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**The Cause of Diamonds  
Part 1**

**Patra Reiser**

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in  
The Department  
of  
English

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **The Cause of Diamonds Part 1**

**Patra Reiser**

**The Cause of Diamonds** depicts the emotional and mental breakdown of a young woman in contemporary Montreal. The two-part novel reflects a narrator endeavouring to harmonise her consciousness with her environment. Mia Diamond, narrator of the novel, is the offspring of a Canadian mother and a Greek father.

In Part I, the adult Mia takes the reader on a journey back to her childhood. Much of Part I takes place in the ancestral land of her father. The world of her extended paternal family is one of superstition and myth, where the names of the ancient Greek Gods are evoked regularly. There is a belief in fate, and the uselessness of fighting against predestination. While sifting through the labyrinth of her memories, Mia alternately reconstructs and revises an assembly of scenes and images, all the while struggling between appearance and reality. At the heart of the novel, the scene to which she constantly returns and which is ultimately the climax of the novel, is the scene of a family birthday dinner where a tragedy occurs.

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**F**ROM THE STREET, it's a normal, well-maintained house: two-story white clapboard, with blue shutters and a small front porch, sitting squarely in the middle of a large lot. Ordinarily, the house would look quite similar to the rest, if not in style, then in spirit. But for the fact that ours, or rather his, had a magnificent garden surrounding it. The garden arrived with my grandmother, after my mother had died. She planted ferns and climbing vines in the front and sides, mounting riots of tangled purples and violets and whites. She had also brought some Narcissus native to her country, more purple and white, as if she wanted to curtain the house from the neighbours. Yet, she chose to cover it in the colour of bruises. Between the shutters, she had made window boxes full of red and scarlet geraniums. Around the back of the house, however, it was all vegetables. In the back, where only the family could see, there was no room for frivolous beauty. She and my father had planted beans and zucchini and eggplant and tomatoes, naturally. What Mediterranean-style garden could properly call itself a garden without tomatoes? Tomatoes and grape vines, of which there was a profusion covering the back porch, so that sunlight never seemed to enter the kitchen anymore. But these aren't the memories that dwell in my mind.

The thing I most remember is the silence of the house after my mother had left this world. On the one hand, it was welcomed, trust me. The silence, not her death. But while she was still with us the house moved; it danced with the sounds she made. The life with which she filled it was like a golden light dappling the rooms. She always played music. She didn't have a favourite, she'd listen to



everything: classical, country, easy listening, jazz. "For company". When my father came home from work, he'd turn it down, or off completely, saying it gave him a headache after a long day at work, the mysterious place he went to every day, and came home from, in a foul mood. The rooms darkened, just a little.

But after she died, the house closed in on itself. No more bright lace curtains, always open to let the rest of the neighborhood in. My grandmother did the opposite of my mother; she made the outside beautiful, caring more about what others thought than about what made us happy. No more filmy see-through fabric on the windows. Now the blinds stayed closed. Always closed. Dark and murky. The thick dining room.

The beginning of the --

When I close my eyes, I see the same portrait: a big table laden with food, heavy drapes pulled closed to block out the world. Dark, unadorned walls with a china cabinet, dusty and smudged. And the smells fill my head too; the smell still sickens me: garlic and vinegar, honey and whisky. The old lady with her hands gripping her face and the tall man with the puffy eyes, his hands raised aloft, a yell cut short in his throat. I can't breathe. *Oh, God, I can't breathe.* The room blurs around me, the candles flicker, voices meld together, everything starts spinning. I am swimming through this thick air: colours, dark red, the taste of rust, my grandmother, why is she screaming? The room closes in, like a box, a tomb. I have to get out of here, enclosed, I'm suffocating, there is no sound ...

Sometimes, I take a step back and watch myself there. Sitting here in this café, drinking by myself while waiting, the memories push into the front of my head like slivers of spiked ice. I try looking out the window on to St. Laurent hoping

that real concrete images, like these people walking by, will push them out. But still they come. I see a little girl with a big blue book bag and shiny MaryJanes walking into the house, eager and hesitant all at once.

The past begins to blur.

Being a Friday night, I was allowed to stay up later than usual. The lights were off and only the blue glow of the TV illuminated us, my father in his recliner, my mother on the couch, and me, nestled into the crook of her arm. Marie was singing she was a little bit country and Donny sang back that he was a little bit rock and roll. I munched on a sweet cookie, feeling cozy and warm under my mom's arm.

"Isn't there something a little weird about them?" my father's voice came out of the eerie glow as he sipped from his whiskey. The ice tinkled like bells.

"What do you mean?" my mother replied.

"They're pretty touchy-feely with each other," his voice sounded like a smirk, television-blue lips curving upward.

My mother laughed. "Oh, come on."

We sat in silence for a few more minutes. Marie now sang *Paper Roses*.

"They've always got their arms around each other," he continued. "They can't stop petting each other. I've never seen such devotion."

It didn't seem odd to me. "That's because they're brother and sister, Daddy," I explained, trying to be helpful. I wasn't sure he was aware of that fact.

"I *know* that, Mia. And I'm talking to your mother."

Her arm tightened around me. "Chris." A gentle admonishment.

My stomach soured just a little. I knew something was wrong but not what it was: the smirk on his face, the cute young couple hugging each other with big toothy grins, the slightly slurred words of my father, and mother's face showing her disappointment, brief though it lasted.

It was the week before we were due to leave and it was passing foggily. I was so excited I could barely sleep, imagining how happy the relatives would be to see us. We lived half a world away, in a different land. We didn't speak the same language. Well, I did. I was to be my mom's interpreter and I was happy to have this job. Proud to do something so important for her. I was determined not to let her down.

My mother wanted me not to lose touch with any of my father's culture even though he himself avoided it. He had no friends of the same background, never went into the ethnic neighbourhoods where most of immigrants settled and never went out of his way to keep in contact with his family. My mother was responsible for keeping the link to his Greek culture strong. She admired its richness, its history, its majesty, as she called it. "You come from the cradle of civilisation, never forget that," she exhorted. I find that funny now, when I see the Greeks shopping on Park Avenue or in their backyards, screeching at each other. In fact, I used to have an old Greek neighbour who always threatened me with the most bizarre things, like he was going to hang my liver from a tree if I didn't turn my music down or keep control of my dog. I decided to let him see me sprinkling some strange concoction of herbs and things around my door, and draw his own conclusions. He finally stopped his weird warnings, muttering to himself whenever he saw me. The two didn't appear to go hand in hand in my mind, the classical and cultured ancients and the common immigrants of everyday Montreal. They were as separate as olive oil and mineral water.

Her bedtime stories always took colourful exotic twists and turns, with Minotaurs chasing maidens, geese, and the fragrance of wild oregano filling the air. I could smell the hyacinths abounding in her fictional realm. As a little child I watched her, enraptured, as she spun her fables, her eyes shining like emeralds, sparks of light glimmering. My father had no interest in such stories and tried to

stop her. It was as if he wanted to forget where he came from in order to fit in here. He never made friends with people from 'the old country', preferring to socialise with the natives. He didn't want to acknowledge his difference, perhaps thinking that it would stop him from getting ahead, whatever that meant. He was hyper-aware of other people's comments or looks. He reminded me sometimes of how Woody Allen thought people were calling him a Jew when all they were asking was "Did you?" Vigilantly on the lookout for sly innuendo.

"Why fill her head with those old stories?" he demanded. It was too late. She had me eating out of the palm of her hand. More, more I always seemed to be begging. It was never enough. It never is. Having the things we love, the people we adore more than ourselves, around.

SCHOOL WAS FINISHING that week for the summer. At home, suitcases were everywhere, filled with the presents we would convey across the ocean, courtesy of Olympic Airways. They must not have VCRs and such toys over there, I concluded. Poor people. My poor cousins. How lucky they were to have us living here so that we could take them these blessings. My father was even going to ship a microwave oven. I imagined their gratitude and felt very magnanimous and proud. Transported back to our homeland, we would arrive bearing gifts.

"Olympic is the best. You don't make any stops anywhere, and they're the safest." My father inhaled his Craven 'A', talking with my mother as she folded clothes gently one on top of another. (He liked to speak in superlatives.) "The minute you get on the plane, you're already there. They'll serve you a nice drink, you'll have some good food, and paff – before you know it, the plane is landing."

His 'rrr's barely rolled. "I wish you were coming with us, Chris." She looked up at him, her blue eyes troubled. Biting her lower lip, she added: "I don't think your mother likes me very much."

"Ach, come on. Don't be ridiculous! Of course she loves you. She knows how much I love you and that's enough for her." He tried to joke away her concerns.

She shrugged, "I don't know."

"Besides, my love, I have to work. I can't take any time off. And they are all clamouring to see our little monkey," he barely glanced at me while he said this. Little monkey. Funny how it sounded cute.

\*

Sometimes now in my adult life, chronology loses meaning. The sorting, the ordering of my memories is a foreign function. I pass a lot of evenings like this, with a sour stomach, wretched nerves and a clock inching tediously towards the dawn. I can't think in actual measurements: is it days, weeks, is it years? I see the world outside changing, the leaves fluid with colour and the dark sky rumbling while I lie in bed, sometimes for days at a stretch. But I can't sleep. Insomnia is a terrible thing, almost as terrible as beauty. Nothing is more disorienting. I lie awake running my tongue over my teeth, over and over, counting them.

\*

At school, I told all the girls about my upcoming vacation. I stupidly assumed that they would be excited and happy for me. Little girls always pack together like dogs with the most dominant deciding the pecking order. Karin Bosley was our leader. A short girl with massive blue eyes and an upturned nose like a ski jump. She was bossy and mean. But so cute that all the boys loved her, pinching her, stealing her pencils and paper, all the suave moves to get her attention. The rest of us were in awe of Karin and did everything she said. Her dad was a cop, giving her an even greater aura of glamour. Sometimes he'd drop her off at

school in his cop car, deeply impressing the other kids who had to ride the buses or walk to school. I was both afraid of her and desperately wanted her approval. Everything about her was perfect. Her hair was straight. She had freckles across her nose. Freckles! I wanted freckles too. Sometimes at night in my room I'd take a black marker and tap little dots on my face. But I just looked ridiculous, not cute. Grimy. Her name, too, was pleasing and delicate: *Karin*. It rolled so prettily off one's tongue. Not like mine. Mia. It meant 'one' in Greek. It sounded like a grunt. I liked staring at her when I thought no one would notice.

Spring was unusually warm, and the sun was bright and crisp everyday. In the mornings, we'd gather by the farthest tree in the school yard, discussing very important matters. Like who we were going to sit beside, who could have lunch with us. Karin made these judgments and we always waited for her arrival before final decisions were made. I was nervous, butterflies in my stomach. Please, oh please, don't let her pick on me. Let it be Debbie, or Lisa, or Suzy. We'd watch her approach, trying to see her eyes. Where they would settle? They widened as she examined our outfits, looking for a clue as to who was odd man out for today. She had a sixth sense, able to intuit the meekest on any given day. Then she honed in, a shark to raw meat. Trying to gauge her fancy, we'd circle her like flies drawn to sweets, greeting her, trying to flatter her.

"Hi Karin!"

"Karin, I like your gypsy dress!"

"Karin, look at my bracelet"

"Karin, let's do back walkovers before the bell rings."

She stood, accepting our homage, because as far as she was concerned, she deserved it. In that June spring, just before the humid summer descended upon us all, sheathing the city in its confining fog, Karin decided I was her best friend. But being Karin's best friend was a double edged sword.

"Hi Mia," she linked her arm through mine that morning. "I want to tell you a secret"

Her eyes, as cruel as a cat with its mouse, swept over the other girls. They glared at me. "Okay." I let her lead me away while she chattered about her evening the night before, and the boy she decided she liked today. There was no secret; she just wanted to be alone with me and I wanted to feel special. Of course I deserved this, I tried to convince myself. Karin saw me for who I was. Just like her. But I knew it wasn't real and at any moment, she'd turn on me too.

"What did you do last night?" she finally asked.

"My Mom and I started packing," I answered, watching her face.

"Packing," she dropped her bag and turned around, examining the playground. "Are you moving?"

"No, it's for our vacation. We're going to Greece after school's over."

"Grease? What's grease? What are you going for grease for?" she looked at me like I had suddenly started speaking Hungarian.

"No, the country. It's called Greece. Close to Italy," but as much as I tried to explain it to her, I saw the wheels turning in her head.

"Hey," she shrieked to the others. "Guess what Mia's doing for the summer?"

The pack came running over. The smell of blood was in the air. "What?"

"No, Karin, don't tell everybody," I could feel an 11 year-old's panic in my chest. My heart started to pound. "It's a secret." *Oh no.*

"She's going in grease!" she doubled over, cackling like a witch.

I looked at the other faces, smiling weakly. *Please don't laugh, don't make me the shut out.* They stood around looking confused. "Grease?" asked Suzy. "What's that?"

"She's going to play in grease. Greasy!" she started pointing. "Like her hair. Mia's got greasy hair."



"No, I don't," my hand went automatically to the top of my hair. "No, it's not greasy!"

The others started to chime in. "Greasy hair, greasy hair. Oh, don't touch it, you'll get cooties!"

Just then the bell rang. Everybody gathered up their books and lunch pails and started running to the doors. Taunting shouts of greasy hair, greasy hair, as I followed, saying "It's a place, not greasy hair. Stop it!"

We had to stand single file and wait for the teachers to lead us to our classrooms. Our homeroom was 3B. Mrs. Gillespie was our homeroom teacher. She didn't tolerate giggling in line so the girls had to pull themselves together or face the consequences. Nobody wanted her bulging eyes, supersize behind her glasses, fixed on them. Mrs. Gillespie also had a strange habit of snapping her fingers at anyone who pissed her off, so there was always the sound of clicking in her wake. Lisa couldn't stop squirming with the hilarity of greasy hair jokes as she walked into the class. Mrs. Gillespie sashayed over to her and clicked, pointing her index finger right in Lisa's face. "Settle down, Lisa, or you can write lines all morning."

I hung up my poncho and walked over to our table. We didn't have desks but round tables encircled by four or five chairs. Usually we all sat together, but this morning, they all hogged the chairs. "Cooties," Karin whispered maliciously, her blue eyes glinting. The others followed suit. "Greasy hair. Cooties. Can't sit here."

"Karin, settle down. Mia," Mrs. Gillespie called out sharply. "Take a seat. Here," she pulled out a chair at one of the other tables.

*Oh no.* I had to sit with the losers. Janey Timlin who was about 200 pounds. Her mother drove a schoolbus. And Eva, the girl who didn't have parents but lived with her grandmother. Eva was the nose picker (every class has one),

always rooting around with a fierce focus for some long lost treasure; it was a shame she couldn't apply that intensity to school. She eventually was shunted off to the remedial classes. The unfortunate Eva had also peed her pants in grade 2 on a daily basis and we never let her live that down. She was fated to be known as Pissy Miller all through school. Christine kept to herself, she was okay. And so was the Indian girl who I thought looked like an exotic bird, but the other kids used to badger mercilessly over the faint smell of spices that followed her, or over the little stone in her nose. Karin called it snot.

Drew Hall was sitting at the table this morning too. Drew was a nice boy. He, like Eva, lived with his grandma, but he had a dad. His mom died when he was little. He had two older sisters and a brother. He was one of the popular kids, and Karin liked to call him her boyfriend. He pretended that it grossed him out, but secretly it made him happy. "Hi Mia," he said when I sat down. Karin's eyes rounded dangerously. Oh, boy, this is going to be a bumpy day. And only Monday. I knew it would be a long week. Especially when I saw the girls writing *C.P.* on their hands. The stamp assured they were cootie proof.

*Once a man bought a blackamoor and assumed that the colour of the slave's skin was due to the neglect of his former master. No sooner did he bring him home than he procured all kinds of scouring utensils, scrubbing brushes, soaps and sandpaper and set to work with his seroants to wash him white again. For hours they drenched and rubbed him, but it was in vain. His skin remained as black as ever, while the poor wretch almost died from the cold he caught from all their scrubbing and washing.*

"Mia my love, children are cruel, but they don't know that they're being cruel. Ignore them. What does the fable mean?"

"I don't care!" A howl, the unjustness of it all.

"It is not possible to change what is human and natural."

I didn't want to let my mother know about the politics of public school. Besides, I wanted her to think I was popular, not a loser. Anyway, it wasn't always hell; sometimes it was good and other times a war, with all a war's planning and maneuvering and defense tactics. The necessity of a good offence. It was like that for every girl, not just me. The best thing to do was stay low under the radar, not attract any attention to myself. To be as invisible as possible. It was hard to do, especially with barracudas like Karin relentlessly circling, but it wasn't impossible. And if I could just get through the next few days, then I was home free and I wouldn't have to see Karin Bosley's jolie-laide face again until the fall.

"Mia, come help me in the kitchen, darling," Mom called out interrupting my thoughts. I was in the living room, watching *Laverne and Shirley*. I couldn't wait to grow up and have my own apartment and a best friend who was also my roommate to get into silly situations with. And have a boyfriend like Carmine, who sometimes was so happy he broke into operatic song and dance. Lucky Shirley.

"Okay mommy," I turned off the TV. She had music on. Ech, some lovey dovey stuff. Late afternoon sun streamed in, filling the kitchen with warm buttery light. Her vines draped around the windows like thin arms reaching for the sky.

I can still smell her when I try, that mixture of her perfume and earth and I don't know what else, but it wrapped around me like a comforting sweater. She's in front of me now, wearing a frilly lilac apron. Her light hair is scraped back into a ponytail, little curly tendrils snuggling her cheeks, and her sleeves are rolled up to her elbows. So lovely. Her skin was light, not the same colour as mine and my father's, but like frothy milk. Her eyes, depending on her mood were either grey or green: the happier she was, the more dazzling, like pebbles under rushing water, they flashed. She was a delicate woman, not very strong. Fragile health. I never really knew what was wrong with her, but I think it fell under that mysterious 'women's problems' heading. Sometimes she had to take to her bed for a day or two, unable to get up and dress or shower or make me breakfast. It never lasted long. But I was terrified when she was locked behind her door and my father moodily sat in his chair, staring into the fire and muttering.

I felt defensive of her, had to keep her sheltered from any semblance of unhappiness so that she'd stay healthy. She had to be happy.

I sat on my stool by the counter, watching her bustle around. This was fun, my favourite part of the day. After school when it was just the two of us. She really liked having this life, being a homemaker. She had painted our kitchen a fervent bright yellow, almost a pumpkin orange. Garish perhaps but the effect was one of great warmth. The trim was a robin's egg blue. Like the sun and the sky. And she always had fresh flowers on the kitchen table, sometimes sunflowers, other times daisies. It was a pretty picture. And she believed in the portrait she'd painted of our family. I believed it too. In moments like that.

When it was just my mother and me, I never wanted to destroy that for her. How could I, with the two of us, the heat of the oven, the afternoon sun burning the wall. It was like our own little hive of activity, her making me feel like Queen Bee, clucking over my artwork from school, or asking me about my day and being proud of my spelling tests.

"How was school today, darling? You only have a few days left."

*Greasy greasy hair. Mia has cooties.* "It was okay," my leg kicked out against the counter. I put my head down and looked at the ingredients spread out.

"What did you do today?" she smiled brightly.

"Same old stuff."

"Did you tell your friends about your trip?"

"They don't even know what Greece is. They don't know there are other countries in the world," I said. "Sometimes they're so stupid!"

"Mia, be nice," always so gentle. "You're very lucky to get to go to Europe this summer. Some people never even leave Canada once in their whole life, and this will be your second time."

"Yeah," I muttered. "I know."

She took a sip out of a glass. "What are you drinking, Mommy?" I asked.

"Nothing," she answered quickly. "You want some juice?" She poured me some orange juice and placed it in front of me. It sloshed just a little.

I'd mastered the craft of cookies and even brownies, and now she wanted to show me some exotic desserts, like baklava. She wasn't Greek, like he was. She was Waspy, of Irish/Scottish descent, although her family had been here for a decades. But she liked cooking traditional dishes for him. Mom did a lot to please him. She gestured to the filo pastry resting on a towel on the counter, defrosting. Another towel lay gently on top, so that the filo wouldn't dry out. A bowl of melted butter waited by the side, and beside that, the honey and the nuts.

"You know, Mia honey, we don't just use the filo for desserts, we make spanakopita and tiropita, too."

"What's the difference?"

"Well, with the spanakopita, we use spinach, but with the tiropita, we only use cheese. Goat cheese."

I liked feta sometimes, it depended. The flavour so salty and gamy that it was overpowering, but when we had it with juicy Kalamata olives or dolmades I loved licking the small wet hunks my mother would hand me.

"The first time I went to visit your grandmother with your Dad, oh, you were just a little baby... but your Γιάγιά, she spent the whole summer showing me how to cook like this for your father. Yes," she winked at me. "He says he doesn't like the 'old country' food, but we know better, don't we, sweetheart? He loves it when we make this food. He can't fool us."

I didn't say anything. My father was an enigma to me, sometimes kind and smiling, but more often than not irritated by everything. Except his wife. I worked hard to disturb him as little as possible; his punishments were effective deterrents to my bad behaviour. There were many times I felt that I didn't deserve some of his correction, not that anyone ever feels punishment is

deserved for the most part. But there was nothing I could do except wait for it to end and try not to bring it on again. It was only later, after I'd grown up, that I realised this man who was our judge and jury was not only deluded and ignorant but utterly incompetent in every sense of the word. But especially as a father.

With a small brush, much like a painter's tool, she stroked the butter smoothly, evenly over the thin layers of filo, one after the other, layering them oh so carefully. They were as fragile as gossamer, easily torn. Then we added the honey. Our hands were sticky and greasy; plus, somehow we'd gotten the butter on our faces, too.

"... a great moisturizer for old ladies like me, sweetie." My mother laughed. She didn't care about the mess, only that she was teaching me something and we were spending time together, me basking in her presence. We placed the trays in the oven, then started cleaning. I helped energetically with my own little sponge. By the time my father came home from work, the kitchen was pristine again. No signs, no gooey hand prints, not even one little crumb remained from our afternoon of cooking. I was upstairs doing my homework and my mother was lying down in her room, where she'd normally stay until it was time for supper.

\*

Now I can see how little I knew of what was really occurring in our home. The little discrepancies always stealing into the edges of my vision that I met with an childlike blindness. And why shouldn't I? A mere child. I let my father place his burden upon my shoulders and I carried it like a donkey, a dumb beast for years. All illusions die and all secrets must out. It's the unspoken law of the Gods.

I HAVE ALWAYS SUFFERED from insomnia. Insomnia and fatigue at the same time. I could be so tired that my limbs felt like overcooked spaghetti, my eyeballs coated in glass. But sleep rarely came as easily as the fatigue. Mother used to tell me the most fantastical stories at night. Rather than make me drowsy, they would excite me and I would beg *please mommy don't stop now tell me more about Jimmy the Crocodile!* but she always shook her head, smiling at me, promising to pick up where we left off the next night. She'd tuck me in, laying her hand upon my cheek for a moment, giving me the look, *that look* that envelops you, that shows you how much you are loved. With a kiss on my forehead, she tiptoed quietly out of my room, wishing me sweet dreams. My sweetest dream was my mother. As a little girl, my nightmare was losing her.

Elusive sleep. The more you want something, the more it slips through your fingers, sandy, slippery, ephemeral. When I was finally floating, drifting, dreaming, it was short (*too short!*) I would hear Jimmy the Crocodile creeping, slithering around my room, big, greasy teeth glinting and I would pull the covers up trying to hide, hide from the inescapable.

\*

The fog in my head, like angel hair on a Christmas tree. No, more like my nose when I have a cold and I try to blow it but nothing happens except a trumpeting sound. Nothing moves in my head no matter how hard I hit it. Bang it against the wall.

\*



The week mercifully ended. After the initial torment, Karin turned her attentions away from me to Debbie, her second favourite target. The whispers behind cupped palms; eyes, narrowed in malicious pleasure, shifted from my face away to poor Deb's. Even though I felt her pain, my relief overpowered most of the guilt.

Debbie rivaled me for oddness in Karen's eyes. Not because she was different-looking like me or the Indian girl. She looked like the other girls and she had a more normal and pronounceable name. Her oddity was that she lived in a trailer park. She'd lived in one all her life. Plus, they got to go to McDonald's all the time for supper. Lucky duck. We had a formal sit-down dinner in our dining room. My father insisted upon it. We rarely went out and we never ever went to McDonalds. My father would just as soon have gone to a hoe-down.

School closed down for the summer with a Friday afternoon assembly. We all got our report cards and were allowed to leave school early. Most of the children exchanged well wishes for the holiday.

"Mia, have a good summer," Karen smiled hugely. All was forgiven.

My mother had given me a little book to collect addresses from kids. "Here," I thrust it at her. "I'll send you a postcard."

"Okay," she took it and wrote down her vital information, then passed it to the others. We all promised to reconnect when I returned. But I turned and walked away from them with relief, feeling the pressure leaving me like the air from an old bicycle tire. Soon, it would be just me and my mother. Very soon.

I walked home slowly, savouring the feel of the air on my cheeks, the wind gently blowing through the newly blossoming trees. The streets were strangely quiet for a Friday afternoon, an unaccustomed respite from the usual rumble of engines and horns. Some of our neighbours were out getting an early start on

the lawns and gardens. Maybe, I thought, Mom will be out too, working with a glass of her lemonade that always smelled like medicine to me. She never let me take a sip no matter how thirsty I was, but insisted I have my own.

Dad's car was in the driveway. He was never home at this hour. The house was quiet and still. I put my stuff down in the hall and walked into the kitchen. I needed a snack, maybe some cookies. "Ma!" I called. No answer. I pulled the stool over the the cupboards and climbed, reaching for the bag. I got a small plate and some milk too and headed for the living room, planning to watch some TV.

As I walked back down the hall I heard a noise upstairs, like muffled laughter. I paused at the stairs and called out again. "Ma!" I put my plate and glass on the first step and went up to investigate. Maybe they were doing more packing. Their bedroom door was closed. I stood outside unsure of whether to enter or not. Peculiar sounds were slipping out from under the door, my dad's low voice like a rumble. My mother made faint giggling sounds. He had warned me before not to walk in without knocking. I rapped. "Mommy? Daddy?" No answer. The noises stopped. Then "What is it Mia?" my father sounding out of breath.

"Can I come in?"

"No!" my mother sharply. "Just a minute."

The same feeling in my stomach, like the night my father made the odd comments about Donny and Marie, started percolating. My heart boomed in my ears. I held my breath. A young animal left alone with a ticking clock for company, confused. *Why won't they let me in? What are they doing?*

My father opened the door, and strode by me in his robe. "You're home early," he muttered as he headed for the stairs. I looked into the room where my mother sat at her dresser, combing her hair. "Hi Monkey," she sounded flustered. "What are you doing here?"

*I live here.* "Mommy, school finished early today. I told you that this morning."

"Oh, of course. Last day of school," she stood up and tightened her robe.

"Why aren't you wearing your clothes?" The bed was mussed up and the curtains were closed. The room was heavy with sweat and tart perfume.

"Daddy and I were having a nap, darling. We were tired. Why don't you go downstairs and wait for me, okay?" She wasn't paying attention to me. Just then, we heard him swear. Then shout again, "Mia! Dammit. Come here and clean this mess up."

*Oh no.* I had forgotten about my snack. He'd knocked it over. Both Mommy and I ran out into the hallway. He stood at the bottom glaring up at me, a forelock of black hair on his forehead. His amber eyes flashed. "Get down here right now and clean this up before it stains the carpet!" He pointed to the puddle of milk and crushed Fudgeeos.

My mother took my hand and led me down. "Come on. I'll help you."

"No, *you'll* make us a drink. She's going to get a paper towel and wipe it off my foot so I don't track it onto the rest of the carpet."

Shaking, my chest caved in a little. He was going to hit me. I knew it. My mother descended, pulling me with her. I tried to sidle by him, staying out of reach of his palm. "Hurry up!" he barked, letting me pass, then to my mother. "It always has to be something."

She followed me into the kitchen and put a rag under the tap, wetting it with warm water. "Here, go clean it up. Don't worry," she tried to reassure me. "I'm not mad. It was just an accident. Take some paper towels too. I'll come and help you in a minute."

She pushed me a little on the back, then turned to the cabinet and got a couple of tall glasses out. I walked slowly back down the hall, my head hanging

low. He stood tall like a grizzly with his hands on his hips. "Can you walk any slower, girl?" he said between tight lips.

I fell to my knees and started wiping the bottom of his foot. He kept his leg raised and his robe opened. I looked up involuntarily and saw skin, a bizarre dark red pouch nested with thick dark hair, and a big purple thing poking out. I dropped my head back down to my task, and heard his laugh. "What's the matter, Mia? See something?"

I kept my head down as I dried his foot, my face hot with shame. He walked down the hall still laughing a gravelly taunt as I tried to clean up the mess he left on the carpet. Dark, shit-brown crushed into the beige shag.

That evening, a few cocktails later, their mood lightened. I felt infected, like all my muscles had locked into one position. Especially my shoulders, which were hunched up beside my ears. I couldn't make eye contact with anyone. But my parents didn't notice as we had a calm dinner and then gathered in the living room with the last of the suitcases left to fill. My father was gently teasing my mother about the trip.

"What will I do without you for 40 days, Leigh?" He sat on the recliner, she at his feet smoothing clothes. I sat on the couch facing them.

"I don't know, Chris," she answered. "Order takeout every night?"

"Ha. No," he smiled slyly. "Maybe I'll have to get a maid to keep the house clean and cook for me."

"A maid, eh?" she joked back. "Like Alice?"

"No, maybe like *I Dream of Jeannie*," he put his head back on the rest. "Oh, that would be nice. She can hide in her bottle until I need her. Then when I command it, she can come out and be my slave."

"Very funny," her smile melted away. "Maybe I'll call my sister in Ottawa to come and check on you."

"No thanks, I don't need any busybodies watching me."

"She's not a busybody." Mom took another sip. "Mia, go put your pajamas on please."

"Okay," I put my cup on the side table.

"Don't drop it, clumsy," my father said as I left the room.

When I came back the suitcase was zipped up, and mom was on the couch.

"Good girl."

"So, the Diamond women are going to the old country," my father mused, looking at us sitting together. "Another granddaughter."

"Yes, a beautiful little girl," my mother caressed my cheek. "Your grandparents will be so happy to see you."

"They've got enough granddaughters," he said laughingly. But he wasn't being funny. "So far, no boys. These Diamond women just keep spitting out more girls."

He puffed his cigarette. I watched the smoke coiling around his head like a dirty halo. His voice was thick, oily. I hated the sound. I don't know why it got that way sometimes at night, his head a little less steady on his neck. He made strange comments when he was like this, smiling at us. My mother just let him ramble.

"Who will carry on our name, Leigh?" he asked.

"What are you talking about? Such old-fashioned nonsense." She tempered her remark with a tight smile.

"We'll never have a son. My brother's wife has 3 daughters. She probably will have no more children. The Gods have chosen not to bless us." His chin touched his chest. He looked at his feet, wiggling his toes.

"Chris, that's enough. All the children are healthy. That is a blessing. We are so lucky to have you," she looked down at me with soft eyes. "Don't pay any attention to your father. He's tired."

"I'm not tired," he suddenly roared. "Don't patronise me."

"Come on," my mother suddenly moved. "Let's go brush our teeth and go to bed."

She hustled me up and as we left the room, my father shouted after us, "Yeah, go brush your teeth. Get out of my sight."

\*

That night I dreamt of Jimmy the Crocodile, but he was a big smelly Sasquatch blundering into my room, knocking things over. The safety in my bedroom was shattered again, my pack of loyal protectors could only stare helplessly with their big button eyes.

\*

The engines started shrieking. Did the pilot put a key in the ignition and turn? I was squeezed between my mother and a fat man who put his arm on the handrest. I watched him buckling the seatbelt over his white shirt, the buttons straining to keep together. He's too fat, I thought, the plane won't be able to get into the air. He caught me looking and smiled at me. I looked away and covered my ears. "Mommy, it's so loud."

"Don't be scared monkey," she said, adjusting my own belt, tightening it around my small belly. "It's just the plane getting ready to go. It's going to be fun."

We started our roll down the runway. The stewardesses sat in their own chairs at the head of the aisle, looking disinterestedly out the small window. They'd done this so many times that it was a mere formality before they started their duties. The plane picked up speed, bouncing, the wings moving up and down. Slowly, the ground fell away and we were floating up, the buildings around us disappearing from the bottom edge of the window. "I'm scared," I whispered.

Mom's face was a little white, "It's okay. It's normal."

We leveled and the seatbelt sign turned off. The man next to me unbuckled himself and lit a cigarette right away. He turned to wink at me. "Τι κανεις, μανα μου?"

I turned away and he asked my mother a question. She replied "I'm sorry. I don't speak Greek."

"First time to Athens?" he asked again.

"No, second. We're going on to Sparta. And you?"

"I live in Athens part-time. Are you on vacation?"

His smoke was choking me, making me feel more claustrophobic than I already was. *Shut up. Leave us alone*, I wanted to scream

"My husband's family is there. Mia," she patted my leg. "is going to see them for a summer vacation."

"Your husband is a Greek man?" His unspoken question *And you don't speak his language?*

My mother nodded. Just then, the cart came by. He ordered himself a drink and opened a book, leaving us. My mother got me a Coke and herself one with a whiskey. I could see stars outside in the night sky. It was late, almost 10 p.m. My eyes felt heavy. The sounds in the cabin – the quiet chatter, cans of Sprite and Pepsi being popped opened, the stewardesses walking around – lulled me.

My mother stared out the window, sipping her drink, not talking. My head rested against her arm. I felt a blanket draped over me.

When I awoke, the sky was grey. "Mia, look down," my mother was shaking my arm and pointing. "We're going over the Alps. You can see the tops of the mountains."

"What?" I asked groggily, sitting up. "What's Alps?" I felt very thirsty.

"Mountains in Europe. Very very big mountains. We're almost there," she sat back in her seat, an uncomfortable smile on her face.

Almost there. Almost there. But where was there?

THE CHANGE WAS as visceral as the air, scorching and dirty. It was late morning when we landed and all I remember is people, loud people everywhere fighting to get their bags, opening them to show the men in uniforms. Then a man who looked like my father, but rounder, less mean, a big smile on his face, with his daughter, a little older than me. Probably about 12. My cousin Ourania. Sky in English. They called her Nitsa.

Amid many hugs and cheek pinching and kisses, they hustled us quickly through the airport to the car and we started zipping away. Athens was loud and the buildings were ugly to me as we zoomed through the narrow crowded streets in my uncle's BMW. Bem-vay, they called it. Everyone drove them here. Or Peugeots. Really, it was a blur of colours and bright lights to my jet-lagged brain. Sparta was still 6 hours away. I was so tired I was delirious. My head lolled back and forth in the car seat. Nitsa and I exchanged secret smiles and curious looks. My uncle could speak some English and so he and my mother talked excitedly back and forth. She exclaimed over the Acropolis in the distance and then the looming Parthenon. My uncle was used to seeing them, these disintegrating ruins juxtaposed with the modern buildings. Going back as an



adult, I remember marvelling over the columns of the classical temples, once so clearly engraved against the blue Attic sky that some poet had compared them to strings of a harp. Now, they were almost completely obliterated by the pollution that hung over Athens. Greeks ruin everything, I remember thinking at that time. Still, even shrouded, these ancient structures were impressive. But back then as a kid, I looked briefly, then looked back at my cousin and my uncle, feeling nauseated.

He drove fast, in jerky stops and starts punctuated with toots of his horn. Some swearing, too. I started falling asleep, my eyes closing against my wishes. I wanted to stay awake, to observe this strange new place, to listen to my uncle. I wanted to keep an eye on things. But the need for sleep was too strong, sliding over me slowly enough to fool me into thinking I could fight it. The last thing I heard was my mother laughing politely.

The houses were different than ours back in Canada, split into two parts. Two separate buildings behind big white walls. But my uncle and family didn't live in a city like we did, so, perhaps the city houses were normal. Downstairs was one kitchen-like room with the stove and fridge and counters, and a big table bisecting the room lengthwise. In one corner sat a television that was only turned on late at night, after my uncle came home from the καφενειον, where he went to play cards and have a 'coffee' after the day's work. My grandfather, usually calm and placid, started shouting and waving his arms around for quiet, telling us all to shut up so he could hear the weather report. Once the weather was over, the TV was forgotten.

In the other corner of the room was a big bed where either my grandfather or uncle would go and lie down after lunch or supper. Maybe one of my cousins might rest with them, but never my aunt or grandmother or the older girls. This

was the first floor: terrazzo floors and unadorned rough walls. In the back were the 'washrooms': wooden mini shacks with a toilet. Like the outhouses when people went camping here. Yes, it was clean, but I still couldn't believe my eyes. This was the eighties, not the prehistoric era. My little brain couldn't get around the idea of outdoor bathrooms.

The second building was different. Wide chalky stone steps led upstairs to a large balcony and the bedrooms, the white-washed walls bursting with bougainvillea and narcissus, explosions of colour against the sun-blached marble. My grandparents had a bedroom, and my aunt and uncle had one as well. The girls all shared one room, two beds. My older cousin, Maria, had her own bed, and the other two, Nitsa and Dimi (short for Dimitra) shared one. Now it would be two girls to a bed with my arrival. I didn't even know these people, now I had to sleep with them?

The furniture was really dark and shiny. Also, the cabinets and armoires seemed abnormally large, stretching up almost to the top of the high ceilings. What did they keep in there, I wondered. The living room and dining room up here were untouched, like show room models in stores. All the right things: coffee tables, lamps, a sofa and ottoman were placed just so, but these rooms were only used when company came over. The girls were not allowed up here for any reason, not even to use the modern bathroom, the one that had a shower and toilet and some other porcelain thing that kind of looked like a toilet. I had never heard the word bidet. There was a strange smell upstairs too. It wasn't unpleasant or like garbage or b.o. Perhaps the smell was absence combined with cheap wood and furniture polish. Nitsa and I were to dust, sweep and wash the wood floors every week.

The main hub of activity was the downstairs, everybody there all at the same time. Except my uncle and grandfather. Every morning they climbed on their

tractor and put-putted out to the fields: grapes and oranges and olives mostly. Dry, scratchy rows of skeletal arms. My grandmother and my aunt talking loudly downstairs, always in motion.

That first, disorienting morning, I awoke all alone upstairs in a strange bed. Hot streaks beamed like a laser through the window, slapping my sweaty face until my eyes squinted open. Lost for a brief moment, my head jerked up off the pillow and I looked around at this strange room, trying to find something familiar, something I could recognise. The sheets were rough. I sat up and swung my feet to the floor, looking for my slippers. It was only 8 am, I noticed, but already the air was parched and heated, not like the heavy humid summer of Montreal. Less unpleasant but just as uncomfortable. Everyone was downstairs. I paused on the terrace, overwhelmed by the view before me. In the distance rose mammoth mountains, the caps drizzled with snow. Craggy and majestic, they stood as they had for eons, serenely. I sat on the top step contemplating them, the sheer enormity, their mythical *presence*. Dreamily, I placed my chin in my hand. Suddenly our Mont Royal became an anthill in my mind.

I don't know how long I sat there: it may have been minutes, it may have be hours in the still, burning air, oblivious to the bees circling the flowers surrounding me, lost in this moment of beauty, this awe; but finally, I heard my grandmother coming from the back.

"Hello, Mia. What are you doing there?" She looked up, smiling at me.

I stood up and descended the steps. She opened her arms and I walked into her embrace. She squeezed tight. "How good to have you here, *μάννα μου*. Come into the house and have some milk."

We walked into the kitchen where my mother sat with my aunt Nina, drinking the dark strong liquid that passed for coffee here. More like industrial

fluid my mother used to joke. I walked over to my mother sitting in the middle of the room.

She kissed me and said. "Say good morning to your aunt, darling."

I dutifully did as she asked and my aunt leapt up and poured me a glass of milk. The smell was different, it was sweeter. And the cloying taste, blech! I spit it out.

"Mia!" my grandmother and aunt both said at the same time, shocked.

"What's wrong Mia?" my mother asked. She took the glass from my hand and started wiping up the mess.

"What is that?"

"It's milk."

"It doesn't taste like milk." I made a face at the women.

My aunt started laughing. "It's goat milk. Not cow milk. We don't really have cows here to get milk from. We get it from the goats in the back," she gestured.

I looked out the window and saw all the strange creatures milling about. The goats with the curly horns and the lambs. Chickens strutting around everywhere. Puppies and kitties. It was like a country fair back there! Excitement bubbled in my chest.

"Can I go out and play?" I asked.

"First," my grandmother said, taken aback, "you're going to wash your face and brush your teeth and get dressed." As I ran out of the room, I heard her say to my aunt, so that my mother couldn't understand. "What a gypsy. How they live over there!"

Life flowed along in a consoling routine. We got up very early in the morning. Often my grandparents went to an early mass at the church at the end of the dirt road. My uncle went out to the fields. My aunt, she had it the

roughest. They didn't have the conveniences that people in North America take for granted. Sometimes when we were having lunch, the biggest meal of the day there, I stared at her hands. Like a man's with big painful knuckles, all chapped and red, with torn nails. She was one of the kindest women I'd ever met in my life. Her hair was raven black, setting off her angelic, big blue eyes. When she was young, she looked like Elizabeth Taylor, before all that hard farm work put the grey in and stooped her strong back. At least, that's what I thought when I saw her wedding pictures.

Thursday was laundry day, which she did all by hand. She started early: big aluminum buckets filled with boiling hot water. One was for rinsing and the other bubbled with homemade soap. She leaned over, rubbing and scrubbing our clothes, her sweat dripping into the water. She never looked miserable, she always smiled when I was near.

"Theia Nina, why don't you have a washing machine?" I asked her one day.

"What's a washing machine?" she responded.

*Where am I? The Land of the Lost?*

"A machine that washes your clothes for you. It only takes half an hour." I was astounded she had never heard of these inventions.

"Oh, only the rich ladies in Athens have those," she laughed, barely looking up from my uncle's underwear.

The soap was so strong it made my eyes water. It smelled like ammonia.

"But, you're rich, Theia. Why don't you tell Theio Vasi to buy you one?"

She only snickered harder, waving me off to go play. Later that night, I asked my mother why no one would let her have a washer and dryer, or a big television, or even an indoor toilet instead of the outhouse.

"Well, Mia," Mother answered carefully. "Things are different here. We are in a different country. You remember the long airplane ride we took even though

you, little monkey, you slept for most of it? They don't do things here like we do back home. It's no better or worse. Just different."

"I think it's worse. She's like their slave."

My mother looked down. I think she agreed with me, but she knew it wasn't her place to say anything.

My cousins helped their mother although the youngest, Dimi, and I used to sneak away to play with the village children. We roamed the fields, eating grapes or my favourite, figs. I loved to pick the figs right from their branches. Shaped like teardrops, with skin the colour of deep bruises, they seemed very exotic to me. On the inside, they were an intimate, violent pink, their seeds like larvae: luxuriously sweet crunching between my teeth. I would eat two, three, one right after the other, my eyes narrowed in pleasure. The kids asked me, "Are you poor in Canada? Is that why you eat so much here? You're so skinny!" And I would think, these hayseeds with their outdoor toilets consider me poor? They're deluded.

The insomnia, my eternal insomnia followed me across the ocean. We awoke early and the adults worked hard during the morning, while young ones meandered around the groves. After the big lunch they ate here, everyone went for the afternoon siesta. Torture. As difficult as it was to sleep at night, it was impossible during the day. I lay in the bed, listening to the my cousins breathing. How could they do it?

I got up and wandered around the upstairs, poking in drawers and looking in cupboards. One day I found a whole bunch of school books. My aunt saved all the old homework and assignments of my cousins. Hmm. In the next drawer, I found photo albums. I sat cross-legged on the cool, tiled floor, and happily set to looking. Baby pictures of the girls in lacy white dresses and blankets. Their heads

were bald and their eyes big and black. After a few pages, I found some pictures of me when I was little. I remembered that day the strange man came over to take some photos. Ma had put a new dress on me and combed my hair until it shined. She lifted me up and sat me on a dresser. My father, I remember, came over quickly and slammed my legs together. They had fallen open a little and I guess the photographer could see my little white undies. In the first few photos, I looked like I was going to cry.

I was mindful of putting everything back carefully, smoothing the doilies and closing the doors, wiping all sticky smudges. I crawled back into the bed and pretended that I slept too. My grandmother wasn't fooled.

"Μία, μαννα μου. Have I told you about the Neraides yet?" she said one afternoon as she sat down to a coffee. She'd had visitors earlier. A young couple with their baby arrived late in the afternoon. The house was abnormally deserted, just my grandmother waiting at the table by herself until they arrived, smiling obsequiously it seemed to me, and nodding. They spoke quietly, the parents looking very nervous and worried as my grandmother made reassuring noises and smiled at them. Then, I watched through the window as she rubbed the baby's forehead directly between his eyebrows with some oily substance muttering some strange words. The young couple thanked her profusely, kissing her hand when they left.

"No," I climbed up onto the mesh chair across from her.

She looked at me, her wiry grey hair circling her face. Her chin was slightly lowered, her honey eyes, just like my father's, twinkling from below her eyebrows. "Neraides are the women who steal the children. Yes, that's right, they take the kids who are in the fields in the afternoon. They know that they can take the children because their parents are home sleeping."

I clucked my tongue. "There's no such thing." Secretly, I was horrified. My God, what dangers had I narrowly escaped. But I didn't want γιγιά to know I was scared.

"Oh yes there is," she nodded her head sagely. "They've been around since the Gods of Mt. Olympus. They wear white gowns with threads of gold, just like their hair. They are so exquisite you are hypnotised by them and that's why they can steal you. Children, and even grown up men and women, have to be very careful when it's time for the siesta. The sun is very hot, perfect for the Neraides."

She sipped her coffee, swirling the dregs around and around. She examined the grounds a little before turning her cup over, letting it rest on the saucer. She sneaked a peek up at me, but I scarcely noticed. I was staring off into the distance, trying to figure out if I had come across the path of one of these extraordinary women yet.

"In fact," she continued. "Your cousin, Jonny, the one that lives in St. Yiannis, narrowly escaped being taken forever. Did your father tell you what happened? He was still here at the time."

I shook my head. He hardly ever talked to me, let alone regaled me with family history. Γιγιά rolled her eyes. "Goodness, child. What do you all talk about over there? Baseball? Anyway, Jonny snuck out of the house one day. He never liked to sleep because he had too much energy and used to flit about here and there like a mosquito. When we woke up after our nap, your aunt Olga came running downstairs and said that Jonny was missing. We looked everywhere, in the trunks and closets, under the beds. In the back with the goats. But," she lifted her hand, palms up, and made a face. "Nothing. No sign. Your uncle, Vasi left, saying he was going to look in the fields. I guess he went to the πιγαδι, because that's where he found Jonny, just sitting there. Jonny



couldn't talk so Theio Vasi slapped him across the face. Still, Jonny wouldn't talk. He brought him back here and we put him to bed. Your aunt called the doctor and the doctor came right away. But I had a feeling I knew what had happened. I was sure he'd seen one."

My mouth was dry. I couldn't take my eyes off her, and she stared right back at me, a focused beam of energy. She was theatrical as she told me the story, wagging her eyebrows and gesticulating with her hands. Her voice too was rising and falling with the action. I was entranced.

"A Neraide?"

"Yes. After all, what happened to his voice? Why couldn't he talk, but just stare. He had probably been terrified or maybe they were interrupted. Who knows? The doctor couldn't find anything. The next day, we were all very upset. Your aunt especially was beside herself with guilt. She was convinced that Jonny was going to die and it was her fault because she slept while he wandered out. I told her you can't fight what the Gods want. There's nothing she can do if this is his fate. But really, words mean nothing. There was only one choice left to us. The church. We had to take the boy there and see if the priest could help us. We put him in a big blanket and your uncle and grandfather took turns carrying him. He was a big kid, 12 years old you know, not a little baby. We got outside when the sun was going down, at the beginning of twilight. In a small group, me, your aunt Olga, your uncle Vasi and Papou, Theia Nina, we all started walking toward the path.

Well, out of nowhere the wind began blowing, just a little bit at first, enough to whip our hair into our eyes. But soon, it was whistling hard enough to mix the sand up from the path and throw it into our eyes. The twilight, too, was becoming hostile. We all started walking faster and by the time we reached the

gates, we were running. I was afraid to look behind us. I was sure I'd see something I'd never forget."

I shivered, my imagination churning. *Big yellow eyes or a purple-veined hand reaching out.*

"We ran across the courtyard, the same one where you play basketball with the kids. And into the church. The doors slammed shut and then flew open immediately, the wind pushing us down the aisle, like hands on our back. All the candles blew out. The priest came from the back asking what in God's name was going on but when he saw us and the fear in our eyes, he knew it wasn't a joke. Anyway, he prayed and prayed while the lights flashed and everything blew out of place. With one final boom, a window smashed, the doors slammed shut. Then silence. The priest looked at me, I looked at him. And Jonny sat up slowly, asking what had happened. We all stared to cry... He was back. Thank God, he was able to come back."

Finishing her story, she leaned back, picking up her cup, probing the muddy grounds for what was to come. "Hmm, look Mia. I'm expecting a letter from far away. Maybe your dad. And what's this, a new person. A stranger's coming. Anyway," she looked back up at me and grinned, a wolfishly playful smirk. "Go out and play. Be careful out there." She waved me off, anxious to get back to whatever it was that kept her busy, studying her cup as she arose and headed for the sink.

Exhaling, I got up, feeling a deeply pleasurable fear and that I, too, had had a second chance. Barefoot, with my hair trailing down my back, wondering why I had never heard about the creatures before if they were so dangerous, I resolved to question the other kids later on.

Usually we did gather in the church yard to play basketball as my grandmother had said. Even though there was no hoop, we improvised by using a large tree branch over which we threw our ball, pretending that it was a net. The yard was deep and round, surrounded by large trees. Their shadows always seemed alive to me, with random twinkling lights here and there. Cicadas sang and the birds shrilly held court while some other presence swished further back. Sometimes it felt to me as if it just stood breathing quietly and other times it pulsed in time with my heart. Behind the church was the cemetery, with the large sarcophagi and the crucifixes crowning every grave. Brilliant marble on every side, kept clean by the never ending line of mourning women. They came every morning to relight the candles and replenish the olive oil. Sometimes they sat in their black habits, a stark smudge against the gaunt stones, perhaps a tear running softly down their cheek. They ended this ritual with a flurry of crossmaking, once twice three times.

The gang was remarkably relaxed about playing so close to death, to rotting corpses and roaming spirits. They took it for granted, perhaps because they had lived so near to them all their lives. Like familiar neighbours, the church was an everyday presence in their lives. Unlike in mine in Montreal where the city was filled with churches but most Montrealers looked upon them as architectural wonders or mere curiosities. Here, this Gothic structure with its spires reaching toward the empty Heavens was a force, a tangible entity that these people looked to for help for comfort. Whether the pilgrimage was daily or weekly, their belief never wavered.

Spiro, a boy with a big oval head sparsely covered with hair grabbed the basketball from between my hands and ran toward the tree, his sandals making a clack-clack sound.

I pointed to his crotch. "You're flying low." Except there, we asked what day of the week it was. When someone answered Monday or Tuesday, the joke was 'I didn't know the stores were open today.'

He looked down, then up at me kind of embarrassed, replying in a tortuously accented English: "Air-condition." I couldn't help it, I laughed. Then I addressed the group at large: Spiro, cousin Dimi, the next door neighbour girl Pota and a couple of others whose names I hadn't yet mastered.

"Has anyone ever seen a Neraide?"

As if on cue, they stopped moving. Just then a cloud rolled over the sun, the shadow crawling over us like a stain.

"Why?" Spiro asked. Rather, he barked it at me.

"I want to know. I bet they're not even real," I looked down, pretending to be nonchalant. But suddenly it was the most important thing in my life. I needed to know. Instantly the veracity of Neraides was my focus. It was a thrilling little mystery, perhaps even a little ghost story I could plunge into.

"They're real. You don't have them in Canada, that's all," Pota said smugly.

"We do too!" I answered passionately. "We just call them something else, is all."

"Really?" Dimi asked with a quizzical eyebrow. "What do you call them?"

"Umm ..." I hunted for a response. "We call them witches."

"Are they beautiful women who come out in the afternoon? Or at night like here?" Spiro asked eagerly.

I decided to try to change tack. "Did you ever see one, Spiro?" I smiled encouragingly at him.

"Oh no," he shook his head. He looked around the yard, almost as if one were about to pop out from behind the tombstones. "No. I never go out in the afternoon."

I looked at the rest of them.

"Once, I think I saw one," Pota began slowly. "It was last year, just around Easter time and my mother was mad at me because I didn't do my chores like she told me to."

We all crowded around her, breathless for a good tale. "Pota, you never said anything before!" Dimi said accusingly.

"I was afraid to say anything," her voice dropped. "I was afraid she'd come back."

"Well?" I urged. "What happened?"

The branches, heavy with leaves, hung over our heads, swaying up and down like a belly dancer's arms. "I was scared that my mama was going to hit me with a βεργα so I was going to hide in the orange grove. I went close to the big πηγάδι that Theio Vasi has."

Again my uncle's big well. I had seen it only once. They had warned us to stay away from it, saying it was dangerous.

"I was walking around, really worried about going back home. My mama was really mad and I didn't want her to tell μπαμπα. I sat down and was trying to figure out what to do. And then." She looked at us, her eyes round and fearful. I was afraid to breathe lest I miss the story. Excitement and terror mingled in my chest like a storm, it was like too much horrible pleasure for one day. "Then I saw her. A woman with orange hair, just like the sun, with a band of gold braid sitting on top. She was a Goddess."

The children were silent, their chests heaving with the frightful beauty of it all. What their parents had warned them about all their young lives. This couldn't be real, it had to be a fake story, like about the men with candy back home in Canada. Stuff that wasn't real but our parents told us so we wouldn't do silly things and get killed. It couldn't be real. Not ghosts. But in this quiet courtyard,

with the ancient trees hanging over us like great watchers, and our ancestors rotting in the ground, it all seemed terribly possible.

"I thought maybe it was Aphrodite, because she glowed like the sun too. I looked at her sitting there very quietly. She was humming a song. And then she smiled at me, a smile of love. I wanted to get up and walk over to her. And when I got up, she lifted her arm and held out her hand to me. I was going to reach out for it, but then ... then ...," she stopped.

"What, Pota?" Spiro was enthralled.

She shivered. "I don't know. I heard a noise, maybe a donkey. Something behind me. I turned around to look, but when I turned back, she was gone. I ran home and told my mama. She said it was the hot sun that made me see something. But she didn't hit me. She sent me to bed and after that, she watched me and made sure I didn't go out alone for a long time. In church on Sunday, she made me take an extra piece of bread."

We all stood in a circle for a long time it seemed, then breathed a collective sigh. I didn't want to believe her. It was too horrible to think that this magic world, another danger to worry about, existed. But nothing had happened to her. She was safe. All's well that end's well, as my mother said. No harm done.

\*

That night I had the dream, the dream the would recur throughout my life. That night my spaceship landed on what seemed like the moon. Everything was in grey and sienna, the only colours. Big boulders, crags, low-lying clouds. I went out to explore and I saw a strange creature, like an ogre, with one eye in the middle of his forehead, eating my mother's head, in sections, like an orange.

"Ma!" I shriek. "Ma! He's killing you!"

**"It's okay, darling. Don't worry. Everything's okay. Don't be afraid."**

**I wake up in terror every time, reliving her absence from my life. I am driving the spaceship. I am the pilot. The guilt will never leave me.**

MOUNT ROYAL IS visible from almost all of my windows, its cross shining every night like a beacon. The bus I take home passes the big statue at the base of the mountain under the cross. I stare at it, the angelic pose reminding me that we're not alone. Even if we feel desolately so, we are never without help. Invisible all around us, there for the asking.

After a long day away from my home, my nest, my comfort, I like to come home and sprawl in a chair. A large glass of wine rests in my fingers and I will watch, just staring out the windows at the mountain.

It still calls me and when I can no longer resist this pervasive pull, especially when the moon is full, I'll go. I'll wander up the winding paths and sit in the soft overgrown foliage above our slowly decaying city. The smell of wet earth fills my nostrils. Slowly dying. Can one feel happiness and sorrow all at once?

\*

As much as I try, I cannot stop the memories coming. Why now, when I have passed so much of my adult life successfully evading these sniffing hounds? Waiting for Pablo yet again in this crowded cafe, they sneak up on me. My own fault for not having brought something to read. I stare out the window, hyper conscious of my every move, afraid I'll do something to draw attention. I hate sitting by myself and he knows this, yet he is always late. I sip the wine, terrified I'll knock my glass over. *Sit as still as you can. Keep your face from twitching.* People



stream by, holding bags of groceries, baguettes, each other's hand. How I wish I could hold his hand in public. He shies away from any such open display.

"Someone might see," he always whispers, pulling away.

"Let them. I'm sick of this secret," I whisper back, almost at the end of my patience. Maybe it's better to be alone than put up with this.

"Sweetheart, just a bit longer. Then we can kiss all we want in front of the whole world." I let him seduce me again. Back into the cave.

I catch the waiter's eye and order another. "Would Madame like a demi-litre instead?"

Why not? "Yes."

But I already feel tipsy and if he doesn't come, I'll be roaring drunk if I consume it all myself. I can feel my self-pity like a heavy blanket. *The heavy dining room. I can't breathe.* The room starts to blur around me, the candles flicker. *Get control, Mia!* All the voices start to meld together and the lights are flickering like sparklers. I am swimming through this thick air, the room is starting to close in, like a box, a tomb, I have to get out of here. Enclosed, I'm suffocating ... *Mia, stop it.* I am chastising myself even as I feel my body being flung backwards against the wall, this well-worn picture intruding again. I start to rise, my scarf in my hand, prepared to flee into the night. But, I sit again, trying to talk myself down like the doctors have told me to do. *Look, everything is fine.* Nothing is moving or spinning. Nobody is going to hurt you. *You can breathe.* Inhale through your nose, exhale out through your mouth. Nice and slow. My heart pounds less, the rate returning to a more normal beat. *Okay. Good.* I look around at the other patrons but no one appears to have noticed. *Such a loser.* I take a tentative sip, looking down at my hands. *Look at your hands, focus.* I hate my hands. Short stubby fingers like his. My nails, no matter how I take care of them, or what vitamins I ingest, curl over the tips of my fingers like claws. Weak and brittle.

or what vitamins I ingest, curl over the tips of my fingers like claws. Weak and brittle.

*Oh no.* I've become one of those women I've always been afraid of being. The ones who smile through the day just to waste an evening reading a bad novel or watching TV with no company save a multitude of cats. My hair will become threaded with gray but I won't notice. I'll age and wither and no one will care. *Stop! Look around, concentrate on something else.* But when the cafe is filled with the sight of other people having a life in progress, when I feel stuck in one moment, how can I? *What's happened to me?*

The moment I first laid eyes on Pablo my heart leapt. I'd read those words before in books, but I never really knew what they meant. How could a heart leap, imprisoned as it was within a rib cage? But at that Christmas party, everyone laughing and drinking and dancing, inhibitions rapidly floating away into the music, I finally understood. He walked in and the light around him flamed. My breath caught in my throat when our eyes met. His nostrils flared a little. He had to walk right by me to get to the counter. I stood with a girl I knew from university, making small talk. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched him pour a drink, greeting people, hands slapping backs, kisses on cheeks.

Eventually, oh so slowly in the midst of the party, the space between our bodies disappeared until we were standing face to face. I had to look up at him, towering like the inevitable.

"Hello," he murmured. Dark golden eyes, hair sleek as the river at midnight.

"Hello."

He held out his hand. "I'm Pablo. Pleased to meet you."

"Mia. Likewise."

Then the rest of the party faded into the background as we stood talking. We talked about many things, I don't remember now what. One thing he neglected

to tell me until some time later was that he had a wife. Not exactly a wife but a Quebec-style *conjointe*. Semantics. He was taken. Living with a woman. And still, I entered that door he held open. I couldn't help myself. It was fate.

Now, there's a dreamy half smile on my face; I know because I see it reflected in the woman across from me. I've been staring in her direction. I look away, back out the window onto the street. The light now is disorienting me, the darkness of the sky and the flickering candles and Christmas lights inside. Too many secrets. I've lived such a life. No more. It has to change. But I'm stuck in the past and in the present. There's no middle ground upon which to flail.

ONE OF THE best parts of that summer was being surrounded by a multitude of exotic animals. The dogs and cats were wonderful enough, but there were turtles walking down the dusty dirt roads every morning. Turtles! We were always to be cautious of snakes, especially out in the fields where they could hide so easily under the leaves. The goats had beautiful curving horns that they would every now and again ram each other with. But the donkeys were the most fascinating. I had never seen a donkey in Quebec. Just horses. Here, the old ladies rode the donkeys everywhere, bundles of sticks on the beasts' backs. The poor donkeys worked hard. I got enraged when these peasants beat them with sticks for no reason. I hated these cruel people.

My uncle had two lambs: Meemecca and Beebecca. They were my favourite of the animals: brother and sister baby sheep. I went out early every morning when I heard them bleating. I insisted on feeding them their breakfast, patting them. Their fur was winter-thick. Dirty white. But their eyes were big brown buttons, soulfully looking at me every morning. Their snouts would nuzzle into my palm, or my stomach. So courteous. *Give me a hug*, I would croon. Sometimes, I even took them for walks on their leads, like they were my dogs. Clop, clop, they would prance behind me, pausing to sniff excitedly, then gape at me, as if saying, *Look! Look at this bush! Life is so exciting!*

My aunt and uncle barely tolerated my adoption of the animals, but my grandfather flew into a rage whenever he saw me playing with them. I was puzzled by his emotion. What was the harm? Why did it bother him so much? One afternoon, when the heat was thick and wet, and I thought everyone was

having their siestas, I decided to give my lambs a bath. Thinking that they were boiling under all that fur, I wanted to cool them down a bit.

I dragged Theia Nina's laundry tubs from the shed and filled them both with cool water. I decided to use my own shampoo, *Gee Your Hair Smells Terrific*, that I'd brought with me from Montreal. I figured the lambs would like smelling terrific for a change. I kept the hose close to me and dragged Meemecca into one tub, Beebecca into the next. They obeyed me, their eyes trustingly following my movements. Because their fur was so abundant, it took a long time to fully drench them. The afternoon heat was intense, the hard sun boring into my back. I was sweating copiously before long and gave myself a cooling squirt from the hose. The pomegranate and orange trees provided a nice shady canopy, yet the sun still resolutely pierced through, putting me into a foul mood. I lathered up Meemee first, the bubbles climbing to my elbows. The shampoo did smell terrific. I started smiling, thinking how happy the lambs would be. It took a long time to rinse her off. I led her out of the tub and put her rope back around her neck. She waited patiently by her pen as I turned my attention to her brother.

"Come on, my little man, your turn," and I repeated the process with him.

Just as I was emptying out the tubs, my bad humour gone, the cicadas singing merrily in my ears, the smell of ripe tomatoes and heavy flowers surrounding us, I heard footsteps quickly running toward me. Just as I turned, I felt a whiplash heat – I heard the whistle before I felt the pain – rake across my calves.

"Γαιδουρα!" My grandfather cracked a switch he had ripped from one of the trees again. "What do you think you're doing!"

My aunt and mother came running. They reached for his arms at the same time, Greek and English all rising into one high-pitched *no*.

He called me a donkey! I'd heard him yell at my cousins using the same appellation, but he'd never said such things to me. Plus, he hit me. Just like my dad. Is that what these people did all the time? I was so stunned and afraid at the same time, I couldn't even cry.

The women tried to restrain him as the rest of the family came out, drawn by the cacophony.

"What in the name of Zeus is going on?" my uncle yelled.

"That crazy niece of yours gave the farm animals a bath! What's wrong with her?" he turned to my mother, tapping his temples angrily. He whirled back to me. "Tomorrow night, they're going to be our supper. Why are you treating them like babies. They're farm animals! They're not pets. What's wrong with you?!" He strode away, still yelling angrily.

I ran to my mother. She didn't understand what he'd said but I asked her anyway. "Say it's not true, Ma, say it's not true."

"What, angel?" she was stroking my hair, trying to calm me down.

"He said they're going to be supper. Tell me it's not true."

She bit her lip. Everyone shook their heads, then slowly went back to their business.

"I hate it here! How can they be so cruel? They're evil people," I sobbed into my mother's skirt.

"Hush. They're not evil. This is how they live. Back home, we go to the grocery store and buy our meat. But this is where it comes from, Mia. I'm sorry to have to tell you, but yes, this is how we get the meat we eat. From animals like Meemecca and Beebecca. Where did you think it came from?"

"How could you let him hit me?"

"I didn't see. But he won't do it again. I promise," she straightened up.

"Come on. Let's take a walk."

The next day, true to his word, my grandfather slaughtered Beebecca. It was terrible. I felt the most helpless I'd ever been in my life. There was nothing I could do to stop what I considered to be murder. All the other kids came to look. It was a party to them, a festive occasion. They sucked on their popsicles, in a circle behind my grandfather and uncle. I forced myself to watch. It was the least I could do. I knew there was zero I could do to prevent what was to come, yet I still screamed inside, *Stop, stop, don't do it. Pretend it was just a threat to scare me.*

My grandfather led a docile Beebecca over to the tree. He had no idea what was to happen to him. Meemee watched. The other animals seemed agitated. The goats in the pen off to the left pawed the ground. The chickens started to pace rapidly. Even the cats sat crouched, ready to pounce. Pregnant Ellie, my uncle's hound, slunk off to the back.

My uncle and grandfather hog-tied him. Now he knew. He started to bleat, his eyes wildly looking around. He looked at me. I shook my head. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry.* I ran over to pet him one last time but my grandfather pushed me back.

"Don't you dare," he muttered.

The kids laughed at me, but I didn't care what they thought. They were the animals. Animals was too complimentary a term for these heartless beasts. They hung Beebecca upside down. His bleating turned frenzied. His sister responded, her voice higher, weeping for her brother. Now the chickens joined in. Do they know, I wondered, do they know what's happening? I looked around me, up at all the trees, full of oranges, pomegranates. Their fields were full of grapes, olives, tomatoes, everything. This was not necessary.

My grandfather made a show, a spectacle of sharpening his knife. Then, as Beebecca still breathed, he plunged the knife into his lower belly, just above his

little penis, and pulled up. Blood seeped out slowly, making it trail, then spewed, pumping in time with Beebecca's fearfully beating heart. His clean white fur that I had washed the day before was soiled a dark ruby red. All I could taste in my mouth was copper. The carnage.

I covered my ears. The shrieking was unearthly. Never, never again, the voices in my head screamed. Grandfather sliced Beebecca's throat, grasping his nose and twisting it left, then right.

When he started to pull out my lamb's intestines, I walked away. Tears blurred my vision and I stumbled over a chicken but kept walking, until I could no longer hear any lamb noises, or any of the other animals, their voices surging into a chorus of sorrow.

\*

I couldn't eat any of the food they put before me after that day. They bullied, they cajoled, they mocked my mother for her bad parenting skills, but all I would eat was what came off the trees or out of the ground. How could they? How could they have these living things with personalities for so long, and then slaughter them with no feeling? Then eat them? I watched them eat my lambs. My cousins, the whole family, even my own mother, they all devoured them. My uncle moreover ate the eyes. I was sickened down to my toes. I didn't give a shit about their laughter, calling me weak.

The other kids somehow learned of it, my inability to be like them.

"Even chickens Mia?" Spiro demanded laughingly. "Chickens are so stupid! Remember the day we got them drunk? How can you care about the chickens?"



I'm the big joke. Yeah, laugh it up peasants. You're the ones eating death and suffering, I thought, the pain of the laughter fading whenever I remembered my lamb's eyes. The horror.

*Step on a crack, break your mother's back.*

A sentence, just because you think it, can't come true. Just because you think it, you don't make it happen. Yet, I know, I ... still, it's my fault.

That's the thing about memory. It never really leaves you. Even though there is the numbing effect of time, our memories become a part of us, like our *DNA*. Some things are too terrible to grasp all at once while others – raw, sputtering, indelible – are too terrible to really grasp at all. It is only later in solitude that we are capable of remembering. When the fire has grown cold, and the mourners have gone home and we find ourself – quite a surprise really – in an entirely different world.

The dining room laden with food, heavy drapes pulled closed to block out the world. Outside, the paint now peels off the walls, the blue faded. There's garbage strewn about, no one has bothered to pick it up. Dark unadorned walls with a china cabinet, dusty and smudged. And the smells fill my head too, the smell still sickens me; garlic and vinegar, honey and whisky.

My grandmother is so proud of the cake she's made. Honey and walnuts. Your favourite, Mia, αγαπε μου. My love. The lying witch. This fake scene. This fake celebration. The anger roils, coursing through my limbs, like an electrical current. Forceful and a little exciting. Just a couple of hours I tell myself then I can go back to my real life. I hear the clouds collide. The rooms rumbles with the anger. The old lady with her hands gripping her face and the tall man with the

puffy eyes, his hands raised aloft, strokes of lightning shooting at me. I can't breathe. *Oh, God, I can't breathe.* The room blurs, the candles flicker, voices meld together, everything starts spinning, I am swimming through this thick air, colours, dark red, the taste of rust, my grandmother, why is she screaming? The room closes in, like a box, a tomb, I have to get out of here, enclosed. I'm suffocating ...

\*

WE CAME BACK home, fatter after a summer away. My skin was brown from the relentless Mediterranean sun. I wore a pair of gold hoop earrings that my aunt Nina had given me. We bought them from some gypsies at the fair and I didn't want to take them off because they sparkled so. My father grabbed my mother in a tight embrace. "Oh my love, I missed you so much." Minutes passed. It was embarrassing. *Let her go, you're smothering her* my mind screamed at him. Finally:

"Mia, give your father a kiss."

He leaned over, his lips thick and wet on my little mouth. "Did you miss your father, monkey?" he asked grinning.

"Yes Daddy."

"You got fat!" he laughed. "Did you eat bread the whole time you were there? You look just like a watermelon."

He picked up our bags and led us to the parking lot. I'd almost forgotten the sound of his voice, pebbles on glass. His bright eyes never left my mother, drinking her in like a man in a desert. I curled up in the back seat as the car bounced along the highway, the twilight deepening. The trip home, ten hours in a cold shrieking airplane was too much. Was it already over? It felt like we had

just left. My father looked exactly the same: shiny olive skin and jet black hair slicked back off his forehead. A long straight nose above his plush red lips. I had never seen him so animated. Almost like uncle Vasi, his older brother. But uncle Vasi was different. His voice was more velvet and his eyes, the same brown, were like a soft puppy. And his big stomach always had room for a head to rest. His big hands liked to pat and stroke, completely different from my father's.

They chattered, their voices far away birds while I watched the sky. A deep indigo fighting off the mournful black, a small crack of fire on the horizon. Pin pricks of stars sparkled above us. We pulled into the driveway, the break grinding down. My mother shooed me up to bed immediately while they lugged our suitcases into the hall. Images like colours were fighting in my head, the summer, faces, the lambs, it was a grand cacophony in my skull. I couldn't brush my teeth, only strip down and put on an old nightie before I crawled under the blankets. Perhaps this was the secret to fighting insomnia, sheer overload and exhaustion.

"MOMMY, CAN I have a pet? A puppy, or a kitty?"

Already, school was starting again. The summer had faded into the expectation of new pencils and books and shoes. But certain parts of the trip still weighed heavily on me. We were sitting in my favourite room of the house, the kitchen. I was drinking a glass of Welch's grape juice, another favourite, while she sipped something from a teacup. My father was at work.

"You want a pet?" she sat down across from me, moving the vase of flowers, so we could see each other.

I nodded, my eyes hopeful.

"Will you take care of it, no matter if it's a cat or a dog?"

"Yes."

"You'll take a puppy for walks, before school and before bed?"

"Yes."

"And you'll play with it?"

"Yes."

"And you'll feed it?"

"Yes!"

"And if it's a kitty, you'll change the litter box?"

"I promise!"

"Okay," she started laughing. "We'll ask your daddy."

My own pet! I was so excited. Maybe he'll say yes, maybe! He'd been so good lately. Less angry and smiling more. He might. Stranger things had happened.

That night, at supper, she couldn't stop smiling. Probably because I looked spirited for a change. I kept hugging myself, murmuring about my pet. In my head, he was already real, mine. If it was a puppy, I was going to call him Sambo. And a kitty, I would name Cuddles. It was all worked out. Even my dad's mood was lighter. Our humour was permeating him.

"What's making you girls giggle?" he asked, spearing a bean.

"Well, we have something to ask you," Ma answered.

"Oh, what's that?" he picked up his glass of wine.

"Well, Mia had a great idea today. I told her it was okay with me, if it was okay with you."

He looked over at me. "Yes Mia? What's your great idea?"

I glanced at Ma. She nodded encouragingly. "Um ... I was wondering if I could have a little pet. That's all."

My eyes went back to my plate of food.

"A pet? What kind of pet," he made the appearance of listening. He steepled his fingers together.

"A kitty, or a puppy." Suddenly I didn't care about begging. My head came up, my eyes gazing at him hopefully. "Please Dad. I promise to look after it, all by myself. You wouldn't have to do anything. I'll be good. I won't ever ask for anything ever again. For real. Please."

He looked up at the ceiling, then at my mother. She was still smiling trustingly, like she expected him to say yes. This was a mere formality.

"No." And he went back to eating.

I exhaled disappointment.

"Chris, that's it? Why no?" she sounded a little angry, but tried to control it.

"That's it. No."

So offhand.

"I'd like a little creature around the house —"

"She's not creature enough for you?" he laughed, gesturing with his knife towards me.

"That's not funny!" Her voice was steel.

I started feeling uneasy in my chest.

"I'd like a little pet, too. You know I adore puppies. I think it's a good idea. It'd be fun, too. We could all take walks at night, together."

"No."

"Say something else besides no. At least give a reason why you don't want one."

"Animals belong outside the house, with the goats and the pigs, not inside, muddying the carpets, leaving their fur on the couch. They're dirty and they make noise and they're too much trouble. I don't want one. That's it." He drained his wine. He never raised his voice.

"Well, you know what? I do," she stared at him, a slight challenge.

Something crackled in the air, like an electrical storm on the horizon. I expected a wind to whistle through the dining room, ruffling our hair.

He put his knife and fork down, patiently facing my mom. "Well, we have a problem, then, don't we?"

She aped his movements. "I think so."

The trip stayed with me. Every time we had supper, and it was meat at least four nights a week, I would practically choke, trying to chew, to swallow my meal. It stuck in my throat and all I could taste was blood. In my head, I would hear the bleating, the clucking all over again. To my father, having steak marked him as being a successful, prosperous man. When he was a little boy after the war, with the poverty that followed, all the family had to eat were dandelion

greens and lots of beans, like lentils or garbanzos. Being rich meant red meat, and assortments of it. As often as possible.

I didn't want to make a big scene, always staying under the radar. I tried to be as meek as possible. The more invisible I tried to be, the more he fixed his stare on me. We were having roast chicken, which had been one of my favourites, before the summer changed my appetites. Ma rubbed the bird with olive oil and oregano. Then a whole lemon was squeezed all over, the pan covered with aluminum foil set to roast slowly, the potatoes absorbing the savoury juice. I filled my plate with the potatoes and salad and some corn on the side. I put a big hunk of bread and olives where the meat would have gone. We started eating. It appeared that no one noticed me. I drank my milk.

"Delicious, hon," my father said. "Isn't it, Mia?"

I nodded, my mouth full.

For some reason - he'd never done this before - he looked at my plate.

"Where's the chicken?"

"I ate it already."

"Huh. That was fast," he went back to his own plate. "Watermelon face." My mother didn't seem to buy it.

"Mia, I didn't notice you put any chicken on your plate. Are you feeling sick?" she leaned over and put her hand on my forehead.

"I did. I ate it first," I looked at her pleadingly.

"I'm sure you didn't."

*Stop Ma. Don't make it obvious. You know what will happen.*

"I did. Now I'm going to eat my potatoes next, then the corn. It's like a system. I'm going by colour." I hoped this explanation would satisfy them.

My father looked at me. "Why?"

"Why not?"



He gripped my upper arm. "Don't get smart with me."

"Sorry," I mumbled.

They seemed to be on the lookout after that. Both of them, but for different reasons. Or maybe I was just paranoid. Everything I put on my plate. Luckily the next night, we had pasta. Short, round hollow pasta with feta cheese and basil, with tomatoes. I didn't have to deal with the meat issue.

We had fish on the Friday. I hated fish to begin with, and had no moral qualms about eating fish really, but I knew that we'd have a problem that night. I wasn't wrong.

"Eat some, Mia," my father insisted.

"No, thanks. I hate fish."

"You'll eat it and you'll like it. Why do you think I work so hard?"

"I don't know."

"To feed my family. Do you think when I was your age, I could pick and choose what I wanted to eat?"

"I don't know."

"What do you know?" he scowled.

"Mia, it's good for you, honey. Have some," my mother served me a slice of halibut.

"I'm not very hungry. Can I be excused?"

"No. Not until you eat everything on your plate," was my father's decree.

*Oh no.* I stared at the white piece of meat, the skin in layers, in rough patches. The smell rose up like a wave. Inwardly, I gagged a little. My tummy flip-flopped, and I felt a shiver down my arms. I knew I couldn't do it. I looked up at my father, willing him away. Anywhere, just go. He looked like my grandfather, harsh and farm-hardened. Where does their heart go? A voice suddenly whispered like paper behind my ear, 'It's okay'.

"What?" I said abruptly.

"What, Mia?" My mother eyed me.

"Did you say something, Ma?" I asked her.

"No."

"Stop fooling around, Mia and eat!" my father growled.

Again like a soft touch, the musical voice in my head. "*Take one bite and he'll leave you alone.*" Not individual words, not one language. I smelled roses. Fear jolted through me. It had happened once before. Back in the summer before the killing.

WE HAD SAT on the balcony as Spiro's grandmother served us icy lemonada: we were on our best behaviour until she left. Alone again, we climbed on the balcony, making jokes. I remember that there were a lot of snakes in Greece, and a lot of these little lizards, I can't recall the name of them. Samo-something. They were harmless, but they darted around startling me all the time like the mice do here. One came running by, and I thought, someone step on it. But all the other kids were used to these things, like we're used to squirrels. They paid no attention. I really wanted to squish the lizard. I had no reason, only that kids like to kill helpless creatures for no excuse other than they can. Suddenly, one of the boys leapt up at us and flattened the poor thing -- splat! --

A couple of the girls gasped. We all gathered around, looking at the mass of blood and guts, its green tail still intact.

"Why did you do that, Spiro? You know that you made God very angry. We're not allowed to kill the lizards."

I didn't know this. I had no access to this information. I was the foreigner here.

"I don't know," Spiro looked genuinely bewildered. "I've never killed one before. It was like something making me do it, making me get up and stamp on it. Oh, I'm ashamed."

He ran down the stairs and dashed out of the courtyard, all the kids calling after him. Some of the boys followed him.

It was me. I wanted that creature squashed and Spiro did it because I wanted him too. I was a terrible person.

"Mia, stop daydreaming and finish. You'll clean the table too when you're done," my father pushed his plate away. He slammed his big palm down. "Now!"

I jumped out of my reverie. Picking up the fork, I pierced a small piece, and lifted it to my mouth. I forced it between my teeth and chewed, holding my breath so I couldn't smell anything. I thought of mashed potatoes, rice, anything just to get this down. He got up and went into the kitchen. I heard the coffee pot, a spoon clinking against a cup. He came back in and saw me chewing, half the fish had disappeared into my napkin, balled between my legs.

"Leigh, when she's finished, tell me. She can't go upstairs til then," he ordered, then went to his study.

Of course, I sat there for a long time, so long that my mother finally dimmed the lights. She came into the dining room with her nightgown on.

"All right, that's enough. Get up, let's wash up for bed."

"Where is he?"

"Your father is in the den, working. Hurry up."

We were climbing the stairs when we heard his door open. "Did she eat everything?"

"Yes. Now she's going to bed."

He looked up at us for a moment. I was afraid he was going to go check, but he merely nodded, satisfied his word had been obeyed, then shut his door again.

"I'll meet you in the bathroom," my mother whispered. We were both thinking the same thing.

As she tucked me into bed, she asked. "Now, will you really tell me what's going on?"

"I don't want to eat meat anymore. That's all. And I won't. You can't force me."

"I see. What made you decide this?"

"I don't like the taste. It tastes like blood."

She peered at me carefully. "We never eat lamb, Mia. Does that change your decision?"

I rolled over, my back to her, murmuring a muffled "no."

"Okay. I understand. Give me a kiss."

\*

*I heard my door open quietly. My eyes popped open. My room was inky black, my eyes had yet to adjust. But it didn't matter, I knew who it was. Jimmy the Crocodile was back. Not Jimmy, though.*

*"Mee—ah," a sing song voice. I bet he was drunk.*

*"You disobeyed me. Imagine disobeying me. We can't have that, can we?" my bed creaked a little, where he sat down. I heard the belt buckle.*

*I was taut as a board. Not this time, not this time. His hand went to my hair. Stroking, harder and harder until he was pulling. I kept my lips clamped together, my teeth grinding so hard, I saw stars shooting in the gloom. Every time it got worse. Dear God, it kept getting worse.*

AUTUMN CREEPS UP on the city. Every year, it's the same routine. Montreal is beguiled into a false sense of security by its humid languid summers, when the air is so thick that breathing is arduous. Everyone remains inside, the malls, movie theatres, wherever there's air conditioning. Only in the evening when the air imperceptibly thins do the denizens sit outside. On balconies, restaurant patios late into the evening, drinking and talking, unwilling to face the heavy mornings again.

Ma had taken me shopping for new school clothes. In the cool stores, I could forget about Karin and Debbie and Lisa and the other girls and coo over the fashions of the day. Short balloon skirts with leggings. Lots of necklaces a la Madonna. Lacy tops and tights. Ma liked bright colours; I preferred more subdued ones. She took a teal blue dress off a rack, exclaiming, "Monkey, this is adorable. Let's try it on."

In the change room she pulled my tank top off. "What's this?"

She fingered a small new bruise on my shoulder. I tried to shrug her off.

"What did you do? Did you hurt yourself?" she asked.

"I don't know. Don't remember," I mumbled. Suddenly shy, I crossed my arms, a picture times three facing me back in the mirror. The fluorescents were unforgiving, displaying the slightest imperfection.

"Be careful honey. You rush around too much."

She drew the dress over my head, brushing my hair aside. "You need a haircut. What did your γιαια call you? Gypsy," she laughed.

Bile sat behind my tongue, foamy and sour. Anger sparked briefly. *Stupid!* But just as quickly faded. She examined the dress, murmuring her approval.

Then brought more clothes in as I waited. My chicken legs looked like pencils, knees close together. The air made goose bumps raise on my skin. I wanted to go home. I wanted to crawl into my bed --

I wanted teddy for comfort. *Edgar.*

The bear. My seventh birthday, all the way from Quebec City. They'd gone away for a long weekend, leaving me with a baby-sitter. She *knew* how mad I was that she went away with him, leaving me behind. Edgar didn't make up for her going, but he was a start. I slept with him all the time.

"Did I ever tell you, Mia darling, Aesop's fable about the Bear and the Fox?"

"No, Mommy," I had snuggled down into my warm comforter, buried amongst my pillows. My toes wiggled happily.

"A bear used to boast of his excessive love for humankind, saying that he never touched or mauled a human corpse."

"Ick."

"The fox said with a smile, "I would be more impressed by your kindness if you never ate a human being alive."

"Ick again. Then what happened?"

"That's the fable."

"That's it? No porridge, no going to Grandma's house? That's not a good story!" I rolled over in a huff, turning my back to her. What kind of bedtime story was that?

"What do you think that it means, Mia?"

"How'm I supposta know?"

"Think."

"He ate live people."

"Yes ...."

"But he didn't eat dead people."

"And it's probably more important not to kill people than to eat them."

"Gross, Ma."

"The moral of the story, my little monkey, is we should not wait until a person dies before showing our respect."

I rolled over to look at her. Cold fingertips danced down my little spine.

"Ma! Don't talk like that," I felt weakness leak down past my chest into my legs, cold tears gathering in the corners of my eyes.

"Hey, aw, don't be scared. It's just a story. Come here and give me a hug. Time for sleep."

My mother hugged me and smoothed down the comforter, covered in ducks. I stared out the window, through the trees into the moon, thinking of black matted fur with snapping fangs.

\*

We made our purchases and walked idly around a bit more. I was afraid to go home now that the time approached. My feet started dragging.

"Tired, Mia?" Ma asked. She took my hand. I shook her off.

Suddenly I was throwing the mother of all tantrums in public, humiliating my mother, my calm and placid mother in the store, where all her suburban friends could see.

"Get off the floor, Mia. Get up!" she whispered. Confused, she dropped our packages and leaned over.

"No! Don't. Wanna. Go. Home!" My sandal flew off into a gumball machine. She squatted down, trying to restrain my flailing arms. "What? What is it?"

"Please don't take me home!"

"We have to go home, darling. We can't move into Rockland shopping centre," she tried to make a joke.

"Mommy, no! I don't want to go there." I started to weaken, getting tired.

She kissed my sweaty cheek. "Sweetheart, sweetheart, love of my life," she crooned. "You're just tired. We'll lie down together with Edgar when we get home."

*I'm lost, all is lost.*

In the car, with me safely buckled beside her, she asked what brought on this tantrum? But I feigned sleep, already a great actor. A little balloon with all the air gone.

He was waiting for us. I saw him outlined behind the living room curtains when we pulled into the driveway. I remember my little head dropping, trying to sink into my chest. My mother struggled to get me out of my seat, balancing the shopping bags. She said, all happy, look, Daddy's waiting for us. Oh, Mommy, I thought to myself. He's going to kill me.

In a fit of frenzy early that morning, I had crept down to his office. I had woken up in this simmering, shaking state, although it wasn't like I had really slept. The night passed black and purple as I lay curled up in my bed, unable to swallow. Feeling sickened and demented with something I couldn't yet name, I got up quietly and went into his office. It smelled like him in there, cigarettes and his cheap Old Spice cologne and booze. Always the booze. I didn't know what I was looking for, only that the more I heard his barbarian, ridiculing voice in my ear (my shoulder hunching against the rasp of his stubble) the more I thought I would puke. I was going to puke, my stomach percolating. I covered my mouth with my hand, knowing I wouldn't make it to the bathroom. And it all came up, a brown puddle of hot chocolate and mush, hot and foul smelling, through my fingers. There was no holding it back. Too late.



The terror when I saw his desk was like a strong wind, almost knocking me backward. My fingers buzzed cold. I knew I had to clean this up. If he saw this he would kill me. Yet, through this frenzy of fear and nausea and anxiety, something said *yeah! All right*. I quickly stamped it away. And cleaned up as best I could, flushing all the evidence down the toilet. I missed some of his files apparently. There was nothing to be done about the smell.

I honestly thought he was going to kill me. He was all powerful. He opened the front door. The look on his face – well, he was purple like a plum. My mother's smile faded pretty quick. Chris, what's the matter? He grabbed her shoulder, saying get in here, then he grabbed me by my hair and flung me into the foyer. Mommy screamed at him, what do you think you're doing? What's the matter with you?

Silence, he shouted at her. You, he swiveled, you little Satan, what did you do? Smack! His big hand, backwards against my face. I fell into the telephone table. The lamp wobbled, the mail spilled over me. He leaned over and hits me again – *crack* – the flat of his hand stinging, tears leapt to my eyes. My nose started to bleed at that point. Then he spat on me, his saliva acrid and rank.

She tried to grab him, tried to make him to get control of himself. But the beast was unleashed. She was no match for it, big, black, ugly. He brushed her off, hard enough that she, too, fell back into the wall. He raised his hand to her, *to her, stay away! I'll show her who's the boss, she – goddammit!* – she vomited all over my office. And on my files! She ruined my papers! Where did she learn that? She's crazy, she's not right in the head. I'll teach you, you little bitch, you little bitch, get back here! I'll teach you to go where you're told to stay out!

While he was yelling at Mommy, spit flying, a forelock dangling in his eyes, I ran as fast as I could up the stairs, heading for the bathroom, the only door with a lock. If he came after me, I was going to swallow all the pills in the medicine

.cabinet, if only to save my mother from him. Otherwise, I knew she'd die protecting me.

*Quid Hoc Ad Eternitatum?*

IT'S FUNNY HOW, after you lose touch with people, like an ex-lover, they become invisible. Invisible isn't the right word. Non-existent? No, that's not it, either. When you imagine them, especially if you still want them, but they don't really want you anymore, they are like a movie character, or a movie actor. You picture them doing things: exciting parties they go to (*without you*), dinner affairs, concerts, mad-dash trips here and there, but not the ordinary things, like doing the laundry, shopping, washing dishes, having a shower. No, they become dream-like and you forget that you knew them intimately and their life hasn't become glamorous and exciting without you. You forget that you used to cook together, and go for walks, or rent videos. Suddenly, you feel like the banal nerd and they move, dance, swing in a cloud of music and passion *without you*.

\*

Like a weight on my chest, but what is it? The elephant that crushes me, that makes me lie under its heaviness, I don't know. I don't know anything anymore. No one can make me do anything I don't want to do. I don't have to say a word.

But just because I don't speak it, doesn't mean it's not there.

*(What is it?)*

This is what I am not:

an acrobat, wealthy, a tea drinker, a lover of country and western music,  
erudite, hirsute, a fern, a vase, crrrrraaaaaazzzy;

This is what I am:

\*

Jimmy the Crocodile meted out his own particular form of justice later on,  
when the moon had sunk and the house was as quiet as bath water. God Bless  
This House.

*God is dead and no one cares.*

*If there's a hell, I'll see you there.*

\*

A strange truce descended over the house. I don't know what my mother  
said to him, but he left me alone after that whole ugly night. We circled each  
other, me avoiding any kind of eye contact, outwardly appearing cowed, yet  
seething inside. *Just wait, just wait, one day, one day, you'll get yours.* Mother acted  
like the cheery housewife: baking, dusting, bustling here and there. Nobody was  
fooling anyone. But I behaved. I ate my vegetables, I kept my room clean, my  
toys picked up, I didn't talk at the dinner table (*stop that chatter, Mia, you're giving  
me a headache!*) Not a peep. Until one night, I overheard my mother telling my  
father she was worried about me. About all of us.

*I seemed to give a lot of people headaches.*

I heard her in tears. That was the end of my young rope. My mommy could not cry. That was unacceptable. I was her protectress. I would not let her be unhappy.

\*

I stood up to him in a dream. The monster eating my mother's head like a mandarin orange. Stop, I yelled, a halo of yellow light silhouetting me. Stop or die. You're going to die anyway.

Princess, he told me with a sick smile, we all die.

If she had just taken me from that house, if we had just left him, none of this would have happened. Why did she stay?

She took to her bed more often. Why did she do that, I ask myself now, locking herself in her room and leaving me with him? When she knew I was not safe? But he rarely bothered me when Mommy was having one of her spells. He usually sat in the living room, staring at his feet, drinking himself into oblivion. Ignoring me, thank God.

\*

PABLO AND I began to meet. At first, there were the accidental bump-ins. Montreal is a small city really. We lived in the same neighbourhood, had many of the same acquaintances. The first impromptu meeting was in Jeanne Mance Park, while I played with Nattie one Sunday afternoon shortly after the party. She was exhausted, the poor old girl after 6 or 7 throws of her toy and sat in the snow, chewing happily. I sat beside her, on a picnic table enjoying the sun on my

face. The ever-present anxiety percolated slowly under my skin but I could forget it outside under the big sky. The mountain loomed behind us, shouts of people laughing as they slid down the snow into the bales of hay filling the air. Nattie looked around now and then for one of her doggy friends. I felt, before I saw, someone walking toward us. A purpose in his stride, it emanated like a wave of heat. I looked up, noticing a dark toque and leather coat. He was smiling.

"Mia?" a question behind bright teeth.

Behind my sunglasses my eyes widened. My breath left me. It was him, the man from the party.

"Yes?"

"Hi, it's me. Pablo. We met at Stephanie's party?" he leaned his hand out. When I reached mine out in kind, he kissed my cheeks. His breath was warm. He smelled of citrus and spice.

I stood up, brushing some snow from the back of my jeans. "How are you?" My legs felt watery.

"Who's this?" Nattie twined in and out of his legs, her tail an arthritic helicopter.

"This is my dog, Nattie," I patted her back. "Eh girl?" I let my hair fall over my cheeks, sheltering me.

"Well, isn't she beautiful," he straightened back up. "Beautiful day, eh? I love this weather. What are you doing?"

"Oh, we're just playing a little bit. You know, getting ready for the week," my voice trailed off.

"Great. Do you live around here?"

Finally, I had to look at him. It was like a punch in the chest. Dark wavy hair, and his eyes, warm and velvety like moist earth. Little smile lines crinkled as he smiled waiting for me to answer.

"Just around the corner, on de Bullion. You?" I couldn't help it, my mouth slid into a smile too.

"Yeah. St. Dominique. So," he looked down at Nattie's toy. Suddenly, he scooped it up and threw it, watching as she galloped clumsily in the snow. "Good girl!" he called as she ran back. She dropped it at his feet, her mouth a great smile.

"How nice to see you. I really enjoyed meeting you,"

"It was nice meeting you," I checked my watch nervously. "Oh my goodness. It's already 4 o'clock. Where does the time go?"

I picked up the toy and put the dog's leash back on. I had nowhere to go really, just home to decide what I would wear the next day, maybe have some dinner. A drink. Rudely, the evening yawned ahead of me, an empty chasm, where a couple of hours ago, the thought never bothered me. We stood facing each other, not speaking.

"Well," he said awkwardly. "I guess ..."

"Yeah," I replied, equally uncool. My mind called out, do something. Say something.

"Maybe we could go and get a coffee sometime. Or a beer or something," he finally proposed. His head tilted to his shoulder, his smile crooked.

The thought, a little lizard skittering up my arm – *He does this all the time* – startled me. I pushed it away. Why can't I? Why can everyone else but me?

"That would be great." With those few words, my lot was set. I would have followed him anywhere.

I began to walk along St. Dominique more, sometimes with the dog, sometimes taking a detour home. Nattie grew to expect walks more often at odd hours: in the middle of the day, late at night. Rush hour. I never saw him. Weeks passed and I didn't see him. Until one rainy icy February morning, running out with greasy hair and glasses in a baggy pair of cords to get a Saturday paper. There he was, in the Portuguese grocery store with a small basket of items: some milk, bread, eggs, a couple of beers and the paper, too. *Oh God, don't let him see me.* I looked like shit. I went down a different aisle, losing myself in the crowd of people. I examined the cans of soup, checking labels, comparing prices, every now and then covertly looking into the big curved mirror above the door for his whereabouts.

"Mia?"

He was behind me. I could feel him. I could smell him, that exotic combination of fruit and spice. I had no choice, I had to turn.

"Hey, Pablo," I acted surprised. "Quel coincidence."

Why did he make me shake so?

"Shopping?" he grinned down.

"Just want the paper really. Gross day, eh?"

"It certainly is. I can't wait to get home," he looked at the line snaking through the store.

"Me too," I turned. "Okay, nice to see you."

I tried to walk away, but he put his hand on my arm, a gentle arrest. Like a jolt of fire, I felt it through my heavy winter coat.

"Wait, before you go. I know it's last minute style, but are you busy?" he asked.

I turned to look up at him, his arm still holding me. "What, now?"

"Yeah, now, today, tonight?"



What I didn't know then was that his whatever-she-was had gone away for the weekend, leaving him free. Temporarily.

"Well, I guess ... why?"

"Let's go get something to eat, bring the paper, sit in a cafe," again he tilted his head in that beguiling way. "Anything. Are you hungry?"

My stomach rumbled but I felt full to bursting. I needed to take a shower.

"Okay, but give me an hour."

Sometimes, we think we don't need something. We convince ourselves we can live our lives without the one thing we truly want. Perhaps it had been taken from us before and we grew used to the hole, the void, the tear. But then, cruel Providence gives it back in a different way, an alternate form. Only to mock us. To taunt us by ripping it away once again.

DO WE REMEMBER the actual moments when our identities are formed? Our character or our integrity, all the things that make us up. I don't know, I only know that the school year that followed the trip to Sparta changed my life. What would have happened if things had been different? The ever elusive could have been, as some singer recently sang.

We started back. That year, our teacher was Miss Minife. Karin tried to start a rumour that she was having an affair with Mr. Noble, the really cute but married grade 6 teacher. Just because they liked to talk a lot and stand close to each other in the halls.

Miss Minife asked my parents to come in and talk to her and Mr. Harris. I was petrified. What would they say? Did I do something wrong that I couldn't remember. There was the day that I stared at Karin, willing her to fall off the monkey bars into the mud puddle and wreck that long bohemian skirt she was wearing, that she showed off all morning like she was the queen or something. She thought she was so big and I was so sick of her. Since returning from Greece, I let her bully me less. She didn't like this loss of her power and pulled out all her tricks but she held no authority anymore, at least not with me. After my close brushes with the infinite unknown in the courtyard, my narrow escapes from the clutches of Neraides, Karin was a poor caricature. The whispers behind cupped hands continued, the ban of sitting at the table eating lunch with them rolled off my back. I didn't care. I didn't. And Karin knew it. The more I was indifferent to her, the more desperate she became for a reaction. Alternating between excluding me and trying to bring me back in, she went on a mission for

a while. My force field went up and her jibes, her glinting blue eyes, her slippery whispers couldn't penetrate me. I had returned stronger than her and she knew it. I preferred to be alone. I didn't want to bother anyone and wished the same for her.

If one of the other girls wore a long skirt that fell all the way to the floor, Karin wouldn't have let them live it down. I could picture it: perhaps the Indian girl, Gita. If Gita wore it, Karin would have laughed and pointed and mocked all day, making racist remarks. Or God forbid, if Janey had worn it. The jokes would be about the amount of material or something like that. But since it was Karin, the style became all the more desirable for her mob of magpies. The top shirt was an off white peasant style, with a scooped neck and puffy sleeves. I thought it was quite stylish; it would look good on me. The bottom was a vivid swirl of burgundies, wines and golds, whorls and figure eights dancing as she walked. Her mother had gathered her hair off her face, securing it into a small bun. In her delicate ears she wore gold hoop earrings. *Like mine!* She was trying to copy me. The whole time she was making my life miserable, she was copying my earrings. Smoke came out of my nose like an angry bull. Oh! I was so mad! I waited patiently until recess then I walked up to her. Debbie's eyes widened and she stepped back to give me room. "Nice earrings, Karin," I complimented her.

"Thanks," she grinned, lips together. She looked at me appraisingly, no fear.

"They're like mine."

She barked a loud "Ha!" her mouth open wide in a black circle. "You wish!"

"No, YOU wish, copycat!" I turned and stomped away. A crowd was starting to gather, the hisses spreading like a fire across the school yard *Fight. Fight.* I didn't want to make a spectacle. I could take her, that wasn't the problem. Those eyes, prisms of them all watching, staring. Making me feel naked. *Cooties. Greasy hair.*

"Look at her walk away," Karin taunted. "Chicken!"

I spun back around and strode back toward her. She took a step back involuntarily. "You're the chicken. You need everyone to protect you."

"*Chicken,*" she whispered, grinning wide mouth. She was loving this show, being centre stage. The hero in her own eyes. I took a deep breath.

"You're going to be sorry, Karin," I promised. I could wait till the next recess. Their laughter bounced off me, the names following me as I went into the school. I could wait. Force field up and shimmering.

The next recess, I remember her lying there in the wet slimy mud. She was on her back, arms up and legs splayed out. The mud slimed through her hair making it look like a dog's tail trailing onto the once white shirt, and one of her earrings had ripped out during the fall. Her eyes looked up at us uncomprehendingly, all of her loyal minions in a circle staring, some of the braver kids laughing out loud. I made sure I stood in the front row, directly in her line of vision. *I told you so,* I mouthed. A green booger snaked out of her nose as she started to cry. Her skirt ripped all the way up, showing off her pink polyester grandma underpants. I was pleased. Did they know I'd done that? They couldn't. But Karin knew. I saw it in her eyes. She showed fear for once.

My father became extremely agitated if he thought people were talking about him, good or bad. The very idea that the school was asking him to come in and discuss his daughter was giving him an anxiety attack. At home, as they prepared after dinner to drive over, he tied his shoelaces, huffing and puffing.

"What do you think she did?"

"Maybe it's something good, Chris, why do you assume it has to be terrible?"

He shot her a look of pure belligerence. "She's a sly troublemaker. That's why. I have a lot of work to do, better things to do with my evenings than haul my ass down there to listen to what an ill-behaved child you have."

"I have? She's your daughter too, although I wonder if you think of that at all. Lord, sometimes I wonder what comes over you. What happened to the romantic, gentle soul I married?" Her voice alternated between wistfulness and sternness.

"My love, he grew up, got married, got a job and joined the real world, of bills, mortgages and responsibilities. He got disappointed like most men are. Let's go and get this over with."

He strode ahead out to the car, while my mother and I followed. She walked slowly, like she was carrying a big clumsy pack. I watched her grimace a little when she bent to get into the car. My stomach clenched. She was sick and I was making her sicker with my trouble at school.

To my horror, Mrs. Minife and Mr. Harris wanted to discuss my apathy, my listlessness. They knew something was wrong, even if they couldn't find any outward signs of turmoil.

The classroom at night looked just as it did during the day. The chalkboard, newly washed and polished gleamed a dark forest green. The letters of the alphabet, both upper and lower case sat over top. Artwork from all the students decorated the walls. Our little tables waited in neat rows. But it was so quiet, the only difference, the stillness. My parents sat on top of a table while Mrs. Minife and Mr. Harris sat on her desk. They faced each other, concern in the eyes of the teachers. My father stared back squarely, but then his eyes would dart, here and there, looking for a place to light. My mother looked scared. I watched them all dance around their words.

"We, of course, do not wish to pry, but we are a little worried about Mia. She's very solitary lately. She doesn't want to interact with the other children. She keeps to herself, and she rarely speaks."

"Oh, I see," my mother looked over at me. "Mia, what is it, honey? Are some of the other kids picking on you? It's okay, you can tell us."

*No. I can't.*

"No." I examined my boots intently.

"Is there a problem at home?" Mr. Harris looked at my father. He smiled encouragingly. *It's okay, you can tell us. We're all friends here.*

My father blinked, then swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down like a rock. I watched his anger flash across his face, quick as lightning. His brows came together until he made a forcible effort to appear surprised. "Why, everything's fine! Isn't it, Mia?"

I shrugged and nodded all at once. My mother sat silently, anguish on her face. The two teachers exchanged a quick look.

"Well, if there is anything we can do here at school that you think may help Mia, please let us know," Mrs. Minife got up. "Oh, I almost forgot. I wanted to show you Mia's last arts and crafts project."

It was the combination painting with plastecine. We had a choice that day to use one or the other. I ended up using both.

My mother rose eagerly.

The painting was our house, with me, mommy, and a figure who was supposed to be the daddy. Instead of a rainbow, I'd painted dark green and purple rain clouds with a jagged yellow bolt of lightning hitting the television antenna. Mother and I were standing in front holding hands, but for my father I had squashed a big, black blob of Play-Doh and where the head would have been, I drew a king's crown.

My mother's eyes widened as she examined it, then she looked over at me. Caressing my head. "Mia," she murmured.

My father glanced at it briefly then at his wrist saying, "That's it then? Well, goodnight. Thank you for your concern."

On the car ride home, no one spoke.

\*

I remember bad things. Bad things I've done. Maybe, he was right. Maybe, I brought it all on myself. But he got his, they all will, the *dirty men* –

\*

My mother herself grew very quiet. She stayed up late, and I knew that she was entering my room in the middle of the night to check on me. Sometimes, I would wake up really early in the morning, before it was light out, the sky turning from pitch to dark blue, and I'd find her stretched out across the foot of my bed watching the branches click on the window like skeleton fingers. She was always gone by daylight. She began to challenge my father, coddle him less, accept his violent mood changes less. I watched all this warily. I didn't like the bags appearing under her eyes, the cords down her neck. She was getting thinner and thinner.

ABOUT A WEEK after the school meeting, Mommy came to pick me up after school and said we were going for a hot chocolate. This was very exciting! I rarely got to go on dates with her, she was always so busy: shopping or rushing home to cook and clean. We went to a coffee shop on Ste-Catherine street and

sat in the window, where we could watch people walking back and forth. I licked the whipped cream off my spoon, reveling in her undivided attention.

“Mia, I was hoping we could talk this afternoon.”

She was speaking to me like a grown-up, like she spoke to her friends. I sat up straighter in my chair.

“Okay.”

“I want you to tell me what is the matter,” she leaned over and took my hand. Her eyes were shiny and I noticed little lines that looked like silver spider webs around them. “You are my little girl and I love you more than anything in this world. I’m your mother, you can tell me anything. Anything, Mia.”

I swallowed. My breathing became shallow, things started to swim around me. I did not know what to do. If I said anything to her, it might make her stay in her room more, the curtains closed, the towel across her forehead. But, inside it was starting to strangle me.

“Okay, Mommy.”

“Why are you so sad?”

“I’m not sad.” My legs started kicking ever so slowly under the table.

“Why won’t you tell me, sweetheart? Are you afraid?” Her hand gripped mine harder.

I shrugged.

“You’re afraid? Of kids at school?”

Shake.

“Your teachers?”

Shake again.

“Me?”

“No!” I stared into her face. “I love you. I wish we could just be alone.”

It slipped out before I could stop.



She swallowed. She inhaled deeply. "I thought so. You're afraid of your father."

I looked back down. My left leg kicked out viciously.

"Why? Because he yells at you? Because he hits you sometimes? He has a bad temper, Mia darling, but he loves you."

I cannot reply. It's physically impossible through the clod in my throat.

"He told me he wouldn't hit you anymore. I made him promise. We're going to be a happy family. Mia, I promise you."

We left shortly after. My chest felt like someone was wrapping an elastic band around me, twisting, twisting, twisting.

That night I dreamt that black oil was engulfing me. I climbed the stairs to the second floor, but it slithered up after me. I headed for the attic. The ceiling's steeply sloped, so I couldn't stand straight. Inexorably, it followed. I was pushed into a corner. The pool grew larger, larger until it was almost touching my toes. I woke up, screaming.

THE INEVITABLE HAPPENED. She found more bruises on me, finally.

"Mia, did someone hurt you?"

I hunched over, trying to hide myself under the bubbles. She grabbed my shoulders. "Answer me!"

"Ow, ma, you're hurting me."

Tears welled, then rained down my cheeks. *She's hurting me. She's scaring me. I'm cornered.*

"Who did this to you? Someone at school?" She knows, *she knows*, somewhere within her she knows, yet she looks outside to put the blame. *It's the devil you know, mommy.*

"Leave me alone. I'm all right."

I started to rock back and forth, my arms around my knees.

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God," she collapsed back, leaning against the toilet. She raised the lid. Bile spewed out from her lips as sweat oozed onto her forehead.

"Mommy, are you okay?" I rose, a little sudsy snowman. "Mommy?!"

"Am I okay?" she laughed and cried, disbelieving her own truth. "Am I okay? Oh, my God, my baby, my baby. How can this be happening?"

She grabbed me, squeezing so tightly my ribs are crushed but not caring that I'm soaking her dress through. "Tell me what is going on."

"I can't."

"You must!"

She held her head.

"Mommy, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm a terrible woman .... how ... how long ... it's your father ... when did he beat you?"

Beat me? 'He didn't ... .' I look up into her face. "He doesn't hit me." I somehow thought this would help. I didn't understand the consequences of my words. "He hurts me by accident."

Her eyes widened. Her mouth opens slowly, wide, wide, wide.

"No," a whisper, then a stronger exhalation. "No!"

She dropped me to sit on the toilet. Again. "No."

I'm scared. Never been so scared in my life. Everything changes, even the light looks different. Never going to be the same again. *Never again.*

"You're lying, Mia. Why are you filling my head with these lies? You can't hate your father so much, you can't be so *malicious* that you would accuse ... no, I can't believe it."

"No," I howled. I had to make her see. "What did I do? I didn't do anything bad. I said he doesn't beat me. It's a mistake. I'm the bad girl. I need the punishment. It's me.. I'm bad. Mommy. Don't leave me –" The fear fills my chest like a swirling wind, the soap suds flying off like bits of snow in a blizzard. I tried to grab on to her, to hold her to me, but she flung me off.

"What? You're crazy." The way she looked at me like a piece of garbage stuck to her shoe chilled me more than the water in the tub. "You must be sick. Tomorrow, I'm taking you to the doctor and we'll get to the bottom of this. The truth will come out. I've known your father all my life. He wouldn't do something like this ... he just couldn't..."

She left, slamming the door behind her. I don't know where she went, all I know is that she left me there, cold, wet, sitting in a puddle on the floor.

Eventually, I dried myself off and went into my room. Putting on my pajamas myself, I curled up with Edgar. Dry eyed and exhausted. I eventually slept the sleep of the dead, black and dreamless.

She woke me up, on schedule the next morning, for school. She looked worse than ever, her cheeks puffy, the lines running from her nose to her chin deeply etched. She barely spoke to me, but fed me breakfast and handed me my lunch, telling me not to dawdle, I'd be late.

"I'm picking you up at 3.20 outside of school, Mia. Be ready. Please don't make me wait."

"Where are we going, Mommy?"

"You'll see. Get your coat."

"Ma, you look so sad. Is it my fault?"

"I have a terrible headache. We'll talk later."

THE BRAIN RACES faster than any measurable human invention. You can live an entire life, all the happy moments, all the tragedies in 10 seconds. Effectively, you can kill something before it has a chance to burgeon.

\*

Pablo and I have finally decided to meet at Dusty's. We wait in line for about 10 minutes watching groups of people leisurely finishing their breakfasts. I had raced home from Soares, the grocery store, and tore my clothes off the minute I entered my apartment and leapt into the shower. Within half an hour I had blow-dried my hair and primped sufficiently to be able to stop and feed Nattie. Her big eyes followed me. *What's this excitement*, she seemed to be asking? It had been a long time. I won't count the numerous nameless indignities as anything other than what they were. Errors. No, *confirmations*.

I lock the door, check it once, twice, then take a deep breath and force myself to walk slowly, heart beating solidly against my left breast. *I'm having a heart attack, is that a pain in my arm? Oh, I can't breathe. Why do you smoke so much, loser?* The voices, those mean voices had long replaced the gentle lilt I used to hear so long ago. The Erinyes I remember from my grandmother's stories drove us crazy by amplifying our inner monologue. They liked to pick on me. *Don't read too much into it. Again. He doesn't like you.*

"Shut up!" I whisper harshly into my scarf. I look up to see if anyone noticed.

"Everyone loves this place," he looks down at me, bringing me back to this moment.

"Yeah, it's very popular." *Good one. Smart.* I look at faces. The light is very bright. Fluourescents have always bothered my eyes.

"The coffee smells good," he adds.

"Yeah." It's all I can manage. I'm so nervous. His leather coat has small splashes of snow on the shoulders. In his hair too, splashes that twinkle like stars. Finally we are awarded a booth halfway down the restaurant and the waitress brings coffee right away.

"I'm suddenly so hungry," he grins down at the menu. "I'm going to pig out."

My appetite has been replaced with nausea. The coffee makes it worse, like fingers picking at my stomach lining.

"What are you getting?" He looks up.

"Um, a grilled cheese and home fries." I never eat eggs, and pancakes seem like big pillows right now. Impossible to swallow.

"Yum. Greasy spoon style. I'm getting the works. Eggs, bacon, etc."

We order, then sit, smiling nervously. I smoke. He takes one from my pack. "So, what do you do?" he finally asks.

"Um, I work at an ad agency --" I name it. "Have you heard of it?" He shakes his glorious black mane. "As a junior copywriter. What about you?"

"I work for a wireless communications company." Pablo explains his job in technical detail, none of which I understand. Something to do with e-mails, and cell phones and some such hi-tech mumbo jumbo. He might as well be speaking Latin. But it's okay. I sit and listen to his honeyed voice, trying to keep a sedate smile on my face. My toes are wiggling in my boots, the only evidence of my pleasure. The waitress brings our food and he thanks her, his eyes resting on her face for a beat longer than usual. So, he likes to admire people, I answer the voice before it can spew its vile insinuations. The numerous cups of coffee have started to make my hands shake. My anxiety, a tide that ebbs and flows but

never leaves me, starts percolating again. I feel jumpy, my head swivels around to look at the walls, the other diners. The waitress.

"How's the food?" he asks.

"Mm. Good. Perfect. Yours?" He's eaten almost everything.

"Hit the spot. Whew, I am stuffed," he leans back, stretching his arms. Then takes another cigarette. "So."

Pablo is grinning directly into my face. I put my fork down. I'm done. The directness of his gaze is disconcerting, yet I am trying to play back. "So."

"What's your story?"

What? "Huh?"

"Tell me about you. How do you know Stephanie again?"

"We went to university together."

IN UNIVERSITY, I WAS surrounded by sex. It was in the air, the trees, the hallways, every conversation resonated. Subtext, pretext, undertone, overtones, shades of – for a while, I just ignored everything. I wasn't interested. The thought of sex repulsed me. Boys, girls, anyone. No interest. I loved the library, the smell of yellowing paper, so delicate, yet potent. Subdued lighting, whispers, people using their minds, scratching pencils, even the odd cough here and there, thrilled me like the touch of a hand never would.

I was away from them, my so-called family, for the first time. I could breathe. Why would I want any more ... well, let's just call them complications. Me, myself, I, for once in my life; it was all about what I wanted to do: what I wanted to see, read, eat, dress, learn. No, I wasn't

going to give away my freedom on a plate to anyone. Entanglements held no mystery, no beguilement, no desire for me. It was safer this way.

The first two years were sheer tranquillity. Pure contentment. Ah, it was like fresh air, spring mornings: that musky, earth smell; the smell that makes you wake up in the morning and no matter what else is happening, you smile. Because the day is new, you are young and free and smart and like the sky itself, everything is endless. Endlessly possible. Free-dom. It's a state of mind, really, more than a reality. But that is all that matters.

Cafés in the morning with my steaming *allongées*, the newspaper, my notebooks and pens. A cigarette or two, sitting by the window, people watching. Every day, I would get up early and start my day like this. Then head off to class, my head filling with new thoughts, ideas, and theories, everyone open-minded and willing to listen, even if they didn't agree. The library, then home, to my own private lair of quiet, of peace, to listen to music or watch TV or just stare more, a glass of rich ruby wine *toujours* by my side. My life, my own. I rarely thought of him. Or of my difficult escape.

Things changed quickly, but change always comes like an unexpected wave. I remember lying in my small bedroom, in between waking and sleep, my eyes dozily closed, daydreaming, stream-of-consciousness thoughts like playing fairies. Up until now, I'd only felt utter serenity in my seclusion. But today, two and a half years into finishing my degree, the delight I savoured at not having to respond to anyone was gone. All that remained was magnitude. My feelings of safety dissipated. No, dissipated is the wrong word. They exploded outward, into the cosmos, and I lay there, shaking, freezing cold, with a sonorous hissing that I couldn't name. Was it a fever, an anxiety attack?

No.

I was alone. I was an alien. I had no one. I could live or die and no one would give a shit. *I hate my self-pity more than --*

I got up quickly, dressed without even showering and went out walking all afternoon, no destination, all I knew was that I needed to be surrounded by humanity, other heartbeats, anything but be alone.

Desolation, when it closed in, came as an ebb of physical infection. It began in the tips of my fingers, rising up my arms, paralyzing me, reaching my chest and climbing up my neck into my head, a band of white ague, skittering rapidly, forcing a grimace, squinty eyes and a locked jaw. It took only minutes, misery forcing me onto my knees, my back, fear radiating like a heart attack. I could only wait for the attacks to pass, the seizures to abate.

The semester passed. That's what time does, it passes. I found that walking around, throwing myself into crowds, interminable walks, as the only way to fight these spells. Stop being so weak, Mia, I would chide myself, stop needing whatever it is you think you need.

One particularly difficult Sunday (ah, Sundays, the day of families, and lovers, newspapers and coffee lazing around in bed, big roast beef dinners, tender evenings preparing for the busy, productive week ahead) I found myself at the pound, where I took home an eight-year old mutt: lonely, craving any kind of attention (the saddest need of all). I'm sure the poor creature, old and ugly, couldn't compete with all those cuter younger pups, and had given up any hope of ever being taken home to a warm couch, an old shoe to chew on, decent meals, some exercise, *God*, a hand to caress her nappy old fur. She broke my heart.

I named her Nattie. She made me cry, her happiness, her gratitude – at being rescued, at having a mistress, her own Mommy to take care of her,



play with her, just touch her – was overwhelming sometimes. She would crawl into my bed, putting her big old head on the pillow beside me as I read, and sigh, little droplets of dog snot blowing onto my cheek.

Heaven, she was heaven. Irresistible. I adored that dog so much. She was the love of my life.

OF COURSE, I could not allow myself to be happy, to enjoy these small gifts from the gods. Are we ever really able to enjoy the small things, live in the moment with pure feelings of unselfish love?

The doubts, the fears crept back. Slowly, so insidious, like small armies of red ants, marching inexorably, single file into my mind. As much as I tried to block them out, they would wake me up in the middle of the night. Shocked, I would sit up, reaching out for Nattie (for what?) *my love, my love, come to bed with Mommy, come give me kisses, let me make sure you are still alive, where are you?* Droopy, sleepy, she would pad over, hopping on the bed, she content, me quaking, we would bury ourselves under the blankies. She slept, I listened to the clock tick.

Tick, tock.

\*

"How do you know Stephanie?" I ask Pablo, pushing back the tide.

"Oh," he abashedly looks down at the ashtray. "We kind of had a thing for a while."

*A thing?* Stephanie, a casual friend of mine, had a lot of things with a lot of people. The first time I met her was at a fellow classmate's party during our last year. Tired of my being alone *all the fucking time*, I forced myself out one night to a huge rager. She was there with her boyfriend, both of them trying to pick up

another girl. The girl, whose name has been long forgotten, was enjoying the attention immensely until her boyfriend stormed out. I don't remember if Stephanie ever did find a third party for her menage a trois, but her ballsy attitude impressed me. I should be more like her, I thought, brave and not giving a shit what anyone thought about me.

"Really?" The one degree of separation phenomenon again, a uniquely Montreal thing. Jealousy streaked down my arms. "What happened?"

"Nothing," he shrugged. "It wasn't serious. We're good friends now."

Ask him, my mind screamed, ask him about now. Is there anyone now? But I couldn't. I didn't want to hear the answer. He looked at his watch. "Oh, wow. I gotta go."

Abruptly something black and heavy and mocking sits on my shoulders. What's this, he has to go? But why did he ask if I was free today? Tonight? *Obviously*, the voice, the hissing voice piped in, *obviously you've disappointed him and he wants to get away from you. You have that effect on people, or haven't you noticed? You're only good for one thing.*

"But it was fun," he takes some money out of his wallet. "Did you have fun?"

"Yeah," I paste a nonchalant smile on my face. "Yeah, man."

"Good." He looks around for our waitress. "It's on me."

I put my cigarette out slowly. I want to say something, but there's nothing to say. No words, my head is void of any thought. Except that I did something wrong again and I don't know what it is. A brief desperation almost makes me say where do you have to go? But pride holds it in. I don't want to appear needy. I barely even know the guy.

"I have to check some e-mails from work for this project. But you know, I'm going to the Copa later with some friends. What are you doing?"

Sunshine has entered the restaurant, the late afternoon light flooding in suddenly. The cloak of rejection has fallen off my shoulders. "I have no major plans."

"Maybe I'll see you there?" he grins. Does he know he has me eating out of the palm of his hand already?

\*

The past blurs. I don't want it. Back.

PABLO TELLS ME he has a woman about two weeks after our breakfast. We had been to the Copa a few times with people who all seemed to know each other. He flirted playfully over pitchers of beer and lots of bad pool games. I watched him with others, I especially watched him with other women. He liked to touch people, resting a hand on a shoulder or an arm. Tapping a knee for extra emphasis. And he always seemed like he was happy. His good mood was infectious, drawing people into his circle. We attract what we need, say the pop psychologists of the day. What did he need then? He looked very satisfied, very content to me. Nary a troublesome mouse disturbing his dreams. What was he like at home, away from the maddening crowds? I wanted to know everything about him. I especially liked the way he spoke. Slowly, choosing each word as carefully as a tomato. He never rushed through anything. He sipped his drinks slowly, and his movements were graceful and fluid. Smiles spread across his face like a spill.

At home in bed, in my private abyss of longing I dreamed of scenes between us beginning like this: leaving a bar together, comfortably drunk, he would inevitably put his arm around me to shield us from the cold, the snow, the cruel elements. I would lean in close, almost too close, as if by chance, and he would seize the moment very manfully and lead us to his house. We'd sit up all night, talking earnestly until the sun reminded us the nightfall was over and it was time to go to bed.

That's as far as I get most of the time. I can't go farther. Why have high expectations? They never would get met, of that I was sure. Then the swirl of voices all arguing with each other in my head: you get what you expect, if you

expect the worse, then that's what comes, creative visualisation, think positive, etc. Bla bla bla. Words. We can fool ourselves into many things. But we cannot change our certainties, our outcomes.

It's a waste of energy to fight against the course. *Go with the flow, man.* There's nothing you can do. I have learned that. We're all powerless.

He tells me very casually, as if it's nothing. Like I wouldn't care. We're walking home together through the slushy streets of the Plateau. The brown muck is seeping through my boots, its icy needles boring painfully into my toes. The scene is not at all like my pathetic little fantasies; Pablo and I are walking together but at least a foot of cold air separates us.

"Who's Nicole?" I ask him. I'd been hearing that name thrown around, more so tonight. *Hey man, where's Nicole. How is she, haven't seen her in a while, etc.* My stomach rolls while I waited for his answer. *Oh, I drank too much again.* The world is unsteady. There must be a logical explanation, his sister perhaps. After all, Pablo and I are meant to be together. Soon. What love worth having is not without its complications?

"I thought you knew," he turns to look at me in the evening air, his face *that face* illuminated by the street lights. A bus passes us, blocking out the sound of me clearing my throat.

"Know what?"

"She's the woman I live with," he didn't look at me when I said this. *The woman I live with.* Not my girlfriend, not my wife, the love of my life but the woman I live with.

"Live with?" I repeat dully. I knew this was going to happen. Depression blew into my lungs with the dirty wind. I exhale.

"Yeah," he stops. "Mia, look. There's a lot I could tell you if you let me."

We're stopped on the corner of Rachel and St. Laurent in the little park. He moves closer to the arch and I follow him. It must be -20 out, and the draught blows into my bones. My teeth start to chatter. What does he want me to do? Be strong, I tell myself. Be strong. Walk away now. While you still can.

"What, Pablo?" I ask, looking into his eyes. "Besides, it's really none of my business."

"Okay, if that's how you feel. I thought there was something between us. But I guess it's just me," he replies, his voice an octave higher than usual.

I have always admired people who can lay their feelings on the line, to say what is in their hearts without fear of laughter, or worse, disdain. I am unable to do that. Not that I don't want to. I do, desperately. The words freeze behind the clear wall around me, the force field that not only stops the hurt from doing me any harm but also doesn't allow my passion out. Not if there is a chance I'll be rejected. And there usually is, so up it stays, my feelings stuck to it like a splayed mime. Pablo stares at my stony face.

"Okay, I was wrong," he walks slowly away from me, his hands in his pockets. "I'm sorry for the mix up. I'll see you."

I let him go, my mind clicking. I know it's not the end. Not yet. What does he expect me to do anyway? Run after him as he heads home to his girlfriend? Please. I do have a tiny shred of dignity, at least at the moment. Despite the fact that he is leaving me, my heart is bursting at his admission. He loves me too. He just hasn't realised it yet. But he will.

*A crumbling castle, like sand*

*Some boys were playing at the edge of a pond when they noticed a number of frogs in the water and began pelting them with stones. They had already killed many of the poor creatures when one of the frogs, more courageous than the rest, lifted his head out of the water and cried out to them, "Stop your cruel game, my boys! What you think is play is death to us."*

I REMEMBER WE were working with Play-do, or plastecine or whatever it was called. All the kids were in groups around little tables. It was a rainy afternoon and the room was dark but Mrs. Minife had lit some lamps. I liked the light from lamps better than the overheads. Karin had asked me to work with her that day, almost pleading when she was out of earshot of the others. I wasn't used to this new vulnerability. "Mia, come on. Let's work together. It'll be fun!" "Okay, Karin." I congratulated myself on my graciousness. I had a lot on my mind. I wanted to concentrate on my art project and not think about my mother's sad face or the other girls staring at the unpopular table and laughing. I never stood up for the others, couldn't protect the Janeys and the Pissy Millers. Not overtly.

The name of the clay may escape me, but not the smell, chemical yet strangely comforting: I don't know, like Vicks Vapo-rub. Brownies in the oven. So, I was sitting at my little table, making pretend animal figures in fun colours, orange elephants and red cats and black giraffes. I was really enjoying myself thinking, I could take them home and my mom would make up stories about

them later on. Just like before. I wanted to go back to before. Mrs. Minife walked around checking on everyone's progress, putting her hand on our shoulders when she leaned down with her comments. I liked that. It had been a good day so far. The girls at lunch time traded their chocolate chip cookies for my cherry cake. Not like the day when I brought dried chick peas for snack time and they rolled all across the floor. Everybody laughed. Sharing lunch, talking about Andy Gibb and Karin's dad. Happy. Off guard for once. The boys teasing us for fun, not out of maliciousness.

The principal tapped lightly on the door and came in. Mr. Harris, big and always smiling with a soft voice: I wasn't at all afraid of him. My mother bought him Hai Karate every year for Christmas and when he saw me he'd make a Kung Fu move. I liked him. He came in and spoke to our teacher. They stood in the corner of the classroom with their heads together. The noises coming out of their mouths were grey. I saw Mrs. Minife put her hand up to her chin, her fingers touching her lips. They looked over at me. When they did that, when I looked up at the exact moment they looked at me and our eyes met, it was like a lightning bolt in my chest. I knew. I knew it with a solid certainty. I got up, went to the cloakroom, got my stuff, and came out calmly. It was a false calm. Like the time my father pulled his big buick out in front of a transport on the 401 and it almost backended us. Only after, when we were safe did I pee my pants. We went out in the hall, where one of the neighbour women was waiting and they all spoke to me. *Buzz buzz buzz*. I don't remember what they said. Just the product of their words. My happiness was gone. My warmth, my sun, my blanket, all gone. It was all over.

\*

The dream ...



*I'm walking up Saint Laurent. Snow falls gently, the sidewalks are covered with a white blanket that muffles my footsteps. I enter the cafe where I'm supposed to meet Pablo. He's waiting, but he looks unhappy. What's wrong, I ask him but he only drops his head, shaking it. He pushes up his sleeves, showing me track marks and little tumours bulging out of his forearm. You're a junkie? I ask in disbelief. No. A strange blond man appears. It's a new thing, only since he's met you. Since you left him. Then the police come in, they start interrogating me like Nazi storm troopers. After they leave, Pablo says, it's only because you're with me that they're hassling you.*

*I look out the window, trying to gather my thoughts when I see my mother. She's dressed all in black, but looks as young as the day she died. Her face and hands are pressed up against the glass of the windows and she looks like she's trying to tell me something. She's in distress, crying.*

*Ma, Ma, what? Come in, I call to her.*

*I can't, she shakes her head, and starts pounding on the windows with her hands, her flat palms making slapping noises. They start to rattle and shake. No one notices but me.*

When I wake up, my sheets are wet with perspiration and the back of my neck is cold. I have my pillow clutched between my legs. Exhaling, I draw my hand through my hair, ripping out little strands, bringing tears to my eyes. Looking out the window, I noticed the rain, a drizzly Sunday. The sky was stormy. No answers behind the clouds. Nattie lay on bed with me, her paws twitching from her own dreams. Coffee, I think. Lots of coffee, and pad into the kitchen. While it brews, I pee, then brush my teeth. My skin looks horrible, patchy red and sallow. There are new wrinkles too, on my forehead. I'm aging into a tired old lady. But I don't care. I take a cup back into bed with me and try to read the paper. My mind won't stop slipping back into last night. Pablo

walking away. I give up finally, after wrestling with the crossword puzzle and writing his name.

"Come on girl, let's go for a walkie," I call out to Nattie.

The dog people of the park, as I grew to call them, were slacker types; students, artists, bartenders, or the general unemployed pot smokers on welfare that fill Montreal's tired streets. Nattie had made good friends with one particular dog, a golden lab named Gina, a rambunctious thing. She was about three, still puppy-like, growing into her years with a noble sense of humour. Her excess of energy made her run and run in excited circles when she saw us coming. Nattie was a generous soul, dropping her ball, pushing it with her snout toward Gina. Taking the cue, Gina picked it up, and the chase began. They galloped along the edges of the park, toward the enclosed soccer field, before heading closer to Mont Royal and the baseball diamond. I took such pleasure in watching Nattie play, knowing she'd be exhausted enough by the time we got home she'd doze for the rest of the day, until I came home at the end my busy one. Sometimes my quiet Nattie would even bark, gossiping with her new girlfriend. I was a little jealous. She made it look so simple. I guess it was.

\*

I'm just like you, whatever you may think of me. I want love. I want to be accepted. I want someone to soothe my brow, to tell my day to, to eat with, sleep with. Why was it so hard, always had to be so much harder for some people, like walking in a wind trying to knock you backwards. Struggling to stand to keep going, holding your scarf, your hat, yourself up. Keep going. Just to keep going.

\*

I realised that God was dead the day they told me what happened to my mother. I didn't say it out loud. The big omniscient god, but also the lesser ones that litter the terrain, playing with our lives like we were ants. A big game.

\*

HE APPEARED TO BE in a state of shock. He was always outwardly so in control. He needed the world to think he was a great man, he had everything together. The night before the funeral, after all the well-wishers had left, he got rip-roaring drunk. My grandmother put me to bed. She had no idea, not a soupçon, of course, of anything that had been going on in that house. She must have thought we were fine. I watched him in front of the fireplace. First, he drank a bottle of champagne. A strange choice, I always thought. Was he celebrating, the cold bastard? After the bottle was empty (I was at the top of the stairs, watching, prepared to run at a second's warning) he staggered over to the buffet and took the bottle of Canadian Club out. Back in front of the fire, he drank straight out the bottle, his Adam's apple moving up and down. I could see his skull under the skin, illuminated by the flames. The house was still. His head started to loll, rolling down to his chest. His shoulders started heaving. He was crying. Silently. Then he started moaning. My love, my love. My wife. My life.

I actually felt pity for him, a dumb beast, aching. All by himself.

The next morning he was back to his normal self, dressed impeccably. The only sign of a hangover was his clenched jaw, perhaps the greener tinge to his face. The funeral home had sent a limousine for the family. Our new arrangement; recently arrived grandmother come to take my mother's place, stoic father and me. The ride was silent. We entered the funeral home and took our places. I don't remember the service, only staring at my mother in her coffin. My father had selected a light grey one, made out of a kind of metal. She had a

cream-coloured suit on, her beautiful strawberry blonde hair surrounding her like candy. When I was made to approach for the final good-bye, I was scared because all I could smell was formaldehyde. They had painted her lips a garish orange colour. I closed my eyes, and walked back to Γιάγιά. This was obviously a dream and I was going to wake up any minute. If it were real, then I'd be crying and afraid. I wouldn't be this calm. And it felt like a dream; I saw everything in a long tunnel, nothing in the periphery, although I knew there were people there because I could hear their deadened voices. I was wearing my good shoes and when I wore them in real life they crushed my feet so hard I couldn't walk. And now, I couldn't feel a thing. My father stood at the coffin so long, the priest had to ask him to go back to his seat. He didn't want to let go of her arm. There was almost a scene, but he composed himself, as usual.

At the gravesite, we threw our lilies on the coffin. He turned to me. He met my eyes, hard as the steel of that coffin, saying:

"I know what you did. Congratulate yourself. This is your achievement. You killed your mother, you little witch."

No one heard him but me. I'm sure everyone thought the great man was whispering words of comfort to his little girl. But that was not the truth. And, monster that he was, he went on:

"I curse you. May you never have a happy day in your life. I will never forgive you for this."

End of Part 1