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Scylla:  
A Novel

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A Thesis  
in the  
Department  
of  
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

August 2002

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## ABSTRACT

### *Scylla*

Lheisa Dustin

*Scylla*, a novel, consists of pieces, somewhere between short stories and chapters, that are gathered and related by the constant identity of their protagonist, the continuity of their storyline, and the concerns that run throughout: of examining the role of our present social context in shaping a more marginalized subject (by middle-class North American standards), and the role of this subject in constructing and situating itself in our time and place. The non-linear structure and picaresque narrative reflect the protagonist's attempt to integrate the seemingly irreconcilable sub-worlds that she moves among into a coherent, shaped identity, while allowing them to retain their own distinctness. Structure and narrative also foreground the importance of chaotic external forces in shaping both subject and events; on randomness and provisionality over individually determined cause-and-effect. I think we need to cultivate a world-view that recognizes the enormous shaping force of social context on the individual subject before we can properly understand the reverse; the much-touted power of the subject in shaping "reality".

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1.

## **Mother of Invention**

Jessica Ingrid Wittim leaned forward to look while her name changed into numbers. All the sixes and sevens, and with her birthday – the numerologist was shaking her head. Jessie could feel the slight warmth of her certainty and a distant compassion, as she explained, and her nails split open the gold-leaf book in front of them to names that would work for Jessie not against her.

Jessie looked down. *Thaddea? Bromley?* What if I keep Jessie and just change my other names? She asked.

Then the changes you are looking for will not come.

*Annica.* That's a nice one, said the numerologist, re-twisting the falling arcs that splashed from her brown Montreal knot. But you have to tell people—say—this is spelled with a C and not with a K. Say this is what you like to be called. No Anni. No Nica. And no Jessie! Not even for family or friends.

Not too much of a problem, said Annica, so far still illegibly deadpan, scanning the page of middle names (oh no).

Montreal was as different from Winnipeg as a forest is from a plain. It reeled like the morning after a party. A lot of windows on Ste. Catherine were broken because some ball team had won something, she didn't know, and cars still crawled by honking, blue and white people and flags hung out the windows.

Annica Hortense Golby didn't hand out résumés because they still said

Jessie. She slowed at the street vendors' tables, looking for something for David, for a coffee shop window in which she didn't meet the suddenly focused gaze of a man. He would be sure to come over and ask her what she was writing, smiling in a way that anticipated failure, arms dangling like key-chain ornaments.

She held some narrow leather bracelets against her wrist, thinking that the dark brown would look best on David's pale skin. That was when she met Eddie, selling them. She told him her name was Annica and he hired her as Annica, to help him sell his jewellery.

As a kid, she'd thought the best way to understand what it was like to be a tree would be by being outside all the time. Outside in snowstorms, cold snaps, she'd looked at trees with an increased feeling of kinship and admiration. It would take a lot of heart, to be outside all the time. She'd felt sorry for trees that grew next to streetlamps, that never got to be in the dark. Their branches in the orange light made her tragic and desperate.

When she came to Montreal she had the same feeling for old buildings. To remain whole, old buildings had to have been abandoned. In the abandoned industrial skirts of Montreal they had a herdlike, anonymous cheerfulness. She tried to look past window dressings and fresh signs to see all old buildings with the wind blowing on their grey stone over time, as they endured post-industrialization and tourists. Inside Notre Dame cathedral she cried, and it seemed as if David was holding her hand.



The glass sliding door to her balcony reflected the wall of her room, white, and her head, a dark hole through which she could see the stucco of the building outside, her features transposed on it faintly. On his way up the stairs was Eddie, her boss. He nodded into the room wearing his mirror-inlaid Guatemalan hat with his face hanging out of it. He sat on her mattress and she rolled joints for him. When they were stoned the need in his eyes was horribly embarrassing. She looked down to where he pointed to photographs of his travels, views, sometimes with him standing in the middle.

Like you, I become a new person all the time. I choose my own life ya. The kids I went to school with, I bet they're all still living there. But freedom for me is more important. I need to always meet new people and have new experiences, ya.

Annica made up rhymes while he talked. She waited until it got dark to say she was tired. When his tight black jeans finally marched out the door she took out a hidden scrap of paper. It was a poem where Scylla met Odysseus. After showing him all the wrecked ships around her, she advised him to swim away. It was the ending that was giving her trouble – OK, so, he swims away. Finally the scrap of paper slid off her knee, unperceived, to crinkle when she turned.

\*\*\*

It seemed like David planned to stay on the balcony all night, invisible behind the

sliding door. Maybe she would just go outside and take a look at the stars. But here was a lump under the blankets, brown hair tendrilling over the pillow – David. She pulled back the blanket, but his face was someone else. She felt infinite relief. But then she realized it was still him. He said, You just read all the time, don't you. Not interested but just stating a fact.

\*\*\*

She lay very still because it was too cold to move. She didn't know where to buy a blanket in this town – she wouldn't have spent the money. The sliding door went slowly transparent, revealing brick wall, graveled roof with pidgeons, hanging laundry stiff. She drank milk from the carton, standing in different places in her apartment until it was time to go to work.

Eddie said that he'd been in love thousands of times and every time he learned something new. He'd never learned to shut up. On Ste. Catherine street while she was trying to sell his jewelry:

You have to free yourself ya. Realize your potential. We all have infinite potential ya. Look at me. I use my imagination. I could go anywhere, because I have all the creative energy inside me. But Montreal is good ya, everybody wants to look good in Montreal.

Eddie's jewelry was a few beads strung on a peice of leather or on silver hoops. It was unoriginal so people bought it. Annica was twenty and she would rather be dead than do what Eddie did and think it was art.

He told her that stripping would be a good way for her to meet businessmen, and in fact she'd been reading a lot of Dostoyevsky and stripping appealed to her for the opposite reasons.

When he was ever gone she sold this crappy jewelry, she thought, by looking into people's eyes as if she saw them. Not for too long or they got nervous. They had to be just nervous enough to buy something, their eyes widening flinching away slightly. They bought something to correct an imbalance she had caused by looking at them. But here was Eddie again. Stripping would have to be better.

On her days off, Annica went to a café on St. Denis and sat behind a pillar, trying to express her loneliness in new and interesting ways. A beautiful waiter brought her lovely allongées but he would never try anything because she was such an Anglophone, which was perfect – if he ever had she would have dropped her allongée into her lap. She could take only light touches from the outside world. A look that was slightly longer than the standard waiterly glance. He wore crisp white shirts and his hands and neck came out of them like warmth. She looked back down at the page with a little smile that froze and cracked, as her smiles did, quite quickly. David said crazy parents have crazy children. Annica tried to remember what her parents had been like in her more impressionable years, whether they hadn't been as crazy, so she would have a chance.

2.

### **Queens of the Barbies and Forests**

Jessie's mummy put her head under the table and said, want to go see Doreen and Nelson? From the sticky plastic seat of the Volkswagen Beetle, Jessie looked out at wide streets with green boulevards and elm trees. The sky was low like the clouds were about to bonk you on the head. The buildings were low, and billboards and signs for strip malls leapt against the grey sky. The parks never seemed to have people.

Millie said that she hated all the smoke and dog hairs at Maureen's house but she sat there with coffee and Maureen for a long time. Doreen and Nelson had orange around their mouths from drinking Beep and that was how their mom knew they were getting enough vitamin C.

The dolls that covered toilet paper rolls were Queens of the Barbies. They demanded that the girl Barbies give them their legs but the girl Barbies ran away and hid between the cushions in the couch where they lived on sunflower seed shells. The Queens made the boy Barbies kiss them and Doreen tried to teach Jessie how to kiss but Jessie wasn't getting the point and then Doreen's dad came home and Millie called Jessie, Time to go.

Millie said in the car that it was the smart women who married the nice men and because she wasn't very smart she had married Ted. She said, I'm not very smart, in the most matter-of-fact way.

Jessie walked past the school fence feeling like her feet might not hit the ground. Then she was on the sidewalk. Voices behind her were like cats about to jump on her back. She didn't run. The streets were wide and empty at noon, without patrols. She snuck in the back door of her house. She squirmed like a slow caterpillar into her feverishly soft bed and slept.

When May knocked on the door with her homework, cross, Jessie got up and walked her home, and then May walked Jessie home, and Jessie walked May home again, back and forth until May's mom saw them and May had to go in for supper. Jessie had supper whenever she wanted. Ted was still awake having breakfast because he worked at night. He smelled. Did you play with May after school? asked her mummy, who knew that Jessie had come home at lunch. Yah, said Jessie.

Maybe you should do your homework together, said Millie. Then it would be more fun. I'll call and ask May's mummy. Should I?

Maybe you should have a coffee, said Ted. He sang,

One more cup of coffee for mummee

One more cup of coffee for mummee

Mummee mummee mummeeee.

Jessie was taking a karate class and Ted asked her if she thought she was so tough. Suddenly his fist would be in her face as a joke. She tried to move it but he held it there stubbornly. She locked herself in the bathroom with the tap running.

On the way to the Anderson's farm, Jessie's eyes held on to the weeds in the ditches like monkeys, swinging from clump to clump. The clouds bearing down and the sky seeming to meet the ground just ahead, the sun far above all this.

Finally the grey, incredibly soft dirt of the driveway, surrounded with the yellow clottedness of poplar trees. Meg came running outside. How did you know we were here? Jessie asked. I heard the car, said Meg. Jessie stood happily. She could hear her mom inside saying hi to the Andersons, sounding excited although she had said in the car that she didn't like visiting Ted's friends, they were always so intelligent, and it made her feel bad. Then she'd turned around and said, Sie freundlich mit James. I think it would be so nice if you two got married some day. Stop! Yelled Jessie. Shut up! Yelled Ted, jolting the car. Millie said, I bet he'd love it if you asked him questions about computers. Remembering this, Jessie was silent and ashamed with James. Do you want to go see the horses? Asked Meg. They ran, pulled up armfuls of matted purple alfalfa that the horses munched up like spahgetti. Then Meg said it would be supptime so they ran back to the house.

In the diningroom with Mr. and Mrs. Anderson, Meg and James and Felicia, Jessie's mom and dad. Jessie strained to follow the conversation, while stuffing herself with buttered puréed turnip, fresh bread, corn on the cob, carrot and apple jelly, and stew made from—What are these? Those are Fava beans, said Mrs. Anderson. They were talking about global politics, about people she'd never heard of, and she wished she had a map of the world. Or they were talking about

trigonometry or Victor Hugo or agriculture in China, anything in the world they might be talking about, Meg and James and Mr. and Mrs. Anderson. For Jessie it was like trying to catch minnows in a stream, far ahead of her hand in the clear water. But then Jessie's mom would plunk down, Oh! Oh! I see, so you mean—and then something so deeply wrong that everything must be explained from the beginning, as Mrs. Wittim cried, Oh! I see! Jessica, did you hear that? Oh, could you just explain it one more time for Jessica?

After supper, Jessie and Meg went to the barn. Half the stalls had mother ewes and new-born lambs with milky breath, their tails wiggling, the naive ones pulling warmly on Jessie's fingertips. There was the room for sick lambs, fluorescent lights warming the hay and rubber nipples dribbling thick-smelling formula. The lambs on their sides, their thin poo matting the hay, their tiny curls of wool stuck to their tummies, rested their heads unresistingly on Jessie's palm.

They went up to the hayloft, where their voices were shrouded but sound from outside very clear. Jessie tried to look through the window to see if her parents car was gone, but it was too high. It let sun fingers through the dusty air to make warm spots on the hay bales.

Jessie asked Meg if she was sad to be moving to California and Meg said she thought so. The walls rustled, there might be a nest of kittens but they didn't look. They could hear Felicia coming up the ladder. Usually it would mean that they were trapped, and one of them should distract her while the other escaped, and then tried to lure her away. But Felicia just joined them, looking not sure what to do with them.

Jessie hid in the rushes while everyone else said bye to Jessie's parents.

When the Andersons were gone she would stay here and live on bulrush roots and wrinkled chokecherries. The wet-bottomed cup of the rushes soaked through her jeans, and finally, after the Andersons had probably forgotten that she hadn't said bye to her parents, she ran back towards the house to change into a pair of Meg's long underwear. Then to the fireplace room for nuts and Inka with the Andersons. Frogs chanted around her and tiny froglets splashed away from her rubber boots as she ran, never hurting them.

Meg and Jessie walked through the poplars and uprooted saplings to make spears. Meg wanted to hunt wild boars for food but Jessie said the important thing was to clear all the goblins out of the forest, so they wouldn't multiply and attack the empty farm while the Anderson's were in California. Jessie brought her spear back to Winnipeg when her mom came to pick her up. It leaned in the corner of her room, curving over time. Meg had to leave her spear, until the Andersons visited the farm at Christmas.



### 3.

#### Access

Only on the way to Josh's house did Montreal ever remind Annica of Winnipeg. That was the only place she went that had boulevards of grass, with trees at intervals, maples (Winnipeg had elms) that were beginning to drop leaf maché although it was still warm. Josh was Annica's best friend. She had noticed him in the café on St. Denis because he'd ordered an allongé in English. He was reading *Nightwood*, waiting for some theater people, who wanted to put on a play he had written. He had been in the wrong café. She was short of pretexts to talk to people. I love Djuna Barnes! she had exclaimed. Josh beamed through the traces of his distant composure. When he smiled he looked more individual. His attractiveness conventionalized his usual look of composed sorrow.

Annica could sleep at Josh's whenever she wanted. He lived downstairs from his mom and brother, in the basement. Otherwise he was unlike David, who had lived in his parents' attic. The first time Annica had slept with Josh she had gone upstairs to take a bath and was shocked at the beauty of Josh's mother, who shook her hand awkwardly and sweetly as if she wanted Annica to like her, standing in this real house full of things that nobody used. A cleaning woman who seemed about Annica's age cleaned the kitchen while Josh's mom looked in the fridge for something that Annica could take downstairs for her and Josh. She said, It was great meeting you. Annica never got over her shyness with Josh's mom.

She had quit her job with Eddie, or maybe been fired. When Josh went out she usually stayed alone in his apartment, reading, or sometimes rented a movie and watched it on the VCR upstairs, with a plate of something from the fridge. It was raining more now and soon Josh would be starting university. He went to Concordia University, downtown amid office buildings and bad restaurants. He took the metro there to get a syllabus and she went with him, and picked up an application and a student loan form. They met back at the front doors and spread out all their papers on the round marble table of a café.

Can I use your address on these? asked Annica.

Of course, said Josh.

Annica kept her own apartment the first year she was seeing Josh, but she didn't really like to go there. After she'd emptied her mailbox and paid her bills there wasn't much else to do. She wrote all her essays at Josh's. Getting up and wandering among the piles of books and clothes in his boglike apartment, she formulated sentences so erudite that placed consecutively they *must* have some logical connection. She felt cozy, with his mother and brother upstairs. She waited up for him before she went to sleep. Constant loneliness, she realized, had made her essays overly chatty and sodden with Christian Existentialism. It was better to take a piece of literary theory that no one understood and draw connections between it and some other text.

Late spring. Their secondary sources were spread out all over Josh's bed, they

needed only lift their heads to study them. In miserable whines, almost joking, they would threaten never to move, they would threaten to commit suicide, unless the other one brought the other coffee. They would lie side by side, desperate with each other, and drift back into a stupor.

Sometimes when they were walking outside together she was happy, and she wanted to cover him with kisses, to make up for something, something she hadn't seen that had been there all along. But he never felt like being touched at those times.

Exams, of course, fell right at the time when it might have been possible to find a summer job. Annica studied instead, and got all A's. And then what would she do, with her un-bilingual résumé that still listed "selling chain mail" under Previous Employment? She went to her apartment to pack up the few things that weren't already at Josh's, to break her lease.

The phone there never rang, but that day it did. When she said hello there was silence. She felt an icy shock, thinking it was Ted, pranking her again.

Hi Jessie.

It was David.

You don't have to say anything. I just wanted to hear your voice one more time, said David, contradictorily.

That's lovely.

Don't, said David.

She held the phone to her ear for a few seconds, then put it down and lay down on her bare mattress. She sometimes thought that if she'd had fitted sheets that David might not have left. And more than one room. And if the window hadn't cracked when David had hit it. He was very susceptible to symbolism.

When Annica broke up with Josh, she told him she didn't want to talk anymore. Except when she picked up her stuff from his place. She had moved into a woman's shelter, the Maison Marguerite. It was in the basement of a nunnery.

Outside it was spring in Montreal, but most of the women didn't go outside. They walked around in donated bathrobes with their hospital slippers ripped up around their ankles. They took their ten-minute calls on the hall phone, their faces down and wet. They slept in curtained off cubicles, with lockers, a plastic-covered bed, a bedside table with a drawer for personal effects. Out of bed at seven, when the nuns yanked the curtains open and shut in rapid warning. In bed (you had to be lying down) at ten, when the lights dimmed the toothpaste-green curtains to grey.

Annica went to buy fabric softener for a pregnant black woman who didn't seem crazy yet. She said she just didn't feel like walking all the way to the drugstore. But you knew that everyone there must have gone a bit crazy and they all never wanted to see each other again.

She wanted more than ever to be deaf at will. She unscrewed and unbent a coat

hanger, but was afraid that she wouldn't be able to hear anymore what she heard in silence, the sound of her thoughts.

She knew some other people besides Josh, but not well enough to tell them she was at a women's shelter, or that she had no money. She would hate for them to buy something and wonder if they should offer her one or not. How awkward it would be.

At the Maison Marguerite they assumed you'd be too far gone to look for a job, and soon this was true. Annica walked around with her résumés, stammering French, trying to get hired on the spot because you couldn't receive calls at the shelter. It occurred to her that she should have done this before breaking up with Josh. She was ashamed to think that – but it seemed clear that life could only move and change when money did.

She had applied for fall student loans and she was waiting to hear from a bank in Winnipeg. At first she had called them every day, and they had told her about some other form they needed, or some problem they were having with her file, and she would send them something else. Then she ran out of money to call them or buy stamps, and probably they still didn't have the right forms, probably she would never get a loan, but she still checked her bank account at ten every morning. Then she walked south to Griffintown where the streets were emptier – Ste. Catherine Ouest was full of prowling men. Her summer was picking among the pipes, old lumber, weedy lots, boarded-up buildings, in the abandoned industrial skirts of Montreal south. They didn't let her down. The other people

there left her alone, as people drawn to that landscape might be hoped to.

Fall came and university started and they said she could attend classes in case she received the loan. That was the only time she ever turned off her walkman – to hear the clear arguments the professors wove in the stillness. But sometimes they annoyed the piss out of her, with their great questions of existence, and there were the women sitting a few blocks away in the Day Room. They can't begin to realize how silly it all is, thought Annica, kicking her beloved old buildings, (startling the prowling men) after another visit to the Student Accounts Office. And then to a Montreal bank. She'd told them, I'm living in Quebec now. They replied, unfortunately, she'd still be a Manitoba resident for two years, and so she needed an address in Manitoba. And also one in Quebec. That was when she started crying. They suggested she use her parents' address in Manitoba. She made up an address, crying on the form, and she used Josh's for her Quebec address although they weren't talking, and she cried on the pink bank sofa for a while because she couldn't embarrass herself any further.

She was walking back to the Maison Marguerite, along Ste. Catherine, when someone said, Jessie, is that you?

You know me?

Jessie. It's you.

Yes, it's me.

A girl with a blonde mohawk, panning on the sidewalk, moved over on her

sleeping roll to make room. Broke off a piece of her donut. Here.

Shel was staying with friends. Everybody; everywhere. She'd seen Jessie around in Winnipeg. Annica? Okay. I got another name too, I'll tell you sometime.

Annica stayed sitting on the sleeping roll and soon she too was smiling at passers-by. She missed the nine o'clock curfew and had to plead to get in. She stood outside the locked doors in Shel's biker jacket with the painted red arm. They'd gone to the *Double Deuce* to look for Shel's friend Orlando, who was wanted by the cops, and Shel kept buying pitchers and refilling Annica's glass, acknowledging no resistance.

The nun opened the door and stood watching as Annica left her Doc Martins on the mat and pulled on her hospital slippers and tiptoed to the bathroom. She swayed on the toilet, brain floating in beer. Taped on the door was a notice:

Do not throw down into toilet bowl

Paper towels, paper cups, or

Any other kinds of objects.

The woman who washed her hands all the time was still there, lather up to her elbows. Red sweater covered with yellow stars, the sleeves rolled up in round bulges. From the elbows down like cured pepperoni. A baleful look at Annica, who also washed her hands rather often.

Long fluorescent lights guttered, shapes of shadows more than of things. Someone was sobbing in slow rhythm, someone else chanting Shut Up! Shut Up!

But Annica had earplugs, (she always wore earplugs to sleep) and tomorrow she was going to meet Shel and do PCP at Orlando's, and cook a big meal. The pillowcase smelled like mushy peas and carrots and milk cartons and puke and the light was always on in the sleep room.

Shel had a migraine and twigs in her hair. It had rained in the night and her stuff stank, the marble steps of the Banque Nationale chilled her ass. They threw off the night bit by bit, the sun on their black clothes. It only took a few hours to pan up enough money for two caps of PCP and two king-cans. Shel's magnanimity fished people from the sidewalk, real homeless people and kids pretending and rich people who wanted an explanation. Why do you do this? Shel said, I can't get welfare because I don't have ID, and I don't wanna be a hooker. *She's* a student. Or she said, I'm saving up for a big lump of hash. Annica sat with her knees open provocatively in her torn fishnets, her orange Yah Mos t-shirt. The clothes she had lent Josh for the punk girl in his play. No one at the shelter had even looked at her, but Shel called her a vixen.

She said Shel wasn't her real name. She'd had to go underground because the government was after her. She could take the life, her dad was a Hell's Angel. Her real dad. Her stepdad was a Satanist. Her arms were a road-map in relief of neat straight welts that criss-crossed, white because they healed.

Orlando played Super Mario Brothers the whole time they watched movies and ate Doritos, they forgot to buy food. Annica didn't forget her nine o'clock curfew, but the CD player kept skipping back so she thought that time had



stopped.

She rang the doorbell of Maison Marguerite ten minutes late, groveling, but they wouldn't even let her in the door to get her stuff. Come back tomorrow, the night nun said behind the grating. You aren't how I thought a nun would be, said Annica. Acting calm, though if they had let her in they would have had to pry her off the mattress and throw her out the door.

She couldn't even remember what street Orlando's was on, anyway he didn't like surprise visits. She could take the Metro to Josh's at one, when they were usually free. He'd said his place was always there for her in an emergency. My life is an emergency, Annica had said. But now was prepared to admit to relative degrees of emergency, walking south where the streets were emptier, cruising for a beautiful and secret place to cry. She walked through empty lots with nothing for the wind to move as it blew across them. A few old signs banged against buildings or clinked on shattered windows, in white frames, over dark, padlocked space. She slung Shel's jacket over the barbed wire tops of fences and saddled across. She wasn't deterred by man-made crap.

She walked among buildings mostly derelict, sometimes with a yellow-lit room on the ground floor, cylinders and pipework casting cinematic shadows. Train-track-ends, a grandfatherly black steam locomotive. Wheat grains scattered on cracked asphalt, bright yellow wheat leaning through. A fresh smell from the weedy lots. There was no place in Winnipeg so brokedown and changing.

Winnipeg, a nervous stage. New frame houses competing for anonymity,

bright, panicking signs. People trying just to walk properly. She couldn't, she tripped and just wanted to lie down. Keep walking.

Too tired now because the earplugs didn't work really, she was drifting back down the hole with David at the bottom. Better than the present, which was, Now what? Now what? (*Oh fuck off* she screamed in the Bonaventure Metro maze, where getting lost interfered with her contemplation of her love for David.)

David,

On the Metro to Josh's at one, covering her naked eyes with mascara. Now foundation, in an upward circular motion. Charibdys puking.

Josh was relieved that she'd only been hanging out with a girl. She looked like such a high slut, he couldn't stop touching her until she changed into a t-shirt and sweats. She relaxed too much then and started giggling, especially when he told her about his mushroom trip that summer.

You don't respect me enough. You think I'm sheltered.

No, I do! I think it's better not to have done that many drugs <hic>. I worry about my brain cells.

You've lost it.

But he promised to help her move her stuff out of the Maison Marguerite, and she fell asleep before he was comfortable with her presence in his bed. A horn kept honking, some fritzzy car alarm.

In the morning she brought Josh along for her ten o'clock ATM check and she

stood covering her face while he checked it for her. He said, You have three thousand and seventy-five dollars and fifty-three cents in your account. He raised an eyebrow at her like it might have been there all along. Actually she'd been too scared to check it for the last week or so. She gave a little scream and pressed the button for the money to come out, and it came out like handkerchiefs out of an empty pocket, it came out like the free gift of Grace.

She used the phone in the shelter to call a cab. The nun at the door was kind of conciliatory because Josh was so obviously middle-class. Some of the women watched her carry her bags out with nice-looking Josh, but nobody said goodbye. Eating their vegetable-shaped mush. How different Shel was from these women, thought Annica. What spirit. No welfare even, every day right from the beginning. Darkness on the face.

With her stuff at Josh's, Annica went and found Shel, panning on St. Laurent. Shel had her collar turned up, wrapped around her neck. She folded her pizza slices in half and raised her eyebrows at Annica. She was too tired to help her look for an apartment. They sat for a while sharing Shel's headphones, singing along to *Hole*, which Annica would usually find embarrassing.

She rented the first apartment she saw: a sunken bachelor of pure white, briefly luminous in the morning greylight. A place of rebirth or insanity. She and Shel sniffed mattresses in back lanes and hauled one back that had only a faint mildew smell. She began to make her own coffee, with mini-filters, buy hangers and hang clothes on them, buy things at dollar stores and put them in drawers. She walked around opening and closing the drawers and looking at the stuff inside

them. There it is, good good.

The plants she bought died sunless deaths, so she grew salt and sugar crystals in jars. They did quite well. Oh the walls she hung pickings from her Griffintown walks; a broken bicycle wheel, a mess of twine with spark plugs dangling from it, mirror shards, pennies, autumn leaves. Other things too.

At night she found Shel. In closed restaurants on the Plateau they sat and drank beer provided by the skulish owners. Hookah-smoking Zeke, Malleo and Pino who re-iterated that all women were whores and everyone had a price. Maybe because they'd lost the person they loved, said Annica, and Shel gave her a blue look. Speech looped turgid like smoke rings, obscuring. Shel faked a Scottish accent until she got really drunk (she was an undercover agent). At first Annica thought that this was a preliminary to underworld deals, jobs, secrets. Probably not. But Shel would never leave, kept opening bottles and pushing them at Annica, lighting two cigarettes and handing her one, as if she had some secret goal. And really it was boring, even drunk, even on coke. Besides, Annica had to catch up on her schoolwork. Keep getting more loans.

The sun came through the window of the Graduate Students computer lab, where she wrote her essays now. They never checked her ID. Maybe she looked like a graduate student, although she only wore black, ripped clothing and had dyed-black spiky hair and red lipstick, a hideous red, a free gift-package red, a self-conscious commentary on red lipstick red.

There was a man usually at the next computer who dressed like men who spend their time in the library. He looked with long blue eyes over at her religion textbooks. Could I ask you what your beliefs are?

Well. I don't believe in anything that leaves anyone out.

So what do you believe?

I believe in being nice to people for it's own sake, said Annica, keeping her eyes pointedly on the screen.

My interest, said the man, is in people who have been broken. People who have been broken need God to make their lives – whole. He didn't sound too preachy, but more like needing God might be a bit of a drag.

Well, there's different ways of being broken.

But they're all spelled b-r-o-k-e-n.

The word God is exclusionary, said Annica, and turned her full attention back to her essay, *The Paradigms Underlying Female Genital Mutilation, or, Reap Before you Sow*.

In Winnipeg, she had kept taking Religion courses with the same professor. He had said that she was welcome to visit him in his office if she needed to. She had tried not to do it too often. Half an hour, maybe, twice a week. She would sink into a chair and say something like, How can Dostoyevsky fault people for taking their own lives but forgive God for taking them? Is that fair? He had said, no, I don't think it's fair. She was safe, he saw her. He had said she could still live, really live, though when she thought back to that time she always thought, I died then. Those words, and a feeling of certainty.

The friend that Shel was staying with packed her stuff out on the landing. Shel, leaden-faced, said she'd sit in all-night coffee shops. Annica said of course she should stay with her, though she knew she'd never sleep, with Shel's huge presence on the tiny mattress. Shel was grateful. She piled her stuff in a corner and said, Wowee, a bathtub. It was a clean Shel who went through her bag and found a gold watch for Annica. You're a student, you need a watch. Annica wore it everywhere, proud that it was stolen.

Shel's fingers lapped slowly up Annica's arm. Annica lay still like at the bottom of a well. She had a class in the morning and somewhere in her mind was the question of how to get to sleep the soonest – she knew school was her only hope – but most of her mind was sending out cords of lust. She turned around; and around like rolling down a slope, through brambles, and a sheer drop to the bottom, thud. Shel said, I love you. I got no intentions on hurting you. They lit cigarettes, and Annica watched the morning light crawl across the blanket furrows. Shel fell asleep, snoring.

There was a spider who lived in the corner where the bathtub met the wall, of all places. Annica felt sorry for him. She tried to catch fruit flies without squishing them and dropped them into his web, but he just ignored them. And his web usually broke from the dead-fly impact so he had to rebuild it and settle down, smaller and hungrier than before.

They met on Ste. Catherine and Peel and went to Burger King for lunch. Annica liked being seen with Shel, but not so much in places like Burger King. Shel melted the little white coffee spoons with her lighter to make cockroaches. The cockroaches kept taking bites out of Annica's cheeseburger. There was a gang war in Montreal between the Hell's Angels and the Gypsy Jokers, Shel said, over turf. She said turf was money, you needed it for dealing, extortion, and racketing. And it was home. The Gypsies planted a bomb right in the Angels headquarters. Was that ever stupid.

Annica went to her morning class with Shel still asleep. The girl sitting next to her wore ripped jeans and a lumberjacket like a Winnipegger. She said, I love your watch. It's so bourgeois. It's stolen! said Annica, and launched into the story of her and Shel. Rachel said it was so hip and Montreal. She really was from Winnipeg, and they had a friend in common, Inger, who never wrote either of them.

Someone was inviting someone else to a party after class and Rachel said, What party? She came over to get dolled up. Shel was probably out panning. Annica offered Rachel some canned chick peas. She added white vinegar to the chick pea can and it was like a soup. She screamed when Rachel was going to kill the spider.

Inger told me that you have a bourgeois outlook, said Rachel. Stop eating out of cans.

Inger told me that you worship her. Stop making fun of her.

Rachel said this was sort of true. Everything had seemed different after she met Inger. She had started going to cool places. She had seen Annica there and had thought she was cool. She remembered Annica coming up to her table and describing the acid trip she was having, but she couldn't remember what she'd said and Annica had no idea what kinds of things she'd said back then. She had felt like a table butterfly and talking was like improvised music.

Did you ever meet David Lautriel? asked Annica.

No, but I heard all about that, said Rachel, a bit carefully. Annica drew her eyes into black holes. Rachel borrowed fishnets to wear with her lumberjacket.

On the street Shel still acted the same, but when they were alone her voice went low and her eyes flat. Her blonde hair hung over her face as she talked, about the demons coming after her, they had tasted her blood when she was a baby. Or worse, just everything, nothing. You're all I have. Oh Please.

But then she would break off suddenly, look sidelong. You don't want to hear this. Why don't you just walk away and forget it, everyone else has. They're all just out for what they can get, the people you think are your friends.

Annica didn't really love Shel, so Shel was going to kill herself, but she'd do it quietly so no one would know. No, said Annica, please don't, please stop. But Shel kept on talking about her bloody cheeseball stepdad and his Satanic rituals and Annica kissed her to cover her mouth and grabbed her ass through the tear in her jeans and dug in. Walking around with her ass showing like that, buy



some jeans. Shel's hand felt like it would burst her cervical bones and when she came there were tears everywhere.

It was amazing how people could think that street people must want to be like that. Anyone could lose everything and then they'd know better, but no one would listen to them either. To live with that, Annica felt, was noble; but Shel just wanted to live for love. She wanted Annica a tranquilized pillow, to have and to hold, crawl into and die, foreveranever, amen.

Annica called Josh, hoping to escape to his place for a while. She hadn't slept. He said she must *want* to go crazy, otherwise she'd ditch Shel. You ditched *me*. *I* still wanted to talk.

It doesn't matter if you *talk*, said Annica.

All right, said Josh, and hung up.

Four a.m., she drank coffee at Moe's diner with her head cocked as if listening. It was true, she wasn't thinking about David as much. It must be circumstantial then, this thinking about David. But Shel was going to kill herself.

Shel, a weight of betrayed need, darkness bearing down over her blonde hair and blue eyes in one of those filth-breathing childhood rooms, sunflower seeds and ashes crunching under her little knees. She couldn't let go of her.

All the same, she could only love Shel when she was with her. Maybe she should just kill herself and let Shel have her ID and apartment and loans. But she

would like to be at least lucid when she killed herself.

Full of coffee and eggs she crouched in a corner of her apartment and watched Shel sleep. Watched her pretend to sleep, as the salt crystals grew. When her eyes finally opened palely, Annica said, I have to be alone. Kept repeating it while Shel tried to crack her. I have to be alone here now. When Shel finally swaggered out the door the morning greylight was gone and Annica could sleep then, Tylenol and a pillow loosening her grip on *here, now*.

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She woke up to black and blocks of deeper black. The only light was the crack of the hall door. The bent bicycle wheel that hung on her wall appeared to be turning slowly. If someone knocked on her door she would die. She slept to leave her cold body to its fate, but again woke and saw the bicycle wheel turning, and creeping to the light switch she it flicked up and down in darkness, and once again in bed, thought she had woken up to the real darkness now, but hadn't.

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She was in a chilly bar in Winnipeg and David as he was leaving turned. His drunken face became still. He said, you look the same. That wasn't true. He meant that she still loved him.

She thought touching him again would be like a well in the rain but they touched like branches rubbing against each other or a door scraping open. She

remembered having locked her door.

After David left it was true she felt peaceful. But she was cold. she didn't have enough blankets. Just the ones Shel had got from some rich ladies. She should get up and go now to a place that gave out free blankets. Maybe they let you try them out first. A whole heap of blankets. But they weren't warming her up enough, she would have to find some other ones.

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At noon the phone woke her and it was Shel with a *Metallica* soundtrack, saying that Annica didn't know how much she, Shel, loved her, and furthermore she sucked. Annica was sorry. She made coffee with a mini-filter but poured too fast, grounds got in her cup. Morning coffee at Josh's. eggs and bagels. That was really a score, she said out loud. She couldn't think, at that moment, why she hadn't wanted to talk to him. She knew his number so well.

Josh was still seeing Fiona, but cranky. How's your new tail, just kidding.

Shut up. She needs help.

Well, she has a lot of friends, right? A girl in my French class even knows her, said Josh mysteriously.

Josh, a warm, smelly bundle in layers of blankets. Coffee cups and laundry and books. Hoping for rain so he wouldn't have to work, the rain in NDG as Annica walked from the metro stop to the basement door, thinking of the food in the fridge upstairs. Her throat filled with water and the bare mattress opened

it's mouth to swallow her. It was raining outside and falling leaves dashed by her window, though there were no trees around that she knew of. One fainted in and smacked against the glass like windshield kill.

(In the back seat with coffee running down her face. Get out! Get out! her father chanted, but he didn't really mean it. It was she who really wanted him out. Her mother would pass her a towel later. The windshield wipers only smeared it around.)

So, what's new? Josh asked urbanely from the depths of his crumpled blankets.

There's a girl from Winnipeg in one of my English classes.

Oh, yeah? Said Josh supportively. He had seen the careful way she copied people's phone numbers into her address book and wondered when to call. Strangely, he hadn't held this against her, or the way she stayed alone in his room. But he thought it would be weird for them to just be friends, and Fiona was over, he had to go now.

Jessie met David under waving tree-tops on a winter campus. He had apologized when they shook hands because his were splotted with paint. She laughed, the first laugh, and in they went. That moment, anyway, (Annica went out into the whacking rain, the tree-tops gasping and shaken, leaves trailing from their open hands.)

It wouldn't be raining in Winnipeg, this late in the year. Probably snowing quietly. Quiet Winnipeg in a white membrane. Hush.

They had walked home across the Assiniboine bridge, the snowflakes far apart and moving in every direction. He grew up outside of St. Pierre, he said. He said in the spring there, at dawn, you could hear the ice crack on the river like gunfire. She thought, later, that she would like that. To hear the ice crack like that under the snow, wetting it. And the birds starting, long morning chirps.

After David left, Jessie still crossed the river every day, on her way to the University.

Her phone rang in the middle of the night, and when she answered there was hoarse breathing or silence. It was her father. She always answered because it might be David. Once David was there when it rang and he picked it up and listened and put it down and said, I can't stand this, I'm sorry. He pulled her hands away from her face and kissed her and then he left.

Annica didn't see Shel again until winter, when she was at the Double Deuce with Rachel and Rachel's sister Sally, visiting from Winnipeg.

Shel acted distant at first, (I have to go dance with that blonde chick now,) but then she acted forgiving, came over with an envelope of PCP that she dumped into Annica's beer. Annica drank obediently.

Rachel said that it was interesting to watch Annica fall in with this scene, as if she were in a hack melodrama. Annica argued that this was a classist perspective. Rachel said it was classist to say that hack melodrama was a class thing.

Shel was playing VLT bingo and called Annica over to help her choose

numbers. But Annica soon slipped off the high, black-and-metal stool and hunched to the bathroom. The toilet bowl was beautiful and white holding her up. Shel stood behind her. When Annica was done vomiting she gave her some coke to help her stand up (You're costing me plenty tonight, babe.) Then she kissed her, and wanted to know if Annica still loved her. But Annica couldn't stay standing, she flopped back down over the toilet. Shel watched her. She held Annica's hair back gently from her face. Rachel walked in and said that they were leaving. She threaded Annica's arm over her shoulder and supported her out of the bathroom. The blonde chick that Shel had been dancing with came over and said, You'll be alright baby, you're so beautiful, I love you. Shel put her face up to Annica's, now resting against the wall, and said, Are you leaving with her or with me? Rachel said, Oh please. Can't you see she needs to get home? Shel said, Come to my place. I'll get a cab. Haven't you done enough? Rachel asked. Shel woundedly insisted on paying the cabfare. She leaned in the driver's window. That one's under my protection. Make sure she gets home all right.

In the cab, Annica seemed to understand perfectly the nature of the soul. It was like a candle flame that pointed both up and down, surrounded by a thick, prickly capsule. Stop breathing so fast, said Rachel.

Am I breathing fast?

Really fast. Do you feel like you're going to die?

How would I be able to tell?

They took the cab to the hospital. Annica smiled at the emergency-room

staff as if to say, it's all right if you want to use all these conventions to dictate the way we interact, but it is a bit funny, isn't it? A nurse stuck an IV in her hand despite her protests: I assure you that any tranquilizing effect will be negated by my terror of needles. (She had that coke impressiveness.) She felt like a secret art object in her hospital gown, trailing her IV stand to go to the bathroom, her bare feet and unshaven legs. Saggy underwear and untanned skin flagging their cumbersome requirements. She had worn them before.

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Jessie: But why do people stop loving each other?

Saintly nurse: If we knew that, it wouldn't happen, would it?

She sat on the edge of Jessie's cot, her careful makeup a bit tired after a long day.

Jessie didn't want her to leave.

Are you feeling suicidal now?

Not really. I'm more suicidal when I'm alone.

Actually, her makeup might not have been applied very well in the first place, a sign of saintliness. Well, she said, I'll give you something to sleep, and someone will talk to you in the morning.

But the morning nurse just gave her pills and said, Good, when she took them. No one else spoke to her except one other young girl, who asked her why she was there. Jessie didn't mind talking about her parents but she started to cry

when she said, David. He took a little walk, nodded the girl. But you're not crazy? she asked.

No. (Regretfully: craziness might be less painful.)

The girl turned back to the TV and didn't look at her again. Jessie saw her later that day, screaming, with two nurses on her. She was on her way to call David, to tell him she was okay. A nurse sat with her.

David said, I think I still love you. I don't know. I thought you were dead.

The one in the story did die. It was her story, but not hers, it got away from her. Now another one, and another story.



4.

### **Quartz Crystal**

Jessie had to get up in the morning to go to High School or she'd be there forever. At bedtime her mom gave her handfuls of herbal tranquillizers, too different kinds. In the morning she found Jessie's hand under the blanket, and close her fingers around the handle of a cup of coffee. She would cry, It'll spill! and Jessie would sometimes scootch up, life reaching her fingers, before this happened. She her bones might stay in bed if her flesh got up.

The next-door neighbors had a guard dog in a high wooden pen and she followed his desolate nightly howling with helpless concentration. He was never allowed out of his pen and it seemed like the other dogs didn't even bother howling back to him. Sometimes she snuck outside and fed him bits of hamburger meat through the slats. She could see only his black nose and slits of ground covered with brown and white shit. He took the meat gently.

When Jessie got through a day of school, the three of them, May and Jessie and Helen from Thompson, would walk home. But usually May and Helen would walk home without her. Mornings Jessie inhaled the gluey smell of the cleaning powder they used on the desks, her face down on her arms. By the lunch bell she would be swaying outside the nurse's room, wanting only the dark and the brown plastic bed and slanted pillow that left soft red marks on her face. When she woke up again the school was quiet. Getting her books and walking home was strange.

Sometimes she thought she was going to school, but she must have forgotten her contact lenses. She might be in class already when she felt a hand on her arm, and Millie stood before her saying, Jessica! Bitte! Holding the coffee with a pale milk skin.

Her brain was being sneaky like that one day when her father got up early, or hadn't gone to bed yet. Millie had re-heated the coffee and he took it from her and poured it over Jessie's sleeping face. She felt something scalding and he stood next to her bed yelling, Get Up! Get Up! She was in her underwear. She held the blankets around her as he pulled her off the bed and pulled the mattress down on top of her.

When Ted was mad he sounded like a witch's cat. The sound of his voice had always made her freeze – that thin whine.

Maybe she lost her caution that day, on the floor after he left. Coming down the stairs, she had no intention of going to school. She came up behind Ted, hunched over the kitchen table, and said, Enjoying your breakfast, daddy? You low-life, sexually frustrated piece of shit.

He jumped up and his chair fell backward on the floor and she grinned at him. Punching her wouldn't help. Get that thing out of here Millie, he said.

Ted didn't want her – It, he called her – in his house anymore. There were only a few more weeks of school anyway. Her mom drove her to the Greyhound station, saying things about how she couldn't leave Ted that had sounded stupid to Jessie

even when she was a little kid. She must be right that she was stupid. She stood outside the bus, wiping her face. Jessie's eyes were dry. She could stay with Jake, she thought, almost definitely. He lived with his girlfriend but Jessie was so, incredibly, discreet.

In Minneapolis she called Jake but there was no answer, so she looked up one of his friends in the phone book and called him. The friend said that Jakey would be working the Renaissance Festival, but she could get there by bus. Jessie hauled her suitcases, five steps at a time, through downtown Minneapolis, looking for the corner where the bus stopped.

The people at the gates were nice, as people often are, to young girls with suitcases looking for someone they know. She left her suitcases with them and went in for free. Inside the festival it was a lake of grass, with peninsulas and islands of shops, stages, cottages. And the people, two kinds: there were the real, willowy, mystical-smelling, Renaissance people, in heavy brocade gowns that their breasts muffled out of, or frothy tunics and cloaks with high boots folded like cuffs, or patches and bare feet; and then the tourists, the males with leather vests over their polo shirts, daggers and Bermuda shorts, the women with garlands slithering off their teased hair and their kids' magic wands sticking out of their purses.

Suddenly there was Brandon, Jake's son, a kind and lovely person, wearing a

lace-up tunic and leggings. She was pretty sure he didn't know about her and his dad. He carried her biggest suitcase on his back and snuck her back to the campground, where only people who worked at the festival were supposed to go. He had an extra tent.

The campground was full of cars and tents but they found a spot where the aspen scrub started and Brandon showed her how to pitch the tent. The ground was a washboard of roots – Brandon said that Rennies stole straw bales from the festival site to spread under their tents. He said that her skirts and peasant blouses would be okay for working the festival but she needed different shoes, or she would have to go barefoot. Nearby, people were lighting campfires and washing their dusty legs at the pumps. Ribbons of geese hung in the sky and their honking was an unpausing relay that was all one sound. Looking around, Jessie thought, I belong here.

She found a job selling chain mail to tourists, who got the headdresses stuck in their perms. They chose ankle bracelets instead, or slave chains—They make your hands look longer, said Jessie. Rennies, the people who worked at festivals, already had long hands, and moss-green eyes, and if they bought anything it was chain mail collars and wristbands. They said, My old one broke, and winked at Jessie.

Rennies traveled with the festival and Townies just worked the weekends and

drove back into town. When the Townies left it was like living in the wilderness. Jake and his friends were Townies. They gathered their tents around two firepits and played music all the weekend nights and Jessie, lurking by, was fine with them. Come over and sit by me, honey! Look how cold her hands are! Don't know how to deal with the cold, girl? One swallow, every time it comes around.

They drank whiskey and Guinness, and Jessie's favorite, Jagermeister chased with unrefined opium, burning as sweet and particular and far more haunting than jasmine, or ylang-ylang. No perfume or incense that she ever found, called opium, ever smelled anything like it.

Festival days when she wasn't working she was usually in some corner of *The Dragon's Taile* tavern, having dropped acid that morning. Her face seemed to drip with the night before, dreams and sleep and oily pores, and she gathered her skirts around her bare feet. Her eyes trailed from the musicians on stage to a rift of straw on the floor, a coiled braid with ribbons in it, a pewter mug that mermaids spiraled up. But quite soon her gaze narrowed to a single beam that flickered to and from the platinum-haired guitar player and lead singer in a band called Christobel.

The acid smiled her mouth and made her look like she might need some help, and it wasn't hard to go talk to her, to gather her in, and she walked him back to his van one night. They sat by his fire and talked about whether life took on the shapes of mythology, and then they went to sleep in the folds of his olive-coloured velvet blanket, on the floor of his van.

When she woke up the windows looked very bright. He was still sleeping. Sober, undone by the beauty of chaste sleep, she pulled open the sliding door of his van and was outside, not looking back in case he woke up and something in her look spoiled it all. She went back to her tent and started a letter to Helen. Oh shit Len. I'm completely destroyed.

She lay in her neighbour's hammock. Branch shadows submerged and surfaced in the sunlight on her legs like driftwood tumbling near the shore. She was writing, ...hair the colour of lightning... when he leaned out of his van to say bye. He drove a school bus in Minneapolis during the week.

At night Jessie wandered the campground amid glow-worm tents, quiet guitar and moaning. In the afternoons the Rennies drove in carfulls to Shakopee for diner breakfasts, and stayed until the bar opened. She sometimes went with them, but usually stayed on the campground where the solitary ones who liked to read could be seen drifting, tattooed gazelles.

Paul played with Jake and his friends at *The Dragon's Taile*, for tourists, but on the campground he was mostly a silhouette in his van. Jessie, walking by, had seen the way his shadow collapsed over his guitar after the final chord. Next to Paul, only the moon seemed bright and unfrivolous.

Late August. Hot showers were twenty-five cents a minute. It seemed like everyone kept warm the same way. Men by the campfire put her fingers in their

mouths, and in tents they were like hot eels against her skin and collapsed over her like blankets. She would wait for their snoring and then walk back to her tent. When she saw them again she smiled and looked away. That's how she thought you were polite. But she put them in her letters for Helen's delectation.

She had to stop draggling after all the Christobel shows. Even after sleeping with Paul she had fits of shaking when he spoke to her. She didn't want exactly to be like one of those hair-bouncing leather-vested girls who were always giving the others a ride into town, but what did she want to be like, then? Wandering around the campground too much.

She left a poem on his dashboard that she realized later was terrible, wrapped around a quartz crystal earring with a bead of malachite and a bead of lapis lazuli. She was wearing the other one as Jake drove her into Minneapolis.

Jake sat her down at his kitchen table, where his girlfriend Miranda was doing some paperwork, cute in bifocals that were way too old for her. Jake rolled them both cigarettes. Miranda didn't smoke. She made her biker jacket look like a nun's habit.

Jake asked Jessie what her plans were and she said, well, letsee...

He said if he was her age he'd probably do the festival circuit for a few years. South in the winter and back up north in the summer. You'd get to know a lot of great people, some of them Biblically, he said. Jessie was silent.

You could, said Miranda, try to work here, under the table. We could lend

you some money to start out. It would be hard. You've never lived on your own before? It would be hard.

Jessie thought of going to a Christobel show in Minneapolis, being scared to join the table where Paul's friends were. Looking into the front window of every schoolbus.

Jake said that her mom had called. She had said that Ted wouldn't mind if she lived with them again. Jessie would know best if this was just wishful thinking on her mom's part. Personally, I didn't finish high school, said Jake, and I can say with relative certainty that it will bother you when you get older. When it's not free anymore.

You could get yourself into a foster home for a few months, said Miranda. The one I lived at everyone was a junkie. But you're in Canada.

Why don't you sleep on it, said Jake.

In the morning, Jake drove her to the Greyhound station in his rainbow-coloured ambulance with scenes from Mother Goose painted on it. Kissing Jake goodbye didn't seem sexual but formal and kind of sad.

Jessie fell asleep again as soon as the bus started. When she woke up the sky was lower. She kept humming a line from a Christobel song, looking out the window. The line of music seemed like a pillar that joined the earth and the sky, and she could see that everything alive, the dry grass and shade trees and people asleep on the bus, wanted to swarm up that pillar, to touch the ground and the sky at once.



She tried to remember that as Winnipeg beat against her, as the bus drove up Pembina highway in the grey fall sun. Everything grey except billboards and shopfronts, and the houses white, white, white, with a strip of flowers along the bottom front. It took forever for the traffic lights to change. A city where telephone wires stood out, among the shoebox buildings and empty parks, with no camouflage, no culture to suggest a way of acting, no rises and falls in the ground to take you somewhere else. Winnipeegers took small-town naturalness and chilled it to urban temperature, with tyrannical eyes for the right denim shirts and worn jeans. Cloaked in tolerant smiles as they passed each other on the flat sidewalk.

Her mom and Helen were waiting in the Greyhound station as the bus pulled in. Helen was waving her arms. Her mom waved one hand and polished her bifocals. In the car she said, You girls probably want to be alone to talk, ay? She drove them to their favorite restaurant for Greek salad. Here, she said, it's on me. So I'll see you later at home, kay?

Then Jess and Len were free to grip each others' hands and moan about Paul and Sebastian. Helen had disapproved of Jessie's drug use until Jessie finally dragged her to the Plant, the vegetarian all-night café where it all happened, and she saw limpid, draggled Sebastian, who made the boys at school look like cardboard boxes. Sebastian seemed pleased whenever Helen came in, but he was still with that girl he called Chica.

Jessie told Helen how Paul couldn't be in a relationship right now because of something that had happened with his ex-girlfriend. The night he'd broken up with her, he'd slept with someone else. In the morning, his ex had come by his van, to tell him something or give him something, and seen them. That was at the festival the summer before. She'd left immediately. He no longer felt sure that breaking up with her had been the right decision.

Helen said, hmm, maybe he's still in love with her.

Well, but why would he break up with her and sleep with somebody else then?

They speared tendrils of white onion reflectively.

At least you got to have sex with yours, said Helen. But Jessie just shrugged, though she knew this would hurt Helen.

Want to see my calluses? she said, and took her shoes off. Helen sang her the alto parts to some madrigals. Then Helen had to go do homework, and Jessie had to hang out with her mom. But they would walk home from school tomorrow.

Helen had a way of rolling her eyes, like a stricken calf.

May's been lurking around my locker. Do you know what she said? She said: Don't you think that Jessie's, like, turning out bad? I don't know if we should walk home from school with her anymore. I said, Who's forcing you?

But why would she say that?

She's *May*.

No, but what would I do to her? Asked Jessie, really not understanding.

Millie said, Hi! I just have a few papers to show you.

Some of the papers had questions like, Do you need some underwear? with *Yes* and *No* boxes for Jessie to tick. Others she needed to sign where her mom had put an X, something to do with almost getting kicked out of school. Jessie tried to listen to what her mom was saying but in her head was the Christobel song. She ticked the *No* box a few times and signed her name and then ran upstairs to where her mattress was back on the bed.

5.

### **Muddy Water**

Jessie went to the same high school that Neil Young had gone to. She listened to *Don't Be Denied* over and over on her walkman. In grade twelve she could never figure out which room her chemistry class was in. In every room, a teacher in a slightly undersized acrylic sweater wrote something on the board, salt-and-pepper hair like wet feathers against the pale backs of their necks. The girl in the corner would nod reassuringly and Jessie would slide into her seat. The equations on the board were like television snow. Usually she was stoned and didn't mind.

It was an accelerated program. Jessie had done brilliantly on the entrance exam, but now Helen had to nag her just to keep up. They pulled all-nighters where they called each other every few hours for moral support. Or every few minutes.

*Bring Bring.* Oh God, I'm going to kill myself.

I'm going to kill myself first, argued Len.

Don't do that.

No? Okay listen: *Thus, we can see that the IMF was successful in mitigating, by and large, fluctuations in the global economy, through implementation of the Five-Year Plan.*

That's *great*. Wait, are you done?

Ha! I started at the end.

I changed my opener. Uh: *Puppets of corporate greed, the blessed IMF*

*pushed an artificial economy on countries who had not the infrastructure, to say nothing of the military force, to resist economic imperialism, propping up the corrupting mechanisms of subsidiary industry and monocropping, entrenching the hideous and despicable exploitation of said countries by this ravenous infant vampire, the so-called First World, who, I pray, will be first against the wall when the revolution comes though of course it'll destroy everything.*

Helen's laugh was a rhythmic, choking squeak, like a giant cricket. The essay was due in five hours. Their telephone receivers slid back into their cradles because their hands were too weak. Jessie got a C+ in economics.

After High School, Jessie slept at Helen's instead of in the nurse's room. She could sleep through anything on Len's futon, with the dusty light coming through the bamboo blinds like light into the sea. The lounge at Helen's was lime-green and full of ubiquitous 70's posters. The mornings were beer graveyards. Len was ascerbic to the cat-nestling boys on her way out the door, but in the evenings she sat unpolished amidst the conversation, smiling from the depths of the basket chair.

Alone, they still talked about boys. But Jessie had developed a distaste for talking about boys that she kept from Helen. She talked about them in a way that sounded bored and ironic to herself. That way her actual relations with boys would not be tainted by betrayed enthusiasm.

Len was grim and smiling about the way Jessie looked at people who sang along

to *Indigo Girls* tapes, or would leave the room when someone put on *ABBA*. It wasn't just that she thought that Bob Dylan and *The Grateful Dead*, were better. It was *how* much better she thought they were.

Jessie dreaded the things that Helen said when they were stoned, talking to one of the many intelligent, cultured people they got stoned with. It was like being trapped inside a bad sitcom with no escape until the merciful next scene. Sometimes she would rather just go to the Plant by herself.

Sometimes girls from their old high school walked in to the Plant and Helen got annoyed, especially when the co-op guys asked her about them. She wanted the authentically deep and mysterious co-op boys to see through these girls, who had leaned against the radiators with Club Monaco hanging off their vacation-tanned bodies, while pale, Au Coton wearing Jessie and Helen stumped by, their problem hair pulled tightly back.

Jessie didn't care. She said it was all about choosing your clichés. Helen said she wasn't going to be any cliché and Jessie raised an eyebrow in her new way. She was at the Renaissance festival in her heart, but first she would have to become impermeable, and save money.

She got a job at the Perkins on Pembina Highway, the highway, she thought hopefully, that left Winnipeg to the south. She measured cooked, oiled noodles into baggies, popped headless shrimp from their shells, and especially, breaded chicken fingers. She sang as she worked. That might have been why she was fired. The head cook sang too, but he was a man and wafted around singing *Do a diddy diddy dum diddy do*—Caesar in four yesterday—here hon, you just yank all the legs off and stick in your thumb, and it pops right out. Jessie, with her trays of

snotlike chicken strips, watered eggs and spiced bread crumbs, sang *Desolation Row* from beginning to end. Songs in her head gave her electrical goosebumps.

One day one of the other cooks said to her, Did I ever tell you, you really scare me?

Why? asked Jessie.

After a pause, the other cook said, You know Randy and I broke up?

Jessie got put on the morning cleaning shift. One day one of the managers saw her walk out of the bathroom, open the front door, and hold out her hand, waiting for a moth to fly away. What the *shit*! He exclaimed.

By the time she was fired she had moved into a lovely apartment with a woman who she'd met at the Plant, Melina. Each morning she put on one of the outfits that Melina had said was fine, and walked through the city, going into every shop and restaurant, trailing résumés from a featureless black folder. She freshened her makeup often in public washrooms. When she was no longer able to seem confident and cheerful she went to see Helen at Music City, wishing to transform her day into funny anecdotes. Helen worked in the classical section and she would yell, *J!* (Not *Jay* but *Juh*; she had decided that *Jess* took too long to say.) She ran up the aisle for a hug.

Helen was hanging out with people from Music City, so she couldn't be mad when Jessie had other friends. Jessie wanted to be friends with a girl called Inger who was really into art. She had a graceful awkwardness (they agreed that Jessie had an awkward grace) and was conflicted about being into art because it

was so upper class. She herself was working class. When Jessie found out that her parents were university professors, Inger said that working class was a state of mind. She said that Jessie had a very upper class state of mind. Jessie was intrigued. Inger would stop conversations abruptly, saying, This is so pretentious, and Jessie would subside, happy about words like *existentialism* and *pretentious* that seemed to make the whole coffee shop expand. Inger said that she really valued Jessie's friendship but she rarely called. When Jessie called her, Inger usually said, I was just going to call you. We must be psychically linked, said Jessie.

It was through Inger that Jessie had met David. Late in the winter, they went to a public lecture on Bloomsbury. Inger wanted to write a paper denouncing Bloomsbury. Her friend David was waiting on the steps of the English building. He looked very respectable, in spite of the paint, as if he might be on his way to a party or to work as a lumberjack.

During the lecture, Jessie was quite conscious of David's plaid-shirted arm on the other side of Inger. But she was friendly instead of ignoring him because she should not try to make him like her. It was probably just Inger's crush on him that made him seem so special. On the bus home, Inger said that Bloomsbury made her physically sick. Jessie said that what she wondered was how all these brilliant types all got to know each other in the first place. David gave her his number for a joke.



Inger said she couldn't make it to a film on German art and architecture during World War II. She was spending time with her family that evening. Yuck! said Jessie, but Inger said, Actually, I like spending time with my family.

What do you do? Asked Jessie, who felt like she was holding her breath when she thought about her parents.

We just hang. Sometimes we watch TV. Actually, *Rosanne's* coming on. Sorry. I love *Rosanne*.

Jessie had said she wouldn't call David. She wandered around her apartment holding the CinemaTec schedule with something like desperation. Nobody ever wanted to do anything intelligent with her.

The film was called *The Architecture of Doom*. It was in the Exchange District, the old part of Winnipeg. All the prostitutes hung out on the three other corners from CinemaTec. It was the first heavy March rain and Jessie looked at puddles when they crossed the street because looking at the prostitutes or past them both seemed cruel. Everyone in the cinema seemed to have horn-rimmed glasses or three-quarter-length leather jackets. She was delighted not to be at *Scandals* with Helen and her friends.

In the café up Albert street, Jessie took apart the whitish-pink plastic flower on the table; stem, leaf, petiole, petals, and sex organs; and put it back together. David was looking at her in disbelief. Her mother never talked about growing up in Germany during the war and Jessie had never even thought much about it. I

identify more with places I've been, she attempted.

But it affects you, said David.

I'm sure. But my mom was only seven. She said her mom pulled them out of Germany in a wagon. The border was closed to Germans too. They escaped when she was seven.

*They* escaped, said David.

Well, my mom says she didn't know about concentration camps, said Jessie. I don't think she knows much more now. I don't. God, that's terrible.

So, what do you think about? Said David after a pause.

Well, lately I've been thinking that maybe spirit and soul are distinct, said Jessie. Soul is like, rolling in the dirt, wailing at the stars, sex, blood and shit, Western religion, you know? And spirit is like Eastern religion, light, silence. So maybe everybody has both, but they focus more on one or the other depending on their culture and personality.

I can see that, said David. I'm more into soul, definitely. Uh, I'll be right back.

When he came back Jessie said, But maybe they're expressions of the same thing.

Ha ha, you were thinking about it the whole time, weren't you? Said David in a nice way. Actually Jessie had just pretended to still be thinking about it so David wouldn't feel embarrassed about having gone to the bathroom. It had come into her head that she wanted him to like her, and now her hands started shaking so she put them under the table.

They waited in the bus shelter at Confusion Corner where Corydon, Pembina, and Osbourne all intersected. Jessie told David about the Renaissance Festival, and he said that to him it sounded sort of nerdy. She was beginning to see his constellation of heavy-metal art snob suburban youth culture values. Beer even in winter and loyalty to one girl at a time and looking for the party in a car along quiet residential streets, also Picasso and Scheile and heaps of crumpled paper in his parents' attic. David loved his friends. They called him the Art Fag. They trooped in and out of bars like beads in a rosary.

David sat next to her on the bus looking, at first glance, like any boy on a Winnipeg bus. He stood up for an old lady, thanked the bus driver, not in a slightly embarrassed way (as Jessie did) but as if it were the right thing. You noticed how clean the lines of his face were. He tried to draw people when they weren't looking. His eyes were pure black. His hair was a braid inside his plaid coat. He was pallid; the space between his front teeth saved him from overly classical beauty when his mouth was open.

His hand held a pencil like a half-closed eye. He drew people like slightly wilted flowers. He tried to draw Jessie but couldn't, and he shook, unable to bear it. Jessie looked at the drawing and said, But it's me! David's hand darted out and crumpled it.

They started kissing at a party. Before the party, Jessie and Melina, had met Helen at a cocktail lounge and they'd had a few rounds of double Bloody Marys.

They told each other funny stories, clinking their twelve-dollar drinks in the deck lights. Everything that had come before, and was to come, seemed incidental.

David brought his friends to the party too. Smiles and winks came from all over when they started kissing.

David made punk rockers out of mango pits and named them Vinny and Mud. He was only allowed to stay over one night a week and on other nights she braided his hair back up and he jogged home in the dark pre-dawn. Or she walked him home along the tracks, with the headlights of trains like Van Gogh paintings. She wrote her only poems for David. He said she was brilliant enough to be famous. Or, he could see her turning out like the women who sat in *Country Style Donuts* all the time. Or marrying a millionaire and living in Hawaii. Whenever the millionaire had an affair, she'd pretend to be mad and get an expensive gift.

Jessie told David to annoy him that she could imagine him marrying a nice girl in tailored suits and being the creative one. But no one could really marry David but Jessie. No one could ever love him this much again. She continued to quietly believe this long after she'd forgotten what it actually felt like to be in love with David, and in spite of the fact that it was obviously a common thing for people to think.

6.

### **The Noetic Quality**

A striking-eyed woman in her poetry class, named Mariette, told Annica she seemed interesting. She said, do you mind me asking, are you in mourning?

No, it's just, when you look at your clothes in the morning and colours are too colourful?

Hmm. You might also look nice in bright jewel tones or pastels. Before I noticed how intelligent you are, I thought you might be one of those vampire people.

Yuck! Really?

Of course, I don't have a trained eye for the various schools of black clothing, said Mariette reassuringly. You should drop by sometime. I'd like to hold some fabrics up to your face.

Annica's aversion to colour held, but Mariette said, All right, I can at least make sure you get a few round meals, and fed her potato salad with tuna, anchovies, black olives, and Granny Smith apple. They drank Twig tea and started a scrabble game in Mariette's living room, that overlooked the climbing trees at the foot of Mont Royal. More snow was falling on them. But it was spring. Mariette had bought daffodil and hyacinth bulbs. Annica admitted that they did make a great difference to a room. Her own room was so small and dark, she explained, that it could only be austere or pathetic. She didn't mind austere.

But you get sick of it, said Mariette. You start to think, what am I doing in this dark little room? Other people have nice rooms.

It *was* rather a dreadful room. Annica wondered if maybe that was why she got such a terrible feeling, when she got home in the evening and turned on the light.

Mariette said, Why don't you stay over, it's snowing. My boyfriend has an exam tomorrow anyway.

Mariette's bed was queen-sized, set diagonally across her room. When Annica lay down she wondered how Mariette ever got up. She said, Mariette?

Yes, honey?

Do you think that people fall in love with someone because they have a cozy bed and stuff?

From the ensuing pause, she knew that Mariette understood the seriousness of the question.

Yeah, I do, said Mariette quietly.

Another summer was looming. Rachel had hitchhiked to the Yukon the summer before and she said anyone could get a job there. Annica printed out a folder full of lying résumés and bought a 7-day Greyhound pass. That way she could stop in Winnipeg for a few days, visit her mom and Melina. I changed my name, she would tell people – Annica.

At the Winnipeg bus depot she went to the kiosk to ask about connecting

buses to Whitehorse. They told her that Greyhound didn't even go to Whitehorse. They went to Fort Nelson where she would have a twelve hour stopover and then they went to Teslin. But she would have to buy another ticket because her seven-day pass would run out. They didn't know anything about buses from Teslin.

Annica's resistance to the fearful carefulness of Winnipeg was low. She walked to Melina's new house and her head had barely settled on Melina's good pink imitation-leather sofa before she decided to stay there, on that sofa, until she found a room. Melina said she didn't mind. She asked her husband and he didn't mind.

David's hair still smelled like Finesse. It was in a plastic bag in a box, in a creepy guy's basement where her mom had stored all their stuff. The creepy guy had red rockabilly hair and a penis made out of stuffed pantyhose hanging in his foyer.

So you're little Millie's girl, he said. She's a nice kid, little Millie. She says you're a real sweetheart. Are you a real sweetheart like your little mom?

No.

But he did have all their stuff in his basement. We're pretty different, said Annica confidently.

He said, I feel like I know you already. I feel like, since I knew her well, and you're her daughter—you know what I mean?

Annica, unhappily, had first opened a box with a top layer of fuzz-balled lacy black underwear. He had followed her to the basement. I feel a bit self-

conscious unpacking in front of you, she said. His smile was unwavering. I'd rather you didn't watch me unpack, she clarified.

There was a pause. Then he said, There's nothing better than the truth, man, and went upstairs and cranked *Voivod*. That was when she found David's hair, wrapped in wax-splotted velvet with the quartz crystal earring, the crystal still shining very brightly as if it was ready for Annica to take it and treasure it again. It was in a carved sandalwood box with other little things that Jessie had cared about, nestled among stuffed animals that Millie had packed. She used to put them back in Jessie's room no matter how many times Jessie took them out. She would say, Oh, you didn't want little Mushi mitze katze und little Teddy in your room anymore? Where should I put them? Should I just pack them away?

Annica left the earring and David's hair. They seemed too pure for her to touch anymore. She just took some incense and shirts that might be job-hunting shirts. The creepy guy followed her out onto his lawn. As she was thanking him, he suddenly whirled to the side and pulled a knife out of his pants. Sssh! he said. Then he said, Nothing, I thought I heard something, and licked the knife and put it back.

Okay, well, bye, said Annica, gently.

She walked everywhere to save money, through the green passivity of Winnipeg. She didn't mind, she *liked* walking everywhere. But David might see her at any time. He'd told her she walked like a little girl. She splashed through puddles and sang along to industrial music. She went down to the Assiniboine river and



squished her toes in the spring mud.

Her mom had moved into a retirement home even though she wasn't that old. It was called the Heidelberg and had special rates for people on welfare. They met at *Country Style Donuts* on Osbourne. She saw her mom coming from blocks away and had time to get used to her as she walked up the street, small and appalling in the hot sun. Her mom's lips were fuzzy with chappedness, her hair nicotine-and-pepper. Her t-shirt was Jessie's from high school and said *Cotton Ginny Club* in pink handwriting. She stood at Annica's table. Hi! she said, and put out her hand, but Annica hugged her. It was like hugging paper maché.

What should we do? Do you think? Said Millie. Should we have a donut? Neither of them wanted to stay and maybe run into Millie's friends, but Millie often suggested things she didn't want to do as if their possibility should not be discounted so easily.

They went to *Papa George's*, across the street. Her mom peeled the tops of creamers and drank the cream, stacking them considerately. Annica told her that she still hadn't found a job.

Do you go into every store? Do you give them a nice smile?

Yes!

Her mother rubbed under her chin. She didn't know why it was so hard to find a job either. She said, I could have gone back to teaching just like that, wen du ein kienes kind was. The principal of my school, er hat anso gesact, Mrs. Wittim, when are you coming back to us?

Did you try back at Perkins? said her mom. And she said, I know! You could be a bank person. The ones that give you the money.

I would 't get hired as a bank teller, said Annica.

But it's worth a go!

Annica's tuna melt began to look slimy. She said, Why didn't you go back to teaching, then?

I guess I didn't really feel like it.

You could have left Ted.

I didn't want to leave Ted, said Millie, swiveling her head rather wildly like a fly-ridden horse. Oh! Der armer man! Er ist gans alein. Kuk nicht, kuk nicht. She always found an old person eating alone in a restaurant and felt sorry for them.

But why did you marry him?

Her mother seemed distracted by something that kept flying around like a June bug. Suddenly she said, You know, I was so in love with Ted, I was heels – head over heels. My friends said, Careful Millie. Oh no, I was sure.

Annica had never thought about her parents that way. Her mom had said once before that she loved Ted, but they were in the back seat of a police car and Jessie had thought she was just caught up in the moment. But here she was saying it now, so it must be true.

Not vengeful, but just scrounging for vicarious romantic tingles, Millie said, Have you seen David? Do you want to see him? Just a little bit?

Will you stop with that?

Ach, insuldige.

When they left, Annica pretended she had to go to the bathroom so she could go back and tip the waitress. Her mom had just given her a thousand dollars that she had gotten from the divorce settlement. She looked at Annica bitterly when she came back.

She called Josh, now, more than anyone. When he'd heard she was going away he'd called and said he'd like to be friends now. She thought maybe he was a bit nervous that she would never come back. She bought phone cards and called him after Melina and her husband and baby were asleep.

Before she'd moved to Montreal, she'd only known Ruth and Sandra and Karen to chat with on the sidewalk, but now, thank God, they called her when they were doing anything. They usually ended up at somebody's house with this bunch of guys because Ruth sort of liked one of them. Well, she liked him. Karen only sort of liked another one, and Sandra said she didn't like any of them but she flirted with the ones her friends liked.

Everyone called her Jessie. She said, Actually, I changed my name. Annica. But it's okay.

They were at the *Toad in the Hole*, drinking Guinness and waiting to play pool. Annica could feel this big smile keep trying to come over her face. She knew that David was going to walk in.

They took over the pool table and then David came in with his troop and a girl with a red beret and Annica was as calm as if her blood had changed to ice water. When she looked up from shooting he was kiss-kissing the girl, who went outside and started unlocking a bike. He turned his head to laugh at the end of a story. Annica's eyes were like a snake's tongue, seeing him in a strobe effect. Sandra raised an eyebrow minutely. After they had broken up, Jessie and David had blabbed up and down the streets. They had a common faith that a degraded emotion loses power, like an over-played song; which faith Jessie subsequently lost.

She thought: Sometimes in the framework of the world an event interrupted the sequence and flow, like a rock crashing down to block a stream. Everything that happened afterwards smashed up against it, collected, like debris in a still, slowly rising pool, as life tried to continue. Nothing that they could do afterwards could damage this event. It all collected in the pool, that night, years later, cover the event and fall into a new track. It was theoretically possible.

She would be the first to admit that real love was the kind that worked, but this should have a special name for it then, because it sure wasn't fake anything, it had a noetic quality that spit out the sun, moon, and stars like teeth.

So she didn't feel surprised when David's idle hand plucked her shirt as she was leaving with Karen and Ruth, to go do coke on someone's parent's dining room table.

I'm going for coffee with David, she explained as Ruth bumped into her.

Lenient in matters of the heart or even just of the cunt, they hugged her, said they'd call her tomorrow.

Winnipeg streets were deserted even on weekend nights, even in the summer. The few punked-out kids who seemed determined to have a street culture looked incongruous against the prissy backdrop of Osbourne Village. They ignored David and Annica as if repelled by the aridity of their idiom.

David said, Still writing?

No.

I didn't think so. I heard you changed your name to Annushka.

Annica.

Ah, Jessie.

They were walking down River avenue, towards her little basement hole. David smiled into the air as she unlocked the door. She turned on her light, to the mattress on the industrial carpeting, the underwear stiffly dry on the radiator, the black plastic folder and incense-dusted résumés. David said, So, are you going back to Mont Royale?

Of course I am David. I live there.

So I hear, so I hear. My girlfriend will be happy, she doesn't like you very much.

Why, can't you stop talking about me?

Ha, you're crazy. I told her you were crazy. She didn't want to be near you.

David was wet-lipped and drunk. He started scribbling something on the back of one of her résumés. See? he said, This is the kind of art I'm doing now. You like this, eh? There you go. (He signed it.) I'm going.

Annica opened the door.

He considered. I want to see you naked first.

Why don't you take off my clothes, then?

No, you take them off.

No.

His hand came up and grabbed her between the legs. She started unbuttoning his shirt, left it hanging off his hands. He was wearing ugly white pants. She wanted to see him naked again too.

He said, Oh my God, are you anorexic?

No, your girlfriend's fat.

David giggled.

Are you going to tell her?

We tell each other everything, said David piously. She's going to be pretty mad.

So what are you doing?

Being a fuckhead.

You still love me, said Annica.

Nope, I'm jus' being a fuckhead, said David, unbalancing her to the floor.

He wasn't as beautiful, she had seen that immediately. David wasn't as beautiful. It was her fault. No one could ever love him that much again. It wasn't

possible. His penis wasn't fully erect.

The hairy-carpeted cement was cold. His hands and face were like wood. She wanted the real David. She wasn't going to get the real David by touching him. He had managed to change that much.

We need to talk, she said, starting to break up. That was when he left, when she broke up. That was when he could leave.

He pulled himself up and stood against a wall. I have a girlfriend, he said in an exasperated voice.

Please, we need to talk, said Annica. Soon he'd be able to leave. She could feel insomnia watching her like a cat. He took her shoulders and shook her back and forth and said, You don't understand I'll kill you I'll really kill you, and backed out the door. He was wrong, he wouldn't kill her. He would have already killed her.

It was true that it was pretty bad in the room after he left. She lit a cigarette—she had a whole pack—and propped up her pillows to stare out the basement window, where it was turning blue slowly. Her muscles gave shocked little jumps. She felt like a balloon that wasn't quite on the ground. She got up and locked the door after David. She could tell by the length of time her steps took that she was feverish. She was not tired but she made some coffee to clear her head. She drank, propped on her pillows, her window the gorgeous blue of Winnipeg pre-dawn with blades of grass black.

She felt emptied out, desolate, but not unsatisfied. She would have liked

to talk about it. Maybe Josh wouldn't mind, since they had broken up. And Ruth or Sandra would probably call. She would only have to tell one of them.

Josh minded. Annica kept wondering if he was joking as, his voice high and strange, he wanted to know all about it, and then he had to go. Then David called.

Allright Jessie. I'm marrying my girlfriend. I'm never going to talk to you again after this. Okay? Also we'd prefer if you could keep it to yourself.

Would you now, said Annica, and hung up.

He called back twice. He had no experience of being at a disadvantage.

I was really just using you.

Does this count as talking?

Oh, the warm sour waves of satisfaction that were lapping her heart.

And, finally: I want you to forgive me.

Um, no. Maybe some day.

When Millie walked past the old people in the foyer of her retirement home they said, There goes the spring chicken! Busy, busy. Her mom was always getting books out of the library and finding out more about what she could do.

Annica came during visiting hours and signed the guest book. The elevator smelled like foil-wrapped bath cubes sashed with little pictures of roses, violets, or lilies of the valley. *Bingorama!* said the posters. *The Hobby Horse Society is admitting members.*

Did you say Hi? Millie said, as soon as she opened the door. She meant to



the old people downstairs.

Hi, said Annica.

On the walls, sickeningly, hung everything that Jessie as a child had ever drawn, from scribbles to princesses riding birds. On dressers, the dolls she had played with were lined up like chorus girls, some naked. Her mother even picked up toys that she found in alleyways and felt sorry for. She felt sorry too for empty bottles, combs with teeth missing, radios that still made a noise and were almost antiques, nubs of lipstick. Annica cleared a place to sit on her former futon. Her mother said she was doing well. She was hopeful. She said, Do you need anything? Do you need more money? I got some nice clothes from a lady downstairs. (She indicated a rotund garbage bag in the corner.) Do you want to have a look? No? Okay, so, what else?

I still haven't found a job.

No? Oh, well, I still have a little bit. We're in this together, said Millie, as though Annica ever gave *her* money.

Millie's friend Walter knocked on the door. He had a shy, monkeyish face that he stretched and said, It's great to meet you finally. Then he sat down on the kitchen chair and Millie tried to get Annica to recite *The Waste Land*. Walter wanted her to come see his *Coca-Cola* collection, but Millie said they were going out for a bite of something. They waited a few minutes for Walter to use the washroom and then they had to leave.

As they walked down the sidewalk Annica said, I tried to find a job here.

Why don't you go back to Montreal? said Millie, who had a way that

Annica still found reassuring of closing the past like a package and shoving it aside briskly. Don't worry, she said. I can help with school.

Millie's last job had been packing meat in a walk-in freezer, and Annica hoped she would be lined up and shot if she was going to pay her tuition with frozen meat money, with Millie's hands growing numb and her arms lugging trays piled with red squishies.

Back in Montreal, she stayed in Mariette's cozy place at the foot of the mountain. She phoned the bank in Winnipeg about her next loan. She never opened the letters they sent her and then she would phone and try to get someone to explain everything. There had been a problem. There was a special form she was supposed to have sent them, as an out-of-province student, to prove she was still in school. Although she had sent them a student loan application, she hadn't sent this form, so they started charging her interest on her loan. She owed them eight hundred dollars. When she sent them a check and the right form they could start processing her next loan. Annica begged them a little, calmly, so that she would seem fit for loans, but there was nothing they could do, they said.

Mariette was the world's most conscientious provider of food and fluffy towels, but she was talking a lot about shooting herself on her lover's doorstep or the Goddam four-poster bed where he slept with his wife. She said she had given this man everything. She called him and upbraided him. She called his wife. She sobbed and Annica summoned up episodes of David, to show that she too had experienced the strange cruelty and unwholesomeness that Mariette kept finding

at the heart of love. Mariette wanted to be told, repeatedly, that it was not that she was not desirable. The absence of her lover was due to his weakness, the weakness of men. Annica told her so, feeling weak and light-headed.

When anyone dropped by, Mariette rallied, became graceful and funny. She went on a lot of dates. When she came home, she described the date and the man with an enthusiasm that waned as she remembered her lover and his wife, often became tears while she undressed.

Annica woke up with her teeth hurting and got up quietly and took her own concerns (money and only money) out to the streets, down into Montreal Central, burning with a roped energy that she hoped would get her through this time, by feeding on the despair that threatened to make it endless.

She had thought she could be true David for the rest of her life. Not so that anyone would notice, just that deep down it would be David she loved. Now, it seemed, there was a part of her that would toss away the peice of his hair. Think of something else as she died.

She searched the free papers for what jobs might have trickled down into the remains of the summer. The jobs were: a rare, minimum-wage opportunity for a fluently bilingual person at a counter, and a great many telemarketing careers and prospects for classy young women. It was clear from the paper: Montreal's more desperate youth lived off people they couldn't see, or could see all too well. In

general, the boys delivered nothing of what was promised, simply ravening across North America in their headsets; and the girls sold nothing but delivered what was already sold.

7.

### **Licking a Stained-Glass Window to God**

Jessie and Helen and their friend Sebastian and David were all driving down to Minneapolis to see Bob Dylan, through the fall patchwork of purple alfalfa, windblown wheat and mustard-yellow fields. Sebastian asked what they were and nobody knew. Golden Sebastian sat in front with Helen, driving, and Jessie got the back with black-and-white David.

They had ordered tickets on Jessie's mom's credit card and then paid her back, except for Jessie, who was still unemployed. Millie had wanted to pay for David's ticket too but he'd only let her pay for half. Jessie and Sebastian were praying to find tickets for the second show from scalpers but Helen said she liked CD's as much as live music and David wasn't that into Bob Dylan.

Who could have imagined she could be here again without looking into schoolbus windows? She held David's hand in the back seat the way small children hold hands when crossing the street. David was like licking a stained-glass window with God on the other side. It was like every line of his body was reflected in a curved mirror so it was elongated, exaggerated, but at the same time it was only a regular body, his (and hers too).

When they got downtown Sebastian said, You can drop me off here, I got a graveyard womin', y'know, she's meeting me in the *Starbucks* over there.

Sure you do, said Helen, laughing.

No, I do, said Sebastian, so Helen dropped him off. Jessie moved to the

front seat. Helen was glaring determinedly at the road signs. They decided to turn around and find a *Comfort Inn* they'd passed. It was outside of Minneapolis, in a tiny rectangle of trimmed grass surrounded by abandoned construction sites. With Sebastian gone it was more expensive than Helen had bargained for so Jessie lent her money. They sat outside on concrete blocks. Jessie said that empty lots, with their beautiful weeds and coffee-brown puddles, empty bottles and chip bags, were like screens of heaven and hell overlaying each other. Helen went to take a shower, so David felt free to cover Jessie's face with kisses like tiny drops of rain.

After the first Bob Dylan show Jessie had to be led away, grinning as tears leaked out of her eyes. She had heard her love for David in sounds. She had heard all the love in the world, how it is broken, how some of it remains.

Even Helen wanted to see the second show. Jessie stumbled up to a scalper who said that he went to every Bob show and this was how he financed it. He didn't think it was bad because to see Bob was worth any price. Jessie got tickets for herself, Helen, and David. She knew that David wouldn't be able to pay her back but Helen would because she was full-time at Music City.

They met Sebastian at the bar next to the concert hall, where he was talking to the guy who wrote *Behind the Shades*. Helen wanted to have tea somewhere because she hated beer. Everyone was looking around for members of the backup band or well-known buddies of Bob's. It was like waiting outside of a door with a party behind it. Helen said that *she* was leaving, and she was the

one driving, so Jessie and David had to leave. Jessie gazed out the car window as if the people on the street were her children that she had forgotten to kiss goodnight.

She was still and wired in the motel bed. David's hand came over and almost touched her hip, almost trailed up her waist. She almost gasped.

Do you still wish you were Bob Dylan? whispered David.

I don't know.

Could you pipe down, you guys? From Helen in the next bed.

Sorry, said Jessie. We weren't being that loud, she added.

There was a frightful pause. Oh no, said Helen, I'm cramping your style. Maybe I'd better just sleep in the bathroom. It took her a while to pull the tucked blankets off the motel bed.

Helen said that she had to finish sleeping before Jessie could use the toilet. Jessie said, Helen, grow the fuck up, and after a pause, Helen came out like nothing had happened. Jessie was a little quieter than usual and David sat in the passenger's seat. They went to a diner and Jessie bought them all omelets, and then she said she'd like to be alone for a few hours. They split up in the parkade, David with his sketchpad and Helen guessing that she would just walk around.

In the car back to Winnipeg Jessie still had goosebumps. She had stage-rushed the second show and stood five feet away from Bob Dylan.

David's mom let him sleep over one night a week and for Jessie it was like trying

to sleep on train tracks. She fell into a light trance where she could still hear her heart like a locomotive. David said she drank too much coffee, but mostly she slept pretty well since moving out of Ted's house.

When he came over she was usually reading, bathed and perfumed, by candlelight. Once he said, You just read all the time, don't you. How come nobody knows you?

She thought, he's going to leave me.

He said, Inger said she doesn't think you're really human. (I'll just lie here very still and when he leaves I'll fall asleep.)

He said, she doesn't see you. I wish more people saw you.

She had started wearing nail polish and David at first said he hated it but when they were having sex he said he could see the appeal.

His parents had her over for dinner. In his house David turned him into a responsible, contentious brother and son, slapping the supper dishes expertly on the table. Strange to say, Jessie had never before sat down at a dinner with two spoons. She used the small one.

Dinnertime conversation seemed to disagree. Jessie waited to talk (David had told his mother she was brilliant) but never found the moment. Talk turned to the Holocaust and David's mother said that she wasn't blaming Jessie but that all German people should feel guilty about the Holocaust. Jessie set about eating her food in a cheerful way. David's grandfather had been Jewish and become a



Catholic. David was a Catholic if there ever was one.

Jessie's parents took them to a Chinese restaurant. Her dad liked to tilt his chair back, in restaurants and at home, balancing with his feet under the table. Her mother asked David if he could draw a picture so she could see what a good artist he was. He drew on the back of his paper placemat.

How's Helen these days, asked Ted, with the air of having found an appropriate remark.

Oh, said Jessie lightly, she needs a boyfriend.

Ted said, Send her over.

Conversation flagged during the meal. David shook Ted's and Millie's hands before getting on his bike.

Jessie went home and got into her tie-dyed blankets with her coat still on. She didn't care if she sweated all night. Sometime the next day one of her housemates brought her a glass of water.

She fell on her way to the bathroom and Melina said they were calling an ambulance unless she ate something. Jessie ate a piece of French bread. David had gotten her into French bread. Melina sat on her futon and said she'd known plenty of people who turned out great even if their parents were a little weird.

David thinks that your family is you, said Jessie.

Well, he's not dating your family.

But he's right.

Never mind, said Melina. If you don't think it matters, no one else will

either.

She gave Jessie a mandarin because it was almost Christmas and Jessie ate one piece and fell asleep in her coat.

She woke up late in the evening, put on her bathrobe, and started filling out a student loan application. She would be a university student. She would never make any money and collection agents would call and threaten her when she was old, but for now she'd have some money.

Her window kept clunking. She looked out but it was dark. There were a lot of troublemakers in Winnipeg. She stuck her head into the hallway. Is anybody home?

What are you doing in there? asked Melina.

Somebody's throwing rocks at my window.

Oh my God, I'm calling the police.

Jessie turned off the lights in her room. A thought struck her. She opened her window. David? Is that you? Why are you throwing rocks at my window?

I'm tryna break your window, said David.

Do you want to come in?

Um...kay.

Melina? Could you tell the police it's okay?

David was painfully young and drunk. She pulled off his cheap white running shoes. You're supposed to unlace them first, he said, holding his feet out in front of him. Just get in my room, she said.

They went to the corner store at night. They drank slurpees spiked with

vodka on the littered banks of the Assiniboine. Jessie was thinking, Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends—when she noticed that it wasn't perfect. No, it definitely wasn't perfect right now. David hadn't noticed. She took his hand and they strolled along Osbourne. David wanted to go to *Bar Italia* even though it was closed at four in the morning. They were pulling each other's arms. Jessie said, David... in her most sweet little voice and an adoring smile broke out all over his face. It was the cutest thing that Jessie would ever see. David didn't remember that but he remembered walking and peeing because he'd always wanted to try it.

God, said Jessie, I can barely afford to move in with David. Do you know, uh, when you could afford to pay me back?

Helen said, For what? She'd made it perfectly clear, she said, that she only had so much money, and Jessie and Sebastian had said that she should go anyway.

Right, said Jessie, in the even monotone that a dreaming person uses to defy dream logic. I was supposed to say, No Helen, don't come with us to see Bob Dylan.

I thought you understood I only had so much money. I didn't even have a good time.

That is not my fault.

Well, I'm sorry, said Helen. It's not my fault either.

Jessie's journal became a torrent of rage against Helen. The next time she

mentioned it, she was more breathless. Helen said that she'd even discussed this with a mutual friend, who agreed she didn't owe Jessie anything. She stared firmly at her hands in her lap. They were sitting on a bench at a bus stop.

Okay, I can't be your friend anymore then, said Jessie. Please don't call me anymore then.

Helen's fingers trailed off Jessie's hippie skirt and Jessie crossed the street and headed the opposite way.

David said the whole thing was crazy but he didn't see what else Jessie could have done. Jessie stopped thinking about it much.

8.

### **Nail Polish**

Annica went to the mall, tipsy from vodka and orange juice. She had the black cut off her hair-ends and put in two blonde streaks. She bought a spray perfume called Magnolia and some razors and face powder. She wandered through the sex, suits, and fast food of Ste. Catherine, looking for innocent lingerie. She couldn't believe she used to buy this stuff because she was in love or whatever. She bought a stretchy blue dress from *La Senza* and stole a skin-tone g-string from *Victoria's Secret* to go under it. It was way overpriced.

Lynn-Kim lay on the floor with pillows under her head and the phone on her chest. Lying is better for your body.

Yes, we have a blonde today, said Lynn-Kim. Yes, what we offer here is a full-body massage. She massages every part of your body and she does the massage in lingerie. In lingerie, sir. It's just a massage, sir. I'm just the receptionist, sir. *No. Good-bye.*

Lynn-Kim's voice was like sugar and tap water. She turned. When I say blonde, they're thinking pale yellow.

I'd like you to say blonde, said Lycra.

The morning sun striped across Lynn-Kim, sheened Lycra's two blonde streaks and stretchy blue dress. She was eating corner store sushi and drinking coffee.

Crystall smoked, and Molly had something in a tupperware container. They took turns meeting men at the door, if the men didn't ask for someone in particular, or to see all the girls (and then, usually, choose Lycra.) Crystall was a bit blasé and Molly should stop wearing those white canvas shoes and should powder her face more. Lycra powdered hers about every five minutes. If she had time, she did herself over for every man. It annoyed Lynn-Kim, who thought she was neurotic. Or else what was she doing with the men that she needed so many showers?

At first she thought Molly would steal because her personality seemed fake. But Molly just wasn't good at acting real. Ugh, she'd say, I hate it when they touch your face with their greasy hands. I say, Excuse me, you're going to give me pimples.

They were sprawled at the kitchen table, if it was a kitchen. It had a sink, fridge, and stove. The radio was set to Q-92. Lynn-Kim said it kept her sane.

If you could hear some of the fucking morons I have to talk to. Du-uh, what colour pan-tees are you girls wearing? Are you wet right now?

They were good-humoured about the idiotic vileness of the men.

After the massage, we should hand them a complementary roll of toilet paper. With an instruction manual.

We should whip out a camera. Smile! We could put together a little booklet. One guy per page, with a quote. *Ooh, you're so beautiful. Do you think my penis is big enough?*

We could have smell samples. Like in perfume ads.

Look! There's a special on baby-wipes at K-mart. We could use those to wipe them off. That would humiliate them.

No, they wouldn't care, said Lycra.

That was her, reapplying her lip liner, adding lipstick and gloss. Big deal.

She used to start crying if she told anyone. That didn't mean it was bad, it wasn't that simple. Tears somehow bridged the gap that was suddenly there, that had been hidden. Lynn-Kim said, Just don't tell anyone. It's not worth it.

Lynn-Kim only made five bucks for every man who showed up. She was there every day except Wednesdays. Wednesday was the day when the cops did the most busts. The average number of guys per day, Lycra would say, is nine point five. So Lynn-Kim made forty-seven fifty a day, for twelve hours. She also got welfare. Lycra usually massaged, oh, five or six guys per day. She got twenty dollars for forty-five minutes, twenty-five for an hour. Plus extras, which averaged, say, another twenty per. So that would be a total of, letsee. Well, she usually carried home two or three hundred dollars, folded in the front of her jean jacket. Added it to a growing wad between pages of old journal entries.

Meg called from Boston, to say she was coming to visit, and Annica freaked. Lynn-Kim said, Tell her you're a telemarketer. Lots of telemarketers do twelve-hour days. If she starts asking questions, say it depresses you to talk about it.

The place was a dive. Men mounted the stairs, saw the bolt twist, the girl. They

were asked to take their shoes off on the mat. Lycra walked ahead of them like a clumsy mermaid in her heels, carrying the towels like a waitress with a platter of burgers. Upstairs, a bass guitar thumped out *My Sherona*. The man watched her spread the towels on the massage table, place the two smaller ones on the night table, next to the oil and alcohol.

Are you here for an hour? Or forty-five minutes. Okay, so, I have to pay the receptionist now. I'll give you a few minutes to get comfy, and then I'll...be back.

Sometimes she pretended the man was a nude model. Whose nude model would it be? Gogol's later work. Otto Dix. Behind the man's back, she made funny faces at herself in the mirror.

The first time she walked back into the kitchen and said, That one's going to come back—he's on his way to a bank machine—they all died laughing. The men only came back if you had their wallet. She imagined that there must be a certain lightness, walking away from the fetid rooms with their Klimt and Botticelli prints, sterile fingers clicking the bolt shut behind them. Out into the clear light of day, alcohol tingling dry on their stomach hairs. Dizziness.

Bob from the Radio Station was a rare and famous visitor. He gave her a 100 dollar bill as soon as they were alone. He acted the way men do when they fall in love in Hollywood movies. Eye-searching, earnest, regretful.

Bob was glad it was her first day. Girls get hard fast here. And then,



when they meet someone nice, it's too late. He said Ooh, I like to see nice little girls be bad. Oh, they like being bad. It's my fault.

She gazed at him with kaleidoscope-blue eyes. It was a bit of a challenge, making her eyes look that open. Like a small child would look at its mother who was about to murder it. Not trust, but self-abandonment. Bob carried her radio-smooth through the hour and let her down with another hundred-dollar bill.

Lycra was on the floor, wiping up something with what they called a dick-rag. Milton walked into this room that was still reeking and said he wanted a four-hand. He'd had one before and it was very erotic. Lycra went to go get Crystall, but wait. Was she a student? Yes, she said, she was in Religious Studies at McGill. Milton changed his mind: he wanted just her, so they could talk. He sent her back to the kitchen with an extra twenty to tip Crystall. Milton's good, said Crystall. He was a regular of Amber's. Amber was an intellectual genius. Lycra smiled to herself.

Without his clothes on he looked like a huge baby, overflowing the massage table. He was happy he'd found her, he said. He needed to be stimulated on higher levels as well as lower ones. She told him he was different from most men.

Most men only like your pretty face?

Well, not the ones I'm friends with.

That's what I want. To be your friend. Maybe you don't believe me yet. You'll see. I'm a good friend.

He put down the three twenties for all her options and an extra one just for her. He touched her naked body and asked her to explain her religious beliefs. It was only her second day. She told him that she believed in being good, even though there was no reward; punishment, she suspected. And what else? She was so deep—what other deep things did she do and think? He wanted to hear her poetry. She recited *Somnambule Ballad* by Federico Garcia Lorca. He told her she was stupid to have a job like this—someone like her—she should be sending her poems out to magazines. She jerked him off for a while but he didn't come. He said he wasn't there just to come. It wasn't like that at all. He couldn't keep his hands off her. He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to know if she had ever been in love.

Feeling bad that he hadn't come, she kissed him lightly on the mouth. She told him that she had been in love with a guy named David. Walking home that night, she could feel Milton moving under her skin and she promised herself that she would never do anything like that again.

It was Lynn-Kim who counted out the dirty towels, seven to a basket. She measured out the half-cup of Dollar Store detergent, that didn't even begin to cut the sperm, the heated stink of it, the waxy film it left on the towels. The masseuses took turns running down to the basement in their bare feet, bending over the washer and dryer in their skimpy clothes like the first five minutes of a horror movie. On slow days Lycra dawdled so somebody else's man might see her and ask for her instead.

Though Lynn-Kim didn't like Lycra, she told her things. For instance, how it was dirty ashtrays, not smoking, that stank up a room. Also how hard it was to find shoes in her size; she took half-sizes. Her father had a boil on his butt and the doctor lanced it but he didn't get it all the first time so it grew and burst and bled all over. This was the same doctor that had wanted to give her a hysterectomy, but she said *fuck you*. She'd had two miscarriages already. She was only twenty-two, Lycra had thought she was thirty. But when she blurted, really? Lynn-Kim said, I know, I have a baby face.

The worst were the ones who were looking for that certain special someone. They thought they were different from other men who went to massage parlours. They waited in bistros on endless deferral, thinking, my soul mate would have to be someone more dependable. Still, they wanted to know what had happened. They paid more money and were escorted back to the massage rooms for an explanation. You could see that they would be the ones who turned evil.

Lycra never made lunch dates. At first she felt bad about it, later she started to hate them. For using her job to try to get to her. Acting like she should want to be with them. Because she didn't. She remembered what it felt like to want to be with someone. It was important that she remember. A balance needed to be struck between reaching mouths in the daytime and the whirlpool of longing at night.

What did it mean, that her breasts had recently been touched by this array of mouths? She tried to think of it, imagining the mouths on her breasts. It meant something but what? It meant one thing if she tried to think of another girl in this position, then it was easy. Another girl having to stand and countenance these stubbornly lifting mouths. But she couldn't see herself that way. It didn't mean anything to her, implacable, gazing into their eyes or down at their penis, the aesthetic of her hands on it. Much better with nail polish. They liked it too, they liked the nail polish. So cute in contrast with their swollen, oily penis.

Meg was asleep in the room that Annica's housemate had moved out of. She had been traveling the world for the past year, and now here she was. She really didn't suspect. Even with Annica coming home wearing a different shade of nail polish than when she'd left. It was easy to come home to Meg. It made her feel peaceful, the way Meg fell asleep when her head touched the pillow.

Oh her days off, they walked around Montreal. Meg had been walking around different cities and writing poems about them. Her Birkenstocks had left stigmata on her feet. She stayed with different people she knew and cooked meals with whatever they happened to have lying around. She didn't spend very much money, but she knew it was different from being poor.

Milton was worried because his feelings for Lycra were so strong. He stayed away for a week, and when he came back he asked for a four-hand. This is my move, he said, like in a game of chess.

Lycra was a terrible one for getting the giggles during four-hands. The minute she made eye contact with the other masseuse, across the naked corpus of the man, she was done for. Crystall made it worse by making shocked faces, while her hands kneaded Milton's rubbery folds, darted like small fish between his back thighs to brush his bruise-coloured scrotum. When they turned him face upwards Crystall smiled into his eyes. Milton rolled his eyes towards Lycra and Crystall said, Oh, she's been doing too many drugs.

Milton said, I'm sorry, I need to be alone with her. She has a spell on me.

As soon as Crystall was gone he grabbed Lycra around the waist. He started telling her about how much money he had to make to get his family out of debt. He couldn't allow her to distract him, though, for himself, he wanted only her. He had used Crystall to make her jealous. Had she been jealous? Well, she said, it's hard to be jealous when you're being so much nicer to me.

He admitted, he'd called more than once this week, and every time they told him she was in a massage. He'd been angry, even though he knew that their relationship, his and Lycra's, was so much different. He'd thought about staying away. But now that he was here, would she give him a beautiful kiss, like a woman gives a man?

He kept clapping her on the midriff—she was wearing a halter top. It was hard to keep the hatred out of her eyes when his hand suddenly whammed into her belly. He sometimes felt bad, he confessed, that he wasn't doing much to make the world a better place. He wasn't materialistic, but he spent his time making money. It was strange.

Oh, but you have to be selfish, Lycra assured him. You have your wife and child to think about. What would they do if you went around trying to make the world a better place?

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Oh, but you have to be selfish, Lycra assured him. You have your wife and child to think about. What would they do if you went around trying to make the world a better place?

Yes! Milton cried. That's it exactly!

Meg said that Annica was just the kind of hostess she'd been longing for, because she treated their lives as separate things. Annica left her the apartment key and Meg wandered Montreal. When Annica came home Meg seemed glad to see her. She said she remembered when Annica too had cracked, callused feet, the summer she worked at the Renaissance Festival. Maybe she thought that Annica had forgotten a part of herself, now that she used a pumice stone and nail polish on her toes. But Annica hadn't forgotten. She would never prefer her pumiced feet over cracked dusty ones, or her silly white hands with their glaring nail polish over Meg's long, brown, horseback-rider's, sheep-farmer's, botanist's hands.

She felt okay coming home to Meg, even though Meg didn't know and must never know. Probably Meg would never even meet anyone like Lynn-Kim. Sometimes, walking with Meg, she heard her voice jump-start into a facetious, half-joking babble, running along ahead of itself and trailing away suddenly. She

told Meg that telemarketing was making her feel fake.

Lycra did not want to know about their interests. It made those things seem yukky. Fortunately, most of them liked stupid stuff like *The Celestine Prophecy* or *Jerry MacGuire* or things she couldn't afford like skiing or bungee jumping. George the Heart-of-Gold molester thought *Good Will Hunting* was "truly wonderful" and when she watched it she had this gross feeling. George even got his lines from the psychologist played by Robin Williams. The forceful commands that break through the defense mechanisms of the young, confused child. Put your arms around me. Look at me. Look at me. And the quest for the one, special lady. George was looking for her in all the massage parlours.

George thought that Lycra was going to see him outside of work. Of course he did. But she won't.

She had told him, Um, it's twenty dollars to touch. And twenty for me to take my clothes off on top, and twenty for the bottom. He said, let's just see how it goes. Presently he kissed his way up her arm. He moved around her, unsurprised by her submission. But he did seem impressed when she cried afterwards. If you're as intelligent as you are sweet I'm going to fall in love with you, he said.

Meg said she was used to being disoriented. She still had her long hair. When she finished a poem she sent it to her friend, Louise Gluck, whom she'd met at Williams. An excellent private university.

Graduating from Williams doesn't mean you'll get a job, necessarily, Meg told Annica. Meg must have known that Annica was jealous of her, and been too polite to show it. Annica couldn't imagine post-Williams anxiety. She just heard money, so much money underneath it all, the invisible depths of Meg's tranquillity. Meg noticed things about people that hadn't developed in response to some outward necessity. Like Annica's writing, which tapered from a thick rounded curve to a thin point like a wave. Annica had left a note for Meg on the kitchen table, and when she came home Meg remarked that her writing had always tapered like that. It seemed to Annica that this gift, this tiny sliver of Meg's perspective, had a kind of value that she'd forgotten. She sank into a chair, shoving her work-bag casually under the table.

A lot of the men wanted to give her pleasure. They said, it doesn't seem fair if you're not enjoying this as much as I am.

She didn't want pleasure from them, even if she started to feel it she didn't want it. But sometimes it was easier, when her arms ached with repetitive motion, to let them have it. That was what bodies did. They responded to certain things.

Whenever one of the men had Nadia, they said, he was spoiled for anyone else. She did more for less. She enjoyed it. Lycra wanted to say, What's so great about hating it? But it seemed like the other girls just didn't have access to postcolonial and postfeminist discourses. Lycra saw one of Nadia's regulars and he got mad because she wouldn't kiss him all over. Not that she thought it would



make her a bigger slut.

One day the cell phone got busted, and Nadia was the last one who'd used it. She wasn't supposed to have been using it in the first place. Lynn-Kim sent her to the drugstore, to pick up another phone, but Nadia took two hours. Lynn-Kim fired her.

It was pretty depressing. Nadia cried and threw her things into a heap on the floor. Lycra looked in the *Adult Help Wanted* section for other massage parlours she could try, but Nadia said that she was getting out of this business anyway. Lynn-Kim snorted.

When she left Crystall said it would be nicer around here. You could sit in the kitchen without Nadia always offering to go down on you.

There was one guy that Lycra was attracted to. He had rich, honey skin and dimples, a cupid's bow mouth, hair like a golden lamb. He had just taken his business degree in Florida. He loved Florida. He would look great on a beach in Florida, in mango-coloured swimming trunks.

He asked her if she had any fetishes. She admitted, reluctantly, that she liked men who could raise a single eyebrow while the other remained perfectly still.

He tried, but it wouldn't have gone with his look anyway. His own fetishes were predictable and not unwelcome. Afterwards, when she was leading him to the door, he put his hand on her waist gently. He put it there to comfort her, because he was leaving, he could see the male pant-leg in the waiting room,

and he felt sorry for her.

Another guy actually said that Dostoyevsky was his favorite writer. That was scary. But didn't Dostoyevsky visit places like this too?

The guy asked her if she liked Tolstoy. Oh, Tolstoy, she said in the sweet little voice that she used there. Actually, he sort of annoys me. All his brittle society women getting destroyed by men. And the ones who don't get destroyed are totally unrealistic and putrid. Cute little Kitty and earth goddess Natasha.

The guy lost his erection. He got it back after a lot of manual encouragement, but his face was strained.

So, you're a feminist?

Well, I guess. But I still like men and everything.

Milton said he needed her help, because he'd never been drunk, or said the eff-word, or had sex with someone he didn't love. Even when he was a student, he'd never gone to parties or anything. He wanted her to lead him across the threshold to the haze and moving lights of Montreal loft parties, filled with semi-conscious girls in corners. Milton had started ripping Lycra off, which he must have thought was okay because they were such good friends. She had described herself having sex with a girl for Milton. She had lain on the massage table and described herself having sex with *him*, her eyes closed but sometimes cracking open to see him looming over her like a bedside monster. And then Milton, that rubbery egg of greed, only gave her forty dollars.

She leaned into the mirror and it reflected the lines on her face, she should change her nail polish, she had to get something out of her that was inside. Inner beauty. Was it her imagination, or was there a look that masseuses got, a weathering of disgusted compliance? She needed David to tell her. He would know.

George said she was sweet. In more ways than one, ha-ha. He was back the very next day with presents. Twinkling in his rich and modest tie, his tie stud, his complex cologne. He must have primped for so long to come here, very yuck. It must have meant so much to him when she cried. He didn't realize that it had nothing to do with him. He was just some old dork who happened to be there, who held her and wiped her tears.

He winked conspiratorially and allowed her to escort him back to the massage room.

She said she thought they should get to know each other. He said he could take his time. He told her about his world-view, in which people were like machines that either worked or didn't. Too many tax dollars were wasted on those that didn't. Save the ones worth saving.

Middle-aged men do not look their best when sitting on massage tables in nothing but dress socks. She asked him if he'd read Camus' argument against capital punishment. Oh, yes. He'd read Camus, and he'd read Sartre. Sartre was a hypocrite, he said, nodding wisely. That was when she knew for sure that she wouldn't call him.

She said she didn't want to kiss, not here, but his mouth kept coming at her. He said, it doesn't matter *where* we are, it's *who* we are. Look at me. It has nothing to do with *us*.

He gave her a book called *The Prophet*, with a passage underlined that "explained his behavior the day before." It talked about how Reason and Passion are conflicting impulses, at war with one another. Duh, she had a degree in Religion, she'd heard enough about that to give her diarrhea for the rest of her life.

When Annica thought of Lycra as *I* instead of *she*, she felt something like a huge marble between her throat and her chest. But Lycra was the successful one, not Annica. Sidling her indifferent fingers along the men in the languid and suddenly urgent rhythms of arousal. It was reason and passion at war in the men as they tried to hold on to their extra twenties. Often they held out until she touched their penis. Then they groaned, Do you have any options? That was the best because it meant they only got to touch her for the last few minutes.

When Annica saw Meg off at the bus depot the marble in her chest swelled to the size of a pumpkin. It was so hard to find anything to say, she finally said that there was something she hadn't been telling Meg, but she couldn't say what it was.

Meg said, I don't think I've ever had much insight into your life. I see you every few years, and anything could have happened to you. But after a few

minutes it seems like we know each other really well.

I'm sorry, I'm just too scared to tell you, said Annica. You had an okay time?

Meg said she'd had a great time. Their eyes met in a look that Annica took home and saved.

She told the men she was saving up to buy some land in Manitoba. She couldn't actually remember what it felt like to be on the farm, but she planned to get it back, the feeling she couldn't remember.

She could despise them all uniformly, but some of them seemed okay. They beamed when she opened the door and she was glad it was them. Jean, one of her favorites, brought her sushi every time.

She had a soft spot for the quiet ones with the cheap suits and horribly tense backs, like engines covered in a rubber blanket. Their eyes watered as she tried to smooth out some of the crunchiness. Sometimes, if they asked her how much it was for her to take her clothes off, she said, Well normally it's forty bucks. But what the hell. I like you. And took her clothes off. It seemed like they probably couldn't do anything much more vigorous than this. It seemed from the look of surrender on their faces that they had no other happiness to protect.

Her mother had just spent two days on the Greyhound bus to get here. She said

the trip had been nice and relaxing. Annica had opened a bank account by then and deposited her wad. She had pulled it out of a manila envelope in front of everybody, two hundred twenties, sweat trickling down her face. The bank teller had hesitated before touching it.

Her mother was impressed that she was doing so well at telemarketing. She said, So it's not so bad, telephoning, ay? Too bad you didn't try it before.

Actually it's a scam. I'm selling this useless crap.

Oh? Well, it's nice to make some money.

It was nice. Annica took her mother to a lot of all-you-can-eat buffets. Her mother always said, Oh, should I go back just one more time? Are they looking? Of course you should, said Annica. The waiters watched as her mother headed back to the buffet.

Millie said that if she were to write an autobiography she would call it *In the Company of Losers*. She was probably talking about the men who let her crash at their houses. Annica had met them, a steady stream of men, who proffered their dumpy apartments to women with nowhere else to go. After which they were overtly rude, somewhat as a flirting technique, to establish familiarity on par with that of a mother changing a child's diaper. If you yawn any harder you'll shit your pants. You don't have to be scared of me, I'm a nice guy.

I'm not scared, said Annica's mother firmly.

Well, you're acting weird. Did I say something wrong?

No, no.

Well, have another beer. Get the rod outta your ass. I feel like you don't like me.

Some men got mad when Lycra didn't call them. They had their pride. They came to see other girls on days that she was working. Jean did that. When he came for Molly, Lycra was massaging a guy in the next room. The guy said that he had given her his number months ago, but when she hadn't called him he'd realized that she probably got thousands of numbers. Lycra said, well, not thousands, but actually I never have called any of them. I just don't think I could, even if the guy seemed, uh, nice. I'm a shy person really.

The two massage rooms were only separated by a sliding door. She hoped that Jean was listening, so he would realize he was being a dumb asshole. All she could hear from the next room was, Softer. Sof-ter. She knew Molly didn't care what the men liked. It made her happy that Jean, in his attempt to punish Lycra, was suffering through a lousy massage and listening to her giggle in the next room. One in the eye for Jean and others like him. If they were so sensitive they shouldn't be here.

With her mom visiting she couldn't sleep. She lay in bed and imagined herself in love with someone, like being totally alone under a black sky. She wanted to call Josh. He was so cute when she woke him up. But Linda, she should call Linda and tell her how sad she was, she had really wanted them to be together. But Linda was too good for her. David. But some things could never never never

never be. Was she thinking that? Of course it could be. She had been acting wrong before, that was all.

No. That could never be. She thought that Rachel, when she called from Halifax, had said that David had broken his engagement and was seeing Inger, but Rachel might not have said that, Annica might have dreamt that she said it. She couldn't check with Rachel because Rachel was living on an Intentional Community with no phone or electricity or running water. She had called to say that she wouldn't be writing anymore because she didn't want to rely on the technology of pens and paper or on written language or on the postal system. She hoped Annica would visit some time.

Annica, sleepless, got up to go to the bathroom, and her mom came and stood in the hallway in her dishrag-like t-shirt and underpants. I read an article the other day, she said. Oh. Do you want to hear it? It said—do you know that ducks sleep with one eye open? It doesn't matter if you close your eyes, you can get plenty of rest just lying in bed.

I'm not getting any rest.

What's wrong? Are you still sad about David? But Annica just looked at something else.

It's me, isn't it. It's okay, I can leave a bit earlier. I have a 30-day Greyhound pass, it's good any time.

When Lycra quit she knew that some of the men would miss her. She could think



of a few who would definitely miss her.

9.

### **Rooms like Letters**

The Andersons visited the farm, the spring Jessie was with David, and she wanted to show it to him, white and yellow-brown and damp, full of new lambs, with pale grass in the ditches against the crusty snow.

See, David? she said as Millie drove them up the driveway, past the clotted poplars and the pasture where the horses raised their heads in half-wild surprise. Meg came out to meet them in the cloakroom, again taller, slower-moving. She still had her hair that, unbraided, she could sit on. David would probably fall in love with her.

Meg had always gone to see the horses first thing in the morning. As they got older, she'd stopped trying to wake Jessie up, and gone by herself. When Jessie woke up, Meg had asked her what she felt like doing.

They walked out in the sonorous afternoon, along a sheep track, through the forest that the sheep had grazed into a tree-dappled park. You belong here, said David, when he saw Jessie thread an electric fence, so loosely. They walked along the road to a cemetery that no one used anymore, Ukrainian crosses engraved in Cyrillic. Their silences were like pauses between sips of tea. If Jessie and David had lived here with the crickets and the poplars their silences would always have been like that.

Even David, after dinner, admitted that the farm was perfect. The Andersons liked him. Felicia was getting really into art and he explained to her

why this artist she liked kind of sucked. She liked him especially.

They slept on fold-out cots in the fireplace room. Jessie was sad because they were going back to Winnipeg in the morning. But you're moving in with *me*, said David.

Oh God, Jessie wanted to say: What are we going to do? What are we going to do, David? She tightened her hand on his in a lying squeeze.

They moved into an apartment that David's aunt Ilana had found for them. It was shaped like an L. Ilana lived next door. By ten o'clock in the morning they could hear the *Songs of Leonard Cohen* tape that David had lent her, coming through the wall.

The apartment building was on the Assiniboine River but their window looked sideways at the building next to it. Jessie had the chandelier and candles and posters the way her old room had been. In the morning she brought veggie sandwiches and coffee and jars of water to the bed. *Songs of Leonard Cohen* wasn't coming through the wall yet. David was like a gummy baby bird under the blankets.

His mom wouldn't let him use their attic for his studio anymore, unless he paid rent for it. David said he could understand that. If he was independent he must be fully independent. They paid his tuition but that was all. The distinction was lost on Jessie and David said he didn't like the way she let it drop – not gracefully but kind of patronizingly.

She was taking philosophy, literature, and French so they could move to Montreal. Millie sometimes slipped her twenty dollar bills, saying, Go to a nice restaurant. But still, it seemed to David and Jessie that they were undertaking a noble, isolated struggle, with only the peculiar dignity of their commitment to each other. Perhaps this sense had come from David—it seemed dignified by a self-conscious conventionality. The humble acceptance of life's usual burdens although they might be mocked by the pretentious, might in fact hinder the struggle for greatness.

Aunt Ilana came over for a visit and she ate the last egg roll in David's doggy bag. After she left he threw the doggy bag across the room. To Jessie it seemed magical that David with his high, lonely cheekbones should care about an egg roll. He said there were things she just didn't understand.

He said Ilana had once had a very tempestuous romance and it was funny that she had turned out the way she was now. Then there was a knock at the door and it was Millie. She said, Isn't this nice, wow. I won't stay for a minute. She sat down on the chair and Jessie insisted on making her coffee. Asking about them, she found out that David couldn't draw right now. He didn't like using the university studio and, anyway, he just couldn't draw these days, he said.

Millie offered to pay for him to rent the attic in his parents' house. Jessie said, Mom! David was embarrassed but he said politely that he'd think about it. Millie didn't seem to notice how quiet Jessie was after that. David was telling her

about how art wasn't just about drawing pretty things and she was acting really impressed the way she did when people told her anything. After she left, David said that maybe she felt rejected by Jessie and she was looking for someone else to mother.

She knew he was painting in his parents' attic. She called her mom and her mom said, I thought I was helping you. The way things were going he would have moved back in with his parents. What do you do? screamed Jessie. Do you just hand him the money? Millie said, Don't yell at me.

Jessie arranged dried grass in wine bottles. She lit the red candles from her old apartment because they were getting all dusty. Aunt Ilana invited her to drop in any time but she never did.

Ted quit his job, he said he couldn't stand the way his bitchy dyke co-worker had always been picking on him. He had worked at night to avoid seeing other people. He was kind to his few friends, but he was shy and hated almost everyone, especially minority groups that victimized white males. Millie didn't have any money to give Jessie and David, after that.

Jessie said she could pay for the apartment with her loan and then David's rent money could go to rent his attic. Jessie said, Please. I don't care. But David just didn't think they were ready to live together yet. He said it would make more

sense to move back in with their families, until they moved to Montreal. He said, I know it'll be hard for you, Jessie. But maybe it's time you got to know them as people.

Millie got Jessie's room ready, filling it with the stuffed animals that Jessie used to play with and even ones she hadn't. It seemed to Jessie that plastic eyes could stare as implacably as jelly ones, but she didn't want to move them because she could imagine them staring at the dark walls of cardboard boxes, rejected and angry.

Jessie put on a thick silver ring and took it off. She would walk into *Bar Italia* after David had arrived. There would have to be some makeup put on. But she stayed on the edge of her bed, thinking of her fingertips, the texture of her skin, the way her teeth felt. None of this was good or bad. David had called, and issued an invitation, and she was late.

He saw her walk in and smiled and a wave of shadow rose over them and they both braced, waiting for it to crash, but it simply remained. David sat in front of the huge videoscreen playing *MuchMusic* which they ignored unless things were going really badly. He would only have coffee. The table was too small for the tray so he took it back to the counter, scraping his chair. She loved to watch him do considerate things like that, his hands so humble on the plastic tray. He sat back down, hunkering behind his eyelashes.

Jessie's blonde hair stirred and settled uneasily in the fluorescent lights. She wanted him to understand that her parents were not being normally dysfunctional. They were always in the kitchen. Her father listened to the Baptist radio station to Know his Enemy.' Millie said, Parden? when someone cleared their throat. She was hard of hearing and thought it sounded classier than *what*.

When Jessie came downstairs she was the center of attention. It was very important that she be nice to them. Hi, she said. Did she say hi? Her mother asked her father. I think so, he said. Friendly, isn't she. He stood behind her as she looked in the fridge, his knuckles like white calcium deposits on his clenched hands. She squeezed against the wall to not brush past him.

Her mother said, Should she get any books from the library and should she return the jogging pants that she thought were so nice but she could return them, should she give Jessie the free wildlife calendar from the bank so Jessie could write down all her homework assignments, and the due date, right?

Millie's motto was *alles halb so schlimm*: everything's half as bad as it seems. She grew up in Hamburg during the war.

Ted got up and began to pace the kitchen, his bathrobe opening and shutting over his knees. Shut UP, Millie, he yelled suddenly. Millie turned red and began to make coffee. So, what's new with Jessie, he inquired politely.

Not much.

How's Davey-poo?

Fine.

What's you're frickin' problem, hey? came the witch's cat voice. I was talking to you, asshole, it said as Jessie left the room. She went upstairs with her peanut-butter sandwich, almost threw it in the garbage can, then kept it so she wouldn't have to go in the kitchen again. That was when David called to invite her for coffee.

She told David, My mom's been saying weird things in the car. She said that Ted can't find out I'm taking a French course. She said she's afraid of what's going to happen.

David said, Okay, want me to have a look? They walked down Corydon. The sky was yellow on one side and pink on the other, the leaves looked spotlit. Jessie looked at the ends of branches. Her flesh wanted to slide off her bones and lay on the sidewalk.

The front door banged. Millie came up the hall like a bee in a glass jar. I told him, she whispered, and, loudly: You have a sunburn on your cheeks. Never wear sunscreen less than thirty times protection.

Then she saw David, and said Oh! Hi! and zoomed back down the hall. David took Jessie's hand as they went into the kitchen. Hi, Mr. Wittim, said David. Her father jerked his head. I hear you don't want to be in this family anymore, he said to Jessie.

You shouldn't do this, Mr. Wittim, said David in his forthright way. She's your daughter.

I'm just doing my part to stop the fricking Frogs from ruining Canada,



said Ted. I'm just doing what I can. I wish I could do more.

They had sat down at the kitchen table. David said that family was more important. Millie told Ted he was ruining everything. Ted said it was Jessie who was ruining everything, he didn't want a daughter who wouldn't respect any rules. His hands and chin were shaking. Jessie got up. It's okay, I forgive you, she told Ted. It seemed true at the time. David followed her into the hall. He kissed her before he went home for supper and said that she was impossibly beautiful.

She was back in the L-shaped apartment, it had still been available. There had been some more trouble with Ted before she left.

The trick, she found, was only to think of what came next. Not ahead or behind. She put in her contact lenses so she wouldn't always be wiping tear-stains off her glasses. She wrote essays, mopping at herself as dispassionately as she would place a bucket under a dripping pipe. But at night she lay in bed curled like a broken violin string, grinding her teeth, getting up a hundred times to go to the bathroom. Adding more hot water to the bath when it got cold, and then on her way back to bed calling 24-hour crisis lines. A few times she took a taxi to the hospital. In the hospital they gave her something to sleep but the days were boring and she had to get back to her apartment and write poems so she could be as good an artist as David.

David said she was making him lose himself. He needed space, and time. He

hadn't been able to draw ever since her dad had gone crazy. He said, I still love you, allrite? I'm lonely too, allrite? Jessie laughed, Ha David, she gasped.

After a month he called and invited her to his parents' house for a beer. He said to ring the back doorbell so he could hear her from the attic. She went through the back yard, past the tire swing, and rang. The lace curtain moved, revealing some blonde hair. The bolt fiddled, having some imaginary difficulty. The door flung open, revealing the girl, skinny and baggy in a turquoise Guatemalan hoodie and her hair was short on one side and a yellow silk curtain on the other. I was just leaving, she rapped.

I didn't mean to interrupt anything, said Jessie. That sounded jealous, but she couldn't think what to add. The girl left with her sandal dangling off her toe and a slam of the door.

Jessie didn't want to take off her shoes. There was his walk coming down the stairs, slow, begrudging, there he was, his bad posture, strained polite smile. His defensive air was so strong that it made him seem vulnerable. He wasn't. She's just a friend, he said in greeting.

The attic was papered with David's portraits. David asked her how she was, too gently so that she swayed in his chair. She had to get it together, it might be her last chance to get it together in front of David. But maybe she couldn't. He put his hands on her shoulders and rocked her back and forth. When their eyes met it seemed like they were the bluest and blackest eyes possible. He said she could stay the night but then that would be the end.

When she woke up they had rolled to opposite sides of the bed. She looked at him sleeping. His skin was soft and dim, his mouth slightly open so she could see the gap between his front teeth. She forced herself to leave without knowing why. She couldn't believe that he would really want her to, that he would really be happy she was gone. Tip-toeing down the hall, she could hear his parents whispering in the master bedroom. His mother laughed as she passed the door.

She spent that day shopping for a computer to write brilliant poems on, but when she bought one and brought it to the L-shaped apartment she couldn't get it to work and she screamed and screamed.

At night the phone would ring and when she picked it up there would be hoarse breathing or silence. It was Ted. She always answered the phone because it might be David.

Sometimes when she was walking outside on her way to or from class she had these moments of pity and love when she resolved to be good and make the world a better place, and sometimes a few lines of words filled her head and her body with a tingling, expanding sense of reconciliation. *By this, and this only, we have existed. As I am a man, I believe this lady, to be my child Cordelia.* It was nice but she would have liked to tell somebody about it.

Round chickadees outside bus shelters, leafy plants trapped in malls, branches hanging over streets, tendrils of fellowship passed between her and them. She saw that the people on the bus, scrubbed and assembled with their facial tics and eyes sliding away from everything, were suffering horribly all the time. It was there, in their faces, none of it justifiable.

But when she was lying in bed she kept thinking that if only David's house would burn down he would understand; she wished it would burn down, other people should have a home and family and friends but not David, he should only have his art.

She still went to bars, because David might be there.

There was something of the frontier town about Winnipeg, especially the Exchange district with its slick cobblestones and puked-in alleys. Middle-class kids thronged the seedy bars, sauntering, stopping: Oh babe come here a minit, I'm so glad to see you fuck. Boys with hot and girls with cold eyes cleared docile circles for guys who suddenly grappled each other. They cheered when someone got bottled, when the cops came and were resisted, when a guy fucked a semi-conscious girl over a urinal. Everyone wore plaid.

It turned out that David had a flair for real old-fashioned scenes. Some poor guy that Jessie had been talking to would feel obligated to tell David that he should let go of her arm, and David would be in his element, yelling, Yeah? You think so?

You think you know this girl? You think you know her? She's not your little friend, man. She's a crazy girl.

He meant that she still loved him, and that she was just fucking around with everyone but him.

They followed each other into back lanes when David was drunk enough (Jessie would do it any time.) They groped for each other's warm skin. Jessie could never understand how they came apart. She would say they had to get back together because breaking up wasn't working and David said no, they would kill each other, and Jessie's fingers on him turned into fingernails and he tore her off. She sat against a building, smearing the mascara from under her eyes with lip balm and the back of her hand, and then went back into the bar. She was scarcely going to go back to her apartment alone. The guys she brought along told her she was very passionate.

After a while Jessie stopped thinking they would get back together. She just thought she needed to touch him sometimes. *By this, and this only, we have existed.*

When she moved to Montreal, after that winter, the first thing she did was to change her name, legally, her whole name from beginning to end. She didn't wear plaid anymore. She never saw a bar-room brawl. Montrealers wouldn't have thought they were cool. She stopped getting silent phone calls; probably Ted didn't want to pay the long-distance charges.

10.

### **The Garden**

Annica gnawed on a leftover chocolate Easter bunny on insomniac nights in front of her computer. The blonde streaks had grown out of her hair. Slowly she finished her last essay for the year, on the multiplicity of narratives in *Paradise Lost*, and then she bought a backpack. It was on sale because it was the last of that line. She made a list of things to put in it, and then she put them in. She stood with her backpack on highway 20 running north, where a friend of Josh's had let her out of his car. Rachel, who had helped to start a very radical Intentional Community in Nova Scotia, had written her a post card to come, visit, stay, and leave behind the horrors of industrial capitalism.

Josh's new girlfriend Jewel had a problem, he explained, with paranoia, and had required that they stop being friends. Annica could have accepted this, but, because Josh had unwisely told her, Jewel had taken steps to make sure that Annica wouldn't pass it along to the gossipy English department. She had let it be known that Annica was unhinged by the loss of Josh and blamed her, Jewel, whereas Jewel hardly knew if she wanted to bother with Josh.

Brief, superficial interactions with people in the English Department halls, and at bars after class, had comprised Annica's sense of belonging. Now everyone seemed to speak to her as if they expected her to start crying and were hoping to

get away first.

She was finally over David, having realized that she wasn't lonely because of his absence.

She had her thumb out, and a tranquil feeling of being at the mercy of whatever mercy there would be. Dry grass lay palely by the side of the road but the stubble plains had been plowed and were dark.

She was borne aloft and deposited by a series of cars, while across the St. Lawrence the dark nun-heads of the Laurentians advanced and retreated. She drove north through townships with a cross on their skyline, snow patching their yards. When the men who picked her up weren't talking she looked out at the passing lines of trees, fenceposts, flashes of water. Open spaces in the brush shot through by twigs and sun-fingers, forks in trees. They looked like places to lie down. That leaning mat of cattails, those pines with needle-silky hollows between them, walled with snow-crests.

She thought that potentially violent men had a sense that they were getting off on the wrong foot with her. They would have to make her nervous before they could take it to the next stage. With her responding politely to their weird remarks, gazing benignly at passing cows, pulling out a gun or whatever would seem like a non sequitur.

She was dropped off finally at the end of a dirt track where there would be no more cars, thank God she was getting sick of cars. In the taillights of the one that she'd coaxed there with a 20-dollar bill there was a hand-painted wooden sign saying *The Garden*, a leafy archway. Now there was only a smudge of grey where the moon backlit a cloud, and crickets chirping as the motor died.

And then a voice in the dark said Hello.

Hello? said Annica. I'm a friend of Rachel's. She said I could find her around here somewhere.

I'm Anthony, said the voice. Rachel's a few hours away, by foot. Do you want to go there now?

No, if there's somewhere else I could stay.

How's your night vision?

I can't see much.

Well, I am lightly clad. You can follow me up the path.

And she could, now, see a lighter blotch between the trees. She followed him up the path, into a pitch-dark house. His voice said that there were stairs on the left. They were uneven and had no railing. She might want to use her hands. He said, now there's a sleeping platform on your right. Do you have any blankets?

No.

He came and put blankets in her arms, in the dark. Goodnight, he said, and she lay back to the sound of crickets and soft human breathing. Peace comes



dropping slow but a lot of it dropped then.

She woke to a sloping wood ceiling. It's paintless beams were upheld by newer branches that had been stripped of bark, clothes and bags slung from their cutoff branches. Sacks of grain hung in the rafters, on the ground were mattresses and sleeping bags, some with people inside. A great bookshelf loomed in the center of the room, apparently holding up the ceiling. Through glass-paned asymmetrical windows she saw blossoming trees.

She went down the inconstant stairs to the main room. It was circled with raised platforms and foam cushions that were covered in, most notably, jean crotches with the waist and legs sewn up. A sink with no pipes drained into a bucket, shelves held mason jars and dishes, matte with clean dust.

She walked out in the cold spring sun. It was like no place she'd seen. Footpaths led away from the house like wavy spokes in a wheel, winding along tilled earth, passing a woodgrey shack and barn.

Everything was meant to be where it was. Every weed even was known, stood proudly missing leaves that had been transformed into tea or salad or compresses.

A few people covered in blackfly netting were turning the ground nearby. The guy in light clothing, now revealed to be a formerly white three-piece suit, came over and pulled the blackfly net off his head. His dampish hair lifted and settled in the light wind. He said, so you're Rachel's friend.

Yes.

She's living about two hours from here by foot. You might want to accompany Jerome, he intends to go there soon.

I don't mind going myself, if you just tell me the way.

How are you at navigating in the woods?

I'll wait.

They went into the house and he leaned against the counter, cutting slices off a heel of bread and eating them with limp chives that he pulled out of his shirt-pocket. He said, I think I talked to you on the phone once.

When you all yelled, Drop out of school Annica?

I was thinking of another time, but I also yelled that.

Do you live here?

Yes.

She looked at the shelves of dishes. Is there anything I can do to help out?  
she asked.

If you want to.

She looked expectant and he added, Usually when people say that they want you to feel constrained anyway. I really don't. If you feel like working I can make suggestions.

Well, I don't, actually.

He said that there was food in the Winter House, a roundish sod house built into a small hill. Inside was a cast iron stove, cold, with a pot of boiled grain, unlidded

and crusty. She added chives and Anthony recommended daisy shoots, so she added some of those. She was hungry and it wasn't bad.

All the fresh greens were wild in late spring. Wood sorrel, raspberry leaves, comfrey, burdock, young daisies, wild carrot. Her favorite was wood sorrel, delicate and lemony. She started to get very healthy and smell better as her body cleaned itself of coffee and chocolate bunny.

Jerome, who had been Rachel's partner but was now marrying someone else, took her through damp-floored pine woods to see Rachel. He said that this was one of the last old growth forests in Nova Scotia. They walked through a footfeast of heaping green moss and squooshing mud. She could barely tell that there was a path, but Jerome said that they were on an old logging road. The sun beat. Jerome told Annica about his plans to start an Intentional Community in Belize. He'd found a site that was fed by a spring, that pooled in the rocks and grew warm like a millionaire's heated swimming pool. It was a day's hike from the nearest human settlement.

Rachel was living in a clapboard hunting shack, a small pine-clearing. They saw her standing on the porch, sunlit, and she peered towards them without her glasses. Annica! she yelled, and ushered them skittishly inside. Her face was reddish and vaguer and more open than it had been in Montreal. She moved like a wild animal, graceful and a little headlong, not looking around the way humans

do.

Her conversation with Annica seemed constantly surprising, to both of them maybe, as if every sentence that she uttered had coalesced into the present from untold distances. As if the act that brought them into this time and place was a fringe act of nature, like fire igniting, that she might decide was too much trouble, and, like fire, be somewhere else without having to go there.

The pink insulation panted in the heat. Annica knew she would only get more tired from now on. She lay back and from the corner of her eye watched Jerome pick his teeth with a thread in Rachel's skirt. It was made of sewn-together neckties. The heat conspired with the dust and grime and fiberglass and the distance of any human habitation to create a vortex that Annica kept trying to lift herself out of enough to write a postcard. Her hands kept falling down to the sweating foam mattress. She got up and drank some speckly yellow water that was in a bucket on the floor. Rachel said that she didn't drink water anymore. Since she'd been eating only wild plants, she was never thirsty. It was all the salt and sugar and oil in processed foods that made you thirsty.

She said that living here was the only time she'd been consistently happy. In Halifax, she'd had a lot of friends who were into interactive healing work. But these friends still didn't seem very happy to Rachel. Annica said, I don't think it's possible, to really get over anything. I think everything stays with you.

When I'm around more than one other person, I start to feel sad again, said Rachel.

Annica prepared herself to stay. But they walked back to the Garden that evening. Rachel wanted to gather clay at a pond near the Garden, so she could start sculpting instead of drawing. She wanted to slowly eliminate all industrially produced materials from her life. She would spend a few days at the Garden, to hang out with Annica, and then hitchhike to Belize. She needed to live in a place where you could eat wild food, all year round. To survive the winters here she would have to kill animals and freeze them or something. Last winter, hungry, she had caught a mouse and tried to bring herself to kill it, but she couldn't. Also, she just wanted to get as far away as possible from North American culture.

Annica spent a lot of time on her sleeping platform, with her eyes closed. She woke up when it was just starting to get light, and looked over to see Anthony's blonde hair on the pillow. She closed her eyes again and slipped into a light sleep that was full of an arctic howl of voices, of Josh asking her what did she expect and Annica saying that his new girlfriend Jewel was exactly like Goneril, and Josh saying he hadn't read *King Lear* and didn't think he'd bother. Annica woke with the bitter satisfaction of having spoiled *King Lear* for Josh. When she got up everyone else would usually be gone. It would be day.

She planted sugar peas, lemon cucumber, Reuben tomatoes, Valentine lettuce, licorice mint, Fat Cat carrots, cinnamon basil, blue potatoes, red onions. She buried underbrush with the others that in five years would decompose and fertilize

the soil.

Thursdays Anthony got up to catch the seven o'clock rush of drivers into Bridgewater, carrying his library books tied in a parcel with hemp rope. Annica started going along. She liked hitchhiking in the morning mist with Anthony and drinking coffee in CoffeeWorks in Bridgewater, the perk like a slow thunderclap. She sat in the passenger's seat and Anthony sat in the back. Sometimes the drivers tried to indirectly figure out how Annica could afford to spend her whole summer on a hippie commune, instead of working. Annica explained that she was taking her Master's degree in English, got loans, and had a teaching assistantship for the fall. This seemed to satisfy them – they assumed there was something worthwhile about it. Then again, they got money by cutting trees down or working in the nearby tire plant.

Don't you care about making the drivers feel comfortable? Annica asked Anthony who was silent in the passenger's seat. He said that the more the drivers found out about him, the less comfortable they usually got. Anthony didn't think that money was necessary. He spent a dollar or two a month on organic whole grain, but he thought that next year the Garden would probably be producing enough of its own grain that he could spend nothing. Well, the drivers might say, what if you didn't have people like me to drive you around?

Things would be closer together, said Anthony.

In Bridgewater he would go straight to the library and Annica to the public

washroom at CoffeeWorks where she peered into the bathroom mirror, an alien burned thing, flakes of scalp in her lank hair. She had become grossed out by the smell of soap and the way it made her skin feel.

Greg their neighbor had quit working and moved into Echo Lodge Cabin at twenty-nine. He'd designed quiet propellers for the American armed forces. He came to the Garden sometimes, and sat with a smile that was expectant, but not of much. He sometimes said things that seemed meant to annoy Gardeners. He said that he was going to buy himself a wife in Mexico, and that he was thinking of opening a whorehouse in Bridgewater, to help out some of his friends who were single moms. But he didn't say things like that very often.

There was a country ho-down, and Greg said that they should all come to his house for dinner and then whoever wanted could go to the ho-down in his pick-up. It would be a chance to meet the locals. Elane was definitely going to the ho-down, and everyone was going to Greg's except for Dawn and Quani, who hadn't had much time lately to be alone together. Anthony and Rachel even said they might go to the ho-down. Annica couldn't picture Anthony at a country ho-down.

Greg had left the door open for them. Echo Lodge cabin had running water, and it didn't take Annica long to help herself to Greg's shower in his absence. When she was finished, Elane and Rachel were cooking, Greg's dog Buddy was jumping and slobbering over everyone, and Anthony was telling Jean-Marc that he thought

having pets was unethical. He gestured towards Buddy, who promptly hurtled onto his lap.

There's no way I can relate to this dog except by imposing my will on him, said Anthony. He pushed the dog off his lap. The extent of his programming as a pet forces me into a master-slave relationship, insofar as I communicate with him at all.

Elane and Rachel made scones, potato soup; comfrey, burdock, and raspberry leaf stir-fry. There were also nachos and salsa that Greg had bought. Greg arrived at dusk, bringing an effervescent English guy named Walter. They turned on the kitchen light and opened a bottle of wine and sat in the lighted kitchen. Elane joined them. The others stayed in the living room as it got darker. When Greg lit candles the fire gathered everyone into the kitchen except for Rachel, who went outside to be in accordance with the light and darkness provided by nature.

Walter was talking about how all religions aspire towards the same thing, and Elane and Annica gave each other looks and went to get dolled up for the country ho-down. Annica felt a bit corrupt putting on makeup, but she liked the closeness of doing it with another woman. She felt warmed as Elane whisked the blush brush over her cheeks and chin.

Anthony and Rachel and Jean-Marc decided not to go to the ho-down. Greg and Walter and Elane and Annica all squeezed into the front of Greg's pick-up, and they jolted over pot-holes and flew down dirt roads to the community hall. An



R&B band in stiff-looking shirts hung over their instruments on the high stage, and the floor was full of couples who were all doing the same dance step. Annica bummed a cigarette from the woman who'd sold them tickets and she and Elane stood on the floor and tried to pick up the dance step. Elane got it—she was a good dancer—but Annica didn't and went to sit with Greg and Walter at one of the long, formica-brown tables. Walter jumped up and dragged her on to the floor when the band played *Johnny B. Goode*, flinging himself around as if there were a fishing line attached to his air guitar.

After *Johnny B Goode*, a man came over and asked them if they had ID. None of them did, but Annica was twenty-five and Elaine and Walter were both thirty-one. The man said he was sorry, but everyone had to have ID.

Elane was indignant. They went over to the woman at the door, who said it was her fault and of course they'd have their money back. She said it was her ass in jail if the police did a routine check. She said that she was thirty-one too and looked old enough to be Elaine's mother. Elane didn't contradict her. In fact it was true.

Walter carried a plastic cup of wine out of the hall. A knot of men at the entrance made as if to reach for him, but he ran past them the way John Cleese would run and jumped into the pickup. Greg pulled away with a great squeal. Annica was secretly glad they were leaving but the others seemed annoyed.

Anthony told Annica later that it was at Greg's, because of a conversation he'd had with Walter, that he'd realized it was over with a woman he'd been seeing that winter. She was living with another man in BC. But she was always living with someone, to get free rent. He'd planned to visit her when he hitchhiked to

California, and ask her if she wanted to come with him. When he realized it was over, he noticed that he was attracted to Annica.

It was the best time to talk at the Garden when the sun was gone. Voices without faces were easy and gentle. But that night at Greg's they turned the light on at night because Walter threw up on the carpet. Annica, who had worried that Walter might try to snuggle her, had an excuse to move onto the right-angle couch and sleep with her cold feet near Anthony's warm feet.

It was also that night at Greg's that Anthony decided not to eat anything that had been paid for, unless it had been thrown away. Greg had bought those nachos and salsa for all of them, and Anthony felt as responsible for supporting industrial capitalism as if he'd bought them himself.

In the common room, tree-branch shadows patterning their outstretched legs, Anthony read how-to books: *Building with Cob*, *The Art of Blacksmithing*, and noted down all of the actual information which, he said, usually constituted about three percent of the book: the rest was friendly encouragement, personal anecdotes, historical detail, and repetition.

Annica tried to read *Pale Fire* but her face felt like stone and she shifted into increasingly uncomfortable sitting positions. Her stomach was still rumbling from the water at Rachel's and she went cold whenever she thought that the others must hear it.

Anthony asked her if she wanted to come and look at the full moon from the roof of Brokenest, a nearby two-story house, falling down.

The moon was huge and orange although it was spring. They climbed to the roof peak. She kept her eyes fixed on the moon, its versatile expression, reflecting every question back at the inquirer. She was shivering a little. She touched the tip of his first finger lightly. She stroked her thumb along his palm, so lightly it might not have been there. He might not have felt it.

He lifted his hand and covered hers. The moon was behind his head so she couldn't see his face. When they took each others' clothes off the clothes slid down the roof and fell two stories. Their balance on the roofpeak staggered but neither of them suggested they get down, until it started raining and they wanted their clothes.

It was the hottest summer in the history of Nova Scotia. There wasn't enough rain to clean the clothes that they hung out on the clotheslines to be rained on. Annica hitchhiked into Bridgewater with a backpack full. Walking around, she must have passed twenty hairdressing places before she found a laundromat. It was even hotter inside than outside. A sweating toolbelted man ran up to her as she was pressing her quarters into a machine. He'd been about to fix it, he said. But it worked. She reeled across the parking lot to a white frame house with a sign saying *Homestyle Nova Scotian Food*. She filled her water bottle from the

pitcher on the table because there was a water shortage at the Garden. She ate haddock chowder—the only vegan thing was bread—in the chilly mint-green decor, waiting for her laundry.

She thought about herself in Montreal that past winter, how much she had wanted to either die or live in the forest, alone. She hadn't felt that way much at the Garden, but sometimes she had; like when Anthony had told her in front of other people that he didn't feel like arguing with her because he didn't think she was listening to him. After that she'd looked in the *National Field Guide* to find out what Deadly Water Hemlock looked like.

Scraping up her dead fish, she decided to go to Bob's old hunting cabin where Rachel had been staying. She paid and headed back to the laundromat.

The washing machine had left yellow-brown blotches all over her white shirt. She showed it to the woman who worked there, and the woman said that it looked like dandelion spots. But okay, she could put the load through again for free. She poured some horrible smelling stuff on the spots, right in front of Annica's highly sensitized nostrils. Annica slumped in a plastic chair under the sun. There were open dumpsters across the parking lot that she should be looking in for food. She ate chocolate bars from the machine, licking them from her fingers and reading over a letter she'd written to Mariette. In the letter she'd described Anthony in this golden way. He had walked in while she was writing it and she'd had to notice the contrast between the feelings of writing the letter and looking up at him. She thought it was because of the way he stood there, so she'd

have to stop writing and think of something to say. Though he would have been the first to say that she should keep writing if she felt like it. She considered telling Mariette, but she didn't want Mariette to blow it out of proportion.

When the washing machine stopped her clothes stank of stain remover. She brought them with the tips of her fingers to the woman at the counter, who said, well, they've been through the rinse cycle, they're clean. Thankfully, the spots were still on her tank top so she asked to have the whole load put through again, for free. Silently the woman walked to the washing machine and turned the key. Annica never told anyone at the Garden about doing her laundry three times, wasting all that water.

Bob, a neighbour, picked her up on the road out of Bridgewater with her wet laundry. He'd been driving into town two or three times a day to see his girlfriend, Dolores. He said that what he needed was warmth and comfort in his life *now*. All this driving back and forth was killing him. He kept swerving in front of cars that were coming the opposite way. He said, She don't need them doctors telling her what to do. She been a *psychiatric* nurse herself for twenty-five years. And then she just goes and checks herself in. I told her myself, I said, you know which pills to take Dolores.

Bob held on to Annica's hand as she got out of the car. She said, be patient. People need time to come around. Bob's face was red and quite gentle. He had crusts of dried blood on his chin from shaving and his teeth looked as if

they'd break if he bit into an apple.

She filled her backpack with bottled water. Anthony said he'd show her the way to the hunting cabin. The sides of the road were starred with great blueberry clusters that would just fall into your open hand. The third time she stopped to pick them Anthony said that at this rate it would take all day to get there. He said that here were probably blueberry bushes all the way there.

Annica didn't mind walking and picking blueberries all day, but Anthony wanted to fix the solar water heater at the Garden so he drew her a map. He remembered every fork in the path, and landmarks that he labeled: fallen pine tree, small stream. He was wrong about the blueberries though—there weren't many more after that.

She turned off the track bed into the forest. The last time she had been here was when Jerome had taken her to see Rachel and she hadn't noticed it much, except for the mud and moss on the ground. It was unlike the teenage forest around the Garden, that would lift you into a good mood as you walked through it, full of moving leaves and shadows, edible undergrowth. This was an old murky wood with shafts of sun, silent and unmoving. To absorb its feeling, she would have had to stop and stand; but even walking she was pulling horseflies out of her hair two at a time. Pine and spruce trees put out their boughs far above the fenny moss and lichen on the ground. Life forms here had been discerningly selected to prevail humbly in the austere grandeur, like devotees of an old, persecuted

religion.

Parts of the path were underwater, and she sloshed along like a giant crossing lakes. She saw a patch of Deadly Water Hemlock, but her backpack was heavy with water, her foot had been gashed by a stick in the path, and she didn't feel like picking any. She wished she would always remember the way different kinds of moss felt on the bottom of her feet.

The hunting cabin was next to a little open space of marsh with pines behind it and the sun was already going down behind their pointy tops. She scrubbed some pots with ashes and water from the cesspool and took them outside in case it rained. The cesspool was sunken, and the limp leaves waited for rain.

She saw nothing edible but Rachel's comfrey plant. Comfrey all by itself is yukky, and contains trace amounts of a chemical which in its synthetic form has been linked to cancer in rats. Inside the house there was an ancient jar of Miracle Whip, some reeking Hamburger Helper. Annica settled in the armchair by the window. On the windowsill was a plastic hand-mirror, with a picture of a beautiful girl on one side and cracked glass on the other. She looked at her sunbaked face, huge-pored like pumice stone next to the picture-girl's white skin. If she'd brought any food she would have eaten it right away, so it was just as well that she hadn't.

She thought maybe she'd pace around like a fasting Doris Lessing character, but

her body became slow and vague. She crocheted in the armchair, or wrote in a notebook, or stared out the window at the marsh and the pine trees. There were bats living in the roof. They came out at twilight, black against the purplish sky, darting and abruptly rushing.

The bottom of her foot was infected the next day. She put on her sandal and gasped. She started to walk back to the Garden but she turned around before long and went back into the hunting cabin and closed the door. She wrote in her book, I guess I'm in for it now. Her writing was smaller than it had been. Then she didn't feel like writing anymore.

From the armchair to the cushion in the corner. From the cushion to the mattress, laying her body down as if she were making a mold in a soft substance. For her body seemed almost lost to her when she lay down. She turned from her back onto her stomach because it felt safer.

Her glasses were on the table, for seeing out the window. Her journal and pen were on the table. She tried to write down words that went through her head but they went too fast and there was something gross about them, like dirty water.

The crocheted scarf was on the windowsill next to the armchair. In the armchair she crocheted. She looked in the hand-mirror, or outside at the trees waving, the sun going down behind them, the bat's three-dimensional darting. The water bottles were lined up on the wood stove. The cesspool water was in a bucket by the door. The pots were outside in case it rained.

She poised her pen above the book but had no interest in the words in her



head. She worked on the scarf. A scarf she made here would keep her warm in Montreal? No, not that again. Sentimental items. She'd have to give the scarf away.

She wondered what Rachel had eaten, had found to keep her out here. In one way it was the most freedom she'd ever had. She could do or not do whatever she wanted, from the options there were, and no one cared. She kept feeling afraid that another human would show up, loom out of the evening expecting her to act a certain way. But mostly she was finding that she'd come here, like Rachel, because she had wanted to stop being lonely. She wasn't lonely now, but if she stayed she'd keep moving farther away from people, with time passing. She had to try to be around other people, and still not be lonely.

The beets and carrots at the Garden must be almost ready. Maybe there would be enough ripe apples to make applesauce. And the blueberries on the trail, and the oat-cakes at CoffeeWorks and the almond croissants in Montreal, the cappuccino flutes. Maybe it wouldn't be that bad, if she remembered there were other places.

On the fifth day, it rained. The pots collected rainwater and she poured it into the water bottles. Clean rainwater is the most delicious kind of water.

She left the next morning, watching the ground so that she wouldn't gash her feet. She carried most of the full water bottles with her, since the well at the Garden was so low. She left a few for whoever came to the hunting shack.

The first blueberry bushes that she saw were scraggly, in the old forest, with one or two berries. She reached for them, balancing in her water-heavy backpack. As blueberry bushes became more abundant it took more and more berries to get her to stop. Finally, near the Garden, she felt for the first time in her life that she'd eaten as many blueberries as she wanted. Her stomach must have been a lot smaller than usual.

When she got back to the Garden they were having a day of silence. She sat kissing Anthony. There were apples piled on the counter. They were mottled pinkish-red, slightly smaller than industrial apples, way yummiier. In a month, Anthony said, there would be more apples than they could ever drag in. They would be rotting on the ground. As many as possible would be dried for the winter, and they would make applesauce if Anthony could figure out a way of sealing jars without using parafin wax.

It was too hot to have sex so they went to the washing well and poured buckets of icy water over each other first. Anthony was plastered with wet hair and clothes and slippery and shone silky in the sun, but almost in contrast he was so quiet and thorough underneath. It was that quietness, it seemed, that her heart opened to then like a mouth gasping for air. And now she began to search his face, for the strickenness, the resigned despair, that came at the onset of love. He looked blissful. She closed her eyes.

She felt a great tug and tingling like insects vibrating their wings, and she fell out of her head the way she would have sunk through water if motionless.

She could not have tried to move. She could feel him making love to her but the string of explosions going off in her chest area overshadowed this.

He arranged her limbs around his body until she started moving. He helped her sit up against a tree. She tried to describe how her body had felt but she didn't tell him that she felt in love with him. He picked a sour apple to help bring her back to her body. She took a bite and handed him the rest and then she told him to go put some clothes on, he ought to be ashamed. He laughed at her jokes.

Whenever they went into the main house, someone would be waiting to ask Anthony how to do something. He would explain how to graft branches or build a roof without nails or how to make oil lamps with jars and twine and vegetable oil. Annica would husk by the window, crocheting perhaps. She didn't know how to combine the raw materials of the world in useful ways and in fact she could hardly put words together into sentences. She told Anthony that if industrial society collapsed she'd be the first to go, her glasses would break and she'd wander around in circles until somebody ate her. Anthony argued that she'd be useful because literacy could be lost in a single generation and with her memory she could help to start an oral tradition. They giggled, imagining *The Waste Land* as oral tradition. In the light of burning books, someone clanging the lid of a garbage can.

Towards the end of the summer she would bike down the road to the highway,

and along the highway to the Irving gas station. In the public washroom she took all her clothes off and splashed water on herself from the tap. She got it all over the floor and used the same paper towel to wipe it up, wringing it out many times. She poured herself a coffee in an *I Love No Name* cup and Mandy who worked there turned the fan on her. What Annica really wanted was to be alone, but she liked talking to Mandy too. There were no other women at the Garden then, just Anthony and two guys who both had long matted hair and looked very healthy and went to India a lot. One of them claimed to get all his money, including airfare, by walking through India with a begging bowl. He had sparkly eyes and a big smile from never working and hanging out in spiritual places. He told Annica that she was crazy for being in university. The other admitted that his parents helped him and was respectful of other people, but, all the same, Annica would rather sit with Mandy, in the room behind the store, with a view of the gas pumps and the yard. Bob liked Mandy too, and he dropped by the Irving station a lot now, much more than he dropped by the Garden.

Visiting the Garden had opened Bob's eyes to how the world was fucked up, and how they'd been giving him medication since he was a kid to make him accept this instead of trying to change it. He'd stopped the medication and though they'd tried they couldn't make him take it. He'd been hospitalized for standing on the highway naked, trying to stop cars. He'd wanted to tell everybody what he'd learned about freedom. In the hospital he had realized that he wasn't going about it the right way. He still wasn't sure how to go about it. He drove around in his

car, dropping in on people, and was always coming to some new realization, bitter or hopeful. He teased Mandy, putting his face up to hers and making snarly sounds like a crazy person, and she laughed edgily, Oh, Bob! Seeing this, Annica realized that she herself was someone that Bob wouldn't be able to tease. She told Mandy that men used to be the bane of her existence; realizing with surprise and gratitude that they weren't anymore. In the past year or so they hadn't come up to her in cafés or on the metro and she didn't notice them staring at her much, probably they didn't. It gets easier, she told Mandy.

Mandy seemed to Annica like the surrounding countryside had infused her with its beauty and serenity. So she was more surprised than she would normally be when Mandy told her that she'd been on *Zoloft* since she was thirteen, without it she cried and cried. That Larry, her boss, sexually harassed her. All the locals she'd met had seemed to Annica so decent and kind.

She approached the Garden rather stealthily and leaned the bike against the barn. She was crashing on coffee and chocolate chip muffins and flies buzzed around her, drawn to sugar as she was. She found Anthony in the Winter House, splitting rocks to go under the cob floor he was planning to make. He stood in the half-dismantled Winter House, the sun on his back, placing the cold chisel on rocks and swinging the hammer so they cracked straight through. Annica lay down in the shade of the remaining sod walls, and he came and lay on top of her. Dust fell from the ceiling and ants crawled on their clothes but they didn't move for a long time.

I can't write here, said Annica. I need a room that isn't all dusty. I need coffee and running water. Next year if I go back to Montreal I get to do nothing but write. And mark papers.

So you want to go back?

If I get my MA, that means I can get a decent job if I ever want one. I'll feel more empowered to live like this. People who are poor without choosing to be, she said, don't feel so good about eating from dumpsters. Other people aren't so inspired by them.

They were lying in the henhouse and she was looking out the window at the Quaking Aspens. Quaking Aspens are all connected to each other by the roots. They are one big single entity, rustling and whispering to itself. The largest living entity in the world, Anthony said.

The woman who gave her a ride down the road from the Garden to the highway said she felt bad separating Annica and Anthony. As they were saying goodbye, Annica saw them reflected together for the first time, in the woman's rear view mirror.

She was looking forward to getting a ride with someone who was going to drive through a *Tim Hortons* for coffee. Double, double, said drive-through coffee drinkers in the maritimes, meaning two creams and two sugars. She walked backwards along the side of the road to Halifax, drinking coffee out of a paper

bag with a big grin on her face.

Hitchhiking was best in the morning, especially after getting out of an all-night truck ride dozing against the windowpane, the door-lock knob pressing into her temple, the skin of the trucker's face becoming more porous and puffy every time she looked up, like a rubber fright mask in the half-light before sunrise. Walking along the highway as the sun rose, not knowing where she was.

A truck stopped and the trucker's mule got out and helped her get her bag up. Steve the trucker aimed to be in Montreal before noon the next day. Annica soon wished she were back on the side of the road but she didn't have an excuse to get out. Bad country music blasted mellifluously through her foam earplugs as she sat upright on the bunk, trying to look out the front window, past Steve and Rob bouncing up and down on the springs under their seats.

She smiled back at Steve and Rob with an assumed frankness that avoided their sexual overtones, but it was she who started feeling that she was being inappropriate and sometimes she lay down and closed her eyes to avoid their smiles although that made her a woman asleep on their bunk bed. Drivers had asked her what the sexual morals were like on that hippie commune and she'd said she didn't know, she hadn't asked anyone what their sexual morals were.

Steve gave commands in a monotone. On the third shelf there's a box of mints. Pass me one. Tell me a joke. You're yawning, go to sleep. Rob seemed

like an extension of Steve's will. If he started talking, it was because Steve was bored. Once Steve told Annica to dance and she moved her arms back and forth in a little cha-cha motion and then felt annoyed with herself. She knew she should just ask Steve to drop her off on the road but she couldn't bring herself to offend him that much. She tried to lead up to it by saying that she'd be in the way when they stopped for the night, but Steve said, There's plenty of room. We don't bite. Then he started telling her about a good turn he once done a young kid he picked up. She made Hmm sounds at intervals that grew gradually wider. Her study of the landscape became sorrowful, as if it were her homeland that Steve with his artificial environment of radio and air conditioning was bearing her away from forever.

It turned out when they stopped for the night that there was no place for Annica to sleep after all other than Steve's bunk which he said had plenty of room. Annica curled up against the wall and Steve's arm went around her and his knee pushed between her legs and she said, I'd rather you didn't do that.

Really?

Yes.

She lay quietly, not wanting to leave just at this moment of Steve's humiliation. After a while he began to thrash around angrily, complaining how stuffy and crowded it was. Then she said that maybe she'd hit the road. She said don't worry, I like hitchhiking at night, I'll be fine. She went and stood under the high orange highway lamp, and no one stopped for a long time.

Who would be insane enough to pick up a girl hitchhiking at midnight?



Only Claude—that is, no one too terribly insane. Claude had a fluffy white dog named Beauty who sat between them and gazed beseechingly at Annica from under eye-dripping-encrusted bangs. Claude was driving to Quebec City. He said that Annica was welcome to stay at his house as his guest. Annica didn't speak French well enough, not just then, to inquire into the nature of the accommodations. She couldn't remember the French words for couch or floor.

Claude lived in a basement apartment in the suburbs of Quebec City. He kept pacing around, going into the bathroom and then coming back out again to get towels, asking her if she wanted a shower, and after his own shower coming out girded in nothing but a hand towel, as if to prove once and for all that her hippie ways were no news to him. She sat fully dressed in her sleeping bag on the cement floor, transferring some herbs that she'd brought from the Garden from a plastic bag to a paper *Tim Horton's* bag so they wouldn't rot. She put her plum pits in the plastic bag so she could empty it later on the grass.

She got up to go to the bathroom and when she was washing her hands she first noticed the girly posters. When she came out he was standing suavely by the washer and dryer and his mouth came at her and she said No! and backed away.

Just a friendly kiss.

No.

He fidgeted lostly in the kitchen and then came and sat where she was huddled in her sleeping bag and tried to smile at her. He said, You want a beer?

No thanks.

He went and got a beer for himself and then he came back and tried to put his arm around her. She scooted awkwardly away in her sleeping bag and then got up and pushed her feet back into her Doc Martins and began tiredly lacing them. Then some spirit of hospitality seemed to conquer Claude and he said very earnestly that she shouldn't leave, that he would go to bed and go to sleep now. He went into the bedroom and she could hear the bed creak. She went outside and looked at the endless sprawling grid of suburban porch lights, and looked up at the stars and wished she could make out other constellations besides ubiquitous Orion, and then went back in and took off her boots and got into her sleeping bag. As she lay there she wondered if Claude was thinking too that nobody knew even what province she was in, and no one was really expecting her anywhere. Even the English department might just shrug and remark that apparently she'd found some Utopia. But Claude stayed in bed and he even gave her a ride into Quebec City the next morning. He asked her what she was going to do all day and she said, Look at churches.

She went first into a white stone church surrounded by gift shops. It must be Sunday, there was a service, with tourists and also churchgoers. She kept looking at an icon of St. Francis at the front and to one side, with candles at his feet. St. Francis had taken off all his clothes and thrown them at his merchant father saying, I don't want anything of yours. He gave away everything. He liked drinking pus from the bodies of the sick. He was a happy person.

When Anthony's rich family sent him birthday checks he used them for kindling. And then there was that guy who walked around India with a begging bowl after taking the plane there. He had told her she was crazy to go back to Montreal. But she understood what he meant. She understood how it was crazy better than he understood how it wasn't crazy.

She took a bus to the outskirts of Quebec city, and from there she walked along the freeways heading towards the highway south. The freeways had no shoulder and sometimes they turned into overpasses and she just edged along the sides with cars whizzing past her ear. Or picked her way across sliding rock sides of underpasses. Or the freeway would branch and the way she wanted to go was on the other side, so she would try to pick the right moment and then step out into four lanes of speeding traffic.

Crossing bridges was her favorite part of hitchhiking. Walking the narrow line between the cars and the vertiginous edge with the river underneath going crossways, like an Escher print. Like walking a tightrope, and there was always a high wind and her hand hovered near the railing. She stopped in the middle and looked out over the St. Lawrence, dressed in young green with some triangular sails, Quebec City already behind the trees. She didn't stand there too long in case someone driving by thought she was contemplating suicide, when really she wasn't at all.



11.

### **Anthony in a Helicopter**

Back in Montreal, Annica wanted to see her life from a different perspective, as a misguided whirl, a search for meaning in the wrong places. She started to read her old journals, but they sent fingers of misery into her relative peace. The way she'd been in the past wasn't very effective, but what about the way she was now? Surrounded by boxes, picking through garbage and journals, trying to write about dew falling on her feet at the Garden as she walked to the compost toilet in the morning. Or wild rose petals that tasted like love; as she sat in a trafficky room eating day-old pastries that she got for free, wearing earplugs, the counter hung with saran wrap that she had washed and saved.

But she was peaceful in a way that she hadn't been, before. She thought, after all, I must have chosen this, in some way, it must be a result of who I am. She was part of the ten percent of the world's population who could move around some on the socio-economic ladder, even here in her penniless extra-dimensional space. After all, she thought, nobody really knows why we're here, what ways of living are better than other ways. What bothered her more than the sudden lack of anything else to do when she finished writing, having once again to listen to her own breathing calm itself, was garbage. Coming from a community that produced maybe one shopping bag of garbage in a summer to the blind waste of Montreal. It took time to stop noticing it. But she had to, her classes were

starting, she had to be viable. Stop dumpster-diving, start using soap, cut her hair, open her boxes to find respectable clothes, make-up, razor blades. Stop putting everything she bought into rumpled plastic bags she unhook from her pockets. Just one more year, she thought, often. Then she would go and live in Belize with Anthony, Rachel, and Jerome, or something.

It turned out that she wasn't as alone as she had expected to be, because Jewel had fallen out with her friends in the English Department, and people who had felt uncomfortable talking to Annica now had stories of betrayal of their own. Josh was still seeing Jewel, and no one Annica knew saw much of him.

She started assistant teaching and getting paychecks, moved into a quieter apartment, got a phone installed, went to a few parties. David was at one of them. He'd moved to Montreal the year before. He looked more French Canadian than ever. Annica had no reaction except for an increased energy level. In the kitchen, his younger brother came and sat across from her. They talked about how hard it was to move to a new city, where you didn't know anyone. He was working as a dishwasher. He moved closer so that their knees were touching. She said that she knew, the lowest-paying jobs were actually the hardest.

He talked the way David had five years before; mostly in sentence fragments, but with a pronounced fake Quebecois accent. It was like dreaming about David but in the dream he looked different. He said, you're like the little girl in *Schindler's List*. The red sweater. And he said, so many guys must have crushes on you.

When his friend came over and said they were leaving, he kissed her chastely. He said, interesting—for years—David.

She heard him leave before she got up to go the bathroom. But he came back in to get his tuque and held her briefly as she stood outside the bathroom door, waiting to be sick.

Telling a friend about it on the phone, she said that David's brother would be the most self-destructive sexual partner she could possibly choose; he would wholly symbolize David. Her friend said, what about David?

Much worse than David.

What about your parents?

I don't know. I'd have to be a very different person to choose my parents.

Anthony called from Halifax and said that he was having sex with someone else, did she still want him to visit her on his way to Belize? She said sure, and then walked around the city all night. In the morning she called him back and said no. Her new friends were supportive. She chain-smoked, staring out of her third-story window at church steeples and the Mountain with the great, lit cross. She liked to drink coffee just to think about her life from that vantage point, the little coffee lift, the four corners and white walls of her room; an artificial clarity perhaps, limited to the knife-edge of her mind and not very in touch with nature or emotions, but a useful clarity that she loved, or at least had chosen.

Coming home from a class, she found a blouse folded by her door that she had left

at the Garden. There was a note: Passing through on my way to California. And a phone number. When Annica walked into her apartment it felt like a mausoleum. The only sound was her shoes hitting the floor. Why did she always have to surround herself with nothing?

Anthony would stay with her for a few weeks, go to California for his birthday, and then come back for the winter. When she came home from classes had dinner ready. It was nice to sit with him and eat as the big window darkened, to tell him about her day and ask him questions. She had trouble getting work done, though. Just knowing that he was in the next room kept her from falling into the dark fertile mulch of words in her mind. She would have to walk past him to go and make more coffee. She stared at the screen in agony.

Anthony accidentally crashed her computer while he was installing Linux, losing all her files, everything she'd written for years. He spent a few weeks trying to get them back himself, while she chain smoked on the floor. Finally she sent her hard drive to some data recovery specialists. By that time she had a cyst on her tonsils and was addicted to tranquilizers. She wanted it back as soon as possible.

Anthony wanted her to explain how it would affect their relationship to let people film them having sex, but how should she know? It was just that at this point a big chunk of money was going to have to appear, to pay the long-distance phone bill and data recovery specialists. He said that it was her choice if she wanted to



live like this; he would rather go with her to the jungles of Belize. It was also her choice if she wanted to buy him some clothes that weren't torn and bummy, he was happy in his clothes. She put mascara and lipstick on him and she thought what a pervert's dream he was, he was like a young David Bowie, he was like a child whose nurses were put to death every time he cried. He said, don't you think it might hurt our relationship?

Yes, probably.

His large blue eyes widened and he said, I feel like you're mad at me. I feel like you want me to go. He wouldn't be happy until she covered his face with kisses.

As far as I'm concerned, she said. I'm already buying our relationship. And then she covered his face with kisses.

Coming home from Mistress Lili's dungeon wasn't like walking out into another world: it was like walking out into a slyly similar world that was pretending to be different.

She wanted Anthony to take them off her skin. Braced over her, his eyelids looked like his eyes were rolled back. A part of her was just waiting until she could go make herself a coffee.

If she tried to get into it, she would start fantasizing about the guy who had handcuffed her to the cage. He was good looking and Québécois.

She could have "borrowed" money from Millie, from the small divorce settlement

she had finally got from Ted, but the very thought of this made her want to punish herself and this made it seem more natural to be a dominatrix.

Anthony said that Annica was temperamentally very ill-suited to live in mainstream society. He had started volunteering at a vegan soup kitchen. At this point he had tried to get a job, as a compromise with her, but without papers or French or being willing to lie or sell his body there was nothing.

The first time Annica used the basement dungeon she was with a guy who wanted to be tortured with every possible device. She glanced around casually, trying to get a sense of how things worked. Okay: cage, strap-in chair, masks with ball gags, whips, rack, extra-hot wax candles, rubber bands, rack of dildos, condoms, peach-scented oil, nipple clamps, handcuffs, girlie dress-up clothes. Okay, he wanted to be in the strap-in chair. But what did she do with him once she got him in the strap-in chair?

She spit in his face and told him to lick it up. She moved her finger in and out of his mouth like she had seen the Nazi soldier do in *The Night Watchman*. She chained his nipples to his scrotum and jerked the chain while he confessed. Ooh, that's bad. What a filthy, stinking pig you are. Say oink oink...say it. Are you sorry? Look at you, you're not even crying, you hypocrite. We're not leaving this chair until you cry.

The rack didn't actually work all that well, one of the arms didn't get longer the way it should, to stretch out the victim's body. He didn't notice or pretended not to. He lay on the floor and she gouged her spike heels along him. He came while she was scraping a heel up and down his penis, balancing on her other foot.

The last guy before she quit wanted her to roll his nipples continuously back and forth. His played-out nipples kept slipping from between her fingers. They were together half the night, pretending that she was a little girl and he was a family friend who had corrupted her and who would do anything for her and who she was torturing with naive gusto. She wondered if he was really managing to project the image of a little girl onto her, or whether part of his kick was watching an adult woman try to act like one. The hardest thing was when he said, Laugh at me. She was supposed to laugh because he was such a pathetic worm and she despised him.

Once she started vomiting from too much coke, she ran to the bathroom and when she came back pretended to be a sadistic little girl for three more hours. He would ask her if he could come and she was supposed to say *No!* though for the last few hours she desperately wanted him to.

When she got home she told Anthony, I got six hundred dollars, I can quit now. He said, good, it was making you miserable. They agreed that now, before winter started, would be a good time for Anthony to go to California. Annica, her hard drive still with the data recovery specialists in Toronto, was picking fights with

him a lot.

Mistress Lili kept calling Annica to see if she could come in that day and Annica kept using Anthony, in California, as an excuse. My boyfriend doesn't like it, she said. Mistress Lili warned her against boyfriends who wanted to keep her in a cage.

Before she got her hard drive back, Anthony called from California. He said he was feeling angry with her, because her sexual possessiveness was making him feel bad and had even made him consider lying to her. He'd slept with Jill again. She had turned up on the beach in Santa Barbara. He loved her, but he also loved Annica. Jill was his best friend's girlfriend. His best friend was also his ex-boyfriend. And his ex-girlfriend's ex-boyfriend.

He said that afterwards they'd talked, and decided to avoid being alone together because their long-term partners were jealous people. Annica said, that's very noble. He said, it makes me angry when you attack me with my love for Jill. I feel like you're trying to own me.

He was against ownership in all forms.

She said, I'm sorry if I ever tried to own you, but look, it's over, it's over now. I have to go buy cigarettes.

He said, I didn't want the anticipation of your response to influence my actions.

I've heard enough, okay?

But now I feel like I really don't want you to get off the phone. I feel

really scared.

That's normal.

That's not true. I've been broken up with and totally known I didn't care.

I bet you made it really obvious.

I didn't try to hide it.

She had a great idea for a Hollywood movie. They break up and he becomes an Eco-terrorist. Years later he discovers that she's working in an office building he's about to blow up. She climbs onto the roof, the wind whipping her Laura Ashley cardigan. There are trampolines and fire trucks below but it's too far to jump. He's in a helicopter with his hand poised on the button. Their eyes meet. Of course, he would have to blow up the damn building in the remaining seconds before they shot him out of the sky.

On the phone from California, he asked her why she kept giggling. She was holding onto things to keep from floating away but everything she touched started shaking.

The bus to California was choked with people. The guy in the next seat sprawled his arms and legs all over her. She kept her eyes closed.

In the Reno bus terminal, an old woman saw her writing in her journal. She said, Good for you. Annica said that to her it was like wringing out a dishcloth, a controlled spew of repetitious pain. The woman—Nellie—said that she was writing an autobiography. It would be called *Soft-shoe in Double-time*. She had just come to Reno, to stay. She needed a warmer climate for her arthritis.

She had been waiting for an hour for a man to come and pick her up, in the dirty bus depot that smelled of taco seasoning, but she still created a little sphere of graciousness around herself.

Anthony looked different when he got out of the back of his parents' car to hug her, at a bus stop in Thousand Oaks. He was wearing jeans and a white t-shirt, and he'd put on weight, he was used to eating whenever there was food. She sat in the sitting room with his parents and brother, and their dog Perky, and they asked her how her bus ride had been.

She told them how she had changed buses, at a rest stop in Utah. Clumps of snow like cotton balls were quivering on the packed earth when she walked across to the other bus, going the same route, and found a seat in the front. The bus driver got on, saw her, and told her there was no changing buses. She said that the man next to her had been bothering her, and there were no other empty seats on that bus. It was true.

The bus driver said that if she didn't get off his bus he was calling the police. She said, Call the police. A groan went up from the rest of the bus. The bus driver stalked down the two steps. There was grumbling. She sat quietly. He returned and gave her a long, hating stare. He asked her if she was on medication. If she heard voices. He rotated his finger around his ear and slammed into the driver's seat.

She knew that people were only being like this because she was already so

upset.

They shoulda jus' throwner out, came from across the aisle.

Well, I don't think she did nothin', came from further back.

After a while, the woman sitting next to her offered her some date squares.

When she told Anthony's parents about this she added, Maybe this isn't the first thing I should be telling you about myself. This got a laugh. She knew that Anthony would like this story. She didn't care for it, but they weren't saying anything themselves so she was just casting around. Anthony held her hand.

She walked through Thousand Oaks to the nearest coffee shop, surging with endorphins. The sidewalk ran along the edge of a huge, teacup-shaped valley filled with pines and eucalyptus, oak and pepper trees. Lawns with roses, oranges, shaped cedar bushes and purple-flowered rosemary. On the other side of the highway were yellow-grass hills spotted with cactuses. Anthony had told her that all the oak trees here had number tags on them, and that had made her so tired that they had stopped walking and watched the sun set. She had thought that he would probably never watch the sun set by himself. Now that she was alone, she was grateful that, as Mariette would say, after all she was getting laid; and here she was strolling through a life insurance ad, perfectly warm in her thin sweater.

*The Second Cup* sold seven-dollar coffee-flavoured drinks in plastic dome-topped mugs. Aerodynamic people in pure colours took them in their cars. There were

only two tables and Annica occupied one of them. I'll just have a regular coffee, she said.

Regular?

You know, normal? With caffeine? In a cup?

A cup?

A ceramic cup?

...okay...it'll be a few minutes.

At the other table were chess players and one of them kept spitting in his plastic mug and drinking it. She turned her back to him and got a lot of grading done. After dark, she walked back towards Anthony's parents' house, thinking about their soft white sheets. Sometimes Anthony would come and meet her halfway. When they weren't having sex he was full of questioning looks. If there was a silence he would ask her if everything was okay.

They hitchhiked to Santa Barbara so he could show her his lean-to and the collectively-run house where he used to live. There were running shoes hanging from all the telephone wires. Anthony said it was like that in the ghettos of LA, too, so it wasn't just a class thing. They went down to the beach. The beach became him. She didn't ask where he'd had sex with Jill. She stood chest-deep in the ocean until he started to worry that she'd catch hypothermia and came and stood with his arms around her. They crashed on couches in the co-op house; she didn't want to sleep in his stupid, smelly, freezing-cold lean-to.



He asked her if she wanted him to come back and live with her in Montreal. That was what she was supposed to be trying to decide. She thought about getting back to her apartment in the evening, the horror of switching the light on, or when she finished reading in bed and switched it off. Trying to be friendly to people without seeming desperate, like trying to pet a strange dog and not be scared.

She found herself enumerating the pros and cons, the way Mariette did with each new man. He was a good person. She liked him. He said he loved her, whatever that meant. She said no.

12.

### **The Law of Impermanence**

On the way back through Nevada the bus driver was a born-again Christian. The guy across the aisle was having a very intense religious experience listening to the bus driver. She could see how someone would. His words threw the light of God on the creosote hills and red crags out the window. The bus driver took out pictures of himself in his former life as a gangster. He told the story of the raising of Lazarus, quoting Jesus' big lines. Which she thought were even more effective when Sonia read them to Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. As he went on, Annica felt battered from the outside, as if by construction work or a telephone ringing in her apartment, someone who kept calling back, hoping she'd be home. That was what God did with sinners said the bus driver. Annica almost got up and moved further back, but she was frightened that he'd say, see, she thinks she's going to the back of the bus, but really she's going to hell.

The woman behind Annica kept sticking her arms over the back of the chair next to hers. Her nails scraped against one another, flicking invisible grunge. It wasn't the flicking that constricted Annica's heart. It was those hands in her line of vision when she tried to look out the window across the aisle. She thought she would probably never see this part of the world again. She shifted from one to the other of the two seats, and the woman's arms shifted correspondingly, bisecting her view the other way. After moving back and forth a few times, Annica decided

to get therapy. In the meantime she tried to see the hands with more compassion. She imagined them rubbing lotion into each other and selecting that pinkish beige at the nail polish rack. When the bus reached a rest stop she ran as fast as she could down a back lane in a Nevada town that she never knew the name of, past fancy chickens scratching and car engines.

Her apartment door was locked, after all, when she got back. It took her a few days to work up the courage to turn on her computer. It was so quiet, it was like her brain was in an echoing cocoon that she had to yank it out of to get anything done. In the morning it was all right but in the evening it began to weigh.

She wanted to go to a meditation course that one of the traveling mystics at the Garden, the one she liked, had told her about. Vipassana meditation, as taught by S.N. Goenka. She downloaded an application form from the internet and she filled it out on her pillow; she was sick again.

She got accepted, got a little pamphlet in the mail. It said that this technique of meditation would show her the way to free herself from all suffering. She believed that this was true. She slept with the pamphlet in her bed.

The meditation course was in the Eastern Townships. She got a ride there from a nice family who offered her sticky rice cakes the one time she woke up from dozing in their car. When they got to the meditation center there was a clump of

people hanging around the main building and Annica wandered away quickly to a nearby meadow. She ate wood sorrel and daisy shoots, and went back to the building, somewhat revived. In a clearing a man was stacking brushwood on a bonfire. He threw in a scrabble board and some of the pieces, blackening, were tossed up.

The course lasted for ten days. That was all she knew about it. She hadn't bothered reading the course description on the pamphlet. Whatever it was, she was prepared to do it.

They were gathered together in the dining hall. Someone gave a speech that explained that after the meditation that evening, they would stop talking for nine days. She said that what they would be doing for the next ten days was very serious and that if anyone had doubts about it, it would be better for them to leave now than after the course started. No one left.

For the next nine days they would do nothing but meditate, starting at 4:30 in the morning and on until 9 o'clock at night, with a few breaks. Annica did feel dread but the thought of going back was much worse.

They stood outside the meditation hall and when their names were called they went in and put their cushions on one of the blue pads, evenly spaced on the floor. Annica was one of the last to be called. Once they were all sitting they chanted words in Pali, taking the five precepts of moral behavior and requesting that the first technique of meditation, Anapana, be given to them.

She slept on a mattress by the window of a small room, with a view of mountains. Four a.m., when the first gong sounded, was long before the sun rose. She didn't hear the gong because of her earplugs, so someone woke her by tugging on her blanket. She woke from a dream that she had been lying in a hospital bed, too tired to move, and a nurse had approached holding a huge syringe filled with coffee. She had been horror-stricken and had found the strength to run to the nearest emergency exit and was tugging on the heavy iron door.

She got up and wet her face, not quite able to meet her dull eyes in the mirror. She wrapped her scarf around her neck and headed for the meditation hall. It was dim and the wind pushed at the heavy blue curtains. She only focused her eyes enough to see where her cushion was on the floor. She sat down.

A woman to the left and back of her sniffled a little with each breath – just the faintest catch as breath shouldered its way through her nasal passages – that Annica followed in helpless concentration, until it seemed that her desperate wish for it to stop was solely responsible for its continuance.

After three days of observation of the breath, on day four they learned the technique of meditation called Vipassana. There was something in the meditation hall; there was always something in the meditation hall but now it was gathered up, waves of goosebumps and less jagged currents like light and water ran

through her still, sitting body and her voice barely came up through her throat as they chanted a request for the technique in Pali. Vipassana meant seeing things as they really were. For the next hour and a half she learned to send her awareness throughout her body, and not react. Parts of her body were numb and parts were a tingling buzz and most was heavy and jagged and knotted, like a shipwreck, and her awareness seemed to touch it as lightly as sun fingers, probing among the smashed wood and glass and heavy slimy ropes. Pain that before today would have made her scream. But something in the way the sunlight touched the shipwreck made it a ghost ship because before her mind parts of it were changing, dissolving, drifting, and she could see through it to the waves beneath, and then only waves, and then again, wreckage emerged. She didn't move.

On day five she looked up when wetting her face, and her eyes sparkled back at her from the mirror. For the first time in years, she didn't look at them in disgust, thinking why do they look so afraid? She just looked.

They sat for eleven hours a day, for nine days. she no longer had bad feelings towards anyone, even herself, for very long. On the tenth day, they learned a new kind of meditation, Metta, the meditation of lovingkindness. She felt full of a burgeoning joy. Sitting on the floor of the meditation hall, the teacher's voice directed it towards all beings, herself and others, the same.

After that, it was time to start talking again. Students slowly rustled and their feet

padded out of the meditation hall and down the stairs. Voices began to sound. Annica sat on, feeling the ebb of the love that had filled her body and seemed to reach out beyond it, to whoever she thought of, to the talking and bursts of laughter in the dining hall below. She would have to get up and walk downstairs, into that. It seemed unreal that she would talk. Testing her weight on her waking legs, she got up.

Clusters of people were standing talking in the dining hall, with the camaraderie of friends who have been up all night and watched the stars fade together. Annica moved towards a cluster. When she told them her name and how it was spelled they laughed because it was spelled the same as the word in Pali that meant impermanence, that the teacher had reminded them of so often. Annica told how she had picked it, at twenty, from a numerologist's book. One woman asked her if she thought she'd ever be ready to go back to her original name, and another woman said that from her perspective it was better to leave the old name behind; and that Annica should change her name again if she ever needed to.