Knowing: Stories

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ABSTRACT

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Knowing: Stories explores the relationship between foregrounds and backgrounds in characters' lives. Set in periods from the 1930s to the present, and written in a realistic style, the stories in the collection examine the ways in which aspects (whether personal, familial, ethnic, or social) of characters' backgrounds are relevant to their present situations. Such aspects may be welcome or unwelcome to the characters; evident or initially hidden; may be felt to intrude on the present, or may be actively used; they may be seen to create limitations, or to provide possibilities. What the stories share in common is a focus on the unavoidable relevance of aspects of background to the characters' attempts to create meaning and identities, and to understand, engage with, and shape their present and future situations.

In the stories, "foreground" and "background" may be understood spatially/geographically, in which sense "foreground" refers to characters' current, and "background" to previous or prospective, locations: characters anticipate, with anxiety or hope, the places towards which they are traveling ("The Dictionary"); conversely, from vantage points in new locations, characters reflect on the circumstances, homes, or countries they have left behind ("Nightshade"). The characters also conceive of "foreground" and "background" in temporal terms, with the present constituting the "foreground" and the past, or the future, functioning as a "background" ("Grey Lake" and "Knowing"). What links the stories is their shared perspective on how coming to know aspects of background is, for some characters, an essential task.

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Contents

The Dictionary

She was not loaded down with bags, as were some of the other passengers. Eva watched the men and women as they headed toward the ship, carrying suitcases and holding bundles that sagged with the weight of their contents. Eva had only one small suitcase, made of pressed cardboard, and was secretly proud of its lightness and portability. She was fifteen, about to join her cousin Maria in the new country, and did not need to take much beyond her papers and some clothes. She was young, still not weighted down with things that held memories or meaning.

She and Aunt Dorota walked to the dock. They were close to the sea yet could not smell it: a brisk wind coming off the land swept away all scent, blowing particles of dust through Eva's long, oak-coloured braids and into the folds of her white blouse. As they neared the embarkation line, Aunt Dorota suddenly stopped. She was a tall woman with dove-grey eyes half-hidden by lids that drooped, as though she could not bear to take in the world fully any longer. She was Eva's mother's older sister, and had raised Eva after both of the girl's parents died in the influenza epidemic of nineteen-eighteen, when Eva was a young child.

Almost shyly, Aunt Dorota handed Eva a small, heavy package wrapped in brown paper. Eva undid the neat folds of paper to reveal a slightly tattered English dictionary, covered in dark blue cloth.

Aunt Dorota smiled. "Remember, it's not a real dictionary until you press in it the flowers given to you by some young, handsome man." She hugged Eva tightly, pointed her chin in the direction of the embarkation line, turned, and quickly walked away.

After the first evening, in which they sailed into a sunset that looked as though it would swallow the ship, Eva settled into a routine. She carried her dictionary everywhere, cradling it like an armful of the delicate first potatoes of spring. She practiced moving her mouth through the obstacle course of consonants and vowels. Eva had been a schoolgirl the week before; it was comforting to study the dictionary, to feel some small link with the place she had left. With each word memorized, she felt the dictionary provided a way into the new country, a means of turning the new country into a home. She also watched the handsome officers, with their waxed, mahogany-coloured mustaches, moving about the ship. She closed her eyes and imagined dancing in the arms of one of the officers: being guided over the dance floor as firmly yet gently as the ship, which moved smoothly through the North Sea and then the Atlantic. She dreamed about such a man one day handing her a fragrant bouquet, whose petals would perfume the dictionary.

Eva continued to study her dictionary on the train between Halifax and Montreal. Forever after, the memory of learning the new language would be entwined with the sensation of being rocked from side to side:

first the soft, lullaby-like rhythm of the ship and then the sharper, metallic jolts of the rails.

Eva moved into the small apartment in Montreal which housed her cousin Maria, Maria's husband, and their four children. Maria found Eva a job at a factory, sewing buttons onto men's coats for a few cents a week. Because she navigated English better than many of the other women at the factory, Eva was asked to help those whose mother tongue was Italian, or Hungarian, or Portuguese, with letters to be written in English. At first Eva felt that she could not take the coins that were put into her hand for this work, but slowly she realized that they represented a way of saying "thank you" outside of language. The words of thanks were stronger, were more complete, it seemed to Eva, when accompanied by a few pieces of copper or silver. With the coins she was given Eva bought magazines, which she and the other women looked through on their lunch breaks. Eva was drawn to the poised and serene women in the advertisements, who glided silently through a life of beauty. She imagined that these were the type of women with whom the ship's officers would line up to dance.

After a few months at the factory, Eva was approached by a woman with whom she worked. The woman's husband was a marriage broker and seeking a woman of Eva's background to introduce to a client. Would Eva be interested? Eva considered for a moment, and told the woman that in the area from which she came it was customary for the man to make a

payment to the bride's family. She held her breath as the woman hesitated before replying that this would be possible.

That evening, Eva dressed in her best clothes. In front of the one tiny mirror in the apartment, she cut off her braids with Maria's sewing scissors so that she more closely resembled the women in the magazine advertisements. Eva's chin-length hair would remind all those who saw her that she was now a woman of this country, a woman who had come here not to start over, but to begin.

Eva walked to the broker's apartment and was admitted to a small living room. The broker, an old man, sat on a sofa beside a younger, sandy-haired man with two diagonal creases on his forehead, like an arrow pointing to the space between his eyes. The way in which he watched Eva reminded her of the men who assessed the animals at her uncle's horse farm. Yet he did not seem unkind.

"Young, strong," the young man said, nodding.

His voice, deep and even, pleased Eva; if she closed her eyes, the voice could belong to one of the officers on the ship.

She took a lock of short hair between her fingers and held it forward for the men to see. "Shiny," she said. "Healthy."

The men walked to the kitchen to confer in low voices. The old man returned and stated an amount, which seemed low to Eva. He pointed to the area where her long braids had hung and explained, "Your hair is missing."

"I speak, read, and write English," Eva said. "That will raise the price."

Back at the apartment she shared with Maria and the others, Eva pulled out her suitcase and dictionary and packed her few clothes. She pulled out from behind the waistband of her skirt the roll of bills that the marriage broker had handed her. She and Edward, the young man, would be married the following day. Eva separated a few bills from the roll: those would go to Maria, for all that she had provided Eva. Eva ran a hand under the soft new edge of her hair. One day, she thought, I will be one of the women with whom the ship's officers would dance. Until then, I will need help, and I must be able to thank people properly. Eva then put the remainder of the money between two pages of her dictionary and closed it, the pages quietly coming together.

Grey Lake

Monty has both hands on the steering wheel; his head is thrust forward and raised slightly, like a turtle's. He is staring at the sky overhead through the windshield.

"Boy, the moon sure is a lot brighter out here," he says.

"Same as at home. We just don't see it there," Lucy says. Something small and darker than the night surrounding them darts across the road ahead, and she jumps in her seat.

Monty turns his head slightly in her direction. "You could, you know, if you really put yourself into it. You could come to believe in the magical idea that there might actually be a moon more brilliant in one place than another." Monty says this matter-of-factly, without antagonism, as though he is describing a plant he has just seen by the side of the road.

They are somewhere in Ontario as night replaces day.

Monty and Lucy are in Monty's car as they drive from Montreal to Grey Lake, Alberta, for Lucy's family reunion. They are giddy and reckless, infused with the heady spirit of the road trip and with the greater excitement of leaving their mundane lives behind, despite the fact that neither could make the five-in-the-morning departure time on which they had agreed.

"Do you think there will be *pyrohy*?" Monty asks.

"Over thirty women are cooking up a storm as we speak, in order to feed almost a hundred people. I think the better question is, 'Will there be enough *pyrohy* left over for the others after Monty gets through with them?'" Lucy smiles to herself. She enjoys watching Monty eat the small, stuffed dumplings, his favourite Ukrainian dish. She occasionally receives batches of *pyrohy* from her mother, which is how she knows that Monty is capable of eating twenty in one sitting. Lucy has never been able to make the dish properly—despite her best efforts, the edges of her carefully-kneaded dough always fail to adhere, turning the crescent-shaped dumplings into messy, open-mouthed smiles.

Monty grins. "*Holubtsi* too, I bet."

"I'm sure of it. Jennifer wouldn't organize a reunion without cabbage rolls." Lucy imagines her first cousin on her mother's side, blond hair hidden under a brightly-printed *babushka*, acting like a general under the watchful eyes of the icon of the Mother of God in her kitchen: delegating preparation of the cabbage rolls to one branch of the family, *borscht* to another, and urging each branch to outdo the other in the tastiness of its dish. Lucy can almost smell Jennifer's kitchen, which she is sure must be scented just as her grandmother's was: the sourness of cabbage giving way to the sharpness of horseradish, then the sweetness of honey—a succession of olfactory statements.

When the deepening darkness makes it too difficult to see clearly, Monty pulls up to the first motel they come across. As he turns the key to

their room at the Moosehead Inn, he lets out a whistle.

"How much would you charge a client to redo a room like this?"

The room is standard fifties' motel-room ugly, all orange and brown, with faded drapes and mottled wooden furniture. Lucy throws herself onto the bed and rolls over on her back. All around them is the scent, pungent and sour, of past lives. "Too much," Lucy says.

Monty has brought along a large bag of Bubblicious bubble gum. The next morning, as he turns up the volume on the CD player and presses down on the gas, they blow fat, magenta bubbles at the passing road signs: Deer crossing; Moose crossing; Deaf child in area; Hidden right turn ahead. They discuss why, according to the signs, deer crossed the road sedately in Quebec, whereas they appeared to dance, stoned, across the road in Ontario. Monty is a Mountie, albeit a behind-the-desk-in-a-grey-suit Mountie, and he ends the discussion by telling Lucy that he has inside information on the reason for the differences in the road signs, but that it is classified.

"No fair," she says, and blows a particularly large bubble in his direction. It breaks and flies back into her face like a parachute collapsing against the ground.

As she peels bits of gum off her face, Monty swerves into a parking lot and hits the brakes quickly. Lucy turns her head to see him staring off into the distance. "What's wrong?"

"It's the world's biggest nickel," Monty says, gesturing ahead. "Where's my camera?"

Lucy sinks back against the seat. "I can't believe you're doing this."

"Come out and pose for me," he says, dangling the camera between them.

"Are you kidding?"

He opens the car door and steps out, stretching. "Nope," he says, more to the roof of the car than to Lucy. "Come on. Indulge me."

She emits a fake groan, for effect, and undoes the seat belt slowly.

"C'mon, c'mon, we don't have all day!" Lucy can hear the gravel crunch under Monty's feet as he walks beside the car. She suspects that Monty is putting her on, but not entirely. A part of him is genuinely excited by the big nickel.

He grabs her hand as she gets out of the car and poses her against the horizon. Lucy imagines that she is surrounded by a metal halo so large that even an Italian religious painter wouldn't have dared to try to fit it, and a figure, into the same frame. During the survey course in Renaissance art she had followed for her interior design degree, Lucy discovered that she preferred late medieval figures, which reminded her of gawky cartoon aliens—all sharp, double-jointed elbows and eyes like pimiento-stuffed olives, with serving plate halos on their heads—to the velvety-smooth madonnas and saints of the Renaissance. There was

something off-putting to her about the prerogative of the figures, whether madonnas or noblemen, in the Renaissance paintings: they seemed to claim the space around them, filling it, satisfied with their present. The medieval figures looked more human, more truthful, in their awkward poses; the paintings reminded her of snapshots taken in the moment before everyone is composed and presenting their best face. Someone in her study group had told her that she might be reading the Renaissance paintings wrongly because of her Orthodox background: that one aspect of the stylistic revolution which marked the Renaissance, the admittance of secular references into religious art, was at odds with the more traditional, sacred style of the Orthodox art with which she was familiar. What Lucy took to be satisfaction with the present in the Renaissance works was the result of misreading these secular references.

"Burger?" Monty asks after he has released the shutter.

"Drive-through," Lucy replies, and they laugh. They are experiencing a sense of being foreigners in the quarried landscape, which is also cut through in places by fists of weathered rock; it feels as though the car protects them, immunizing them from the roughness of the scenery.

Before long they are trying to hold on to the waxed burger wrappers that will not stay still on their laps as Monty edges the car to one-hundred-and-sixty kilometres.

"I have an idea," Monty says after they finish the burgers.

"What's that?"

"A Year-of-Lucy calendar. The Big Nickel can be Lucy-of-July, to commemorate the month of this trip. We'll stop at other attractions along the way. I'll hang the calendar in my office at work."

"Oh-no-you-won't."

They feel the soft, rhythmic bounce of the car as it jumps lightly over the seamed areas every few hundred feet where stretches of repaved asphalt join.

"Then marry me, Lucy. Call it blackmail if you will but I'm serious." He turns to look at her. "You know how I feel about you. This is a genuine proposal. We can stop at a little whitewashed town church—Manitoba, Saskatchewan, it doesn't matter—and turn up at the reunion as Mr. and Mrs. Monty Smith. Or we can ditch down to Vegas after the reunion. We can have a huge wedding back home, your family, my family, doves on the cake and flower girls in pink. Whatever you want."

Lucy crosses her arms over her chest and turns away from Monty to watch the soft shoulder whizzing past outside the window. Monty's little Beetle, which had seemed so cosy, suddenly feels like a trap. Monty had first proposed three months ago, and while she hadn't turned him down, she also hadn't accepted. She had lived with her previous boyfriend—a big, sharp-featured bassist named Rob—for seven years without the question of marriage ever becoming relevant. With Monty, something different has evolved; she pulls back from the thought, overcome with a

childhood superstition: if I name it I will jinx it and it will die. She and Monty spend all of their time with each other: evenings, weekends; they do together the sorts of things neither would do alone: drive down to Vermont to see the fall leaves, to sugaring-off parties filled with kindergarten students and seniors on day trips. Each privately feels these activities are a little clichéd, but that somehow, when done as a couple, they are less so. Coupledom allows them to complete the irony quotes surrounding the activities—Lucy on one side, Monty on the other—freeing them to laugh over their enjoyment.

They are, to their friends and family, "Monty and Lucy"—a couple, a unit, together, a *thing*—already an entity with weight and presence in the world. Both are in their mid-thirties. Monty, while bouncing friends' kids on his knees, looked wistful as he read "Thomas the Tank Engine" to the toddler on his lap, and glanced in Lucy's direction when he thought she wasn't looking. After spending over a year with him, Lucy knows how Monty feels about having a family, just as she knows the pale pink scar running parallel to the shin bone on his left leg, made with an ice skate during a hockey brawl; the name—Stephen—of his best childhood buddy; how much, as a child, he missed his father, who travelled a lot; and the warm, soft wave of his back when he rolls away from her in sleep. She also knows that there is something he is keeping from her: it is always his T-shirt—never his skin—that she faces when he rolls away from her, just as it is the shirt that she feels as he reaches for her.

Early on in their friendship, she and Monty went to the beach at Plattsburgh together. A gust of wind had lifted the T-shirt Monty wore over his swim trunks, displaying for Lucy the hideous patch of scars—like a universe exploding—that Monty bore on the right side of his torso. She knew that Monty had worked in the field before getting his desk job with the RCMP; he had made references to the danger involved in his past work, and to the injury that had put him behind a desk, for life. But at the sight, which no words of Monty's could have prepared her for, of the extent to which his skinny, pale body was deformed, she experienced the startling unsettledness of vertigo: the lumpy, puckering skin grafts covering the area where his ribs had been re-built had a grotesque brutality, yet also an unexpected, delicate intricacy, about them.

"What really happened?" she asked him that evening. They were both relaxed from the day; Monty had opened a bottle of wine and they were sitting on the balcony of his apartment.

"Ah," he'd said, raising his arms from the elbow, as if to ward off a blow. "That. You saw."

"The wind...your T-shirt lifted."

He pursed his lips. "I forgot to read the section of the Royal Canadian Mounted Cub Scout manual that advises against standing close to a bomb—like a pipe bomb, say—in a warehouse during an investigation." His hands came together into a tight knot of fingers before he pulled them apart violently, as if describing the explosion in sign

language. "I can measure mortality in degrees—in a file somewhere is a dry calculation of the number of degrees in the other direction I would have to have been turned for the thing to have gotten to my heart." He finished the wine in his glass and refilled it. Indicating the area between the top of the hip and the bottom of the armpit with his hands, as if framing a picture, he said, "Somewhere there's a chart—no doubt colour-coded—explaining why only this area was affected. Kept the guys busy for months calculating position and velocity and trajectories, that sort of thing." He refilled her glass before adding more wine to his. "That's what happened."

He took her hand and held it.

That should have been the end of it, Lucy thought; it was out in the open, she had seen the wound. They had talked about it. But as their lives blended and they moved in together, Monty never displayed the wound. He put on a T-shirt immediately after taking a shower. He turned away from her while changing clothes. In bed, even in absolute darkness, he covered his torso with a shirt.

"Why are you doing this? It doesn't bother me."

"I don't want you to have to see it."

"I don't mind," she said. "Really."

A shake of the head.

One night, saying nothing—she had run out of word—she reached for the shirt and began to lift it. Monty grabbed her wrists firmly. "No. Please."

When he first asked her to marry him, she said that she couldn't marry a man who seemed to be concealing something from her.

"I'm not hiding anything from you except for an ugly scar. I want you to look at me, not the scar. That's all."

So she had not said no to his proposal, but had not said yes, either. She had said that she would see.

She wants to be able to treat this situation like one of the rooms she might fix for a client: march in, survey the damage—the aggregate mistakes of the past (bad lighting, wrong colour of paint, water stains on the ceiling)—and apply solutions. But this situation confounds all norms: it feels as though nothing is where it should be.

Lucy has confided only in her sister Clara. Her friends' relationships have all followed a pattern she sees as natural, like the letters of the alphabet following each other. She is reluctant to mention the topic to them, although—judging by their sympathy for Monty—they must know about it, from him. She is embarrassed to be the one bringing the obscure Cyrillic character of her feelings into the neat Roman alphabet of relationships.

"Am I being unreasonable?" she asked Clara after Monty first proposed. " I love Monty, I want to be with him. Am I making too much

of his T-shirts?" It seemed churlish to be upset with someone who was trying to protect her from ugliness. Yet the more the wound was hidden, the more it seemed to call her. Even to Clara, Lucy could not admit that what she really wanted to do was touch the wound, feel her fingertips run over its topography.

Monty cuts into her thoughts. "I won't be here forever. I just want you to know that." His voice sounds very un-Monty-ish, harsh and hard, as though he has gargled with whiskey. He shoves a new CD into the player and Lucy looks at what is left of Northern Ontario through the perspective of chanting monks, calling mournfully to their God.

There is only cursory conversation between them on the drive through Manitoba and Saskatchewan. As there is nothing else to do, Lucy chews the Bubblicious. Monty declines her offers of gum with curt, tight-lipped shakes of his head. Lucy knows that to broach the silence, to even crack it, she must bring up Monty's proposal. She thinks of a video she has watched with a friend's toddler as she baby-sat: a sorceress slowly raises her arms and begins to chant magical words. As the sorceress lifts her arms, all around her begins to coalesce into violent, shuddering swirls. The magical words bring about transformation, but at the cost of uprooting everything—plants, houses, cows, people—in sight.

Monty is still glum and short-tempered as they finish the last leg of their drive under the stars in Grey Lake. The Bubblicious is long gone, and missed: their relaxed frame of mind, which blowing sugary bubbles expressed, seems to Lucy to have belonged to the earlier part of the trip, before Monty's comment about not being around forever. She stares out the car window at the fir trees that line the road thickly, like an army of soldiers in tight formation. Was Monty's comment a statement of fact, a threat, or a veiled ultimatum? His obstinacy is uncharacteristic, and troubling; Lucy wishes that he would understand how critical the matter of openness about the scarring is for her. Really, what she wants is for Monty not to conceal the wound from her, more so than the positive gesture of displaying it. It seems to Lucy that there is an important difference between these two actions, one which Monty doesn't appreciate.

He worries Lucy. He has been in charge of the music on the trip, and they are now listening to the Kronos Quartet: discordant, atonal music that is completely at odds with the ancient silence of the land, whose rocky surface breaks through the asphalt in places. The music, however, is as dark and spooky as the night that has crept down on them. Over and over again, Monty plays a track called, "Tex Avery Directs the Marquis de Sade," and Lucy tries to read the music for clues to Monty's state of mind: there is something angry and almost menacing about the song that makes her uncomfortable. She will be very glad to get to her Grandfather

Walter's place, where they are staying, although she wonders how Monty, in his current mood, will act with her family. She also remembers Grandpa Walter being as dark and spooky as the music. Forty-five years ago, when Lucy's mother was still quite young, Grandpa Walter one day gave up his job at the mill in town, left his wife and six children, and moved to a rough cabin he had constructed in the woods. He had become obsessed with what Stalin was then inflicting on the Ukraine, and attempts to talk, reason or plead with him were met with a barrage of statistics from the newspapers he had stolen from the small town library. Eventually, Lucy's grandmother gave up on Walter, moved with the two youngest of her brood to Montreal, and took up with a short-order cook. But Walter—whom Lucy has met only once, when she was ten—is her real grandfather, and the nominal head of the clan now gathering in Grey Lake for a reunion. Reports from cousins suggest that Walter has mellowed with age, although they have advised Lucy and Monty not to mention Chernobyl to him, under any circumstances.

Monty flicks on the interior light and searches with his right hand for the map. Lucy hands it to him and he slows the car.

"I think the turn off is coming up," he says absently as he glances down at the map.

"I can call Walter to be sure."

Monty is squinting at the hand-drawn map that Kim, a daughter of Lucy's cousin Jennifer, had sketched for them. It was Jennifer, organizer

of the reunion, who had decided that they would stay with Grandpa Walter. "Maybe you'd better. God knows where we're likely to end up with this thing."

Monty has never once even implicitly criticized any member of her family, living or dead. This change of attitude on his part lends credence to Lucy's concern about Monty, weighing it down into something deeper, like anxiety.

Grandpa Walter is standing in the yard, cell phone to his ear, still offering directions as they turn a bend in the road and come upon his place. Lucy waves from the passenger's seat, and Walter roughly presses the "End" button on his phone. Grandpa Walter has not wizened with age; if anything, he appears to have grown thicker and more muscular, so that from a distance he looks like a particularly photogenic bison in a wildlife calendar. Lucy and Monty climb out of the car and Grandpa Walter hugs Lucy with strength, lifting her off the ground a little; she can feel the tips of her shoes brushing the earth beneath them.

"That's quite the cell phone you have there, sir," Monty says in his best opening voice, after the introductions. Monty's words have an artificial jauntiness to them, as though he were trying too hard. If Monty is attempting to be complimentary, he's achieved the opposite result: his words, to Lucy, resound with an attitude of superiority. She wonders whether these words are a sign that lurking beneath Monty's critical attitude in the car is nervousness about meeting her family.

"Maybe I want to know when Russians invade," Grandpa Walter replies, sizing Monty up. Even after sixty-odd years in this country, Grandpa Walter's diction is that of the steppes. "Monty," he says. "What kind name is that?"

"Actually, sir, it's British," Monty says. "And you know how our secret service kept the Russians running during the Cold War. Still do, in fact."

Grandpa Walter's expression changes at this, the movement of lips drawing back turning his face into an indecipherable Halloween jack o' lantern of jagged, black and missing teeth. Lucy finds herself watching him carefully, remembering the temper she saw when she last visited Grey Lake, as a ten year-old. She had been staying with her Aunt June and Uncle Victor; Grandpa Walter was over for supper. Someone who rang the doorbell had set Grandpa Walter off. All the grown-ups she knew as a child were reserved in a way that she took as normal; she had never before seen such a display of emotions—an explosion of raised voice and gesticulating arms and small items being thrown across the room—in an adult. The experience left her uneasy and timid around Grandpa Walter. But now he simply looks at Monty for a long moment and then puts an arm around her shoulders. "Come, have vodka," he finally says. "Long drive."

Lucy is awakened by the sound of Monty moving around the room quietly. They have slept side-by-side on a series of quilts that Grandpa Walter had laid out in front of the pot-bellied stove. She was too drunk last night to appreciate the heat—Grandpa Walter had insisted on refilling their shot glasses of vodka several times as he asked what were, to Lucy, uncomfortable and ultimately unanswerable questions about her mother (was she happy? had Lucy's father, and life, treated her well?)—but now she wriggles her toes free of the heavy layers and stretches them toward the warmth emanating from the stove. It is so cold away from the stove that she can see Monty's breath, in little puffs, around the room. Monty had turned his back to her as soon as they had lain down last night, but this morning he seems more cheerful, humming something under his breath. Lucy can see him unzipping his duffel bag and pulling from it what he calls his morning routine. A series of pill bottles is lined up on the wooden chair beside the stove. There is one pill to prevent infections, one pill to prevent scar tissue from building up inside, and one big green pill for the pain. Although he doesn't talk about it, Monty's pain is chronic. Then, a part of the routine that Lucy has never seen before: as she peeks from between half-closed eyes, Monty takes off his T-shirt and pulls a jar of lotion from the bag. He rubs the lotion over the damaged area of his torso, and the expression on his face rivets Lucy: it is a look of disgust, as if he cannot stand to touch his own body. Lucy drops her gaze from Monty's face to the reddish patch of skin on his torso. Seen

obliquely from her place on the quilts, the area appears bewilderingly incomplete, or prematurely brought to a close: it has the unfinished aspect of half-cooked meat, not pleasant but also not distressingly abnormal. She tries to imagine what it must feel like beneath Monty's fingers, and what the sensation on her own fingertips would be. Would her hand, too, recoil from the unfamiliar touch of the lumpy, puckered area against her skin, even though it is a part of Monty?

As he leans over the chair to return the pill bottles and jar of lotion to his bag, Lucy manages to grab with the toes of one foot a small area of Monty's jeans behind the knee, and tugs a little. Monty turns around.

"Hi," she says.

He smiles, quickly grabs his T-shirt off the chair, and drops it over his head. It seems to Lucy more than ever as though he is pulling a shade down.

Monty goes out of the room, and soon Lucy hears him and Grandpa Walter banging around in the kitchen and laughing. The sound and the smell of frying bacon come to Lucy at the same time, and she moves out from under the covers and into her jeans and sweater.

They are sitting at the small table, eating platefuls of bacon and fried potatoes. Monty is recounting for Walter some of his father's exploits as an agricultural inspector in Britain after the war. The stories aren't cloak-and-dagger exciting, but Walter appears to be enjoying them.

He barely takes his eyes off Monty to point out the frying pan on the stove to Lucy and say, "Eat."

Lucy adds a little food to her plate—her head and stomach are still feeling the effects of last evening's vodka—and looks around the tiny kitchen. About a year before, because of client demand for knowledge about the topic, she attended a conference called "Feng Shui for Interior Designers." The main speaker described feng shui as a system for optimizing the flow of energy in a room or a house; she suggested that an interior designer could read a person from the decor of his or her house, could see where a person's life might be blocked. Case studies were presented for analysis and Lucy now wonders how the speaker would have dealt with Walter's place, which is plastered with faded newspaper clippings and photos torn from magazines, all detailing what the Russians had done to the Ukraine. Lucy runs her fingers over the edges of the clippings in front of her: what looked haphazard from a distance is, on closer inspection, methodical. The edges of the papers have been neatly trimmed to fit together. It's hard to imagine a big bull of a man like Grandpa Walter spending hours working with delicate scissors to get the placement right. The careful arrangement of the clippings suggests another side to Walter, one not contained in her memories, her cousins' accounts, or her mother's childhood recollections. In this space that is wholly Grandpa Walter's own is his familiar obsession with the past, but visible in it is a dimension—a calculated, almost clinical precision—that

troubles Lucy in a way which his obsession (now a family joke, really) never has.

After they wash up the few breakfast dishes, Lucy, Monty and Grandpa Walter head out to the car. They are off to Lucy's cousin Jennifer's place, a farm twenty miles away, where the family reunion will take place. Jennifer and her husband grow canola on one hundred and sixty acres, with plenty of open space for close to a hundred kin. Grandpa Walter's place, which would have been the logical setting, is simply too small: one cabin on a small clearing eked out of the woods; the fir trees begin their segue into forest not ten feet away from his house on three sides of the structure.

In the clear northern sun, Monty's blue car gleams like a bit of the ocean dropped into Grey Lake. Grandpa Walter's eyes grow wide at the sight of it. He outlines its fluid lines with his large hands. "Nice," he says to Monty.

"Want to drive it to Jennifer's?" Monty asks, holding out the car keys.

Lucy wants to tell Monty that no one knows for sure how old Grandpa Walter is; he is at least in his mid-eighties.

"Manual or not-manual?" Walter asks Monty.

Lucy supposes that, like the other family members, she is supposed to find Grandpa Walter's diction endearing. She doesn't: she is annoyed by it, but tries not to show this. He's just an old man now, she tells

herself. He's had a hard life, having to start over in a new country with a new language when he was in his twenties. She wants to feel compassion, but can only muster a suspicion that Grandpa Walter—having spent over three times as many years in Canada as in Ukraine—is being obstinate in not letting go of his formative years. Over their last glass of vodka the night before, he had told them that the cabin was the kind of home he had been born in, and in which he would die. Lucy, thinking of a softer life, one which did not include chopping and hauling wood, said that there were other options. "Not for me," Grandpa Walter had growled. "Never." It occurred to Lucy that she had encountered this obstinacy before, in her mother's determination never to revisit her childhood home.

"My life started when we moved to Montreal," her mother had said when the topic of the reunion first appeared. "There is no reason for me to go back there." She corresponds regularly with her sisters but will not set foot west of the Ontario-Manitoba border.

Hearing her mother in Grandpa Walter, Lucy had thought that perhaps attitudes could be passed down, along with physical traits, from one generation to another. Now, looking at Grandpa Walter, Lucy wonders whether this might apply to herself, too, in some way.

Monty glances at Grandpa Walter and smiles. "Manual."

Grandpa Walter takes the keys, and soon they are bumping down the unpaved road, the car tilting from side-to-side as though there are waves underneath, not solid land. Lucy leaves the two men to continue

discussing agricultural politics in the front seat and sits alone in the back, taking in the scenery. It has been a long time since she was in Grey Lake, and she had forgotten how beautiful it is. It is not the delicate, filigreed beauty of New England, nor the sharp, self-assured beauty of the Alps. It is certainly not the Zen-like, anti-beauty of the Prairies. The land around Grey Lake undulates, neither flat nor hilly, covered by a mass of thick, myrtle-green fir trees. This far north the sun has a particular cast to it, neither yellow nor Arctic white, but something in between, which coats the green horizon in a demi-haze while making objects in the foreground appear extra crisp. To a city girl like Lucy, there is something menacing about this beauty; there are no indications of human inhabitation as she scans the horizon, as though all that loveliness had squeezed out the people entirely. She reflects that perhaps this is what drew Grandpa Walter: a land without interruptions, one in which he could pursue his fixation with what the Russians had wrought in the Ukraine unimpeded by even the briefest of interactions that the presence of others might involve.

The mass of trees becomes less dense before ending altogether, giving way to an expanse of canola field whose stalks weave in the wind. Lucy unrolls her window. A white, vinyl-sided ranch house sits on a large lawn reclaimed from the field; Grandpa Walter pulls the car into a gravel driveway by the side of the house. Jennifer's youngest kids stand on the lawn, small as garden gnomes, trying to blow up balloons. There are already so many balloons tied to the house—the front porch, the side

deck, the sticks holding up the pink geraniums, in pots, which line the front steps—that the house looks as though it could lift off at any second.

As Lucy, Monty and Grandpa Walter get out of the car, Lucy looks in the direction of the kitchen window. A head appears in the window, followed by a muffled cry. A door opens, and about fifteen women run down the deck stairs while removing aprons, wiping hands in tea towels, and running fingers through their hair.

Lucy takes one of Monty's hands in hers, whether to offer assurance or take comfort before the onslaught of family she isn't sure, but there is no reply—neither animation nor warmth—in his: it feels to Lucy as though Monty's hands sits unwillingly in hers, merely tolerating the gesture. Like the gusts of wind that accost them, bewilderment and hurt at his muted response—and anger his unreasonable withholding—rush at her, just as they had in the morning when a thread of coolness ran through their interactions: Monty had been quite gregarious with Grandpa Walter while neatly avoiding her.

Not wanting to give any indication of the tension between her and Monty, Lucy studies the group of women approaching them. At the front of the pack, as always, is Jennifer, who has appointed herself acting head of the clan, gatherer of far-flung relatives. Jennifer's hair is tied back in a ponytail and the pink track suit she wears makes her look like a giant Easter bunny.

"Oh, not too much grey, your mother made it sound worse," Jennifer whispers in Lucy's ear as she hugs her. Lucy feels her own hand reach up to smooth down the strands of grey, more visible against her dark hair than they would be in Jennifer's butter-coloured pigtail. "It's too bad that your mother and father couldn't make it."

Lucy's parents are on a wine-tasting cruise in the Caribbean. "Good luck," her mother had said when Lucy had told her that she and Monty would attend the reunion.

"And this must be Monty," Jennifer says, turning to him and adding, "What a handsome name!" before hugging Grandpa Walter, who is still admiring Monty's car.

"Beware the bite of the saccharine bunny," Lucy whispers to Monty.

"Yeow," Monty says, looking amused, and crosses his arms over his chest.

Jennifer calls over to the group of women, who have been standing back. She introduces Monty to each woman: the Aunts June, Dolores, Vera; their numerous sisters-in-law, whose names fly by; and various female cousins. Each woman hugs and kisses Lucy; Aunt June embraces her in an especially tight hug before stepping back. She wipes her eyes quickly with her apron before smiling. "I can't believe it's been twenty years since you were here," she says. "So much has changed."

Lucy nods, although Aunt June looks exactly as she did when Lucy was last in Grey Lake: her curly grey hair is cut in the same style—long

on top, extra short on the sides; she still seems relieved that Jennifer is around to take charge of things. Lucy remembers being surprised by how deferential Aunt June was to her ten-year old daughter; now, as then, she can't imagine June daring to suggest another way of doing things to Jennifer.

"Okay, everyone," Jennifer announces loudly. "Into the kitchen." She runs ahead of the others to prepare a tray of bread, cheese and cookies for Monty and Grandpa Walter, which she thrusts at them as they enter the kitchen.

"The other men are out back looking at the fields. You can take this and join them."

Monty, playing his usual jovial self with her now, gives Lucy a feigned "mayday" look as he takes the tray. Lucy sits at the big kitchen table, breathing in deeply, unsure of what to make of Monty's staged reversal of attitude. She is also disappointed. Jennifer's kitchen doesn't remind her at all of her grandmother's: it smells like Mr. Clean. Everything in the room seems to give off waves of the disinfectant.

"Boys with the boys, girls with the girls," Jennifer laughs. She pretends to snap a tea towel at Monty's bum to hurry him out.

"He is so cute," she gushes once he is out of the room, but still within earshot.

Lucy was ten years old the year her father had his first heart attack, and was sent to spend the summer with Aunt June, Uncle Victor, and

Jennifer. Coming from an urban family, Lucy was unprepared for life on a farm. She did not know which berries could be eaten, and which were poisonous. She didn't know one species of bird from another, and had little experience in the domestic arts beyond opening packages of cookies. Jennifer turned everything they did into a competition: who could catch the biggest fish, knit mittens the fastest, pick the most berries, make the tastier jam. Jennifer always won these competitions. Half way through the summer, she decided that they should see who could get Tommy Stefanyshyn, the new boy down the road, to kiss her. Jennifer won, of course, and married Tommy at eighteen. Thoughts of her have set Lucy's teeth on edge ever since that long-ago summer. Although Lucy realizes that it's past the point of reason to hold a grudge for so long, she scans the always-overexposed family photos Jennifer sends each year at Christmas, looking for a hint of something dark in the background. Just once, she would like to see a tiny flaw in Jennifer's aggressive, pink perfection.

Though in her assessment of Monty, Lucy has to concede that Jennifer does have a point. She was attracted to Monty the first time they met, when Lucy's firm was hired to remodel the lobby of the apartment building in which Monty lived. She had been standing in the middle of the lobby, swatch book in her arms, trying to decide whether the new leather armchairs should be cocoa- or tapioca- coloured. Monty had walked by her carrying a five-foot long, stuffed swordfish in his arms.

He had shrugged when he saw her glance at the swordfish. "Friends divorcing," he'd said. "Neither one wants the fish. I said I'd adopt it."

At least at the beginning, last year, A had led to B for them: a chance meeting by a swordfish; a drink; dinner. There was Monty's dark hair, the colour of coffee, and his wry smile. The way he squinted slightly at each person he listened to, as though he were trying to peer into the space between the speaker's words. Who can specify exactly where attraction lies, except for a particularly pleasing arrangement of qualities, like elements in specific proportions that happen to come together to form a molecule? "Just so," Monty liked to say, the only hint of his British father. But that summed it up for Lucy: Monty was just so, and just so because he was Monty.

"Have some coffee cake," Aunt June says. "You look too thin. Must be all those hours you spend at work that your mother was telling us about."

"What has she been telling you?" Lucy asks.

"Everything," Aunt Vera replies.

"You're a hard woman," Aunt June says softly as she fills up Lucy's coffee cup.

"If you wait much longer, you'll have to adopt those Chinese babies you see on the news," Vera adds.

Lucy gets up and walks from the kitchen out onto the deck. She suspects that their concern has led them to believe that she embodies

everything that is bad about city life: as though she were smoked through with distemper and obstinacy. She wonders if they believe she is holding onto independence, afraid to accept her female nature. She wants to hold up Monty's shirt and display what lies underneath. These women, she knows, have seen their share of disfigurement: arms lost in threshers, legs crushed by tractors, cheeks turned concave by frightened cattle. They are not strangers to the kinds of violence that can befall a body, and she wants to ask them: how did you cope? She is thinking not of the actual injuries, but of the corona of conflicting emotions surrounding them. But she is afraid to betray Monty, to reveal him now as less than the perfect man he is in their eyes.

Out on the deck, it takes her eyes a minute to adjust to the sunlight. She is surprised to see a figure sitting on the deck stairs, nursing a beer: Kim, Jennifer's oldest daughter, who looks almost exactly like her mother, down to the same light shade of hair. Kim hadn't been part of the pack of women who had rushed out of the kitchen to greet them.

"Isn't it kind of early to be drinking?" Lucy asks. The sun hasn't reached its high point yet.

"Want one?"

"Yeah." Lucy sits on the stairs beside Kim, who pulls a bottle of Blue from under her hooded sweatshirt.

"They giving you a hard time?" she asks.

Lucy nods and takes a long drink.

"Fuck them," Kim says emphatically. Lucy turns and glances again at Kim: perhaps she isn't so much like Jennifer after all, for that was a comment Jennifer would never make, particularly about members of the family. Being Jennifer's daughter can't be easy—nothing Lucy saw on the front lawn or in the kitchen disproved her memory of Jennifer's bossy, demanding nature. Lucy feels sympathy for the girl, who has not only Jennifer but also the aunts—most likely following Jennifer's lead—to contend with regularly. The pressure on Kim must, at times, be severe.

They drink in silence, and after a while Kim asks, "Want to go for a walk?"

"Where to?"

"This is Grey Lake. You don't go anywhere when you walk here, you just walk."

"Okay," Lucy says, and the beer bottles swing from their hands as they walk slowly along the road, dust rising slightly behind each step.

After some time Kim says, "Monty said you slept together."

Startled, because it's not like Monty to boast, Lucy asks, "When?"

"Last night."

"Oh, at Walter's." She finishes the last of her beer.

"Pitch it," Kim says. When Lucy looks at her, she takes the bottle from Lucy's hand and throws it, hard, into her father's field.

"We didn't sleep together last night, we slept under the same quilt together," Lucy explains. It seems unnecessary. "When did you see Monty?"

"I was out in back, watching the brats, when he and Grandpa Walter came by looking for my dad."

"And he just told you this? 'Lucy and I slept together'?"

She gives Lucy a look meant to communicate how stupid she sounds, and says, "No, we had a con-ver-sa-tion."

Surprised, Lucy tries to imagine Monty opening up like that to her seventeen-year-old cousin when Kim adds, "He asked, 'How are you?' And I said, 'How am I? I'm thinking I might be pregnant' and he, like, mumbles something I can't understand and then he tells me that he wishes you guys had that problem."

Flustered, Lucy blurts out, "You're pregnant?" and cringes at the horrified tone of her voice, which reminds her of her aunts, as though when faced with the surprising her immediate reaction is to express their perspective. She realizes that she doesn't really know anything at all about Kim: what her life is like, what she enjoys or dislikes, or what her dreams and plans for the future might be. What's more, from what Kim has said about her conversation with Monty, Lucy wonders how well she herself knows him.

Kim looks at her and smiles slyly. "No. But I like to say that sometimes, to get a rise out of people." She sips from her beer and tilts

her head backward, letting the full force of the sunlight fall against it. "Then he said that you'd slept together last night, and it was the hottest it had ever been." In the midst of her carefully-composed face, her eyes are wide, as though she were looking at something from Ripley's-Believe-It-Or-Not. She hadn't picked up on Monty's sarcasm; Monty had also probably not mentioned the pot-bellied stove. "I think it might have been the moonshine talking," Kim adds. "Dad and Uncle Ted make it, and Grandpa Walter wanted to try some."

"Monty's RCMP," Lucy says, relieved by Kim's apparent misunderstanding, and amused. She has a vision of Monty coming to his senses later in the day, and realizing that, technically, he should arrest her entire family for producing home-made alcohol.

"So what's up with you guys, then?"

Lucy says nothing for a moment. There are endless rows of canola around them. The beer and sun have gotten to her head a little. No matter how hard she strains her eyes, sweeping them across the horizon, seeking anything onto which she can clasp her attention, she finds no distraction. "We're trying to work things out," she finally says. The words strike her as hollow. She and Monty were not trying to find a resolution. What they were doing was negotiating a compromise. No decision regarding the T-shirt could satisfy them both.

"Monty seemed lonely," Kim offers.

At this, Lucy studies Kim carefully, wondering what she might be trying to achieve with her statements: they seem designed to provoke, but to what end? Lucy senses something possibly mean-spirited in Kim now. Kim's blond hair is teased by the wind; its flapping about her shoulders seems to Lucy a sign of intentions that can't be pinned down.

Lucy feels lost. Lose, lost, and loss should be connected in a single situation, she thinks, but the point of reference for each is unclear here: is it she that is lost, has she lost something—understanding of Monty—or even herself, in her reaction to Kim's comment about being pregnant, or is this loss of understanding—of Monty, of Kim, of the whole situation—as a static and final destination?

She thinks back to the morning, remembering Monty as he rubbed the lotion into his side. He had started with a wide circle, first rubbing the perimeter of the mangled area, then moving in smaller and smaller circles until he reached the centre, tracing a spiral. Lucy had studied the expression on Monty's face: he hadn't been looking at the wound as he rubbed it, but rather off to one side, as if to distance himself from it. At the same time, she remembered the look of disgust on his face. The thought occurs to Lucy casually, the way a lazy incoming wave slowly laps onto shore: it's not me that he doesn't want to have see the wound.

She takes the empty beer bottle Kim has been dangling and throws it, as Kim did, in the direction of the field; it flies in an arc and when it crosses in front of the sun it glows—just for a second—like a comet.

When they get back to the farm, Lucy and Kim find that the area in front of the house has been turned into a parking lot, filled with trucks and cars of all sizes. There are so many people in the clearing behind the house—all of them, Lucy realizes with a start, somehow related to her—that it is hard to move. Extra barbecues have been brought in, so that there are five grills smoking simultaneously on the side of the grass. Grandpa Walter is sitting on a lawn chair, trying to pick out "Roll Out the Barrel" on an accordion. Lucy scans the crowd, but Monty is nowhere to be seen.

Aunt June calls Lucy over to where she stands with various cousins. On the grass in front of them is a genealogy chart that Aunt June has created for the occasion, made of eight yellow poster boards taped together.

Aunt June is describing the various wings of the family, now interwoven to form one lacy mass. With her index finger, she traces the inter-relationships. "My sister-in-law's family, the Tretiniaks, are actually related to us by blood as well as marriage; there was a Tretiniak who was a third cousin to Grandpa Walter." She points to where the relationships loop together like the fabric braid used in trimming Ukrainian costumes. The chart reminds Lucy of a giant cobweb; the little squares that hold each of the family member's names, neatly printed, look to her like so many flies caught in the web. Aunt June hands Lucy a leaky

blue pen with which to add her signature beside the square that contains her name.

Grandpa Walter puts down the accordion and comes over to stand beside Lucy, watching her.

Suddenly, they are all standing too close, casting a shadow over the chart: Grandpa Walter, Aunt June, the group of cousins peering at the names, even the other relatives packed onto the lawn. Lucy wants to find Monty and leave this place, but there is only more Grey Lake for miles around them. Looking at Aunt June's chart, which is as neat and precise as Grandpa Walter's rigidly patterned kitchen walls, Lucy sees that she is a part of the web whether she adds her signature to it or not. Like her mother, whose name is also there on the chart, and for whom physical distance cannot remove the connection.

"And it looks like we're going to have a wedding," Aunt June says brightly to Lucy. "Why don't you add Monty's name to the square beside yours?" As she has done for all of the unattached family members, June has included a series of horizontal dashes for a mate beside Lucy's name, and a smaller vertical dash below it for at least one child. Lucy hesitates, her eyes taking in the blank beside her name. The wind picks up stray locks of Aunt June's hair and straightens them for a moment before releasing them; the locks spring back into tight, grey coils against her head, as if emphasizing that nothing in this place was allowed to get too far away.

Monty.

Lucy hands the pen back to Aunt June. She badly wants a drink—beer, moonshine—something to stop the rushing sensation in her head.

She walks around to the front of the house, where Jennifer has set out laundry tubs full of ice beside the porch stairs: one for beer, one for soft drinks and juice. Monty is holding an empty glass in one hand and leaning back against the slats of vinyl siding; he looks as though he has had more than one shot of moonshine. With his other hand he is holding up his shirt for Kim, who is standing in front of him and running her fingertips over his right side.

They both look at her, startled.

"I was just trying to help," Kim says quickly.

It is like the moment after a car crash, when the driver very calmly and deliberately removes the keys, steps out of the car, closes the door, and walks away, experiencing a clarity that is like dizziness, feeling the gasping emptiness in the space between each second.

Lucy walks into the house and leans against the kitchen table. Monty follows, with difficulty, and puts down his empty glass on the table in front of her.

Lucy moves her eyes from Monty's glass to the dish towel lying on the table beside her left hand; it is embroidered with a likeness of Beregynia, whom she remembers as a pagan figure pulled from the dim, inarticulate past and inserted into Ukrainian folklore. Beregynia's original

meaning was unknown. Lucy studies the figure on the dish towel. Beregynia stands, her arms upraised in a gesture of what may be benevolence, or forgiveness, resignation, or openness.

"Don't say anything," Monty says into her ear. "Just don't say anything. I'm going to ask, and you're not going to say no, and I'm going to take that as a yes."

Lucy lifts Monty's glass from the table. She picks up the dish towel and carefully dries the condensation off the bottom of the glass, then wipes the table. Against their reflection on the table, she can see the full moon of moisture under the glass slowly disappear, like the photographic process in reverse.

Nightshade

"Ah, you want to know where the scar comes from, do you?" Gráinne said. She leaned back in a green armchair covered with *petit point* acorns. To Lisa, sitting across the room from Gráinne, the expression that overtook the other woman's face was hard to read: Gráinne's lips tightened while her cheekbones lifted.

Lisa and Gráinne lived in a highrise building that overlooked the Ottawa River, in an area where the city of Ottawa, having unfurled itself northward as far as land existed, ended in a multi-lane highway on which cars moved noisily at all hours of day and night; beyond the highway, the city gave way first to a narrow band of murky, bluish-grey river water and finally, on the opposite shore, to another place all together—Quebec, visible from the building only as a green haze of fir trees. The highrise, erected in the sixties, was made of an oyster-grey concrete, and devoid of charm; the building always reminded Lisa of a Roman necropolis she had once visited, in which the bodies of the deceased had been stacked one atop the other, like cartons in a factory awaiting shipment. Lisa lived on the fourteenth floor of the apartment building, and Gráinne on the second, and might never have met had a chunk of concrete not fallen from the façade one November morning a year ago, landing dangerously close to the sidewalk on which Gráinne walked her fox terrier, Finn, several times a day, and where on nice evenings Lisa liked to take her mother,

Elisabeth, with whom she had lived, out in the wheelchair for some air. A meeting of concerned tenants was called; the ten people who attended were told by the building's management that the dense filigree of fissures in the concrete outer walls of the building could only have been caused by the weather, which, the nervous-looking representative had said, reading from the paper in his hand, technically rendered the cracks the result of acts of God. What he couldn't say, when pressed, was exactly when management planned to begin reversing the acts of God, and Lisa and Gráinne had volunteered to start a petition demanding quick action—if one fairly large piece had already come down, there was nothing to prevent another from falling and injuring someone the next time. The petition signers took turns meeting at each other's apartments, and among Lisa, Gráinne, and Elisabeth there came to exist the kind of casual intimacy common in urban settings, in which details of the high and low points of a life are compressed into one, or at most two, tellings, and where the accounts are like crib sheets on which answers, but not how they are arrived at, are given. Lisa and Elisabeth came to know that Gráinne's husband of almost fifty years, Edward, had died only the year before, after a long bout with Hodgkin's Disease; that Gráinne was retired from the antiques business she and Edward had run; and that their four children lived in different cities: two in Toronto, one in Vancouver, and the daughter in Baltimore. Elisabeth's condition was multiple sclerosis, Gráinne learned, and progressing less quickly than the doctors had

anticipated—"Thankfully," Lisa had added, but Elisabeth had shaken her head and said, "Mixed blessing." Lisa was a guidance counselor at a local high school, and—according to Elisabeth—selflessly putting off marriage to her boyfriend, Mark, to care for her. From these first conversations, held over drafts of the petition that demanded the outer walls of the highrise be repaired AS SOON AS POSSIBLE, there emerged a pattern of regular visits; Elisabeth and Gráinne, who were close in age, seemed to particularly enjoy each other's company.

Now Lisa, facing Gráinne, shifted in her seat. The coarse wool of her pants scratched, and the warmth of Gráinne's apartment intensified the pricking of her skin. Heavy red drapes covered the windows of the small room, which was filled with furniture. Three bookshelves, a tall china cabinet, and a large clock in a dark, glossy wood, a sideboard holding a crystal decanter and glasses, the armchairs on which Gráinne and Lisa sat, and a silver brocade sofa were clustered together, leaving little space in which to move.

"It's a long story, the story of the scar," Gráinne warned. At seventy-five, her shoulder-length hair was still mostly dark, with only a few strands of white flowing down from the temples. Lisa was sure that the colour of Gráinne's hair was natural; she couldn't imagine Gráinne—who insisted on authenticity, from the Queen Anne furniture in the apartment to her signature black pearls and Hermès scarf—living with the insincerity of dyed hair.

"I have some time," Lisa said quietly.

"Of course you do," Gráinne said sympathetically. "Of course you do. God bless your mother—she didn't suffer too much, did she?"

"I'd like to believe she didn't," Lisa said. She offered Gráinne a cigarette, which was declined. Lisa lit her own and exhaled slowly. The smoke brought to mind the hospital room: its graying walls and its tarry odor, a mixture of dwindling hope and progressive fear. At one side of this picture was the figure of her mother in the vast hospital bed, after the handicapped transport bus Elisabeth took to her Thursday physiotherapy appointment had overturned: her small body overshadowed by a thick tangle of plastic tubes. In Lisa's mind, her mother always lay to one side of the memory-image, never at its centre; in the middle of the picture were several large machines, beeping and clicking in their own, incomprehensible language. Of the seven people injured in the accident, Lisa's mother was the only fatality; she succumbed after a nine-day coma. "She's been unwell with that degenerative condition for so long," her mother's friends had said to Lisa at the funeral. "But in the end, to go like that—it's terrible."

The doctors and nurses—the nurses especially—had assured Lisa that her mother hadn't suffered. Remembering the pale and thin figure—the periodic, violent twitching of her right hand the only sign of life—Lisa wasn't so sure.

Lisa saw the focus of Gráinne's attention waver and turn inward. Edward, Lisa knew, had also spent his final days in a place neither words nor touch could seemingly penetrate.

"Get the whiskey from the sideboard, will you Lisa, dear?" Gráinne said after a moment, indicating a table just beyond her reach. "Mind you take the Powers and not the Jameson."

Lisa poured shots of whiskey into two of the cut crystal glasses that were set beside the decanter for this purpose. In the mirror above the sideboard, she caught a glimpse of herself: an oval face, the skin still smooth enough, although the area under the eyes was a little puckered and the lips cracked from twenty years of cigarette smoking. Lisa's hair was greyer than Gráinne's, despite her being thirty years younger than the other woman; now only a few resistant strands of her original caramel-brown colour remained. The mirror seemed to reflect a figure whose features could only be rendered in gradations of black and white.

"To Elisabeth," Gráinne said, raising the glass Lisa handed her. "May her spirit be at peace."

Lisa lifted her glass and nodded at the toast to her mother. She drank the whiskey in a single swallow; its passage down her throat left a burning trail, like the afterimage of fireworks.

"Are you getting on all right these days?" Gráinne asked.

Lisa nodded. She had been smoking more, but that didn't seem unusual under the circumstances. She had been busy attending to

paperwork with the notary and clearing some things out of the apartment. In these and in other tasks (the messier work of dealing with the emotions) she had been helped over the last two months by her boyfriend, Mark. She said, "Mark is wonderful, as always." At the sound of her own voice speaking Mark's name, an involuntary smile spread across Lisa's face. Mark usually finished his day at the hospital, where he worked as a pharmacist, around six. Lisa had some news she wanted to share with Gráinne in the hour before he arrived, but sometimes secrets, she felt, were best savored for a while. Perhaps, Lisa wondered, this was part of the bridal madness her friends, who had experienced it a decade, or two decades, ago, had talked about. Once the decision to marry had been made, they'd said, a woman had to beware of a tendency to think and act in uncharacteristic, and retrospectively embarrassing, ways: there was often the onset of a sudden, commanding obsession with the pettiest of details, such as the precise shade of blue required for tablecloths at the reception in order to avoid a celebration apocalypse. This was her first, and she hoped only, marriage, and she was anxious not to overlook any details, having been merely a spectator at the proceedings for so long. Already, she felt herself drawn to things that, under other circumstances, she would have scoffed at: the white, fairy tale, duchesse satin wedding gown, as intricately constructed as a Buddhist temple; the band of paunchy, mustachioed musicians in gaudily-coloured tuxedos, to ensure lively dancing during the reception; and, in the purse by her feet, the

wedding invitations embossed with two golden doves that appeared not to be each holding one loop of a tiny bow in their beaks (as they had in the sample catalogue at the printer's), but rather, and quite disturbingly, flying directly into one another.

Also, her hesitation over telling Gráinne involved the issue of timing: it had only been two months since Elisabeth's death. Lisa had suggested that it was perhaps a little soon to get married, but Mark had said, "Why wait now? We've already waited a few years." As usual, Mark's calm voice and the reasonableness of his statement had smoothed down the rough edges of her concern, transforming it into agreement.

Once she agreed, though, an irresistible momentum had taken care of the rest, and she found it easy enough to give in to the swamp of details and plans and tasks that surrounded the event. Dropping by today to see Gráinne was part of it. As she was leaving, she would casually drop the news: "Oh, by the way..." This was how her friends had done it, with a careful modesty, and how she herself had done it that afternoon over lunch with friends.

To prolong the anticipation, she again asked to hear about the scar. She had once glimpsed Gráinne's brow, usually covered by bangs; among the wrinkles was a deep, pinkish-red gouge-mark, and Lisa was certain there was a story behind it.

"Yes, the scar," Gráinne said. She placed her empty glass on the small mahogany table, its heavy legs ornately worked, beside her chair.

Lisa noticed Gráinne's fingers, which had come to rest on the carved wooden arms of the chair. They were fat and stubby, and arthritis had rendered them permanently bent, so that they looked like inchworms paused in mid-crawl.

"In 1947, I was sent by my father to the neighbouring farm for the day, to work on the Sullivans' potato harvest, " Gráinne began. "I would have been twenty at the time. My father, God rest his soul, had arranged it with Old Man Sullivan...they were trying to set me up with Daniel Sullivan, who was the eldest son. You must know the type Danny was—dull of mind, earnest about petty things: were the rains heavier this month than last? A farmer has to take an interest, to be sure, but Danny would debate that question for what seemed hours. He was thin and pasty, with dark hair on his knuckles and eyes that went in different directions. He'd sometimes stare into space for no reason; as kids we teased him something fierce because he'd just stand where he was for several minutes without blinking. Anyway, I wasn't one of those serious types—I liked to sing, to have a good time. I also didn't want to get married to Danny Sullivan, farmer, of Killorglin parish, County Kerry. I was a bit of a looker in those days—slim, tall, with my mother's green eyes. Did I imagine grander things for myself? I suppose I did."

Gráinne stopped and waved a hand at the sideboard. "Let's have another," she said. As Lisa re-filled their glasses, Gráinne added, "You

know that whiskey is *uisce beatha* in Gaelic, which means 'water of life'?"

"So I'm told," Lisa replied absently, as she carefully replaced the stopper in the decanter. The whiskey had left her feeling warm and sluggish. In the congested space and dim haze of the room, with the whiskey loosening her muscles, she moved cautiously, afraid of knocking into the furniture.

Gráinne sipped from the glass Lisa handed her and resumed. "To this day I don't know if Danny was in on what his father and mine had arranged. He may just have been interested in me, with no knowledge of their plans. 'Over here, Gráinne,' he called when I arrived. He waved me over to the row beside him. There were about thirty people there for the harvest that day—family, of course, and what neighbours could spare their day. The Sullivans had a big farm, unusually big—Old Man Sullivan had married Nora O'Shea, some said, for her land, so he would have been disposed to making a business match out of Danny, his eldest son, and me. The June sun was out—I'll never forget that—there were clouds, of course, but behind them were patches of clear sky, and every once in a while you could see the sun. So Danny beckons me work beside him. 'It's a fine day, Gráinne,' he says, with this smile on his face like he's the first and last man clever enough to think of saying such. 'It's fine enough,' I said, and set to work over my basket."

Gráinne finished her drink and addressed Lisa. "Have you ever picked potatoes?" she asked.

Lisa shook her head. She'd been born and raised near Ottawa, where her father had worked as a government auditor. He had died a decade ago. Her mother had had a flower garden at the house in Kanata, but that was as far as it went. Lisa herself had no green thumb—neither the apartment she'd until recently shared with her mother, nor her office at the high school, had plants.

"Ah, but you don't know what you're missing!" Gráinne said. "The feel of dry, sandy earth between your cracked hands—like talcum powder, smooth and cool. And the potato itself—potatoes are nightshades, from the nightshade family of plants—they're South American in origin, either Incan or Mayan, I don't remember which. The potato: that cool heft in your hand, if it's been a good season, or a puny thing like a river rock if it's not. Working in the field, there is no shade from what little sun there might be—there are no trees around. But in the sky overhead: jays and gulls, each with its own distinctive call. Well, we worked in the field for hours. We took one short break for bread and cheese. The rest of the time it was: 'Will you look at the size of this potato, Gráinne?' 'Gráinne, who d'you think will win the all-Ireland football championship this year, Kerry or Cavan?' ('I don't follow football, Danny, most girls don't.') 'What did you think of Father Moynihan's sermon last Sunday?' ('I thought it was a pious sermon indeed, Danny'). 'Would you look at this—

it's sure to be good harvest this year if we're getting potatoes this size.' ('That's good, to be sure, Danny.') 'I hear Mary O'Connell—she's married to Patrick Fitzgerald—had twin babies last week. Girls: Bridget and Anne.' ('That's nice, Danny, good for them.') 'D'you like children, Gráinne?' ('I prefer a good sausage myself'—and there was only a blank look on Danny's face at this.) Finally: 'There's a dance down in Killorglin town the weekend next, Gráinne—would you go with me?'

"'I can't, Danny, I've already said I'd go with John O'Donoghue.' I might have said this too quickly, with too much relief in my voice—even if I hadn't said yes to John I wouldn't have gone with Danny—but it was this comment that started the whole thing."

"Did your father know?" Lisa asked Gráinne. "That you were seeing John O'Donoghue?"

"Ah, no," Gráinne said. "I'd neglected to mention to my father that John had asked me to the dance, and that I'd said 'yes.' John was very fine—tall, with dark hair and eyes like the waters of Dingle Bay: a lively blue on the surface, but with hints of grey—of something darker, more intense—underneath. He had a good voice and a nice laugh. We both liked a laugh. John and I had more planned than just attending the dance, you see, but I hadn't yet had a chance to talk to my father about that."

Gráinne travelled away for a moment, to the company of John O'Donoghue. This was not the first time John O'Donoghue's name had

come up in their conversations; each time it did Gráinne would become quiet after mentioning his name.

"Whatever happened to him?" Lisa asked, lighting another cigarette.

Gráinne played with the silken edge of her shawl. "He married Katie Griffin, a neighbour of ours; they ran a pub in Killorglin town. He died about ten years ago—I had a card in the mail from Katie—a drunk driver hit him while he was walking his dogs. Terrible," Gráinne said. She stared at the glossy finishing of the scarf, visible to Lisa between Gráinne's thick fingers. "He was a good man, you know?" Gráinne said. "It's not often you come across a good person like that."

Lisa sat respectfully in the silence that ensued. "Would you like another whiskey?" she asked after a few minutes.

"No, thank you, dear, I'm fine," Gráinne said, and straightened in her seat. "Now, where was I?"

"You've just told Danny you're going to the dance with John."

"Right," Gráinne said. "First of all, you'd think the boy had never been turned down before—which I know for a fact not to be the case. All the families in the area were big families—six, seven children—and a fair number of them were boys, of course, so Danny had plenty of competition for the ladies. So this wasn't the first time that a girl had said, 'Sorry, no,' to him. And at first, all he says to me, with his sing-song voice in a sad key, is, 'Ah, that's too bad, Gráinne.' He goes back to his potatoes

and I to mine. He is quieter after this, and so I have some peace. After a while I forget about Danny and begin to sing to myself. But those working nearby heard, and they were the ones who later said, 'She cast a spell on Danny Sullivan with her singing.' 'He lost his head,' they claimed—as if he'd had much of one to begin with. But that comes later. In the field, I can see that the sun overhead is moving toward the west. I've been singing to myself to pass the time when Danny pipes up again. 'What about the next dance, Gráinne? Would you go with me to that one?'

"At this point I've been working, bent over my hoe, for hours. Oh, I was used to hard work, I was—my father had his own crops, five cows, and several chickens. I'm annoyed at Danny, but it's because I just want two moments of peace strung together: that boy could talk the head off a cow. I'm also mindful of what my father might have tried to arrange with Old Man Sullivan. I want to stay on my father's good side, because the O'Donoghues also have a decent farm—not as big as the Sullivan farm, to be sure, but big enough in size. My father was a good man: he'd wanted to make sure his grandsons would inherit a sizeable farm, is all. So I'm thinking I can persuade him that a match with John O'Donoghue would work out just as well, in the end. I bite my tongue's first reply to Danny's question and try to find a softer response. 'I don't know, Danny, why don't we wait until the next dance is announced?'

"Danny says nothing, but he grows agitated. He starts chopping at the earth with his hoe, and throwing the potatoes he's picked into his

basket. Old Maggie Griffin, with the soft grey frizz of her remaining hair in braids wrapped around her head, is working to the left of Danny. She notices how he's acting and calls out, 'Danny, your old man's going to mind your bruising the potatoes.'

"Danny says nothing to Maggie; he keeps right on whacking at the earth and tossing potatoes. His face is flushed, and getting redder by the second.

"After a few minutes—I've turned back to my work—I hear a soft thud. I turn my head. Danny has dropped, or thrown, his hoe; it's lying on the ground in front of him. He's standing in the weak sun and he's perspiring heavily—I can see a dark stain across the front of his light blue shirt, and there are two patches of damp under his arms. He has his furry-fingered hands on his temples.

"'I've an awful headache,' he says, and it's like he's talking to someone standing in front of him, not to Maggie or myself on either side of him.

"'Why don't you go have a drink of water, Danny,' I say to him. There was a small stream across the field, with fresh water feeding the river Laune. This was how my mother used to treat my little brother Michael when he'd cry with the pains in his head.

"Danny nods. 'That I think I'll do,' he says, and walks away. Maggie and I turn to our rows and continue harvesting.

"About five minutes later, the most terror-stricken scream you could imagine comes from across the field. It was a sound I'd heard before: the screech animals make when their fear is pure, absolute. We all drop our hoes and run toward it: almost thirty people, moving together. We must have looked like a swarm of bees returning to the hive.

"At the edge of the stream is Mary Murphy—she was a cousin of the Sullivans on the mother's side—and she's shaking, poor girl, just shaking from the top of her dark head to her dirty bare feet. When she sees us all, she points to the stream: there is Danny, lying face down, arms and legs splayed so that his body looks like an 'X' across the water. One of the men approaches Danny and turns him over—the stream wasn't deep at that point, maybe six inches. We all see it immediately: Danny's eyes are open, but glossy and unmoving. They looked like the gooseberries we used to come across in the fields as children.

"There is a flutter of hands, like a group of butterflies rising, as everyone makes the sign of the cross. 'He's with us no more,' Thomas Moriarty says unnecessarily. Danny's sisters Catherine and Mary begin to wail.

"'How could this be?' shouts Old Man Sullivan, who's pushed his way to the front of the group of us. Little Pat McCarthy turns around and looks at me. Another cousin of Danny's; he'd been working close by Danny and me in the field. He points a finger at me; I can see his freckled hand trembling. I can feel the anger in that body, that mind. I see a vein

throbbing in his left temple: I still remember that, the dull green of it pronounced against his pale skin. 'She sang to him,' Pat calls out to the crowd in a loud voice. 'She cast a spell on him.'

"It goes dead silent all around. I can see faces—different faces, but the same expression on each one: glaring eyes, sharp eyebrows, tightened mouth.

"'And she bade him drink the water of this stream,' comes a voice from behind me. I know the voice at once: it belongs to Maggie Griffin.

"'His head hurt,' I say. 'Any one of you would have said the same thing as I to him. And of the singing—I was hardly the only one to pass the time in that way.'

"'She's got green eyes,' Pat McCarthy says after studying me silently for a moment. His look feels like a poke with a rough stick. 'That's a sign,' Pat says to the crowd. 'She's a *pishogue*, all right.' They thought I was an evil one—something like your witch—with the power to inflict harm on others.

"Well, they beat me, of course. But to say 'they beat me' doesn't convey what it was like: the crowd moving in around and over me, blocking the light—the sky above seemed to turn dark, like it does during an eclipse; the sound of thirty voices, cursing and yelling, combined—like a gale, and if you've ever heard one you'll know that the worst part isn't the shrieking but the menacing, low undertone that doesn't let up; the feeling of being pushed by strange, rough hands, one way and then the

other, and being punched and slapped and pinched the whole time—I no longer knew in which direction I was first standing, and then down on the ground. Hands, feet, faces, again and again, coming at me like waves of nausea—little pauses of eerie silence and inaction between the torrents of beating.

"At the end of it, I had a fractured skull and other broken bones, cuts and bruises all over my body, and internal swelling: the doctor said he could see my liver when I was stretched out—it rose like the hill of Tara from my abdomen. He didn't think I'd live. Oh, and the scar," Gráinne added, putting her hands to her temple and lifting the dark bangs from her forehead.

Lisa saw that the scar ran from one temple to another beneath the hairline. It looked like a tilde mark, or a stylized wave: it began mid-way up Gráinne's right temple, rose abruptly to the hairline, dropped diagonally across the forehead, only to rise slightly at the other temple.

"Once I was down on the ground, some bastard still had his hoe with him decided to slash me, for good measure." Gráinne let go of her hair, and the bangs dropped into place against her forehead as gently as pillow feathers settling on the ground.

"Can you imagine?" she asked. "Danny Sullivan has a seizure at the stream, and I become the *pishogue* next door. What do you make of that?"

"What about the police? Couldn't they do anything about what was done to you?"

"The *Garda*?" Gráinne shrugged. "What keeps this world going is order, and part of order is believing that there's a line between cause and effect. No one could see what killed Danny, so the reason had to be something invisible too, like the power of a *pishogue*."

Lisa shook her head. Just listening to Gráinne's story had her heart beating thickly in her chest. "That's awful," she said, feeling the inadequacy of her words—of any words—to the violence Gráinne described.

"People don't see what's right in front of them," Gráinne offered, glancing toward the window. "They see what they want to believe."

"And that's when you came to Canada," Lisa said.

"I had no life there, Lisa. No life at all, even if I escaped death. John never came to see me after the beating. Such was the strength of the fear and abhorrence of the *pishogue*: it was a rare man, indeed, who would approach a woman suspected, even if only in neighbours' gossipy whispers, of being such. After I recovered, my father sold a cow—that cost him dearly—and bought me passage to Canada on a boat." Gráinne was silent for a moment. "You know the rest of the story—I met Edward, got married, worked with Edward at the business, had children. I've never been back. Never saw my parents again. My brother Martin visited us a couple of times, before he became too ill to travel. But it worked out well in the end. I've had a good life here. And when I think back on my life before that day—well, it is beautiful in the way only something lost can

be." She allowed herself a small smile. "The present can never affect what's lost to the past—there is something comforting in that, isn't there?"

At this, Lisa too smiled, but the smile felt thin. Last autumn, before the disease had begun to affect her speech, Elisabeth had sat in her wheelchair by the kitchen window one evening. Mark had come over, and what had Elisabeth heard in the mundane conversation while he and Lisa cooked dinner—*needs more salt, I'll chop the shallots, the potatoes are about to boil over*? More than mundane domestic details—she must have heard in their comfortable, unthinking ease with each other the imperative of the present: its ringing demand, its urgent need, to exist.

"I could live for years yet," Elisabeth had said to Lisa after Mark left. "I'm a burden to you."

"No," Lisa had replied, shaking her head. She and Mark had discussed the situation several years before. At the time, the doctors had expected Elisabeth's disease to progress quickly. Lisa and Mark decided to defer a life together until after the inevitable. It was for the best: Lisa would care for Elisabeth, and Mark, living outside the situation, would provide needed support for Lisa.

"It's hard on you," Gráinne said softly.

Lisa swallowed several times to stop the tears that threatened to emerge. "I'm sorry," she said.

"No need to excuse yourself, dear," Gráinne replied. "All those years."

"It was hard, I won't say it wasn't, but not as hard as it was on her. I miss her. A part of me even misses the life we had, as difficult as that sometimes was."

Gráinne adjusted the scarf around her neck. "Ah, but that's normal. I feel that with Edward, and it's been over a year. Will you have another whiskey? No? It lessens with time, you'll see. Much like my scar—it won't disappear, but it'll fade." She peered at Lisa. "How did you see the scar in the first place, dear? I usually keep it well covered with the bangs."

"I noticed it when you were sitting with my mother one time, in our kitchen. A gust of wind coming through the window blew the hair away from your forehead for a second. I wondered what the story behind it might be."

"Ah, dear, that's all we have in the end," Gráinne said. "Our stories." She smiled.

"But things worked out well for you."

"They did," Gráinne said. "That they did."

She appeared tired; there was a bluish heaviness to the skin beneath her eyes that Lisa didn't recall seeing when she'd arrived.

"I should let you rest."

Gráinne nodded. "That would be nice. The telling of the story of the scar isn't easy, even after all of these years." She glanced at the heavy grandfather clock standing in a corner of the room. "And your young man should be coming home soon," she added. "I sometimes see him from the front balcony. He's quite fine."

Here was the moment: the silly rush of it—about which she, a grey-haired guidance counselor, should be embarrassed—reinforced by years of waiting, of doubting its eventual reality. Lisa now couldn't imagine the time before, when she would not wake to find Mark beside her, his bare arms thick and solid and at home in their place close to her.

"Mark and I have set a date."

Gráinne's eyes were drawn to a sudden glint above the sideboard, as the mirror which hung there momentarily reflected the headlights of a passing vehicle on the nearby highway.

"Congratulations, my dear. Oh, that's wonderful! I'm so happy for both of you. A wedding. Oh, that's lovely. Soon? Yes: well, why not?"

In Gráinne's effusiveness Lisa could make out the pale outline of her mother, who would have reacted less enthusiastically—she had always been a person that others called "reserved" or "serene," depending on their perspective—but no less genuinely than Gráinne now did.

Gráinne looked at Lisa with sympathy. "Your mother would have been happy, Lisa. She was quite fond of Mark, as I'm sure you know."

"I do know." Elisabeth and Mark had gotten on famously; she could appreciate now how much easier this had made the situation for all involved, though at times during the past years she'd often felt something like resentment toward Mark, guiltily wishing that she were as reconciled to the situation as he.

She pulled the envelope holding the invitation from her bag. "I almost forgot—here's the invitation. It's going to be a small ceremony, and we'd very much like you to be there."

Gráinne insisted on one last glass of whiskey to celebrate the news. "To the future," she said, holding the glass up in the darkening room as the big clock announced the time with six thunderous booms. "Oh, I'll have to think of something to wear! And I'm so glad we had this talk today, dear," she added. "It was nice."

Lisa nodded. The conversation today felt like the cap to their relationship; Lisa knew that once she moved into Mark's house her contact with Gráinne would naturally diminish, and then fade away all together, in the way that these things happen. But she would always remember how much good Gráinne had done her mother, just by offering friendship.

"Yes," said Lisa, glancing out the window. "You know, my mother enjoyed so much the times you spent together in the afternoons. That was always the hardest time of the day for her, and having company during those long hours made it easier for her."

"Think nothing of it," Gráinne said, smiling that unique smile, both pleasant and pained, of hers. She followed Lisa's glance to the blue-grey river, which was just visible in the distance as a dark mass beneath the night sky. Happiness, like sadness, Gráinne thought, often obliterated a person's view of the present. No need, then, for her to tell Lisa that all she had done for Elisabeth was sing to her a little, to ease the pain.

Knowing

To know mushrooms is to identify each one found—whether it is hidden in the dank crucible of a rotting tree stump or surrounded by sentinel-like stems of tall, razor-edged grass in an open field—according to strict categories: good or bad, edible or poisonous. Aga believes that knowing is partially in the bones—something sensed deep within and ancestral, a surety passed down through generations as silently, and as concretely, as that which determines the exact hue of the iris or precise curve of the upper lip. But knowing is also partly learned, this by watching others who gather mushrooms and discovering how to read the signs: the compass direction in which a cluster faces, the type of soil, and the significance of small variations in colour, texture, and smell (there is a world of difference between those that are tan-coloured, and those that are caramel, and between woody-smelling ones and those whose scent is more reminiscent of the earth after a heavy rainfall). More important is knowing which mushrooms can be picked and delicately nestled in a plastic bag or small basket. Some types bruise easily: they are frailer than they appear and weaker than one would expect from fungi whose existence come either through energetically feeding on dead organic matter or stealing away, day in and day out, the energy of their host organisms. This is what the knowledge comes down to, Aga thinks: identifying which can be brought home, cleaned (the murky soil brushed off, bruised areas

cut away with a paring knife, then the mushrooms held under cold running water to remove any soil still adhering to the stems), and fried with onions and butter, or finely chopped, wrapped in dough, boiled, and dropped into a bowl of steaming, claret-coloured borscht. This was what Aga's own mother used to do for any malaise, physical or emotional—a nagging cough, a failed math test, or a broken heart: serve up a dish of mushrooms.

In the kitchen this morning it is still dark, and cool. Last evening, after yet another humid, mid-August day, Aga had opened the windows and pulled back the curtains, white muslin covered with slightly faded red poppies, to let in some of the fresh night air. Sophie's curtains: Aga imagines Sophie a decade ago, her two white-blond toddlers by her side, carefully choosing the material by running her long, thin fingers along the bolts to test for durability. The fabric would have to last, as well as be pretty; the interior of this cottage in the Laurentian Mountains, with its plain, white wood-frame furniture, chintz coverings, and sturdy, washable cotton carpets in hues of pink and orange, is a testament to Sophie's attempt to combine functionality with looks. As the salesclerk cut the requested three yards off the bolt, Sophie could, of course, not have foreseen that the curtains she would spend hours sewing would outlast her, and that another woman would one day stand in her tasteful kitchen, putting on the kettle for Stefan's morning tea.

Outside the window above the sink, Aga spots a robin going through its morning paces, crossing half the broad lawn in a few hops before it pauses, sensing worms in the moist soil under the dew-covered grass. "*Nic nietrwa*," Aga says to herself as she fills the kettle. Along with "Tomorrow is another day" and "We'll live," "*Nic nietrwa*"—the Polish version of "Nothing lasts"—is a common saying from Aga's childhood. When she says "*Nic nietrwa*" she is thinking of Sophie, but also—with anxiety—of herself and Stefan.

She lights the burner and pulls two tall glasses out of the cupboard. From the pantry comes the bowl of sugar cubes—Stefan will only use cubes in his tea, and they are increasingly hard to find in the stores—and from the refrigerator a lemon, which will be cut into thick wedges. Aga moves delicately for such a large-boned woman, but it's a delicacy of context: she *has* to move and place her feet carefully.

Aga was one of the many women who descended on the family's grief in the days following the funeral, like delivery maidens of the gods, bearing dinners for Stefan and his children, Robert and Sarah—months' worth of prepared meals to be pulled from the freezer and simply reheated in the oven or microwave. And desserts (something pleasant to counter your pain), in the form of breads and cakes of various kinds, with sweet cheese, with apricots, with raisins, all topped with icings as thick and opaque as the heavy November frost outdoors.

Somehow it was Aga, who was not the prettiest, the youngest, or the thinnest, not the top cook nor the best conversationalist, whose visit begat a second, and then a third. One Saturday afternoon, she arrived with pork chops, potatoes, and green beans in her oversized purse, and cooked dinner—probably the first fresh meal the pale family had eaten in weeks. At the end of an evening four months ago, Stefan said, "Don't go," and that's how it has been since.

Robert, who could only look bewildered in the aftermath of his mother's death, is back at military school. He sends his father curt, one-page letters—Aga has seen them—that are more like lists of what he's accomplished in the past two weeks (adding ten sit-ups to his morning routine) and what he plans to accomplish in the next two (getting an "A" for his history paper). In the past month, he's been made team leader for a flag-capturing exercise; under his command, the team won. Robert is polite, respectful, ambitious, focused, and sixteen; listening to him talk at the dinner table one evening soon after she had moved in, Aga thought that this was the type of person who would either become a brilliant tactician or a man who could kill another, silently, effectively, and not a second thought about it.

Sarah is fourteen, and the skull earrings and big rough rings, like brass knuckles, on her fingers have been getting bigger as she gets thinner. Her clavicle juts out sharply from her chest, as though it were separate from the rest of her.

Stefan moves in and out of awareness of the present like a man starting awake for an instant before going back to sleep. The periods in between are longer now, a good thing. But Aga fears that the day will come when Stefan will awaken fully, see her, and wonder why she is there; he will know then that he had made an error, that he had moved in the haste of blind sorrow.

(There has been talk, of course, in the small Polish community attached to Saint Joseph's Church. And surprise: Agatha Kowalski? She is forty, and the years have added heaviness to hips that were never slim. Also, hers has been a cautious life; this is written all over her from the cheap cotton dresses she wears, to her bargain-basement sandals and the shoulder-length, brown hair she trims, unevenly, herself. The cautiousness is there in the tiny, one-room apartment she has rented for the past fifteen years, since her husband, Ted, left her for that American woman. Hers is a life of managed thrift and constructed penury, like a theatre piece, and all unnecessary: she works as a real estate agent, and has done well enough for herself. When she had stopped by the house, a chicken casserole in hand, Aga could tell from the puzzled expression in his eyes that Stefan remembered her, but dimly. In fact he could not think of her name, and couldn't place the face that he knew he had seen, somewhere, before. So uninspiring and unpromising, that beginning, so unlikely to have led to this.)

What no one knew was that since the day ten years ago when Stefan and Sophie came into the real estate office at which Aga worked, looking for a nice duplex in the city in which to raise their toddlers, Aga had had to live with longing within her. Stefan and Sophie sat across the desk from Aga, heads bent toward one another as they discussed a question she had just put to them about the house they wanted to buy. It was a simple, domestic portrait, unremarkable except for what Aga glimpsed as Stefan lay a hand on Sophie's arm to emphasize a point he was making: at his touch, Sophie seemed to expand, to become so much herself that she was no longer herself. The moment was so powerfully intimate that Aga felt embarrassed to have been present as witness. Seeing it elicited a simple longing within her: "I want that." But what "that" might be was more complicated: it had something to do with what occurred to Sophie, but which had been conferred, mysteriously, via Stefan's touch. "Nothing lasts," the voices of Aga's childhood had warned, but the longing did last, as a sentence at times sublime, at times corrosive: the quiet, intriguing, yet also shameful gnawing of it (shameful because of its futility—it didn't seem possible to ever fulfill) was something she couldn't lose, no matter how hard she tried. So when Stefan made his negative plea—"Don't go" wasn't, after all, quite the same as "Stay"—Aga had only thought for a moment before agreeing, then subletting her apartment and, later, arranging with Basil, her boss, for an extended summer vacation.

"She's not at all like Sophie," people said to each other, baffled by the human heart, or the mystery of choice. Sophie had been blond-haired, green eyed, and beautiful. She had liked to joke and laugh. By way of conclusion, they told each other that some gem-like trait, hidden from their view, must exist in dour Aga.

Now Aga hears a shuffling behind her: Stefan moving into the kitchen in his pair of *dziadek's* slippers—the cracked brown leather type, lined with shearling, worn by an arthritic old man concerned about an early morning chill to the pine floor boards. The slippers are an incongruous element: Stefan is still a young man, just past forty, his blond hair untouched by grey and, beneath his black shorts and green T-shirt, his body firm and strong.

"Good morning," Aga says, adjusting her yellow cotton wrap, patterned with butterflies—the one new piece of clothing she has recently bought, on the advice of a woman's magazine secretly browsed through at the grocery store in the little town where, once a week, they stock up on supplies.

"Mmm," Stefan, not a morning person, manages. Sitting at the kitchen table, he reaches for the sugar bowl, which Aga had placed on the table, and pops a lump into his mouth. This seems to do the trick: after a moment he says, "Nice morning out there."

Aga turns off the kettle and fills the teapot. "It's going to be hot again," she says. The morning sky is unveiling itself as a pale, hazy blue,

a sure sign that this day, like the one before it, will continue the heat wave they have been experiencing for the last week. Even here at the cottage, a two-hour drive north of Montreal and high in the mountains, the humidity has been stultifying; every movement has felt like it's been made in jelly.

"I can't image what it's like in the city," Aga says as she places the teapot onto the table and sits opposite Stefan.

"Hmm," Stefan says in his absent way. "I hope it breaks soon." Stefan teaches mechanical engineering at university; they have been up at the cottage since the beginning of July, and plan to stay until the end of August. There is no television, no newspaper, and no radio, here—Stefan did not want distractions from the textbook he is writing. This decision, like the insistence on sugar cubes, and like Stefan's attachment to the ugly, unnecessary slippers, were the mundane quirks that formed the real person, Aga felt, and discovering them pleased her. She had noted every one, for each suggested a piece in the puzzle of intimacy. Now Aga knew, as probably only Sophie and Stefan's mother had, that he would eat bread, but never toast, and that he had a habit of humming himself to sleep with a tune that sounded vaguely like "*Frère Jacques*."

Stefan pours tea into his glass, adds two cubes of sugar and a bit of lemon, and sips, wincing. Another habit: he can never wait for it to cool just enough to be drinkable. He pushes the glass away from him.

"What's today's topic?" Aga asks. The cozy kitchen, into which the sun is now beginning to creep, the communal pot of tea, and their careful, early-morning movements conspired to elicit from her this expression of interest in Stefan's work, although she understands little of the subject except for its importance to him.

"Noise and vibration," he says, nodding to himself, already half-lost in the labyrinth of his current chapter. He generally rises early, breakfasts on tea and bread, and then disappears into his study at the back of the house until late afternoon. The sound of tapping that comes from behind the closed door is steady, like raindrops on the cottage's tin roof during a downpour.

From the solemn tone of Stefan's response, Aga wonders whether the words "noise" and "vibration" have a personal resonance for him, a sense—beyond the pages of his manuscript—which involves both the daily barrage of typing in his room and the disturbing quiet of absence that he must have experienced after Sophie's death.

Across the table from her, Stefan tries again with his tea, gingerly testing the liquid in the glass with his tongue. Satisfied, he drinks deeply.

"What will you do today?" he asks, his tone almost formal: nothing in it to indicate that, an hour before, they had been sprawled beside each other in bed.

Aga occupies herself cooking and baking, things she hasn't recently had the small pleasure of doing for others, as well as tending the little

vegetable garden she has been trying to coax out of the thin soil; so far she has gotten some small potatoes and a few heads of tough cabbage. Only the string beans have done well. Sometimes she accompanies Stefan's daughter, Sarah, who is still sleeping upstairs, to the lake, which is a five-minute walk away, down a gravelly lane lined on both sides by giant pine trees. Last week, in an uncharacteristically friendly gesture, Sarah—who always sits apart from Aga at the beach—offered Aga a book she had finished reading. But the book is about two vampires in Paris, which doesn't really interest Aga, and the writer seems to be trying hard to make the vampire lifestyle seem appealing, which doesn't so much discomfit her as seem a pointless undertaking. Aga regrets not having brought her old Agatha Christie paperbacks; she could re-read them a dozen times, her pleasure in the unfolding of the novels undiluted by knowledge of their endings.

"I'm not sure," she says. It is a Wednesday; the fridge and pantry are still well-stocked, so there is no reason for her to walk into town. It's too hot to bake, and she weeded the garden yesterday. "There's an old bike in the garden shed," she added. "I saw it there yesterday. Maybe I'll see if it works, and go for a ride."

"Well, be careful if you do," Stefan says, spreading apricot jam on a piece of bread and taking a bite.

Their nightly lovemaking is a bedtime tonic, for Stefan at least. Aga lies awake afterward, staring at the pine rafters. In those few moments of

passion, the Stefan she met ten years ago—alive, vibrant—reappears, and the eyes that peer at her suggest that she is seen, and that she is wanted. These are the moments, too few, that seem saturated with the promise of something more. What Aga would like is for Stefan, just once, to break from his routine: for him to lock the door and to take her here, in the kitchen, among the geraniums and the carved sunflowers on the walls. But this seems too much to hope for. And one-sided. Her need, frightening in its ongoing intensity, is like a monologue.

As usual after his glass is emptied, Stefan rouses himself from the table, kisses the top of her head, and, clutching the half-eaten slice of bread, heads down the hallway to his room.

Aga drops two lumps of sugar into her tea and watches them dissolve. It's not guilt that she feels, in Sophie's cottage. Aga is too practical a woman for that: what happened to Sophie is unfortunate, but it is she, Aga, whom Stefan asked to be here, with him, now. Yet on the cold, February morning when Ted left (unexpectedly, though others later said that they saw it coming), she had decided that she was done with—above, or beyond—passion: that it was something that could be shed as willfully, and as simply, as a pair of shoes. And that was how it had been for many years, until some entity had betrayed this resolve. Not her body, which might have been the expected element, but whatever it was within that was the seat of ideas. In Sophie, she had seen the compelling change conveyed through Stefan's touch. It was the desire for this change in

which, and by which, she was now ensnared. Aga recognizes humiliation, persistent as a stalker, just behind her need: an inexpressible disgrace at the unexpected, and unwanted, necessity of this need to be touched, after so long on her own.

An hour later, the sun is already a plain white disk, its scathing power in that simplicity, and Aga is finishing her third cup of tea when Sarah walks into the kitchen. She is wearing a rumpled pair of boy's pajamas, a light blue cotton patterned with sailboats. Clumps of her short hair stand up at discordant angles from her head; she had come home one evening a few weeks after Sophie's funeral with her long, blond hair cut by what appeared to be pruning shears into thick chunks of uneven lengths. Aga had been over for dinner that evening; when Sarah walked into the kitchen, Stefan had simply stared at his daughter.

"I paid a lot for this haircut," Sarah said to his stare. She worked at a stylist's on Saturdays, sweeping up piles of unwanted hair.

"Your loss," was all Stefan had said after a moment.

Now Sarah glances angrily at Aga, as if to say, "Are you still here?" and slumps into the chair Stefan had occupied.

"Some toast?"

"I'm not hungry." Sarah crosses her arms across her flat chest. "Where's my father?"

"In his room, working."

"Of course," Sarah says, staring out the window.

Aga cuts two slices of bread from the end of the loaf onto a plate and pushes the plate gently toward Sarah: a suggestion. Stefan hadn't mentioned Sarah this morning, which was not unusual, but Aga finds it impossible to believe that he hasn't noticed how thin the girl is becoming. Yet he's said nothing about it.

Sarah pulls the plate toward her and picks at one of the slices with her fingers. She flattens the spongy dough into a disk and then rolls it into a ball. Aga has seen this before: Sarah will reduce the contents of the plate to a series of little spheres, with none eaten. Sometimes, depending on her mood, she will then scatter a handful of the balls onto the lawn outside the kitchen window for the birds. But now she gets herself a mug from the cupboard and pours the last of the tea into it, adding one squeeze of lemon.

"I thought I'd go down to the beach later," Aga says. "Read more of that book you lent me. Will you join me?"

"Brad Pitt was in the movie," Sarah says in her teenager's manner of abrupt segues. Or perhaps it's just her way with Aga. "He's an actor."

"I know who Brad Pitt is."

"I bet you do," Sarah says, a sudden, malicious smile playing over her pretty face. "Right. You probably spent a lot of time alone at the movies before, lusting over Brad Pitt."

Aga feels awkward with Sarah; in fact, she experiences a trill of panic whenever Sarah is near. For one thing, she is not used to being around young people; she and Ted were childless, and the few close friends she made after his departure were not the kind of people to have children. There is something about the young—their cat-like stares, which seem to penetrate but reveal nothing in return, their caustic observations, and abrupt, Jack-in-the-Box-like gestures—that defeats her ability to connect with them. Sarah is by and large hostile toward Aga; her politeness is mostly predictable, such as when she is looking for a piece of clothing that Aga has washed in the machine that sits in a small room off the kitchen. Yet Aga is conscious of her uncertain, tenuous place here; with Sarah, she is mostly defined by who she is not, which is Sophie, and by what she cannot do, which is lessen some of the girl's angry hurt. Also, Aga thinks, Sarah must resent the fact of her—Aga's—relationship with Stefan, when the girl and Stefan barely speak. So Aga says nothing to Sarah's statement except, "I'll make us some sandwiches and lemonade to take along."

Sarah leans her elbows on the table and rests her chin in her bony hands. "I don't know why you're here, " she says slowly. "I don't know why you let him treat you like he does. He treats you like shit. He treats everyone like shit. He treated my mother that way, too, you know, even after she got sick."

"Well," Aga says, "it's very hard on all of you. Your father is dealing with it the best he can. Try," she adds, thinking of how the past always registers on Stefan's face as a seismic event, a tremor breaking up his placid expression, "to have some compassion."

"Compassion?" Sarah says, and the anger in her voice is real, palpable. "What are you trying to be now, the fucking Buddha?" She leaves Aga alone at the table with the plate full of wasted bread.

Sarah has complained since they first arrived at the cottage at the beginning of July, but has not asked to leave: if she had, her father would have let her return, alone, to the city, and she must know that. On rainy days she is in her room, reading books with lurid, fantastical covers: vampires in *fin de siècle* clothes, knights battling multi-coloured dragons and many-limbed daemons. Much of the rest of the time she is at what they all call the "beach"—their inflated term for the clearing along a nearby lake covered with a whitish sand that looks welcoming but is gritty and uncomfortable to sit on, no matter how many blankets or towels are put down.

Mid-morning, Aga and Sarah walk along the hot gravel to the beach. In her shorts and loose T-shirt, Sarah, as usual, separates from Aga, finding herself a spot on the sand between two groups of strangers, older couples sporting tight-fitting, fluorescent swimsuits and zinc'd noses. Aga watches as Sarah lays down three towels—the lumpy sand

must press right up against her bones—and loses herself in a book. Aga tries to do the same, but Sarah's half-statement, half-question from the morning—"I don't know why you're here"—keeps running through her mind. Useless to reply: because your father asked me; the fact that it is both the true answer, and an inadequate one, bothers her.

How can she explain to Sarah how strong, how binding, pleasure can be? Not the possibly expected kind—physical—though there is that, too. But Aga is thinking of something promised by pleasure, something for which she has no name. It sits in her mind as a place to move toward, an idea more substantial and pleasing and longer-lasting, in the end, than the awkward geometry of physical passion, with its rearrangement of limbs into acute and obtuse angles. Her existence here with Stefan is like the hiatus of vacation, the amusement park's suspension of the real and allowance for immersion in another kind of reality, louder, brighter, and more colourful. All of it is made stronger—more potent—by its very unlikelihood. She likes to study Stefan when he doesn't know that she's looking, drinking him in: she can't quite get over that it is she who is here now, when others are not.

Yet, in truth, Stefan is difficult to be with, often taciturn and aloof: between nights and days is an uncomfortable space that she ferries across regularly, trying to reconcile the man she knows in bed and the one she has to construct, piecemeal, from such mundane signs as how he likes his breakfast and his off-tune humming of *Frère Jacques*. And Stefan's

apparent blindness to Sarah's growing thinness bothers her: it is like the tiniest of slivers in the skin, virtually imperceptible yet not ignorable.

The relationship between Stefan and Sarah has nothing to do with her: at the moment, she remains an outsider to the family and its tenuous dynamics. Still, Aga too knows something of the reverse alchemy of loss, the transformation of presence into absence. How do we interpret what happens to us, and then go on to act in certain ways based on those understandings? she wonders. She remembers herself, after Ted left: those long years in which she compressed everything around her, emotions and thoughts and living space, as if life's full three dimensions were simply too much. She thinks of Stefan, existing in a netherworld between brief moments of acknowledgement of the present. She looks at Sarah: skin and bones. "How awful," she thinks, and it must be aloud, because a woman sitting nearby looks over from her lawn chair, sees the title of the book in Aga's hands, and smiles.

Later, Aga tries to restore the bike in the shed to working order. The small building (quickly put together years ago by Stefan: some grey aluminum siding nailed over a wooden frame) is dark and damp, with the musty smell of a place closed during the winter months, and crammed tight with objects: cracked and chipped terra cotta flowerpots, various garden tools (a rake, a hoe, a shovel and spade), a rusted barbeque, a saw missing some of its teeth, two hammers, nails in a tin can, and a pair of

pink rubber boots in a smallish size: either Sophie's or Sarah's. Aga is not given to imagining presences, yet it is here, and not in the house where Sophie's touch rests on every carefully selected and positioned object, that she feels the other woman. Why? Aga pulls the bike out of a corner, finds a can of oil and a dirty old rag among the scattered items in the shed, crouches down, and sets to work oiling the chain. Stefan never mentions Sophie. It has been nine months since she died; the aftermath of numbness, Aga thinks, should be receding by now. Stefan and Sarah barely speak, so they cannot be confiding in each other, which would be understandable, rather than Aga. The family does not talk about Sophie directly; occasionally, either Stefan or Sarah offers an indirect and general reference to her—"We used to make muffins in the mornings, remember?"—as if the woman had been swallowed whole by the collective pronoun. Or, Aga thinks, banished from the house, like the objects, no longer wanted or functional, in this shed.

And she is having no success with the bike: no matter how much oil Aga applies, the jammed chain refuses to budge, its motionlessness a reminder of someone else's arrested movement: Sophie's?

Aga sits back on the cement floor. "Well, nothing lasts," she thinks automatically, and the thought encompasses Stefan and Sarah's grief as well as Sophie and the bike. Then she shakes her head no, rejecting the thought. A cracked flowerpot, maybe, but not in relation to a person. Aga feels alone with her thoughts in Sophie's shed, though she's been alone

with them since the beginning of the summer—for a long time, really, maybe forever—but still, they're potent things, and Aga tries to put together some notion of what it is that she can do.

That evening, they eat fresh summer corn, which Sarah nibbles at randomly, leaving undecipherable hieroglyphs on her cob. The meal is silent; the heat seems to have sucked the energy out of them all.

Aga collects the dinner plates and says, "How about some ice cream? It's a little cooler out: we could take a walk into town." She is craving something sweet.

"No," Sarah says flatly. Of course she won't come; she won't eat corn, never mind ice cream.

Stefan shrugs.

"Well," Aga says. "I'm going."

Stefan surprises her by quickly saying, "I'll join you." Sarah turns on her heels and leaves the kitchen. Stefan doesn't appear to register his daughter's movement; he stares out the window at the thin shadows cast onto the grass by the pines and oaks that encircle the lawn. Aga can see the shadows moving slightly back and forth, reminding her of the trance-like swaying of those either deep in thought or out of their minds.

The town is a fifteen-minute walk away along an uneven asphalt road. Stefan holds Aga's hand loosely; she can barely feel his soft palms, though her fingers are caught in the cage of his. The slanted rays of dusk,

filtered through the growth, create thick diagonal shadows on the road. A few white clapboard and aluminum-sided cottages front the road, but mostly it is a jumble of pine and birch trees and shaggy, wild cedar bushes that they pass as they walk in silence, but it's not the companionable silence of anything shared: perspective, history, or even the present. Rather, Aga thinks, it's the looming silence of things left unsaid. Beside her, Stefan seems as light and insubstantial as a balloon; if she let go of his hand he might float up into the darkening sky.

Somewhere in the distance is the reluctant whine of an old lawnmower, and from deep in the bushes come a variety of bird songs, each growing more energetic as evening brings coolness.

The countryside they pass through becomes a town quite suddenly, like something the road picks up for several hundred feet before abruptly dropping and disappearing again into the bush. The town itself has a hundred or so full-time residents, and on its three-hundred-foot main strip are an old grocery store with its original, creaky wooden floors, a tiny post office, a stone-walled bank, and a liquor store, plus a few restaurants and antique stores (offering aluminum washtubs and hand-carved, wooden roosters) that cater to the summer cottage residents in the area. The ice cream shop falls into the latter category: it's a small, white-washed wooden structure, open only during the warm months, on top of which sits a jolly-looking cow that, through the magic of neon, appears to dance as it genially offers customers the tasty goods of its very large udders. Once in

the shop, however, cottagers are subtly forced to concede to country ways: a limited number of flavours is available, with cherry the most exotic.

Stefan orders two cones: vanilla for himself, and a chocolate one for Aga.

"It's too bad Sarah wouldn't come," Aga says as they wait.

"Well," Stefan says, "teenagers." He looks toward the young girl behind the counter, who scoops their ice cream out of cartons while simultaneously flirting with her co-worker, a blond boy with a long, thin goatee, like a tassel.

"Have you seen Sarah lately?" Aga says, accepting the cone Stefan hands her.

Stefan gives her a look that says, Of course I've seen her: I saw her a half hour ago, at dinner.

They step outside and onto the small deck where, even in the cooler evening air, the cones begin to drip onto the wooden floor.

"She's very thin."

Stefan moves his shoulders in what might be a shrug. "Teenage girls," he says with a sigh, as if he's resigned to the existence of some doubly foreign, and therefore incomprehensible, entity.

Aga shakes her head and says, carefully, "She's getting *too* thin now, Stefan. Have you seen her arms? Sophie's rolling pin is thicker than they are."

But Stefan, eyes focused rigidly on the dancing cow above them, only says, "They diet, don't they?"

In real estate, an impasse is death, or, at least the death of a deal, in which no one wins: not the prospective buyer, who wants the property, nor the seller, who wishes to unload it, and certainly not Aga, with her commission envelope open and waiting. Yet here was a situation in which loss and gain were immeasurably more nuanced for all involved. Stefan's lack of reaction to the mention of Sophie (not even a quiver crossed his face) and his attitude regarding Sarah were either willful or unintentional, a matter of denial or an unfortunate byproduct of the situation. Aga wants to believe that what she is seeing in him is merely the palimpsest of grief. The thought occurs to her that it may not matter whether Stefan's actions are willful or unintentional: the consequence, for Sarah, has been the same. She wants to help Sarah, just as she wants to help Stefan. Yet in helping, she risks bringing forth an old-new Stefan who doesn't require her presence. At the same time, being with Stefan, standing so close to him, is still dangerous: one gesture on his part, one hand around the waist, and she might fall back into the dusk of languor, of silence and inaction.

Stefan finishes his ice cream. When he glances at Aga, she sees understanding registering on his face: he seems suddenly to comprehend that she is waiting for something more from him.

"I'm a mechanical engineer. I don't know how to fix any of this." When he says "this" he spreads his arms wide, as if to indicate the whole of nature itself.

Aga feels the first tapping of annoyance within, as if an entity long trapped in darkness were attempting to find its way out. "Try," she says, in a voice she does not recognize.

The next morning, Aga is at the kitchen table finishing her second cup of tea when it is Sarah, and not Stefan, who first comes into the kitchen.

"Can't sleep," Sarah says. She doesn't sit, but stands at the window looking out over the yard. She looks as restless as Aga feels. Aga lay awake much of the night trying to marshal her thoughts, which seemed to her as wildly disorganized as the cottage's flower garden had been at the beginning of the summer, so that she couldn't tell the clematis and hollyhocks from the weeds. When Stefan turned toward her in bed after switching off the lights, her body had responded to his gesture as if on cue. But this betrayed her discomfort, which was given shape and texture by her dissatisfaction with the words he had spoken in town. As an oblong of moonlight, filtered by the bedroom window, made slow progress across the room, Aga tried to come to some sort of understanding of how she feels about Stefan and Sarah. It does matter whether he sees Sarah or not, she had thought. Perhaps she was overreacting to both Stefan and Sarah's

situations: she hadn't lost a mate in the way Stefan had, and she wasn't the girl's mother, did not have the understanding of another that only comes with time. But, she thought, surely there are others—grandparents, aunts, uncles, and family friends—who can see Sarah's appalling thinness, though so far no one has stepped forward. The more she thought about it, the less certain she was of what the real problem might be. Sarah's thinness and Stefan's numbness, their avoidance of the topic of Sophie: all of these struck her as being too easily understood as symptoms of an occurrence—Sophie's death—that didn't fully explain them. Once, Aga knew, she would have been able to look away—even to walk breezily away—from the situation. The apathy and withdrawal in which she had wrapped herself for so long had been surprisingly luscious and smooth, like satin; but also like satin, quite cold. Now something in Sarah's bony face and Stefan's blank gaze had claimed her, whether she wanted to be or not, and she sensed herself propelled onward by a conviction that to do nothing would be intolerable. As dawn broke outside the bedroom window—the blackness slowly evaporating from the air—Aga was still trying to think of what it was that she faced, and what she might do.

"I was going to look for blackberries," Aga now says to Sarah. A dense cluster of blackberry bushes grows alongside the lake, just past the beach. Aga has been eyeing the bushes for several days now, watching the dark berries expand and ripen, imagining a juicy blackberry pie. "Want to

come?" She might as well offer; the girl isn't going to eat breakfast anyway.

From the table Aga sees Sarah shrug; the fabric of her pajamas twitches in the area of her shoulders. "Why not?"

Once Sarah has changed into her shorts and T-shirt they head out along the road, the only sounds the crunch of their sandals on the gravel and the call of a lone whippoorwill. What sunlight is able to make it through the mass of pines and onto the road feels hot in their skin. The beach is deserted except for one swimmer, an older man—Aga can see a flash of silver hair above the waterline as he reaches forward one arm, then the other, and then the first again, in an even tempo, like the beating of a metronome.

They cross the sandy area and stop in front of the blackberry bushes. Some of the branches are already starting to droop with the weight of the berries they carry.

"I can't believe no one has picked these already," Aga says.

"Not too many people bake their own pies anymore," Sarah says, mimicking Aga's crouch and plucking berries from the branches. There is a small basket on the ground between them.

"That's true." Aga waits for the second half of Sarah's thought, for the criticism of Aga and, more specifically, of her relation to Stefan ("Not too many other people suck up like you do") but no further comment

follows. Sarah has offered an observation, its neutrality not quite a peace offering, but, as the absence of aggression, different from the usual.

Soon they've filled half the basket. Sarah, who like Aga has been sitting on her haunches, moves to adjust her position and kneel on the damp ground. As soon as her knees touch the earth she springs up, saying, "Gross."

Something brown is partly smeared to a slimy pulp on the ground. An ant marches across it.

"A mushroom," Aga says. Of course, the same damp environment on the water's edge which fed the blackberry bushes would be good for mushrooms, too.

"Look around," she says to Sarah. "There should be more somewhere."

Together they check the crevices of logs weathered to the colour of bone, around the crumbling stump of an old fir tree, and under mouldy, grayish-brown leaves that have been dropped by a nearby oak in previous autumns and arranged by the wind into a surprisingly neat pile. But the mushroom that Sarah knelt on, growing in the shade a blackberry bush, seems to be the only one nearby.

Aga holds the mushroom, which despite the damage inflicted by Sarah still resembles a tiny, opened umbrella, between her fingers. "Colour, markings, and smell," she muses. She can hear voices—her mother's, aunts', and neighbours' voices—offering guidelines for

identifying mushrooms. Aga remembers a cluster of brown and grey heads drawn together over a new find, the pointing out of and disputing over features, and mostly the triumph in their voices when a judgement was rendered, as though in the midst of the often strange and overwhelming aspects of the country to which they had immigrated decades before here was one thing about which they could be certain. These were the same voices which had both cautioned and promised that nothing lasts.

"Are you trying to teach me some big lesson?" Sarah says, brushing a mosquito away from her ear. "Because if you are, I really don't need it."

"I'm just making conversation." Aga glances again at the mushroom in her hand. "Maybe one day you'll want to know."

"I don't think so," Sarah says, with the familiar hard-edged tone returning to her words. "Especially not from someone like you."

Aga leans back on her heels and looks at the girl. "I'm not trying to replace your mother, you know."

"That has nothing to do with it!" Annoyance permeates Sarah's words, as if Aga has missed some big, and quite evident, fact. "They call you 'Miss Miser.'" This in a different voice, one uncertain as to whether she is telling Aga something new.

"They?"

Sarah shrugs and looks away. "People. You know."

Aga does know. She's familiar with the chorus in the wings, tossing out comments. After Ted left it was said by some—the same people who

smiled sympathetically at her on the church steps, or confidentially consulted with her at the real estate office—that it was hubris for her, Aga, to have believed that the relationship would last. Nothing lasts, and nothing lasts because what rises must fall. Some of these same voices, she knew, were right now saying that Stefan and Sophie were too happy, that it couldn't have lasted.

Where did this reasoning come from? Aga glances again at the mushroom in her hand. It was, she thinks, as though the people saying such things—people who had come from, or whose forebears had left, farms, forests, or villages—had, for whatever reasons, put all of their trust in the rules they knew for reading the natural world. She thinks of the voices as they offer pronouncements and judgments, and hears in them not glee in the misfortunes of others so much as relief in the re-establishment of the natural order of things.

And for a long time, Aga realizes, she too thought like this. After Ted left she'd retreated into her coffin of artificial penury, believing that it was her due. That way of thinking had surrounded her almost invisibly, like smog, and adopting it had been easier. Easier, she now realizes, than accepting the simpler (but more hurtful) explanation that Ted merely preferred the company of the American woman. What she had wanted, more than anything, was to be left alone, for the voices—the commentators', Ted's, and the self-berating voice in her own mind—to stop.

Aga glances at Sarah with her shorn hair, the hair of a penitent or convict—punishment somehow referenced in every roughly chopped-off lock. Someone, Aga thinks, needs to tell Sarah that that the reason for Sophie's death doesn't lie in any precisely discerned cause, like too much previous happiness; that Sophie's illness was not something that was their due, to restore balance the world. The words should come from Stefan, but if he can't, or won't, say them, Aga will have to do so herself. "Not from someone like you," Sarah had said. But Aga thinks that it's precisely someone like herself who needs to state the obvious, someone who knows how insidiously the clichés work and how easy it is to allow them to disorient you.

"Come," she says, tossing away the mushroom and taking hold of Sarah above the elbow.

"Where are we going?" Sarah writhes a little under Aga's grasp, but does not really protest. Despite Aga's roughness, there is more curiosity than alarm in Sarah's eyes, as if she senses something different in Aga and is intrigued by what it is Aga intends to do.

"You'll see," Aga says. It feels to her now that things have been leading up to this moment inevitably and with a quiet necessity, even though just a few hours before she lay in bed wondering what it was that she needed to do.

She will prepare the pie for lunch. It seems to Aga simple-minded, as well as simple, her idea that the pie can be used to break open the

small box of a situation in which they all find themselves. She'll emerge from the kitchen—the searing heat from the opened oven mingling with the already soggy heat of the day—bearing the golden pie, through which they will all be cleansed of wrong notions, and purified, set aright. The pie will give Stefan a chance to see how much—how little—the girl eats. Aga's error in the past has been that she's made reference to Sarah's appetite away from the table, but over lunch she will draw Stefan's attention to it. The pie will serve as indisputable evidence, and then Stefan will respond. It will serve as a beginning.

Back at the cottage Aga washes the blackberries under icy water, carefully checking for insects hiding within the crevices of the bulbous fruit, while Sarah hovers at the edge of the kitchen.

"Want to help me?" Aga looks up at the wall clock. They have plenty of time.

"No," Sarah says, but does not move away.

Aga spreads the blackberries out on a piece of paper towel to dry and pulls out of the fridge a disk of pie dough she made last weekend. She turns on the oven, and after a moment opens the oven door to make sure that the element—which is temperamental, and sometimes needs to be jiggled a little—is working. The opened oven gives off a dry heat, which adds to the already uncomfortable warmth of the kitchen. Satisfied that the oven is working, Aga takes a tin pie plate out of a cupboard, pulls the

wooden rolling pin out of a drawer, and sprinkles some flour on the countertop.

"Come and help me out, while I mix the filling," she says to Sarah, holding out the rolling pin. "Start at the middle and roll out toward the edges. Try to make the dough a little larger than the pie plate."

Sarah rolls her eyes, but takes the implement from Aga.

In a bowl, Aga combines the blackberries with sugar, lemon juice, and a small amount of flour: she like her pies simple, and her blackberry pies a little sour. When Sarah is done with the crust they drape the thin sheet of dough over the pie plate, crimping the edges of the dough against the tin.

Aga glances at Sarah, who's been wary but unusually compliant—and quiet—during the process.

"Have you ever made a pie before?"

Sarah shakes her head. Aga considers everything that lies in front of the girl—not only unanticipated joys stumbled across in out-of-the-way places (whose occurrence, if not content, could be predicted), but also the wayward disappointments and meandering losses that afflict when and where least expected—everything involved in the breaking-in of the human side of the animal, a process which Sophie's death has already given Sarah a start on.

At the end of the corridor leading off from the kitchen, the door to Stefan's study opens. They hear the slapping sound of his bare feet

against the wood floor, and then Stefan—his forehead covered in sweat—appears at the kitchen door.

"Today is even more humid than yesterday was," he says amiably. The chapter he is working on must be going well, Aga thinks. Stefan holds an empty glass in his hand, and moves over to the kitchen sink in order to fill it up.

Sarah indicates the piecrust. "Look at what we're making." In her voice is a tone Aga hasn't heard before—a girlish delight mingled with desire for approval.

Stefan glances at the pie on the counter. "You don't think it's too hot to bake?"

"Well, it's hot," Sarah says, "but – "

Stefan looks at the bowl of filling, which is the livid colour of a fresh bruise, and shrugs. "I'd say, 'Why bother?' It's only going to be gone by the end of the day."

Nic nietrwa, Aga thinks. Here it was again, that apparently ever-present thought.

"Fine," Sarah says flatly. "We can do that. Not bother." She puts down the wooden spoon she had picked up to add the filling to the crust, and walks out of the kitchen.

"It's never how you think it's going to be, is it?"

Aga isn't aware that she's spoken the words aloud until Stefan asks, "What are you talking about?"

She tells him about her realizations down by the lake, about herself after Ted left, and about Stefan and Sarah in the aftermath of Sophie's death. Of how she thought—and Aga grimaces now, at her idea—that the pie could somehow be useful in getting reactions from him and Sarah.

"'For every action, there is an equal but opposite reaction,'" Stefan quotes from memory. "Newton's third law of physics. That's what it feels like with Sarah," he appends. "That's not what it is, but that's how it often feels." He turns away from Aga, so that she sees only his back, expressive in its rigidity. "First Sophie, and now Sarah and her thinness," he says in a quiet voice.

It sounds like an unfinished thought, but it isn't. Or, Aga corrects herself, perhaps she is choosing to believe that it isn't, that this is what it comes down to: the realization that one carefully-placed decision can shift an entire situation, just as much as a properly placed tap against the tiny chip at the edge of a plate can sever the piece. In the back Stefan has turned to her Aga sees both the person who, years ago, sat with Sophie across the desk from her, and the one for whom Newton's laws of physics, or any principles at all, have become useless—random and meaningless blotches on paper. Perhaps it wasn't so absurd after all, the pie. Perhaps it was as absurd as Aga finding herself here at all, claimed by these people in a way that she could never have anticipated.

"I don't know why all of this is happening," Stefan says.

Aga would like to offer advice, something sage and comforting and possibly enlightening. She puts a hand against Stefan's warm back and feels its shaky tautness, and the words seem to come from elsewhere, as though she were channeling them against her will; they are the only words, satisfying despite the stark splendor of their inadequacy to the situation, that she can offer at the moment. "I know," she says.