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**Here, Now:
Stories**

Peter Eastwood

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

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

March 1998

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0-612-39421-2

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Abstract

Here, Now: Stories

Peter Eastwood

The four long stories in this collection focus on men struggling with questions of responsibility -- personal, familial, moral -- that characterize their relationships with others: the betrayal felt by a teenage theatre usher once he realizes the projectionist he admires is an unfaithful and abusive husband; the anxieties faced by a young man after his partially artificial teeth come loose just before he proposes to his girlfriend; the strange connection made between a displaced university instructor and an immigrant taxi driver; and the new hope found by a young father during the intrusive visit of his bizarre, born-again father-in-law. All of these men face significant and often unexpected dilemmas as they negotiate their ways through contemporary urban lives that are suddenly revealed to be different than the ones they envisioned themselves living. These stories reposition these characters on the precipice of new discoveries about their lives, wherein which their recognition of the realities of present time and place is a necessary first tentative step towards maturity.

Acknowledgements

“Readograph” was originally published, in different form, in *Epoch*.

The generous support of a Concordia Graduate Fellowship and a Teaching Assistantship offered by the Department of English allowed me to complete these stories. I would like to thank both Concordia University and the Department of Graduate English for this gift of time and opportunity, as well as Susan Brown, for her relentless support with all things Concordian.

I am grateful to Catherine Bush for supervising this thesis, for her editorial wisdom and for helping me to find these stories and this collection.

I would also like to thank the following people in particular, for their ideas and suggestions concerning material in these stories: Scott Lawrence, Stephanie Bolster, Elisabeth Harvor, Eileen Walls, Todd Babiak, Kevin Eastwood.

These stories would not be here, now, without everything my parents, Ruby and Peter Sr., have done for me.

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And it seemed to them that in only a few more minutes a solution would be found and a new, beautiful life would begin; but both of them knew very well that the end was still a long, long way away and that the most complicated and difficult part was only just beginning.

-- Anton Chekhov, "Lady With Lapdog"

READOGRAPH

The readograph tells you what movie is playing. I know, because I'm the one who changes it, up above over the street, little red and green letters that tell you what is on, sometimes the names of the stars, if they're a draw. But that's it. I used to go up there every Thursday night when we changed a show. I'd take down the letters and replace them with the new show, careful not to drop any letters on little old ladies down below. Then I'd unlock the poster case and replace the posters, and wait around for the projectionist to break down the film so I could carry the two canisters of film down the stairs and leave them by the door to be picked up in the morning. Then I'd go home, sleep for a couple of hours, and go to school before coming back the next evening to work. I used to do this every week, until we got a new projectionist.

He came in on Friday, like a new movie. That's how I kept time, by what movie we're playing, like I remember playing *Forrest Gump* when I first got the job a year ago. We changed every week. Repertory, it's called, which means we play a different movie every week, not always first-run. Single screen, which they're not building anymore, only multiplexes where you can choose between a dozen Hollywood films to see. Soon they'll shut this place down, I know, and I'll be out of a job, but hopefully not before I'm out of high school, because as far as I'm concerned, this is the best job in the world to have. Before this, we had another projectionist, and he was old and miserable and wore brown clothes. When I saw the

new guy I knew I wouldn't have to yell at him to turn up the sound or adjust the focus.

He came in that day and nodded. Just nodded, to me, like he respected my being there. "Hey," he said, "you'll have to show me around this place when you get a minute." I wasn't sure if he was being serious or not. If he had worked around any theatres he should have known I have a lot of minutes, usually around one-hundred-and-twelve minutes, the average length of most features. I mean, there are times I am busy, like when the shows are going in and I have to rip tickets and seat people who come late, but most of the time I am free to do what I want.

He went right up to the booth, right then, I guess to check out the equipment. He came down about ten minutes later. He just stood there on the balcony landing, and I noticed his hands on the railing first, like a close up, bony tan hands that could thread film. "How long you been here?" he said, the words falling down to me and landing on my forehead.

"About a year," I said.

"This is a nice neighbourhood. Very different from all the downtown theatres. Away from everything."

"Yes." I wasn't sure if he wanted me to talk. "We like it here, it's more casual, like neighbourly, people like to come here, I think."

"How old is this place anyway?"

I told him it was built fifty or sixty years ago. I was going to add in my joke about how we liked to call it a monoplex but I didn't. He was silent for a moment or so. It seems to me that a conversation is like blowing up a balloon. You have to be careful, to put the right amount of air and words into the conversation for it to expand, for it to grow and everything, but you can't go too far, because a new conversation is sort of tense, more taut, which means it can break easier. If you say the wrong thing the conversation might just blow up in your face.

"A lot of the place is run down," I went on. "Those curtains up there" -- I pointed to the ugly green curtains hanging above the lobby area -- "they're falling apart. There's hundreds of bugs trapped in them."

The conversation was about to blow up. I couldn't believe what I was saying. I was talking about bugs to a new projectionist. But I am being honest. There are bugs, you can see them, and I believe in telling people the truth.

Sometimes people call up and ask if the movie we're playing is any good. I can't lie, but I can't say what I really think of some of the movies we play. That's not good business. The problem is, I see quite a lot of movies, and I guess I should say that I'm quite sophisticated when it comes to films. Films, that is. Not movies. That's how you tell. My friends all call them movies, the ones with several car chases, but then they don't work in a movie theatre. So when people call I usually just say, "I haven't seen it yet," which is safe. One day I'll tell people what to see, maybe I'll be a film critic or something.

"You're pretty young to be doing door." He smiled then, and when he smiled his face bent in two, like folding a piece of paper. When he said this I knew I liked him.

"I'm sixteen," I said.

"I don't suppose Bill ever had you up in the booth."

"No. He didn't talk much."

He laughed. "Wild Bill. That's what we called him. Why don't you come up later? I want to ask you some things."

"Sure," I said, and I felt like I do when I sit back and the coming attractions are just coming on. I went over to the concession, grabbed a handful of popcorn, and went into the theatre. "I'm going on a break," I announced to the candy girl, and I watched about twenty minutes of the movie and came out. I can do that. I went up to the balcony, then up to the large steel doors. PROJECTION BOOTH somebody had scrawled on the door with black Jiffy marker. They should have a proper sign, I thought.

I knocked a couple of times and opened the door and went in. He was sitting back in the chair, reading a newspaper, and he looked up. The booth was warm, a little room, and it glowed yellow from the light coming from the inside of the projectors, like a wood stove in an old cabin. We still had twin projectors, and changeovers, the little bell to signal nine seconds to the next change. I used to sit in the back of movie theatres, right next to the booth, so I could listen for the bell and count the nine seconds to make sure the projectionist got it. Nine seconds would go

by and then the show would go on, and no one would know except me and the projectionist.

"Like a machine," he said, watching me. "A machine that shows us what we all want to do." I listened to him and looked at the inside of the projector, the blinding bulbs burning like a fire, thinking about what he said. We were playing *Jurassic Park: The Lost World*.

"You like film?"

"Yes. I'm very interested in it." I wanted to sound old. I hoped he didn't think I was too young, like he was teaching me something. I never know how old to act, like in my interview for this place. I wanted to be confident, to show them I loved movies, but if you want me to be honest, I think I got the job because I live two blocks away.

"What do you think of this thing?" he asked, gesturing towards the projector, the reels of film disappearing over the edge like a waterfall. I told him I felt it was very commercial moviemaking, but well acted. I said I thought the editing was intrusive. I asked him what he thought.

"Oh it was good. Not bad actually. Yeah, I like it."

I should have told him I hadn't seen it.

"I notice this door has no lock. It's really important to have this place locked. I have some expensive tools I wouldn't want stolen. You know, by the cleaners. I'll have to speak to . . ."

"Gordon," I said.

"Gordon." He repeated my manager's name. "I'll tell him about the lock. Maybe you can help. Oh, by the way, I'm Ken." He put out his hands, his projectionist hands.

"I'm Len," I said, and we both smiled at the coincidence, like the movies. Sometimes things are like that.

Ken was standing on the landing with Gordon when I came in on Saturday. He was sipping some Coke out of one of our water cups.

"Hey, Len. How's school?"

I wished he wouldn't bring up school. I was at work, and school didn't matter then. My parents worry I work too much. I told them they should be proud of me, one of the youngest doormen in the city, but they didn't understand, even though I let them in for free.

"You want to work on that lock tonight?"

Ken glanced over at our manager. "Sure, Len, probably. Sounds good. I might have somebody coming in." He smiled at Gordon. "I mean, just to visit."

I let in a lot of people. I'm quite popular at the theatre. People from school often come by, on a Friday night, and my manager always lets me sneak them in. You have to be discreet, so nobody in the line-up gets upset, but all doormen let in people. It is very common. You'd be surprised what goes on in theatres.

* * *

She came in around seven-thirty, like she knew when to come, when the show has gone in and everyone is pretty much hanging around except for the projectionist, who has to get up and change reels every twenty minutes. She had a very soft face, but scared, like she saw a lot of bad things. I imagined her as the kind of person who grabs your arm when you go to a movie with them, even if it isn't a really scary part.

"Is Ken in?"

"He's upstairs," I told her. "Up in the booth. Do you know where that is? Want me to buzz him?"

"Yes, thank you."

Ken came down right away. He smiled when he saw her, and put his hand around her waist. He kissed her on the forehead, and then sort of buried his face in her chest for a moment. I hoped he wouldn't forget I was there.

"Len, this is Caroline. Caroline, Len here is one of the best ushers in the city."

"Nice to meet you," we both said at about the same time, but I sort of drowned her out.

"Here, come in. You seen this yet?" he said to her, smiling a lot. I started thinking about my door log. I'm supposed to write in everyone who comes in, and what time they enter and leave. I was trying to remember if he had said, "my wife" Caroline, or not, and I couldn't remember, so I just wrote "Caroline," and under "Purpose" I put, "to visit projectionist." They went up to the booth.

I started measuring the size of the screw holes for the lock on the projection door. My manager had put me in charge of that, I didn't mind. I was reading up on how to install the bolt properly, my manager had got me a power drill and everything. I couldn't do it during the movie though. I realized I didn't know what size screws I needed so I buzzed Ken.

He didn't answer at first. When he did he seemed busy. "You can figure it out Len," he said, "you know what you're doing. We'll look at it later."

I went into the theatre for a while and watched part of a love scene. I'm not a pervert, but watching the nude scenes just becomes part of your job. You have to check the theatre every now and then, to make sure there's nobody making out in the balcony, although if there is, I usually just let them go ahead. Sometimes I watch for a moment.

When Ken came out that night Caroline was still there. They both looked different. She looked a lot more comfortable now, not so nervous. There was color in her face and her clothes looked like they fit better. That's what love should do to people. It should make you look comfortable, like a warm breeze.

Ken looked past me, over to the manager's office. "Len, is Gordon still around?"

"No." Gordon always left early and let me lock up, especially when there was a hockey game.

"Well I guess we better get going, Caroline. You go ahead and start the car." Then they kissed. On the lips, right there in front of me. I thought this was kind of funny since they were about to drive away, but sometimes people can't stand to be away from each other, like in *Casablanca*. I've seen that about ten times.

Ken started to go. He turned around. He was one of those people who always talk to you just as they're about to go. "Len, we'll finish the lock tomorrow, okay?"

"I don't work tomorrow," I said, slowly.

"Well next time then. Thanks for everything tonight," and he left.

Walking home that night I thought I saw Ken driving alone, but I must have been wrong. Sometimes the eyes play tricks on you, like motion pictures. Twenty-four frames of film per second, each being stopped for one twenty-fourth of a second, and we think the image is moving. But it is not. Those kind of thoughts move around in my head easily, especially when I'm walking home at night and the sky seems oily and dark.

She came in often after that. Usually once a week, sometimes a couple of nights that I worked. Once when I was up in his booth and he was teaching me how to splice trailers I asked him.

"Caroline seems very nice."

He looked at me carefully but not angry. "You like her, Len?" he said. He looked uncomfortable. "Do you ever talk to her?"

"Sometimes. Just a bit," I said, although we had only talked about movies. She didn't see much, considering she was with a projectionist. I slipped holding the film and he corrected me. His hands were quick and strong.

"Do you have any kids?" I asked, imagining him holding something small, saying the silly things parents have to say. I wondered if he made home movies.

He didn't say anything for a moment. "Yes, I have a wonderful girl." He seemed very intense, like he was studying the film or something. I could see his eyes squinting, rewinding the words again and again, wonderful girl, wonderful girl, wonderful girl.

"How old is she?" I wanted to ask, but I didn't. Maybe she was disabled or something. Or slow. I was going to tell him about how our school was getting used a lot as a location for some of the American films and TV movies that were always being shot in town, and how often they needed extras, if his daughter was interested. But he didn't seem to want to talk about her. I didn't want him to worry about it.

"You want a drink?" I said instead, and his eyes looked like they were thanking me. "Coke and Orange half and half?" I said to him. He nodded and smiled, and I let him do his changeover while I went to the concession with our paper cups.

One night the film broke down. I know because the screen went blank all of a sudden for a few seconds. I thought the film might have broken. This happens sometimes. Nobody realizes that film can be vulnerable. Little pieces of celluloid,

like plastic really. Nobody realizes how easy it is to break something like that under the stress of having to be stopped twenty-four times a second under an incandescent light, which is what happens. Ken had shown me one night.

I went up because I thought he might need a hand, a flashlight or something. The door was locked, with the bolt I had installed a week before. It looked good, and worked very well. I was going to knock but then the film was back on screen, and I told the people who had come out that it was just a breakdown.

My manager came down. He looked worried.

"Len, what happened? Three people complained the film went down. Were you up there?" My manager doesn't know much about how the film is shown. He just books things, and calls movies "product" like a candy bar or something.

I told him I didn't know. "I think it broke or something. But he fixed it really fast."

"Is that woman still here?"

"What woman?" I said, even though I knew. I didn't see her come in that night. I no longer wrote her in my door log. Gordon went up to the booth.

Caroline came down after Gordon went in. She looked nervous and her clothes seemed uncomfortable again. She looked at me quickly.

"Was it serious?" she said. She talked like she was trying to suck in the words as soon as they came out of her mouth.

"No. It wasn't. It just broke, didn't it?"

She stared at me, surprised. "You mean . . . Yes, it just broke. I don't really know these things."

She said she had to go. As she was leaving I said "Take care" to her, which I don't say to anyone, but it seemed like the thing to say.

Gordon came down a little while later. His face was serious, like he had just seen *Platoon*. "Len, I don't want you spending so much time up there in the future. You're distracting Ken. He has his own job to do. Okay?"

I nodded but didn't say anything, and was going to go back inside the theatre but half a dozen people came out just then asking where the washrooms were, because it was the one hour and fourteen minute point of the movie, exactly when the large Coke sets in.

The next week a girl came in, right before the late show. She walked right up to me at the cashier desk.

"Do you work here?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, suddenly conscious of my red bow tie.

"You the door guy or whatever?"

"Yes," I said. I was looking at her eyes. They were small, like not much got into her head that she didn't want, like mosquito netting.

"Is Ken Prince working tonight?"

When she talked I realized that although she looked a lot older, she was my age. We were playing *Silence of the Lambs*, which was 18A, so I had been

wondering if I should I.D. her, even though I could go in and watch it anytime I wanted.

"Yes. I think he's busy right now though." Caroline was upstairs.

She smiled. "It's all right, I was just wondering."

"Did you want me to say who it was?"

"I'm his daughter," she said, smiling. When she smiled her lips came together, like a purse. Then she frowned. "Look, I know he's having an affair."

When you look into a camera you can focus things. You look at a person's face and you can't see the little lines that make their nose and mouth clearly. This was how I felt. When she said this it was like something was out of focus and then somebody pulled it in tight, too tight, too fast, and my eyes hurt. I looked up at the curtains.

"My mother thinks so, and now I know. You knew, didn't you?"

"What?" It came out like a small noise, not a word.

"You know her. What does she look like?" Her eyes were very intense, a beam of projection. I felt like a screen, 70 mm, little silver panels waiting to reflect but all I could do was blink a lot.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Prove it. Show me upstairs right now."

I wanted to take her by the hand and walk up into the dark together. We would wander up into the balcony, past the seats and the storage room, into the

booth. But I was scared, scared like when you go into a corner in a long tracking shot and you know something might jump out at you.

I tried to look at her but her eyes were beaming in my face and it hurt my eyes. I kept looking at the green curtains.

"There are a lot of bugs in our curtains. It is a very old theatre."

"What?"

I was talking about the bugs on our curtains with one of the most beautiful girls I had ever seen in my life. I was talking about the bugs on our curtains with one of the most beautiful girls I have ever seen in my life. I was also repeating myself in my mind, a hundred takes of the same shot.

She started to walk past me to the steps. I went over to her and tried to stop her.

"Please, don't," I said.

She stopped, and smiled at me. I didn't like her smile. It was funny, I thought she had the most beautiful face in the world, but I didn't like her smile.

"I'm coming back. I have to go. I have a date. With a guy," she said to me.

Then she left, through the doors and into the night like a dissolve.

He came down later after the show.

"Len, could you get me a Coke and Orange. Make that two."

"Are you allowed to have guests up there?"

Ken looked at me like I confused him.

"Your wife was here." I don't know why I told him this. I could lie.

Everybody lies in the movies.

"Did she want to see me?"

"No, she just wanted to say hi."

Ken looked scared.

"I told her you were busy."

Ken's eyes were looking for a place to focus, like a seat in the dark without a flashlight.

I couldn't say anything else to him. I realized what I was saying was like dialogue, it didn't seem real.

"She said she would come back."

I noticed Caroline was upstairs, on the landing. She was just staring at me, and I felt all this light on me again, but all I wanted was to stop feeling like a screen.

I didn't see Caroline after that night. A couple of nights later Ken called me up to the booth before the show. His eyes were red and his face was moist, and his body looked tired and weak, like it had been hard to squeeze the drops out.

"It won't work," he kept saying, "the damn thing won't keep going."

"What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? This whole damn place is falling apart! How the hell am I supposed to do my job with this equipment!"

"Is it the projector?"

"With this goddamn place it could be anything. Like those bugs of yours. There are probably bugs or some shit in this machine. That's why it won't work."

"I don't think there can be --"

"There's bugs in there, dammit! Look at it, Len! The damn projector won't work. That's it."

I looked at him and I realized something. The heart is made of a very strong material, I thought, like celluloid. It can be bent, rolled, snapped, stepped on, but usually you can always fix it and splice it back together. But then sometimes, sometimes it just breaks, right there in between all the frames and pictures of what you see and what you're supposed to do and you can't show it to anyone because they won't understand it. But I was thinking too much, and I knew I was thinking too much because he wasn't saying anything. Sometimes you have to say something just to fill up space. I thought about cartoon bubbles, when people say things, and how I could just put one up above his head, and I knew it would say, "I love Caroline, but she is not my wife, and I have a daughter." That's the kind of thing your head does to you sometimes.

But I just nodded. I didn't talk about bugs, not this time.

"Len, we've got to do something about these bugs."

I knew her when she came in. I was waiting, like the final scene in a movie, and when I saw the woman waiting outside the doors one night after we had cashed

out I knew it was her. She looked a lot like her daughter, and when I unlocked the door to let her in I realized I did not know what I was going to say.

Her eyes were strong, focused, but she looked past me, as though she was watching something that I was not a part of. She reminded me a bit of Donna Reed in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

"I want to see Mr. Prince." She called him Mr. Prince. I wondered if she always called him that, around the kitchen at home.

I had been rehearsing what I was going to say, but then I felt her eyes. My lips changed words on me, like flipping coins. "Tails," they said, and "You can go right up" came out. She glanced at me, nodded quickly, like he did when I first met him, and went up the stairs. She seemed to know where it was.

It was a Thursday. I should have been organizing the letters in the readograph room because it was my job, not going up and sitting in the back row of the balcony, in front of the booth, which is what I did, after making sure she had had enough time to go up.

I walked in quietly, ducking underneath the little square projection windows, even though they were much higher than my head. If I jumped I could put a shadow of my head on screen; I had tried this before. I sat down quickly. The door was closed, but I couldn't tell if my bolt was in place or not.

I could hear sounds in the booth. They were loud, but I couldn't hear what they were saying. I concentrated, and I felt as though I could see the words, and it was like two blurry cartoon bubbles, one for each person, and they got faster, and the

bubbles were now bumping off and hitting each other and I knew they were going to break and then there was a final sound -- a strong slapping sound, the kind you hear in the movies -- so I turned my head and looked at the screen and Richard Gere and Julia Roberts were kissing.

I saw the sound in my head. *WHACK*. Sound in a movie is edited after, on a soundstage, I saw it done on a T.V. show once, these actors make fake noises and they dub it in after by splicing film together -- I was trying to remember how they do the slap noise, how they make it sound just like a hand hitting a face -- *WHACK*, I heard the sound, but I couldn't get an image, the image of someone making a slapping sound, a strong sound, the kind made by someone with projectionist hands.

I noticed something near the door to the balcony. Something moved. I felt my flashlight in my hand.

His daughter was standing by the door. I turned the flashlight off.

"What are you doing?" she said. In the dark her face was softer, more uncertain. I looked at her and I thought about her life, with her mother, and Ken. I wondered if she had heard the slap. What was it like, I wondered, to live with a man with strong hands? Had she heard that sound before? She just stared at me.

"I'm watching the movie," I said. Instead I watched the lights from the projection windows coming over our heads, great beams of light shooting out from the windows between us, little flecks of dust from our old theatre hovering there in the light. I had never kissed a girl. I thought of this, then. She took a step towards

me. I loved the way she moved. I was falling in love with motion, I thought, the way her arms moved first, then her legs.

"She's in there, isn't she?" she said. She looked scared this time, not like before when she had first come in.

There was a night shot in the movie and the lighting dimmed. There were no bright lights in between us anymore, just the dust. There was only dust between us.

For a moment we stood, staring there, in the dark, in the balcony, and all I could think of was what Ken had told me about the projector, and the bugs, and I imagined little flies, wasps, flying around in front of the lens, little wings being fried to a crisp by a couple of frames of *Pretty Woman*, their burning shadows dark on the giant screen up front, people wondering what had happened to the movie, and people falling in love and everything they had paid for.

I could have told her then, but I didn't. "I think you should go home," I said, carefully.

She looked at me for a moment, then turned and walked out through the door. When I got out she had gone.

I knew which letters I wanted. They were all marked in their little shelves, for each letter, A's, B's, etc. about twice as many E's, T's, and S's, because these got used a lot. Often letters broke.

I carried the ladder outside, around the block to the front, and passed the restaurant next door where I usually waved, but tonight I didn't. I climbed the ladder

carefully in my dress shoes, slipping a bit on a few of the rungs, and got up on the little platform and looked out over the street. There were street lights that went down the hill in perfect lines, like aisle lights. There were several broken extra letters lying on the side of the ledge, little 1:30's left over from daily matinees that did not exist anymore.

I took down the letters that were up, and laid them out neatly, then quickly put up all the letters I had brought. I went down the ladder, carefully again, took it down, and laid it next to the theatre. I knew my manager would be mad but I could put it away tomorrow, maybe.

I did not look until I was a block away, following the streetlights up the street. Then I turned. All the letters were perfectly centered. In dark red they read "THE PROJECTIONIST HIT HIS WIFE." Underneath it still said, "MAT SAT SUN 2:00."

I took off my tie as I walked, and wondered who would see it, if people would think it was a movie. For a moment I thought about going back, in case Ken missed a changeover, so I could tell Gordon, but I didn't. I kept walking, steadily, and I felt like I did when you're young and you go to a matinee and you come out and the lights hit your eyes and you can't see, even though the night was oily and dark.

TEETH

Sometimes you are sure of things, my friend Rye says, you just know. We'll be having a drink at The Sad and Unfortunate Bar we like to go to, although that's getting less frequent because I just don't have the time these days, and most of the time I know exactly what his answers are. But the last time he said this, I asked him what, I mean, what are you sure of. I was looking for clues, hints, anything I might be able to use, although it's been awhile since he's given me anything like that.

"You know," Rye said. "Like the first few chords of a song with a great guitar riff, right there in the beginning, you know. On a nice day in spring. That kind of thing. The opening of *The Untouchables*, that Morricone score during the credits, Duh da dump. I mean, you know, right?"

That night when he said this I just nodded, finished my beer, and told him I'd see him later. I got to Moira's place and she was still awake when I knocked, which I do even though I have a key. Her smile seemed pleased to see me, but her eyes looked a little busy. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"There's two homeless men downstairs on that bench," she said. I knew what she meant. There was a small park just outside her window. We'd often watch people there, late at night, through the slit in the blinds over her bed. "I was thinking of asking them if they wanted to come up and warm up with some tea."

"I'm sure they're fine." She does this often, and I can't understand it, this asking strange people, usually men, into her life. You never know, I say, I mean, you

really never know with people, what's going to happen. But what can I say? "It's not actually that cold outside."

Two days ago, while in the middle of Christmas dinner with Moira's parents, my teeth came loose. I wasn't even chewing anything that hard, not even the turkey, which was moist and tender anyway. Mrs. Williams had just said grace. I was chewing on a bread roll which I didn't even need to eat in the first place. It was just one tooth at first. I felt it immediately, and knew what that meant.

I suppose I must have looked genuinely alarmed. Mr. Williams glanced over at me. "What's the matter Chris? Bit off more than you can chew?"

He frequently told jokes that usually, under different circumstances, made me smile weakly. I liked him. "No," I said, "actually, um, one of my teeth just came loose."

"Oh no," he said.

"Was it the turkey?" Mrs. Williams asked.

"No, I'm okay," I said, getting up. "I'm sorry, excuse me, but I just want to check this out."

"My God Chris. What happened?" Moira had gotten up now too. She looked scared. She was wearing a navy dress I liked; it set off her eyes perfectly, making them seem even larger and deeper than they already were.

"Don't worry," I said, "this has happened before."

“This has happened before?” I knew what she was thinking; that she’d never heard about it, which was true.

“Not for a while. My front teeth are fake.” I was walking to the hallway washroom as I said this, my head a bit dizzy, feeling the teeth with my hand. The front ones were definitely loose though, and the whole interconnected bridgework that held them together was probably going to come apart, I figured. I realized that my mouth was tired, I’d been smiling a lot this evening. When I looked in the mirror in the washroom, I saw a twenty-six-year-old guy whose front teeth were loose.

It happened eight years ago, more suddenly than anything else I can think of that has ever happened to me. *Suddenly*. They came in with baseball bats, about a dozen of them, and as soon as they came in the door, which I guess was open, they started using them. They started smashing out windows in the living room before anybody knew what was happening, pushing those of us who were in the way *out* of the way, and then went into the other rooms, which seemed quickly full of them. Their faces did not have any particular expression on them; they did not seem to be angry or vindictive, but rather, just a group of kids about our age, wearing baseball caps backwards like we did, jeans and T-shirts and windbreakers like us. But the difference was that they had come in the house looking to take some things, and they didn’t really care that we happened to be there, which somehow made what they were doing more frightening.

There weren't even many of us left at the party. A few guys and girls, maybe six or seven. It was shortly after midnight; we were drinking, talking vaguely about graduation, maybe playing Trivial Pursuit or something. I know Rye was there, but I can't even remember who else. None of us had ever seen these guys before, and as far as we could tell they had no reason to be doing what they were doing.

I remember yelling at Robert Blaine, whose house it was, to call the police. Robert's face was the colour of newsprint, and he wasn't moving. Rye, who was right next to him, grabbed the phone and spoke to the operator. I remember him asking Rob, "Where the fuck are we? I mean, what's your address?" He was yelling by then; before all this happened, he was already pretty drunk.

I went into the next room, the other living room, and saw the guys turning over cabinets and drawers. They smashed antiques and knocked over plants so that there was dirt and glass and pieces of things everywhere on the floor. They took mostly stereo stuff, televisions, a VCR -- this was before computers were that common -- and put them under their arms to carry out. When I came back into the front room four or five of the guys were hitting Rye, a couple of them holding his arms behind his back while the others kept punching him in the chest and kicking him in the shins. Then I saw one of them take a pool cue -- I don't know where they got it from, I didn't even know the Blaines had a pool table -- and slam it down, hard, on Rye's head.

They kept hitting him, but by then I was on them. Rye is a big guy, maybe six one or two even, but still, he needed help. I didn't see what was happening as a

fight, but rather that someone I knew, a friend, was being hurt. I found a kind of strength, maybe adrenaline, or anger, or both, and started pulling each of the guys off him. I managed to get most of them away from him, none of them was really any bigger than me, before I turned to look at Rye carefully to see if he was okay. He was bleeding a lot from where the pool cue hit him; years later he would have a scar there, at the crest of his forehead, that he would joke was from being in 'Nam. I noticed a guy behind him talking on a cellular phone, although I couldn't really hear what he was saying. It was in this moment when I was looking at Rye, when I took my eyes off these other guys, that I made a mistake, although I didn't realize it then.

Something -- a fist, or a fist holding something -- swung into my face, hitting me in the upper part of my mouth, missing my nose. Sucker punched, I guess they call it. I saw the face of the guy who hit me briefly before I was struck.

I went down immediately, although I was only out for a moment. When I got up I realized that my mouth was bleeding, a lot. And something felt strangely, horribly wrong. My teeth were gone. Two of my teeth were gone and another was hanging feebly half out of my mouth, like a large scab or a useless limb. It was a very disturbing, vulnerable feeling, having no teeth there. I was aware that my tongue could just come right out of my mouth, that there was nothing holding it in anymore.

I was in shock. Later, the others told me the guys left soon after they hit me. They just grabbed everything they could, the televisions and stereos, and their bats, and left. Maybe they weren't expecting to hit anybody. On their way out, they

smashed several more windows up front, apparently, but of course I wasn't paying attention at this point. I don't remember anything after this. Two girls I knew found one of my teeth at the bottom of a beer case, the other on the carpet, wrapped each of them in a piece of Kleenex which they had moistened with water and drove me to Emergency. On the way, the other tooth, the loose one, came out in my hand. My dentist, Dr. Brown, told me later I have shallow roots, which is why the teeth had come out so easily.

I'm amazed the girls did this -- pick up the teeth, that is. How did they think of something like that? I have never asked them. Even though I have spent a lot of time in the dentist's office over the last few years, part of each of those teeth has been in my mouth until now.

I've told this story to a lot of people, but somehow, never to Moira. We've talked about violence, about people being victims of horrible crimes. Her father's a judge, and she's always debating issues of the law with him. We've argued about things such as whether criminals are treated too leniently by the court system, although I'm never really sure how I feel about these things. The only thing I know about crime is that it seems to be contagious; all the negative energy from the asshole robbing or assaulting you gets transferred somehow, so that you want to hurt them back.

We sat in her old bedroom at her parents' house, talking about all this for a while. I was thinking about whether or not the dentist was going to be open between

Christmas and New Year's, and what I was going to do. I kept going back to the washroom to check the teeth. The one, my front left incisor, was loose, and the other incisor was starting to wiggle. I tried to imagine the diagram Dr. Brown had shown me a long time ago depicting how they were all joined. I tried to figure out what had gone wrong

"My God Chris, why didn't you tell me all this?" Moira was looking at me differently, I thought, like I was someone else. I had seen her give this look to many other people before: homeless men, women she encounters crying in washrooms, ESL students she occasionally teaches, but somehow, never before to me. Her eyes were more *absorbent*, I thought.

"It didn't seem important," I told her.

"Of course it's important," she said, running her hands up and down the back of my neck, one of my favourite things.

I kept wiggling the tooth that was really loose. It was definitely getting worse, and I kept wiggling it, almost perversely, hoping it would stop wiggling and be solid and secure again, or that it would fall right out, rather than being in between.

Moira kissed me on the forehead. "I just can't believe it," she said. "You. Getting hurt like this. I would never have known you went through all this."

I wasn't sure why she would say this. It's like I had been diagnosed with something. Victimhood. Suffering. Perhaps this is what she meant. But it's true. Before this happened, I hadn't had anything particularly bad ever happen to me, and I

still haven't. When I look at my life, and everything I consider it to be, I know I've been pretty lucky.

It's funny, though, how things work. Sitting on Moira's old bed that night, I thought about what Rye had told me about *knowing* when we were in The Sad and Unfortunate Bar. It was all *timing*, I thought. I remember all those years ago, before it all happened, there was probably a group of us sitting there at that party, talking; I don't remember what we were talking about, but I'm sure it had something to do with what we were going to do with our lives. And then at Moira's parents', this had to happen. It had been a great evening. Moira and her parents were getting along well, and it was good to see her with them, happy. I was thinking, during dinner, how perfectly everything was going, and I wasn't even as nervous as I thought I would be about asking her to marry me. Sometime down the road, nothing really formal, but we could worry about that later.

I was going to ask her on the porch in the Williams' backyard, after dessert and coffee. The Williams' home, like many houses in the area, has a large backyard with a fancy fence of perfectly trimmed bushes, and a view overlooking a small canyon where during, the summer, you can hear crickets and occasionally coyotes near the North Shore mountains. I didn't have a ring yet, but I had a speech I had written about antiques and how I wanted to be able to afford something right, something with a sense of history, like from one of those shops we liked to browse in on Sunday afternoons, where they wouldn't even buzz you in until they looked at you through the door. I knew she would understand. I work in Arts Administration,

fundraising mostly, corporate sponsorships for film and theatre festivals, and it's all contract. Meaning I only know where my paycheque is coming from six months to a year at a time. Any moment the whole thing could go under. Moira understands this -- that I have no security, because she is an actress. At least this is what she intends to do, has been trained to do, and is, I believe, very good at. I know being trained to do something and being good at it don't mean anything nowadays, but they should. And although I know many people who would fall into her category -- knowing what she wants to do but not being able to do it very much -- I think she, above a lot of other people, deserves to get a break. We met while I was coordinating a theatre festival she was involved with and I saw the show she was in because she had invited me, over the phone. The play was *The Seagull*, by Chekhov, and she played a girl who is an actress. It struck me, watching her, that she had a quality that I have seen in every good actress, the ability to move your heart a little, towards the exact place on stage where their character is standing. That night she somehow made me think she was only speaking to me, even though there was a packed crowd of people in the dark along with me. Her eyes, a striking, haunted blue, stayed with me for a long time after that evening. After, I told her I liked her work and eventually we started seeing each other.

But sitting there on her bed after telling her my story, I knew I wouldn't ask her to marry me that evening. Not with a loose tooth in my mouth.

* * *

After three days of eating soup, mashed potatoes, rice, and occasionally applesauce, I managed to get an appointment on the first day the dentist's office opened by telling them it was an emergency. Dr. Brown was also my family dentist when I was young and still covered on my father's plan. Now, I can't afford to go as often as I'm supposed to, but I still go to him because he's the one who knows what's going on with my teeth.

I don't hate dentists' offices like most people do. Pretty much everything that could happen while sitting in a dentist's chair has happened to me, so I'm not really worried. I read the paper because I was too anxious to read it on my way home from Moira's, which is what I usually do in the morning. We live near enough each other that it's a short walk from my place to hers. Usually, on my way out the door, I glance at the neighbours' newspaper to see if there's anything I think I should know, then buy a copy while I have a muffin and a coffee at a place on my corner. Then I go to my apartment, shower, and go to work. Moira and I have talked about moving in together, and I think now it is just a matter of time and deciding what we can afford at this point in our lives.

I'm reading an article about a man who was shot by police in front of a building, I notice, near where I used to live, when I get called in.

The dental hygienist is new, at least I haven't seen her before. Like all the other hygienists, she wears a pastel green outfit, pants and blouse, of some lightweight fabric that looks like polyester or cotton. When she leans over to put the bib around my neck I glance at her face; there is a simple, concise beauty to it, the

way her features fit around her mouth. Her teeth are perfect, but then, all the hygienists have perfect teeth here: white, solid, shiny. It's intimidating.

"What happened here," she says. "Chewing rocks for the holidays?"

"That was all I got for Christmas," I say. "Two lumps of coal."

"You know you're long overdue for a check-up, Chris." She's studying my chart diligently. "I see you've spent a lot of time in this chair. You and Don must be old friends by now."

"Yeah," I say. "Actually he was the one who did this to me." She laughs, raises the chair up, and takes out those dental instruments on the tray. I've always liked the order of them all, in their carefully arranged lines.

"You play hockey or something?" she asks. I've never played hockey in my life. I can't even skate.

"No," I try to say, but she is looking in my mouth, checking the teeth.

"My little brother plays hockey, he's always getting into fights. He's a good kid, he just needs to grow up, you know." I wonder how old she is.

"Yeah," I say.

She is leaning over me. As she does, the front of her blouse touches my shoulder. "Tell me if this hurts," she says. After poking around in the back she moves the overhead light down, so that I can see my reflection above. I notice how chapped my lips are, that my gums are bleeding slightly where she's poking at the back, and that I've missed several small places shaving this morning. I look grotesque.

She steps back for a moment, casually. "So, is that what happened to you," she says, her eyes curious.

"No," I say. "I mean, a fist hit me, I guess, but I wasn't in a fight."

"You were assaulted?" I never know what to think of that word, but I guess it's the right one here. I've only been in three fights in my life. That time, once in a play fight with Rye that got out of hand when we were both drunk and arguing about something stupid, and once when our baseball team got into a brawl. Nothing ever happened to me those other times.

I tell her, quickly, about the guys who hit me that night.

"And they saved the teeth?"

"I was in shock, but somebody picked them up and brought me to the hospital. They put them back in, wired them up. Then I had root canals, bridge work, crowns, the whole works."

"What about the guys?" she asks.

"Nothing. They were just looking for trouble. They were robbing a house I was in. I just happened to be there." It's not as simple as that, of course, but what can I say when someone's got their fingers in my mouth? I've become convinced, too, that there are many people in the world who just want to break things.

She shakes her head, a dental pick in one hand. "I just can't believe it," she says. "What's happening to this world?"

"It was a long time ago," I say.

“It’s the same world,” she says, looking at me seriously. “You know, your mouth feels trauma,” she says. “Your teeth can remember pain just like any other part of your body.”

Dr. Brown comes in, a large, burly man with a handlebar mustache and great ties. “Chris, how’s it going?” he says, shaking my hand. I try to sit up in the chair, feel my legs stick to the vinyl.

“Now what happened here? You know it helps if you use a nutcracker.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I mumble. His hands are already in my mouth. They always smell like coffee. He’s pushing, wiggling the loose teeth, looking at the back infrastructure of my mouth. Sandy assists him, recording measurements and notes he calls out to her. He calls out millimeter measurements, numbers, terms I recognize: central and lateral incisors, talks about how the crowns have been broken, how the periodontal ligament has been destroyed, cuspids, bicuspid. I’m not sure what each of them are, even though I’ve had them explained to me a million times, but I recognize their names. He mentions that he will have to take a few X-rays, and then he’ll wire the whole thing up temporarily, like braces. He tells me we will have to set up an appointment to talk about what we do next, then apologizes for being so busy, and leaves.

“So,” Sandy says as she starts my cleaning before they attach the brackets. “I guess we’re going to see a lot more of you in the next while.” She attaches the suction hose in the corner of my mouth, and asks me to hold onto it with my hand. It gurgles and gasps steadily like a dog at a water dish. I used to worry, every time I

came in here, about what was happening at every moment. Now I just try to focus on the ceiling, thinking about work, or what I will do as soon as I get up out of this chair. What Sandy's doing with the pick is making my nerves crawl, so I close my eyes and focus on the sound of her voice.

"Yeah," I try to say. "I'm going to be a regular again."

"Could you open up a little more for me? I want you to open up for me," she says. I try to look up at the ceiling, and not her eyes, and I do the best I can.

When we first got together I liked most things about Moira. I liked the way she smelled of cigarette smoke. I had never dated someone who smoked before, and I know it's stupid, but it excited me. I liked the way the smell stayed on me after we had been together, and after awhile I began to crave it and remember it in the same way I could remember perfumes from other girlfriends. I liked the way we always had long conversations, like a good, hard rain, for hours, the way her voice came crashing down over the words, rounding them down and smoothing over all the edges, making them into something else. I liked the dolour and drama in her life, and the way she conveyed it to you in the intense, exasperated tone of her voice. And I liked the way she saw me, which seemed to be, in many ways, what love was exactly; you felt certain things toward the person whose idea of who you were you liked the best.

I have been in love with a few people in my life, but with each of them I knew, deep down, that we simply met at the wrong time. It seems to me that there is

an expiry date for when you can love somebody. At the wrong time the whole thing falls through, easily, silently. I have been in love with people from afar, in offices, on other sides of subways, in classes, where every glance across a table could *mean* something, but sometimes for whatever reason, you miss the timing and that's it.

I go in a few days later before work one morning and talk to Dr. Brown. He takes out my X-rays and shows me how, apart from the brace set-up they've got in my mouth, there's nothing holding these teeth in anymore. For a while, it was looking good, he said, referring to the last few years. But you never know, he says. He tells me that when you implant anything, the body can either choose to accept or reject it. In my case, this is what happened: the bone structure of my jaw rejected the teeth, and that night, while chewing on the bread roll, some ligament came loose, and the teeth had nothing connecting them anymore.

He tells me repairing it could cost quite a lot of money, and that I should look into the compensation fund for crime victims I had applied for and gotten a few years ago. He knows my parents, and that they don't have much money either. He knows my father just got laid off so I can't try to get on his plan. He knows I don't have any coverage myself, not on contract work. But he tells me what he thinks I should have done.

"There's no real sense in waiting, Chris. I want to get going right away." He can do a new series of bridges, he thinks, but they will need more to work with. First step is to take these teeth out, the two that are gone and the third, which is still

connected, extract them, and let them heal for half a year or so, maybe a year. Then he might do some grafting of tissue from the roof of my mouth, and implant it to the gums. The worst of it, he says, would be over within a year and a half. But first we have to get these teeth out, he says.

“What will I do then?” I ask.

“Oh don’t worry,” he tells me. “You will have a partial plate. Like dentures,” he says, “while we’re allowing the gums to heal. Look, I know this sounds a bit overwhelming, but you’re young. And these teeth, the new ones we give you, they should stay in for a very long time.”

I don’t want a long time, I realize, walking back to work. I want *forever*.

I drop by Moira’s after work and we spend the evening watching television together. I’m in a bad mood because of the teeth. I don’t like the idea of having dentures. I should be alone, but Moira’s had one of her arguments with her parents so I’ve come over to cheer her up. They’re down on her acting, which they’ve never really been too crazy about. Now she’s thinking of taking a job at a clothing store a friend works at, but I know she really doesn’t want to do this.

“You don’t know them, Chris,” she says. They’re impossible people to live with.”

“You don’t live with them. You live here.”

“Chris, you don’t understand how much pressure they put on me.”

Sometimes I'm not sure if acting makes Moira happy, but I'm not sure if that's really important. Maybe happiness in itself isn't particularly attractive, I often think. Maybe what we find attractive about people is the distance between what we know about a person, who they are, and the person they want to be. That *reaching* is what makes people interesting, even beautiful. But I don't tell Moira this. In a way, I can see what her parents mean. When I hear her talk about what she wants to do, how much she wants to act, all I can see is the possibility of her being hurt by this absence in her life, this need. If you ask me, nothing is worth that. But I don't mention that I understand where her parents are coming from; we've had this conversation before, or one that rhymes with it.

"Look, they just want what's best for you," I say, moving a chair over with my foot. The first time I was over at her apartment, I loved its elegant disorder: the books on radiators and shelves, the mirrors, scarves and hats hanging on walls, the plants, candles and wine bottles everywhere, and the mounted theatre posters and framed pictures leaning against chairs and tables. She had acquired most of her furniture and clothing in cluttered second-hand shops, and I guess she saw no need to reposition them in her own home. Increasingly, however, there was something about her wardrobe, with its torn jeans, old sweaters, funky embroidered coats, which to me seemed to be a sort of camouflage for her wealthy background, the fact that she was the spoiled only child of a relatively well-off family.

"Chris, you wouldn't understand, okay? Your parents know who you are. They understand what you do."

I wouldn't say this, but I'm not interested in arguing about it right now.

Many unnecessary conversations, it seems to me, can be easily avoided. I tell her about what Dr. Brown said, about the operations, the teeth coming out, the dentures, the whole thing. While I am talking I look over at the dishes piled up on her counter, thinking how much we really need to sit down and talk sometime, about what we want from our life together.

"Is it going to be very painful?"

"What?"

"Your teeth, Chris. Is the operation going to hurt?"

"I don't know," I say, "they'll probably have it so I don't feel anything."

The next day I'm paying off part of my bill during my lunch hour, after borrowing some money from my parents. On the way out I see Sandy, who's leaving too. She smiles and, I think, looks happy to see me.

"So you're going to have them taken out," she says as we walk down the steps.

"Yeah, I guess," I say. "I better eat as much as I can in the next week."

We stand awkwardly on the sidewalk in front of the building. "Well, I'm just going for lunch," she says. "I guess you have to get back to work."

"Maybe I'll have a quick bite," I say. I want to be alone, but I don't want to be back at my desk just yet. I like lunch; I like the idea of it as a meal. "Is there anywhere good around here?"

“Anywhere with soup?” she smiles.

“Sure. Do you mind if I join you?”

“No,” she says. “I’d like that.”

We end up at a nearby diner, a popular lunch place with lots of regulars. I order soup, and perhaps in sympathy, she does too.

“You don’t have to have that,” I tell her, “on my account.”

“It’s okay,” she says. “I know the dentally challenged are as capable as anyone else.” I like her smile, although sometimes I think it seems to be trespassing in a place it shouldn’t be, and that she knows this. “Soup is good for you, though. I work out after work and it’s better than having a huge meal.”

“It’s funny how everyone talks about that now. Working out. You hear it everywhere. At the office. People brag about how many reps they did. Or which program is the best. You don’t hear people do that with like, their dental hygiene. I mean, you don’t hear people talk about how well they flossed last night. Or how they met somebody while using their water pick.”

She laughs, and asks me if I’m worried about the operation. “No,” I lie. “I’m looking forward to it.” I touch my teeth, to check if they’re still there, which is becoming a habit.

Then I notice something. There’s a guy sitting in a booth near the back, a young guy, around my age. He’s wearing a brightly coloured Tommy Hilfiger jacket, and has dark blond hair, cut short in a similar style to mine. There are large rings on several of his fingers. He takes off his jacket and he’s wearing a small T-shirt that

shows he has been lifting a lot of weights. As he does, his eyes make contact with mine.

I feel like my heart has just leapt into my head. I feel dizzy. It's him, I think. Him. The guy who hit me.

"What's wrong?" Sandy asks.

"Nothing," I say. "I'm fine."

"Your face just lost its colour. You're pale."

"I'm okay," I say. "I just burned myself on the soup." I look across at the guy's booth again. He's talking to his friend, another large guy, who has his back to me. He doesn't look over at me, not even casually. I look at him carefully, and try to figure out if it is him. I wonder if he would remember me.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Sandy asks again.

"Yeah," I say. "I'm fine."

It has been eight years, I think, as Sandy starts talking about taking guitar lessons. I keep watching the guy, looking for a glance, a stare, anything that might show me what he is thinking. I want to know why he is here, today, at this moment. I want to know what he has been doing all this time. But he never looks at me again, the whole time I am eating and talking to Sandy.

By the time I'm back at work I'm convinced that it was him. All afternoon I feel slightly engorged, volatile, like I've swallowed a memory too fast.

* * *

The night before the operation I go to The Sad and Unfortunate Bar with Rye. I've got to get up early, so I shouldn't be drinking, but I wanted to see how Rye was doing. I often feel bad for him. His old man lost it a few years ago. They found him trying to lock up places that weren't his, with what he called "the magic key." Before that, he used to beat Rye regularly. I met him once, years ago, and he asked me to look after his son.

"So this receptionist," Rye says. "You gonna go after her?"

"She's a hygienist," I tell him. I had mentioned to Rye that I liked talking to one of the dental assistants, and that I thought she was cute. "Don't be an asshole."

"Ahhh. Whatever." He plunks down his pint. "Music," he declares. "We need music!" The last time I was here was with a group of people, and I remember he started singing a lounge, a cappella version of an old Pixies song. "Got me a movie," he started crooning, up near where old drunk couples sometimes danced, "I want you to know. Slicing up eyeballs, I want you to know. Girl is so groovy, I want you to know . . ."

We all knew, and when he pulled his shirt off and started dancing with a trashed-looking woman twice his age we knew she probably knew what we knew; that this young man had a serious drinking problem, and in other circumstances I might not know him now. But he was my longest friend, and by that I mean he's not the person I have known the longest, but the person I have traveled the farthest with. I sometimes wonder if Moira would be my friend if I hadn't happened to fall in love with her. But that's a stupid question to ask, I think.

“You’re just like me,” he told me one night. “You want the same thing I do. You don’t really care what you’re supposed to do. That’s what I like about you, Chris. You’ve got everyone fooled.”

I went home that night and I thought about what he had said. I thought about what he meant. I must have been thinking about it a lot, visibly, because Moira asked me what was wrong. I told her I was worried about Rye.

Tonight, he fills the jukebox but it won’t work and he insists we go somewhere else. I tell him I’ve got to get up early anyway.

“Listen, I’ve got to talk to you about something.”

“This hygienist,” he says. “The woman who caresses your gums.”

“This is serious. Do you remember that guy?”

“What guy?”

“The guy who hit me. And you. That night.”

Rye sobers up slightly, then looks angry. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

“Chris, that was like four or five years ago.” I can’t bring myself to tell him it was actually eight.

“But I remember, I mean, don’t you?”

“No,” he says. “No way. Look, I’ve slept with people last year whose faces I can’t remember. Are you actually serious? You saw him for like what, five seconds?”

“I thought I saw him,” I say, my voice wavering.

“Man,” he says. “Get a grip. It’s only your fucking teeth.”

The operation, as it turns out, isn’t too bad. I’m loaded with local anesthetic anyway. They pull, or extract, as they call it, the teeth right away. Then they take the moulds of my mouth in order to fit the partial denture plate, three fake front teeth that just sort of clip onto the roof of my mouth. They’ve got to make the plate overnight, so until that time I have no teeth in the front of my mouth. My parents pick me up and drop me off at home. Moira wants to come over as soon as I get back.

I have no teeth. I don’t want anyone to see me. I never saw myself without teeth when I first got hit and I don’t like it now. It is disturbing; I look like a goon. I can’t speak properly. I can’t make any consonant sounds involving my teeth, which I soon learn, are quite a few of them.

“You poor thing,” Moira says when she hears me on the phone. “I’m coming over.”

I tell her I don’t want her coming over, there’s no need, I’m fine.

“Chris, don’t be ridiculous, I’m coming over.”

I just want to go to sleep, I tell her, or try to. Without teeth, it’s hard to talk. I’ll call you later, I say.

She’s not happy about it but she finally agrees. They’ve given me a lot of painkillers but they’re not really doing much good. Instead of a sharp, focused pain in the nerves where my teeth used to be, there’s a dull, diffused feeling, an *awareness* rather than pain. I can’t do anything with any concentration. I try to hang up a shirt

and the bar in my closet falls down. After all my clothes fall to the ground I just sit there, for a moment, on the floor, surrounded by shirts and pants and ties. I don't want anybody to see me like this. "Huck," I say, over and over. "Huck."

The next day I get the partial. I'm within walking distance of the office, which is good, because I don't want anybody on the bus looking at this large, gaping hole in my face. I'm not allowed to drive, either, because of the painkillers.

Sandy is at the front desk when I come in. "Hey beautiful," she says.

I smile in spite of myself, although I know from staring at myself in the mirror it looks pretty horrible.

"Looking forward to having teeth again?" she asks.

No, I try to say. I'm starting to get really fond of Jello. Jello for breakfast. Jello for lunch. Jello for dinner. Sandy laughs.

Once I'm in the chair Dr. Brown comes in, opens a case containing a strange little flesh-coloured contraption with a few wires and three incredibly realistic teeth on the front. He had shown me the colours the day before, but they're incredible. They look exactly like real teeth.

"And this is your appliance, Chris."

He calls it an appliance. I'm not sure I want an appliance in my mouth, but when he sort of plops it in, it seems to fit fine. It's surprisingly solid, considering what it looks like, somehow just fitting over the ridge of my gums where my teeth

used to be. But I'm aware of it. I'm just as aware of it as I was without teeth, and I'm lisping like crazy when I talk.

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it. Anytime there's something unfamiliar in there the mouth has to get used to it. You'll have to relearn how to talk as it adjusts."

"Gweat."

"And you have to take it out at night, put it in a glass of water."

Terrific, I think. I'm a senior citizen at age twenty-six.

"Anyway, you should be okay," he tells me. "Sandy will show you how to clean it, and things to be careful of with eating. Give us a call if you're experiencing any discomfort or pain, or if the appliance gives you any irritation. Call us right away."

He leaves, and in a moment, Sandy comes back in. "It looks great," she says. "Absolutely real."

"Well that's a relief." It's hard to deadpan with a lisp. "I was worried I could get a part in the new Anne Rice movie."

"Ah, you're much better looking than Tom Cruise," she says, surprising me. "You have braces when you were younger?" I'm not sure why she's asking me. She could just look it up on my chart.

"Yeah," I say. "Four years."

"Lot of good they did," she laughs.

“My mother never allowed me to play hockey,” I tell her. “She was worried I’d get hurt. And now I look like a hockey player anyway. Without a single penalty minute.”

“Okay, well two minutes if you eat anything hard. As Don says, you’re going to have to be careful with what you eat, especially for the next while. No hard foods. Nothing you have to bite down on hard with those front teeth. No apples, for instance. Biting down on an apple would pull your teeth right out.”

“Okay,” I say, looking carefully at her eyes. “No apples.”

“That’s about it,” she says, pulling up the chair. “Would you like to have lunch again sometime?”

Moira had an affair once. Not when we were together, but before. It was with a woman she was doing a show with. Just before she met me. It was just a one night thing, after a closing night wrap party. There were a lot of people there and it was one of those evenings when everybody pairs up and things just happen, as she says. I told her I knew what she means, and I do. She went to this woman’s house and they slept together and in the morning she got up and left before this woman, Gina, woke up. Only because it was early and Moira was still kind of drunk, when she got to the hallway where she had left her shoes, she put on a pair of Doc Martens like the ones she wore, and walked out the door and down the stairs and out onto the street before she realized that the shoes weren’t hers. They looked very similar but they were much newer, and although the fit was close, it was a half-size smaller than

her foot size. But it was too late to go back and she couldn't even remember what apartment number the woman lived in, and besides, it would be too embarrassing to wake the woman up because she had decided she didn't really want to talk to her ever again and so she just kept the shoes and eventually they stretched out. She still wears them in fact, because unlike most women I've been with, she has very few pairs of shoes. I've offered to buy her another pair, but every time I do, she says, Why, she likes these. Do they bother you? she asks. No, I tell her, I couldn't care less what shoes you wear.

That night Moira comes over, and makes minestrone to celebrate. I've got my teeth, and she just found out she got a part in a play about environmental issues that will be touring high schools in the fall.

Later, after we've gotten ready for bed, she asks me. She wants to see me without the teeth.

"No," I say.

"Why not?" she asks.

"It's embarrassing," I say.

"I've seen you in a lot of embarrassing ways," she says. "If I have to remind you."

"That was different," I say, trying to think of what things in particular she means.

"How was it different?"

"I had teeth. I could bite you back."

"Chris, a lot of people have dentures. It's not a big deal."

"They're not dentures," I say. "It's a partial plate."

"Whatever. I think it's kind of sexy."

"It's not sexy," I say. "It's like being handicapped, or something."

"Handicapped people have sex," she says. She volunteered for four years with the handicapped, I know, I shouldn't have said that.

"That's not the point. I've just got to get used to these." I'm not sure why I'm being like this. I tell myself, looking at the candle light shimmer on her face, that I've got a beautiful woman in front of me who loves me more than I deserve to be loved.

"It's about trust, Chris."

She uses this word a lot. How trust, and loyalty, are the most important things to her. I'm not sure what trust has to do with my not having any teeth at the moment, or wanting to show her what I look like without them.

"Let me just get used to this," I tell her. "It's just brought back a lot of bad memories, okay?" I figure this is about the best thing I can say, but all the same, I don't feel good about it.

She softens, like I thought she would, then we talk about her new job instead. I don't take out the teeth at night, when we go to bed. I just clean them and then put them back in my mouth so they're there when I kiss Moira good night.

* * *

The day of the lunch I have no appetite at all in the morning. I tell myself it's because of my strange diet lately but I know it's because I'm feeling guilty. I tell myself I'm only having lunch with someone, that it doesn't mean anything. Moira doesn't even like lunch. Most days, she's not even up by lunch time. She has no sense of the rigidity of a work day, the skeletal necessity of coffee breaks and lunch hours, like vertebrae holding the whole day together. She gets up and, most afternoons, goes and acts. Right now she is doing a movement theatre piece. I went and met her after rehearsal one day, in part because I wanted to see what they did. On days she's been rehearsing, Moira often comes home and tells me she has had a breakthrough. I ask her what the breakthrough was and she says that she realized something like how out of line her posture was, or how she was breathing out of the wrong place. I didn't know you could breathe from the wrong place. The day I went to meet her I was early and the group was in the studio in the middle of one of their exercises. All of them, probably six or seven of them, were lying there in their sweats and T-shirts, rolling around on the ground, in the dark -- they had the lights turned off, and they were moaning. I wasn't sure what they were trying to act like, although, like I said, I don't know much about such things. All I could think was that they looked like a group of large, unhappy earthworms.

But like I said, I'm no expert. Sometimes I wonder if I'm not the right kind of person for her. I'm not artistic, for instance. I mean, I'm *really* not. I work in Arts Administration. I like music, and theatre, and even reading, but the thing is, I like them all about the same. I think they're all pretty good, but it's the same way I

feel watching a good hockey game, or a program on television. As part of my job, probably to compensate me for the fact that they're not paying me much, I get what we in the business of sponsorship call contra, giving things in place of money. I have a lot of free tickets to concerts, opening nights of most plays, the Cinematheque, and it makes me happy because Moira enjoys these things more than I do.

There are many people I know who have gotten married now, people my age. People my age have done important things, played professional sports, become well-known, even famous, and here I am. Most of what I do is common sense. That's how I see what I do. People want things. A logo on a poster. Fine, I say. They want to hear things. I tell them what they want to hear. Use your Board, I tell the organizations. Reach into the community. Make yourself marketable. But while I have many doubts about what I am doing at the moment, I still assume there will come a time when I won't.

I see him again when I go to meet Sandy. Crossing the street in front of the office, I notice him, wearing the same jacket, going down the block. He moves with a certain swagger, his legs grabbing space and throwing it aside. As he passes the office he glances in, and I wonder, for a moment, if he is looking for me. I start to follow him, becoming aware of what my heart is doing: a confused, uncoordinated rhythm.

I put my hand up and touch my teeth. Then the memory of him, of his face, that night, rushes into me. But I don't see him clearly at all; it is the faces of all the

people on the street who are passing me, all running into one another, each zooming into tight focus for a single second. I realize that my heart is doing what it is doing, beating like this, because it is angry, not scared. I start walking faster.

I catch up to him when he stops for a light at the end of the block. He notices me, I think, just before he stops, but keeps looking straight ahead. We're standing next to each other right on the corner of the curb. He keeps tapping his foot in a steady rhythm. I want the light to change so I can walk ahead of him; now that I'm next to him I don't know how to examine his face, or even what I am looking for.

The light on the other side of the street changes and I turn and stare at his face. He observes me, full of disinterest, it seems to me, as though nothing could really make him see me right now. I notice that his eyes are badly bloodshot, and I think, suddenly, that he is stoned. There is hardly any white left in his eyes.

"Hey man," he says. His voice is steady, even. "Do you have a problem?"

I think how a lot can happen in eight years. The detective who looked into the case determined that the guy who hit me had a long criminal record, and they even knew his name, but they couldn't get anyone to positively ID him. After a few months, the detective called me. He told me he was sorry, but he had to give up the case.

I wonder what Moira would say if she saw me here.

"No," I say, looking at his face for a moment longer, trying to find something I'm not really sure of. Our light changes and I turn around and walk away to the office.

* * *

Sandy is talking to the receptionist, who looks at her knowingly when I come in.

“Hi there. Crazy day in here. How’s the teeth?”

“Fine,” I say, and stand there feeling awkward. “Ready to go?”

We go to the same diner we went to before. I’m suddenly very hungry, which I never am at this time of day. “I almost got in a fight today,” I say, after the waitress has brought our food. Sandy is having soup; I’ve ordered a sandwich.

“When?” Sandy looks surprised, which I would have expected if I had thought about what I am talking about now. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Just now. Right before I came here,” I say calmly, drinking a sip of coffee. “I didn’t, though.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I keep thinking I see the guy who hit me. It was him. The guy I almost wanted to fight.”

She takes a moment before responding, sipping her soup. “Chris, wasn’t that like a long time ago?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I say. “It was him. I thought it was, at least.”

Sandy just looks at me carefully, like she knows something I know. “Maybe it was,” she says softly.

“You’re wondering why I’m telling you this,” I say.

“Would it have helped?” she asks.

"I don't know," I say. "It might have."

We sit in silence for a moment. "Chris, are you seeing anybody?" Her voice is soft, gentle.

"I'm fine," I say. "I mean, I know it wasn't him. I'm okay, really."

"No," she says, "I mean, do you have a girlfriend?"

"No," I say. "I don't." I take another careful bite of my sandwich, concentrating on making sure the molars at the back take all the pressure.

"Look, do you want to go to a movie or something," she asks.

"Sure," I say. "That sounds like a good idea." I don't even think about what I said. I just finish my lunch and we talk about the new songs she is learning on guitar. I think about it later though, staring in front of a computer screen, watching the flashing cursor blink steadily in front of me, like a heartbeat.

That night, Moira and I have the discussion I guess I've been expecting. The thing is, I can't have sex. There's something about the teeth that is unsettling, the idea that I've lost my teeth. Even kissing is strange.

"It's only temporary," I say. "I've just got to get used to this thing."

"Chris, it's been two weeks," Moira says, looking at me. She's wearing a plain white nightshirt she knows I like. Just now, she was putting her hands down into my pants. I know I'm not being much fun. But I can't even kiss her, I mean, *kiss* her. I think of my teeth coming loose, falling out.

“Chris, if it’s uncomfortable, you should go in and see the dentist. Tell him. Or the hygienist. Maybe it’s just a question of adjusting it or something.”

I remind her how patient I was when she was taking a variety of anti-depressant medication a while back that interfered with her sex drive, how understanding I was then.

“You weren’t understanding at all,” she says, and she’s probably right. “Look, Chris, I have no clue what’s happening with you. No clue whatsoever. I mean, your teeth. That’s all you talk about. We can’t eat out because of your teeth. You aren’t even here half the time because you don’t want me seeing you without teeth. I know you’re supposed to have them out at night. My father has dentures, for Christ’s sake. What is happening with us?”

I realize, then, that I am only seeing a glimpse of how angry she actually is, like the white edge of a wave, and the worst thing is, I don’t know what to say to her. I look at her in the moonlight, the glare of her eyes I’ve been avoiding, and she looks like she did in the spotlight when I first saw her in that play. She’s been talking lately about going down to the States to do some auditions there. I can’t imagine what I would do if she left.

“When I was in the car, on the way to the hospital,” I tell her. “I was in shock still, and apparently I just kept repeating, over and over again -- it was in December some time -- ‘Now I know what I want for Christmas, now I know what I want for Christmas.’”

I look at her and I know I've screwed up. I've never told her this before. It's a funny story, and it's my life, but it's not what she needed to hear. "Christmas is ten months away," she tells me. "They're just teeth, Chris."

Then she tells me she's going to go to Toronto the following weekend to visit an old friend of hers who had a baby a while back. I try to make a joke about how the baby, who just turned two, can probably talk just as well as I can without my teeth, but Moira doesn't laugh. She just turns over on her side and goes to sleep.

"Things fall apart," Rye says to me in the bar the night after Moira leaves. "Accept it. Or in your case they fall out."

"You're quoting Yeats to me?"

"The roots cannot hold."

"You're being a lot of help."

"Just give me some teeth," he sings in a poor British accent.

I want to talk to Rye about Moira but I realize there's no point. He keeps glancing up at the television and trying to read the closed captioning. Most of the evening, we've been watching the regulars play shuffleboard, a lot of lonely, older men around us.

I remember a game Moira and I used to play, Match the Couples, in which we'd try to put people together, guessing who would be meeting each other in movie line-ups for instance. There's nobody to do that with here. I've started to realize that bars are mostly full of people who are avoiding being somewhere else.

"It's funny," he says. "Nobody reads books anymore. But we'll read television sets. Now *that* is fucked." He takes a sip of his beer. "So, anyway, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," I say, watching a man stumble on his way out.

"Is she interested in anybody else?"

For a moment I wonder who he means. "You mean Moira," I say quickly.

"Of course. Look, Chris, you are not going to do anything with whoever that dental person is. You know that. And you probably shouldn't. You and Moira shop for *antiques* together, for God's sake."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I'm the one without a clue here." He looks at me, more seriously, I think, than he has in a long time.

"You know that guy I thought I saw?" I put up my hand to cut him off. "It wasn't him. You were right."

We sit there, silently for a moment. He just nods, then goes to feed the jukebox again. It's a strange beast, one of the greatest selections of songs I've ever found in a CD jukebox, and is one of the main reasons we come here.

I sit there, watching a couple of guys doing pretty well on the board, when suddenly, Rye looks up. "Oh God," he says suddenly. Duran Duran's "The Reflex" is playing. I look around at the old guys, expecting one of them to have passed out or something. I suddenly wonder how long they've been coming here, and at what age they started coming here.

“What?” I say.

“That song,” he says, looking genuinely concerned. “That song doesn’t make any fucking sense.”

Sandy and I go to a movie together, a few nights after Moira is gone. We go to a neighbourhood theatre, one of the old single screen repertory theatres that show a variety of double bills. We decide to go there, it seems, together, without either of us actually making a decision, but I know I want to go there because there is less chance of being seen by anyone I know. I don’t like how this feels. The place is beautiful inside, I’ve been here before when I was coordinating a film festival, but it feels older now. We go in and pay and give our tickets to the doorman, an earnest looking kid. He scrutinizes the ticket distractedly and says, “Two adults,” only for a moment, I think he says, “Adulterers,” and I get tense, guilty. I tell myself, I’m just going to a movie, I’m not doing anything wrong.

In the middle of the film the screen goes blank for a moment and after a few minutes, the lights in the auditorium come on. While we are waiting, sitting there next to one another in the light, I ask Sandy if she wants something to eat or drink and she shakes her head. I think of telling her, casually, that my girlfriend is in Toronto, to make it clear what is happening here, but I realize it’s too late for that. Then the lights dim and the movie comes back on again.

We don’t do anything afterward because I can’t think of what exactly I want to do. I end up just driving her home. She talks a bit about her life, how she is

interested in music therapy, for instance, which I have read a few things about. Then we are at her house and she invites me in, for a coffee. I know she has to get up early for work tomorrow and because of the breakdown, the movie was quite late. I look at her for a moment, carefully. I think of hugging her, for some reason, although that wouldn't be right. There's all this distance between us, I think, that we've got to account for somehow.

She looks at my teeth, a bit nervously. "Well those are looking just fine," she says, although it sounds strange, now, in my car, not sitting in that large chair. She reaches her hand toward me and touches them, the tip of her fingers against the front teeth, the enamel, the hardest part of the human body, although these teeth are not real. Her hands feel knowing and gentle, and I almost move my face toward her to kiss her, although I realize that I am not going to do this. Then she shifts her body around, and opens up the door.

"Well good night," she says, looking a little sad, which makes me feel like I have done something I know I can't change.

"I'll see you next week," I say.

"Right," she says, her face brightening a little.

"At my next appointment," I add.

She looks carefully at me, and nods her head. Then she turns around and walks up the stairs to her building. As I watch her fumble with her keys, I think of how people can leave impressions on each other like this, like tiny marks.

* * *

A few nights after Moira comes back I'm at her place, lying next to her, in the middle of the night. I can't sleep, and after making sure she's sleeping, watching her breathing for a moment, I take out my teeth, feeling the roof of my mouth free and exposed, the night air from the window cool and soft on my gums. Then I put the plate back in and I get up, quietly, and pull on some pants and a shirt. Moira's a deep sleeper and doesn't hear me, even when I wake up in the mornings before I go to work. I grab my jacket and step out onto the street. It's a cool night, damp from the rain that has just stopped. There's a lineup for the slice place down the road where the afterclub crowd is waiting to soak up the alcohol in their stomachs. I walk down her street a little ways, then find I'm not that far from the diner that Sandy and I went to and so I keep walking. The side streets are quiet, but as you get near each streetlamp the buzz is almost deafening, like thousands of little bees. A woman coming down my side crosses over off in the distance. I have become used to this, used to knowing that it does not mean that they think I am an evil, disturbed person, but that I *could* be. They don't know me, after all, and it is a strange world. If I were a woman, I would do exactly the same thing.

I go into the diner and sit in a booth. I order tea, and then a piece of blueberry pie. Over the years, partly because of my teeth, I have gradually stopped eating most sweet things. After a while you lose the desire for them, and I've forgotten what a lot of desserts taste like. I rarely eat chocolate, for instance, which infuriates Moira; like many women I have known, she often says she prefers chocolate to most things that have to do with men.

The pie tastes like something I don't remember. I can't quite describe what, but just something different, like I am finding a new taste that hasn't been discovered yet. While I am eating it I watch the grill cook at the back. He's in his late forties, maybe older. I've seen him in there every time I've been here before, and he always looks happy, smoking a cigarette by the grill. He is wearing a baseball cap backwards with NASA written on the front. It occurs to me that we never really get to know that much about any person's life, even if we think we do.

I ask my waitress if he was ever involved with the space program. She laughs. "I think the only things he knows about space he learned from the lyrics to old David Bowie songs," she says.

The papers get dropped off by a delivery boy, and I realize it's later than I think. I wander over and pick up a copy, and look at the front page. There is a story about a young woman who went missing a while back, who has been presumed dead because they found some of her hair fibres on the body of a man who committed suicide, a suspect. They have found the girl's remains in a shack somewhere in the interior that burned down. The police say they have only been able to make the identification by her dental remains, which I remember Dr. Brown once telling me is what they do.

I put the paper down and feel very sick all of a sudden, for a moment, deep in my stomach. It could be the pie, that I am not used to eating sweet, hot things at this strange time. I pay my bill quickly, because all of a sudden I want to get back to Moira's. It is still dark out, although you can see the edge of day in the sky now, and

I walk faster than I did before. There is a single, steady noise in the air from somewhere, maybe a car alarm, or a siren far away, like a dial tone, like you could call anyone right now and get through. A fresh, gentle wind, like the kind you get after a rain, makes the trees, heavy with wet leaves, rustle a bit.

When I get back, Moira is sitting on the edge of her bed by the window, looking out at the park, smoking. There is something about seeing her, sitting like this, that makes me think of the first time I met her, after the performance. She was sitting on a chair backstage in the green room, coming down, she said later, from the role. There was a secure tranquillity to her face that suggested a kind of permanence I had never seen before, and maybe that is why I started talking to her so easily. I knew that I probably fell in love with her while she was sitting in that chair.

Moira looks up at me when I come in the room.

“What are you doing,” I ask. “There’s nobody out there.”

“You’re out there,” she says. “What were you doing?”

“Walking,” I say, and catch myself, before I start. “I need to tell you something,” I say, not realizing what is going to come next. I start thinking of the things I am not going to say. I don’t say, I think you and I have a pretty good chance of being around together for a while. I don’t say I wish we had met somewhere else, in some other way, at some other time, because I don’t think these things anymore. I don’t say that there’s a place where I feel I am most of the time, and then there’s a place that I feel when I’m with you, and I don’t want any of that to change. I realize, in fact, in these moments, how few things I can actually say I know about my life.

“What,” she says, looking worried, watching my mouth. I can tell.

“I’m scared,” I say. I take the teeth out of my mouth. The air rushes in: a strange, discontinuous, even thrilling, feeling.

BEAUTIFUL CRIMINALS

He would go out. It was a bad time to fall in love with anyone, the beginning of the ugly and cold part of the year in this city, the city which still surprised him with its size and the steady rhythms of its inhabitants, the daily movements of millions trying to find their way home. People slipped on ice buried under snow underneath a crust of ice, and when the sidewalk finally emerged, it was rife with potholes that appeared like sores on coarse, cracked streets. A bad time of year to fall in love with anyone, Aaron knew, but he would go out anyway.

You could become too closed, he had begun to think, boxed in your little apartment, your view the windows of the dozen other apartments in your back alley, the faint, cold blue light of a dozen television sets diffused through cheap, fading curtains. Entering and leaving his building only for routines, he realized he had become too dependent on the various exotic smells lingering in the hallways of his building to set his mood -- a spicy curried dish he knew he could not make (exotic, urbane), expensive cigars he knew he could not afford to smoke (opulent, decadent), or even laundry, the kind of hope offered by clean clothes, a simple thing -- reminders, everywhere, of how other people lived. The rest of the year there was something about the close proximity of lives here that he liked, the sense of a living, breathing organism, how aware you could be of the intricate movements of life around yourself -- the aching of hardwood floors above, the clatter of keys against the wooden doorways of the next apartment, the sexual habits of those in the adjoining

bedroom. But in the winter you could become too sequestered in these spaces, crammed in your own little box, and what kind of space was this to live in anyway? People got protective, aggressive, demanding. Sometimes, stuck in the midst of a long line-up when he was already late to teach, paying a bill with what seemed to be a wallet full of instant teller receipts rather than money, he wondered if everyone else in line felt the same way he did -- that it would take one request, one demand to put him over the edge. *I'm not going to rip you off*, he often felt like yelling in these moments, *I don't want anything from you*. Sometimes that was just how he felt, living in a city like this. Everyone just wanted -- no, needed -- a good reason to say they'd been robbed or cheated, taken advantage of, a *cause* to animate their lives.

Aaron suspected that deep down, he was happier here, teaching composition to barely literate students, rather than in that other city, writing and proofing letters for strangers, in offices where the smell of bad coffee had been ingrained in old desks like a wood stain. He missed his friends, and The Sad and Unfortunate Bar they used to meet at back home, the city where it seemed everyone wanted to go now, where films were made and supposedly lives were easier.

When his despair became too aggravated, Aaron would go and sit and read, or mark papers, in restaurants which had better CD collections than he did. He chose the kind of places where people often went to break up with each other: cafes and bistros full of couples engaged in long, earnest discussions, or arguing in raised voices and crying. He found afternoons spent sitting there, absorbing the wreckage of other people's lives, soothed him, and it was cheaper than a movie.

Aaron had known for a while that he had to get on with things, but the beginning of December was a bad time. The Christmas lights were up now, and everything was on hold. People momentarily avoided political rallies and police beatings by going shopping; here, the holiday seemed like a deliberate distraction, strategically placed at the end of the year so people could survive winter in two installments. So he waited. Like everyone else he knew, he was waiting, waiting for something simple and good to happen, although he wasn't even sure he believed in this possibility.

It was Lauren who had told him he had to have more faith in people, even after he had shown her the cracks in his door where some skinheads had tried to kick it in on at least four different occasions. People stole things in his building. Little things. Newspapers, laundry, mail. He himself had held onto a postcard which had arrived in his mailbox that simply read, in thick black pen, *Hey Cat Lady, I miss you and the whip -- where are you? Call Me!* followed by a number. He put this one on his fridge, always intending to put it back in the mail in the hopes that it might find her. He even thought of adding a note: *Hey Cat Lady, you know where to find me --* with his address. But of course you didn't take chances like that, ever. Not in this city.

Lauren had never liked his building so he had usually gone over to her place. Before -- days when he would meet her where she worked, at the art gallery. Back when she was studying studio art herself at the same university where he taught. She had gotten into the program on the strength of six charcoal drawings she had done in

a rage in response to finding her ex-boyfriend, the one before him, together with her best friend. These deranged, violent portraits, of bloated, heated faces of her ex, some with horns, coarse line drawings of strangely stick-like bodies, limbs askew, were each accompanied by a single shoelace taken from one of her ex's old sneakers, tied in a noose around each portrait's neck and stuck to the heavy construction paper. The portraits were all hung on her wall in the room she used as a studio. When he and Lauren had first gotten together, she had asked him what he thought of them. He wasn't entirely sure what to say. "I don't think we have a permit for that kind of question yet," he told her instead. Sometimes he surprised himself, saying things like this.

Now Lauren was in a group show of young artists that he knew he was not going to go to. Apart from everything else, he missed the city things they did together. Foraging, they used to call it. You searched for secrets that everyone knew were hidden somewhere, you just had to know where to look. Where to eat cheaply. Where to get second-hand furniture that was going to be thrown out. Half-priced movies. It was close to romance, at least in a place where no one owned anything they could give to one another. They were all renting, borrowing, hoping. Everyone was.

Tonight though, he would go out and meet people. A party. He hadn't been to one in a while. But he had been busy. Turned down invitations. No, I've got too much work to do, he would say. He didn't feel like talking to anyone.

He had told Jim, the Composition Coordinator, about Lauren.

“Well, take heart, Aaron,” Jim had said. He was a nice man, but all the things he said sounded second-hand, as if someone else had already used the words before.

Whose heart? he had wanted to respond.

Yesterday he had gone over to her place. It had been almost four months. He told himself it was a spontaneous thing. Just passing by, after all. Her building was always open, although she had good locks. Her door had no cracks.

“You what?” she just said, looking at him in dismay after answering her door. She didn’t open it very wide at all. Her hair was longer, and wet.

“I came by to pick up my toothbrush.”

“What?” She used this word a lot in conversation.

“It’s in the cabinet,” he said, trying to help.

“I know where it is. Where it was. What are you doing?”

“I just thought I’d stop by. It’s mine,” he said. “I need it.”

“You haven’t brushed your teeth in four months?”

He was glad she was aware of how long it had actually been. “I need this one,” he told her.

“No, you don’t,” she said. “You have another one.”

“I need a spare,” he said, “in case I travel.”

“You’re going somewhere?” Her face seemed to light up at this.

“Uh no,” he mumbled. “But I might.” It was true. He might go somewhere.

She looked at him with a touch more tenderness, he thought. "Aaron, what are you doing? I mean, why are you here? Why the hell do you want your toothbrush?"

Because you've taken everything else, he felt like yelling. Then someone said something in the background, a man whom Aaron decided he did not want to meet at that particular moment, so he left. He decided that it was probably this man who had thrown out his toothbrush.

He wandered out into the crowd trying to stay afloat on the melting snow, leaping over slushy curbs. Icebergs, he thought. *Just steal me*, sometimes he found himself thinking, looking at the hunched-over bodies in winter coats, folded in half. *Wander over here, put me in your pocket, and take me.*

Was this how things happened in a city? How he found himself in a cab on his way to a party? He thought about how maybe everything was cause and effect: Lauren was the cause here, or the city, or possibly some combination of the two. He was going out -- the effect -- and therefore had a simple equation on his hands that he liked the sound of. He had taken a binder with him; the party was a couple of blocks away from the university and he wanted to drop off a report on some suggestions for the curriculum that Jim had asked him for. He hoped this would convey the right message, that no matter how much he had babbled to Jim in the past, he was back on track. Getting things done. Extra things.

He rarely took cabs, and he admitted to himself that he liked the novelty and luxury of it, the smooth, easy ride through the winter streets, rather than carefully placed steps, sinking boots, lurching buses and overheated subways. He deserved to splurge for an evening, he thought. He wondered if he should buckle his seat belt. There was a casual elegance to taking a cab, as though it didn't really matter; wearing a seatbelt was something you did when you drove, as opposed to when you were being driven. After a quick swerve left, however, he tried to make sense of the buckle's bachelor ends.

Then he realized the driver, an affable, vaguely Middle Eastern-looking man with a thick mustache, was talking to him. "Going to work?" the man asked, gesturing to the blazer and tie Aaron had put on, the binder in his hand. Was he dressed too formally? He decided he would take the tie off before he went into the party.

"No," he replied. "A party actually. I'm just dropping this off at work. The university," he added quickly.

"Ah. So you're a teacher," the cabbie said. "What do you teach?"

"English," he said, hoping the conversation would end soon. He wanted time to relax, to just watch the city go by, the aesthetics of the city at night, this perfect choreography of people moving within the carefully ordered lines glowing in the dark. He wanted to be nine years old in his parents' back seat again. "Composition, actually. Writing English."

“My daughter, she is a teacher of English, too,” the driver said eagerly, lighting a cigarette and opening a window. The cold air rushed in and Aaron pulled his jacket closely around him.

“Oh. At the university?” Aaron’s voice was too guarded, he thought. He tried to ease it into a higher gear.

“Oh no. She is teaching English in Japan.”

Along with about ten thousand other people I know, Aaron thought. Or Prague. Many of them were in Prague. Someone had send him a postcard from there. “Really? Does she like it?”

“Yes. We miss her. But she is doing very well. We are very proud of her.”

He was the only person in his family who had ever gone to university. His family liked the idea of him teaching, although he rarely spoke to them. He made a mental note to call them. “Well, that’s good.”

“She is about your age,” the man said, looking at him in the rear view mirror. He closed the window after throwing his cigarette out.

Where did all these cigarettes go, Aaron wondered. “Really?” What was the point of *that*?

Then the driver did something strange. “Take a look,” he said, picking up a black binder that was sitting on the seat next to him and passing it over the front seat. “She’s beautiful, see? And very smart.”

Aaron took the binder, a standard academic three-ring binder, and opened it up. It was full of photographs. Every photo in it seemed to be of the same person --

the cabbie's daughter, he assumed, an attractive woman with straight black hair who was in her middle to late twenties, judging from the pictures arranged toward the end. There were photos of her as a little girl; with a younger, clean-shaven father; in a ballet costume; in front of a piano; on family vacations with what seemed to be siblings, a brother and a younger sister; amidst a girls' basketball team wearing green jerseys; high school graduation photos -- with friends, and a young shy-looking boy who seemed to be a date; travel photos -- London, Paris; in cap and gown at university graduation. There it all was: the smooth, steady progression of a life. He wondered if his parents had a book like that of him. He studied her eyes and to his surprise, discovered that there was something in there, a simple, knowledgeable look, a clear, certain direction, that he found himself admiring.

"We miss her. I wish she was back here with us," the cabbie was saying. "But she wanted to go. She knows what she wants. Had so many student loans, you know. She was going to go there for two years and then she will be back."

"How long has she been there?" he found himself asking. That was how conversations went between strangers in the city, he thought, the easy ebb and flow of questions and answers.

"A year. But I hope she will come back soon." There was a genuine sadness in the cabbie's voice.

"You're right," Aaron said, turning the pages some more. "She is very pretty."

"I am lucky to have her," the cabbie said. "She looks just like her mother."

Aaron realized that's what was missing. There were no photos of any mother in the album. "Yes, where is she?" he asked cautiously.

"She is a bitch," the driver said, although not entirely unkindly. "She left me to go live with another man. A man who teaches woodworking. She met him while at a parent-teacher meeting -- you know those -- after she was complaining that Sonia, my daughter, didn't want to do the class. She had allergies."

"She was allergic to wood?"

"No, he was teaching her physical education then." Aaron wondered if he showed these photos to everyone who came into the cab. The driver continued talking about how Sonia had been living with her mother, the court had awarded her custody, but she wasn't happy there. According to him, that was the other reason she had gone to Japan.

"That seems pretty drastic," Aaron said.

"There's nothing dramatic about it," the driver said, coughing. "She's a bright girl, sensible. Smart, you know." Aaron wasn't quite sure how the conversation had ended up taking this route. He just wanted to concentrate on the city, and for the driver to concentrate on the traffic, which was getting worse. The driver was now talking about how difficult it had been for them to immigrate to Canada years ago, and how tough it was driving a cab in this city. The company he worked for was ripping off their drivers, and the insurance and fees they had to pay for their cars were immoral, he said. Everyone wanted something. "Look at that," he said suddenly. "Beautiful criminals."

“I don’t know if it’s that bad,” Aaron said. He wasn’t sure why he was taking up this argument. Inductive reasoning, he thought, particulars to the general. Sometimes the only things he could think of saying to people were rules of logic and grammar.

“No, Beautiful Criminals,” the driver repeated, gesturing across the street. Some people were putting up large, billboard-size signs outside the new sports centre. BEAUTIFUL CRIMINALS: FAIRY TALE ON ICE they read. A NEW MUSICAL. It was, from what Aaron could tell, some kind of show. “That’s exactly what they all are,” the cabbie was saying, pointing at the people walking in front of them at a cross walk, dressed up for a night on the town, carefully stepping over puddles. “All these beautiful people, they’re are all like criminals, you see?” He turned around to Aaron for support.

Aaron nodded, and tried to smile. The cabbie was right, he supposed in a way. But right now he felt like he often did when talking to strangers, like he was being prodded with some sharp, irritating object when he was otherwise content to mind his own business.

Then the cabbie turned around and looked at Aaron. “Let me tell you this. You know what you want?”

“Sure,” Aaron said, nodding. He wanted to live somewhere where you didn’t turn corners to find police with shotguns pointed at people lying face down in the street. He wanted to eat meals that couldn’t be prepared by pouring water over dried, apocalyptic powder. He wanted to be able to use the laundromat on his corner which

he had been barred from entering ever since he had thrown half a roll of quarters against the wall after a dryer had swallowed up his change. It had been the morning after Lauren had left him, and suddenly, having clean socks and underwear seemed like the most necessary, fundamental thing in his life.

“Good,” the driver said, nodding as he accelerated ahead past a police car. “If you know what you want, none of this --” he gestured to the street around him -- “matters. It is all nice. Me, I like people. In my cab, they are nice.”

Aaron was starting to feel agitated. “What do you want?” he asked the driver.

The driver glanced back at Aaron briefly. “Me? That is simple. I want to see my daughter. That is all.”

“Sounds nice,” Aaron said, thinking of the photos in the binder. He glanced over at the meter, suddenly wondering how much money he had on him. He was noticing how fast it was changing when the driver, switching lanes, veered into the car next to them on the right. The sound of the collision wrenched Aaron out of his life and into the moment, when there was only the horrifying sound of wrestling metal, then the car jostling and spinning briefly out into traffic, where miraculously it avoided the other cars around them. The other car, similarly, spun out, and then, for a moment, everything was still.

The realization: he was okay, and so was the driver, although when he turned around he seemed stunned. There was a small frightened look on his face, as though something important had been shaken out of his body, jostled by the impact.

“You okay?” the driver asked.

Aaron looked around, his heart still beating frantically. He tried to remember the last time he had been in an accident. A station wagon containing several members of his rugby team in high school had been on their way to a game and had hit another car head on. Surprisingly, everyone had been okay then too, although they were badly shaken up, and the fact that they had absorbed all the impact of the accident made them poor rugby players. They lost the game.

“Yeah, I’m fine. You’re okay?”

“Yes, yes, but --” he gestured to his car, swore several times, opened his door and stepped out. Some people had come over to see if Aaron and the cabbie were all right, and several were over talking to the other driver. Someone would have called the police, Aaron thought. There were always sensible people around who did these things. They would be there soon. Things just continued on in a city like this. Some guy was joking that he probably shouldn’t leave a tip.

Aaron wanted to leave. Nobody seemed to have been hurt -- even his bottle of wine was unharmed -- and he was within walking distance anyway. He reached into the cab, grabbed his binder, coat, and the wine. The meter had been about eight bucks before the accident, he remembered. He fumbled with his wallet, then went over to the driver with a ten dollar bill. “Look, I’m late,” he said, “I hope this covers it, okay?”

“No, no, you don’t worry, wait,” the driver was saying, but Aaron just kept walking. He wanted to get away from these people, and get back to his night. It was

so easy to get sidetracked in a city like this. You would be having a conversation with someone in a bar, spilling your guts out, only to realize they were actually watching the closed-captioned escapades of characters in music videos; ambiguous, decontextualized images that had nothing to do with the reality of how you lived right now.

He had left his keys to the office at home, he discovered, so he went straight to the party. He wanted to make sure he was okay, really okay, no secret bumps or bruises, any latent concussion he might have suffered in the accident, so he headed right for the washroom after greeting the hostess, his friend Kaitlin, a cheery, bold brunette who favoured a sort of elegant gothic look.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said, doing the obligatory smack smack on the cheeks. “It’s a long story.” She took his coat and the binder.

“You know you didn’t have to bring work,” she said. “Maybe I forgot to make it clear. This is a party, not a meeting. You can’t *be* late.”

“I wanted to drop it off at the office,” he said. “It’s those suggestions about the curriculum. Actually, Ange might want to take a look at that.”

“I’d rather not disturb my guests with work. I do work occasionally, too, you know.”

“I know. Look, where’s your washroom?”

“Down the hall. But when you get back, we have to do introductions. We have to let people know who you are.”

* * *

When he returned he noticed several people on the other side of the room were looking at him. Or was it his imagination? Had he missed an exposed wound, some secret peek at his insides he was unaware of? A few months back, strung out marking and mired in the deterioration of his relationship with Lauren, he had had a series of dreams that he had a hole in his head; an uncertain, pus-like fluid oozed out which everyone stared at. Lauren had told him it was probably some kind of male anxiety dream about imminent baldness.

He was interrupted by a colleague.

"Aaron, how are you doing? Haven't seen you in ages."

"I haven't been out much lately."

"How is your girlfriend? The artist one, Lauren?"

"She's fine. Working at the Gallery still. Oh, and we broke up several months back."

"Oh. I'm sorry." She grabbed part of his collar and straightened it out. Women were always dressing him. Usually he liked it. "How about your class?"

"Well there's no one I really want to date there," he joked, before thinking twice about it. Sometimes his jokes in class went flat. *The instructor doesn't have much of a sense of humour.* He liked to imagine his evaluations. "I was joking," he added, when he saw her look at him strangely.

She talked about her life for a few moments, while he noticed several people in one of the corner pockets of the party glancing over at him. He felt the distracting

claim on his life that came from other people talking about you -- the threat of someone knowing something about you that you weren't aware of. He checked the top of his forehead for scars again, extracting himself from the conversation gracefully, and started walking over to them. When he got closer, he noticed they were holding the binder, and suddenly he realized what they were laughing at.

He had brought the wrong binder.

"Aaron, man, way to go. She one of your students?" said one guy whom Aaron didn't like very much. "You've got her whole life here." They were looking at him like he had stolen it.

"Very sweet," said another.

"That's someone else's," he found himself mumbling. *Please speak up*, he often ended up telling students in his class who spoke only in surly, half-mumbled tones when asked a question, *please share your idea with the rest of your class. This is all about communication.*

"There was a man -- this cab driver. We had an accident. I grabbed the wrong binder. I don't know her. I don't know her at all. She's not a student." This is what he thought he was saying, but he wasn't sure if this was actually what was coming out of his mouth.

The teacher is a nice guy, one of his students had written on his last evaluation, *but he does not know how to teach information clearly. He does not know how to teach.*

* * *

Thankfully, people at parties had short attention spans. Soon, everyone forgot about the binder and the photographs of the girl. The party wasn't even very happening -- most people were talking about last week's episode of *The X-Files*, which was what most people seemed to do at parties now. Aaron hadn't seen it, so he sat down at an opening on the sofa.

"It's amazing," someone was saying. "I mean it's just incredible what you can do, and it feels so good."

They were talking about a home decorating show on television and how they had started doing woodworking. He thought of the cab driver and wondered if everything had worked out. He should have stuck around, he thought. He listened to everyone talk about their projects they had learned from watching the woodworking show: refinishing chests of drawers, making end tables. Then he thought about how his sole experience with woodworking in high school had been a class project in which he had to make a standing heron sculpture, which he had ended up sanding too much so that the head fell off his strange, anorexic-looking bird. He liked the idea of woodworking though; the simplicity of it. He wanted to stop teaching, he realized.

Aaron had started drinking to ignore all this, probably too much, he realized later, as he found himself talking about Lauren and how much he hated teaching. Then, several of the younger-spirited guests were leaving in a cab to go dancing. Without thinking about much else other than the fact that he was out of alcohol, Aaron decided to go. He had, after all, made up his mind to go out. Why stop now?

After closing his eyes for much of the cab ride -- he was a bit anxious about being in another accident -- he found they'd arrived at a club. Aaron checked his blazer and the binder at the front. He had never been there before, but all these places were the same anyway. They even had similar names, names invoking ironies and icons and religious occurrences, anything beyond human control. People who went to clubs in the dark of night wanted to be associated with these things. Once you were there, there would be the music, a strange, relentless throbbing and the endless sound of disembodied voices, the choirs of angels and drag queens. He missed the simple anger of grungy guitar chords from back home.

Even the people in the clubs seemed the same, the same haircuts and serious looks on the people dancing on speakers, everyone trying to project Jean Seberg and Jean-Paul Belmondo. They were all wearing the predictable mutant fashion blends of funk, punk, hip hop and grunge, everybody dressed up like the soundtrack to a Tarantino film.

Nothing mattered here, Aaron thought. You danced a little, had a few overpriced drinks, all in the hopes that someone you were always meant to meet would come over, or, failing that, that at least maybe a song you knew and liked would come on, the opening chords of "How Soon is Now" booming over the sound system. If you couldn't live in the moment, at least you could be comforted by the past. At this time of night, it was probably the best you could hope for.

* * *

The cold air coming through his window felt good on his face the next morning, although every other part of his body was making strange, unintelligible noises. He tried to imagine them, these soft, resilient organs, floating around inside, but all he could picture was an installation piece he had seen at the museum where Lauren worked, which featured dozens of different-sized hearts, kidneys, uteruses, all hanging from the ceiling from pieces of fishing line. It was like being in a Muppet butcher shop, he'd told Lauren. *I Want To Be Inside You*, the title placard had read.

Lauren had been assigned that room that day. She worked as a security guard, one of the lurking, uniformed figures in doorways watching over carefully preserved masterpieces on display, in case someone were to run off with them. She wore a navy blazer and dark skirt that he found sexy.

Once, he was with her when a young child went running up to one of the paintings in her room, and then carefully reached out to touch it, before Lauren took a step forward and the mother grabbed the little boy.

"You mustn't touch the paintings," the mother had told him.

"Why," he asked innocently, "are they still wet?"

Other vague details about the previous night paused briefly in front of him, suspended and waiting for recognition. The world blinked unsteadily in front of him, like a computer cursor. *What are you going to do?* it asked. *Make up your mind.* He remembered accidents, a binder -- his binder, someone else's binder, which he now realized he had forgotten to get back from the coat check.

He got up and drank a glass of water, then looked for his phone book. His blazer was lying on the floor in a sad crumple. When he picked it up, he noticed it was covered in various mounds of hardened, grey wax. He needed it to teach tomorrow, although lately his wardrobe for teaching had deteriorated. Where he had once consistently worn nice pants and a tie and blazer for every class, he now tried mostly to avoid wearing old T-shirts with band names emblazoned across the front.

He found his phone book underneath a pile of folders containing teaching evaluations. He realized he had no idea what the club was called or even where it was.

He glanced through the listings for clubs. Then he noticed he had a large purple stamp on the back of his hand that he could not remember getting. It was in the shape of a Peanuts character, that funny bird, whatever his name was. Woodstock. Woodstock was not the name of the club; at least it didn't ring a bell, and it wasn't listed in the phone book.

He looked up the number of the cab company instead. The operator picked up after a few rings.

"Hi. I'm wondering if you can help me."

"Sure." The operator sounded phenomenally bored. *I'll try*, the voice told him, *but don't stretch me, because I'm close to losing my soul altogether.*

Look, I'm not going to rip you off, he almost started. "I'm trying to find out how to contact a driver who works for your company. I was in his cab last night and I left, and he left -- there was a mix up, and I left something in the cab."

“Do you know which cab number he was?”

“Uh no. But it was a car that was in an accident.”

Her voice perked up at this, after a delay. Something new. “An accident?”

“Yeah. But he was okay.”

“Are you sure it was this company?” she asked. Maybe he didn’t report it, Aaron thought suddenly.

“I think so,” he said. “But I could be wrong.”

“What did the car look like?”

“Well, I didn’t look at it too closely.” He tried to think clearly. “But most of the damage was on the front, right side.”

“I meant what colour was it.”

“Well, it was white.” He realized how few cabs this would eliminate. “I think there was a kind of checkered pattern on a logo on the door.”

“Well that *could* be us,” she said sarcastically. “But nobody’s claimed any accident.”

“Do you have a lost and found or anything?”

“Yeah, we do. What did you lose?”

“A black binder with some material in it.”

“Material. Like pages?”

“Yeah. Do you have it there?”

“No. Nothing at all in fact.”

“Oh. Guess I’ll call back. In case the driver reports it.”

“What did he look like?” she asked.

He realized this might amount to telling on the driver, something he wasn’t ready to do.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “Look, I’ve got to go.”

He looked in his fridge for something to drink, juice, ginger ale, anything, although he knew he needed to go shopping. He went to grab his blazer and was reminded of the wax.

He thought of calling Lauren. She would know how to get it off, and he wanted to call her anyway, to see if she had forgotten the toothbrush visit. He dialed her number and almost hung up when he got her machine, but ended up leaving an unwieldy message asking if she might know how to get wax off a blazer. As he spoke he found himself doodling and writing his name over and over on a piece of paper, until, long after he had put down the phone, he had something that resembled a new signature.

He checked his mailbox when he returned. There was another postcard for the Cat Lady. Lately, the cards had become increasingly desperate. *Hey Cat Lady, I need you. I miss you. I want you. Please save me. I need the whip.*

He thought, for some reason, of his and Lauren’s one feeble attempt at fetishism. “What do you want,” she had asked him one night when they were sitting on her bed, curled up in blankets, surrounded by the careful elegance of candles all around them. “Tell me.”

He didn't know. He only did it because her desperation seemed to suggest it was necessary, a requisite for love. He had wanted to cuddle, to just watch the shadows the candles were projecting on the walls, but some kind of mild masochism seemed more appropriate to what she was suggesting. They ended up improvising using a large, palm-like plant in her bedroom that they had bought together, one of their first mutual purchases. As the candle flames got larger, the dips and swoons of the shadows more dramatic, they took turns gently whipping each other with the plant leaves. The stems kept breaking so they kept pulling off more leaves, until, by the time the candles had burned down, their plant was destroyed and he had started to break out into a rash. He remembered her sitting there on the bed. Across her face was strewn a look of sadness that he wished he could pick up. The memory rushed into him like boiling water.

There were three blinking lights on his machine. The first was from Lauren, telling him to use a paper towel with an iron. The other two did not leave messages. His machine was often full of messages for other people who were long gone, or lengthy recorded silences and then awkward hang-up noises, clicks, whirls, and beeps. It was like being the answering service for ghosts, he often thought. This technological residue of contact taunted you with the possibility of connecting to the people you found yourself staring at on the other side of subway station stops -- before trains came along and wiped their faces from your mind like an eraser on a dust-filled, once-green chalkboard.

* * *

For two days Aaron didn't wash his right hand. He showed it to everyone he knew who was even remotely young or marginally hip; the only people who would know the location of the club were the people who were supposed to be there in the first place. It was like that in a city, he thought. Information was accessible to those who required it. *Make the information your own*, he would tell his students in his class discussing research. They would greet his enthusiasm with cold, vampiric stares. *Feed me*, they said, their attractive, well-groomed faces looking expectantly up at him, *give us what you know. Point me, click me on, highlight me, drag me where I need to go.*

He tracked down Kaitlin. She didn't know. "Oh, I don't go out that much anymore," she told him. "It's too much *work*."

He asked people at work. Then the secretary told him that everyone in the department was talking about the student he was having the affair with.

"What," he said, realizing he sounded a bit like Lauren. His mind raced ahead. Then he thought of the binder at the party.

"Don't worry," the secretary said, "they're only looking into it. Nobody's done anything." Her eyes asked him, So what's going on, is it true?

"You're not serious," he said. "I mean, that's funny." He tried to look calm. It *was* funny, he thought, but only in the same way a Beckett play is funny. You didn't want to live there. "This is ridiculous," he simply said. "I'm not having an affair with anyone. That was a misunderstanding."

The secretary just nodded. Now she obviously thought he was lying. "Of course," she said. "Don't worry. I'm sure you're not doing anything wrong."

He felt himself strangely out of breath, a little dizzy. "No, you're right. Maybe I'm doing everything wrong. That's what it is. I'm doing everything wrong," he said to her, and left.

There were all these lines, he thought as he left the office. Lines, everywhere, that were supposed to tell you what you could do and what you couldn't. Dotted lines on the road. But it was like the passing lane; half the people didn't know what these lines meant in the first place. Yellow, white, broken lines, solid. You could be on the wrong side of the road and have no idea.

In the middle of his class, one of his students in the front row put up her hand to ask a question. He had been discussing passive verb construction, holding up his arms in what he hoped was an engaging and attention-getting gesture.

"Hey Mr. Leeson," the tall blonde with pigtails said. She was wearing a T-shirt that read SHUT UP YOU HAVE NO PAIN. "You were at Pigpen?"

At least it sounded like that. She was chewing gum loudly. He made a mental note to make a policy against that next term.

"What," he said. "What was the name you said?"

"Pigpen," she said again. "I was there the other night and they stamped that on my hand."

“But it’s got Woodstock,” he said. “That’s another character.” He noticed that only one of the four main fluorescent lights in the room was working properly.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe they couldn’t get a ‘Pigpen’ stamp.” She was right. It made sense. Everything made sense, if you just held it up at a different angle and looked closely at it.

He realized he was in front of a class and went back to talking about intransitive verb forms. After class, he went to the washroom and scrubbed the ink off as much as he could, using his nails. It took a while, but finally the purple ink left his hand, a bruise running down the drain.

Sylvie, his student, had told him the address of the club. The next evening when he should have been marking, Aaron put on his blazer, now wax-free, and a shirt with a wide collar he believed might be in style again, although it stuck out at a strange angle. He took a bus to the club, which was in a part of the city he didn’t remember seeing when he was drunk and in a cab the other night. There was no signage out front, just a neon square over a doorway, and a large bouncer setting up a rope, although there was no one around.

Aaron told the bouncer he had to go inside to get something he had left.

“Ten dollar cover.”

He glanced at his watch. A little after nine. “I just have to go in for a moment to get something. I don’t want to go in.”

The bouncer looked at him a little strangely. “Give me your wallet.”

Aaron gave him his wallet, although he took out his driver's license first. In case he was murdered inside, he thought, and they had to identify his body. He tried to look at the stamp the bouncer was using. "Can I see that?" he asked.

"No. Sorry."

"Why not?"

The guy just looked at him for a moment. His body was large, dense, and frightening. Then he shrugged and handed the stamp to Aaron. From what Aaron could tell it was of Snoopy, not Woodstock.

"Do you guys, like, have any stamps of Pigpen?"

"What?"

"Pigpen. The Peanuts character. You have any stamps of him?"

The bouncer looked at him like he had lost his mind. Just then two people came to the queue and he turned to them, waving Aaron through. Inside the place was nearly empty. Dark, brooding music played, something that vaguely resembled the clinking of tablespoons on pots, dungeonesque, he thought. Maybe it was The New Thing. He asked the woman at the coat check if they had a lost and found. She directed him to the woman at the door where he had showed his hand before. She was attractive -- everyone there was attractive, though -- with sharp, lined features and severe hair, a black cocktail dress.

"Excuse me, I left a black binder here the other night with some pictures in it."

"Uh huh."

“A black binder.”

“With pictures?”

“Yeah. Do you have it?”

“I don’t know.” And her expression said, *I don't care either*. But she went to the back and came back browsing through a black binder.

“She’s pretty,” she said to Aaron, who took it and closed the book. “That a gift or something?”

“Yeah, it’s a gift,” Aaron said, wondering what she meant, and grabbed some matches. Just in case. “Thanks,” he said, getting his wallet back from the bouncer on the way out. He checked to make sure his money was still there. It was starting to rain and he had forgotten to bring an umbrella. He didn’t care. He had the binder in his hands. Adjusting his collar, he walked out past the line-up that was just starting, feeling like a fashion model parading down a slick, oily runway.

He bought what he thought was mint gum from a convenience store that only sold snack foods and beer, so he could have bus fare home. As he paid he noticed a monitor, mounted up near the counter, which showed him standing there, in washed-out, blurry black and white, looking at himself. He looked around and couldn’t see the surveillance camera anywhere. But there he was, standing awkwardly, being watched, being *seen*, in case he *did something*. Someone would know this moment.

“Where is the camera?” he asked the guy sitting behind the counter. They had exchanged no words, so far.

The guy looked at him suspiciously and just shrugged.

“You mean you don’t know? Or you’re not going to tell me?” Now the guy gave Aaron a hostile look, and started punching in numbers on a cellular phone.

Aaron decided he should leave.

There was a bus right outside. Once he sat down in his seat, he took out the gum, which turned out to be lime, and found the matches from the club. *Playpen*, he noticed it read, in bright, abrasive red, like lipstick that would never come off.

For the next week, Aaron burrowed into his apartment, with its strange smells and noises. He marked his students’ final papers, punctuated by calls to different cab companies in the hopes that he might track down the driver. He went for walks in the evenings, wandering in the area where the cab driver had picked him up that night, carefully peering at the faces of drivers in cabs speeding by, filled with Christmas shoppers. He wondered if the cabbie was still driving.

A few days before Christmas, Lauren called him.

“How are you?” she asked. There was a strange noise in the background.

“Where are you?” he asked her.

“At the airport. I was going to go but then I decided I wanted to tell you first.”

“What?”

“Look, Aaron, I was meaning to talk to you about this before. When you called a few weeks ago, I wanted to tell you.”

“What?” *Be as direct and concise as possible*, he often wrote on his students’ papers.

“I’m getting married,” she said. “There’s this guy, John.” She paused.

He didn’t say anything. John?

She waited a moment, then continued. “He was there that day you came by. He’s a great guy. You’d like him. I mean, I really think you would.”

“When did you meet him?”

There was a notable pause. He tried to imagine her there, on the payphone at the airport, staring straight ahead. He saw all the people coming and going, the little electricities of departures and arrivals, those simple closures. People simply got smaller as they disappeared into the hallway that led to the gates. Then they were gone.

She was talking, something about earlier in the year. He woke up a bit, but it really didn’t matter. “When we were still together?” he asked.

Another pause. “Well sort of. I didn’t want to hurt you,” she said. “That was the thing. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

I’m not okay, he wanted to say, *I’m still wet*.

“I’m fine,” he said, “I appreciate you telling me.” He wondered how it had happened; if John had gotten down on his knees or not, and when it was that he actually proposed. He asked her where she was going.

“Oh, I’m going to stay with John’s family for a while. Then I’m coming back for the New Year. John has tickets to a gala opening. This big ice musical that’s opening. He’s going to see if he can get me some set design work.”

“That’s great,” Aaron found himself saying. They dutifully talked about the holidays and their families and how wearying the holidays could be.

“Oh, my plane has been called,” Lauren said. “I’d better be going I guess. Merry Christmas, Aaron,” she said. “I’m glad we talked.”

“Yes, me too,” he said to an empty dial tone. He wanted his voice to just crawl up into the phone and stay there.

After a long-distance Christmas, spent on the phone to parents, friends and relatives he couldn’t afford to see, Aaron spent several days watching well-worn seasonal movies and woodworking programs on television, and going through old photos of himself and Lauren. One night, after having drunk a bottle of pitifully cheap red wine, he crudely pasted each of them onto sheets of paper, hole punched the pages, and put them in a binder. Just before he glued each photo he held it up and looked at it carefully, as though each one had failed to have been brought to life through his best attempts at CPR. He finished the bottle of wine, ran out of paper, and stared at newspapers that were several days old. The neighbours to the right were playing Joni Mitchell’s “River” and the words mumbled through his head pleasantly. *I wish I had a river I could skate away on.* He thought of himself and Lauren skating, somewhere, but he couldn’t. Then he realized they had never gone

skating. It was a memory that wouldn't take, no matter how much you tried to force the thing. Aaron drunkenly stood up. The world seemed covered with gauzy bandages: safe, harmless. He picked up the binder, along with his small tree that he had never gotten around to decorating, then took both downstairs and threw them out back in the garbage. Coming back in, he heard dance music playing, loudly, now, through the apartment wall, a pounding, incessant beat. His neighbours were probably having one of their parties. He realized, suddenly, that it was New Year's Eve.

He poured himself a glass of water and tried to concentrate on the pages of the newspaper in front of him. There was an article he had noticed but not read, about the opening of some musical, a gala, that night. Then he realized it was "Beautiful Criminals: Fairy Tale On Ice." He read the article describing the show, "an inspiring saga of a family's rise from rags to fine fashion and riches, set in the contemporary world of haute couture and crime syndicates in the fashion business." The article went on to describe how the play's New Year's Eve opening would have a later start than usual, so that it would finish just before midnight, at which point there would be a gala party.

It occurred to Aaron that the cabbie might be there, along with all the other taxi drivers who would be there in abundance, dropping off the invitees. He glanced at his watch. He had to leave right then, if he wanted to be there, too. He put on his wax-free blazer, grabbed his keys, and the binder. He was going out.

As soon as he was out on his street he saw the bus coming, blocks away. He didn't have any bus fare, he realized. The laundromat on his block was the closest place he could get change, and the lights seemed on.

The owner, sitting in a chair by the window, looked up at him, surprised, when Aaron knocked on the door. He shook his head.

Aaron banged again. The man got up, came over and unlocked the door. "I told you you can't come in here," he said, shaking his head. "We're closed, anyway."

"I need to get in here," Aaron said to the owner. The bus was now about four blocks away. "Please, I just want to come in for a moment." That was the key, he realized suddenly, you just had to keep trying to fit different parts of yourself into place, like a key in a lock.

"This is a laundromat. Nobody *needs* to get in here. We're closed."

Aaron just walked in past him and went right to the change machine. "I just need some change, okay. Please." He surprised himself. He felt like he was that boy in the art gallery, touching the painting.

"I could call the police," the owner said, but Aaron knew he wouldn't do anything. He kept trying to fit the bill into the machine, unbending corners, smoothing it. It didn't work. His heart was pounding now. Sooner or later it would go in. He waited for the sounds of change, gloriously metallic and solid, but nothing happened. Nothing happened at all.

He heard the door open and looked up.

In that moment the whole world seemed to shift just a little bit, so that he could almost hear a faint *click*.

The girl, the young woman, who occupied a prominent role in forty-seven photographs (he had counted) in a black Hilroy binder that was in his hand at that moment was standing in the doorway.

"We're closed," the owner was saying.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I just saw him in here and I thought . . ." She glanced over at Aaron and he tried to smile. He found himself staring at her dark features and strong, bold eyes. Her hair was shorter than in what had seemed to be the most recent photographs. She was holding a garbage bag full of clothes. "I mean, I'm sure you have better things to do. But I won't be long," she told him, smiling.

The owner looked up at her and his glare suddenly diffused into better, gentler lighting. "Ah, come on in," he said. "I can stay open. I only came here because I wanted to be away from home." He looked sad. Aaron knew he was a former pilot for Air France who had retired to run this place and spend evenings smoking cigars with the regulars. The man looked over at Aaron, shrugged his shoulders. "You, too, if you want."

"Hi," she said, coming over to Aaron, her eyes meeting his securely. Maybe it wasn't her, he thought, trying to make her face change as he looked at it, a kaleidoscope of impossibilities that kept looking the same. "You finished with that?"

He realized she wasn't referring to the binder he held, welded to his sweating hand at the moment, but the change machine. He nodded. "Yeah," he said, not knowing what to say next. *Your graduation photos are great* was probably not a good place to start. It was her. They were standing together in a laundromat, maybe the only one open in the city, at the close of the year, near the final lap of the century.

"I've been flying for fourteen hours," she said as she scooped up her change, "and I have nothing to wear. That's why I'm here. What the hell are you doing here?"

He liked her voice, strong and clear, easygoing. It was the voice, he thought, of a teacher. He tried to think of the normal answer to this question, and the natural question to ask here, for someone who didn't know the answers already.

"I need clean clothes." He gave a smile, the kind that tried to say, this is true, this is all true. Once, he told his students to write a composition on what they know. One student rolled their eyes and said, *That's what you are supposed to show us*. "Where were you?"

"Japan. Teaching English." She rolled her eyes. "What everyone else is doing, right? Just for another year. I came home to surprise my parents. My father, particularly."

"He must be happy to see you." He imagined the man and his reaction. He liked this feeling, of peering into lives he barely knew.

"Yeah, I can only be here for half a week, but it's good to see him. He drives a cab and things haven't gone that great lately. He had an accident a month ago and

he can't seem to get things together. Insurance, etc. I won't bore you. But it's just so sad. He was a *doctor* before he came here."

"He drives a cab?" This seemed natural, didn't it -- the repetition of details, appropriate. But when, and how?

"Yeah, he's driving tonight. He was going to take the night off but he needs the money, I know, and it's a big night. He's going to stop by later." When she said this she looked at him and he could tell that her life, at that moment, wasn't really there at all, not in that laundromat, but somewhere else; in that cab with her father perhaps, driving through the city, the slow, sprawling emergency of night.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" She gave him a careful look as she said this.

"Yeah. Sure."

"So what's the deal with your clothes?"

What? His blazer -- again? He glanced down at what he was wearing. Had he missed a spot of wax?

"The ones you are going to wash. I mean, isn't that what you're here for?" She was smiling though, when she said this. "Or are you just going to take off those ones and wash them?"

He found the warmth spreading through his face. It felt good to blush, he thought, to feel something there. He tried to smile. "Right. Clothes. Forgot," he said, keeping a firm hold on the binder. "I'll be right back."

He ran out into the street, thinking how he might never tell her. Maybe it would be the secret that lay between them, the thin semi-permeable membrane through which their lives would pass into each other. He would allude to it, telling stories of the strange ways that people met in cities. He would tell her the story of the couple he had read about in *Ann Landers* who had met during the L.A. riots while looting a store together, and how they were now married and looking for advice on how to tell people the real story of how they met. It was true, he would insist, it was in *Ann Landers*.

Or he would tell her as soon as he got back to the laundromat, and she would be surprised, of course, even shocked, at first, but would gradually come to understand it. She would tell him stories of people she knew and how they had met, and would even know the *Ann Landers* story, for she would have read it at the same time he had! They would trade and borrow information like this, surrounded by the smells of detergent and bleach, the two of them, in front of the dryer, watching their clothes tumble over each other joyously.

Then they would go out, the three of them in the front seat together, circling the downtown core in a newly painted cab. The driver would smile, they would *all* smile, at the coincidences involved in all this. They would use words like *belong*. They would pass by the centre where the gala was happening, watch the couples leaving, still humming the final song from the show, an upbeat, operatic number, "I'll Never Steal Your Heart Again." Just before midnight he would direct the driver to a place he knew of, a club where a jazz band who called themselves The Funny

Valentines and who performed on-stage wearing nothing but boxer shorts with little hearts on them, were playing. There, at the perfectly synched, obligatory countdowns to midnight, he would turn to them both, drinks in hand, and propose a toast. “This is it,” he would say, “this is the end.”

They would take photos of each other, to remember all this.

But that would be later. First, at the laundromat, in this city, they would have to meet. Like anybody else.

LOOKING LIKE ROSES

When he called me up from the airport, Sam Wainwright told me that fatherhood was a blessing, direct from Christ. Like mail-order, he said. It's like a blessing sent to you direct from the Lord himself. I listened to his voice burst and cackle, like leaves burning in a fire. I hadn't spoken to Sam in a long time, and I wondered what he wanted. He told me he had some things to talk about. They would have to be discussed in person. He was only in town for the night. He didn't know a good place to stay and wanted to know if I knew anywhere. He had a friend, a woman, who used to live in Montréal. But now she lived down in Burlington, Vermont. He might drive down there. But he wanted to talk to me as soon as he figured out where he was going to stay. Good things, he said. Good things still can happen. I didn't say anything. I stared out my window at the corner opposite mine where a lone prostitute sat every night on concrete steps that used to lead to a building but that was now a vacant overgrown lot. I told Sam to come by my place, and that no, it wasn't a problem, he could come stay with me if he needed. I believe that simple gestures matter. Like kindness. Like putting up your father-in-law -- even without the law, even when the rest of the in-law side wasn't speaking to him. It was a gesture. Ford, you're a good man, he said to me. I've always known that you were. Then he told me he needed to have good directions. I need to know where you are, he said. I gave him the best directions I could think of so he wouldn't get lost.

* * *

I had only met Sam once before, shortly after Foster was born. Even then -- before he had acquired his sweet, curious voice and dark brown hair -- Foster was a beautiful baby, healthy and good-natured and surprisingly calm. Marie told me that he had probably inherited my temperament and her looks. By this, I assumed she meant that Foster seemed to demonstrate none of his grandfather's noisier, delusional tendencies, for her mother, Roopa, was actually an intelligent, straightforward woman, as was her daughter. I didn't question what she said about looks: watching her lie there, glowing with the weary luminescence of motherhood and thick-headed by drugs given to her throughout the difficult birth, I felt, a bit awkwardly, more tenderness toward her than I had previously ever known.

The day Sam came to visit his daughter and grandson, Marie was actually asleep the whole time. It was probably just as well. At an early age she had been handed the concept of a biological father as a kind of container in which to put all sorts of complaints and grievances. But Marie had felt obligated to call him in Kamloops, where he lived, to tell him the news, and even Roopa had agreed to let her estranged and exiled ex-husband visit and meet his only grandson. In the disorienting and cluttered days following the birth, I happened to be in Marie's mother's house myself; Sam's hearty handshake as he introduced himself nearly crushed my bones. On first meeting him, I noticed his size, which seemed to be an extension of his edgy, magnanimous nature. He moved about constantly, and took up a lot of space in a room. I found myself wondering if Foster would grow wide,

like his grandfather, rather than narrow and tall like his father. Yet what struck me most about Sam was his voice, its raspy, rustling, seeded quality. At other times it managed to be quite deep, even bluesy, with a ravaged, soulful echo of another time and place. After hearing Marie describe him over the years, I realized that Sam and I had nothing in common, other than the fact we had both become fathers when we were twenty-seven years old.

I should add that Marie and I had agreed that no matter what happened, we were going to raise Foster in a way neither of our parents had succeeded in doing, although my own family history is another long and unnecessary story. Foster was not planned. Marie and I had long since broken up -- being several years older, I was simply more serious than she wanted to be, and I had realized and respected that she needed a lot of time to grow in whatever ways she felt necessary. As many couples do, we had come together on the night of Foster's conception out of simple need, out of serendipity rather than passion. I remember the night, in fact, for there had been a power outage. A simple technological sigh that perhaps signaled something to us, an opening in the universe through which our own behavior might have been influenced. Or so I liked to think.

Marie had come over to my place -- our former apartment -- to use my computer. She had been working on resumes she wanted to send out for new, more fulfilling work. The ugly glare of the cold lights in the mall made her tired of life and people, and caused migraines. She was in my small bedroom, where my computer was, and I was watching a hockey game in the next room while listening to

music. I could hear the gentle click and clatter of Marie's small hands on the keyboard, and memories of the time we had spent in this apartment as a couple, this oasis of gentle noise in our twin self-contained worlds, suffused me and made it hard to concentrate on the game. I thought of going in to help her out, but she was already self-conscious about describing her work experience -- mostly service industry. She had told me she didn't need my help, just the computer, even though putting together a strong resume is a skill I have become quite proficient at. But I respected her space.

Then the electronic devices around us let out a small gasp, and there was nothing. All the sounds, all noise, was gone. The steady, comforting hum of the fridge, the whirl of the computer fan, the buzz of the CD sound system and strings of Pachelbel, the incessant sound of game commentators, even the tiny tone of the track lighting I had installed: only silence. The two of us were suddenly in the dark, with only the sound of water dripping steadily in our bathtub as any sign of time at all. I could hear Marie -- who no doubt had not been saving anything -- cry out and then swear, upset at losing her night's work.

I came into the bedroom. In the moment I first saw her she looked almost scared. Perhaps it was just the chill of the silence and darkness with all the light and noise removed from our world. Now there were just our strange, sudden-moving shadows coming through the blinds from the headlights of cars outside. They were reminders of our bodies, cut loose from the clinging residue of our electronic world, the one full of responsibilities and obligations and problems and difficulties. *Gone.*

In the diffused shadows of the room Marie looked smaller and younger than usual, her eyes catching the light of a car's headlights outside. In her early twenties, she has retained a childlike awkwardness to her body which has always drawn me to it. That night I went over to her then, in the dark, thinking I was going to hug her. I thought we might hold each other, as though to say, look, it's over, we both know that, but we still care for one another, and we'll always know one another. I wasn't going to tell her what I was actually thinking, which was that I knew I was still in love with her, and that I probably should have told her this earlier. I knew, however, that she didn't want to hear this at this point.

I didn't hold her, though. I leaned over and kissed her, firmly, and the gently guiding trajectory of my mouth and lips pushed us both together, there, in the dark, in the way we hadn't done for months. We were both surprised, I think. In the dark without electricity, it was like we were different people -- unplugged, acoustic. When we were lying there, still in darkness, on my old futon, the two of us soiled by the surprise of still using each other's bodies, the power came back on. A series of strange, startled clicks and whirls, start-up beeps of printers confused by half-finished commands, information inputted that had been lost, scrambled into the back corners of the hard drive, tapes lodged awkwardly in tape players and VCRs rolling tentatively forward -- everything in the room confused by the sudden surge of power, of memory, of *feeling* rushing through its wires, the strange, unexpected current of life continuing on as it always had.

This is how it happened, and I have always taken responsibility for it.

Memory is an elusive thing. I remember clearly that night, every moment, more than I remember when I first met Marie, or even much of our relationship. I remember it more clearly than Foster's birth, although this was the most significant thing that has ever happened to me. But I remember the night he came into this world, even before I *knew* him, and knew that I would never leave him, that I would walk through burning buildings, dive into ice, and gouge the eyes out of murderers to save his life.

Before we knew about Foster, however, we both agreed it was a mistake. Marie had already been thinking of moving to Toronto, for she was tired of this weary city and the sheer difficulties of getting work. Roopa and her step-dad, Frank, were in Toronto. She applied for and got the job she had been preparing the resume for that night -- coordinating a customer service line for a daily newspaper in Toronto -- and made plans to move. Several days later I came down with a relatively serious case of food poisoning from a half-chicken that had been left out for too long on my counter. A week later Marie started feeling nauseated in the morning, although she did not tell me this until several months later, when her decision had been definitively made.

Sam arrived at my door a half hour later, and asked if I could loan him the cab fare for the taxi he had taken.

"I didn't want to spend my whole evening waiting for a bus to get here," he told me. "All the bank machines in the airport were in French. I'll get the next one."

The taxi from Dorval is twenty-five dollars with tip. I gave him the money and he ran down the steps.

He entered with his luggage, one bag, which I took and put into the small living room of my apartment. Then he offered his hand, which I grasped, before he folded me into an abrasive hug. He smelled of stale cigars.

“Ford, it’s good to see you. It’s been a while, eh?” He clomped over to the chairs near the window. He didn’t take off his boots. “So, this is Montréal,” he said. “Regarde les castors la bas. I remember learning that in French class.”

“That means, ‘Look at the beavers down there,’” I told him.

He shook himself slightly, as though cold, and looked at me. Despite being born-again, he looked bad. He was wearing a large overcoat of an awkward length for him, for the bottom of his coat reached midway to his heavy, thick thighs. He took off the coat and put it on the chair. He wore a stretched-out grey wool sweater, with an orange and brown strip down the sleeves that made him look like an old CFL football player. His chino pants were olive, a colour that did not look good on him. He’d grown his hair out a bit too, which he ran his hands through several times. His clothes could date him, I thought, to the exact moment in time his luck ran out.

“I had a bad teacher,” he said. “I knew Spanish, though. That’s what they taught us down there.” Down there meant Ohio, which was where he was born, before escaping the draft. He kept looking around. He noticed the empty bottles of gin on top of the fridge. “You’ve been hitting the booze heavy, haven’t you,” he said.

"I haven't thrown them out, that's all," I said, feeling annoyed.

"Hey, it's okay. It's just I don't want a grandson of mine being raised by a boozehound."

"I'm not really raising him," I said, after choosing which aspect of what he said I wanted to contradict.

He kept wandering around, looking through the rooms. "You like it here?" he asked, walking into the washroom and starting to run the tap.

"No," I said, honestly. I had accepted Marie's move from Montréal, even after we had talked about the baby and what we were going to do, because it was the right thing for her. There was no question of us, after all. Toronto was closer to her parents, and the newspaper she worked for would even give her maternity leave.

It had occurred to me, too, that Marie did not want me there. It was important, I thought, for me to be supportive of all her decisions at that time, if things were going to continue to go well. I had a good job here, as a sales manager for Aporia Management Systems, a software company that produces business report programs. In Toronto, who knows? Particularly with a baby -- I was going to be a father, after all -- we had to have some decent income. I would continue to visit, regularly, for with my position now I could always make up business excuses. None of this made it any easier. Sometimes I would return to my small apartment -- small, even though I could now afford better, because I wanted to be able to send most of what I made to Marie and Foster -- and find myself spending evenings thinking of calling her so that I could speak to him on the phone. Often I would end up drinking

gin instead, feeling the slow burn inside me and the elegant feeling of drunkenness that would come over me as I sat and looked out the window. This had all happened very quickly. A year went by, then more. In December, Foster would be two. How quick they grow, it is often said. It's silly and simple, as are most things people say about children, but it is true.

"So how you been, Ford?" Sam said when he came back into the room. He reached behind his head and started massaging the back of his neck. "Hot in here," he muttered.

"You know," I said, "hanging in there." I showed him my new business card, for lack of other conversation. I had recently been promoted to be Team Leader of Sales for the Northwest division. I was thinking of how much work I had to do tomorrow. With Sam staying, I might not be able to go in that early, I thought. "You seen Foster and Marie recently?" I asked, showing him a recent photo. I don't know why I asked him this. I knew he hadn't. He was officially barred from seeing Foster and Marie ever since Roopa went and got a court order after his last escapade, which had involved him wanting to baptize Foster in the Straight of Georgia.

"No," he said softly. "Ford, it's a sad thing when a man can't visit his own daughter and grandson." He looked at the photo for a minute, then smiled broadly. "I knew it. He's got my eyes," he said, proudly.

I took the photo back, looking carefully at Foster's eyes. It wasn't a very good photo. I told myself his eyes looked nothing like Sam's, which were a deep, disorienting green.

“See, you know, Ford, what I’m talking about. You know how I feel.”

“I guess. So, how did you get my number?” I asked.

“Directory assistance,” he said. “But now I have this.” He held up the card and put it in his wallet. “We can’t let this much time go by again. You don’t think I’d forget my son-in-law,” he said.

I didn’t correct him. What was the point? “I almost didn’t even recognize your voice on the phone at first,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. He looked at me. “Tell me Ford, does it sound different to you?” He seemed interested in what I had to say about this.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I mean, it has been awhile.”

“I’m a changed man, Ford. That’s the deal. I imagine you’re wondering why I’m here in La Belle Province.”

“Sure,” I said. I was tired, and I found myself looking out the window. There was an old dance studio across the street past the vacant lot, and you could often see shapes moving gently and gracefully through the fogged-up windows, like falling snow catching the light of a street lamp. Marie and I had talked about taking lessons, a long time ago.

“Thought you’d like to come to Washington with me,” he said. “I’m sure you’ve heard what’s going on.”

I tried to think of what was going on in Washington. I tried to think of why I might want to go there. I couldn’t think of a single thing.

He started to tell me about the Promise Keepers, a group of religious men, and how there was going to be a huge rally of them in Washington, D.C., on Saturday. He had flown here, from up in the interior of B.C., where he was working building houses, to take a bus down. He said he had planned to visit me here tonight and then bus down tomorrow. He thought we could go together. He explained to me that the Promise Keepers were a group of men committed to following promises. He didn't explain what these promises were. I had not heard of the group, although I know if I had I probably wouldn't have paid any attention. Although I'm not a religious person, I have started to realize that there are things I believe, although I do not know how to explain this to anyone. I don't know if I would even *want* to describe them. I prefer to be in churches when no one else is in them. Shortly after Foster was born, I sometimes found myself stopping in the beautiful churches and cathedrals downtown during my lunch hours. I liked being inside the empty halls, where the air seemed to shimmer silently with the possibility of God's voice, like the air over a bonfire. But how can you explain these things to the people from work on a Friday afternoon?

While I was listening to Sam, I started wondering what Marie would think if she knew her father were visiting me. I decided she probably wouldn't like it, not at all.

When he was finished Sam looked at me carefully. "So Ford," he said, "have you ever felt the Lord inside you?"

* * *

Among a few other things, Sam really messed up with his family when Marie was still pretty young by leaving one day to go fishing on the Sunshine Coast -- they were living in Vancouver in those days -- and ending up three days later near Canmore, Alberta shooting pigeons off the balcony of a hotel with an unlicensed rifle he said he had bought in a pawn shop in Kamloops. Sam claimed that other forces were at work during this time and that he had little memory of the whole thing. No one to this day has been able to connect these four points, even with his help, so the line that explains how he, in attempting to fish on the West Coast, ended up shooting another class of animal life in another province is best left unexplained.

After this fiasco, Roopa gave him one more try, and for a while he settled into a decent job as a movie projectionist. He liked the hours. Sometimes he'd leave after the late show broke and drive all night to a field he knew of somewhere near Squamish, where he liked to meditate at dawn. He'd told me once that he'd practiced several different kinds of what he called "Buddhist techniques," and that you had to devote yourself to it entirely, which is why he did this. He didn't need to sleep. He'd drive back during the afternoon and go to work. Sometimes Marie and her mother went days without seeing him. They said this arrangement went surprisingly well for a time. He shaved his head, giving him the dull sheen of an uglier, more jovial Marlon Brando.

But he screwed this up too. It was discovered that he was routinely cutting out scenes of films that he found morally questionable. Some of these things were questionable -- that is, what he found questionable was questionable. He spliced out

all scenes involving violence from the films, and sometimes tried to cut out moments of swearing, too, which was tricky, and not often done very well. Sex was okay, as long as it was with older characters and not teenagers or young people. He cut out the scene from *Bambi* where the Great Stag tells Bambi that his mother can't be with him anymore.

The stories went on and on. I had heard most of them from Marie, and some from Roopa and Frank at dinners at their house. Whether or not all of them were true wasn't really important. You could try filling in all the gaps and blanks in the stories but it was like trying to colour in a colouring book using a single Bic pen. It was a lot of work, and for dubious purpose. Some of the stories, I guessed, like the one about him sitting in a field in the interior for three years doing various mind-expanding drugs, were not lies, but rather exaggerations laced with the truth. The one story I hadn't heard was about the night he actually left the family and didn't return before he was officially banished from the household for good.

His even bigger problem was his recurring and habitual belief after 1978 that he had been in Vietnam. He hadn't. In fact, he had come over the border in a blue and white VW van at the Sumas crossing in 1970 where he'd promptly met Roopa, a customs officer who welcomed the obviously draft-resisting Sam to Canada by asking him out. He had known enough to wear a suit, and had looked good. They were on the outer perimeters of their own relationship when Roopa became pregnant with Marie. Sam waited until she was born before he started leaving, once there was actually things for him to do, like night feedings and diaper changing.

He *was* crazy, but he was like a bad movie which you had to watch for a while to realize it was bad. If you only saw a couple of minutes it drew you in. It might even seem interesting. Sam was like that. In short doses, he was your friend, advisor, priest. People grew towards him as plants do to sunlight. He spent much of his time where people with such skills excel and shine, like bars. He was good in bars. He was good in situations where people didn't really want to think about anything. He was good at distracting you. He was good at being distracted.

We went to a bar that Sam had noticed on the cab ride here and insisted on going to. We deserve to celebrate, he told me. After the cab incident, I assumed he was buying; it was a swank retro place where a martini costs more than a six-pack. "I don't know, maybe you think this is funny, Ford," he said, once we had drinks. "But the day it happened to me was the happiest day of my life. Suddenly, you know, I mean, *suddenly*, I felt this crack open up and everything -- all these things, rush into me. There was colours and light in my soul. That's how it happened. Suddenly, boom, I was full. It was all inside me. Like a good scotch. It felt warm. And suddenly, I saw this new beauty inside me. It was a matter of light. Like stained glass. I needed light to see inside myself. Isn't that funny? You never know. And that's why I want to go. To show how I can be a man. To show everyone this goodness inside me. I feel it. I breathe goodness. I sweat goodness." He raises his martini glass. "To the Lord," he toasted.

I felt I should stop him. But I was curious. Like I said, he drew you in. “So when did all this happen?”

He adjusted his face and looked at me dead straight. “Ford, you won’t believe it,” he said. “I tell you, this is how I knew there was a place for poor sinners like me. I’m on a plane going up to Prince George. Little twelve-seater, not big at all.” He gestured with his hands. “The plane’s going on to Dawson City after. I get off in Prince George. I have business there, you see. I’m there at the airport, waiting for my luggage. And nothing comes up. My bags aren’t there. They’ve gone on to Dawson City.” He shook his head, slowly. “Ford, later that evening I’m staying at my friend’s house, watching the news. And there it is. The announcer is saying there’s been a crash. A crash of a small plane going up to Dawson City.” He looked over at me and made sure I was watching him. “Everyone’s dead. Everyone died when the plane went up in flames. Nothing could be done. Everything is gone. Nothing left. My luggage. Everything I own. *Gone.*” He shook his glass, took a sip, and then put it on the table. “That was supposed to be me. But it wasn’t. I was supposed to be dead, along with all those other poor people. But I wasn’t. Why? I’ve asked myself that a dozen times. A hundred times. A thousand times. And you know what? I know the answer. It was for me to find myself again. Christ gave me the chance to do this. To find forgiveness for what I have done.” He finished the drink. “Everything I had was on that plane, Ford. But I got something else.” He paused here for effect. I knew what was coming, of course. “The Lord.”

He picked up the olive in his glass and popped it into his mouth.

“Well,” I said. What, after all, do you say to a story like that?

“That’s why I’m going down to Washington, Ford. This is what we are supposed to do. Find forgiveness from the Lord. Expand our male horizons. Form close friendships with good men. You’re a good man, Ford,” he said. “I’ve always thought so. My daughter deserves you.”

I tried to ignore this. “What about your other friends,” I asked him, weakly.

“What friends?” he said. This seemed to upset him. “Ghosts,” he shouted loudly. “They’re all ghosts! They’re gone. Killed. Lost. Gone.” He didn’t explain what he meant by this. “You,” he said, “are my family.”

I nodded, not knowing how to get out of this.

“I bought you a bus ticket,” he told me, waving the waitress over.

I went to the washroom and ran cold water on my face. For some reason I thought of Foster then, of his smiling face and how nothing made me happier than to see him, to feel his little body shake and laugh when I tickled him, or to hear him start to put together words and phrases, which is what he was doing now. “Daddy car,” he said to me the other week when I drove up. “Daddy bye-bye,” he said in a low voice, when I was leaving. It amazed me to see how he was beginning to order his world. I was missing things every day, I kept telling myself.

Once when I was visiting shortly after Foster was born, Marie told me something a psychologist had once said about how the perceptual world of a newborn baby resembled a kind of blooming, buzzing confusion -- this is what the guy called

it. When she told me this we sat there watching Foster in his crib carefully. Marie asked me how I thought Foster saw us, and I wasn't sure, at first, what she meant. I assumed she was asking me if I thought Foster saw us as a couple, as a mother and father, as parents, but then I realized that what she meant was if he saw us as anything other than blurry, noisy shapes.

I guess I stood there looking at the mirror for a while. I thought of the panic attacks I'd been having at work lately, how sometimes my heart felt like something heavy was resting on it. I was convinced that my breathing stopped in these moments. My doctor kept telling me I was fine, other than the usual problems -- my food allergies, asthma, a tightening of the jaw at times.

A gentleman wearing an expensive suit came into the washroom. He checked his hair, then looked over at me suspiciously. "You should lay off the drugs," he said, seriously.

There were two more martinis on the table when I returned. Sam was flirting with the waitress who had brought our drinks.

"It was nothing, really," I heard him saying. "I just have troubles with numbers. It was the shrapnel. Nothing really. Like slivers inside your mind. You can't get those *out*, let me tell you."

She looked at me when I sat down. She was probably around Marie's age, I thought, taller.

"Ford, I'd like you to meet Donna," he said.

“Hi, Donna,” I said.

“Ford and I are going to the Promise Keepers Rally on the weekend. In Washington.”

She looked at us blankly. “It’s so sad what your father went through in the war,” she said. “You must be proud of him.”

After she left to go to another table I looked at Sam and tried to figure out what I should say. Marie once told me that she didn’t hate him. She felt sorry for him, she said, even after everything he had done to her and her mother. I wondered sometimes what Foster would think of me, and how much he would be able to remember. I know there was a time, before he was born, when I probably didn’t act as well as I might have with Marie. I wanted to be supportive, and I was, but there was a time when I didn’t understand why she was making the decision she was, and I resented her for not including me, as though she didn’t really care if I were around or not. How could she do this, I thought. Everything I did felt sour. Then as it got closer to the time, I found myself watching her, and I became amazed at how beautiful she had become.

“What were you telling her?” I asked him.

“What? Oh just now. Nothing.”

“You were talking about being in Vietnam, weren’t you?”

“Everyone always wants to hear about it,” he said. “It’s strange, isn’t it?”

“Why do you talk about it like that,” I said.

“Like what?”

“Like you were there.”

“I was there.”

“No you weren’t,” I said. “I know you weren’t.”

“Don’t tell me where I was and where I wasn’t.” I wondered what would happen here, if he got angry.

“You were a draft dodger Sam,” I said. “You came across the border in 1970 to avoid being in the war. You’re just confused. It’s a problem you have.”

“You think you know me,” he almost shouted. “You’re telling me my problems?” Suddenly I wished I wasn’t there. I didn’t want to be having this conversation. I wanted to be going over sales figures, because early in the morning I had an important meeting.

“Nothing,” I said. “Forget it.”

“Ford,” he said, looking at me seriously. “I want you to be honest with me. That’s fine. That’s all I want. That’s what the Lord wants. I think you know why it is important for you to be in Washington.”

“I have to work,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Ford,” he said. “I respect that. I want you to know I understand your work situation. Of course I do. I mean, you must have an important job. Team Leader. Work is important. I worked hard. Christ worked hard.”

The waitress brought around some peanuts in a bowl. I’m allergic to them, so I told Sam to keep them on his side of the table. He nodded, grabbing a handful and shoving them in his mouth.

"This place is first rate, I have to say, Ford. First rate." He looked up at the video screen. "Who's the skinny chick," he asked.

"Celine Dion," I said.

"Man," he said. "*She'll* never get anywhere." He started singing. "I bargained for salvation, but she gave me a lethal dose." I vaguely remembered his tendency to randomly quote Bob Dylan songs, whose disembodied wisdom he liked to sprinkle around like it was pixie dust. He put down his drink and shook his head. "Dylan," he says. "You gotta love him. And *he's* Christian. He played for the Pope," he added, as though this might be a noble ambition for me to take up.

"Sam, maybe we should get going," I told him.

"Of course," he said. "I don't want to keep you up. But let's just get another."

"Maybe that isn't a good idea," I said. "I'm kind of broke."

"It's okay," he said. "They take debit I'm sure. Seriously Ford, when do you want to talk about the Lord. Now or later?"

"I have to make a phone call."

I went over to the phones near the washroom. I dialed my number and listened to messages, which I find myself routinely doing now. There was a message from one of my co-workers, whom I particularly don't like, calling to take issue with some of my promotion ideas for tomorrow's meeting. I would have to go in early. I thought of calling Marie, to see how Foster was doing, but I realized she would be able to hear the band that was starting, and the dulled edges of my drunken words.

I returned to our table. Sam was not there. I looked around. He wasn't at any of the other tables, or the dance floor up front, and if he had gone to the washroom I would have seen him go by me. Then I noticed him. He was behind the bar, showing the bartender, an attractive black woman with thin cheeks and a tight purple blouse, how to make some drink.

Then the band started up, playing what seemed to be a kind of funky gospel music. I couldn't hear him, but Sam and the woman started singing immediately. The singer, a young guy, was singing something about the Lord walking with him everyday. Sam was getting into it, and so was the woman. He was clapping his hands and swaying his body along to the music. I started to think of how Marie and I once saw a gospel band at the Jazz Festival when we were both still students -- she in her first year, me in my last. It was a muggy summer night, the kind where people in the city move towards one another like an indrawn breath, when the heat of your bodies makes you cling to others. I remember the charge between us that night, dancing there, listening to this woman singing. She was at least seventy, possibly eighty, years old. She wore a pink dress along with the other singers but she was the leader. When she sang, she bent backwards and looked almost straight up in the air as she sang, like she was waiting for God to pour the words right into her mouth. We were surrounded by other couples and families, black and white and French and English, and many, I imagine, who were probably not any more religious than we were, which wasn't really at all. But there was something in the music that felt so powerful, so good, it swept you up in it, and made you feel a certain pull in your

blood. I felt good that night, alive and young and there was the feeling that everything between us was going to work out like a drive along a road lit by the fading sun, stretching off for as far as you could see. Maybe something like that was happening right now, I thought, although I wasn't sure what that was yet.

When the band finished the song Sam came over to me, sweaty, and wiped his brow. "Man, that was something," he said.

"You were dancing up a storm," I told him.

"That's how you know, Ford," he said. "That's how you can tell you have the Lord inside you." The bartender he was dancing with came over with a drink.

"Ford, meet Nancy. I was just trying to show her how funky I actually am."

"I don't care how funky your sad white ass is," she said.

"Nancy loves the Lord too," he said.

"You're going with him to the March?" she asked me.

"No, I'm not," I said. "I have to work."

She looked at me with what was either pity or curiosity. I wasn't sure.

"Another dance later, all right?" she said to him.

"I can see why you like living here," he said, grabbing a handful more peanuts. Several spilled out onto the table and I pushed them away with a napkin. I wanted to leave. "Boy, I'm hungry. I ordered some snacks for us."

"I should really get to bed," I said.

"We'll just eat and go," he said. "Nancy's something, eh?"

I didn't feel like talking anymore. It was later than I'd been up in months. I thought of asking him if he told Nancy about his combat experiences too, but I didn't. The waitress came over with several appetizers that smelled good. She asked Sam if he had lost any friends in action. I started to try to figure out how I was going to tell him that it really wasn't such a good idea that he stay at my place, since I had to get up so early, and as I did, I grabbed a slice of the mini-pizza bread on the plate. I'm usually a lot more careful, but for some reason I didn't even think. It looked safe. As soon as I'd swallowed, I felt it: the tingling sensation on my tongue and in the back of my throat. My mouth started burning, a nasal feeling. I could already feel my throat start to constrict. I grabbed the martini and drank the whole thing in a sip.

Sam looked up at me, worried. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Get me some water," I told him. "I'm having an allergy attack."

"What's happening," Nancy asked, seeing me having trouble breathing.

"I'm allergic to nuts," I told her.

"There were pine nuts in the pizza," she said.

"There you go," I said. "Could you call an ambulance for me?" I asked.

We ended up jumping in a waiting cab outside and driving to the hospital near the university. Sam looked worried. He kept joking with the cab driver, who spoke little English, about how it was good he had decided to come visit me in Montreal on this particular night.

“Think what would have happened if I wasn’t here,” he said, awkwardly. I nodded, concentrating only on the sharp, burning pain in my stomach. Sam just stared out the window. When we stopped we had to use my credit card. Sam still didn’t have any money. “I told the people at the bar we’d pay them another night,” he said.

We waited for quite a long time before they could admit me. Sam seemed restless. He kept singing part of what sounded like “Simple Twist of Fate” to himself, over and over. People in the waiting area stared at him.

After I was admitted he disappeared. I didn’t mind. They put me on an IV right away after checking my blood pressure. After a doctor saw me they gave me an adrenaline shot. As my heart started to race, I thought of Foster’s face in front of me, looking at me in his quizzical, curious way. “Daddy what?” he said, again and again. Then I thought, for a moment, of Marie in the hospital and how I had held her hand during the entire fourteen hours of Foster’s long and difficult birth.

I slept for a while. I was still hooked up to the monitor when I woke up, but my heartbeat was steady, calm. Sam was standing there. “Christ pulled through for you, my friend,” he told me, solemnly.

He held up some flowers. “I got you some roses.”

I raised my head softly on the pillow and tried to get a closer look. What Sam was holding was some kind of long-stemmed flowers with red petals. They were not roses.

“Are those roses?” I asked, weakly.

“They *look* like roses,” he said. “I mean, you should see what roses cost.”

I nodded, wondering where my credit card was, and if he had paid for them at all. “I’m not going to Washington,” I said. I closed my eyes and felt calm, even light.

They released me early in the morning and we took another cab home. As we were making up beds to try to get some more rest Sam told me that he didn’t have any money left. He’d sold most of his stuff to buy the plane and bus tickets -- including mine, he reminded me. I didn’t say anything. I asked him if he could call Marie for me and let her know what had happened, just in case she got a call or anything with the insurance.

“I can’t,” he said quietly.

“Why not,” I said.

“She won’t talk to me.”

“She will if you explain this to her.” I didn’t feel like arguing. “Okay,” I said. “Bring the phone over.”

I dialed. Marie was up, of course, even though it was early. I told her about my reaction and the hospital.

“Oh God, Ford. I can’t believe it. Are you okay?”

I told her I was fine. In a strange way, I actually felt good -- even powerful, I realized. The doctor had told me that if I had ingested any more nuts, I could have

gone into respiratory arrest. I felt more brightly alive, I guess, like a higher watt bulb.

“How about you,” I asked her. “How are you doing?”

“I’m okay. Foster’s getting out of hand,” she said, happily. “I think he is going to be terrible when he’s in his twos. Today he knocked down the photo of my mom that’s on the drawers, it smashed and there was glass everywhere. He didn’t knock down your one, though. Course, you’ve been through enough, I guess.”

“Maybe we should get him retested for allergies,” I told her. “He might have developed more allergies now.”

“He was only tested a few months ago, Ford, don’t worry.”

“Why don’t we do it anyway? Just to be on the safe side.”

She sounded annoyed. “Okay, Ford. So where were you when this all happened?”

“Oh, just some place.” I didn’t want to tell her I was at a martini bar. I didn’t want Marie to think I had been having fun while she was killing herself working and raising our son. She was an amazing mother. “I want to see Foster,” I said.

“Aren’t you coming this weekend?” she asked.

I realized I couldn’t, now. “I might not be able to,” I told her. “I might have a friend coming.” I don’t know why I didn’t tell her that her father was with me. I didn’t want her to start getting upset.

“Do I know this person?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I don’t think so.”

“Well, don’t get into too much trouble,” she said.

“I doubt it,” I said.

“What are they, a priest?” she asked.

“Something like that. I’ll come next week for three days,” I told her, wishing I were leaving right away.

“Stay away from nuts,” she said, cheerily, before passing over the phone to Foster. We conversed in two-word phrases for a few minutes. Finally, I told my son I loved him, which is three, and kissed him over the phone.

I noticed Sam was in the room. He had obviously been listening to us. His face looked different.

“You love my daughter, don’t you?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” I told him. “I do.”

“I thought so,” he said, and went back into the kitchen. He looked very serious. I called into work and told them I wouldn’t be coming in until later. I didn’t tell the secretary I had just come out of the hospital. I told her I had a houseguest, and that he was only staying for the night.

When I woke up in the afternoon, Sam was sitting in the chair by the window, watching the corner.

“Some nice looking ladies there,” he said. “Looks like they’re going to start construction sometime.”

“No they won’t,” I told him. “They’re not building anything in this city anymore.”

“Well they’re putting up some boards.” I looked out the window. He was right. There’ll be construction sounds, I realized, any day now.

“You’re not going to Washington?” I asked.

“I can’t,” he said. “I mean, I know you’re not up to it.”

“Go without me,” I found myself saying forcefully. “You’ve already got a ticket. Why not use it?”

He shook his head. “Those bastards at the border are not going to let me back over.”

I realized, suddenly, *why* he wanted me to go with him. He wanted the company at the border. He wanted me to get him through without a hassle. He didn’t want to cross back into the country alone.

“Haven’t you ever been back over, Sam?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “They remember you. You can’t.”

“They pardoned everyone, Sam. They gave everyone amnesty. It was years ago. They’re not going to prevent you now.”

He shook his head. “They don’t let you, Ford. They remember you. They have ways of keeping track of you. They never forget.”

Only if you keep doing stupid things, I thought of saying. “How long has it been,” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “What’ll you do now, my blue-eyed son,” he sang instead, in his crackling voice.

“It’s been like thirty years,” I realized. “You mean, you’ve never gone back home?”

“This is my home. I like it here just fine. America,” he declared, “is just a lot of noise.”

“Right,” I said. “I have to go in to work for awhile Sam. You gonna be okay?”

“Of course,” he said. “You think you’re the only person I know in this city?”

In the evening Sam was working at the kitchen table when I got home. I asked him what he was doing.

“Just an idea I’m working on, Ford. Memory Salvaging, I call it. Been thinking of this for a while. Sure thing,” he said. “Thought I might talk to some people here about it.”

“Sounds good,” I told him. It occurred to me that I didn’t know much about how he made a living. From what I had heard, it mostly consisted of these kinds of plans, and a lot of carpentry work when these plans didn’t work out.

“Say, you could probably help me out with something here,” he said. I noticed he had the phone books, white and yellow pages, open in front of him.

“Where is the nearest landfill around here?”

It took me a moment to figure out what he was talking about. “I don’t know,” I said, trying to think of what it would be in French. “Why do you want to know about landfill sites?”

“Computers,” he said, taking a sip of tea.

“What kinds of computers,” I asked.

“Not kinds. Parts. Think about it. People, they must have information trapped away, in their hard drives, right? Where do these old computers go?”

“The dump,” I said. “What kind of information?”

“I’m not sure. That’s what I have to work out. Maybe taxes. Financial information. Personal information. Love letters. Things people would pay us to recover. Things they would have forgotten. We’d dig and see what we could find. People will pay us to recover their lives.”

“You mean like archeology?”

“Exactly,” he said. “Exactement, I should say. Thinking I might head over to the dump tomorrow. Check it out.”

“So,” I said. “You’re thinking of staying here for a while?”

“Just a couple of days.” He looked up at me. “That’s okay, isn’t it? Just till I get back on my feet.”

“I have to go away next week,” I told him, my voice catching an edge that I hoped he would hear. “I have a lot of work to do.”

"Of course," he said. "I realize that. Got to provide for your family. I'm only here to spend some time with you. Think of it as a Summit. A Summit of Good Men."

"Sounds good," I said, trying to smile.

"Sounds great," he said. "Everything's roses then." He started singing from a song that sounded a bit like "You're Going To Make Me Lonesome When You Go," although I wasn't entirely sure.

The next day I went into work early even though it was a Saturday. Most of the staff were there too. Everyone was expected to put in extra hours for the company. The company was full of young men and women in their twenties and thirties like myself. Many of the people were from other provinces. Because we were dealing primarily with sales to other corporations throughout North America, it didn't matter where our offices were -- which is why the company had expanded to Montreal, where rent is still cheap.

Our company, the Information Management Group of Aporia Software, has two main products, something called Total Reports and Total Info, which were used to report and download data from virtually any source -- accounting programs, Goldwin, Access, Excel, Dbase, Exchange, and others. Software developers also used our products to develop applications. The Business Intelligence Market, as it was known, was now one of the biggest growth areas of computers. Aporia was an American company that had purchased a small but incredibly successful Canadian

company, Total Systems, which made our products. Now, with business booming, the company had grown from 80 to 230 people in the past year. My sales territory was the northwest part of North America, which was one of the reasons I stayed late every night, in order to take advantage of Pacific Standard Time. As Team Leader I was head of a salesgroup, and was responsible for driving up revenue and keeping the team organized. We used what was known as an Open Structure Office. There were no walls, just cubicles, so you could always see what everyone else in the room was doing at their desks. I had a single photo of Foster and Marie I kept on one corner of my desk in a wood frame. With everything else on my desk, I didn't have room for any more.

I caught up on several files and prepared reports for my team so I could get back to some potential clients on Monday. Although I knew a lot of them, I found myself wondering what all the other well-dressed, well-groomed young people did when they weren't here. Jamie, the guy who had called the other night about the reports, came by my Open Structure Office and asked me what I thought of his idea for new promotional strategies. Jamie wanted my job.

"I don't know if it would really appeal to our customers." His campaign, as he pitched it, would consist of flashy ads of figures from the Last Supper demonstrating our software.

"Really?" he said, smugly. "I thought it was very po-mo."

Po-mo? I decided that Jaime wouldn't know post-modern from a Post-It. "I'll think about it," I told him. "Hey, what happens to the information in

computers?” I asked him. “I mean, when somebody gets rid of their computer, what happens to all the stuff on their hard drive?”

“I don’t know, Team Leader.” He knew I hated being called this. He also knew that I knew next to nothing about computers, his main reason for disliking me. “Most people don’t care. I mean, *I* usually erase all my stuff every time I upgrade, but most people, forget it. Why, you leave something important? Like your taste?” He grabbed his rough mock-up and left my Open Structure to go talk in someone else’s.

When I got home I was going to tell Sam about what Jamie had said. Who knows, I thought. Maybe he had a good idea. He didn’t have to do it in this city, after all. Landfills are landfills. Computers are everywhere.

Sam was watching the Promise Keepers Rally on the television. The reporter described how thousands of men had shown up in front of Capitol Hill. Thousands of men were shown praying at the same time. They showed hundreds of tents which the reporter described as “Prayer Teepees” where men could pray privately. Then they interviewed a man from Toronto, who described how the event was about men “reclaiming their responsibility to lead their families.”

Another announcer came on and talked about how the men were told to confess their weakness publicly and ask for forgiveness. Another man being interviewed described how he became a much less selfish and more responsible father and husband. “I came here a sinner,” he said. “I will return home redeemed.”

Sam watched all this intensely. "Look at that, Ford. That must have been something. All those people." He shook his head. "They're thinking of planning a rally in Ottawa sometime. We'll have to go to that."

"No," I said suddenly. "I'm not going to any rally, Sam."

"You don't know that," he said, smiling. I noticed he had put the flowers that look like roses in several of the gin bottles and put them on the kitchen table. "Christ will wait for you. Why not let him in?"

Sunday Sam went off to Church early in the morning. I told him I wasn't interested in going. I was glad he had gone. After making a cup of coffee, I called Marie.

"Daddy hi hi," I said. "Did you get him checked out yet?"

"Hi, Ford," she said. "No, the office isn't open on the weekend. How's your friend?"

"He's fine. He's out at church."

"Church? Wow, you're getting pretty crazy, Ford."

"Yeah, well, we don't have much in common."

"Well, if he's your friend I hope you can have some fun while he's there."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. It's just you're always so serious now," she said. I wished we were having this conversation in person. "You weren't always like that."

"I *should* be serious," I tried to joke. "I'm a father."

"Oh my," she said. "You're a *parent*. I can't imagine what that's like."

"That's not what I meant."

"I just wonder what makes you happy these days."

"Foster makes me happy. Seeing him always makes me happy. Seeing *you* with him makes me happy."

"I know," she said, sounding a bit exasperated. "But what else, Ford?"

I thought for a moment. I couldn't think of anything. "Look, I am happy," I said.

"No you're not," she told me. "You're not even a bad photocopy of happy."

"I'm fine," I said. "I'll take a dance class or something. Will that convince you?" I looked at the flowers. "Everything's roses."

"Good," she said. "You can bring me some next time you come to town."

She paused for a moment, as though she were thinking about something. "Where did you get *that* from?" she asked.

I came home late the next day after negotiating what would be a huge deal with a subsidiary of Microsoft in Vancouver. Sam was sitting on the sofa wearing all new clothes. He had asked to borrow some money that morning.

"I just spoke to the mailman earlier," he said. "He and I had an amazing talk about the Lord."

He handed me several bills I hadn't paid lately. I threw them on the sofa.

“That’s funny,” I said. “I just had a talk with the Lord. We had an amazing talk about the mailman.”

Sam looked up at me sadly. “Ford, you don’t understand, do you?”

I realized I was too tired to have the talk with him I’d been planning on my way home. I was in a good mood and I wanted to hold onto it for awhile.

“So, guess what I did. To thank you for putting me up for the past few days.”

I looked at him. I started to wonder if he had actually mentioned leaving.

“I signed us up for lessons,” he said.

“Lessons?”

“Dancing. The place just down the street.”

“I don’t have time for dance lessons,” I said.

“It’s free,” he said. “We’ll just try it.”

“Sam,” I started to say, then stopped. He was already watching the next program, a talk show. The subject was people whose fathers had abandoned them as children. I wanted to turn the television off. He seemed to be watching it carefully. Then he turned to me.

“Marie hates me, doesn’t she?”

He looked at me so sadly I almost wanted to hug him. I forgot how much I wanted him to leave. Then I thought of him staying with me any longer.

“Yes,” I told him. “She will never forgive you.”

* * *

I was in the middle of an important meeting -- Jamie was giving a presentation that was making a direct attack on my figures for the upcoming quarter - - when I got a call. One of our many receptionists came into the conference room, which has walls, and told me it was important.

"It's the police," he told me, as soon as I was at the door.

"What," I said, grabbing the phone at my desk. A man on the line told me he was the security guard for a bookstore downtown and that a man named Sam Wainwright who said he knew me was caught trying to steal a Bible from the store. The alarm had gone off. "He had one of your business cards on him," he said. "Says he's your father-in-law."

"I'll be right there," I said, putting on my coat.

There was a security guard in the back with Sam when I got there. Sam seemed more agitated than upset, and looked embarrassed to see me. "Hi, Ford, just a misunderstanding," he said in his loud voice. "This is ridiculous," he told the guard. "I'm a vet," he almost yelled. "I deserve to be treated better than this."

"I know," I said, cutting him off.

"It's a crime for them to be selling the Holy Book," he yelled. "This is not literature, it's food."

"He had it under his coat," the security guard told me, passing it to me.

"You said there were police here. Where have they gone?"

"Actually, I haven't called the police yet."

"You said you were the police," I told him.

"I'm *like* the police," the guard said, standing upright.

"Let's get out of here, Sam," I said.

That night was the class. I had gone back to work to find Jamie had been assigned to share the responsibility for Team Leadership of the Northwest Division. The last thing I felt like doing was learning how to waltz. But I had a formula in my head that told me that *if I do this, Sam will go*.

He was waiting for me, and seemed in good spirits, even after what had happened in the bookstore. He didn't say anything about it as we walked across the street to the studio. It was a beautiful fall night, the time of year when the remaining leaves seem to be hanging onto their branches for one final moment. You could feel the edge of winter in the air. The girl on the corner steps was shivering slightly and watched us as we walked by.

We went inside the building. On the main floor was the large space of what used to be a video store but was now boarded-up with a lot of graffiti on it in both languages. We walked up through two rounds of staircases and ended up at the entrance to a studio. Inside the room was full of people wearing sweats and boxing gloves.

I looked up at him. "They're fighting," I said. "Not dancing."

He looked confused. "They said it was tonight."

"You sure?" I asked. I looked up at the schedule. It had Dancing written in the space for Tuesday night, but it had been crossed out and Martial Arts had been

penciled above. A man wearing a T-shirt with the words Boxe Francaise written on the front came over to us. He bowed to everyone in the room as he left.

“Bonjour Hello,” he said.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m not sure if we are in the right place. Was there supposed to be a dance class tonight?”

“There was,” he said. “But we changed the schedule. It’s a new season. There is not so much demand for dance anymore. Everyone wants to learn how to fight now,” he said. “Tonight is a free drop-in session,” he told us. “Open House.”

“You mean we could do the class?” I asked.

“Certainly,” he said. “It’s good there are two of you. You can be partners. You just won’t be dancing,” he said, joking.

“Sounds good,” I said. Sam looked at me, a bit alarmed. “Well we’re here now,” I said to him. “Why don’t we see what we can learn?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said to me. “I’m not really dressed for it.”

“Sam was in the army,” I told the man, feeling a kind of warmth in my face. “He was in Vietnam.”

Sam stiffened, I noticed. The man looked at us. “Well, we’ll be getting started in a minute. I’m sure you can show us a thing or two.” He went back in the room and bowed again. I tried to do what he did. Sam swooped down with a flourish, like a Shakespearean player with a large hat.

Everyone in the room was stretching out, pulling out mats, and getting these small kinds of punching bags from the corners. There were maybe a dozen people in

the room, both men and women. Most of them were in their early teens and twenties. Sam was older than anyone in the room.

The instructor started us off slowly, with push-ups and sit-ups. I held Sam's feet for him as he did the stomach crunches. He did four, then lay over on his side like a kind of large animal.

The instructor then started showing us how to throw jabs. He demonstrated how to keep the weight evenly distributed, to step in with the punch, and throw with your body in, using your hips and not just your arms. Don't watch the hands or eyes, he said, because they are too fast. You should watch the chest. Everyone in the room started shadow boxing for a few minutes, trying out techniques. I looked over at Sam, who made a few feeble jabs, but mostly just stood and watched everyone else. He started talking to another guy wearing a Metallica T-shirt who seemed to be having trouble, but I couldn't hear what he was saying because I was trying to concentrate. After a moment, the instructor asked us to do more knuckle push-ups. Several people in the class complained.

The room reminded me of my old high school gym. The radiators made a faint, knocking, hissing sound, and the room echoed with everyone's grunts and groans. The room smelled like dirty laundry. I looked over at Sam, who had collapsed again. The instructor told us to do fifteen more stomach crunches, the kind where you lie on your back and extend your legs into the air.

I heard Sam talking to the other guy, who seemed like a bit of a loser. “It’s just like when I was there,” he said to the guy. “In the army. Those damn bastards. What they did to me.”

“Yeah,” the guy said, looking up at him. “Where were you?”

“Vietnam,” Sam said, not looking over at me. “I was in Vietnam for two tours. Then I got sent back. They just use you, man. Just use you then they don’t want you anymore. I could do hundreds of push-ups before.” He started describing the jungle vegetation, the feel of the bushes crawling over you like tiny hands, the sky cracking open above you with artillery fire.

The instructor told everyone that this was it, the big moment, that we were going to start practicing a few of our jabs and punches. One person would hold one of the bags, which he called Thai bags, and use them as a kind of target for the other person. Don’t get too carried away, he told us.

I went over to Sam and tossed him one of the bags. “Come on, Sam,” I said. “I need a partner.” Sam nodded to the other guy, who didn’t have a partner, and approached me. As everyone in the room got organized, I shadow boxed a bit, concentrating on my form. Then the instructor yelled “Go!”

As soon as he did, each of the partners with the gloves began hitting their partner’s Thai bags. The room exploded into frantic activity and movement. Some people had obviously been boxing for a while. These people looked poised and graceful, and their punches were hitting their partner’s bags more powerfully than you would think.

I started hitting the bag. Sam grunted a bit with my first few jabs. I tried to think of all the things the instructor had told us, keeping my elbows in, watching my hips, keeping my left lead up. I thought of Sam and what he was saying to the guy about the jungle. I hit and hit, and soon I was just hitting the bag without thinking of any of the things the instructor had told me. I was just pounding in a continual movement, until finally with one of my jabs the bag bounced out of Sam's hands and he staggered backwards a bit, the bag hitting his face. His nose started bleeding. I didn't want to stop. I wanted to keep hitting. I told Sam to pick up the bag. Come on, I shouted, pick it up. Pick up the bag, I said. I started to yell.

"What the hell are you doing?" the instructor said, coming over. I looked around. Everyone in the room was staring at us.

I didn't say anything. I grabbed my jacket, and walked over to the door. I turned around and bowed to the class, and to Sam, and left.

Sam came home shortly after. "Maybe we should have tried dancing," he mumbled.

"I don't know," I said, drinking the gin. "That felt pretty good."

"You nearly broke my nose," he said.

"Sorry," I said. "I thought with your background you'd be okay."

"Look, Ford, I know you don't want me around. I realize that now. I thought maybe you just needed more time to accept the Lord. To get to know the person of Jesus. I wanted to know if you believed in Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord."

"I believe you're a liar," I said, after a moment.

"This is sincere," he said. "I wish I could explain to you. I was lost. Okay, I admit this. I was a lost soul. I fell short."

"You left your daughter," I said. "How could you do that?"

"Jesus is not embarrassed by your questions," he told me. "God can love us all. He forgives us. I had nothing to live for before."

"That's good," I said, pouring another glass, wiping the sweat that still kept coming off my brow.

"You don't think I'm aware of what I have done," he said.

"No," I said. "I think you're very confused."

"How can I convince you?" He said this very seriously.

I looked at him, at his blue-green eyes, the beginnings of a grey beard on his face. Covered in sweat, his face looked soggy, like cardboard that had been left out in the rain.

"Why did you leave Roopa and Marie?" I asked, finally.

"I was having trouble seeing," he said. "I didn't have vision. My eyes were not open then --"

"No," I interrupted. "What happened?"

He looked away for a moment, perhaps out the window at something. When he started talking, his voice was firm. "I was driving home. I was working for a trucking company then. It was late. I had been driving all night. I was coming home to see my wife and baby. And then I saw these police lights flashing up ahead. I

knew it wasn't a roadblock, but something else. It was an accident, Ford. A horrible accident. I didn't even see it at first, there were so many police everywhere. There was this trailer full of horses that had overturned in the ditch on the side of the highway. It was dark, you know, but I could still see this horrible mess of blood and wreckage -- I mean, you could see it, shining there in the moonlight, you know. I slowed down and pulled over myself. I got out of the truck and went over to where the policemen were standing about. They were trying to figure out what had happened."

He looked up at me to see if I was listening. Then he started again. "Then I noticed this native man. He was standing off to the side, and some policemen were trying to ask him questions. But he wasn't listening. He seemed to be praying, in a way, looking up at the sky, you know. I knew a little bit of Haida I had learned from a woman I once knew and I tried to ask him what had happened. The man was very upset. It was his trailer. Everything he had was in that truck. And now it was gone. He just kept looking up into the sky, as if to ask how something so horrible could happen to anyone. And then he asked me, in Haida, if I could help explain things to the officer. I did what I could, Ford. I tried to explain things to the police there. But the state trooper didn't really listen. He didn't *want* to know. *Nobody* wanted to admit what was going on back then. It was crazy, Ford, crazy." He shook his head, paused, and looked at me carefully.

"I did what I could. I couldn't even help the man much. I mean what could I say? What could I do? What could anyone do? The state trooper told me I should

get going and keep moving. They didn't want things to get tied up. I told the native man I had to go. He thanked me, Ford. I'll never forget it. Even though he had lost everything in his life, he was more gracious than anyone has ever been to me in my life. He kept thanking me. And then, you know what he did?" I shook my head.

"He gave me this ring. He gave me this ring with the raven carved into it -- that's the trickster symbol in their culture. Very important. They don't just give it to *anyone*, Ford. But he gave it to me. I mean, I wouldn't let him give it to me but he insisted. I don't have the ring anymore but I remember exactly what it looked like." Sam was sweating now, I could tell, but I wanted to let him finish. I wanted to see how this would end.

"I got back onto the road and I drove for a bit. But I couldn't keep going. I just started asking myself how something like that could happen. You have to understand, Ford, I was empty. It was wrong, I know, but I couldn't go home, not after that. Do you understand? I was scared, Ford. I was scared of having something like that happen to me. Of having that kind of loss. You have to understand what was happening then. Do you understand me Ford? Can you understand?" He looked at me carefully. "I mean, I wanted to die. I really did. There was nothing for me to live for. Not without my family."

He looked at me, smiling weakly. He shook his head, over and over, hanging his head. He looked convincingly repentant.

"A state trooper told you to keep going," I said, finally. After a moment.

"Yeah, he just told me to keep moving. I wanted to help him --"

“It was a state trooper though. You were in the States.”

“Yeah, I was . . .” He realized what I was getting at. His face, suddenly, looked like someone who had unfolded his memories like a map and had no idea how to fold it all back together. I knew, in that moment, that there was never any plane crash and lost luggage that made him become Born-Again, and that it was doubtful there was any night with horses and native men waving at the sky either. I knew that he had no anchor to his life, nothing to hold him to the ground. I realized this and it made me feel sad.

“So you don’t need me to cross the border,” I said. “Why don’t you go to Burlington,” I said. “Visit your friend.”

He looked at me and understood what I was saying. “I was thinking of leaving tomorrow.”

“I think that’s a good idea.”

“I was thinking I might just get a quick drink,” he said. “I guess you wouldn’t like to join me.”

“Sorry Sam,” I told him. “I have to work early.”

“Okay then,” he said. “I’ll see you in the morning then.” Through the window I watched him go out the door and down the street, his feet moving sadly through the crunching leaves. Then I called Marie.

“Daddy hi hi,” I said.

“How’s your guest?” she asked.

“He’s leaving.”

“Why are you being so secretive? I’m sure you’ve mentioned him.”

“An old friend. I don’t even know him very well.”

“Hey, you were saying you were going to take dance lessons. I forgot to ask.

Who you going to take them with?”

“I thought I’d just go by myself. If I came to Toronto, we could do them together.”

“You thinking of coming here?”

“I don’t know. C’est possible.”

“Sure, I’d like that,” she said. “We could be like those couples in the window.”

“Yeah,” I said, noticing the girl on the corner was not there anymore. “We’d look just like them.”

In the morning there was a note from Sam:

FORD I’M OFF TO STAY WITH BARBARA IN BURLINGTON.
ADDRESS ON BACK. YOU WERE RIGHT ABOUT THE BORDER. I’M NOT
LETTING THOSE BASTARDS GRIND ME DOWN. YOU ARE A GOOD
PERSON, AND I KNOW YOU WILL FIND JESUS AS I HAVE AND TRUST
YOURSELF IN HIS CARE.

SAM GABRIEL WAINWRIGHT.

PS: CAN YOU GIVE THIS TO MY DAUGHTER AND GRANDSON
WHEN YOU SEE THEM.

I picked up the package on the table, crudely wrapped with what seemed to be the covers of several *People* magazines that had the address of some laundromat on their mailing labels. I knew what it was. It was the exact shape and weight of the Bible he'd stolen. I reminded myself to check my VISA bill at the end of the month.

I stuffed the note in my pocket and realized I was late for work. I started walking to the metro. Then I thought of how lost Sam had looked when he had left the night before, and what he had said. I started to worry, which I knew was stupid, but I couldn't help it. I started walking quickly back to where I keep my car parked. I knew I was not going in to work.

I had missed the worst of rush hour so I got out of the city quickly, and soon I was on the highway south. I drove through the townships, past the farms and occasional cows, and before too long, I was at the border. The customs officer asked me the usual questions and then waved me through.

When I got to Burlington I stopped and asked some college kids for directions. The address was on a quiet street. You could see Lake Champlain not too far away. I rang the doorbell, which didn't seem to make any sound. Then I tried knocking.

A woman wearing a colourful outfit -- free-flowing purple pants and a red gown-like blouse than hung freely over her -- answered the door. She had greying hair and large rimmed glasses, but looked as though she were in very good shape for someone her age.

"Sorry," she said cheerfully. "I was just finishing my yoga."

“Are you Barbara?” I asked, feeling very awkward.

“Yes, I am,” she said, looking at me carefully.

“I’m a friend of Sam Wainwright.”

Her expression changed. In what way, I wasn’t sure. “Sam Wainwright? I haven’t heard from him in years. Who are you?”

“I’m sort of a friend,” I repeated. “He was staying with me in Montreal. He forgot something, and I thought he might be coming down to see you.” There was an uncomfortable silence. “He gave me your address,” I said.

“Well, I haven’t heard from him,” Barbara said, “not in awhile.” She waved me in and closed the door behind me gently. We walked into the front room, and she opened the drapes to let the light in. “And I can’t imagine him coming to see me now. He always said he had a good life in Canada.” Then she looked closely at me again. “What was your name?” she asked.

“Ford,” I said, shaking her hand.

“Ford, would you mind if I asked you to wait for just a moment while I finish one of my exercises. I know it’s awfully rude, but I don’t like to be interrupted.” She smiled at me sweetly.

“No problem,” I said, not knowing what to do. “I really don’t want to bother you.”

“No, stay, I’ll put on some tea,” she said.

She went off into the other room. I looked around the living room, which was filled with plants and books. Numerous large homemade cushions were on the

floor. There was no sofa, and no chairs in the room. Several tie-dyed fabric designs were hung on the walls, along with brightly-coloured scarves. Then I noticed little clay ornaments that were scattered around on top of the shelves and old stereo speakers, little strange male and female figures that looked ancient and exotic. I went over to examine them more closely. For some reason, I was scared to pick them up.

I waited for five minutes, until I heard the kettle boiling. After another minute I went into the hallway and kept walking until I heard sounds coming from another room. "Would you like me to turn off the kettle," I started to say, until I came into the doorway and saw Barbara, on her hands and knees, arching her head up, as though a growling lion. "I am the sun," she kept chanting, "the sun is inside me." Then she noticed me.

"I'm sorry," she said, still on the floor. "I lose track of things when I'm doing my funky little exercises. Is the tea ready?"

"It's okay," I said. "I'm sorry but I should really get going. I've got a long drive. I just wanted to see if Sam was here." I had realized that Sam was not going to be coming here. The tea kettle kept boiling off in the distance.

Barbara didn't seem to mind. She got up and went over to the kitchen. The noise stopped. Then we walked over to the door. "I heard Sam was a grandfather now," she said to me. "Is that true?" This surprised me. I wondered how she had found this out.

"Yes," I told her. "It is."

She shook her head. "Sam a grandfather. Can you imagine that?"

"No," I said. "I really can't."

Then Barbara stretched out her arms in a slow, elegant gesture. I noticed a ring she was wearing on one of her fingers. It was large, and there seemed to be some kind of native art design on it.

"That's a nice ring," I told her.

She took it off and looked at it. "It is, isn't it? You know, I'm not even sure where I got it." She handed the ring to me. There was a raven on it, I could tell, like the Emily Carr paintings of totem poles I had seen before.

"It's beautiful," I said. "Is that a raven?"

"Yes it is," she said. "I think it's Haida. Actually, you know I think Sam gave me this once, during our times." She put the ring back on her finger. "He really was something. But I guess you know that."

"Yes," I said. "Anyway, I'm sorry I disturbed you."

"Oh please don't worry," she said. "Are you sure you don't want to stay?"

"No thank you," I said.

She opened the door for me. "And tell Sam, if you see him, that I said hi. Tell him I teach art at the college here."

I told her I would. She waved at me when I got into my car, and I waved back. I stopped and had a quick coffee in town first. Then I started driving.

By the first turn off I knew I was never going to go back to work at Aporia again. By the time I got to the border I was thinking about how it wouldn't be that

difficult to break my lease. When the customs officer asked me what I was doing I told him I was going to see my wife and son in Toronto, where I lived. I could make things up, I realized, as I started to drive away. No one would know the difference.

At the first exit I went to a gas station and filled up. As I got back onto the highway I started flipping through the dial of my stereo until I settled on a classical station. There were strings that sounded a bit like Pachelbel. I listened carefully and noticed things I had never heard before. There was mischief in the notes, a youthful quality threaded through the violins. All the strings seemed interwoven.

I am the sun, I thought suddenly, and started laughing. “I am the funky sun,” I said again, out loud. I pounded the steering wheel with my hands. It was starting to get dark, and I realized it would soon be Daylight Savings; the darkness sneaks up on you, I thought. In the night the cars performed graceful moves changing lanes, like ballet. It was a kind of waltz, I thought, these cars on the highway, moving. It was amazing what could happen when you just started driving.