

**Moments Under Water**

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## ABSTRACT

### Moments Under Water

Gregory Gilbert

This manuscript is a collection of short stories that are linked thematically and through the use of recurring metaphors and imagery. The collection has nine stories and one vignette that locate themselves geographically around Thunder Bay, Ontario, and Ottawa, Ontario. They explore themes of departure and reunion, both in metaphorical and literal terms. The manuscript is fictitious.

**thank you world**

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## These Things That Grow

Days that winter, we explored the bush around the house, following well worn trails to Kingsmere and further south into the park. Other times we found animal tracks and followed them to where they led us. In the dead of winter we walked without paying attention to where we headed and found our way back by retracing our steps. At night the snow fell and we could not see where we'd been. In the morning we'd set out again.

It was dark. Karen whispered, do you love me? I said I did. I was in love with her feet and her calves and her knees and her thighs. I put her toes in my mouth one at a time. Everything was body and sweat and where we went came from no thought at all. Afterwards, the darkness was swimming and wonderfully alive. We ran outside and let our bodies sink in the snow, then we ran back in and slept between flannel sheets. I opened my eyes one night and Jesse slept quietly on the floor beside the bed. His ribs moved up and down with the quick breathing of a baby. I reached down and touched him, but gently, not to wake him, and his body shivered. His legs pawed the air as if he was running. I whispered, it's ok, and watched him until he calmed. His fur was like hair in my hands.

Now it is summer and the growth is incredible. Dogwoods sprout shoots and the shoots unfold into leaves. Forget-me-nots colour the earth. Karen called me out of the blue and said, *How are you?* I said, *My God, how are you?* She said it was a lovely summer and then, *It's been a long time, hasn't it?* A long, long time.

*But how are you?* I asked. *How are you doing?*

For a moment, I could not picture what she looked like.

*How did we lose touch anyway?*

I was snowshoeing in the park and they were walking on one of the paths when Jesse found my trail and took off after me. That was how we met. I heard Karen calling him, Come here sweetheart, come here pup... Jesse, come here! and then Jesse found me on the trail and I bent down to pet him. He was just a tiny thing, a little golden lab whose legs disappeared in the snow. I have no idea how he got as far as he did, but his tongue hung out and his tail went back and forth so I picked him up and carried him back to where Karen was calling from.

She was wearing running shoes and snow was caked around her ankles. Her ears and nose were bright red and her eyes were watery. I thought I recognized her from school, but wasn't sure.

I handed her the puppy and she thanked me.

"He's awfully small," I said.

"He's still a baby. He's not too good at coming when I call him yet."

I went back along the trail and it wasn't long before Jesse caught up with me again. He hopped on the back of my snowshoe, tripping me up as I walked. What are you doing? I asked. I picked him up and headed down the path.

Karen was shivering and her jeans were wet at the knees. I offered her my jacket and she said no, but she was cold so I asked her again and she took it. I walked back to the car with her, carrying Jesse while she wrapped her arms around herself. It was a beautiful day. Snow had fallen on and off for the past week and then the weather cleared and it was sunny and cold. The snow was a thin powder. The whole winter was like that, cold with thin air that felt good in my lungs. Winter is always a good time but that winter was something special. Walking then, I was cold without a jacket but the puppy was warm in my arms.

Karen was quiet so I got to talking about how much I like the snow, the way it covers up everything for a time. The earth is alive beneath it, but everything is still and new. Nothing grows old. I didn't know what I was saying but I kept talking because we were walking and because she was listening.

A couple of days later I was at the park again. The air was thick and humid and snow fell. I was trying to find a hut I'd seen once but I couldn't remember where it was, so I doubled back on my tracks. I heard a dog bark way off and saw what I thought was a deer through the trees. There was another bark and it seemed only natural when the puppy found me. I rubbed him with my mittens and threw a snowball for him. And then Karen found us on the trail. She was dressed warmly



that time, with boots and gloves and a toque on her head. Her eyes were the most incredible green.

“How’s the puppy today?” I asked.

“He still runs off,” she said. “Obviously. But he’s a good puppy.”

I threw another snowball for him.

“Do you have a dog?”

I shook my head.

“You must have had one when you were young.”

“I always wanted one.”

“Everyone wants a puppy,” she said, and looked me in the eyes. “You should come to our place some time. We could take you for a walk.” She smiled and bent down and Jesse came back to her. “It would be fun.”

Karen wrote her phone number on the palm of my hand.

When she was out of sight, I walked back, deeper into the woods. It had been a long time for me with no one to think about and my head came up with ridiculous ideas in the outside air. Nobody had ever written their phone number on my hand before. I thought of Karen’s eyes and the way she looked at me and I imagined waking up to those eyes. I decided she was beautiful and thought of opening my eyes in the morning and seeing her beside me. It was a stupid but delicious thing and it went from there to wondering what her skin smelled like... I could picture kissing her on the neck, a little below the ear and a little behind it, smelling her skin and moving my fingers through her hair. I got to thinking about the ridge of spine at the base of her neck, running down her body, how it would

separate her shoulders perfectly. My head got away from me and again I thought about what it would be like to wake up to Karen in the morning. What it would be like to be married to someone with eyes so green. What our children would look like and all those things. The day faded and with the snow falling in the dark it was warmer than you would expect. It made me light headed. The snow sank underneath but it did not crunch. I scooped up a handful and made a snowball. It missed the tree I aimed at and landed quietly in the dark.

We drove out of the city in the late evening. White Christmas lights were still up on Elgin Street and a couple crossed at the stop lights wearing ice skates, headed for the canal. Then we were driving out of the city and the lights died away. The car hummed beneath us. By the time we got to Karen's place, the stars were coming out and everything was dark except for the snow reflecting something in the sky and the sky shining a little over the snow.

Karen lived in an old farmhouse that friends of her parents had bought and renovated. They'd put in new insulation, windows and an electric stove. Karen told me this as she showed me around the place with Jesse running from one room to the next. The owners were in Italy for the winter. Their house had old, worn floors and wooden dressers and it looked like a place where a big family should live. A house where everyone helps with the work and where there are always children.

Karen slept in one of the four rooms she kept heated. It had a wood stove

in it and a big, soft bed. Close to the stove was a wicker basket with a blanket inside that was meant for Jesse. It was a big room and when she got the stove lit it had a cosy feel to it.

We ate fettuccini for supper and drank from glasses with long thin necks. I'd brought a bottle of wine and as we drank I made a few jokes. Karen smiled a beautiful smile and her eyes caught me and made me feel sick and excited. We sat at the table, eating and drinking and talking about all the things that everyone talks about: school, what we planned to do afterwards, the food we like and movies we watch, music we listen to. Truthfully, I can't remember much of what Karen said, and I have no idea what came out of my mouth. The whole time we talked I wondered if something else was there and hoping that it was, but telling myself that it couldn't be. It was too much to think about.

When supper was finished we sat on the couch. The colour of the wine stained Karen's teeth red and I loved it. I picked up the puppy and put him on my lap; held him by his front paws and made out that he was dancing. I said something about Fred Astaire and Karen laughed and I got to see her teeth again. I knew exactly what it would taste like to kiss her. I held the puppy up and kissed him instead.

"You're a good puppy," I said. "A sweet puppy. I bet you want to go for a run."

Outside, the sky was clear and the stars were everywhere. The air was crisp. Karen and I walked side by side and Jesse ran ahead in the snow. I was smiling and had no idea how long I'd been there or how old I was.

“My ears feel like they could snap off,” said Karen.

“Race me somewhere, it’ll warm you up.”

Karen told me she didn’t race. But then she started walking faster and when there was a little distance between us, she broke into a run. I ran after her and soon I was beside her. When I started getting ahead, she tackled me into the snow. My head hit something hard and I lay there a minute before I realised where I was. I rolled onto my back and laughed.

Karen pulled herself on top of me and kissed me. “I beat you,” she said.

She kissed me again and air caught in my lungs.

“I beat you.”

She rolled away and above us was the sky. My face burned and my eyes burned. Where my head had hit something, there was a warm trickle. It was the most wonderful feeling. I looked up at the stars and Karen pointed out Orion’s sword. I closed my eyes and my lips burned.

“Oh my,” I said.

“Oh my,” said Karen. She laughed and I tried to pull her on top of me again but she grabbed my jacket and pulled me on top of her. We kissed for a long time and it was cold and tasted sweet. Then Karen said, Where’s Jesse?

I looked up at the stars as we walked back, trying not to lose my balance. There were so many. The evergreen branches were heavy with snow and they were something else to see. I looked at them and thought, *Remember this*, while the snow moved under our feet.

Nights that winter, everything was heat.

The summer nights are terrible, the heat gets in my dreams. This morning I woke up with a feeling that won't leave me alone. It's as if I knew the telephone would ring, she would be on the other end. I woke up with a terrible feeling, *Someone has died, someone has died* and I was afraid to be near the telephone. I was afraid of what Karen would say.

But I wanted to tell her some things. That I'm still the same person, to begin with, but I'm not that person at all.

And I wanted to tell her of some of the things I've seen. Of things that grow. Tadpoles that fill pools of sitting water and purple flowers that bloom under the power lines. Blackflies (too many blackflies) and mosquitoes. The growth is incredible. One week the earth is black and the next it's covered in green. Wild roses and poplars, bull rushes and tiger lilies.

In April, the snow melted. It stuck to the sinew of the snowshoes in clumps and rotted it away. The earth was coming out. When I walked Jesse, he raced down paths on his growing legs while I plodded along behind, trying to keep up. Mud started showing through in patches and the days stretched out into the evenings.

Winter was ending and it was a sad thing. The comfort of layers was gone.

Karen and I lay in bed that month and outside, water dripped from icicle tips into pools below. Jesse slept on a couch in the corner of the bedroom even though he wasn't allowed on the furniture. At night we'd crawl into bed and moments later hear Jesse get up on the couch. Karen would turn on the light and tell him to get down. He always did, but later I'd hear him get back up again. With Jesse on the couch, I listened to the weather turn outside.

It was sometime that month that we sat down to gnocchi for supper and Karen told me she thought she was pregnant. I asked her was she sure and she said no, but she'd skipped a period and it made sense if we considered it. I asked her what she thought of that and she asked me what I thought of it. I don't know if I would have picked it to happen, I said, but I guess it didn't matter if I picked it or not. I asked her again what she thought of it and she said that we shouldn't get ahead of ourselves. We should get a test and find out.

"I was too afraid to do it alone," she said.

"You must be going crazy wondering."

"Let's not think about it until we know for sure," she said.

But we thought about it. You can't keep yourself from thinking about these things.

"Where would you want to live?" she asked. "If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?"

"Would you finish school?" I asked. We sat at the table with our plates half full but not eating. "You'd finish school, wouldn't you?"

"I'm going to finish school," she said.

“Would you take a year off?”

Karen got up and grabbed my hand. She pulled me over to the couch.

“I’ve always wanted to move down east. Would you move east with me?”

“I’d go anywhere with you.”

“What about out west? To the mountains?”

“I don’t know about the west. Wouldn’t you want to be near our parents—for the baby?”

“I don’t want to think about it,” she said. “I was just dreaming of what we would do if we could do anything.”

“I wish we could live right here.”

“They’ll be back from Italy soon.”

“I know, I was just imagining.”

I thought about the winter ending and people coming home and us leaving. I thought of how Karen looked when she stood naked in the shower. I imagined how that would change. A baby is a small person that gets bigger. It starts out inside and then you hold it as close to you as you can. It has little hands that open and close and eyes that learn who you are. It is a tiny person that looks something like you and after a time says words that you say and grows up and stays with you for a long time. You give it a name. It gives you a name. You carry it with you forever.

I lay awake in bed with my eyes wide open thinking about how I was supposed to go away for the summer. It was April and everything was changing. If I went away, time would escape. Beads of water were forming in the snow,

water finding other water and making rivulets. The water ran.

April.

When I woke up it was still dark. The wind was blowing and hard rain or hail was coming down on the roof. Jesse was whimpering on the couch and I said, Don't worry pup, it's ok. Beside me, Karen slept, but the dog kept making noise so I got up and sat with him on the couch. He put his paw on my leg and then buried his eyes. I rubbed his head and talked to him, saying everything was alright, it was just rain. After a while he calmed down but then there was the snapping of a tree branch and he let out a yelp. I picked him up and put him on my lap. He was getting heavy.

"It's ok pup. It's ok. It'll be over soon enough."

But the wind kept up all night and I ended up sleeping on the couch with the dog at my feet. By morning the wind had stopped and the ground was slick. It was too slippery to walk up the driveway without holding on to trees along the way. Up at the road, the pavement was covered in ice and it didn't seem like anyone would be able to go anywhere.

Inside, Karen looked at me as if she was thinking hard.

"Does it make you nervous?" she asked. "Thinking about it?"

"No."

"You're lying," she said. "It scares the hell out of me."

"I'm not lying, I just wish I knew what was going to happen."

"Please," she said. "I've thought about this a lot. I'm not ready to think about it again right now."



“What did you think about it?”

“I don’t know, I think it’s crazy. Anyway I think about it is crazy.” She stood up and kissed me on the forehead. “Don’t make me think about this right now.”

She left the room and I sat for a long time trying to think about nothing. I could not say what it was exactly, but something turned in my stomach: hearing her in the other room doing whatever she was doing, and knowing that outside there was freezing rain coming down, and that we couldn’t even talk about it.

“Jesse, come here,” I said.

In the rain, crunching through the ice, we walked.

We bought a test at a drugstore in town and waited until we got to the country to find out. It was negative. Karen looked at me and I looked at her and then we both read the instructions again. I drove to town and bought a different test made by a different company. It came up negative too and everything that had kept me wired collapsed. I sat on the edge of the bathtub and stared at the mirror. Karen sat beside me and put her arm around me.

“Do you feel let down?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Me too.”

She ran her fingers through my hair and kissed my cheek.

“Do you feel relieved?”

I shook my head no.

“Not even a little bit?”

“No.”

“I do.”

The porcelain tub was cold through my jeans.

“We’ve known each other for four months,” she said. “Can you imagine having a baby together? It would be crazy.” She laughed a little as she said this, but it was a half-hearted laugh.

I turned around and ran bath water. The sound of it in the pipes and coming out of the faucet deadened everything else. Karen pushed the door shut and watched me as I undressed. I sat in the bathtub as the water ran.

Karen said, “Don’t be mad. Talk to me at least.”

“I’m not mad.”

She smiled and said, “I guess this isn’t the time to bring up birth control.”

“Ha ha.”

“Don’t be mad,” she said.

“I’m not mad.”

“Can I get in the bath with you?”

I nodded my head.

Karen sat behind me in the bathtub with her arms wrapped around me. Once the tub was full, I started to sweat. The faucet covered over in a film of fog that I wiped off with my hand. My face was stretched in the reflection.

“I’m getting out,” I said. “I don’t feel like having a bath.”

“Stay in for just a bit, I want to talk to you.”

I got out of the tub and got dressed. Then I sat on the toilet seat and watched her. She looked at her body, surrounded by water. Her eyes were tired.

“I don’t want things to be bad between us,” she said.

“They’re not bad, I just don’t feel very happy at the moment.”

“I don’t want to have a baby right now.”

“I never asked you to have a baby.”

“But it seems like that’s what you want.”

“I thought it was going to happen.”

Karen hugged her knees to her chest. I stood up from the edge of the tub and thought of what I might do next. I couldn’t think of anything.

“I’m relieved it didn’t happen,” she said. “Don’t make me feel like I’m being selfish.”

I opened the bathroom door and Jesse was looking up at me from where he was curled up on the floor.

“I never said you were being selfish.”

“It feels like you’re saying it.”

Outside the bathroom the air was cool. Outside the house it was cooler still.

In the summertime, there’s a fever that runs through everything. *So, you moved to the country*, Karen says, and there is a moment when I hear her waiting. In that moment I can’t speak.

She says, *I'm so glad we're back in touch. Can you believe it's been this long?*

*I can't believe we let it go like that, I say.*

Three long years, we remind each other.

We exchange niceties and talk about the summer. It is nearing the end of July and we are in the steady days of the season—the ones that fool me year after year into thinking that they will go on forever. We don't talk about what happened. About how afterwards, I went back and said I love you. She said it too. We said all the right things and still the bad feeling stayed. Outside, the earth was coming up through the snow and the bad feeling would not go away.

We only talk about nice things and soon the phone grows hot in my hand and the conversation lulls. I take a deep breath and tell her my news.

*Really?* she says. *Wow. Who's the lucky girl?*

Her voice carries the sound of possibility lost.

Then she clears her throat. She says, *Life's not so busy here. It's alright.*

*Jesse and I...*

After I get off the phone my wife, Candice, says I look tired. I tell her Karen called and she asks me about it. Then she changes her mind, saying she doesn't want to know. It's almost August, she says, we should enjoy the heat while it's here. She reminds me of the time we went driving in the spring and saw two bear cubs, small enough to fit in a mailbox, and their mother close by. We should go driving, she says, I won't be able to get around so easily in the winter.

She's growing, right before my eyes. Candice. She puts my hand on her belly every couple of days. From a grain of sand to a walnut to the size of a plum. It has grown.

So I get in the car and wait for her to join me. We will go for a drive, talking about the things we see: wild flowers and the birds of summer.

Everything so exotic. The months will slip away like the breath of my lungs:

August, September, October, November...

## Juliet Considers Her Options

Daniel rented a cottage on Twelve Mile Lake for the first week in October to celebrate Janice's return to Ottawa, to give them time away before they started living together and dealing with work and friends. She called him a darling when he told her: a darling, a sweetheart, a prince. Privately they called it their honeymoon, although they weren't married and had no definite plans.

They would canoe and swim, they promised each other, and walk through the maple forests of early autumn. They would spy into empty cottages, find places where they would live when they were older and had money. They joked that they would meet people going by in boats and introduce themselves as Mr. and Mrs. Amante, make allusions to a baby which was not on the way.

They were busy, Janice with school and Daniel with work, but they put aside time every night to talk about it. Their conversations were a mix of the past and the approaching future, with no present to speak of. Janice once fell asleep with the telephone cradled between her shoulder and ear, her body sunk into her futon. She awoke to Daniel's voice and a cramp in her neck. She had the strange sensation that she was eavesdropping on someone else's life. She heard him swallow and then laugh nervously. She could see him then, on the other end of the telephone line. "But that's just my opinion," he said.

Daniel's long neck stretched high above his collarbones; a bulging Adam's apple moved up and down his slender throat. His appearance struck Janice as bizarre when she first met him and later, strangely attractive. When she got off the red-eye flight from Vancouver, she was gripped by the irrational fear that she wouldn't recognise him in the crowd, but then she thought of his neck. His long neck, his slim jaw, his lips that easily found their way into a smile, and the fear left her. She walked down one of the airport's narrow corridors and stopped at a water fountain. She drew a hand through her hair and smiled at her reflection in the chrome. Her face took on an odd shape. It had been three months since she'd seen him. She tried to wash the taste of the night away in a stream of water.

Down the escalator and through smoky glass doors, a crowd waited. Daniel's head stood a foot higher than the people around him. His hair was cut shorter than usual and his chin was covered in a thin sheen of stubble. He strained his neck and his head rose higher still as he scanned the crowd for her. In another moment, she knew, she would be in a different world. The west coast, school, nights in a single bed, would diminish like scenery from an airplane window.

Daniel waved at her and she waved back.

"Welcome home, Mrs. Amante," he said. They kissed and he rested his hands on her hips. "How was the flight?"

"I'm exhausted," she said.

He moved a hand from her hip to her stomach. "And how's Junior?" he asked.

They drove northwest through Richmond, Franktown and Perth. They took the turnoff to Bob's Lake and then turned again to Twelve Mile Lake. Before noon they were at the cottage, an A frame that stood high above the lake, secluded in the trees. A cedar deck looked out over the water below. Inside, a ratty couch stood neglected on an old hardwood floor. A stack of magazines lay on a coffee table and an arm chair sat facing the fireplace. "Danny, this is perfect," said Janice. They went upstairs and looked in on a small bedroom and before they made their way to the master. They peeled each other's clothes off, layer by layer. The lace curtains that hung in the windows splayed mysterious signs in shadow across their bodies. The signs were indecipherable, their bodies foreign, and afterwards they lay on top of the sheets and listened to the wind outside. Janice closed her eyes. It seemed as though they'd been making plans about the cottage only hours earlier, and suddenly there they were, the two of them together. She wondered how it had happened, wondered how her life out west and her life back east, her past life with Daniel and this life, could reconcile themselves in one person—she lay on top of the sheets and wondered when his smell would become familiar again.

"What are you thinking?" asked Daniel.

Janice closed her eyes. She let the mystery behind the question wash over



her.

“Do I seem the same to you?” she asked.

“Do you feel different?”

“It feels a little strange.”

“It’ll take time,” he said.

Daniel stood up and went to the window. His skin looked translucent in the sunshine. He might have been an angel then, or an apparition—something beyond her comprehension. Then he stretched out his arms and held them over his head. Janice could remember, in another lifetime, telling him he looked sexy. Maybe she was right. His shoulders were large, his back muscular. He opened the window and yelled out. “Hello?” he said.

His voice came back to him from across the lake.

When Janice selected a mug from the dirty dishes piled in the sink, it was morning. Or at least she thought it was morning—there was no clock in the bedroom and none in the kitchen either, and she hadn’t checked her watch in days. She looked out the window and tried to guess the hour from the sun’s position in the sky. Then she realised she wasn’t even certain what day it was. “Danny, what day is it?” she called, but there was no answer from upstairs. *Monday we ate rosemary lamb, she thought, Tuesday we went canoeing. It’s Wednesday.* She rinsed out her mug, and considered washing the plates and knives and forks stacked underneath. Hollandaise sauce had hardened egg yolk

coated one plate, a piece of spinach coated another. *No, Monday we ate poached trout and slept, Tuesday we ate the lamb and Wednesday we went canoeing.* Thursday: the thought was disturbing. Except for their one, brief canoe ride, they'd done nothing but eat and sleep and, of course, make love. They'd done it on the dining room table, on the couch, in the bathtub, on the floor in front of the fireplace, and on the deck outside as well, each time with a fevered determination, as if they were on a mission, or performing an age-old ritual they'd lost the meaning of. One their one canoe trip they hadn't even made it out of the secluded bay, but lay one on top of the other in the bottom of the boat instead, crammed precariously between the thwarts, skin exposed to the October air, the crisp smell of dried leaves washing over the lake in gusts. The water splashed the side of the canoe to the hurried rhythm they set, covering the sound of Daniel's breathing. And when they were done, Janice looked at the cottages peering out at them from between the trees, red and green roofs shading the eyes of log cabin windows. A chill passed through her. She tried to think of all the reasons she loved Daniel, of the plans they'd made. He sat in front of her now, paddle in hand again, his neck like a loon's, his head pointing in the direction they would follow. On the shore ahead, the wind tricked leaves from their branches. They spun in a spiral, as if caught in an eddy. They drifted down.

The next day Janice woke to an annoying pain she recognised as the start of a bladder infection. She rolled over in bed, away from the drool mark she'd left on

her pillowcase, and saw that Daniel's stubble had grown into a patchy beard. They went downstairs to find mouse droppings on the table and counters. Some left over chicken sat on a plate with teeth marks in it. The dishes in the sink were covered with paw prints and Janice felt her skin crawl.

"I can't believe we let this place get like this," she said. She picked up a dishcloth from the sink and started wiping the table. "It's disgusting."

"Leave it for me," said Daniel. "I'll get us some tea and then I'll clean up. I saw some traps I can set. You give Junior a rest."

He patted Janice's stomach as she walked by him.

Janice found some *Canadian Wilderness* magazines around the cottage and took a few of these outside with her onto the deck. They were full of strange facts: polar bears are more likely to attack women than men, waterfowl mate for life, maple leaves make beautiful papier mache. She turned to an article that linked domestic cats to the solitary cougar rather than the lion. She looked at the pictures until she was bored and then she walked to the back of the cottage where the blanket of leaves on the forest floors rustled under her footsteps. She followed a path that led away from the water, between tree trunks and rock outcroppings. A chipmunk scurried through underbrush ahead of her and further along, she thought she heard a deer, or a bear, but when she looked closely it was only a small bird rustling in the leaves. She followed the bird as it hopped from tree to tree and further back in the woods she surprised a partridge—it beat its wings and flew away. Janice turned around then and realised that she wasn't following a path at all, that, when she looked carefully, trails seemed to be

everywhere, but they all wandered aimlessly. The A-frame was lost in the bush, and she'd turned herself around—she couldn't be sure which way she was facing. She did not feel panic, but a strange relief. She chose a direction and began to walk, and in a few minutes, she saw the cottage in the distance. It was a comfort, yes, but not as beautiful as she'd first thought.

Inside, there were mousetraps set by the stove and on the counter. The dishes were washed and stacked by the sink. It looked as it had when they first arrived. She heard Daniel upstairs and called to him, "You're a prince, Danny."

"I'm going to take a swim," he yelled back. "Come put on your bathing suit."

"You wouldn't believe it—I thought I was lost," she told him when she went upstairs.

"Hurry up," said Daniel. "Before I lose my nerve."

They made their way down the steps to the dock. Janice wanted a picture of Daniel in his bathing suit but when she saw him in the full light of day, his skin pale, facial hair too long, she changed her mind. The surface of the lake was smooth, reflecting the coloured leaves from the far shore, and she took a photo of that instead. When she looked closely, she could see through the reflection into the water below. She dipped her foot.

"It's too cold," she said. "I can't go in there."

Without a word, Daniel jumped off the dock in a canon-ball and splashed water all around. Then he scrambled out of the water, shivering, with a smile on his face.

“Refreshing,” he said. “You should try it.”

He ran and jumped off the dock again, this time in a dive. His body moved under the surface and then his head broke through, neck stretched above the plane of water.

“Come on,” he said. “Live a little.”

Janice dipped her toes in again and then started back to the cottage.

“Where are you going?”

“To get cranberry juice. I’ll get you a towel, too.”

She heard him pull his body out of the water; he came up behind her.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

She tried not to look at his body, the water that dripped from his skin and pooled on the ground. “I just don’t want to swim.”

“That’s not what I mean. What’s wrong?”

“It’s different,” she said. “It’s different than I thought it would be.”

“We’ll get used to it,” he said. “It just takes time.”

They ate supper on the deck in front of the cottage and watched while the sun went down over the trees. Somewhere on the lake they heard a car door close and then another car door do the same. It was the first time that week they’d heard a human noise they hadn’t made. There was talking between a man and a woman and it bounced off the water, came through the trees, so that they couldn’t figure out where the sounds were coming from. There was the slam of a screen door and

a minute later the door slammed again. It slammed a third time and Daniel raised his eyebrows.

From somewhere on the lake they heard a man's voice say something about the leaves being in colour. Then the woman's voice came across the water clearly. She said, "Paul, come and look at what the goddamned mice have done!"

Daniel put his hand on Janice's knee and whispered, "They seem like a quiet couple."

"Pleasant," said Janice.

They were quiet then and sat still as the light left the sky and the people across the water slammed doors behind them. As the sun went down, colour left the water and the shore until there was nothing but the silhouettes of trees and the empty space of lake. Sound formed from somewhere in the darkness.

"Come out for a bit," the man said. "It's beautiful out. We won't get another night like this."

The woman could not be heard clearly.

"Leave that until later," the man said.

The screen door slammed shut and then again a minute later.

"You know those mice make me crazy," the woman said. "When you see them run across the floor with no regard to you being there, it's like they think they own the place."

"I don't think they care about us one way or the other," said the man.

"And those tails," said the woman. "You see them sticking out from under the furniture and they twitch. They twitch when they're caught in the traps

too—I've seen them twitching when the mouse is supposed to be dead.”

The man laughed and the laughter filled the air around Janice. It was unsettling.

“You know those mice make me crazy,” the woman said. “If you find it all so funny then you go in and clean up and I'll sit out here with my feet up on a chair and not worry about it.”

“Don't worry about the mice, I'll take care of the mice,” said the man.

“That's what you say every year,” said the woman. “But they're always here, every year.”

It was quiet on the lake for a few minutes and then chair legs scraped against wood. Out in the night the screen door closed a final time. Janice was holding her breath, listening for what would happen next. There was nothing.

Daniel whispered, “I think the show is over.”

“I don't know if I want to meet those people,” said Janice.

“They'd be a bad influence on Junior.”

Janice could here him snickering to himself.

“He sounds really creepy,” she said.

“She sounds a little hysterical.”

Janice listened for more.

“Every cottage has mice,” said Daniel.

They got up from their chairs quietly and took their plates inside. Janice closed the door and latched it behind her.

Throughout the night, Janice's sleep was interrupted by trips to the bathroom. She pulled herself from bed and walked in a daze. Afterwards she lay in bed and tried to sleep. Her face felt as though spiders were spinning webs on her skin. Then her legs began to itch—something crawling under the covers. She scratched but there was nothing there. The cottage creaked through the night and when she slept, her dreams were nasty. Something chased her in her sleep.

Downstairs there was a snap and then a scratching noise—something trying to get in the door. Janice shook Daniel awake.

“Something's downstairs,” she said.

“What?”

“Someone is downstairs.”

He rolled away from her and she shook him again.

“Listen,” he said. “There's nobody down there.”

They both listened and there was no sound. Daniel rolled away from her again and the bed squeaked.

Janice shook him but he didn't respond. In the dark, his body was a mass of useless parts. She turned on the light and he buried his face in a pillow. The room was bright, painted baby blue with a wooden bookcase at the end of the bed and a painting of Twelve Mile Lake or somewhere similar on the wall. The ceiling was tongue and groove pine, the floor a cool hardwood. She understood that inside the room was safe, but outside the door was darkness and when she went to the bathroom, the dark would run into the light and then the room would



be as dangerous as the darkness outside.

Her bladder was almost full.

“Daniel, come to the bathroom and then I’ll leave you alone.” She shook him. “Come to the bathroom and then you can go back to sleep.”

Daniel followed, shuffling along with her and waiting while she urinated. His figure, standing in the bathroom doorway, did not comfort her. The floor creaked and the wind could be heard from outside. Daniel’s thin, thin wrists looked as vulnerable as his neck. He yawned and his nose wrinkled like a child’s. Back in bed, Janice lay next to the wall with the body of her lover between herself and the door. She made herself as small as she could.

The morning was clear and bright and Janice woke up early, went to bathroom and then headed downstairs. By the porch door a mousetrap was overturned; a long tail ran out from underneath, pointing towards the kitchen stove. She nudged the trap with her toe until it turned over and the mouse could be seen. The wire had not snapped the mouse’s neck, but had caught on the body instead. The distance it crawled, from beside the cupboards to the door of the cottage, was about ten feet. She picked up the trap and held it at eye level. Up close, the fur was not as smooth as she thought it would be. Individual hairs grew out of the skin like weeds from the lake bottom. She wanted to touch it, just to feel, but couldn’t bring herself to do it. Its teeth were lodged in the metal piece where the peanut butter had been spread. It was dead but had been alive, that was the

incredible thing, however filthy its life. In one of the magazines she'd learned that they bred and bred and scavenged and bred: that was their secret to survival. But Janice knew there was more to it. The mouse had dragged itself ten feet. Its eyes peeked out at her from its fur.

“Where were you going?” she asked. “Where would you go?”

Then she heard Daniel upstairs, and Janice dropped the mouse, trap and all, into the garbage. It sank into the yellow plastic bag and did not move.

Daniel brought his tea to the deck where Janice sat with her magazines on her lap. It was a warm morning again but a breeze came off the lake. Across the bay leaves made the slow descent from the coloured canopy to the water below and lay face up, barely making a ripple on the liquid surface.

They heard the woman's voice from across the lake: “Is it ok?”

Janice and Daniel strained to listen.

The woman said, “Can I come out yet?”

“Wait,” the man said.

The wind picked up and the lake rippled into small waves. The air made a rushing noise through the trees, like running water, and suddenly the cottage seemed very small and secluded once again.

“I think we should take out the canoe and find out where they're staying,” said Daniel.

“I don't want them to see us,” said Janice. “I don't want them to know we're here.”

Daniel sipped his tea. "We could wait until night," he said. "That way they wouldn't be able to see us but we'd see their cottage lights."

"We'll see."

"It'll be fun. They can't be far."

There was something about the couple that bothered her. The idea of the woman stuck somewhere asking to come out. From where? she wondered. Strange ideas of what was going on ran through her head. Nothing *really* bad, or *really* wrong, but something about it was creepy.

"I don't know," she said. She held her magazine and ran her hand across the face of an owl. "How come you didn't wake up when I was scared last night?"

"I did. I went to the bathroom with you."

"But you went right back to sleep. I heard things downstairs."

Daniel sipped his tea. "I didn't know," he said. "I don't remember."

Janice peered at him over the top of the magazine. His half-beard of the last few days had changed the shape of his face; his eyebrows were wiry and starting out of control. He looked indifferent as he sat in the sunshine.

"It wasn't very nice of you," she said.

Daniel shrugged his shoulders. He sipped his tea.

That evening, a warm wind came across the lake and picked up leaves from the forest floor. Daniel sat beside Janice, dressed all in black in anticipation of the

spying game. They ate macaroni and cheese and waited for the sun to descend. But the day's heat was lingering and there was a feeling in the air that dusk would hold off the night for as long as it could. Janice put her food aside.

Daniel winked at her.

"Do you think I should put on face paint?" he asked.

"I wish it would storm tonight," she said. "I'd love to be in bed with thunder and lightning."

"I could live here," said Daniel. "I'd never have to leave."

Janice picked at her food and then put down her fork. The wind stopped suddenly and the lake lay flat and still. Everything was quiet in the evening calm and the birds stopped calling out. The leaves lay down for the night. Daniel put his finger to his lips and then pointed to his ear. He wrinkled his brow.

Janice shook her head—she didn't hear anything.

But then it came from across the lake. They heard the clinking of cutlery on plates, the creaking of chairs. It was as if the surface of the water not only carried, but amplified the sound. Janice thought she heard someone breathing a long way away but knew it couldn't be. Still, she wondered how close those people were.

Across the water the woman said, "This salmon is superb."

"Do you remember the salmon we had at that restaurant in Vancouver?" the man said. "That was salmon."

There was quiet.

"Not a bad bottle of wine for ten dollars, is it?" the man said.

“Mmm,” said the woman. “I told you to buy the bottle with the leaves on it, didn’t I? It seemed right to buy it at this time of year.”

“I don’t think the label makes it a good bottle of wine.”

“But it is good, isn’t it?”

Daniel made a motion towards the dock. Janice shook her head no but he stood up anyway. She followed him down to the water.

Across the lake the man coughed.

“It’s hard to believe we’re all alone, isn’t it?” said the woman. “I love the country— there’s so much space.”

“If the car breaks down you’ll wish there were more people,” the man said. “Imagine being stranded out here alone.”

The man’s laugh made Janice’s hair stand on end.

“Don’t start,” said the woman. “And don’t be so argumentative.”

“Sorry,” said the man. “I’m sorry, I was just thinking.”

Janice grabbed Daniel’s sleeve as he got into the canoe.

“You can’t go over there,” she whispered. “Don’t.”

“I just want to see where they are.”

She held back and he took her hand. “Come on,” he said. “It will be nice on the lake.”

Janice looked at the water. She strained her eyes.

“No,” she said.

“Come on.”

“No.”

Janice walked back up to the cottage. After a minute she thought she could see the shape of the canoe out in the bay. It was a dark night though, and the shape was far away. She couldn't be sure what she saw.

"Just a minute," she heard the woman say. There was an intimate laugh and then the woman said, "Why don't you turn off that light?"

The door slammed and then creaked open and slammed again.

"What's that you've got?" the woman said. There was the laugh of the man and then a sound like a rocking chair moving back and forth.

"No, let me," said the woman. "That's better, like that."

The rocking continued and this time Janice was certain she could hear their breathing. She pictured the couple together. The man was fat around the middle. The woman's make up was excessive. They had salmon breath and kissed each other with sloppy lips. Year after year. She did not want to think of them doing whatever it was they were doing.

Daniel will be over there soon, she thought.

The rocking continued and the canoe, if it was the canoe, disappeared from sight. Behind her, the cottage was clean and the mouse bedded securely in the garbage, but Janice did not want to go inside.

From somewhere over the lake the woman screamed and then she said, "Jesus!"

"What is it?" asked the man.

"I think it was a bat."

He laughed and then she laughed too.

“What a scare,” she said.

The rocking noise started up again.

Janice went inside. She tripped the mousetraps using a pencil and threw them in the garbage.

In bed the world was quiet. Janice looked through another article in *Canadian Wilderness*: nomadic scavengers. Beside her, Daniel read a spy novel while his body gave off heat under the covers.

“Were those people having sex over there?” asked Janice.

“I didn’t see.”

“Did you hear them? It sounded—“

“I didn’t go over there, I paddled around the bay and came back.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t want to go alone.”

Janice felt a touch of guilt but she said, “I’m glad I didn’t go. It sounded like they were having sex.”

“So what if they were?” said Daniel.

“The two of them,” said Janice. “I don’t know.”

Daniel said, “You don’t know them, Sweetie.”

“I know enough,” she said.

Daniel rolled onto his side.

Janice closed the magazine. “They’re disgusting.”

After a time Daniel put his book down and Janice knew he'd be asleep soon.

"I'm sorry, Danny," she said.

"There's nothing to be sorry about." He reached out his long arm to turn off the light. "You don't know them though. You shouldn't judge them."

"I mean I'm sorry I didn't go with you."

"Maybe tomorrow," he said, but she knew she wouldn't go.

Janice lay with her eyes open, staring at the dark for some time. She didn't want to be alone and awake but she felt restless, unable to sleep. She'd had a cat once that paced neurotically and cried when a storm was coming, and when the bedsprings creaked, Janice heard an echo of that cat, even though the night was calm. There was no wind. She tried to clear her mind and after a while she fell asleep with her face pressed into the pillow. Soon she dreamed of drowning.

Janice awoke with a start and pushed the pillow down with her hand. She looked over at Daniel and said, "Danny, I just had an awful dream."

He did not move.

She touched the hair on the back of his head and then tried to roll him over. She held him by the shoulder, but his body wouldn't turn. Had he gained weight in the last few days? She shook him and whispered in his ear, "Danny, roll over."

Daniel pulled his head away and grunted in his sleep.

Janice felt a wave of irritation come over her. When it passed, she pulled herself into him, feeling for his hipbone. It had always fit her hand nicely. She



tried to sleep then, tried to think of the leaves outside and the lake below, of all the things she wanted to remember about their stay. But all she could think about was her own stomach and how much it must have grown since they'd been there. After just a few days. And winter was coming, it would not get any easier. She rolled onto her back.

*Please, she thought, not us. Not me.*

Whatever happened to that cat? Janice had given it away when she moved out west. It had never seemed like hers anyway. It clawed and bit her when she tried to hold it on her lap. Sometimes it would jump out from under the couch to sink its claws into her legs. She'd fed it and brought it to the vet and tried to ignore the awful sounds it made when it was scared—she pretended otherwise, but was happy when she gave that cat away. Janice turned on her side again and felt for Daniel's hipbone, his love handle. Her face was lightly burned from the day's sun. Her skin felt tight, dry.

She hated those people, hated their talking. Why had they dragged themselves into her vacation? *Please, she thought. Please.*

Her thoughts went from one thing to another, running in circles, until after a time they became tangled in each other. Janice turned that ugly mess over in her mind, trying to hide it behind pictures of lake tops, of leaves, until she was no longer awake. But still she tossed and turned—now there were animals in her dreams. She could not see them but she knew they were there. Her body shifted, her legs moved. She pushed Daniel away. She pictured the paths that led through the trees, that would bring her somewhere new: to a road, or a highway. These

thoughts of escape came naturally, as if by instinct, and Janice clung to them through the night.

## Christmas, 1978

The nudes hung in the kitchen, the living room. They caught the eye; they begged it to linger. Bodies were rendered in lines so sparse they bordered on abstraction, but they were erotic nonetheless, perhaps because they were of Isobel, or perhaps because they were created by Gerald. The canvases betrayed signs of both of them. Sometimes when the studio floor was stencilled by morning sun, Isobel would lay naked on a bed of pillows while Gerald worked. He would stand in front of his canvas, taking her in, considering her along with the light in the room, his mood, her mood, the thickening paints, all in terms of possibility. I'd see them from the studio door, where I'd pause to watch. Then Isobel would catch my eye and invite me inside.

I met her first, in the photography lab, nestled in the back of the darkroom. Her hand touched mine when I showed her how to block, how to shade. As we bent over the enlarger together, bringing the image into focus, Isobel turned her head just as I inhaled. I tasted the lavender oil she used in her hair. For a moment it blocked out the smell of the processing chemicals. Isobel turned the developing light on; it clicked off. The print was a close-up of an eyelash and behind, an eye, slightly out of focus. I was developing a photo of a rail-bridge over Baseline Road with a train stalled half-way across. I slipped it under a stack of papers and

looked more closely at Isobel's print. It seemed to be holding secrets. "It's of Gerald," she said. "I'm just playing around though, you should see his work. He's an artist."

(Later I found out that she and Gerald needed a housemate to make ends meet. I was living with other engineering students at the time, but the household repulsed me. The kitchen table was made from a door laid across two empty beer kegs, the newspapers in the bathroom had strips torn from them—evidence that toilet paper was in high demand. That's not to mention personality differences. I moved my things over the next day.)

Isobel and I met at the photo club on Tuesday afternoons. Other days I left my classes, walked up the canal and hitchhiked south on Prince of Wales to her and Gerald's house, my new home. I studied outside when the weather was warm, turning my chair to face the sun and straining to hear Gerald's music as it whispered through the studio window—Vivaldi or Bach or Haydn. Sometimes he'd ask me to look at his work and I would go inside. Sometimes he worked without music and I'd hear the tinny sound of Isobel's radio playing in the kitchen, where she read her philosophers: Kant, Plato and Hegel. In the mornings we ate a breakfast of toast and coffee together—Gerald's square frame would look boyish in his sleepiness, Isobel would sit on his lap with her bare legs protruding from her bathrobe—before they disappeared into the studio. In the evenings, we'd share a bottle of wine and Gerald would ask me questions about mathematics or engineering. I don't think he was truly interested, but asked out of courtesy: what did the symbol he'd seen in my notebook mean, or how could

we be sure an overpass wouldn't collapse? "That's an algorithmic sign—it's basic mathematics," I'd say, and Gerald would nod his head, but soon his attention would drift. He'd pour salt onto the table and shape faces with the grains. "Keep going, I'm listening," he'd say, but soon I'd be caught up in what he was doing and forget what I was talking about. Maybe I was delusional, but even those salt sketches spoke more to me than algorithms ever did.

After my last mid-term exam, I bought a couple of bottles of wine in plans of celebration, but Gerald and Isobel were out when I got home. I drank alone, straight from the bottle, as if I was a rogue artist myself. Although I only had a quarter litre, I wandered from the kitchen to Gerald's studio feeling a little drunk, and I touched the paints drying on his palette, leaving my fingerprints behind. It seemed a simple thing that he used those colours to produce the sketches, yet I wouldn't know where to start. I began looking at one painting after another, wondering why they affected me the way they did. I placed a series of canvases one beside the next, the nudes of Isobel. Then the front door opened and I heard her laughter and Gerald's. I didn't try to hide them and soon Isobel came into the studio to find me. She picked up a sketch and studied it for a moment. I watched as she held the canvas in front of her.

"You see these lines? See where they lead—how they draw the eye from the centre to the face?" She moved from that sketch to another. "You see in this one, the angles draw you to the breasts, do you see that? Each one accentuates something different, Gerald's preoccupations. Lovely, aren't they?"

I wanted to tell her she was missing something, though I couldn't explain what. Gerald entered the room then and put his thick hands on Isobel's shoulders, ran them down until they rested on her breasts. He was a big man; his hands covered her chest. He laughed and Isobel laughed too, then she pulled his hands down to her hips. He dipped his head and kissed her hair. I could almost smell it myself. I knew it wouldn't be long before they moved to the bedroom. I felt unsteady on my feet.

I looked at the sketch that Isobel had pointed out, the one where the angles led me to the breasts. I wanted to bring it to my room and hang it on the wall. Gerald had once told me that he planned to turn my bedroom into a gallery one day, and I could picture the room painted white, with all the furniture gone, and just a bedroll to roll out at night. I would look up at the painting from the floor. In the mornings, sunshine would come through the window. I stood in the gallery for another while before I noticed that Gerald and Isobel had left. I went outside to clear my head.

When the weather turned hot and the darkroom became unbearable, Isobel and I stopped going to the photo club altogether. I was busy anyway—recruiters often came to the school and I sat through interview after interview before finally being offered a job in Thunder Bay, from a chemical company that supplied bleaches to the pulp and paper mills. I signed a contract without hesitation. Isobel helped me pick out a car, a seventy-one Pinto, that I loaded so full the back end sank over the wheels. When she hugged me goodbye she gave me a pair of oversized

sunglasses with heart-shaped lenses. They were cheap—the arms fell off the first time I put them on, but they snapped back in place. I wore them while she took a Polaroid. Gerald gave me a sketch: two bodies drawn from one line, without a doubt, he and Isobel, joined in dance. I made my trek north and found an apartment on Rupert Street, where I hung the sketch in my bedroom, above my bed.

Right away I was busy with work, busy enough that it took me sometime to realise how little I liked the city. Once in a while I'd get in my car and drive for a couple of hours in one direction or another, but never ventured far, at first because I couldn't afford to and later because I was saving my money to get out of there for good. And the Pinto kept dying anyway—I couldn't trust it beyond getting me to work. When I felt the need for something familiar, I telephoned Gerald and Isobel, until I realised I couldn't afford that either, and we lost touch. Still I thought of them often, and Gerald's painting brought them to mind every time I entered the bedroom.

Dust collected on the telephone and, except for a Christmas card my first year, only fliers and bills came by mail. In 1978, as winter approached, layoffs were rumoured at the plant and I started dreaming about Isobel and Gerald. They were short dreams, but vivid: in one, I was on the front steps and Isobel called to me from inside. In another, I was in the backyard and heard Gerald's music through the studio window. I'd awake with a pained sense of longing. I got my pink slip in early December but worked until my birthday, the 23<sup>rd</sup>. That day, taking the expressway home from Fort William with my office things stuffed into

a box in the back seat, I felt desperate, elated. I had the heat on full, the defroster blowing, and I turned on the windshield wipers to clear the blowing snow. They creaked, brittle in the cold, as they scraped across the surface of the glass. I decided just then what I would do.

Their telephone rang and rang again until an answering machine cut in. Gerald's voice sounded electronic: "The Rideau Gallery is closed right now, please leave a message."

*The Rideau Gallery.* "Hello you two," I said. "I'm coming for a visit. I hope you're home."

Snow came down in big, sticky flakes as I turned onto Prince of Wales and searched for familiar landmarks. It had been a while, and I'd forgotten the expanse of distance, the long curves of that road. I felt almost drunk from two days of staring at highways. At the end of a slow curve I saw a wooden sign through the snowflakes, Rideau Gallery, and I turned in. A car sat under inches of snow in the driveway, but the walk had been shovelled recently. Christmas lights flashed in the window.

Little gnomes in Christmas colours, green and red, lined the path to the door. Snow flakes collected on their caps and their legs disappeared into the snow as though they'd been frozen in place. I counted them, one to nine, and laughed, though I imagined there was more to the joke.

The world was absolutely quiet once the ticking of the Pinto's engine died away, and I wondered if I was really back or just dreaming. My legs shook



unpredictably, as if I'd been at sea for days. I went up the steps and knocked, and heard footsteps inside. Bells chimed as Gerald opened the door. I'd forgotten how big he was until I saw him again—he'd grown even thicker with age, making me feel tiny in comparison. His bloodshot eyes strained to recognise me; then they misted and his face broke into a grin. He grabbed me in a rough embrace and a button on the chest his overalls raked my cheekbone. My ribs sank under the pressure of his arms and I tried to hold him tight as well. He smelled of old sweat and dust and when he hugged me I felt unusually secure, as if I'd come home after a long time away. He pushed me away from him, at arms' length, and looked me over.

“Clayton,” he said. “My God, Clayton, it's good to see you! My God, look at you!”

He hugged me again and this time I avoided the button, letting my head rest on his chest. “Gerald,” I said, once he'd let me go. “You look great.”

“Come in,” said Gerald. “Are you really here? My God, I've had ten hours of sleep in the last three days, I feel like I'm hallucinating—”

“Didn't you get my message? I called last night.”

“God, no. I've been open to all hours; I haven't checked my messages in a month—it's Christmas.”

We were both laughing.

“I saw the gnomes,” I told him.

“Ha! Yes, I guess you would. My God, Clayton!”

Gerald led the way to the kitchen. He took my coat and hat and handed

me a beer. I handed him a bag I'd brought with a bottle of rum and a carton of eggnog inside. Gerald sat at the kitchen table and I sat across from him. I looked for signs in his face to mark something of our time away, but couldn't be sure of what I saw. He looked healthy, but he always looked healthy. His eyebrows and hair were peppered with dust, but he looked great. Sitting across the table, I wondered what he saw.

"Cheers," he said, and we clinked our bottles together. "Good God, it's been a long time—how long has it been?—no I guess it's only been a couple of years. Well, it seems longer. What's new?" he asked. "Forget I asked that, it's a stupid question. I couldn't begin to answer that kind of question. Here's a better one—how are you doing? How do you feel?"

"Great. I'm glad I finally came. I've been thinking about visiting for a while."

"Down for the holidays?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "No solid plans yet... I'm not really sure."

"Alone?"

"All by my lonesome," I said. "Same old, same old. But how are you doing?"

"Busy. Really busy. I haven't had a second to think about things. When did you get in?"

"Just now—just this instant."

"Good old Clayton."

"Where's Isobel?" I asked.

“You’ve surprised me,” he said. He looked me up and down, as if I really might be an hallucination. “By God, yes, you’ve surprised me!”

We clinked our bottles together again and Gerald laughed. “If only I’d known!” He went to the kitchen sink and washed his hands. He splashed water on his face and took a drink from the faucet. I looked at my own hands and noticed that underneath them, the kitchen table had coffee rings staining the wood. The room smelled of something familiar, like sawdust. I felt as though I’d never left, although the artwork on the walls had changed. A sketch of old, weathered hands stood on a bookshelf by the window. On the wall beside me was a photo of a Vietnamese man in a rice field, bent over with a scythe in his hand. The photo was reproduced four times, each in a slightly darker shade than the last. I stood up and looked at them more closely.

“These are different,” I said. “Are they yours?”

“They certainly are.”

I looked at those prints and then another next to the fridge, all the while waiting for the sound of Isobel at the door, or coming out of the bedroom. I turned to Gerald and for some reason his eyes made me feel uncomfortable. “Hey,” I said. “I haven’t seen the place since the gallery. Why don’t you give me a tour?”

“Of course,” he said. He took another sip of his beer. “But it’s a little different than you probably think.” He led me through the house, past the old rooms that I suddenly remembered perfectly but saw very little of with the lights turned out inside. I glanced in anyway, but saw very little: a chair and a couch in

the living room, a television under the picture window. Gerald brought through to the gallery, my old bedroom, where a plastic carpet had been nailed to the floor to catch the dirt from people's shoes.

He opened the door and, in a subdued voice, said, "surprise." A wall had been knocked down to make a long, narrow room, painted white, and bright track lighting shone from the ceiling. Christmas lights flashed in the windows. Instead of the canvases that I had imagined, instead of paint and charcoal and pencil sketches, gnomes lined the floor and hung from the walls. Gnomes in Christmas garb, with round bellies and black hats, gnomes in Halloween costume, garden gnomes with pickaxes and rakes and spades. There were gnomes in Boy Scout uniforms and gnomes with tennis rackets. Their faces were disturbingly familiar.

"Good God," I said. A strange feeling came over me, seeing them all there—it got hold of my spine and passed into my eyes. The plaster dust hanging in the room made me cough. Gerald looked at my face and then turned away. He picked up a boy scout and flipped it over. His initials were etched into the underside of the foot.

"People," he said. "They buy them. Kids love them."

"Oh Lord," I said.

"My studio's still back there." He gestured towards a door at the back of the room.

I looked, but the door was closed.

"Yes," said Gerald. "Things have changed."

I understood the dust in his hair. "Gerald," I said.

“We needed money.” He rapped his knuckles on the gnome—it made a loud, hollow sound. “I missed you,” he said. He ran his hand over the gnome and picked at a spot on the ear where the paint had chipped away.

“I missed you too.”

“We should go outside—I haven’t been outside in a long time. It gets depressing in here.” He put the boy scout down. “What do you think of vodka and orange juice?” he asked. “Or eggnog? We could start on your eggnog.”

He turned off the lights but I still saw the gnomes. Their shapes filled the space of the room.

“Gerald, where’s Isobel?” I asked.

“Gone.”

I could smell him better than I could see him—a rich, musky smell beneath the room’s shroud of dust. I heard him breathing.

“Since September,” he said. “I haven’t heard a word from her.”

We took mugs of eggnog outside and sat on the front steps, watching snow fall on the yard, the gnomes. It was a dark night and the air was heavy. Behind the cedar hedge, cars passed on the road where the dark lines of tire tracks led the way out of town. The air around us lit up as headlights passed—snowflakes held in slow descent. They covered my jacket as we sat there and collected on my hat. I looked up and snowflakes landed on my face. One clung to Gerald’s eyelid and refused to melt.

“They’re not all bad,” I said, talking about the gnomes. “They have their

charm.”

“Isobel thought they’d sell,” said Gerald. He stood up and ran his fingers through his hair. On the roadside, the Rideau Gallery sign hung quiet in the snowfall. Gerald walked to the driveway, wiped the snow from the sign, and walked back. He looked huge in his winter coat. He stood in front of me, as though considering what he wanted to say. Then, with a startling violence, he kicked a green gnome clear across the yard. It hit the hedge and disappeared into the snow beneath. I stood up and rubbed my hands together. Maybe it was nerves, but I laughed.

Gerald stood perfectly still.

A car drove by and the air lit up.

I was feeling tipsy. I sat back down.

Gerald crossed the yard and brushed the snow from the gnome he’d kicked. It was tiny in his hands. “The funny thing is, at one point I really did like them,” he said. “Then, I don’t know. Do you know what I mean? I think I hate the little fuckers.”

We finished our eggnog and then Gerald said we should do something; he asked if I’d help him make a sculpture. He got down on his hands and knees and together, we rolled balls of snow around the yard until the knees of my jeans were wet through. Dead pieces of grass and fallen leaves stuck to the snow and we uncovered brown patches of lawn underneath. Occasionally, cars drove by and we saw the falling snow. I worked until my hands felt numb and I stopped to look

at the yard. The gnomes were lined up like guards for the mermaid Gerald was shaping. It's tail stretched along the ground and body rose up into the air, but if I didn't know what it was supposed to be, I wouldn't have guessed what it was. I got down on the ground again but just then tires screeched to a stop down the road from us. Gerald and I both looked over the hedge and saw a woman get out of a car.

She slammed her door and started down the road carrying a suitcase. She was bathed in red from the taillights of the car and didn't even flinch as man got out of the driver's side and yelled at her: "Come back here! You're being crazy!" She kept walking towards us, although she didn't see us, and the man got back in the car, reversed until he was beside her and got out again. "Leave me alone!" she yelled, and when he grabbed her arm she swung the suitcase at him. I turned to Gerald, but his eyes were riveted, staring over the hedge. I looked back and the man was getting back into the car. He revved his engine and, when the woman kept walking, sped away, fishtailing into the road. The car's taillights moved into the distance and disappeared around a curve. I turned to Gerald but his eyes were riveted, staring over the hedge.

As she came near, I saw that the woman was young, probably a couple of years younger than me. Her hair was jet black, pulled into a ponytail, and snowflakes melted when they touched it. After a minute, she put down her suitcase and blew on her hands. Then she pulled the sleeves of her coat down over her fingers. She looked up and down the road and started again, this time with the suitcase dragging behind her on the asphalt. When she got closer, she

saw the gallery sign, then the first of the Christmas gnomes. She took a couple of steps into the driveway, following the line of gnomes with her eyes until she saw the abused gnome, on the path again, where Gerald had put it. She saw Gerald then, still on his knees in the snow, and she must have thought he was a child at first because when he stood up, she took a step back. But she regained her composure and smiled. She introduced herself as Claire, and asked if she could use the telephone.

“Of course,” said Gerald. “Of course you can.”

He showed Claire inside and I followed. In the hallway, I could see she was shaking, and I waited by the door while she used the telephone.

“Do you have someone to call?” Gerald asked her.

“I guess I’ll call a cab,” she said. “Do you know of any hotels?”

It was quiet in the kitchen and I could imagine what he was thinking: *it's Christmas Eve, it's late.*

“Would you like to stay for a drink?”

“He’ll be back,” she said. “I don’t want to be around when he comes back.”

There was more quiet and he asked again, “Won’t you stay for a drink?”

We sat in the living room, and Gerald turned on the television to the channel that showed logs burning, as if the television was a fireplace.

“It was a stupid argument,” said Claire. “But he’s so frustrating. He never listens.”



The picture window above the television drew our attention every time a car passed on the road. But I watched the burning logs more than the window, and I listened to Claire talk. The alcohol was catching up to me, and the driving as well, and, I suppose, the understanding that I'd come back to a place much different than the one I'd left. I sat on the end of the couch with Claire beside me and Gerald beside her, and watched the logs and tried not to think about these things. There were drinks in front of us, and I picked mine up, held it in my hand.

"He'll come back for me," said Claire. "I know he will."

I nodded my head.

"It's probably hard for you to understand," she said. "But he loves me. He really loves me."

"And what about you?" asked Gerald.

Claire took her drink from the table and sipped it. She looked at the picture window as if it might answer the question for her.

I cleared my throat. "It's rare to find someone you love," I said. "You can't throw that kind of thing away."

"But sometimes things just don't work out," said Gerald. "Sometimes there's nothing you can do about it."

"I don't know what I think," said Claire. "But I know he loves me."

A passing car showed us the front yard, the falling snow. We all looked, and I saw the shape of the gnomes outside, along the pathway. I felt cold. The car kept going.

"I know I'm not in your situation, but sometimes you've got to look at

things realistically," said Gerald.

Claire finished her drink and he got up to get her another one. While he was in the kitchen she asked me, "Do you have a wife?"

I told her I didn't.

"Have you ever been in love?"

"I don't know."

"When you find someone, I bet you'll never leave her."

I looked at her hard then and wondered what she saw in me. Because I believed just then that I could fall in love, with her for instance, and never think of leaving.

"Maybe," I said.

Gerald came back in with the carton of eggnog and the bottle of rum. He poured Claire a drink and sat beside her once again.

"It was him that pulled over," she said. "We were arguing and the next thing I knew we were pulled over and he yelled at me so I got out of the car. My Christmas present's still in the back seat."

"Sometimes things just don't work out," said Gerald.

She turned to him and said, "I know you've been in love."

Gerald said, "Clayton could tell you."

I watched the logs on television and wondered what I was supposed to say. I said, "He made all these paintings of her," I told Claire. "If you saw them, I think you'd understand."

"But things change," said Gerald. "One day we woke up and realised

something was wrong—we were living our lives, but they weren't the lives we wanted. We realised what we needed to do.”

I saw from the thoughtfulness of Claire's face that she was putting her story within the frame of his and seeing how it might end. She looked around the room. She looked at me and then at Gerald.

“I'll bet you broke her heart,” she said.

Gerald shook his head, no. “Change is the hardest thing,” he said.

Then a car illuminated the yard once again. The gnomes were being buried by the snowfall. This time the car did not pass by, but drove slowly, slowly down the road. Gerald stopped talking. We all watched as the headlights turned into the driveway and light shone through the glass of the window. Claire tensed beside me and I smelled a trace of body odour, acrid in the still room. Before long, the doorbell rang.

“Dear God,” whispered Claire.

“You stay here, I'll deal with it,” said Gerald.

He moved into the hall. Claire followed him, but only to the threshold of the living room, out of site of the entrance. We heard bells ring.

“Hello?”

“Hello. Excuse me for bothering you—”

“Do you know what time it is?”

I came up beside Claire until my left arm touched her right. She trembled—her fingers clasped the frame of the doorway.

“I'm sorry, I'm very sorry. I wouldn't bother you if it wasn't important,

but I've been driving all over. I'm looking for my wife."

Claire let go of the doorway and took hold of my arm. "It's not true," she whispered. "It's not true—I'm not his wife."

"You can't find your wife?" said Gerald.

"We had an argument, a stupid argument. She got out of the car..."

Claire took a step towards the men, towards the door, but held herself back. I could see her ribcage rise and fall under her shirt. Her hair was held in a ponytail at the back, tied with a simple piece of leather. One tug and it would fall free, over her shoulders and down her back. I willed her to go. I took her hand from my arm. She leaned on her front foot as if to move, but then heard Gerald's voice and hesitated once again.

"You left your wife on the side of the road? In the middle of winter?"

"We were tired," the man said. "We were both tired. Christmas is a hard time for us."

Claire covered her face with her hand.

"Look Mister, it's late," said Gerald. Then his voice dropped and he talked quietly. It was a kind voice I heard, a voice that said, *I understand. Believe me, I understand.* Soon the bells chimed—the door closed. Claire wavered, still balanced between possibilities. She reached back blindly with her hand and caught my arm once again. "It's not what you think," she told me. "It's not that simple."

Headlights flooded the window as the car backed out of the driveway. Gerald came in then and put his hand lightly on Claire's back. "Are you ok?" he

asked.

She nodded her head.

Then Gerald looked at me. His eyebrows came together, as if in worry.

“How about you Clayton? You don’t look well.”

“I’m tired,” I said. “I guess I’m tired.”

Gerald put his hand on my shoulder and led me back into the living room; Claire followed. “I know how you feel,” he said. “I’ve had six hours of sleep in the last three days.” I looked at Claire but she was caught up in her own thoughts. “You can sleep on the couch if that’s ok, there are blankets in the closet. And there’s a telephone in the studio if you need it.”

I sat on the couch and watched the logs burn on television. In the kitchen, Claire and Gerald talked about the man in the car. There were two sides to him, Claire was saying, she didn’t expect Gerald to understand. They talked about the man and then they talked about Isobel and soon they talked in abstract. They were talking about love. I went through the gallery to the studio, where colourless gnomes waited to be blasted in the oven, to be painted one colour or another. Behind the gnomes, Gerald’s canvases were stacked against the walls. The telephone hung above a sketch of footprints. I wondered what Isobel would say if she heard my voice, if she’d be the person I remembered or someone else altogether. I felt as though we knew each other, intimately, and that we would fall into old comforts. I pictured her in the red light of the darkroom, and then, lying on pillows in the studio. I wondered if she ever thought about me. But then the

colourless gnomes brought me back to where I was. I wanted to believe she left after this had happened. I turned off the light and went back to the living room.

The logs burned on and from the kitchen I heard Gerald and Claire talking about very little now: their favourite fruits, their love of sunshine on bare skin. I stopped listening and after a while they stopped talking. I looked in the kitchen and it was empty—Gerald's bedroom door was closed. I went back to the living room and flicked through channels. There was a sermon, but little else. I turned back to the burning logs, then I got an idea. Quietly as I could, I looked through the living room, the kitchen. I searched through drawers, flipping through notepads. I even looked in the gallery, the studio, and revisited the canvases that were stacked against the walls, but I found no trace of her. She was gone for good. Finally I sat on the living room floor, trying not to think of what would happen next. I closed my eyes.

Thinking someone was calling me, I opened them again. A piercing pain stung my eyes; my head pounded. I was tempted to lie perfectly still, to wait for it all to pass, but a fleeting terror gripped me; I made my way to the door. Outside it was growing light. The snow had stopped falling, but everything was white. The gnomes sat frozen in the morning light, their hats covered in peaks of snow. I slid on my shoes but didn't dare tying the laces. I kept my eyes glued to those gnomes. The bells chimed as I stole my exit.

## Comfort

After a quick divorce, Trevor moved into a small apartment near the hospital with a bed, a futon he used as a couch, and the books he had accumulated in college. He bought a reclining chair at a garage sale and a dining room set from a colleague at work and in no time the place began to take on the appearance of somewhere someone might live. He draped a batik cloth over a coffee table that had been left in the apartment and bought candles that he lit and then blew out so they didn't appear to be merely for decoration. Sitting on the futon, Trevor could see into the kitchen with its bright white cupboards, past his bedroom door to the unmade bed, and out the picture window at the neighbouring buildings across the street. On occasion he would get in his car and drive by the house he'd shared with his ex-wife, knowing that she was long, long gone, and he could knock on the door for an eternity without getting another glimpse of her. Sometimes it made him feel good, driving by there, as if some kind of resolution had been achieved.

Trevor's sister, Erinn, began calling after he made the move. She asked how he was doing and when a lost note sounded in her brother's voice, she invited him out. One weekend it was to go drinking with "the girls" and the next it was to see a play at Magnus Theatre. Trevor declined these invitations, feeling that he

had too much to do, that something needed to be done. And after getting off the phone, he would sit on his futon and look at the buildings across the street with people coming and going; he would ponder the new recliner and the refrigerator and try to picture how the place would look if someone else lived there, how they would walk into the living room, click on the stereo and relax.

In those first weeks Trevor came to understand a few things. Although he wasn't ready to think of his ex-wife, he was unable to stop thinking about her. He had built his life on her needs, and even though her dependence was identified and removed with care, with diligence, he was unprepared for the ensuing fall. If he was angry, which he thought he should be, he wasn't ready to feel it. Sooner or later, he was sure, the words would come to describe exactly how he felt.

The second thing Trevor came to understand was that his life occupied a very small space in the world: going to work and coming home from work, trips to the grocery store and beer store, talking to Erinn on the telephone and occasionally his parents as well. Without Larissa, the days lacked substance. Urgency. It could not go on that way. Sooner or later he would begin to hate himself, as well as everything he relied on.

Already he hated the apartment. Putting his beer down on the hardwood floor he was certain that the building was on a slant. The bottle rocked back and forth before coming to a rest. The pictures he hung, the one painting he owned, never looked to be level; either the floor or the ceiling was off, he could not tell which. The books in the bookshelf toppled the minute they weren't packed tightly together and that occasional thud made Trevor's eyelid twitch. Still, when



he finished work, he bolted to the apartment as if something pressing awaited him.

Larissa, naked at the foot of the bed. It was cold outside and Trevor watched her root through her clothing, deciding what to wear. Her skin was covered in goosebumps and he lifted the covers so she could crawl back in beside him. This image snuck up on Trevor when he wasn't careful. He couldn't place when it had happened except that it must have been winter. Sometime after her drinking started again. (In the bathroom he held her hair while she brought it back up. She cried afterwards and then fell asleep while he stayed awake, wondering how she went from one state to the other so quickly.) He was exhausted through the days.

Sometimes he made himself remember the way she'd held him. There was the feeling that their bodies would fuse. She would kiss his neck gently, under the jaw, just below the ear. *An I love you* without the words—to let him know that she was there, that it meant something. And it worked: it was etched in his memory. And what about him? Was there anything he'd done to affect her in the same way? He was not the kind of person who did memorable things.

Perhaps that was part of the reason he felt so special when they were first together—she picked him out of all the people she could have had. She was abrupt, but funny and beautiful and sexy—he couldn't believe she found *him* attractive. At work he told Caroline and Julia about his first dates and the way Larissa talked dirty when she flirted. The two older women listened to Trevor's

stories and smiled at him as he passed blindly through the honeymoon period with his new love. They joked with Trevor in a friendly, meaningless way, poking fun at his state of amazement and his inability to interpret innuendo. And when the honeymoon period ended without warning, without monument, they smiled in the same knowing way.

In those days, Trevor would stand outside with his coworkers while they smoked on breaks, waiting until one of them said, "What's on your mind, Sweetie?" before he let it out. Sometimes he would bring marijuana to work and the three of them would pass a joint around, the two women giggling at being nearly forty and smoking pot on work breaks, Trevor saying, "At one a.m. out of nowhere she says, *I think I'd prefer if you slept on the couch tonight*. What do you make of that?" And Caroline would smile sympathetically, as if she'd heard the same thing a hundred times herself, before laughter overtook her and she simply patted him on the shoulder, saying, "I'm sorry, love."

Time and again, the three stood in a group with the joint burning down and the wind blowing through the parking lot. The stories kept coming and Caroline finally said, "She's got you whipped, Sweetheart." Trevor could do nothing but shake his head. Things had started so well. You could not fake a love like that, he thought. And there were still great moments. (She would sit on his lap in a bar full of strangers, kiss him full on the lips and say, "Take me to bed, Stranger.") Sparks would fly from the joint as it was thrown to the ground. There were still great moments.

One time Trevor found Larissa crying in front of the kitchen window, looking out as if some heartbreaking drama was unfolding in the back yard. He wasn't sure why it made him feel good, but it did. He put his arms around her and she went limp, as if she had no control over her body. "What's wrong?" he asked but she was unable to answer. "Don't worry," he said. "We'll figure it out."

Trevor moved his things from his apartment to her rented house in the north end of town. The crying, in some way that Trevor still didn't understand, led them to that point. She was so happy to have him there, she said, but still she cried. Together they painted the kitchen a warm, peach colour and hung a wind chime outside the bedroom window. They tried different restaurants in town and spent evenings walking the beach at Wild Goose Bay. And just when it seemed like things were on the mend, the tears would come again, and nights and nights that Larissa wanted to sleep alone. Caroline suggested one smoke break that the world was full of nice girls, it was unwise to settle into anything too quickly.

In his life as a bachelor again, in the apartment on Nora Street where the pictures would not hang straight and beer bottles were always on the verge of tipping, Trevor began to rely on things which had never held any value for him before: the daily newspaper with its doses of misery and feel-good, the occasional day time talk show, horoscopes and psychology magazines.

"She was afraid," he told his sister. "We worked through the drinking *together*, we worked through the eating thing *together*, the nightmares, her

troubles at work... in the end she was afraid of what we had.” He couldn’t look at Erinn when he talked this way.

Erinn looked around the room and then, critically, at her brother. He knew what she thought of Larissa, that he’d been taken for a ride.

“I think you’re still putting more into it than she ever did, Trevor. She never appreciated what she had.”

“Maybe,” he said. “But maybe there’s more to it.”

“Have you ever thought about going back to school, Trevor? Why not take some time to do something you want? Forget what she wants.”

“You know what, Erinn? It’s just that I felt we were over the hump, you know? I felt like we could start to relax and enjoy things.”

He sat on the futon looking out the window and then at his sister. She sat on the edge of the recliner, as if she couldn’t wait to leave.

“Do you really think she’s changed at all?” she asked.

“Yes, I do.”

“I think with Larissa it was going to be one thing after another. If it wasn’t the depression it was the alcohol. If not that it was what –bulimia? There was always something. That’s why she needed you.”

Trevor was quiet. He had often thought the same thing himself. In bed at night he dreamed of a telephone call from Vancouver with a familiar voice attached to the other end, saying, “Trevor, I really *need* you right now.” And when the call did not come, Trevor wondered if everything was better. But how could it be, with him so far away? And if it wasn’t, why wasn’t she calling?

Trevor thought far too much, and he knew it. Now when he looked back on things, he saw them through a muddy filter. Their elopement no longer seemed like a sudden, spontaneous decision. Larissa had quit drinking and there was cause for celebration. She wanted to try something new, outrageous. Not for the last time, he thought they were beyond the worst of it. Days after the trip to town hall, they flew to Cuba and stayed on the beach for two weeks, burning in the sun. They made love with their bodies angled precariously away from each other, skin too sensitive to touch. They laughed about it, but their laughter seemed desperate. The boredom of sobriety had set in—Trevor saw that now—and Larissa needed distraction. They moved farther apart even as they pretended to grow closer. And when they watched the waters of the Caribbean swell below the hotel window, Trevor's feeling that he didn't want to go home—that he wanted to stay forever—was not something beautiful. It was not happy. It was a feeling of loss, of losing something.

The water in the bathtub never fully drained. It pooled where someone else's bum had moulded itself into the porcelain. In the bedroom, the lampshade would not stay level on its perch and Trevor feared falling asleep with the light on. When he closed his eyes he pictured the heat of the bulb turning the lampshade brown and then smoking black, fire running up the curtains to the ceiling over his

bed. At work he fantasized about coming home to an apartment that had been devastated by fire, earthquake or tornado, but not while he was in it, not so close to the blanket he slept under.

Time passed. Autumn winds drove out the northern summer. Trevor began to take risks: he left his reading light on when he went out at night and talked rudely to men who looked like they could snap him in half. Erinn tried and tried. Maybe a blind date would help? What about a drink with her friend, Becky? Had he thought about talking to someone about it—someone professional?

“Erinn, I’m ok. Don’t worry about me.”

“How can you expect me not to worry about you?”

Trevor’s air of something-big-is-on-the-horizon left him. After a night of heavy drinking he walked home, trying to look as distinguished as possible, but he tripped and crumpled into the street just as a young couple walked by. He knew how he must look.

“You wait, she’ll break your heart,” Trevor yelled.

The couple began to walk faster.

“Hey it’s just a joke,” he said. “You look great together!”

It saddened him when they didn’t look back.

Trevor got home and sat in his living room. The walls were not as solid as he remembered them. He tried to think of all the things he might do to pass the time and sober up and before he knew it, he was dialling his sister.

“Erinn, Erinn.” He closed his eyes and gripped the phone as if it would escape him.

“Trevor, what time is it—what are you calling for?”

“Jesus, I don’t know.”

“Trevor, it’s late. What do you want?”

“I thought she would have called by now, you know?”

“Jesus.”

“Why did she get the furniture? What—“

“—Trevor, she’s gone. Get over it.”

“Oh Christ. It’s useless. I’ve tried...”

Erinn did not answer. For a moment, Trevor wondered if she’d hung up.

“Erinn? Hey, Erinn? I’m sorry.”

“You’ve got to put it in the past—you’re making yourself miserable.”

Trevor tried to think of something that would make him happy, but he could not. When he closed his eyes he couldn’t see anything. His head spun. He got off the couch and stood in the middle of the room, holding the phone at his side. “You know what?” he said. “This apartment is tilted!”

“What?”

“I have to walk uphill to get to the fridge!”

He woke up later, the telephone still in his hand.

Saturday morning, Trevor stood in his living room with the window open while cold air blew in. He wore rubber gloves and the smell of lemon-scented cleaner hung in the air. Winter was coming, he realised, and he had to come to terms with his life. Earlier he had rummaged through old family photos, selecting a few that he would buy frames for. Then he stood still for a moment, looking first at the photos on the table and then the painting on the wall, feeling as though he was forgetting something very important. His feet were wide apart, as if the floor might change its tilt at any second.

The telephone rang.

“Hey brother, you awake? You ready for an adventure?”

“Hey, I’m sorry about the other night.”

“Remember? We said we’d go somewhere together.”

“No.”

“Well I’ve cancelled my other plans, so we’re going. Grand Marais first; we can hit the casino on the way back.”

“The casino?”

“We’ll see when the time comes, but pack a suit for tonight just in case. It could be fun.”

In his closet, Trevor found an old dry-cleaning bag and, for lack of option, filled it with the suit he’d been married in. Then he sat on the futon, watching the traffic as it passed by below. When Erinn arrived, he put the suit in the back alongside his sister’s toiletry bag. He climbed in the passenger seat and she put the car in gear before his door was closed.



They drove south of the city as the sun heated the September air. The wind blew hard and the wild grasses on the roadside leaned against the grey rocks of the Norwesters. There were wildflowers in the ditches, yellow and purple and red against the straw grass and grey stone, and the highway was quiet with only the occasional car passing by.

Erinn looked over at her brother in the passenger side as he watched the scenery. She turned down the music on the radio and said, "What's up? What are you thinking?"

Trevor did not know what he had been thinking. The wildflowers leaning on the grass... He had been drifting, caught up in the motion of the car.

Erinn said, "Trevor, I don't know if you want to hear this, but I'm going to tell you anyway. You're better than she is. You're too good for her."

"Please. Don't start with this. I get the message."

"I mean it, you're better than she is."

"You don't know that."

"Look at all the things you did for her."

"I wanted to do those things."

The wind was blowing hard and Trevor felt it push against the car. The trees bent with it and then they straightened out.

"It's nice to be able to help," he said.

"I'll tell you what. If she was here right now, I'd probably smack her—that's what she needs more than anything."

"I'm sure that would help a lot."

“I’m not going to fight about this,” said Erinn. “I’m just saying what I think. You sounded bad the other night. It pisses me off. I thought it was time I told you what I think.”

Trevor did not know how to respond. He looked out the window and watched the trees, huddled in groups and disappearing as the car drove by. Occasionally there was a side road, a neighbourless house.

“I know her better than you think I do,” he said.

“She never would have been happy for long,” said Erinn. “There would have been something else. There would have always been some crisis.”

Trevor reclined his seat and unrolled his window a crack. The sky was an intense blue, the trees a a clean, dark green. “I know that. I’m sure she’s not all that happy right now.” The wind blew into his face and he said, “It makes me sad. I think the only reason she’s not calling me is because she thinks I hate her. I told her to call me if she needed to, but I know what she’s thinking.”

Erinn drove fast on the road. “This is the last word on Larissa: it’s out of your hands. You can’t do anything else for her. She made that decision and it’s time you moved on.”

“I still feel sorry for her.”

“That’s not helping.”

An hour later they arrived in Grand Marais and parked the car. They ate smoked lake trout at a restaurant that overlooked the water and bought t-shirts on sale

from the general store. They walked through the craft shops together and talked about their parents, how they would be back in the city soon, leaving the camp for another year. They talked about trivial things and the sunshine warmed them as the wind cooled them and the water capped out in the bay.

Just before supertime, they got in the car and drove north on the highway, back toward the city. The car hummed with the familiarity of movement. The traffic was light again and Trevor felt content, light-headed after being somewhere different.

A light drizzle started and Erinn switched on the windshield wipers. She leaned forward and peered through the blurred glass in front of her at the road. "I don't know about the casino," she said. "I wasn't counting on rain."

"It'll clear up in a second," said Trevor.

Under the tires, the pavement was sleek. The sun appeared for a minute and then disappeared. After another wave of rain the sun came out again. It shone brightly, making the highway glare.

"Did you think the sun will hold up?" asked Erinn.

Trevor heard his sister but he did not answer. In front of them a curious thing happened. A car slid off the road and disappeared completely. They saw it go off, still a good distance away, and then they didn't see it. Erinn looked at her brother and he looked at the road. She drove past where the tire tracks led off, trying to catch a glimpse of what had happened. Then she pulled over and reversed. They sat still for a moment before Trevor opened his door and got out.

He ran his thumb along his jaw and looked at the ditch, considering what to do.

He could see the car down there, the glint of a bumper in the sunlight.

“My God,” said Erinn.

“I think it rolled,” said Trevor.

He picked careful steps down the incline, through the long grass. Behind him, he saw Erinn following at a distance, her cardigan ballooning out behind.

When they got close, the whole car became visible, resting upside down at the bottom of the ditch, almost hidden by poplar shoots. In the passenger side, a red windbreaker was blowing in the wind where the window had shattered. The door was dented in but the roof had not completely flattened. Trevor knelt down beside the car and saw a woman inside, sitting upside down with hair covering her face, trying to move in her seatbelt. Next to the woman was a man and Trevor motioned Erinn to go to that side of the car. But then he looked closer at the man and he motioned her to stop, to go back to the road. Erinn crouched beside her brother and looked in. She covered her mouth with her hand and Trevor said, “Wave someone down. Get an ambulance.”

Erinn went back to the road. The grass and flowers pressed to the ground where she walked and then, slowly, rose back into the air.

The woman in the windbreaker made a noise and Trevor tilted his head so that she no longer appeared to be upside down.

“It’s ok,” he said. “I’m here with you now.”

She quieted and he said, “Let me find your hand.”

He reached into the car and found a hand at the end of a sleeve. He held it and rubbed it with his thumb. With his other hand he touched her forehead, pushing her hair out of the way.

“What’s your name?” he asked. “Can you talk?”

The woman made a noise and he saw how her head was twisted against the roof of the car. At least, Trevor thought, she couldn’t see the man beside her.

“It’s ok. It’s ok, you don’t have to talk,” he said. “You’re doing alright. Things are going to be alright.”

Trevor looked up to the side of the road and saw that his sister was watching him with horrified eyes. She looked at the highway and then back to her brother. He shrugged his shoulders to say, *I don’t know what to do either*. He rubbed the woman’s hand and touched her hair. He said, “Don’t worry, it’s not as bad as it seems.”

From the roadside came the sound of a car door closing and Trevor looked up. A man and a boy approached Erinn and started talking to her. She pointed down at Trevor and said something. The man grabbed the boy by the shoulder and pulled him in close; the boy’s baseball hat fell off onto the ground. Trevor felt like he should say something to them but then the woman in the car made a movement and he turned to her. He said, “Don’t worry, we’ll get you out of here soon.”

The woman made a noise and squeezed Trevor’s hand.

“You’re going to be fine,” he said. “I’m right here.”

The woman's hand relaxed and he bent in closer. He could hear the woman's breathing when the wind let up. It was mixed with sounds that he imagined were from her tongue trying to say something. It was airy, insubstantial, whatever the sound was.

He understood that she could not talk to him just then, not in the condition she was in. Trevor felt dizzy. Still crouching, he leaned against the side of the car. Rust flecks speckled the metal surrounding the wheel well. The tail pipe was nearly rusted away. He closed his eyes and then opened them. He leaned as close to the woman as he dared.

"Don't worry, darling," he whispered. "I'll take care of you."

Trevor remained kneeling in the grass until an ambulance arrived. He looked at the paramedic as if he'd just woken up from a troubling dream. "I don't know who she is," he said. He looked at the woman, her windbreaker still flapping in the wind. Then he asked, "Where will she go now?"

Trevor climbed the incline of the ditch to where his sister had been sitting, waiting, for some time. She got in the passenger seat and Trevor got in behind the wheel. His pants were wet at the knee and his hands shook slightly.

"Do you think she'll be alright?" asked Erinn.

He didn't know what to say. He looked at the highway, first in front of them, and then behind, in the rear-view mirror. The asphalt had dried up and the tire tracks leading off the road had disappeared as well. If they hadn't arrived at

the right time, if they hadn't seen it happen, the car would have been there a long time.

Trevor nodded towards the highway and turned to his sister. "It's a strange place to go off the road, don't you think? Right in the middle of a straightaway."

They drove north across the border and back into the city with Trevor quiet and Erinn talking now and again. "Can you imagine that poor boy? Did you see him there with his father? They'd just come back from fishing—they thought I had car trouble... can you imagine what that kid must be thinking? That's an awful thing to have to see at that age."

She said, "Do you think she'll live? She looked bad but she wasn't dead, was she?"

Trevor understood that his sister needed to talk it out. He wasn't sure why he didn't feel the same way, but he didn't. There had been a car accident and that wasn't good, but these things happen, he told himself. People drive in cars every day. He began to cry, but he wasn't sure why. These things happen, he told himself.

The streetlights and motel signs were bright on Arthur Street, the colours frightening after the moon and dark sky over the highway. Trevor drove carefully and looked over at his sister. He put his hand on her knee to reassure her, but the gesture seemed wrong somehow and he took his hand back.

"Was there a lot of blood?" she asked. "It looked like there was a lot of blood."

Trevor parked the car in front of his apartment and brought his sister upstairs. He poured her a glass of scotch and then changed his mind and put on the kettle for tea. He showed her to his bedroom and gave her a t-shirt, a pair of jogging pants to wear for the night. She lay down and he sat at the end of the bed, watching her.

“You’ve never seen anything like that, have you?” he asked.

“You act like you see it every day,” she said.

Trevor didn’t answer. He got up, waited for the kettle to boil and then poured a cup of tea for his sister. When he brought it back to the bedroom, she was asleep.

In the living room, the lemon scent from the morning still hung in the air, even though the windows had been left open. Trevor closed the windows and fingered through the photographs on the table. He would put them in frames and hang them. He saw where they should be hung. He looked hard at the walls. Everything was a little different, a little strange. The furniture, he noticed, needed rearranging. The futon would have to go, maybe the armchair too. He understood that things needed to be done. He pictured how the place would look when he finished and the room seemed to right itself. The painting and the curtain rod could be aligned. The coffee table had sturdy enough legs.

Trevor started to move the furniture but then he stopped. It was getting late and he didn’t want to leave a mess to deal with in the morning. Instead, he made himself a cup of tea. Standing in the middle of the room, he looked at the



telephone and then at the mug he held. The telephone would never ring; that seemed certain. He sipped his tea. It would never ring.

He hadn't really been able to help her— that was the worst part. He had tried to give her comfort, what else could he do?

Trevor told himself that whatever had happened, had happened before he got there. He could not change that. But it didn't make it any better. If only he'd listened harder, he thought, maybe he could have understood what she was trying to say.

He drained his tea and put the mug down in front of him. There were other things to think about and he tried to focus on them. Erinn was the first. She would need him. He would have to talk to her in the morning, to make sure she was alright. And the woman in the accident as well, if she survived. Both of them would need him. Maybe there would be a funeral to attend. Nothing was very certain. Maybe the morning paper would tell him more.

Trevor ran his finger along the wall behind the futon. Underneath the paint, lines of drywall tape were rough and bumpy. Suddenly he wondered, did Larissa take the wind chime from the back porch? He didn't think so. But leaving it there after the two of them left seemed criminal. Trevor put his head in his hands and tried to picture the back yard of their house, the wind chime. Instead, he saw the car accident as if he was standing in front of it. The woman, he remembered, wore a red windbreaker. She had given him her hand. He could feel that hand, knew how scared she was. He had touched her forehead, her hair. He had listened to her breathing. He strained hard to remember her face.

Something about it had been beautiful. Yes, he remembered. He could not put his finger on it exactly, but he knew. She had been beautiful. A warm and beautiful person.

## The Trick

My father taught me a trick. Make a circle with your thumb and your forefinger. Hold it away from you. A circle. Now look through it. What do you see?

He would take me to the cutover with him, where he worked loading trucks with lengths of black spruce, jack pine. In the summer he took scrap wood for the stove and I helped him. I told him once how ugly it was out there, the clear-cut with its grey hue, all deadwood and rock. That's when he showed me the trick, told me to look through the circle.

Everything was different.

I used it on the cutover and later, when I was bored at school. Looking at the world in that way I saw pencil shavings curled into themselves, the wood grain of my desk trying to swim beyond its limits. Everything made up of smaller parts. A bruise running blue to yellow, hair at that magical point where it enters the skin.

I forgot. I forgot that trick the same way I forgot many things as I grew up. But then, all at once, it came back to me. Looking at the world that way was a sudden relief. There were wildflowers in the long grass, purple against the green and white, yellow against the purple. The seeds in the grass were like grains of wheat. Higher up from the road, lichen turned the rocks to rust.

Looking at things that way, I almost laughed for a second and I wondered if my father had forgotten that trick too. Through the circle I saw the wind blowing hard at everything in front of me; leaves were bent, the grass and wildflowers moved in waves. I could almost ignore my brother crouching down at the bottom of the ditch. I could almost block out the tire tracks leaving the highway, disappearing in the grass.

## Every Little Bone

Then it was Tracy: "Dad, my legs are really sore."

He ignored her. He looked over at his wife. She had a black t-shirt wrapped around her head, covering her eyes. Through her blindfold she talked. "Honey," she said, "Your dad's the one who has to drive here."

"But we haven't stopped since Sault Ste. Marie."

In the Sault they'd taken a wrong turn and got caught in construction—it had thrown the schedule all to hell.

His wife pulled the t-shirt from her face, squinted in the sun. "Todd, I think we should stop now."

"I think we can push them another half hour."

"It's been over an hour. They've been crazy for over an hour."

He looked at the clock: one-thirty. "Wawa's only half an hour away. We might as well wait for Wawa. There's nothing before then anyway."

She shook her head. "Really," she said. "Really. What's the point?"

"Mom, I have to go to the bathroom." It was Mark.

Ella composed a memoir as they drove. It was in her head; it passed time. She pictured a pen scrawling notes on blank, white paper. She wrote down the same thing she'd once told her mother, *There were sides to him that nobody else saw. And he was a known quantity if you talked to him the right way. I knew how to talk to him.*

Ella looked across the seat at her husband. She ran a tentative finger along his forearm.

"Just a few more minutes," he said. He put his hand on the stick shift.

She watched as he stared at the road. "This is crazy," she said. She put the black t-shirt over her eyes again.

*We pushed on against my better judgement.*

Tracy pushed on Mark's stomach. "Time to make you pee," she said.

Mark laughed.

Todd looked at his wrist. Only five minutes had passed. "Can't you two keep still for twenty five minutes?"

"They've been in the car for five hours!" said Ella. She turned around to the back seat. "Tracy, don't make your brother pee his pants."

"Five hours?" said Tracy. "We've been in the car for five hours? Dad said it was three."

Mark was still laughing.

Todd shook his head. "Good one, Ella." He turned around to the kids.

"Let's sing a song," he said.

"Jesus, Todd, she knows I'm exaggerating," said Ella.

Mark started crying. He said that his stomach hurt. He said that he really had to pee now.

"It's only twenty minutes. If you two can't keep it down then I'll drop you off on the side of the road."

The car quieted down. Tracy sulked and Mark looked out the car window. Ella picked up a magazine from the floor. It was one of Tracy's Seventeen magazines. Ella couldn't understand what a nine year old wanted with a Seventeen magazine. She put down the window a crack and let in some fresh air. The wind was cold and loud and they were stuck behind a slow moving camper.

*Juvenile—at time he was plainly juvenile.*

"Really," she whispered. "It would take two seconds."

He turned on the radio. It was mostly static but he turned it up.

"What's the problem with stopping for two seconds?"

Ella didn't get an answer.

Tracy was whispering in the back seat. Todd couldn't hear what she was saying, but he heard Mark. He heard: "He did not. He said both of us." The kid was so damned gullible.

"Shh!" said Tracy, and then her giggle. "No," she said. "Just you."

"Mom, Tracy said Dad was going to leave me here."

"Leave your brother alone, Tracy."

Todd pulled out to pass but there was a blind corner ahead. With the camper in front of them, they'd be on the road until midnight. There was no getting around it. He honked his horn once and his wife turned to look at him.

"Accident," he said.

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Ellen saw that his jaw was set. With Tracy singing loudly in the back seat, there was nothing she could do. She looked around for something to distract him, but there was nothing: the road, the trees, the camper in front. She watched as if it were all in a movie. He put his foot on the brake and cut over to the edge of the road. The kids weren't paying attention. Tracy sang as quickly as she thought up the words. She didn't notice the car stopping. "God, Tracy, Shut up!" said Ella. She said it and then she scribbled in her brain: *that was no way for a mother to talk, and I knew it.*

God, this is insane, she thought.

*I think we were all going insane.*

A car passed, heading the other direction. The camper in front of them was pulling away, around the corner. Their car stopped.



When Ella's voice died away, the car quieted. "Out," said Todd. The kids got out and he pointed up a hill at a coniferous stand. "Over there," he said. The kids walked over to the trees. Todd turned to Ella.

*The children watched as we argued.* She wondered if they could see her hand on top of her husband's, fighting over the gearshift. She thought about getting out as well, but then what would she do? As the car pulled away, she made a point of looking back; to show them they didn't need to worry. She saw them but what could she do? "Christ," she said, and looked back at the road.

Five minutes. It was only five minutes. Ella pulled the car over to where they'd dropped the kids off. *I prayed to God they were all right.* She was the driver now. She looked at her husband and he got out of the car. She killed the engine and saw her children standing up the hill, by the trees. Tracy came running back to the car, but Mark didn't.

"He peed his pants mom."

"Why didn't he go in the trees?"

"He was too scared."

Ella looked up at her son and her husband walking down the hill. Her son had stopped crying; he had a dirty face. She saw no resemblance between the two. In the rear view mirror, she watched Todd undress Mark and put fresh clothes on him. Mark was shivering on the roadside with no pants on. She thought about going back there herself, but it was his doing. He had to fix it.

"Don't make him stand out in the open," she said, but Todd didn't hear. Either that or he ignored her. *How do you tell someone you love that you hate him?* She saw him take a bottle of Gravol out of the cooler. "Don't give him Gravol," she said. "The smell will make him throw up."

He put the Gravol back.

Todd got back in the car. From the passenger seat, things were different. The kids were hungry and he was too. The bag of apples didn't look like food any more. "I'll be glad to get to Wawa," he said. He looked over at Ella. She didn't take her eyes off the road.

"We could've been there by now," she said.

He turned around to the back seat. "How you guys doing back there?" Tracy stuck out her tongue. Mark looked like he might cry again. Todd said, "How about pizza for lunch?"

"Just cheese?"

"Just cheese."

He looked at Ella. She didn't look back. He knew that she could feel him smiling.

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Three on the nose. The pizza box was empty except for the two pieces they were saving for Ella. Mark was asleep on the ground with his head on Todd's leg.

Tracy did another cartwheel. Todd wished he'd been counting. They'd be in the thousands by now, he was sure. He looked at his watch. It was still three. He took a bite from one of the remaining pieces.

Tracy did another cartwheel. These are the things I notice, he thought. I'm lucky for that, for seeing so much in the smallest things. He pictured Ella in the car somewhere, still mad. He thought of her with pity. If only she could let things go, she wouldn't hurt herself this way. If only, he thought, she could see things the way I do, without being hurt by them.

When she finally did appear—when she pulled into a parking space by the picnic table—she appeared to Todd as she always had. Nothing had changed.

He put Mark in the car and then Tracy got in. Ella climbed over to the passenger seat. Todd gave the pizza box to her. She didn't look at him.

"Where were you?"

"I don't want to fight about this."

"That's fine," he said. "Me neither. But what was I supposed to tell the kids?"

"I'm not going to fight about this."

"I know what you were trying to do," he said. "You were trying to teach me a lesson."

She didn't say anything—she looked into the side mirror.

"Two hours was a little excessive."

Ella didn't look his way. He knew he wouldn't get a word out of her. All around were things to talk about. (Tracy must have done a thousand cartwheels...) Things worth noticing. If you can't appreciate your family then what are you left with?

"It didn't work," he said.

"Obviously."

"But it didn't work," he said.

"I heard you the first time."

What had she said earlier, to the kids? Your father's the one who's driving. That was it. Your father's the one who's driving. I'm the driver here. He turned it over in his head. Can't she see that? I'm the one who's driving.

"I'm driving," he said.

"Yes. Yes, you are," she said. She put the t-shirt over her face again. She laughed.

Todd felt his face heat up. Then he laughed too.

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Todd was the only one awake. He drove past the turn-off to Sibley Park, seeing the lake in glimpses. Big Lake Superior, he said to himself. The sun wasn't dead yet. In the evening light, the water looked warm. Through the windshield it passed him by. He thought about waking up Ella, so that she could see this too, but he didn't. He felt frozen, riveted, as if in a dream. There were signs for

Amethyst Beach and Sunnyside Beach and Mackenzie Beach and he thought about pulling over and camping somewhere along there. But the car moved smoothly along the road until the sun began to descend. By then they were in Thunder Bay; he didn't know where. It was still a long way to Winnipeg. He pulled over on a side street, near a big field and a school. Something was electric. He watched as the sun went down.

It was almost dark when Ella woke up. The car was stopped beside a big field and Todd was sitting on the hood.

"What are you doing?"

"Just watching."

"It's getting chilly. Aren't you cold?"

"No. Not at all."

She watched him and wondered what exactly he saw. What was it with men? *Thankfully, he still surprised me at times.* He looked lost, and she knew that when they got back in the car, he'd be dreaming. There was something that made her want to touch him— to reassure him just then.

She said, "We should get going soon, don't you think?"

"Have we been here before?" he asked.

"No."

They looked at each other and then at the field, at the place where the sun had been. Nothing was familiar anymore. Ella got into the driver's side and

drove until they found a main road. They followed it to an ice cream stand; hotel signs lighted the street up ahead. Ella called her parents from a pay phone to tell them how far they'd made it. "We should be in tomorrow," she said. Then she paid for the kids' ice cream while Todd got sweatshirts from the trunk.

The kids ran around in the dark. Ella knew that they were on some high right then, the ice cream and the night air. She watched as Mark spun in circles and Tracy did a handstand. She put her memoir away. In the end, she believed, she wanted to believe, it would turn out right. In the end there would be *something*.

"We should put her in gymnastics," she said.

"She's good, isn't she?"

They watched the kids until Mark got tired. He sat on the grass and then on his mother's knee. It was cool out and the stars began to shine up in the sky. Then Tracy made her fingers into pistols and shot at Mark. He jumped off of his perch and ran after her. Ella watched him go.

"We should find a hotel room before he gets cranky," she said.

"I don't know," said Todd. "I was thinking we could keep driving for a while—remember that motel we used to stay at outside of Dryden—the one with the hot tubs in the room? The kids would love it."

Ella didn't answer for a minute. "No," she said. "It's already dark."

"But I'm not tired. I could go for hours."

"No, there's no way," she said. "We've got to get the kids washed up, and Mark's pants have to be cleaned."

"I think we could do it," he said.

Ella waited a couple of minutes and then she called to the kids. She held Mark's hand as they waited to cross the street.

"Are you coming?" she asked her husband.

"Just think about it," he told her.

"No."

"I'll call ahead to make sure they have a room."

"No."

"I'm just going to call," he said. He went to the pay phone and picked up the yellow pages. "Just to see," he said.

There was a break in the traffic, and Ellen looked back once more before crossing the street. They turned south on the far sidewalk, towards the neon signs.

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He'd put down the phone, but he hadn't moved. He'd seen the hotel they went to, it was just down the street. For all he knew, she might be watching him from the hotel window. But he thought that if he waited, she'd be back. He was sure. When she came he'd sit on the table until she came to him. "Very mature," he'd say. "It's a good thing we can solve things by talking them out." She'd be upset and then he'd say, "I'm sorry this happened. I'm really sorry."

When she came, he'd say this: he'd say, "It's a nice night isn't it?" He'd say, "Why don't we go out tonight and leave late tomorrow? We could still make a good night of it." She'd be surprised, off-guard. What could she say then?

He imagined the hotel to have a pool and a sauna. The pool would be closed by now but they could sneak in. They could sneak in and swim quietly, just the two of them. Then they'd tell the kids in the morning, about how they'd broken the rules and gone swimming while everyone else was asleep. Mark would open his eyes wide and Tracy would pretend not to care. They could take a sauna after the swim.

There was this possibility: he'd walk around and find a flower shop and bring her orchids. She loved orchids—it was something he'd relied upon in the past. Of course there wouldn't be any flower shops open at this time, but morning wasn't far away. He thought he could just walk around until then. Neither of them would sleep that way. But there was also the possibility that if he stayed out all night, he would freeze to death. The dew was set. The night was cold.

This could be it, he thought. This could really be it.



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Ella pretended to be sleeping when she heard a noise at the door. She saw Todd walk in and look at her, at the kids. She saw him sit down on the ledge by the window. He looked different than before. He looked beat. She heard him whispering to himself. "Swim?" he said. He laughed. She watched him for a while before saying anything. "If it makes you feel any better, I haven't slept a wink either," she said.

"It's a nice city," he said. "There was a strip club just a few blocks over from the ice cream place. There was a fight outside. I was walking by."

"Are you all right?"

"Are you kidding? I was like a shadow. I didn't exist tonight."

She watched his silhouette. It was all she could see. "You can come to bed now," she said.

"Have you seen all the trucks here?" he said. "There's more trucks here than anywhere else I've been. Big trucks too, with the big lights on top."

"I'm sorry I left you there."

"I don't know who's going to drive tomorrow... what is it, four a.m. now?"

"Three-thirty."

"Neither of us is in any condition..."

"We can sleep in."

"Maybe we could let Tracy drive tomorrow, how's that for an idea?"

She looked away from the silhouette. The clock radio was one thing, and the converter on top of the television was another. Really, there was nothing to look at but him.

"I'm sorry I left you there."

"I'm not going to be taught a lesson that way," he said. "That's no way to learn a lesson."

"I said I was sorry."

"It's ok," he said. "There's still tomorrow to contend with."

He walked over to the bed and stood there for a minute. He watched as his wife rolled over so that her back was to him. She was just a lump under some covers now. He took off his shoes slowly. He took off his socks and sat on the edge of the bed. In his hands, he took one foot and then the other and rubbed them in circles. Then he took off his clothes. As he unbuttoned his shirt, he saw his thumb. He considered it. He had just massaged his feet with it. It was thin: skeletal. With only the lights from outside, it was almost a bare bone. He thought about how his body was made up of so many little pieces. He crawled in beside his wife. He thought of all the little bones. This is a gift, he thought, seeing things the way I do.

It was something to remember.

Under the covers, he felt his hipbone and then his ribs. The picnic table and the strip club were far away. They were getting farther. He followed his collarbone to his neck and then his jawbone to his ear. Aren't the smallest bones in your ear? He considered this too, and looked at the ear of his wife. It was like

tissue paper: translucent. He wanted to touch it, but didn't. She was sleeping. He was past fighting, but sometimes he became overwhelmed by these things. He really wanted to touch it. He held his hands in fists and thought instead that he should take the time to remember what he was thinking. Bones, he thought. Thumb. He had it in his head and then he didn't. It was gone.

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Todd and Ella slept in fits. First they were too hot, and then the morning came early as the kids woke them up. That day and the next were long days.

## Damage

I'm in the kitchen getting drinks for Reese and Eileen when I hear my wife tell them about the trip we took to New York in August, Labour Day weekend. And that starts it. The New York story will go into the other one, the way it always does. She's told Ricky's parents, Sarah and Hugh, and the Kincaids as well. It's always the same story, nothing new to add, but we still don't know what to make of it, how to handle it. I drop ice into Reese's scotch, pour Eileen's gin and tonic, listening carefully as Susan tells our guests what happened.

"New York was heaven," she says. "Have you been lately? The end of August is the best time of year, not too hot. That's when you should go, not in July. July in New York is awful."

"I've heard," says Eileen.

"We saw a show called *Boulevard at Night* and it was just fantastic—witty as hell. Just a touch of romance."

I walk into the dining room then, holding the drinks, and Susan smiles at me. The table is cleared of everything but the candles we dined by and our coffee cups, unused, resting upside down on their saucers. The candles light Susan's face and hair. She takes out a cigarette and toys with it, tapping it against her lips, waiting for me to sit.

"It was a great show," I say. "Sexy."

“Really?” says Eileen. “I haven’t seen anything sexy in a long time. I could use some sexy.” She makes a gesture as though she’s hot under the collar and laughs as she takes her drink from me.

Susan says, “Don’t take William’s word at face value, he thinks everything is sexy. Apparently I’m still sexy and it’s been what, seventeen years?”

Eileen laughs again and looks in my direction. I pretend to be shy about the subject and she winks at me.

Susan continues. “But we loved it, sexy or not. It had been years since we’d been to the theatre. *Real* theatre. And New York was heaven. The next morning we walked through the village, looking at the houses. I swear to God, if it hadn’t been for Toby we would have packed up and moved the second we got home.”

“If it hadn’t been for money,” I say. “Then we would have really thought about it.”

“New York is no place to be without money,” says Reese. He nods his head at me, looking uncomfortable in our dining room. “Not that there’s any good place to be without money,” he says.

“Let me have my dream,” says Susan. “In my dream we were on the verge of moving there. Forget money. If it had been up to us, we would have moved there in an instant.”

She has the hint of a smile playing on her lips and for a moment, I almost believe her. We would have moved to New York.

I look at Reese and Eileen and sip my drink.

“That was the dream,” I say.

“I’m sure you already know the next part of the story,” says Susan. “We probably told you about it ourselves. No? I can’t believe it, I thought we told everyone. You missed an earful, believe me. New York was wonderful but you know how flying will suck the life out of you. And it was the Monday night of the long weekend when we got back, so we were exhausted, you can imagine. At any rate, we picked up Toby from his friend’s house and then we came home. We could see from outside that something was wrong; all the lights were out inside even though we always keep a couple on. It wasn’t a big thing but we both noticed. Then we opened the door and discovered that we’d been robbed. Robbed!”

Susan makes a high-pitched noise that might be the start of a laugh, and then stops. She looks at our guests to see what kind of impression she’s made. Both of them shake their heads in disbelief.

“I remember that *now*,” says Eileen. “I can’t remember who I heard it from, but I remember someone telling me. How awful.”

“It was awful,” says Susan. “Especially after New York. Coming home to find the house the way it was. You expect certain things: the television, the computer... the liquor too, I suppose, but you don’t expect it to look the way it does.”

“I can only imagine,” says Eileen. “What an invasion.”

They all shake their heads and I do too. I’m smiling when Lord knows I shouldn’t, but I can’t help it, I’m caught up in it.

“I don’t have a memory for details,” I say. “But I’ll never forget the glass. They smashed glass all over the floor. There were little pieces everywhere, caught up in the carpet, all over the floor. They smashed the mirror from the front hall too. Everything. Like Susan was saying, you think the television will be gone but you don’t expect the rest of it.”

I try to think of other things that I saw, the details that we found disturbing at the time, but all I can think of is the glass on the floor. All those jagged edges sticking out of our carpet.

“It wasn’t just the glass,” says Susan. “They broke the legs off my kitchen chairs. And one of them pissed on the rug, can you imagine? Everything they put their hands on was wrecked. Someone even stabbed holes in the sofa cushions with a steak knife!”

Eileen’s jaw hangs open, unbelieving.

“What a horrible thing,” she says.

Susan and I nod our heads.

“You must have felt violated. Absolutely violated.”

Susan puts her cigarette on the place mat in front of her and looks for a moment at Eileen, considering the word. Then she looks at me.

“It was an invasion of privacy,” I say, “It was definitely an invasion.”

“But I can’t say we were *violated*,” says Susan.

She looks upset and I know what she’s thinking. I’m thinking the same thing. Neither one of us wants to have been violated. Not by this.

For a moment everyone is quiet. In the kitchen, the refrigerator hums away as if nothing has gone wrong. And then Reese clears his throat.

“Those people,” he says. “They must be animals. They have no regard.”  
And he still doesn’t know.

Susan gets up for drinks so I go upstairs to check on Toby, to make sure that he’s sleeping. A light is on in his room but he’s fast asleep, sprawled like a great big jellyfish on top of the sheets. The stale odour of adolescence and stagnant water make me hold my breath. The aquarium bubbles and Toby’s hockey posters gaze down at me from up on the walls. I look at my son for a good minute before I turn the light off. He’s changing now. Between worlds. At fourteen he’s really starting to change. I feel I should whisper something to him, *Goodnight*, or *Sleep well*, but in the blue half-light of the aquarium I stand still for another minute, wondering if he’s really asleep.

I close the door behind me.

Going downstairs, I hear Susan telling more of the story and I listen for a minute before entering the room. She says, “Violated? I suppose that’s the word...” There is something about her voice since it happened, the robbery. I where can no longer guess what it will say next. I enter the room and everyone looks at me until I sit down. All eyes go back to Susan.

“The incredible thing is that we didn’t know what to do with ourselves,” she says. “We came home and we saw the glass everywhere and pillow fluff and everything of value was gone, and we didn’t know what to do. We must have stood in the doorway for a full five minutes before it even occurred to us that we should call the police. It’s not what was missing, just that it was so shocking to



see the house that way.

“When it comes down to it, the money didn’t matter,” she says. She looks at me and adds, “With insurance being what it is, money wasn’t the issue. It’s that we were scared. Or I was scared anyway, just knowing that someone could break in at any time.”

“I’d be terrified,” says Eileen.

“I didn’t think I’d be scared but I was,” says Susan. “I went to bed feeling fine, but I woke up in the middle of the night with my heart racing. When you’re scared you hear every little sound—the house creaks like you wouldn’t believe. I never knew until then. And William was awake too. His knuckles were almost glowing in the dark they were so white.”

Eileen laughs at this last joke. Then she says, “Do you mean to say you slept in the house that same night? When the place had just been broken into?”

Susan nods and then she smiles, incredulous of her own bravery.

“Wait a second before you go on,” I say. I go to the den to get my cigar box and offer it around. I don’t know why, but it seems like the right thing to do. I don’t like smoking them much myself but we got them on a trip to Cuba, and what’s the point in wasting them? Eileen takes one and wets it between her lips as if she smokes them all the time. I light one for myself and then let it sit in the ashtray. Susan settles for a cigarette instead. After lighting it, she crosses her legs and leans back in her chair.

It is quiet then, with smoke hovering in the room, so I start with the clues.

“The next morning we noticed that some things weren’t quite right,” I say.

“The thieves missed some things.”

“Stupid crooks? There’s a shock,” says Eileen.

“Stunning, I know. And yet they were.” I pick up my cigar before I go on. “The thieves didn’t take anything from upstairs, that was the first thing. They went through everything in the basement and on the main floor, but the upstairs was untouched. I had loose bills in my dresser—not very much, but what kind of thief doesn’t take free money? It was like they hadn’t even gone upstairs.”

“Except that there were footprints,” says Susan. “Don’t forget the footprints. They were all over the carpet, going right up the stairs and into our room. Big, muddy footprints. And I had jewellery up there too. Expensive jewellery that wasn’t even touched. It made no sense. That was the first thing we noticed. The second was that we couldn’t figure out where the thieves broke in or how they got out. The window above the kitchen sink was smashed, but you know how small it is—it’s tiny. Nobody could have crawled through there. And other than that, there was no way for them to get back out. The doors were locked and we checked all the windows, even the ones in the attic. What kind of thief locks the door on his way out?”

Reese stares down at the carpet and shakes his head.

“So what do you make of that?” Susan asks. “I mean, what were we supposed to make of that?”

Eileen looks at Susan and shrugs. Her eyes are wide, the mystery is beyond her.

The truth is that we did not know what to make of it either, but a little voice inside me said not to tell the police what we'd discovered. Susan felt the same way. When we finally did call them, to get a report, we hid the jewellery and propped open a basement window. The whole thing began to take on the quality of a mystery for us—*What went on here?*—and we wanted it for ourselves. Once the glass was cleaned up and the insurance papers were filed, we really put our heads to it. You could say that we had a sick fascination with it, staying up after Toby went to bed, comparing theories. We made lists, clues in one column and possible conclusions in the other. *Broken window, locked doors, jewellery left, alcohol taken.* It was a puzzle that engaged us: new pieces were added, the picture remained unfinished.

We asked the neighbours if they had seen anything and Mr. Tsouluhas told us that he'd heard loud music playing one night even though there were no lights on in the house. He fit into our game beautifully, Mr. Tsouluhas, and we wrote *music, dark house* on our list. Still, we had no idea where we were going with it.

Susan tells Eileen, "About a week later we found the clue of all clues: a video camera that we bought in Buffalo. We thought it had been stolen with everything else but we found it in Toby's room, in a drawer. Then we found the stereo in his closet, under some clothing."

"No!" says Eileen. "He didn't!"

"He did," I say. "Believe me, he did."

"He came in here with his friends. *To have a party*, he told us. They started into the wine and got drunk. He says it got out of control."

“A little more than just *out of control*,” says Eileen. “Reese, did you hear what she just said?”

Susan moves forward in her chair, excited by Eileen’s disbelief. “Exactly!” she says. Then to me: “You see what I mean? There was no way we could have known.”

She looks relieved, the same as she did when we told Laura Hogan, Ricky’s mother, and she cried at the news.

“So what did you do next?” asks Eileen. “You didn’t tell the police, did you?”

Susan puts her hands to her face and shakes her head.

“Our hands are tied,” I say. “What would the insurance company say if they knew? It isn’t just the problem of Toby.”

“But it is the problem of Toby,” says Susan. “You can’t imagine how I felt when we found out.”

“No, I couldn’t possibly,” says Eileen.

“We don’t know where all the blame lies,” I say. “Who knows what kids might have had a hand in this?”

“The camera was in *his* drawer.”

“But there are bad kids out there—“

Susan cuts me off. She starts to say something but then a tear forms in the corner of her eye. She puts her hand in front of her to make it stop. She breathes deeply. She inhales on her cigarette.

“I don’t know that there’s any solution,” I say.

“There must be something,” says Eileen. “You have to do something.”

Reese looks up from the spot he was staring at on the carpet. His face is red, and he looks at his wife and something passes between them. I imagine he's heard more than he wants to. I imagine he doesn't think too highly of us for telling the story. And if I was in his shoes, I would probably feel the same way.

Eileen puffs on her cigar and then butts it out in the ashtray. She turns her back toward her husband and asks Susan in a quiet voice, "Are you ok, Susan? Are you scared? Does it scare you, having him in the house?"

"No!" says Susan. "What do you mean does he scare us?" She looks to me. "Of course not. He wouldn't do anything like that again."

"Of course he doesn't scare us," I say.

"I don't know," says Eileen. "I think I would be scared. I know I don't have kids, but the idea of him in here with his friends, breaking glass all over the floor."

We don't say anything. There is no way to defend what happened.

"I would feel betrayed," says Eileen. "With something like that, you would have to feel betrayed."

"Betrayed?" says Susan. Her eyes harden as she thinks about it. "Do you really think so?" she asks. "Betrayed?"

Reese and Eileen leave without coffee. Reese shakes my hand on the way out the door but doesn't say much. Eileen hugs Susan and then she hugs me as if we've all been through something terrible together. She hugs Susan again and I close the door behind her as she goes to join her husband. For some reason it makes me

sad, watching Reese and Eileen leaving the driveway, backing out onto the street. And then Susan leaves the room so that I'm there all alone, watching tail lights disappear out of view.

I find Susan in the living room with a fresh glass of wine in her hand. It is not what I expected to see. She is not crying or wringing her hands. She turns the glass in a slow circle and watches the liquid inside. Then she looks up at me with a thoughtful expression. She takes a sip from her wine.

"How are you doing?" she asks.

I feel that I should lie. I feel that I should say something light, something comforting. *We've got to stop telling that story.* But I can't make myself. Instead I say, "What next?"

Susan looks at her wine again and then sits on the sofa, patting the spot beside her with her hand so that I'll sit down too. I do, and she leans her head on my shoulder as if we're an ordinary couple, sharing a moment together.

"Imagine if we'd moved to New York?" she says. "Imagine if we'd never come back to this house. We never would have known."

"Imagine if he hadn't done it," I say. "Imagine that."

But Susan ignores me. She says, "We might have gone out to the theatre tonight, gone to Broadway. We'd have a show to go to and we'd have some new friends to eat dinner with. I'd kill for people who don't already know us. We haven't met anyone new in ages."

She stops and puts her wine glass down on the table. Then she leans back and rests her head against my shoulder again. "We'd be eating Thai food, or Malaysian— some little restaurant that's really good but that people don't know

about yet. And after that we'd walk down the street and hear the bands from inside the clubs. We'd keep going until we found a place that served good martinis. We'd get to know the bartender, we'd be that kind of couple. Our house would be small compared to here but it would be tidy and Toby would love it too. He wouldn't be bored and he wouldn't spend his time getting into trouble."

I start to say something but she puts her fingers to my lips.

"Shh. I know what you think—you think I'm drunk but I'm not. I'm not drunk at all. There's no good thing to do here, so let me have my dream."

I let that sit for a minute. The dream of New York.

Then I say, "We have to figure out something."

Susan sits up and reaches for her wine glass. "Well you figure it out then and you tell me when you do. You let me know how I'm supposed to feel better about what he's done. I'm all ears. I'm dying to know."

"Don't take this out on me."

"I'm not taking it out on you. But the damage has been done. I think it's time we realised that: the damage has been done. If he hates us this much now then I don't see how anything we do will help."

"Susan! It doesn't mean he hates us."

"Tell that to Eileen."

"He did something stupid, that doesn't mean he hates us."

I wait for Susan to tell me I'm right, but she doesn't. She puts her feet up on the end of the couch and then takes my hand and puts it on her head. I move over, making room for her, waiting for her to say something more.

When the clock strikes one thirty, I shake Susan awake and tell her it's time for bed. She has that angry, confused look that comes with waking suddenly. I get her upstairs and under the covers and then I undress and lie down beside her, although I know by the dryness of my eyes, by the way my heart won't settle, that I won't fall asleep anytime soon. It's not insomnia exactly; it's the kind of thing that brings you to tears watching television at three a.m.

Usually Susan is the object of my envy at these times, sleeping unaware in our bed, her glass of water on the nightstand untouched, her dreams passed by and forgotten. But tonight she turns on her back and her breathing escapes in gasps. She breaks into a snore. Seventeen years. And when I sleep, I sound no different—she's told me so. I watch her lips, the deep red of her lipstick, still and slightly open, as if she were a corpse.

The two of us, I shudder to think.

Under the covers, once the lights are off, I roll Susan onto her side, to stop her snoring. But even then, the air dribbles through her windpipe. Saliva crawls up and down her throat. I think of the nights I've passed like this, nights that follow cigarettes and stories around the dinner table. *He doesn't hate us*, I whisper. Susan's breath catches. After a moment, it moves again. I pull the covers tight. I close my eyes and wait.



## California

“Come here, Graham, sit down,” he says.

He’s lost another job, or quit it. I know because it’s too early for him to be home. My mother walks into the room and shoots him a look he ignores. When she turns to me, I shrug my shoulders and smile; she nods her head in agreement. To what, I can’t really say. She unplugs a lamp from beside the old corduroy couch and takes it with her when she leaves.

“Come here,” he says again, patting the floor beside him. I move close, but stay standing.

He’s kneeling on the carpet, surrounded by maps that are taped together at the borders. There are two sets, one of the eastern United States and one of the west, and on each set he’s traced a route in pink highlighter, starting at the Canadian border and heading south. One line snakes through Minneapolis, Chicago and Nashville. It winds its way down to the kitchen door, in Florida. The other one moves in a similar fashion but turns west instead of east, through Omaha and Denver, to southern California. “Have you ever thought about California?” he asks.

It is October, just after Thanksgiving, and I’ve still got a chill from being outside. A cold, dry wind blew up over the hill as I ran home from school. It

came off Lake Superior and up John Street. I'd heard Anthony Testa wanted to beat me up, so I bolted when the bell rang. I left my sweatshirt in my locker, wore just a windbreaker over my t-shirt, and ran. My face burned in the wind. My lungs hurt. I came through the front door and collapsed in the hallway. That's when I noticed our shoes and coats were gone. In the kitchen the dishes and the pots, everything, was packed away. My father was in the living room with his maps.

"Look at this," he says, pointing to the end of the western line. "Down there they have worker co-ops, you know what they are? They're like communes but not so flaky. You see, down there everyone works as a group. There aren't any bosses, no divisions between one man and another, you understand?"

He doesn't look to see if I understand.

"All these families live together and go to school together. You're going to love it. Kids skateboard instead of playing hockey. You'll be a skateboarder, what do you think of that?"

I can't tell if he's serious or not so I look hard at the maps as if I'm thinking. My mother comes back in the room, with a big cardboard box this time, and takes down the photos from the wall. I give her a questioning look and she says, "Ask your father, it's his idea."

"Your mother's going to love it there too. You're going to love it honey. Do you know how many Buddhists live in California? People are nice there, you'll see. I've thought this one through." My father reaches over and tries to squeeze my mother's hand. She pulls away and he says, "Do you know that more

people eat seaweed in California than anywhere else in the world? They eat everything there. There's more freaking vegetarians than you can wave a stick at... I swear to God, honey, you'll love it."

My mother wraps the picture frames in newspaper and packs them away with her LPs. "This morning it was Florida, now it's California." She picks up a soapstone turtle and polishes it on her sweater before speaking to him again. "By tonight we'll be headed to the Yukon."

"Believe me," my father tells her. "California's our best bet."

My mother leaves the room with the packed box in her arms and he follows her with his voice, talking louder as she disappears down the hall. It's a sermon more than anything: the virtues of California. I listen and let my mind wander over the names on the map. They're just words: Minnesota, South Dakota, Montana, but with the different colours they look like something else altogether. You can almost see the desert in Arizona's pale red borders. California, long and thin, could fall right into the ocean. When I look up my father is staring at me with a strange smile on his face. "You know what we're doing here, Graham?"

I nod my head.

"I don't know that you do," he says. "We're going to California."

It's night. I'm in bed and most of my things are packed away, my clothes in a duffle bag and everything else in boxes. I think about the kids at my junior high,

what they'd say if they knew. Soon word will get around and they'll think of me in California and they'll be jealous. We've moved many times, from Clarkson Street to Pine to Ray Boulevard to Rockwood. We've gone out of town too, but only on short trips. Once, when my father was laid off from the ministry of natural resources, we went out west for two weeks, but I was young. I remember a dinosaur museum and not much else. When we came back my mother said, "I guess we're stuck here now." Soon after she started up a meditation group on Thursday nights. About ten women come; they sit in a circle on our living room floor. My mother is closest to the stereo, where she plays a tape of a bunch of people humming—she sent away to the States for that one. She keeps the volume low and crosses her legs; all the other women cross their legs too. But she knows what she's doing. Everyone else looks uncomfortable, as if they're trying to be like her. But none of them are. None of them ever could be. *Your mother has grace*—that's what my father says. When she meditates, she wears her hair in a braid, pulled back from her face. She concentrates and her eyebrows lean in over her eyes. Her eyes are brown, and her skin is darker than my father's. Sometimes when she's serious, she looks frightening, and I forget she's shorter than me. But then she'll laugh and her nose will twitch like a cat's. *More grace than all those other women put together*, he says. The other women sit in a circle and after a while their eyes flicker open to see if hers are still closed. After a few minutes they get up one after another, stretching their legs, saying they need to use the washroom. My father makes fun of them once they're gone. "They look so

pained,” he tells my mother. “They’d be happier if you just invited them out for beers and cigarettes.”

“Why don’t you go out for beers and cigarettes and leave them alone?”

But he never goes out. He used to hunt with some guys from the ministry but that was a while ago. After he lost his job there he wanted to open a store, and once he tried to convince TBT to let him start his own television show, something about forest rangers, but it never took off. “People in this town are idiots,” he tells me. “They’re not even worth thinking about.” Still, I can’t help it sometimes. Sometimes I lie in bed and they’re all I can think of. All the stupid kids at school: Anthony Testa and Blaine Macdonald and Richard Tucker and Carl Samuelson. I wish I could see them now and I’d be stronger than them and I’d laugh in their faces. Ha ha. Ha ha ha ha ha ha. *I’m going to California.* I want to call someone to let them know, but can’t think of who. My bed is warm anyway and I don’t want to get out. My jeans are crumpled on the floor and my running shoes are in the doorway. My sweatshirt—I remember my sweatshirt hanging in my locker. I try to block out the thought. I turn off the light and think of how their faces will look when they’re told: California.

I lay still and hear my parents’ voices from the kitchen. My mother is quiet, but my father sounds excited, almost frightening. I hear a few words: chance, opportunity, family. These are things he says. Then I close my eyes and when I hear them again they’re in their bedroom. “Our lives are wasting away here,” my father says. “We’ve got to try. Please, can we give it an honest try?” My mother says, “I just don’t want to move every six months anymore,” and my

father says, "We won't have to, once we get to California." They talk some more and then other sounds come from the bedroom. I wonder how talking leads them to it. My mother's sounds are muffled, as if her face is buried in a pillow. I can picture her dark braid twisted into a knot at the back of her head. My father makes no noise at all, but I can see his face, his fake front tooth darker than the others, his tangled beard scratching her skin. That's all I can think of: his tooth, her hair. I know what they're doing. I've seen magazines; I've heard people's stories at school. But I have no idea what he says to get her to do it.

I think about those magazines I've seen, but my parent's faces keep ruining the pictures. For a while I try to think of bodies without heads but it's no use so I think about what I'd have to do to get my parents to stop. Sometimes I come home from school upset and my father asks me, "Did someone hurt you?" He frowns as if he knows exactly what happened—it doesn't matter what I tell him. He moves his head from side to side and his body shakes. My mother asks what they've said and what they've done, but I don't answer because my father laughs at her questions, a mean laugh, and he says, "Jesus, Margaret, you can't expect him to reason with kids like that." Those nights she comes into my room after I've gone to bed. She runs her fingers through my hair and tells me she loves me. She's small, but when she cuddles up behind me she feels big. She says, "I know it's hard. It's hard when people don't understand you. But it's because you're smart and creative and sensitive and they don't know what to make of it." She smells like herbal tea, like nutmeg and cloves, and after a while I pretend I'm asleep. "They just don't know you, Graham, that's all. It's not

because they're bad, even if they do bad things sometimes. I know it feels awful but people change, they redeem themselves. You have to believe they will. You have to believe that or there's no point believing in anything."

After a while the sounds in my parents' bedroom stop. There's nothing more. I roll on my side and curl the blankets around my feet.

The next morning my father and I strap the couch to the roof of the Impala and rope the armchair in the trunk as best we can. Driving downtown, over the potholes on Rockwood, the car sometimes bottoms out, making quick skidding noises. Vibrations come up through the seat. My father bought it for four hundred dollars last summer and the floorboards were already rusting away. We worked on it for a good week, sanding down the rust and filling the holes with putty. We painted over the patches in green, but you could still see where we'd done the work, and the holes in the floorboards got worse instead of better. You could look down from the passenger seat and see the pavement between your running shoes. My father covered the hole with a piece of plywood but the air still came in around it. If you put your feet up on the dash, over the heater vents, it's not so bad.

We stop at a pawnbroker in Port Arthur and my father leaves the car running while he goes inside. He comes back with a scowl and we drive to another store, then another, until he gets the price he wants. After the big furniture, we take the lamps and coffee table, then the kitchen table and chairs.

The rooms start to look like rooms from other houses we've lived in, as if they're losing their shape, and strangely, with everything emptying out, they become smaller. The living room is funny with no pictures on the walls, dust-bunnies where the furniture used to be. We prop open the front door every time we move furniture into the car and my mother wears her winter coat as she cleans the floor in the kitchen. My father and I load up the bed frames and drive them downtown. The mountain of garbage on our curb is growing and I recognise some of the things in there as my own.

When we finish with the furniture, my father lies on the living room floor and closes his eyes. It's mid-afternoon. My mother and I get in the car and drive to the neighbourhood behind Grandview Mall, to the landlord's. He lives in a brick house with shrubs shaped like Christmas bulbs out front. The windowsills are painted a clean, clean white and a wreath hangs on the front door. Burgundy curtains cover the windows and you can't see a thing through them. My mother knocks and the landlord comes out. He takes the envelope that she hands him and listens as she talks. Then his face changes—in an instant it turns a deep, angry red. He swears and she looks past him, at his house. He notices me then and yells, "Where the hell is your husband?" My mother doesn't answer and the landlord pokes her once with the corner of the envelope, digging it into the shoulder of her jacket. He stands there, as if waiting for something to happen, and I put my hand on the door handle, though I know I won't do anything. He swears again and disappears into his house. My mother comes back to the car. Her hair's come loose around her face and she closes her eyes tight for a second when



she first gets in. A single line creases her forehead. She doesn't say anything but looks at me as if there's a question I'm supposed to answer. Then she says, "I'm sorry you saw that, Graham." She breathes in deep, like she tells her meditation class to do. She starts the engine and backs out of the driveway. Once we're on River Street she reaches over and pats my knee. "Don't worry, Graham," she says. "It's going to be fine."

We sleep in the house again, the three of us in sleeping bags on the living room floor. The carpet is a darker grey where the couch was, but faded and dusty everywhere else. I lie beside my mother and my father lies on the other side; the maps are folded and stacked beside him, and our duffle bags are by the door. When we wake up, the room is bright and empty. We eat a cold breakfast and pack the car and leave, my mother slipping the house keys into an envelope and dropping them into the mailbox before we go.

We're just past the airport before we can't stand it anymore—it's freezing inside the Impala. I can barely feel my toes; my mother tells my father to pull over. In the summer we drove the car up north, to Red Lake, on a fishing trip. The holes in the car didn't bother us then—it was a hot summer. We drove with the windows open and dust came up through the floor and got sucked out through the windows. When we got out of the car, I'd shake my head and dust would fly everywhere. We covered our faces with bandanas as we drove, as if we were train robbers. But that was partly because the car smelled of fish, and we smelled

of fish too. Thinking about the bandanas and fishing and the sun makes me feel warmer, but then I remember that it rained for two days at the end of the trip and all our things were soaked. It was a great trip until then.

When the car stops, my mother takes my father's duffle bag out of the trunk and lays it down on the floor, overtop the plywood. The muffler is quieter with the bag there, and the car becomes almost warm. Then my mother turns in her seat and the two of us play the license plate game. It's stupid, but kind of fun. And when it gets boring I say, "England" and my mother says, "Denmark" and then my father joins in, saying, "Kenya," and we play that game until we run out of names. We play games as we cross the border and drive south between the lake and the Sawtooth Mountains. When the games are no fun anymore, my mother turns on the radio and tries to find a channel. I look out the window at the scenery, and read the road signs as they fly by. We're all quiet for a bit and out of nowhere I get a hard-on. I cover it with my sweater but it takes forever to go away.

After a while my mother pulls a paperback out of her purse and reads to us. It's a story by Alice Munro, "Royal Beatings." It's been ages since she read to me. She has a good voice; it changes every time someone speaks. I lie across the back seat and close my eyes. Soon it's just the rumble of the car and the sound of her reading. It almost puts me to sleep as she tells the story of Rose, who seems normal enough, and her stepmother Flo, who might be evil, or just a little stupid. She tells the story of Rose's father, too, who doesn't seem to care about anything until he works himself into a rage and takes off his belt. When he

starts whipping Rose and chasing her around the kitchen kicking her and hitting her in the face, my father says, "Enough, Margaret. Enough!"

I open my eyes and see that he's gripping the steering wheel tight. My mother flips forward a couple pages and says, "But we're almost at the end, there's not much left."

"No," he says. "That's enough."

"Just listen, we have to see how it turns out," she says. She continues on to where Rose lies in her bed, sore and unable to move much. My father can't stop himself from listening, so he sings to himself, *no, no, no, no, no*. After a minute he stops. "Listen," my mother says. "It's not so bad." Her voice comes over me again and I lie back down. She's at the part where Rose is thinking of running away.

We're pulled into a grocery store on the outskirts of Duluth. It takes me a second to remember why we're here. I get out of the car and stretch my legs while my parents buy food for the road. Then we're back in the car and driving through the city and onto the interstate. My mother makes sandwiches of polish sausage and cheese and hands them over the seat. Soon the light fades away and the dusk turns to night and the air in car grows colder. I stare out at the road, the taillights that lead us and the headlights that blind us from the other direction. It seems like a lot of people are on the move. It makes me wonder where they're going, how many people are doing the same thing we are. It gets even colder and I put my

hands inside my sweatshirt, against my skin. My father says the heat from the dash is drying his eyes but we tell him to leave it on, that we're freezing. At every exit we look for a place to pull over and pitch the tent but it is too dark to see anything, so we press on until we find a rest station. By then we're almost at Minneapolis—we can see the glow of the city on the horizon. We put up the tent right by a sign that says *no overnight parking* and I point it out to my parents and laugh. We clean up in the bathroom and then I crawl into my sleeping bag fully dressed. The ground is uneven and I twist on my side trying to get comfortable before I close my eyes.

It's freezing. I'm shivering when I wake up. I can only see shapes. My mother wakes up beside me and asks, "Are you alright, Graham?" Then she moves over and I crawl in between her and my father, stealing what heat I can.

My ears and the tip of my nose are frozen, so it's strange to wake to the sound of the lawnmower. My mother's still asleep beside me when I open my eyes; my father is kneeling at the door of the tent, looking out. He hears me move and opens the flap so I can see too. Outside a man on a tractor mower is driving along, shredding through leaves. He's a ways off, but he looks at us as he goes. Then he turns in a slow semi-circle and aims the tractor at our tent. My father swears and I shake my mother awake. She looks out through the door and blinks her eyes, trying to understand the situation. Then she jumps out of her sleeping bag, still in her underwear and t-shirt, and runs over to the man on the mower, her

feet leaving prints on the frosted ground. She's tiny next to him and when she opens her mouth to talk, all I hear is the roar of the mower. I laugh without meaning to—the scene is too ludicrous to believe—and wait for the mower to stop. Then my mother will come back and put on socks and ask me to blow on her toes until they're warm. But the man on the mower pretends not to see her at all. He keeps driving. I can guess what she's saying from the way her mouth moves: "Please, have a heart. We'll be gone in a minute." She throws her hands in the air and through the stretched neck of her t-shirt I see a white flash of breast. The man continues and I stop laughing. My father yells, "Graham!" and I scramble around, pulling the tent pegs out of the ground. My father drags the tent from the path of the mower just in time. Then we collapse the tent poles and I put the sleeping bags in the back seat while my father crams everything else into the trunk. We both jump in the car while my mother continues to yell. The veins stick out on her neck and her feet cling to the ground. There's nothing soft about her and I hear her scream, "We're people too, do you understand that?"

Thankfully, the Impala's motor catches on its first time over and I don't hear anymore. My father honks the horn. He honks it again and my mother comes at a run. Once she's in the backseat, she gives the man the finger and we speed away. She starts to shiver then and I give her a pair of socks from the duffle bag beneath my feet.

"Jesus Christ!"

"Bastards," says my father.

"I could have used some help."

“Hicks,” my father says. “God damned hicks.”

“Not hicks, just him.” She rubs her feet with her hands. Goosebumps cover her arms. It’s hard to watch; I want to cover her up. “He said he called the police.”

“Bastards.”

“Well why the hell didn’t you say something?”

“What could I have done?”

“You could have done *something*.”

My father looks over the seat and waits until my mother looks at him. In a quiet voice, he says, “Margaret, you know I’m no good at some things. I do what I can, but there’s some things I really can’t do.”

“Well obviously I wasn’t doing too well on my own.”

My father doesn’t respond to this. For a minute he looks distressed, then he turns to me and smiles. He reaches under the seat and pulls out the stack of maps he had in our living room. “He called the cops, eh?” He winks at me and says, “You’re the navigator now, Graham. We’ve got to find back roads to get around the city. No highways, no pavement if you can manage it. All the way to Colorado if we can.” Then he looks into the rear-view mirror, as if we’re being followed. In the back seat, my mother pulls a sleeping bag over herself.

I unfold the maps and try to find our location on the pink line while my father turns down one dirt road after another, making a game of it. “What exit did we take?” I ask him, but even when he tells me I can’t find it. I don’t know where we are, don’t have a clue, and I put the maps away. My father says, “What, no

luck? Hey Champ, watch this.” He floors the Impala. “Watch, she’s still got spark in her.” He keeps his foot on the accelerator and we gain speed until the speedometer reads eighty miles an hour. Outside, farmland lies flat and still. It speeds by. When I look in the side mirror, I see dust rising up, swallowing the world behind us. Then my father yells, “YEE-HAW!” like some cowboy and I jump—it scares the crap out of me. He yells it again and then eases his foot from the pedal. I look in the side mirror and to get him back I say, “Uh-oh, cops!” which makes him look. He laughs and my mother laughs too; she says we’re both nuts.

I turn around but my mother’s too tired to play games. She curls into a sleeping bag and stretches out across the back seat. My father taps my arm and says he sees police lights but the joke isn’t funny anymore. I hardly laugh, and look out at the farmland instead.

“But seriously,” my father says. “Do you think we lost them?”

I smile, wondering if he’s serious or not. “You never can tell.”

“One thing’s for sure, if they catch us, they’ll send your mother right to the loony bin, no questions asked.”

I don’t say anything.

“Did you see her back there? Did you see how crazy she looked?”

I peek over the seat, but her hair covers her face. She’s sleeping.

My father scratches his chin and sifts his fingers through his beard. “In her bare feet—she was practically naked!”

“That guy was crazy.”

"*He* was crazy? Are you kidding? She's the crazy one! He was terrified. I would have been scared and I'm married to her. She's off her rocker!"

I laugh in spite of myself. "She's not crazy," I tell him.

He looks over the seat at her. Then he turns to me. "You've got to love her," he says. "Without a doubt, you've got to love her."

We drive down one road and then another, guided by my father's intuition. Gravel pings off the underside of the car and, when we turn onto a rougher road, I feel the thud of stones through my seat. I turn back to see if they've woken up my mother, but she sleeps soundly. She doesn't look crazy. Her thin legs and shoulders poke out from under the sleeping bag. Her body vibrates with the rattle of the car.

Somewhere along a dirt road we run over a branch and it drags beneath us. My father swears and my mother wakes up. We stop and my father pulls the branch from under the car. The muffler comes with it. He tries pushing the muffler back in place but it won't stay. Up close I see it's got rust spots anyway, they cover it like pimples. Some places it's eaten right through. So he winds up and throws the muffler as far as he can, saying, "There you go you son of a bitch," and it disappears where it lands in the grass on the roadside. Then he crawls under the car and says, "Christ almighty. Margaret, where's the duct tape?" He comes out with his fingers covered in something that he makes me smell. It's sickly sweet, like burning sugar. "Hole in a rad hose," he says. He sits on the road, rests his



back against the bumper of the car, and spits into the gravel. He has a frustrated look, the kind that means no one should laugh. You never know how long it will last with him, so when he turns his head toward me, I get in the car and spread the maps across my knees.

We come into a suburb of Minneapolis. At a stoplight we watch the temperature gauge climb until there's a small popping noise in the engine and my father turns off the car. He gets out to push while my mother steers. Thankfully it's downhill—I slouch in my seat and try to look like I'm busy. But when we pull over and get out of the car, I feel a little ashamed. We're in an ordinary town and there aren't that many people around. We walk down a main street, past a record store and used bookstore and a stained glass shop with coloured teddy bears hanging in the window. Further down the hill, in the distance, I can see the brick sides of factories along the water. I point them out to my mother and a couple of longhaired men sitting on a bench ask us where we're from. "Canada," my father tells them and one of them says he used to hunt with his brother in Canada. My father asks what they hunted for but I don't hear what he says back; my mother and I continue down the road until we find a diner.

There are booths inside and we sit near the jukebox. When my father joins us, he's all smiles. He takes off his jacket, throws it on the bench seat beside me and slides in beside my mother. The men outside told him about a friend of theirs who works at a garage down the street. My father grins, his fake tooth dark against the rest of his teeth. "Did you see the river, just down the hill?" he asks. "It looks like a snake. Honestly, it looks like it could just slither away. And hey,

those guys told me there's supposed to be a meteor shower tonight." He catches me smiling back and winks. "They said the mechanic has some land behind his house where we could probably pitch our tent. We'd get a good view of the stars."

"Kevin, let's just get a hotel room," my mother says, but she's smiling too and I know he'll win her over. He takes her hand and holds it on the tabletop.

"We'll need our money once we get to California." He looks at his watch as if he's got somewhere important to be. "Leaving was the hardest thing, wasn't it? I feel like we're almost there."

The waitress comes by and my parents order coffee and sandwiches; I ask for a milkshake and a grilled cheese. Afterwards we talk to the mechanic and drop our things off in his back yard before my father brings him the car to be fixed. We fill a jug with water from the mechanic's house to brush our teeth and then we cut up apples and cheese and nibble away while we play cards in the tent. We play straight through the evening—hearts and spades—and I win at both. We play crazy eights, then turn off the flashlight and go to sleep.

I'm so cold when I wake up that I want to cry, but the tears would surely freeze. My mother tries to warm me but I can't stop shaking. She covers my head with a sweater and when I open my eyes again it's light: I can see my breath. My shivering is like a seizure, I can't control it. My father moves around in his sleeping bag, trying to get dressed inside.

“Don’t worry, Champ,” he says. His teeth chatter. “This is our last night of cold, I promise. The car will be fixed by noon and we’ll drive through the night if we have to. We’ll change our route—you can do that for us—we want to head due south and then cut west, no more cold. I want to see cactus trees by morning.”

I don’t even answer, I’m that upset. When the two of them are out of the tent, I dress as quickly as I can and then we head downtown and eat at the first place we find. It’s a Scandinavian restaurant with flags hanging on the walls. My father gives me a cup of coffee to stop my chills and it works for a minute, but then I start shaking all over again. The waitress looks at me like I’m deranged. After my coffee I get a hot chocolate and just hold it in my hands, letting the steam warm my face. Then we get three plates of the breakfast special. The restaurant starts to fill up though and at around eight o’clock, our waitress asks us to leave. I start to feel sick—the idea of going outdoors puts a shiver right through me.

Outside, my father heads off toward the water and my mother asks if I want to help her find the library. “It’ll be warm there,” she says, so I go with her. A woman we ask points us up the street, saying that it’s by the high school. As we head to the library we pass kids my age, walking with their heads bent against the wind. The school stands on the crest of the hill, a big stone building that looks out over the town, and students file in through its tall wooden doors. It makes me jealous. Not because it’s school but because they walk in groups, talking to each other. I hear someone call out, “James, you moron!” and I realise I’m going to be

around strangers for a long time. At least in Thunder Bay I know people's names. It's not like I want to be back there, but I'd like to walk into that big stone high school, just like the kids on the street, and sit down at a desk and know the people around me. My mother crosses over to the library entrance but I don't follow. I put my hands deep in my pockets and tell her I'll see her in a while. She looks up the street at the high school and nods her head. She waves goodbye. I don't look back as I walk, but imagine she's watching me as I go—I imagine she feels something of what I feel and that she feels sorry for me and it twists her up inside. I shiver, just to let her know I'm still cold. I slow my walk and kick at a pebble on the sidewalk. I use all the power I can muster to bring her closer to me, to make her understand. With my head down, I almost bump into a group of girls.

"Hey," says one of them. I stop and look up. They're taller than me, all three. Two of the girls have blonde hair and the third is a brunette with peaked eyebrows. She looks smart. She says, "Hey, are you new at school?"

"No." I motion over my shoulder with my thumb. "From out of town. Just passing through."

"Oh."

"Yeah," I say.

There's an awkward moment before I realise I'm standing in their way and move to let them pass. I turn and watch as the three of them go up the hill, their breath rising from their mouths. I want to say something to them, but can't think of what. The dark-haired girl walks just behind the other two—her hips move from side to side under her backpack. She's fourteen, maybe fifteen, and moves

as if she knows I'm watching—as if she'll turn and smile over her shoulder. Suddenly I can see it all. I can imagine living here and running into her at school, telling her I'm new. She would show me around, would introduce me to people and say, *This is Graham, he's Canadian*. As I watch her hips move farther away, up the stairs that lead into the school, it seems like bad luck that we're leaving. Worse than bad luck, it's almost tragic. The three of them disappear through the school doors and I picture my dark-haired girl turning around once she's inside to see that I'm still watching. I raise my hand casually, just in case: a half-wave, hello, and I wait. The wind is cold right through my jacket. She doesn't come back out.

In the bathroom of the library, I lock the door and take a long look at myself in the mirror. I wet my hands and run them through my hair until it lies flat on my head. My eyes are bloodshot—I could fall asleep—but it makes me look older. How old did she think I was? When I smile a certain way and cock an eyebrow, I look intelligent, mysterious. I practice that look and then another, one I've seen my father do many times. I raise my eyebrows just slightly and widen my eyes: surprise, concern. I rinse out my mouth. I look at myself with my jacket on and then off. I look older with it on. I leave the bathroom and sit in a chair with books that I've picked at random. I look at pictures to distract me but I can't stop thinking about the dark-haired girl. Actually, I'm thinking about me, what I'd say if I could talk to her. I'd tell her something about Canada, about Thunder Bay. I'd say something funny: "You just head north, you can't miss it—as long as you don't blink." I'd smile and she'd laugh and tell me a secret,

although I couldn't guess what that would be. It's not that I think I'll see her again—I know I won't. But you never know, strange things happen. Maybe when we're leaving town, or if we ever drive through again. And if not I'll see other girls like her; there are tonnes of girls all over the world. Beautiful dark-haired girls. By the morning we'll be in a new town, with a different school, and cactus trees all around.

My mother finds me just before noon and touches my shoulder. "What are you thinking?" she asks. "You seem lost in thought."

"Is it time to go?" I say.

We walk downtown towards the mechanic's shop and the wind picks up as we go, cold and strong. We turn a corner and my father's there, leaning on the Impala, drinking coffee from a Styrofoam cup. When he sees us, he crumples the cup in his hand and walks our way. The wind blows the cup off the sidewalk, into the gutter. From the look in his eyes, I can almost guess the story. My mother pinches the bridge of her nose.

"That bastard," my father says. "He overcharged us for the rad and now he wants us to pay for camping at his place."

"How much?"

"It doesn't matter how much. It's the principle."

My father looks steadily at my mother and she returns the look. After a moment he turns and stares off, down the street.

“What are we going to do then?” she says. “Tell me, Kevin, what can we possibly do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Kevin, you’ve got to straighten this out. I can’t step in and plead your case every time something goes wrong.”

“Do you know how much he wants to charge us?”

“I don’t care how much, you have to figure it out. Graham and I will wait.” She opens her purse and takes out a roll of bills. It’s a huge roll. My mouth drops open and I try to imagine how much money she’s holding, but my father doesn’t even notice it. She tries to hand it to him but he’s looking at our car, sitting in the mechanic’s lot, and she puts the money away. “Straighten it out,” she says.

We cross the street and find a laundromat with a few tables and chairs inside. The air is sick: full of lint from the dryers. A woman behind the counter looks at us as if we don’t belong but my mother doesn’t notice. She watches my father as he stands on the street, looking towards the mechanic’s, but not directly at it. He just stands there and waits and so does my mother, watching him. I tell her I’m going for a walk. She nods her head and takes my hand. “Don’t be too long,” she says. “He’ll take care of it. If we just give him a few minutes, he’ll take care of it.” I pull my hand away and go outside, turning up the street instead of down, away from both of them. I could never tell them, but I’m happy for the delay. I look at my watch, wondering when the dark-haired girl will have a lunch break. I stroll up the street towards the high school, looking into store windows

as I go, catching glimpses of my reflection. I stop in front of one and try to make my hair lie flat. I smile to myself and move on.

The school is up the hill, in the distance. Through its windows, you'd be able to see the whole town and the river too. It looks like the kind of place that would have a lot of smart people inside, like those old stone buildings of the big universities you see pictures of. It makes me understand how some people actually like school. On the stairs that lead up to the doors, I see two girls and a boy, sitting and talking. I make my way slowly, like I'm just passing by. The boy is tall and skinny with pimples covering his chin. I get to the steps, where I'm close enough to hear them, and sit down. There's nowhere else to go except into the school, through the wooden doors. I look over at the girls and the boy instead. He has a high-pitched laugh but laughs anyway and the girls laugh along with him. He keeps laughing and I notice one of the girls is pretty. I lean back against the stairs, but none of them look at me.

"He's so creepy," says the pretty girl. "He's greasy and he's got hair coming out of his nose."

"He's not as bad as Mr. Kittridge," says the boy.

All three of them laugh and I smile a half smile, looking at the steps just below their feet.

"What about Brian Stewart?" says the other girl. "Did you hear he was caught doing it in the bathroom?"

"Doing what?" asks the pretty one. "No! You mean alone? Who caught him?"



“I promised I wouldn’t tell.”

“Come on!”

As if on cue, all three turn to look at me. They turn back and talk in quieter voices.

“What do you mean they caught him?” asks the boy.

“They saw him—they saw everything.”

I look away from them, up at the windows that line the school front.

Through one, I see a student sitting at his desk, through another, the back of someone’s head. I look at the trio on the steps but they ignore me until the bell rings and they stand up. Then the pretty girl looks at me, and I smile. She turns, runs up behind the boy, and jumps on his back. The three go inside without another glance. Some students come outside and walk by and soon another bell rings and I’m alone. I look up at the windows again and see people milling around. Then one of them looks down at me. I glance around but I’m all alone. In the window, the boy is still staring and now others are looking too. I can see their eyes, their ugly faces. I’m almost positive one of them laughs.

It’s not hard to think of everyone I’ve ever hated. I see each and every one of their faces. As I shuffle along the street back towards my parents, I could kill someone. My hands are frozen, and I haven’t changed my clothes in three days, and we’ll never make it to California because our car will always break down or someone will piss off my father and we’ll be stuck walking around some stupid town. It won’t matter where we are. If I had a brick and Anthony Testa was here I’d smash his face in. I could punch my father. I would tell him he has

no idea what it's like. No idea. I'd steal his money and run away and never, ever come back.

I walk down the hill and see the river in the distance and it hasn't moved an inch; it's probably frozen in place. Downtown, my father sits on the sidewalk in front of the laundromat. My mother, I'm sure of it, is inside drinking coffee, watching him and waiting. She'll do his dirty work for him if he waits long enough. The two of them make me crazy. I go up to my father and plant my feet on the sidewalk in front of him. "What the hell are you waiting for?" I yell at him, "It's a goddamned radiator, that's all it is!" He looks at me, stunned, and I go on. "Why are you going to California? What's so great about California? You can't even get out of Minneapolis!"

"Graham, just hold on a minute. You have to understand—"

"You hold on. You sit here—" I start crying but make myself stop. "You ruin everything," I say before I start crying again. Then I run over to the Impala and get inside. I sit still for a minute, my legs cold against the upholstery, before I dry my eyes and look over. My father stands on the sidewalk, looking dumbfounded, his eyes in my direction. Then my mother comes out of the laundromat. She says some words to him and points at me. When my father shakes his head, she throws her hands up in the air; her eyes look mean. He shakes his head again and she opens her purse, pulls out the roll of bills, and gives him half. My father says, "What?" but the bills are in his hands. She turns away and goes to the mechanic, counting through her half as she walks.

When my father comes over and opens my door, I don't even look up at him. He says, "I know how you feel, Graham, believe me I do. I know how hard it is. But it's a means to an end. It's a whole different world down there, you understand?" I don't look his way. "In a couple of days this will all seem ridiculous," he says. "We'll laugh about it. We'll be on the beach by then. What do you think, Champ?" he asks. "What do you say?" I hold my breath then let it out all at once. My mother gets in the driver's side of the car.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" she asks my father.

He looks at her and then he looks at me. I turn to my mother. The key is hanging in the ignition. She starts the engine.

My father waits, as if she'll change her mind. I wait too, for her to tell him to get in, or to move over and let him drive, but she doesn't. She releases the parking break. "Then I guess this is goodbye," my father says, and he closes my door. We wait a minute longer and he says, "If you change your mind, I'll be in Fresno."

When the car jolts forward, he still looks stunned. Then he turns from us and starts down the sidewalk, shoving the roll of bills into his pocket as he goes.

After we pick up our things from the mechanic's house my mother and I drive north and don't talk about my father or what we'll do next or anything at all. I know what she'll say when she decides to say something: that's it not my fault. But she'll be lying. It is my fault and worse than that, we're going back to

Thunder Bay because of it. We drive and I look out at the same scenery we saw yesterday. I try not to think about it: what he's thinking or what he'll do next, and I try not to think about going back to school and having to tell everyone either.

"Are we going to leave him there?" I ask.

My mother doesn't answer. As we head up the interstate, tears roll down her cheeks and after a while she pulls over.

"I knew it was a stupid idea from the start." She says, "He knows it too, I know he does. That's the crazy thing about it; he has to try anyway. He has to learn for himself."

My mother dries her eyes and looks over her shoulder to pull back onto the highway. For a minute I think she'll turn us around and we'll drive south again, but she doesn't. We head north and she turns the radio on low. It's a country station we're tuned to, and soon she turns it off again.

"It's not the worst thing in the world," she says. "At least we're not stuck in California with no work. There's no way anyone would have hired us there." But that only makes me think of my father wandering around California broke, with no one there to help him.

"Graham," she says. "I don't expect you to understand, but this was a long time coming." For some reason I start crying then, and she puts her hand on my knee. "I'm sorry," she says. "I'm sorry we put you through this."

We keep driving and once I stop crying, I feel dry inside. I try to make myself cry again but I can't, it seems too fake. I have nothing left to do, so I watch my mother and wait for her to say something else. But she's in a different world: her lips move as if she's talking but she's not saying anything out loud. It's scary. At one point she tells me we're not going back to Thunder Bay, that we'll head east to Nipigon and stay with her parents until we figure out what to do with ourselves. But even then she doesn't want to talk, she doesn't seem to notice I'm there. She's just thinking and every once in a while she lets me hear what it is. It seems wrong to try talking to her and I don't know what else to do, so I sit quietly until it gets dark, then I lean across the seat and rest my head on her arm. Her sweater smells faintly of sweat. She touches my head with her hand, positioning it on her shoulder, and I tell her I love her. "I love you," I say, and my voice sounds odd against the hum of the car.

"I love you too."

Soon after, she pulls into a motel where we get a room with a double bed and cable television. It's luxury. My mother turns up the thermostat even though it's already hot inside, and opens the bathroom door. She runs water into the tub. I take off my shoes and socks and pants and shirt and lay in my underwear on the bed. She takes off her heavy sweater and splashes water from the sink onto her face, her shoulders. I turn on the television, using the remote control, and look at myself in the big wall mirror as I flick through the channels. I picture my father out there somewhere and it's not so bad anymore. He's happy. He's warm. Steam comes out of the bathroom. My mother hums to herself and looks over at

me, through the doorway. Her cheeks are red from our nights outside but when she smiles, her face softens. I smile back, warm to the core. "We're going to be ok," she says. "You'll see, we're going to be ok." I want, more than anything, for her to lie behind me on the bed and cuddle me. I turn off the television. "I know," I tell her. "We'll be fine." Then she closes the door and I hear the click of the lock. She steps into the bathtub, the splashing water sounds through the wall. I don't know why, but it breaks something inside me and I cry. I cry until I can no longer see.

## Another Man's Bed

Just before two a.m. I hear a car door close. But at the window I see that it's just Jakobson. He stands beside the cab and pays the driver. The rear passenger-side door opens and a woman gets out. She looks young, certainly younger than Jakobson. She wears nothing but a t-shirt and jeans. In October, it's foolish.

When the cab pulls away, Jakobson puts his arm around the woman's waist and leads her to his door. From my bird's eye view across the street, it's almost like watching a movie. Soon the lights are on upstairs and I open the window a crack—sometimes Jakobson takes them out on the balcony for a drink. Then I hear what they talk about and I have to say, it sounds anything but exceptional to me, except that they are talking. *Did you see such and such a lecture? I didn't like it either... No, Jakobson's not a German name, but my grandmother was German. Have you ever been to Germany? Me neither, but I've heard that the Rhone is quite beautiful...*

But the smiles, the laughter that comes from those conversations! You'd think they were speaking some magical language, that their observations were nothing short of brilliant. *Oh yes, I agree, Latin Americans are friendlier than the Canadians—in more ways than one, I'm told. Ha ha ha ha.*

Not that what's said is meant for me, and it must be hard for Jakobson to be interesting with every woman he brings home. I counted three in September alone: a happy-looking blonde, a brunette, and a woman with a scarf on her head. I wouldn't be able to keep their names straight. And there could have been more, I'm not much with detail—that was Louise's department. But how does he do it? What's his secret? You'd think Jakobson would be the most dashing man you'd ever seen. Well he isn't. He's quite plain looking and he often has his shirt-tails half tucked in and half hanging out, as if part way through the job, he forgot he was dressing. That, for Jakobson, passes for fashion. For some reason the women love it.

It leaves a sour taste in my mouth. Call it jealousy. Who wouldn't be a little jealous? A plain looking man who doesn't make very good conversation having all those women over, women who laugh at his jokes and stay the night. Nonetheless, I'm happy for him. Even with all his escapades he finds enough time to invite me over every once in a while. More than once in a while. In difficult times it's hard to find friends, and Jakobson has certainly been there for me.

Before long, Jakobson and his friend make their way onto the balcony. (I should mention that Jakobson refers to all people as friends. It took me a while to understand that Krista, the *friend* he told me about, and the other woman, the blond I've seen escape his apartment while I drink my morning coffee, are one and the same.) Right away, I can tell this one's not the laughing type. I'd put money on it. She sits facing the street, with her hair pulled back. She wears one



of Jakobson's sweaters over her t-shirt and crosses her arms in front of her. I can see Jakobson's face too. They are drunk, both of them. They talk loudly.

Jakobson waves his hand and says, "I got the place for the view."

Now I see I was wrong—his friend's lips move easily into a smile, a laugh trickles out. Louise would have seen that from the start.

Jakobson says something about Venice, something about canals, and his friend laughs again. Then they sit quietly. There are no cars on our street, no people wandering home too late at night, to attract attention.

The woman says, "When I was younger I thought it would be really great to have an apartment somewhere extravagant, Cyprus or Sicily... Somewhere my balcony would look out over the water and I could drink coffee and do nothing."

"I still have that dream," Jakobson tells her.

"Not me. It would be nice for a week at a time but not for too long. Not where I couldn't understand the language."

Jakobson stares off into the dark as if she isn't even there.

The woman laughs and puts her hand on his leg. "Maybe to write a thesis," she says.

Jakobson puts his hand over hers. They are quiet for a minute and then he whispers something to her. He points to a house on my side of the street. Then he points to my house and whispers something else.

I'd pay a good dollar to hear what he's saying.

But the woman doesn't laugh. She nods her head and then looks straight at me. Thank God it's dark in my room. I don't even breathe.

Before long they go back inside. Now the routine is set. It's a sure bet. In a few minutes the bedroom curtains will close but the light will stay on. A while later the light will go out and the curtains will part. Sometimes Jakobson opens the window just a crack.

I shut my own window. I can't believe I've come to this, imagining what goes on in another man's bed. But now I can't sleep. The sheets of the bed are too tight and my feet are cold. Last night I wrapped the covers around me and woke up in the middle of the night suffocating and terrified. I don't try to fool myself, it's not the covers that keep me awake.

I don't want to think about it but sometimes it sneaks up on me.

Tonight I try distracting myself with Jakobson instead.

Last January he came over to introduce himself. He'd just moved and told us that he didn't know anyone in Ottawa. Louise and I were both taken by him, though neither of us could put a finger on what it was exactly. He has an easy grace, I guess you'd say. The way he stood in our front hall and said, Hello, I'm Liam Jakobson, without any shyness or fake joviality. He shook my hand firmly, and his hand was warm and dry even though it was January. He only stayed a minute but after he left we agreed that there was something about him. It's hard to believe that was only ten months ago.

Those early days, or the before days, haven't left that much of an impression on me. Back then I worked more and went out periodically with my

co-workers. Louise and I made a point of taking in a movie once a week. I didn't have much opportunity to get to know Jakobson. A couple of times I went over to his place and we drank rye on ice because rye was the only thing he kept aside from beer, which I've never had a taste for. We talked about things that held no meaning for either of us. Jakobson is a Ph.D. student in psychology and can talk a streak about anything. At one time I planned to do my Ph.D. too but then that changed. Louise and I met and all of a sudden everything felt different. I forgot about my Ph.D. and decided to start my adult life instead.

Jakobson and I only talked about this kind of thing in passing. We concentrated on the state of politics and what was wrong with professional sports, that sort of thing. Neither of us votes and I don't think Jakobson thinks too highly about anything on television. I surely don't. But we chatted and it was comfortable enough that we got together every now and then. Sometimes I'd come home and find him talking with Louise over a drink. Then we'd order out for food and Jakobson and I would end up at the kitchen table drinking rye on ice. Whether or not we were truly friends, I can't say.

When I look back on those days, I think of them sadly. Louise said there was more to him than I could see. There was more to her than I wanted to believe. She and Jakobson really talked, *they connected*, she told me, but months after meeting him, I still didn't know a thing about him.

There's no telling what he knew about me.

A door closes outside and I rush back to the window. Hope is a cruel animal: it's just Jakobson's friend, leaving. He follows her to the curb and then stops. She looks down the street and he says something. Then she kisses him on the cheek and walks off.

It's not even two-thirty. I don't think the bedroom curtains were ever drawn.

Jakobson watches her walk away. She still wears his sweater and he doesn't go back into his house until she's gone around the corner. At his door, Jakobson turns and looks directly at my window. He nods and gives a slight salute. I don't know what to make of it. He has that scowl he sometimes gets when he looks at my house. Then he goes inside.

I keep watching and in a minute he appears on his balcony. He waves to me with his whole arm this time. I turn on my bedside light and wave back to him.

Sure I'll go over. I get out of my pyjamas and put on cords.

Jakobson already knew what was going on when I found out. Other people probably did too. But Jakobson didn't beat around the bush about it. He took me out for supper one night and asked me how I was doing. It was a desperate feeling I had then. "I've had my heart broken too," he told me. "I know it's not the same thing, but I've had my heart broken too." That was in June, the first days after.

Later that night he read my cards and lined up my future beautifully. The Fool card was in my present position, he told me. I was going through a time of change and it would be difficult, but when it was over I would wake up a new person, with strengths I never realised I had. Then came The Empress card, Possession, The Dance: hope, he promised, lust, transcendence. I would become great friends again with someone from my childhood, an old flame was thinking of me, I should try vacationing but avoid airplanes. Everything was happening for a reason, he said, and when I came to understand that, I would start to get on with things.

I didn't know one of those cards from another, but afterwards I truly felt relieved. I believed I would survive, and that was no small feat. Jakobson had the ability to show the greater design of things, to let you know it made sense. It's an incredible ability.

In those days, as Louise moved her things out of the house and I understood that my world had collapsed around me, I spent a lot of time at Jakobson's. In a manner of speaking, he took care of me. We sat together and he talked about himself while I alternated between coffee and rye. He sat in his armchair and I lay on his couch.

Jakobson told me that he was raised in Toronto. His family lived on old money from northern gold mines. His father was a truly good man. Having a successful family made him happy. His mother... well, the jury was still out on her, he told me. Until all is said and done, there's no judging a person one way or the other. He attended the best private schools and only associated with the most

obnoxious cliques. He was, he admitted, the kind of kid people would rather run over than offer a ride to. They did nasty things then, he and his friends, to humiliate anyone who could be humiliated. They did hateful things and thought very little of it. But then Jakobson went across the border for university. His first year away he learned what it was like to be unpopular, and worse, to command little respect or affection. People like him wouldn't give him the time of day and neither would anyone else. That year and the next were his hardest years. He tried with people and failed, so he tried again. And then, over time, something began to work for him. He'd changed. He'd developed a conscience; his life was better for it.

And it happened just in the nick of time. In his final year at Iowa, he went home for Christmas to find that his family's house was for sale and most of the furniture was already gone. His father had been too embarrassed to tell anyone that the money had run dry. Jakobson, being an only child, suffered alone all vacation. Dinnertimes were silent and the rest of the day was covered in a stifling anxiety that didn't allow for conversation. On Christmas morning he received lavish presents that he feared his parents couldn't afford. Jakobson was relieved to escape when the holidays ended. He went back south for his final semester.

Over the next six months, Jakobson watched his family fall apart. His mother left his father for a Bay Street man, a confidant of the family. Jakobson then stood helpless as his father, the only decent role model he'd ever had, slipped into a depression that he would not come out of for two years. Only when he fell in love with a woman from Halifax did he start to feel better.

That's when Jakobson started seeing a lot of different women. He told me that he slept with more people than he can remember the faces of, and one of them became pregnant. Maybe because of his new-found conscience, or maybe because his own family was falling apart, Jakobson proposed to the woman and they were soon married. But it wasn't long before they realised that they were wrong for each other. Her family was bigoted, southern Baptist. Agnostic, he told me, was a word they weren't ready to understand. So one night he packed his bags and left while she ate dinner at her parents' house. He drove north and then west and then north again. He was scared and made damn sure not to leave a trail they could follow.

At least that's what Jakobson told me, and at the time, there was no reason to think he was lying. I took in the story without really thinking. And when it ended I was surprised by how much it affected me. I wanted to know more. What happened to his wife? What about the baby? And his father, did his new love last? Was it real? How, exactly, did it all turn out?

Underneath my bed I find a clean pair of socks. A long, red hair is knotted in the fabric and I pull it until it breaks. Little reminders. I slip my feet into a pair of loafers.

Outside the air is crisp and there is a breeze. I don't lock my door and I don't knock on Jakobson's. I walk right in. I hear the kettle on the stovetop and

find him sitting on the couch in his living room, looking at the French doors that lead to the balcony.

There is no secret as to what will happen next. He will start in on some story of things that happened to him long ago. And I will listen, like I always have, without asking the questions that would make it all fall apart. Because Jakobson is a liar. An incredible liar..

By the time Jakobson got around to telling me about his father, I really wanted to know how the story turned out. I needed to know. Louise hadn't left me for a Bay Street man, but I had my suspicions; there was surely someone. And how does a man deal with that kind of thing? What can he possibly do? "What happened to your father?" I asked.

The story evolved from visit to visit, each time he added something that he'd *forgotten* to tell me the time before. Pieced together though, it went something like this: After his separation from his wife, Jakobson's father fell into a deep depression. The house sold for an exorbitant amount of money but even with the financial means to do as he wanted, he had no desire to settle down anywhere. In this state of mind he joined a volunteer organisation that built houses for low-income families. He worked there for over a year but never felt that he fit in. Everyone else was younger than he was and he felt that they looked down on him for having money. Lonely and still depressed, he figured it was time to try something different.



He decided to take a bus tour of the maritime provinces. He left with just one suitcase. The bus was scheduled to go through Montreal and Quebec City, the Annapolis Valley, Halifax, and end up in Cape Breton before turning back. But the tour was a disaster. Everyone played bridge and took pictures while Jakobson's father turned an off shade of green, a victim of motion sickness. He ended up living in a Grivol haze as the bus ferried them from one tourist location to another. He never even took out his camera. Many times he thought of flying home, but what did he have to go back to? He was still at loose ends and hoped that making friends on this trip would give him an idea of what to do next.

Once the bus arrived in Halifax, however, Jakobson's father had had enough. He informed the driver he wouldn't be travelling with them any longer and walked downtown, trying to find a place to collect his thoughts. He checked into a bed and breakfast and called Jakobson. They talked for well over an hour and during most of it, his father was in tears. He confided things that a son should never have to hear from a father. But in difficult times, Jakobson told me, these things happen. His father didn't know what to do and needed to talk. After they got off the telephone, the woman who owned the B&B knocked on his door and asked if he'd like some tea. She explained, rather embarrassed, that the walls in the house were not thick. They drank tea and talked. That's how it began.

Jacobson smiled at me then. "That was three years ago. I've never seen my father happier."

The night the story ended, I slept better than I had in weeks.

But only days later Louise and I met for coffee and my insomnia started again. We sat at a coffee shop on Beechwood and tried to negotiate a conversation. So many topics were off-limits that we didn't know where to turn, so we talked about Jakobson. I listened mostly, and learned some things. For Louise, Jakobson was a man who'd lost his mother at a young age. She'd died in a car accident and he remembered her as a saint. His father remarried quickly, something Jakobson never forgave him for. His family was poor, he'd never married or even engaged to marry. He knew some terrible heartache, but came through it relatively unscathed. He tried to live a better life than those around him; he tried not to make the same mistakes.

I was astounded. A saint for a mother! A heart-broken son! How does a person invent his own life? I tried to piece it together but it didn't make sense. A lech of a father! Which of the stories was true?

I bit my tongue and didn't tell Louise my version of Jakobson. We were already on shaky ground and she found him so charming, so considerate, she would have thought I was being malicious, or just jealous. I looked across the table and she was smiling, her mind distant, thinking of something else. *What?* I wanted to ask. What other stories had Jakobson whispered into her ear?

One night before she left, I saw Louise standing by the window, looking at someone outside. She waved and I went over and there was Jakobson, standing in the shadow of his porch, giving her his little salute. He had a serious look, but Louise, before she knew I was there, wore a radiant smile. That night we talked for a long time and read to each other from old magazines. It seemed like the best

of the early days and I associated this with Jakobson and was all the more taken with him. It was March, and it felt to me then that summer would arrive any day.

I know what most people would think, Louise waving through the window, smiling at a man who seems to have his pick of them. I won't say the thought never crossed my mind. But I asked and she told me no, she and Jakobson were only friends. And that night, cuddling and laughing like we did, I felt like something long forgotten had come back into my life. It had. The man seemed like an angel.

The next morning, I wasn't so sure, but I'd ask her again and she said they were only friends. What good would it do to find out she was lying?

Jakobson shifts on the couch and doesn't say anything, so I say, "Hello, Jakobson."

He looks up but doesn't respond. He motions to a chair in front of the French doors and I sit there.

"Tough night?"

"You could say that."

"I saw her leave."

Jakobson nods his head. "It's not that," he says. "I don't know what it is."

"She had somewhere else to be?"

“It’s got nothing to do with her,” he snaps. “Just a tough night. Maybe I’m thinking too much.”

“Don’t think then.”

He gives me a nasty look.

“Sorry. I’m in the same boat. I can’t stop thinking.”

Jakobson looks past me, at the French doors, and runs his tongue over his teeth. I turn. Behind the glass is the balcony and below that, the street. Across the street is my house with my bedroom on the second floor. It is emptier than any other. The wind rattles the windows, the doors. It is autumn already.

“I’ll get the tea,” I say.

Jakobson doesn’t acknowledge me and I consider taking the kettle off the stove and leaving. But for some reason I can’t. It’s not any one thing. I can feel my heart knocking at my rib cage and I know there’s no way of getting back to sleep. So I wait for the tea to steep. Mine is black; Jakobson takes milk and sugar. I put it on the table in front of him.

Jakobson leans forward and looks down at his mug. He says, “I’m at loose ends here, compadre. I’m thinking rye on ice.”

I get him a glass full of ice cubes and the bottle of rye from the kitchen.

He pours himself a drink and holds it up. “Cheers. To the two most depressing men on the block.”

I hold up my mug. “May we be healed by morning.”

Jakobson swallows his drink and then closes his eyes and leans back on the couch.

“So,” I say. “Loose ends.”

He covers his eyes with his hands. “You’d think a move to a new city and falling in love once or twice would get you back on track.”

“Look at you. It can’t be all bad.”

Jakobson opens his eyes and looks into his glass. The way he’s slumped over, his body looks broken. “It’s all up here,” he says, tapping his skull with his index finger. “All in the head. Don’t listen to a thing I tell you, I’m not depressed. I’m talking like an ass.” He picks up his glass, tilts it back and gets nothing but ice. He puts it down and sits there, broken. It is not the Jakobson I know.

“Jakobson, let me tell you a story,” I say. I mean why not?

He nods his head and looks past me, outside.

I try to think of something, anything at all. “In university, I knew a guy named Howard Reid,” I say. “He was on the football team, a running back. One of those good-looking guys that always had girls hanging off him. I’d hear his name mentioned by any number of people. They felt important knowing him.”

I sip my tea. I don’t know why I started with Howard Reid in the first place. Truthfully, I have no idea where I’m going. But Jakobson watches me.

I take a deep breath.

“I was unpopular, Jakobson. Not like you were—not because I did bad things—but because I was quiet guy from a small town in northern Ontario and didn’t know anybody. I met Reid in economics. He wanted to be a smart guy who played sports, not a jock pretending to go to school. But he wasn’t that

smart, and he let the academics slide during the football season. He needed help getting back on top of things when it was over. That's how I knew him. He'd come over a couple of nights a week and we'd go through it all. We'd have a beer together and I'd help him with economics."

Jakobson nods his head.

"He wasn't a nice guy, Jakobson, but it took me a while to figure that out. He'd see me in class and slap me on the back as if we were friends, but after a while I heard that he said things about me. People asked why I was helping him and I lied and said he paid me well. But I just didn't know what else to do. He was so good at being two-faced that I thought there was some kind of mistake. Then I overheard him once myself, and I knew better, but what could I do? I was embarrassed more than anything."

Jakobson pours himself another drink. He leans forward, rests his elbows on his knees and eyes me with a curious expression. He looks better. Just sitting up he looks better.

"In those days, everyone went to the same parties, month after month. You'd recognise people who you'd never talked to, but because you'd been drunk with them, you'd think you knew them. I had my eye on this one girl I'd seen at those parties and on campus, and I was dying to meet her. Her name was Jenny Hayes. She was on the rowing team and, to me, she looked just like Bo Derek. At this Christmas party, we were standing in the same group of people and I introduced myself. She said, 'You're Howard Reid's friend, aren't you?' and I didn't know what to say so I said I was. Later that night, Reid asked me what her

name was. 'Who's your girlfriend?' he said. 'She's got great tits.' I told him to stay away, but I knew what would happen. I knew there was no stopping it.

"I went home for Christmas and thought about this girl anyway. I thought about her the whole time. I wrote her a letter that I never sent, I made up a song... that kind of thing. But, of course, she had other plans. She and Reid got together over the holidays and I knew the day I came back, because I saw them walking across campus together. Reid knew it would drive me crazy, so when he saw me in class he slapped me on the back and told me he'd slept with her, right in front of everyone. Then he asked if we could study at his place that night, because he thought she might drop by."

I take a sip of my drink.

"Did you go?" Jakobson asks.

"Of course I went. I wanted to see her too."

I take another sip of my drink and consider it. Jakobson watches me and slowly, a smile spreads across his face.

"What happened next?"

"What do you think happened?"

"I'm hoping you'll tell me you punched him out."

"No, I had other plans for Reid. I knew what kind of guy he was by then. I'd heard about all the women in his life. So I went over there with the idea of spilling of dirt. I thought I'd rub it in his face. But when I got there and I saw them talking, saw the way she was hanging on his every word, I knew she wouldn't believe me. I knew I'd have to have proof. So after our next class I

followed Reid and wrote down everywhere he went. Then I waited outside his house the next day and followed him then, too. I followed him for over a week and I found out all the other women Reid was sleeping with.”

Jakobson leans back on his couch and regards me with a new expression. He rattles the ice in his glass.

“I had the plan of ratting him out. I had a list of all the times he met other women, and the places too. I telephoned Jenny and asked her to meet me for coffee. I figured she’d realise what a prize I was compared to him—you can see the way my mind was working—I would console her for a couple of days; we’d spend all our time together and it would be a done deal. I was convinced, absolutely convinced, that she’d fall in love with me. But she was too nice to hurt—I liked her too much. I couldn’t tell her. I wrote Reid a letter instead and told never to see Jenny again. I said I had times and places and pictures.”

“Blackmail,” says Jakobson.

“Except that he knew who I was. I didn’t hide from him.”

“But why would he care if people knew he was sleeping around?”

“No, you don’t understand. It wasn’t his sleeping around. I said I had evidence about school too—I didn’t, but I knew I could get it—he was no genius. I told him everyone would know he was a fraud, a liar. He knew I would expose him.”

Jakobson looks at me funny, as if he doesn’t quite know what to do next. He stands up and sits back down. “So that was Howard Reid,” he says.

“Do you ever call your wife?” I ask him. “Just to keep in touch?”



“My wife?” He looks at me and says, “No, I told you, that would be a mistake. Those in-laws...”

“I see.”

Jakobson pours himself another drink from the bottle of rye. He looks at the label as if he’s never seen it before. “That’s quite a story,” he says. “A shot for the road?”

I shake my head no. I stand up and Jakobson walks downstairs with me. At the door he avoids my eyes. “You did all that just so Reid would stop sleeping with her?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“I’ll bet he never saw her again.”

“That’s right.”

“That’s quite a story,” he says, and he looks at me strangely, impressed? Confused? I stand at the door until Jakobson holds out his hand. I shake it.

“Goodnight Jakobson.”

“Sleep well.”

He closes the door and I head across the street. The air hasn’t warmed up but it feels good. I feel good for the first time tonight. I wish I’d left just one light on in my house. I open the door and fumble for the light switch. Inside, it’s warm. I go upstairs, get undressed, and climb into bed.

The first time I saw a woman over at Jakobson's it was summer. I was late coming home and from the street, I saw them on his balcony. She wasn't very talkative, but Jakobson pushed her along, asking questions, making quips that made her laugh. He was wearing a pair of cut-off jean shorts and an old t-shirt at the time and I remember thinking he needed new clothes. But he was *engaging*—that was the only word to describe it—and she was taken—from the time it took me to get to my front door and let myself in I could see she was taken. I could see why any woman would be.

But now I'm thinking too much. So many thoughts seem like harmless animals until they get loose and run the brain in circles.

I roll on my side, then on my back again. After a long minute under the stifling heat of the covers I go to the window and open it a crack. Just as I do, I see Jakobson leaving his place. It's well past three o'clock and he's off somewhere, navigating the shadows like a man afraid to be seen. I'd like to know what he's up to.

Jakobson, Jakobson.

The way he sneaks around makes me wonder. I have half a mind to follow him, but of course I never would, and he knows it. Such a charming man. Right now, I hate Jakobson. It's sinister, waiting until I go to sleep and then sneaking off into the night. I'm the one who told him the story tonight—I *told him*. And still he goes off in search of whatever Jakobson searches for.

Tomorrow, when he invites me upstairs for a drink and I ask where he went and he tells me an innocent story of needing fresh air, or working on a paper

at a coffee shop, I'll be tempted to believe him again, to think the best of him, but tonight I hate him. The way he knows so much about me. The way he approaches people, so familiar. He walked into my house and said, *Hello, I'm Liam Jakobson*. He shook my hand firmly, sincerely. Louise left me on a Thursday afternoon and I didn't see it coming. Jakobson did.

I can just imagine what he's doing now. Walking down Fourth Avenue, looking for a dependable *friend* to visit. A redhead I imagine. A real beauty. He will do something corny but endearing to wake her up: throw pebbles at her window or climb a nearby tree and serenade quietly. She will be sleepy and wonder why she's being woken so late. But looking out her window, she will see that it's Jakobson and that the air is clear and open all around. The night will feel magical and she will put on some clothes to join him in the street.

Jakobson will say something simple and charming. *It's almost noon in Paris. You can't pass up a walk at noon in Paris.*

She will smile.

After walking down alleyways and strolling through parks, they will emerge, as if from a maze, on my street. Jakobson will hold her arm with his hand and say, "It's a lovely neighbourhood when everyone's sleeping."

She will feel his hand, warm on her arm, and she will laugh.

I will hear that laughter. It will wake me up and I will go to the window. I will see them walk up the street slowly, weaving their talk and their laughter together until I don't know what I'm hearing. Something beautiful and rich and

fragile. It will grow stranger as they draw near: the sound of breath between lips.  
And they will go into his apartment like this, their new language in front of them.

## Distant Geography

The scene as it stood: our compact, two-story house, not unlike the one I grew up in, that used to be called a wartime house. Its white aluminium siding turns gold in the evening light of July; its porch reaches into the back yard—an addition from a more industrious time. In the living room, photographs in frames, curtains instead of blinds, a streak of permanent marker peeking out from behind the couch—a leftover from Ian's toddler days. Garish, but not garish enough to warrant repainting the entire room. In the kitchen, a pack of cigarettes on the table and beside them a saucer filled with ashes, still to be dealt with. Shards from two plates, broken mainly for effect, are scattered on the floor, while the dustpan meant to collect them stands forgotten between the refrigerator and the stove. Ian is upstairs, remarkably still sleeping (or so I hope, by the grace of kind spirits) and in the morning will know nothing of this, only its aftermath. Inside the porch (that we built, Jennifer and I, with the help of my brother-in-law Leonard and his wife Grace) the pillows from the lawn chairs are laid across the floor, and this is where Jennifer and I make our peace.

Afterwards, the porch stops creaking underneath our weight and Jennifer laughs quietly. Her skin is flushed and her breathing is not yet back to normal. I

laugh too and she says, shhh. We listen for the sound of slippers on the staircase (Ian has begun sleep-walking of late) but hear other things instead: the grandfather clock marking time in the hallway, a night time breeze blowing through the screen door. We remain quiet, side-by-side, until our breathing is no different from the other sounds of the world. Then Jennifer stands up, saying she'd better use the washroom. I get up too, and in the kitchen I look again at what we've done. We're not usually violent people.

If life could be broken down by moments, I would have paused there and closed my eyes and lived it again. I would go back to where the tears ended, or further back still, and never move beyond. But, perhaps this tendency of mine to revisit, to revise, is precisely what caused the trouble.

The fan whirred in the bathroom, the toilet flushed. I surveyed the kitchen and wondered where I would put the plate shards, the ashes. I remembered a small box that once housed champagne glasses, probably collecting dust in the basement, but I didn't try to find it. I let the dustpan alone. I stood there looking at the mess until Jennifer returned.

She came up behind me, put her arms around me. We can deal with this in the morning, she said. Let's go to bed.

But I couldn't, not just then. In my brain, I was replaying the argument we'd had. I thought I could pinpoint where it turned from a discussion into something uglier. Without considering the idea thoroughly, I believed we could rework what had happened until it turned out right. When I opened my mouth,

the wrong words came out.

I'm not grieving, I said. I haven't thought about my father in months.

Jennifer's arms dropped from my waist and she let out a long breath.

Graham, no, she said.

It's been a long time, I told her. It's been almost two years. It's been a long, long time. Really, I don't think about it.

If it's not your father, what is it?

I don't know.

Is it us? she asked. Tell me, is it me?

No, I said. No.

Of course not, it's nothing. You're depressed but it's nothing. Nothing bothers you.

I was quiet, I waited. She rested her head against my shoulder. I put my arms around her.

She said, Jesus, Graham, I never thought you'd be this stubborn.

The next morning she packed the car with her things and Ian's. I tried to eat breakfast, just like I tried to concentrate on what I would teach in class that day. She went outside, picked up Ian's soccer ball, and turned on the sprinkler. Then she came in and opened the fridge and pulled food out of the crisper to make a lunch. I watched her spread butter onto bread and break a head of lettuce into small pieces. She turned to me and said, Don't look at me that way, Graham. It won't be long, I promise. But I need a break. We both do.

How long?

Not long, she said. I don't really know. Please, don't look at me that way. Just take some time to think about it while we're gone. Think about what we can do to help you through this.

I brushed my teeth and got my papers together before going to the backyard to find Ian. At six, he was beginning to grow weary of affection from his father, but I gave him a hug and kissed him on the forehead. He didn't know what was happening and I didn't offer any explanations. I kissed him again and said, I'll see you soon, Ian.

When I left the house Jennifer was staring through the kitchen window at the backyard. I avoided the sprinkler as I made my way to the sidewalk.

I walked down Dovercourt and took a right at the stoplights, but I wasn't ready to go to work yet, and I sat on a bench at a bus stop, looking out at the road. The sun was out, although the clouds were thick to the west, and I caught an unexpected scent of garden roses on the wind. I watched the traffic go by and felt as though I could sit there forever—never move again—or at least until Jennifer and Ian passed on their way out of town and stopped. Then I would clamber into the car and watch the sky through the window as we drove and, when we got to Leonard and Grace's, I'd smile as brightly as I could and say, Yes, it has been a beautiful summer, hasn't it?

I don't know how long I would have sat on the bench and waited, or what I would have done next, if a student of mine hadn't seen me across the street and come over to ask me a question about the homework from the night before. It



was Brian Middleton, a quiet boy I sometimes failed to notice in class, and when he asked me why I was sitting on the bench I told him I was taking a moment for the finer things in life. Then I stood up and asked him what his homework question was, and we walked to school together.

That afternoon, walking home from the grocery store, a summer shower started. At first it felt refreshing, and I thought of my summer school kids playing basketball after classes. I imagined how funny it would be to walk by the court, as if by accident, and join them. But after half a block with the grocery bags pinning my arms to my sides, my shirt clung to me like cellophane. The wind blew, and goose-bumps came out on my arms. Earthworms wriggled across the concrete sidewalks and it began to feel like autumn, even though it was still July. I could imagine the leaves falling from trees, steam rising from my mouth. For a moment I had to remind myself of our plans for later in the summer: a cottage north of Bancroft, a time of roasting marshmallows and catching fireflies. I headed straight for the house, and changed into dry clothes. Only then was summertime possible again.

I heated up some leftover chicken and sat with my books in the porch, where the rain tapping against the low roof has an intimate tone. It sounded like sleep, persistent and unavoidable, and I made myself a cup of coffee before trying to sketch out a lesson plan. I was jotting down ideas when the telephone rang. I went to the living room and waited until the answering machine cut in. After the message, Jennifer's voice came over the line.

Hello Graham, are you there? Are you home? I'm just calling to tell you we got to Leonard's all right. Is it raining there? It really came down on us just before we got to Eganville. But the lake looked gorgeous in the rain, you would have loved it... Call me when you get in, ok?

When she hung up the phone, the line went dead and the machine clicked off. The rain continued on, and in the hallway, the clock ticked; but aside from those incomprehensible rhythms, there was nothing but one empty room after another. I waited for a minute before calling back. Grace answered the telephone and I asked her how she was doing. She talked for a minute before saying, Oh, hang on a second, Jennifer just came in the room. I said, Grace? Grace, is Ian close by? Could you put him on the line?

I listened until I could hear his breath through the receiver. He was still at the age where he didn't understand the need to talk as well as listen when on the telephone.

Ian, are you there? How are you doing?

Fine.

Is Uncle L there? Are you guys having a good time?

We're going fishing tomorrow.

Fishing? That's lucky. What kind of fish are you going to catch?

Trout, I guess.

In the background, I could hear Grace and Leonard talking. I heard Jennifer whisper something to Ian.

He said, Uncle L let me use the lawnmower.

I'll bet he did.

I cut the lawn.

Good for you. Were you careful of your toes?

Yes. Uncle L helped me.

Good—don't use it unless he's around.

I heard talking behind Ian again and then Jennifer came on the line.

Hi, Honey, how are you doing? she asked.

I'm ok. How are you?

It was nice to get out of the city. Once we got off the highway, I felt a hundred pounds lighter. I wish you could be here too.

I didn't say anything and, for a moment, neither did she.

How are you doing? she asked. Are you really ok?

I'll be fine. I just feel like you're far away.

We're not that far.

But you are.

The rain continued without pause, and behind Jennifer were voices that distracted us both, animated and unaware. I heard Grace laugh, and then Leonard laughed too, and they sounded like kids, but we kept on talking, Jennifer and I, ignoring them as much we could. Our conversation moved in familiar circles, first Ian and then the drive and then the weather, something almost tragic in the insistence, despite our clumsy words, of an undying love.

\* \* \*

That evening, I rummaged through the closet for a sleeping bag. The only one I found was Ian's. It was small, but did the trick. I took it out to the back porch and made a bed out of the pillows from the lawn chairs. I pulled the sleeping bag over me. With the rain on the rooftop it was easy to picture a lake and a boat full of fishing gear. I imagined putting bait on Ian's hook for him, watching as he cast out and reeled in, hoping beyond hope for a fish to strike—not really knowing what to do once it did. I remembered too (although perhaps it was only the desire for memory) that same excitement when I was a boy. Sitting in a boat, trying to see through the water and my father telling me not to fall out, that people don't float. I thought again of Ian and realised how much I missed him. —Dear God, don't let him fall out of the boat, I thought. I felt as though I hadn't seen him in a long, long time.

The next morning was overcast. Low clouds blanketed the sky, giving the illusion that it still wasn't time to wake up. The alarm went off and I felt a dull pressure behind my eyes. I thought about putting water on to boil for coffee but my body didn't want to move. I propped myself up in a chair and draped Ian's sleeping bag over me. The clock in the hallway reminded me I should get moving, but I didn't. I sat still and let the air from the open windows settle around me.

Grace and Leonard bought their house when they found teaching jobs in Barry's Bay. It's an old farmhouse off the highway with a big wooden porch

facing the woods out behind. We've played cards in that porch into the night every summer since Ian was born. We've been drunk there at times and have done embarrassing things. Back there it seems like you're the only people in the world. There are other animals: at night, the flutter of moth wings, the quick shadows of bats, the scent of skunk, mice scuttling in the walls, and sometimes the far off call of wolves. Jennifer and I built our own porch with theirs in mind. We used cedar so that it would never rot away. We planted trees around the border for privacy. But it never captured the feeling of Leonard and Grace's, all those sounds.

The air around me was damp. I felt horrible. I waited, then I called the school. Judy Pollock answered the telephone.

Graham, is everything ok? she asked.

Things could be better, I said. To be honest, they could be a lot better.

What's wrong? she asked.

It was early, and in that dull morning fog, my mind went blank. I didn't want to go to work but didn't know Judy well enough to imply anything personal without being explicit. All I could think of was Grace and Leonard's porch, a card game with poker chips and gin and tonics. What could I say? I had no option but to sink into a lie, and nothing came spontaneously.

Graham?

It's my father, I said. He's gone.

Oh no, said Judy. I'm so sorry, Graham.

I'll have to go, I told her.

Oh my Lord, I'm so sorry. Was it sudden? she asked. I mean, was it unexpected?

Very.

There was a time when Jennifer and I would pack Ian into the car and drive from Ottawa to Kingston on a whim. We'd buy pizza on Princess Street and take it down to the lakeside. Ian would watch the shallow waters for slow moving carp and afterwards we'd drive home in the darkness, windows open and the road disappearing beneath us.

My early morning ideal, however vague and ill-conceived, had been to sit in the porch and think, as Jennifer wanted me to do, to get beyond whatever was subsuming me. The summer hours were growing shorter and, for the second year in a row, I couldn't honestly say that I would remember a day of it. I felt preoccupied all the time, as if I was always forgetting something crucial. One night I woke up thinking the oven had been left on, but when I went downstairs it wasn't. Then, lying in bed, I thought that something must have woken me, and soon I heard burglars moving around below. I got up again and found the house empty, the doors locked, and when I got back to bed Jennifer asked if I was feeling ok. But her voice sounded more annoyed than concerned, just as it did when she would ask why I was sitting in the house watching television when it was gorgeous outside. I often heard her speak without catching the individual words, although the meaning came to me as I sat staring at her, nodding my head blindly. All the while my brain was running around without going anywhere.

Still, I wanted to believe that if I just thought about it for long enough, whatever *it* was, if I could just concentrate, I would be able to rise above it. But sitting in the porch, trying to think it through, I could only think about how stupid I was to lie to Judy. I realised suddenly, clearly, that prolonged thinking would only make things worse. Distraction was my only hope. With an effort, I pulled myself from the chair.

I changed into some old jeans and a sweatshirt and made a list of things that needed attention. The seal on the bathtub was leaking. The screen window in Ian's room had a tear that I'd mended with fishing line and the stitching was haphazard. The washing machine made a high pitched squeal during the spin cycle and I had no idea how to fix it, but I knew that taking it apart and putting it back together could distract me for days. I went to the basement and got my tools. By noon the pieces of the washer were arranged on the floor in the order they were taken out. I had no idea what I was looking for, or even, except in vague terms, how any of the parts worked. But I felt the satisfaction of working at something, and if I ended up calling a repairman, I would feel no shame when he found the loose screw or ungreased bearing that needed attention. I was so intent on removing every bolt, every washer, and then wiping them clean on a rag and placing them in order on the floor, that when the doorbell rang, my greater surroundings—the cold concrete lining the lower half of the walls, the empty wooden stairs leading up—surprised me.

I didn't move, fearing that someone from work was standing at my doorway and that they would hear me down below. The doorbell rang again and

then everything was quiet. After a few minutes I peeked out and saw that something had been left on the front steps: Easter lilies and irises bedded in baby's breath, arranged in a basket. The summer faculty had all signed a card—Our thoughts and prayers are with you—and a few had scribbled personal notes. My heart sank. I took the flowers to the back porch and put them in a vase. I sat across from them and tried to reconcile their beauty, their smell, with the sick feeling they left in my stomach. I tried crying, thinking that would release me in some way, but I couldn't manage it. I leaned back in my chair and looked out the screen window, where the clouds had dissipated and the sky was a vast plane of blue, bordered by treetops and roofs and telephone poles. The sky smelled of flowers. Clumps of white moved serenely across the sky, disappearing at my eavestrough. I thought I saw a face up there and later, animal parts—a fish spine with ribs scattering, the head of a loon. A purple finch darted across the sky and shortly after that, the clouds left altogether.

He died in a single-car accident north of Thunder Bay, on the Spruce River Road. He may have fallen asleep at the wheel, or skidded on ice, but more likely he swerved to avoid a moose and lost control. It was winter and many things could have gotten him, even if he'd survived the crash. He picked up contracts from the paper mills after moving back to Thunder Bay, and was driving home from work when it happened. He'd only seen Ian once, when he was first born. We promised to see each other, to make other trips, but the geography was immense, and we always pushed our plans back. At the funeral, a half-sister I'd only met a couple of times held onto me and cried into my shoulder. She was



young, only a couple of years older than Ian, and I felt for her most of all. She told me I looked like a photo of our father that she had in an album. I felt for us both. She hung onto me and cried until I unwrapped myself from her thin arms and left as quickly as I could.

I watched the sky through the pattern of the screen windows and tried to picture my half-sister. Then I tried imagining what that photo she had must have looked like. I could see the scar that drew a line through his left eyebrow, and I could see his fake tooth. Then I saw the rest of his face when it was smiling, and his hands, and his thick, dark beard that turned silver on the tip of his chin. But then the picture left me, and the harder I tried to bring it back, the less genuine it seemed. I began to wonder what he looked like when he died—how he'd aged those last years—and what he thought of me then. Or if he could see me now (as I sometimes believed Jennifer could, when we spent time apart and I spoke deliberately into mirrors, *It's time to come home*) sitting in my porch, funeral flowers in front of me, what would he think? What would I want him to think? What would I want to show him? I couldn't begin to make sense of anything around me. He was a part of it in some way—*you are a part of this*, I wanted to say, *you're still here with us, you understand?* — but the whole thing made me anxious. The thought of the washing machine spread out in pieces on the basement floor put a chill up my spine. The idea that one day would follow another and another and another, or that one day it wouldn't, terrified me. Jennifer would ask what made me so upset, what was wrong. Honestly, I didn't know how to tell her.

The phone rang in the darkness. It took me a minute to understand where I was. In the back porch again, under Ian's sleeping bag. The phone rang and rang and I listened for a voice. It was Jennifer, of course, and she'd been drinking with Leonard and Grace, she told me so. She told me she missed me, she loved me. I could picture her in the dark, whispering into the telephone, hoping no one else was awake. She wished I was there, she said, wished we could go to Bancroft right away. I'm so pathetic when you're not around, she said. And then the answering machine cut her off. Her voice was lost in the darkness.

I wanted to call her back—wanted her to call me. I prayed that she'd fall asleep quickly, that she'd remember her feelings in the morning. I prayed she could hear when I told her, *It's me, I'm right here. Don't worry, I'm right here.*

Throughout the night I heard animals: raccoons or skunks in the laneway, something rustling under the porch. I woke and then fell back asleep before I knew where I was and was not. My heart beat, breath whistled through my nose. And then the sounds changed. Starlings twittered and something bigger, a blue jay perhaps, shrieked. I could smell dew on the grass, on the damp pavement nearby. A skateboard rattled down the street and then joggers padded by—their talking breathy and rushed between footfalls... When I opened my eyes, a thin mist hung over the yard and everything was still.

I got up and replayed the message from Jennifer. Then I packed a small backpack, ran a cloth over the kitchen counter, and locked the door behind me as I left. Someone had dropped a card in the mailbox but I didn't take it. I felt

weightless as I walked down the street.

\* \* \*

At Wellington I caught the 2 heading downtown. Then I went south on Bank to the Greyhound station. The bus headed west down the 417, almost passing through our neighbourhood. It occurred to me that I should have called before I left, that Jennifer and Ian might have got in the car first thing and headed back to town. It wouldn't be unheard of. We could pass on the highway without knowing. The coach continued on and I realised how nervous I was, thinking about such things. It was a nice feeling, and I smiled. I looked up through the big shaded windows of the bus, searching for seams of sunlight in the clouds. By the time we reached Renfrew, the seams had widened to cracks, the sun was winning over the sky, and the air had turned hot. I got off the bus and trekked through town to the 60. Then I stuck out my thumb as if I was ten years younger, off on an adventure. I began to walk that twisted road backward, trying not to frown or smile too wildly. The sun beat down and I amused myself with thoughts of surprise.

It was mid afternoon when I arrived. After a long wait, an old couple heading into the park picked me up. They dropped me on the highway and from the grass at the side of Leonard and Grace's drive, I picked a small bouquet of forget-me-nots, dotted with yellow king devils. Then I made my way to the back of the

house, where there is shade and Leonard and Grace like to sit on summer days. I heard Grace's voice from the kitchen, singing along to a quiet radio. I said hello as I opened the door, but she didn't notice.

She put her hand to her heart when she saw me. She wore cut off shorts and a loose-fitting t-shirt, and strands of her long hair fell over her face, making her appear younger. Jesus, Graham, you scared me, she said. She reached out with thin, tanned arms and gave me a hug. You look parched, she said, and poured me a glass of water.

Where is everyone? I asked. Are you here alone?

Leonard took Ian fishing again. Jennifer's having a nap.

How are you doing?

I'm good, said Grace. I'm good. How are you?

I'm good, I said. Where's Jennifer?

She was sleeping on the couch, a paperback propped on her belly. The windows were open and the thin curtains that covered them blew shadows across the floor. She looked young, a young Jennifer, and I wished I could take a picture, to capture her this way. I kneeled next to her and brushed the hair from her face. I kissed her.

Graham? she said. She opened her eyes wide and looked around the room, unsure of where she was. What are you doing here?

I came to see you, I said. I gave her the flowers. I missed you.

We missed you too. I was going to go home tonight to see you—how did you get here?

I hitchhiked.

Really? she said. Really, you did? She laughed. She put her arms around me and kissed my neck. You're full of surprises, aren't you?

I was suddenly embarrassed. I couldn't help smiling. Just from Renfrew—I took a bus to Renfrew. I got your message.

Jennifer laughed. So you're here to rescue me? she said.

Do you need rescuing?

She pulled me in tight and whispered in my ear. Let's get out of here, she said. When Ian gets back, let's just get in the car and drive—I don't care where.

She kissed me again and the kiss lingered. I thought of our bed at home that we'd made our way to, night after night. I thought of the camper behind Leonard and Grace's as well. It gets hot in the summer but the screens keep the bugs out and there is nobody around to hear you. I thought of the porch we'd built; the cushions spread out across the floor, plate shards not far away.

Alright, I said. We'll find somewhere new.

We drove west in the dark, then turned north towards Bonnechere. The car floated over the uneven pavement, the high beams lighting raspberry bushes that lined the ditches and fence posts in behind. Inside the car was dark, the dash-lights had burned out months before and I hadn't replaced the fuse yet. Ian slept in the back—was already sleeping when Leonard brought him home from fishing, and did not stir as I moved him from Leonard's car into ours. Jennifer's hand rested on my thigh, warm and slightly damp in the summer heat. She'd been

quiet since we'd said goodbye to Leonard and Grace and made our promises to visit again. I thought she might be drifting off, but she squeezed my leg affectionately and opened her window a crack.

Leonard and Gracie are trying to have a baby, she said. They've been trying for a while now, but no luck.

How long?

Quite a while now, just over a year. Grace just told me this morning. She doesn't think they can.

What did you say?

What could I say? I said give it time, you never know.

Did you tell her what happened when you had Ian?

She knows about that already.

Jennifer took a cigarette from her purse and lit it. She put her window all the way down and I opened mine a bit. I could see the outline of her nose, of her fingertips, from the glow of the heater. There was a swirl of smoke as she exhaled.

I feel weird about having Ian there so much, she said. It can't be easy for them.

I'm sure they'd rather see him than not see him.

The road dipped and curved and red pine stands replaced farmers' fields as we skirted a lake. We saw cottages now and then between the gaps in the trees. They seemed to be hiding from us, slinking away from the roadside like animals escaping the night-time traffic, disappearing into dusted underbrush.

It made me think, said Jennifer.

Uhm hmm.

Does it bother you? she asked. She inhaled on her cigarette and held it.

Then she said, It bothers me. When I think about it, it bothers me.

I looked in the rear-view mirror, but could not see Ian in the darkness.

Do you think less of me? she asked.

For what?

You would have had more. If we could.

Do I think less of you? No. What do you mean?

Jennifer put out her cigarette and quieted in her seat. The pine stands gave way to fence posts again as we left the lake behind. The car rolled over a small hill and the lights of a farmhouse appeared across a field. Then the moon came in view, blank-faced and high in its arc.

I guess nothing bothers you, she said.

I looked over but did not know how to answer. I unrolled my window and put my hand into the night wind.

You don't have anything to say? she asked. She took out another cigarette but then put it away.

I tried to think about him, I said. And I really had. Jennifer waited, but I couldn't explain it. Even to myself it seemed wrong. I felt as though I could see again, after a long time without sight, but I still didn't know how to make sense of it.

And?

It's not how you think.

How is it then?

I can't really say.

Jennifer was quiet, waiting for something more. She put her hand on my knee and after a minute took her hand away. We drove under the sound of the wind, and the high beams moved across the field tops. We passed a porcupine that lay dead in the middle of the road and shortly after, a car passed us going in the other direction. I saw Jennifer's long, dark hair illuminated by the light of the passing car. I saw her summer dress, yellow and white, and the curve of her legs where they were tucked underneath her. I saw Jennifer's face and I put my hand on her knee and told her I was sorry. The car passed and we were in darkness again.

Graham, just tell me this, she said. If it's not your father, what is it? Is it me that makes you feel that way? Is it us?

No, I said. No.

What is it then? Please, just tell me what it is.

But I didn't have time to reply. Out of nowhere, the car coughed and sputtered. The engine slowed down and then revved up. It slowed down again and then died altogether.

Oh shit, said Jennifer. The tank was low, I completely forgot.

Oh shit, I said.

The car rolled on, the lights still shining. We crested a hill as we slowed, until we were barely moving. Then we began to roll down the other side. The



road stretched out in front of us: a long, mild grade that went on and on. I had no idea what we'd do when we got to the bottom. But amazingly, it didn't end, or not for what seemed like a long time anyway—the car rolled, as if with purpose, down the road. Jennifer took my hand. Do you still love me? she asked. Of course I do. Tell me you love me, she said. I love you Jennifer. You know I love you. The car kept rolling. Jennifer stuck her head out the window and yelled, Can you believe this!? She laughed. Ha ha! And then Ian woke up startled, wondering what was going on.

He was shocked to see me, to find himself in the car with his father. He strained to focus. His hair stuck up and to the side, as if he'd been caught in a windstorm.

Quickly, I told him, climb over the seat. That's it, now take the wheel. Hold it steady!

He sat on my lap and Jennifer helped him steer. I hadn't seen him in a long time, you understand, and I was excited. I wanted him to take the wheel while we were rolling, to let him know it would continue. I hadn't seen him in a long, long time, you understand, and I wanted to show him the fun we could have. To leave him with something he wouldn't forget.