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Scribe Rule

by

Carolyn Rowell

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in English at
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ABSTRACT

Scribe Rule

by
Carolyn Rowell

This collection of short stories is set in, or near, the Eastern Townships of southern Quebec, and takes its name from an ancient technique of timber framing used by the early settlers of the region. The characters of the collection are connected by their experiences during the 1960s and 1970s in the small town of Galt. During this time of rapid social change, they struggle to understand themselves and others, and try to shape relationships while confronting the inescapable nature of the past. The effects of war, poverty, alcohol abuse, and intolerance on a community and its members, interweave with the hope offered by family, fellowship, courage, and love.

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Centrifugal Force

The summer that Jeannie finally learned to ride her bike, the same summer that she began to swim in water over her head, the summer that she spent days playing Davy Crockett with her cousin Bobby by the little brook in the woods behind Memorial Park—the old major disappeared. Just walked into the bush. Aunt Sandra, Bobby's mother, saw him go.

"I didn't think nothing of it," she said as she separated a strand of Jeannie's hair with the wrong end of her rat-tailed comb. "He goes by the house—right through the backyard—lots. Easiest way to get to the railroad tracks." Jeannie was sitting on a high stool in the middle of the kitchen. She watched Aunt Sandra's red nails pluck an endpaper from the pile on the table. The tissue looked like one of her father's cigarette papers. "He said something like, *fine day*. You know, whispered it. If you ask me, it's a wonder he hasn't gone and got lost before now. There's miles of Crown Land back there."

"I don't think he's lost," said Jeannie's mother. She sat at the kitchen table turning the pages of Aunt Sandra's copy of *Vogue*, her eyes squinting over her cigarette smoke.

"So what do you think he's doing, Beth? Gone camping?" Aunt Sandra snorted. "Honestly, you and your old men."

Jeannie's scalp felt sore. Aunt Sandra had given it a good scrubbing under the hot stream of the kitchen tap, using her fingernails to loosen the dirt and dead skin. Now it felt as if Aunt Sandra was going to pull the hair right out of Jeannie's head as she rolled hair and paper tightly on a metal roller and fastened it all with a bobby pin. While she worked, Aunt Sandra hummed a bit of *Where the Boys Are*. She just loved Connie Francis.

"They're letting the shop out early this afternoon to go look for him," said Aunt Sandra. She rapped Jeannie sharply on the head with the comb. "For Heaven's sake, Jeannie, sit still." Jeannie looked to see if her mother would say anything, just this once, but her mother only arched her eyebrow at Jeannie. Aunt Sandra was the only one who could ever get away with talking like that to Jeannie, let alone hitting her. Jeannie's mother seemed to view Aunt Sandra as an extension of herself, as if Aunt Sandra's hands were her hands, Aunt Sandra's sharp words her words. Jeannie's eyes stung and she frowned hard to keep from crying. She knew if she started to cry Aunt Sandra would get huffy and her mother would act mildly exasperated, as if her life would be perfect if not for sniffling little girls.

"I suppose Andy will have to go," said her mother with a sigh.

"Why wouldn't he?" said Aunt Sandra, scraping up another hank of hair on Jeannie's tender scalp.

"You know," said her mother.

You know what? thought Jeannie. She could hear her cousin Bobby talking in the basement. He had been instructed to keep his two younger sisters busy while his mother fixed hair. He was showing the girls the nativity set that Jeannie's father was carving from the pieces of cherry and maple he

brought home from the sawmill where he worked. Jeannie heard him say, "Look, but don't touch," just like her father would. She wanted to yell down the stairs, *Get away from there.*

Later Bobby and Jeannie took their bikes and went down Main Street from Jeannie's house to the Galt Legion Hall. Mr. Thompson, the Legion president, was splitting the search party into three groups; one for each of the Major's usual routes—along the railway track, down the East Flat logging road, and on the back road to St. Adolph.

Bobby and Jeannie climbed onto the big anti-aircraft gun that stood on the grass in front of the Legion. Jeannie hitched as far forward on the barrel as she dared. From there she could see almost the full length of Main Street, from the hotel across from the textile factory to the Manse Pond and the Anglican Church at the lower end. Elms met above the road creating an estuary of shade. Across the street was the Town Hall and on its lawn was the Cenotaph, with its long lists of names. The names faced her and the gun she sat on: a gun whose mouth had been filled with cement last year after Steven Ross, on a dare, got his leg stuck in the barrel.

Jeannie saw her father standing near Mr. Thompson. On Remembrance Day, after putting on his uniform with its funny socks and black beret, her father marched behind Mr. Thompson in the long parade of veterans. Sometimes Jeannie's father carried a flag on a pole that fit into a sling he wore around his hips. He called Mr. Thompson *Captain*. Jeannie liked Remembrance Day because on that day her father would take out his medals and shine them. He would let her touch them if she was careful, and when she asked him what they meant he would say that maybe someday he would tell her.

Bobby scooted up behind her making airplane noises. "How come your dad is so much older than your mom?" he said.

"He's not older," said Jeannie.

"He is too. Mom says he robbed the cradle when he married your mom." Bobby held his arms out to the side like wings. When Jeannie gave him a little push he yelled, "Hey!"

Jeannie looked hard at her father's hair with all the gray in it and his tall soft-bellied frame. Her mother looked younger than the other mothers who belonged to the Legion Auxiliary; her hair was blonde and she wore it in a sleek beehive and she smoked and wore slacks, but Jeannie hadn't really thought about it before. To Jeannie the difference between her mother and her father was not one of age but of family. Her father being a McLloyd while her mother was a Wollerton.

The search party men jiggled from one foot to the other, some listening, some talking. Jeannie heard one man say to another, "Jesus Christ, do you think the old buzzard has finally gone and done it?"

Gone and done what? she thought. Gotten lost, gotten so drunk that he'd lain down on the train track and got run over by the three o'clock Atlantic Limited, been attacked by a bear in the wild raspberries by Dawson's Swamp? There were miles of scrubby cutover forest where the Major could be and not many men to look for him.

She waited for them to get all fired up—like they had one day last fall when Rachel Leonard's father had come into the Legion Bar and told them that a carload of French boys had tried to force Rachel and her cousin June into their car while the girls were walking to the park after supper. The men had boiled out of the Legion, split rapidly into angry units, and leapt into dented Chevys and rusted pickup trucks while Rachel stood with her mother by the

cenotaph and frowned at her shoes. Rachel was only two years older than Jeannie, but she was already as tall as her own mother and had little breasts that made her blouse stick out. Jeannie thought that must be kind of embarrassing. When she had asked her mother what those French boys wanted to do to Rachel, her mother had answered, "Nothing the English boys hadn't already thought about." Which seemed pretty confusing but her mother wouldn't say anything more and got kind of angry when Jeannie wouldn't stop asking her about it.

The men didn't seem all that enthusiastic today. The younger men, the ones in ducktails and black boots and the ones in faded plaid shirts and jeans, said, "Stupid old coot. He'll show up sooner or later," and "I've got chores to do," and "Like I got nothing better to do than to tromp around in the mud lookin' for a silly bugger like him."

The older men, the veterans, said nothing. Her father seemed to be looking at the flags on the flagpole, at the clouds, and the birds.

Mr. Thompson said quietly, "He gets confused after dark." Jeannie didn't hear an answer from the men, but they slowly began to form groups, some getting into the backs of pickups.

Almost as an afterthought someone said, "Should we call the Provincials?"

Glen Clark, who acted as policeman during the 1st of July parade and at the Friday night Legion dances, said, "I don't think that's necessary."

Jeannie didn't want them to find him. She liked the thrilling idea of someone dying alone in the woods. She imagined someone coming upon his

skeleton some day—like the skeleton in Treasure Island—one boney hand holding a bottle and the other pointing deep into the forest.

Jeannie thought it wouldn't take long for the Major to become a skeleton, he was so tall and thin. He moved with a disjointed jerky motion like one of her Dad's marionettes, all long freckled arms and long chicken-fleshed neck. His head wobbled and his knees looked as if they could bend backwards.

He had no hair on his head, or none that Jeannie could see, and she had looked at his head last Remembrance Day during the services by the Cenotaph. He'd stood at the front of all the men, in a uniform that was very different from theirs, wavering from his knees like a huge brown crane ankle-deep in mud, his hat held over his heart. He was the only man there who did that, and his rheumy eyes were swollen with what Jeannie would have taken for tears, if she hadn't known that grown men didn't cry.

Jeannie had heard her Dad say that as soon as the service was over, the Major would go and find one of the bottles he had hidden around town. The Major never joined the younger veterans for oyster soup and crackers at the Legion Hall.

Everyone said the Major drank—as if drinking were his job—and Jeannie wondered how he could because of the hole he had at the base of his throat. Did he hold his hand over the hole when he drank? If he didn't, would the drink spurt out and down the front of the brown shirt he always wore?

The Major walked all the time, at all times of the day, in all kinds of weather, up and down the streets and side streets. The kids in town hated to meet him or at least they pretended to. If they spotted him, they ran screaming up the nearest driveway and along the series of backyards that melted into the hayfields behind the town. Or they hid behind trees to watch him pass, whispering about what he would do if he caught them.

Sometimes you couldn't help meeting him face to face. Sometimes Jeannie would turn the corner near the hotel, where the Major lived, and he would be there. Tall, gaunt, with eyes in deep sockets of cold wrinkled flesh, pendulous ears, and a nose bent sideways and only partially there. He would look down at her and a whistling sound would come from the hole in his throat where the air went in and out when he wasn't speaking. "Fine day," he would whisper in a voice like two bones rubbing together. His voice seemed to come from the hole. Jeannie thought that would be the way the dead would sound if they could speak.

"Gassed," her Dad said when she asked him about the hole in the Major's throat. "They had that in the first war." Jeannie asked how drinking gas could do that. Her father made a noise like strangled laughter in the back of his throat and turned to his work bench where he was applying red paint to a line of wooden toy Santas.

Jeannie's father was still out with the search party, so after supper Jeannie and her mother went out to do the chores by themselves. While her mother milked the cow, Jeannie went to the hen house to collect the eggs.

The windows of the chicken house were smeared with fly specks, chicken shit, and pieces of feather, making the inside almost dark. The chickens moved toward her. She quickly closed the door so they couldn't get by her. One of the chickens had no feathers on its backside where it had been plucked clean by the other hens. Its flesh was pink and puckered. Jeannie's mother said that a flock of hens would sometimes do that; pick out one of their own to tease and harass. They would pull out the victim's feathers. She said that

sometimes they got so carried away, they would actually peck the outcast to death.

The hens pecked at her rubber boots, and she hated the little drumblings on her feet. She made her way through them to the feed trough where she poured out a small bucket of grain. The hens scurried to eat, and while they were busy, she leaned over the nesting boxes near the floor. She kept looking over her shoulder at the rooster, afraid he would sneak up behind her and poke her bum.

There was one broody hen who refused to move off its nest and let her have its egg. It clucked angrily at her and tried to peck her hand. Jeannie stood there looking at it until her mother came in and said "Honestly" in an angry voice. Her mother pulled the chicken roughly out of the box and tossed it toward the opposite corner. The chicken burst from her hands and began to fly in mid-toss. When it landed in the droppings in the corner, it pretended nothing unusual had happened and went about its chicken business, pecking and scratching. Her mother scolded her "You are such a . . ." but then swallowed what she was going to say and turned to put the egg in Jeannie's basket.

On the way back to the house, Jeannie carried the eggs. Her mother, one shoulder sloping under the weight, carried the milk pail. Jeannie noticed that the plaid shirt that her mother was wearing didn't do up easily at the waist.

In the house, her mother clamped the separator to the kitchen table, and with difficulty, hoisted up the bucket of yellow milk to pour it through a clean cloth pegged across the wide bowl at the top of the machine.

There were two spouts on the separator, one pointed into a bucket and the other into a cream can on the floor. The bucket caught the thin skim milk which her mother drank to keep slim. What she didn't drink went to the dogs

and cats. The cream can caught the cream that her Dad sold to the local creamery in exchange for money or for blocks of butter wrapped in waxed paper.

Jeannie's job was to turn the handle as her mother poured in the milk. Inside the separator were thirty metal cones through which the milk spun. The separator whirred softly as skim milk and cream poured out the spouts. Jeannie thought of how the thick part of the milk was pulled away from the thin blue part by what her Dad called centrifugal force.

Before they ran the milk through the separator, Jeannie's mother saved out a glass pitcher of whole milk for Jeannie. "You need the butterfat to grow," her mother said. Overnight, the cream would rise to the top of the pitcher, and in the morning Jeannie would have to stir the cream back into the milk so she could drink it. She liked the taste of milk better in the winter when the cows were fed on rusty bland hay and a few scant handfuls of cracked corn and barley. She hated it when the cows first went out to pasture in the spring and the cream was almost orange and tasted strongly of dandelions. Her father didn't drink milk. He said it gave him stomach cramps.

It was well after dark when Jeannie's father came home from the search party. He didn't say anything as he unlaced his boots. Asking her father a direct question often resulted in either a short one word answer or a stock reply like "that's for me to know and you to find out" so Jeannie, even though she was dying to know if they had found the Major, just watched as her father's hands pulled at the rawhide laces, snapping them out of the rivets. His boots were muddy.

"You manage the chores?" he asked Jeannie's mother, who was getting his plate out of the warming oven of the wood cookstove. Her mother answered, "Jeannie helped." There was a long silence.

Finally her mother said, "Did you see any traces of the Major?" Jeannie could see that her mother was turning her face away to hide her impatience.

Her father looked down at his socks as if they were something new to him and said, "No."

"Did you look up in Dawson's Swamp?" said Jeannie's mother.

"We looked everywhere." Her father sighed heavily and leaned back in the chair.

"He gets so agitated at night. God knows what's going on in his head." Jeannie heard tears in her mother's voice.

Her father got up abruptly, nearly tipping his chair over. "What goes on in his head is his business. And if the Major doesn't want to be found, I expect we won't find him." He thrust his feet angrily into his slippers and headed for the basement door. "I'll eat in my workshop," he said.

"Who wouldn't want to be found?" Jeannie's mother called after him as he descended the stairs. "Who wouldn't?"

Next to Christmas, Dominion Day on the first of July, was Jeannie's favourite holiday. Every year in the park, there was a morning baseball game between the men who worked at the sawmill and the workers from the textile factory. She loved to watch her father at bat. His swing was deliberate, almost slow, but he always hit what he swung at. You had the feeling that the ball

went exactly where he intended it to go, whether it shot by, just out of reach of the shortstop, or arced high to land in an unguarded spot in the outfield.

In the afternoon there was a parade down Main Street, and in the evening a talent show in the park, followed—once the sun went down—by fireworks. Major Lawrence always led the parade, riding on one of C. T. Sawyer's horses and carrying the Canadian flag. With the Major missing, there had been some discussion as to who would lead the parade this year. According to Jeannie's father, Mr. Thompson thought it should be another veteran, preferably of rank, but C.T., otherwise known as Crooked T, wouldn't hear of anyone but himself or the Major riding one of his horses. So the parade committee had relented and let Crooked T ride in the Major's place.

"Someone could have walked with the flag," said Jeannie's mother.

"The parade committee thought that would be insulting to the Major since he's done it all these years on horseback," said Jeannie's father.

"I still say it should have been a veteran," said Mr. Thompson, who was watching the parade from Jeannie's front lawn. "I know it's not C.T.'s fault he never went, but still. . ."

Jeannie looked at Mr. Sawyer, bent sideways over the staff of the flag. He had a twisted back, but he rode like the cowboys Jeannie had seen on TV—like he and the horse were best friends and he didn't even have to think about how the horse would move, he just flowed along with it. He waved merrily at everyone and called out good-natured insults at his friends.

The Major had always ridden in uniform, stiff-backed, eyes straight ahead, occasionally raising his free hand to the brim of his hat in a salute. Jeannie scanned the faces of the crowd that lined the street. She was looking for the Major. Even though the Provincials had finally been called, and several members of the Hussars Reserves from Sherbrooke had spent the last

week scouring the woods, no one had seen the Major, or his body. Her mother had said, "Wouldn't it be funny if he slipped into town when everyone was busy and watched the parade from behind a tree somewhere?"

Crooked T was followed by the Highland Pipe Band from nearby Scotchville. The sound of the bagpipes and the thump of the big drum vibrated in Jeannie's chest, making her feel as if her heart was expanding and pressing against her ribcage. She watched the twirl of the tasselled drum sticks and the men's knees beneath the swing of the kilts.

Then came the Galt Majorettes, scowling in the heat in their tunics and pleated skirts. Jeannie had gone to try out for the Majorettes once, mostly because she liked the pom-poms on their white boots, but she could never get the hang of twirling a baton and so had given up on the idea.

There were floats; tractors pulling hay wagons decorated in crepe paper themes of fairy tales and television shows. Little kids, dressed up as Goldilocks or Daniel Boone, squinted down at the crowd and waved. One float featured an outhouse and men drinking beer in brown bottles who hollered a lot. Bobby's father, Uncle John, was one of them.

Jeannie's mother, like most of the other women who lived on the Main Street parade route, hosted a post-parade family potluck luncheon on her front lawn. Jeannie's mother always said that it was an opportunity to pay everyone back socially without actually having to have them all in the house.

Her mother's family, the Wollertons, drank heavily and openly. By the middle of the afternoon, Aunt Sandra was snapping photos of everyone with her Kodak. A cigarette dangled from her red lipstick and she was swearing liberally. Jeannie hated the way the adults behaved when they drank, the heavy hands on her shoulders, the loud toothy laughing.

Jeannie's mother pulled Jeannie into a bear hug and made a big show of kissing her on the cheek while Aunt Sandra pointed the camera. Jeannie scowled. Aunt Sandra said, "Come on Jeannie. Don't be such an old sourpuss. Say cheese."

Bobby, who was making bunny ears behind her head, echoed, "Sourpuss. Sourpuss."

Her mother had also invited Aunt Beulah and Aunt Connie, the two elderly great-aunts who had raised Jeannie's father. Jeannie didn't know what had happened to his parents. Bobby once told her that they had died in a suicide pact, but she hadn't believed him because her mother had told her not to believe everything that he said because he was a Wollerton and Wollertons were born liars.

The great-aunts were stern shy women, who drove an old green Studebaker and brought jellied salads and a non-alcoholic cranberry cordial which they mixed with ginger ale. They called Jeannie's father Andrew, instead of Andy like everyone else. He sat next to them, not talking, just sitting. Jeannie saw how her father picked at his plate just like they did. She saw how the three of them set themselves apart from the joking and loud talk of the others.

"Sourpuss. Sourpuss." Bobby wouldn't stop, not even when Jeannie gave him her worst hate-your-guts look, so she ran around the table and climbed into her father's lap. Aunt Beulah patted her on the knee and said how pretty her hair looked and how big she was getting, maybe too big to sit on her daddy's knee.

At six-thirty sharp, the aunts pulled their thin cardigans around their large boney shoulders and asked Jeannie if she would like a ride over to the park to see the talent show. Jeannie's mother, who had just said to Aunt Sandra, "Well that's over for another year," waved her away. Her father came too. Aunt Connie drove the short distance to the park, and pulled up on the baseball diamond as close to the outside stage as she could get. The park field soon filled with cars, all pointed toward the stage, their windows rolled down so the occupants, mostly older folk, could hear the program and toot their horns for applause.

More people filled the bleachers, wooden seats built into the side of a small but steep hill, below which sat the stage. The stage was a platform just behind home plate. The dressing rooms were built underneath, and it was lit by a single street light installed on a pole on one corner.

The master of ceremonies was Mr. Thompson, and he lead the crowd in the singing of *Oh Canada* and *God Save the Queen*, after which they watched three little kids tap dance to *Teddy Bear's Picnic*. Then they listened to Mr. McGee and his singing saw and Réjean Lapointe singing *Quand le Soleil Dit Bonjour aux Montagnes*.

Most of the kids her age were at the swings near the park gates, but Jeannie liked to sit in the car with the aunts and her father. The aunts always gave her peppermints and enough money to buy an ice cream cone at the Boy Scout booth, and they always seemed the same—quiet, slow moving, and considerate of her feelings, not loud and unpredictable like her mother's family.

The Wollertons sat on blankets spread on the grass at the top of the hill behind the bleacher seats. They had a big cooler full of beer and soda. Jeannie could see her mother sitting up there with Aunt Sandra and her husband

Uncle John, Bobby and his sisters, and other uncles and cousins. She knew they would be buying cotton candy and hot dogs.

"You'd think after what happened last fall they'd tone down the drinking a bit," said Aunt Beulah, looking up at the Wollertons. One of Jeannie's older cousins, a McBain, had accidentally shot and killed his own brother during hunting season last fall. They had been horsing around out at the hunting camp, drinking and cleaning their rifles. Bobby said that Jimmy had got Carl right between the eyes. Jeannie's mother had thrown up when she heard about it, and there had been a large funeral that Jeannie's father hadn't let Jeannie go to, even though she'd begged.

"Alcohol is a terrible thing," said Aunt Connie, as a woman made her way unsteadily through the parked cars then staggered and fell against their car grill. Her blouse was partly unbuttoned.

"Things happen, Aunt Connie," said Jeannie's father.

Aunt Connie looked hard at Jeannie and then back at Jeannie's father and said dryly, "I suppose you could say that."

Jeannie didn't like the way Aunt Connie had looked at her. It made her feel like something was her fault and that she should apologize. The car felt stuffy and there was a mouldy smell to the material of the back seat. Jeannie could see Bobby playing freeze tag with the Murray kids. She felt bored and the bug bites on her legs were itching her.

"Going to see Mum," she said to her father and before he could say anything she took off, dodging between the cars and the people. Up on the hill the Wollertons were yelling something about *taking it all off* at the baton twirler who was on stage. Her mother didn't look up from her conversation with Aunt Sandra when Jeannie dropped to the blanket beside her.

"Got bored with the old ladies?" said Aunt Sandra to Jeannie. Her voice sounded thick. Jeannie's mother stopped in mid-sentence and her face seemed to close in when she saw Jeannie. She was drinking a Coke from a bottle and she offered Jeannie a sip.

Bobby was running up and down the hill between the seats yelling "Geronimo." Jeannie wanted Bobby to come with her into the woods behind the park to look for the Major. After what her mother had said about him slipping in to watch things, she had begun to think that he must be out there. Maybe he was hiding out at the hunting camp where Carl had died and because his army training made him an expert at survival skills and covering his tracks, he was able to sneak in and out of town whenever he wanted to. She grabbed Bobby's arm to get him to stop and listen to her but he pulled away laughing. His arm was hard and his eyes were wild. He shouted "Geronimo" into her face.

Jeannie sat back down beside her mother and watched the Smooth Tones singing *Blue Velvet*. She began to feel cold. When she asked her mother if she had brought a sweater, Uncle John yelled at her, "What did you say? What did you say? Speak up, girl." He waved a beer bottle at her and leaned into her face. His nose was the colour of hamburger. Jeannie blushed, hating him. Her mother laughed and that made Jeannie mad so she got up and ran off down the hill. "Where you going, little girl?" her uncle hollered after her.

As she made her way back to the aunts' car, Mr. Thompson announced that since it was just about dark enough and there didn't seem to be any more talent to showcase, it was time for the fireworks. Jeannie's father always slipped away just before the fireworks so Jeannie wasn't surprised to find him gone when she got back to the car.

She had always thought that he slipped away because he was part of the team that set off the rockets and that he never said anything about it because

it was a secret like being Santa Claus at the Legion Christmas party. She liked this secret and she had never told anyone about it, not even Bobby. She also liked to sit with her aunts in their car to watch the fireworks; they never embarrassed her by yelling *ohhh* and *ahhh*. They never made fun of her when she hid her head at the loud whiz-bang kind.

But now she felt like crying because Uncle John had yelled at her and so she said she had a headache and asked the aunts if she could walk home. Aunt Connie said she'd go with her, that she didn't feel much like fireworks this year, and together they wove their way out of the park and down the dark and nearly deserted Main Street. A few young men, too cool for fireworks, stood by the general store, beer bottles in hand, looking over a car with a new paint job. Aunt Connie put her arm lightly across Jeannie's shoulder and walked between her and the car. One of the boys called out to her, "Hey, Miss McLloyd. How are you tonight?" and she replied, "Just fine thank you, Gary." A few steps later she said, "They'll kill themselves in that car."

The first fireworks exploded behind them just as they stepped off the sidewalk onto the lawn of Jeannie's house. They turned to look and saw three showers of light above the trees: pink, green, and gold with one dud that went off with such a big bang that Jeannie ran up the back steps.

When Jeannie came into the kitchen, she saw that the door to the basement was open and the light was on. She could hear the sound of her father's radio. Aunt Connie went over and softly shut the cellar door. She said, "Your father would probably appreciate some peace and quiet."

He was in the basement, not on the hill setting off fireworks. Jeannie heard five rapid explosions outside as Aunt Connie went to the cupboard. "Now where would your mother put the baby aspirin?" she said. As she opened doors

and peered inside she muttered, "I wonder if the Major has found himself a hidey-hole too."

Bobby was tired of playing Davy Crockett. "I want to play Lawrence of Arabia," he said. Bobby's godfather, one of their unmarried uncles, had just taken him to see Lawrence of Arabia in a real theatre and Bobby, a tea towel wrapped around his head, talked about nothing but camels, and sand, and nasty Turks. Jeannie had never been to a movie in a real theater. Last year, Mr. Bennett, the new principal, had shown some movies on Friday nights in the school gym, but she knew that sitting on the metal cafeteria chairs and eating popcorn that the school cook sold in little paper bags, watching a movie that no one had ever heard of, was not the same thing.

Her parents never went to movies. Her mother once said to Aunt Sandra, "What's the point? He never makes it past the newsreel at the beginning. The first gun goes off and he's heading for the lobby. He thinks the movies are all the same. He would never let her go either." She had tipped her head at Jeannie. And of course she hadn't answered when Jeannie asked why not? Jeannie wished she could have seen *Lawrence of Arabia*, Bobby made it sound so great. Jeannie hated not knowing something Bobby knew about.

"What about Cubans?" said Jeannie. "We could play soldiers and Cubans." Jeannie had heard Cuba mentioned a lot on the radio. Her father, who liked to listen to music while he carved in the basement, had been listening more than usual to a channel with lots of men talking. Jeannie had heard something

about boats, and Russians, and missiles. There was a place called the Bay of Pigs that Jeannie thought sounded funny.

"What's a Cuban?" said Bobby, "Look, you be a Turk and I'll blow you up."

"I know. Let's find the Major," said Jeannie. She didn't want to have to play Lawrence of Arabia because that would mean that Bobby would get to be the boss all the time. She'd only meant let's *pretend* to look for the Major but as soon as she said it, she could see Bobby latch onto the idea. Something heroic.

So that's why they spent the rest of July lurking in the woods behind the park, looking for footprints in the mud and threads on the blackberry brush. They watched the doorsteps of people who left food out for him, hung in net bags so the cats couldn't get at it. For a while it was their game alone and they didn't tell the other kids in town what they were doing. They established a tracking headquarters under an overturned tree root and pretended that the Major was a downed German pilot with information pivotal to winning the war and they were American GIs on his trail in the countryside of France. They were always Americans—like John Wayne on ABC's Sunday Showcase.

Jeannie sometimes thought that she could feel the Major watching them but then she did have what her mother called an overactive imagination. Everything got spoiled when Bobby told the Murry kids what they were playing and all the kids in town started to play *Find the Major*. Jeannie quit then because it wasn't so much fun when it wasn't her game anymore and besides she started to get the feeling that the Major might get insulted, or something.

In August Jeannie went raspberry picking with her mother. Aunt Sandra, who said she would pick raspberries if she didn't have to bring her

kids, came along. They took the East Flat logging road that ran about four miles into the old clear-cut on the Crown Land near Dawson's swamp. The day was hot and the road was bumpy and rutted. Jeannie unrolled her window and tried to pull leaves off the bushes that brushed the side of the car as they passed. The car rocked, and when they came to outcroppings of stone, her mother slowed the car to a crawl.

They stopped in a clearing where the logging crews had once yarded timber; a wide open area where raspberries now grew, moving in like waves of soldiers from the scrub of the clear-cut. Her mother handed her a Crisco can with a handle to hang on her belt. Jeannie smelled wild skunky smells and looked into the shadows of the thick brush. Grasshoppers rubbed their legs together. Paths had been tramped down all through the raspberry canes.

Aunt Sandra said, "Looks like somebody else has been here."

Her mother looked quickly at Jeannie then shook her head at her sister.

"Don't tell me Jeannie is afraid of BEARS," said Aunt Sandra putting her face into Jeannie's and making her eyes round.

"Oh right. Thanks a lot, Sandra. Don't pay any attention to Aunt Sandra, tootsie. She wouldn't know a bear if it jumped her."

"Beth," Aunt Sandra said, pretending to be shocked, "The child. . ."

Jeannie didn't understand what they were talking about and didn't much care. They always got so show-offy and silly when they were together. They made her mad. Jeannie got back in the car.

"I'm not going if there are bears," she said crossing her arms.

"Thanks a lot, Sandra," her mother said again. "Suit yourself," she said to Jeannie. "All the more for the rest of us."

"You going to stay in the car ALONE?" said Aunt Sandra, pushing her face up to the glass of the windshield, flattening her nose and lips, leaving spit marks.

"Oh, just leave her," her mother said and pulled Aunt Sandra away.

In the car, windows open, Jeannie could hear bees, cicadas, and the leaves of the stunted trees in the slow moving air. She could hear her mother and Aunt Sandra talking as they picked at the edge of the canes. They talked as if she weren't close by, as if they'd forgotten she was there; the way adults talk when they think children are safely asleep, in voices that suddenly become younger and faster.

"Did he call you himself?" asked Aunt Sandra and her mother replied,

"Yes."

"Not just the nurse? Wow. What'd you do to rate that?"

"I don't know. He just said to stop taking the pills. To bring what I had left over to the office."

"Oh, Bethy. What's in them?"

"I don't know. I couldn't read the label. Besides, they use different product names and it makes it hard to know what's in things."

"He wouldn't tell you?"

"I didn't ask. You know how it is."

"You should have asked."

"Well, I didn't."

"After what happened to Helen's baby. And you didn't ask?"

"He said it should be all right. I didn't take many. They're going to do an x-ray in a week or two," said Jeannie's mother.

"What for?"

"Oh, don't be dense. We're talking about thalidomide. What do you think for?" There was a long pause.

"Did you hear that Helen's pregnant again?" said Aunt Sandra. Jeannie sat up and listened. Nobody said *pregnant* around kids and she had just found out from Bobby, while they were looking at new kittens in the haymow at his place, what the word meant.

"Good Lord. What a glutton for punishment," said her mother, but then the two women moved out of earshot.

The sun seemed to grow over the trees and the inside of the car was hot. Jeannie's head began to ache. Behind her were the raspberry canes, tall and deep. In front of the car was an open area where meadow grass and brush had been flattened by many car tires. Aunt Sandra had said it was a popular place for necking, whatever necking meant. "Probably for a lot more than necking," said her mother.

Across the flattened area was a clump of white birch taller than the alder brush and thornapple bushes around them. A glimpse of brown moved between two trunks. She sat forward quickly, feeling suddenly sick. A bear? Should she yell and warn her mother. She couldn't make any sound come out of her mouth. She hardly breathed as she stared into the thicket willing something to appear, willing it to be only a shadow. Then she saw a thin white hand appear on a tree trunk, a thin long hand attached to a brown shirt. Jeannie watched the hand as it pulled back and then appeared again. A person, a man. For a moment she saw a face—long and fleshy with a dark hole at the base of his throat, and then he was gone.

Jeannie got out of the car. She had to tell her mother. Her mother would know what to do. She knew about stray dogs and sick cats. She was brave enough to pick up wounded birds. She stuck up for people nobody else would.

She sometimes took fresh bread to the Major at the hotel. She let men, who the great aunts called hobos, sleep in the woodshed.

Jeannie had heard her mother say to her father just the night before, "I know he's out there. I think he's been helping himself to some of my eggs, and Elsie Ross lost a blanket off her clothesline."

"I can't help him," said her father.

"You won't help him. What about at night? The nights get cool in August."

"Why don't you just put out a saucer of milk, Beth? Maybe you could coax him to come curl up in your lap." Her mother turned quickly from the stove, a mixture of anger and eagerness on her face.

"The way I trapped you, Andy? Is that what you're getting at, Andy?"

Jeannie had been playing with a set of paper dolls she had made herself with cutouts from the Eaton's Catalogue. "Who's out there?" she asked, not because she didn't know but to get them to remember that she was there. So they would stop. "Who took Mrs. Ross' blanket?"

Her parents were looking at each other. Her father's face was flushed. Her mother, a hand on her stomach, looked as if she had just won a prize or something. She had said, "Oh you know Jeannie. The Major."

Jeannie stepped into the canes trying to locate her mother by her voice, her high laugh and her aunt's throaty replies.

The canes were over her head. Paths, knocked down by something wide footed and wide shouldered, crossed and curved deeper into the bush. Jeannie stopped to listen. Her mother seemed to be on her right but there was no opening to get to her. Jeannie pushed her way further and found a trail that seemed to bend toward her mother's voice but the path ended abruptly. Thorns

pulled at her as she tried to turn around and go back. The bushes crowded in on her and hornets were everywhere.

Suddenly her mother's voice was so close that Jeannie startled. She could see her mother's baggy pink shirt through the tall canes. Instead of letting the women know she was there, Jeannie squatted down. She didn't want Aunt Sandra to know. She wanted it to be something between herself and her mother.

Her mother said, "He would never let me do that, Sandra. He wouldn't let me do it the first time, and I'm not seventeen anymore. Anyway, where would we get the money?"

"I'd lend it to you, Beth."

"Don't be stupid. You have less than I have. Besides, you can't keep a secret in this town. Everyone would know."

"*YOU* don't be stupid," said Aunt Sandra. "They put Helen's away in some sort of institution. They wouldn't even let her see it."

"It will be all right. Besides it's too late to get rid of it now. Look at me," said her mother. Jeannie wondered what was too late and tried to look at her mother to see what she was showing Aunt Sandra. All she could see was the baggy pink shirt that had recently replaced the trim sweater sets and the sleeveless blouses her mother used to wear. Jeannie remembered that she had something important to tell her mother but she wanted to pay Aunt Sandra back for trying to scare her. She waited, thinking Aunt Sandra might move away so Jeannie could talk to her mother alone.

Aunt Sandra and Jeannie's mother moved off together and Jeannie, trying to circle around to get to them, lost the sound of their voices. She

stopped. She thought of the Major moving in the bush. She thought of bears. Her breath felt like it had the first time she had gone all the way under the water at the beach at Lake Piskeart and for a moment had lost track of where the surface was. She sat down and listened to her breathing, surprised to find tears on her face. Her head filled with the sound of grasshoppers, crickets, wasps, and rustling leaves.

She didn't know how long she had been sitting there in the tall canes when she heard her mother calling her. Her mother's voice sounded worried. Aunt Sandra called too. Her voice sounded angry.

"Jeannie. Jeannie," called her mother.

"Jeannie, you little shit," yelled her aunt, "Why don't you answer us?" Her mother almost stepped on her before she thought to say, "I'm here." Her mother grabbed her arm and hauled her to her feet.

"I saw the Major," said Jeannie wishing her mother would let go. "I saw the Major and I came to tell you and I got lost."

"Jesus," said Aunt Sandra.

"Where?" said her mother. Not waiting for an answer, she yanked Jeannie hard and began to run back to the car.

"In the clearing," said Jeannie, her breath in gasps trying to keep up with her mother and not get scratched by the thorns of the raspberries. The clearing where the car was parked suddenly opened up beyond her mother's shirt.

"Jesus," repeated Aunt Sandra. "I'm not going out there."

"Don't be stupid," said her mother. "He's not going to hurt you."

"You're hurting my arm," Jeannie whined. "He's already gone. He didn't stay."

Her mother dropped her arm and stepped out into the open. Jeannie followed. Her mother called, "Major Lawrence. Major Lawrence, are you here?" but the only answer was from a large crow that flew overhead making strange clicking noises.

Jeannie looked at her mother, her rounding stomach, her blonde hair stuck in the moisture behind her ears, the way her head was up and her nose seemed to sniff the air like a dog trying to catch the scent of another dog.

Her mother called out a few times more. She said, "It's me, Beth McLloyd. Andy's wife." And "Come out, Major. I'll give you a ride home," while Aunt Sandra said nothing, just stood, looking sweaty and angry, her hand on the handle of the car door.

Jeannie wondered why Aunt Sandra wasn't afraid of bears but seemed to be really afraid of the Major. And why was her mother so unafraid? Her arm still hurt from being pulled on and the buzzing of the hornets made her feel sleepy. Jeannie wanted to go home. When they finally got into the car, Aunt Sandra said,

"How do you know Jeannie really saw him?"

"Jeannie doesn't lie," said her mother.

One rainy Saturday afternoon, near the end of August, when Jeannie had begun to wish for school to begin so that she would be able to play with the farm kids who bussed in from the back roads and smaller nearby towns, she and Bobby were playing in her basement. Her father was working on a new nativity scene, one to give to Aunt Beulah for Christmas.

Jeannie had set up house in the area where the stovewood would be piled once her father got around to throwing it in through the basement window. Bobby was enthusiastically joining in the game. They made chairs and tables out of leftover pieces of last year's block wood. They rolled other pieces together to form a bed and laughed at its bumpy uncomfortable surface. Then Bobby wanted to play cops and robbers.

"Pretend this is a rich house and I'm the robber," he said, all ears and short blonde brush cut. "You're the rich lady." He pointed a stick of kindling at her and said, "Give me your money or I'll shoot you." Jeannie looked at her father, face bent over his work bench, gray hair longer than most of the men in town but combed neatly back. Had he heard? He had a small brush in his hand and was painting eyes on a donkey. Suddenly she hated Bobby, he had been telling her what to do all afternoon. She wanted him to go home so she said, "No. Go ahead and shoot me." She knew what would happen.

"Pow Pow," shouted Bobby. "You're dead. You're dead. You've got to fall down."

Her father rose from his work so quickly that small sheep, and shepherds, and wise men scattered across the table. Bobby, who seemed to have forgotten that Jeannie's father was there, jumped and tried to run. Jeannie's father grabbed Bobby by the back of his shirt and smacked him hard across his right ear. Bobby was too surprised to cry. Then her father turned Bobby around and lifted him until Bobby's face was level with his own. Jeannie thought her father was going to yell but he did worse, he hissed through his teeth as if his teeth were all that was keeping the thing inside of him from getting out. He said, "Don't you ever play guns in this house. Don't you ever pretend you are killing anybody. Understand?"

Bobby nodded and her father let him down gently, slowly releasing his fingers from Bobby's shirt. Bobby ran for the basement steps. When he got to the bottom he turned and yelled at her father, "You just wait. I'm going to tell my mother." His little body shook and his ears were bright red. He summoned up the worst thing he could think of and he screamed "you crazy asshole" before he ran pounding up the stairs. Jeannie heard the front door slam.

Her father shut his eyes. His breathing sounded loud. When he opened his eyes, he looked at Jeannie. Jeannie tried to make her eyes like his, blank and empty. Her mother appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Andy," she called. "What was that all about?"

"Never mind," said Jeannie. "It's nothing."

She thought Aunt Sandra would be on the phone any minute now to chew her father out. But the phone didn't ring all afternoon and her father stayed in the basement through supper and well into the evening.

One night, not long before Halloween, Jeannie saw the Major again. It was almost dark by suppertime and during supper, Jeannie's father had been silent. He didn't stop to listen to the six o'clock news after dessert but went right out to the barn to do chores. Jeannie stood on a stool to help her mother do the dishes as it got darker and darker in the kitchen. When Jeannie went to flip on the big overhead fluorescent light her mother stopped her, told her quickly not to waste electricity and to turn on the small lamp over the sink.

When her father came in, he didn't take off his barn boots. Leaving the pail of milk by the door, he went to the nearest window and pulled down the blind. When he headed for the next window, cow manure dripping from his

boots, Jeannie's mother put a hand on his arm and said, "I'll do that Andy. I was just getting around to it."

"The light. . ." He didn't finish his sentence.

"I'll do it. You finish the milk." Jeannie turned the handle for her father as he poured the milk into the top of the separator. His big hands shook making the edge of the milk pail tap against the rim of the separator bowl.

The kitchen was dark with one small pool of light from the lamp on the table. Jeannie saw that her mother had pulled all the blinds down—right down to the window ledge and then pulled the curtains over them—like she sometimes did in the summer to keep out the heat. The blinds were dark green and light couldn't get in or out through them. Her father, who had gone to clean up, came out of the bathroom washed and shaved and in a good clean shirt. He looked like he was getting ready to go to church or a meeting but instead he pulled a kitchen chair closer to the fridge in the corner. On the Kalvinator's curved top was the radio, an RCA in a wooden case that her father had repaired with tubes like miniature light bulbs. He always said what a good tone it had.

On the radio, two men were talking solemnly. Jeannie caught the tone but paid no attention to the content.

"Wouldn't there be something on TV about it?" said her mother.

Her father said, "Too much light."

Jeannie's mother crossed the floor again and again going from the pantry to the fridge, washing the fridge door, the paint around the light switches. Then she dumped a basket of clean laundry on the table and began to fold it, snapping each piece briskly. She put one pile aside to iron.

Jeannie expected to be told to go to bed, but since no one did, she slipped quietly under the table with one of the clean towels to play Cuban spy. She wedged the corners of the towel into the inside corners of the table to form a wall for her cave. If her mother caught her she would be mad at her for ruining the corners of the bath towel, which would come away crunched and covered in old grease. But her mother didn't seem to care where or what she was doing.

The solemn men on the radio were cut off in mid-speech by the sound of a radio siren and an urgent voice calling out in a heavy way something that sounded to Jeannie like "Red Fox. Red Fox. This is a test of the emergency broadcasting system. I repeat this is only a test." The voice went on to say what people should do if it was not a test. Jeannie heard something about basements, fallout, and clean water. Her mother's legs in their sheer stockings and slippers crossed quickly to where her father's wool slippers curled as if to hold on to the floor. Jeannie looked out to see her mother's hands on his head. His hands were curling into fists as he said in a voice that sounded like nothing Jeannie had ever heard before, "I knew it. I knew it."

Her mother just pushed her hand down on the top of his hair as if she were pushing him down into his seat. Her stomach was large and it pressed against his shoulder. Jeannie had finally figured out, because Bobby told her that she was a stupid dummy when she said she didn't know why her mother was going into the doctor's so often, that there was a baby inside her mother. She didn't know, and wouldn't ask, how the baby would come out. Her older married cousin had a baby last summer and Jeannie had seen a long scar on her belly when she was changing into her bathing suit in Jeannie's room. Jeannie wondered if the scar was where they cut babies out. She couldn't see how else they could be born. From under the table, she tried to look up her

mother's legs and under her duster to her belly without her parents seeing her, but they weren't paying attention to her and it was too dark to see anything anyway.

At first, staying out of sight under the table after her bedtime was sort of fun, like pretend camping out in the backyard under a tent made of blankets and rope. Or like when the power went out for days in a big storm and Dad had laughed and joked and made toast on the stove-top and popcorn in a wire basket and brought water home from the spring in one of the cream cans.

Then Jeannie began to feel tired and cold. The radio droned on and on with the sound of a siren mixed in with the words and she felt frightened. She thought her father should go to the basement and fix the furnace fire. He should go turn on a light and read the paper. He should come and find her and say she shouldn't be scared because he was there. Her mother should tell her to go to bed. Jeannie began to feel like she had the day she was lost in the raspberry brush. Like no one would ever find her. Like even if she opened her mouth no sound would come out. Like fleshy skeletons would get to her before her own parents. She didn't know how to make them hear her.

She must have fallen asleep because when she woke up she was in her own bed. The window blind was drawn and it was so dark she could barely see the outline of her bedroom door. She got out of her bed, felt her way to the window, and peeked behind the blind. There were stars and little by little she began to make out the quadrangle of buildings that made the boundaries of the backyard, the woodshed, the garage, and the small barn. There was an open

space in the middle, a lawn covered in frost so thick it looked like snow. One of her mother's cats came out of the shadows of the apple tree. Jeannie could see it because it was black and it moved across the white frost.

She tugged at the blind just a little, enough to make it release its spring so she could raise it a few inches but not enough to let it thwap up to the top, to spin noisily around and rouse the house. That's when she saw the Major. He moved out from beside the barn, crouching down as he walked, his long legs folded under him like a grasshopper. He followed the path of the cat across the lawn, stopping every two steps to look over his shoulder. Jeannie watched him make his way out to the driveway and disappear around the corner of the house. It was like a dream and later she would think that maybe it had been.

Her room was less dark now but very cold. Jeannie wondered if her father and mother had gone to bed without making a furnace fire. Maybe the men on the radio had said not to. Maybe the thing her father was afraid of could see smoke coming out of a chimney. Jeannie ran back to her bed and in the dim light from the window she could see her father's army greatcoat lying across her quilt. He must have wrapped her up in it before carrying her to her room.

In the morning when she came down for breakfast her father had already gone to work and her mother sat looking out the window, a cup of tea warming her hands. The cones from the cream separator were piled on the wood stove to dry. Drops of water fell from them and scuttled, hissing, across the hot surface. Jeannie looked around at all the light in the kitchen. She smelled toast and jam and heard music on the radio. She tried to remember the way everything had looked the night before but couldn't.

Jeannie walked to school with Bobby on Monday morning. The streets of Galt were strewn with leaves. The October sky was a pure, clear, almost golden blue—so sharp a blue, her father said, because the air was full of invisible fragments of broken leaves that reflected the sun like a million tiny mirrors.

The Major was walking toward them. He looked as if he were marching in a parade, as if he held a ceremonial sword against his chest. His clothes were clean, neatly pressed, and a pure white scarf was tied around his neck, knotted at the throat to hide the hole. He passed by them without looking down but one hand went up to his hat in a sort of salute and Jeannie heard him whisper, "Fine morning."

Jeannie tugged hard on Bobby's arm and Bobby, who had lost interest lately in playing with her and only walked to school with her because his mother made him, said, "What? What?" and when she pointed at the Major's retreating back, he said, "Jeeze. He's been home for ever. Mom said he's like an old tom cat. He came in when the nights got cold. Don't you know anything?"

The pH of Spit

A dentist once told Janet that there are two kinds of saliva: the kind that builds up on your teeth as plaque and the acid kind that eats at your enamel, making your teeth abnormally prone to cavities. Janet, unfortunately, appeared to have the latter. Her present dentist, Dr. Rauhausen, had made light of this theory, making Janet feel as if the poor state of her teeth, the darkened, thin enamel, was Janet's fault alone. As Janet opened her mouth, her face throbbing, she wondered if Dr. Rauhausen realized just how much she had paid out, over the years, because of the pH of her spit.

The halo of the dentist lamp backlit Dr. Rauhausen's dark brown hair. It blurred Janet's view of his hazel eyes, his thick lashes, and his finely arched eyebrows. His hands, with their neatly trimmed fingernails, were sheathed in latex and the touch of his fingers in Janet's mouth made her feel as if she was engaged in something not quite proper.

Janet was old enough to remember when dentists didn't wear gloves or masks and you could taste the soap on their fingers, feel the suggestive probe

of tight skin and hard nails in your mouth as they pushed aside your tongue and lifted your upper lip. Without the masks you could smell their breath—smoky, or spicy, or strong with wintergreen. Janet wondered how Dr. Rauhausen's fingers might taste and if his breath was sweet.

"You're in for another root canal, Miss Sawyer," the dentist said as he turned and stripped off his gloves. Janet liked the way he said her name, enunciating both syllables. So many people slurred it into one word that sounded like sorer or sore. Miss Sore. But it made her feel old to be called Miss. She should have told him to call her Janet, right at the beginning. It would be too embarrassing to correct him now. "We'll have to clear up the infection before I can do anything." He glanced at her chart as he pulled off his mask. "I'll write you a prescription for antibiotics and you'd better have a pain killer." He walked with her out to the reception desk, one hand resting softly, high on her back.

With the prescription tucked in the front pocket of her handbag, Janet made an appointment for the following week and then went out into the late afternoon street. Frigid November wind, blowing across the river, struck her face, making her toothache worse. It was only four o'clock but the sky had been gray all day and the street lights were on.

She saw her reflection in the windows she passed. It flickered over a couple laughing as they looked at movie cases in the video outlet, over a serious-faced young woman measuring rice in the health food store, over an old man looking out at the street as he drank coffee at a small Formica table in the café. A group of students from the university overtook her. They talked,

not missing a beat, as they washed around her like water flowing around a rock. As if she wasn't there.

Wind-borne ice pellets stung her cheeks. Even her eyes felt cold.

In the pharmacy, after picking up her prescription, Janet saw Jimmy McBain in front of the magazine rack. He was leafing through a copy of *Sports Illustrated*. Janet knew him immediately even though she hadn't seen him in years. Her stomach twisted and she felt like ducking by him, unseen, but she didn't. She found herself staring at him, surprised that he had gotten older, middle-aged. When she thought of him, if she ever thought of him at all anymore, she thought of him as a lanky sixteen-year-old.

Jimmy's hair was thin on top and the lines around his eyes that used to appear when he smiled had deepened and lengthened to become prominent, constant, features of his face. His once flat stomach was round. It pushed against his shirt, strained at the buttons, and mounded tidily over his large belt buckle. Janet had the urge to run her hand over his stomach, to see if it was as taut as it looked or if, instead, it was soft and pliable.

Occasionally Janet's mother, who kept up with all the goings on back home through the various people who visited her in the St. Stanislaus Senior Center, would mention Jimmy. Janet had heard that Jimmy was divorced again. That he had come back from out west and was working for a trucking firm, hauling logs and Christmas trees to the eastern seaboard. He lived, so her mother said, in an apartment in nearby Sherbrooke. "You should look him up," her mother said. "He probably never heard about Belinda or your father. He probably would love to see a picture of Tater and her kids." Janet hadn't argued. After all this time she had learned that it was useless to try to correct

her mother's optimistic, unrealistic view of things and as Tate once said, "Janet. Why in the world would you want to? I'm OK with it. Why can't you be?"

Perhaps he felt her looking at him but, at any rate, he glanced up and met her eye. Janet remembered the clear-as-glass blue of his irises, the guarded look around the lids. Janet didn't know if he would recognize her, a small middle-aged woman with thick glasses and neat shoes. She hadn't actually spoken to him since before his brother Carl had died nearly forty years ago. He looked at her with a mild, suspicious defiance. Janet noticed that his cheeks were criss-crossed with the tiny lines of burst blood vessels.

Then he knew her. He smiled a half smile and his hand came up in a small salute. Janet realized that his stomach and arms were soft, as if he was slowly melting.

At that moment the pain of her tooth seemed to intensify. To Janet's embarrassment her left eye began to water. She was afraid Jimmy would think her tears had something to do with him. That he would think she felt sorry for him, or worse, that she felt sorry for herself.

She looked into his face, its furrows, its sad, belligerent eyes and she blurted, "It's just a toothache. I have a bad toothache." He grimaced and Janet couldn't tell if he was expressing sympathy or if he was mocking her. She turned and rushed away before he could say anything.

It was Thursday, Janet's evening for manning the desk at the library in the town hall. Janet was the town archivist, and worked most days in the records room in the basement. She enjoyed her evenings upstairs in the library, chatting with seniors who came in to borrow romances and mysteries, helping school children find books for projects or information on the

internet. She got along well with her French-speaking counterpart, a woman named Marie Claire, and she liked the ritual of reshelving books, the shuffling through the card catalogue as if looking for secret messages.

Janet hung her damp coat on the wall behind the front desk. Marie Claire was still working and Janet could hear her talking on the phone in the office. Janet filled a paper cone at the water cooler and took her pills—one for the infection and one to kill the pain that radiated upward and outward from her left front incisor. As Janet began to sort through the returns, she visualized taking bits of pain and attaching them to the library cards as she slipped them into the ecru paper pockets inside the back covers of the books.

* * * * *

Jimmy McBain lived in a derelict house near the town dump on the road between Galt and Brook Island. There were six boys and two girls in his family. All through high school either Carl or Jimmy, or sometimes both of them at once, were in Janet's grade.

Carl and Jimmy weren't twins, and they were both older than Janet, but, due to one or the other of them being "kept back," they frequently turned up in the same class. In the late 50s, students were failed more often and the grades between six and ten were full of rowdy older boys marking time until they turned sixteen and were old enough to quit. There were always a few older girls too, waiting to get married or pregnant—whichever came first.

Carl and Jimmy were tall. Their pants and sleeves were short and their hair was always military issue. Janet used to look at the grayness of their skin

and the way the dirt seemed to gather darker in the creases of their necks, like shading in a pen and ink drawing.

It didn't do to look too long. Since grade six, when the girls were just developing breasts and little shelves of hip, a girl lingering too long by the cloakroom doors or alone in the equipment storeroom of the gym was an open invitation to a McBain boy. A moment of inattention and you could find a quick McBain hand running up under your skirt to feel for your garter belt, or between the buttons of your blouse to touch the fabric of your bra and, if it was accurate enough, the tenderness of a slightly swelling nipple.

To tell the truth, she never had much to worry about when she walked back to the cloakroom. Janet was not what anyone would call a looker. She had always been skinny like her father. Her mother had once said that it was as if Janet had been made out of the odds and ends of what was left over, like the snippets of material in her Mum's ragbag. Janet had never weighed over 100 pounds her whole life. Her face was small and heart-shaped, her hair thin and limp. The thick glasses she had worn since she was seven made her eyes, already large and liquid, seem enormous.

At school, the McBain boys stuck together, all of them as gray as the unpainted clapboards of their house. They shared cigarettes out behind the school rink. Spent their Saturday nights together siphoning gas from unattended cars at the Armory dances. They muscled in for each other when fights broke out over girlfriends or cruising territory.

They must have acted differently at home because sometimes, when you drove by their house, you would see two or three of them rolling murderously in the weeds and chicken feathers in front of their falling-off porch, punching and kicking each other while one of their dogs tried to get a nip in.

Janet's father said he thought they staged these fights; that they had so little to do that when they heard a car coming they jumped on each other, to try to get a rise out of the neighbours. Why he would say that, Janet hadn't known. As far as she could tell, all of the McBain boys had plenty to do. They all worked in the woods when they were not in school and, sometimes, when they should have been in school. She knew because they often lifted their shirts and invited the girls to punch their flat muscular stomachs.

He was probably jealous of them. Her father. Jealous of their straight backs and the way they toenailed into life without having to scrape and bow. Without feeling they had to be some sort of dancing monkey to fit in. Although he would never say that. Never in a million years. He was Charles-Taylor Sawyer, the man everyone loved. The man who didn't give a hoot that people called him Crooked T; he was just that sort of happy-go-lucky, loving, accepting fellow. The man they all forgave, no matter what he had or hadn't done.

In grade ten Jimmy began to pay attention to Janet. He'd cleaned up. His skin was no longer dirty. His plaid shirts and blue jeans were washed. Somebody said that his father had a new woman and she was good at keeping things clean.

One day, during noon hour, Jimmy sat down beside her where she perched, legs swinging, on top of her desk. She was talking to Norma and Patsy, who were playing two-handed gin rummy. And casually, as if he did it everyday, as if they were an old married couple, he put his arm around her waist, resting his hand on her hip bone and anchoring his thumb in the waistband of her skirt.

Janet didn't move. She waited for him to do something that she could slap him for, like a finger touching her breast or a hand dropping into her lap. She thought about what she would say and how cutting she would make her voice sound.

She kept up her conversation with the others as if nothing was going on. They were talking about Elvis, or maybe about the cost of the school pins. Norma, who was crazy about babies, had asked Janet if Tater had started to talk yet and how many steps she could take at once. Meanwhile, Janet's back seemed to be on fire. She hoped she wouldn't sweat. She hoped his arm wouldn't come away damp. She felt paralyzed by an unfamiliar feeling that radiated from her thighs.

She could have shrugged Jimmy away. She didn't like him. She didn't trust him. She certainly had nothing in common with him, but she felt suddenly unwilling to hurt his feelings and could find nothing really offensive about his arm. He wasn't moving it suggestively. He wasn't squeezing her. His hand stayed still and didn't stroke her hip. In fact, his arm felt friendly, comforting, undemanding. She could feel the hardness of his bicep against her shoulder blade. When she turned her head toward him she caught the smell of flannel and warm skin.

He sat beside her for several minutes. Finally, he leaned into her hair and sniffed it. Then he took his arm away and sauntered off.

"What was that about?" said Norma, but Janet shrugged as if it was no big deal.

Every noon hour that fall, Jimmy would appear and sit beside her, on her desk, on the stairs, on the low stone wall by the swings, and slip his arm protectively around her waist. He usually just listened to the conversation.

Sometimes, not often, he would join in. After awhile he would nuzzle her hair, smell it, and leave.

Janet waited. She didn't know how to talk to him. She tried asking him about the car he was working on and his weekend job cutting pulp, but Jimmy never said much. At first it seemed strange to Janet but after awhile his silent presence seemed almost natural. In fact, she appreciated that he never asked her questions she didn't want to answer. About her sister Belinda's absence from school at the beginning of last fall. Or about their baby sister.

She waited for him to ask her out, to a dance perhaps. She imagined having to plead with her parents to let her go. They wouldn't like it much, especially her father, because Jimmy had a car. She imagined dancing with him, maybe kissing him but she didn't like the crawly feeling she got when she thought about him unbuttoning her blouse so she never imagined beyond the kissing part. It didn't matter though. He never asked her.

* * * * *

Janet tried every trick she knew to stay calm. Her tooth had been killing her and she had been reluctantly taking codeine at night to sleep. Now, four days after her first visit, as Dr. Rauhausen tipped the dentist chair back and Janet felt as if she were a body about to be slipped overboard into the sea for burial, she repeated a litany in her head, *it will all be over soon, it will all be over soon, the pain will be gone.*

"Just relax," murmured the dentist as he probed. "Much pain?" His eyes held Janet's for a second. Janet made a drowned throat noise and nodded

slightly. Dr. Rauhausen suddenly squinted and drew back. He put down the probe and grabbed the suction wand. He tugged up on Janet's lip with one hand and suctioned with the other. Janet could see his nose wrinkling under his mask. Janet smelled pus and closed her eyes. *It will all be over soon*, she thought.

"Wow," said Dr. Rauhausen cheerily, glossing over his initial reaction of disgust. "You've got a lot in there. I'll have to change the antibiotics. Doesn't look like the first one worked. Hold on Miss Sawyer, it will feel better in a minute, once it's drained." He chatted on, trying, Janet thought, to distract her from the fact that he was removing a hidden intimate rot.

* * * * *

Each spring, in return for logs, the McBains came to Janet's farm to cut, split, and stack her family's firewood. They returned in the fall, when the wood was dry, to throw it into the basement and pile it against the wall next to the furnace. There were many things Crooked T could do but cutting wood wasn't one of them. He always said, in the most jovial manner he could muster, as he watched the McBains haul away more logs than could be decently thought to be their share, that getting in the firewood was a thankless occupation. He was more than happy to let the McBains do it.

This fall—the fall that Janet spent her school noon hours in the curve of Jimmy's arm—Jimmy and Carl came to put the wood in. They moved it with a wheelbarrow, pushing it over the lumpy lawn from the runs where it had been drying all summer, to an open basement window. Belinda put on her rubber

boots and went out to help. It was a warm fall day and Janet opened a kitchen window by the counter where she was slicing the last of the summer's cucumbers for bread'n'butter pickles. Carl, Jimmy and Belinda worked just below her.

Belinda moved in and out of the backs and arms of the McBain boys, occasionally brushing up against them. She laughed loudly when she knocked her piece of wood against one of theirs. Carl took off his shirt, although Janet didn't think it was that warm, and he kept calling Belinda "Big Momma." Jimmy just smiled and smiled. Janet stuck her face close to the screen.

"Belinda. You're in the way. Why don't you go stack in the cellar?" she said.

"Don't boss me, little sister," said Belinda with a laugh to show that Janet shouldn't be offended. Big joke. Janet was a year older than Belinda but only about half Belinda's size.

Carl slapped Belinda's wide rear in a friendly fashion and said, "Get over there, Spud." He might have been speaking to a cow he was about to milk. Jimmy looked up at Janet. His eyes crinkled at the corners. He seemed to measure her.

Janet didn't like Carl using her father's nicknames. Crooked T, as if to make up for his own unfortunate nickname, had pet names for all his family. He called Janet *Sprout* and Belinda *Spud*. Now he called the baby *Tater* even though her real name was Crystal. "In keeping with the potato motif," he said. Even though Janet tried to stick to calling the baby Crystal, she soon gave up. Everyone called the little girl *Tater*, and the baby wouldn't answer to anything else.

Janet understood how *Tater* felt. She had grown up answering to *Sprout*. Had been happy to. Her pet name used to make her feel included in her

father's circle; special, loved, proud to belong, Crooked T's daughter. Last year she had told him never to call her that again. From now on she would only answer to Janet. He had been terribly hurt and Mum had scolded her for making him feel so bad. But he stopped calling her Sprout. He stopped calling Belinda, Spud. He stopped calling Belinda anything.

Belinda's horse, a paint gelding named Splash, had gotten out again and was hanging about watching the activity. He came up behind Belinda and nuzzled her shoulder looking for a peppermint. Belinda rubbed her cheek against the horse's nose. Splash moved his lips, catching at Belinda's hair and letting it go again.

"Hey," yelled Carl. "Get away from my girlfriend." The horse jumped sideways, knocking over the wheelbarrow. He trotted away, bucking a few times to show his displeasure. Belinda swatted Carl across the ear.

"Look what you've done, you peckerhead," she said. "Don't you know nothing about horses?" She started after the horse. "He was OK with us. Now I've got to catch him before he runs off to the neighbours." She called back over her shoulder, "And I am nobody's girlfriend. Especially not yours."

"Jesus," Carl said to Jimmy, "Apt to see a horse anywhere around here. The only time Crooked T knows how many goddamned horses he owns is when he rounds them all up to take to the fair." Carl picked up the wheelbarrow. Janet was about to say something harsh about Carl and Jimmy's father not knowing how many women *he* had, when Jimmy put a hand up to the screen. He rested his hand for a moment, palm toward her on the mesh and then slowly let it slip down, back to his hip.

Tears started to Janet's eyes and she pulled the window shut. She hated that Jimmy seemed to know what she was feeling. She could deal with people

like Carl who made fun of her family. She could deflect the anger and shame with her own sharp tongue. But the least bit of sympathy from someone else set her off. Made her realize how sorry she felt for herself. Made her cry and she hated to cry.

Splash easily outdistanced Belinda. Janet could see he was headed for a group of her father's horses that was eating apples off the ground in the orchard. The horses all looked up as Splash trotted toward them, and catching his excitement, they began to mill around and buck. When Splash reached them, they spun away, galloping out of the orchard, over the ditch and into the road. Janet heard Belinda swear as the horses disappeared beyond the maples, heading toward the Naylor farm.

Carl was right. You were apt to see a horse just about anywhere on what passed as Crooked T's farm; in the backyard eating flowers; by the tumbling bricks of the barbecue pit; picking delicately through the rusted wood stoves, the broken washing machines, and the old hay rakes thrown out on the rock pile behind the barn. They were like roaming spirits. There was something not quite real about them. It wasn't unusual to go to a window to open it and find a horse looking in at you.

Crooked T wasn't much on fences or halters and in the fall when the grass in their pasture was too short for their liking, the horses easily jumped the cedar rails, or pushed open the gate. The shorter, feisty ponies had even been known to crawl under the fence. Sooner or later they would head down to Naylor's farm to run around in his barley or stand outside the barnyard looking at his milk cows.

Mr. Naylor, like all the neighbours, made allowances for Crooked T's horses. They made allowances because Crooked T was so small and cheerful and well, crooked. He didn't really farm. He couldn't, and so his fields were rented

out to the Naylor's and he delivered the mail. He cheerfully waded through snow up to his thighs to deliver parcels too large to fit in a mailbox. He told off-colour jokes to housewives as they signed for registered letters. He kept an eye on the elderly on his mail route, often bringing in their mail and stopping for a cup of tea.

When the weather was fine he did his circuit on horseback. It took him longer but people seemed to like the sight of him, like a picture out of the past, leaning over his saddlebags to put mail in the roadside boxes. He said he always felt best on horseback. That horses made him feel free, almost normal.

Mum was sitting at the kitchen table with Tater on her lap. Tater had just gotten up from her nap and she looked cranky. She sucked her thumb and frowned at Janet.

"The horses are headed for the Naylor's," said Janet. Mum had been kneading bread and there was flour on her broad forehead where she had pushed her hair back with her fat, swollen fingers. "I suppose I'll have to help Belinda get them."

"Watch your tone, Janet Louise," said Mum. "That is not how you were raised. Of course you will go for the horses. Take those McBain boys with you and tell Carl to put his shirt back on."

Janet pulled on a quilted barn shirt and slid her feet into her boots. She didn't want to go, especially not with Jimmy and Carl. They would see that she was afraid of the horses. She was afraid of their sudden lunges, their unpredictable hooves, their strong jaws. They made her feel tiny, powerless.

Of course, the horses weren't wearing halters so she and Belinda would have to do a song-and-dance with a pail of oats until the horses let themselves be caught and the halters were slipped over their ears.

And then there was Belinda, big and loud, wearing their father's overalls. Belinda was apt to say anything to Mr. Naylor. Once she had said, "Janet Louise'll clean the horseshit off your driveway," and when Janet had punched her, she had said, "What? That's what it is, isn't it? Shit."

Most of all, it shamed Janet to be seen leading a horse up the gravel road while her sister rode bareback beside her. Janet had only been on a horse once that she could remember. She'd never gotten on again. Instead of feeling free, like her father said he did, she had been terrified. She preferred to walk. But it seemed to her that, no matter what Belinda had done, the people passing in their cars would be comparing Belinda on horseback to Janet on the ground. They would admire Belinda and despise Janet when maybe it should be the other way around.

By the time Belinda, Janet, and the McBain boys got to the Naylor farm, the horses had bypassed the cow pasture with its triple strands of barbed wire and run into the stubble of a cutover oat field. At the top of a low hill, the horses stood stock-still, all faced in the same direction, their ears pointed forward, their tails clenched in fear, ready to turn and flee at any minute.

"What are they looking at?" said Jimmy, as he held two strands of barbed wire wide enough apart so the rest of the teenagers could climb through the fence.

"Geese," hooted Carl. "There's a bunch of Christly geese." A small flock of wild Canadas had landed in the stubble to feed on the leftover grain. The geese, necks stretched up to full height, were facing the horses. Janet saw their black and white heads and their small eyes. The flock began to move toward the horses and Splash stamped his foot in panic.

Belinda put her fingers into her mouth and whistled. The horses, recognizing her call, spun on their haunches and galloped toward her. They

whinnied to her as if asking her what in the world those weird little animals with the long necks were. Janet stepped behind Jimmy as the horses skidded to a stop and crowded around Belinda. Belinda caught Splash by a tuft of his mane and pulled a halter over his head. She crooned as she snapped the lead rope to a ring in the halter.

"Silly horse. Were you afraid of those big bad geese?" The other horses, looking for comfort, pushed near her. One of them went partway back up the hill toward the geese but soon lost his nerve and cantered back to his own kind, neighing anxiously.

Belinda and Carl rode two of the horses while the rest of the small herd, disquieted by their meeting with the geese, followed closely. Jimmy and Janet came behind them on foot. Jimmy reached out and took Janet's hand but she only let him hold it for a second before she took it back. She didn't want anyone to see and she didn't like the way his big hand felt over hers.

As they neared home, Janet could see that Mum had put out another load of laundry. There was always laundry on the line. Sometimes the same wash would spend a whole week out there having been caught out in a shower and never managing to get dry. Mum said, "Let it be. The rain will soften it." Mum's clothesline was strung from the shed door at the side to a pole near the barn and, because the house was close to the road and there were no hedges or trees to hide it, the laundry was in plain sight. Janet saw her own small underwear hanging there. Her slip, her stockings, her tiny bra, and her panties.

Carl yelled, "Gosh Belinda. Those little things can't be yours. Must be Tater's." He looked back at Janet and grinned at her. Jimmy, walking beside her, acting as if he never touched her, never put his arm around her, never tried to hold her hand, snorted.

Janet turned to him and saw that he looked sorry he'd laughed, but she said, "Why don't you just shut up. Why don't both you McBains just shut up."

Belinda turned the horses into the barnyard as Janet ran for the house.

"Don't be so touchy, Janet," Belinda called. "We all wear 'em."

"Speak for yourself," Carl hollered.

Before she got to the shed door, Janet saw her father come out of his workshop in the barn wiping the grease from his hands with a rag. Tater followed him, holding on to the hammer loop of his trousers. Crooked T was probably working on one of his projects, his "inventions," in there. He might be making a metal lathe that ran off the transmission of a Cub Cadet or turning a horse-drawn hay mower into a self-propelled one with the help of a cut-down Ford pickup and a bulldozer lag. She saw him step up to the horses as they skirted the overflow of his shop—the ancient tractors, the flatbed truck, the dismantled cars. The hoods in his junkyard gaped open. The wheels were blocked so the machines couldn't roll.

Crooked T spoke, some joke that Janet couldn't hear, as Belinda rode up to him. Belinda laughed down into his face.

Tater hugged Crooked T's leg and Janet wondered if Tater was safe among the horses and the machinery.

It was getting dark when Carl and Jimmy finished with the wood. Mum invited them into the kitchen for something hot to drink before they headed home. She made them instant coffee, pouring water from the big kettle that boiled on the back of the wood stove. She put out store-bought cookies and some of the rolls she had baked that afternoon.

Crooked T was washing up at the sink. He had set Tater on the counter beside him and she was holding a towel for him, waiting for him to finish. Crooked T had a meeting after supper and to Janet's embarrassment he had decided to shave at the kitchen sink, saying that it was too cold in the upstairs bathroom to do a really good job.

"You boys want to earn a little money and put on my double windows for me?" he said to Carl and Jimmy, who were eating cookies in uneasy silence. Janet wondered if they felt awkward being inside. Her father peered into the little mirror over the sink and began to scrape at his two-day-old whiskers. Tater, her thin blonde hair falling about her fat face, leaned forward to watch the razor. She made faces to match his, her mouth forming an O as his mouth did, her chin tipping up with his.

"Could do," said Carl. "Getting kind of cold. Could finish your painting for you too, if we got a couple of nice days." Janet frowned at Carl as Jimmy hid a smirk behind his coffee mug. Carl had made his voice sound innocent and helpful but Janet knew he was making fun of Mum, of how she had started painting the house three years ago and then, because of the diabetes making her dizzy, had given it up. She had wanted it mauve because she missed the brightly painted houses of her home in the Gaspé. Now it was two-toned, bright mauve and dirty turquoise. Janet couldn't finish it because she got vertigo three steps up on a ladder and no one would ask Belinda to do something like that.

"I don't know," said Crooked T, stopping to paint Tater's nose with his shaving brush. "Don't think I have the money for that right now. Nice of you to think of it though." His voice was light, but Janet could see his shoulder bunch above the twist in his spine.

Janet was looking out the window and so she saw Belinda coming back from the barn with Splash trailing her. The horse's head was so close to Belinda's back that if she had stopped, he would have bumped into her. Belinda walked into the shed with the horse following and before Janet could move, the kitchen door opened and Belinda came in with Splash right behind her.

At the sound of the hooves, Mum turned from where she was stirring soup on the stove and guffawed. A great mule-like laugh. The whole of her massive bust shook until she seemed about to choke. Crooked T scuttled to her side and thumped her hard on the back. Belinda smirked at Carl, who had risen from his chair. Janet could see that he didn't think much of a horse in the kitchen. Tater, afraid of being alone on the counter, afraid she might fall, started to howl. Janet scooped her up and held her close, smelling the sweat in the little girl's hair.

"You scamp," said Crooked T. "Get that horse out of here."

Belinda turned to Splash and said, "Back. Back. . ." and Splash backed out the kitchen door as neatly as any thoroughbred trained in dressage. Janet's mother still talked about this, not so much about the horse in the kitchen, but about the horsemanship of poor Belinda backing her pony through unfamiliar territory without so much as a halter, just her voice. She still told how mad Janet got about the mess of hooves on the kitchen floor, as if it were typical of Janet, the only typical thing worth mentioning. Carl and Jimmy had both been there to hear Janet screech at her mother, "Disgusting. It's disgusting how you let her do just anything."

Janet watched Carl and Jimmy leave in their father's truck. The pickup's lights bounced off the tail lights and reflectors of Crooked T's junkyard, like they would bounce off the eyes of a herd of large beasts, waiting patiently at the side of the road for a chance to cross.

* * * * *

When Janet got home from the dentist's office, she took her new antibiotics and a double dose of codeine. She fed her cat and watered the plants before she checked the messages on her machine. There were two.

The first was her mother and Janet listened to her wavery voice saying, "It's Mum. Just called to chat. Call back later."

The other was from Tate, who sounded curt and edgy. "Janet. It's Tate. I'll call back later. By the way, Mum's been sick and I'm working like crazy so maybe you could drop in and see her since I can't get down for awhile. Like sometime in the next millennium? There's only you and me left. In case you forgot."

For a minute Janet had forgotten. She'd thought Tate was talking about Belinda. But then she remembered. Belinda was gone.

Besides, Tate had never called Belinda *Mum*.

* * * * *

One afternoon, in the spring of that year, Janet was sitting on the floor behind the lab counter sorting old chemistry exams for Mr. Martin. The rest of the class had been given the afternoon to work on the graduation decorations in the gym. Janet was hurrying so she could join them and so at first didn't pay

attention to the group of boys who came into the room. She didn't say anything to let on she was there.

Then she heard Jimmy's voice, and Carl's, and she began to listen. The group was talking about which girls in school had the best tits, which would make the best lays.

Janet listened for her name. She waited for them to mention Belinda. She intended to leap out and scold the boys, to say "as if I would stoop that low" or "I'm sure Mr. Martin would be interested in this conversation."

Carl and Jimmy led the discussion. They chose big-breasted girls with ponytails. They said that they had both screwed one of them, Donna, behind the cars in the parking lot at a school dance and that she had been wet and easy.

Norma and Patsy were in the next group of girls who were called frigid virgins who really only needed to have "the boots put to them" to warm them up. They lumped five more girls into a "if there were nothin' else" category.

But they didn't mention Janet. She felt heat rocketing up from the small of her back to flood her shoulders, her neck, her face. These boys—boys who spent their summers throwing hay bales and digging potatoes, whose ambitions involved the buying of old pickup trucks which they would cut down with welding torches, jack up the ass ends, install mags, dual carb and exhaust systems—these boys didn't see her as having a body at all.

And they hadn't mentioned Belinda. As if Belinda was off-limits. As if they didn't buy for one minute that Tater was her sister. As if even they had their standards. In her head she heard the slide, thump of Crooked T's footsteps as he moved down the hall past her room in the middle of the night and wondered how much they knew.

Mr. Martin stuck his head in the door and called to her, and trapped, she had to answer, "Just about finished, Mr. Martin."

"Bring them to the teachers' room when you're done. OK?"

"OK," she called out from her place on the floor. She waited, feeling through her nylons the cold of the rubber tiles on the backs of her legs but, in the long hostile silence, she knew she had to stand. Her face was red and her knees stiff. She looked at the floor, stared at her neat black shoes, watched her toes as she walked by the sneakers and workboots of the boys. She glanced up at Jimmy but he looked back as if he didn't know her.

She was almost by them, almost to the door, when one of them reached out and plucked her bra strap. She cried out as it snapped back on her skin and then she ran. There was a sudden brawl of male laughter, self-conscious in its newly acquired deepness, and she heard someone say,

"Would you fuck that?"

"Maybe if you put a paper bag over its head," Jimmy answered.

Next fall Janet enrolled at O'Sullivan's Secretarial School in Sherbrooke. During the week she stayed with her Aunt Minnie in the city. On Fridays, after last class, she caught the number 2 bus outside the school. The satchel of laundry and homework that she had brought from Aunt Minnie's in the morning and kept by her desk all day while she learned shorthand and typing, pulled her shoulder down. She would ride across the city to the bus station and board the St. Georges de Beauce milk run that went through Galt. She'd get off at Beaudoin's restaurant and call her Dad to come pick her up. He would show up in his mail van; the one he had retrofitted himself from an old bread truck, putting the

steering wheel on the right-hand side so that he could reach the roadside mailboxes without having to lean all the way across the front seat.

One weekend she didn't go home but instead decided to stay in town. She and the girls were going to celebrate their first report cards by going out for dinner at a Chinese restaurant and then to see Ben Hur at the Granada. Mum had said she supposed it would be all right and Crooked T, who always had to get on the line and talk to her too, said he thought it was fine that she had made some new friends. He teased that he was jealous she was going to see Ben Hur and that he'd sure like to see it too and what would she think if he just showed up and sat with her and her friends and would there be any boys? Janet supposed it was a funny thing to recall but she always remembered her Dad saying he'd really love to see that chariot race.

Janet thought about her dad a few times during the movie. She imagined Crooked T up in a chariot, his twisted back making him list to one side as he yelled at his horses. But it was the scene in the galley that she knew she would always remember—the sweaty oiled bodies of the oarsmen, the thrilling desperation of male slavery.

After the movie they went to the new doughnut shop and ordered doughnuts trimmed with lots of icing and chocolate sprinkles. The others made fun of the movie's bad dialogue and stiff acting. Janet had joined in, feeling a little disloyal to her father and herself.

Aunt Minnie let her sleep in the next morning, so she was still in her red felt bathrobe, sitting at the kitchen table, when her father called. Her stomach fell at the sound of her father's voice. Her mother was always the one to speak first, unless it was bad news. But it wasn't

any of the things that Janet ever thought about, like a serious illness or even death of someone in her family. It was about Jimmy.

There had been an accident. Carl McBain was dead. Jimmy had been cleaning his rifle, been drinking, horsing around, didn't know it was loaded, have it on his conscience the rest of his life, in shock, father threw him out, maybe Janet might want to talk to Jimmy. . .

"Why?"

"It might mean something to him. Weren't you and Jimmy friends?"

"Who told you that?"

"A little bird. Isn't it true?"

"No."

"Well. I thought. . ."

"No."

Janet went to her room: Aunt Minnie's spare room with its white chenille bedspread and sheer pink curtains. She changed into the Saturday clothes that she had brought from home just for this weekend: pedal pushers, the blue cotton blouse with the Peter Pan collar, the oatmeal cardigan her grandmother had knit her. You weren't supposed to wear slacks in public, so she had planned to change into a school skirt to go out shopping in the afternoon on Wellington Street. But she changed her mind and didn't go. She stayed in her room all day studying her shorthand notation. The curls and loops of its code contented her, made her feel as if she were in some sort of secret society.

* * * * *

Janet wiped her mouth with the dentist bib as Dr. Rauhausen tilted the chair up.

"OK?" he said.

"Yes."

"Your enamel is deteriorating fast."

"I use a soft brush," said Janet, speaking carefully, trying not to drool.

"Have you been thinking about crowns? I know this would be expensive but it could save you a lot of pain."

Janet thought of her dentist making lunches and dropping his kids off at daycare. She pictured his wife leaning into his back as he stood at the sink peeling potatoes. He had unclipped his mask. His lips were the colour of a roan horse, distinct against his pale face. He had perfect, white, impervious teeth.

"I can't see spending that much on my teeth," said Janet.

"What about dentures?" he asked. "They make very good ones now-a-days. It might be cheaper in the long run." Janet wondered what he was seeing as he looked at her. She began to struggle out of the chair.

"No. Not yet. I'm not ready to be put out to pasture yet."

He tried to grab her hand, "I didn't mean. . ."

"That's quite all right. . ." Janet headed for the front desk feeling puzzled at her urge to cry. It must be the freezing, she thought. Dr. Rauhausen followed her to the desk.

"Miss Sawyer? Janet? You're always so brave and you never say boo, but did it hurt? Tell me. I could have used more anesthetic if you'd told me. Are you OK?"

"I'm fine. Fine. Don't you worry."

It was dark and had begun to snow. As she hurried along the sidewalk, she saw Jimmy McBain leaning against the Plexiglas of the bus shelter that stood on the corner across the street from the town hall. Janet had wiped away her tears but still it seemed as though she was seeing him through a thin layer of ice, like the ice that forms on a puddle after a hard frost. Without stopping to think, she walked up to him. He watched her approach and straightened slightly.

"How's the tooth?" he asked before she could say anything.

"Better. Frozen," and then she laughed at the slurred way her words came out. "Little hard to talk."

"Hate dentists, myself." Janet smelled beer on his breath. His voice was as slurred as hers and she realized he was drunk.

"Sorry I was so short with you the other day," she said.

"No problem." He peered at her, concentrating. "Heard Belinda died last year. Cancer or something."

"Yes. She wasn't sick long."

"I saw her, oh, four or five years ago. One of my sister's kids is in that group home where Belinda was. Jesus. She'd gotten fat." When Janet didn't reply, he said, "Oh. Sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Guess it was hard on her after your dad died."

"Well, he did look after her." Janet watched a snowflake land on Jimmy's face. She had intended to say something important to Jimmy, something about how she should have called him when Carl died but now she knew she wouldn't. What did that matter anymore?

"I heard Crystal is in Toronto," Jimmy said as he fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette.

"She still calls herself Tate. She works in theater. Set design."

"You don't say. Look. I don't want to seem stupid but I can't for the life of me remember your real name. I keep wanting to call you Sprout but of course . . ."

"It's Janet. Janet Louise."

"You folks were always big on nicknames. Like a bunch of Indians or something. What happened to all Crooked T's horses?"

Janet stepped off the curb, ready now to say goodbye. "That was a long time ago, Jimmy. What usually happens to horses? Well. See you around."

When Janet got to the steps of the town hall she turned to look at Jimmy. He had gone into the bus shelter and she could see the glowing tip of his cigarette inside the Plexiglas box. Snow was falling heavily between them.

Janet climbed the stairs. Her upper lip, her nose, and most of her cheek were frozen but at least the pain was gone. She walked down the hall, past the town offices, and into the library. She flipped the light switch and watched the fluorescent bulbs struggle on. They lit in a wave that began just above her head.

Fireweed

Late in the summer of 1977 Lemuel Beakes lost his barn to fire. Thirty-five pigs went with it. The rest of his stock, including his two workhorses, Doll and Dot, eleven Holstein-Hereford crossbred steers, and a pleasure horse he was boarding for some summer people, were, fortunately, out in the night pasture when the fire started. The local volunteer firemen had managed to save Lem's house by dousing it with water. Even so, the edges of its tin roof had curled up in the heat.

Doris said Lem was some lucky. She'd seen flaming cedar shingles sailing away in the updraft from the blaze. They'd drifted in the still night sky, out over the dry fields, to land in the grass of the summer pasture. Some of them bumped into the side of the house. Some of them landed on the roof. Her granddaughter Angie ran around with a broom and an old wool blanket putting out grass fires started by the flying shingles.

She said it was lucky there was no wind or the whole forest might have caught.

Doris poured tea into a white mug decorated with pansies. The mug was stained brown on the inside and Paul could taste chlorine and the bitter tannin of tea brewed too long. The kitchenette in Doris' apartment in the Senior Center was sunny and Doris had a pot of salmon coloured geraniums on the windowsill over the sink. Lem sat across from Doris. He was wearing his familiar green cotton work pants and a plaid shirt frayed at the cuffs and collar. He stared suspiciously at Paul, his mouth working around unspoken words and a tear beading in the corner of one eye.

Earlier in the day, Paul had been over to see the farm. The house had been pulled down in the early 90s. Standing in its place was an ostentatious brick house sporting a hash of architectural styles and a "B&B" sign. Across and below the road he had found all that was left of the barn—the stones of its foundation. One of the four sides of the foundation was caved in, leaving three sides open to the valley and the lake below. Poplars and birch, some of them twenty feet high, grew through the thin cracked cement of the floor.

Fireweed, mauve riding above the green, blossomed all around the outside of the stone. It grew in the hollow between the burnt-out stable door and the road. The warfin, like a drawbridge over a castle moat, had once spanned this hollow, stretching steeply up from the road to the big doors of the second story haymow. Angie and Paul used to run across the warfin, dizzied by the height, feeling as if the poles of its floor might roll at any minute, roll and trap their feet between them. They ran across like loggers running along the backs of logs in a millpond.

Once, when Paul was eleven or twelve, Lem lost a wheel while backing a loaded hay wagon up the warfin. He backed crooked and dropped the rear wheel of the rig off the edge. The load teetered. Angie and Paul and the rest of the kids, who were riding on the top of the hay, scrambled off and ran, squealing, into the barn. Paul remembered Lem stopping his tractor, which, counterbalanced by a full load of hay, had one front wheel spinning uselessly in the air. Lem got off and walked into the middle of the gravel road, where he took out his pipe and lit it. Pushing back his straw hat, he said with a slow shake of his head, "Well. I'll be jiggered."

Now at Doris' table, Lem ran his old fingers over the purple fireweed that Paul had brought him from the farm. Lem said, "Fireweed. Saw a lot of that out west in B.C. Only grows where there's been a fire. Seeds have really tough shells and it takes a hot fire to crack the shell enough fer them to sprout. They can lie in the soil, dormant, fer years, centuries and then all of a sudden they're woke by a blast of heat and fire."

"That there fire was probly started by one of them teenagers, cottagers, thet used to come fool around in the hay. Sometimes I saw them in there doin' whatnot but I didn't pay 'em no mind."

"How come you never rebuilt?" said Paul.

"Too old," said Lem, "and what woulda been the sense of rebuilding it when some little shit from the city would just, more 'n likely, burn it down agin." Lem had moved over to Doris' house not long after the fire. The arthritis bothered him too much to keep on farming. And after a time he had ended up here in the Home where a man couldn't spit without someone running after him to clean it up. He squinted at Paul and said for the third time, "You're Ellie Naylor's boy, aren't you?"

* * * * *

The summer that Lem's barn burned was the last summer that Paul spent at the lake. Paul wasn't supposed to be spending his summer with his parents. He was supposed to be working at the Dairy Queen in Pointe Claire, the one between the Chemin St. Marie service road and the inbound Trans-Canada.

Not that it was a great job. Everyone had asked him why his dad hadn't gotten him a job at the college. A job like helping in the soil science lab, or doing fieldwork in the plant breeding plots, or even cutting the grass around the Raptor Center. But Paul had been looking forward to a summer at the Dairy Queen, where no one knew him or his father. He liked the soothing blandness, the whoosh of the highway behind him, the noise of the soft ice cream machine. He had even been looking forward to serving parents with their whiny kids and lines of teenagers in their pastel long collars and big hair. They were real losers. Worse than him. He liked to play the game of smiling inanely at them while he called them obscene loser names inside his head, his long hair well hidden under his perky DQ hat.

Having the house to himself while his parents were gone would have been an added plus. His older brother was never there much either because he worked in some bookstore downtown and lived with his girlfriend by the Forum most of the time. Paul had been looking forward to hot afternoons before going on shift, spent in the cool basement of his parents' split-level, drinking Pepsi, smoking dope, and watching soaps.

He'd planned on watching old black and white movies on an afternoon show called *Pippa's Showcase*. Pippa, a thin woman with a 60s bouffant

hairstyle, sometimes dressed in a chiffon baby doll peignoir set, sometimes in a trim black sheath, introduced movies that starred people like Doris Day and Audrey Hepburn. Paul liked the way Pippa pouted her lips at the camera and said, "Enjoy the show."

Instead, the manager of the Dairy Queen had decided that Paul was the prime suspect in the disappearance of several pounds of chocolate sprinkles and \$25 from the till and Paul had been fired after his third day. His parents, after expressing their "profound disappointment"—God, he wished they'd just hit him and get it over with—had hauled him off to the cottage where they could keep an eye on him.

He hadn't wanted to go, hadn't wanted to be cooped up in the sticks with the two of them. He didn't think he could take another minute of his mother's sullen silences but those silences were nothing compared with his father's overbearing fake cheeriness. Why his mother and father thought eight weeks together at the cottage would somehow make it OK between the two of them was a mystery. Maybe his mother had read about a similar situation in the "Can This Marriage Be Saved" column of *The Ladies Home Journal*, or something. And now they had to drag him into it. Man, he wished they'd both just go for a long walk off a short pier.

Paul was swinging in a hammock he had just hauled out of the shed and hung between the two big fir trees at the edge of their lot, wondering if anyone ever died of boredom. His father would say that he knew a cure for boredom—work. And his mother would say that boredom was a sign of a lack of inner resources. Paul thought boredom might just kill a person. It could lead to anything, like hitchhiking with a serial killer, overdosing on beer and barbiturates, or jumping off a cliff just for the taste of air rushing by you and the roller-coaster feel of your stomach falling into your knees. At least that

would feel like something. Speed and fear instead of some dull ache you couldn't figure out.

"Paul," said his father from the end of the dock, "make yourself useful and get me a beer." His father, in floppy cut-offs and flip-flops, was fiddling with the tripod of his telescope, trying to get it level. Paul looked at the hair on his father's broad brown back.

"What'd your last slave die of?" he called back. It was what he, his brother, and his father—the guys in the family—always said when asked for a favour. The joking family retort that had the serious aim of making sure no one was taken advantage of. That no one did more than was strictly his share. Paul's mother once said that she could never bring herself to say "what did your last slave die of?" because the irony would be too much for her. His father had looked pissed then and gone out to finish waterproofing his expedition tent.

"My last slave," said Paul's father happily, peering into the lens as he turned an adjustment, "died of a good swift kick in his smart little butt." He sat back on his heels and turned to Paul. His sunglasses sat on his black curly hair and he was smiling. "Get me a beer and I'll let you have a taste," he wheedled.

"Ohhh. What a treat." Paul's voice came out wrong, sounding sarcastic and mean even to him. Part of Paul wanted to play along like when he was still just a kid. Part of him wanted to run into the house, get a cold Molson from the fridge, bring it out to his dad, and sit beside him on the dock. He wanted to dangle his feet in the water and talk about the peregrine falcons that nested on the cliff across the lake. He wanted to see his father's conspiratorial grin as he motioned to Paul to crouch beside him, where Mom couldn't see, and handed him the cool, cool bottle with its beads of condensation, giving him one sip for every five swigs of his own.

Paul almost got up to go to the cottage for the beer but then he saw the look on his father's face. It was a look of disappointment and anger. He was mad at Paul because Paul hadn't answered in the old sure-daddy-right-away-daddy way. Paul had seen the same look when his father had turned from the phone after talking to the manager of the Dairy Queen. Paul felt something cold in his stomach, he wasn't sure what, but whatever it was seemed to call for motion: for escape and deflection.

"Go get your own fucking beer," he snarled as he rolled himself out of the hammock, landing on his feet.

His father shouted after him, "What did you say? What did you say? Paul. Come back here." Paul walked quickly up the porch steps.

"What did you say to your father?" asked Paul's mother from the chaise lounge on the porch where she was reading a fat paperback. Paul thought, *why do they emphasize "your father" as if somehow the words are going to force you to instantly respect him, make him something other than he is—just another guy who can't seem to keep his pants zipped.* "Paul. What is the matter with you?" Paul heard the accusation in her tone, like whatever was the matter with him was his fault, curable if he'd only try.

"Nothing is the matter with me," he yelled as he slammed the door and stomped through the cottage. "Why can't you just leave me alone." To Paul's surprise and shame he heard tears in his own voice. He grabbed his sneakers and his shirt on the way out the front door. Without missing a step he mounted his bicycle and set it in motion. The momentum of his actions pleased him, made him feel vindicated.

He pedalled up the grassy lane to the dirt road that followed the curve of the lake. Then he took the first road to the right that led away from the water and up to the farm. He hadn't been up to the farm yet this summer. His father

would have said he was enjoying being miserable too much to go and maybe he had been. He felt better as he stood on his pedals to make it up the hill.

"What's yer old man lookin' at through that thing he's got set up on your dock?" asked Lem. "Hand me that wrench. No. No. The littler one." Lem had made a work table out of a heavy piece of slab wood laid across two sawhorses and was taking apart a large greasy chainsaw on his sloping, rotting front porch. A large yellow dog sat under the makeshift work table and scratched his fleas; his enthusiastic thumping made the whole porch shake. The porch was crowded with pieces of chainsaw, empty discarded oil cans, a bench seat from a scrapped car, discarded truck tires, gears, an axle. Stovewood was stacked by the kitchen door and an axe stuck in a chopping block. An old wooden rocker with the cane seat busted out moved in the strong breeze that was blowing.

"Birds," said Paul. He leaned carefully against the porch railing, testing its wholeness before putting his full weight against it.

"Kinda birds?" asked Lem. Lem's hands were broad and liverspotted. The hair on the back of them white. The wrench he carefully turned looked like a child's toy. Paul avoided looking in his face. It still gave him the creeps to see the stumps of Lem's sparse brown teeth.

"I dunno," said Paul. He did know, but it was supposed to be a secret. Two summers ago one of his father's colleagues, a bird specialist, had come for a weekend at the cottage. The specialist had identified the small hawk-like birds that wheeled above the cliff face as peregrine falcons. He'd said not to tell anyone. He'd said that if word got out there were peregrines on the rock face,

they'd have the place crawling with the curious—scientists, tourists, poachers—who would disturb the breeding pairs. According to him, if they were disturbed the falcons would abandon their nest and their young would die. Peregrines were in danger of extinction, he'd said. He'd asked Paul's father to keep an eye on them and take notes.

Paul knew that his father had been more than a little miffed, embarrassed that in all the years he had been coming to this lake, first as Eleanor Naylor's boyfriend visiting her family's cottage and then as her husband bringing his own family, he had never identified the peregrines for what they were. His mother had said, "Lord, Brad. You don't have to be first at everything. Relax. Your specialty is marine life. Who cares if some near-extinct bird was flying right above your head." She could be mean, thought Paul, but his father left himself wide open by being such a know-it-all.

At first Paul's father had grumbled, saying he figured that the peregrines were only a secret until the bird specialist managed to get his upcoming paper on them published. It wasn't long until he'd become obsessed with them himself. He'd bought a telescope and an expensive pair of field binoculars. He watched them daily when he was there and often hiked to the top of the cliff to get a closer look. He made endless notes and talked as if he'd been the one who'd made the big discovery, as if no one else had ever noticed the falcons and their fascinating lives.

"Don't suppose he's lookin' at the hawks?" Lem commented absently. "I see him out there when I go fishin' in the mornin'." He reached for an oil can. "There's been a pair of them hawks on the cliff as long as I can remember. Sometimes two pairs. No more than two. We call them cliff hawks. Testy little

guys. You climb near their nest and they'll try and take a chunk outta yer scalp."

Paul was comfortably quiet. That's one of the things he liked about Lem. Lem could talk on and never seem to care if you talked too. He never looked you in the eye and demanded the truth. He asked the occasional question but didn't seem to mind if you didn't feel like answering. He respected silence even though he always seemed to be busy filling it in.

"Fly. Mister man, those little bastards can sure fly. I seen 'em dive from up near the top of the cliff—and mind you, that cliff is near 800 feet high—and nail a swallow down near the water. Hell, they must be movin' at close to a hundred mile an hour when they stoop. Some bird. I seen one once take a hunk a feathers outta the back side of a golden eagle. Eagle must a been four, five times its size. Feisty."

"Peregrines. They're called peregrine falcons." Paul suddenly wanted to show Lem that he knew something about these birds too. "They're on the endangered list. And they're really rare in Eastern Canada." He thought of his father at a dinner party with a lot of fellow biologists, expounding on these rare birds and how the local population was totally unaware of them.

"You don't say?" Lem whistled. "I read about them somewheres. There's beer in the fridge. Help yourself. It's Sunday after all." Paul headed into the house. If his mother knew that he drank beer at Lem's house, had been drinking beer here since he was about ten, she never said. She wasn't crazy about Paul spending so much time at Lem's farm but Paul's father would say, "Lighten up, Eleanor. Let the boy get out and see how REAL people live. Right Paul? Lem is the salt of the earth. Heart of gold."

Paul's mother would just narrow her eyes at his father and say, "Fine. Fine." She grew up here. She knew Lem's easy ways—the alcohol, the

cigarettes, the muddy boots no one made you take off, the swearing that was tolerated, the guarantee of sanctuary should you need it in the form of a mattress on the floor—and that these things made Lem's house a boys' paradise. Summer boys from the city, local farmers' boys, Lem's own boys who came and went between their father's house and the various homes of their mothers. Lem could always get the boys to work, stacking hay bales, splitting firewood, with a quick word of praise and a beer. He even turned a blind eye to boys smoking pot in his kitchen.

Paul was sure his mother was onto all of the attractions of Lem's farm but she never said so to his father. Not in so many words. She liked to keep things for her own, as if she was a farmwife secreting away egg money from her husband instead of details from her past.

"You want one too, Lem?" he asked.

"I could use one, right about now," said Lem, hauling on his suspenders. He pushed his hat back on his head and scratched his brow.

Doris was in the kitchen washing dishes. Paul was never sure as to the exact relationship between Doris and Lem. Doris cooked and cleaned for Lem and mostly treated him like her husband but she had her own home and three or four grown up children and several grandchildren that Paul knew of. Sometimes when Paul dropped by in the early morning she was there cooking up pancakes, and yet, often he wouldn't see her for days. Lem would only say, "She's to home," when asked.

Doris was a tall, sunken-chested woman with a large purple mark that covered the left side of her face. Her hair was black, streaked vividly with white, and she was as quiet as Lem was talkative. Not unfriendly, just silent, as

if words were not to be wasted anymore than you would waste a used tea bag or an old flour sack. Paul nodded at her as he opened the fridge.

"Angie's here," she said over the slank of dishes in the sink.

Paul put two beer bottles on the counter and reached for the bottle opener that hung from a string attached to a cupboard pull knob. He felt his face go red as he pried off the tops.

Angie was Doris' fifteen-year-old granddaughter. One night last year, at a bonfire set by a group of teenagers on the narrow pebbly beach of the campground, Angie had let Paul and another guy feel her up. Paul remembered the touch of her nipples, his surprise at their size in contrast to the small mounds of her breasts. He remembered brushing against the other boy's hand under her shirt. When he had tried to put his hand down the front of her jeans, she had laughed as if he were tickling her and squirmed away.

Over the winter he'd fooled around with a few girls, nothing much, a little tongue, a little feel, but the thought of Angie, her bold stare, the flip of her long brown hair over her skinny shoulders, her direct talk, seemed just what he wanted right now—not the posturing of the town girls with their pale lipstick and layered hair.

"Where's she at?" Paul fell into the speech pattern of the house. A pattern that made his mother wince when he used it at home—wince and correct him; *not I saw him over to home but I saw him at home; not spun, its spoon; and for God's sake there is no such word as ain't.*

"In the upper garden," replied Doris. She wiped her hands on her apron and reached out for a beer bottle. She took a small sip and handed it back.

"Picking Lem's peas."

"You got another pail? I'll go help her after I take Lem his beer."

Doris reached out a long thin hand and caressed his hair. "Well, bless your heart. There's a couple of pails out there." Paul's throat constricted and he blushed. Doris always caught him off guard with her small endearments, endearments that, ever since he could remember, she had been doling out to the boys that were drawn to Lem's house. *Bless your heart*, she would say over any small favour a boy did for her. She always made Paul feel as if he had just given her something precious. Unlike his parents, who treated his help as if it were something they had a right to.

Angie was in between two rows of tall pea fence. He could hear her singing, loudly and off-key, so he was pretty sure she hadn't seen him. He tried to sneak up on her, grab her hand as she reached through the wire to pick a pod on the other side, but she saw him just before he reached.

"Jesus. Don't scare me like that." She jumped and laughed. "You come to help?"

Paul got a pail and began to pick across from her. From time to time he let his hand brush against hers. Sometimes they reached for the same pod and then they would pretend their fingers were miniature people, fighting. It was almost as if he'd been seeing Angie everyday of his life instead of only one or two weeks every summer. The flirting was part of it. Angie flirted in a relaxed way, like it was no big deal, no different than picking peas.

Angie, who spent a few weeks each summer with her grandmother, didn't often play, even here at Lem's. She always had chores of some sort to finish, although in the evening she would take Lem's boat out on the lake to go fishing. Sometimes she hung out with Paul at his cottage but she never stayed

long. Paul could tell that his father, with his I-admire-you-country-folk-so-much attitude, made Angie uncomfortable. His mother hardly spoke to her.

The sun was hot. Bees worked in the pea vines, their bodies and the white pea blossoms trembling together like lovers. Paul felt each firm smooth pea pod before he picked it, guessing at the size of the peas inside.

"Want to go for a swim when we're done?" he asked Angie.

"Maybe." He looked at the soft skin of her underarm as she reached up to test a pod above her.

"Are you staying long?" asked Paul.

"Long as I can. 'Til Dad comes and drags me home, I guess. I thought you weren't coming this summer. I thought you were going to get a job." She said *job* as if it were something you bought and then had to look after, like an exotic pet. He knew she was implying that he was spoiled and didn't really know what a job was.

"I thought you were going to run away and join the circus," he countered. She made a face at him through the peas.

"Is your father here for the whole summer this year?" she said.

"I guess. He's not going on any field trips up north this summer. Maybe he'll go in the fall. Something about funding."

"Be kind of weird to have him around all the time."

"Yeah. Kinda." Paul's father spending the whole summer at the lake was another reason Paul hadn't wanted to. His father used to come for the first two weeks of July, after which he usually went off on some research project, returning for the last two weeks in August. In the four weeks that his father was away, Paul and his mother would fall into a pleasant routine of sloth and calm, blissfully unaware, until his father came back, just how much space the man took up, with his voice, his plans, his busyness, his impatience, and his

barely contained temper. For someone who professed to love the country life, it seemed to Paul that his father often acted like a bear on a leash when he was here, but then maybe that wasn't because of the country. Maybe it was because of his family.

Yesterday, while out bicycling, Paul had seen his father in the phone booth by the general store. His father had turned his back to the road, as if his back was some sort of disguise, and he was talking animatedly, his free hand slashing at the air in front of him. Paul had pedalled as close as he could to the phone booth, slapping it with his hand as he passed. He'd heard his father yell behind him, a startled "Hey!", but Paul wasn't sure his father had seen it was him on the bike and his father hadn't said anything about it since.

The man was such a jerk, like they didn't have a phone at the cottage, like Paul, or anybody, wouldn't know what he was up to.

His mother had insisted on a phone for the cottage. She'd said, "I will not be stranded out here without a way to call for help. I know what can happen."

"Oh come on Eleanor," his father had said. "Up north in the bush I go for weeks with just my toothbrush and a handkerchief to wave at passing planes." A typical bit of a exaggeration.

"You know your wild things, I know mine," she'd said.

Near the end of July the electricity went off. A bunch of them were sitting around Lem Beake's kitchen table just before dark one Saturday night, when it cut out. There was no storm, no wind, no lightning, no warning, just the sudden silence as the fridge clanked to a halt and the florescent kitchen light stopped hissing.

"Friggin' hell," said Lem. He pulled himself up and went to the cellarway where he retrieved a metal hurricane lantern that hung there on a peg.

"Shit. I knew this was going to fuckin' happen," said Marvin, one of Lem's sons. "I wouldn't put it past those strikin' bastards to cut the lines themselves."

"Jesus. Hope this don't last long. The old man don't have no fuckin' generator and I'm not too partial to milkin' them fuckin' cows by hand," said one of the others.

"They have to get the attention of the government some way," said Paul. "They've been without a contract for months."

Workboots shifted on the worn linoleum and someone snorted. Lem laid a big hand on Paul's shoulder as he walked past. He reached by him to put the lantern in the center of the table. "Well now, professor. Just as long as they don't leave us without lights fer months."

"Fuckin' unions," said Marvin. Paul picked at the greasy dirt in the chrome trim around the edge of the table. Paul was drinking with Lem, Marvin, and three other local boys Paul's age. These boys had large biceps and dirty baseball caps and thighs straining at the fabric of their jeans. They threw "Jesus H Christ" and "fuckin' this" and "fuckin' that" into their sentences so liberally that it took them twice as long to say anything as it should have. They were young men who had intimate knowledge of cars, rifles, and alcohol. With practised agility they would hook a bottle neck between two fingers as they fished a Molson out of its case while grunting "beer?" in Paul's direction.

These boys all drove—mostly farm pickups—and talked about "the old man" when they mentioned their fathers. They sometimes came and stayed with Lem when they had a fight with their "old men", showed up for a week or

two to help with the sugaring or firewood or the potato digging. They "bached it" with Lem, worked for him, took him off to the strip clubs at the border, drank his whiskey, and sat with their workboots propped on the open oven door of his wood cookstove. They stayed until they patched it up at home, or if Doris wasn't there, until they got sick of Lem's diet of eggs and fried potatoes. Or if it was winter, they got sick of having to thaw out the pipes with a propane torch every morning to get water to make coffee. They drank beer as casually as Paul drank Coke and never turned down a joint if they were offered one.

Paul drank the beer quickly, gulping it down as he watched Lem's hands lighting the lantern. He could hear Doris and Angie in the front room. They had been watching *Hee Haw* when the lights went out and were now looking for candles and matches. He heard Doris say, "Dear heart" to Angie and it made him feel melancholy and envious. Angie and Doris were deciding on which decks of cards to use for canasta.

Paul drank another beer and was halfway through the third when Lem pulled out a bottle of Canadian Club. The flame from the lantern flickered, reflected in the amber liquid. He lined up six juice glasses on the table, clear white glasses with the designs of hearts and spades on them. You could buy these glasses filled with cream cheese and pimento spread. "Can't stand the Christly spread," said Lem, "but the glasses make a nice set." He filled each glass half full and distributed them around the table.

"Shot of CC, Doris?" Lem called into the living room.

"Not now, sweetheart," she replied.

"Down that," he said to the boys, "chase it with the rest of your beer. Put hair on your chest."

The others tossed back the hard stuff, making wry, manly faces. Paul downed the shot quickly, choking a little. Lem pounded him on the back, too hard, as if he were intent on saving Paul's life.

"That's it. Make a man out of you," said Lem.

Paul felt warm and happy. "I want to live here forever," he said.

"You sound like your mother," said Lem. "She used to say, *I wish I could live here forever* or *I wish the summer would last forever.*" Lem's hand fluttered up to touch his hair in an exact imitation of one of Paul's mother's gestures. "Shit. She grew up just down the road away. Between Galt and Brooke Island. Remember her, Marvin?" Lem's son nodded.

Lem leaned forward and fixed Paul with his bleary eyes. "Your grandfather was a good man," he said, as if he was daring Paul to contradict him. "Bought that property by the lake for taxes. Boy, he was some worker. Not many farmers had time for camps by the lake but he always said he wanted his kids to know a little fun. Maybe they'd stick around when they grew up. But only your mother stayed around—and she's only here in the summer. But what can you do?" Paul's mother had two brothers and one sister, and they had all gone to Alberta after they'd finished high school. His grandparents had sold the family farm to Jean-Marie Lizotte and moved to Calgary. Grandpa had given Paul's mother the cottage, saying that she was the only one who had never asked him for anything. His mother's siblings were still mad about that.

"I used to be sweet on your mother, you know," said Lem. Paul sniggered. "You laugh," said Lem. "You laugh but I was a big man with the ladies once upon a time and that Ellie Naylor, she and me. . ." He entwined two fingers and leared at Paul. "She did put on airs some, but she sure was pretty."

Paul didn't, wouldn't, believe what Lem was suggesting. His mother would have been half Lem's age back then and Paul was sure that even when

she was a teenager she would have avoided Lem, would have considered herself too refined to keep his sort of company. She only spoke to Lem now if she had to and always with a condescending sort of smile.

Paul shook his head at Lem, grinning as if to say, *Good joke*. Lem's eyes narrowed and he reached for the bottle of whiskey.

Lem called to Doris in the front room, "Doris, remember the time Ellie Naylor came runnin' into your place when you and George lived by the mill—whoopin' and hollerin'? Said she'd heard some woman gettin' murdered." Lem made his voice shrill, "*Oh come quick*, she said, *I heard this terrible scream in the woods. It was a woman. Oh. It was awful!*"

Doris appeared in the doorway and leaned against the door jamb, a fan of cards in one hand. She said, "Now Lem, she didn't know."

"I thought she was going to piss herself." Lem thumped the table. He made his voice go high, "*Why are you just sitting here?* Oh, she got real mad then. Real mad. *Why aren't you going to see about it?*" Lem was laughing so hard tears were squeezing out of the corners of his eyes. Paul looked from one face to another. Everyone but him seemed to get the joke or else they didn't dare admit they didn't, but the other boys weren't really laughing, just grinning sheepishly into their shirt collars.

"Your grandfather might have been a hard worker," said Lem, suddenly solemn, leaning across the table at Paul, "but he never taught his kids Jack-shit."

"What did she hear?" said Paul, trying to ignore Lem's insult.

"What did she hear? Jesus H. Christ! A mountain lion. A cougar. When a female cougar's in heat she screams—just like a woman that's real scared. Scream is kinda cut off at the end like the woman has just got strangled. Makes

yer goddamn hair stand on end," hollered Lem, hitting the table every few words for emphasis.

Paul knew his face was flushed and, where a few minutes ago he had felt like one of the gang, as if he belonged here, now he felt intensely uncomfortable. He didn't know these people at all. Maybe he should leave. "My father says that Eastern Cougars have been extinct since early in this century. There aren't any big cats around here anymore. They've been hunted out."

"Your father," said Lem nastily, "doesn't know Jack-shit either. Sits around all day lookin' at the cliff hawks, callin' them peregrines, like he was the only one who ever looked at them." Paul's face smouldered and his eyes smarted. Paul knew Lem could get mean when he drank but that didn't make Paul feel any better.

Lem said, "Christ, Ellie was mad. *What are you sitting there for? Get your guns.* Oh she stamped her little foot." Paul felt sick.

"Poor girl," said Doris.

"Poor little rich farmer's daughter," sneered Lem. Paul looked at Doris to say something more about his mother but she was looking at the cards in her hand. Angie was beside her staring at Lem.

"Got downright Hi-sterical." Lem shouted on. Paul looked at his fingers. "Doris had to call old man Naylor to come take her home. Ellie called us all a *bunch of fuckin' hillbillies.*" Again Lem made his voice go high to imitate Paul's mother. He was deadly accurate.

Angie went to the sink to get a drink of water. She said, "Did you ever set her straight. About the cougar or whatever?"

"Not me, not this hillbilly," said Lem, "I never." He paused as he watched Angie turn the tap. No water came out. "Are you stupid or something, girl? You can't get a drink. The pump don't work if there is no electricity."

"No stupider than you," Angie shot back.

"Don't get mouthy," Lem touched the belt buckle under his paunch. He was suddenly all menace. He glared around at the others in defiance. "Don't make me take off my belt."

"Why? Afraid your pants'll fall off?" Angie asked coolly. Paul held his breath. He thought of the time Lem lost his temper while loading heifers on a cattle truck. One cow had balked at the ramp. Lem had yelled, hit the cow across the brow with a fence post, and it had dropped dead on the spot. And once Paul had seen bruises, the shape of large thumbs, on Doris' neck.

Lem had turned the shade of raw veal. All the boys were looking at their beer bottles. Doris said, "Lem" quietly. His hands moved to his sides. Lem took a breath, stared at Doris, and then slumped back in his chair. He grinned around at the others as if embarrassed by his own lack of manliness, backing down for his old girlfriend.

As if a signal had passed through the room, the other boys shifted in their chairs and began reaching for their thin denim jackets.

"Better get movin," said one.

"Need a lift?" said another to Paul, and shrugged good-naturedly when Paul said tensely that he would rather walk.

"Where you fellas headin' off to?" protested Lem. "Party's just started. You just got here." Lem was far drunker than anyone else.

"Other fish to fry, Lem," said Marvin.

"She got big tits?" said Lem, leering as the other man tried to step around him to the door.

"Big all right," said Marvin, looking at Paul and winking as if nothing had happened.

"See you tomorrow, Lem," said one of the boys. "You make sure you're up when I get here. I don't want to be cuttin' hay by myself."

"When you goin' home, Angie?" said Marvin to Angie, trying to sound friendly. She just stared at Lem and then walked deliberately into the living room.

Paul stood alone on Lem's front porch. He looked across the field and down to the lake below and listened. The silence, the absence of electrical hum in the wires, in the air around him, was complete. He'd never thought before how that hum was the background sound of everyday life. The night sky was cloudy and the stars were hidden. There was no moon. In the distance near the lake, he could see a few faint lights, kerosene lamps and candles in the windows of the cottages. It was very dark.

He thought, *this was what it was once like*. Night, dark and quiet, lying, softly breathing, like a heavy, furred beast, owner of the hills and valleys. Then, the ability to drive a car, to mow a lawn, to turn on a light, would not have mattered. It wouldn't have been so long ago really. This wasn't an old country, not like England or Spain or someplace with history, with houses and laws, going back and back.

Here, he thought, we live on the surface, the peel of the apple. Slip back only a little way in time and you'd find yourself in virgin timber; listening to the scream of a cougar that sounds like the terror of a woman being murdered; looking up at the looming cliffs where the peregrines savagely guard their nest; watching the distant campfire flicker of men whose culture is so foreign to yours that you might as well have woken up on Mars.

Paul began to walk. He walked past the barn, its bulk hulking up beside him. He could hear Lem's pigs snuffling in the stable.

The road cut through a section of forest that spilled northward from the large wooded tracts of crown land. In the woods it was so dark that he couldn't tell exactly where he was on the gravel road. He felt through the soles of his sneakers for the difference between gravel and the roadside grass, trying not to walk in the middle of the road or to fall into the ditch. He smelled the trees bunched around him on either side of the road and he could hear his own breath coming jagged and loud.

As he neared the center of this part of the woods, it became so dark that he had the uncomfortable feeling of walking into a void—as if at any minute he might walk off the edge of the world into thin air. He stopped, trying to still his breath, trying to make his eyes adjust to the blackness, willing them to see something. His hands, seemingly on their own, reached out in front of him. He felt grass, not gravel, under his feet and felt suddenly lost. He wondered if he had turned around, if he was even going in the right direction anymore. Afraid of falling, he took a few tentative steps. His hand brushed against tree bark and he steadied himself against its solidness. He felt dizzy, drunk, but, at the same time, exhilarated.

Then he heard breathing that was not his own.

When he thought of it afterward, he wondered why it hadn't frightened him, why he had reached out toward the sound without thinking. His hand felt a thin shoulder, his nose smelled something female. He reached out with the other hand and pulled to him whoever, whatever, it was. A mouth came up to meet his. Arms went around him. It was so dark he couldn't even see the face he kissed. It felt like kissing in zero gravity and it didn't matter who belonged to the mouth.

He pulled away enough to say, " Who is this?" and heard Angie murmur back. Her hands rubbed at his crotch and his hands cupped her buttocks. They groped, looking for the first feeling—the one of kissing an unknown, an incubus in the dark. Finally she broke free and without a word slipped out of his grasp. As soon as she stepped away it was as if she had never been there. Paul strained to hear her.

He whispered, "Where are you?" and heard the faint shuffle of her feet somewhere behind him, heading, he thought, back to the farm.

The Hydro-electric technicians' strike lasted nearly three weeks and people soon fell into a rhythm that living without power required. Every morning Paul and his mother made the trek to the roadside spring near the campground to fill their jugs with enough drinking water for the day. They used lake water for everything else and it was up to Paul to haul buckets of water up from the lake for flushing the toilet.

The blackout was extensive and the nearest town with a laundromat and electricity was Sherbrooke, a forty-five minute drive. Paul's mother said she preferred to do the wash by hand than waste gas, so she waded out to a large rock offshore to beat their clothes clean. Scrubbing socks in her bathing suit, her hair pulled back in an elastic and hanging loose down her back she looked young, like a teenager. Watching her from the shore Paul considered asking her about Lem, if she'd ever "dated" him—if "date" was the word—but he didn't.

Paul's father seemed to be in his element. He took over the cooking entirely. They had a small Hibachi but he preferred to cook over an open fire and only used the charcoal burner on the porch if it rained. He got up early to start a small fire in the firepit and made coffee before anyone else was up. He

cooked huge dinners of skillet-fried trout and potatoes in foil and even showed Paul how to make bread in a Dutch oven placed at the edge of the fire. His father spent his days gathering firewood and fishing with only brief times spent watching the falcons.

Every night he would make a bonfire. People from neighbouring camps would drop in, sink into the Adirondack chairs around the blaze, pass bottles of wine and bags of cheese doodles. Sometimes Paul would go to other bonfires at other cottages while his parents entertained people they had met that day at the spring. They played Scrabble and Monopoly at the picnic table pulled up to the fire. Paul wondered at the easy way in which people made friends in the dark, how they exchanged stories about coping without electricity, sang silly songs and played games they had almost forgotten they knew. These were the same people they had been passing by with barely a nod every summer for years.

Paul's mother and father seemed to have declared some sort of truce, like people at the site of a disaster might. Paul watched his mother curled into a lawn chair, laughing open-mouthed in the firelight at something his father had said. It reminded him of when he was five and his brother seven, and the cottage still belonged to his grandparents—when all the cousins, aunts and uncles had made his mother seem like the relaxed center of things instead of the tight, tense containing rim she was now.

Angie would slip out of the dark and into the group that surrounded the fire. She would find Paul, touch him on the shoulder, and they would easily fade into the trees, unnoticed by parents or friends, who would look up after an hour and dreamily say, "Have you seen Paul?"

In the dark Angie and Paul progressed rapidly from groping to real sex, which they tried everywhere: in boathouses, in the woods, in Lem's barn, but

always, always after dark. During the day, if Paul saw Angie as he cycled by to the store, neither of them did more than wave. Paul never helped Angie pick peas again and, after the first night of the blackout, Paul avoided Lem's house. They didn't talk about it but Paul knew that Angie didn't want anyone to know their secret.

One night Lem came across them. The electricity was still out but the sky was clear and the moon close to full. There was a brightness everywhere. Long shadows lay across the fields, and birds, confused by the brightness, twittered sleepily in the trees. Lem had come with his flashlight to check on his pigs in the stable below them. Paul thought he must have stood under them for a while listening.

Then quietly Lem had climbed the ladder to the haymow floor. In the moonlight that shone through the cracks in the big bay doors, Lem had watched their white limbs—their breasts and asses and thrusts. Paul always pictured Lem watching, toothless and gristled, a hand on his own penis. When they finished and were panting into each other's hair, Lem said, in a low voice, not 10 feet from them, "Mind you don't smoke in here. Place'd go up like a firecracker. You want to smoke, you go outside by the spring." Paul looked at Lem, a moonlit disembodied bust sticking up through the trap door.

"Sure Lem," Paul said. Angie looked into the hay and belatedly pulled a shirt over herself. Lem disappeared below.

"Mind though," he said as he descended the ladder.

"Horny old coot," said Paul. He ducked his head, moving the shirt away to suck briefly and fiercely on her nipple. Angie pushed him aside and began to root around looking for her clothes. Paul placed a hand firmly on the small mound of her belly. "He's got about eight kids by 3 or 4 different women," he crooned as if the older man's prowess, his proclivity, removed barriers between them. He tried to hold her there as she squirmed into her underwear.

"Lem? Jesus, he hasn't got any teeth," she hissed in a whisper.

"He's got one or two, might make it interesting."

"Jesus. Don't be gross." He grabbed her around the waist as she tried to get up so she could pull on her jeans. "Cut it out. I've got to go." Paul slipped his hand between her legs preventing her from pulling the jeans up any further.

"Just think of him down there with the pigs. I bet he's got that big old prick out now."

"Shut up. Don't talk like that. Let me go." She pushed at his head.

"Maybe he's going to try it on one of those sows."

"Jesus," she yelled suddenly at Paul, "Just shut up." She backhanded him hard across the ear and he let go. "You just don't fucking get it. He knows now. What do you think is going to happen to me?"

"Lem's not going to tell anyone. He never rats. And what if he did? Doris isn't exactly a saint either." Paul was all at once ashamed of the way he had just talked about Lem and the pigs, how he'd sounded crude and disloyal. He could see that Angie was shaking.

"You just don't fucking get it. Boys are one thing but girls, girls are most definitely something else. You all think of Lem as some kind of angel or something. It makes me sick." Angie pulled her shirt over her head. She headed for the opening between the two large bay doors, still pulling on her shoes.

"But he's not your grandfather. It's got nothing to do with him," said Paul.

"It's not him I'm afraid of."

Once, when they were ten or eleven, Angie had ripped her blouse on a tree she and Paul were climbing. Paul thought of that now; how she had been inconsolable, how she had cried even harder when he had offered to have his mother fix it, how she had shown up the next day with long red welts on her legs.

"Come to my house," he said. "You could stay with us until you see what's up. My parents would be cool with that."

She turned before she slipped out and said, "Fuck you and your wonderful parents. Just fuck you."

Paul walked back to the cottage and laid on the dock, wishing he could just fall asleep looking up at the stars. The water of the lake was still, like ice, and the reflection of the moon lay across it, fire on the ice. Sounds from other cottages drifted across the water. Quiet conversations around bonfires, a screen door slamming, children playing in the dark, their voices thrilled and barely restrained as they called *Alley Alley Ump Frum Free*. From somewhere around the shore came the sound of someone playing a guitar.

Inside the cottage, Paul's parents had left a lamp burning on the kitchen table. The door to their bedroom was closed. He saw the cottage upside down like a reflection in a lake. The shut door was a sign they were not to be disturbed. Paul tried to imagine them having sex. He pictured his father heavy on his mother and her face turned away. He couldn't imagine wildness, passion. He couldn't really imagine it at all.

The door opened and his father appeared in the uncurtained kitchen. He was naked, barrel-chested. Paul saw him take his cigarettes from the kitchen table and step out onto the porch.

They saw each other and something passed between them, something sad and resigned. His father said, "Looks like a perfect night for skinny-dipping." As if that's what he'd come out for. The moon was high and Paul could see the sweat on his father's chest hairs as he walked purposefully across the grass, tossing his cigarette and striding down the dock. His penis was long, limp, and it swayed in his damp, sticky pubic hair. Paul couldn't look away without admitting that it embarrassed him, so he didn't—even as his father stepped over him to the end of the dock where he dove into the lake in one quick shallow movement. His father turned on his back, shaking the water out of his hair.

"Come on," he said, "The water is fine." Paul sat up. His father floated on his back. Paul looked back at the cottage but his mother was still in her room.

He stripped quickly then eased himself over the edge of the dock and gasped as the cold water touched his genitals. Shivering and hugging his thin arms to his shoulders, he turned toward his father. His father suddenly flipped his feet down and with a sweep of his big arm splashed Paul, drenching him.

"No use doing it slowly. You got to get all wet right away or you'll never do it." His father laughed as he turned away toward the center of the lake. He dove back under and swam. Paul swam after him, trying to catch him, but he knew he couldn't. When he surfaced, he saw his mother standing on the dock, wrapped in her bathrobe. His father was calling to her. His mother's face looked like a small moon, white above her dark robe. She was unsmiling, absorbed and absorbing.

"Eleanor," shouted his father, "Come on in. Jump."

She waved at him. Paul heard her say, "Not now. Not yet."

* * * * *

Paul's parents broke up that fall and Paul moved with his mother to Calgary. They lived with Grampa and Gramma Naylor for the first few months. Paul slept in Grandpa's basement family room where he watched a lot of television. His grandparents were a lot older and frailer than he remembered. Grampa Naylor walked with the rolling stiff-legged gait of a man who had spent a lifetime on his knees milking cows. When Grandpa heard that the Parti Québécois had taken power back in his home province he said that he knew it was bound to happen, that he was sure glad he'd gotten out when he did and they should watch for the rest of the rats to abandon ship. Gramma just sighed.

Paul got used to the big sky but he missed the red and gold of the maples back home. On Thanksgiving Sunday, when all the Calgary cousins came over, he couldn't stop thinking of the lake.

Thanksgiving weekend was the weekend they always closed the cottage. When Paul was little, before his grandparents and the rest had moved away, all the family, the cousins, uncles and aunts, would gather on that weekend to hike to the top of the cliffs and look out over the lake to the brilliant hills and the rolling farmland, to the low mountains.

In the last few years it had been only the four of them, his mother, his father, his brother, and himself, who climbed. They would stand in the wind and point out Elephantis, Owl's Head, Orford, Jay Peak, and, if it was a clear day, the kids would pretend that they could see Mount Washington far away in the

Presidential Range in New Hampshire. His father would say Mount Washington was way too far to see and his mother would say, *it could be possible, who knows how far you can really see?*

He wondered if his father was at the cottage now and if the peregrines had left on their migration to South America.

Paul's father remarried within the year and his mother had to sell the cottage so she could support herself while she went back to school. They moved out of Grandpa's into their own place and Paul finished school, went to collage, got a job in computer technology just when it started to take off, got married. Over the years, he and the cousins stopped talking about returning to Quebec to farm. They talked about Quebec as if it were a foreign country they were fond of.

Paul hadn't been back until now. His father lived in Toronto and everyone he grew up with had moved away. Paul's own wife had left him a few months ago, taking the kids to Vancouver. While attending a conference in Montreal, Paul had decided to drive down to the lake. Just for a look. He wondered if Angie was still there.

The hills, the cliffs, the water were all the same but everything else seemed to have changed. There were street lights and pavement. There were signs everywhere. Most of the little camps that he remembered had been transformed into year-round homes with basements, vinyl siding, skylights, and motion detector floodlights. Cabins that were once named "Ayers' Acres" and "Camp Fun-4-All" were now suburban houses with names like "Val Jolie" and "Domain du Soleil." French was spoken everywhere.

Paul drove around looking at mailboxes for familiar names. He looked at the faces of children playing outside the dépanneur that had been built near

the campground. At the farm he got out of the car and walked into the fireweed that swayed where the barn used to be.

* * * * *

His mother was standing on the dock, wrapped in her bathrobe, watching Paul and his father skinny-dipping in the moonlight, when Paul heard the far-off siren. He could hear it coming closer and saw his mother turn to look at the skyline above the trees. There was a reddish glow in the direction of Lem's farm.

His father swam to shore. Paul watched him take the towel his mother gave him.

"They'll handle it, Brad," she said. "They'll only resent you if you interfere."

His father motioned to Paul who had swum closer to shore. "Come on, Paul. Let's go see where the fire is." To Paul's mother, he said, "How can I be interfering if I live here?"

"That's just it. You don't."

"Right. How could I forget that? Growing up in a place doesn't automatically make you belong, Ellie."

By the time they got to the fire the gravel road was lined with cars. People were walking up the roads with their little kids, stopping to talk with their neighbours. The barn was engulfed in flames and Paul could see the beams through the half-consumed boards of the walls. The lower story was sheathed in cedar shingles and burning shingles were beginning to fly off in

the updraft. Marvin was there and was holding his father by the shoulders to keep Lem from running into the stable. "Now come on, Dad," Paul heard him say. "Them pigs is gone already." Men pulled hoses over the lawn toward the house. The firemen seemed to have given up on the barn the moment they saw it. The light from the fire flickered on their faces.

Someone yelled, "Get out the marshmallows." People stood around at a safe distance watching the blaze and the working men.

Paul saw Angie stomping out the small fires that were starting up here and there in the grass of the nearby field. The horses in the night pasture were neighing and running around in wide circles. Their eyes bulged in fright, the whites showing. Lem's cows stood placidly near the fence and watched the burning barn.

Paul ran toward Angie. When she saw him she stopped and waited for him to reach her. Raising her voice over the roar of the fire she said,

"I knew you weren't in there. I knew you had gone. I wasn't looking to hurt you."

Paul hadn't even thought about that. He didn't know how to answer her.

"I just wanted to do something, you know," Angie said. "I imagined it—the fire licking up the straw, climbing up the beams. I imagined how Lem and Doris would feel and then I did it. I wanted something big to happen and it did."

Her eyes looked like the horses' eyes, the whites showing all around and glowing red in the firelight. She looked toward Doris who was tracking a shingle as it flew over her head, waiting for it to land so she could beat out the fire.

"I'm leaving. I'm never coming back. Nothing ever happens in this place. Nothing." The roof of the barn collapsed with a sound like thunder and the crowd of spectators responded with a shout.

Angie ran off to chase another burning shingle that drifted by. The piece of wood looked harmless and delicate. Paul stared after Angie. The skin on her bare arms reflected the blaze. She looked as if she was shining from within, as if her own blood was on fire.

Paul turned back to the crowd that had formed around Lem. He looked for his mother.

Lem spotted him. "I told you not to smoke in there," he yelled at Paul. His face was sooty, streaked with tears, and he was coughing.

"I wasn't. I wouldn't," Paul cried out over the sound of the blaze. Paul's mother was watching him, hugging herself despite the heat. Paul's father was helping unroll a firehose out to the pond where Lem watered his cattle.

Lem thrust his face up close to Paul's. "I didn't do that, Lem. Honest. I didn't." More than anything else at that moment, Paul wanted Lem to believe him.

Lem's eyes flickered to the left where Angie was moving in a pool of red reflected on the grass. Then he turned his head to look at Paul's mother. Ellie Naylor and Lemuel Beakes exchanged a long look. Then Lem said, "All right then. I guess you wouldn't."

The last time he had seen Angie, she was in the grocery store about three days after the fire. He'd told her he was leaving the next day. Now that the electricity was on, his mother seemed to be in some kind of hurry to get

back to the city and do the school shopping. Angie wouldn't look at him, wouldn't talk to him.

* * * * *

Paul asked Doris about Angie. She was out in Colorado. "Married again," Doris said, as if Paul knew that she had been married before, or for that matter how many times she had been married.

When Paul got up to leave, Lem hadn't spoken for a long while. Instead, he had been staring with alarm at Paul. Doris said that he did that. She said that sometimes he knew where he was and sometimes he didn't. She said that it frightened her when he looked at her like that because he looked so angry. Like he didn't know her and thought she was a thief or something.

Paul gave Doris a hug and shook Lem's hand. Paul said, "You are so lucky to have lived your life in a place like this. It is so beautiful. I've often thought of you here."

"Christly cold house," said Lem, looking around him confusedly. Paul knew he thought he was back in the farmhouse, "Lot of hard work. Lot of hard work."

Then Lem looked at Paul and his eyes suddenly cleared. "I know you," he said. "Don't think I don't remember you." His face became animated as he smiled and shook a finger at Paul. "Your father still watchin' those birds? You know, folks climb all over the front of that cliff now. Rock-face climbing they call it. Don't bother those birds at all. Fact, I think the climbers got more to worry about than those falcons do. Those peregrines would think nothin'

about takin' a hunk outta the hide of one of them fools. Your father was just wastin' his time. Those birds don't need no protecting. Hell, I read they even nest in the middle of the city. On the skyscrapers. Eat pigeon meat all day."

"Ever hear anymore about the Eastern Cougars?" said Paul. Paul didn't try to tell Lem that his father had retired long ago and that, once the cottage had been sold, his father had lost all interest in the peregrines. Lem seemed to be floating freely between the past and the present. Paul prompted, "Didn't you once tell me a story about the cougars?"

"The cougars? What'd Marvin tell us the other day?" Lem reached for Doris' hand. "Some guy said he saw one out near the old Sawyer farm, out near where the Naylor's used to live. He called the Wildlife fellers."

"They found a hair and some scat and a clear footprint of a big cat," said Doris. Her free hand moved from her teacup to the vase of fireweed and back again.

"Proof positive the cougars never went extinct. That they've just been hiding for the last hundred years or so. I dunno." Lem shook his head. His skin was transparent and Paul could see the blue lines of his veins running thick beneath the wrinkles. Lem said, "Didn't Angie once say she heard one screaming? She was all upset about it."

"That was Ellie," Doris said. "Ellie Naylor. Paul's mother."

"Ellie. That's right. Ellie." Lem seemed to be drifting away again.

"What do you think?" said Paul. He wanted Lem back. He wanted it all back. "Do you think they found traces of a real Eastern Cougar?"

"Dunno. Could be one of them. Could be some big cat. A panther or something, escaped from somewhere. Some fools keep 'em as pets, you know. Don't make much difference where the cat come from. It's still a wild, unpredictable thing."

Scribe Rule

On Sunday mornings Hiliard Cobb drove around the countryside looking for barns to buy. Barns that people no longer seemed to care for. Barns that sloped into hillsides, squatted, their sills almost gone, their vertical sheathing splayed like the teeth of a ten-year-old. Granaries that leaned away from the prevailing winds as if from a slap. Old carriage sheds and chicken houses hidden by goldenrod and weedy aspens. When he spotted one of these buildings, in such a sorry state of ruin that he wondered why it hadn't been pushed over with a tractor bucket long before, he would drive up to the nearest house and make his offer.

In the early 80s, when Hil came back from Canada, he'd gone to work for his father building houses. He'd ignored his father's grumblings about the length of his hair, the money wasted on his education, and found that he enjoyed the trade and was good at it. Hiliard soon figured out that the flatlanders, the rich professionals who move up to the mountains to claim for themselves a piece of paradise, driving up the land values and the taxes in the

process, were crazy for old barnwood. By the time, several years later, when Hil took the business over from his father, Hil was specializing in the construction of expensive new homes built with recycled barnwood. He'd built a modern woodworking shop out behind his house where he cleaned and restored beams and sills. He called his company Cobb's Re-construction and he made a good living.

To the rich people from the plains, Hil was a sort of backcountry guru, smart, well-educated, with an eye for architecture, a vast knowledge of antique construction techniques, and the local connections with which to get the artifacts they wanted.

To the local Vermonters, he was a boy who'd played the hippie draft dodger, gone away, and then, after fifteen years, had come home—like they always knew he would.

This Sunday morning Hil left his daughter Caitlin sleeping and his girlfriend Marlene slamming water buckets around in the sheep barn. He got into his pickup, the one without the lettering on the side.

So far this November there had been no snow to speak of except at higher elevations. The mountains hunched all around him, shoulders rounded by long-ago glaciers, white on their northern reaches. It was one of those mornings that the air was so clear you could see individual snow-coated trees on the high slopes. The mountains seemed to hang like mirages on the edge of the world. So distinct as to be unreal. So close that you felt you could reach out and touch them but if you did they might vanish, leaving nothing but blue sky and rundown farmhouses.

Hil sometimes longed for the wide vistas of a beach that opened out to the endless horizon of an ocean but mostly he loved the mountains, felt they were like watchful old people.

He drove through town and out toward Sudden River Junction, taking one back road and then another. The gravel roads had been a mess just two weeks ago, heavily rutted from an autumn of hard cold rain. They had frozen that way. Hil bumped and jolted along, trying to keep the road while craning his neck back and forth to look at the farm buildings he passed. He'd heard that old man Miller had just sold out to his son-in-law, a trucker who lived in town. Sold his livestock long ago. The son-in-law and the daughter had moved out to the farm but weren't farming it. The barn, an old one if Hil remembered it properly, was no longer in use and Hil was hoping that the new owners wouldn't have heard about him.

Lately Hil had to drive farther afield to find people like that.

He found the Miller farm way back on Wesley Plain, past a large tract of scrubby clear-cut. The barn slouched halfway between the house and the road. The tin on the roof seemed intact, so Hil knew that it hadn't been all that long since the barn had been in use, but, as he drove down the drive and around to the other side of it, he saw that the big doors stood wide open to the wind.

Any farmer knew if the wind was allowed to blow into a barn it wouldn't be long before the wind began to erode the strength of the building, twisting the frame, lifting at the roof purlins, weakening the mortise and tenons of the beam joints. The new owners had either given up on the barn or didn't know any better.

He didn't see any cattle around, or any manure piles, just one thin elderly workhorse hanging out near the open door. Without getting out of the truck, Hil could see that the barn was very old. The wide doors, hinged to swing out rather than slide on a track, positioned under the eaves rather than in the gable end, were those of the English style barns of the early settlers—1850 thought Hil, maybe older.

Hil recognized the horse from the August plowing matches. This horse, a light blonde Belgian, along with its harness mate, almost always won its class. The team's owner, old man Miller, was a "by crimony" kind of fellow who knew everything and had an opinion on even more. He was a thickset man who wore a heavy, red plaid coat and moose boots and was snarly with anyone who got near his team. Hil once asked him something about his harness and old Miller had replied with a sneer, "Well, young fella. You should know that. You grew up on a farm. You forget everthin' up thar in Canada? Shit. If you don't know, I'm sure not tellin' you."

Old Miller's horses always won even though their owner, who seemed to respect no human being that had yet been born, never raised his voice to his team. He carried no whip. He spoke to the horses in a conversational tone, as if to equals who knew their job better than he did. He almost seemed to apologize for asking them to do something so ordinary as plow a furrow. Hil wondered where the other horse was and figured this one, with its head hung low and its lack of interest in his truck, was far from happy. A horse hates to be alone.

He looked the house over, trying to size up the owners. Hil saw that the son-in-law, a John Ives by the mailbox, was spending a fair bit of change on renovations. There were new windows, a roofline that had been recently altered and shingled, and a new foundation. Gray vinyl siding sealed the whole thing hermetically, like a zip-lock freezer bag. He was familiar with this sort

of renovation, had done some of it himself when he was first in business and needed the cash. Cover up the old. Make it look like a house in the new development on the edge of Mandinville. The sort of renovation done by people who liked the countryside for its ATV trails and its ski-dooing but despised the hard times, the work, the mucking out, the boot marks on the linoleum. Usually only one generation away from the farm, they covered it all up with an idea of civilization garnered from television and Builders' Depot showrooms.

Hil drove around to the back of the house. In this part of the country, people who came to the front door were viewed with suspicion. They might be county building inspectors or Jehovah's Witnesses. As he got out of the truck he saw a woman open the back door and realized that she must have been watching him.

"Help you?" she said. She was a middle-aged woman with thin brown hair. She pulled a jacket around her as he walked up to the back stoop. She was taller than Hil and heavily built but her voice was soft, timid. "Here to look at the horse?"

Hil put his hands in his pockets. Hearty handshakes didn't do at the outset of things. They also made people suspicious. Better to look down at his boots. She obviously thought he was after the old horse. All right. If she thought he wanted to buy her horse, it might be easier to get a good deal on the barn. He'd just be some guy come to look at a horse, sees a falling apart old barn and offers to take it down for her.

"Still for sale?" said Hil.

"Yeah. But he's a little sick right now."

"Can I have a look?" said Hil. In the way of the people here, he didn't offer his name. He acted as if she should know him or at least know who he

was. It was a habit of folks who had lived long in communities where everyone knows you; you and your parents, your grandparents, your cousins, your aunts, your old girlfriends, your ex-wives, your dogs.

She slipped her feet into a pair of rubber boots near the door.

"Must have been an old paper you seen. I never renewed the ad." She led him back to the barn. Hil let her assume he'd seen the ad. Let her think that maybe he knew her husband or brother or something.

"You people been renovating?" he said as he walked.

"Yeah. Dad left it in bad shape. Seems like we'll never be done. John wants to put a big deck and a pool out back next summer. I just got finished cleaning up plaster dust. Throwin' good money after bad."

"Know what you mean." Hil's own house was a local landmark. The sort used to give out-of-towners directions. *You go up to the left there bout three quarter mile—take the next right after the crazy-looking house at the top. Or if you pass a house look like it been put together from a bunch of other houses, you gone too far.*

His house consisted of an ancient granary added to the side of half a hop barn. His bathroom, tacked on the east end, had once been a rather elegant chicken house on a gentleman farmer's estate. A wide porch ran all around the outside following the drastic angles of the main house. The porch roof was held up by the mismatched Queen supports of a hay barn. The exterior sheathing was mostly made of recycled cedar clapboards, and when he'd run out of them, he had continued with cedar shingles.

Pieces of old farm machinery of long-forgotten use hung on the exterior walls, parts of threshers, crosscut saws, and stokers. A collection of axe handles hung from the porch, where they knocked against each other in

the wind. Hil wanted his house, at least from the outside, to be whimsical, puzzling.

"I used to see your Dad at the plowing matches," he said. "What happened to the other horse?"

"Tim died in the summer. Old age. Dan's been alone since July. Dad sold off all the stock before he moved to town. Left the horses for me to do somethin' with."

"Where's your dad livin'?" Hil couldn't remember if he'd heard the old man was dead. The woman looked at him through the corner of her eye and Hil thought she looked suspicious. He thought, *I should have known this one. Now she's thinking I'm not someone she should know after all. She's wondering if I'm friend or foe.*

"Lives in Fairmount. Moved in with a Mrs. Elton. A widow. Thought everyone knew that."

"Hadn't heard," said Hil. "Must be nice for him to have company." Hil hoped he wasn't going too far. Hoped her mother hadn't been put away in a nursing home and that Mrs. Elton was a brothel keeper or something. It had been over fifteen years since Hil had come back but the gap in the fabric of his local knowledge had never quite closed in again. He was always surprised how much people knew about him, while he still felt uneasy, somewhere between an anonymous stranger from away and an established son-of-the-land.

"What's your name, anyway?" she asked.

"Hiliard Cobb," he said. "Live over to Blaineville." Since she didn't seem about to volunteer her own, he asked, "Yours?"

"Wanda." She kicked a rock. "You're the guy who takes down barns, aren't you? Russ Cobb's brother. I went to school with Russ."

Hil tried not to sigh. She knew who he was. There would be no getting this barn for the cost of tearing it down. It was never as much fun if you paid full price for it.

At first the locals had been disarmed by his just-folks charm, his battered pickup and tattered sweater. They had been relieved to get rid of old eyesores. Would gladly give them to him just to have them taken down.

But they became wary when Hil arrived on the next nice day with a large well-equipped crew and proceeded to dismantle the buildings piece by careful piece. He and his men did not use chainsaws, sledgehammers, and bulldozers, but small crowbars and rubber-headed mallets. Each board, each beam, each joining peg that could be salvaged was numbered, not with paint, but with removable tags, glued on so as not to mar the wood. They were numbered according to their compass orientation, E1, W32, N58 and carted away to be cleaned and oiled in his workshop until all that was left were the foundation stones. And often, if those stones were not mere fieldstones but slabs of local granite that bore the wedge marks of a human granite cutter, Hil would take the rocks of the foundation too.

The owner would look at the skill, the care of Hil's company dismantling his buildings, and at the detailed contract Hil had asked him to sign. He would begin to think that he might have just given away something of great value.

So in recent years, as Hil's reputation grew and the locals began to hear stories of the big prices he got from the moneyed flatlanders—for houses with heritage charm built into the ceilings in the form of 12 x 12 hemlock beams, and into the floors with granary boards scoured smooth by 100 years of oat husks—they were less likely just to give their old buildings away.

The old horse didn't move as Hil walked up to him. A slight flick of an ear was the only indication that he knew Hil was there. Hil laid his hand on the side of the horse's head, feeling the hollow of the cheek bones, the lack of flesh, and the heat. Hil breathed into Dan's nostrils by way of introduction and the horse's upper lip quivered a little.

His coat was dull and when Hil pulled back the upper lip he could see the gums were shrunken. Hil moved his hand up the arch of the nose to the eyes. One eye was marbled with white streaks, certainly blind. He shifted around the big head to look at the other eye. A rich brown eye with a film of white, the beginnings of a cataract, floating under the surface.

"Blind in one eye. Can't see much out of the other," said Wanda. "What you thinkin' to do with him?"

"Oh. Horse would be a help. Pullin' beams." Hil ran a hand down the left front leg while putting his weight against the horse's shoulder to get him to lift up his hoof. But Dan wouldn't, or couldn't, and Hil spotted a jagged infected tear along the inside of his leg. Wanda saw that he had seen.

"He ran into a nail or something. Something sticking out somewhere. I just leave the barn door open so he can go in and out. Dan don't go nowhere."

Hil saw a shudder run along the surface of the horse's flank. With new understanding he saw the hollows, heard the shallow laboured breathing, felt the unnatural heat under the skin. Hil murmured to the horse. "Hoa, hoa."

"I know it," Wanda said suddenly. "You don't have to tell me. Maybe I should have him put down. I asked Dad what I should do but he wouldn't come out and see. Just said to suit myself."

"You could ship him," said Hil. That's what most of the farmers would do, ship the animal to the slaughterhouse, get something for the meat even if the meat went to dog food.

"I couldn't do that," she said flatly. "Can't see him dying with strangers." There was a low rumble from deep in the horse's throat. "My kids used to play right under his feet when they were little."

"You could have a vet put him down," Hil said. "Get a fella with a backhoe to come bury him."

"We don't have the money for that. John would have a fit. Not for a vet or backhoe."

"What'd you do with the other horse?" said Hil.

"Knacker man. Never could get used to that. Worse than finding them dead."

Hil thought of the winch and the chains of the Dead Animal Recovery man, known by most as the Knacker Man. He saw the chains wrapped around the hoofs. The lifeless indignity of bent-back necks and shit-streaked truck boxes. Dead flesh dumped on other dead flesh.

Wanda turned to him and looked him in the eye for the first time. "You want to look at the barn, you go right ahead. I'm going back up to the house. Come up when you're finished."

She knew he hadn't come for the horse. His hand on the horse's neck, Hil watched her walk back to the house.

He took a look around. More quickly than he usually did. He felt like an intruder in the bedroom of a sick old person. As if he shouldn't be there. As if there were secrets of bedpans and opium to be stumbled on.

The barn was definitely pre-1850. At least parts of it. Hil could see that the massive beams of the sills had been hand-hewn with broadaxes and adzes. The marks of the adzes placed the making of the beams in the early part of the nineteenth century.

Hil looked at the joinings of the upright posts and cross girts. He was looking for the marriage marks of scribe rule. Scribe rule was an ancient framing method used by timber joiners as far back as medieval times, maybe farther. This method followed the taper of each individual tree. Each joint was custom made and unique. The joiners, who worked on the ground chiselling out the mortise grooves and sculpting, or scribing, the tenon heads that fit into them, carved marriage marks on each piece. When the beams were hoisted into place the marriage marks were matched up. Things wouldn't fit otherwise.

Builders had changed to square rule in the mid eighteenth hundreds, because using square rule meant that all beams and rafters were cut to the same interchangeable dimensions and so required less craftsmanship to erect.

Hil's customers treasured these marriage marks, marks that looked like skewed Roman numerals or mystic Celtic runes. When Hil spotted the first ones in the joint above the door, he took a deep breath. Along with several marriage marks, he saw joints pegged into place with hand-drawn pegs. He tried to scratch a mark in one beam with his thumbnail but couldn't. *Hardwood*, he thought, breathing quickly, *the framing timbers are hardwood. Very old. Very rare.*

He said, "I'll be damned. I'll be damned," when he found a hand-wrought rosehead nail. The nail would have been formed by a nailor or a blacksmith sometime before 1790. The nailor would have used a forge to heat and soften a long square iron rod. He would have pounded the end of the rod on his anvil until it was round and tapered to a point. After cutting off the sharpened end, he would have put the nail, point down, in a special hole in his anvil, and, with several glancing blows of his hammer, have formed a head that looked somewhat like a single-petalled wild rose.

The barn had been made over, recovered, repaired, but if he squinted he could see the original dimensions, imagine the light slanting through the cracks before the outer sheathing had been put on. He imagined rebuilding it whole. He pictured where he would put the lofts, the fireplace. He listened to the rustling of pigeons in the rafters.

He listened, like you would listen to a conch shell for the sound of a faraway ocean. He listened for the slough of deep virgin woods, the echoes of cattle hoofs, the rough laugh and hollow hammering of men in the rafters. By the open door, the horse shifted its weight and moaned softly.

In Wanda's kitchen he said, "I could take the barn off your hands."

He was standing on a small braided rug by the door and looking at all the cow paraphernalia: cow butter dish, cow salt and peppers, cow clock, cow calendar. They were all black and white Holsteins.

He wondered if Wanda really liked cows or had she once bought a single cow teapot thereby opening a cow floodgate. People probably said, "You want to know what to get Wanda for her birthday? She likes cows. Get her something with a cow on it." Hil's ex-wife Rachel said she rued the day she told him she liked cranberry glass because after that he didn't have to think anymore when he bought her a present. She'd said she was sick and goddamned tired of cranberry glass and their house looked like a down-at-the-heel antique and curio shop. But still, she'd taken all the red glass with her when she left.

"I don't know," said Wanda. "What am I going to do with the horse? With Dan."

Hil worked at a sliver in the palm of his left hand. "I have a friend who's a vet. Maybe I could get her to come out and take a look at him."

Wanda, who was filling up the kettle at the sink, said, "You live with Marlene Duncan, the lady vet from the Village Animal Clinic."

Hil wondered what Wanda was thinking. If maybe she knew him when she first saw him down by the barn and knew she could strike a bargain.

"Will she come?"

"Think so."

"When?"

"Today. I'll come back with her."

"We could talk about the barn then," said Wanda

He found Marlene sitting on a hay bale in the sheep pen, watching her small flock as it fed. She would watch them for hours, looking at backs, udders, the nap of wool, deciding which ones to send to slaughter and which ones to save for breeding. Hil was both admiring and unsettled by these apparently ruthless decisions. Marlene named each of the lambs at birth, spoke of them as family members, but when the time came to ship them to market they might as well have been just numbers. During this last fall shipment, Marlene had been almost gleeful as she loaded the remainder of the spring lambs onto the truck.

At the same time, Marlene kept two elderly neutered males and one ewe too old to lamb. Hil had no idea why she kept these three while condemning countless others to be shrink-wrapped as chops and legs-of-lamb. Hil

sometimes wondered if she would one day turn her cool appraising eye on him and decide he didn't measure up.

Marlene said she kept sheep as a hobby. She said that keeping a bit of livestock helped her reputation with the local farmers who were still a little skeptical about having a woman veterinarian tending to their milk cows and horses. She said it meant that she practiced what she preached.

Seeing her sitting on a hay bale, surrounded by moving mounds of dirty wool, eyes so intent on the way the sheep were interacting that she seemed not to notice him, Hil had his suspicions that her sheep were more than a hobby. He was reminded of TV programs of Jane Goodall watching her chimpanzees and thought Marlene, like Jane, was taking mental notes of all the little tussles, the jockeyings for position of the flock. She might be putting together a thesis on animal family behaviour, thought Hil, perhaps to apply to humans.

"How are things in deepest, darkest Blaineville?" said Hil.

"I'm thinking about castrating Charlie."

"Why don't you just ship him?" Hil looked at her short legs in their skinny jeans and rubber boots. She was rocking her heels back and forth in the dirt, making her knees bounce up and down.

"Can't."

"Why not?" *Just why not*, thought Hil. Charlie, a two-year-old with only one curled horn, was basically no different than the other rams. Hil's father might have supported his family as a carpenter but they had always lived on the family farm. Hil had grown up with animals—horses, cows, and sheep. As a kid, Hil had tried raising rabbits and chickens on his own and for a couple of years he'd worked part-time for a neighbouring sheep farmer. He knew no one kept an unproductive male.

"Just can't," she said as she squinted up at him.

"Well, Dr. Duncan, that is not very scientific." Hil wagged his finger at her and imitated one of her wealthy clients." Exactly why can't a professional, such as yourself, be able to face mortality in your own herd when you must face it every day at work?"

She jumped to her feet and thrust her slight, almost boyish, body between two sheep, making an elaborate show of checking their ear tags.

"Oh. Shut up, Hil." Her voice was tight.

He still hadn't figured her out. Sometimes she laughed at everything he said. Other times, like now, his joking fell worse than flat.

Marlene had been living with him for nearly a year. They had dated for a year before that, ever since the day he heard her swapping dumb men jokes with the woman who was doing the milking at Blaine's. He knew that folks talked about Marlene and him, wondered about his living arrangements with the woman whose first husband had died in a car accident. An accident that some said might have been a suicide, might not have. People said her husband had been sick, cancer. It was another one of those things Marlene wouldn't talk about, couldn't talk about.

No use discussing the horse now, thought Hil. He saw the tightness of Marlene's jaw and the way her eyes glistened behind her glasses. Hil decided to go in and see if Caitlin was up yet. His daughter had stayed up late fooling around on the internet after her mother Rachel had dropped her off last night.

Caitlin used to love to go barn hunting with him. She could tell a purlin from a girt and could spot a hog shed hiding in the alders. Today, though, she would probably sleep until noon and when she got up she would make wisecracks about her mother's love life. She was in her final year in high

school, thinking of going into fine arts or theatre. She was stringy, like him, but with Rachel's soft round face. Caitlin dressed in a wild assortment of clothes scavenged from her grandfather's attic: polyester blouses with pointed collars, old man wool pants, skirts that looked like tablecloths, stripes with plaids with loud flowers, work socks and hiking boots.

"Looks like she's tryin' out for goddamn clown school," Hil's father said every time he saw her. Hil's own appearance—his ratty hand-knit Icelandic sweater with the holes in the elbows, his hair that twisted and straggled from beneath his dirty toque, his large sandy-coloured moustache—served to keep his clients guessing. He often wondered what Caitlin's costumes hid.

Caitlin would say, "Nothing. What you see is what you get."

Right. As if that were ever true.

In the kitchen, Caitlin was making herself a morning meal of eggs and leftover potatoes. The contrast between the inside and the outside of Hil's house was marked. Outside, his house was a tangled patchwork, a show for the neighbours. Inside there was no jumble, only the feeling, almost holy, that comes from vaulted ceilings and dark polished woodwork. Here, each mark of a long gone woodworker was treated with care, each work-engendered scar had beeswax rubbed into it to highlight, not hide it.

"Hey, kiddo," he said to his daughter as he sat down at the table. He had made the table from one long slab of maple he'd found hidden away in the rafters of an old woodworking shop. He'd made it the year they came back. When Caitlin was just a baby.

"Hey, Daddio," she replied. "Did you talk to Marlene before you came in?" Hil heard the false note in Caitlin's voice and thought, *what now?*

"Dr. Duncan, Medicine Woman, is out breaking the news to Charlie the Ram that his services are no longer required in this valley," said Hil in his TV announcer's voice.

Caitlin pursed her lips in a mock pout and whined, "She's not castrating him by herself is she? I really wanted to help."

Hil imitated Marlene's brisk, professional manner, "I said she was telling him. Getting him used to the idea. Seeing how he takes to it."

"Ah." Caitlin switched to a Dr. Freud voice. "Do I sense that she is conflicted on zee issue of Charlie's emasculation?"

Caitlin and Hil always seemed to talk like this now, a mock conversation full of borrowed voices and flip prattle. Here we are. We're OK. We can joke. Hil remembered Caitlin climbing around on a stack of hay by his father's house, calling, "Daddy, look at me. Look at me."

He also remembered four years ago when she had said, with excruciating directness, "I don't want to leave. I don't want Mom to leave. I want to stay here. I don't see why I have to suffer because you and Mom can't get along. You're not the only people in the world, you know."

Now her responses to him were scripted, always quick as she deftly deflected any questions that might reveal something she had no experience in naming. Fear, passion, sex.

"What's your Mom up to?"

"The usual. Got a new boyfriend."

"Oh. What's he like? Anybody I know?"

"Yeah. I think his name is Freddy. Hard to tell what he looks like under the hockey mask."

"Remind me not to invite him to the prom," Hil said.

Marlene came into the mud room. Hil could hear her rummaging around through the vet supplies she kept there.

"Hil?"

"Here I am, dearest. Come and share a cup of joy with me."

"Bozo," she said as she passed him on the way to the sink, her face stoney. "Did you find anything interesting this morning?"

"A barn—pre 1800—and a real sick horse." He saw Marlene look at Caitlin but Caitlin kept fiddling with her eggs and didn't look back or acknowledge Marlene. Hil saw Caitlin's lips twist and wondered what they had fought over; hair in the tub, a boy sleeping over, the colour of the sky?

"A sick horse?" Marlene turned to him, wiping her hands on a towel. Hil heard the shift in her voice. "How sick?"

"Old. Nearly blind. Seems to have septicemia from a bad scratch on his leg. Shivering. Standing real still."

"You told the owner I'd come?"

"Yeah. Seems like there's a barn in it for you."

"Ooh. A barn. I could build me an artist's retreat," Marlene said.

Caitlin snorted and brushed by Marlene to put the dishes in the sink. Hil began to describe the horse, the barn, Wanda.

Caitlin said, "They have a kid my age. Amber. In my grade at the regional. She used to live in town before her grandfather died. Not too far from Mom's. The new development by the quarry. We used to go there sometimes and hang out after school. Amber's Mom was heavily into cow stuff."

"What's her father do?" Hil asked.

"A trucker. He's not home much. Goes on long runs to Mexico and stuff." Caitlin scowled and added, "Fortunately."

"Why fortunately?" said Hil. Marlene was still looking through her vet kit. She took out little ampoules and peered at labels.

"He's a jerk."

"What kind of jerk?" said Hil.

"Just a jerk."

"Come on, Cat. There are degrees of jerkdom. Is he the kind of jerk that tells lots of really bad jokes, like me, or is he the kind of jerk whose hands seem to have a mind of their own when the friends of his teenage daughter come to visit?"

"Shut up, Dad." She said this as if it were a joke. "You don't have to know everything."

Marlene snapped her bag shut. "I'll have to stop at the clinic for meds in case I have to put the horse down. Can you organize a backhoe? They're really not supposed to bury large animals but I never push it. Not with an old horse." Marlene put her hand on the nape of Hil's neck. Her fingers were warm.

"Can I come?" Caitlin addressed the question to Hil.

"I don't know." Hil checked for a response from Marlene. Marlene's face was unreadable. She didn't say anything. "What if Marlene has to do her vet thing and put the horse down?"

"Kill it?" said Caitlin emphasizing the word *kill*. "I think it would be interesting. To see how she does it."

"Sure. Bring her. Might as well bring Daddy's little girl," snapped Marlene as she headed for the door.

"I'll start the truck." Hil felt the urge to drive off without either of them.

They drove in near silence, Marlene in the middle. The sky was no longer blue. Weather had moved in from the north and the mountain tops

were wrapped in clouds. Here and there a snowflake trailed across the windshield.

Wanda was in the barn when they got there. She recognized Caitlin as one of her daughter's friends. Marlene examined the horse while Caitlin talked to Wanda. Hil stood back, glad to be out of the way of feelings that were bound to fly. His eyes strayed to the beams above him as he calculated how many man-hours it would take to pull them down.

Hil often went with Marlene on emergency weekend calls. He loved to see her handle people. She turned on something, always knew what persona to slip into. She was folksy, the farmer's daughter, with the dairy farmers. Tough, smart, and horsy with flatlanders. Soft and empathetic with very young or elderly pet owners.

Hil poked around in the corners of the barn. Often he found interesting things in the rubbly bits of old trash, baler twine, and bolts, swept together with dirty straw. One time, he'd found a blue Spode teacup in perfect condition that set him to wondering for days about the sort of people who would take a fine china teacup out to a barn. Often he found broken toys, wagon wheels, and rusty Tonkas left from a time when the kids played on the barn floor while their parents did the chores.

Today, in the corner of a grain bin, half-hidden by a soggy feed bag, he found a naked baby doll. It was made of crumbling, cracked rubber. As he looked at its dimpled knees and small hands he thought, *Now who designed this?* Caitlin said that everything had to be designed by someone—every plastic

glass, every bead, every knife and fork. She said that's what she wanted to be; the person who designs the plastic wine glasses in the dollar store.

Someone had designed this doll, each finger and toe. Someone had sketched, planned, and chosen the materials. Hiliard felt one of the hands. Saw that the wrist was cracked wide open and he thought of suicide attempts and questions buried without a chance of an answer.

He thought how when she was born, Caitlin's hands had not been much larger than this doll's hand. He thought how nice it would be if a moment in time, like the moment when you first hold your own baby and feel her tiny hands and feet in your own rough fingers—looked at her solemn eyes trying hard to focus on your face as she listened to the sound of your voice—was something you could keep, glossy and hard, like a teacup, a cow-shaped jug, or a pickle dish made out of cranberry glass.

He remembered Caitlin's baby fingers, how she felt still and knowing in his arms, just minutes after her birth. He hadn't wanted to be anywhere but there. Hadn't felt the need to run from the swell of feeling under his skin. Feelings deep, primeval, and easily read. Hil wondered how often you felt like that? It had been years since Rachel moved out and now Caitlin only came home to use his computer, play with the cat, and talk about design, as if creation was only a trick of the eye, a sleight of hand.

He looked at Marlene's slim, childless body as she leaned into the horse's flank, listening intently with her stethoscope, and he felt a longing so sharp that his eyes ached. The doll's hand came off and he slipped it into the pocket of his sweater.

Marlene called to Hil. "Did Glen say he could come over with the backhoe?" Hiliard saw that Wanda was tugging at a burr in Dan's mane.

"He said to give him a call." As Hil pulled out his cell phone, he saw Wanda's heavy face flush. He felt her reassessing him as he spoke to Glen, his heavy equipment operator. The cellphone didn't fit the character he played and he knew it.

"He can be here in about an hour."

"So," said Marlene, "do we do it? It's your decision but he is suffering." Marlene's hand touched Wanda's shoulder. Caitlin was petting the horse's nose. Her forehead was pulled into deep furrows.

Wanda, who had been staring at the cellphone in Hil's hand, abruptly barked at Hil. "You didn't tell me. Are you going to take the barn or not? I want two thousand dollars for it. Plus the vet bill and the backhoe job."

"All right." Hil was confused by Wanda's sudden animosity, too confused to bargain.

"And I want it all gone," she said. "I want it all gone by next Friday."

"Friday?" said Hil. "Well, that depends on the weather."

"Friday. It has to be all gone by Saturday morning. And I want it in cash. The money goes to me. Not him." Hil looked at the set of her shoulders. He saw the muscles in Wanda's jaw clenching. Marlene caught his eye. She nodded slightly.

"Take it or leave it," said Wanda fiercely.

"OK. OK." Hil pulled his hands up in a placating gesture. "OK."

"Come on, Wanda. Where do you want to bury him? We'll do it there."

Marlene's voice was quiet.

The horse could barely walk. Wanda pulled on the lead rope as Caitlin pushed on his rump. Hil slapped the horse, loudly but painlessly, to move him along. Caitlin protested, "Dad." Marlene followed, carrying her supplies. They plodded along tractor tracks out to the edge of a hayfield, next to a stand of scruffy alders and poplars.

By the time Wanda said, "This spot'll do", the horse's coat was wet with a pained sweat and he was shivering. Wanda dropped the rope and backed away.

Marlene said, "Hil, you hold his head. It won't take long."

Marlene put her bag down on a rock and began to prepare the syringe. Caitlin stood near her, watching, and Hil could hear Marlene telling Caitlin, "There are two meds in here. The first and fastest-acting will paralyze and anesthetize the animal so it won't feel any pain while the second one causes the heart to stop. He'll just kneel and then lie down and go to sleep."

Wanda backed farther away, her hands at her side. Hil held the rope up close to the horse's chin and spoke softly to it, "Hey, ole Dan. Good fellow."

The sound of Dan's laboured breathing filled Hil's head. The wheeze in, the whistle out. The horse jerked its head down suddenly, nearly pulling out of Hil's grip to snatch at a mouthful of still-green grass. As he chewed, he perked up and seemed almost lively. He looked, ears forward, in the general direction of Marlene. Marlene was approaching slowly on the side of the horse's good eye. The hand holding the syringe was down out-of-sight but the horse looked for it, nickered with his mouth full, spraying Hil with green spit.

"He knows something's up," Hil said to Marlene.

"Just hold him loosely. You pull too hard you'll scare him. Hoa, boy," she said.

The horse's eyes rolled up and his ears went back as Marlene touched his neck. She ran her fingers over his skin looking for the biggest, most-promising vein.

"Hoa, boy. Good boy," Marlene crooned.

Hil repeated her words, crooned with her, as she pushed the needle into the side of the horse's neck and quickly depressed the plunger. She was out and stepping back before the horse reacted. Dan started to rear up.

"Let him go, Hil," she said. "Just drop the rope."

Hil dropped the rope and backed up quickly. The horse, eyes wide and rolling, tried to run but before he could take more than a step his knees buckled and he crashed heavily to the ground. He thrashed his head around, trying to get up.

Dan let out an angry whinnying bellow. He farted hugely and pissed in panic as he still tried to get his legs under him. It was as if he'd come to life. As if he was saying, *Wait a minute. I was only putting you on. I'm fine. Just let me up.*

Marlene ran back to her bag and prepared another syringe.

Caitlin cried out to her, "What's the matter?"

"He's fighting it. I need more," said Marlene. Hil felt as if he had always stood on this forest edge, the wind slanting into his moustache and his teeth. As if he had always been watching a big horse fighting indignantly for its life. His chest hurt. He looked around for Wanda. She was watching Marlene with a look of unshielded hate.

Marlene ran back to Dan who, although he could no longer move his legs, was still trying to lift his head, still trying to whinny. With one hand she undid the buckle on the halter and pulled it over his ears and off his head. With the other she jabbed in the syringe.

"Look now, old boy," she said, "this will make it better. Just give in. Go to sleep."

Caitlin knelt beside his head across from Marlene. She said, "Come on, Dan, give up. It's OK," as she gently ran her hand over his face. The horse laid his head down in her lap and Hil could see her brace against the weight.

Dan went still. His breathing came in increasingly shallow gasps. Hil knelt down beside Caitlin, across from Marlene who had her hand pressed against the big artery in the neck. A final long sigh from the horse and Marlene said, "I think that's it. It's over."

The three of them knelt together listening. For what, Hil wasn't sure. The horse's bladder relaxed and piss trickled out. Hil put his arm around Caitlin's shoulder and said, "Heavy?"

She nodded, biting her lip and began to wiggle backwards, easing the horse's head off her knees.

They hadn't been paying any attention to Wanda. It was as if it wasn't her horse at all but theirs—or at least the moment of its death was theirs. So they were almost surprised when they heard her say, "How come he didn't just lie down like you said he would?" Her face was red and her voice was shaking. "How come he fought like that? I'd have been better off getting my husband to shoot him." Her hands knotted and unknotted. "Shit," she said. She walked away quickly down the fenceline.

She stopped once to yell back at Hil, "Cash. I want it in cash. For me. To me." She hit her shoulder just over the heart.

Driving home, Hil tried to plan how the barn would come down. But he kept seeing the horse thrashing on the ground, kept seeing the terror in the whites of its eyes. Kept seeing Wanda slapping her rubber boots against the hard ground as she walked away from them.

"Does it happen like that a lot?" said Caitlin to Marlene, with no shade of sarcasm that Hil could hear, just a simple direct question. Marlene took a deep breath before she answered.

"No. . . Yes. . . Once in awhile," she said. Hil, watched the dirt road in front of him. He felt that nothing he could say would make any difference.

"Sometimes they don't care how sick they are," Marlene said. "They just don't want to go." Her voice trembled. "I hate it when it's like that. Like I've made a decision that I have no right to make."

Hil looked out over the dash. Beyond him were the hills of home but in the foreground old Dan kept falling over and over and over in front of him. Caitlin had one arm around Marlene.

Hil tried to think of the barn and the job ahead. Of finding just the right buyer for the house he had in mind. Someone who would love what hand-turned rosehead nails meant. Someone who had never touched a saw in his life but could appreciate the men who had. He would need to be extra sure that each of the marriage marks was cleaned and matched.

His seat belt rubbed against something in his sweater pocket. Hil pulled out the hand of the rubber doll and put it on the dash in front of him. It rested palm up, waiting to be stroked.

Mouse

Allie had stayed behind in admissions to do the paperwork and so she was unprepared for the locked door. The door was white and there was a little window through which she could see a white corridor. She looked through it for her sister-in-law, Judith, who had come up to the ward with Doug, but the only people she could see were staff members in their white coats. When she tried the door handle it wouldn't move. Allie thought of gurneys and the smell of strong cleaning fluids, rubbing alcohol, and urine. She thought of bodies arcing on shock therapy tables. She took two steps back and turned, ready to walk, to run, away.

Judith was at her elbow. "Whoa. Where are you going?"

"I didn't know they'd lock him up. He's not going to hurt anyone. He can barely move, for Christ's sake. I shouldn't have. . ."

"Come on. You just have to ring the bell. They'll open for you. Maybe Doug's not going anywhere but I can tell you there are some patients in there

who would escape if they had a chance." Judith balanced two Styrofoam cups of coffee. "Come on, Al. Just push the button so they'll let us in."

In his room on the other side of the door, Allie's husband Doug was curled on his side. A male nurse was tucking a blanket around Doug's shoulders, tenderly, as if he was a frail old man. Doug's long hands were crossed beneath his chin and his fingers gripped the edge of the coverlet. His eyes moved to Allie as she came into the room and she thought she saw a hint of something like self-deprecation in them.

The room was just wide enough for a bed, a bureau, and one curtainless window. Allie noticed there were no curtain rods. Nothing that would provide a place through which knotted strips of pillowcase or lengths of shoelace might be slipped. There was no glass or metal on the supper tray that had just been brought in.

Allie looked at the soft mauve of the walls. She wondered if everyone was soothed by mauve. Or did some patients find it unsettling? Did it make some think of war and rape, of mothers who pinch too hard, of high school coaches who stand too close? Judith, perched on the edge of the bureau, caught Allie's eye and grinned. She seemed to know what Allie was thinking, the way she had known since the first time they had played in the leafy shadows of Allie's tree house.

"How about that mauve, Doug?" said Judith as she leaned over and touched Allie lightly on the shoulder.

"It's all right," he answered. He closed his eyes.

Allie sat down on his bed and placed her hand on his forehead as if to test for fever. His eyes moved beneath his closed lids. Allie thought of unborn

kittens moving under the stretched bellyskin of a cat. She thought of playing with Doug and Judith in the hayloft of their grandmother's barn where there had always been a cat with kittens. She thought of swinging from a long rope tied to the rafters and yelling *Tarzan* as they fell down through the dusty air into the loose hay.

Her heart hurt her. Longing swamped her eyes in its effort to get to him, to enwrap him. At the same time she wanted to shake him and say, *That's enough. Snap out of it. We don't have time for this.*

She looked at the lean curve of him under the blankets, the motionless hands with their long fingers, the still, quiescent face against the white pillow. She saw him swinging by his hands from a rope, long after she and Judith had given up, leaping over and over again from the rafters, yelling as he fell into the gathering dark.

A few months before he had got out the *darbouka*—the ceramic Moroccan drum he had brought back from Africa years before. The top of the drum was made of fish skin held tight with animal gut. The ceramic was painted gray-blue with light, wavy lines that suggested water. Doug had set it on the freezer in the basement laundry room along with other household items that he'd found to have percussive possibilities: a colander, baskets, pot covers, clay flowerpots, spoons. At night after supper, he would bang, tap, stomp in the basement trying to find rhythm and the antithesis of rhythm. He'd said it helped him think. Sometimes he'd convinced the girls to join in; Melissa slamming the laundry room door and Jennifer tapping the side of the dryer with chopsticks. At first they'd thought it hilarious.

Then one night, Allie woke up at three in the morning to the sound of drumming in the basement. He hadn't been to bed. The drumming went on and on with no pattern that Allie could discern, but its unrestrained wildness had

kept her from getting up to see if he was all right. She'd fallen asleep again wondering how he could slam the dryer door and the washing machine lid so fast.

"Sometimes," Allie said to Judith now, "he seemed a little low, would sleep for a long weekend, but you know, we all said—what do you expect?—we admired him. Like how could anyone keep up the pace that he sets and not need to catch up once in a while?"

Allie was sitting with Judith in the visitors' lounge while yet another doctor was trying to talk to Doug. The middle-aged parents of a young man with bandaged arms and a personal relationship with Satan were watching the TV. The room was small and windowless.

Judith reached forward and pulled a stray hair away from Allie's mouth. She said, "You can't blame him for not taking his meds. He hates the drugs because they level him out. He loves the way up. You know he does."

Allie shut her eyes and saw Doug bending over her in bed, again and again, and thought, *so do I*

They had been a trio back in high school. Allison Bennett, the new principal's daughter, along with the twins, Doug and Judith Hunt, whose father owned the big sawmill in Galt. The Three Musketeers, Allison's father called them, and they rather liked the name except none of them had ever read the book. Allie guessed the three of them were kind of wild, smoking dope, dropping acid, driving into Sherbrooke to crash parties in the university residence.

So when Doug hit bottom that time in grade eleven—when his mother found him in the potting shed unconscious from an overdose of barbiturates—his parents blamed it on the dope. For awhile they even blamed it on Allie and banned her from their house. Even then Judith and Allie knew it wasn't the pot or the acid but something inside Doug. Something wild that got out of control on occasion and in the end left him flat and listless.

Back in the eleventh grade, when Doug got out of the hospital, he told Allie and Judith that he was never going back. And he'd kept his word—until now.

The first time since high school that Doug really lost control was about a year ago after his father died. Up until that time Allie and Doug seemed to have the best of his *chemical imbalance*, as Doug liked to call it. They—and Allie always included herself in Doug's condition—had his energy for Allie to lean on and his charm to draw people to him and, by association, to Allie.

When her father-in-law died, Allie had thought, *That is how life is. They get old. They die. It's sad but we cope.* But Doug hadn't seemed to know how to walk on the ground anymore, as if the earth had shaken and he could no longer trust his balance. Allie would find him sitting in the dark, staring.

"What's wrong?" she had asked again and again.

"I don't know," he'd said.

The girls had tried to get him to do things, go sailing, ride bikes. He would say, "No. I'm tired."

Allie remembered Melissa sitting on the arm of his chair saying, "Come on, Dad. Look at the sky. It's so clear. Let's go sailing. Let's go over to Smith's Head and check out the boats. Come on, Dad."

"I can't." He'd turned his head.

Melissa had tossed her hair back, that was before she'd cut it all off to within an inch, "Come on, Dad. Mom. Tell Dad he's got to come on."

"Give him a break, Melissa. He's tired." Melissa had looked at Allie with hatred. At the time, Allie had thought that Melissa was just mad at her because she couldn't get her own way.

Allie had called Judith but all Judith could say was, "Shit and goddamn."

And then one morning, he had been okay again, as if a switch had been turned off, or maybe, on. After that, Allie felt as if she were on the beach watching the waves come in—sometimes one would break higher than the others, the cold water enveloping her, thrilling her, the ebb sucking at her legs, threatening to pull her out to sea.

The week before Doug had stayed up, sleepless, for five nights in a row. Even the basement drumming didn't seem enough to contain his energy. He went out at night and walked and walked. He came back with plans to winterize the garage, to build a deck, to plant a garden. The house was littered with half-done projects. His language changed, he swore more, and sometimes he acted as if he was sleepwalking, aware, but, at the same time, unaware of his surroundings.

Then Allie found him crying on the bathroom floor.

Allie pulled him to her on the cold tiles by the toilet. "Did you take anything?" She scanned the room for empty bottles even though she was sure she had locked away everything that he could harm himself with.

"Leave me alone, Allie." Allie pulled him to his feet.

"Did you take anything? Doug? Did you take anything?" She was aware of how loud she speaking, as if she were talking to a deaf person. Melissa appeared in the doorway and Doug looked at her.

"No. Leave me alone."

Melissa said, "I called Aunt Judith. She's called the hospital and she's coming over to get you."

Jennifer was trying to look around Melissa's shoulder. "What's the matter with Daddy?" she whimpered.

Allie had tried to get Doug to talk while they waited for Judith to take them to the hospital. She lay beside him on the bed.

"I want to understand," she said, "what it is like to be so sad."

"It's like being under mud. Everything is so cold. There's no colour. The colours are gone. Nothing means anything." He turned his head away. The girls had gone downstairs and turned on the TV.

"I don't understand, Doug. Tell me."

"I look at you, at the girls, and I feel dull. It's so hard to move my hands. They're so heavy." He wiped at his face. "I feel moths fluttering all around my eyes. It's like I'm frozen in a dark tunnel."

He said he could hear death.

"Death has two sounds," he said. "One is a slow, wordless voice. It's deep and distorted. The other sound is a light, rapid voice. Wordless. It dances all around the slow, deep voice, pleading with it, scolding it." He'd told her that he listened very carefully to the voices of death, thinking if he could only understand what they were saying, he would know what he was heading for.

When Allie came home from the hospital, she found Melissa sitting on the living room floor. The television was on. Melissa was painting her toenails and she didn't look up when Allie came in the room.

"Has Jennifer gone to bed?"

"Yeah," said Melissa, not taking her eyes off her feet and at the same time listening to the TV.

"Is she asleep?"

"Don't think so."

"Is she OK?"

"Yeah, yeah." The smell of nail polish stung Allie's eyes. She thought, *she knows I can't stand that smell.*

"Why didn't you sit with her until she fell asleep?"

Melissa didn't answer. She leaned forward to block out her mother and to hear what the male lead was saying as he peered into a filing cabinet in a murky room. She turned the volume up with the remote. Allie felt her throat clench as she crossed the room and pushed the Off button.

"Hey! I was watching that!" shouted Melissa, springing up from the floor. "What IS your problem!"

Allie shouted back, surprising herself. "I suppose you put your little sister to bed and left her by herself just so you could watch this stupid show."

"It's not a stupid show!" Melissa took a step toward Allie, the remote aimed at Allie's heart.

"That is not the point and you know it." Allie tried to control her voice, "Jennifer shouldn't have been left alone tonight."

"She's not a baby."

"But you're acting like one."

Melissa screwed up her face, replaced the nail polish cap, and stomped away toward the stairs. On the third step, she turned and screamed at Allie, "Not that you care. But she broke Dad's drum." She ran to her room and slammed her bedroom door so hard that Allie felt the house shudder.

Allie stood, breathing raggedly. She was no good with them. Doug never let it happen like that. Not when he was well. She went up to Jennifer's room. Her younger daughter was curled up on her bed in the dark. She had pulled a blanket over her head. When Allie tried to fold it down, so she could see her face, Jennifer held on tightly to it until Allie stopped.

"I'm not a baby," said Jennifer through the blanket.

"I didn't say you were." Allie hugged her daughter's shoulders, leaned on her. The little girl moved and her small hands pulled the blanket down to show her face. She scowled at Allie.

"I didn't want her in here."

"Why?"

"She's annoying," said Jennifer. "She's always trying to tell me what to do."

"She said you broke something."

Jennifer covered her eyes. Her voice came out in a squeak. "I didn't mean to." Allie could see tears seeping from around her hands. "It fell."

"That's okay. Accidents happen. Don't cry. I'm not mad."

"It was an accident." She was sobbing hard now. "When is Daddy going to come home? He's going to be mad."

"No. He won't be mad. He'll be home in a few days. We'll go see him tomorrow. OK?"

"I can come too?" Jennifer wiped her nose on her pyjama sleeve.

"Sure."

When Jennifer was finally asleep, Allie found Melissa waiting for her in the hall. She seemed composed, cold, although Allie could see that she had been crying.

"It wasn't an accident, Mom. She threw it down the basement steps. On purpose. I saw her. It's near the garbage if you want to see." Allie couldn't read Melissa's expression. Melissa went back into her room and locked her door.

Allie went to the basement and found the drum in the furnace room by the recycling box. It was cracked and there were several crushed areas where the pottery was smashed but still held together by the sinew that lashed the top to the bottom. There was a large hole in one side. Allie pictured it careening down the stairs to land with a splintering sound on the cement. She thought sure that if she took the sinew off, the drum would fall into shards and dust in front of her.

She took one piece of blue ceramic, on which she could still see the outline of a fish, and went back up to the kitchen.

Allie made tea and toast and sat at the kitchen table. She saw that Melissa had cleaned the counters, and she keenly felt the space between herself, under the bright kitchen light, and her teenage daughter, lying on her bed upstairs with the light of her bedside lamp shining on her face.

Allie looked around the kitchen, Doug's kitchen, with its jars of rice and nuts, its five kilo pail of organic peanut butter. He'd joined a health food co-operative last year and had systematically replaced the foods in the cupboards with things labelled "natural" and "organically grown." Allie thought of him scrubbing down the kitchen counter while the girls ate breakfast, and telling them about the dangers that lurked in the foods they ate.

"Peanuts," Doug had said, "are one of the most heavily-sprayed crops grown. Ordinary peanut butter is laced with all kinds of toxins."

Melissa and Jennifer had looked at the unsalted, unsugared, organic peanut butter dripping off their toast.

"Yeah, Dad. I know all that, but this peanut butter is slimy and you have to stir it all the time," said Melissa.

"It tastes like playdough," said Jennifer.

"You see!" Doug had said triumphantly. "That's the way they hook you. The food industry puts tons of salt and sugar in everything—salt and sugar that you don't need—so you eventually can't appreciate the real flavour of real food."

"You appreciate it," said Melissa sourly. "I'm not eating it."

"I like Skippy," said Jennifer.

Both girls had refused to eat the peanut butter, although they'd learned to like couscous and nori. Doug had tried slipping peanut butter into cookies but they'd said the cookies were dry and tasteless. He'd made peanut butter muffins, peanut butter and chocolate chip squares, peanut butter and banana smoothies, Thai dishes with peanut sauce. They'd turned up their noses.

After it became clear that the girls would not eat his peanut butter, Doug had turned to other obsessions, so the contents of the peanut butter pail never seemed to diminish.

Allie cut her toast in squares and thought of Doug making happy faces on the girls' toast, with raisins and sunflower seeds. Kids loved Doug. He seemed to be on their level, seemed to know what made them laugh. He usually took over when he and Allie came home from work. Allie would collapse on the couch with a drink as he made supper with the girls, keeping up a constant run of stories and jokes. Telling them all kinds of trivial facts, letting them cook with him. Jennifer once told Allie, "Dad's more fun than you, Mom. He lets us do stuff." Allie knew it was true. Making cookies with kids always seemed to be too much trouble to Allie.

Allie opened the peanut butter pail and ate a spoonful of it. She liked its bland, undemanding taste. It made her think of the mud pies she used to bake on a board in the sun on her family's back porch. She'd eaten some of those mud pies, had even craved them a little. Her father had been very angry when he'd caught her. It was the only time she could remember being spanked. She supposed she only remembered the spanking because she had thought it was unjustified.

As she rinsed her plate in the sink, she wondered how long peanut butter kept before it went rancid.

The next morning was Sunday. Allie woke up early with the sun lying across her bed like a weightless partner. Birds sang outside her window. The house seemed to be made up of waiting hallways and rooms of silence.

In the kitchen, Allie pulled the peanut butter pail from its place under the counter. Jennifer played in her Cheerios and Melissa warmed up leftover spaghetti in the microwave. She wasn't talking.

Allie noticed the lid hadn't been tightly replaced but didn't expect to see a large mouse dog-paddling in the oily top layer of the peanut butter. His nose and whiskers stuck valiantly above the surface. His back was slick and dark like a newborn kitten's. His feet and belly were mired in brown. She screamed and slapped the lid back on. Jennifer jumped out of her chair, nearly upsetting her glass of juice.

"Now what's the matter," Melissa asked, tapping her fork against her plate with an air of someone with important things to think about who is continually interrupted by the petty domestic scenes of others. Jennifer approached Allie warily.

"A mouse," Allie breathed. "There's a mouse in the peanut butter."

Allie had an unreasonable fear of all rodents, but especially mice. She hated their quick movements and small shiny eyes. Their hairless tails, their tiny human-like hands caused her throat to swell and her back to drip with cold sweat. She fought the urge to run from the room.

Doug had once explained to the girls that everyone had their own phobia—snakes, bats, caterpillars, water. He told them that if they were going to get one, they shouldn't just adopt their mother's.

The girls were looking at her, watching to see how she would handle it.

"Gross. Is it dead?" said Melissa.

"No," Allie said evenly, trying to remember to breath. "No. It appears to be alive."

"It'll drown," said Jennifer solidly. "You have to get it out." Her eyes met Allie's and held them. Her small solemn face willing her mother to be calm, willing her to do something.

"Oh, just stick the whole thing in the garbage," said Melissa. "Stupid mouse, stupid peanut butter." She slammed herself into her chair and returned to her breakfast.

Allie thought that Doug would have dealt with it quietly and quickly. He would have gone outside, dumped the mouse out and killed it with the spade. He would have told the girls that he let it go. That it had scampered off to its nest where all its brothers and sisters had licked it clean and wondered at its adventures in the world of people. Allie, on the other hand, stood by the counter unable to move, picturing a cartoon mouse going down for the third time, one small hand waving goodbye above the brown surface.

"It's going to die," shouted Jennifer suddenly, tears beginning to fill her eyes. "You have to do something."

Allie thought that if this was happening to Judith, Judith would laugh. She would call her cats into her back shed and shut them in so they wouldn't go after the mouse. Then she would let the mouse loose in her garden, telling the kids the differences between indigenous mice and the inferior, imported, European kind.

Allie imagined Judith's laugh of sympathy tinged with disdain. Later today, in the guest lounge at the hospital, Allie would tell Judith the story about the mouse—a city slicker of a mouse in a Hitchcock movie who suddenly finds himself lured into a pool of quicksand by the backwoods natives. It was their running gag; Allie, the little pampered townie, and Judith, the wilderness survivor. Judith would laugh, the way she had when Allie had moaned, *How*

will I survive without Doug? I have no idea which grubs in the woods are edible.

Tears were running down Jennifer's cheeks.

"Oh, for God's sake," snarled Melissa. She went to a drawer and drew out a large slotted spoon.

"Don't let it out in the house," Allie whimpered. She felt limp, helpless yet soothed, like a kitten that has been picked up by the nape of its neck by its mother.

Melissa took the pail and the spoon in one hand. With her other hand she turned her little sister toward the door.

"Of course I won't, Mom," she said serenely with that quick teenage change of mood. "Come on, Jen. Let's let it out on the lawn."

Jennifer, taken off guard, gulped back a sob. She quickly glanced at her mother and seeing that Allie was still not going to move from her spot by the sink, she wiped her eyes and ran after her sister shouting, "Wait. Wait for me."

Allie watched them from the window. The teenager in skinny jeans, tight T-shirt, and short spiky Kool-Aid-yellow hair. The little girl in a flowered print sun dress and jellies. They carried the pail between them to the back fence—both thin, curveless, and fierce. They knelt together and opened the lid. Jennifer drew her hands back in a squeamish gesture while her older sister quickly dipped in the spoon and lifted out the mouse.

Melissa tipped it out carefully on the grass where it lay panting for a moment. The girls watched it, as still as two robins watching a worm. They knew they shouldn't touch it. Doug had told them all about not touching wild animals—that their own kind might reject them because they smelled of humans.

The mouse picked itself up and walked stickily away. His quick mouse movements were reduced to slow motion by the peanut butter dragging against the blades of the unmown grass—the mossy grass that was already two inches longer than the neighbour's because Allie couldn't bring herself to mow it.

The mouse walked in a crooked arc, appearing stunned, unable to decide where to go. Finally, it headed out toward the shelter of the bridal wreath spirea that sprawled against the fence.

The girls watched the mouse until it reached the bush. It had left a trail of brown streaks behind it. Melissa wiped the spoon on the grass, put the lid tightly on the pail, and, talking companionably to Jennifer, returned with her to the kitchen. The morning sun touched the down on their faces, turning their cheeks a soft golden colour. Allie thought of how their skin must smell, how it smelled on warm June mornings when they were babies. They were both smiling, giggling as they came in but they fell silent as they looked at Allie.

"What do you want to do with this?" said Melissa handing the pail to Allie, "He pooped in it."

Allie reached out to touch Melissa's hair.

"I'll look after it," she said. "You go get ready to visit Daddy." Melissa smiled back as she left the room.

"Mice like peanut butter. Aunt Judith puts it in her mouse traps," said Jennifer solemnly. "Imagine drowning in something you really like."

"Like butterscotch," said Allie.

"Or chocolate sauce," Jennifer said.

"Or maple syrup," said Allie.

It was Doug's favourite food and Jennifer's eyes went wide with surprise when Allie named it. She looked into Allie's face. What she saw there made her

snigger in conspiracy with her mother. She giggled and ran into the hall yelling, "Hey Melissa. Imagine drowning in maple syrup."

Allie took the pail out to the garbage can in the laneway. She looked around her small backyard and spotted, at a safe distance, the mouse, still wet and sticky but almost able to scurry, moving across the short space between the spirea and the back porch. He stopped, sat up on his hind legs and looked at her. For a moment they eyed each other, then he slipped away under the porch.

Surely mercy shall follow

The building on the corner had once been called The Grand Terrace Hotel but now people referred to it as just The Hotel. The young loggers who frequented the tavern, sitting under the bright fluorescent lights at wobbly Formica tables, their workboots lightly sticking to the beery floor, had no idea of The Hotel's once-genteel past. The old men who rocked on the front porch in the afternoon, watching mothers with their children passing to and from the park, knew its real name but never used it, as if by evoking its past they might visit upon it a sense of shame for its tawdry, rundown present.

The Hotel sat in the middle of the block between the Catholic Seminary and a large weedy lot where the railway track ran. Ben supposed that, at one time, proximity to the railway tracks would have been considered an asset and trains a wonder to be watched as you sipped your lemonade on the terrace.

At the back of the railway lot was the station house which had been boarded up since the late 50s when the CPR had eliminated most of the passenger service on the line. The passenger train still clacked through twice

a day on its way to and from New Brunswick but it never stopped. Four times a day the long freight trains thundered by, picking up speed for the climb through the hills. Although at first Ben had trouble getting used to the noise of the trains, now his day seemed to be framed by the sound of their whistles, regular as clockwork. A late train made him uneasy.

Behind The Hotel was a large wooded area belonging to the Seminary where the kids in town played games of Cowboys and Indians, and War.

Back in the 1890s, The Grand Terrace Hotel had been a prime example of railway hotel architecture: a solid, two-story rectangle with wide porches—the terraces of its name—running all the way around both floors, interrupted only by the large round tower built into the front east corner. There would have been a fine view of the river and the falls below town from those terraces. Now the porches were long gone and the view was of Provost's Garage across the street and the broken windows of the bankrupt textile mill. Fred Leonard, the owner of the car dealership out on the highway, who also called himself Reverend and held evangelical church services in the apartment over Provost's Garage, said that the loss of one of the town's main industries was God's way. How they ever thought that, just because they had cheap hydro-electric power, they could truck cotton all the way up from Louisiana and still turn a profit. . .well, he could have told them it would fail. That the mill took sixty years to fail, making cotton khaki for two world wars, did not disprove his point.

With the textile mill hiding the river's shine and leap, the power dam taming it, you would find it easy to forget that the town was built on a waterway. The river slid under the roads through concrete channels and flowed unnoticed behind the mill, the garage, the IGA, the bank, and the Legion Hall. Ben could hear it if he stopped to listen, the sound he had heard

every minute in the last four years since he had left Boston, the sound of heavy flows of water shearing over a concrete sluice.

Archie, one of the old men who lived in Ben Goldstein's hotel, had a picture of the building that dated back to 1905, and even through the haze of sepia-toned age, you could see that The Grand Terrace Hotel had once lived up to its name. The siding, since replaced with red brick, had originally been light-coloured clapboard. Potted trees had flanked the large doors that opened onto both floors. The railings of the terraces held flower boxes overflowing with greenery. In Archie's picture, you could see wicker furniture, settees, high-backed chairs, tables, and plant stands that held lush Victorian era ferns.

Ben Goldstein looked at the picture as he put the beer down in front of Archie. He'd seen it before—Archie brought it out at least once a week—but Ben stood for a slow, quiet moment to look at it. It made him think of the deck of an early-century cruise ship. Although there were no people in the picture, he imagined ladies in white lawn dresses tied with sashes, parasols protecting their white, white skin as they strolled in the afternoon light, much the way ladies would have ambled on the doomed decks of luxury liners like the Titanic or the Empress of Ireland.

"Quite the lady. Quite the lady," said Archie as he coaxed change out of his wallet with his one hand. The cuff of his empty shirt sleeve was tucked into his belt. "A grand old lady."

Ben sighed, "Certainly was." Ben wiped the top of Archie's table with his bar rag.

"Too bad. She was a real showcase," said Archie. "You wouldn't know this, but I helped brick her back in 1942. I may have had but one arm but I could do the work of two able-bodied men." Ben turned back toward the bar. He'd heard

this story before. John Keat, the real estate agent who had sold him the hotel four years ago, had warned him the only steady income he could expect would be from the bar, the tavern, and the five old veterans who rented rooms by the month. Archie was one of the old men.

When Ben had told Bernice about him, back when she was still accepting his phone calls, she had laughed and said, "Why Ben, you've gone and bought yourself an old man."

"I remember it well. One of the Colbys owned it then. They tore off the porches and bricked her. Even that godawful tower," Archie said slyly to Ben. "I bricked around those windows in the tower, you know." Ben sat on his stool behind the bar and opened his newspaper. "Curved glass, those windows." Ben turned a page. Archie continued, "Can't get that kind of glass anymore."

Ben read the headlines. Anti-war protesters, who, during the May Day March in Washington, had been herded into a football stadium by riot police, claimed their civil rights had been violated. Charlie Manson's "girls" were staging another vigil on the courthouse steps. There was a picture of their shaved heads. They had scratched swastikas into the skin of their foreheads. At the unveiling of a fountain he had designed for the city of San Francisco, an artist from Quebec had spray-painted *Vive le Québec Libre* and *FLQ* on the sides of his creation.

"Yup. Can't get that kind of glass anymore. Real workmanship," continued Archie. "So," he said as if it had just crossed his mind, "when are you going to tell me what you're doing up in that tower attic?"

Ben always tried to keep a certain distance from Archie. Archie made it his business to know everything, and, as far as Ben could see, to relay that knowledge to the whole town. When Ben had finished building the new stairs to access the tower attic, he had installed a trap door across the stairwell.

Mostly to keep Archie out. Unwilling as yet to share his creation, he kept it closed and locked even when he was working up there. Archie had sat below in the second floor tower lounge, stewing as he listened to the hammering, and watched buckets of paint, lumber, and a new carpet from Sears all ascend the new stairs. He never missed an opportunity to ask Ben what he was doing up there.

"When are you going to finish?" said Archie.

"Pretty soon," said Ben, turning a page and purposely misunderstanding Archie, "you can have the sports section." Archie sighed heavily.

"You know," Archie said, "I like to read the Readers' Digest. You know the part they call Increase Your Word Power? I read a word today that just about sums you up."

Ben looked over his glasses at Archie, "And what was that?"

"Inscrutable," said Archie.

"Is that so?" said Ben. He almost laughed but then he saw the picture on the front page of the World in Review section. It was a close-up of two young American soldiers in Vietnam. Between them they were carrying a wounded friend. The boy who was hurt had no helmet. His hair was dark and hadn't been cut in awhile. The shape of his head was irregular as if it had been squeezed by a giant hand. Blood dripped down his neck and onto the front of his shirt. The boy's face was calm, vacant, and Ben could see that his pupils were dilated; perhaps with pain, or drugs, or the approach of coma. There seemed to be a lot of confusion behind the trio and you could tell by the set of the soldiers' shoulders that they were almost running, pulling the wounded boy away from something. Ben closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. Archie came up to the bar and took the paper from Ben's hands.

"I don't know why you read the American papers anyway," he said. "Full of crap."

Ben opened his eyes again and saw Archie's face studying his with a detached curiosity, the way a child would study a dead cat by the side of the road.

* * * * *

Rachel Leonard, Reverend Leonard's daughter, put the pictures down, one by one in front of her mother, Nilda. Nilda picked them up, one by one, careful not to get fingerprints on them. She tilted them to diminish the glare of the fluorescent kitchen light. Simon, Rachel's thirteen year old brother, was making a peanut butter sandwich and feigning disinterest.

"That's Phoebe. She's the one I want to invite to stay for the month of July," said Rachel.

"She looks very. . .neat," said Nilda in her detached, puzzled way. She was looking at Phoebe's tiny body framed by a door. Even in the picture Phoebe seemed to emit a forceful personality, a concise, distilled fierceness.

"She is very interesting," continued Rachel, aware that her voice had slid into an imitation of her mother's. It was a habit of hers that she'd been unaware of until Phoebe had pointed it out, *you talk like whoever you are talking to*, she'd said. *You even copy their hand gestures. You do. You do.*

"She grew up in Africa. In Kenya. Her parents are missionaries. They're still there. She could give a presentation to our congregation about their missionary work."

"Her parents are in Africa? Poor child. Where does she live then?"

"Phoebe is very independent. Right now she is in Chicago. Helping to set up a youth ministry. In the inner city."

"Chicago? Oh my." Nilda carefully put down the picture of Phoebe and reached languidly for another. Rachel watched her mother's thin fingers, her brow that knitted at the effort taken to concentrate.

"That's the main lecture hall at Bethal," said Rachel.

"How old is this girl?" said Nilda, her voice as soft and impersonal as if she was asking for someone to pass the butter.

"My age. Twenty. She started college late, like I did."

Simon sawed his sandwich in two as noisily as he could, scratching his plate with the bread knife. Their mother didn't appear to notice but Rachel did and she frowned at him. Simon took a big bite of his sandwich and chewed, open-mouthed, in Rachel's direction. She reached out and pulled his ear and he pretended he was going to bite her hand.

"Have you talked to your father?"

"Not yet." Rachel didn't know how to tell her parents that Phoebe was coming, whether they gave their permission or not. It wasn't that Phoebe didn't understand proper manners. It was just that she didn't think common courtesies, like waiting for an invitation, applied to her. She was a soldier for Christ, a holy pilgrim, and everyone would naturally welcome her with open arms.

"You should tell him."

"Yeah, Rach," said Simon with a sneer. "You should tell him."

Rachel gathered up the pictures; the record of her winter away at Bethal Bible College in the southern United States, learning to be a preacher

like her father, or more accurately learning not to be a preacher like her father. She thought of all the things she had to tell him.

* * * * *

Archie whistled as he turned around. Delivery men had been there that afternoon. They had set up the new mattress and installed an air conditioner under the eaves where one of the small windows had been. Ben was making up the bed with new linens and pillows. He straightened up slowly, minding his head against the slope of the low ceiling of the tower attic.

"So?" Ben said. "What do you think?" Archie looked at the fresh paint, a sunny canary yellow that Ben had chosen because it reminded Ben of a vacation he, Bernice, and their son, Miles, had taken in France. A new blue and yellow carpet lay across the deep yellow floorboards. Archie looked at the antique headboard that Ben had found in the carriage shed. He had cleaned, oiled, and hung it on the wall behind the new bed. The lamps, the built-in closet, the bookshelves under the eaves. Archie even looked at the book titles, *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Prometheus Unbound*.

"Not enough room to swing a cat in." Archie rubbed the stump of his arm, a sign that he was upset. Ben wondered at what.

"I was aiming for a cozy, hideaway feel," said Ben.

The slope of the roof began only four feet above the floor. The windows, as wide as normal windows but shortened to fit the space, were set in not far above the floor. Archie leaned over as far as he could to look out across the roofs of town. He looked back over his shoulder at the bed and Ben could tell

that he was thinking that you could lie on the bed and gaze out the windows without even moving your head.

"I was thinking of putting in a skylight," said Ben.

"You thinking of moving up here? You got a lady friend coming up from Boston or something?" Archie sounded almost belligerent.

Ben, whose own living quarters consisted of a large room on the second floor by the back stairs, said, "No. No lady friend. I'm not moving up here but look, Archie, I bought an air conditioner. No one in this town has an air conditioner and this is going to be a long hot summer, maybe hotter than normal." The air conditioner hummed.

"So, what are you going to do? Have a raffle and raffle off a night's stay in here?"

"I hadn't thought of that. That's a good idea. A raffle to drum up interest. Before you know it, everyone will want to pay to spend a night in the coolest room in town."

"Jeezum Crow," Archie sputtered, unable to hold it in any longer. "Why couldn't you have put an air conditioner in the bar? That's where you need it, for crying out loud. You're losing all your business to Jean-Guy's Dance Hall. You could have painted the bar yellow for that matter. This isn't a hotel where people come to spend a night. It's where people come to get pissed drunk and drunks like me can live cheap. Respectable people wouldn't stay here for love nor money. You haven't put a cent in the place since you moved here and when you do, you do this."

Ben thought of the worn floor in the kitchen. He thought of the smell of urine in the narrow dark hall between the tavern and the bar, the burnt-out light bulbs, the windows that didn't fit properly anymore, all the cigarette

burns in the dirty carpets in the old veterans' rooms, the stuffing that squeezed out of the leatherette couches in the second floor tower lounge.

Then he thought of the first time he had seen this room. How he had opened the trap door from the top of his stepladder and pulled himself up. How he had looked at the round intimate space, the slope of ceiling like pictures he had seen of the inside of a Bedouin's tent, and had thought—here was something he could manage, something controllable. All by himself he could transform it. He could complete one round perfect world high above the rest.

"Maybe I will invite my wife to come up," Ben heard himself say. Until that moment he hadn't really thought of calling Bernice again but now he thought he might. Maybe it was the way Archie had scorned the idea of him having a "lady friend" that made him say it. Maybe he actually thought she would like the room, the whimsical idea of living like Rapunzel in her tower. But then, he knew detachment was not what she wanted or needed, and he regretted mentioning her.

"What? You never said nothing about a wife. I'll be a monkey's uncle. Where would she be living now?"

Ben knew he had put his foot in it. The people in this town might be curious about him, they might talk about him behind his back, but they would never ask him a direct personal question. Even Archie wouldn't unless given an opening like the one Ben had just given him.

Ben had come to Galt prepared for friendly curiosity, believing that country people were like that, open-hearted and kind. He hadn't expected them to be stand-offish. He was unprepared for the way they seemed to ignore him or treat him with vague hostility. He hadn't understood at first that leaving him alone was their way of being polite.

He hadn't understood it but he had appreciated it. He didn't want to talk about what had brought him here. How could you explain a hatred for your own country? For all that reminded you of what it had stolen?

But now, he had said it out loud. To Archie. Now that Archie knew, everyone would know. Ben felt that he had just opened some sort of door and he wasn't sure that he was ready for it.

"New Mexico," said Ben.

"What's she doing there?" said Archie.

"Artist colony."

"Any men in that colony?" said Archie meaningfully as he looked out the window again.

Ben was often surprised at the turn Archie's thoughts could take. Ben reminded himself, as he often did, that even though Archie's present life was spent either in his small room, the tavern, or on the front porch of The Hotel, Archie had travelled the world as a cook on a laker, had worked in the logging camps, had grandchildren, had been to war. He also read extensively and had been elated to see the boxes of books that Ben had brought with him when he moved in. There was a whole life behind the faded blue eyes that Ben could only guess at.

"No men that I know of," said Ben. "Mostly middle-aged women."

"*That* sort of place," said Archie. "You better get her up here."

Ben bent to scrape a bit of dry paint from a window. In front of Provost's Garage, Reverend Leonard and his daughter Rachel were getting out of their car. After supper on Wednesdays they came to open up the church hall for their congregation's mid-week bible study group. Rachel's mother Nilda was fragile and couldn't stand the smell of oil and exhaust, so, even in cold weather, Reverend Leonard opened all the windows for at least an hour before

the meeting to air the place out. While Ben watched, Rachel caught her coat in the car door and turned in confusion to see who or what had trapped her.

"Any kids?" asked Archie as he turned to the stairs, his hand searching for the railing to steady himself.

"Only one. A boy." Ben found his chest tightening, his eyes filling with tears.

"Where's he?" said Archie from the stairs and when Ben didn't answer he turned stiffly to look at him. Ben could see Archie thinking, putting things together. "Vietnam?" he guessed.

Ben nodded. "Four years ago." Archie turned back to look at his feet as he shuffled down the remaining steps.

"It's always one damn thing or another," said Archie.

* * * * *

Rachel Leonard turned in confusion to see who or what had trapped her and found her gray coat stuck in the door of her father's Lincoln Continental. Something drew her eye up at that moment and she saw a face looking out at her from a window under the eaves in the tower of The Hotel. She felt her own face go red as she ducked her head and pulled at her coat.

She couldn't open the door of the car because her father had told her to lock it as she got out. They had to be the only people in this whole town who locked their car doors on Main Street. It was a matter of local pride that no one locked their front doors, their car doors, their woodsheds.

It was a matter of local disdain that Fred Leonard did.

Another example of his holier-than-thou attitude. Another example of him putting on airs. They all knew that he, the car-dealer-cum-preacher, had the newest, biggest car in town. He didn't have to rub their noses in it by locking it. Adding insult to injury, they would call it. No matter that the insult had happened long ago and her father had started locking his car the day he came out after Sunday service to find a large piece of dog shit on the plush velour cloth of the driver's seat.

Her father, without a backward glance, had left her getting out of the car and was halfway up the stairs to the hall before Rachel realized she was caught. She could have called to him but then the men on the hotel porch would hear her, or the boy who pumped gas for the garage would come out and look at her, or Mrs. Lewis would look up from her flower bed, put up a hand to shade her eyes.

No one would ask her what was wrong. They would just stare. Rachel didn't think to slip out of her coat. She couldn't think of anything but the shame of being caught on the street in broad daylight attached to a cream-coloured Lincoln. Stranded, when everyone knew that the Leonards thought they were part of God's chosen, too good for the rest of them, above and beyond the pale of ordinary life, the life of small embarrassments: of spinach on your teeth, of stained underwear hanging on the clothesline, of running to catch a bus that won't wait for you, of holes in your nylon stockings, slips that hang below the hemline, of coats that catch you in your car door.

Rachel decided to stand by the car as if she were merely waiting for her father to return. She took several deep breaths and forced herself to look calmly around. She looked up again at the attic windows of the hotel tower. She hadn't thought of the possibility that there was a room up there under the

eaves, even though she had looked at the tower often in the scratchy hours of heated personal testimony that made up a good portion of her congregation's services.

From the church over the garage, especially during evening services, she could look into the second story windows of the hotel tower. She was familiar with the lamp-lit sight of Archie Coombs reading a paperback in the lounge. Of Thomas Merton smoking cigarettes and watching the gray flicker of the black and white TV. Of Major Lawrence, pacing back and forth like a leopard in a zoo, one hand at the hole in his throat. Of the owner, Ben Goldstein, walking through to clean the ashtrays. Until now she had thought the windows in the attic were merely decorative.

Her father opened a window above her in the church hall. He called down to her, "Aren't you coming up?" Rachel saw the garage boy poke his head out around the open bay door. "What are you standing there for?"

Rachel felt herself go red all over again. She looked up into her father's face and silently pleaded with him to see her problem but all she saw were his blue ironic eyes and his ready smile, a smile that could just as easily turn to a thin angry line.

"Could you toss me the keys to the car?" she said just loud enough for him to hear.

"Why?" he called, teasingly.

"I forgot something."

"What did you forget, sweetheart?" he shouted boisterously. The boy had stepped out and was leaning, arms folded against the cola bottle rack.

"My coat seems to be caught in the locked door of your car, Father," Rachel said clearly, attempting to stop his game, his good-humoured torture that included sugary names that he knew she hated. "Would you please come

down and unlock the door of the car and release me." She glared at him. She dared him with her eyes to embarrass her further.

"Sure, Pumpkin. Why didn't you say so?" he fairly bellowed back. "You know I would do anything for my little sugar dumpling."

Rachel put the hymn books out on the folding chairs while her father opened the other windows to let in the afternoon air. The smell of daffodils and hyacinths came in on the breeze and mingled with the smell of auto-lubricants, antifreeze, dust mites, and rust. She would have to give the carpet a good vacuum but she doubted that anything she did would make it look like anything but a thin old rag that buckled and threatened to trip up the feet of the children and the scuffling old people who made up their small group.

Her father had chosen Psalm 23 for tonight's study—*The Lord is my shepherd*—as an easy passage to compensate for the last two months spent struggling with the book of Job and its issues of God's unknowable, unquestionable nature. Rachel loved the familiar loving lilt of Psalm 23 but one line always stopped her. *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.* It was that word "surely." Her father would say "surely" was the promise, the assurance that a life lived with the shepherd would be rewarded. But Rachel couldn't help hearing doubt, even rebuke, in the word. As if the speaker were saying, *after all I've been through, SURELY, I will be rewarded.* As if mercy was not a gift but a right earned in the valley of death. A right the speaker was not at all certain of collecting.

"Soon we'll have to start thinking about a bigger place," her father said as he yanked at a sticky window. "There's a family over near St. Ignace that is thinking about joining. Maybe someday we'll have enough to build our own church."

Rachel didn't answer, she had heard this before. Always promises that their church would get bigger. True, people did join, almost every month or more someone new would join. But people left too. Having to stand up in front of everyone to confess their sins and ask forgiveness often proved too much. To admit that they had lusted after a neighbour's wife, that they had lied to their mothers, that they had taken the Lord's name in vain, that they'd indulged in pre-marital sex, that they had backed over their neighbour's dog and enjoyed it, was a trial worthy of Job.

Rachel, who at least four times a year had to stand and confess, envied the Catholics their private confessionals. She envied the mainstream Protestants who seemed to think that sins just fell away from you the moment you walked through the door of your church and that whether or not you asked God's forgiveness was your own private business.

In the kitchen, Rachel filled the 20-cup coffee maker with water and put out the coffee mugs. Some congregations denied themselves coffee, as a drug, a stimulant, but Rachel's father hadn't been willing to give up the last of his vices. Not yet. Rachel supposed *that* particular sacrifice was pending.

Rachel looked at the mouse droppings around the burners of the rusty electric stove and thought of the clean kitchen in the Legion Hall where they used to hold their services before her father had offended the veterans. He had stood up at one of their meetings and called them all sinners because they allowed dancing and card-playing in their building; activities that, at the time, he had abandoned as unholy.

Her mother had said that the veterans were justified in turfing out the congregation because the veterans owned their building and their souls and should be allowed to do what they pleased with both. Her father's version was more along the lines of a holy exodus from a heathen land.

Her mother used to be like that. She used to provide a sensible counterbalance to Reverend Leonard's passions. That was before the accident. Before she lost control of her car on a patch of ice. Before she lost part of herself as she slammed into the large maple tree in front of the Manse Pond.

"Ready to go, sweetie?" said her father, putting his arm around her and giving her shoulders a squeeze. "Oh, it's wonderful to have you back with us." Rachel struggled with the last of the coffee cups, her arms almost pinned to her sides by his grasp. She laid her head briefly on his shoulder and closed her eyes for a moment.

"Come on, Daddy. Let me go. I've got to finish this." She laughed when he tickled her. "I saw someone up in the tower of the hotel. In the attic. Is there a real room up there?"

"How would I know that? The time I spent in that place was spent in the bar." Fred Leonard was always honest about his drinking past. He even seemed to brag about it, as if the depths from which he had pulled himself were inversely related to the heights he now inhabited. "Who knows what the filthy Jew is doing."

"Daddy! How can you say that? All people are loved by God." Rachel knew how he could say it and in some ways she admired his audacity. He was only saying out loud what the people in this town said in hushed tones over their back fences.

"Maybe so," said her father. "But God loves some of us more than others." Rachel couldn't tell if he was joking or not. She seldom could.

* * * * *

The weather turned hot overnight. Gardeners like Mrs. Lewis complained that one minute the tulips were out and the next they were dropping their petals. The lilacs and honeysuckle blossomed hurriedly, never seeming to truly open before they withered and turned brown.

Ben held a raffle for a night in the air-conditioned tower room. At first the only people who would buy tickets were those who frequented the bar. The Hotel had a bad reputation, one that preceded Ben. It was commonly thought to be a haven for drunks and there were many who said that alcohol had ruined their community, was ruining it still. They blamed the barkeep and said they wouldn't set foot in the front door of The Hotel, let alone spend a night there.

However, things began to change after the winner, Marie-Claire, Ben's part-time barmaid, gave her prize to her grandparents. Mr. and Mrs. Lizotte, who farmed the old Naylor place, were a respectable couple. They decided that the price of a raffle ticket should not be wasted and so were the first to spend a night in the tower. They praised its coolness, its quiet, the view, and the "gentillesse" of the owner, to all their friends.

Some grumbled that the Lizottes were French, so what could you expect, but others began to see the sense in it. The play in it. Maybe you wouldn't buy yourself a night but maybe you could buy one for someone else. There could be nothing wrong with accepting a gift. It would be wasteful to refuse it.

By July, two couples had honeymooned in the room, as shower gifts from their friends. An exhausted mother of twin baby boys, who were in the middle of teething, was given a night alone by her own mother. A woman recovering from a "woman's" operation spent four days in the cool of the tower courtesy of her husband. A couple celebrated their 25th anniversary there. Ben made

sure that everything felt proper. Clean and neat. Cool and fresh. He began to stock champagne for special occasions.

Archie kept saying, "Wait until these fools figure out that anybody can drive thirty miles into Sherbrooke and buy an air conditioner."

Ben said, "Oh, I expect someone will. Not a lot of money to go around in this town though."

"Maybe not," said Archie, "but did you hear that the Bennetts just got a colour TV? Maybe they should raffle off a night in front of that."

With the success of the tower room, Ben's hotel began to take on a new air of respectability. His cook Micheline decided to try her hand at serving a Sunday morning brunch, an idea she had read about in a women's magazine. She thought people could come after church. She would volunteer her own time to paint the dining room and make new tablecloths and curtains if Ben would paint the front hall and put down a new carpet in the entryway.

Ben decided to let Micheline give it a try. When he had first bought The Hotel, a brunch wouldn't have worked but now he thought it might. Ben had noticed a change in attitude toward him lately. He had lived among these people long enough to gain their trust and he seemed to have caught the fancy of the town with his fairy-tale tower. But that wasn't all.

Things had changed since he told Archie about his son. The people here understood loss. They had watched their sons and husbands leave for wars in France, in Italy, in Hong Kong, never to come back again. They understood what it was like to attend the funerals of young men who died in fiery car crashes on prom night, or under the wheels of the forklift in the mill, or with their faces half-shot away in a drunken accident at a hunting camp.

Recently, Mrs. Lewis had come up to him, taken his hands between her own and said, "Sorry for your loss." And even though the loss was an old one, he had felt tears in the back of his throat and knew that she felt them too.

There weren't many people in the dining room on the first Sunday when John Keat, the real estate agent, came in with two clients. Micheline was already certain that no one else was going to show up.

"What the heck am I going to do with all this pancake batter?" she said.

John Keat's clients were two young men who looked like nothing yet seen in Galt. They had long bushy beards and waist-length hair tied back in thick braids. The short blonde man wore wide, white pants that looked like sailor's pants and sandals without socks. Sandals on a man were unheard of. Socklessness smacked of sin. The tall dark-haired man wore a hat that looked like a pancake with a beak.

It wasn't long before the dining room began to fill with people. Ben suspected they were coming to look at the outsiders. At least when Ben had moved here, he had looked ordinary enough, even though he was an American Jew from a big city. The community hadn't exactly welcomed him but they hadn't crowded around to stare at him either.

These young men were a different kettle of fish altogether. They were the first visitors from a "counter-culture" that the community had, until now, only heard about on radio and TV and seen echoed in the attempts of their teenagers to grow long hair. These men were what the community had been afraid of when it opposed the building of the large regional high school that bussed their kids away and exposed them to teenagers from the city. These men were what opponents of the new highway had feared. In the flesh.

People like Mr. and Mrs. Lewis came to eat scrambled eggs and sausages and look the strangers over with a mixture of horrified delight and righteous fear. A large crowd of teenagers came to admire them and wonder if they dared ask them for pot.

"Hippies," said Archie to Ben who was checking stock in the tavern. "You should come and take a look at them."

"I've seen my share of hippies, Archie."

"Hair down to their backsides. Weren't for their beards you wouldn't know they were men."

"I hate to break it to you, Archie, but the crewcut has pretty much gone out of fashion anywhere but here."

"Land. I heard them say they're buying land. That old farm across from Sterny Smith's. Going to build a solar house, I heard them say. The big fella says he's an architect."

Ben wiped down the counter and the small motion made sweat spring to his upper lip. He opened a window hoping to create a cross-breeze and heard the water in the river and the call of red-winged blackbirds.

"Draft dodgers," said Archie, "I'll bet you anything they're draft dodgers."

"Could be," said Ben. He looked out at the railroad track where a robin picked among the stones. The Seminary forest crowded up behind the tracks. He half-expected a deer to step out of the shadows.

"What do we want them types around here for? They should serve their country like the rest of us," said Archie. Archie was getting loud. It was Sunday. Archie always allowed himself to get good and drunk before noon on Sunday. He said it was his form of worship.

"Maybe they need more coffee in the dining room," said Ben. He crossed the hall to the brunch picking up the coffee pot on his way past the buffet table. Micheline smiled happily as she put another pancake on another plate. The dining room was crowded.

The strange young men had finished their meal and had papers spread out across the table. They were laughing at something the real estate agent had said—laughing opened mouth, easy, seemingly unaware of the stir they were causing, unafraid. Unafraid.

As Ben filled their coffee cups, he felt anger rising from his stomach. They were both in their twenties, the age his son would have been, should have been. The anger filled him. Forced him to speak in the ear of the one with the dirty blonde braid and sandals.

"Get the hell out of my hotel," he said. He hadn't meant to say it. He hadn't known it was what he wanted until he said it, but there it was. There they were. Unafraid. Alive. He wanted them out of his sight.

"Hey man. What's the problem?" said the large dark-haired one in the oversized skimmer. Ben placed his accent as Brooklyn. Ben didn't want to hear that accent. Never wanted to hear it again.

"Just go," he said loudly. "Just go."

"OK. OK. Sorry. We don't want trouble. Come on, Hil," the big one said to the smaller one. "We were just going." He spoke affably. The one called Hil smiled and tried to catch Ben's eye. Unsuccessful, he rose to collect his surveyor's papers.

"Come up and see what Findlay and I are building," said Hil to Ben. His accent was softer than his friend's, Vermont maybe. "It's something really new. Like nothing you've ever seen around here." Ben couldn't understand

why they were still smiling. Why they were still looking at him. He turned away.

"Old army guy?" The one called Findlay said under his breath.

Ben went back to the tavern and sat down beside Archie.

"Were you ever in the army, Ben?" Archie asked.

"Yeah."

"Which war?"

"Second."

"Where were you stationed?"

"I'd rather not talk about it."

"You're right. Ain't much point." Archie rubbed the stump of his left arm. "If I knew then what I know now. Ask me if I would have gone," he said. When Ben ran a shaky hand through his hair and didn't answer, Archie said, "In a pig's eye."

* * * * *

When Rachel saw Phoebe get off the bus, she felt homesick for college. Galt was behind the times. Some outlying farms had been without electricity until the late 50s. Ideas, like the electric current, had taken time filtering through. So at first she had been taken aback by the level of open thought that had invaded even that staid conservative Baptist college. She heard things she never expected to hear, read books surreptitiously passed from hand to hand

that she never expected to read. The first months she had hardly slept, her mind racing as she lay on her back on her narrow cot.

Phoebe had been Rachel's roommate and Rachel had immediately loved her firm sense of self, how she argued endlessly with her circle of friends about the evils of the war, the holiness of the civil rights movement, the emancipation of women. Rachel had often felt out of place and inferior, a pale imitation of her father with his narrow views of salvation. She watched how Phoebe did it. How she managed to be.

She and Phoebe had become inseparable even though, or perhaps because, Rachel often resented her own lack of experience in contrast to Phoebe's. She despised herself when she heard her own voice imitating Phoebe's or repeating, as if it were her own thought, something Phoebe had said. Perhaps this was why her pleasure at seeing her friend was mixed with more than a little dread. Although there were other reasons.

Rachel father's had one arm hooked through hers as she waved to Phoebe.

Phoebe, her small definite shoulders set in a straight line, her sensible shoes firmly planted on the ground, her demure gray skirt unwrinkled even after hours on the bus, rushed up to Rachel and hugged her. Rachel's father stood back watching, his arms folded, smiling out of one corner of his mouth.

"What a trip. I haven't made so many bus transfers since I left Africa. I love the sound of French. I didn't realize that so many people here speak it. And so green. It is so green here."

Rachel's father stepped up to take Phoebe's suitcases from the bus driver.

"Are you going to introduce us?" he said. "I haven't met a world traveller before." Rachel hit him playfully but warningly on the shoulder.

"This is my father." Rachel said. She saw Phoebe's sudden flush and then the slight toss of her head that meant that she despised her own insecurity. Phoebe liked to seem fearless but her brashness was really a device to hide an intense shyness that she considered to be her most lamentable weakness.

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When Ben pulled into the laneway that led up a hill through the ragged alders and thorn bushes of an abandoned pasture, he could see the skeletal framework of the new house above him on the ridge. The framework was asymmetrical, lofty, looking like a house cut in half, or a tall ship ready to take wind and sail into the blue. One high side faced south-east and Ben could see framing for immense windows.

"Heard this isn't their first house," said Archie beside him. "Built one in Ontario. Around Alexandria. Sold it for a good price to some darn city people. Probably what they're going to do here."

Ben wondered if Archie no longer considered Ben a city person or had just forgotten.

The laneway had been well-travelled. According to Archie, people from all over the countryside were driving over to see what the two young Americans, Hil and Findlay, were up to.

"Wonder they get any work done," said Archie, who had been out twice; once with Crooked T the postman and his little girl Tater; and once with Mr. Lizotte. He had come back with reports of the fantastic size of the hole they had

dug for the basement, right into the side of the hill, and the massive size of the beams that to his eye had no logical means of support.

Archie had raised an eyebrow when Ben suggested they go have a look at the "hippie haven." Ben regretted telling the two Americans to leave his hotel. He regretted the red-faced scene and had been wondering ever since how to apologize. He was still embarrassed that he had lost his temper in front of so many people. Most people didn't know about what he considered to be his terrible temper. He seemed so even. So quiet. They didn't know he had spent a lifetime trying to control it, and that it boiled and seethed in him, and sometimes, although rarely, got away from him. They didn't know what the quietness of his body, the stillness of his hands and face, hid. Ben imagined himself capable of doing great harm, although in reality he had never struck another person except in war, or said anything hurtful that he had not apologized for.

Hil and Findlay were sharing a beer when Ben drove in.

"Hey Archie," they called out when they saw who was in the passenger side.

Archie angled his way out of the car. Ben opened his door and draped himself over it.

"Where's your crew?" said Archie.

"Had to let them go." Findlay walked toward Ben with an outstretched hand. "Hello, Mr. Goldstein," he said.

"Little question of cash flow," Hil continued for Findlay. "We've got the main muscle stuff done for now."

Abruptly, Ben said, "I've got some work at The Hotel you might be interested in." Archie looked at him in surprise. Ben said, "Might help you out so you could get on with this." To hide his embarrassment he looked around at

the scenery. The building site was high and Ben could see a long way across the rolling hills below him. He could see the Ham Mountains to the north, rounded like sleeping bears. To the west he could make out the shape of Mount Orford and to the south, the Green Mountain range of northern Vermont, blue and indistinct on the horizon.

"What a view. Look," he added in a rush. "I'm sorry I spoke out of turn that time."

A look passed between Hil and Archie. Findlay said, "No problem, Mr. Goldstein. We understand. Totally. It's forgotten." Ben wondered what Archie had told them.

"Right," said Hil. "What kind of work have you got in mind?"

* * * * *

Phoebe hadn't been at the Leonards' house for a week before she began to get restless. She had spoken at Reverend Leonard's Sunday service and had gone on several long walks with Rachel. She had found the Leonard's congregation to be a bit of a disappointment. She told Rachel she thought the old people were more concerned with the ability of Jesus to cure their arthritis than with the poverty and cruelty of the world. What young people there were in the church seemed well scrubbed but lacking in any intellectual understanding of the Lord's message.

As they walked along the edge of the ballpark, the railway tracks, the green streets, Rachel listened to Phoebe pick apart the people Rachel had grown up with. "It's beautiful here, truly," Phoebe had said, "but eventually

you have to say that one leaf is very much like another, one shady path just another path to nowhere." Phoebe said she needed the excitement of the real world—the streets, the want, the hum of other languages, the issues. This world of Rachel's was merely an escape from what was really happening out there.

One afternoon Rachel, in an attempt to keep Phoebe amused, asked to borrow the car. Her father was home from the dealership and was working in his flower beds. Rachel didn't want Phoebe to get into another argument with him. Phoebe and her father were beginning to challenge each other on their knowledge of the scriptures and Rachel was completely sick of the whole thing.

"I want to show Phoebe the countryside," said Rachel.

Simon, who had been combing their mother's hair on the sun porch, called out, "Can I come too?"

The three of them drove away, across the bridge, and out into the afternoon heat beating on the fields. Rachel turned down one dirt road after another, swooping up and down the gravelled hills, making the dust fly house-high behind her. When they met a car coming the other way she called out *Roll up the windows* and everyone rolled up the windows with exaggerated speed. They laughed and called out *Aye, Aye Captain*. When the other car was long past and the dust had settled, they rolled the windows down again. Rachel felt free, as close to a bird as you could come without actually flying. They laughed and told jokes. They stopped to look at horses swishing their tails in the shade of gnarled pig-apple trees. They saw farmers cutting hay and bales going into barns. They drove down driveways just to see what was there, pretending, when they pulled into the yards of farms or hunting camps, that they were lost.

Simon said, "Let's go see the house those hippies are building."

Rachel, her hair flapping in the wind of the open windows, said "Why not?" Phoebe took out a package of cigarettes and lit one.

Simon, in the back seat, said, "You smoke?" Phoebe turned and winked at him.

"Yeah," she said, "I've been dying to light up all week."

Rachel said, "Don't burn the seat. Dad will know."

Ben was toenailing a large spike into a brace above his head, feeling the shock of metal on metal surging up his arm. Archie was hammering below him. Archie straightened up and called to Hil, who was above, straddling a beam, his feet dangling in the air, "Looks like you've got more company."

Hil stood and walked easily along the span and began to climb down. "Anybody you know own a cream-coloured Lincoln Continental?" he asked.

The car pulled into the yard with a flourish, spitting small stones that bounced off the tent that the young men were living in. Two young women and a teenage boy tumbled out laughing. Ben recognized Rachel and Simon. He had seen the other girl walking with Rachel.

The three stood together suddenly silent, blushing. Neither Hil or Findlay were wearing shirts. The only time men around here went shirtless was when they were swimming at the old quarry. Sometimes someone would show up drunk and shirtless for the 1st of July parade but the provincial police always hustled them into their shirts or into the back of the squad car.

The young men quickly filled in the silence. They grabbed shirts and sloughed them on while they chatted about the weather and Rachel's car. They asked the newcomers if they would like some water. Ben realized that Hil and Findlay must be lonely. That the people who visited them were most certainly

all men, older men who challenged their building techniques and talked in loud voices while the younger men hammered and tried to get on with the job. Not young women in their daddy's car.

Ben watched the new girl, Phoebe. She reminded him of his wife Bernice when she was a young woman. Once the men had their shirts on, she recovered her poise and spoke brashly, and brightly, in a curious direct manner, curious in its lack of flirting. Rachel seemed more at ease as she slid to the grass under a nearby tree, although Ben noticed she sometimes imitated Phoebe's gestures and he wondered if she did it unconsciously or if she was mocking her friend. The boy had climbed down the ladder into the new basement. Findlay was keeping one watchful eye on him and the other on the girls.

Ben felt tired and left out. He wanted to go home. "You'll come over and do some measurements?" he said to Hil who had just handed Rachel a glass of water, holding it just a moment longer than necessary as she took it from him,

Hil nodded, "Sure Ben, thanks for helping." As Ben drove away, Archie nodding sleepily on the seat beside him, he looked in the rear-view mirror. He saw Phoebe, Rachel, Hil, and Findlay lounging on the grass. Youth in the lines of their hips and the wave of their hands. Simon was climbing up the side of the framing. When he turned onto the road at the end of the driveway, Ben looked back. He could see Simon sitting on the very top beam, forty feet above the concrete floor of the basement. Rachel was climbing rapidly toward him. Hil wasn't far behind.

* * * * *

Hil and Findlay stretched a tape measure across the tavern floor. Archie was hovering nearby. Ben noticed a twist in Archie's suspenders and he wanted to reach out and straighten it. The receiver of the tavern phone felt warm in Ben's hand, as if it conducted more than cool fragments of sound. Ben drew his hand across the black top of the bar leaving a smear of sweat.

"Will you do it, Ben?" Bernice's voice spoke in his ear. It was crackly and seemed distant. Ben wondered if the static meant the heat of the July afternoon would be lessened by a thunderstorm.

"I don't know, Bernice." Ben felt irked. Bernice hadn't returned his calls for months and now this.

"Twenty-two feet, eight inches," called Findlay to Hil. Hil wrote the numbers down in a small notebook. The tavern seemed dusty in the bright afternoon sunlight. The heat of the sun's rays, coming through the uncurtained windows, warmed the smell of old beer, urine, and vomit that permeated the rubber-tiled floor. The odours seemed to rise like wax in a lava lamp, drifting toward the open windows, bursting when they touched the screens and falling back to the floor. Grasshoppers rubbed their legs together in the tall grass outside. Ben could hear a cricket chirping with annoying regularity somewhere behind the beer refrigerator.

"Look, Ben. His birthdate has just come up in the draft lottery. If we don't do something, they'll send him to Vietnam for sure. I know this kid. He wouldn't have a snowball's chance in hell." Bernice must have been smoking heavily lately. Her voice was raspy, almost mannish. Ben peered into the crack between the refrigerator and the bar sink.

"I don't even know the fellow." Ben could see the cricket way back next to the wall. Behind him Findlay and Hil were measuring the bar, discussing

whether it was worth moving. They were close enough to hear what Ben was saying but they didn't appear to be listening. "I don't know. Why should I stick my neck out for someone like that? I don't know his parents. I don't know his community."

"Ben," interrupted Bernice, "you know me. Do it for me." Archie had moved to the bar and was signalling to Ben that he wanted another quart.

"I'll have to think about it. You'd have to give me more details."

"I'll write to you. I can't tell you over the phone. My line might be tapped."

"For God's sake. Aren't you being a little paranoid? Who would be tapping your phone? Besides, they say it will be over soon." Ben saw Hil straighten and catch Findlay's eye. He thought he saw them nod.

"It's never over, Ben. You left the States. You don't know what it's like anymore. You're up there in your Canadian paradise—living the life of Reilly." Bernice was getting wound up. Ben recognized the signs. Her way to deal with life was to fight. Ben supposed that his way was to run. Bernice hated that. *Why don't you stand up for yourself?* Bernice would say. She'd said that as she packed to leave him, as if fighting her would have made her stay.

"Yeah. I'm living the good life. Away from all of it, and I want it to stay that way. I don't want all that shit coming to visit me here."

"Don't say shit, Ben. It's not nice and you were always a nice man." Bernice snapped. "Think about it, Ben."

"I'll think about it."

"He's my best friend's boy, Ben."

"I thought I was your best friend, Bernice," said Ben.

"Oh, Ben." Bernice sighed. Ben reached in beside the fridge with the broom handle and tried to squash the cricket but it disappeared under the fridge where he couldn't reach it.

Bernice said, "I read this story once about Rudyard Kipling. He really admired the warrior—fighting for king, country, the white man and all that. During the First World War, he pushed his son to enlist and after his son was killed in France, Kipling wrote a poem about how he had gone to his death with a smile on his lips. Can you imagine that? His son was dead but he still clung to the idea that the whole thing was noble. But there was this friend—a boy who had been with Kipling's son at the front—who saw Kipling's son, on the day he died, staggering away from the front. The bottom half of his face was gone and he was struggling with his bandages." Bernice took a large ragged breath. "The boy was sobbing, crying for his mother. That was the last this friend saw of him. He never told anyone. He thought it would have been too cruel if the boy's father heard the story. That it would have destroyed Kipling and all he believed in."

"Rudyard Kipling was a fortunate man," said Ben.

"I know," said Bernice.

* * * * *

"Murder is part of God's world," Reverend Leonard shouted. "Does that make the murderer holy?" Rachel looked at Phoebe who sat in the light of the bay window upright and uncowed on a straight backed chair.

"Yes." Not *yes sir*, or *yes, Reverend Leonard*. Just an uplift of her firm little chin, a narrowing of her almond-shaped eyes and a firm unequivocal Yes. Rachel's father, unaccustomed to disrespect, stood up from his place at the table.

"Homosexuality is an abomination in the eyes of the Lord. It says so in the Bible." Rachel's father lowered his voice, aware of the open windows, the way sound travels on the still hot air of the dinner hour. He placed his hands on the table and leaned forward.

Rachel could see that Phoebe's right leg was trembling, not with fear Rachel knew, but with indignation. Simon had stopped eating and was looking from his father to Phoebe, his eyebrows knit, colour rising into his crewcut. Their mother had left the room the minute the conversation had turned to dangerous ground.

"You can find quotes in the Bible to support any position you choose to take. You can find passages that seem to justify torture, deceit, hatred, misogyny, but those are not the passages that matter. What matters is that Jesus said that he lives in the least of us and when we love the least we love him."

"Would you share a room with a lesbian? Would you let a homosexual be a minister?"

"Yes and yes. I have done both. In fact our youth ministry leader is gay." Rachel pushed the green beans around her plate. Phoebe wasn't exactly telling a lie but Rachel knew that in both cases she was referring to herself.

Rachel's father's hands went up to grasp his ears as if to keep his temper contained. He stepped away from the table and turned in a quick, agitated spiral and then came to a stop looking, not at Phoebe, but at his daughter Rachel. She couldn't meet his eyes. He was no fool. He often said that,

"I am no fool. I have seen it all and done it all. Do not think you can ever fool me."

"Rachel," he said slowly. "Do you have something to say? Why do you suddenly find your beans so interesting?"

Rachel sighed and looked up at him. She tried to make her face not mirror the suspicion, the alarm in his. She tried to make it full of love and understanding.

"Is this what you have been learning at college? To accept abomination?" Rachel heard the implication in his tone, the fear that she might tell him something that he couldn't accept, something that he would have to condemn even though it would break his heart to do it. "I'm waiting."

"Rachel's not gay if that's what you mean," said Phoebe. Her fingers lost control of the spoon she was holding and it spun across the tablecloth and hit Simon's waterglass. Her eyes were suddenly wet. "But I am."

There was a long silence. Simon seemed to be making himself small, hoping no one would notice him and send him out of the room but at the same time wishing someone would.

"Leave my house. Pack your bags and go."

"Daddy. Where will she go?" said Rachel. "There's no bus 'til tomorrow morning. Where will she go?"

"To hell, I suppose," he said.

"Daddy," said Rachel. "You don't mean that. You know you don't."

"I don't care where she goes. I will not have my family spend another night with her under my roof." Reverend Leonard's voice shook. "I am very disappointed. I thought that college would be good for you. They will be hearing from me about this young woman and you will not be returning in the fall."

"Daddy. You'll get Phoebe expelled. Don't call. Daddy. Please." Phoebe had turned white.

"You can't expect me to turn my back on my convictions, Rachel. She is a dangerous influence." He sat back down at his plate. "Finish your meal," he said. Phoebe got up and ran from the room. Simon, Rachel, and their father listened to her footsteps running up the stairs.

Rachel had never been inside The Hotel and as she followed Phoebe through the wide front door with its peeling paint, she still had no intention of entering the place. Phoebe didn't pause. Her small neat fingers closed on the dirty brass of the door knob in the same instant she stepped up to it and pushed. Rachel didn't have time to wonder what Phoebe would have done if the door hadn't given way. She followed Phoebe's trim calves into the front hallway.

On the right was a door opening into an empty office. There was a lamp on in there and Rachel could see a counter of dark wood and a bank of empty mail cubbies. In front of them, on the left side of the hall, were broad stairs that sloped treacherously away from the wall like steps on a listing ship. There was a landing partway up where a small chair sat. Above the chair hung a portrait of the Queen's parents.

The bar was on her left and Rachel, hoping no one would recognize her, looked in. In the bar, dark window blinds had been pulled down against the last piercing rays of the setting sun. Patterns of rose and orange made by the holes and tears in the shades, mottled the opposite wall and stippled the floor.

Rachel saw a woman in a tight sweater and wide-legged trousers leaning across a table to talk to her friends. The woman's breasts rested on the Formica tabletop and one long fingernail traced a pattern in a circle of condensation. A man sat beside her and he had a large arm around her shoulder. His other hand was on her upper thigh. He wasn't talking but looking absently over the shoulders of their table companions. The hand on the woman's thigh was moving up, crawling finger over finger toward the woman's crotch.

The man caught Rachel looking at his hand and a slow malicious smile spread across his face. While he held Rachel's eyes, he stabbed his hand deliberately between the woman's legs. At the same time he slipped his other hand from her shoulder, down to her breast. His hand covered the breast and he squeezed.

Rachel couldn't stop looking. She stared back into those eyes, thrilled, a voyeur, a sinner. The woman shrugged away the hand on her breast and cried out in a shrill laugh as she slapped the man on his stomach. Rachel heard her say, "You dirty thing," but the woman didn't make him move the hand from between her thighs. He kissed the woman noisily on the neck and Rachel looked away.

Down the hall, past the stairs, bright light spilled from the door to the tavern—a bright green light, nasty and cold. Rachel heard loud male voices and the click of pool balls. Phoebe looked around for a bell to ring and, not finding any, started down the hall toward the tavern.

Rachel put down Phoebe's bag. "I should go," she said catching at Phoebe's arm and pulling her back.

"No. No. Wait a minute. Wait until I've got my room." Phoebe's eyes were grayish brown, flecked with green. Rachel saw them shining under the bare

dim bulb of the hall. Phoebe was frightened, shy, still upset by her confrontation with Rachel's father, by his refusal to lend Rachel the car, and by the long exposed walk, suitcases in hand, through town.

"I should go," repeated Rachel. "Someone might see me here."

Phoebe touched her arm and whispered "courage". It was what they whispered to each other on midnight raids on the dormitory kitchen, or before walking past a group of war protesters on the courthouse steps near the college. It is what they whispered before exams. Rachel started to giggle and Phoebe did a little warrior's dance, bending at the waist and patting her mouth with her hand.

Ben Goldstein appeared in the tavern door. Rachel saw him walk toward them and had the peculiar impression, as he moved from the bright light of the tavern through the shadows of the hall, of watching someone disassembling. He seemed to become less distinct as he drew closer to them until he almost disappeared in the gloom before reappearing under the hall light. He crossed his arms loosely over his chest, not a defiant gesture but a shy one. Rachel could see his thinness, his withdrawal. He seemed unwilling to engage them in conversation but at the same time he seemed kind and open. Rachel thought of Catholic saints, those who suffered until they seemed to fade away.

"Can I help you?" he said respectfully. He didn't call them young ladies or girls. Perhaps he thought that the usual rural greeting would be too familiar or condescending. Phoebe was suddenly wordless, disarmed by his eyes, his lack of hearty, aggressive local irony, and she turned to Rachel for help.

"My friend needs a room for the night, Mr. Goldstein." Rachel looked him in the eyes, the way her father had taught her to look whenever talking

to adults. *Don't look down, they'll think you are hiding something. Look them in the eyes. Look at them with respect.* He gave her a nod of encouragement. She smiled.

Ben returned her smile, warmly, as if he was one of her father's best friends and there was nothing unusual about her standing in his seedy hallway, asking for a room.

"Could she see the tower room, please?" Rachel held Phoebe's elbow.

Ben Goldstein reached for Phoebe's bags and said, "It would be my pleasure." If he thought there was a problem he didn't let on. He said to Phoebe, "I think you will find it very comfortable. We have recently installed air conditioning."

Phoebe shook herself and squared her shoulders. "Thank you, Mr. Goldstein." She looked at Rachel. "You'll come to see it too, won't you?"

Rachel thought of her father pacing back and forth in the living room and her mother in her darkened bedroom, picking compulsively at the counterpane of her bed. She thought of the man in the bar with his hand between the woman's legs. She looked up at the poorly-lit stairs, listing off into the unknown above. She looked at Mr. Goldstein's reedy back as he carried the suitcases ahead of them up the stairs. She looked at the corded muscles of his forearms below his rolled-up shirt sleeves.

"Of course," she said, hearing her own voice as an imitation of her friend's. As she followed Ben Goldstein up the stairs, her arm brushed repeatedly against Phoebe's small tight shoulder.

The trap door closed behind them and they were alone.

"Oh. My. It is so cool in here," said Phoebe. "I hardly remember being cool."

Rachel said, "I should go now."

Phoebe repeated, "It's so cool. You could imagine you were anywhere else but here." She looked Rachel boldly in the eye and said, "Courage. Stay."

Rachel turned away and, because she felt her head uncomfortably close to the roof, she sat down quickly on the bed. When she looked down through the windows, set almost at floor level, she saw mostly the garage and the textile mill. She laid down on the coverlet with her head at the foot and her feet on the pillows. Turning onto her stomach, she looked out the windows again.

At this angle she could see across the rooftops and the trees of her hometown. She could see to the jewel-blue eastern horizon where a star hung, turning like a lighthouse beacon. If she turned her head, she could see out the western window where the deep peach colour of the last of a sunset still stained the sky and silhouetted the trees—a peach the colour of the webbing between your fingers when you hold your hand over a lit flashlight in a darkened room, a colour of pulsing blood and contained, secret life. Bats flitted from under the eaves and she saw the street lights come on. Across the far valley beyond the town, farmhouse lights flickered.

"I've never seen it like this," she said. "The town. It's unreal. Like it's been scooped up and put on a different planet, a different plane." Rachel felt benevolent, understanding, a child looking at an ant hill, a god looking at the farmers of Greece. She could almost forget the wet smears of soil on her father's face when he turned back to weeding his roses while she and Phoebe walked away. His knees had made dents in the scorched grass of the lawn.

Phoebe laid down beside her and put her hand on the back of Rachel's neck, resting it there until Rachel looked at her. Phoebe's small chin quivered

and her eyes glistened. Then she kissed Rachel tenderly on the lips. Phoebe had never done this before, even though they had shared a room for eight months.

Before tonight Rachel would have recoiled, leapt from the bed and wiped her lips, ashamed and afraid, but the room seemed so otherworldly, the night so strange, that Rachel didn't think; she followed the urge that started at her lips and reached through her whole body. She pulled Phoebe to her, holding her close while she kissed her. They laid like that, mouth on mouth, hip to hip, barely breathing, until Phoebe said, "Come with me. Don't go home. Come with me."

"No. I can't. I don't want to." Rachel felt both elated and ashamed. Elated by the role reversal, the control she felt, if only for a moment, of her relationship with her friend, of her body, of the round room and her own voice. Ashamed, not that she was doing something her father and her religion would find disgusting, but that she was doing something that was deceitful to the girl beside her. Rachel thought of Hil helping her to coax Simon down from the high beam where he had frozen, like a cat high in a tree, unable to come down. She pictured his wiry hands as he caught at Simon's shirt and softly, confidently, talked him down.

Phoebe rolled away.

"I see."

Rachel got up and straightened her dress. Phoebe wouldn't look at her. Rachel opened the trap door and started down the stairs. She turned on the third step.

"Will you write me?" Rachel knew that she sounded like her mother asking her father if he would be home for supper.

"I certainly will. And as soon as you can, you must leave this horrible town and come and join me. You'll see. There will be so much we can do."

Phoebe had recovered her composure.

Rachel called over her shoulder as she descended the staircase, letting the trap door drop gently back into place above her head, "Good bye."

In the sitting room below, Archie Combs woke up with a start. Rachel saw his head snap forward, the questing of his old eyes. He didn't seem to see her as she reached the bottom stair. She strode purposely past him, fighting the urge to break into a run. She walked through the hall, past the closed doors behind which she could hear horking, to the top of the main stairwell. Ben Goldstein was on the top stair and he nodded at her.

Rachel stopped on the sidewalk and looked up at the windows of the Hotel. Night had fallen—fallen like a blanket, fallen like relief, the sun's absence a release. Above her head, lights glowed in the tower bedroom. Rachel could see Phoebe's shadow crossing back and forth. Rachel heard the hum of the air conditioner.

Rachel turned and began walking. The night was thick, warm, and humid. There were few cars on the street. Sounds spilled out from the open windows and the screen doors. Rachel heard dishes being washed and saw the heads of women bent over sinks. She heard the laugh tracks on the televisions and rock music from an upstairs window. A baby crying, the creak of a porch rocking chair, a car door slam. In the park on the corner, older children were swinging one last time before they ran home. She heard children calling, *see you tomorrow*. She heard Madame Loiseau calling her children home. She

smelled green green grass, green trees, green all around her, sighing in relief, breathing and stretching into the air.

There was release in her walk and she stopped for a moment behind a large maple and hiked up her skirt. She rolled down her pantyhose, slipping them off her legs. She balled them up and mashed them into the toe of one of her shoes. Barefoot, she swung her shoes in one hand and felt the warmth of the pavement, the cool of the lawn grass on her unaccustomed soles.

In front of the Anglican Church, not far from the intersection where she would turn left toward the bridge below town and home, was the Manse Pond. In the daylight it reflected the white-trimmed red brick of the church. To the right was the manse, and on the left, the new beige funeral home. At night, a streetlight shone through the leaves of a large maple tree and fell like light from a stained glass window across the pond's surface. At night you couldn't see the wound in the tree's side that had been made by Nilda Leonard's car.

There were four 13-year-old boys fishing in the pond, their bikes leaning against the lamppost. One of them was Simon. Rachel felt love for these boys—for the way they dared the rules, trying to catch the minister's fish that he had stocked the pond with for the Sunday School Fishing Derby in August. She loved their short hair and dungarees, the skinny certainty of their hips, the whispered *hey I nearly got one*. A clan, a tribe that she wished she could join.

She went up to them, intending to ask them pleasantly what they thought they were doing, to gently tell Simon it was time to head home, to shoo the other boys away from trouble.

Simon turned and saw her. His nose wrinkled up, his eyes narrowed and then a laugh that started low in his throat and then cracked at his Adams apple, hurled like spit from his crooked teeth.

"Ha. Hey Rach. Did you get the lezzie bedded down for the night?"

Rachel lost her temper, quickly, the way you lose your temper with your sibling, a way that seems out of the blue unless you consider all the peltings with apple cores, all the dogged repetition of your words, all the milk spilled on purpose, the bad words written on the fly-leaf of her Bible, the crossed eyes, the open-mouthed chewing. Her temper fed on how placid and loving she had felt just a moment before.

"How dare you? Get on your bike right now and go home," she hissed at Simon. Her shoulders were shaking with anger and Simon, surprised but jubilant, crowed,

"What's the matter, lezzie? Does your little girlfriend have to go home?"

Rachel's hand came up ready to hit him. She saw the defiance in Simon's eyes. She remembered the misery she had seen there earlier over the supper table. The other boys wound up their lines, tucked their fish hooks in the eyelets, and turned toward her. They were grinning. Looking at her like she was new prey. Like a fish out of water. A frog to skin alive. Rachel walked away, her anger a hard rock in her chest, her eyes filling with frustrated tears.

"Cunt breath," yelled Simon and the boys picked up the refrain. Delighted, they called after her, "Cunt breath, cunt breath."

She walked faster. It seemed to her that all the radios, and all the TVs in the houses went suddenly quiet, that dishes stopped clinking and people were peering out their windows.

Then she heard the whirr of bicycles behind her.

Over her shoulder she could see Simon and his friends pedalling after her. They steered their bikes with one hand and held their fishing rods with the other. They pedalled with a leisurely masculine control and they were gaining on her. They were calling out, *lezzie* and *pussy breath* but not so loudly now, aware that people were listening behind the closed screen doors. Rachel bit the inside of her cheek and began to run, her bare feet hitting awkwardly on small stones.

The moment she began to run she knew she shouldn't have because, like dogs shadowing a cat, the minute she began to run the boys were after her. Standing up on their pedals, they put on speed. Rachel ran down the hill toward the bridge. The boys caught up with her where the road went through a wooded lot near the river. They circled in front of her, trying to make her stop. One of them poked her with the end of his fishing pole. She would remember, even through her anger and fear, how beautiful they looked, circling, not touching, taut and confident, as graceful as birds.

Under a weak flickering street light, Rachel turned and screamed at her brother, "Shut up. Just shut up." Tears ran down her chin and dripped under her collar. Simon poked at her with his fishing rod. She dropped her shoes and grabbed at the pole with both hands and pulled. Simon didn't let go but did a little hopping sidestep, throwing one leg over his bike, managing somehow not to lose his balance.

"Ohhhh she's mad," sang the other boys as Simon landed two-footed on the ground, his bike crashing sideways away from him.

"Hey," yelled Simon. He pulled back on his fishing rod. "You're going to break it. Let go."

Rachel pulled harder and Simon lunged forward with one hand grabbing the rod where the double-sided fish hook was loosely fastened to a

guide loop. He gasped and his voice turned panicky. "I'm caught, Rachel. I've got the hook in my hand. Stop pulling."

"No shit," said one of the other boys. "Look, it's bleeding."

Rachel stopped pulling, and in the silence that followed, she could hear the water below the bridge and the heavy breathing of both herself and Simon. The other boys jumped on their bikes and took off, pedalling hard, leaning over their handlebars. Simon took a deep breath and went white. He hated blood. He especially hated the thought of fingers and blood.

"Is it in deep?" he said, turning his face away. His lower lip was trembling.

Rachel turned his hand over. One side of the double fish hook was imbedded in Simon's palm, the barb sideways through the pad below his index finger. Blood trickled down his wrist. The barb was anchored there, impossible to pull back out and through without ripping his hand wide open.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Tears welled up in Simon's eyes.

"Rachel. I'm sorry."

Rachel looked at the hook while Simon held the pole so that it wouldn't pull at it. Rachel wiggled the hook a little as she released the other barb from the guide loop on the pole. Simon cried out.

"I'm sorry, Rachel."

"Stop saying that," Rachel snapped. She thought about getting home. She had no way of cutting the line. She would have to walk Simon home attached to the fishing pole. She would have to tell her father. They both would be punished, although it would be worse for Simon because her father thought Rachel too old for the strap. She thought of the leather strap that hung on the wall beside the kitchen stove and the tears that would start from her father's eyes as he strapped Simon's bare palms. Of her mother going silently up to her

bedroom and locking the door. Of God's name being invoked. Of Phoebe on the morning bus ready to do battle against all who would hurt the weakest. "Stop crying. I won't tell. Can you cut the line with your jackknife?"

"I lost it. Don't tell Dad but I lost it."

"I'll buy you a new one," Rachel said. The strap punished carelessness as easily as cruelty. "Don't blubber."

They both heard footsteps coming toward them. "I'll pick up your bike," said Rachel, "We'll look like you're just walking me home. Dad'll have pliers in the garage." Then she saw it was Ben Goldstein.

"Nice night," he said to them as he came up to them. Rachel saw him wince when he saw their tears. He looked at the blood on Simon's wrist and he said, "What can I do to help you?"

"We're caught," Rachel said simply.

* * * * *

Ben had heard the ruckus of boys on bikes, the words indistinct. He had left the hotel after the Leonard girl had barrelled down the stairs and out the door. Not that he was following her. He usually took a walk after dinner. Archie had waddled down the stairs to tend the bar and tavern but the only people who would need serving were the two out-of-town couples who had come in for a drink. They thought that no one would talk about the fact that the women were dancers in a club in the neighbouring town and the men both recently separated from their wives. One of the men had asked him how

much he would charge the four of them for a couple of hours in the tower room. Ben had told him the price was way beyond their reach.

The rest of the customers were regulars, after-work pool players and residents of the hotel. They helped themselves to beer and left the money by the cash. Honourably, thought Ben. An honourable lot.

Rachel and Simon Leonard were standing at the edge of a pool of light cast by a street lamp. Ben caught sight of them as he rounded the corner and started down toward the bridge. The boy's bike lay flat on the pavement beside him and the two were holding a fishing pole between them. Ben could see that both brother and sister were crying and trying hard not to.

Ben, seeing the boy's tears, had the urge to cry himself. The sight of a boy, that close to being a man but still all skinny arms and legs, trying not to cry but not succeeding, always affected him that way. He would give them anything, give anything, to stop the crying, to stop the things that made them cry. He approached them, looking for a broken fishing pole, a skinned knee.

He saw Rachel's discarded shoes. One of her toes was bleeding. She must have been running, he thought. Her blouse had wide hemispheres of sweat under the arms. He saw blood running down the boy's wrist but still didn't understand what was wrong until Rachel said "We're caught."

"So I see. Hold on a minute. I've got my jackknife on me." He patted his pockets in a showy manner. He knew his knife was in his left pants pocket but he wanted to take the boy's attention away from his wound. "Oh, here it is." He saw the boy's eyes widen at the sight of his Swiss Army knife. "21 functions," he said. "First let's cut the line."

After the fishing line was cut, Ben took Simon's hand in his and looked carefully at the hook.

"Darn, it's a double and it hasn't gone all the way through. Where the heck did you get a double hook? I don't know the last time I saw one. You know, a hook is like a porcupine quill. It goes in really easy but the barb on the end keeps it from going back." He saw the boy wipe his eyes on the shoulder of his T-shirt, pulling up the fabric with his free hand. Ben felt tears start in his own eyes. He cleared his throat.

Rachel was very still. She said, "My father can't see it."

"We'll have to push the barb all the way through," Ben said, "so we can cut the barb off the hook. Then we'll be able to draw the thing back and out." Simon exchanged a solemn look with his sister. Each of the families in this town, Ben thought, each household, held a world of recriminations, interactions, pasts—all hidden. "I think I have a wire cutter on this knife."

"Simon faints," said Rachel.

Ben looked at Simon's face, pale beneath the freckles. "He won't," Ben said firmly as he studied Simon's palm. "Are you any good at painting, Simon? I need someone to help me with some painting at The Hotel." He talked on, trying to make Simon listen to the sound of his voice, making his voice calming, hypnotic. "Hil and Findlay are going to be doing a lot of work for me. I want to move the tavern into the back. Enlarge the dining room and make the bar bigger so I can have live music in there."

"Dad would never let me." Simon drew a ragged breath and looked at his sister, his pupils dilated. With a firm push, Ben poked the barb the rest of the way through the pad of Simon's palm. Simon choked back a sob and then stuffed his free hand into his mouth.

"You OK, Simon?" said Ben. He could see the veins sticking out on Simon's neck. Ben opened the wire cutters on his knife. "Try to hold his hand

steady while I snap it. It will take a fair amount of force," he told Rachel.

"Simon, this is going to hurt."

Rachel held Simon's wrist tightly in one hand, his fingers with her other one. Ben heard Simon's sharp intake of breath, a whimper as he applied pressure to the hook. He knew he was hurting him but the boy didn't cry out. The barb of the hook broke off with a snap. "Now we have to draw the hook back."

"Let me do it," Simon said. His voice shook. "I'd rather." Rachel released his hand and looked around for the broken barb. When she found it, she wrapped it carefully in a piece of tissue from her pocket.

"Just watch you don't catch the other hook on your good hand." Ben watched as Simon wiggled the hook and pulled it sideways. Once he had it started, he pulled firmly, making it curve back through the wound. Blood pulsed behind it.

"Now we should wash it," said Ben. He took the hook from Simon and dropped it into his shirt pocket. "You did good, Simon. Real good."

They angled off into the woods and down a steep path that led below the bridge. Ben told the boy to hold his hand in the cold running water. Simon hissed against his teeth as he plunged his hand below the surface. Ben saw the river curling down in the dark from the textile dam. He felt the cool air rising from the rush of it. Air like air-conditioned air. Air that would pull through you and leave you empty and clean.

"I could paint for you." Rachel was squatting on a rock, swishing her own hand back and forth in the water—a cool pale ghost of a hand under the dark gray surface.

"Would your father let you?" Ben sat and leaned against a tree stump, his wrists dangling over the cliff of his boney knees.

"I can make up my own mind." She looked over her shoulder at him, her brown hair falling over her eyes. "If I can't find a job here, I'll have to go away. And I don't want to go. I want to stay here."

"Not me," said Simon, holding his hand up to inspect it. The stars had come out. There were so many, so thick, that the night was brightened by them. "When I'm eighteen, I'm out of here." Simon held his hand back under the water. The skin around the puncture was turning white. The bleeding had almost stopped.

Ben looked up at the stars above them. Trees brushed the star-worried dark. The air was humid and swam with the sounds of tiny insects. You could almost imagine yourself at the other end of the world, by the sluggish flow of a tropical river, beneath the trees of a rain forest, waiting, waiting for the pain to go away.

"I want to stay here too," Ben said.

Rachel helped Simon put his bike away. When their father, sounding hollow and cleaned out, like someone who has been crying hysterically, asked what had happened to Simon's hand, Rachel said, "He caught it on a nail. I'll wrap it up." Her father was sitting at the dining room table writing a sermon for Sunday. Rachel pulled his head to her and hugged him. "I'll see if Mom needs anything. Don't worry."

When Ben got home, he phoned Bernice. Phoned her from the tavern phone, with Archie listening in drunken bleeriness. Hil and Findlay were there, chalking their pool cues and looking away. He listened to her hard,

sharp voice, and thought of Phoebe, exiled and pacing high in the tower room.

"Oh Ben, I knew you would," she sighed.

Rachel let herself into her mother's room. She sat down beside her on the bed and took her hand. The room smelled of lavender and clothes stored in trunks. There was a crumple of underclothes and nightclothes on the floor. A noticeable lack of maleness.

"On Sunday, Mum, we're going to the brunch at The Grand Terrace Hotel," Rachel said. Her mother looked at a spot over Rachel's shoulder.

"How nice," she murmured.