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PLANET PLACE

Cheryl Armour

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April 1997

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ABSTRACT

Planet Place

Cheryl Armour

This collection of short stories explores the effect of place on the lives of various characters striving to define themselves within their geographical, social, and biological realities. The stories' central characters are predominantly young; the environments they encounter are impersonal, isolated, or unfamiliar. On an alternate level, the places inhabited by the protagonists can be seen as psychological ones, giving the stories a sense of *fugue* in their play between the tangible, the puzzling, and the hyperconscious. Whether looking at the interaction between child and parent, man and nature, siblings, strangers, or fellow citizens, each of the six stories tests the phenomenon of adaptation in distinct and unavoidable predicaments.

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GOOD BOYS

It's a Friday morning, around ten o'clock. Serge Laframboise and Ti-Pi St. Ange turn left at the first stop sign on the mountain through-road, and head downhill to the village. The sign also means that their half-hour walk through the woods is over and that they are now in full view of the citizens of Castorville. If they've been kidding around with each other before this, they put a stop to it. From now on, there will be no more shoulder bumping, hooking of pinkies, or lingering smiles between them. Old man Lemieux will probably be sitting on his porch at number one rue Champagne, hands locked against his circle of belly as if to make a gate between the heavy arms that fence it in. He'll be staring out into the street while his wife works out front, weeding the borders or sweeping the painted concrete path. Whatever it is she does, she keeps out of her husband's way. She knows how he hates having his vision obstructed, especially when something worth seeing passes by.

Serge is good at adapting to the constraints that face him. He can do it in a way that doesn't seem phony or forced, keeping intact the intimacy he shares with his much younger companion. A friendly wave to the old man is all it takes, followed by a smile and nod from Ti-Pi. Raoul Lemieux

dislodges himself slightly in his chair and acknowledges the two with an erection of three fingers disengaged from the cluster in front of him.

"*Bonjour*, Messieurs Laframboise," he wheezes from under a scarf of fat and skin. Serge and Ti-Pi hear this part but not the mumbled curse that follows. "*Maudits tapettes...*" say the old man's lips while his fingers prod one another stiffly. His wife looks uncomfortable. This the men read, but they walk on. It's the same thing every week but the groceries have to be bought.

The maple-covered mountain rises behind them as fast as they descend, swallowing their cabin home into its leafy face. If it weren't for the wisp of smoke rising from the green northern slope no one would be able to tell, even Serge himself, exactly where the house, the shingled shed, the dog run, and the chicken coop were. At about two o'clock the fire will burn out and there will be no way of telling that anyone lives up there. The pot of supper simmering on the stove will cool down and thicken, and Pouf, the cat, will snuggle closer to her kittens, making up for the disappearing heat from the side of the oven.

Ti-Pi kicks a gravel stone in a straight line down the asphalt street, enjoying how easily it rolls. He could do this all the way to the bottom, but Serge wants him close by; he has opinions to share on what he sees from the top of the

hill.

"You see that guy over there getting into his Lincoln?" he asks through barely moving lips. "You know how he bought it?" Ti-Pi shakes his head. "Unemployment insurance, my friend. Normally a guy gets one cheque a month but not him... He gets two. A paycheck AND a gift from the Régie."

"But a person can't do that," replies Ti-Pi. "Can they?"

"That's what you think. But this guy and his brothers use one another's social insurance numbers, depending on who's working and who isn't. Get it? They just do it like it's their right and no one ever gets caught. It's what you gotta do." Ti-Pi smiles toothily, raises his black eyebrows, and spits with a loud "Ouais?" into the still morning air. He wants Serge to tell him more, but he senses from his storyteller the need to start acting casual, noncommittal. They have passed through the forest's last clump of trees, and Serge stops talking. He takes on the air of a royal visitor inspecting a row of something. Ti-Pi doesn't worry about the sudden silence. He knows Serge doesn't want to give anyone the chance to say anything new about him. But the younger man feels the force of the houses' windows focussed down on them. He already knows the amused voices behind the glass call the two of them "Monsieur et MONSIEUR Laframboise." In one respect he likes the connection but not the way most people mean it. He knows what part of their bodies the faces by the curtains look at when they call them

that, and what their minds imagine. The best he can do is to look content, and walk jauntily past. As a final guarantee, he steps off the smooth road onto the gravel shoulder and spaces himself respectably from the man he loves.

"Ostie, there you go again," mutters Serge, lifting his arms slightly and dropping them with a soft slap against his thighs. He keeps looking straight ahead and seems to speak through closed lips. "Come back here, 'Pi, I told you they're all a bunch of goddamned hypocrites. Let 'em eat shit, they're assholes anyway." Ti-Pi stays where he is. He's turned red and looks as though he's going to cry. He wants to be tough, but at eighteen, has a long way to go before he can come up with ways to put people just where he wants them. Serge, now forty-nine, has had a lot of practice. There is little he can't do if he puts his mind to it. He is the only person Ti-Pi knows who doesn't have a regular job or a car, but can get whatever he wants. Sometimes he wonders if Serge could even perform miracles, like the saints whose statues they'll soon pass in front of the Convent. "Come on, *mon coeur*, it's been three weeks," continues Serge, softening his tone and lessening the space between them by degrees. "You should be used to Castorville by now. I think you're ashamed of me, huh?" teases Serge.

"No, I'm not," replies the boy. "Please don't think that, okay? It's just easier for you, that's all. You don't care about nothing."

"'Cept you, eh? Don't worry, soon you'll see everybody in this town's an *espèce de cochon* like everywhere else, and you won't give a fuck what they say about you. Hey, come on, I've been here all my life. Trust me, *Chriss....*"

* * *

Serge was born in Castorville when the town was still owned and run by a handful of families whose ancestors founded the riverfront village. He knows everybody here. As a hometown boy he'd gone to the little school at the bottom of the hill, played hockey on the river in winter, and worked in the summers for his pick of *oncle* or *tante*. By the age of twelve he was able to do what any Quebecois deserving the name could do. He could hunt, build, drive anything on wheels, and take on whatever nature put in his way. Like all the other children, he'd gone to l'Eglise de Castorville to honour and document the major crossings of his life. But these milestones, entered into the leatherbound records with scratchy pens, weren't the ones to fill in Serge's picture of himself; he never gave a damn about his baptism, first communion or *le sacrement du pardon*. Besides, it was difficult for him to feel special about these events when his nine older brothers had all done the same thing. Nor could he be properly affected by the drama of the ceremonies after he found out one day, while backstage, that the priest wore blue jeans under his exquisite white robes. Right next to

the holy hem.

The young child was intrigued instead by the church itself. The building had a mystery about it that could fill him with inspiration one minute, and scare him the next. Even though the front part was always filled with fresh flowers and soothing music, the church seemed eerie. In certain places it smelled bad from lack of air, and there were rooms no one ever entered. He didn't like going downstairs on special service days to help bring up more seats or hymn books, in case he ended up there alone. Then he'd imagine the devil peeping out at him from behind stacks of extra pews, and have to plan how to get away if the salivating horned monster decided to leap out at him. Once he heard shrieks and giggles coming from the end of a long corridor when no one was there except Soeur Clothilde. Everyone said she was the oldest nun in Quebec, and would probably never die. He'd found her sitting there all alone, hunched up in an alcove, cradling a wooden cross. At the sound of his hollow footsteps, the nun had turned her pinched grey face towards him, and was feebly waving him on with her tiny hand. Almost hidden in her heavy black clothes, she looked to Serge like the moving pieces of a severed worm. There were many things he didn't understand about nuns, priests and God, but there was no one to ask. The red velvet he brushed, and the crystal ornaments he had to clean once a month, didn't help him sort things out either. If anything, God's beautiful *bebelles*

confused him even more.

There were two things in the church, however, that Serge did like. Wood and posters. He loved the feel of the rounded oak pews against the backs of his swinging legs and the carved armrests under his warm fingers during mass. High above him the great room's beveled arches pushed, steam-bent, against the white plastered ceiling. They enclosed him like wooden rainbows in a pale sky, keeping him small, but letting him think big. While the far-off priest chanted familiar words Serge did not understand, the boy dreamed about becoming a carpenter, like Jesus, and of living in open spaces just as soon as he could.

He also wanted to have posters like the ones used for Sunday school. They were mostly of Jesus and his disciples, who were very good-looking men with shiny dark hair and supple bodies. They wore draped clothing that slipped off their shoulders most of the time and rugged leather sandals on their smooth feet. Their eyes were fiery and their mouths swelled full and red in the middle of carved beards. Their heads lolled, sometimes with great sadness and other times with love. They were always together, sitting or lying down with their arms and legs entwined. On the posters showing the Lord in danger, the disciples reached out to him with strong hands and naked muscular shoulders. In storms their curled locks and flowing tunics blew behind them, showing off

their tanned and anxious faces. As far as Serge could tell, there was very little difference between the disciples and a lot of rock singers on TV. They were also a lot like the models in the pictures pasted on the window at the beauty parlour down on rue Principale. Again Serge wanted to be like Jesus. He would look around for friends like these, to teach, or help out, and be with all the time.

* * *

They reach the bottom of the hill. Serge and Ti-Pi slow down at the high school where they are in time to watch the end of recess and wave to a few friends who go there. There aren't any houses around the back of the school; a playing field pushes them into the distance where they follow the edge of the diagonal fence and swerve back into view further down the road. The friends shout back and forth from the boundary ditch, asking about dope, someone called Sylvain, and if they can drop by later that afternoon.

"Yeah, come tonight," answers Serge through cupped hands. "I'm a father again, *tabernac'*. Did I tell you? Yeah Pouf had four, a few weeks ago. Bring beer, I've got stuff." He listens for their answers. Ti-Pi wants to shout something too, but he'll wait 'til Serge has completely finished. He keeps his hands funnelled at his mouth and clips his smiles in case he gets his chance.

"The kittens are orange," he finally shouts over the

recess buzzer. "My FIRST time, shit, and they end up being the colour of jam!"

Ti-Pi is still smiling about his joke when he and Serge enter the post office. It is small and well-built, the only government building in Castorville. There is a sign outside, posted on government-issue aluminum, identifying the town and its postal code. Older men stand in the way of busier people, and move like sleepy flies only when they have to. Some of them stand outside under the flags, raising their voices over the sharp flapping sound above them. Others loiter inside in a cloud of cigarette smoke, making conversation with one another, or with half-interested postbox subscribers on their way in or out. The first thing Serge does as he swings open the heavy door is to quickly scan the gathering of old men. Then he focusses on a big clock mounted just above them.

"We're early," he says irritably. "Raymonde won't have finished sorting yet... Still about eight minutes to go."

"I guess you walk faster when I'm around, *mon vieux*!" replies Ti-Pi, flushing with amusement. "I'm good for you, eh? Keep you greased up for a long time yet!" Serge fidgets with the contents of his pant pockets even though he knows the postbox key is in his shirt, and prepares himself to be drawn into the morning gossip. As he raises his head to acknowledge whoever might be waiting to meet his gaze, his face pales slightly and pulls against his cheekbones. Almost everybody in the small room has known him since his birth,

and has no reason to hold anything back on his account. Some of them tease him out of habit because he still doesn't own a car, and others want to know his price for firewood or furniture repairs. Today it is Jacques Latulippe who means to seek him out. The elderly man waves loosely in Serge's direction, and pulls himself away from his cronies who don't seem willing to let him go. He is obviously the man of the hour about something. Serge knows him well enough to guess that he probably had a good catch last night on his trapline. If so, congratulations would be in order, but he stands quietly where he is, making no effort to penetrate the crowd for the old man's benefit. He waits, instead, for Jacques to push through to him before he acknowledges his excited friend's presence.

"*Bonjour, mon oncle.* How are you? So what's happening? You seem to be very happy about something this morning," says Serge in a mellow tone, coaxing old Jacques as far into a corner as they can get, away from everybody else.

"*Ben oui,*" laughs the panting man. "I caught me a gorgeous fox last night. I tell you, you haven't seen a tail like this thing has, for years. It's as red as fire, and clean like it was just washed and brushed. Wait 'til you see it, *mon grand.* You won't believe it took only a smelly piece of fish to get it."

"Well, sometimes you gotta make a stink, eh...? replies Serge, chuckling. "So, what are you gonna do with it now? Tie

it to your car's antenna?"

"*Calique*, no. I want to get a hat or a headband made out of it for Adele. She'll wear it, I think, but if she doesn't I'll have a reason to look for some woman who will, *non?*" The old man's laughter fills the post office anteroom where they stand. It fits in well with the brisk atmosphere as people begin opening their post boxes and planning their day according to their mail. "Yah, it's the best thing I've ever caught," he continues. "And I've been doing it a long time now. You know that, you were six when you used to go out with me where the Esso station is now. There's still a lot of fur around here for a good-looking guy, you know... It's a shame to waste it, *non?*" He nudges Serge and winks theatrically. Serge breaks from the man's gaze. Jacques knows he has hit a sensitive point with his joke, so he steps back and lowers his tone. "How about you, then? Anything up where you are? I wish I wasn't so damn old, I'd climb up to see you sometime." He looks at Ti-Pi who has made his way to the corner and waits against the rough wall of hinges and keyholes. "I'll leave such things to you young people." Serge tells him he understands and turns around to locate his box. The old man takes this opportunity to glance over at his group of admirers which has now grown in size. Someone calls over to him, and he taps Serge on the back to show he's leaving.

Ti-Pi squeezes into the place left by Jacques, and holds

out his hand to take the grocery flyers and discount coupons that Serge automatically sorts from the mail. It takes time because not all the mail in the box belongs to him. Most of it belongs to the church. He just has a key to the box; one of his brothers, who is now the local priest, gave it to him. Serge doesn't see anything wrong with sharing a mail box with the church. He likes the idea of God's address being his too. Ti-Pi laughs as Serge makes new jokes about this arrangement, and makes way for him to pass alongside so he won't have to miss any of them.

"That reminds me," says Serge, as they file out onto the sidewalk. "Sylvain used to mail me coke and weed from Trois-Rivières. Did I tell you? He used to send it care of the church and I always got it *pas de problème*. Yeah, religion is okay. You just gotta make it work for you."

Le Restaurant Petit Piché isn't very busy for a Friday. Serge is glad. This means he can have his sister to himself for a while. She is a waitress here and enjoys spoiling her brother when he drops in. He sees that the table by the window is available, which is good, not only for its view of the street, but also because it's hidden from the kitchen and *Le Petit Piché's* cook/owner. Serge and Ti-Pi decide to make this table their headquarters for the morning, coming and going as they please. The grocery store is just across the street, which means that they can study the 'specials' flyer before going in, bring their bags back to their table, and go

about their other errands unburdened.

"Coffee, you two?" says a pleasant voice connected to a steaming container of coffee appearing between them.

"Allo, Diane... Yeah, please. Toast as well, and don't be tight with the jam. So, how are you anyway? Yves treating you right? He better be, that fuckin'...."

"Ah, come on, Serge, leave him alone. Y'est correct," replies his sister, playfully knocking his shoulder. Are you so perfect then?" She looks at him looking back at her. "Oh excuse me, I forgot." She pours Ti-Pi's coffee and returns to the kitchen for the toast and jam. If the cook lets her get it herself, she'll likely throw in more than that.

Serge spreads the flyers across the table and discusses each advertised special.

"Look at this," he says bitterly. "Just because it's the end of the month they give you nothing of any use, pure shit. They know that this is when society's crotte get their welfare cheques, so they don't put a damn thing you usually buy on special. Pricks... I mean, do I want a shampoo with ten herbs in it, or some piss cleaner in a spray? Or, look at this, a two dollar discount on a plate?" He closes the flyer, straightens the pages, and begins to look through it again. "Tabernac', about the only thing that's of any use to us is this cat food. And even it's the kind for spoilt cats. You know, the kind where some guy stands on a high ladder at the factory and throws a few chunks of actual beef over hundreds

of mixing drums?" He takes a sip of coffee and lightly dabs his lips with a clean paper napkin. "What the hell, though, Pouf deserves it. Maybe it'll get her blood back to normal after having all those kittens suck the life out of her." Ti-Pi asks Serge what flavour they should get, but their own food comes and they occupy themselves with arranging it around the grocery pages.

Diane has brought them more than they ordered, and Ti-Pi is delighted at the amount of cheese she has put on his poutine.

"If you're anything like Sylvain," she says, "I'll have you falling in love with me in no time. Tell him, Serge, tell him how I nearly got that guy to go straight and run away with me!"

"She spoilt him rotten," replies Serge before taking a last mouthful of coffee. "Made him soft, I swear... Say, how does it look for more of the same?"

"One minute, I'll make some fresh."

"So Sylvain and Diane got on good, eh?" asks Ti-Pi, watching the woman scurry behind the counter. "It seems everybody liked him. Really. Wherever we go everyone is crazy over Sylvain. I thought you said he was unhappy here, and that's why he left." Serge also stares after his sister's brisk movements and seems reluctant to break from the distraction it brings. "Eh, *mon chou*," teases Ti-Pi, waving his hand in front of his companion's set expression.

"Are you there? Knock, Knock. So what happened to him? You still have to tell me." Serge brings his eyes back to the flyers on the table and aligns the pages against his fingers. He sighs in reply to Ti-Pi's questions which keep coming. "Maybe there's a fag-basher in this town you're scared to tell me about, huh? Some uptight *crétin*? If there is, why don't you get Portelance, that wrestler guy you told me about the other night, to do him over?" Serge sees Diane returning and straightens in his chair to uncover his cup.

"Later, okay," he says to Ti-Pi, and pulls a smile for his sister who pants as she pours two steaming refills.

"*Mon dou*, what happened to you two then," she asks, looking at their full plates. "Why aren't you eating this crap I bust my ass to get you. What's up? Don't tell me you're having a lover's quarrel now. 'Ostie, I can hardly understand my own kind of love." She whisks away the used cream containers from the table and mechanically puts a smile to her face as she notices a couple enter the restaurant. "For Christ's sake," she whispers to the two men in her charge. "Behave yourselves, okay?"

It is difficult, as the afternoon progresses, for Ti-Pi to pick up where he left off on the subject of Sylvain. Serge is normally eager to tell a story, but this time he talks about groceries or bargains instead. Ti-Pi realizes he will have to find out for himself what he wants to know about Serge's previous lover. Maybe he'll ask around at the party

later; someone should be able to tell him how Sylvain came to Castorville, if not why he left.

* * *

For Ti-Pi's part, nothing in particular had brought him here. Just a local band he'd heard was pretty good. Even then, he might not have bothered coming except that the bar where it was playing opened out onto a terrace, giving him the idea to sneak his dog in with him. It was a big plus that he could take Ricki along; the two of them had been almost inseparable for the last three years. The night Ricki was brought to Castorville, his fur shone from the brushing he'd got before leaving home. Ti-Pi had learned from experience that a dog stood a better chance of getting in places if it looked like it just came from the groomer's, or out of a commercial. To be sure there'd be no problem with Ricki, he sat by the door to the terrace, ready to go out if he had to. After the lights dimmed and the band began its first number, he noticed a man come in and also make for the back. There were just the two of them there, and the dog. Ti-Pi kept looking at the man. He hoped he wouldn't see Ricki sprawled out in the space between them. At the 'take-five', he smiled at the stranger, pointed self-consciously at the dog, and began explaining its presence. The man, middle-aged and handsome, followed his speech with interest and didn't seem to mind. When the bustle in the bar became too

loud to shout over, the man moved up to sit beside him. They kept talking about Ricki until the band seemed ready to do another number, then Ti-Pi made the dog lie down at his feet again. He was proud of its obedience. The man smiled as the animal made itself comfortable. Then just before the lead guitar began to pound the air with the intro to the next song, he leaned over and said, "Oh, by the way, my name is Serge Laframboise. Pleased to meet you, and all that."

Although Ti-Pi did have his parents' car that night and could have been home in half-an-hour after the show, he found himself ambling through the quiet streets of Castorville instead. It was more or less because of the dog that he ended up heading in quite the opposite direction, without any sense of urgency, and in the company of a man just as unhurried. After they left the bar he'd just wanted to let Ricki stretch out before going back to the car, but the dog kept pulling at its leash, wanting to get closer to the smells and noises of the dark woods not far ahead. Serge had laughed and said that animals were like that, always after something or other. He'd also said that he was going up that way and they might as well walk together. Between interruptions from the foraging dog, Serge answered questions about Castorville. They also talked about living off the land, neighbouring towns, and roommates they'd had.

"Sylvain," said Serge. "He was my last one. About your age, as a matter of fact, and just as good-looking...." He

laughed tensely at the liberty just taken and waited for Ti-Pi's reaction.

"Yeah?" replied the boy. "All right...."

"Yeah, he stayed with me in the cabane for almost two years. At first, he didn't know a nail from a finger up his nose. Know what I mean? But he learned fast, man. Pretty soon he was splitting four cords of wood a day and helping me build things. His muscles as well, I'm telling you. You should see the chicken coop we built, it's great. Got everything in it. Insulation, lights, and a beautiful sloping floor under the roosts." He stopped to kick at a paper bag on the side of the road. Glass rattled inside. "Bottles. I figure if I pick up five a day, it'll pay my insurance for the week. You know, 6/49s."

"So what do you have in the chicken coop? Laying hens?"

"Ah, shit, I got everything. Five kinds of chickens, ducks, geese, even a turkey. There's a stream up there, see, so I made this pond where the ducks and geese swim. Then I also got a housecat. She just had kittens, two days ago. You gotta see it to believe me. The place is really something." They came to a corner at the end of the long main road which was less well-lit than the rest of the street. "Here's where I turn to go to my place." He pointed up a dirt road leading to the mountain. "You comin' further?" Ti-Pi looked up the dark track. The dog tugged at its leash. A cool breeze blew through the tops of the trees down across their faces. It smelled good, with just a trace of woodsmoke. "Look, if you

stand here..." Serge said, moving over to the other side of the road and onto someone's lawn, "you can see my porchlight. Way up there. See it?" To make way for Ti-Pi, he stumbled slightly on the grass and brushed up against the boy's shoulder. They both laughed and apologized. Serge stopped first. "Say, it's getting late, eh? You know you're welcome to crash at my place, if you like. It'd be good. You could get to see the woods and the animals in the daytime." Ti-Pi pulled his dog towards him and made him sit quietly while he undid a twist in the leash. The animal panted as he waited to be freed.

"My car, 'though... replied Ti-Pi, considering the idea. "Will it be okay down there? And what about Ricki? I don't know how he'd be around the cat and kittens. Fuck, I'd hate to wake up in the morning and find he'd eaten them, or something! Maybe I should come another time when...."

"Nah, it'll be okay. I'm sure. Come on."

Ti-Pi woke up early the next morning to the sound of birds, and Ricki scratching at the bathroom door. He wanted more than anything to let the dog come into the room, but wasn't sure where the cat was.

"Quiet, Ricki. Shh, lie down now. Good boy," he whispered at the door. "I'm coming to get you soon. Take you for a walk, okay?" The dog whined and kept scratching at the door. Serge stirred where he lay asleep on an unfolded couch in the darkest corner of the room. "Shh, 'ostie, I'm

coming." Ti-Pi unzipped the sleeping bag as quietly as he could, but Ricki, sensing that he would soon be let out, began to bark excitedly. Serge, now awake, raised himself slightly out of his blankets and rubbed his eyes against his knuckles.

"Check by the stove," he said, yawning towards the floor. "Pouf normally sleeps there. If not, then she'll be in the attic bedroom." He pointed to the staircase. "Maybe put her out, then let your dog in." Eager to be with Ricki, Ti-Pi sprung from his sleeping bag, forgetting he had taken off his clothes the night before to save his good pants and shirt, and not sweat in the sleeping bag. In the few seconds he had to hide his embarrassment, Ti-Pi decided any shame he might feel from his nakedness wouldn't compare with that of having his dog scratch someone's door down. Besides, he'd thought a bit about Serge's talk of muscles earlier, and began wondering how his own looked to a man who had probably seen many.

"The kitchen...?" he asked vacantly, bringing his hands together and pointing two fingers towards the next room.

"*M'ouais*, probably in the woodbox," suggested Serge, his voice following Ti-Pi into the kitchen. "Have you found her?"

"No, not here." Ti-Pi came back into the room. "I guess I'll go upstairs?" He glanced back at the man in the corner as he began to mount the narrow staircase, clapping his hands hard against the railing. The wood shook under him. He felt his muscles pull as he climbed, and sensed the warmer

upstairs air meet his body as he neared the top.

The attic was dark and humid. Red curtains hung across the window, turning the morning light into a fiery glow. Ti-Pi moved slowly across the floor, trying not to collide with the contents of the room. He hissed for the cat, but couldn't lure her from wherever she slept. He tried pulling open the curtains, but they were too tightly sewn around the rod holding them in place. As he lifted them to jam their hems between the rod and wall, shafts of sunlight pierced the rosy shadows of the room. Now he could make out that the small place was filled to capacity. Old chainsaw parts lay sorted into oily piles where the light was best, and snowshoes jutted out everywhere, their ends planted among stacks of antique furniture in various stages of restoration. The name 'Hastings' was written in chalk across some of the furniture, or in pencil on curling beige labels attached with wire to drawers and scraps of wood. There was a pile of flat cushions in one corner, where the cat and her kittens lay in a warm knot, and pictures of naked men had been carefully pasted edge-to-edge, over the yellowing walls.

Serge lay back on his pillows, listening to the creaking above him. He pictured Ti-Pi's progress in the attic bedroom. When the movement stopped, he figured the boy must have found either the light switch or the cat.

"Any luck?" he called, channelling his voice as far up

as he could. The footsteps started again.

"Found her," came the reply from the top step. "She's got the kittens with her. They're all asleep, and so small... There's four of them, eh?"

"Yah. Probably best to leave them there for now," Serge answered, trying to be patient. "Shut the...." He was still yelling when Ti-Pi emerged. "Just shut the door," he finished, lowering his voice and looking hard into the delighted face of the boy descending his staircase. "That'll work."

"I did. I closed it really quietly." Ti-Pi folded his arms tightly against his bare chest in the cooler downstairs room. "They're beautiful, aren't they? Are you going to give them away later?" Serge shrugged his shoulders. He straightened out his blanket with his leg.

"Cold?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's hot up there," Ti-Pi replied, heading for the bathroom. "Here Ricki, come boy... Hey, Serge, could I have one of the kittens when the time comes?" The dog bounded out into the room, immediately taking its place on Ti-Pi's bed.

"Sure. You can have the lot," answered Serge, holding the boy with his gaze, and slowly drawing back his blanket. "The works... All yours if you like." Ti-Pi looked at the man's full nakedness and then down at his own. He smiled coyly as a response welled up inside him. A ray of early sunlight quivered across the room. Ricki was already asleep.

"Depending on what a good boy I am, I s'pose?"

* * *

It's a good thing Serge specified to the boys at the school that the party would be a "Bring-Your-Own." By the time he and Ti-Pi reach the front steps of the cabin, it is already six o'clock, and they are exhausted. They drop their bigger bags onto the porch.

"Imagine if we'd had to bring booze as well as all this shit," observes Ti-Pi, flopping down on the big bag of dog food he'd just hauled up the hill.

"*Merde*, I'd have drunk it before now, lemme tell you," replies Serge, unlocking the front door and carrying in as many bags as he can with one hand. On the way in, he kicks up something lying on the floor. It is a letter. He brings it back towards him with his foot and reads the upside-down envelope. "Ah, *Chriss*, Hastings was here," he says. "I wonder what that stiff wants now. He thinks he owns me, you know, and half the world." Ti-Pi takes the bags from Serge's hand and puts them in the kitchen.

"He's your landlord, right? The rich *anglais* who owns the mountain?"

"Yeah, but he doesn't own me, *tabernac'*. I've told him so many times to phone me if he wants something. But I s'pose things get so boring up in Westmount that he has to escape to the country for fresh air, and to let his dog shit in peace."

He's opened the letter and reads parts of it out loud, struggling over the quickly-scrawled English words. "'Sorry I missed you again, Laframboise... the middle-sized dresser as soon as possible... it's for a wedding present... thank you... call me if there are problems.'" The paper shakes as he reads. Ti-Pi watches him fold it up when he's finished and fling it into the firebox.

"You have to do a job for the boss?" he murmurs.

"Yeah, when he says 'Jump,' I have to ask when to come back down."

"But you guys have an arrangement, right? About the rent?"

"That's right, but there's a way to do things, man. Ways that shouldn't make me feel like something even his dog won't sniff. Jesus, why me...?" Ti-Pi puts his hand solidly on his friend's shoulder for a second as he stretches past him to take down a big can from the mantelpiece. He opens it and lifts out the cigarette papers stuffed in on top. Then he points into it and raises his eyebrows questioningly. "Now we're talking," mutters Serge. "Let's forget about nice antiques, and make a real cock of a joint to ram up this asshole of a day."

It seems to take forever to open the new bag of dog food. Ti-Pi knows it's because he's gone on dope, but the kittens underfoot aren't helping either. He teases them with bits of string, making them cling to his socks, and scat

across the floor when he shakes them off. Serge shouts from the living room that the noise is getting on his nerves, so Ti-Pi tries to interest the kittens in their mother. He carefully clears four squares in her stomach fur for them, gently pushing away their eager noses until he has finished. Then he hears Serge shout, "Alain's here," and the two come into the kitchen, talking animatedly. This sets the kittens scurrying again. Some make for dark places in the room but one flings itself onto Serge's leg, embedding its claws in his flesh.

"Aie, 'ostie," he screams, falling against Alain and grabbing hold of the kitten's head. He rips the animal from his clothing, pulling its skin tightly across its skull. The force of his grasp stretches the kitten's eyes into long watery slits. Content to let it dangle like a badly-made toy from his fist, Serge resumes his role as host. He breathes heavily. "Go put your beer in the stream, Alain, it'll stay cold out there. Good as a fridge." Then he turns to Ti-Pi who is standing in spilt dog food. The boy is pale and stares at the rigid kitten. "See this," begins Serge, lifting it up. "It's time to do something about it, eh? I have enough troubles, don't you think?"

"Please don't hurt Sara, *mon coeur*, it wasn't her fault. I was the one who excited her," stammers Ti-Pi.

"Isn't it enough that you treat that dog of yours like a king? You want to have our lives run by these fucking cats too? *Sacrement*, I last went through all this with Sylvain,

and believe me, I learnt a thing or two in my old age about goody-goodies. Yeah, it was hell to put up with. That's why he left me... Satisfied? Now you know, mystery solved. So are you gonna do it to me too?"

"Ah, come on, don't talk like that," pleads Ti-Pi, his young Adam's apple prominent as he swallows past his tight neck muscles. "You know Ricki stays in the dog run like you want. All day and night, even though he's not used to it. Do you know how much he hates it in there, Serge?" Alain has returned to the house and hovers by the back door because of the argument. From here he sees Ti-Pi rush out from the kitchen to his caged dog. "Hey, Ricki, come on... That's a good boy," he hears him call. Then he watches him pat the happy animal against the gate, sending thick puffs of dust and hair up into his face and clothes. Finally Ti-Pi says, "I'm just gonna get the leash. You wait for me, okay?" The dog repositions itself at the gate. Alain swears it understands.

Serge is still standing against the counter, holding the kitten when Ti-Pi returns. It has stopped struggling. Alain has come in enough to lean against the door.

"Kittens are great," Serge is telling his visitor calmly. "But only when they're very young, you know? I have nothing against them when they just lie there. Actually, if you want the truth, Pouf gets herself banged up three times a year, which is fine with me." Alain looks surprised. "Yeah,

and I make her real comfortable when she pops the kittens. Fuck, she has everything she wants. I like it anyway, you know, when the house smells of warm babies, and you can hear the sound of them on their mother. Suck, suck, sucking away. Makes it feel like a home, eh? And that's no small potatoes." He rubs his forehead with his free hand and laughs self-consciously. "And let's not forget, *calique*, it's the closest I'll ever get to being a father." Serge sees Ti-Pi pause in the doorway to listen to what he's saying. He is working the knots out of a dog chain. "So where are you going?" Serge asks, changing his tone. "There's a lot going on around here, eh? You gonna let me down now? Oh yeah, *c'est certain*, you gonna let me down."

"Can't I take Ricki for a quick run... Five minutes? We can all calm down. Alain can come. Here, do you want me to take Sara too?" He holds out his hands to take the kitten from Serge.

"No, it's fine, I'll see to it. But you have to stay and help. Hey, you live here too. Also, I've decided this is not a good time to have a party. You go back down, Alain, okay? Tell the others things aren't going so good here tonight." Serge coaxes Alain out of the kitchen towards the front door. "You see, Hastings, my boss, wants me to make a nice wedding gift for one of his chums, and Ti-Pi and me, well, we have to do some tidying up before I can get started." He feels around in his pockets. "Here, take this. You can snort some, and sell the rest. For your trouble, okay?"

Ti-Pi comes outside once more before night has fully settled on the mountain; Serge needs a sledgehammer from the shed. Ricki sits up, pricking his ears for the rustle of the dog chain, but it doesn't come. He lies down again. Ti-Pi wants to tell his dog he's sorry for bringing him to a place where exciting scents and sounds lure him, but are seldom his to hunt down. He wants to understand, himself, what it is about a forest, a mountain, a riverfront village, that can fix itself around a man and his dog, allowing them only a small corner in so much space. First he will give Serge what he asked for, then try to steal a chance to take Ricki for a bit of a run. The trees around the cabin have become a fort of black columns against the purple sky. The air is caught between night and day, waiting to echo the whine of a foraging wolverine, or the nightlong snapping and tumbling of outermost twigs. Ti-Pi knows this is the best time for a walk in the woods. In the half-light he can choose what he wants to see.

Coming back down the stone steps from the shed to the house, Ti-Pi thinks of thawing snow trickling from a high place, with no control over where it ends up. He stops at the backdoor as if it were some kind of obstacle he will eventually push past. He shifts the hammer to his other hand, and goes in. Almost as soon as he enters, he bursts out again. Now he is holding something small and light, away from his body, out into the air. With him comes a battle of

noises from the house: Serge's angry shouts, dull banging, cats squealing. Somewhere closer, Ricki whimpers. Ti-Pi makes him out at the edge of the mountain's falling shadow, which borders now on the very front of his cage. He watches the dog pace behind the wire gate. His ears are taut, eyes alert. This time Ricki holds his head high into the air. From where Ti-Pi stands halfway up the slope leading from the low backdoor, he can hear the animal's deep, indecent, sniffing. He waits out of the light, afraid to see what he knows is Sara's blood dripping through his fingers. He's glad the dog is caged, and away from him. The banging continues. Ti-Pi can see his hands are as good as tied.

THE PROBLEM WITH CLEANING GLASS

I'm on the nineteenth floor of the hotel where I clean rooms. The view is nice; Paradise Towers is in the tourist part of the city. I'm standing by the sliding door that leads out onto the balcony in room 'B.' By four-thirty today every glass door on my floor has to be cleaned. That means up to Room 'L,' or number 'nineteen-twelve.' What can I say, it's a job.

The problem with cleaning glass is that you start out too fussy. You always figure this time you're going to get it right. No streaks or smudges. Eventually, though, it gets to you, especially when there are scads of windows and you have to do both sides yourself. This is why I'm glad I have a lot of gin left over from yesterday. It's a bottle I found in an early check-out and which is now hidden under dirty towels in my cleaning cart. With this to kill the perfectionist in me, and a bit of music going, I should be okay.

The city is already busy. The parking lots and sidewalks are filling up. From where I stand all the cars seem new and the people good-looking. Even the walls of the buildings look perfectly clean and symmetrical, like in magazine ads. If I'd never been down at street level before, I would think the

world was a pretty good place.

There is a bus stop across the road from the hotel. A lot of people get off the buses that pull up from just about all the suburbs of the city. Most of these people work at government jobs across the street and run to make the 'WALK' sign on the corner. Only one person seems to be waiting to catch a bus; he sits on the bench under the sign showing route numbers. His legs are stretched out in front of him and his arms make a dark line across the back of the seat. From the way the sun shines on him I can tell he's wearing blue jeans and a leather jacket. Every now and then he bends his right arm, bringing his hand to his mouth. From this high up he looks like a big fly cleaning itself but he's probably just smoking. I decide I'd better get on with the window cleaning.

I'm trying everything to make this job easier. The housekeeper told me scrunched up newspaper would shine the glass, but for me it curdles after a while mixed with the cleaner, and leaves grey balls all over the window and floor. After each piece is worn out like this, I take a break to kick the crumbs of paper out of the carpet and sip from the bottle stashed next to my cleaning solutions. I prefer doing the outside of the windows even though it's a pain to keep my newspaper from blowing away. The sounds of the street beat the occasional 'DING' of the elevator door, and the cooler

air on my face makes me really feel the gin. Things eventually get quieter around the bus stop. It looks like there are mostly older people with big shopping bags coming in now, but the guy on the bench is still there. I see him through the gap between two parked buses.

Then I start wondering if he can see me from where he is, and life, all of a sudden, gets more interesting. I start wanting him to see me up here, so I take to rubbing the glass in an overdone way like actors do when they're running through big yellow fields, or talking with their mouths full. When I reach up on tiptoe, I make out as if I can't help the fact that my dress is blowing way up my legs. When a bus takes off, I stay stuck like this for a little while longer which makes the top part of the window end up really clean. He must be blind if he hasn't seen me by now.

I feel special way up here, and safe. I wonder if those ancient philosopher-types ever wondered what distance means, the kind you can see and feel. Like whatever's happening to me up here won't really count as something that happened on *Earth* today. I guess they would have had to experience what I'm talking about from the top of a mountain or some temple, looking down on carts and peasants yacking about. I just think it's got to mean something that that guy is down there, and I'm up here. Like this.

I finish the window in room 'D' and get my things ready to move next door. I hurry because I want to get back outside. But while I'm at my cart this time, getting fresh supplies and a gulp of gin, I go and spill a whole lot of the booze down the front of my uniform. Suddenly I smell like a carpet in a sleazy bar, to say nothing of the stuff evaporating all over the room, and down the hall. I realize I'll have to wash the dress immediately so that the smell will be gone, and my clothes dry, by the time the housekeeper comes around to check up. I get myself into the next room, lock the door, and in my underwear rinse the booze out of my workdress. Afterwards it's sopping wet so I figure the best place to hang it would be in a breeze somewhere. I get a hanger from the closet and bend the point around the handle of the sliding door. This latest fact means that I can only do "insides" now, and all of a sudden I hate this job more than anything in the world. I see the guy is still down at the bus stop, still moving his arm back and forth, and I start to feel sad that my research, or whatever, with him is over too. I start thinking the old thing that I'm really stupid and deserve everything that happens to me, until I get the idea to go outside holding the dress, on the hanger, against me as a cover. I am far enough up from the street, so what's to lose. Anyway I try it out, and it seems to work, even in the wind. It covers me most of the time like a green blur, and I do have a good tan, which helps.

Out here the fresh air blows against my bare skin, my head spins from the booze and the height, and if I look at the clouds I feel like I'm on a huge sailing ship moving slowly away from the city. It's a good thing all this is happening at a time of day when the hotel guests are out taking in the sights, and I'm glad it's warm as well as breezy so my dress can dry fast. I decide to keep going with the window as best I can, since I don't really want to stand here doing nothing. Talk about looking obvious, and the shit I'll catch if I don't get this job done. I bring my basket of supplies outside to make things easier, but I leave the rolled-up newspaper on top because it's too thick to wedge under the handle. Then because I don't have any hands to spare, and am too busy thinking how wonderful I am for balancing the wad of paper on the handle as I swish it around the door, the wind gets hold of it and pages fly everywhere. There are ads for nice tidy stores slicing through the air, and news of the world flapping around like shot ducks. I'm hoping all this looks better from the ground; like a flock of seagulls taking off, maybe, or something from a kids' party.

Up here, though, things are getting worse. In the commotion my uniform has slipped off the hanger and sucks against the railing for a second before it blows through, to also go sailing over the street. Of course I don't catch it in time, so I scream, and keep standing there with my arms pulled together across my chest. A normal person would have

scattered inside by now but I can't resist glancing down to see my things coming in for a landing on the hotel's evergreens out front. Like *this* has to mean something now. While I'm at it I look for the guy on the bench, hoping he hasn't noticed. He's no longer there, but I catch sight of him stepping out into the busy street right in front of Paradise Towers, even though there is a light a bit higher up. He seems a lot more alive now than he was earlier, stretched out in the sun. Halfway across he bobs up and down, impatient for the rows of cars to pass. This is the route I take when I'm late in the morning and have to sneak in the parking entrance. I wonder why he needs to go that way after all this time. Inside room 'E' again, half-naked and still quite wasted, I don't know what to think anymore except that the view *is* nice from the nineteenth floor where I clean rooms... and isn't it weird that just about everybody knows how to count.

ROUND AND ROUND, TATYANA

"Maybe it's living north of California that makes us so wacky," said Lou Wells' wife, her voice rising over chopping sounds, cupboard doors closing, and the frequent clatter of pots and pans. It was hard enough for someone to see into the kitchen from the armchair where her brother-in-law's new girlfriend was resting after her trip, so she took care to at least have the girl hear what she said. The glare of the sunset as it played off the Gulf waters at the wide end of the island was, for the girl's part, the main problem in her settling-in; the room grew steadily brighter and hotter in its unobstructed exposure to the concentrated shafts of dying light, giving her no option but to lie back with eyes closed, arms lightly fallen from the sides of her chair in a necessary but polite recline. "You'll just have to excuse us," the woman in the kitchen added with a strenuous laugh that brought her to the doorway for a moment. "But as they say, my red carpet's at the cleaner's."

The girl opened her eyes and smiled before the woman disappeared again with a chuckle, and words spoken into cupboards, a cluttered sink, or the crisper drawer of the fridge.

"The ferry docks at the worst times of the day when, no

matter how hard a person tries, there are too many things to do at once. I guess Ted explained all that, eh?" The girl wanted to answer that she'd come to the island to get away from stress and obligations, and for the woman not to worry, but the sudden sound of an opened tap rushed in to wash the words off her tongue. It had been the same way looking overboard as the ferry came in to dock, down at the edge of the village. She'd wanted to remark to her boyfriend on how strongly the waves were beating up against the hull under them, how she could feel the pull of the cross-current up through the deckplanks to the soles of her feet, but the bumping of boat and water rose like a rubber wall around her, soaking in her words. So she'd just smiled along with all the other passengers, alternately clutching the handrail and her windswept hair, until a sudden swerve sent the little ferry nosing into a wharf of scarred oversized tires. It'd been difficult, even after landing, picking out Lou in the small crowd on shore and piling into his truck, to really say anything. It was funny, she thought, turning her head away from the armchair's dank smell of smoke and cooking into the full burst of sunlight, how quiet Ted had become as well, driving with his brother through the lower, more populated part of the village, then to the cabin a good way up the island's main rise. How all the way over on the ferry he had excitedly talked about going home, not keeping his hands off her for one minute, and making sure he'd told her as much about Lou's place as he could before getting there. She

would like the old place except for the fact--Ted kept saying--that Lou would "probably rule the roost, as usual."

"So you got the run-down of all the islands on the way over?" the voice from the kitchen continued, sounding softer now that the chopping had stopped and there was just a sauce to stir. "Did Ted also mention that not only are we stuck out here on the smallest one but we're also the furthest out?" The girl peeled her hands from her eyes, sat up against the chair's worn sides and held herself prey to the glow which continued to weld all she looked at into a flare of yellowish white.

"What about being the closest part of Canada to California?" she replied at last, trying to sound relaxed. "Yes, he did. He made it all seem quite exotic." She wouldn't mention that she and Ted had done as much fooling around as sightseeing on deck, and in the ferry's cafeteria near the end of the trip, nor that his good looks were all the scenery she could ever want. For the sake of good manners she'd save it till later and, for now, keep her mind on getting through the sunset. At its closest point to the horizon before giving itself up to the night, the fiery ball slivered itself into shafts of pink and orange through a mesh of trees which flanked the cottage like a practical haircut. It would be at least ten minutes before sunset, she thought, ten minutes of straight staring at the adjacent wall just shy of the blinding light. Her eyes had begun to water, making

her sniff and clear her throat before continuing to speak. "Yeah, he also told me how you would spoil us rotten. Like now. Me sitting here and you making the supper. Are you sure I can't...."

"No no no, I'm fine. It's just the onions I can't stand but they're done now. I don't know about you, but the darn things always make me cry something terrible."

With the ebb of daylight, the women in Lou's cottage--one wiping up the last of chopped onions, the other opening her eyes to a slightly cooler, greener room--could at last enjoy their position high among the treetops, and get to know each other over mugs of tea. The men had not yet returned from their hunt for late fiddleheads, nor the baby awakened from its nap, so they politely made space for each other around the cluttered coffee table, one balancing her mug on a stack of catalogues, the other sweeping off a crowd of plastic toys into an old margarine container. The new light defined everything in the room now. Its objects came into focus for the girl like a Polaroid picture developing proof of where she was. The women on the couch sighed amiably to await the bustle of suppertime. They'd decided to take things as they came; the salad just needed the fiddleheads, and pasta could always be cooked in a flash.

To the girl the cabin did not seem untidy, but took on an order as natural as the one which began from conifer

points across the sky to the shore where the saltwater bleached only what it could touch. There was no sense of financial investment here, no obvious thought given to the property in terms of improvement or resale value. Where something had found a place in the house, it remained, like an old wringer washer pushed up along an arc of wheel marks from the kitchen sink to a corner of the living room. For now, a pair of panties and baby underclothes were draped over its folded parts like damp leaves, waiting to dry in the room's still air and whatever sunlight reached them at the end of the day. The rest of the room's belongings, from Lou's heavy toolbox on the dresser to a smoked glass vase of clothes pegs and unpaid bills, had also found their places, chosen slowly through use or distance from the back door. There was a gang-like feeling to the row of dull yellow workboots by the door, clusters of old cushions heaped at each end of the couch, and the midsummer birds clinging like another weathered knot to the swaying macrame seedholder out on the balcony. True to the sky which rose monotonously above the contours of the land, there were no framed pictures on the walls of the living room. Only an old calendar showing an aerial view of the French Riviera hung from a loose nail on the side of a washstand, sharing the veneered surface with a curling photograph of a newborn tightly bound in a red crocheted blanket. Something written on the back showed through the child's forehead, pushing up a sinuous blister across its sealed expression. Any visitor would have

wanted to run a finger across the ripple trying to flatten it out, for the sake of the child at least.

"Cute baby," said the girl, pulling back her hand. "I can't wait to see her. I mean, in person. Ted told me she's the apple of her Dad's eye."

"Oh jeez, yes. Old Cindy-Lou is that all right. Wait 'til you have a daughter, you'll see what little girls mean to their fathers. Especially when they start running around and talking a mile a minute."

"Cindy-Lou? But I thought you were Cindy?"

"I am," laughed the woman, holding her face against the path of remaining light weeping in off the low ocean. She clutched one hand to her chest and pointed the other towards the door. "See, Cindy and Lou make..."

"Cindy-Lou," finished the girl. She looked at the photograph again, taking its curled end between her fingertips and unrolling it. "Wow, that's really togetherness."

"Yeah, wacky eh?"

Cindy finished her second mug of tea, placed the empty mug as a bookmark in the catalogue she'd been paging through, and got up to click on the outside light. The girl noticed Cindy had left the book open at men's underwear, specifically a picture of a well-tanned male model in thermal longjohns. She tried to imagine the little house in the middle of winter, reeking with dampness from the crawlspace, and

filling with cold air each time the door was opened. The temperature would be the exact opposite of the heat entering the walls and single-glazed windows now, not taking into account the stifling vapour produced by the simmering sauce, and the hot halo of a hanging lamp. Cindy moved awkwardly around the supper table, pushing chairs well in, and turning glasses upside down, until whatever was really on her mind pulled her to the high back window. Stretching to balance her elbows on the ledge, she molded her hands around her eyes to better search the darkness. The girl could hear Cindy mumbling, but couldn't pick up her words. Even as Cindy unperched herself and walked to meet her full reflection in the wider front window, she sighed in a way which wasn't meant to be shared, but simply to blend into the other forest sounds. With the kitchen light behind her, her blonde hair glistened in the glass, topping a good face and figure for the mother of a two-year old. She possessed as well, the girl thought, a restless beauty, which showed itself best in her movements; a kind of fussing she seemed to count on to relieve the constraints of the cottage, the island. Deciding something from her reflection, Cindy suddenly untied her hair and dramatically flicked it loose. Then she returned to sit beside her visitor with a burst of good humour, and once again freed the catalogue from a balancing mug.

"You know, Ted would appreciate a pair of these," she said, grinning, and shuffling her chapped fingertips over to a picture of camouflage bikinis. "Since he moved to

Vancouver he won't be needing the bulky ones anymore. I mean, there's no reason to go out in the dead of winter up that way, is there?" They both laughed. "What do you think... No?" She made quick circles around her choices for Lou and bent the book to set it its pages fluttering once more. "Speaking of the outdoor life," she said, coming to the coat section, "I really need a new parka this year. C'mon, let's go wild. What would you choose? What do you wear up at the university there?"

"Actually, it's the Institute for Forestry and Wildlife Management. A branch of..."

"Oh yeah, I know the one. We've had a couple of their field-trippers up here doing God knows what. Well, with those instruments and painted poles, you know? But let's find the perfect coat for you now, Tat... Tanya... Sorry, I've gone and forgotten your name again."

"Tatyana. I know it's a mouthful."

"Wacky all the same."

"Thanks. Well, I don't know about a coat, winter's a long way off yet. But maybe something in green with buttons? I like those wooden ones." She bent over to look at an insert showing the back view of a short-waisted bomber jacket in frosted green with plastic toggles. "Something like that." Cindy moved closer and tilted the page to the light.

"You're kidding," she scoffed. "What's the use in that? Your ass'll freeze good and solid." She began to laugh again, Tatyana joining in with her, pointing and jabbing at the

model's carefree expression.

"Well *she* doesn't seem cold," she cried. "Look at her tan. I mean, where does the coat come in? She's probably wearing a bikini underneath it for her next shoot."

"Next shoot?"

"In the next room with a different backdrop, or outside in the desert sun," replied Tatyana as Cindy flipped through the pages of the catalogue as if looking for something other than clothes now.

"These ads are all made in the summer you know, down in Los Angeles... or Nevada, for all we know."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Look at the phony snow sprinkled on her hair and clothes. It's some sort of white powder." Cindy rubbed the picture lightly.

"Yeah, I see your point. Then it must be cocaine judging from the broad's spacey gaze," she burst out.

"Talk about being in La-La Land." Tatyana struggled to hold a model's pose as both she and Cindy doubled over with laughter. "How do these models throw their heads back like that, anyway?" She straightened and pulled her shirt tightly around her waist. "How's this, do I have the look? A filly heading for the plains with my mane caught in my teeth?"

"Almost. Higher with the shirt, and stick your neck and chest out. Remember this jacket is for people who don't need to cover their asses." Cindy's joke made Tatyana giggle again, but she forced herself to keep a straight face as she

thrust herself toward the light coming through the back window. She was naturally a tall straight girl, her long brown hair shooting down her back to emphasize the strength of her posture. Looking back for more directions from Cindy, she didn't see the door open nor feel the draft as it was closed again. "Okay, freeze...!" shouted Cindy, leaping up to click an imaginary camera at the girl's precarious pose. Someone shuffled in the entryway and placed a brown paper bag on the floor. Cindy snapped her picture and lowered her hands to see her brother-in-law loom into the small entryway. "Ted! Jeez, where have you guys been?" The man flashed a sharp glare into the room, then impatiently shook off his rubber boots.

"A long goddamn way, and I'm alone," he replied. "But never mind that. Did you know Cindy-Lou's awake? What's with you people anyway that it takes someone coming up the driveway to hear her crying and carrying on?"

There wasn't much for Cindy to do in the face of Ted's return but to rush to her child in the bedroom, leaving Tatyana to stare blankly at her boyfriend. She watched him kick his boots out of the way and see to his socks. A triangle of light from the porch cut across his face where he stood in its path through the back door window. The visible part of his forehead was covered in pricks of sweat, contradicting his usually cool good looks. Although his climb up to the cottage was over, his movements were still

intense, making Tatyana feel as though she didn't know him. She wasn't sure how to approach him now. Back in Vancouver, in high-rise apartments with the sounds of people and traffic hurrying old thoughts out of the way to make room for new ones, they would have been straight with each other to get on with it. Here she felt stuck, the only part of the island out of order, and as much a stranger to his silence as she was to the constant hiss of trees and water. When he picked up the bag she offered to take it from him--for the salad. The rest of it waited on the kitchen table under plastic, and Cindy would be busy with the baby. Where the bag had been in his hand the paper was soft and damp. Tatyana stirred at this reminder of him and slowly unrolled the tight rim his grip had shaped.

"Not too many fiddleheads at this time of year," he said. "So I picked up some asparagus down in the village." Tatyana took out a bunch of limp purple tips and flopped them back and forth. "Lou," he said, pointing to them. "It never fails. We start out fine, then he ends up harping on the past or something no one can change. Before you know it the whole damn weekend's a goner."

"So where is he? The supper's all..." Tatyana asked quietly.

"Down at Ferguson's, drunk as a dog. He won't be needing any supper, and Mrs Ferguson'll send him packing later. Tell Cindy about it, will you? I'll be in the camper they have out back, watching TV."

Little Cindy-Lou looked nothing like the washstand photograph when she finally scampered into the living room ahead of her mother and a pile of dirty laundry. Instead of the opaque, newly unearthed look of the newborn, the little girl wore an expression of ownership for the sights and sounds around her. Slowing down to fuse her eyes with those of the unexpected stranger on the couch, she circled the coffee table slowly, careful to show neither fear nor acquiescence at her discovery. Tatyana stared back at Cindy-Lou, lured by the child's unfaltering gaze. In an atmosphere becoming more and more alien to her own expectations, Tatyana immediately felt she had touched upon the familiar. As a forestry major in Pacific Coast flora and fauna, she'd come to Beaman Island ready to distinguish at a glance, the health and age of woodlots, the height of trees through the squint of an eye, and estimates on worm, water and acid rain rot from general shading patterns. But that was as far as her understanding of life on the island had taken her in the four hours she'd been here. Even her boyfriend had become part of her missing information; the link she thought she had with him through the trees and ecosystems they'd talked about so much in the city seemed false in the growing context of what she'd seen for herself. But now she looked upon a creature as fleshy and flawless as a forest mushroom, its tender luscious face hardly moving except to contort slightly with curiosity as small slender fingers rooted themselves wherever they needed to. She reached out to the child with restrained

relief but dropped her arms again, hiding them behind the pillow on her lap.

"Hi Cindy-Lou, I'm Tatyana. I came to visit you with Ted... Or I guess he's your uncle, eh? You have a nice house here in the woods, by the sea too. Wanna show me around a bit? Bring me your favorite toy?" Cindy-Lou nodded shyly, her gaze burrowing into Tatyana's. "Yeah?"

"After supper maybe, you two," called her mother from the kitchen. "Us girls have to eat sometime, don't we?"

By island standards it was a late supper. The ferry going back over had sounded its horn hours ago, a signal to all it was six o'clock and time to come in from whatever they were doing to settle around the kitchen table.

"Might as well have just had a midnight snack," said Cindy. "At least we could have called it a fun evening then. Or a pyjama party, what the hell."

"Well, we were getting there," replied Tatyana, glad that Cindy seemed to want to get back the rapport they'd built up before Ted's return. But supper was also quiet. Whether because of the men, or because she'd been left to entertain the visitor, Cindy had picked at her food without saying much. Now, while she washed the dishes Tatyana kept bringing in from the table, Cindy merged her explanation of Lou's absence with the sound of her scrubbing. She described the demands on him as the island's handyman, the problems of living so far out, and where Ted figured in all of this. As

she spoke, she stared into the water, soap foaming up to her elbows, and the heat of the kitchen breaking out in thin streams down the window above the sink.

"Me and Ted go back a long way, you might as well know that. All three of the Wells boys actually, at one time or another. I guess here on the island we recycle without it being a big deal, know what I mean?" She smiled coyly and rubbed her nose on her wrist. "You're probably forced to learn about saving the planet, and all that garbage at school, I guess."

"Yeah, but more about the endangered species, pollution end of it," said Tatyana tentatively, deciding not to risk Cindy's new talkativeness by throwing in that Ted was *her boyfriend now*.

"Ah, old Ted was a species and a half. Really good-looking. Blonde, and all that. But he wanted no part of the island... or Lou, after a while. But Lou's okay too, though, eh? As a he-man type?"

"Yeah, he's... Lou's really nice."

"Boy, keeping the peace here was a job. Anyway, it was all ages ago." With the big pot rinsed, Cindy fished around for the lost pieces of cutlery, and took out the plug. The draining water gurgled deeply, taking with it bits of spaghetti and the last of floating lettuce pieces. Tatyana still had the drying to finish up, and the challenge of guessing where the clean dishes belonged.

"You go ahead," she told Cindy. "The baby...."

"Well, listen, would you mind keeping an eye on her while you get this out of the way? She's no trouble, and I was thinking I'd go out to the camper with some clean linen for you guys. I mean, maybe a mouldy blanket's okay for Ted but you gotta sleep too, right?" Tatyana looked up in surprise. Cindy *did* understand that Ted belonged to her now, going on about making a decent bed for the two of them out in the camper. It was a good thing she hadn't got touchy about Ted during their talk over the dishes. Reveries were reveries, and from what she'd seen so far, a good way to stay sane among the trees and sunsets of Beaman Island.

Although the cabin was small, and Cindy seemed to be taking forever outside, Tatyana and the baby found a lot to do as they burrowed down the narrow passage, around the rooms, and out onto the balcony. They were good at making it through the small spaces single-file, Tatyana bent over Cindy-Lou, her index fingers held tightly in the child's small hands. But the balcony was where their game worked best, round and round the plank table under the bird feeder. The sound of their short slapping steps resounded through the night air, through the spaces in the slat floor to the forest below. From where they played Tatyana could make out the road to the village by the occasional carlights that probed the soft darkness. Somewhere between there and the cottage was the rough winding track that had brought her here. She thought of her ride up earlier in Lou's truck, seated between

the brothers as they eventually overcame their awkwardness enough to exchange news and a few jokes, and decide what to do over the weekend. All that was also in darkness now, purpled by the glow of the moon which had cleared the treetops and stuck to the sky like a sad face tilted to ask a favour. In its light, Cindy-Lou's skin blushed from the running around, bringing deep patches of colour to her face. Tiny dots of perspiration covered her forehead like an early dew, and her gaze, leveled on Tatyana, fused her to the spot until the cue came to run, or chase, or hide.

"Do you want to play some more?" asked Tatyana. "You go round me. Sing round and round Cindy-Lou, round and round Tatyana." The child giggled and began to circle the table, slowly at first then as fast as she could manage to grab and clear the ends. "Round and round, Tata," she cried, dizzy with delight.

"Very good, little mushroom, Can you say that? Or how about *amanita muscaria*? That's a mushroom name."

"Round and round, 'nita-scaria'" mimicked the child, responding to the strange words that took her beyond her stumbling orbit into a flight of swirling dancing sounds.

"What about *amanita rubescens*."

"'nita 'bessens."

"Wow, you're really good at learning new words. Try *Tricholomopsis rutilans*, *Flammulina velutipes*, *clitocybe nuda*," recited Tatyana, gasping for breath and reaching out to catch Cindy-Lou as she came around the table. With her

hands firmly docked under the child's arms she lifted her high into the air, and brought her down to join their panting chests in a quick, close embrace. Cindy-Lou laughed, cupping Tatyana's face in her hands. Her grip was warm and firm, something explicit in the wide, unmarked darkness.

"Sing some more," she begged. "Round and round Tata."

"Tatyana... it's a hard name to say, isn't it?"

"Tat-yana?"

"That's perfect! Just for that we'll play a little more, but then we'd better see your Mama about bedtime. I wonder what's keeping her? She's probably into some show with Ted, and has forgotten all about us." Tatyana put the child down and waved her on, but she stopped dead at the balcony door.

"So off you go then, *Tricholoma portentosum*," she coaxed, only to have Cindy-Lou remain at the door, holding her hot cheek against the glass and staring into the dingy, unevenly lit room. "Well, it looks like you are ready for bed after all."

"No... Daddy... Look, my Daddy's here."

Lou had just come in through the back door and stood in the middle of the room out of the light from the kitchen. He too was sweating after his climb up the track, his tousled dark hair hanging over his eyes and his body heavy with the fatigue of passing drunkenness. He moved over to the dresser to anchor himself somewhere by the elbows and lowered his head into his hands. Cindy-Lou scrambled over the high

wooden step leading back into the house and ran to her father. She made for his legs and landed with a soft bounce against them to bury her face in the fabric of his pants, damp from the sea air.

"My Daddy came home," she said, entwining herself there and peeping past the folds. Lou released an arm and felt for the child's head. He patted it against his leg and ruffled the fine blonde hair to really feel its texture.

"Yes, I see that," replied Tatyana, drifting to the armchair by the window where she had earlier waited out the island sunset. "Hi Lou, Cindy's out..." she began, making Lou shift and raise his face to wait for her to finish. "I'm watching Cindy-Lou, we've been out on the balcony."

"Yeah, I know, heard all about it on the way up to the house. Really whooping it up, eh? I thought we had a herd of Indians up here, not you city types." He forced a laugh. "Good thing we got four-by-fours under you there." Cindy-Lou unwound herself from him and ran back to Tatyana. Her expression resumed its shyness, but radiated the warmth of a newly-won trust.

"I play games with Tatyana," she said proudly.

"Tat who?" repeated Lou. "Ah, right, you've got that wacky name. And you're probably one of those primadonnas... Well, Teddy's type, you know." He waited for Tatyana's reaction as if inciting his own game with her. But Tatyana knew to remain pressed to the armchair until Lou's outburst was over. Keeping her eyes lowered she listened to his

snickering even as he sauntered over to her. He'd come to take Cindy-Lou over to his side. "The tighty type... Uh huh, I like that. The tighty-tuppity-type." The strain of hoisting the child to his chest narrowed Lou's voice to a tight whisper. "Yuh, old Ted. Nothing stands in his way. See, there aren't too many around here who won't do it, you know... WON'T DO IT? So off he goes to the mainland, Toddling Ted, my brother, your... lover? No. Friend? Who needs him? Specimen! That's the word, that's what he calls you city broads everytime he shows up here with a new one." Tatyana felt her chest tighten, and the heat she'd just lost to the breeze returning to her face. She wished she were outside again so she could think straight without her confusion showing. "So what about you, then. Do you... DO IT? Come on, don't be slow in coming forward. Be proud." Lou was standing erect again. It seemed to Tatyana that her presence was revitalising him, that his fatigue was fast giving way to the cheap energy gained from sarcasm or insult. She wanted to protest his vulgarity, but somehow his single, sudden words had begun to intrigue, rather than frighten her. They were like fresh air, a news bulletin to someone waiting out a natural disaster. Tatyana looked at Lou, risking a connection with him, but the man's gaze seemed strung to buried thoughts and habits. He was new only in his speech, his species restored by the fury and profusion of raw words against the hum of water and leaves. It was as if she were the latest reason for him to live, to be himself. "I guess

you're not too willing, eh... Hellooo Tat... to get down and dirty 'cause Ted sure ain't sniffin' round here. And nor is my wife, strangely enough. I knew it. I bloody-well knew it when I walked in here. You could tell, huh? Tell me I was right."

"Yes, you were...."

"So where did they go?" he whined now, raising his eyes, and nervously rattling keys and coins in his jacket pocket. "The Ritz... Windsor Castle, Tutankhamen's tomb? Ah don't tell me, the camper, right? Yeah, they'll be there humpin' their little blonde heads off right about now. Well, I can take heads off too. Watch me." Tatyana stared after Lou in disbelief as he disengaged himself from Cindy-Lou, and stumbled through to the kitchen to splutter through a dousing of cold water. Not only was she horrified at her own stupidity for not trusting her earlier feelings about Cindy's claims on Ted, but there was nowhere for her to go now. No stairs to hysterically run down to a crowded street, no elevators or buses to catch to anywhere until the shock had passed. She looked around the tiny house. Its walls and windows held her like a closed jar, trapping her for the temporary amusement of her captors. "You'll have to excuse us," said Lou, lumbering out of the kitchen, and stopping in the entryway to awkwardly hang up his front-soaked jacket. "But as they say, the chastity belt's out for jumbo rivets." With a thump against the wall adjacent to the door he held himself out of the way as he flung it open, and pointed to

Cindy-Lou with a slow rotation of his finger. "You wouldn't mind would you? Running her around a bit longer? I'll just be up at the camper. I mean, if there's a party going on somewhere, and you're not the squeamish type, you might as well join in, eh?"

With the slam of the door ringing in her ears, and the tremble Lou had thrown into the walls finishing as a throb in her chest, Tatyana made for the balcony again in search of air. Cindy-Lou pattered behind her waiting for the right moment to instigate another round of her new game. Her face was creamy white now, the colour sunk from her cheeks into wider blue eyes, while a look of slight disquiet was drawn across her softly settled lips. Tatyana reached out and gently pulled her to sit down at the picnic table. Without talking they held hands and Tatyana lay her cheek against the child's head, fine stray hairs blowing up against her like thin lines of light in a dark painting. The warmth of the small body by her side, and the neat fit and slide of her hands around its easy contours, brought Tatyana from impulse to quick-thinking now as to how to leave Beaman as soon as possible. She wouldn't wait for Ted to lead the way to the ferry at the end of the weekend, or to handle the goodbyes, the explanations and apologies dockside. She thought crazily of taking Cindy-Lou instead, down the hill, through the village and even out on to the ocean with her at the ferry's first departure; all in reverse of the way Tatyana herself

had come to be there. The little girl would be grateful one day. She would save Cindy-Lou's life, take her away like a threatened species from her stained box house in its humid nest of trees, rotting pine needles and endless ring of water. They would go back to the city where islands could be exotic, talked about for their scenery, clam chowder and natural harbours. Tatyana's thoughts shot wildly between options, making her feel one minute the hero, the next a bookish urban fool. She blindly caressed the child's small shoulders, then dared to look at her. A silver moth had also found her, attracted by the light around her small blonde head. Round and round it flopped, bringing the child's bright eyes to mechanically track its path with full attention. Tatyana had rarely seen such an alliance between child and nature. Was it best left alone? Could she take Cindy-Lou from her home after all? Tatyana felt her passion receding to common sense like an informed hiker stopping short of unearthing a ladyslipper for a city garden. Maybe she could take Cindy-Lou down with her as far as Ferguson's, not just to extend the time they had together, but to feel less afraid of the strange night that fell thick and full from the cabin down to the road. She'd call from the pub, leaving Cindy-Lou with Mrs Ferguson until someone came down in the truck to pick her up. There was a different way of doing things on the island, Tatyana was beginning to find out. People, it seemed, did whatever came naturally. She was finding too that, once decided, it was easier than she

thought to take matters into her own hands.

The moth also had a special name, Tatyana had started to explain to Cindy-Lou, that was much bigger than it was and which meant it could find flowers in the dark, when the pair of blue eyes watching her suddenly turned sideways waiting for something other than moth stories. A small stretched finger froze against the rough surface of the table until a woman's scream rose from behind the house, making the eyes and finger point in the same direction. A metal door banged, and sounds of stamping and throwing rolled through the dead night.

"That's Mommy," said Cindy-Lou, pulling away from the table to tiptoe to the edge of the sundeck and hold her head out to the wind.

"Yeah, I think so," replied Tatyana, forcing her voice past the clenched muscles of her throat. "Let's go inside, come, follow me. It's kinda cold out here, don't you think? We'll close the door and be warm."

"Can we play inside? Chasing? Round and round my toys?"

"No, I want to play something else now, mushroom-face. I just got an idea." Tatyana cleared her throat loudly to dislodge the quiver crumbling her voice into a quiet chirp. "Something that you can play too, of course. But you'll need your warm red blanket, the one your Mama knitted you. Put on your shoes too. We're going outside to the truck, okay? Go on now." The child, aroused by the mystery of this latest

game, stumbled over the high step back inside to carry out what she'd been told to do while Tatyana rushed in behind her, making for Lou's jacket and fishing his pockets for keys. With them in her hands, she at last felt a use for herself. Both she and Cindy-Lou were as good as on their way now, Tatyana told herself with growing defiance. She'd have to take the child with her; she'd promised both Cindy and Lou she'd watch her. She would say it was a matter of survival. Soon they would be on their way to wait first in line for the early ferry, and Cindy-Lou would be asleep, wrapped in her favorite blanket. From there, cutting through the shorebound waves, the right moves would unfold for her, instead of going round and round her mind like they were now in the entryway of Lou's hidden and airless cottage.

Mushrooms are fungi. They are defined by both their habits and places of growth, as well as their inability to survive independently. The so-called good and bad mushrooms are not restricted to any one group, both the edible and poisonous species occurring in the same order, the same family. The beauty of mushrooms is bound to intrigue. There can be green ones, purple ones. Some glow in the dark, blush when bruised or shoot up before your very eyes. Mushrooms return to the same place at about the same time of year--though in reality they are there all along, their white mycelium threads waiting beneath the surface until favourable conditions prevail

for regrowth to occur. It must be stressed, great care is needed in the handling of these fascinating life forms.

All set to go, Tatyana could just make out the truck from the back window. Lou had parked it to one side below the last big bump in the road to the house. Its windshield caught the reflection of the porchlight as though someone were signalling to her, but despite Cindy-Lou's trusting grip on her arm, she'd never felt more alone. She thought of Lou's leaving not long before, how he'd geared himself up with cold water to the face. It made sense to her now, a way to declare war, to shock herself into the recklessness it was going to take to rescue herself and the young child. She gently broke from Cindy-Lou's grasp and ran to the sink. The water gushed out again as if it were the whole ocean's entry point into the house. She splashed her face, leaving the water to trickle down to her lips, and closed the tap. Then she began to busy herself again with keys and straps, this time blowing and sniffing water from her face. Cindy-Lou watched intently. A silence had come over the little girl which Tatyana sensed was more than fatigue. Her gaze, forced and blue, pulled to one side again, as if in anticipation of unnamed but routine disaster. She shuffled guiltily from the door, her hands and chin well-drawn in under the blanket. Tatyana followed as Cindy-Lou circled the room now, deciding at last to pick her up. With this a shower of drops rained from the ends of her bangs, making the child wrench herself

free and bound to the couch with an eerie determination. Lying face down she desperately groped the seat's tight fabric for places to clutch.

"C'mon funny girl," whispered Tatyana as she tiptoed to the couch with the blanket. "I know you're tired, but you can sleep very soon." The child cowered until Tatyana's shadow slowly drew itself over her. Then she popped up viciously, and held herself firm and unsheathed against any more gestures from her new friend. Her long thin arms stiffened in her lap, as if she were suddenly very cold. A faint blueness, leaking from the centre of her eyes through her pale skin, pooled in the hollows of her face, giving a lethal edge to the thoughts played out there.

"You're cryin' again, aren't you,?" she charged Tatyana with a burst of contempt, struggling vehemently to accent her words into a bizarre performance of something she'd heard before. "Jeez, I hate a cryin' woman. Water, water everywhere, hmmmmmm...." Tatyana pulled away as if stung. The child's voice feigned Lou's unmistakable whine. Also her radiant gaze had disappeared to assume the twisted expression he'd worn earlier, sweeping her eyes upward as if in a swoon. "Blub, blub blub," she continued monotonously. "It's raining, it's pouring, isn't life boring?"

"Cindy-Lou, stop it," cried Tatyana. "I don't like this game."

"Look who's playing games. Blub, blub, blub, three men in a tub, and who do you think they were?"

"I'll leave you here, that's what I'll do,"

"Ha ha ha, but she WON'T DO IT, she WON'T DO IT."

"Oh I WILL, I WILL. Watch me," began Tatyana, backing away from the couch as if answering Lou himself. The child stared after her, a pale opaque face rooted in the musty clutter of the room. "My God, he's poisoned you, his own little girl," she finished on her way to the door, ready to turn its lock. A short giggle rose behind her.

"The garbage, the garbage, Mother Blub-bard. Make it and take it, prick it with 'C.' Put it in the oven for Teddy and me," Cindy-Lou bawled undaunted, leaping up to throw the baby blanket against Tatyana, and quickly returning with a scratchy scramble across cushions to the dim furrow between armchair and window. Tatyana hurried to push herself from the room. The child's words rang in her ears, "oven," "Teddy," "garbage." Out of their horrible nonsense a curious equation was forming in her mind; the child was telling her why she had to leave Beaman Island before she laid eyes on Ted again.

"Ted... Oh God, Ted's your father. Ted's your tall, blonde father. That's what's going on here! Poor little Cindy-whoever. I bloody-well knew there was a connection somewhere." Tatyana stood at the door, staring back into the small dark room. She wondered how different everything would have looked had she known all this from the start. She opened the door bringing in a wedge of porchlight. As suddenly as it cut through the dormant entryway lined with

quiet boots and coats, Cindy-Lou bobbed up from the arm of the chair and sent a silver burst of spit high over the side. "Goddamn moths," she cursed as the door closed. "Get back to where you once belonged. Zap 'em, kid. Ten points!"

Tatyana planned to waste no time once outside the house. She quickly adjusted her knapsack, unsnagged the blanket which had caught onto its buckles, and searched the darkness as far as she could. From where she stood she could see the lighted windows of the camper, which was parked well back, higher than the house, on a mantle of rock. Holding herself in the shadows, she watched and listened for any sign of Lou before crossing the path of light that broke her escape route from the backdoor to the driveway. She could make out silhouettes passing to and fro behind the camper's curtains, raising arms and pointing, and sometimes holding a profile long enough for her to figure out that Ted and Cindy were the ones doing the talking now. Lou had no doubt passed out somewhere, exhausted at last by his drinking, long walk and family problems. Higher still, the moon glimmered from a stained warped paleness, forever embedded, untouchable. Now that she didn't need the truck, she would make her way by the distant yellow glow. She felt for Lou's keys, rolled them up in the knitted blanket, and tossed the careless bundle behind her. In the porchlight, its splash of technicolor red looked foreign and urgent amongst the dead houseplants and old pails collected there. It said there'd been a struggle, someone

had left, and that a baby was locked up in the house, alone.

Tatyana skirted the dark rim of her hiding place and turned to face the way down. She knew that once she took a step into the mist, it would be impossible to come back up on second thoughts, or guilt for abandoning the baby. She had to find a way to call Cindy to the house. A way that would still give her time to get a head-start. She shifted around like a horse at the post. The low stagnant warmth of the forest told her she wasn't moving. She needed noise to start her off, an animal cry, a ferry blast, three quick deep bursts of the truck horn on her way down. The sound would spread up the slope, making Cindy and Ted, and eventually Lou, come out from whatever they were doing. Within minutes she'd hear them over her stumbling: Ted calling her name perfectly, Cindy announcing the baby was fine and asleep on the couch, and Lou drawling, "Boy, was that little Tat ever a tit." At the same time as the voices harmoniously chirped, or called, or barked, the moon would grow fainter and lose itself to light. For the first return passenger of the day finally making it to the dock, there would already be a few seagulls to watch, swooping around a grid of high creosoted piles. It would be dawn on Beaman, with red-stained waters, and less and less time to kill. Tatyana hurried to the truck. Then in the rude reverberations of its single, sudden hornblasts, she took on the last of the island's west side darkness, and ran for all she was worth.

PRAYERS

Our mother, who prefers to be called Penny, lives along with us, my brother and me, in an old farmhouse in the beautiful Pointe-Fortune woods. She brought us here quite a long time ago, after our father left, to try out life away from the city. First, though, she had to fix the place up. Raccoons had made holes in the walls, and a person couldn't sleep through a winter night without freezing to death. Worse than that, crowds of bats used to get into the house through rotten places in the roof and fly or flop around us. There were also a lot of wasps building nests in the eaves, but we found they didn't take much notice of us as long as we didn't get in their way. We didn't know very much about the woods then and were always scared that something would go wrong. Penny kept saying things like: *We have no choice, everybody has to start somewhere, hearts heal through work, so much for marriage, we were lucky we could get away with calling ourselves eccentric.*

Once she had to hold the kitchen up during an earthquake. It happened around the time we were digging out the old foundation, and had to hold up that end of the house with a wooden post to keep the joists from snapping. My brother and I shone flashlights down into the hole so she

could crawl in to grab onto the post and keep it from twisting out as the ground shook under us. Afterwards she said she understood what a man had to go through and that it was no wonder they ran off a lot of the time.

I really like it here now. In the summer the front yard is filled with wild violets and black-eyed Susans, and the apple tree we planted over Heidi gives us at least a dozen apples a year. Also, our cats and dogs have a new porch to lie on. These days, if they want to come inside during thunderstorms or when it snows, we just open the front door, call their names and say, "Come on...." The air always smells good and our water is very clean. Well, it was, up until yesterday when I poisoned it by mistake. Penny was mad right away. She wouldn't even listen to me explain what'd happened. I never knew she could look so ugly and shout so loudly. She said afterwards that it was all about survival and that she couldn't wait for us to finally learn what that meant.

I'm sure what I did was all because of my Halloween costume. My brother and I had been practising for next week, making a huge mess out of paint, kiddie glue, and toilet paper. We had decided to go as a pair of "Its" from "The Addams Family," making long bushy hair out of rolled paper, and sticking it all over the white clothes we'd put on underneath. My brother's turned out the best. His hair was shaggier than mine and he stuck a long point on his nose, for

no reason, that made him look like a giant mosquito. Around here that's about as ugly as you can get. That, and the sight of a bat screaming in panic when its papery wings get caught in the burrs by the old manure pile.

Whenever we need to wash anything, which my brother and I eventually had to do yesterday, we have to fetch water from a hollowed-out spring near the house. Since it's the only water we have, there's a whole procedure to go through, and we can't make any mistakes. We know it off by heart--Penny says it enough times: *First of all, you step on the rock. Then you spread the leaves. Let the "boatmen" swim away, and the crayfish have their shade. Leave the sludge nice and still, take water from the top. When you have it, swish it slow, and treat it like cool millions.*

I couldn't see properly yesterday because of the "It" costume and the "boatmen" bugs were really stupid, constantly swirling into the bucket. Sometimes they do this when there are frogs waiting around to catch them. Since I didn't want to empty the bucket and start over, which is what you have to do to stop them ending up far away from home somewhere, I stretched out too far and fell in. The water looked so clear, just the way Penny likes it, except for me coming at it with black and red paper hair flying. If I'm that ugly next week, I'm going to get a lot of candies, that's for sure.

Fortunately, the waterhole is wider than it is deep so I didn't go under. Instead I skinned my legs and arms which, I guess, filled the water with blood as well as paint, glue and soggy paper. Just as I was about to crawl out Penny came around the side of the house to hang up washing. She'd done the white load, which takes about six two-bucket trips to the waterhole, and had carefully arranged it into a crouching shape so nothing would fall. She looked glad that the washing was almost done. Before she saw me everything was quiet except for the scratching sounds she made hunting through the peg basket for the tight plastic ones, and for the slow whine of our old cat, Sexy Sadie, meowing at the back door in her usual crabby way. Around me, the water rippled now and then, washing the paint I'd used to darken my face and hair, to the sides of the waterhole. It made grey smudges on the surface like scratches on glass, while the toilet paper hair swelled into lumps of striped mush. Slowly they floated or sank the way dead mice do when you find them drowned and slimy in spring. The water was filthy, and the "boatmen" shot about on their thin legs even more frantically than when they end up in the toilet bucket, and burn to death in overnight pee. This close up I could see the crayfish on the bottom, nudging their waxy pink bodies back under rocks. Like this, the only thing I could think of doing was to keep sitting in the water and pray that everything would turn out alright.

Heidi looked like a mouse when we buried her. She held

her tiny see-through hands together under her chin, like folded claws, and her face seemed very businesslike for someone born way too early like she was. Penny explained the whole procedure to us: *It was a miscarriage; the bag Heidi was growing in was too hard and shrivelled to feed her properly. Or maybe it was because "the guy" was an alcoholic. Or maybe the oil fumes from the old chainsaw we had back then were too much for the baby, and poisoned it. We don't know for sure whether Heidi was a girl. It was too early to tell... And out of bad comes good.*

I really like Penny. Not only does she know how to make and fix things but she has the kind of face that makes you think of a comfortable room. One with two windows in it, on a white wall, letting in the blueness of the sky and the shade of trees. Whatever is in the room depends on how she moves her face or what she says. When she smiles, a soft carpet unrolls across the floor for her words to land on and bounce into our ears. There are candles in the corners of her mouth and her cheeks are satin cushions around the woodenness of her nose. I also like watching the way her hands move. Like yesterday from the waterhole. First she'd take two pegs, then something out of the laundry basket. Whatever it was, she'd shake it and feel out its corners, exactly, so everything came out straight. When I think of it, she didn't look like someone who was about to, in less than a minute, swoop down from the little platform we made to reach the

washline, and scream so loudly, that the cats woke up under the hosta leaves and ran away. But she did, and that's that, amen.

First of all, she asked me the usual questions which I couldn't answer this time because her face wouldn't let me. There was no longer any room in it, nowhere to stand or sit down. It looked hard and shrivelled, dusty, and dark as a low cloud. From where I was, in the hole, I could see her face getting harder and darker. When she came closer, I wanted to jump out of the water with a splash big enough to hide me, but I couldn't decide exactly when to do it. Luckily my brother came to help me. He at least got me past the place in the rocks we call "Slime City." I think he could also tell Penny meant business.

Her questions weren't the worst part. We're used to them, like hearing the beginning music to a T.V. show. Also, there's always something happening around here, or somewhere else in the world, that makes her have to ask: *What the hell...? What the fuck...? What the christ...? What the fucking christ...?* While she went on like this, you could tell she still saw things around her like the bright green of the lawn we planted in the summer, the last apple on Heidi's tree, and the white load flapping in the breeze. Even during what she calls the perspective stuff: *You would think after all this time... O.K. let me get this right... Of all the*

things I've ever asked you... she still noticed the dogs barking at the big woodpecker that recently came to live in a tree right outside our house, and our new pile of kindling sticks by the front steps. But this time she went on and on until she saw only me. I knew by the way she fluttered her fingers around her head and pulled her eyes together that I was sitting right on top of her nose. A tiny little "It" who was going to die way too early, starting to feel scared, and covered in slime like a burst mouse. Her face was eating the world, pushing away our house and its shiny black shutters. I was caught in a small hot room, the sound and smell of a chainsaw going into me, choking on oil and revving up again. My own voice came running down my thin thin legs, burning my skin.

In between feeling warm and cold, I also felt brave and scared. In the spaces between Penny's shouting I wanted to answer that I wasn't a *brainless little bitch*. *Oh Christ, a bloody child you couldn't trust as far as you could see in these godforsaken woods. A fool, a blonde ditz. Something on the way out, and no wonder. A white wimp, with no ability to survive in her natural state. A silly twelve year-old girl with nothing on her mind but "who likes me and who doesn't?" A trickster, put on this earth to slowly squeeze her mother to death through the kind of hydraulic stupidity that tightens and loosens in all the wrong places. Oh Jesus, a field-day for hormones, starting in to rip open her gangly*

legs so that she couldn't even balance over the water that keeps her alive. An insult to the idea that women could ever make it on their own. A curse, love's tumour, the price of a three-second orgasm, a birth more useless than any iffy Heidi.... But suddenly there was no more screaming, just a long meow beginning in me and slipping far into the woods. I looked at the waterhole. There was a cold pink giant sitting in it, swelled up to its rocky sides. I wanted to say there were too many cold pink giants in the world, and that I'd fallen in by mistake, but my tongue pulled flat in my mouth, pinned by the corners. I saw my brother sitting by the woodpecker's tree. He was still covered in hair, and kept knocking at the tree bark with his long cardboard nose. The end was almost flat, beaten in. He was probably seeing how long he could go before it fell from his face. Knowing him, he'd turn it into something scientific and come and tell me about it to cheer me up.

"Two hundred and six pecks at the tree," he told me later when he found me in the woods. I'd run there over the plywood bridge we made, all the way past the dry well, to think up another idea for Halloween. "It really took the punches, eh?" he asked, breathing so fast that his heartbeats made his shirt flutter. I said I guessed so but I was really trying to decide between a witch and a fairy. They were both supposed to do magic tricks.

"By the way, Penny's fixing up the waterhole," he said,

trying to find a way to balance on a skinny stump. "She cleaned everything up and put a drum over the spring so the water fills up higher than before. You should have heard us smashing out the bottom of the barrel. Now we don't have to balance on the rock anymore." That was good news except I was wondering whether I should look ugly or beautiful when my friends and I went trick-or-treating down in the village. "She's glad about it all now, you know," he carried on. "She says: *Come home to see how it all turned out... Come and put on warm clothes 'cause you must be freezing to death. And, to forgive and....* Oh, and other stuff... I don't know. You know how she always says stuff we just forget." I wanted to laugh because he still had toilet paper stuck to the back of his head, but he was being so nice to me for a slightly older brother, that I hummed and looked up into the trees instead.

Their leaves were all pink and falling fast, one at a time against our faces, into our laps and hair. Sometimes they landed wet side down and stuck to us like big Band-Aids. When my brother spat one of these off his nose and said "So come on let's go back to the house," I pushed my luck and said I would, only if he went first and held back the "face-slappers." Amazingly he did, and soon we came to the edge of the woods where the side of the house suddenly appears, looking more like the sky than pale-blue stucco.

The laundry was still flying in the breeze, like flags, and Sexy Sadie had fallen asleep under our heavy tomato plants. I saw Penny standing by the waterhole in wet rubber boots and splashed clothes. Her temples were smeared with mud in the places where her bangs always bug her while she's doing something. When she saw me pushing through the milkweeds she gave a little wave, and stared at me for a little while, as if I was someone she'd never seen before. I went up slowly to the new drum over the spring and peered in. It was filled with the most beautiful water ever. When Penny came to stand close to me, I told her I really liked the new setup. Even though she looked happy I was back and that the water was clean again, I didn't go any closer to touch the drum, or taste the water. I was still very messy. My skin and clothes were streaked with a drying dark red slime, some of it peeling off in scales around my eyes and mouth from laughing at my brother all the way home. Out in the open air and sunlight I could feel the rest of it drying and pulling my arms and legs together into a tight cocoon. It was the perfect "mummy" costume. For Penny's sake I didn't want to take any more chances at the waterhole. For my sake, I prayed right there to find a good way to never make mistakes. Like Penny's.

EVEN

Pushing his white face cautiously around the half-opened door at the landing, Quintin gazed at his mother busy at her desk. The urgency in his eyes at that moment was lost to her bent form, softening slightly with his decision to wait for her to notice him. Normally he would have just burst in and said what he wanted to say, but since his problem was one he knew she wouldn't want to hear, he'd let her read most of it for herself in his face when she eventually looked up. He sighed up into his hair, knowing that she knew he was there, and orientated himself against the height and hardness of the heavy dome-shaped door. This door was completely different from all the others in the house. It was one she'd bought as salvage from the library demolition sale, and got a carpenter to install as her very own "door to opportunity and success." With nothing to do but wait, he ran over his points of contact with it in his mind, pressing and pushing as well, his body against its mouldings in what he figured was the best way to get to know a door if you had to. This close up, so close that he could make out which varnish bubbles had refused to burst under the hard strokes of someone's paintbrush, and where the wood still showed its natural pale colour at the bottom of small dusty holes passed over by the thick wet brush, he felt lost. He had so many more important

things to do than make something out of a door. And it wasn't as if he were stuck in an elevator or something, killing time by reading, over and over, its safety certificate and inspection dates. He was at home, one floor above his things all laid out on the coffee table, wanting to get on with his homework, wanting people to leave him alone, and waiting around for all this to happen.

At first the door was cold to the touch, but he held himself to the places he fitted best until they started to warm up, dulling a little from the rub of his skin and the moisture of his breath. Where the surface was smoothest on the outside edge of the door, his cheek and hand met, one resting on the other in a loose arrangement of anchored bone and sticky skin. Lower, his left hip and foot jammed into the corners of the door's first indented panel, hurting a little, but fitting the design of the door. At the bottom, his right foot pressed up against the wood, his little toe clinging to the underside of the crossbrace where tiny splinters caught his skin with the slightest movement of the door. In his other hand, his heavy Geography book stood upright on a shelf of thumb and forefinger, following the stiffness of the door as closely as the slip of his fingernails along the varnished wood. He had a test tomorrow on the topography of Canada and had almost finished memorizing the rock strata of the Shield when his sister began acting up, disturbing his concentration. He parted his

lips to give his face more room to move, and inched his cheekbone further along his hand. This put him in a more comfortable position, but did little to improve his view. Perched now on the dome of his knuckle, which rose from his anchored fingertips, his cheek held his whole body up. He could feel himself pulling against the door's urge to swing on its hinges, keeping them almost totally still like a circus performer doing unicycle tricks all in one place. This was perfect balance, he thought, and a lot like the ecology he was learning about. It was funny how movement could cancel itself by going in both directions at once, or how life-forms are most successful when they are exactly in the middle of what they give and take. It was fun keeping the door still, and slowly, strangely, he began to feel as if he could stay hovering like this for the rest of his life.

"Hi Q, what do you want? You look like a badly-installed door knocker." His mother was talking to him now, phone to her ear, for as long as it took to reach whoever she was calling. She eyed him curiously, smiling off and on until someone came on the line, and then she lowered her head again to talk and laugh in a different direction. As she went on about making an appointment somewhere, he watched her lips against the smooth plastic of the receiver. While she listened, they rested closed and full on the molded ridge, catching slightly the tiny square holes there, but slipped open and off the mouthpiece when she answered, or

interrupted, the other person. He wondered why people smiled when talking to others they couldn't see. Or why they moved their hands like she was now, describing to someone at the opposite end of town how to get to a certain address. Even the fingers of her phone hand were stiffly pointing directions, leaving her thumb to find some way of balancing everything. It grew white at its base, tightly clenched to hang on to the narrowest part of the curved handle within it. Sometimes her shoulders rose slightly to help her thumb, all connected, the tension ending where the surface was smooth and comfortable. He was learning just that day about the importance of surface: how one aspect of the earth's geography depended on the conditions and shape of another to root itself or fit itself in. Like the Great Lakes for instance. Once glacial craters, they now stood full and smoothed out with water, itself trickling in to find a place of its own. Treed valleys shaped by wind velocity around mountain barriers were about surface as well. The same for deep Arctic ice, clutched by waxy bushes and creeping tundra moss. All this was true, even in his mother's study. It seemed everything in the world simply wanted to belong, and know that it would never slip or fall from wherever it liked to stick.

"Have you become a permanent part of the door, Q?" his mother said at last, her voice fanning out towards him. "What's the matter, you look funny."

"It's Josie, she's bugging me again and I have a test tomorrow. You're going to have to come and whip her or something." Quintin's lip began to quiver and he peeled his cheek from his hand to look lopsidedly from above a rosy dent in his skin. "I have all my books out downstairs and I'm not going to move. I don't see why...."

"What's the problem now? Is she bearing out a family resemblance again?" Quintin nodded, relieved that his sister's adolescence was trouble enough to come by other names as well. Names that invented themselves the worse she got, making it seem as though the main problem was what to call the problems, instead of just sitting there and taking it. He liked this latest explanation. It was about their father, filled with mystery as to who he was, what he was like, and possibly what had made him leave the family when Quintin and his sister were very young. Knowing as much as he could about the man might also help him not to turn out the same way. All he knew was that he would never hurt his mother like his father had done. He only wanted to help her, hoping she would never cry again the way she used to; the times he and Josie would crawl in beside her on the couch to try to make her stop. They'd promised then that no one would ever hurt her again. Quintin practiced his bow and arrow until he could shoot around a tree, and Josie spent hours teaching the dog to obey secret commands to kill. It all seemed a long time ago now. Josie only laughed these days when he reminded her of their torture plans for "Dude Daddy

Deadmeat." She acted as though she had always been fifteen and couldn't care less if he were to slide in the driveway and take her away. "So put me through to Dude Daddy himself then," she liked to say whenever Quintin said he was going to call him and tell him to come and get her. "I'll listen to what he has to say. You never know, maybe he'd be glad to check me out, give me a heap of stuff to get rid of his guilt, etc." Just thinking about the way Josie suddenly had so much power just because she didn't care anymore, made him imagine things like ripping her arms out or seeing her off at the airport. If he failed his Geography test because of her, that's what she was going to get for sure. Directory Assistance, Long Distance to Calgary, "Is this Mr Sam Danby?" a reservation, and she would be history.

"She's playing that awful music again, and writing pretend suicide notes in my agenda with a purple felt pen. I know you're busy but could you come and kick her or something?" His mother sighed deeply, and the door moved, sweeping a bristle of splinters over his toe. "Ouch, that hurt," he muttered, leaning out from the door to bring it back, and topple his Geography book corner-first into his wrist, then out of his hand onto the floor. It landed with a thud, half-open, pages flipped and bent around a map of "The Evolution of the Earth's Relief." A list of subheadings flooded his mind. *Igneous rock, sedimentary rock, metamorphic.* Maybe it was a sign he was going to get this on

his test. Maybe Josie was going to get killed by a dump truck on her way back from one of her late dates with Horny Hubert Beauregard. What was it about death that made it really suit some life-forms, while others deserved to live forever? Like leaves and trees.

"Yeah, she's really eating up that Alternative Rock, isn't she," his mother replied, still in a business-like mood. "Well, we all have to go through something like this, Q. Soon it will be your turn and it'll be the same old thing." Quintin wanted to say he would never be caught dead carrying on like Josie, blaming her teachers for homework, sleeping with earphones pushed halfway up her head, and spending an hour in the bathroom every morning to come out looking dirtier than when she went in, but he didn't. His book hand had found the door handle and was feeling out the grooves in its metal cast. They were smooth, starting out wide, and narrowing like his fingers. He began to flick it back and forth on its spring. It was interesting how loose and springy doorhandles were, even when they were new and of the highest quality. *The movement of the Earth's Crust, Earthquakes, Faults.* What they were supposed to do.

"Stop that will you, Q? It's irritating."

"Shall I tell her you want to see her up here? You're always telling us to come to you rather than destroy the house or rip each other's throats out."

"Yes, but you should be able to solve this between yourselves. I mean it only takes two." His mother groaned and

ran her hands down her head from her eyebrows to the back of her neck, clasping her fingers together there and pressing them tightly around the curve of her skull. For a moment she looked like a man without her flower of loose curly brown hair. Her elbows pointed towards him like bayonets. "That way," they said. "Look away, while I have the strength to strangle myself." Suddenly she was different in other ways too. Smaller and paler, someone who couldn't fight anymore even if she wanted to. Or someone who had always been small and pale under her hair without ever knowing it.

"Two what? Ice Ages? Forget it." Quintin felt different too. They weren't working together anymore. "I need help, not opinions, Ma. I want you to stop Josie from trying to ruin our lives just 'cause she's trashing her own. Who else am I supposed to ask?" Quintin half-rolled his body across the door, losing to a fast swing back to the wall. "Crash," he said, holding his head out from the impact as the doorhandle hit. His mother dropped her elbows to the desk remembering just in time to stretch out her arms before they landed on their points, and her hair sprang back into place.

"Look, the truth is I can't," she began, rounding up some paper clips in the warp of her stiff white hands. "I'm sorry, Q. I'm busy and tired, and she's too much for me right now. All I can really do is show you I can't help you this time. That we're beat, have to wait it out, and try to set a good example." She went back to the paper clips, sweeping them up into a peak that looked to Quintin like the lines on

a meteorological map. Their colours swirled and merged, thin lines of blue, pink, and green, meant to show changing levels of atmospheric pressure. They had a funny name; he knew it was about halfway in the book on the left side. Sounded like acne soap or ice cream.

"Isobars."

"What?"

"Nothing. Just call her up here, Ma, please? Try coming down heavy on her, take her breath away. She's gross and deserves it. She hates us, thinks she's perfect, and steals our things. Call her, Ma. Let her know her time is up. Did you know she does drugs with Hubert? And that she has sex, and takes afternoons off from school?"

"I've had my suspicions, but like I said, teenagers are like that. She's gotta find out for herself. Believe it or not, even you'll want to rebel and go off on your own."

"Not like her. She's evil and getting worse. Get her up here, Ma, I'll help you nail her." Quintin did his best impression of a jackhammer, but his mother didn't seem to notice. She was rummaging through her bottom drawer for a block of staples.

"She'll grow out of it. Show her some patience, give her time." This made no sense. Josie already had everything. Quintin closed his eyes and pushed his head hard into the door's highest bevelled molding. He felt as if he were Mount Everest. The highest of the Himalayas, fitting into the sky.

"And how am I supposed to be patient when she makes up

lies about us?"

"Us?"

"Well, she also loves to tell everybody on the bus about Dude Daddy. Crap about how I'm really his kid, not yours. That you aren't my real mother. I think she should be mangled for that. Don't you think she should be made to suffer for that?"

"What?" His mother stiffened in her chair, her hands opening and coming down flat on the desk's surface like landing gear. Quintin watched as a sudden power gripped her shoulders, wrenching them squarely in line with the doorway and the empty staircase draining from it. "Where did she get that from? What a... Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Well, she's always doing it. Here, I'll call her, you'd better ask her yourself. It's about time she was nailed," Quintin said quickly, pulling the door against his upturned toes while he leaned out from the handle to shout downstairs. "Hey Josie... Ma wants you. Up here. Now."

He was just the right height, Quintin found, while listening to Josie's slow tramping upstairs, to hook his fingers over the top of the door and wedge his heels into the bottom panels for a boost now and then. As he struggled into his new position, he heard his breathing bottom out, and felt his shirt slowly rise and pop out of his pants. He tried to look down but his body pulled up as hard as the door, curving and pressing his waist into the firm thinness other people

found hard to resist tickling or hugging. From the feeling of cool air coming in around his waist he knew he was bare up to his ribs, his shirt loose and short above the deep basin of his stomach, and the waistline of his jeans hovering around where his body should be. If he were older, his pubic hair would be showing. *Plains, coniferous regions, dust bowls, Albertan coulees, Arctic lichen.* He probably looked like a torture victim now, his body a crown possession, public property, and free for the taking. A tortured thirteen year old, fancy that, in Canada, for wanting to study Canadian geography in peace; trying to pass Grade Eight with flying colours instead of becoming a delinquent. For believing adults who talk about making the right choices, and then think you're weird when you do. For not caring about fashions and peer pressure. Or wanting to kill, maim, and neutralize, so that you could live a normal life.

"Thanks for coming so quickly, Josie." His mother stood up when Josie sauntered in, slicing papers through the paperclip model in her nervousness, and moving her fingers around pens and books like churning blades. "Thanks. I realize you're busy too." The girl rolled her eyes and raised her arms stiff and handless in the long sleeves of Hubert Beauregard's denim jacket, to find her fingers, and grab onto the frayed edges of its open front.

"Gee, what's with all the scuffling and politeness?" she asked. "Am I at last getting the respect I deserve? Where's

little brother's contribution?" To Quintin, stretched and pinned the length of the door, Josie's entrance meant nothing now. There was no spare muscle left in his body to flinch at the sight of her. Her long unwashed hair, ripped knees and pockets, nose-rings, earrings, chapped hands and lips, were only there if he forced his head down with a tight squeak against the door's centre-beam, and stared carefully through the forest of eyelashes which brushed his vision. His mother had said, "wait it out." At least he could do it with dignity.

"Ha ha ha," he chuckled, straining against his diaphragm and thinking about something the school principal had once said about going to any length to do something worthwhile.

"What's that?" Josie flashed. "What is your problem?"

"Can't move. Help...."

"God, how childish," she retorted, flicking her hair out of her face, and making a shadow which looked to Quintin like the movement of a whip slashing about her head. "How the hell can you call me up here to prove you're better than I am, when you carry on like that?"

"Easy," her brother grunted. "I'm a new Jesus dying for your sins. I suppose you think the old one looked stupid too?"

Although it didn't seem as if anything was going to suddenly change the situation with his sister, Quintin began to feel better. Coming to his mother with his problem

instead of attacking Josie with his compass (which he felt like doing when she'd called him Goody-No-Dink and dug her stained nails into his map of Regional Rainfall) did make sense. She always said it was better to have a mediator in tight situations who could do the thinking, while the people involved were only interested in tearing each other's faces off. He imagined how much would have been left of Josie's face right now if he hadn't come upstairs. And he liked the fact that he couldn't move; it was a good way to keep his own face out of it. Pulling up, holding his breath sometimes, and then blowing out when he'd finally arranged himself again, made it look like he was busy. If he smoked he would be sitting on the floor now, probably against his mother's desk, playing with a fresh cigarette for the same reason. He would fiddle with it between his lips to find the best place to let it hang without soaking up spit, or falling out. He'd wedge it between his first two fingers just below the knuckles where fingers don't quite meet, and push against its stiff filter gently with his thumb to enjoy how well it sat there on the verge of being squished, but not squishing it. He knew this from watching Josie with hers. She liked the smoking part best, sucking the fumes deep into her lungs with a tough black look in her eyes, and breathing it out again in two white narrow lines. She always seemed in pain though, as if smoking was a hazardous job that someone had to do. Like she was important, chosen by popular demand, connected to saints and heroes, and always on duty to say the world was

gross, and everyone should poison themselves to save it.

Quintin hated Josie lately. Mostly because she hated him and made their mother sick with worry. Also, he had to do most of the chores, which made him busy too, but not half as dramatic as she was while talking on the phone all night, smoking, and constantly running the threads from her ripped clothes through her grubby, trembling fingers. He remembered when he'd tried to tell her one day that she was spoiling everything like Dude Daddy, and she'd said, "Oh well." He'd wished that she would suddenly start to melt like a snowman, making her cold stony eyes fall out of her head, and her ragged clothes end up in a mouldy heap on the floor. He found her really stupid even though everyone on the schoolbus thought she was cool. Quintin didn't know what else he was supposed to think when day after day on the way home, in the same cramped space, she and Hubert acted like he didn't even matter. Maybe he didn't, then, to them, while they carried on so importantly. Maybe they were remembering lines, clever things to say, like some actors who did a show in the gym once on child abuse, and who never really looked at anyone even though there might have been kids in the audience who needed to be noticed. He was beginning to think that maybe Josie was going insane. A family resemblance. Stuck somewhere comfortable even though it made no sense, like Tundra caribou showing up on the Appalachians with unevolved hoofs because of softer moss at similar elevations. His

mother was going to find it out for herself, admit it like she admitted she was tired, and send Josie away. He was going to hang around, literally, to watch this happen, if not for the thrill of seeing the idiot shoved into an institution, jail, or Calgary, then just to test how long he could last, today anyway, on the door. With a boost once in a while from his heels against the rim of the panels, and the padding of thumb muscles against the hard edge of the door's topside, he'd do his part by amazing Josie with his strength, irritate her with his childishness, and basically try to bug her to death.

"Ha ha," he chuckled again, shoring himself up with a dull kick and a wriggle. Josie groaned and banged herself against the back of her chair in disgust.

"Ooh, you get on my nerves twirp. Fuckin' get down from there. Are you out of your mind?"

"You tell me. What's it like?"

"Mother, can we get on with this. I have things to do."

"Okay, only after you tell me what you've been telling people on the bus about Quintin."

"What? Nothing."

"Josie, I need the truth, now. And we all have things to do. Where did you get it from that I'm not Quintin's real mother? Why do you talk about the family like that?"

"Mother, shut up for God's sake. I don't know what the hell you're talking about. I never said that. Quintin's lying. He makes things up, can't you see that? I mean just

look at him. Does he look like a genius to you?"

The best thing about having his own terrain in his mother's study was that Quintin felt he couldn't help but be there, like a stray beaver or bear in the middle of Toronto. Josie may have been slouched in one of the chairs, smoking, but she looked like she had a choice, and was there out of the goodness of her heart. Uncool, visiting, *non-native species*.

"Ha ha." He'd conned her nicely this time.

"Oh God, not again. That settles it. I'm going to kill you," Josie cried. She was actually getting up. "I'm going to personally rip you off your bed of nails, or your door of suffering, and strangle you. You think you're too busy for us, proving some gravity thing or other, and dreaming up lies. Well here goes, runt." Quintin felt her small hard fingers lock around his ankles and begin to tug. The points of her long hair brushed the tops of his feet with her forward thrusts at him, and her breath hit his skin with pricks of spit. He wanted to kick her, give her the flat of his foot against her face. It would be so easy, a heave and a swing, the crack of a nose, blood, and crying. But what about mediation, Zero-movement, balance, and family resemblance? He'd never prove anything if he gave up so soon.

"No," he screamed, counter to the force dragging him from his own voice. Josie had to be called off somehow.

"Ma... So tell me. Am I your child or the Dude's? Please. Josie said...."

"Leave him alone, Josie. Haven't you caused enough trouble already?" cried her mother, swinging around the corner of her desk towards them. "Besides it's just his way."

"Well, we're all supposed to be here to criticize my way, aren't we?" Jose snarled. "So does this all mean my case is dismissed?" The back of Quintin's knees had begun to chafe against the pull of his sister's grip on the sides of his pants. If she tugged any harder they would come off, and he would have to come down. She would have cut him down, pulled him out by the roots. If he were a torture victim he would have to let her. But the door was his, it had all started out this way. His mother would help. She had come to him now. Her hands were on him too, around his waist where it was stretched and hard. Her thumbs pressed into his sides, strong and anxious, the fingers behind stroking the curve in his back unconsciously as she spoke. He felt her coming in closer, her hair brushing his chest and face. She kissed him, softly at first, making stretching and struggling sounds against his cheek as if she were trying to find a place for herself on his body, on the door. Her lips pushed harder and harder into his cheeks, his forehead, his ears. Her voice burrowed into him. This close up his mother looked like a relief map: thousands of tiny holes and lines that stretched and fell like a faraway moving view of a large city. Quintin

pinched his eyes shut. He always got motion sickness. It was guaranteed to cause a big fuss, especially with Josie who said it proved he was a nerd and budding homosexual. He tried to look past her face, which blocked his view and his breathing now.

"Don't worry my sweetie, everything will be alright." His mother was trying to smooth things over now. This was a bad sign. "Josie, let me talk to Quintin. Just leave us alone for a while. Sometimes three's definitely a crowd."

"Ooh, sick," said Josie, falling on her haunches to get a wider view of the crisis above her. She froze her hands in one last grip on her brother's ankles, then poked herself through whatever opening she could find, to maneuver her way out from Quintin's legs and her mother's desperate hold on him. "I'm out of here. You two are on your own. Mother and child, I think...."

Quintin pressed his heels against the door's lower panels now that he had the chance, hoisting himself up onto his toes, and closer into his mother's embrace than he could remember being in a long time. From the moist salty smell bursting around her, and a sudden cramping of her shoulders, he could tell she had started to cry. Nothing had worked out, just like she'd warned him. Josie was all-powerful. Each of them had tried to reason with her, or outsmart her moves, but she never seemed to feel anything except sunburn in the wrong places, and Hubert's hands all over her. He

wondered if now wasn't the time to drop off the door, find somewhere else to do his homework, and forget the whole thing. But his mother wouldn't let up grasping and holding him. She was shaking, sobbing, her face burning into the place it had found against his neck.

"I'm sorry, Q, I should have told you earlier," she said, sniffing, and lifting his head level with her own.

"Ah, come on, Ma, she only started getting really bad lately. You didn't know how hard it would get to put up with her. I didn't mean for you to get this upset." Quintin lowered his head to rest on hers. He felt bad now that he'd lied to get Josie upstairs to make trouble. It was just that she made him so mad with her superior attitude when he knew he was better than her boyfriends or the rockstars she was ready to die for. It was true she did stuff with Hubert, but the part about him being Dude Daddy's kid with some other woman was something that had just popped into his head from nowhere, while hanging on the door. But that wasn't the problem as much as the fact that he hadn't realized his mother couldn't do anything about Josie right away, like freeze her or sew her lips shut. "I'm sorry too, Ma, I should have believed you from the beginning. The teachers at school are always on about teenagers, too."

"No," she cried, passing her hands feverishly over his chest now, kissing his neck again with wet, weak lips. "Not that. There's something else I should have told you a long time ago."

"Ma, what are you doing? You're strangling me. Let me get down. I'm fine now, honestly. Go lie down for a while."

"All your life, Q, well, almost twelve years, I've kept a secret from you."

"Twelve, but I'm thirteen." *From coast to coast to coast, nine point nine seven million square kilometres.* "One missing. What are you saying? It's true? My lie is true? Holy Moly, I must have remembered." Quintin searched his mother's face. She bravely drew away from the hiding place she had found in him.

"Yes, it's true. I meant to tell you sooner. I'm so sorry. Please believe me honey, but we were so happy, and you so good. I'll make everything okay again, you'll see. With a little time, and a whole lot more love.

Now it was Quintin's turn to want to hide. He looked up at the ceiling. For the first time during his door game, he felt a sense of weightlessness. He could still see his arms on either side of his head, swelled to the shape of long firm banana balloons rising to pull from his hands, but the pain, the pressure, was no longer there. He wanted to drop down and feel the floor again. Come back to life, slowly lower his arms in a wide falling circle, and walk downstairs to his books. How could he do that now? As crazy as it seemed he belonged on the door, born there, an adapted and classified species on an indigenous surface. Something held him there other than the anxious woman beside him, or his far-off

fingertips. He had worked too hard at being something else. Now he was extinct.

"Another mother?" he asked weakly, his body dying now to the careless fumbling around him, the connections with his bare, unguarded skin. "One child, two mothers..." *Mutant propagation, meteor collisions, or climactic aber...* "Aberrations."

"No, I'm your mother, Q. Can't you feel that? I took you in when Lola... the girl... gave up after eight months. I forgave your father and tried to make a normal home for us all. Hasn't it been great? Haven't you always felt like you really belonged here?" Quintin turned his face away from the searching eyes that begged for his understanding and forgiveness. He tried to remember whose they were. The woman who had smiled at him more than anyone else in his life? The woman who had hugged and cuddled him as naturally as they breathed, sometimes to find comfort from bad things that happened, other times in fun where his warm young neck was maple syrup, or his cheek, a fuzzy Okanagan peach? "Come on, Q, get down from this silly door," he heard her say in her old way, calmer, musically, but with a brave shiver in her voice, and a lot more sniffing. She'd moved away slightly, still holding on to the edge of his shirt with a light pinch. "You said you wanted to. Come, I'll help you down. You don't want to be there when the wind changes, otherwise you'll have to stay like that for the rest of your life."

Trades or prevailing westerlies, Quintin had already begun to feel wooden. The movement of his mother's hands fumbling their way into his armpits to hoist him down seemed more like thick vibrations, like fat birds coming to nest in rocky hollows. Her head, pressing hard against his chest to stop him from falling forward when his fingers dislodged, reminded him of a mountain climber struggling against a difficult cliff. Her nearness didn't seem like love anymore. What was it? *Summer in winter, B.C.'s warm Kuro Shio ocean current in reverse?*

"I can't," he whispered hoarsely. It was comfortable where he was. He felt proud and stubborn, stuck to a surface he'd conquered, bothering everyone enough to make them want to pull him off. Like Rocky Mountain pin violets flowering almost upside down, their stems like hairs pulled by the wind, just out of reach, wiry roots in rock. "Maybe I'm an endangered species, better back off."

"You and your Geography. I think you study it too hard sometimes."

"You should try it. Rather than grow boys in pots on your windowsill."

"Come on, help me then. You're the weather expert, the agronomist, the seismologist."

"I want you to close the door."

"Okay, get down and I will. Then we can sit and talk for as long...."

"No close it, with me on it."

"What, now?"

"Go on, Ma. Slam my fingers right up there. You have to kill me, see. Whoever I was. Your borrowed, acclimatized boy, hero, saint, cutie-pie, whatever." *Camouflage phyla, types of dependence, predation, parasitism, commensalism, mutualism.* "To save me, if you really care. Please, Ma? Really hurt me, not just with bad news, but the pain of a rifle shot, or the snap of a leghold trap, so I can feel something again. Maybe I'll cry, and you can end the explanations. It'll give me a good excuse to come down, fall off like a dead thing. It's how this game ends."

Later that day, Quintin got up stiffly from his books in the spare room where he'd set up a place to study away from the scratchy sound of Josie's Walkman, to stretch out in front of an old TV someone had dumped there along with other junk. It must have been there a long time, judging from the smell of hot dust that rose from the vents in its plastic back as its first picture in ages flickered across the screen. Quintin couldn't remember the last time he'd watched anything on it, but he knew he must have, many times. On one channel, in black and white of course, there was a show about recruiting young dancers for a ballet company and, on the other, a soap opera about two or three things at once. On both shows the people sometimes smiled and looked very happy, and at other times, were all alone, frowning. Quintin had to wonder what it was all about because the old TV had no sound

dial. Even later, when his mother came up to peer around the door, her white face hoping it wasn't interrupting, Quintin was still trying to work it all out, moving his lips along with the people on TV. His fingers were okay, he told her, still moving his lips and carrying on in a kind of made-up sign language, and that she should stop worrying. Josie had gone out, his mother told him, joining in with arm and eyebrow movements of her own, and he could come down and finish off his studying downstairs on the Lazyboy where it was more comfortable. He nodded "thanks," and did a charade telling her she was a good policeman, but she shook her head, and did one of a ballerina, gracefully lifting her arms and standing on her toes. While she was balancing--quite well, Quintin thought--the phone rang, and he ran across to the study to pick it up. He mouthed a silent "hello" against its smooth mouthpiece, raising his eyebrows and pretending to be interested. His mother did one more *porte bras*, and sailed back downstairs. "Hello... hello?" cried a voice on the other end. It was Josie. She sounded rushed and afraid. "Quintin, is that you?" she pleaded. "Listen, I'm in big trouble." *Wind velocity versus natural barriers.* "QUINTIN... Shit on you. ARE YOU THERE? Say something." Quintin frowned and mouthed more silent words into the phone. "Oh God, oh God," Josie shouted in a flood of sound. "Don't tell me you're not speaking to me now? Help me, Quintin. Q, PLEASE. Aaaah...." Quintin pressed the mute button on his sister's demanding cries, and changed the phone over to his other

hand. While looking around for somewhere comfortable to sit, he shook and bounced the tangled phone cord, making sure it came towards him in a long uncomplicated line from the wall into his hand. After he'd got himself wedged, frog-like, between the bookcase and an old pine Buddha his mother called "His Thusness," he pressed the mute button again, and put Josie to his ear. She was still there.

SCIENCE

My older sister has never been one for doing things half-assed. She either does something flat out or not at all. Take the time she made a cage for the rosebush. She spent the whole day twisting and connecting some old stucco wire that had been lying around the shed, into a perfect prism to fit over the plant. She even clipped out wire parabolas at the bottom of each side to make legs for the cage. I was amazed. There was no way any cat or dog or raccoon could stand and rub itself endlessly against the rosebush from then on, pulling off every new shoot that tried to grow past the bud stage. The cage became known as our mini Eiffel Tower. It's still stuck in the ground around the base of the rosebush, even though the branches are really long now, and twisted, and covered with fat waxy thorns.

Another one of her obsessions has done more or less the same thing for me, although no one would have guessed it. For a long time I've wondered if I was normal, because of something I did when I was seven. Fortunately, she's proved I am as normal as the next person despite my brother Christian's idea that I am doomed to become a serial killer. It's strange that he would worry about this, even to the small extent that he jokes about it, since he was the one who

committed murder in front of me; making me, in fact, come and help him when he needed a knife and rope and company.

One thing my sister doesn't do is go out with guys, although it's obvious she really needs to get rid of her pent-up emotions. She stands in front of the mirror for three hours every morning making sure her face is flawless before she leaves for work, but we never see any results for her efforts come walking through the front door. Most people would say her obsession with her looks is because of low self-esteem, but what is low self-esteem if not the beginning of the whole sex act? For girls especially. I know, believe me, I see it everyday in the washroom at school: girls making themselves so dissatisfied with their appearances that they have to devote all their time to their faces, bodies, feelings, etc.. Christian hates the way our sister carries on, especially since she calls herself a feminist. He says she's really ripe and wants it bad, but can't pull herself together to get down and dirty in true woman fashion. He says all her obsessions are substitutes for pregnancy, especially the way she constantly squeezes niblets of pus out of her nose. But my sister has decided she hates kids. Christian thinks feminism is just another *primal* tactic for women to get men, not some cerebral way of getting at them. He says Darwin has a lot in common with Adam and Eve, and that the more things change the more they stay the same.

Although Christian is incredibly good-looking he doesn't care about sex; he has completely killed his urges. He says dating is expensive, the last thing he wants is a wife and kids, and that horny and/or married people look really stupid and *tentatively* comfortable. Also, he watches a lot of hardcore porn, which he says puts sex in perspective for him. I agree with him. The stuff we watch is more educational than romantic, and it makes me feel a lot better about being human than the complicated explanations they give us in biology class. There, whatever the sex educators can't, or don't want to, tell you about sex, they cover up by bringing love into it. I don't think governments want kids, especially us girls, to know the exact truth about bringing babies into the world. They gloss over the cost in money and pain in case everyone stops breeding, and then where would we be? Where would the rich be without poor people's hoards of kids to organize, sell garbage to, and put in prison? (I'm really sounding like my brother now.) He also says life is a fucking lie, survival of the fattest, bad science.

I think I've learned more from Christian than anyone. Maybe it's because he's the oldest in the family, and I'm the youngest. Actually, it's weird that I would decide he has taught me more than anyone, since he dropped out of university, and I do really well at school. I've never had anything but 90s and 100s on my report cards; a lot of these marks coming from things he has helped me write, or in his

impatience, written for me. I find most of the people in Grade Ten very boring. They all think the same, talk in the same way, swear only at school, hate their families, but at the same time walk around hoping they look like really good genetic material. Worst of all, they think I'm a religious goody-goody, as tight as a book, and always trying to be perfect. Of course, it's because by the time I get to school I'm ready to do schoolwork. Believe me, swearing, sex and violence are normal for me. I get my kicks from high marks, and getting the book prize at the end of the year, which usually deals with my favorite subject: outer space, and the way the earth is killing itself.

When I was seven, and Christian about seventeen, we lived in the woods some distance from town. Although we were on the outskirts, we were by no means protected from the stupid things people do. We had to regularly cart away garbage that had been dumped in our woods, pick up broken glass, and sometimes phone the cops because of ditched stolen cars, or girls screaming in the woods. Worst of all, we were always rescuing abandoned cats and dogs, especially during flea season, or if the animals were in heat. Our house was never without kittens, but none that we had brought into the world. It just became a way of life after a while, to somehow find the money to have a never-ending stream of kittens and puppies fixed in order to stop the pathetic sight of more kittens appearing out of nowhere. I guess it got to

us after a while, all those scrawny kittens and cats in heat carried down to the vet's as quickly as possible, because something really bad happened which showed us, I guess, the meaning of life.

My sister figures, based on her new obsession with astrology, that everything a person does is determined by the planetary aspects at the time of birth. She says the reason I am normal today despite what I did when I was seven, is because of my well-aspected Moon/Pluto conjunction in the third house, and the best quadruple trine aspect possible. I have Mars in the eleventh house, Mercury in the twelfth, with the two nicely aligned on either side of the twelfth house cusp. She says they are 120 degrees from the Moon/Pluto conjunction in the third house with the four planets positively-aspected. And that these, along with my double Cancer, make me intuitive, powerful, driven, impervious, quick to react, decisive, and controlled. I have the ability to do anything, to distance myself from all horrors. Everything in me works like a well-oiled machine, with ideal career as astronaut or gynecologist. It is true that the sight of blood, for example, or a really close-up view of intercourse, hits me logically rather than emotionally. Back when we lived in the woods I was also very good at getting rid of cats that didn't make it through the winter. It was all in how you handled the garbage bag when you picked up the corpse. You had to put the bag over the cat, not the other

way round. Otherwise, it was too much of a struggle to get all four of the cat's legs into the bag at the same time, forcing you to start noticing the cat's loss of dignity, and its uselessness.

What I really like, is my sister's proof that I am compatible with Christian. After studying our charts for a long time she found out we share an Aries mid-heaven, with the one having the Sun in Leo, with Leo ascendant, and the other's as much in Cancer, making for a unique bond between two souls. His strong Leo next to my Cancer invites natural harmony and implicit trust. Also, the Venus of one, aligned with the Sun of the other, makes for a highly-resolved empathy, sparking mutual admiration, and an absence from any sense of limitation. Two such personalities measure themselves against each other as if they were the Gods of Justice. One's Uranus in line with the other's Jupiter and Saturn conjunction, makes them love challenges, especially ones they know no one else will understand. Christian's double Leo loves someone who is willing. My double Cancer likes to be willing. She has figured out that our mutual mechanism is perpetual, very effective, or dangerous. I think we just want to fix things up.

I asked her what planets prove that Christian knows everything. She says his heavily-aspected Saturn is compatible with the way the world is now, that some people

seem chosen to understand the times they live in better than others. Neptune in the fourth house gives this character the power to protect his own kind, especially when threatened. The age of Pisces is over. Jesus is passé; the global economy is everything; human alienation and impotence will be seen as profitable, and convenient to those in power; for a time we will see the odd individual warrior trying to save us as the technological age of Aquarius takes over. I'm glad I will be able to handle it.

The way my sister sees what happened when I was seven was because of the Sun of one paired subject transiting the Neptune of another. In other words, the affected Neptune turned up opposite the other's Mars to activate all salient aspects to Pluto and aligning the Mars of each. She says that the sight of the stray dog we stabbed, when I was seven, dragging its bleeding body off into the woods, was not something which would have bothered either Christian or me unduly. She is sure we each prefer to understand death, rather than waste time shaping and twisting it into something dramatic. She says that the sound of the dog's gasps for air, as Christian punched holes through its neck skin, would never affect someone like me because I am defined by my great sense of practicality. She is exactly right there. The moment the horny stray dog finally peeled off our dog, letting go its urges to bang away at her, I felt better. It had taken about eight jabs at its neck to get it to release

its claws from our dog, never mind how many more to get it unplugged from her ass. Christian had been the first one out on the porch. We'd heard a loud noise. He'd said, *okay that's fucking enough*, and had gone out to find that a stray dog had forced itself into Jeannie's (our dog's) house. It was a small wooden crate which was barely big enough for her, but good for winter snugness. With the two dogs stuck like that, he had to find a way to reach into the crate to get the horny dog out. Then I heard him shout for the carving knife, a hockey stick, and some string. He also wanted me to hang around on the porch to help him, since the handle of the knife kept slipping loose from the end of the stick where the connection was really badly done. In between his jabs at the dog, Christian tugged at its tail, then its springy back legs. Eventually it was weak enough for him to yank out. Out in the open, it was obvious he'd done a major job on the dog. What a difference in its eyes since the stabbing. They were back to being doglike: thick and kind and loyal.

I had never seen an animal's eyes look so human, the three days the stray dog ran round and round our house till it finally burst through the barricade we'd made across the porch. It was as if getting to Jeannie was the only thing it'd ever been sure of in its life. Of course, she was in heat, which wasn't too bright on our part, but it was the middle of winter, and we thought we could put off fixing her till the weather was warmer. My sister's right again. I liked

the sight of the butchered dog way more than the eager one with its sure black eyes, its stupid, open face saying it was made of the finest genetic material, and we should've been glad it was there panting at our front door like the first day of spring. The way it ran off into the woods, letting go big loose drops of blood into the snow, was totally satisfying (in comparison, I mean.) Afterwards, Christian was panting just as much as the dog. His lips were as dark and tightly pulled, but he had the look of someone who had slain a dragon. All he said was that a gun would have been nice.

I think the thing that bugs Christian--and me--most about my sister is the way she says absolutely nothing these days, unless it has to do with astrology. When she comes home from work she doesn't think we rate a *hello*, or anything. We know she has been working alongside this guy she likes, all day, but jeez, we wonder, why does it make her so miserable? I remember when she wouldn't be caught dead lusting after someone; when she and Christian, as the oldest kids in the family, used to play with dolls in the barn, making them sexually unattractive with blots of ballpoint ink. Tonight, as soon as she got home, she went straight for her charts, and started working out what this guy was all about even though she doesn't know his birthdate! She told me not too long ago she was convinced he has a lot of Aquarius in his chart because he always misplaces things. She says she's convinced that with enough research she'll

figure out his exact birthday. Then, she is going to surprise him with it. Christian says she should just ask him his birthday, ask him out, ask him to do her, and be done with it, rather than rely on an inexact science to find happiness. Tonight they had a fight over her moodiness. He asked her how the hell people who control themselves are supposed to endure *the lovelorn* when they look and act so brainless. He told her there's no way we can be expected to live with her. He said living with her feverish craving for this guy was as torturous as being forced to watch people eat their snot in public, search their hair for split ends, scratch their heads or asses or armpits, nibble at their finger skin, or beg Jesus to save their terminally-ill offspring.

Our nerves were really on edge the third day the stray dog came panting around our house, looking for a way onto the porch. By now, it had worn a path around the house which looked like a dirty brown rag in the snow. I remember we were sitting on the couch watching "The Flintstones," waiting for the dog to tire itself out, and leave, so we could escape to buy food. It was our favorite show. All about the beginning of everything.

It turns out, now, the guy at work is very superficial. His chart shows *Uranus rising, Sun in conjunction with Uranus as well as being in the eleventh house. Uranus. Uranus.*

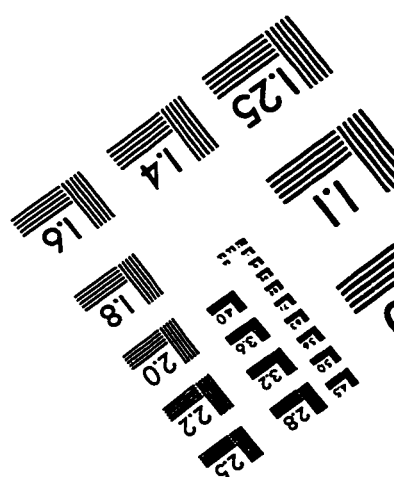
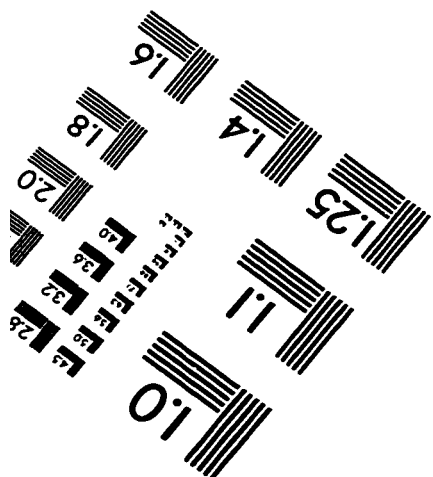
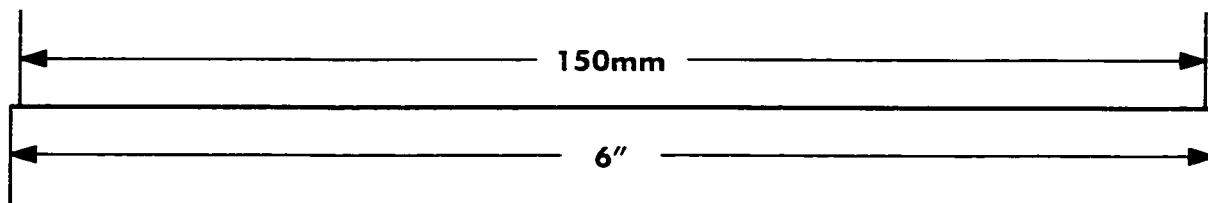
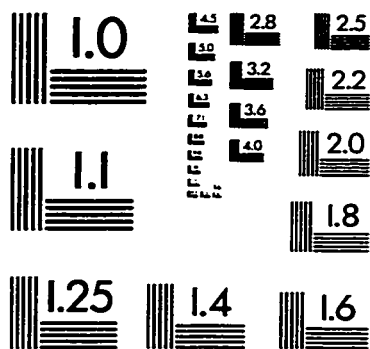
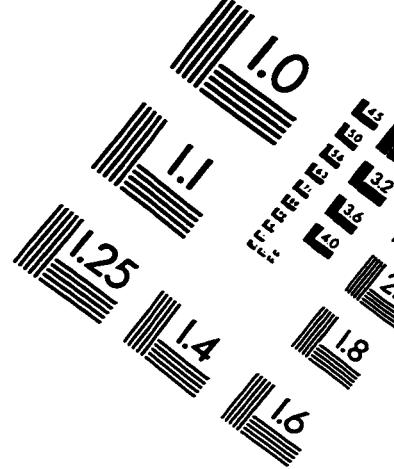
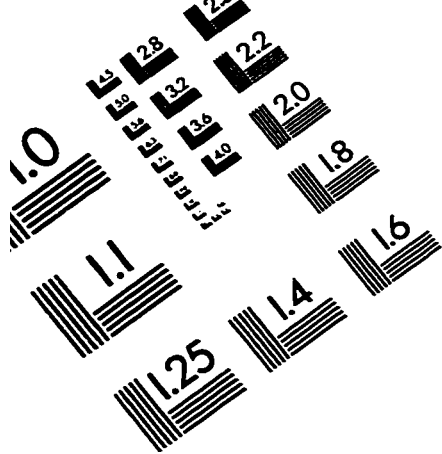
Uranus. He is the definition of detachment. My sister is devastated. She's up in her bedroom crying, and saying over and over, she's glad she found out what he was really like before she got hurt. Christian is disgusted. He went up there with some spaghetti and sauce he's been making all afternoon, but she wouldn't even taste it. He was trying to do the right thing. I personally feel a bit dizzy all of a sudden, as though there are many, many people in the house; all of humanity floating in the air with their noses in one another's crotches as if packed to go somewhere. If I were to give this feeling a sound it would be the worst silence you have ever heard, the nothingness of a horrible wondering and waiting inside many, many stupid heads all at the same time. If I were to give it a face, it would be one of a dog on one of those days where it had to pay for its happy little life. The face is on the other side of a porch railing. It has hard eyes which glint like steel, and a long, wet nose working like a tool to do only one thing on an assembly line, before passing everything up. Christian is going to add more garlic and onions to his spaghetti sauce. I love the chopping sounds he makes. They are sounds for everybody.

My sister is still crying. She is coming downstairs buried in her dressing gown. Christian is coming into the room where I'm watching TV. He wants to see the part where Homer Simpson skateboards over Springfield Gorge. Still holding the knife he's chopping vegetables with, he yells,

save yourself, Homer, save your fat white ass! Bits of garlic and green onion are stuck to the wide silver blade. My sister walks down the hall, and back. Her eyes are smeared with mascara. I've never seen her eyes look so animal-like. She is carrying her pile of charts. There she comes again. She is sobbing like some kind of engine. My sister won't respond to my questions. Christian and I wish she would stop pacing. He asks her, *what gives?* She lifts her arm to wipe her snot, and the charts fall to the floor with a loud clatter. Christian says a long *meeoow* right into my sister's face. She looks at him desperately.

I'm sitting on the couch watching "The Simpsons." It's almost over.

TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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