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**LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ  
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CASUALTIES

Sandy Wing

A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
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## ABSTRACT

### Casualties

Sandy Wing

The four stories in this collection are set in and around the mythical eastern townships community of Laurel. Each story depicts a character in a state of confinement or existing within a rigidly controlled environment. Living close to the land, these characters frequently look to the natural processes in the world about them in order to gain insight into their own unnatural situations. The stories are concerned with the characters' struggles to escape such oppressive circumstances---a woman strives to overcome the strictures imposed by her social position, a man searches for a way to free himself from a life governed by tedium and disease, a child battles to break the stranglehold of a tyrannical parent. Often, escape necessitates violent measures, and the attempts at freedom, whether successful or not, frequently produce casualties.

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### Casualties

The bird flopped at her feet, beating dust onto her shoes. The iron trap had bitten the bird almost completely in two but somehow its front end was still alive. Wings flapping, beak sawing noiselessly open and shut. Melanie knew what she was supposed to do. Lindon would do it without thinking. In fact, he came down to the garden every hour or so to make sure none of the crows were suffering, to make sure they were all dead. And when he found a bird like this one he'd lift his foot and let his steel-toed boot come crashing down on its head. Put it out of its misery. Well, she'd be damned if she'd do anything so barbaric. Damned if she'd walk around all day with crow guts on the bottom of her shoe. She'd have to soak her feet for hours before she felt the filth of it, the stink of it, was gone.

She moved to the other end of the garden, skirting the rest of the traps. Eight of them altogether between the rows of corn. All of these birds dead, thank God. Lindon had told her that if they wanted any corn this year---and they needed

it because the poorer quality stuff went for cow fodder---he'd have to use the traps. He'd tried scarecrows, aluminum pie plates bobbing and flashing in the wind, even sending the kids down in shifts to yell and stomp whenever a crow landed. The birds couldn't have cared less. So he raised a fence around the corn patch to keep out dogs and cats and kids and hauled the traps out of the barn. Big clinking iron affairs looking like shark jaws. Meant for badger or fox, not crows. He dragged the traps down onto the lawn next to the house, spread out a tarp and painted them. A brilliant, almost luminous red so that if anybody did stumble into the garden they couldn't miss them. Melanie watched from the kitchen window but after awhile she had to turn away, appalled by Lindon's calm face, his whistling as he sloshed the paint over the traps. He could have been painting the picnic table, whitewashing the fence for all the difference it made to him.

She picked corn, stuffing it into the pillowcase she'd brought. Lately she found that she was still doing things for five people instead of only four. Picking too many tomatoes, making too large portions at meal-time. Still doing things for herself and Lindon, for Joey and Shelley, and for the hired boy Calvin. Even though Calvin had been gone for a month now. Back at his mother's sitting all day in a rocker on the front porch, his head bandaged and lolling. The stump of his left leg jutting out over the edge of the chair seat. A vegetable now after the accident.

And maybe she was going to have to start doing things for

five all over again. No, there was no maybe about it. She recognized the symptoms---the headaches and backaches, the cramps and nausea. But five would be reduced simply enough to two, to just her and the baby, when she left Lindon.

When she left Lindon. The words came easily to her, naturally. She'd been saying them for years now, waiting, waiting for just the right moment, the right reason. She'd almost left the day of the accident. No one could expect her to put up with this anymore, living in this torture chamber, this slaughterhouse. But people had said after the accident that Lindon wasn't entirely to blame, wasn't really to blame at all. Calvin had been careless for an instant and it had cost him a normal life. Nothing Lindon could have done about it. Certainly forgivable. But it was a beginning. A point of reference. All she needed now was some final push.

A crow landed on the fence beside her, close enough that if it had wanted to it could have leaned down and pecked her on the top of the head. Or if she'd been fast enough she could have reached up and grabbed it around the neck. It watched her, tipping its head and focusing one black, non-reflecting eye on her. Then it flew down into the garden and sauntered between the traps, inspecting the corn scattered around them. It stopped beside the trapped crow, cocking its head, beady eyes watching its fitful flopping. Then it reached down and gave the other bird a vicious peck on the neck. Melanie flinched, looked away. Saw a flurry of black out of the corner of her eye as the crow flew up and lit on a stalk of

corn. Lindon said crows were probably the worst kind of birds around here. Real scavengers. Opportunists.

The accident. It always came to her early in the day after Lindon had gone to the barn and the kids had left for the neighbours. Like now. Flashes of it creeping into her head. A blaze of light---the sun had been white hot that afternoon---a square of brilliant blue sky. That would be what she'd seen out the kitchen window. She was standing at the sink washing tomatoes. Tomatoes so ripe they were almost rotten. She had to handle them carefully while she rinsed them under the tap, dried them. She thought then (or had she only added this later?) that they were like breasts. Smooth and tight on the surface but with a warmth, a ripeness just underneath. And then that terrible noise. The groan and screech of the hay bailer. Then the scream. The tomato had split open when she dropped it into the sink.

Lindon raced into the house then, his face ashen, sweat pouring down his cheeks. He dialed the hospital number and waited but when he opened his mouth no noise came out. He coughed, almost whispered into the receiver. Then he was gone again, not seeming to hear her cries of "What happened? What's wrong?"

The ambulance careened into the driveway, its siren suddenly choked off, followed by a procession of neighbours in cars, on bicycles, on foot. Vultures, she'd thought, they won't be happy unless Calvin's dead. They moved in a stream behind Dr. Hill and the stretcher bearers, out to the west

field. She sat waiting a long time, wondering why she seemed to feel nothing. As if some connection inside her head had been abruptly snapped off.

They brought Calvin down wrapped in a tattered grey blanket. It was sodden with blood in several places, big black patches of it. His head was bandaged out to two times its normal size. She learned later, even though Lindon had warned everybody not to leak any details to his wife, who couldn't handle this sort of thing, that part of Calvin's skull had been ripped off, leaving the coiled grey mass of his brain exposed. Some people said the sight of it made them feel pretty damn sick. Lindon stumbled along behind the stretcher, something in a thick plastic bag held tight to his chest. She learned (also later) that this was Calvin's severed leg. Lindon shook his head from side to side and she saw that his face was still slick with sweat. No, tears. She was sure then, seeing Lindon crying, that she loved Calvin. Looking at Calvin's bloodless face below the bandages, convinced that he was dead, she thought that she had probably been in love with him for quite a long time.

She'd done it again. Picked too much corn. Not only picked for five but for about twice that many. She pulled a few ears out of the pillowcase and tossed them over the fence. Maybe the crows would eat these instead of the corn that wasn't even ripe yet. She made her way back through the traps. They frightened her; she kept imagining her own foot caught in one of them, severed at the ankle. The bird at the end had stop-

ped flopping, its beak gaping open.

She locked the gate to the garden behind her and walked up the narrow dirt path towards the barn, letting the pillowcase bang against her leg. She went in through the side door to the barn, walking along the plank laid there. Squish of shit and urine with every step she took, residue from the manure pile only a few feet away. Lindon always smelled like this, like a manure pile. Even after he'd soaked in a tub for an hour and put on fresh clothes he still smelled of cow shit and hay. Or maybe it was the house that smelled that way or just the air. Very possibly it was just the air. But somehow she figured the smell had gotten into Lindon's blood, into his sweat glands.

It was dark inside the barn, the windows so covered with dust and cobwebs that next to no sun came through. The bare bulbs between the two rows of stanchions were on, shedding a gloomy half-light onto the cows that were in for milking. The steady chugging, sucking sound of the milking machine filled the barn. Lindon was down at the far end of the barn, hunched over beside a cow, milking her by hand.

"Why isn't she on the machine?"

Lindon turned and smiled at her. Didn't even jump. Somehow he always seemed to sense when she was going to show up.

"She's got a sore tit here." He poked at the cow's udder, sending a red swollen teat swaying. "The machine hurts her too much."

She stood watching Lindon's hands for a while, his grip

lightening every time the cow mooed, turned her head. Big liquid eyes somehow registering pain. When he was finished he swivelled on the stool and faced Melanie, using the cow's broad belly as a backrest.

"Got a problem, Missy?"

"Yes." She said it seriously, her face more drawn, more sour-mouthed than it had to be. Lindon leaned forward, touched her arm.

"What is it, Mel?"

"I'm going into town tomorrow morning to see Dr. Hill. I thought you might like to know."

"What's wrong?" Lindon still leaning so close. She fought back the urge to reach out and shove him away.

"I have stomachaches all the time and I want to find out what's wrong. Maybe it's ulcers." She heard a touch of pride in her voice.

"You can't have ulcers, Melanie. Not at your age. Why don't you go see that Dr. Williams in Montreal?"

She felt her heart race. "He's a gynecologist. I don't need anything like that." Maybe Lindon had seen her slip the specimen into her purse. Maybe he'd connected it with her trip into town to do "groceries." His knowing, even suspecting, would ruin everything. The element of surprise would be gone.

Lindon reached down, picked up the bucket of milk at his feet. "Do you want me to come with you? I could drive you in."

"No." She turned away, angry. She wished Lindon would have made more of a protest. Asked her who'd get the kids up

and going in the morning, who'd make the breakfast, feed the chickens. Tell her the pain was all in her head. She'd have enjoyed going into town more then.

Lindon called after her. "Will you be back by lunchtime?"

Here it came. "Yes."

"Good. The new boy's coming over tomorrow afternoon.

I'd like you to meet him."

She took a few steps back toward Lindon, letting the sack drag along the floor. "Boy?"

"Yeah, well I guess so. He's twenty or around there."

"Does he know what he's in for, Lindon?"

He stood up then, slowly, as if even the air was heavy on his shoulders. The milk sloshed in the bucket.

"What are you talking about?"

"I mean, does this new boy know that this isn't exactly the safest farm to work on?"

She watched Lindon's face go hard, felt a surge of pleasure as a flush spread up from his neck, darkened his cheeks. His knuckles turned white where he gripped the handle of the milk pail. He took a step toward her and though she kept her feet rooted to the floor she felt herself leaning forward, holding herself only an arm's length away, a fist away. She felt a rush of relief, disappointment, when he picked up the milk stool and pushed past her.

At breakfast the next morning she drank only a glass of juice. She'd been sick during the night, woken up all dry-



mouthered and trembly from a dream, run for the bathroom. The whole thing had been clear as a photograph, not hazed-over like a dream at all. She even remembered the colours. The fleshy pink of the butcher's paper the package was wrapped in. The package Lindon brought to her. It had been tied with string and there'd been a price marked on it. How much she couldn't remember now. She opened it and Calvin's leg sat there in the middle of the paper, somehow miniaturized, shrunk to the size of a ham, a leg of lamb maybe. Still wearing the red-toed rubber boot, the faded blue jeans. Dried brown blood at the knee. She stood the dream until then, half-awake and marvelling that she could imagine anything so ridiculous. But then she saw herself turn to Lindon, the package in her arms. She'd smiled and thanked him. My God she had thanked him.

Lindon sat across the table from her now, sipping tea while he read from some farm journal put out by the co-op. Joey and Shelley sat at the other end of the table, going along with the silence. Joey had dripped strawberry jam all over the oilcloth.

Lindon laid down the paper, "Interesting article in here on bloat, Joey. I'll leave it for you to read later."

Melanie shifted in her chair, cleared her throat. Saw herself mirrored as Shelley made a face, placed her piece of toast ceremoniously on her plate.

"They've got some kind of serum that the calves take orally, on a tongue depressor I guess, that brings down the

swelling. It says here," he picked up the journal again, "that it 'dissipates the water buildup and in two years the use of syringes, with their high risk of infection, will be obsolete.'"

Joey nodded. "It's hard getting those syringes in some-times, too. Calf hide is pretty tough."

Melanie put down her glass, glared across at Lindon. "You let Joey do that? Stick needles in cows?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"Because it's a terrible procedure, that's why not. You can hear the calves screaming all the way down here when you do it."

"Use your head, Melanie. You're going to hear them screaming all the way down here if we don't do it. Screaming till they bust open or drown in their own water."

"Yeah, Ma, you should see." Joey leaned across the table. "They swell up like balloons and then---"

"I've seen it before, Joey, thank you." She kept staring at Lindon. "I don't see why Joey has to do that sort of thing."

"He has to learn sometime."

"Why? Who says he's going to be a farmer?" She spit the last word out.

"No one. But while he's living on a farm it's a good thing to know." He let his eyes move away from hers. "Besides, we're shorthanded right now."

She got up, rinsed her glass out at the sink. Lindon. He would probably strap Joey in a harness and hitch him to the

plow if the tractor broke down. She picked her purse up off the counter. "I'm going now."

Thank God she had her car. A gift from Lindon for their fifteenth wedding anniversary last year. She pulled out onto the highway and passed into the glen. There were no houses here, only tree-covered mountains looming up on both sides of the road and the river winding along to the right, widening into a pond every once in a while. Some of the trees, the sumacs and silt maple, the early trees, were already changing colour. This was what she loved about the country. The beauty of it. If she didn't look at the gaps in the trees where house foundations would be laid soon, the glen looked like it had when she and Lindon used to go walking after school. The quiet of it then. No whining chain saws, no people shouting. Only the sound of the river, the birds. The crackling of leaves underneath them as they made love. Their laughing as they picked bits of moss, pieces of leaf out of each other's hair, off each other's clothes. Shelley had probably been conceived out here in the glen. Well, there was no maybe about it. She had been. It had been too beautiful, too romantic out here and Lindon had been too gentle. Maybe if she'd grown up in the city with only movie houses and parked cars to find refuge in, she would never have had to get married.

The road took a sharp twist just before it entered Laurel and if you didn't keep the wheel turned just right, you'd end up sitting in front of Jerry Petrie's gas pumps.

Jerry said he got half his business that way---by accident, ha, ha, ha. After the service station came the school, the library, the grocery store. Then the neat little clapboard houses. All of them nearly identical but trying hard not to be. A walkway lined with blue painted stones. A brilliant pink flamingo sprouting up between someone's tiger lilies. But all the houses still the same except maybe one. Calvin's. She stared straight ahead as she passed it but still she saw the front porch, the rocking chair out of the corner of her eye. Empty. She would have to ask Dr. Hill what that meant.

Calvin. Arm muscles twitching as he pulled the rabbit, Joey's rabbit, out of its hutch. The animal quiet in his hands, not struggling, kicking the way it usually did. Big back feet spotted with red. Calvin had looked at her then. Frowned, shook his head.

"Its feet got caught in the wire on the bottom of the cage."

"Will it be alright?"

"Oh yeah. I'll just put a board down so it don't happen again."

He handed her the rabbit then as if it were made of china. Startled her with his gentleness.

Calvin. Following her down into the back pasture. She was sure he'd followed her. It couldn't have been just an accident. He'd crouched beside her in the bramble as she dropped raspberries into a grey tin pot. His hands resting on his knees, then darting out to pick a berry, toss it in with

the others. Fingers stained red. Black hair on the backs of his hands. She'd wanted to touch them, stroke them. Had she?

Calvin, shirt off, skin slick with sweat as he dug the marigold bed below the kitchen window. Grunting with each shovelful. A good head taller than Linden, so much broader in the chest. No fat at the waist for her to pinch between her fingers. She tapped him on the shoulder, felt a tingling go up her arm. Handed him the glass of water, ice tinkling. Their fingers touched longer than necessary. She was sure of that. Calvin kissing her thank you the way he'd kiss his mother. On the cheek. Or maybe the mouth. Taste of salt. Smell of sweat.

And the weekend Linden went away to an auction she'd prayed Calvin would come into her bedroom. And like a dream he had. Just a sound in the darkness and then the weight of him on the bed. So dark she could hardly tell if her eyes were open or not. Just the same she had seen every inch of his body, felt it with her hands. Felt the colour of his skin, his hair, with her fingers. Felt the sharpness of bone, the tensing of muscle. Heat of blood. A throbbing that seemed to fill both of them. For a moment not thinking at all, losing track altogether. Layer after layer of blackness peeled back.

No, it was all too clear, too vivid to be imagined.

Dr. Hill's office was in one of the little clapboard houses. The one with the gilt-edged swinging sign planted on the front lawn. Dr. Joseph S. Hill, M.D. M.D. for the past

forty years as near as she could figure it. He probably hadn't been to a conference or a seminar or read a medical journal in forty years either. But people in Laurel wouldn't go to anyone else. Dr. Hill, they said, knew them all so well, knew their family history so well, that all he ever had to do was look at them and he knew exactly what was wrong, what to prescribe. No need for any messy, embarrassing examinations.

She was glad to see that there were no other cars parked in front of the doctor's house. She would have the waiting room to herself. She got out of the car and walked along the path to the side entrance. Down a few steps to the basement door. Ring the bell first then go right in.

It was always clammy down here and smelled of must and Mrs. Hill's laundry soap. It was always dark, too, half-light even with all the lamps turned on. She sat down on one of the vinyl sofas. She swore this must be the same furniture that Dr. Hill had had fifteen years ago. The same stuff she'd stuck to when she came in sweaty and terrified, pregnant with Shelley. Dr. Hill had ushered her into his office then and he did know, just by looking, what was wrong with her. Patted her on the knee, told her not to worry because she was one of the lucky ones. She had a good reliable boyfriend who wouldn't hesitate to do the right thing. Then he handed her a booklet on diet for the expectant mother and wished her good luck.

She'd been grateful to him then for taking control of things but she hadn't come back when she was pregnant with Joey. She'd branded him an incompetent by then, had seen too

many people with chronic bronchitis die of lung cancer, too many people eat their way to a heart attack because Dr. Hill couldn't embarrass them with their obesity. And so on. People would be better off with the local veterinarian, who at least had some guts, some professional integrity. But Dr. Hill would do for what she needed. Even he could do a simple pregnancy test, refer her to a specialist in the city.

She dug her book out of her purse, read a few pages then closed it. She hadn't been able to get through a book in almost a month. Couldn't seem to concentrate. She'd have to get back to the library, take out her three books a week and read them all the way through or she'd end up like everyone else out here. With the intelligence of a scarecrow and half the personality.

She studied the pictures on the waiting room wall. A Norman Rockwell print, the one where the jolly-faced, bespectacled doctor (not unlike Dr. Hill actually) pressed a stethoscope to the chest of a little girl's doll. A calendar from Joe Petrie's Garage + Auto Parts turned to the month of February. A poster showing a stomach wearing boxing gloves and silk shorts, its inane grinning face spouting some garbage about "feed me right and I won't fight." And then the diagram that she guessed must come from Grey's Anatomy. Her kids particularly liked this one. Whenever an emergency forced her to bring them here they always wanted to look at the "skinless man." All the skin peeled away, replaced now by slightly yellowing layers of plastic. Lift all the sheets

up, calendar fashion and the body was filled with blood vessels, little spidery capillaries, a heart etched in blue and a ghastly purplish red. Used and unused blood. Drop a sheet and vital organs appeared. Stomach, lungs, liver, kidneys, pancreas, internal sex organs, intestines. Everything you could possibly need. Then came the muscles, tendons, ligaments, cartilage. Raw red meat. And finally bones, fitting neatly between all the other parts. All so static, as if only a good shove would get the machine started. And then there was no promise that the parts would co-ordinate, work in unison, no promise that something wouldn't break its moorings. A heart plummeting into the coil of the large intestine.

She marvelled at the diagram's incompleteness. The blood vessels, nerve lines, sheathes of muscles were all severed at the neck, a large black arrow with the words "To the Brain" replacing the head. The head must have been covered on another page, a whole section of the book that maybe Dr. Hill never got to.

Dr. Hill peered around the door of his office, motioned for her to come inside. They sat down facing each other, he behind his desk, fingers touching on his blotter.

"Well, I haven't seen you in a long time, Melanie."

"Not since the accident."

He lowered his eyes. "Yes."

"I drove by Calvin's this morning. He wasn't out on the front porch."

The doctor looked at her, blank-faced.



"What does that mean?"

"Well, I guess it means his mother just hasn't got him up yet. It's still pretty early you know."

"Then he's still alright?"

The doctor nodded. "My guess is he'll be alright for quite a few years yet. He's got a good sound body---except for that left leg of his. His brain's looking after that part of him pretty well. It's the thought processes, the reasoning that I'm worried about. He can't think for himself. Worse, he can't do for himself."

She hadn't expected this. Maybe he'd read the section on the brain after all. At least enough to sound ethical, convincing.

"Do you have the test results?"

"Yes." He flipped through some papers on his desk, pulled out a pink one. Glanced over it, then smiled up at her.

"Good news. The tests were negative."

"What?"

"You're not pregnant."

The doctor's face dropped. There must be more showing on her own face than she meant there to be. He coughed, stuck the pink sheet back into the pile of papers.

"I'm sorry, Melanie. You didn't seem too happy the other day when you came in for the test. I figured with Joey and Shelley practically grown up you wouldn't want to start all over again. I thought you'd be pleased."

"Well, I'm not." Or was she? She stood up and walked over to look out the narrow slit of the basement window. She'd counted on this. Counted on giving Lindon the news. Watching his face light up, then telling him she couldn't possibly have it, not here anyway. She couldn't be expected to bring up another child in such a monstrous environment. She'd have to move away, to the city maybe. She had to think of the child. Or something like that. She gripped her purse until her fingers hurt.

She turned to face the doctor again. "How can I not be pregnant? I have all the symptoms. The nausea, the tiredness---"

"Well, that's the other thing I wanted to talk to you about, Melanie. It looks like you might have a mild ulcer. Nothing to worry about. Nothing a good bland diet won't cure. A bland diet and maybe your trying to relax a bit."

She set her mouth in a hard, incredulous line.

"I know, Melanie, I know. You're under a lot of strain. Some things that happen are hard to stomach." He smiled. A sympathetic smile? Maybe sometimes all this got to be too much for him too.

"I think you should try talking to someone. A social worker maybe. Or I have a colleague in Montreal, a psychiatrist---" He paused and she watched as he studied her face. He must be waiting for some sign of outrage, some denial on her part. Well, he wouldn't get that sort of thing from her. She was surprised though. She figured he wouldn't recommend a psychiatrist to anyone short of a raving, foaming at the

mouth lunatic.

"I don't think you're crazy, Melanie. And I know, especially with haying going on, you've got better things to do with your time. But I really think a few visits with this fellow would help. This business with Calvin would make anyone sick."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I think a few sessions with a psychiatrist and this business with Calvin will be cleared right up. You'll be surprised how quickly things get back to normal."

Normal? There was no normal. Not here. Just clear things up. Clear it up the way she'd scoop up an offending heap of dog shit in the middle of her kitchen floor. Toss it out the door and forget about it. Out of sight, out of mind. But the stink of it still there. The stink of it everywhere.

"I think that's really where your trouble is Melanie. Upstairs." The doctor tapped his temple. "Too much thinking. Too much dwelling on things."

She stared at him, fought back the urge to fling her purse at him. Send it ricocheting off his bald skull, his bald empty skull.

"I can give you my friend's number if---"

"No thank you." She strode past him. Closed the office door behind her and leaned against it for a moment. She would need the drive home to think things through, figure something out.

She stood at the edge of the garden and watched Lindon sprinkle bug powder around the potato plants. He was almost finished so she waited. She could afford to wait now. At this stage a few minutes didn't matter.

Lindon sealed the can of bug killer and looked up. He walked over to where she leaned against the garden fence, stepping around a crow trap that gaped unsprung on the edge of the corn patch.

"So what'd the doctor say?"

"He said I'm pregnant."

And there it was. Just like she'd expected. All the tiredness suddenly gone from his face and replaced with something that looked like relief.

"When? When's it due?"

"Sometime in March."

He reached out to touch her, maybe to pull her to him, but she stepped away. Picked at some corn silk hanging on the fence. Watched Lindon out of the corner of her eye.

"I thought maybe we could call the baby Calvin."

She saw Lindon flinch.

"Considering Calvin's the baby's father."

She faced Lindon full then, watching as a quivering set through him. He stared at the ground between his feet, hands thrust into his pockets, shoulders trembling. His head slowly, slowly swaying from side to side.

"You can't..."

"Can't what?"

Lindon's mouth opened and closed, no noise coming out.

"Can't have it?" she asked.

"Yes. I mean no."

"Just snuff it out. That would be the right thing to do I guess, eh, Lindon?"

"Shut up." Said almost below his breath but perfectly clear, carrying its warning. A few more carefully aimed words and the brutal, the inexcusable would happen.

"Calvin and I did it every chance we got. Every time you weren't around---"

He came for her then. Rocked forward on his left leg and sent his arm arcing through the air. His hand hard against her face. She could almost feel the red print of his fingers emerging on her cheek. He grabbed her by the shoulders then, his face only inches from hers. Eyes red at the corners. He slammed her against the fence two, three, four times. Then he seemed to lose strength, let his hands slide down her arms. Head slumping forward. She stared past him, studying the neat rows in the garden, waiting.

"Get out of here. Get the hell out of here. I've got work to do."

She turned, walked up the path towards the house. It would only take her a few minutes to pack her suitcase.

## Lessons in Biology

The summer I turned thirteen there was an outbreak of tent caterpillars in our county. I don't know where they came from or why they picked that particular year, but they descended like locusts. They cast their gauzy cocoons between the branches of every tree, dropping to the ground, crawling on the grass, crawling on the road, sometimes even crawling into our house. My mother, who hated anything ugly or useless, claimed they carried some foul, mysterious disease, something that sounded to me at the time like a cross between sleeping sickness and gangrene. When the caterpillars attacked my mother's rose bushes she declared war. She went after them, wielding her broomstick torch before her like some flaming crucifix. She scoured every tree on our lawn for nests and when she found one she thrust the lit torch into the heart of it. Instantly the nest shrivelled and the baby caterpillars hit the ground like so much dirty rain. I followed my mother from tree to tree and as soon as the caterpillars hit the ground I pounced on them, smashing

them with my sneakers. My mother watched, her arms squeezed across her chest, a hard satisfied set to her face. We kept up this same ritual once a week all summer and somehow we managed to ward off nearly all the caterpillars. Ours was the most chaste lawn in the neighbourhood.

Other than these times I was forbidden to go anywhere near the caterpillars. Since they were everywhere it meant I spent most of my time either inside the house or outside on the lawn. But once in a while, if I promised not to go off the highway, my mother let me go bike-riding with my friend Selena. Usually we followed the twist of the road up the nearest mountain, Selena pumping ahead, her short skirt flying out to the sides like wings. At the top all the other mountains seemed to loom up close, great grey slashes cutting across them where the caterpillars had chewed the trees bald. Selena dropped her bike on the shoulder and stretched out on the grass beside it. I stood on the edge of the highway, leaning against my bicycle, rocking it back and forth and panting. After a few minutes the other bike appeared over the rise in the road or sometimes, if the boy was a little older, it would be a car. Selena examined him and then taking his wrist, like a nurse testing a patient's pulse, she led him down into the raspberry bushes beside the highway.

The bushes were alive with caterpillars. They hung on the branches, putrid ripe berries ready to burst in the sun. They were ugly like my mother said, hairless and sallow

yellow, but there was something fascinating about them too, something fascinating about all that teeming life. Selena said my mother was crazy; the caterpillars didn't carry any disease. They were all part of the natural order, the biological cycle. Selena, who was always working on some sort of science project, kept a few caterpillars in jars, stacked on a shelf in her father's woodshed. Once in a while she took one out and let it crawl across her hand, let it teeter blindly off the tip of her finger, groping into nothingness. It made my skin crawl to watch, but I wondered what it would feel like too, those hundreds of suction cup feet, the pin-prick mouth and feathery feelers. Sitting on the side of the road, waiting, I imagined Selena and the boy entwined in a rapturous embrace, arms and lips locked. If a caterpillar were to crawl across their clothes, across their skin right now, I was sure neither of them would even feel it, so convinced was I of their overwhelming ecstasy.

Once two boys came over the ridge. After Selena and the taller darker one disappeared into the bushes the other boy and I were left sitting on the side of the road. If we were going to do anything, whatever it might be, we'd have to do it here because I'd decided I wasn't going down into the caterpillars. But nothing was possible out on the highway with cars flashing past every two or three minutes. By the time Selena came out of the bushes the boy had edged only a few inches in my direction. He hadn't even touched me and I wasn't so sure I wanted him to.



Selena said the caterpillars were all part of the natural balance of things but it seemed like just the opposite.

I remember that summer, almost fifteen years past now, and my mother's face looms over it. I see it as it looked then, smooth, serene, held in beautiful, desperate control, threatening to twist out of shape at any moment.

My mother had been a child model for Eaton's catalogue. She always spoke of it as the best time of her life, the walking to downtown sessions at a Montreal photographer's, the trying on of dress after frilly dress, the movies and slumber parties with her model girlfriends. They had their hair done every day, washed and brushed and rolled onto giant hair curlers like soup cans. They were taught how to apply make-up so discreetly it was barely visible, how to stand, how to place their hands, how to smile. They wore the latest fashions, bell-like taffeta dresses, cashmere sweater sets, white tucked office-girl blouses with black-ribbon bow-ties, T-strap pumps with understated heels. Miniature replicas of the women's styles. Once, and she recalled this as the high point of her modelling career, my mother was asked to appear in the catalogue's bridal spread. She wore a sunflower yellow organdy bridesmaid's dress and carried a bouquet of synthetic daisies.

The big events of the year were the end-of-season parties, one after the completion of the spring and summer catalogue, one after the fall and winter edition. My mother made them

sound like gala movie premieres. Each girl was allowed to choose a dress from one of the lines, wear it to the party and then wear it home. When they stepped out of taxis in front of the hotel, their mothers as escorts, each one was a vision in blue gaberdine or red wool or pink cotton. They were met at the door by several women executives from Eaton's and let upstairs to a fancy hall. There was a buffet spread and beside it a table with stacks of pre-release catalogues. The girls spent most of the evening poring over their own images in the catalogues or dancing with one another to piped-in music. Some of them, the less gifted ones my mother said, spent the whole party giggling in corners, talking about boys.

My mother's modelling days ended when she reached puberty. She never told me exactly this but she did say that over one summer she outgrew the children's clothes. Her legs were too long, her waist too small and her hips too rounded. But she didn't develop into a perfect woman's size either and even if she had her face was too young-looking. She told me no woman of forty, no matter how trim and attractive, would buy a dress that looked good on a fourteen year old.

The years after that were a blank for me. There were no vivid, whirling, breathless descriptions of that time. I knew only that she took a secretarial job at a law firm after she graduated from high school. It was a place to meet eligible bachelors but my mother found none to her liking. Then, when she was close to thirty and on vacation in the

townships, my father saw her sunning on a local beach and spread his towel out beside her. A week later he proposed marriage. My mother refused and they said good-bye at the train station for what was to be the last time. But my father followed her into the city and presented himself at her door with a dozen white roses. It was the proper romantic gesture and my mother accepted.

My mother's stories about her modelling days, about my father's courtship came often that summer, usually in the late afternoon to fill the restless grey hours before supper. We sat at my mother's vanity table, a small lamp shedding a pool of light across its surface, and leafed silently, almost reverently, through Vogue, Town and Country, Harper's Bazaar. My mother had mostly back issues from the fifties and early sixties because she said the see-through blouses, the non-existent skirts that were the current fashion, were indecent. The unisex clothes were even worse. Within a few weeks I knew the magazines by heart but the models in the pictures remained foreign to me. They were like no women I had ever seen---alabaster-skinned, blood-lipped, their long, dangerously slender necks bent at unnatural angles. There seemed to be no body beneath their clothes, just a few strategic bones. And the clothes themselves looked odd to me, the cinched in waists, the long full skirts (the last vestiges of the New Look my mother said), the spike-toed, spike-heeled shoes, the starched white collars and cuffs. Once, when the magazines were still relatively new to me, I laughed

at a pill-box hat with what looked like a six-inch spike sticking straight up out of the centre of it. My mother snatched the magazine out of my hands and refused to talk to me for the rest of the afternoon.

I learned quickly not to laugh at the photographs. Instead I learned to pick out the clothes my mother would like best and remark on them. This invariably set her to rummaging about in her closet, looking for something close to what I'd seen in the magazine. She flung twenty years' worth of dresses, skirts and blouses onto the bed, one after the other, and usually she found what she wanted. Then the transformation began.

She shed her skirt and sweater in one quick, silky movement, her slip clinging to her legs. Shivering, she pulled the dress over her head. Often it was the black cocktail gown, simple, elegantly understated, considered an essential by all the leading fashion authorities (I never saw my mother wear this particular dress outside the bedroom). Once the dress was properly arranged and she found the right shoes and handbag she stepped out for me, slinging her shoulders backward, her hips outward, twirling on her heel so smoothly it was as if she were run by machinery.

My mother was over forty then but she was still a beautiful woman in the aloof, serene, sloe-eyed way of the models in the magazines. She had the same slim hips and waist, the same coat-hanger shoulders and small hard-looking breasts. The clothes she put on seemed to become part of her. The

rustling of silk, the whir of satin became her sounds. But the twirling in front of the vanity mirror always came to the same end. Staring at her reflection, she spread her fingers fan-like across her belly and sucked in air. Then she turned to me with a sad, accusing smile.

"Well, Daphne, there's no denying it. Having you gave me a tummy alright. I'll never wear those lovely little sweater outfits that keep turning up in Vogue."

My mother had never forgiven me for ruining her figure. She had photographs of herself taken during almost every month of her pregnancy, the date of each one carefully labelled. There was one in which she was seven months along. It showed her standing stiffly in front of our then-new house, wearing a striped shirt-dress, belted no less, and no matter how hard you looked it was impossible to tell she was pregnant. By the ninth month I was only a slight swelling of my mother's belly but after I was born the bulge didn't go away. No number of sit-ups, no manner of dieting would get rid of it.

Sometimes, as I watched my mother turn in front of the mirror, I imagined that if she were able to get whatever she wanted by simply snapping her fingers, she would do it and both I and her belly would disappear. Both of us caused her so much frustration with our lack of perfection. I was built like the women on my father's side of the family, broad-hipped and short-legged. I would probably have big breasts one day, too, and then none of the clothes my mother picked out for me---clothes that looked beautiful on her and

in magazines---would look right on me.

After my mother had examined herself from every angle we sat down at the vanity table to complete the effect. She began to make up her face. I parroted her movements, picking up the eyeliner pencil or the rouge or the lipstick as soon as she put it down. I tried to copy her exactly but when the faces were done it was as if they had nothing in common. Now she had the china-white skin, the striking red lips, the dramatic green eyes of the Vogue models. I looked a mess. No matter how carefully I followed my mother I ended up looking like the victim of a drowning, my skin a pasty grey, my lips a crooked red smear and my eyes sunken, heavy-lidded. The make-up was all wrong for me but my mother never suggested anything different and I never dreamed of asking. Besides, it would have upset the ritual, a ritual as important to my mother as the burning of the caterpillars.

Then it was up to me to close things off. I stood up and put my hand on her shoulder, my head almost on a level with hers.

"Gee, Mum. You look more like my big sister than my mother." I stared down at her folded hands, oddly dark compared to her white face. The words came automatically, as automatically as a protective lie.

"Why thank-you dear." She put her arm around my waist and laughed, almost giggled as she looked at my reflection in the mirror. "You've sure made a mess of yourself, haven't you? You better go wash all that stuff off your face before

your father gets home."

In the strong white light in the bathroom I scrubbed the make-up off, leaving fleshy pink smears on the wash-cloth. I felt as if someone had been sitting on my stomach and I took long deep breaths. In the mirror over the sink my face looked raw, as if a layer of skin had peeled off in the process. I looked younger than I had before, my skin red and splotchy like that of a newborn baby or a burn victim.

By the time my father got home my mother was back in the sag-seated skirt and ragged sweater she wore around the house. She'd scrubbed the make-up off her face and when my father came through the front door she was usually almost finished making supper. My father always stopped in the kitchen on his way to the livingroom where the newspaper waited. He stood in the doorway, sniffed loudly, said "Halloo, girlie. Sure smells good" then bent at the waist in a courtly bow. If my mother was in a good mood she smiled and gave a self-conscious half-curtsy. Most times she just nodded.

Selena said my father was a dreamboat. Or as much of a dreamboat as a man his age could be. That summer, when I was thirteen, he was already in his mid-fifties, a short, slight man who always seemed to be moving. He had only a few grey hairs and Selena thought he had the looks and charisma of Cary Grant. At the time I thought my father could out-charm even Cary Grant. And I thought my parents made the ideal couple. When they dressed to go out every

Saturday night and stood in the hallway for me to admire them, I wished they would stand there forever. They looked glossy and perfect and elegant, arms linked, backs straight, faces smiling, their bodies not quite touching. They moved formally, awkwardly, like two people on their first date but I was sure somewhere, probably in the darkness of their bedroom long after I was asleep, that formality dissolved and was replaced by unabashed, unselfconscious love.

In the winter my father was the principal of our high school, Laurel Comprehensive (he called it Laurel Reprehensive when he'd had a bad day), but in the summer he took up teaching again. Three afternoons a week he gave remedial reading classes at the textile mill and on those days he came home flushed, bursting with stories to tell my mother. Usually we were only seated at the diningroom table a few minutes when the words came tumbling out.

"You know this has got to be one of the most rewarding things I've ever done. Just today, Mrs. Crowhurst got through a complete two-page story without having to stop once. You've met Freda Crowhurst, Amelia---" He looked up at my mother then. She kept on chewing, bouncing her fork between her fingers as if she were listening to some private music. "---at the Legion dance last fall. She's fifty-nine years old and she decided to come to the classes because she was embarrassed when her grandchildren asked her to read to them and she couldn't do a thing about it. And I've got this other student, Amelia. A Mrs. Potter. She's about your age---"



"Would you like some more potatoes, Daddy?" My mother said the words absently, quietly, as if we'd been talking about potatoes all along. She always called my father "Daddy." It sounded silly to me, coming from a grown woman, but it usually made my father's face soften. Tonight he just set his fork down and stared at a spot somewhere near my mother's water glass.

"No. No thanks. I'm fine." He kept staring and pushed his head forward a bit. "Anyway, Mrs. Potter, she has four children and when the last one got married this spring and Mrs. Potter couldn't even sing the hymns at his wedding, she figured it was about time----"

"Daddy, I really wish you'd take the potatoes. If you don't I'll just have to throw them out. Daphne and I can't manage any more---we have to watch our figures."

I wanted to sink through the bottom of my chair. She was doing it again, allying me with her, mentally leading me over to her side of the table, draping her arm across my shoulder and smiling triumphant at my father. She did this often that summer, somehow convinced I think that power, whatever power it was she wanted, came in numbers. But I wanted no part of it. Her face at these times was coldly, sharply beautiful, like the faces of wicked witches in fairy tales. It frightened me, repelled me.

My father stared down at his plate now, his hands white-knuckled on either side of it. Then he smiled a little and looked up.

"Sure, Amelia, sure. I've got room left. But not too much. You don't want a fat husband, do you?"

My father and I sat silent until she came back from the kitchen; the pot in her hand. There was only one tiny potato left.

After supper my parents played Scrabble in the dining-room. I lay stretched out on the rug in the next room, watching reruns on the television. Their voices drifted in to me, my mother's high and girlish when she produced a good word, mock petulant when my father did the same. My father was chuckling and calling my mother "girlie." They played a lot of games together. My mother liked Steeplechase, even taking a tiny mounted knight from our chess set to make a more authentic marker. My father's favourite was Monopoly but my parents hardly ever finished a game together. My mother always quit when her sets were broken, claiming my father had a killer instinct when it came to property. I usually finished her turns for her.

My mother's voice was louder now. She was convinced that 'captivate' was spelled with an "e" in the middle because then she could use up all her letters and get fifty extra points. That is, if my father would listen to reason. He was arguing with her, he had probably given her too many free words already, and his voice was patient, even, like a doctor's voice.

"Melia, it's spelled c-a-p-t-i-v-a-t-e. I swear that it is, honey. You'll just have to think of another word."

"Well, I'm sure it's spelled my way. In fact, I'm positive. I think we should look it up."

I was already off the floor and half-way across the room when my name was called. I took the Oxford off the television set and lugged it into the diningroom. My parents were sitting on opposite sides of the table, my mother drumming her fingers on her knee, her leg swinging in tight circles under the table. My father was watching her, his face tired. I plunked the dictionary down on the table, making the tiles on the Scrabble board jump, and turned to leave.

"Well, Daphne, aren't you going to look it up?" My mother had put her hand on my shoulder to stop me. "The word's 'captivate'."

"How can I look it up if I don't know how to spell it?"

"Don't be smart. Just look it up."

I already knew my mother was wrong so I took my time thumbing through the dictionary. My mother started drumming her fingers on the table.

"Captivate. C-a-p-t-i-v-a-t-e. To fascinate, charm, hold irresistibly by---"

"We don't need a definition thank you, Daphne." It was my father this time, staring so hard at me I had to look away. Somehow I knew I'd gone too far. My father had started things but I'd gone the final step too far and made my mother look stupid. "I think it's about time you went to bed, Daphne. It's getting late."

I didn't go to bed. It was the only way I could think

of to pay them back for their unfairness, their deceit---with smouldering, willful, cowardly disobedience. I went into the kitchen and took a handful of cookies out of the jar, a thing forbidden before bedtime, then wandered quietly around the house for a few minutes. I thought of prying open the top drawer to my mother's bureau where she kept her underclothes. Maybe I would even swipe a pair of lacy, fragrant panties and brandish them on our mailbox where both my mother and the postman would be sure to see them next morning. Or maybe I would climb into my father's closet and take the old leather-bound album off the uppermost shelf. I was sure it was full of pictures of illicit lovers and women of questionable reputation, pictures I would leave in decadent disarray across his bed. But I did neither of these things. I was afraid not so much of their anger as of their silent, tight-lipped embarrassment.

My parents seemed to have forgotten about me which was an even worse offense. There had been no repeated, impatient urgings for me to stop my dawdling. I went back to the diningroom and slipped in behind the half-open door, peeking into the room through the crack at the hinge. My father was standing behind my mother's chair now, his hands on her shoulders. My mother's face was turned from me and half of her body was obscured by my father's. What I could see was rigid. The only movement was that of the fingers of her right hand, turning a Scrabble tile over and over. My father was talking to her, almost too low for me to hear.

"Amelia, I'm sorry. Sometimes I come home cranky from those classes and I guess I take it out on you." He rubbed her shoulders but she didn't move. "Anyway, who knows. There's probably several spellings of 'captivate'---you know how the newspapers are always inventing new words---and the Oxford just doesn't have it. It's a very old dictionary."

He bent down and kissed my mother's hair. She jumped, turning her head so I could see one side of her face. It looked like it had at the supper table, frozen, a bit crooked, still beautiful. My mother set the Scrabble tile down on the table. It was a preparatory gesture, a gesture I would later remember with the setting aside of a cigarette or a pair of glasses, a signal for the warm, comfortable coming together of familiar lovers. With my mother it was an overly dramatic surrender, more like a final sigh someone gives before he submits himself to a doctor. My father kissed her hair again, then the nape of her neck. She blinked and stared straight ahead of her. His hands slid down her arms and he tried to kiss the corner of her mouth. She turned her head a little, to make it easier for him. His hand went to her breast, almost covering it.

My mother made a move to get up then but it seemed almost mechanical. There was still no expression on her face, no anger, no indignation. I saw my father's fingers tighten around her arms and then he twisted around in front of her, his chest pressing against her knees, his hands still planted on her arms. For an instant I thought of all the pictures

I'd seen in the fairytale books of the prince kneeling before the princess, the proposal on his lips as concrete as a ring or a bejewelled slipper. But neither of them said anything. My father kept rising part way up off his knees, leaning across my mother's lap and trying to undo her sweater with his teeth. He made snuffling noises, baby noises. My mother twisted out of his reach again and again, pressing her back into the chair, bracing her knees against my father's chest. But somehow her struggling seemed listless. There was no real energy behind it, as if what she was doing was so familiar to her she didn't even have to concentrate.

It was a terrible game, a game they were both frighteningly accustomed to. I think they must have been playing it over and over for years, my father pretending my mother's struggling was passion, my mother giving nothing, keeping all and knowing always that the control was hers. One twist of the game, saved for special occasions, for certain black nights, and he would know it too.

She tried such a twist now. My father had the top button undone on her sweater and when his lips touched the skin at her throat my mother stopped struggling. A look that I recognized as the one she wore when she burned the caterpillar nests, a hard, cruel look, passed over her face. My father hesitated, drew his hand away from her neck and rested back on his knees. His hand slid down her arm, down to the curve of her thigh, over to the inside softness of her knee. His hand disappeared up her skirt but my mother

still didn't move. She looked as if she was suspended in ice. I imagined her skin would be cold to the touch but when my father finally drew his hand away it was as if he had been burnt.

He stood up slowly, his joints cracking, and cleared his throat. The sound acted as a release for my mother. Her arms and legs loosened and she pulled her skirt back over her knees, smoothed her hair, did up her sweater. The gestures were calm, efficient. She had done all this before too. Somehow she found strength in my father's downcast eyes, in the thrust of his hands into his pockets, and when she finally spoke to him, it was in an even, patient, put-upon mother's voice.

"You know, Daddy, you shouldn't make overtures when Daphne's in the house. She might see."

My father looked surprised, then relieved. Maybe he'd been afraid she'd never talk to him again.

"Well, it wouldn't hurt her to see a display of affection once in a while."

My mother made a snorting sound in her throat. "I'd hardly call what we just had here a display of affection."

"Well, I meant it to be. At least it started out as affection..." His voice trailed off but then he recovered himself for a moment, straightening his shoulders. "Besides, Daphne's going to have to know about these things sooner or later. She'll be going to high school next year, going out on dates with boys. Don't you think it's about time you had

a talk with her?"

My mother frowned and pursed her lips as if my father had just told a slightly absurd, slightly risqué joke.

"Don't be silly, Daddy. Daphne's just a little girl. She's got no need for that sort of thing." She didn't sound perfectly sure of herself.

I left them, like that, my father standing sheepish and tired before the straight-backed figure of my mother. I crept upstairs to my bedroom and for most of the night I thought about what I had seen. I had believed sex was something mysterious, something almost painfully private and intimate. It was gentle as well as unbearably exciting. Sex was one long tantalizing kiss in a daisy-strewn field. What I saw that night had not even the earnestness, the simplicity of what I would later come to know as lust. Sex, or more likely I was thinking of love, had no more place in our house than the caterpillars had outside it.

The next day I told Selena about the episode with my parents. My mother had let me out on my bike alone, a rare thing, nervously dismissing me when I asked permission. Her voice had been distant---her lips hardly seemed to move---but her eyes were piercing as if she was trying to see through my clothes. Selena, who rarely looked at anyone except herself in the mirror and lately the Royer boy down the street, would be a welcome relief.

We sat on the swings in Selena's back yard, facing out



onto the cropped hayfields and the woods beyond them. Selena wasn't listening to me, or didn't seem to be, even though I emphasized the details I thought she would find most interesting, blowing up to mammoth proportions my father's hand on my mother's thigh, his mouth at her throat. Selena stared off at the tree-line in front of us, her lips moving slightly. Maybe she was counting the white patches of caterpillar nests on the edge of the woods or reciting something she'd read in a magazine. Lately she devoured Woman's Day and Redbook, memorizing beauty tips, dos and don'ts, bits of gospel about oily skin or wardrobe choice for figure type tripping off her tongue when she happened to look in my direction. She spent less and less time on her projects--- the collection of various forest fungi, the capture and mounting of butterflies, the dissection of frogs and field-mice---and more and more time on her appearance. She discarded the cut-offs and T-shirts of the summer before for short skirts with attached bloomers and white cotton blouses that showed the outline of her brassiere. Instead of sneakers she wore polished white sandals, (once in a while we spent an afternoon painting her toenails a decadent red) and now she shaved her legs once every two days with her mother's electric razor.

I gave up trying to talk to her and stared down at the rut that had been worn underneath the swings. The swings were too small for me now. I had to bend my legs almost double if I wanted to go high. I tried that now but I set

the whole frame to shaking until it seemed like the whole swing set would come uprooted. Selena glared at me and got up off her swing. I was glad I'd upset her if only for a moment. Sometimes I just couldn't stand her ignoring me any longer.

"You know Daphne, you sure act like a baby sometimes." Selena stood in front of me, her hands on her hips. She flipped her long, silvery hair over her shoulder. "By the way, I think your father's an animal. I don't know why he wants to bother your mother like that anyway. She's too old to have kids."

I wasn't sure I understood. "What do you mean?"

"I mean why bother? At his age." Selena's own parents were in their early thirties and her mother was expecting a baby in a week.

"Maybe he loves her."

"Mmm, maybe."

"Well, if what...if what my parents did is only good for making babies, then why do you go with all those boys into the bushes?" I was sure I'd caught her now.

Selena turned to me and rolled her eyes. I'd insulted her intelligence again, somehow. "Come on, Daphne. I don't let them do anything. I'm not stupid. I let them touch me and kiss me but only in certain places and I never let them do everything. Some of them get mad but that's their problem. I keep them interested and then when I'm old enough to get married I'll have lots of guys to choose from. Nobody likes

a cold fish, you know, Daphne, and nobody likes a girl who does everything either."

I rocked back and forth, trying to let this sink in. Selena's mother called from inside the house and Selena was gone in a minute. She spent a lot of time with her mother lately, fetching and carrying for her, amazed that a baby could survive inside there without any air. As soon as the door slammed behind her, I got up and went into the woodshed.

It was dim inside the shed, the windows clouded over with dirt and matted cobwebs. The caterpillars were hidden in an old armoire in the corner because her mother would kill her if she knew Selena kept any of the things that close to the house. There were six jars inside, lined up one next to the other on the middle shelf, and there were a couple of caterpillars inside each jar. I picked up one of the bottles and tapped on the side of it. Two of the caterpillars uncoiled and probed about blearily with their knobby heads. The third didn't move, not even when I tipped the jar upside down.

Sooner or later they were all bound to die. They didn't get nearly enough air or light. They had nowhere near enough room to string up nests and so they couldn't reproduce. If they didn't reproduce, they wouldn't spin cocoons and turn into the little bluey-white butterflies Selena had told me about. The cycle had been interrupted. And Selena would never let them go. Once in a while she remembered they were still in here and stuffed some leaves in on top of the

caterpillars, but most times she forgot. Besides, she wanted to watch. She wanted to see if just maybe one of them would manage to spin a cocoon. She figured it would be really something if she could produce a butterfly right here in such a controlled environment.

I carried the jars out onto the lawn two at a time. Around the corner of the shed where there was a small stretch of grass and bramble, I dumped the caterpillars out. Most of them hit the ground and didn't move. A few of them uncurled, probed about groggily, then disappeared deeper into the grass.

### Comet on a String

Every morning Flash woke to the sound of his brother Winston moaning in the next bed. Long low gurgling moans like an old man clearing his throat. And every morning Flash automatically pulled a pillow over his head. But the sound always seeped through and it really didn't matter much since he had to get up to go to work anyway. It didn't matter much except that he hated it. He was eighteen years old and he couldn't remember a day when he hadn't heard the moaning. He heard it while he ate breakfast, lunch and supper in the next room, the sound droning in his ear like a mosquito. He heard it in the evenings when he watched demolition derby on television, the moans getting lost under the scrape of metal but coming up even louder when the engines had all sputtered and died. He even heard it at work, or thought he heard it, in the groan of a dump truck wheel on gravel, in the grind of bulldozer gears. He heard Winston moaning the way he heard his own heartbeat when he stopped to listen---strong and steady and insistent.

This morning was no different from any other morning except that Flash woke up before Winston's moans did the job for him. He'd been dreaming that he was in his Comet, racing with the boys down at the gravel pit the way he did every Saturday. He was pushing the car flat out, the nose pointing toward the red drum at the finish line and he was winning. Then, out of nowhere, the engine choked and stalled. No matter what Flash did he couldn't start it up again. When he tried to undo his safety harness it was jammed, so he sat for awhile waiting for someone to come and pry him out. But they all drove right by. One by one the boys drove their cars out of the pit as if nothing was wrong, as if he wasn't even there. He started pounding on the window with his fists and screaming. But the sound was muffled, blurred and bubbly as if he was screaming underwater. When he finally woke up his fingers were curled claw-like around the bedpost and his face dripped sweat.

He propped himself up and wiped his face on a corner of the sheet. He took a cigarette out of the pack on the night-table and lit it, the match quivering in his hand. It was a stupid dream. Cars didn't choke like that, not at full throttle. And besides, he didn't wear a safety harness. Not even an ordinary safety belt or a helmet when he raced at the pit. Now if he made it to the big-time or even the semi-big-time at Napierville, he might get one of those shiny asbestos suits with a helmet to match. He'd have his name and number

on both of them and he'd wear a harness if it was regulation. But with the duds he raced against down at the gravel pit he didn't need anything like that. Stick Winston behind the wheel and he'd probably beat every one of them.

When he thought about Winston he heard the moaning for the first time that morning. It was part of Winston's breathing, low and full of phlegm on the intake, high and whining when he let it out. Winston was lying on his back as usual, the mound of his stomach heaving up and down. His arms rested like dead weights on either side of him, his palms upward and his wrists tied with rag strips to the iron bed frame. He stared straight up at the ceiling but he probably wasn't awake yet. Lots of times he slept with his eyes open. Flash sucked hard on his cigarette and blew smoke rings that floated across the room and settled in a blue haze over Winston's bed.

Flash could hear his mother clattering around in the kitchen. She'd be in soon to wake him up and to change Winston. If he got up quick he wouldn't have to help her or listen to her nag. He reached up to take his shirt off the bedpost and as soon as he'd done it he knew he'd moved too fast. Winston's moans turned to short, hiccupping grunts. Flash swore and glared across at Winston. Winston stared back. His fingers curled and uncurled and his legs twitched underneath the blankets. Flash turned away and put on his shirt.

"If you keep on makin' that goddamn noise Winston, I'm

gonna fuckin' strangle you."

Winston speeded up the grunting until it sounded like he was about to choke. Flash stubbed out his cigarette and started fiddling with the rags around Winston's wrists. They were sweat-soaked and Winston had pulled them tight during the night. Flash got one of them undone but the one on the far side of the bed was even tighter and while he worked on it he had to fight off Winston's free hand. Winston kept grabbing at his fingers, slapping him on the back. Flash hated it when Winston touched him. His skin was too soft, like a baby's except clammy. He ignored him but Winston whimpered and heaved the full weight of his arm against Flash's shoulder. Flash stepped back a bit and held his hand to the spot where Winston had hit him. It didn't hurt but he felt as if he wanted to wipe off something that had been left behind, something gummy and rotten.

"Alright, Winnie. You asked for it."

Flash took hold of the rag and pulled. He twisted it back and forth, squeezing Winston's wrist against the bed frame. Winston went silent, a puzzled look settling on his face. Then the rag gave way and Flash took a few steps backward to avoid Winston's swinging arm. He threw the rag on the floor and kicked it into the corner. Winston started moaning again.

Winston was what the guys down at the pit called a vegetable. He'd been that way all his life. When he was ten, he still hadn't learned how to talk or feed himself. By then,



Flash had finished grade one and was playing hockey in the Laurel mosquito league. But what Flash remembered most clearly about that time wasn't school or hockey. It was Winston, wandering around the house in a diaper, trailing after their mother and whining. Winston followed her everywhere, scuffing through dirt she'd just swept up, stepping on her heels. She never yelled at him, just hoisted him into a chair and gave him a magazine to look at.

Flash's father yelled at Winston all the time, screaming at him to quit his bloody whining and groaning. And he yelled at Flash's mother, too, telling her over and over to use her head and put the kid in a home where he belonged. But she wouldn't and one day, after Winston spilled a pitcher of maple syrup down the front of his favourite dress pants, Flash's father disappeared. He came back only once, a week later, to pick up his clothes. A year after that Flash's oldest brother Peanut married his highschool sweetheart Lee-Ann and moved into an apartment in town.

After that Winston got worse. He started having trouble walking and Flash's mother had to keep him in bed. One day, when Flash was eleven or so, he found his mother sitting at the kitchen table gripping an empty coffee mug with both hands, her knuckles white. He sat down beside her and she muttered something that sounded to Flash like "cowards" or "bastards," he wasn't sure which. He felt a flush of humiliation, shame because he knew exactly what she meant, who she meant. Even then he felt that somehow, simply because he

he shared their blood, he would commit the same crimes as Peanut and his father, that even thinking about leaving was a crime. His mother had reached across the table and clutched his hand, squeezing his fingers so hard it hurt. He thought she would never let go.

Flash buttoned his shirt and took his jeans off the bedpost. With only one leg in he heard the bedroom door open, heard his mother's sing-songy good-morning. He turned his back quickly to her and yanked his pants all the way up, did up his belt.

"Jesus, Ma. Can't you see I'm dressin'? You could knock first."

His mother said nothing. She just smiled, the same absent-minded smile she'd given him ever since he was a little boy and he'd yelled at her to stay out of the room while he was taking a bath. She started pulling at Winston's bedclothes, tugging at the bottom corners first. When she got to the top of the bed she stopped and kissed Winston on the forehead, sweeping his fine hair out of his face. On the far side of the bed she stopped and looked over at Flash.

"Where's the other rag?"

"I hadda rip it off."

She pursed her lips. "Well, you've left a nice red mark on Winnie's wrist. You could have come and asked me for the scissors."

"Yeah, I guess I coulda but I didn't." He fiddled with his belt, tightening it so he could hardly breath.

She kept struggling with the bedclothes, pulling all the top covers off and bundling them into a corner. But she couldn't get the bottom sheet out from under Winston. Flash watched her, while he finished dressing, knowing he should help her but wanting only to get out of the house and down to the pit. She was trying to roll Winston over but she couldn't get him more than an inch off the mattress. Flash let out a long breath, loud enough so she could hear it, and grabbed hold of Winston's shoulder. He rolled him onto his side and then onto his other side while his mother pulled the sheet and the rubber mat out from under him. Flash let Winston fall back on the bed with a dull thud. His mother started unbuttoning Winston's nightshirt.

This was the part Flash hated the most. The only reason he stayed in the room at all was because his mother needed help when she washed Winston. Flash propped Winston up and his mother pulled the nightshirt off over his head. Winston flopped back down and grinned, smiling out from a mound of grey, thick flesh. He had no hair on his body, just a light fuzz on his face and arms and legs like a girl's, a fuzz that got slightly darker and wirier between his legs. Flash hated watching his mother clean Winston, especially there. She would scrub at him there as if it was any other part of his body and once, when Flash was half looking, Winston got an erection. His mother had stopped for only a second, seemed hardly to notice the change, then continued her scrubbing as if nothing had happened at all.

Today while she washed Winston, Flash looked out the window. He had to bend his knees a little because if he stood straight his eyes came on a level with the top of the casement and he couldn't see anything. Since the house had been built thirty years ago, it had steadily sunk into the clay underneath it. There was no foundation, only a linoleum covered concrete floor, so when you came into the house you stepped down, like into a sunken livingroom. Outside the bottoms of the windows were only a foot off the ground and every year Flash had to plane down the doors or else they dug into the lawn. It looked like a toy house from the road, the peak of the roof maybe ten feet high, a dwarf's house. When he was little Flash had dreams that one morning he would wke up and the whole house would be underground, that all he would see out of the windows would be gravel and clay. After a while everyone would suffocate. When he was older he had thought about fixing the foundation some way so the house wouldn't sink any further. He figured that if he didn't, the whole place would collapse. But a house could only sink so far and even if he could figure out how to fix it, he didn't have the money anyway.

Winston kept up his grunting behind Flash. His mother gave Winston instructions as to where he should put his hands while she scrubbed his chest, where he should keep his tongue while she washed his face. Flash knew that no matter what she said, Winston would just flop all around anyway. She might as well put him on trolley ropes and raise and lower his arms

and legs for all the help he was. She might as well let him stink and rot away in his bed. She might as well let him sleep in a coffin.

"Albert, can you help me turn Winnie over?" Flash didn't move. He never answered her when she called him by his real name, not the first time anyway. "Albert, will you help me here?"

Flash heaved Winston over onto his stomach so his pale buttocks stuck into the air. His mother started scrubbing at Winston's back and Flash looked away. He wanted to get this all finished and get his hands off Winston's skin. His mother finished washing Winston and started making up his bed, darting under Flash's arm while he held Winston up. She slipped a clean nightshirt over Winston's head and as soon as his arms were into the sleeves Flash let him fall back onto the bed. Winston's head missed the pillow and bounced hard against the mattress. His mother turned and glared at Flash.

"Albert! What are you trying to do? Break his skull?"

"Christ, Ma, he's got so much fat on him it'd take a sledge hammer to break a bone." She kept staring at him and he spit out the next words without thinking. "Besides, with him a broken skull ain't gonna make a helluva lotta difference, is it?"

His mother turned her back to him and started to struggle with Winston's nightshirt, trying to uncoil it from around his chest. Flash watched for a few minutes, his hands deep

in his pockets. Then he lunged forward and pulled Winston up.

The Comet was sitting out on the driveway, ready to go. Flash stood in the doorway, Winston's moaning faint behind him, and admired the car. The Comet was a 1963, already ten years old, but it looked brand new. It was painted a glossy canary yellow with two identical black racing stripes running side by side across the hood, up onto the roof and down over the trunk. He'd spent a whole weekend getting those stripes just right. Almost every night after supper Flash worked two or three hours on the Comet, tinkering and altering and improving, trying to figure out how to make it a better, faster car. Sometimes Peanut came over to watch but he usually got impatient with how slowly Flash worked and went home after an hour or so.

Flash was supposed to pick up Peanut for the races in about five minutes. Helping his mother with Winston had made him late so he slid in behind the wheel and gunned the motor a few times. He saw his mother's head poke out of Winston's bedroom window. She looked like a groundhog sticking its nose out of a hole. He raced the motor some more and let the car rip out of the driveway, sending a shower of pebbles ricocheting off the wall of the house.

Every Saturday since he was ten years old Flash had gone to the drag races at the gravel pit. Before he was old enough to have his own car, Peanut picked him up and they

rode most of the way over on the wrong side of the highway. Usually Flash just watched the races, getting close enough to the track so that he could feel the dust on his face and the spray of dirt against his shins. Once in awhile Peanut or one of the other drivers strapped Flash into the passenger seat and took him for a spin around the pit. He planted his feet on the floor and flattened his hands on the seat so he could feel the roar of the engine shivering up his arms, his legs. He thought nothing would stop this barrelling forward, that if they came up against a wall of the pit the car would just drill right through. But the car always did stop because Peanut had to take Flash home to Winston and his mother.

As soon as Flash was old enough he got his driver's license. He hung around the pit then, racing every car he could get his hands on. Peanut wasn't a very good driver, he lost most of the time, so he let Flash race his battered old green Falcon a lot. Flash won a few times and the other drivers started paying more attention to him. They started calling him Flash and once in a while one of them would offer the use of his car without Flash even having to ask. A year later, as soon as he finished high school, he got a job at the pit as a bulldozer operator. He saved almost all of his salary and bought the Comet. He started winning races.

The Comet was running smooth today, sliding along the rutted, cracked highway. Peanut lived only about a mile away in the centre of the village. He and Lee-Ann and the three kids lived in an apartment over the grocery store.

Two or three nights a week, if he wasn't working on the Comet, Flash went over to their place to play canasta or watch television. The only noise in the house would be the voices from the television set, or the flip of cards, or once in a while the baby crying. Sometimes Peanut would grab Lee-Ann's housecoat as she shuffled by and pull her onto his lap where he'd bounce her up and down and kiss her, then let her go again. Flash liked to watch them, liked the quiet of their apartment. He had started looking at the girls on the street and in the bars a little more closely to see if any one of them was particularly interested in him.

When Flash eased the Comet onto the shoulder in front of the store Lee-Ann and the kids were sitting out on the apartment landing. He honked his horn and Lee-Ann waved. She leaned down and said something to Frank, Jr. and the little boy disappeared into the house. Lee-Ann was pregnant again. She had on an old bathrobe over her nightgown and it didn't meet across her middle. She never got fat anywhere else, just her stomach, and the baby stuck out on her like a bag of laundry. Her skin always got splotchy and she got terrible bags under her eyes. Flash remembered that she'd been pretty good-looking when Peanut married her. But she didn't look that good anymore and it wasn't just because she was pregnant. Everything about her body had slackened and weakened.

Peanut came out of the house, the screen door slapping behind him. He stepped over Lee-Ann's feet and took the



stairs two at a time. When he stood beside the Comet his head was only a little higher than the car roof.

"You're gonna have to give me a ride, Flash. I smashed up the Falcon pretty good last night." He slid into the passenger's seat and told Flash to "burn it."

"Lee-Ann won't like it."

"So? Burn it."

Flash revved it, the engine roaring beneath his hands like something alive and when the time was right, he shot the car forward, the back wheels squealing and spitting gravel. When they were out of sight of the house he slowed it down.

"Lee-Ann come down hard on you cuz of the Falcon?"

Peanut nodded. "She's cranky as hell all the time. Slaps the kids if they drop a spoon. Can't say hello to her or she picks a fight."

"I guess a lotta women are like that when they're pregnant."

"She's like that even when she ain't pregnant---which ain't very often. She's the only woman I know who's had morning sickness every day of her life."

They drove in silence for a while. Flash felt something like panic rising inside him. He turned suddenly to look at Peanut.

"But Peanut, it sure must be nice to have a warm body to sleep next to at night---"

"Lee-Ann don't let me sleep in the bed with her. She says I take too much room and make her sweaty. I either sleep

on the couch or find a bed somewheres else."

Flash stared out through the windshield, concentrating on the white line down the middle of the highway. When he spoke this time he made sure his voice was low and offhand.

"When's Lee-Ann expectin' the baby anyway?"

"I dunno. November, December. Somewhere around there."

"Shit. Twenty-four years old and you're gonna be a father for the fourth time already."

"Yeah, well, I dunno if I'm gonna stick around for the next one."

"What? Whadya mean? You're leavin' Lee-Ann?"

"Yeah. Maybe. I think so."

"She know?"

"No. Yeah. Well, she'd have to be pretty dumb not to have a pretty good idea."

Peanut coughed, started poking around in the glove compartment. He pulled a can of beer out from under a heap of rags. When he opened it, it bubbled sluggishly over the rim and down onto his hand.

"It's really that bad between you two, Peanut?"

Peanut nodded, took a swallow of beer. "Yup. I'd rather be married to Winston."

Flash gunned the car then, popped it up through the gears until they were going over a hundred miles an hour. Straight out on a flat stretch of highway. He felt like he was going to fly through the windshield. He never wore a seatbelt so if something went wrong, if he hit a rut in the

road or a bird flew into his path, he could fly through the windshield. That was the best part. The not knowing. He glanced over at Peanut. Peanut looked back, his hair plastered away from his face, and grinned at Flash. Flash eased up a little bit on the gas and then jumped it forward again. It felt like they were going even faster now, felt as if when they reached the end of the flat stretch of highway the car would take off like a plane on a runway. But Flash kept the edge of the road in sight. When he saw the turn-off to the gravel pit he jack-knifed the car onto it. Peanut bounced off the door and Flash felt a sudden stab of satisfaction when a pained, appreciative "w" was forced out of Peanut. Flash pulled the car into the flat bottom of the pit then twisted the car into a three-sixty so that it faced the far end of the pit when it stopped.

Peanut stared at him, still grinning. Their conversation seemed to have left no mark on his face. "Ya know, Flash, you're gettin' better and better all the time. You really oughta think seriously about Napierville."

For a split second Flash saw Winston when he looked at Peanut's face, so wide and empty and child-like. He nodded and looked away.

Most of the cars were down at the end of the pit, about a half-mile away, and the rest would be there soon. Flash picked out Lenny Graves' baby blue Camaro. Lenny was the only one who could give him a run for his money and even he had never beaten Flash. Only two people had. One was a

fellow from Sherbrooke with a car imported from the States. He'd even had a parachute hitched to the back of his car that shot out when the race was over. It had only been for show though because Flash knew he wasn't going that fast, just barely nosed past him at the end. The other driver had been Jackson Travers, a local boy. Everyone had said he had an airplane engine under the hood of his car. Flash believed the story the day he raced against Jackson. Jackson beat him by a good two car lengths and Flash had had the feeling he wasn't even pushing it. After that Jackson went to Napierville every weekend and brought home trophy after trophy. Then he was hit by a car in the fog on his way to the big time at Saratoga or somewhere down in the States. Sometimes when he was really flooring it, a picture of the mangled car they had towed back to Jackson's parents would jump into Flash's head and stick there, make it impossible to concentrate.

All that Flash had to race against these days were second-raters. Lenny Graves, the postman's son. Evvy Pritchard, the mayor's son. Joe Paulette, the hardware store owner's son. They were all average. Flash figured that if he went around and stuck a number on every car, a "one" for himself, a "two" for Lenny and so on down the line, the cars would pretty well finish that way in the races. Most of the drivers knew who they'd stand the best chance with and automatically paired up with them at the starting line.

Flash drove over to where the other cars were parked and

let Peanut out. He stayed inside the Comet and smoked. He didn't feel like being with the other men, not today. Flash watched them. He hadn't realized how much they looked alike, moved alike. They were all loose-boned and tall, their arms and throats sunburned. And they moved as if they were half asleep, digging grooves in the sand with their toes, blowing smoke rings, mumbling to one another. They only came alive for a few quick seconds, the few quick seconds it took to run a drag race.

The cars raced in two's down a flat stretch about a half mile long. At the end of the track two red drums marked the finish and when a race was won one of the boys would stand to the side and flag the winner. Then the cars would circle out to the edges of the pit and park back by the starting line. The first four or five races were over by the time Flash finished his cigarette.

When it was his turn Flash eased the car up to the starting line, making sure the Comet's nose was exactly even with the nose of Lenny's baby blue Camaro. He let the engine roar and when the white handkerchief dropped, the Comet shot forward. Already he was a car length ahead of Lenny. He felt every bump on the track in the soles of his feet. He felt the engine in the pit of his stomach, felt it roll and turn and circle. But something was different today. Today there was nothing new about it, every bump and rut in the track, every shift and bounce of the car was familiar. He

had felt all the same things a hundred times before. He felt suddenly numb and dragged down, as if the hard floor of the pit had somehow turned into slow-rolling quicksand.

It seemed as if the Comet was plowing through mud but Flash pushed it across the finish line, beating Lenny by at least two car lengths. They were the last racers so he and Lenny turned together and drove back down the track, nose to nose. Flash glanced across at the Camaro and Lenny nodded and grinned. There was something about the grin that made Flash want to spit. Lenny grinned like he didn't even mind losing, as if even knowing he would lose was all right. The goddamned fucking bastard probably hadn't even tried. If he'd won, the other drivers would've said it was a fluke, and it probably would have been, so why even try. Flash jammed his foot down and sped forward a few feet. Then he slammed on the brakes. Lenny kept going at the same speed, right by him. Flash gunned it again and when Lenny passed him this time he shot Flash an embarrassed look. This time Flash went about twenty feet ahead and whipped the Comet into Lenny's path. Lenny slammed on the brakes, his car bouncing like an old mattress. Flash backed up even with Lenny. He gunned his engine and stared into the Camaro. His finger tapped once, twice on the steering wheel and then he slammed down his foot until he thought he'd drive the pedal through the floor.

Lenny kept up with him this time, the Camaro's nose even with Flash's hubcap. Flash floored it but he knew that

even if he eased up he could still beat Lenny. They were getting closer and closer to where the cars were parked behind the starting line. They would be on top of them any minute. With fifty feet to go there was a squeal of tires beside him and Lenny had stopped clear. Flash let it go a few more feet then jack-knifed the car and sped across the floor of the pit to the opposite wall. When he'd gone as far as he could in that direction he turned the Comet around and took it out the mouth of the pit and home.

Flash had been watching demolition derby on television for what seemed like hours. He stared at the screen but everything blurred together. All he could think about was his race with Lenny yesterday afternoon. He tried to think about something else but every time he concentrated all he heard was his mother's voice and Winston's moaning coming from the bedroom.

Flash got up and tip-toed over to the bedroom door. His mother was sitting on the edge of Winston's bed with her back to Flash. She was cutting Winston's hair, leaning over and snipping his fine bangs. Somehow she had propped him up on a pillow and wrapped a tablecloth around his neck to catch the hair. She was talking to him, making little encouraging sounds for him. Flash had heard people talk to dogs like this when they were trying to teach them tricks. She leaned back finally to survey her work, holding up a little mirror for Winston to look into. Winston reached

out to touch the mirror and Flash saw his mother's back stiffen, almost twitch. She took Winston's hand in her own and pressed it to her mouth, held it there for a long time.

Flash leaned his full weight against the door frame. There was something in his throat and he went to the sink for a drink of water. He leaned against the counter with the glass in his hand and stared out the window. A few minutes later his mother came out with the tablecloth bundled in her hands. Shiny blond hairs stuck to it. She went to the front door and let the wind untwist the cloth. When she started shaking it, flapping it hard in the air, Flash went to her and took it from her. She stood beside him while he shook the last hairs out.

When Peanut walked up the driveway a few minutes later Flash was still in the doorway, the tablecloth tucked under his arm. It was beginning to get dark and a long yellow column of light from Winston's bedroom stretched across the lawn. Peanut stopped in front of Flash and offered him a cigarette. Flash shook his head "no." He noticed that in the faint light that came from the kitchen, Peanut's face looked pale, almost greenish.

"I'm goin' to Napierville, Flash, and I want you to come with me."

Flash wasn't surprised. This had been coming for a long time. He said nothing and Peanut raced on. "I figure we could stay in a motel out there and get some new parts for the Comet. I got two thousand dollars here." He patted the



pocket of his jeans. "That should hold us 'til you start winnin'."

"You mean go there and stay?"

"It's the only way to do it. That way you can take in all the races. I been savin' this money," he patted his pocket again, "for over a year and a half and---"

"Doesn't Lee-Ann need that money?"

Peanut's face turned sour, sullen. "Lee-Ann ain't the woman I married."

"What about Ma and Winston?"

"There's welfare." Peanut took a long haul on his cigarette, pushed the smoke out through his teeth. "I'm offerin' you somethin', Flash. I'm offerin' you somethin' that ain't going to come around again."

The finality in Peanut's voice frightened Flash, made him want to jump into the Comet right then and there and drive all night to Napierville. But he stayed in the shadow of the doorway, twisting the tablecloth in his hands, listening. It was quiet out. He could hear frogs singing in the swamp beside the house. And he could hear Winston's moaning. It drifted out of the bedroom and slid across the floor, slow and easy like the breeze that wound around Flash's ankles.

"Well, you comin' with me or not?" Peanut poked his head forward, jabbed at the air with the stub of his cigarette.

And this time it was the fear, the desperation on Pea-

nut's face that pushed Flash back into the house, back to the light coming from Winston's room.

### At the Deer Farm

After a while I'm not sure about anything I see. Every bridge we cross over, every farmhouse and cluster of trees we drive past look equally foreign and familiar to me. I should have known better than to trust my memory, my wobbly sense of direction to lead us back to that deer farm I visited when I was fifteen years old. I could easily have confused this route with another---we visited so many different places that gung-ho "summer of adventure," as my father liked to call it. Maybe this is the way to the fish hatchery or the Whiterock Caverns. Maybe I've mixed up the landmarks, deposited them into the wrong space and time.

"I think we turn left here."

Jeffrey makes the turn, jerking the wheel. I see the beginnings of a scowl forming behind his eyes. It took us at least an hour to drive out from the city and now another hour of poking along rutted dirt roads that are covered with a treacherous layer of invisible ice. Even Vicky, who

is almost abnormally patient for a three year old, is growing fidgety on my lap, drumming her heels against my shins. Asking questions about nearly everything we pass along the way, questions impossible to answer because what she's seen has already disappeared by the time I turn my head. My sister Myra would know if we were on the right track. She was the family navigator on those childhood trips around Laurel County, practically carried road maps inside her head.

Suddenly Vicky squeals, bouncing up and down on my lap, slapping the palms of her hands against the car window. I pull her sticky fingers away from the glass and there it is--- the fenced-in field, the mossy feeding troughs, the sagging, weatherbeaten barns lined up in a row like motel cabins. A sign, somehow prehistoric looking with its child-like stick figure of a deer painted into one corner, is wired to the mesh fence and reads "MINIATURE DEER --- VIEW AT YOUR LEESURE." Behind the fence I spot at least six of the little creatures, all of them with their heads up, suddenly frozen by the sound of our car.

I reach out and touch Jeffrey's arm. "This is it."

He nods. Without looking at me he pulls the car sharply onto the shoulder.

I open the door and Vicky has jumped out even before I have a chance to button up her jacket, pull on her mittens. She barrels down the gentle slope beside the road, tripping on a protruding root but she is in too much of a rush to stop and cry. She rights herself, reaching the fence just before

Jeffrey and I do.

We stand and look at each other. We at the deer, the deer at us. They are all so small, no taller than sheep but not nearly as squat. Everything shrunken down, reduced, except for the eyes, huge in their tiny, fine-boned heads. Looking at them, seeing those eyes, I suddenly remember a picture I came across the other day. Flipping through the encyclopedias in search of an answer to one of Vicky's never-ending questions, I found a picture wedged into a corner of the "Mammals" section, a picture of the oldest known ancestor of the deer. Recreated, the caption said, with the aid of fossil remains. A rabbit-like little creature no bigger than a cat with padded toes instead of cloven hooves. And great opaque eyes like pools of black cave water, like the eyes of night-time rodents.

Gradually one of the deer breaks away from the others and zig-zags warily closer. Vicky, standing between Jeffrey and me, wraps her arms around herself to keep her excitement in check, her face already glowing with anticipation. I've noticed on my frequent visits to the zoo with Vicky that there is almost always one plucky animal in every bunch, one braver than the rest. And often it is the one with the game leg, the crippled wing that thrusts up against the bars of the cage first, bulldozing its way forward as if it can somehow outrace its own disadvantage. I've seen the same thing in children, this working double-time to make up for what sets them apart, to make up for the red hair, the thick glasses,

brain that works embarrassingly fast. But this little doe that pushes her nose at Vicky's fingers seems perfect, is set apart only by her loveliness. Already her coat is smooth and russet-coloured. She has shed the moth-eaten grey winter fur that still clings in patches to the other deer who circle timidly behind her.

I hand Vicky a crust of bread from the bag we've brought along and she holds it out toward the nuzzling deer. I wince as the doe bares her teeth, straining to reach the outstretched bread.

"Bring it closer, Vicky. She won't bite." And Jeffrey takes Vicky's elbow, guides her hand forward. How can he be so sure? How can he know?

Vicky takes the bread bag from me, feeds the deer another crust, giggling when the doe's velvety lips touch her fingers. The other deer are sidling closer, their fear giving way to curiosity, hunger. I climb part way back up the slope and settle on a rock there. Today is an unusually cold day for late April and the earlier glacial rain has added an edge of dampness to the air. I duck my head into the hood of my jacket and light a cigarette to keep warm. Watch Vicky and Jeffrey through the haze of smoke that rises in front of me. They are probably discussing deer, Jeffrey telling Vicky about how they shed their antlers, about the camouflage spots of fawns, about foraging habits. Twin smoky columns rise above their heads, their warm breath turned to mist.

There is a farmhouse and a barn down to the left, well within shouting distance of where I sit. It belongs to a Mr. Lagarde, or it did fifteen years ago, and I'm surprised I remember his name after all this time. He must be at church now; there is no movement at the house except for the sluggish, fitful turning of the fish-shaped weather-vane on the roof. But that afternoon we drove by with my father Mr. Lagarde was home, came shuffling up the road to greet us. A tiny, wizened man, his mouth stretched into a wide grin to show a single row of blunt, yellow teeth. My father met him with his best Sunday smile, sliding easily into his country squire pose (his country square pose, as Myra always called it), hooking his fingers into his suspenders, leaning against our car and commenting on the apparent good health of Mr. Lagarde's crops, the well-groomed appearance of his barn. As if we had intended on stopping here all along, had driven out just to see Mr. Lagarde's property. Not once letting on that we were actually on our way to some dingy little museum on the outskirts of Laurel County and Myra, spotting a lone deer behind the mesh fence, had pounded on the back of my father's seat until he agreed to pull over and stop.

We followed Mr. Lagarde down to the fence, Myra and I trotting along on either side of my father, each of us with a shoulder caught in the grip of one of his strong hands. Myra leaned down and pulled up a tuft of grass from the ground near the base of the fence, threaded it through the

mesh. One of the tiny deer edged forward, sniffed at the grass and then pulled the whole lot of it into its mouth. My father chuckled, squeezed Myra's shoulder.

"You be careful now. We don't want Mr. Lagarde's deer to get too fat."

I frowned, shifted uneasily under the weight of my father's hand.

While Myra and I continued to push grass through the fence, my father and Mr. Lagarde discussed the breeding of the deer. I half-listened to them as I lured a little doe close enough to nibble at my fingers. Mr. Lagarde had snared two fawns fifteen years ago. Through a careful process of elimination and selection, by breeding only the smallest does to the smallest bucks, he had managed to get them down to this size---about two-thirds as big as a regular deer.

"What's the point?" Myra's voice broke suddenly into the conversation. I jumped, not realizing she had even been paying any attention. I saw my father snatch his hand from her shoulder as if he had been burned.

Mr. Lagarde hesitated, his eyelids drooping in thought. Then he grinned at Myra.

"Well, Miss, I'm hoping to sell them to zoos one day. And to eventually breed them down small enough to be house pets."

Myra nodded, as if she had known all along this would be his answer. She fixed first Lagarde and then my father with her brilliant blue eyes and flipping her long russet



hair over her shoulder, she dismissed them. She turned and walked away, one of the little deer trotting beside her. At the southernmost corner of the field she squatted down and touched noses with the deer through the fence, her mournful voice drifting back to me as she talked to it. A minute or so later, mumbling something about going back to the car, I escaped from under my father's hand and shuffled over to join Myra.

My father snapped pictures then, taking careful aim with his Kodak, plodding over rocks and through bramble to get the best angle, several times ordering Myra or me to pose in front of the fence or beneath the hand-lettered sign. Weeks later, when the photos were finally developed, I saw nothing but blurs of foliage overlaid with a web of wire mesh. But my father insisted he had captured the deer in at least a dozen of the frames and fanning the snapshots out, peering at them the way some amateur scientist might study specimen slides under a microscope, he discovered first a truncated antler, then a blurred black muzzle, then the pale shadow of a white, upturned tail and waved the pictures triumphantly in our faces.

Once my father had rounded Myra and me up, reeling us in with a whistle and a beckoning motion of his finger, we said our good-byes. Mr. Lagarde must have remembered that my father had introduced himself as Reverend Shepherd because he abruptly spread his arms wide to take in the deer in the field and said, "This is my flock. Mes moutons."

I felt my father's hand tighten, ever so slightly where it once again rested on the nape of my neck and I saw a shadow of anger cross over his smiling face. He took his leave curtly, icily, dragging Myra and me hurriedly back up the slope to the car.

When we were on the road again my father shook his head, glanced over his shoulder to where Myra and I sat in the back seat. "That," he said, "was a horse of a different colour." In the rear-view mirror I saw the reflection of his eyes, crinkling at the corners in amusement. Myra and I exchanged a furtive look of distaste, disbelief; we had heard this expression often enough to know that my father was talking about Catholics. Both of us slouched deeper into the back seat as if we wished we could sink clear through the upholstery and be free of my father's embarrassing, irritating presence.

Vicky is skipping along beside the fence now, arms out to her sides for balance. Her hands paddle through the air making the "flying fish" motion, as Jeffrey calls it, that she makes when she lies belly down in the shallow water of the bath-tub. She steps into a puddle that has formed in the rut at the base of the fence and water splashes up her pant leg. This stops her and she lets out an impish giggle. She glances quickly at me and then brings her other foot down hard into the puddle, more water spraying up. The little doe who has been trotting along beside her jumps back stiff-legged at the splashing sound. It will be a miracle if Vicky gets through this day without catching pneumonia.

Then with one foot still in the puddle her body turns suddenly quiet, her eyes fixed on something in the field. I have seen her like this before, have often found her sitting motionless, plastic tea-cup suspended half-way to her lips or toy alphabet block held high above some teetering, lopsided construction as she stares into space with bright, almost feverish blue eyes.

Jeffrey breaks the spell now, patting the crown of Vicky's head like a magician tapping a top hat with his wand. She beams up at him and points in the direction of the deer barns. Her face is flushed, her voice excited, insistent, as she tugs on the hem of Jeffrey's jacket. I grind my cigarette into the rock and shuffle across the brittle grass to where they stand. Jeffrey turns when I get there, shrugs.

"She says she sees something over there to the left of the barns."

I look, see nothing but a clump of bushes. I adjust my glasses, squint through them. Still nothing except a tight criss-cross of newly-budded branches. I squat down next to Vicky. Her eyes are rivetted on something and she refuses to look at me when I talk to her.

"What do you see, honey?"

"Baby. Baby deer."

I study the spot again, still see nothing. Just last week we read Bambi and maybe her imagination is working overtime.

"I don't see anything, sweetie. Are you sure?"

She turns her head then, glares at me. So exasperated, already wondering how big people can be so stupid, so blind. She turns stubbornly back to stare through the fence.

"Baby!" she shouts and smacks the fence with her small hands, making it vibrate. "Baby!"

Before I can stop myself, before I can say to myself the necessary calming words, I grab her hands, force them down to her sides, twist her round so she is looking at me, only me.

"Vicky, there is nothing there." The words come out louder than I intended them to.

"Do you hear me?" Still louder.

"Absolutely nothing."

Jeffrey's eyes are large and he allows my name, a shocked "Elaine," to slip past his lips but he will wait to reprimand me in private, will not humiliate me in front of Vicky. My face burns under Vicky's stare. I see I have left marks on her forearms, little red crescents where my fingernails dug in. She rubs absently at these. She is unimpressed by my words---she has heard subtler, milder variations of the same thing dozens of times before---and turns back to watch the deer.

But the words have their effect on me. I half run back up the hill where I shut myself inside the cold car. Those were my father's words, aimed at my sister Myra hundreds of times when she was a child. Myra, there is nothing there.  
Do you hear me? Absolutely nothing.

Other expressions of his creep into my conversations, too. Often I hear myself warning Vicky to "beware of false prophets" or when she is particularly obstinate I insist that she "be tolerant of spirit," the awkward, archaic phrases leaving a leaden taste in my mouth. I didn't think Vicky even heard me, let alone understood me, but then just last week I caught her reciting "All we like sheep have gone astray" as if it was in the same sing-song nursery rhyme league as "Little Bo-peep has lost her sheep." Hearing this, I wanted to suck the dry little cluster of words back inside me. And I kept them inside until a few moments ago, until I saw the willful forward thrust of Vicky's fine-boned head, the stubborn set to her mouth. Myra's expressions, Myra's poses. And then my father's words dropping from lips with the dead weight of pebbles.

I feel suddenly shaken to the bone by cold and pull the car blanket over my shoulders, duck into it like a turtle into its shell and light a cigarette. Slide down in the seat and study the reflection of the rutted dirt road we've just come along, neatly reduced in the rear-view mirror as it snakes backward into a tangle of leafless trees.

\* \* \*

My sister Myra and I were the products of a miracle. Or so my father always said. When we were growing up he never tired of telling us how our births, our very conceptions,

had defied all reasonable odds. Apparently my mother could not---by his tone my father always implied she somehow would not---get pregnant and so after two years of "trying" they visited a doctor. My mother was pronounced infertile but my father would not accept such a preposterous diagnosis, refusing to believe it was God's will that he should remain childless. So my parents prayed each night for guidance and within a year of their visit to the doctor my mother was pregnant with Myra. In another year I arrived on the scene. A miracle still, I suppose, but somehow a second-class miracle. Early on I believed that Myra had literally cleared the way for me, shattering whatever barriers existed inside my mother and making my conception and birth merely a reminder of how truly amazing Myra's birth had actually been.

According to my father Myra's birth had caused a definite stir in Laurel and at this point in telling his story he would invariably produce an old newspaper clipping as proof positive of this. He would thrust the tattered, blurred photograph at Myra and me and wait while we studied it and made the expected complimentary remarks. The picture, cut from the now defunct Laurel County Churchman, he always told us, was sealed between two sheets of yellow, brittle plastic. It showed my mother perched on a hospital bed with my beaming father standing next to her, holding a squint-eyed, very newborn Myra in his arms. Beneath the photograph, in capital letters, was the caption "MIRACLE BABY!" and below this were a few details about my parents being "blessed from above"

with a little seven pound "gift from God" in spite of the most dire of medical predictions. By the time Myra and I were eight or nine years old we ceased to see the photograph, didn't even focus on it when it was placed in front of us. And I suppose we thought we didn't really hear my father's endless droning either. But I know I did. Those phrases--- "blessed from above," "gift from God," which my father readily integrated into his own telling of this story---stuck with me. I heard those words, so often that it began to sound to me as if Myra was part of some sort of celestial business transaction, presented to my father for services rendered. Before I was old enough to understand the mechanics of sex and while I was still young enough to apply the catchwords of my father's sermons to everything around me, I decided that Myra's birth must have been the result of an immaculate conception. So immaculate, in fact, that no woman had been involved at all. I believed that my father must have found Myra the way I sometimes found robin's eggs---inexplicably nestled in the grass on our front lawn like bits of fallen sky, miraculously perfect and intact.

In my memory, Myra is perfect. And in the snapshots I've kept of her she is as close to physical perfection as any child could be. My father liked to preserve practically every moment of our lives for posterity and I've saved at least one photograph from each epoch of Myra's childhood. I have pictures commemorating her baptism, her graduation from elementary school, her confirmation, her first violin

recital, her first art exhibit at the local Legion Hall. And I have photographs of each of her birthday parties right up until her sweet sixteen. If I sort through them in order, I see Myra growing in fits and starts from a tiny, almost frail-looking baby into a tall, lissome young woman with a head of thick, shining auburn hair. A beauty with vivid blue eyes. Once when Myra was perhaps eleven years old she made a blouse out of a sickly fabric that the catalogues described as "Electric Blue." The colour, a blazing cobalt, matched her eyes and since then I have always thought of them that way, as electric blue. Rivetting eyes that stare the camera down, almost glare out from behind the web of creases and scratches that mars the glassy surface of each photograph.

My father decided that since our births had been supposed impossibilities, nothing should be beyond us in the future. We must leave no rock unturned, no stream unforded. The two of us were enrolled in music and dance classes. We were signed into drama clubs, stamp clubs, bird-watching clubs. We joined Brownies, then Girl Guides, then Explorers. We sang in the choir, worked at church bazaars, sat on the Young Christians Committee. And through it all rang my father's chant-like refrain of "Nothing is Impossible." When Myra complained of her absolute hopelessness with algebra problems or geometry theorems or chemistry equations, my father would respond with "Nothing is Impossible." The same litany I would hear---delivered as always with an irri-



tating gusto---whenever I insisted on the utter inability of my own stubby fingers to play a particular set of piano scales. "Nothing is Impossible." And we were obliged to try again and again until whatever it was became possible.

To me it seemed as if nothing was impossible for Myra. When she was very young she began to see things, things that were always miles beyond my plane of vision, beyond anyone's normal plane of vision. It began on a winter day when Myra was about seven years old. My father had a passion for ice-fishing on Spider Lake behind our house, a passion he insisted Myra and I share with him, so that Saturday in February the three of us sat round the oil-drum stove inside my father's drafty little particle-board shanty and waited for the fish to bite. We all stared out through the large picture window that filled almost an entire wall, out at the neat row of six holes my father had drilled in the ice, at the neat row of tip-ups he had driven in beside the holes. Myra sat with her elbows resting on the narrow window-sill. She sang to herself, rocking back and forth on the soft-drink crate she used for a chair.

Then her singing suddenly stopped in mid-verse. I saw her back stiffen, and her head tilt up. She tapped sharply on the window glass.

"The last tip-up on this side." Her voice was loud, excited.

She was pointing at the stick furthest to the left. I had been staring at that one all along, having decided it

was my lucky tip-up, and I had seen no movement there. My father must have been looking at it, too, for he turned to Myra, spoke impatiently.

"There's no fish there, Myra."

"There will be in a minute."

And then, miraculously, the red-tipped cross-bar quivered and dipped sharply downward. Nobody moved. My father seemed so shaken that I doubt he even thought to go out and reel the fish in off the line.

Just before we packed up our gear that day, my father told Myra and me not to tell a soul about Myra's assumed predictions, which she had repeated twice that afternoon. I had been looking forward to giving my friends the news at school the next day but the panic in my father's voice kept me silent. Still, I didn't have to stay quiet, for after a few more afternoons out on the lake, during which Myra's predictions proved accurate again and again, my father seemed to lose his fear. He even began to brag about what he called Myra's "superior response time" and every visitor to our shanty that winter was treated to my father's story about Myra's amazing talent at flash-cards. According to him, Myra could give the answer to  $16 - 9$  or  $18 + 5$  or  $12 \times 4$  almost before she even saw the numbers. For my father this seemed to explain everything.

I could always tell when Myra had seen something unusual. Her eyes deepened in colour until they were almost black and they bore into me as she told me about what she had just

witnessed. One day she reported seeing a catfish flopping along the muddy shore at the Spider Lake inlet, heaving itself from one shallow puddle to the next. Another time she saw a luna moth, in daylight, hovering huge and velvety above a milkweed blossom, "As if it was trying to pass for a butterfly," Myra said. And still another time she told of seeing a coydog---half-coyote, half-mongrel dog, she thought---rooting round the garbage bins behind the slaughterhouse in Laurel. But my father invariably found explanations for visions that, like these, were too outlandish for his taste. In his opinion (a humble one he always assured us), the catfish was a bullfrog, the luna moth a hummingbird and the coydog was Jackie Phelan's German Shepherd, a mangy, arthritic creature that my father considered even more of a mutant than any so-called coydog could ever be because it had once dared to snap at my father's ankle and had left tooth holes in his best pair of clerical pants.

We were not to repeat this sort of story outside the house. My father felt that walking catfish, scavenging coyotes and the like fell beyond the realm of physical possibility and warned Myra that people would believe only so much before they branded her completely crazy or, even worse, eccentric. But other stories he allowed us to circulate. Those stories which I think he believed had the best chance of finding confirmation from someone else in Laurel. From someone else reputable. And usually they did. Two weeks after Myra saw a bear on the Lightfoot road (none had been

sighted in Laurel in over a decade), Mabel Dempster nearly ran over it with her husband's pick-up truck. Myra saw a scarlet tanager where none had ever been reported so far north and a few days later it was seen by several people, sitting pretty as a picture on the peaked roof of the hardware store. When Myra told of an albino deer she saw on one of her treks through the woods that surrounded our house, my father hushed it up. But luckily for him the news leaked out because within a week it was sighted in the next county, flitting along the edge of some farmer's woodlot, swift and silvery white as a ghost.

Other people who saw things in Laurel---like old Danny Dalton who every few months reported seeing his dead wife standing out on the little jetty behind his house---were referred to with that smirking, patronizing fondness so common in small towns. But Myra was never treated like Denny, even when her stories weren't confirmed. She was, after all, the minister's daughter and so her reports were endowed with a credibility never possible for someone like Denny whose own father had been one of the garbage-picking Daltons.

Myra did much for my father's credibility, too. While he preached God's wonders from the pulpit she sat in the front pew, week after week, year after year, living proof of these wonders. Living proof, too, of my father's virility. After all, he had impregnated a barren woman, a feat which especially impressed his female parishioners. There was a

great commotion whenever he made one of his impromptu visits to the ladies' auxiliary meetings. Sitting off in the corner with my mother, who never seemed to notice anything except the crochet work in her lap, I watched as tittering ladies lumbered to find my father a chair, jostled to win a seat next to him and then carried out their business with strained, self-conscious faces, double chins and protruding bellies tucked in tight. My father basked in the attention. I think he even began to seek it. He always sat in on the women's choir practice---never the men's---claiming that the ladies lacked an organizing, disciplinary force. During the pleasantries after Sunday services he clasped the gloved hands of his female parishioners for an embarrassingly long time (Myra and I counted one-elephant, two-elephant for each one), fixing them with his sparkling amber eyes until they flushed and stepped aside. And sometimes he dropped in on the auxiliary while they prepared for one of their numerous bake sales, often dragging Myra and me along with him. He always joked with the ladies---who on these afternoons called him William instead of the usual Reverend Shepherd---and sitting perched on the kitchen counter he allowed bits of blueberry muffin or date bread or chocolate fudge to be popped into his open mouth. The women always leaned a little close during this procedure and with their great breasts almost resting in my father's lap they marvelled at how he could possess such a healthy appetite and still maintain his trim physique.

Trim physique. Myra and I got a good deal of mileage out of that one. The two of us nearly sick with laughter as we took turns mimicking Mabel Dempster or Judith Brown or Gloria Pennington purring over the words "trim physique" and tilting their heads in a girlish gesture they had probably not even thought of using in over thirty years. When we first noticed the flirtations we were around ten or eleven years old and we knew next to nothing about sex. My father was more than willing to talk to us about our own special "genesis" as he came to call it but he never went beyond clinical detail. He filled us with unwanted information about the complex wiring of the DNA helix, the incorporation of male and female gametes, the intricate ~~maneuverings~~ of X and Y chromosomes, going on and on until the whole thing sounded to me far more like an algebra equation than it did like any so-called blessed event. He told us over and over about my mother's under-developed ovaries that the doctor had said were no bigger than two withered peas. And about her irregular, unreliable cycles, making my mother's insides sound like some sluggish, stagnant tidal pool. He told us also about what he had learned from this whole ordeal--- that he would never again under-estimate the miraculous potency of the male seed.

Myra and I learned instead to piece things together for ourselves, gathering information from books and magazines and from friends that we believed must be more knowledgeable than ourselves, the two of us whispering and comparing notes in

the safety of our bedroom long after we were supposed to be asleep. Sometimes, if I didn't understand---and often I didn't---Myra would draw pictures for me, pictures that we studied under the beam of a flashlight. When I couldn't fathom what a womb was, Myra made a drawing of a woman with a belly like a window so that I could see the baby neatly curled inside. She sketched a penis, something neither of us had ever seen, drawing from memory after she'd taken a furtive peek inside an old biology text left over from my father's college days. And just before my thirteenth birthday, when I still couldn't figure out how the male and female bodies could possibly fit together, Myra drew a picture of two lovers. It showed a man and a woman lying on a ruffled bed, their bodies tightly coiled in an embrace. Myra said she had seen something like it in an art book in the school library. I looked at the sketch for a long time, at the breasts and thighs and bellies pressed so close, at all the naked skin. At the rapturous faces, the lines of muscle, of pleasure in the legs and buttocks. I tried to imagine my father and mother lying like this, tried to convince myself that Myra and I were the products of such an act. It seemed impossible.

A few days later my father came stamping out onto the back porch and bellowed down at Myra and me where we sat on the little jetty, bare feet dangling in the lake.

"Girls, get up here."

We knew something was wrong so we took our time walking

up the lawn. When we reached the top of the stairs my father pulled a piece of paper out from behind his back and held it gingerly in front of his chest. It was Myra's sketch of the two lovers and I felt the blood drain out of my face. Framed by my father's black clerical shirt, it hardly looked like the same picture. The figures on the page seemed pale and lifeless, as if they had been pinned to the paper like insects on a square of cardboard.

"My father fixed Myra with his glittering eyes. "I see you've turned to pornography now."

Myra glared at him. "Where did you get that?"

"That isn't important. What is important is where in God's name did you get the idea for such a picture?"

I took a deep breath. "She wanted to show me what making love is."

My father's eyebrows shot upward. "Love? This is what you call love?" He took off his glasses and rubbed at the two red crescents on either side of his nose. Gazed at Myra with his watery, bleary, unfocused eyes. He shook his head. "And this is what they teach you in art class."

He made us follow him into the bathroom then and watch while he ceremoniously ripped the drawing into bits and sent it swirling down the toilet. I felt lucky to escape without worse punishment---this time my father decided not to pull back our weekend curfew, not to lecture us on lady-like behaviour---and I watched with relief as the drawing disappeared into the plumbing. But when I turned to leave I



found Myra standing rigid in the doorway, her face drained of colour, her chest heaving quick and shallow beneath her crossed arms.

Although Myra shone at nearly everything she tried, she was best at art, showed a talent for portraiture almost as soon as she could lift crayon to paper. She'd won dozens of poster contests and local art competitions with her bold, vivid paintings and Mr. Clemens, the art teacher at Laurel Comprehensive, had told my parents Myra should go on to art school when she graduated. My father had never shown much interest in Myra's artistic abilities. But not long after the episode with the picture of the lovers, he arranged for Myra to have her own portrait booth at church socials. For a charge of one dollar she made charcoal sketches of the local ladies. She reproduced the various faces with a startling, almost photographic accuracy, following my father's instructions and leaving out warts, moles and excessive wrinkling. She sold landscapes, too, small pencil sketches of tree stumps and toadstools, collapsing barns and tumbling stone fences, the kind of drawings that Myra could practically turn out with her eyes closed but the sort of picture that sold well at handicraft fairs. That summer, the centennial year when Myra was just fourteen, she was commissioned by the town council to paint a series of Laurel County's major historical sites---to preserve our heritage in oil, my father said. She had a terrible time with the tiny canvases the council claimed was all they could afford. She

made dozens of preparatory sketches, most of which she tore up in a fury, telling me more than once that if they wanted bloody postcards they should have hired Abigail Simmons, an old lady famous in Laurel for stencilling wobbly, minute flower patterns onto porcelain tea-cups and saucers.

I studied the results of Myra's efforts on the night of the opening of her exhibit at the Legion Hall. Six 10 x 12 inch canvases in identical frames, three pictures of churches, two of houses (including our own) and one of an old round barn. People were fascinated by them, marvelling at the microscopic detail, at the thumbnail windows, the matchstick fence-posts, the cow that was no bigger than a beetle. And they were fascinated by Myra, too. They kept congratulating my father---puffed up big as a bullfrog with pride---for having produced such a beautiful and talented daughter. And they hovered awestruck about Myra, crowding round her until I could no longer see her from where I stood on the opposite side of the gallery.

I spent most of that evening out in the Legion Hall parking lot, holed up in our musty, damp Chevy so that my father wouldn't see the look of sinful, shameful envy I knew must be etched on my face. I ached to be like Myra, to be such a perfect "complete package" as my father was so fond of saying, to be a walking, talking miracle. I dreamed of having her talent for transferring what she saw to paper, of having her miraculous visionary powers. But mostly I ached to look like her. With my thin, graceless

limbs, frizzy orange hair and grey myopic eyes, I was no match for Myra. At best I looked like her sickly, stunted, very distant cousin. And I could never hope to be looked at the way she was looked at. To be the focus of all those dismayed smiles, all that incredulous head-shaking. To have boys stare at me the length of a school hallway, struck speechless, never blurting the embarrassing insults they reserved for me and other mildly attractive girls like me. Huddled deep in the back seat, pulling my sweater tight around me, I wished over and over not that I was an only child but that Myra would somehow fade to my level. Then my innocuous prettiness, my above-average grades, my middling-to-good singing would be considered quite a respectable and complete package all on their own.

Unnoticed inside the dim Chevy I watched as several times Myra burst out onto the fire escape, slamming the door behind her and bracing her slim body against it. She smoked cigarette after cigarette, the glowing ember at the tip hovering, trembling like a firefly in front of her. I half-expected her to whirl about on the iron landing in a little dance of ecstasy. I was convinced that she had come outside to privately luxuriate in her triumph, to expel some of the excitement I was sure she must be feeling. I didn't see any panic in her then.

When Myra reached fifteen or so, she and my father began to argue a lot, usually about boys. My father blamed these problems on the fact that Myra had begun to acquire

"a mind of her own," a stage of Myra's development that he always referred to in a weary, regretful tone. In July my father forbade Myra to go to a mixed beach party. The two of them had sparred over it all afternoon, Myra alternately sulky and coyly persuasive. But she was unable to dissuade my father from laying down the law. He had finally insisted that no daughter of his was going to spend an entire day lying half naked and unchaperoned on the beach while whole herds of sun-worshipping Adonises prowled around her. Myra exploded, accusing my father of living in the Stone Age, maybe even the Ice Age. She stormed into our bedroom and the sounds of slamming bureau drawers and closet doors reverberated throughout the house for the rest of the afternoon. She refused loudly from behind the door to come out for supper and when I finally went into bed she was already asleep, motionless beneath the blankets. Later that night, much later, something woke me and I turned to see Myra standing at the bedroom window, staring out at the glittering, moonlit lake. I saw her for only an instant before the moon's brilliance forced my eyes shut. A dark silhouette in the white square of the window, the full July moon, caught behind the fuzzy filament of the screen, hovering big as a noon-day sun just above her shoulder. She was rocking back and forth, heel to toe, and the cricket-like squeak of the floor-boards lulled me back to sleep. I wonder now if she was crying.

The next morning she breezed into the kitchen. With

one slender hand poised above the toaster, waiting to catch its contents, she made her announcement.

"I saw a lightning ball." When no one spoke, she continued, an edge of impatience to her voice. "Last night. It floated in off the lake."

"What did it look like?" My words echoed in the quiet kitchen.

Myra shot an angry, sidelong glance at me as if I had asked a totally inappropriate question. But after a slight pause, during which her eyelids drooped sleepily, she went on to tell us how a little reddish, bobbing ball of fire--- no bigger than a robin's egg, she said---had drifted in through our bedroom window. Sizzling and popping and making her hair prickle at the roots before it suddenly and inexplicably disappeared. Called upon to either confirm or refute this story, I turned to Myra, hoping to find some clue of an answer in her face. She refused to meet my eyes and I could only feebly suggest that maybe my fitful night's sleep had been brought about by all the electricity circulating in the room.

My father raised his eyebrows at this. What Myra had actually seen, he said, was something called ignis fatuus or Friar's Lantern for the layman. He fetched a volume of our battered Book of Knowledge set and, flipping through it, he produced a picture of this "gaseous phenomenon" as he kept calling it. I squinted at the photograph from where I stood in the kitchen doorway. It showed a blurred white dot

on a grey background and I thought it looked nothing like the fiery lightning ball that Myra had described.

"So you see, Myra dear, what you saw was simply an optical illusion. No more. No less." My father snapped the encyclopedia triumphantly shut.

Myra nodded at this with what I thought was her usual mute, grudging acceptance. But then she smiled slightly, fixed my father with mocking indigo eyes.

"Seems to me, Daddy dear, that it's impossible to take a picture of something that doesn't exist."

I stood frozen in the doorway, breathless at Myra's audacity, her foolhardiness. As she strode past me I grabbed at her arm, tried to force her to look at me. She wouldn't and, shrugging off my hand, she disappeared down the back stairs. I slipped quickly out of the room, too, afraid my father's angry gaze would settle on me and I would fall prey to his icy, splintered anger. Later, troubled by the image of Myra's heavy-lidded, furtive eyes, I went into our bedroom to study the screen on the lakeside window. I hoped I might find a circular scorch mark there or, better yet, a hole surrounded by a fringe of melted wire. But I found nothing, nothing different.

Later that month my father hired the Bergeron brothers to come work on our house. Every few years Guillaume and André Bergeron trundled into our driveway in their rickety old pick-up, unloaded their hydraulic jacks and hoisted up

our back porch where it had sunk---again---into our sandy back yard. It was quite a joke to them. The two of them would survey the sagging rear to our shoebox house and chuckling, shaking their heads, one of them would always mutter something about "relevant le Titanique." After they had sized up an already familiar situation, Guillaume would turn to Myra and me and ask the same question he asked every time he came to work on our house.

"Don't your Daddy know dat a wise man build 'is 'ouse upon de rock?" He would wink at us then and set to ripping the decorative trellis panels from beneath the porch, expecting no answer from us except our appreciative laughter. I always suspected that Guillaume deliberately exaggerated his accent whenever he spoke to Myra or me.

For my father the whole process was anything but a joke. Our house was a family house---an ancestral home as my father called it---built by some great-great-uncle or great-great-grandfather at least a hundred years earlier. It was one of the oldest, if not the oldest house still standing in Laurel County and because of this my father considered it his historical duty to preserve its original character. So year after year we had roof shingles replaced, windows resashed, holes in the fieldstone foundation plugged, the back porch heaved back up again. And year after year the rectory, a huge, airy building in the heart of Laurel, was rented out as a home to a half-dozen senior citizens. One of them was my Grampa Shepherd, "a pillar of Laurel

County society" my father said, who had made my father promise never to sell the family's "ancestral home."

Our house was almost five miles outside of Laurel on the east shore of Spider Lake and our nearest neighbours, two elderly brothers, were another two miles away. I hated to see school end in June for that meant that unless I could hitch a ride into town with my father, I would see little of my friends, few as they were, until September. I couldn't have survived those summers without Myra. On sunny days the two of us would spend whole afternoons lying on the jetty, flipping through magazines, studying lingerie ads and fashion spreads, imagining ourselves in dresses with décolletage down to there, slits up to here. Or we leafed through one of the two or three novels we'd managed to smuggle into the house, reading the steamy parts to one another. And for hour after hour we talked about boys. Usually we ended up discussing the men we would someday marry. I went along with the game, creating for myself a broad-shouldered Nordic prince with an impossibly perfect smile who could strike my father speechless with a single piercing stare of his flinty blue eyes. But deep down I was sure I would die a spinster in this house. I was convinced no boy would consider me worth the five mile trek out into the boonies. No boy would ever be willing to run my father's torturous gauntlet of questions knowing that I was the only prize. I was glad that at least I had Myra to keep me company.



Because of this isolation Guillaume's and André's arrival was always an event. Myra and I would set up the deck chairs on the lawn and for the two days that they worked we hardly stirred from the back yard. We watched as they loosened the half-dozen pillar supports and rolled the jacks into position, the two of them wheezing like bull elephants, their great fish-belly white stomachs swinging free beneath their sweat-soaked T-shirts. And then the porch chugged slowly upward---like an old man hitching up his pants, Myra always said---creaking and groaning in protest.

At noon-time Myra and I gave up our lawn chairs to Guillaume and André. We turned our backs to the house, the four of us facing out to the lake while Guillaume and André ate their lunches. Even when Guillaume ate he never stopped talking. He liked to tell us mainly about his own Olympian virility, about how he had blessed his wife with ten children---first five boys and then five girls which was just as Guillaume claimed he had planned it. He recreated some of these births for Myra's and my benefit, assuming a stern, almost teacherly expression that eliminated any thoughts of challenge that Myra and I might have harboured. He told us of one child, in too much of a rush to get into this God-forsaken world he said, that had been born on the way to the hospital, completely ruining the upholstery in Guillaume's spanking new pick-up. Another baby had emerged a deathly shade of blue ("As blue as your

eyes ma petite, Myra"), as if, Guillaume said, it had dropped out of an ice bucket and not a steaming womb. But the circumstances surrounding the birth of Guillaume's first son were probably the most amazing, the most fascinating. This child had been born with its head shrouded in a densely veined, yolkish caul which, Guillaume said was a guarantee of good fortune, a promise for the future.

Myra seemed fascinated by these stories, asking Guillaume questions about labour pains and midwives, about how babies were made in the first place. I sat silent at Guillaume's feet, too embarrassed to look anywhere except straight out at the lake, bombarded with images of torn and mutilated flesh, blood-drenched infants, ragged umbilical cords. The picture of the baby with the caul was the worst, floating up bigger than life against the backdrop of the lake as if it had somehow risen out of the water itself, the baby's head enshrouded in a thick, viscous sac as its mouth opened and closed in pitiful, silent screams.

Guillaume saved his most shocking story for the last time he and André came to work on our house. Myra was thirteen then and I was twelve. Guillaume, smiling smugly, topaz eyes glittering, had told us that he, Guillaume Bergeron, was the father of Father Delorme, Laurel's youthful parish priest.

"His father is Mr. Delorme," I insisted. I saw Myra's eyes widen in disbelief, embarrassment and I wished I could somehow draw the words back inside me, hide their naiveté.

Guillaume shook his head. André snickered.

"Before I was married to Madame Bergeron I took Madame Delorme for a little boat ride on Spider Lake. We gave each other confession," here Guillaume winked at André, "and nine months later Père Delorme was born."

Then Guillaume and André rose to go and replace the panels of weatherbeaten lattice beneath the porch, leaving Myra and me to ponder the logistics, the probability of what Guillaume had said.

But that July that Myra saw the lightning ball, it wasn't Guillaume and André who trundled up in the old pick-up. It was their sons, Julien and Paul. I had seen them before in Laurel but I had never connected these two boys, with their broad shoulders, flat stomachs and full heads of hair, with Guillaume and André. Myra and I didn't set up the lawn chairs that morning. Instead we sat down on the jetty and pretended to read magazines, all the time casting sidelong glances up at Julien and Paul. I decided that Julien was the most handsome boy I had ever seen.

They began heaving junk out from under the porch, the muscles in their bare backs jumping with every movement. I silently took note of each new piece that emerged from the cavern beneath the verandah. An old toy carriage---given to Myra as a Christmas gift nearly three years earlier, neither of my parents realizing she was too old for it by then; a rotting miniature lawn chair that I had outgrown ages ago but which my father refused to part with; a naked

Barbie doll, its rosy plastic skin and orange hair bleached almost white now, a present to Myra and me from some unknown aunt or cousin out in Alberta. Artifacts of a childhood that seemed to have occurred eons ago. Then Julien tossed out a faded yellow beach ball. Veiled in cobwebs, caved in on one side, it rolled unevenly down the lawn, stopping just short of the water.

"Remember that?"

I jumped, not realizing that Myra had even been watching. I shook my head "no."

"Daddy bought that for us in the spring two years ago. And I chased it out over my head, out past the buoy line, and Daddy said that was it. No more beach balls. Don't you remember?"

I shook my head "no" again.

"Well, that ball is the last in a long line. The last of its species. Myra laughed but there was no smile on her face. At the sound of her laughter I saw Julien pause in his work, look quickly in our direction.

At lunch time Julien and Paul joined us on the deck. We sat lined up along one side of the jetty, the pile of magazines separating Myra and me from Julien and Paul, eyeing one another, grinning. Julien offered Myra a bite from a slab of cold tourtière, a sip from his thermos. His eyes didn't leave Myra's face when he offered me the same and I refused rather rudely. I couldn't really blame him though for being so mesmerized by Myra. She looked even more beau-

tiful than usual that afternoon with her hair turned copper by the sun, her skin glowing gold. I thought if anyone had been created in God's image it was Myra.

We cast around for something to talk about and lit on Guillaume and André, Julien filling us in on the past two years during which Guillaume had become a father for the eleventh time. And then Myra blurted out the question I had been dying to ask all along.

"Your father says he's Père Delorme's father. Is that true?"

Julien laughed, a sarcastic hoot of a laugh. "My father thinks he's everybody's father. My father thinks he's got the whole bloody kingdom of God right in his own goddamned pecker." I felt myself blush at the last word.

Myra leaned forward slightly and stared at Julian.

"Where do you think it is?"

"Where do I think what is?"

"The kingdom of God?"

Julien looked away, examined his dirt-lined fingernails.

"I don't know. In church, I guess. That's what they always told us in Sunday school---L'Eglise est la Maison de Dieu."

He glanced up, looked straight at Myra for a moment. I saw that his eyes were almost as blue as hers. Then he turned his gaze out across the lake, a shimmering, rippling sheet of silver that day. "I think it's out there mostly." He extended one bare arm for a second and then let it drop. "I think there's killing powers in that water. Healing powers

too."

I thought Julien sounded a bit melodramatic but then I guessed he was trying to impress Myra. I stared down at where the water lapped against one of the jetty piles. I felt uneasy not because of what Julien had just said but because of the way that Myra looked at Julien. As if she never wanted to take her eyes off his face.

Two weeks later Myra turned sixteen---that magic age at which my father deemed us old enough to go out on dates alone---and the day after her birthday Myra announced that she was going to a corn roast with Julien Bergeron. My father took the news quite calmly considering he always referred to the Bergerons as if they were somehow subhuman, on a par with mice or rabbits because of what he called their characteristically Catholic approach to breeding. He simply warned Myra that boys of sixteen rarely showed much maturity and young Julien would probably grow quickly tired of her. I think what he really hoped was that Myra would quickly grow tired of Julien.

But she didn't. Myra was still seeing Julien well into the new year, going to movies and dances with him almost every weekend, sometimes even riding Ski-doo with him out on the frozen lake. Each winter snowmobiles whizzed by our house nearly every night. Sometimes they came so close to the shore that they made our windows hum, their headlamps piercing the darkened kitchen with sudden shafts of light.

But worse---according to my father---they interfered with our T.V. reception. A snowmobile passing on the lake would animate the stunted, captive figures on the screen into a herky-jerky electric dance 'til I was almost convinced that they would leap free from the box and spill into my lap in a molten shower where I sat squeezed behind the dinette table. Usually my father merely sighed, shook his head and drummed his fingers on his knee until the Ski-doo sped out of range and the picture readjusted itself. But when Myra was out there with Julien, every snowmobile that passed sent him into a rage, flung him from his chair to pound on the television, yank savagely at the rabbit-ears that rested so innocuously on top of the set. He thumped to the window and peered out into the murky blackness, muttering over and over how he would never make a single catch that winter, so convinced was he that every fish in the lake had been scared witless and long since swum downriver to safety. Once he had settled back in the old easy chair he kept in the corner of the kitchen, I relaxed, let my fingers loosen where they gripped the edge of the table. I wished I could be out on the lake with Myra and Julien. I wished I could be anywhere but here in this stuffy, cramped little kitchen with my mother and father.

I didn't see much of Myra during those first few months she spent with Julien. On the evenings she wasn't with Julien, my father insisted she do schoolwork and I wasn't to bother her then. But sometimes we would talk after lights

out. Usually about Julien. I learned how Julien played the trumpet, the harmonica and the guitar so well that he would probably go on to university next year on a music scholarship. I learned how Guillaume wouldn't let Julien practise anywhere near the house because he was convinced that Julien's future lay not in trumpets and guitars but as a partner in the family business and how Guillaume hated to hear Julien speak English. And I learned how much Myra loved Julien. She told me again and again how much she cared for him, pulling herself out of bed and pacing the room as if the realization would not allow her to lie still. At this point I usually rolled over to face the wall, pulling the blankets up around my ears so that I could block out her words.

When Myra wasn't with Julien she was perched on a stool in our bedroom, painting or drawing by the light that streamed through the lakeside window. Myra told me that sometimes she took her inspiration from the play of light across her sketch pad, whole worlds springing from a single, radiant spot. The pictures she produced were alive with people. People milling about in the sea of red and yellow, blue and green neon of the midway at the local Labour Day fair. People swimming, running, boating and water-skiing at the municipal beach in Laurel. And people whirling and spinning round in a room that looked remotely similar to the one where Myra and I had been taking ballet lessons every Saturday morning for the past ten years. But this room was somehow airier, brighter, and these dancers were wearing



tights and leotards flashier and far more revealing than any girl in Laurel would ever dare wear. Some of these dancers even eddying clean off the page, only a luminous orange leg, a delicately arched, blue arm left behind, as if they had simply floated free from the limits of the canvas.

Myra taped or tacked all of these pictures, rotating them every week or so, and from the fixed centre of my bed I could watch the paintings shift like constellations across the walls and ceilings of our bedroom. One painting stayed up longer than the others. It showed not people but deer. A half-dozen of them stepping gingerly across the frozen lake. In winter-time we often did see deer crossing Spider Lake, tiny figures at least a quarter-mile distant, making their treacherous way over one of the thin fingers, the spider's legs, to reach the next peninsula of trees. But with her telescopic eyes Myra had brought the deer in close and in the painting it seemed as if they passed through our very own back yard. Six deer at sunset, their rough coats absorbing the colours of the horizon. The ice beneath their hooves reflecting these same colours until it looked as if the deer had simply melted into the lake. This picture troubled me. For all its brilliant colour it seemed somehow ominous; the deers' legs looked far too slender, the ice far too thin. My father was disturbed by this painting, too, claiming it was no more than meaningless abstract rubbish, vulgar exhibitionist psychedelia, and he finally insisted that Myra take it down. After all, he said, who in their

right mind had ever heard of a rainbow-coloured deer?

But Myra didn't take the picture down until weeks after my father demanded it. In the months since she'd met Julien she'd become more and more willful, displaying that "mind of her own" way too often for my father's liking. She refused to listen to him when he forbade her to wear miniskirts, simply stuffing the scant outfits into her purse and changing into them in the washroom at school, seemingly unconcerned by the reports that would inevitably filter back to my father. She refused to attend any more Explorers meetings where she claimed they never "explored" anything more exciting than the mysteries of bread-making or the miraculous transforming powers of cosmetics. And she refused to sketch any more "toady-faced old biddies" at church socials. With each new act of defiance came days of icy silence on my father's part. If Myra happened into a room where my father was sitting he would simply take off his glasses, close his heavy-lidded eyes and feign sleep until Myra had wandered away again.

In March Myra broke curfew. I woke to the sound of the front door slamming, and fumbling for my glasses I read the luminous hands on my alarm clock. One o'clock. I listened while my father, who must have been laying in wait in the pitch-black livingroom, hissed savagely at her, promising her she would have him to deal with in the morning. A moment later Myra reeled into our bedroom, bringing with her the musky smell of beer. She threw herself, still wearing

all her clothes, face down onto her bed and soon I heard her faintly snoring. I realized then that my teeth were clenched so tightly my jaw ached. It took me a long time to get back to sleep.

The next day my father forbade Myra to see Julien anymore, except on Saturdays, citing her last report card as the reason for such "belt tightening." Myra's report, mostly Cs and Ds instead of the usual As and Bs, had been presented to my father over a week earlier. He'd said little then, simply heaved a monumental sigh and filed it away in his blazer pocket, muttering something about paying Myra's teachers a visit to discuss this new "phase" of hers. But that morning he reached across the breakfast table and flapped the report card in Myra's face. She would have to devote less time to Julien and to her painting hobby and more time to her studies or else she wouldn't graduate that spring and then she wouldn't be able to go on to college. He was telling her all this, he assured her, because he had her best interests at heart.

Myra took the news calmly, staring at my father, who refused to meet her eyes. Sitting beside her I saw the colour drain out of her face. And seeing this I felt a guilty jolt in my chest for only a moment before I had been privately exulting in the fact that now Myra would be home much more often.

But she wasn't. Myra didn't stop seeing Julien. She merely evolved into an expert sneak. During those first few

months of spring she spent most of her time sitting out on our back steps, staring off at the woods that bordered our property. Often I would peer out at her from behind the drapes on our bedroom window and she always seemed perfectly motionless, completely oblivious to everything around her. Until that moment when her back would stiffen and her head tip up and she would bound like a deer across our yard, disappearing into the trees. To meet Julien I guessed. They must have worked out some signal, some code decipherable only to the two of them. I thought maybe it might be the mimicking of bird-calls, the glinting of sun off a mirror, methods I'd often seen Hollywood Indians use on television. But in all the times I watched I wasn't able to discover exactly what it was that Myra saw or heard or felt out there in the woods.

One night in June I joined Myra out on the back steps, the two of us sitting bundled in sweaters to fight off the cool breeze that blew in off the lake. It was one of the rare nights when both my parents were out and I thought Myra would be more relaxed because of this. But she was nervous, fidgety, smoked cigarette after cigarette and seemed absorbed in watching the fireflies where they bobbed and blinked in front of the dark backdrop of trees. Then suddenly, in the same instant that I heard a twig snap somewhere on the edge of the woods, Myra stood up and shouted, "It's okay. You can come out."

Julien emerged from the trees then, half-crouching, eyes

large as he scanned the yard. I felt a shock of anger, disappointment seeing him this way, reduced to scurrying through the woods like some jittery night-time rodent. And though I knew I should give ~~the~~ two of them some privacy and go inside I stayed put on the stairs, gazing petulantly into space, pretending I was intent on listening for the sound of the Chevy's tires turning onto our driveway.

Myra and Julien sat down on the jetty, arms wrapped round one another, leaning into one another, talking only in whispers. But then Julien's voice rose slightly, loud enough for me to hear.

"You know, the stars are brighter in spring than they are at any other time of the year."

I looked up, the sky a black sea afloat with glittering stars. They did seem unusually bright and for a moment I was reminded of the unearthly, eery brilliance a light bulb emits just before it pops and goes out.

Julien began pointing out constellations, his arm swinging from Boötes to Draco, from Gemini to Cassiopeia. And for each cluster of stars he told a story. A story of adventure or betrayal or revenge until the sky seemed to me to be alive with people, to be a vast battlefield awash with bodies. I tried to keep up with Julien's swining arm, surprised that I was so interested in what he had to say. Usually I did everything possible to avoid star-gazing, making a speedy exit whenever my father emerged with his binoculars and his infamous "book of the heavens." For with

my father, Myra and I spent more time squinting at the fuzzy grey dots and yellow latticed lines on his star maps than we actually did looking at the sky.

Down on the jetty Julien pressed his face against Myra's and pointed out across the lake.

"See that group of stars there?"

Myra nodded and I scanned the sky until my eyes settled on what I thought the two of them must be looking at---a dense cluster near the northwestern horizon.

"That's Perseus. The hero who comes to the rescue."

Myra laughed softly. "How does he do that?"

"Well, see those four stars on the horizon?" Julien raised his arm again, swung it slightly to the right of Perseus. "Those are Princess Andromeda's legs. She was supposed to be sacrificed to a sea monster because her mother insulted the sea nymphs or something. So they chained her to a rock on the shore but just before the monster pulled her under, Perseus flew in and saved the day."

Myra tipped her head to one side. "Where's the monster?"

"You can't really see him yet. He's still sunk below the horizon. But he'll show up big as life by August or September."

I stared at Perseus, imagining a great winged warrior, his muscles bulging as he lifted the hapless Andromeda free of the water. But this picture suddenly disappeared when I heard beside me first a rumbling belch and then a voice so loud on the still air it nearly sent me plummeting down the

back stairs.

"Dat's all a loada bullshit if you ask me."

I spun round to find Guillaume standing at the foot of the steps, one hand gripping a beer bottle, the other clutching the bannister for support. Off behind him, at the end of our long driveway, I could just make out the twin amber specks that were the parking lights on Guillaume's pick-up.

Julien and Myra had turned, too, and seeing this, Guillaume lifted his beer bottle in greeting. Julien scowled and twisted round to face the lake. Guillaume took a few unsteady steps onto the lawn and began cheerfully bellowing at Myra.

"Don't you listen to 'im, Miss Myra. De stars, dey are all just big balls of gas. Just big 'elium balloons. No more. No less." He let the last word linger on his tongue, a long hissing "s."

He tipped his beer back, draining it, and taking a huge backward step, mimicking a pitcher on the mound, he sent the bottle sailing over Myra's and Julien's heads, the follow-through nearly throwing him face-down into the sparse grass on our lawn. I saw Julien flinch, almost imperceptibly, when the bottle splashed into the lake only a few feet in front of where he sat. Guillaume stood silent for a moment, swaying, his head wobbling down toward his chest, his eyes bleary beneath drooping lids. Then something caught his attention, his head lifting.

"Les mouches à feu!" Guillaume's voice was filled with wonder, as if he was seeing lightning bugs for the first time. He began swatting at them, his right arm darting out again and again. Then all of a sudden he stopped, raised a clenched hand triumphantly above his head.

"Eh, regarde ça mes enfants." He lowered his arm and shook his fist in the direction of the jetty. "I got a piece of de sky right 'ere in my 'and."

From where I sat I thought maybe I detected a faint glimmering between Guillaume's fingers. But Guillaume had no doubts. He kept pressing his fist to his ear to listen, I imagine, to the humming of the insect inside, smiling at what he heard there. Then, without warning, he rammed his hand into his shirt pocket, slipped it quickly back out again and clamped his open palm across the top of the pocket. Standing like this, with one hand flattened over his heart as if he were paying allegiance to something, he began to sing his own jumbled version of the lyrics to a song I'd heard a few times on the radio.

"Catch a falling star and put it in your pocket, never let it get away..." He repeated these words several times, hoping I suppose to catch the thread of the next line but, unable to, he trailed off. When he stopped, Julien, who had ignored Guillaume from the moment he'd shown up, lifted his hands and clapped once.

I saw all the wobbliness, all the uncertainty disappear from Guillaume's body. He took a step towards the jetty.



"Eh, quand est-ce-que tu reviens?"

Julien, his back still to Guillaume, didn't move, didn't answer.

"J'ai dit, quand est-ce-que tu reviens?"

Julien turned slowly and stared blankly at his father. When he finally spoke he did so in a flawless English, each perfectly pronounced syllable aimed unerringly at Guillaume.

"I'll come home when I bloody well feel like it. So why don't you just fuck off."

I wouldn't have been surprised if Guillaume had run screaming across the lawn to throttle Julien, to throw him head-first into the cold lake. I thought Julien heroic, courageous, for I hadn't yet learned that for some families raising one's voice and swearing were as commonplace, at times even as inconsequential, as small-talk. I saw on Myra's face the same shock, the same disbelief I felt, a look that swiftly melted into admiration when Guillaume did nothing but shrug, shake his head. As he shuffled back towards the pick-up he gave Julien a last warning.

"Okay, 'ave it your way. You just better pray to de good Lord dat de good reverend don't get 'ome too early tonight."

When the sound of Guillaume's truck had died away, Julien stood up, pulling Myra with him. He kissed her with an urgency that both frightened and embarrassed me.

"Well, I guess the old man has a point. I better get going." Julien's voice sounded tired, on the verge of crack-

ing and with a last clutching embrace he disappeared back into the woods. I watched as he flitted through the trees, his white shirt turned silver by the moon. After Myra had gone back inside I sat for a long time out on the back steps, staring at the spot where I'd last seen Julien, wishing he had not given Guillaume even this much of a victory.

As exam time approached Myra began to study more. Or rather she spread her text books conspicuously across the diningroom table, furtively hiding her sketch-filled scribbler whenever my father passed by. And she discarded her fluorescent miniskirts and stockings for more subdued clothes; she even began to wear a drab, shapeless little dress that my father had picked out for her, a fawn-coloured shift in which, if not for her flaming red hair, she would have literally faded into the woodwork. But I knew, if my father didn't, that all this was just camouflage. Diversionary tactics meant to put my father off guard so that if he did permit Myra a weeknight visit to the school library he wouldn't necessarily suspect that she was actually meeting Julien in one of the deserted classrooms.

Occasionally my father allowed Myra a date with Julien beyond the usual Saturday. As long as I went along as chaperone. As spy. If I refused to go Myra wasn't permitted to go either. Who, my father said, would make sure Myra minded her manners, got home by ten o'clock? So on those evenings I would make myself as scarce as possible, sitting alone in a separate restaurant booth or slouching in the front

row at the movie theatre while Julien and Myra huddled up in the balcony. The three of us made the rounds together--- Julien sucked into the fish-bowl existence that Myra and I, being minister's daughters, had known all our lives---because we realized that the restaurant-owner, the movie-house manager and just about anyone we happened to run into, would be only too willing to squeal on us as a way to get into the Reverend Shepherd's good books.

Other times my father suggested that Myra take Julien to a church social or card party. Functions at which my father shunted the two of them about with a military efficiency, dragging them round for endless introductions, setting them up at separate tables so they could only gaze distractedly at one another across a smoke-filled room. Eventually Julien had stopped going, telling Myra he felt too much like a fish out of water, felt he would choke if he had to take one more sip of tea, one more bite of a petit-four. At the last function Julien went to, a strawberry social in early July, I watched as he tried to edge away from Mabel Dempster who kept thrusting a heaping bowl of shortcake into his face. I was about to go and rescue him when Myra appeared at my side and dragged me across the room. She positioned me where we could easily see my father standing with Judith Brown and Gloria Pennington, both women gazing up at him with worshipful, admiring eyes. I saw that Myra's face had gone hard, her mouth a thin, sour line. She leaned close so I could hear her above the drone of the crowd.

"They have no idea, do they?"

I turned to her, puzzled. "No idea of what?"

"No idea of what he's really like. Of what he's like at home. When nobody's watching but us."

I had never heard such anger, such venom in her voice. Or such resolve. I reached out and touched Myra's arm. I intended to warn her but I found myself unable to put into words the uneasiness I felt, and she slipped away.

It all came clattering down in mid-July. On an unusually cool day in the first month of summer vacation. I sat with Myra and my mother in our drafty, cramped kitchen, the room flooded with an unsteady, metallic light---the sun reflecting off the lake. My mother stood at the counter, miraculously peeling potatoes by feel like a blind woman, her eyes never leaving the television where it sat jammed in amid the other appliances. Myra sat at the kitchen table, twisting round in her chair so that she could look out the window at the lake. I slouched beside her, contemplating the long, grey eventless expanse of the next month and a half.

I could hear my father talking to the paperboy at the front door, his voice cheerful as it boomed backward into the house. But when he burst into the kitchen a moment later his face was a splotchy, liverish red.

He flung the paper down on the kitchen table and I had to grab at it to keep it from sliding onto the floor. Beside me Myra hadn't taken her eyes from the window but I'd

seen her jump ever so slightly, seen her fingers tighten where they clutched the back of the chair. I smoothed the newspaper out in front of me. It was the local paper, The Laurel Standard. And across the middle of the front page in large exclamatory letters was the headline "SPIDER LAKE MONSTER SIGHTED THREE TIMES!" Below this was a trio of photographs. The middle one was of Myra. The same one that was in the sterling silver frame on the mantle-piece in our livingroom. Below this again was the caption "Laurel's 'Miracle Child' Is Third To See Monster In Two Weeks." I felt my throat clot with fear.

My father threw himself into the chair across from Myra and me, glaring first at Myra, then at the newspaper, breathing wheezily through his nose. My mother set a mug of coffee in front of him and she hesitated by his side, her eyes settling on the newspaper for a second, then rotating back to the television. My father gripped the coffee mug with both hands and casting his eyes down, he talked into it.

"Well, you've certainly picked some fine company this time, haven't you?"

It was true. Myra's fellow visionaries weren't exactly among Laurel's most respected, reliable citizens. Joe Desaulniers, who had been the first to see the monster, was what the more unkind people in Laurel called a "retard." Armistice Brown was an out-and-out drunk. But the article, coyly diplomatic, had referred to Armistice as a "colour-

ful local character" with "no fixed address." Joe was a "jack-of-all-trades" who was currently enrolled in several "special education" classes at Laurel Comprehensive. And as I skimmed down the columns I saw that Myra's name had been linked---repeatedly---with its own incriminating label, "Minister's daughter."

My father reached out, yanking the paper across the table, slopping coffee over the front page so that Myra's photograph was covered with a liquid ochre stain. His eyes raced down the columns and I saw the colour gradually seep from his face. Finally he raised his head, stared open-mouthed at Myra.

"Just listen to this tripe." My father began quoting from the newspaper. "'The creature was sighted for the third time virtually on the doorstep of Laurel's own Reverend Shepherd.'" His eyes sped down the page. "And listen to this---'Apparently the minister's beach is now home to the Spider Lake monster.'" My father glared at Myra. "Sweet God in Heaven, girl. This makes it sound as if this thing dragged itself out of the lake and took up residence right here in our house. You've made it sound as if it's practically a member of our family!"

Myra smiled slightly, made no sign of denial.

I saw my father's knuckles go white where he gripped his coffee mug. "Well, Miss, don't you have something to say? Don't you have some sort of explanation for us?"

Myra stood up, eyes blazing. "All the explanation you

need is right there in your precious black and white."

For a minute my father seemed unable to move. Then he leaped from his chair and I thought he was going to slap Myra. But he hesitated, seemed suddenly to catch sight of his own extended arm and let it drop back down at his side. He had never struck either of us before; it was not in his character he said. He sat back down, content to glare at Myra's back as she strode out of the room.

A minute or so later I slipped away, too, leaving my father with the newspaper, his hands pressed firmly down on top of the neat rectangle into which he had folded it.

I found Myra sitting at the foot of the back stairs. She didn't look up when I sat down beside her, just kept sucking hard on her cigarette. She passed the cigarette to me and I felt her hand tremble where it touched mine. I took a drag on it though I didn't like smoking---not then, anyway. I passed it back to her, keeping it down at ankle height so that if my father happened out onto the back porch I could easily drop it into the dirt below the stairs.

"I saw it, you know. I really saw it." Myra's voice was emphatic, left no room for challenge. She pointed out at the lake and I noticed how frighteningly thin her arm was, how tightly drawn the skin on the back of her hand had grown. "Julien and I were sitting just down the shore from here and I saw it right out there in the middle of the lake."

I squinted at the water, flat and grey as a sheet of granite. "What did it look like?"

Myra dropped her arm. "Like a snake. But big as a man round the middle. There was a loop of it sticking up out of the water when I first saw it. Then that disappeared and the head came up." She seemed to be calmer now for when she raised the cigarette to her mouth her hand no longer shook. "I don't even know if it had any eyes. But I knew it could see me. I knew it could tell exactly where I was."

We sat in silence for a few minutes and I tried to picture for myself what Myra said she'd seen. I imagined a great, hulking creature, a giant eel perhaps or maybe a variation on the huge Brontosaurus whose picture I'd often seen in my grade school science books. Then again, what Myra had described could just as easily have been an old, rusted drainpipe, a tree branch caught bobbing and whirling in one of the lake's fast currents.

"It looked like a snake?" I tried to keep my voice neutral, non-committal.

She nodded. I waited a moment before going on.

"But Joe and Armistice said it looked more like a pig or a cow. Like a hippopotamus with flippers and a long tail."

And then Myra turned on me, eyes flashing accusation.

"Then Joe and Armistice were lying, weren't they?"

I thought for the first time, seeing Myra's twisted face, hearing the vehemence, the certainty in her words, that perhaps my father had gone too far.

But he went even further. A week later---a week that my father must have found very embarrassing, for people in



Laurel loved a good bit of scandal---Myra's final marks arrived. She'd failed Chemistry, Biology, Geometry and Algebra and in these failures my father found his means of reprisal. With such low marks Myra couldn't even hope to be considered for college entrance. So on that muggy afternoon in late July my father decided that Myra would repeat grade eleven. And to ensure that she attained the straight As he knew she was capable of and in order that she get a jump on her competition, Myra would have to cut out boys and painting, in that order. She would study for at least three hours every morning---my mother and I were instructed to keep a close eye on her---and on Saturdays and those weekday afternoons when my father could spare the time, we would go on educational field trips. He would turn the next few weeks, my father assured us, into an experience in learning for us all.

We had been assembled in the diningroom instead of the kitchen because of the importance of this announcement. As soon as my father was through, my mother disappeared and I heard the familiar drone of the television start up again in the next room. Myra sat across the polished table from me, unmoving, startlingly indifferent it seemed, to what my father had just said. I glared at the top of my father's balding head where he bent over a list of excursions he was making but when he glanced up I quickly dropped my eyes. I couldn't believe Myra hadn't stood up for herself. I lacked the courage to do it for her, lacked the courage even to stand

up for myself, to tell my father that I would prefer not to be included in his plans, that I did not appreciate being appointed as Myra's warden. I simply sat, trying to convince myself that Myra's impassive face was just a cover-up, that she had anticipated this move of my father's and would now put some elaborate, fool-proof plan into motion.

At least my father's "summer of adventure" filled a lot of empty hours. We must have covered hundreds, perhaps even thousands of miles during that July and August. Most of them over narrowly winding, treacherously graded back roads, some no wider than cow-paths and so thickly shrouded with trees that branches slapped the sides of our halting old Chevy and even occasionally met for a sudden, blinding instant across the windshield. More often than not we ended up at a church. Many of them deserted, their low-slung belfries barely visible above the creeping underbrush. These churches were usually open---left unbolted for "pilgrims" like ourselves, I suppose, or perhaps the padlocks had long since been pried off---and my father would throw the doors dramatically wide; a blast of musty, dead air invariably ballooning out to engulf us. Inside, each church was basically the same. Everything overlaid with a thick film of dust and bat droppings, pastel walls and ceilings marred with amber-coloured water stains. But with everything still in its proper place---hymn books nestled in their racks, inspirational notes tacked to foyer bulletin boards, prayer pads laid down at communion rails. As if things had simply

been arrested in mid-service. In some of these places the air of suspension hung so heavy that I half-expected to see the pews filled with rigid, dust-covered parishioners. Bodies as still as figures in a photograph, waiting for some cue to begin again, to shake off the dust and their own inertia and once more fill their lungs with air and song.

Myra rarely came inside churches like these. Instead she hung back by the doors, watching with large, wary eyes as my father examined a bit of carving on a pew or pulpit, held a grimy altar cloth up to the faint criss-cross of light that seeped through a boarded-up window. I found these buildings too damp; they sent a chill deep into my bones and after a cursory tour up and down the main aisle to appease my father, I usually joined Myra outside. Once, as we drove away from one of the first abandoned churches we visited, Myra had said that places like these gave her the creeps. They were so cold and empty that she thought God would be more at home out in the woods than he would be inside such a dump. My father stopped the car and twisted round to face Myra. God did not live in trees, he indignantly told her and Myra must remember that each and every one of these churches was no less than a House of the Lord.

Every weekday morning Myra studied and every weekday lunch hour my father would check with my mother or me to make sure Myra had spent the required three hours buried in her books. Often I stood outside our closed bedroom door and listened for her. Sometimes I heard the shuffling of

papers, the turning of pages. Or I heard her chanting Chemistry or Algebra formulas, the numbers and letters of which seemed to stick in her throat like the syllables of some guttural, foreign language. But usually Myra was doing anything but studying. Occasionally I heard the familiar squeak of felt marker on sketch-pad paper. Or sometimes I picked up the sound of Myra singing along to the faint hum of her transistor, the radio turned down so low my mother couldn't possibly hear it over the blare of the television set. Once or twice I even caught the whirl of the sewing machine though Myra had little need for new clothes with the cloistered life she led that summer. But most often I heard nothing at all and I would imagine Myra standing silent at the bedroom window, breathing in the fresh air that filtered through the screen.

On those mornings when my father was home I helped Myra study, quizzing her from old test papers my father had gotten from Mr. Dewit, the science teacher at school. On a dreary, overcast morning in early August the two of us toiled for what seemed like an eternity over a dog-eared Chemistry exam.

"Okay, My. What's the law of conservation of energy and mass?" I looked expectantly, hopefully at her. She'd answered only two questions right in the past hour.

Myra said the words over a few times as if she thought that by repeating them she might unlock their meaning. Then she stared searchingly at me, perhaps hoping to find a hint

of the answer written somewhere in my eyes. Finally she sighed and threw herself face-down on her bed.

"Beats me." Her voice was muffled, exasperated.

I read from the answer sheet: "Matter and energy can be neither created nor destroyed but can only be transformed into one another."

Myra rolled over onto her back and glared up at the ceiling. "So what does that mean? So what's that supposed to mean in plain English?"

I wished that I could explain it to her but unable to find the proper words I sped down the page, hunting for something I hoped would be easier, more straightforward.

"Define osmosis."

Myra sat suddenly upright and flung her arms wide. "Miracle of miracles. I actually know the answer to this one!" And she rattled off a definition of osmosis that was word-for-word the same as the one on the answer sheet. I suspected she hadn't understood a thing she'd just said but I tried to smile encouragingly. We went on.

"Here's a neat one." I passed the exam booklet to Myra. "Take a look at question number twelve. What's that a picture of?"

Myra studied the diagram, a jumble of large black dots joined by a criss-cross of thin lines. The answer sheet said they represented part of the atomic structure of a diamond.

Myra frowned at the test paper, chewed on her thumbnail.

"I don't know. What's it supposed to be?"

"It's called a space lattice. This one shows the structure of a diamond."

Myra wrinkled her nose, set her mouth in a hard, deprecating line. "Oh, yes. Now that you mention it I do see a definite resemblance." She stood up and walked over to the window then, leaving the booklet on her bed. She made a sarcastic sound in her throat. "That looks as much like a diamond as I do."

Myra pulled a chair over to the window and climbed up onto it, retrieving a pack of cigarettes from on top of the valance. She lit one and slid a glass of cloudly, grey water out from behind the drapes. The bottom of the glass was coated with a thick scum of cigarette ash and several filter stubs floated in the water.

"You know, I've only seen Julien two times since Daddy started this bloody house arrest. Two stinking times in almost three weeks. She sucked hard on her cigarette, blew the smoke out between clenched teeth. "The last time was for a grand total of two minutes. I went into Daigle's to buy some milk while Daddy waited in the car and Julien just happened to be in the store, too."

She angrily flicked cigarette ash into the glass.

"He says I look different."

Julien was right. She had always been slim but she'd practically stopped eating in the past few weeks and she was pitifully thin now, the bones in her hand rotating out like

spokes from the hub of her wrist when she raised the cigarette to her mouth. A few days earlier, on an afternoon my father had deemed too hot for adventure, I'd found Myra asleep on her bed, curled up on top of the blankets. She'd been wearing only her bathing suit and her spine stuck out knife-sharp, each vertebra a distinct, cutting point. The skin pulled so tight across her ribs it seemed almost translucent, like a baby's, a frail casing intended simply to hold her bones in place. I reached out to touch her back and I felt a surprising coolness rising from her skin. Suddenly, I was reminded of the brittle, skeletal reeds I sometimes found iced into the shallows of the lake after the first freeze in November or December. I drew my hand away without ever touching her.

"He says I act different, too." Myra frowned, squeezed her arms tightly across her chest.

"How does he think you act different?"

"Oh, he says I seem tired. He says I seem to be walking in my sleep. I suppose he's right."

She reached up and pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose, a habit she'd picked up only recently. "Anyways, he wants me to go away with him."

"When?" I felt as if I had been caught a sharp blow to the stomach.

"I don't know. Soon I hope. Julien says it'll take him a while to arrange things. But I know it won't take too long. Julien can do what he wants when he wants. Not like me."

Myra blew a single, quavering smoke ring out through the screen and dunked the cigarette butt into the glass, the tip hissing as if hit water. Swept by a sudden wave of envy I had to force the next words out.

"Good luck."

Myra looked startled but then she smiled and caught in the embrace of those brilliant blue eyes I felt suddenly more hopeful than I had in months.

The next afternoon my father had some sort of organizational meeting with the tombola committee so nothing was scheduled for Myra. She told my mother she was going for a boat ride and my mother, absorbed in the laments of two women on some soap opera, nodded absently. I watched from the back porch as Myra untied our old fiberglass boat from the jetty and rowed slowly out onto the lake. As she disappeared round a point of land a quarter-mile or so distant, it occurred to me that she might at this very moment be trying to run away. But I pushed the thought aside and instead convinced myself that I was more concerned with the fact that Myra had neglected to strap on one of our old, musty-smelling, luminous orange life-jackets.

By supper time she still hadn't come home and my father, my mother and I sat waiting as the light in the kitchen gradually faded through shades of red and pink and mauve. The T.V. had been shut off---I suppose it was my mother's way of paying penance for allowing Myra to slip away---and we listened for the slam of the back door in unusual quiet.



Every half-hour or so my father would spring out of his chair to dial a number on the phone, asking whoever it was on the other end of the line a few casual questions about Myra. Just before midnight the telephone rang at our end, the sound blown so out of proportion by then that it forced a startled little yelp out of me. When my father finished with the call, closing things off with a string of effusive "thank-yous," he dropped the receiver triumphantly back into its cradle. He motioned for me to get up.

"Come on, Elaine. You're coming with me."

I didn't want to go with my father that night---at least not as his ally. But I was too frightened not to go, too frightened to stay home and simply wait for news of Myra. So I pulled on a pair of jeans and a windbreaker to cut the August chill and climbed in next to my father in the front seat of the Chevy. We headed north, pitching along through the dim tunnel of overhanging trees that lined the lakeshore road. After we'd driven about ten miles my father brought the car to a lurching halt in what seemed to be the middle of nowhere. But then I saw that the headlights were trained on an old wooden sign wired to a fence post on the left-hand side of the road. The sign was for the "METEOR MOTEL" which boasted six double-occupancy rooms, each with its own black-and-white T.V. and breathtaking view of Spider Lake. I'd ridden past this billboard hundreds of times on my way to school but until that night I'd never noticed that the sign-painter had transformed the "O" in "MOTEL" into a

primitive picture of a meteor---an anemic yellow splotch with a ragged lightning bolt tacked onto it like a tail onto a kite.

We turned down the rain-rutted driveway. There were no lights on at the motel, not even in the squat little trailer with the word "OFFICE" painted below one window. But by the faint moonlight I could make out a short row of sagging, weatherbeaten motel cabins facing the lake, each with a plastic lounge chair parked outside its entrance. My father slid out of the car, closing the door quietly behind him, and strode towards the last cabin. I had to run to catch up with him.

He tried the cabin door, hoping I imagine for a dramatic entrance, but it was locked. He hesitated, glanced towards the darkened office. Then he rapped sharply on the door and called out Myra's name in a hissing stage whisper. I felt an involuntary shivering set through me as we waited. I suppose I was afraid that the door would be opened by a stranger and then we would have to start our search all over again. But I think I was even more afraid that Myra would actually be the one inside the motel room and if she was, God only knew what my father would do then.

Finally a faint shuffling sound came from inside the cabin and the door opened, musty, stale air eddying outward. Myra stood in the doorway, eyes hooded by shadow, skin turned silver by the moon. She didn't seem at all surprised to see my father and me. She simply stared blankly past us

to the lake and casually reached one thin arm across to the inside wall of the cabin. I heard the sharp click of a light switch and on the bedside table behind Myra a small lamp with a cracked, yellowed shade flickered on. She stepped aside then, making a sweeping motion with her arm.

"Won't you two come in?"

My father pushed past her but he was stopped up short almost immediately by the double bed that filled three-quarters of the room. He whirled round to face Myra.

"So where's your friend?"

"What friend?" I thought I heard a slight catch in Myra's voice.

My father scowled. "Don't be coy with me, Miss. You know exactly what friend I mean."

He did a little pirouette then, pivoting on his heel in the middle of the room as if he expected to find Julien lurking in one of the dim corners. He poked his head into the bathroom cubicle, pulled it back out. Watching him I was reminded of the jealous husband skits I often saw on T.V. and I wondered if my father might suddenly fling aside the curtain that served as a closet door or drop to the carpet so that he might check the narrow space beneath the sagging bed.

"Well, I guess the lad made a clean getaway." He sounded disappointed.

Myra strolled past my father, skirting round him as if he was merely one more piece of furniture. She began rum-

magging in her purse where it sat on the bedside table, extracting first a crumpled pack of cigarettes, then a little pot of crimson rouge, a stick of chewing gum, a tube of lipstick, two or three Beatles cards. Then she pulled out a water-colour brush with the price sticker still on it and for an instant she looked directly at me, her face puzzled, even dazed, as if she hoped I might tell her who it belonged to. Before I could say anything her eyes had dropped back down to her purse. She spoke into its depths.

"So are we about ready to leave?"

I stood frozen. I had expected, I had hoped, that Myra would lay down some ground rules, strike a bargain of some sort while she had the distinct advantage. I had never expected such a simple surrender.

I gazed at Myra, unbelieving. She thrust her hand deep into her purse again and with eyes closed, brow furrowed, she felt around inside it. She smiled and pulled out the key to the motel room.

"Isn't this something?" Myra grinned, holding the key ring high in front of her. At the end of the key chain was a yellow, plastic disk stamped out in the shape of a star, its long, jagged tail snapped off mid-way. Myra poked at the star with her finger and it spun listlessly around a few times. She giggled and dropped the key on top of the pile of débris she had extracted from her purse.

"Well, I'm ready whenever you are."

My father strode triumphantly out to the car, Myra and I following a few steps behind. Just before we reached the Chevy Myra clutched onto my arm, her nails digging in. She whispered into my ear, her voice quavering, catching on the tears.

"He never came, Elaine. He never showed up."

Her whole body seemed to droop then, to lose its buoyancy, as if all the matter in her arms and legs was simply dissolving, melting away. And as she leaned against me I felt my own trembling body transformed, my limbs shot through with a surprising energy. I half-carried Myra the rest of the way back to the car.

Later that night, once everyone else was in bed, I crept out to the porch. Too keyed up to sleep, I sat on the back steps, shivering inside the blanket I'd thrown over my pajamas. A falling star burned a short, brilliant arc through the sky near the northwestern horizon. It was quickly followed by another and still another. I remembered Julien mentioning a meteor shower---the Perseid shower he'd called it---that occurred in mid-August. I located Perseus and as each meteor plummeted earthward I imagined it to be a fire-tipped arrow aimed at Cetus. The monster was fully visible above the horizon now and in my mind's eye it shook its ugly, cumbersome head, trained its hooded, blood-lusting eyes at the defenseless Andromeda. But after I had counted almost twenty falling stars in under an hour I decided that the

meteors were not Perseus' ammunition but Perseus himself as he rapidly, inexorably disintegrated.

After that Myra was an easy target, raising only occasional weak protests against my father's endless suggestions. We were on the road almost every day until the end of August, visiting a fish hatchery, a granite quarry, several cemeteries, the Whiterock Caverns. We took a day trip into Montreal, dashing along tree- and flower-lined walkways, trotting through greenhouses at the botanical gardens so that we would have time enough to go to the wax museum---what my father had really driven all the way into the city to see. I don't remember much of any of these places. By then I was growing tired of my father's idea of adventure and so I didn't pay very close attention to what we saw on our never-ending outings.

I was glad to get back to school. Myra and I shared a lot of classes that fall---Chemistry, Algebra and Geometry among others. She was quiet during lectures and I think her friends and teachers saw this and the subdued clothes she now wore as simply part of another phase, simply another example of her eccentricity, and moved warily around her for the first few weeks. In late September Mr. Dewit scheduled a visit to a natural history museum for our Biology class. I tried to hush up news of the field trip because I knew my father had a penchant for acting as chaperone at these affairs,

but somehow he caught wind of it. And that Friday I found myself sitting at the rear of the bus glaring at the back of my father's balding skull where it loomed above the perfectly coiffed heads of other students' mothers.

The museum was housed in what looked like an only slightly renovated hay barn and inside I could still detect the dusty odor of chaff. It was jammed to the rafters with display cases, most of which seemed to be filled with insects. Beetles, crickets, June-bugs, midges, centipedes, ants, termites, ladybugs. Deerflies, millipedes, earwigs, grasshoppers, aphids, glowworms. Each one pinned to its own neatly labelled square of yellowing cardboard. There was even the odd powdery cocoon on exhibit; mummified larvae gassed before they could develop any further. Against the east wall stood a slim, upright case with a tree-branch wedged inside it. On every spare twig a stuffed song-bird perched, each one with its wings outspread as if it were about to take flight, each one with its beak opened mutely, souldlessly. The birds must have been sealed inside the case for years---they were lustreless, faded. Even the goldfinch whose summer plumage rivalled the brilliant blooms of the sunflowers in our yard at home was bleached to a sulphurous, pasty yellow.

There was also a table littered with dusty rock and mineral samples, a few squares of bristol board tacked to the wall with withered leaves and burst seed pods glued to

them, some sea shells nestled inside styrofoam egg cartons. A tour of the entire museum took less than half an hour and soon people were milling out through the back door. My father, Myra and I followed, stepping into a sandlot that someone had set up as a miniature zoo. My father had probably seen every one of the species represented here at least a hundred times before in the woods and fields that surrounded our house. But though he showed little interest in them in the wild, these same animals seemed to hold a strange fascination for him in this environment, as if in this captive state they had suddenly become immeasurably more precious. He trotted excitedly from pen to pen with Myra in tow, yanking at her arm as if it was a leash. I hung a few steps behind, stopping to stare at a scrawny apricot-coloured red fox, a pair of motheaten deer, a hawk that glared imperiously down from atop a dead birch stump, a skunk, a porcupine and a weasel, all tightly curled into sleeping balls. My father spent the most time inspecting a large, dusty tortoise. The tortoise didn't seem to be restrained in any way but then it showed little desire to escape either, content to loll like an old barn dog in a gully it had carved for itself in the sand, only the occasional, slow blink of its miniscule eyes indicating it was even alive. My father gave it an affectionate slap on its great shell, leaving a handprint in the dust there.

In the centre of the zoo someone had built what looked



like a gold-fish pond, a hole dug in the sand surrounded with a circle of white-washed stones. The water that filled it was green and thick as pea soup---I could locate no run-off drain---but even as I watched, a paunchy raccoon waddled up to its edge and fastidiously dipped a sandwich crust into its murky depths. Still, what caught everyone's attention, what sent my father bolting across the sandlot, was not the raccoon but the chimpanzee that was that moment settling itself down onto one of the white-washed rocks. An attendant with an obvious flare for the dramatic had only just led the chimp outside and now, with one end of its leash fastened to a post beside the pond, it sat staring dully down at where its own dangling feet disappeared into the water. I moved over to look, too, elbowing my way to the front of the crowd to stand next to Myra and my father.

I assumed that the chimp was a male for it wore a jaunty, little red tartan vest. And though it had a spreading, sagging belly I don't think it was so much old as over-fed. It had none of the manic playfulness I'd seen wild chimps show on T.V. documentaries; it didn't even have the embarrassing programmed energy of the chimps I often watched in circus acts on the Ed Sullivan Show. This one just sat with its hands clasped across its gaping vest front. I think it even fell asleep for a moment because as I watched, its head began to droop ever so slowly downward and when its chin finally met its chest the chimp's whole body jerked

upright, the same sequence of movements I'd frequently seen displayed by passengers on a rolling bus.

The chimp heaved itself off the rock and stood buttocks-deep in the pond, oblivious to its tittering audience. It waded leisurely out into the water and then, abruptly, it squatted down until the whole front of its body was submerged in the muck. It seemed to be probing around for something on the bottom of the pond; occasionally it grunted or squinted in concentration. After a minute or so of this it pulled its hand above the surface, gripping a dingy, soggy cigarette butt between its fingers. The chimp brought the cigarette to its lips, smacked enquiringly at it and then popped it into its mouth. A few people gasped. Most sputtered with laughter. I watched as the animal's jaw muscles rotated and then slackened as it swallowed.

The chimp began the process again but this time it was less successful, bringing up only a slime-covered nail and a few twigs. With a disgruntled snort it hauled itself out of the pond. Everyone skittered away as it shook the water off its fur but moved quickly back in when, curiously, the chimp threw itself belly-down onto the ground. It crawled crab-like across the sand as far as its leash would allow, nose in the dust, eyes watchful for any peculiarity. Just in front of where I stood, the chimp found another butt and giving a little grunt of satisfaction it promptly popped this one into its mouth as well.

Beside me my father was busy with something. I turned to see him taking a package of cigarettes from one of my classmate's mothers. Myra watched him, her face expressionless. He lit one of the cigarettes, sucking on it with a surprising expertise. Then he crouched down and held it in front of the spread-eagled chimp's face. I expected the animal to scramble frantically away, screaming at the red-hot tip, at the acrid, unfamiliar smell of tobacco smoke. But instead it yanked itself eagerly upright and very carefully grasped the cigarette between thumb and forefinger, baring its square, yellow teeth at my father in a cheerful grimace. For a moment I thought the chimp was about to drop the lit cigarette into its mouth as it had the others but it was cleverer than this. It placed the cigarette to its withered lips and took a deep, practiced drag on it. This time there was no laughter, simply awe-struck silence.

A smile spread across my father's face, a superior, patronizing smile that seemed to include not only the chimpanzee but everyone and everything in the sandlot zoo. I blurted out the next words.

"Don't you think it looks just like Grampa Shepherd?" I wanted to wipe the look off my father's face and I spoke louder than I was accustomed to. Those who had begun to drift away from the fish-pond stopped, turned to stare.

My father gaped. "What?!" The word was an outraged squeak.

"The chimp---it looks just like Grampa Shepherd. They've both got tons of wrinkles and they've both got pot bellies. Grampa even has a little red vest like that." The last was a lie but I bulldozed ahead, heart pounding, before my father could interrupt me. "And when we go visit Grampa at the nursing home he always smokes like a chimney. Who knows, maybe he even eats his cigarette butts when no one's looking."

A few people laughed outright and my father made a weak attempt to chuckle good-naturedly along with them. He reached out to grab my arm but I swerved away. I glanced at Myra, thought maybe I saw a flicker of interest beneath the puzzlement, the embarrassment on her face. Leaning down I took the chimpanzee's hand and shook it enthusiastically.

"Hiya, Gramps."

And at the word "Gramps" the chimp's head tilted up and its eyes glimmered in recognition. I knew that the animal's name probably had a similar ring and it was simply responding to a familiar sound. But I thought, too, that perhaps the chimp grasped the mechanics of my little game and was doing its part to make it a success. The chimp's face turned empty again. It took another drag on the cigarette.

The last of my father's patience dissolved then and he clutched on to my arm. Digging his fingers in, he began dragging me across the sandlot, all the time shouting cheerfully back at our audience.

"I think the child's had a touch too much sun. I'm

just going to get her into the shade and give her a bit of water."

I looked back, searching the crowd for Myra's face. I found it and with a hopeless thud in my stomach I saw that it was as blank, as empty as the chimpanzee's.

A few days later as I stood rummaging in my locker at school, I felt a hand touch my shoulder. I turned to find Julien standing there but before I could condemn or accuse or demand an explanation he was gone. But not until he had pressed a note into my hand. Back home I watched while Myra read the letter, waiting for tears to well into her eyes, for some expression of relief to flood her face. But neither of these things happened and when she finished reading she simply tossed the letter onto the bed. I felt my heart flutter downward with the pages.

I pounced on the note and when Myra didn't protest I began to read it. It was written in French but reading slowly, calling on the formal, minimal French I'd learned so far in high school, I managed to decipher it. Julien had had every intention of meeting Myra the letter said but Guillaume had somehow caught wind of their plans. Julien had been climbing into the pick-up when Guillaume came waltzing into the garage to tell him that no son of his was running off for a rendezvous with some "petite Protestante." Julien slammed the truck door in his father's face but Guillaume had reached in through the open window and snatched the keys

out of Julien's hand. Then Guillaume scurried outside, padlocking the double doors behind him. So Julien had spent that night a prisoner inside a pitch-black, windowless garage. He'd tried, the letter said, to phone Myra at least a dozen times since then but each time he managed to get through, our father, always the gentleman, had told him Myra was indisposed.

Myra sat at her desk thumbing through a ratty old biology text. I placed the letter carefully next to the book.

"So are you going to try again soon?"

Myra didn't look up from the page. "Try what?"

"To leave. To go away. Julien just got stopped by Guillaume, that's all."

Myra swivelled round and stared at me for a long, uncomfortable moment, her face sour, incredulous.

"How can you be so sure he's telling the truth? He's had plenty of time to make up a nice, noble story for himself, hasn't he?"

She snatched up the letter then and folded it until it was perhaps two inches square. Lifting the biology text, she slid the letter under the blotter on her desk. She slammed the book back down, crossed her arms on top of it and then rested her head on top of her arms. Feigning sleep, she refused to answer any more of my questions.

Myra worked hard at school---she had little else to do.

Most of her girlfriends travelled in different circles now, having moved on to college or jobs or marriage. She didn't seem too eager to make new friends either, invariably finding excuses to turn down party invitations. And she seemed even less eager to replace Julien, refusing date after date until word got around and the boys simply stopped asking. Perhaps she saw a "C" average as a means of escape and so she spent her free time doing special projects and experiments with Mr. Dewit and a couple of the school's "Einsteins" acting as her supervisors. I swung by the science room to pick her up one day after classes. It was well into November and the windows in the lab were iced over with an intricate web of frost. Myra sat in one of the shadowy corners staring at a large fish laid out on the counter beside her. It was a bottom-sucking fish by the looks of it and it reeked of formaldehyde. Myra didn't seem to notice, though, for she spread the pectoral out with her pencil eraser and brought her nose to within inches of the smelly flesh and scrutinized the fin. She had drawn a picture of the fish on a piece of looseleaf paper, simplified it down to the sparsest of outlines. While I waited, uncomfortable in the unusual quiet of the lab, Myra put the last touches on the drawing, sketching in arrows and labeling each separate part. The finished picture was on display for several weeks, placed directly to the right of a tin tray where the real fish floated in a shallow pool of pre-

servative. When this exhibit was replaced by a new one I asked Myra if I could keep her diagram. She raised her eyebrows at my request and I could give her no clear explanation as to why I wanted the picture. I still have it, framed in coloured cardboard and sealed behind plastic, as she gave it to me.

Near dawn a few weeks later, Myra shook me awake and while I was still half-asleep she dragged me over to the window. She directed me to look out through a little square she had cleared in the frost that coated even inside of the glass in our chilly bedroom. I obliged, shuddering with cold, longing to get back into my warm bed. I saw nothing except the grey expanse of open lake. That and the first glowing line of day at the horizon.

I gazed foggily at Myra, shrugged my shoulders.

"Look again." She frantically rubbed at the glass where my breath had clouded it. I peered out once more to please her.

"What am I supposed to be looking at, Myra?"

For an instant the old light came back into her eyes, turning them a shimmering, electric blue, flooding them with that look of fearful wonder they used to hold when she told of seeing a luna moth or a coydog or a walking catfish.

"I saw something go through the ice."

"But there's no ice on the lake, Myra." I kept my eyes rivetted to her face.



"Yes there is. On the fingers. Near the shore where the water's shallow there's at least a couple of inches of ice."

I drew Myra over to sit on the bed.

"What exactly did you see?"

"A deer." Myra began rocking back and forth on the edge of the mattress. "It must have seen wrong, El. It must have believed the ice was thick enough to hold it." She pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them tightly. "It tried so hard to get out. It tried so hard. But it was dragged under in just a few seconds."

I put my arm around her. She felt surprisingly warm.

"Maybe you would have been better off to stay in bed. It hasn't done you much good to see this."

She turned her head sharply to stare at me.

"No. Somebody had to see it. Somebody had to know it happened." She paused, her brow furrowing. "Will you go check as soon as it's light, Elaine? Will you go see?"

"Why? No one can do anything now, Myra."

She didn't seem to hear me.

"Will you go?"

I nodded and an hour or so later I found myself trekking along the lakeshore. When I reached the most easterly of the spidery fingers I saw that Myra had been right. A layer of slushy ice extended out for a good fifty yards from either shore but down the centre of the finger ran a sickeningly

wide strip of granite-grey open water. I stood on the bank for a long while, scanning the lake out where it began to narrow into the other four fingers, the sun warm on my back. I kept wishing over and over that the deer would somehow burst to the surface and swim unperturbedly, miraculously, to shore. But I saw nothing, was witness to nothing, and finally made my way back home beneath a sun that was quickly slipping behind a clot of wintery clouds.

At first I thought this marked the beginning of a whole new series of visions for Myra but it wasn't long before I realized that I was wrong. There were no more sightings, no more reports of strange, unexplainable things---at least not that she told me about. Perhaps she simply didn't have time to see anything other than her science texts, for even during the Christmas holidays she "kept up her grades" as my father liked to call it. And when she wasn't studying she was down at the parish hall painting cardboard cows and pigs and sheep for the Nativity pageant at my father's church.

After Christmas I went on an exhibition tour with the school glee club. We sang holiday songs at nursing homes, and Legion Halls, hospitals and private ladies clubs in Montreal. All of us were billeted at the homes of members of glee clubs from other schools and almost every night activities were planned for us. There was party after party and usually there were no adults, no parents in sight. Sometimes the parties were held in houses in Westmount or Hampstead, homes so huge and opulent by my standards that I

had to force myself not to stand gaping at the front door. At one of these houses I drank my first beer. That night I danced with at least a half-dozen different boys, boys who had never seen Myra, who would never know how I paled by comparison. I even kissed one of these boys in a dim corner of someone's book-lined den and the next morning I woke curiously pleased with the slight ache behind my eyes, the fuzzy feeling in my head.

On Sunday I lay in bed daydreaming, occasionally glancing at the clock on the bedside table, growing more and more elated as the hands passed from eight o'clock to nine o'clock to ten o'clock. The family I was staying with were agnostics ( My father would die, I had thought gleefully when the daughter told me this) and for the first time that I could remember I didn't go to church on Sunday. I felt weightless like I did each spring on that day when it was finally mild enough, finally dry enough for me to shed my leaden boots, let my coat flap open in the warm breeze.

But I was brought quickly back to earth with a phone call from my father, summoning me back home a day early. He was convinced that 1970 was the beginning of a far more serious, far more sensible era and since it was not only a new year but a whole new decade, he had decided to allow Myra and me to attend his all-adults' New Year's eve party. On the trip back in the freezing train I sat slouched in my seat, glowering at my own sour-faced reflection in the

darkened train window.

When I got back home, Myra seemed even smaller, thinner, than I remembered her being a week earlier. Just before midnight I went into the party and stood watching Myra from the doorway. She wore her Christmas outfit, a red and blue checked jumper that with its tiny, heart-shaped pockets and ruffled straps was at least five years, too young for her. It seemed that the ladies she was chatting with were admiring the dress and Myra smiled sweetly at their compliments. I'd seen Myra in situations like this dozens of times before and I'd always found the events more bearable because of her cheekiness. Often Myra mimicked people to their faces, sometimes aping Mabel Dempster's habit of endlessly patting her lacquered hair into place or echoing Judith Brown's embarrassingly girlish, high-pitched titter. And her victims, usually so caught up in their own monologues, rarely noticed what Myra was doing. But that night she no longer seemed to be playing the game. Or she now played it so flawlessly--- smiling and wrinkling her nose and coyly giggling---that I could no longer detect the seams, could no longer determine where the mimicking began and where it left off. She had learned the game so well that what had once been so unnatural was now perfectly natural.

I spent the ringing in of the new in my bedroom, banished there by my father because I refused to change my sweatshirt and jeans for a proper dress. I sat on the bed and sifted

through a stack of magazines while the sounds of laughter and Guy Lombardo and clinking sherry glasses drifted in from the livingroom. Several of the magazine covers showed the traditional cartoon of old Father Time and the baby New Year. I had always thought that these sort of pictures were rather juvenile in the way they suggested a whole lifetime's worth of aging and deterioration could be crammed into a single, calendar year. But that night I felt so deflated that such a thing seemed frighteningly possible. Still, there was another possibility, another less literal, more hopeful possibility. Perhaps the old man in the picture was not actually destroyed at the striking of midnight. Perhaps he was magically transformed, all the energy and light and promise that still flickered in his frail, sagging body somehow finding new life in the robust little infant that tugged at the hem of his tattered robe.

I began thinking seriously about where I would go to school in the fall; it suddenly seemed urgent that I make some final decisions. In February I spent almost every evening flipping through college catalogues and brochures, studying photograph after glossy photograph of sweeping campuses, airy libraries, spacious dormitories. The students that decorated these pictures, all of them looking more than a little dated with their beehives and crewcuts, beamed out at the camera as if they couldn't believe their good fortune at finding themselves in these halls of learning. I sus-

pected though that their smiles had far less to do with the joys of education than they did with the fact that these co-eds were now finally free from the pressure of their parents' thumbs. They were no longer "Mabel Dempster's son" or "Reverend Shepherd's daughter"---always that and nothing more. Now they were just one among many, safe (and maybe even happy, I thought) among the thousands.

I pressed some of the college brochures on Myra, hoping to shake her torpor with pictures of aspiring artists working diligently at their easels, with descriptions of exchange students touring galleries and museums in distant, foreign cities. But Myra showed only a flickering interest in the catalogues. Until I showed her the listings in the anthropology section and told her these were the courses I was thinking about taking. She stared at the glossy pages for a long time and then she closed the catalogue. She didn't look at me when she spoke.

"You're going for sure then." Her words sounded both like a question and a resignation.

I had always been nervous on the lake in winter, imagining the ice to be full of invisible cracks and fissures just waiting to swallow me up. But that winter, desperate to escape our stifling house, to find some privacy, I pushed the fear aside and spent most of my spare hours trudging over the ice and thinking. Towards the end of March I was out there almost every afternoon, trying to make some final

decisions about what schools to apply to for the fall term, trying to decide if I should leave Myra here all alone, unprotected.

The ice was a good foot and a half thick the last time I went walking on the lake, though March was almost over. A few of the braver (or perhaps more foolish) souls had driven their cars and trucks out onto the lake and a half-dozen Ski-doos, darting and skittering across the surface like manic water-bugs, were using two of the pick-ups as markers for the start and finish of a race. I wondered if Julien was driving one of the Ski-doos. And I wondered if he had a girl riding with him. I didn't even know if Julien was still in Laurel. I'd heard he'd become a partner in Guillaume's business but then I'd also heard he'd gone away to college on a music scholarship. It was always hard to get news in Laurel during the winter when everyone seemed to hibernate like squirrels round the warmth of their T.V. sets.

The lake was dotted with flimsy particle-board fishing shanties, most of them with a thin spiral of smoke rising up out of a rusty stove-pipe. I kept my distance from them, walking close to the shoreline, but as I passed a clump of the shacks the door of the one nearest me was flung violently open. A man in a red checked workshirt burst out and scuttled across the ice to yank savagely at one of his bobbing tip-ups. He pulled the line up hand over hand and his catch---a writhing sliver of black from where I stood---emerged

from the hole in the ice.

The fishing was good that afternoon---there was a lot of door-slamming and scuttling going on. I found that even when I couldn't see their faces I could still often identify the fishermen by the way they waddled or hopped or trotted out to their tip-ups or by the quality or quantity of profanity that reached me if their catch was lost. But as I watched I found that a scrap of my father's latest sermon kept buzzing annoyingly in and out of my head. "We are all fishers of men." Over and over. "We are all fishers of men." It was one of my father's favourite expressions and though I'd heard it dozens of times before and thought little about it, that afternoon it conjured up a ghoulish picture. A picture of men, of men and women and children being hauled up hand over fist out of fishing holes in the ice. Bluish, bloated, wall-eyed bodies, looking the way I imagined victims of suicide or murder would look when they were dredged up from a river bottom, a lake bed. Bodies dangling twisted and hideous from the end of a giant grappling hook.

I sped up, trying to shake the image from in front of my eyes, and headed down the most easterly of the lake's fingers. The snow that covered the ice, grey-blue where it reflected the sunless sky, had been carved into ridges by the wind until it resembled stratified rock. In other places the ice had been swept completely clear. I felt uneasy walking across these slippery, bare stretches, imagining that I



was being watched, that deep below, some great, hulking creature might be gazing blearily, morosely up at me. Passing over these patches I refused to look down, focusing instead on a large poplar that towered on the far shore of the finger.

When I flew headlong across the frozen lake I thought I had tripped on a nub of jutting ice or perhaps a forgotten tip-up stick. Still half-sprawled on the ice I looked over my shoulder to check. I never expected to see the deer.

It lay a few feet behind me, a small grey-coated deer frozen into the lake. A doe or a young buck by the looks of it. It was almost flush with the ice, only the top of its head, the ridge of its spine and the tips of its front hooves protruding. But the rest of it---shining black muzzle, large, tucked-back ears, white-fringed tail---was easily visible where it hung suspended in the clear ice. The deer's head was pressed in between its outstretched front legs as if, like an old, tired dog, it had merely flopped down to take a short nap.

As I scrambled to my feet the thought struck me with such force that it nearly knocked me back down onto the ice. This deer was Myra's deer. It had to be the same one. The same deer she had seen plunge through the ice on that grey, frigid day in early December.

I circled closer to the deer and squatted down a foot or so in front of it. Looking at where the sleek head rested

between polished hooves I was reminded of a calf I'd once watched being born. It had emerged like this---with wet muzzle wedged between slender legs---and when it slithered onto its straw bed the vet, waxing poetic, had called it a "glistening little miracle." Myra had said that someone should see the deer, someone should know what had happened. I had seen. I knew. Now I had to make sure I heeded its warning, had to make certain that this image was kept safe amid the vast tangle of my other memories.

\* \* \*

I still visit Laurel a few times a year. Jeffrey, Vicky and I make the pilgrimage out from Montreal every Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving. Vicky dotes on her grandparents though I expect she'll outgrow them soon. She and my mother spend long, giggle-filled hours watching "Sesame Street" and super-hero cartoons on television. And my father reads to her. In the past fifteen years he's had several cataract operations and now he has difficulty reading anything without a magnifying glass. But Vicky's large-print story books with their bold, colourful illustrations are tailor-made for him. He especially likes to read from the Junior Bible he bought for her on her birthday last year. When I watch the two of them bending intently over a book, my father's bald, pink head looking nearly

as babyish as Vicky's, I sometimes wonder who enjoys the reading more.

We visit Myra, too. She lives on the main street in Laurel in a little bungalow which, to my father's embarrassment, she has painted mauve. I suppose this and the colour of her hair, a bleached straw-yellow now, are the last vestiges of her old defiance. She runs a little craft shop in the front room of her home where she sells hand-woven placemats, patchwork lampshades, clay flower pots. And stained-glass figures---her specialty. Colourful parrots and butterflies and bumblebees, suns and stars and crescent moons that dangle in her picture window from near invisible lengths of fishing line, the light filtering through them to cast shaky, nebulous patterns on the carpet. Each time we visit, Myra shows Vicky how to use the loom or the potter's wheel or explains how she injects various chemicals into the molten liquid to give colour to her stained-glass. She feeds Vicky bowls of all-natural granola and patiently plays game after game of Snakes and Ladders with her. A year or so ago I finally worked up the courage to ask Myra why she had never had a baby of her own. She seemed startled by the question and for a moment her upturned face grew taut with anger. But then she went back to the needlepoint in her lap and giving a jittery laugh she simply told me that mutants weren't supposed to have children.

Even though Myra lives only five miles away from my

mother and father she rarely visits them, perhaps even less than Jeffrey and I do. A few weeks ago at Easter she did go to my parents' for Sunday dinner and after the meal she and I took our tea out onto the back porch. Myra lowered herself down onto the stairs and set her cup on the step beside her. Then, groaning in exasperation, she buried her face in her hands.

"God, that man drives me absolutely crazy."

Though nothing out of the ordinary had happened at the dinner table I knew she was talking about our father. I laughed softly.

"I know. He drives me crazy, too."

Myra dropped her hands, stared out at the lake.

"No he doesn't. Not in the same way."

And I had to agree. With a single, disdainful stare he seems able to paralyze Myra, to arrest her words of disagreement or defiance or protest even before they pass her lips. Once fixed with that look she seems sapped of energy or perhaps she knows only too well the futility of fighting with him singlehandedly and so she gives up the battle before it's even begun. She's not as lucky as I am. She doesn't have a husband or child, two bodies that can sometimes deflect the persistent gaze of those milky eyes.

We looked at photographs this past Easter as we always do on holidays, my father dragging out the old album from where it sits enshrined inside the china cabinet. And as

usual everyone remarked on the similarities, the striking similarities they always say, between Vicky and Myra when she was a toddler. I smiled and nodded at their comments--- how could I do otherwise when, if I didn't know better, I would say that the impish, radiant child in many of the snapshots was Vicky and not Myra? But the whole process fills me with a sickening dread; I always feel as if I'm inspecting the pictures of a child who, victim of some tragic accident or illness, never survived to adulthood. And this last Easter was no exception. I remember pulling a startled Vicky up onto my knee and hugging her tight to my chest, trying desperately to keep her enclosed in the protective shroud of my arms, trying to unsettle that awful lump of foreboding from where it sat like lead in the pit of my stomach.

It must have been that same foreboding, that same fear, that made me shout at Vicky this morning. A morning that is all but over. The sun is almost directly overhead now and in its arcing climb it's managed to warm up the interior of the car. I let the mangy car blanket slip from my shoulders. I see that the ashtray is full to the brim with cigarette butts and guiltily I decide not to light another.

Vicky and Jeffrey are still down at the fence and as I watch, Vicky pulls up a tuft of new grass and threads it through the mesh to a waiting deer. Jeffrey reaches down and ruffled Vicky's thick, russet hair and the gesture, so natural, brings a tightness to my throat. I have made a good choice

with this man.

Finally I push myself out of the car. When I reach the fence Vicky beams up at me. Apparently my most recent sins have been forgiven. I crouch down and hold my face close to hers. I feel the heat of her skin radiating out to warm my own cheek.

"Is that where you saw the baby deer, honey?" I point at the clump of bushes to the left of the barns, willing my outstretched arm not to shake.

Vicky nods, casting a suspicious glance at me. But I feel the excitement mounting in her small body. Or perhaps it is tension, perhaps she dreads another outburst.

I keep my eyes fixed to the bushes for a long time. Vicky must draw some confidence from this for she sidles closer and leans against me, steadying herself with a chubby hand on my bent knee.

"Dere," she says, raising her own arm parallel to mine. Then her brow furrows and she looks first at me, then back at the bushes. She reaches up and touches my cheek.

"Feckles." She giggles, the puzzlement fading from her face. She swings her arm back towards the barn, bobs her head excitedly up and down. "Feckles!"

At first I have no idea what she means. But then I suddenly realize she is trying to tell me that the fawn she sees has freckles. To her, the white spots on the little creature's coat must look like the brown pigments scattered

so profusely across my cheeks, the bridge of my nose.

I smile, then laugh out loud.

"You're right, sweetie. Baby deer have freckles."

I feel an odd mixture of wobbliness and anticipation, as if I've just been allowed up after weeks of prescribed bed-rest, and I lean against Vicky's sturdy body for support.

Then, over in the bushes, I see something. I see what might be the flash of light on a dappled flank, what might be the movement of a fawn as it teeters upright and makes its timid, hesitant way out through a criss-cross of newly-budded branches. I catch my breath and wait. There is no more movement but I keep staring at the bushes through a glistening veil of tears. It doesn't matter if I see nothing more. It doesn't matter if I never see what Vicky sees. It matters only that I have faith.