for the miserable ones and avoid the cheerful. Inlaid in the Christmas music, a sad song I used to know plays out. Each face is a wall.

I'm just about to give up when I discover the way to the farmer's market. It's a glassed in place where they are selling the pine trees. And this is where I finally find her.

Immediately, my heart rate goes up. Bird. Bird. I watch her for awhile, not wanting to overwhelm her, still unsure. She's squatting by a pillar, her hand out for money. Her hair is still wheat, a golden field gone over slightly, and she's got the tan and squint of too much weather. But over this is her softness, that's what comes out the most, the softness of her body leaning against the cement gives her all the likeness of a flower just in season. A man is standing against the pillar above her, his eyes going back and forth amongst the shoppers as if he is reading us, or them I should say, since I am not one of them.

It's funny how I feel – confused with gladness and grief and then unexpected laughter comes rising up in the back of my throat. I'm nervous. It's not what I expected. But I move through it, and move through the crowd of walkers until I'm standing right before her and then kneel down. "Bird? Is that you?" I ask. I feel like a little girl seeking absolution although this is the absolute opposite of how I want to be. Her face up close is harder than it looked. I see the roughness of her skin and, on her chin, a glimmer of saliva. There is a toughness to the blossom. Her eyes give nothing away. "Bird?"

She looks at me and laughs. This is the kind of laugh that comes from being in unstable situations, a laugh that can be interpreted as wisely sardonic or happy and glad by the hearer. I know it perfectly. It's a laugh you toss up, waiting to see how things scatter.

“Hey,” she says. Her voice has that sleepy quality I remember. Even now all these years later.

“It’s Laurie. From Campleton. I think we were kids together. Do you remember me?”

Her eyes narrow in suspicion suddenly. “What do you want?” she asks me.

“I’d like to – Can we talk for awhile? Can I buy you a coffee?”

She looks up at her companion. I pull out my wallet and put some money down on the ground in front of them, maybe forty, or sixty, or eighty dollars, I’m not sure, holding it with my hand so it doesn’t fly away in the business of the crowded hallway.

“Well sure you can,” she says slowly. “Laurie?”

“Yes, yes. It’s me, Bird. Don’t you remember me?”

“God, it’s been awhile,” she says, and then she laughs and I laugh, and she slowly brings her hand to her cheek and lets it rest there as she contemplates me.

“You’re magic,” I say. “I always thought you were. Look at you! Back from the dead finally.”

“Oh Hon, I’m death warmed over.”

She’s wearing little high heeled boots that quiver and a hockey jacket that she pulls closed as she stands up. We walk together, her hips and ankles and head and hair swaying over to her left and then to the right as though there was wind although there isn’t any. “I can’t believe I found you!” I say. Bird sings “Now that I’ve found yooouuu,” and turns back to her male friend and laughs. He tags behind us by a few feet, his eyes still shifting around all over. I wonder if I

should introduce myself, but decide not to. I head to the Kwik-Wick, which is the only restaurant I've really noticed in the mall, and hold the door open for us to go in.

"Order the best thing," I say and they quickly order Pepsis and Steak sandwiches with fries and gravy. The table cloths are red and white checkered and speak of down home values and pancakes and I can't quite make myself speak of what's important although I've imagined this conversation a hundred times over. I fall back on the standards. "So how are you?" I ask Bird, and she says, "I'm good, I'm good. I gotta be." She tells me about traveling around and a course she was taking in interior decorating and finally about coming up here with her boyfriend and how all their worldly goods were stolen. "Hard times," she says. All the while, she's looking at me strangely, wonderingly. I put my hands under the table.

"Remember the quarry?" I ask her. She sucks on her cigarette and her cheeks get so bony and pale she really does look like a ghost. "We were young then – sheesh!" she says and I nod. "Too young." I almost give my head a shake too – tsk, tsk, too bad – although this is not the direction I want things to go in. No, not this banality! There are big things to consider and I pause to gather my thoughts.

But they are eating dessert now, suddenly, and I realize I'm almost out of time. "I thought you died," I blurt out, finally. "No of course not – not me," she says. Her eyes are blue and grey and green. "It was horrible after you left," I say. "Yeah. Had to be," she murmurs. She is dusting off her lips with her napkin. I want her to be proud or angry or ashamed but she's not. Instead she coughs up

phlegm and gets lipstick on her napkin. The waitress comes by with a coffee and Bird leans her head against the wall for a second with the breeziness that is the Bird I remember, a girl happy about a meal in a restaurant. I want her to explain it all to me then, how she pulled off her escape, but I see that I've lost my chance – the money is burning a fast hole in her pocket and she looks at me as though she's mostly already gone in her imagination. Both of them are like that now, shifting and tapping, fidgeting, yearning. Too soon, they stand up. "Well this is it then," I say, standing too. "I'm sorry," I tell her lamely. She must know what I mean, but she just gives me a blank look. "Hey, no problem," she mutters. And then she waves at me a bit. "Thanks," she says and then she turns away.

I watch them run out of the mall together, thinking that of course she'll look back for old time's sake, but she doesn't. They are laughing as they hit the revolving door at full speed and disappear into its pie-shaped piece together.

I sit back down and then I slowly walk out of that restaurant and go to Zellers. I believe I'm in shock as I pick things up automatically in the aisles – socks for the kids, plastic gadgets for me and Brian, chocolates, a book on astronomy. It's the oddest feeling. Nothing matters. Even my hands are numb.

It's only when I look at my watch that I remember Brian. Damn, I have to get to him!

I get in the check-out line and wait even though the line is long. There are a couple people in front of me making really large purchases. Why didn't you do that earlier? I think at them, angrily.

So it takes me twenty minutes to get out of the store. Ten more to walk back to information and stand in line waiting to discover that the roads are better. I attempt to sprint through the hallway after that, but half way along I slip, barely keeping myself upright. I keep running. And because I'm thinking of Bird I remember that day then, my feet pounding and the look of the sky the day she died.

There was a party the night before, a stag, and Leon had called Bird because that's who they wanted. Everybody wanted Bird. I was there that evening, so was Moira, joking around before the guys arrived. When they pulled up in their van we giggled and then Bird swayed out towards them like a lithe piece of grass in the wind, perching her head on her arm when she leaned inside. A bunch of yells and whoops went up from the van, they were riled up, drunk, happy. She turned – I always tried to copy the way Bird turned because she could make turning look so riveting, as if only she were less under the force of gravity – and walked slowly over to the open shack where Leon was waiting. The five guys got out and ran after her, punching each other, rolling their eyes. Me and Moira had been sharing a cigarette as we sat next to each other on some cinderblocks, and she bumped me with her arm. “That's Rainer, my cousin's friend,” she said. “He's psycho.” I looked over, afraid and bored and sad. Leon was talking to the guys as he rolled some twenty dollar bills and put them into his pocket. “Well that's it for me,” I said and got up to go home. I was supposed to work the next morning, early.

Bird had been on something, I'm not sure what, but she'd been high and when I reached my car which was parked out on the road, I could hear Bird – or someone –screaming, really loud, and I had almost gone back again – nervous pacing, fingers raveling, tucking my hair behind my ears – but hadn't. Instead, I'd turned the car around and listened out the window along the road, hoping everything was okay, that she was just having a bad trip. So I was there listening, just about to turn on the radio and drive away, when I heard her voice stop.

The next day she was gone.

But she's alive again! The ice in my stomach suddenly melts and I'm flesh and blood and flooded with emotion. I stop running and look around, seeing her face in everyone, in the old lady in the grey wool and in the off duty postman and in the mother with the little girl on a string. Bird, Bird, I say, holding out my arms. And I know then exactly how she escaped and I imagine it all – the way she must have felt at first, her need to get clean driving her on – getting out of her clothes very fast, leaving her purse and rings – frantic, how very frantic she was. The sound of the water just below like a song. She probably thought about us all then and said goodbye, her body already craving the waves, the feeling of being free. And then she put out her arms and flew.

I'm near a tropical plant in the hallway and I touch its shiny leaves and rough bark as I imagine this. And then I plunge my hands into the earth and hold them up, wet and tingling, alive. Exactly as they should be. I start walking towards the exit again now, quickly. Afraid of nothing. I can hardly wait to tell Brian.