

FRIENDS AND RELATIONS
A Book of Short Fiction

Douglas Abbott

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ABSTRACT

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The nine short stories that comprise this thesis are about Maritimers shaped by the geography of eastern Canada and the action of time.

The style of the stories is naturalistic. Three are told from the first person point of view. The other six employ the third person limited point of view. The technique utilizes the dramatic method - the presentation of a conflict that opens out scenically into a dramatic confrontation leading to a resolution.

As the title suggests, the unifying themes concern the often intense relationships between friends and those united by family ties. A particularly strong theme is the conflict between fathers and sons viewed in the son's archetypal search for the father. The characters are mainly children, adolescents and young men attempting to define themselves, to map the landscape of their lives.

IN MEMORY OF MY PARENTS

... in time as well as space we leave people
as if by volition and thereby incur guilt and
thereby we owe them, the dead, the forsaken,
at least the homage of rendering them.

— John Updike

The Paris Review Interviews, 1967

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THE LAST COWBOY

I was eleven years old the summer I decided to become a cowboy. There were no cowboys in Halifax among the sailors, soldiers and men like my father who worked in a liquor store and drank too much on Saturday nights. We lived on a narrow street of tall, wooden houses near Citadel Hill. Beside the Acadian Lines Bus Terminal across from Annandale Street there was an open field. When my father bought our house in 1946, the year I was born, there was a farm and horses and cows grazed in the field. The farm had disappeared when I was a boy and the field was empty except for the rotted trunk of an old elm and clumps of sticky briars we called "buzzies" and put in girls' hair to make them scream.

On my way home, swinging my school-bag past the open door of Osborne's grocery, I would gallop like a pony express rider. I ignored the fish smell that came up the steep streets from the harbour. Through the dust churned up by the buses as they lumbered into the terminal, I pictured a stagecoach plunging across an endless plain. Place names over the windshields, like Truro and Wolfville, became wild, frontier towns, worlds away from the Maritimes, filled with cowboys and gun-fighters who bore only slight resemblances to the stiff, cardboard cutouts on the marquee of the Garrick Theatre downtown.

I knew we wouldn't take one of those buses when we went to visit my grandfather. My uncle Andy was a conductor for the CNR and on his pass we could go half fare. Although the trip had not been mentioned again since that Sunday evening, I knew we would go. Somehow my father, who never let me down, would win over my mother's objections.

I had been listening to Hopalong Cassidy and the Lone Ranger after supper when he asked me if I'd mind wasting a couple of weeks of summer vacation out in Alberta. I twisted around from the radio on the kitchen sideboard. It was an old Philco we had always had, shaped like a tombstone with knobs, that scratched and whined when you turned it on and adjusted the dials to get the CBC.

"I could learn to ride there!" I said. "That's what I want to be you know. A real cowboy!"

"That's silliness, David," my mother said. She was wiping dishes and stacking them on the bottom shelf over the sink.

"Mrs. MacFadden says that her boy wants to go into the radio shop with his father. He's a fine, level-headed boy that Richard."

That was just like something he'd do, I thought. Stumble around through all those bits and pieces of broken radios scattered all over the yard with their three Irish terriers barking and Mr. MacFadden in the shop cursing and yelling "Testing, one, two, three" into a busted transmitter.

My father winked at me as he settled forward in his chair and folded his arms over the oilcloth covered table. He was a tall, rangy man, prematurely bald, with a wiry quickness that looked for outlets it often couldn't find.

"There aren't many cowboys left anymore, pardner. Your granddad was quite a wrangler in his day though. He was a champion rider and roper at the Calgary Stampede years ago."

"Does he have a real ranch with wild horses?"

He glanced at my mother. She bore burdens silently and you did not realize she worried unless you happened to catch her in unguarded moments and saw the trace of strain in her face.

"It's more of a farm now," he said. "Outside Lethbridge. Most beautiful country you ever seen. If you want wild horses and cowboys we'll have to take in the Stampede."

There was a crescendo of horns and trumpets from the radio as the Lone Ranger and Tonto rode off into another sunset.

All right, David," my mother said, folding the dishtowel

and draping it over the drain-board. "Upstairs. You got school tomorrow."

I hesitated in the dark hall at the top of the stairs with my cheek pressed against the bannister, listening to the muffled voices that came up from the kitchen.

"You shouldn't make promises like that," my mother said. "We can't afford any trip this year all the way out there."

"He's never seen his own grandfather, for God's sake!"

There was a long pause.

"I remember when we went out after we were married. You were still in uniform then. You and your father. Cowboys. You spent the whole time in bars seeing who could drink who under the table first."

"He didn't have anyone after Mom passed away."

"He always had his drinking buddies, Gerald. Did one less make any real difference?"

The radio was turned off. It was quiet for a long time.

"I know you always blamed me for not wanting to stay," she said.

"You didn't give it much of a chance as I remember. Dad was pretty broken up about it."

"I couldn't stand it," she said. "There was nothing there for me. It was like a graveyard. After those three months, I just couldn't take it any longer. With David on the way I wanted something better. For all of us."

"His health hasn't been any too good these last couple of years. I think we should just go."

There was a creaking sound of the cupboard opening and a clink of glass.

"You're not going to start tonight, are you?"

"Just a little," he said. "To keep the mortal chill off."

School was almost over. Everyday when my mother was busy in the kitchen I tried on the high crowned stetson that my grandfather had sent on my last birthday. I angled it on my head and swaggered in front of the mirror in the downstairs hall. It was a size too large but my father said that, like life, I would grow into it.

I re-hung the rope and inner tube in the big elm against the fence at the back of our yard. I pulled myself up into my private place high in the branches and dreamed about swinging into the saddle of a real horse that would gallop wherever I wanted him to go.

The lengthening evenings before summer vacation were getting warmer. After supper, Annandale Street filled with kids playing.

My father did not come home after work on this particular evening. We sat at the kitchen table, not saying anything to each other. My mother stared vacantly at her plate, not eating much of anything. When I asked her what was wrong she told me to finish up and go outside. Surprised that I would be allowed out on a school night, I rushed out of the house before she changed her mind.

It had rained, a sudden shower. The sidewalk was drying and only scattered puddles remained, glistening under the streetlights that had just come on. Windows were open along the street to catch any breeze. A hunchbacked old woman called Aunt Etta, although she was no one's real aunt, was thumping away at her piano, playing "The Big Rock Candy Mountain." Our neighbour, Mrs. Amiro, a retired school teacher, had just finished putting the last of her flower seeds into the stubborn patch of ground in front of her house. Despite years of gardening and the care she lavished on it, Mrs. Amiro always produced the worst garden in the neighbourhood. She stood up now in front of an uneven row marked "gladioli" on a little card attached to a stick. Pulling off a pair of dirty gloves, she shook a trowel at some of the kids running up and down the sidewalk playing tag.

"You children stay out of this garden," she said, "or I'll call the police." She looked around, suspiciously, conditioned by years of classroom disobedience, and then tottered onto her porch. Her black cat, Othello, who had been watching from the top step finished licking himself and curled up against the step.

In the doorway of Mrs. Baker's boarding house stood Whitey. We all called her Whitey because her face was always heavily powdered and her hair, dyed silver, was swept up in a cone like cotton candy. She was wearing a polka dotted dress that spread over her wide hips. The man with her said something that made her giggle and Whitey took him inside.

Richard MacFadden asked me again if I wanted to join his club. I ignored him, crouching down in a smooth patch of dirt under a lamppost where a bunch of kids were shooting marbles.

"He says you can be in the club now, Dave," Ronnie Dwyer said, tugging my arm as if I hadn't heard.

I slowly undid the string around my bag of marbles, savouring the excitement that flowed through me. Richard was the biggest boy on the street. For months I had tried to get into his club, begging, humbling myself by offering my horse-shoe magnet and my prize set of Davy Crockett bubblegum cards. Now that they all knew I was going out West I was suddenly acceptable, a celebrity to everyone in the neighbourhood who had never been outside the province.

Carefully, I arranged my shooting marbles in neat rows in front of me. The other kids waited expectantly. What was the matter with me? I was finally being accepted into the club. Everyone agreed with Richard, did everything he said. No one had ever challenged his authority.

"I don't want to be in your old club," I said, slowly examining the swirls of colour in my favourite agate and trying to keep the tremor from my voice. "Your club stinks!"

There were murmurings; heads shook at my stupidity. To prove I was in control, that I knew what I was doing, I won most of Ronnie Dwyer's marbles.

"Hey, Dave, ain't that your old man?"

I smiled, suddenly very happy, as I looked to see my

father coming down the block. His coat flapping against his long legs, he half skipped and half ran, dodging the puddles. He glanced at his feet, trying either to make out the faded hopscotch squares chalked into the sidewalk or to measure the movements of a difficult dance step.

I held out my winnings. "Dad, hey Dad! Look!"

His head snapped back. He called out "Whoa there!" as though he were reining in a temperamental horse. "Come on, you varmits, let's play cowboys and Indians."

Staggering, putting out his arm to keep his balance. "Whoa up there!" His hat fell off and rolled onto the grassy edge of the pavement. No one moved to pick it up.

"Hey, Dave, what's the matter with your old man?" Ronnie Dwyer yelled.

"He's loaded!" Richard MacFadden shouted, his voice full of contempt. "He's stewed to the gills!"

"Come on. I don't mind playin' the bad guy once 'n a while." Lurching away from a telephone pole with his hands thrust into his pockets, he toppled back into Mrs. Amiro's garden. The little stick signs and the mounds of newly worked earth flattened under his feet.

A car roared by, its horn blaring. A couple of high school kids hooted from the windows.

I had never seen my father so drunk before. He never made a spectacle of himself like this. What was the matter? I stood there, unable to move. Watching, waiting for people to come to windows and doors to see what was going on. Wait-

ing for Mrs. Amiro to call the police. Othello was already up, his ears twitching. Whity and the man came out on the porch and started down the steps. She pointed at my father, floundering in the garden, and they both smiled.

Tears of anger, confusion and helplessness, struggled at the back of my eyes. "Come on, Dad," I said. "Let's go home, eh?"

He threw his arms up into the air over his head, nearly tripping over a tricycle. "I guess yuh got me dead to rights," he said. A shower of coins tinkled against the pavement. "There's the loot. It's all yours."

There was a scramble of arms and legs. Only Richard remained by the lamppost looking embarrassed now as if he had been caught again reading the girlie magazines at the drugstore.

"Gee, thanks," the kids called out. "Thanks a lot." Someone picked up his hat, crushed underfoot, and my father slapped it, roughly, on his head.

His eyes glazed, his mouth hanging open, he weaved along the sidewalk in front of us. "Okay, who says I'm not the fastest gun ... in the West." His movements were as disjointed as a rag doll when he drew imaginary guns. "Bang ... bang," he said, sighting along his finger and closing one eye. "Got yuh, David. You're dead."

I stared at him, a stranger now, a clown whose mask had fallen off to reveal a ridiculous old man, dropping away from me into the shadows under the streetlights.

I started to walk away and then I ran. I ran with my sneakers hitting out against the pavement, pulling me away from my father's voice. "Come back here, David. You hear me? Goddam you ... come back."

Down the block and into the alley behind the Fina station on the corner. It was all cinder underfoot. I stumbled and fell, pushing my arms out in front of me. Pain stung my hands, plunged up my leg. I pulled myself to my feet. Reaching the fence that separated our backyard from the Amiro's, I climbed it. I swung up towards the tree, hoisting up into the thicker branches.

My breath burned in my throat as I drew my legs up. My dungarees were torn on the right knee; blood oozed against the scraped skin. I lowered my eyes and quickly raised them again. I felt sick and almost numb along my arms. It was dark all around me. I moved my shoulders under my shirt in an attempt to shake off the chill and ran my tongue, nervously over my dry lips. There was a persistent pounding in my ears. I could hear it, my father's voice. *Damn you ... goddam you.*

Suddenly the porch light came on. My mother stood silhouetted against the step at the back door, wiping her hands on an apron. I knew she must have seen, must have been watching. I couldn't face her. She called me. I pushed back against a branch. Below me, the inner tube twisted like a noose at the end of the rope. Othello, prowling now, leaped on the back fence, balanced there, momentarily, and dropped to the ground. The screen door banged shut. She left the

light on.

Sometime later I lowered myself slowly to the ground and limped across the yard. The cat skittered away through the grass, his eyes bright in the dark.

I had never thought the house could be so quiet. My mother put down the book that I knew she was not reading and glanced quickly at the clock set into the stern of a clipper ship on the kitchen sideboard beside the radio.

"Where have you been, David? The street is as quiet as a graveyard, I already got your father up into bed."

Her face was pale as she looked at me. She saw the torn pants and dried blood.

"It doesn't hurt anymore," I said.

"You're going to be the death of me one of these days!"

I winced when she put the iodine and a bandaid on my knee.

"Do you want some ginger ale?"

I shook my head and turned away.

My mother glanced down at her hands folded in her lap.

"David, there is something I should have told you before."

She smoothed her apron. "We won't be going out to Lethbridge this summer."

There was a knocking ache in my chest, a weight that pulled inside my throat.

"We got a phone call this morning. Your grandfather passed away." It seemed that my mother's voice came from a distance, across some gulf where the voice should not have carried.

"Your father was very upset. Do you understand, David? Sometimes things hurt people inside so they don't know what to do to make that hurt stop. They look for ways to make themselves forget."

I looked past her at the table and the pattern of sunflowers on the cracked oilcloth. For a moment I teetered in hesitation but it seemed that now I must go on. "You don't care! You didn't want to go. I heard you. You wanted granddad to die!" I stared at the dim, orange glow of the radio and shook my head. "I don't want to be it anymore. I don't want to be a cowboy."

My mother looked at me and there was a flicker of fear in her face which she quickly banished. "You're a big boy, David. You can be anything you want."

I realized suddenly that something in my life had ended. My mother was leading me across a bridge away from a place where cowboys ride off into the sunset. I was entering an uncertain territory where you had to know what you wanted to be when you grew up and your father could embarrass you in front of friends because of a pain he could not bear.

She reached out to hold me and I twisted away and rushed down the hall into the living room. Nowhere in the silent, dark house did anything move or stir, nor were there any lights, any movement in any of the houses I could see through the window after pulling back the lace curtains.

The terminal was deserted; there were no buses going anywhere. But the field was not empty: I closed my eyes tightly

and there they were, rearing up in the dark, hoofs thrashing the summer night, beating it down. I saw their eyes kindle with reddened fire as the wild horses leaped and plunged through the night sky, leaving me here as they surged away across an ever receding plain.

HIS BROTHER BENNY

Angry and tense, Martin watched the door of the weather-beaten shed. Beside him, his brother's small eyes darted through the crowd on the government wharf. His astonished mouth hung open and bubbles of saliva collected in the corners.

"MONSTER!" Benny bellowed. "MONSTER!"

His head hung to one side, too heavy for his thin neck to support. He jerked, awkwardly, up and down on spindly legs on the hot asphalt.

Two old ladies stared at him.

"Isn't it a shame," one of them said. "He can't be more than ten or twelve."

"He could be older than that, Moira. You can never really

tell with retarded kids."

Martin Driscoll glared at the red ribbon around the crown of the old lady's floppy, straw hat. Stupid old bags! He squinted through his glasses at the fat commissionaire picking his nose beside a stack of discarded tires near the heavy, scarred door. Mopping under his hat with a large, checkered handkerchief, the commissionaire strutted forward and signalled the next group to enter the darkened doorway of the shed.

A freak show! That's what this was. It reminded Martin of the Bill Lynch Shows that came to Halifax two or three times every summer when he was in grade school. Once, he slipped away from his mother who was trying to coax him onto a kiddie ride with Benny. Shouldering through the jostle and crush of the midway, he was swept in under a sign that said only: THE WORLD OF WONDER. Pressed in line on the sawdust floor of the sweltering tent between a couple of snickering sea-cadets, he peered through peepholes at pictures of tattooed Siamese Twins; an alligator-man; a horse only ten inches tall; and a smiling, naked dancer with a boa constrictor wrapped around her enormous breasts. When he wandered out onto the fair grounds, his mother and Benny were there. His brother was exploring the stain that spread down over the front of his pants. "He's wet himself again," His mother said. "I wanted you to take him somewhere!" Martin winced as if he had been suddenly slapped.

There was no admission charge here on the wharf. That,

he decided, was why there were so many freeloaders and thrill seekers with nothing better to do on a hot summer day. Whatever they had in there would probably be taken over to the Bedford Institute and dealt with properly by Fisheries authorities. He was employed for the summer as assistant to Dr. Philips, one of the senior marine biologists. He had worked hard all summer. But this morning when he heard the familiar, urgent voice calling across the office, everything crumbled around him like a sodden sandcastle.

"Marty! Finish!"

Benny was standing there at the door beside the Xerox machine. His head cocked like a bird, he listened and watched but hesitated to venture into unfamiliar territory. A shank of sandy hair drooped over his forehead. There was a line of freckles across his pale cheeks. His T-shirt was dirty and hung loosely over a pair of patched, khaki shorts. He was wearing tattered sneakers and there was a grimy bandaid over his left knee.

Sitting at his drafting table in the far corner Martin refused to look up again. Hunched over, staring at the drawing tacked to his board, he rehearsed the argument that he always had with his mother.

I don't want him showing up where I work!

You're ashamed of him. Just because he's in auxiliary class.

Your only brother you saved from drowning and you don't want him around!

It always came back to that. Why didn't Benny drown that

summer when he was five? Why couldn't he have been somewhere else when that big kid from across the lake suddenly appeared and reached down into the icy water to pull Benny back onto the sunbaked wharf? Martin had been afraid. When he carried Benny, white and trembling, up through the trees to their cabin, why did they think he was such a hero? Even Benny believed he had rescued him. Martin said nothing. But he didn't want his brother around to remind him that he was a fraud, a coward. And Benny was always there. Martin withdrew into himself, became shy and moody. He wanted to stay on the sidelines but Benny was there waiting, watching him. What did he want? In his brother's larger shadow Benny was stunted, slow, nakedly sensitive. Watching television brought tears when children or animals were threatened or in danger.

"Hurt! Gonna hurt them!"

"It's only a T.V. show, Benny. It's not real."

But he knew Benny's fear was as real as his own.

Exasperated he said to his mother, "I don't want him coming around where I work that's all. It's only a summer job but if I make a good impression"

"Impression! Your own flesh and blood. You are the one who should be ashamed,"

The sharp point of the pencil snapped between his fingers. Martin reached for an erasure and rubbed it quickly over the smudged drawing.

"How's it coming there?"

Martin looked up. "Fine, Dr. Philips." He tried cover-

ing the drawing with his arm as he reached for a fresh pencil. The container on his desk was empty.

"I'll need that piece for a presentation tomorrow morning." Dr. Philips took the pipe from his mouth and brushed some ash from the sleeve of his lab coat.

"Hey, Marty!" Heads turned toward the door.

Martin stared down at the lines, letters and figures that suddenly scrambled into hopeless confusion. "I should be through this afternoon," he said.

Dr. Philips, studying the pipe, returned it to his mouth, "Do you know that boy?"

Martin swallowed hard. *Go away, Benny. Please go away!* He stood there, watching Martin, and picked a scab on his elbow.

"He shouldn't be hanging around here," said Dr. Philips.

"I know. I'll tell him to go right now."

The lab coat disappeared down the corridor past the water cooler. Work in the office suddenly stopped as if, ten minutes before lunch, everyone had found a reason for distraction in the arrival of Benny. A secretary with a manila envelope lingered in the doorway of an office cubicle. Wes Hayes and Ed Newlove, shirtsleeves rolled up, straddled their stools. Jack Comeau, one of the salmon hatchery supervisors, sat with his fat thighs spread over the edge of a desk. He cracked his knuckles noisily as Benny lurched through the office.

"You Martin's brother?" Comeau said, winking at Martin.

"He never told us he had a brother."

Martin grabbed a fistful of pencils. At the window, traffic sounds drifted up from the street. A gray pigeon with matted feathers, cooing on the ledge, fluttered away as Martin, savagely, ground one pencil after another through the sharpener. With all of them watching, he thought, he would climb out and leap, screaming, to the pavement.

"What doin', Marty?"

"I'm busy, Benny! Can't you see that?" Conscious of everyone watching him, he held up the jagged stump of a yellow pencil. "Can't you see that I'm very busy?"

His brother gazed at him with a bemused expression as if Martin had just finished a funny story. Martin looked to see if his mother, wearing her pained and indignant expression, was standing behind his brother.

"Where's mom? Did she bring you down here?"

A look of painful concentration narrowed Benny's eyes.

"Did she tell you to come up here?"

"At store," Benny blurted. "Coming back after!"

Benny studied the floor as if what he wanted to say was written in the black and white tiles. "You take me! Mom said you take me!"

"Take you where!" Martin marched back to the drafting table.

"Sea monster!"

"There is no sea monster, Benny. It's some kind of stunt."

Martin let the pencils drop, emphatically, into the container on his desk.

"On the radio. The man said." A thin stream of saliva trickled from the corner of Benny's mouth.

"There-is-no-sea-monster," Martin said, slowly and carefully. "It's a joke!"

"Oh, I don't know about that." Jack Comeau removed a cigarette from his shirt pocket and tapped it lazily against the pack. All summer, whenever he came into the office, he was the main instigator in baiting Martin. "A Jap whaler picked up a mighty strange carcass in the Pacific a couple of months ago there," he said, placing the cigarette between his lips. "And don't forget ole Nessie over there in Scotland. Seems you never know what's going to turn up these days,"

Benny stared.

With a feeling of acute desolation, Martin looked at the unfinished drawing on his table.

"MONSTER!" Benny bellowed.

Wes and Ed exchanged grins.

Martin grabbed the lunch bag from his desk and glanced up at the clock.

"You watch out there now," Comeau said. "We wouldn't want a smart fella like you swallowed up by no sea-monsters."

Across the parking lot where the sun seared the roofs of cars, a solitary seagull squatted on top of a piling. Martin noticed grease stains on the brown paper bag from the bacon and tomato sandwiches. He wanted to sit in the shade on one of the benches in front of the Department of Fisheries building as he always did. He wanted to have a relaxing lunch

while the sandwiches were still fit to eat. Thanks to Benny he would have to work hard all afternoon at his desk. Harder than he had worked all summer. It was hot; his head began to throb.

He watched people emerge from the exit door at the other end of the long shed. A little boy, in shorts and sneakers, skipped along beside a stern, plump woman carrying a shopping bag. He waved his arms wide in her face. She cuffed him around the neck. The boy, sobbing loudly, half walked and half ran as she tugged him toward the street. Martin winced. He felt the sharp slap of the sun against his own neck.

"It's stupid hanging around here," Martin said, carefully lowering his voice. He glanced at his watch. "How about a milkshake over at Woolworth's, okay?"

"I wanna see! Mom said!" Benny's whine grated against Martin's ears. The old ladies were watching them again, shaking their heads. Suddenly, Martin wanted to hit him, shake him, pull him away. He stared at the old ladies until they turned away. Arching his back to get a look at the front of the line, he twisted around to gauge its length around the perimeter of the parking lot. A few more minutes, he thought and they would be there. Then they could leave. Without a scene.

The pressure against his shoulder knocked him forward, off balance. Startled, Martin turned around and stared at the serpent encircling the torch on the crest covering the front of the university, athletic jacket. Two more boys, in

baseball caps, pushed in beside him. Solid shoulders. Thick necks. The one slapping a tennis ball into a fielder's mitt turned his head and grinned at the people waiting.

"Pushin' in!" Benny yelled. He tugged at the arm of the big kid in the athletic jacket who was digging a sharp stick into the tarred boards around his feet.

"Whatsamatter, pipsqueak, you retarded or something."

"It's okay," Martin said, pulling Benny back by the shoulder. "We're almost at the front anyway."

Benny's eyes widened; his mouth trembled.

"You start bawling and that's it." Martin worked his fingers, nervously, around the bag.

"I hear they caught it in some fishing nets around Lunenburg," she said. "Do you think it's going to be scary?" The girl smiled as she flicked some hair away from her forehead. Martin noticed her before in the line and wondered where he had seen her before today.

He stared now at the outline of the brassiere against her thin, blue blouse. "I don't know," he said. She was very attractive. Where had he seen her? Yes. Dr. Philip's secretary. He remembered standing in front of her desk that day when he came for the job interview, his hands sweating. "I don't know what it is." He averted his eyes. The sun pressed hot against his neck and dug down, mercilessly, between his shoulder blades.

The boys made crude, smacking sounds. The commissionnaire, his hat tilted back, looked at the girl as a breeze caught

her skirt and pressed it back against her legs.

"Come on," the big kid with the stick called out. "Let's get this show on the road, eh?"

The commissionnaire twisted a toothpick back and forth between his thick lips. He signalled the two old ladies to join the next group entering the shed. They disappeared into the darkness that seemed to swallow them up like an enormous mouth. The commissionnaire sauntered back to take up his post outside the door. The brass buttons on his uniform pushed out against his bulging stomach.

"What's in there?" The girl smiled at him as she tilted her head to see where the old ladies had gone. "Is it scary?"

The commissionnaire removed the toothpick from between his teeth and winked at her. "He's a sight all right. You got a boyfriend to hold your hand?"

Martin could hear water sucking against the pilings under the wharf. The sun seemed to be slowly drowning him. Even behind closed eyelids it throbbed red and dark. His thoughts drifted with the heat. He was standing on another wharf. Benny bobbed and thrashed in the water beneath him. He was afraid. His mouth was dry. A stream of sweat trickled down between his shoulder blades. The hot pressure of the crowd pushed against his back. Voices beat inside his head. *Your own flesh and blood. A brave thing. Just because he's in auxiliary class. Save your brother from drowning. You're the one who should be ashamed.* Martin looked towards the darkened doorway. He could see nothing but he knew that something menacing was

waiting there.

The wharf seemed to sway under him as if it would break apart under the weight of the crowd. He could not resist the movement pushing from behind and pulling him forward like an undertow.

"Move it buddy, eh?"

"Marty!" Benny shifted from foot to foot beside him.

Martin thrust his hands out, desperately, in front of him, flailing at the air. He was falling into the dark, an almost total darkness that swallowed him. A subterranean grotto. Thin pencil lines of light through weathered wall-boards. Water dribbled down and trickled across the stone floor. Smells of salt water and kelp drifted through the damp, dense space. A small rectangle of light appeared at the end of the narrow passage. It was cold. Martin shivered.

"Stay close, Benny!" Martin sensed a gulf opening between them. Clutching the bag of sandwiches, he lunged to cross it.

In a holding tank something massive thrashed in the murky water that rose and fell. An enormous sucking sound like strangled breath.

"What is it!"

"Whaddya see?"

"It's fuckin' spooky in here!"

"Sonafabitch comes near me, he's gonna get this stick!"

The girl gasped, out of breath. Then suddenly she gave an exclamation of delight. "Look. It's just a big sea turtle!"

Martin's glasses were splotted with water. He couldn't

see clearly. He felt the shoulder jostle him against a rough, wooden railing covered with a thin, chicken wire.

"A fuckin' turtle, for crissake!" the voice over him said.

A huge, stony shell shifted in the water. The stiff paddle of the turtle's foot pushed out, beating an erratic rhythm against the side of the tank. A head, the size of a large coconut, appeared in a corner held, furtively, above the dark surface.

"It's hurt!" the girl said. "It's being hurt in there!"

Martin leaned forward. Benny, beside him, breathed heavily.

There were gashes in the green, woody hide like scars in a tree trunk made by an axe.

"Hurt, Marty!" There was an urgency in Benny's voice, almost a cry.

The word pricked Martin like a hook that began to tear into him. "They'll let it go later, Benny. It won't be hurt anymore. Come on, we've seen enough. It's getting late."

Other voices seemed to drown his own.

"Give it to him. Make him turn so we can see his head."

Benny twisted around frantically. "Stop, Marty! Make him stop!"

The stick was thrust down over the railing. Water splashed over the top of the tank. The heavy, scaly paddle-foot came out again, beating erratically. There was nowhere for it to go. Slipping against the slimy floor, as though

being pulled under by a treacherous current, Martin tried to find his voice in the enclosing space.

"You don't have to do that."

"Says who, buddy!" The stick, held against the big kid's jacket, jabbed again into the water.

Benny stared into the tank; his hand clutched the railing.

"Why don't you guys just mind your own business," the girl said.

The boys jostled against each other. "How'd you like a nice swim with Moby Dick here, sweetheart?"

She looked at Martin, an expression of appeal on her face.

They were all around him. Martin couldn't draw air into his lungs. He was suffocating. What did she expect him to do? He didn't bring the turtle in here; he wasn't bothering it. He didn't want to have anything to do with these punks.

The commissionnaire positioned himself, a ridiculously inadequate authority, into the retangle of light. "All right, let's move along down there, eh?"

The girl's expression changed to contempt as she glared at Martin. "You creeps got me all wet," she said, brushing at her skirt. Then, swinging around, her head held up, she moved quickly towards the exit.

"Let's split," the big kid said, thumbing his nose at Martin. "This place stinks anyway. So long, hero!"

Martin couldn't move. He saw only the hurt and confusion in Benny's face.

"You didn't do nothin'! You let him, Marty!" Benny's shrill voice suddenly beat against the wooden walls. Saliva collected at the corners of his mouth.

"Stop it!" Martin yelled, looking over his brother's head at more people entering the shed. "I never wanted to come in here in the first place!"

"You didn't do n-nothin'!"

"I said stop it!" A chill ran all through Martin, all over him, in long waves. His hand came up sharply and struck Benny across the face.

Benny stood there with his eyes filling with tears. He held his arms down rigidly at his sides, his thin body trembling. Martin flinched, his head throbbing with each beat of his heart.

"I didn't mean it. I'm sorry, Benny. I didn't" His voice trailed away as he held out his hands.

Benny pulled away, sobbing. "I don't n-need you ... anymore!"

Martin's chest closed. The darkness flooded into his eyes. He grabbed onto the wooden railing. The water beat, in short slapping strokes, against the sides of the holding tank as the turtle, trying to protect itself, shifted its massive shell.

"Benny!" Martin called. "Benny, wait!"

He struggled, gasping, as he reached out to his brother to save him from the confusion and fear in which he was drowning. But Benny, he realized, sinking back into the dark,

was already moving away from him towards the light.

FIRST SNOW

The first snow fell, miraculously, against the school all morning. He didn't think it was cold enough yet for it to stay - it was only the middle of November - but the big spinning flakes began to settle quickly against the wide, dirty windowledge. By recess the basketball court in the schoolyard would be covered. By lunchtime, if it got sticky, he and Arthur would be able to make snowballs on the way home.

Danny lingered longer than he should have at the window sharpening his two pencils. He felt warm and comfortable and safe, the way he did when his mother baked cookies and he perched on a chair at the kitchen window watching the wind

blow leaves around or rain rushing like a river down the glass. Now he saw snow clinging to the wires and the branches of the elm trees like wisps of cotton candy. The pavement in front of the public library across the street was as white as a fresh sheet of foolscap. Old man Cobb, the janitor, was already out scraping the walk in front of the main doors that he would have to keep clear all winter.

Danny wondered where all the earthworms went. During the Spring and Fall the rain made them crawl up out of the ground, whole wriggling armies of them, that were squashed underfoot on the sidewalk. Did they stay underground all the time now? He would have to ask Arthur at recess. Arthur knew all kinds of things: Indian war cries, gypsy curses, how to make a real igloo.

Soon after Arthur Aspen had transferred to St. Michaels' they met in the gym. Arthur had put his left leg upon the bleacher between them. He was a big boy with curly, red hair; there was a long scar below his knee.

"I'm new here," he said, swinging the leg back and forth. "My father was transferred. He's a lieutenant in the army. They held me back a whole year. I was in the sixth grade in St. Boniface. That's in Manitoba. What grade are you in?"

"Four." Danny looked to see if the gym teacher was watching. "You're not allowed to put your feet up on the seats," he said, trying to be helpful to a new boy who obviously didn't know the rules yet.

Arthur started to remove his foot. "Wanna see something?"

he asked excitedly.

"Sure."

"You're not squeamish are you?"

"What?"

"I better not show you. You look like you probably throw up all the time."

"No I don't!"

"Okay, okay. I guess I can show you then."

Arthur slowly began to remove his sock. "I dropped a fifty pound manhole cover on my foot two years ago," he said, matter-of-factly. "I was in the hospital for two whole weeks. Intensive care."

Danny stared at the sock, suddenly wanting to walk away.

"Just look at this!" Arthur peeled off the sock.

Danny looked.

"My father said it was my own fault for going where I had no business. But sometimes you have to try stuff or you'll never find out anything."

He wagged the small, pink-veined stump where his big toe should have been.

Danny felt sick. He glanced away and watched a boy struggling across the parallel bars.

"It doesn't bother me or anything," said Arthur. "But I want to go to the States soon as I can and join the Marines and I don't know if they take guys with only nine toes."

Danny's eyes widened.

"Hey, you're pretty cool," Arthur said. "I show this to some guys and right away they practically throw up all over the place."

They discovered that they lived in the same neighbourhood. Arthur had become more than his best friend; they were blood brothers. Late one Saturday afternoon they had wandered home from the Odeon theatre where they had sat twice through *BROKEN ARROW*. Arthur had taken his penknife from where he had hidden it under the front porch because his mother said he was too young to have a real knife.

Danny closed his eyes tightly when Arthur drew the thin blade across the back of his own wrist and a little blood oozed against the skin.

"Now it's your turn," he had said, wiping the knife clean on his shirt.

Danny jerked his arm away. "Can't we just pretend?"

"You wanna be real blood brothers like in the movie or don't you? Are you scared? 'Cause I'm not scared of anything. I can ask Keith. I can go down to his house right now and ask him if you're too scared!"

Danny had no real brother and Arthur was the best friend he had ever had. They had something together, something the other boys didn't have and he felt it made them responsible for each other. Danny slowly held out his rigid right arm. But he hardly felt the prick of the knife. They had pressed their arms together to get the blood mixed and Arthur said some strange Indian words. Danny saw a little curled

smile shaping itself in the lower half of Arthur's face. He couldn't phrase it for himself, but for the first time in his life he had a conscious feeling of confidence and pride in himself.

"When Danny Russell finishes daydreaming at the window," Miss Richardson said, "and can find his way back to his own seat I'm sure he can enlighten the class as to the principal exports of India."

There was snickering from the last row of desks.

"Simmer down, 4C!" Miss Richardson closed her sweater over her breasts. The scroll-like map above the blackboard was unrolled and her pointer rested on the larger, blue spot, like an inkstain, that had INDIA written across it.

He liked Miss Richardson; she was his favourite teacher. She often chose him to run messages and to copy things on the board when she was busy with her class register. He didn't like Miss Brewster, the principal. She had come into the class one morning and, after explaining what an honour it was to serve in the Church, had ordered him and four others to report to Father Hennessey at lunchtime to become altar boys. Danny had been pushed down in the courtyard behind the rectory and his head started to bleed. Father Hennessey drove him to the hospital in his big black car. They gave him seven stitches.

and a strawberry sucker. "You're a brave little trooper," Father Hennessey had said before taking him home.

Although he had never been strapped, he didn't like Mr. Duggan, the vice-principal, who strapped boys until they cried. One day at recess, Morrison, who was in Mr. Duggan's grade six and had been strapped many times, announced that Miss Richardson had big knockers. The other boys laughed and he had laughed too, thinking of the big brass knocker on the door of the rectory. When Miss Mundy, who was always forgetting things, answered it she said, even if he wasn't there, that Father Hennessey, bless his soul, could not be disturbed.

"You know why Miss Richardson takes a day off almost every month?" Morrison continued. "'Cause she gets the curse!"

He looked at Danny and grinned.

"What curse is that, Morrison?" asked Keith. He took out his recess apple and bit into it down to the core.

"It's something women get all the time, stupid! How about a piece of that apple?"

"You're full of baloney, Morrison!" Arthur said, looking through the wire fence into the girl's yard. "Helen of Troy put a spell on all these Greek guys and they started fighting and killing each other because she was so good looking."

Joey, who was always reading said, "My mother told my big sister it's because of Adam and Eve in the Bible."

"What's that 'sposed to mean?" Danny had asked, confused.

Morrison pushed him. "Don't worry, Russell. You'll never

get the curse."

Arthur grabbed Morrison in a headlock.

"Give up?"

Morrison grunted and squirmed and kicked, trying to throw him off.

"Let go, Aspen!"

"Give up?"

"You just wait, Aspen!"

The bell rang and Arthur let go.

Danny could not find Arthur at recess. As soon as the noon bell sounded he joined the thunder of boots on the stairs.

"Line up smartly, 4C," said Miss Richardson, pacing back and forth with her arms folded in front of her. If she were not so busy and he were not so shy, Danny told himself, he would tell her he was glad she had big knockers and that he hoped she would never get the curse again.

The stairs on either side of the school formed a V that met in the lower corridor before the main doors. Miss Brewster stood stiffly beside the phonograph under the portrait of the Queen and a drooping Union Jack as if the snow had hardened something inside her. Near her, moving back and forth on his heels, was Mr. Duggan.

Danny tried to stuff his speller into his jacket pocket. It wouldn't fit so he pushed it up under his arm. He could smell damp coats and rubber overshoes. Where was Arthur?

He wanted to get outside, sink his bare hands down again into the cold tingling snow. A window was open somewhere; the cold air lifted against his face.

Keith nudged him from behind. "Hey," he said. "A bunch of us are going up to Citadel Hill after school to make a fort. Don't forget your toboggan."

They grinned at each other thinking about it.

A boy beside Keith leaned over and whispered loudly, "I got this special kind of wax that's gonna make my toboggan the fastest you ever seen."

"My toboggan is made of aluminum," said Keith. "Not clunky old wood like yours. It's the fastest toboggan you can get."

"Quiet up there! No talking! Face front!" In the chill silence that followed Mr. Duggan's voice, the only sound was the jingling bracelets on Miss Brewster's arms.

"As everyone is aware," she suddenly said, her eyes darting left and right at the boys crowded together on the narrow stairs, "we're having our first snowfall. Before any boy gets over rambunctious I want to warn him right now that I expressly forbid the throwing of snowballs on school property or anywhere in the vicinity of this building."

The voice stopped. The boys stood rigid and stared straight ahead.

"Last year we had a boy who lost an eye in a snowball fight. Isn't that correct, Mr. Duggan?"

The vice-principal nodded, looking around for talkers.

"If I catch any St. Michaels' boy throwing snowballs that boy will be severely strapped."

When the double doors were opened, a rush of cold air caught at Miss Brewster's tweed skirt. She turned on the scratchy phonograph and the blaring music of a marching band sent the boys, in twos, along Grafton Street. Danny made dinosaur tracks, dragging his feet behind him and tried to gulp down the big, wet flakes that melted against his face. Snow fine as salt drifted off the tops of the sidewalk snowbanks, spiralling up and over the intersection where a policeman raised his white paw, halting traffic to let the boys cross.

Danny breathed deeply and broke into a run across the street. Arthur leaped up from behind and cuffed him around the shoulder.

"Whaddya say, blood brother?"

Together they trudged up the walk in front of the library. Danny stopped to examine a large footprint.

"Look at that, Arthur. An abominable snowman must have been through here."

Morrison came up, kicking at the snow.

"There must be over two feet," Danny said, twisting around.

"It's almost up to my knees."

"This is nothing," said Arthur, pulling off his cap and shaking his curly red hair. "It's going to keep on snowing until the whole world is buried. Everybody will have to live underground in cities made of ice and wear special suits

so they won't freeze to death." He swung his scarf around his head like a banner.

"Hey, Arthur," Danny said. "Where do all the worms go in the winter?"

"They go south, stupid," said Morrison. "Like all the friggin' birds."

He poked at the book under Danny's arm. "What have you got there, squirt?"

"We got a spelling test this afternoon."

"Well why aren't you studyin', Einstein." Morrison nudged the book and it dropped into the snow.

After Danny picked it up, Arthur hurled himself at Morrison. They wrestled backwards and forwards until Arthur threw Morrison on his back in the snow. Then he sat on Morrison's chest, pinning his arms to the ground.

"Come on, Aspen, I'm getting all wet."

Arthur jumped up and down on his chest.

"Hey, get off, Aspen, you bastard. You're hurting!"

Arthur sprang to his feet with a fistful of snow, forming it into a hard round ball between his mittened hands.

"Don't Arthur!" Danny shouted. "Miss Brewster says we can't throw snowballs!"

"You're a little suck, Russell," said Morrison, brushing snow from his jacket.

Arthur tossed the snowball into the air above his head, catching it as it dropped. "I'll put a gypsy curse on her," he said. "I'll make horns grow out of her head like a moose!"

Besides, she can't see us way over here anyway."

"I bet you can't bean that flagpole!" Morrison tried to slide with his arms out to keep his balance.

"Arthur!" Danny yelled. "She's probably watching through the window right now!"

Arthur looked at him as he squeezed the snowball hard in his hands.

"You chicken," Morrison said. "You're just as scared as Russell."

"I'm not scared," Arthur protested.

Danny glanced at the janitor's shovel leaning against the library's glass doors and across at the brick school with the main doors closed and the heavy snow settled on the high windowledges. The shouting of the other boys and the movement of traffic down Spring Garden Road suddenly diminished and they were all alone now in the silence and whiteness of the snow.

Danny's eyes swept over the tops of the elm trees and down through the crescent of blue sky. He saw a white snowball suddenly rising and spinning in an arc above his head over the walk. His breath rose and fell sharply as the snowball floated by and froze at the back of his throat when the snowball seemed to stop in the air before its downward, spiralling plunge. It struck the base of the flagpole, sending out a shower of snowflakes.

"Not bad," said Morrison, grudgingly.

"I had two years pitching little league in St. Boniface."

"Big friggin' deal." As if Arthur's snowball had been a signal, Morrison quickly made his own and threw it at him.

The snowball was high and wide and Arthur jumped for it, knocking it down. Morrison's second snowball dropped between Danny's feet.

"Get him, Danny!" yelled Arthur.

He scooped it up and drew his arm back. Morrison tried to dodge out of the way but the snowball caught him on the right shoulder.

"Great shot, blood brother," cried Arthur, leaping commando-style over a snowbank in front of the library.

"You're in for it now, pipsqueak!" said Morrison.

Arthur's sudden laughter made Danny feel happy. The air was soon filled with flying snowballs. Danny's clothes seemed lighter and he felt how fresh and whole his body was as he bent to the snow, scooped it up and threw in one swift, effortless motion. The sweat against his skin was a cool moisture, lubricating his skin like oil.

"Race you guys!" Arthur suddenly yelled and Danny smiled to himself as he ran beside Arthur holding a snowball lightly in his hands, his legs pumping high. He felt the wind rushing through his damp hair, wonderfully cool behind his ears and at the nape of his neck.

The three of them ran with their mouths open and their hearts pounding; running and stumbling through the snow, away from the school. They did not look back but ran and ran through the streets until the blood pounded in their temples and their

throats were dry and aching and they could not run anymore.

That afternoon the knocking and the opening of the door were simultaneous.

Danny looked up quickly from his scribbler and the long division problems he couldn't finish. He had been thinking about hitting Morrison with that snowball and Arthur saying it was a great shot and about going up to Citadel Hill after school with the gang to make a fort. The feeling of confidence and pride had come back and settled inside him like the snow on the windowledge.

"The class need not stand," Miss Brewster said, adjusting the cuffs of her blouse.

Danny wondered why the principal had come all the way up to his classroom. Did she want boys now to join the church choir or the Scouts?

"Something extremely serious has come to my attention, Miss Richardson."

Miss Richardson, who had been drawing a map of Europe on the blackboard, replaced a piece of coloured chalk on the ledge.

"Several boys in this school seem to have either extremely short memories or else take a peculiar delight in flagrant acts of disobedience."

Miss Richardson brushed nervously at the chalkdust on her

fingertips.

"This noon I observed three St. Michaels' boys throwing snowballs."

There was a long silence.

Danny stared at the initials scratched into his desk beside his pencil case.

"If any boy here was throwing snowballs I want him to own up to it immediately."

Danny shut his eyes tightly and tried not only to shut out the light and the classroom but his own existence too.

"There will be dire consequences if those boys do not own up. That's all I want to say!" Miss Brewster glared at the class and moved towards the door.

"What is it, Danny?" asked Miss Richardson.

He stood beside his desk, moving his fingers down the spine of his scribbler.

"I'm very surprised at you, Danny Russell," Miss Richardson said, her voice coming from far away.

There was a sudden pounding in his chest.

"You're an altar boy, aren't you?" Miss Brewster nodded slowly as if something had been confirmed for her. "And what do you think Father Hennessey would say about one of his boys throwing snowballs on the street when he was expressly told not to?"

Danny stared at the gold maple leaf brooch on the front of the principal's blouse and then looked down at the floor.

"Well I can tell you, young man, that he would be

extremely disappointed. Come with me!"

As he stood at the front of Mr. Duggan's grade six, Danny looked at the top left-hand drawer of his desk where teachers kept their straps. He had never been strapped; he did not want to be strapped by the vice-principal. He did not want to cry.

"I did recognize one of those boys, Mr. Duggan," said Miss Brewster, surveying the silent rows. "I'm afraid he is one of your students."

Danny did not look at Morrison. He kept his eyes focused on the bulletin board at the back of the room.

"Come on then," the vice-principal said, raising his voice and glancing at his watch. "I'll give him just ten seconds."

Silence.

Then, slowly, Morrison stood up.

"Get up here!" Mr. Duggan slapped a steel edged ruler against his open palm. "We've had our little difficulties before, haven't we, Morrison? You're a bit of a troublemaker aren't you?"

He turned to the principal, tucking his tie inside his jacket. "Is there anything you might need me for, Miss Brewster?" He stroked his thinning gray hair with the flat of his hand.

"That will not be necessary, Mr. Duggan. I'm sorry to have disturbed your class."

Out in the hall again, the principal looked coldly at them. A boy coming out of the nurse's office looked quickly and hurried past them down the corridor. It had turned gusty

and snow was swirling against the windows.

"I've had just about enough for one day," she finally said. "Tell me who that other boy was. Now!"

Their heads were bowed. Danny studied the scuffed toe of his shoe. He knew that he was going to be strapped but Arthur could get off. He wouldn't tell on Arthur; they were blood brothers.

"Tell me right this minute who that other boy is!" She jabbed Danny on the shoulder. "Do you know that other boy?"

"It was Arthur Aspen, Miss," Morrison blurted out, jerking his head up and pushing his hands into his pockets. "Arthur Aspen was with us too. He threw the first snowball. Didn't he!"

Danny said nothing. His mouth was dry; his hands were sweating at his sides. He was beginning to tremble.

"All right," Miss Brewster said to Morrison. "You go and get him and bring him to my office immediately!"

Turning back down the stairs, the movement of the tweed skirt and her bracelets seemed to scratch at the silence. There was the strong smell of floor wax mingled with that of rubber boots and damp coats from the cloakrooms that lined the corridors. Whorls of dust were visible between the ribs of the radiators. Through the empty, lower hall, Danny could hear Miss Brophy's grade seven singing out Latin verbs and Mr. Hunter marching his class through the multiplication tables.

In the principal's office, a small dim room at the end of the corridor, Danny waited. He did not want to be strapped.

But he hadn't told on Arthur; he would never do anything like that. Did Arthur know that he would never tell? The black second hand was sweeping around the face of the clock above the bookcase. In an eternity twenty minutes from now the three o'clock dismissal bell would ring.

Arthur came in followed by Morrison who stood back at the door. Miss Brewster stared at them.

"Stand up straight and get those hands out of your pockets," she said to Morrison. She carefully examined a paperweight on her desk as if it would reveal some profound truth. "I realize that you are relatively new here," she said, studying Arthur, "but your behaviour is inexcusable!"

Morrison waited, a frightened look on his face.

Tears formed at the back of Danny's eyes. He could not look at Arthur; he didn't want Arthur to see him cry. "I didn't tell on you," he suddenly blurted out, shaking his head. "I didn't say anything, Arthur!" His voice broke off under the principal's stern, unrelenting stare.

"That'll be enough," she said. "I didn't give anyone permission"

"It's okay, Danny," said Arthur. "I know you didn't."

"I said silence!"

Arthur stood, looking at a silver volleyball trophy beside the globe on top of a green filing cabinet. He shrugged. "It was only a few snowballs," he said. "Nobody got hurt or anything."

"That has nothing to do with it. Discipline will be

"maintained in this school!" Miss Brewster took her strap from the top drawer and placed it on a pile of papers. Danny looked at it, his face quivering but no tears.

"I threw most of them," said Arthur. "I told those guys it was okay."

"Oh you did, did you!" Miss Brewster picked up the strap and held it at her side.

"All right," she said. "You, Russell and Morrison, can go back to your classrooms now."

Danny waited looking, helplessly, at Arthur.

"I said go back to your classroom, Russell!"

He slowly followed Morrison down the corridor past the portrait of the Queen and the shroud-like folds of the Union Jack. Morrison hurried ahead up the stairs without looking back. Danny stood motionless looking in the direction of the windows. It wasn't fair; Arthur was right. It was only a few lousy snowballs. Would Arthur cry? He could hear the firm, hard strokes of the strap, harder than he had ever heard before. One. Two. Three. Four. He saw the whorls of snow climbing against the high windows and his heart pounded wildly, looking at it. He turned and ran up the hollow stairs away from the snow and the sound of the strap, sobbing at last.

FOREIGNERS

Pressed together in the stifling subway going out to Jamaica Plain, my father said it wasn't his damn fault we waited until the last day.

"We'll take her out somewhere nice to eat." He nodded past my mother at the sooty suburbs of Boston rushing by the windows. "I'll explain everything, the whole situation to her." His words were lost in the screech of the wheels as the train stopped at a station to take on and discharge passengers.

My face and back burned from Revere Beach. The T-shirt my mother made me put on for Aunt Mandy showing a Mountie on horseback with CANADA underneath in large red letters, stuck

to my skin.

"Stop fidgeting, Larry," my mother said, full of agitation now that we had to face what could no longer be avoided. "Stand still and you won't perspire so much."

A couple of kids, a guy and a girl carrying rolled up towels, swayed in the aisle near me. They moved so confidently, so easily, like the people on the streets and at the beach through some magic element that made my own movements seem awkward and alien. When the girl laughed suddenly, tossing her hair back and playfully brushed his hand away from around her waist, my own sweating hand squeezed the yoyo I had slipped into the pocket of my shorts back at the hotel. I was different, a prisoner of my twelve year old body. I ached to be an American, to share the special space in which they moved.

"You told her on the phone what time we were coming out, didn't you?" my father asked.

"I don't think she understood two words I said. You should've talked to her. She's your relation."

My mother looked, disgustedly, at the dirt, the newspapers and candy wrappers around her seat. She seemed tense and tired. While this past week had filled me with excitement, it had, inexplicably, drained her.

"This whole trip," she said, "was a mistake."

The mistake, as she called it, might never have been made if a letter from a woman named Hannah Burchell had not arrived just after school closed in June. She was the landlady

in the building where Aunt Mandy had been living for almost twenty years. She informed us in a spidery, almost indecipherable handwriting, that something had to be done. At seventy-eight and living alone since her husband Burt had died, Aunt Mandy seemed to be tottering on the uncertain edge of senility. She left scraps for the scores of birds that fouled the fire escape; she littered the hallways with beer cans. When she wasn't cursing the Blacks and that nice Mrs. Perez on the fourth floor for being foreigners, she was railing against the communists she claimed riddled the Eisenhower administration. None of the other tenants wanted it on their heads if she got stabbed some night coming home with her beer or had a stroke going up and down all those stairs to her flat on the top floor. The only family she has left in the world, we were reminded, should want to do something about her.

"I don't know what we are going to do," my mother said, staring at the beads of water streaming down the windows of the Greyhound that, a week ago, had carried us down the brown back of New Brunswick and into Maine and Massachusetts where it was greener. My mother was superstitious. The rain could only signal something inevitable and foreboding.

"Your father says that we should arrange for her to come back to Fredericton." Her face had seemed to grow pale in the shadows that enclosed the bus.

Many years ago Aunt Mandy had married an American and gone with him to the States. It was a family scandal. Everyone said that he was no good. His name was Burtrand Wheeler.

He was a butcher. He drank and was always away hunting somewhere in the Maine woods. After his death the only communication we had with Aunt Mandy was the Christmas parcel that always arrived containing coarse woolen socks and scarves.

"We offered to bring her home after the funeral," my mother said, tired and drained by duty. "But she's your father's side of the family and those MacArdles are as hard-headed as they come."

Aunt Mandy lived on a street of ancient brick the colour of flowerpots squeezed between the concrete and steel girders of the Elevated tracks. The noon sun glared down on the pavement and the parked cars along the street. Passing a furniture store, I noticed a baseball game on the big TV set in the window. Men in undershirts lounged on fire escapes. Black kids with soaking underpants clinging to their skin leaped through the spray of a fire hydrant. Strange, foreign voices called out shouts and curses.

I thought I never wanted to go home again. Now I was not so certain. I had thought about her, dreamed about her until she was as large as a legend. But now that we were almost there, I didn't want to see Aunt Mandy.

Hannah Burchell came to the door and led us up the dark stairs. "The old girl ain't been out in days," she said. Inescapably, there was a rancid smell clinging to the old paint, the ceiling plaster.

"We should have come out sooner," my mother said, clutching the bannister and turning away from my father. "But you had to see all your ball games."

My father did not reply.

The woman's gray hair was caught in a tight net. She seemed to have no teeth. "Ain't too hot for you is it?" she said, glancing down at me. "You people must be more used to the cold."

Aunt Mandy was sitting in a big stuffed armchair. Age had shrivelled her into the appearance of a dowager queen or an old crone in a fairy tale. In preparation for going out, a blue, velvet hat with a hatpin and a long drooping feather was perched on top of her head. Tufts of white hair stuck out underneath. She had a long nose and Coke-bottle glasses that made her eyes seem twice as large as they should be. She was wearing a cotton dress covered with little pink flowers and brown laced shoes from which bunches of skin spilled over like dough in a breadpan.

I was shown her elephant collection. The pieces, all various sizes and made of polished glass and ebony, shook on a sidetable as the subway clattered by the windows. I turned away when she kissed me on the cheek. She smiled and called me Lawrence and said I reminded her of her husband.

My mother fingered a loose thread on the arm of the sofa. There was a picture of a short, stocky man in a white apron standing on the sidewalk in front of a window in which carcasses were hanging from hooks.

"That's Burt there," Aunt Mandy said. "Even after all these years I still expect to see Burt coming through that door with that hunting cap on and a headful of stories to tell." She shook her head and gave a short wheezing cough.

My father cleared his throat.

"I've still got my health," said Aunt Mandy, refusing his help in getting on her coat.

"Knock on wood," my mother said.

Outside, I took out my yoyo and whipped it in an arc towards the sidewalk. My mother told me to put it away before I hit someone. I knew Hannah Burchell must have been watching. There was a ROOM FOR RENT sign in the front door. Aunt Mandy said that if Hannah knew what she was doing and one of those coloured people came around she would put a coat in a closet and tell them it's already rented. My mother looked shocked as my father steered Aunt Mandy towards the subway.

We went back downtown and took her to a Howard Johnson's, and sat in a safe corner beside a hatrack and a pot containing an enormous plastic fern. The meal was filled with awkward silences. We might all have been strangers forced to sit at the same table in the crowded restaurant. When Aunt Mandy suddenly jabbed a fork in the direction of my plate, I pulled back, startled.

"How much is that frankfurter?" she demanded.

I looked down at the limp hot dog and the few, overcooked French fries.

"I know a place where you can get a frankfurter for ten

cents, Lawrence!"

She lifted her head defiantly, challenging anyone in the restaurant to contradict her.

I tried to avoid staring at her magnified eyes darting behind those thick glasses and the thread-like hairs sprouting from a mole on her chin. Sucking Coke up through my straw, I picked at the scab on my knee under the table where my mother couldn't see.

On the street, the subway rumbled under the grates on the hot sidewalk. My father stood in front of a liquor store next to a Fanny Farmer, studying the labels on a pyramid of bottles.

Across from us there was a park and a playground. Children scrambled on and off the swings and the plastic animals. Pigeons pecked in the gravel; couples strolled under the shade of the large trees or sprawled on the grass. Women with shopping bags and nowhere to go carefully checked the benches for bird droppings before sitting down.

My father was nervous. All through lunch he had wanted to say something to Aunt Mandy but couldn't get it out. I knew he'd rather have a look inside this liquor store. My mother wanted another chance at Filene's Bargain Basement down the street before we went home the next day. They were wondering what to do with me and Aunt Mandy. They really didn't want to leave me alone with her either.

"Well, what does everyone want to do?" my father said, expansively.

Aunt Mandy was looking across at the park. "That's Boston Common, Lawrence. They have the Swan Boats over there. Would you like a ride on the Swan Boats?"

Dad told us not to go anywhere, to wait right there by the playground until they got back. I thought we would be run over before we could make our way through the traffic. There were a couple of toddlers squabbling over a plastic pail in a sandbox. Aunt Mandy tottered off down the path a little way and glanced around suspiciously. That funny feather and the coat hanging like useless wings made her look like a strange, tropical bird that had fallen out of one of the trees and forgotten how to get back up. I didn't know what to say, what was I doing with her here.

"Where is this place you can get a hot dog for only ten cents?"

She had those intense eyes trained on me like a teacher trying to figure out who was talking at the back of a classroom. I searched for the word that would make me understood.

"Frankfurter! The ten cent ones."

"Oh, that's nowhere around here. You have to take the Elevated."

There was a fountain shooting columns of rainbow-coloured spray into the still air. Around it people took pictures of the flowerbeds, the squirrels and ducks. Through the trees I could see a narrow bridge over a pond and white, carved swans gliding over the water.

I had the yoyo out again and she was looking at it as

if it were an old doorknob, something I picked up and should throw away.

"It cost \$1.49!" I said. "This is real gold paint on both sides. I'm going in a contest when I get home."

To show her, I did "around the world" and "rock the cradle."

Her head bobbed back.

"I can do 'walk the doggie' and lots of other stuff but not on this gravel."

She stood there as stiff as one of the statues.

"If we can't go on the Swan Boats, how about an ice pop, Lawrence?" There was an ice cream vendor beside a bandstand some distance away through the trees.

"Dad says we've got to wait here."

"Well, I'm not standing around in this heat. You wait if you want. But don't have anything to say to anyone until I get back."

She started to move off along the path. The pigeons scattered around her and the feather fluttered on top of her head. An old tramp eyed her lazily, then went back to digging in a battered garbage can for what he could stuff into his pockets. I watched her go, snapping the yoyo back and forth.

They were around me, settling like the pigeons, before I knew they were there.

"Hey, what you got there, boy!"

The yoyo went limp on the end of its string and struck against the gravel. The bigger of the two moved in, bringing the heat closer to my face. He was black and big, maybe fourteen or fifteen, wearing a Red Sox cap pulled down towards his eyes that flickered white under the brim. His buddy, with no shirt and a silver chain around his neck and dirty, paint-spattered jeans, potted pigeons with bits of gravel, scattering them up onto the grass.

"You don't know nothin' 'bout workin' that there yoyo."

I was winding it up, clumsily, blinking into the big guy's face. He moved lightly on his sneakers, working his shoulders inside a striped polo shirt. The other one, skinny, with bones sticking out and pimples all over his face, let his eyes slide over my T-shirt.

"Where's that place! That where they got all them Eskimos. You one of them? Live inside an icebox. You live inside an icebox?"

My mouth felt dry and thick as if it were full of peanut butter that wouldn't go down. I looked at the scuffed toe of my shoe, digging it into the dirt under the gravel. Dig down far enough and maybe I could get away! My hand was sweating around the yoyo. I edged it closer to my pocket, watching the path, wishing my father would come back.

"Whatsamatter! Can't you say nothin'!"

"Lemme see that yoyo. Show you somethin'!"

Pimples sprawled on a bench with his legs straight out in front of him. He hooked his arms along the back of the

bench and gazed up into a tree. "Eskimos don't know nothin'," he said after a while. "Can't even keep themselves warm in them iceboxes. Ain't that right, Yoyo?"

A girl in bright yellow shorts went by pushing a baby stroller. Pimples didn't move as she circled around out of his way. Rolling his eyes, he followed her swaying hips down the path.

"Oh, Mama," he called, snapping his fingers. "I do love that watermelon!"

There was a man on a bench with a bag of peanuts that he was scattering to the pigeons. Close enough to call out to. "Mister! Hey Mister?" I couldn't find my voice; my throat had closed. I looked away, thinking that maybe I should just run. The big one moved up on his toes, flexed his arms and sank an imaginary basket.

"Didja see that! Twenty footer right off the backboards! Man, I am s-so cool!"

There was nowhere to go. I was like one of those little kids in the schoolyard unlucky enough to have a recess apple or a stack of hockey cards that some big kid wanted. If you didn't give it to him, he'd punch you and take it anyway. My face was burning.

"Lemme see it."

"It's mine!" I blurted out. "I bought it with my own money."

"Man, I want one I don't need no money. I just walk in and take it."

He was studying me, sly, grinning, knowing he was going to get what he wanted because there was no one here to stop him. I could feel his warm breath. His hand was almost touching the front of my T-shirt.

"Leave that boy alone!" The sudden shrill voice could have been one of the birds, disturbed on its branch and announcing its displeasure.

The big guy pulled away as if someone had given him a shove. Pimples' eyes flickered wide. He leaned forward on the bench. "This your Mama? She an Eskimo too?"

"Don't you call me Mama!"

Aunt Mandy was standing there, the feather trembling on her hat, her hands clutching two dripping, vanilla ice cream cones.

"You need any help eatin' them cones, Mama, you just say so."

Why didn't she stay away, I thought, panic scooping out a hole in my stomach. She was an eccentric old woman as foreign and helpless as I was.

I realized now that they must have knives. I had seen this often enough in the movies. That grin would grow on the big guy's face until he brought his hand out suddenly with the blade. Aunt Mandy would collapse in a heap on the gravel, holding on where the knife went in while they ran away and flies came to buzz around the dropped cones. I had never seen anyone dead before. I was frightened. My hand came up, holding the yoyo. I wanted to give it to them now to make them go

away.

"I'll box your ears!" Aunt Mandy said.

"Oh, Mama, I'm scared. I'm so scared."

"I'll get a cop after you two!" Her mouth twitched with the effort to speak. Her face was red and the cones trembled in her hands.

"Relax, Mama. We ain't gonna do nothin'!" The grin slid off the big kid's face. He tugged the cap down. Pimples stuffed his hands into his jeans, eyes shifting down the path, looking for an opening behind us.

They were giving up. Aunt Mandy was standing there between them and me, holding those cones like two clubs. I wanted to rush in under the wings of her coat, press myself tightly against her.

"You hold onto that yoyo," the big kid said. "Don't let anyone go messin' with it!"

They swaggered off along the path, kicking at the gravel and scattering the pigeons that sprang out of their way.

"Put that away in your pocket, Lawrence. Here, eat this before it melts away to nothing."

Aunt Mandy held out one of the cones. I was watching the black kids stroll over towards the fountain, looking for a safer place to settle, and lost them in the trees around the pond.

"Don't bother with boys like that, Lawrence. They're only looking for trouble."

I took a tentative lick of the ice cream.

"Burt always said that a person has to look out for himself. There's no one can do that for you."

I nodded slowly, thinking about the picture of the stocky man in the white apron beside the miniature elephant collection; this old woman and the letter that had brought us here. Unable to keep it back any longer, I told her that I knew she was born in Fredericton, the same as I was, that she was a MacArdle on my father's side of the family, hard-headed as they come, and that we were here to take her home.

Aunt Mandy, astonished, stared at me. She took out a Kleenex and dabbed it against the corners of my mouth. Her nose arched into the air as if she were measuring the strength of something carried in the breeze that had begun to move the distant tops of the trees:

"This has been my home for a long time," she finally said. "I guess it always will be. Burt and I came here from Canada a long time before you were born. He was in the war."

"Was he killed in the war?"

She balled up the Kleenex in her hand. "No. It was peace that killed Burt. He always had to be on the go, always doing something. He died in a hunting accident. Now finish your ice cream, Lawrence."

"But aren't you a foreigner too?"

"A foreigner?" she said, giving a short, wheezing laugh and patting my arm. "I'm as American as Eisenhower himself."

I considered the things she told me, sensing their strangeness, their disarray. She touched my hair with her hand.

Together we curled our tongues around the cold, sweet softness of the cones.

Down the path past the playground I could see my parents coming back for us. My father's new straw hat with a polka dotted band and a bottle in a bag under his arm. My mother, exhausted by the heat and clutching a package, seemed distracted.

Sitting on the bench beside Aunt Mandy, working the cone around my mouth, they became the foreigners, like the tourists taking pictures of the flowers and squirrels. Aunt Mandy, I knew, would scatter them too like those black kids. I was happy, happier than I had been all week. For a moment, Aunt Mandy had made a space for the two of us there in the park. She had pulled some of the heat out of the air, the trees, the playground and the pond with the Swan Boats and sent it down cool inside me like the ice cream and the good feeling of the yoyo in my pocket.

THE JOB

The bottle of sherry slipped from his hand as he lifted it from the case. It struck the side of the bin and smashed against the floor.

Tony Donato, running a comb through his long, black hair, shook his head decisively. Jackie Cogan leaned over his cash register and grinned.

"You're gonna get an ear full now, Professor," Cogan said as he unwrapped a role of nickels and emptied them into the till. "One thing that burns up the Captain more than anything around here is breakage."

Greg pushed the carton away from the pool forming around his feet and brushed, hopelessly, at the damp stains on his shirt and trousers. When he looked up again Frank Kelly was standing over him with a mop.

"Come on, son," Kelly said. "We better get this cleaned up quick."

Mulcahy, the manager, was already hovering in the passage between the banks of shelves that led back into the stockroom. His sharp, severe jaw jutted forward prominently.

"What the hell are you doin', Charlie!"

They always called him by his father's name since that first day last week when Mulcahy had introduced him as "Charlie Nelson's boy." Standing awkwardly, he had seen reflected in the plateglass window a nervous young man with dark eyes and neatly combed hair. He had wanted to pull off the necktie and suit jacket that made him seem so out of place. He had felt the older men appraising him and finding only shortcomings.

"Is this Charlie's kid!"

"Are you really Charlie Nelson's boy?"

His father worked in a night store in another part of the city. Summer jobs were hard to find but his father had gotten this one for Greg.

They gave him a hard time from that first day, needling him about his neat appearance and the absence of four letter words in his vocabulary. They ordered him to go down to the corner store for soft drinks and sent him on searches through the stockroom for obscure wines that didn't really exist.

He had wanted to quit right away. But he knew that he couldn't. When he was in high school his father had landed a part time job for him as a busboy in a restaurant run by an old navy buddy. Greg had refused to go back after the first weekend. But worse than the stench of the hot kitchen had been the look of disappointment in his father's face. If he walked out on this job among men his father had known all his working life, the old man would never get over it.

Crouched before the counter, Greg glanced down at the bits of broken glass and the amber liquid seeping slowly across the dirty, tiled floor. He realized that starting with the secondhand power mower that he had bought for him when he was twelve to cut neighbours' lawns, his father had been responsible for almost every job he had ever had.

At least going to college had been Greg's own idea. But when his father, who had never gone past the eighth grade, prodded him about his future plans Greg angrily denied that he had any plans. Even this was untrue. He knew that he wasn't going back in the Fall to finish his degree. Once he had made up his mind the last three years began to seem remote and meaningless.

"I never had one of you college guys in here yet that was worth a good goddam," Mulcahy said. The manager was a short, gruff man with an iron-gray brushcut that revealed a long scar behind his right ear. Kelly had told Greg that although Mulcahy had never risen above the rank of corporal during the last war, he always insisted on being called Captain

by the men who worked under him in the three liquor stores he had managed since leaving the service. He was also a relentless slave driver. He had convinced himself that the head office would eventually reward his efficiency with a transfer from this dingy hole in a dying neighbourhood into one of the new self-service stores that were beginning to open in the suburban shopping centres.

Greg stood up in front of the counter brushing the flat of his hand against his trousers. His mouth was dry.

"It's the first one I've broken," he said.

"Is that a fact!" Mulcahy glared around the room at the men. "Well I happen to know it won't be the goddam last one either. When you get it cleaned up get a dusting rag from Walt and do something useful."

Tony, who had put the comb in his pocket when the manager appeared, tore open a new case of gin.

"Get those sleeves rolled down, Donato!"

"It's gettin' hot as hell in here, Captain."

"I don't care how goddam hot it is! Get those sleeves down."

The manager straightened a couple of bottles of *Golden Diamond Rum* and moved them forward on a shelf. "And don't show up here tomorrow without that greasy mop trimmed back unless you're bucking for a suspension."

The Captain went back into his office. Walter Dunlop handed Greg a limp cloth.

"Here you go, Charlie," he said, not meeting Greg's eyes.

"This is about the cleanest one I got left." Walt was a small, pear-shaped man in his forties. He always smoked a pipe and spoke like an adolescent whose voice had failed to change.

Greg took it from him. "My name is not Charlie," he said, half to himself as he raked the cloth across a row of shelves.

"You do a good job there now, Professor," Cogan said, still grinning from behind his cash register. "The Captain's gonna want to see his mug shining in those shelves."

When Greg went home after work in the warm July evenings, he climbed Cunard Street where winos sprawled in doorways and sallow-faced women stared vacantly from windows. The street looked even more cluttered and overrun than usual. It was the heat. It lay on the sidewalk like an electric blanket. Scores of restless people were in motion. They looked uprooted and a little dazed as they drifted past the junk stores, the Greek and Chinese restaurants, stood at the curb and moped, or turned in at the corner tavern for a beer.

Before supper, Greg would empty the change from his pockets into one of the jam jars his mother set aside to collect his and his father's tips. Although his father had gotten tips for years, it had surprised Greg after his first day with Kelly on the wicket that customers would leave a dime or a quarter on the counter for the simple service of being handed an over-priced bottle of liquor.

Since the job started, conversation around the supper table had become a ritual of questions about business in the

store, what he wanted to take for lunch, and whether he had enough clean shirts to last out the week. He couldn't wait to get out of the house again or to escape to his room. He would sprawl on the bed with his hands behind his head and stare at the map taped to the wall above his scarred dresser.

Greg dreamed about getting away. Toronto, Vancouver, the States, Mexico. It didn't matter where. By the end of the summer or maybe even before that, he told himself, he would make a break. He had turned twenty-one and could do what he wanted. But he wondered if getting away was what he really wanted to do. He didn't believe in anything. He wondered if being lost within himself, just drifting with no need to think about anyone or anything, was what he desired most. The terrible thing was to have that feeling fade and to wake up and find everything unchanged.

For always the next day he was back at the job. Under the level gaze of the Captain, he stacked beer cases, swept up with Walt or stocked the shelves until the store opened at ten. Then he waited for customers behind the wire grill of Frank Kelly's wicket. Frank was a spare, friendly man, nearing retirement, who gave him pointers about bagging and boxing orders, customers who never tipped or those who had to be denied service because they were already drunk.

One morning they were taking inventory together in the stockroom.

"You're a sensitive kid," Kelly said. "Maybe a little too touchy. Guys see that and they start picking on you right

off."

Greg shrugged.

"The guys like to have a little fun but Cogan's really got it in for you."

Greg didn't answer.

"Jackie is okay, you know, but he's got a lot of hate inside that he likes to take out on an easy target." The old man looked at him. "Jackie ain't been right since his wife run off with this guy she picked up last winter down there at the Canadian Legion. Jackie went right crazy and smashed his car all over the highway. Nearly killed himself. Brand new Dodge it was. The stupid bastard didn't have a nickel's worth of insurance on it neither."

Greg let his eyes move along the length of a shelf. He counted the bottles to himself.

"He's been swiping pints," he said after a while. "I saw him the other day."

Kelly examined the label on a wine bottle before slowly making a notation in the ledger resting on a stack of cases. "Yeah, Jackie takes a swig every once in a while when he thinks nobody's looking," he said. "Don't you get mixed up in it. That's between him and the Captain."

When the old man went on vacation Greg took over the wicket himself. The routine was slow early in the week when there were few customers. Greg spent the long hours daydreaming about where he might be in a few weeks and what strange directions his life might take. He only half listened to the

scraps of conversation among the men as he gazed through the plateglass window at the winos sitting in the sun or shuffling up and down the street. They seemed to appear from nowhere to roost in the neighbourhood like pigeons. He had come to recognize some of them: Arnold, Turk and Nick who had been in Mulcahy's war and made his separate peace afterwards.

Nick came in each morning around ten-thirty for his bottle. He was usually bruised around the face and always wore the same smelly overcoat with a poppy in the lapel. A game developed between them. Nick would appear at the wicket drawing his thin lips back over jagged yellow teeth and empty a dirty fistful of nickels and dimes on the counter. Greg reached into the bin underneath and placed a bottle of *Hermit* or *Scotia Sherry* in front of Nick. Sometimes Nick accepted what Greg offered but at other times he asserted the customer's prerogative and made his own choice. Cradling the bottle inside his coat, he grinned at the men behind the wickets and lifted his feet in a mocking jig.

Greg would slowly count the change, often adding something from his tips to make up the ninety-five cent total.

At the cash register Cogan always recounted it.

"Some day that little weasel is gonna be found in some alley with his fuckin' head bashed in," Cogan said, matter-of-factly, as he dropped the coins into the till.

Ignoring him, Greg would watch through the window as Nick lurched stiffly out of sight around a corner.

The second Monday that Kelly was on vacation the men's

morning coffee break was interrupted by the arrival of a large beer shipment. Grumbling, they set up the metal rollers in preparation for getting the hundred cases into the stockroom, before the store opened. Cogan insisted that Greg take the "hole" position to grab the cases as they came off the rollers in relay. The man in the hole was responsible for heaving the cases in stacks of eight and keeping the tiers in numbered order. Beside him in the line Cogan, breathing heavily, shoved the heavy cases into Greg's chest. He badgered him about stacking them in more even rows and pushed him further and further into the narrow hole as the number of cases grew until they towered all around him. When Greg stopped to wipe away the sweat dripping down into his eyes, Cogan let a case drop heavily to the cement floor between Greg's legs. Cogan slowly lifted one end of the case to reveal the liquid seeping from its underside.

"Well, Professor," he said. "Looks like you got some more breakage here."

Greg straightened up, feeling the nerves in his shoulder blades tighten.

"Come on, Jackie," said Donato. "Stop picking on the kid, eh?"

"Who's picking on him! College boy here can't hold his end up he shouldn't be here. Look at this. He can't stack for shit."

Mulcahy appeared at the top of the rollers. "What's holding up the goddam work!" he shouted back into the stock

room.

"Okay, Charlie," Donato said. "You been in there long enough. Let's change for a bit."

On the way home that evening Nick called to him from across the street. Greg put his head down, ignoring him. He decided that he would have to quit the job. He had tried but things were just not working out. Cogan wasn't going to leave him alone. Things would only get worse. His father would have to understand that. But what would his father understand? The job. Since the age of twelve when he had left school to sell newspapers and magazines on street corners his father had held down a job. He understood hard work. Anything else was only an excuse for failure.

Several of the jam jars were emptied out on the kitchen table. Greg watched for several minutes as his father separated the coins into even piles that his mother rolled in neat stacks. His father looked old and tired in the dim light that accentuated the deep lines in his face. Twenty-four years with the Liquor Commission. In another five he'd be pensioned off.

"Are you all right?" his mother said to his father. "You don't look well."

"I'm okay."

"You don't look okay."

"What do looks have to do with it."

There was an uncertain silence.

"I saw Frank Kelly downtown today," his father said to him. "Frank's having himself a nice quiet vacation. He says

you're doin' fine down there at the store." He poured out another jar of coins. "That was always a good store for tips even when I worked there years ago. You keep going like this and you're gonna be makin' more than your old man."

Greg shook his head and went into his room, flinging himself onto the bed. Then he got up and tore the map from the wall. Why didn't Kelly mind his own business? Why didn't they all just leave him alone? He didn't need Frank Kelly lying for him, dreaming up stories to make his father feel good. Then he thought of the haggard expression on his father's face as he hunched over the kitchen table counting out nickels and dimes as if they would somehow add up to a king's fortune. Greg stared out the window watching the darkness slowly gather around the streetlights.

He had been on the job for five weeks when his father had the heart attack. Each night he and his mother ate in silence together at the table; then she took a tray up to his father's room. Greg stayed out of Cogan's way around the store. He came home just long enough now to change his sweaty work shirt before leaving the quiet house. He wandered around downtown, sometimes going to a movie. He would sit in the dark at the back of the theatre not paying attention to what was happening on the screen.

On his way out to work one gray, Saturday morning near the end of the summer his father called him into the room. He

was sitting up in bed in the half-light looking at the barred shadows forming on the opposite wall. He had removed his glasses and his eyes seemed small and wary like a trapped animal. The room was stuffy although the window was up and sharp cries of children playing reached up from the sidewalk below.

"I'm tired," his father said.

"Well, try to get a little more rest," Greg said, shrugging. "The doctor says if you take it easy you should be up and around in a couple of weeks or so."

"I been tired all my life."

Greg forced his hands down into the pockets of his jacket. He always wore the jacket over his shirt so that no one in their neighbourhood would know that he worked in a liquor store. He glanced, restlessly, at the floral pattern on the bedspread. He didn't want to be reminded again of his father's narrow, enclosed life, its poverty and hard work that pressed themselves on him.

"I'm proud of the way things worked out for you down there at the store," his father said, pulling the bedspread up around his narrow chest. He nodded slowly as if after lying here these past weeks an elementary and unshakable truth had revealed itself to him. "And you're going to do better for yourself being at that college too."

A sense of real isolation came over Greg as he walked down the steep streets that morning. It was cool and looked

like rain and there was a fish smell coming up from the harbour. He wondered why he couldn't talk to his father, tell him what he really felt. He passed the deserted high school field with its empty bleachers. He didn't want to go to work; he didn't want to see that place again. He thought about getting on the first bus that came along and going downtown to the train station and reserving a seat as far as Toronto. If he at least had a ticket in his hand wouldn't that mean that he had made a decision, that he definitely decided something?

But Greg kept on walking with his head down as he had done each morning all summer until he was standing on the corner of Cunard Street. The store was there, pressed like a dilapidated box, between the little grocery and Blakney's Furniture Shop. Arnold and Turk were squatting on the steps. He saw Nick lurching up the street from the direction of the Sally Ann on Gottingen Street.

"Come on, Charlie, we're gonna be late." Out of breath and clutching his pipe, Walt Dunlop brushed by him. He held open the side door.

Greg hesitated.

"Come on," he said, "or the Captain will have your hide."

Another beer shipment was waiting after they had punched in. The Captain stood with his hands on his hips at the door of the stockroom watching the cases as they slid from the belly of the truck onto the rollers. Greg moved past the others into the hole. He was angry for allowing himself to come in here at all. Positioning himself with the weight of his body settled

forward and his arms swinging, rhythmically, he gripped each case that came to him. He hoisted it up against his chest, raised it to the level of his shoulders and heaved it into place. The sweat flattened his shirt against his back. He watched Cogan out of the corner of his eye and then swung his head back to concentrate on the cases. He was breathing heavily but he wouldn't slow down. He had to get rid of his anger. He had to show them now. He could do the job as well as anyone. They wouldn't be able to pick on him anymore. Greg shook off the tightness in his shoulders and arms. He shouted back down the line, "Come on, you guys, let's move it, eh?"

Mulcahy glanced up and shook his head in disbelief.

"Hey, Superman, take it easy," Donato called out, rubbing the back of his wrist across his forehead. "Don't sweat your bloody balls off."

When they had finished, the exhausted men slumped back against the solid wall of cases that climbed to the ceiling of the stockroom. Climbing down to the cement floor, Greg tucked his wet shirt back into his trousers. Kelly grinned at him.

"What the hell's got into you," said Donato. "You gone crazy or something?"

Greg turned away quickly but not before catching the dull hatred in Cogan's eyes as he brushed past him on his way to the office.

Later, Greg was carrying a couple of wine bottles out to the bins. He could hear the Captain's voice from the other

side of the partition.

"You're through as far as I'm concerned, Cogan. I don't put up with anyone stealing in my store. You had about all the chances you deserve. Here's the report on you just come down from head office. From right now until the office says differently you're on permanent suspension."

Greg swallowed hard. Although Cogan had done his best all summer to make him quit or get fired, Greg didn't want him to lose his job. He wandered back to the screen door at the rear of the stockroom to be by himself for a few minutes. There was a small table covered with a tattered piece of oil-cloth. On it was a coffee mug and a *Spam* can lid for an ash-tray. Greg sat on the edge of the table and looked out through the screen door. The yard behind the store, surrounded by a rickety, picket fence, was overgrown with weeds and coarse grass. The sky was heavy. Spatters of rain began to beat against the top of a garbage can in the alley. Greg concentrated on the rhythm of the drops, trying to empty all the conflicting thoughts from his mind. He sensed someone behind him. He turned around.

The man, in a zippered jacket, was staring vacantly at the stack of cases above Greg's head. Greg tried to avoid his eyes but his arm shot out suddenly, pushing him back towards the door.

"I ought to pound the livin' shit out of you," Cogan said.

The muscles in Greg's arm quivered.

"You squealed on me didn't you, Professor?"

Greg kept his eyes focused on the red lettering on the side of a case. "No I didn't. Mulcahy has been watching you for a long time." He tried to keep the tremor from his voice. He wished he hadn't overheard what went on in the office.

"You're full of shit," said Cogan. "Just like your old man!"

A vein throbbed in Cogan's neck.

"You college punks are all the same. You come in here and dump on guys like me. Think you're fuckin' big shots!"

"I never dumped on you. I never said anything."

"You're no fuckin' big shot. I worked with your old man for years. You're a stinkin' little weasel just like he was."

From his side Greg's arm swung upward in a sweeping motion. His fist caught Cogan on the right side of his face, knocking him against the table. The coffee mug crashed to the floor. In the silence that followed, Cogan rubbed his hand slowly along his cheek. Greg watched as the expression of terrible rage left Cogan's face. He breathed deeply and stared at Greg. Then, head down, he lurched away through the stockroom.

Greg leaned his weight against the doorframe. Sickness ran all through him, all over him, in long waves. He had never been in a real fight before, had never hit anyone. He let the cool air clear his head. A dull pain pulsed in his hand and along his arm and then began to subside. He covered his eyes for several moments, his fingers pressing against his eyelids. He was relieved that something was over now, that he

had come through a testing of himself and now it was over.

Greg let his breath out in a long sigh.

When he walked back to the front of the store, the men were silent, tense and waiting. Cogan was gone. Walt Dunlop, drawing on his pipe and avoiding Greg's eyes, passed a dusting cloth across a row of shelves.

The Captain came out, looking up at the clock. "Okay, you guys, it's about time to open up. You take Cogan's cash, Kelly. Charlie can cover your wicket."

He stood up in front of the counter.

"My name is Greg."

"What's that!"

"I said my name is Greg."

Mulcahy glowered at him and went back into the office.

Greg looked out at the rain streaming now down the plate-glass window. A few people hurried by. The street in the rain appeared shabbier than ever.

Frank Kelly touched his arm. "It had to happen sooner or later," he said. "Jackie will sit out his suspension and be back. By then you'll be gone." Kelly nodded slowly.

"What are you gonna do when you're through here?"

Greg shrugged. "I guess I'll go back to finish my degree."

"Your old man is gonna be some proud of you," Kelly said.

When Greg glanced up again Nick was waiting at his wicket.

"You look like a drowned rat this morning, Nick," Donato called across the room. "What happened? Your sewer sprung another leak?"

Greg placed a bottle of *Scotia Sherry* in front of him.

Nick drew his lips back showing his long, yellow teeth. The rain dripped down from his wet hair into the collar of his overcoat. He shook his head.

"Gimme the *Hermit*," he said with a grin.

Skipping towards the door, clutching the bottle inside his coat that flapped against his baggy trousers, Nick cackled, "I fooled yuh this time, sonny."

"I can't expect to win all the time," Greg said, thinking of the game they had played all summer. He leaned forward over the counter and, for the first time since he started working in the store, Greg found himself smiling.

HOME

"You will have to tell him," Kenneth's sister said as they drew up to an intersection. A motorcycle pulled up alongside them. The driver gunned the engine. Gas fumes drifted through the open window. A girl in yellow shorts on the back of the motorcycle hugged the driver around the waist, pressing her cheek against the back of his black, leather jacket. The driver gave Kenneth a sidelong glance through his goggles. Kenneth looked away. The driver leaned forward working the gears and gunned the engine again. The motorcycle lurched ahead and sped away. Kenneth looked out through the windshield. The glare of the sun made him squint. "There is no one else now," his sister said.

Kenneth Walsh cleared his throat. "What?"

"You will have to explain to him what's happened to Dad." She glanced at the knob on the glove compartment. "Not that it will make much of an impression."

Kenneth reached up and loosened his tie.

"You are his only relative now as far as I'm concerned," his sister said. "I was at the bank this morning. I didn't want to tell you but you might as well know that Aunt Norma's money is almost gone. We can't afford to keep him out there anymore. He's not our duty." She looked down at the dashboard. She ran a finger along the edge of it and then inspected the finger for dust. "It's going to be a little late if you decide to take that teaching job out in Winnipeg next month."

Kenneth suddenly stepped on the accelerator and swung out to pass a station-wagon filled with kids jumping up and down in the rear. When the station-wagon suddenly slowed down, Kenneth moved back behind it and pressed the brake. His sister was pulled forward in her seat.

"Be careful, Kenneth!"

She settled back and gave Kenneth a sidelong glance. It was quiet for several minutes. "I know you can't wait to get away," she said. "Have you made a decision yet?"

"No. I haven't made any decision yet."

A little further on Kenneth stopped for a light. A woman pushing a baby carriage and a little girl clutching a blue balloon hurried across the street in front of the car. Kenneth looked at his hands gripped around the steering wheel.

He cleared his throat. "Why don't you come with me, Laura? He's your uncle too. You haven't been out to see him in a long while either."

Laura turned in the seat and faced her brother. She frowned. "I don't want to see him. Ever. I do not regard that man lying in a bed out in that home as any relative of mine. I gave up on him when Mom died." She lowered her eyes to the carpeted floor. "You remember when we went out with Dad after the funeral to tell him. He just sat there in that dining room stuffing food into his face and clicking his teeth in that disgusting way." Opening her purse, she removed a Kleenex and brushed it against her eyes. "He doesn't care about anyone except himself. I won't go through that again."

The light changed. Kenneth drove on watching the flow of traffic. "Dad hadn't been out to see him in the last couple of weeks," he said. "He must suspect something."

"Just let me off at Beth's. I'll visit with her and the kids until you're through." Laura touched the Kleenex against her cheek and put it back into her purse. She placed the purse on her lap and folded her hands on top of it. "I called the real estate people yesterday. I think we should consider selling the house before you leave. With Mom and Dad gone now it's not really a home anymore."

Kenneth glanced down at the A & P shopping bag on the front seat between them. Laura pushed it away from her and crossed her legs. "I don't know why you had to buy those things," she said.

"He certainly doesn't need all those aspirins and vitamin pills. There is nothing wrong with him. His own wife and brother are gone and he stays as healthy as a horse. Remember when we were kids and had measles or something. Someone was sure to say that your Uncle Ed was never sick a day in his life." She shook her head and removed a cigarette from the pack in her purse. Tapping it against the side of the package, she placed the cigarette between her lips and lit it with a silver lighter. "He might have had all our sympathy when he finally had that stroke but now all he has are his selfish complaints. He wore poor Aunt Norma down until she couldn't take it anymore. She used to call me up sometimes just for someone to talk to. In tears, Kenneth."

He slowed down as they passed a stretch of broken roadway near a new housing development. Some of the units were almost finished while others were in various states of construction. Two boys were playing ball beside a large mound of earth, one tossing a ball to the other holding a stick. There was a metallic sound as the ball bounced off a parked car. One of the boys laughed.

"I don't know how we could have kept him out there all this time if Aunt Norma's estate hadn't been paying for it." Laura blew smoke against the windshield. She brought her other hand up to brush some hair away from her forehead. "He will have to go into the county home now."

They drove out further into the suburbs passing blocks of frame houses set back from narrow lawns enclosed by neat

hedges.

"I remember when all this was woods out here," Kenneth said. "Remember we used to come out here on Sundays for picnics and to pick wild blueberries? Now all you see are these condominiums."

"People have to have homes to live in. Let me off up here at the next corner." Laura leaned forward and ground out her cigarette in the ashtray on the dashboard.

Kenneth glanced in the rearview mirror. He slowed down and pulled over to the curb near a fire hydrant. He didn't turn the motor off.

"It's just after three now," his sister said, glancing at her watch. "Can you pick me up around five?" She looked over at Kenneth who was sitting with his hands resting against the steering wheel. "I said can you pick me up around five."

"All right. Around five," he said.

Laura opened the door on her side and got out of the car. She bent down and looked through the window. "I want you to go out there and tell Kenneth, because I trust you," Kenneth looked at her and he nodded. "I trust you to handle everything in an automatic fashion." She straightened up. Adjusting the purse on her shoulder, she walked down the block. She stopped in front of a house and removed a child's tricycle from the porch and placed it on the grass beside the walk. As she started up the walk, a woman, followed by a little boy, came out on the front porch waving to her. Laura waved back,

smiling.

Kenneth watched his sister climb the steps and then drove off. He turned down a street past a drive-in restaurant. Three teenagers were leaning against an old Plymouth convertible with a red racing stripe down the side. They were drinking milkshakes and watching cars gliding smoothly by in the sunshine. On the other side of the divided highway was the cemetery where Kenneth's father had been buried the day before yesterday.

The home was a private institution called Seaview Villas although it was many miles from any sizable body of water. It had been built a few years before on a steep rise of land. The road leading to it had not yet been completely paved and bulldozed mounds of earth and rock along with the wooden frames of houses under construction lined both sides of the road. The parking lot was empty except for two cars and a panel truck. A workman in coveralls lifted a carton from the back of the truck and carried it along in front of a building. Kenneth pulled into one of the vacant visitors' parking spaces near the main pavillion. Another workman was crouched before a flowerbed working a trowel into the ground. He twisted around when he heard the car approaching and then went back to his work. Kenneth watched for several minutes as the man lifted bulbs from a carton beside him and placed earth around them. Kenneth shifted in his seat. He noticed that his hands were sweating against the steering wheel. He got out of the car and walked past a bush with white gravel

around it toward the main entrance. He stopped, hesitating, and then turned back. He unlocked the door of the car and eased the shopping bag across the front seat. Cradling it in his arms, he entered the building through glass doors.

There was no one at the reception desk. Kenneth stepped across the waiting room. There were chairs, a bench and a low table with several magazines placed neatly on it. Turning left he walked down a carpeted corridor. The walls on either side were decorated with seascapes showing sailboats and light-houses against the background of a tranquil sea. He stopped before a door with HANDICRAFTS printed on it. In a display case beside the door were an assortment of woven scarves, pot holders, pieces of polished driftwood and several hand painted seashells. The large windows in this wing looked out on a flower-bordered patio. There was no one seated on the metal folding chairs arranged around tables with striped umbrellas. An attendant in a white jacket carrying a stack of metal trays pushed open a door. There was the sound of rattling dishes. Kenneth stood behind an imitation brick wall. The top of the wall was lined with coloured plastic flowerpots. He looked out over the rows of empty tables and chrome chairs. On the far side of the dining room an old man sat staring down at a bare table.

Kenneth walked along another corridor. There was a lounge area with sofas and armchairs. Several card tables were folded against a wall. Four women were seated on a leather sofa watching a colour TV. There was loud applause

coming from the TV. An announcer's voice listed the prizes that someone had just won and the applause increased. On the sofa the women's heads bobbed up and down and shook from side to side. Their mouths moved but no sound came out.

An old man in a bath robe lurched towards him leaning his weight on a metal walker and dragging his feet behind him. Kenneth slowed his pace as they drew nearer to each other. Kenneth smiled and nodded. The old man looked at the bag he was carrying and then stared into Kenneth's face. He frowned.

Kenneth stopped at a nurse's station. He cleared his throat. "Excuse me." A nurse, seated at a desk behind the counter, glanced up at him. "Excuse me," Kenneth said. "I can't seem to locate Mr. Walsh's room."

The nurse put down the pen she was holding and closed a folder on the desk in front of her. She got up and approached the counter. A nameplate on her uniform over her left breast said SHARON. She looked at Kenneth holding the bag in his arms and smiled.

"That's Edwin Walsh," Kenneth said. "I'm his nephew."

The nurse turned to look at the clock on the wall behind the desk. Kenneth looked up at the clock. It was twenty-five minutes to four. As they both watched the black and white face of the clock the minute hand clicked.

"Visiting hours don't begin until seven on weekdays," she said, continuing to look at the bag Kenneth was carrying. "Is it something important?"

"Yes."

"You couldn't come back at seven? You're not a regular visitor, are you?"

Kenneth glanced down at the white enamel surface of the counter. "His brother just passed away. I wanted" He began to turn away.

"Mr. Walsh."

Kenneth turned around.

Nurse Sharon opened a drawer under the counter and removed a typewritten list. She stopped near the bottom and moved her finger across a line. "Edwin Walsh," she said. She looked up at Kenneth and smiled. "It's all right," she said, pointing past his face. "Just go along this corridor and turn left at the end. Room 503."

A woman's voice made Kenneth stop before an open door. A nurse was holding an elderly woman by the arm and guiding her across the room towards a bed. "There now," she said. "You don't want to disturb the other residents. Just a short nap. You will feel so much better after a short nap." The nurse noticed Kenneth standing in the corridor looking through the open door. She frowned. Releasing the woman's arm, she crossed the room and closed the door.

Kenneth stopped before a green door with the numerals 503 on it. There was a large pot with a plastic fern in it in a corner of the corridor. Beside the pot was an empty wheelchair. He stood there for several moments. A nurse approached him pushing a metal cart on which bottles were arranged. "May I help you," she said.

"No," he said, indicating the door. "This is the room number I wanted." The nurse watched him. Kenneth pushed open the door and entered the room.

An old man was sitting on the edge of a bed looking down between his spread legs. His penis was visible through the opening in his pyjamas. "I can't find it," he said. "I can't seem to locate it down here at all."

Another old man sitting up in the other bed with a magazine in his hand was watching him. "What are you trying to find now," he said.

"What does it look like I'm trying to find." He held up a slipper. "The other one that goes with this."

"What do you want your slippers for?"

"To go to the bathroom."

"You don't need your slippers to go to the bathroom. It's right behind this door. A few feet away. There's carpet on the floor." The old man shook his head and held the magazine up to his face.

"I know where the bathroom is. I know there is carpet on the floor here. But there is no carpet on the floor in the bathroom. I could catch cold on that cold floor in there." He stared at the magazine held up against the other old man's face. "I could fall down in there," he said. "I could fall down and cause serious bodily injury to myself."

The old man lowered the magazine. He scowled. "Why don't you call a nurse to get a wheelchair." He raised the magazine back to its former position.

"You know a wheelchair wouldn't fit through that bathroom door there." The old man held up the slipper in front of his face and shook it. "In all the time you have been in here with me," he said, "I have never seen you go into that bathroom without putting on those big, ugly slippers of yours. And you're closer to the bathroom than I am."

"Hello, Uncle Ed," Kenneth said from the door.

The old man placed the slipper on the bed beside him and looked up. He stared at Kenneth. There was stubble on his chin. His eyes were watery behind thick glasses. The other old man lowered the magazine to his lap again.

"It's me, Uncle Edwin. Kenny." He held out the bag in front of him. "I've brought a few things for you." The two men continued to stare at him. Kenneth looked around the room. "I'll just put them over here." He crossed the room and placed the bag on top of a dresser beside a portrait of his Aunt Norma. He went over between the two beds. He reached out and touched the old man's shoulder. Kenneth cleared his throat. "How have you been, Uncle Ed." He looked down at the top of the bald head. The old man continued to glance down at the floor between his legs.

"Can I help you, Uncle Ed? Maybe I can help you find your slipper." Kenneth knelt down beside the bed. Lifting the bedspread several inches from the floor he looked under. He saw nothing but a wadded piece of Kleenex and a cellophane candy wrapper. He raised his head and looked away. "Maybe it will turn up later on," he said, standing up and brushing

at his trousers.

Kenneth pointed to a chair between the dresser and the window. "I'll just sit over here if it's all right." From where he was sitting he could see his uncle's bent back and the old man sitting up in the other bed looking across at him. He was not the same man Kenneth remembered seeing during his last visit. Kenneth glanced through the window. Several yards away there was a tangle of bushes and a steep grass-covered slope. From somewhere above it he could hear the sounds of traffic.

He unbuttoned his jacket. "Fine day," he said, nodding. "Really fine day. Warm."

His uncle turned around slowly, leaned back against a pillow and eased one of his legs up onto the bed. Holding the other leg with both hands he pulled it up. The slipper dropped to the floor.

"Are you comfortable, Uncle Ed," Kenneth said, leaning forward. "Is there something I can get you?"

The old man reached out for a blanket and drew it up across his stomach. He rested both hands on top of the blanket. Then he raised his right hand and removed his glasses. He held them against his chest. Kenneth looked past him to the other man.

"My name is Kenneth," he said, smiling. "I'm Mr. Walsh's nephew."

The old man's head nodded.

His uncle put his glasses back on slowly and looked at

a picture on the wall opposite his bed.

"I brought a few things I thought you might need, Uncle Ed," he said, gesturing towards the bag on the dresser. "A little fruit and some of your vitamin pills." Kenneth looked down at his hands resting on his knee.

It was perfectly quiet for several moments.

"I graduated, Uncle Ed. From university. For a while there I was seriously concerned about my future, what I might decide to do when I completed my education." Kenneth shook his head. "A young person today is confronted with a lot of bewildering possibilities. Many of my friends are choosing a career in the education field." He looked up. His uncle was frowning.

"Grade six!"

"What?" Kenneth glanced across at the other man.

"Grade six was all I had. Didn't even finish that. Had to get out and work. You young fellas today have everything too easy."

Kenneth turned towards the window. A fly was crawling along the ledge. It edged slowly up a pane of glass. Half-way up it hesitated, working its wings. Then the fly dropped to the ledge on its back. After struggling to right itself, it lay still for a minute and then began to move up the glass again. Kenneth glanced at the portrait of his Aunt Norma.

"Uncle Ed," he said, shaking his head and looking down at the carpet. "Dad hadn't been too well after he went into hospital for the exploratory operation."

There was the sound of movement in the corridor. The door opened and Nurse Sharon came into the room. She nodded at Kenneth and stepped between the two beds. "Aren't either of you gentlemen getting dressed again today? We'll have to do better than this." She looked down at Kenneth's uncle. "Here we go, Mr. Walsh," she said, holding two small plastic cups out to him.

The old man frowned at her. He pulled on the edge of the blanket. "What's this."

"You know perfectly well what this is," she said. "It's the pill you have every afternoon."

The old man's head arched forward. His eyes widened. "I can't find my slipper."

Kenneth looked away. Nurse Sharon nodded. "We'll look for it later. Here now." She offered one of the cups. The old man took it, his hand trembling slightly, and brought it up to his mouth. He began coughing. Nurse Sharon gave him the other cup. "Here, wash it right down. That's fine." She smiled at the other bed. Nodding at Kenneth again, she went out. The old man, who had rolled the magazine into a tight tube, looked across at Kenneth's uncle. He was sunk back against the pillows, looking up at the ceiling. "Nurse Bedpan," he said.

Kenneth got up quickly and started across the room.

"Excuse me."

Nurse Sharon was standing in the middle of the corridor arranging several of the dispensing cups on a portable tray.

Kenneth stood on one side of the tray. He glanced back at the closed door. "Who is that man in there," he said.

She picked up one of the cups, examined its contents, and placed it back on the tray. "What man, Mr. Walsh?"

"That man in there. With my uncle."

"He's your uncle's roommate. Mr. Doyle. He has been with us for about six months now."

Kenneth shook his head. "There was another man the last time I was here. A big man with a heavy beard. He had a European name. He was always telling jokes."

Nurse Sharon removed a ballpoint pen from the right pocket of her uniform and made a notation on a clipboard attached to the tray. "Mr. Kowalski."

Kenneth nodded.

"Mr. Kowalski is no longer with us."

"He's gone home," said Kenneth.

"Mr. Kowalski passed away." Nurse Sharon replaced the pen in her pocket.

Kenneth looked down the length of the corridor. It was empty. He glanced down at the yellow and pink pills in the dispensing cups. "What are these," he said. "Sugar."

"Medication, Mr. Walsh." Nurse Sharon moved around behind the tray and placed her hands along either side of it.

An old woman appeared in a doorway across the hall. She scowled. "Miss," she said. "I demand that my bed be remade immediately. I was given dirty sheets again. It's intolerable."

"All right, Mrs. Humphrey," Nurse Sharon said. "I'll

send someone right away." The old woman watched them for several moments and then closed the door.

Kenneth rubbed his hand slowly back and forth across his forehead. "I don't understand," he said. "I don't understand any of this."

"What don't you understand, Mr. Walsh? It's medication perscribed by the doctor. If you wish you may discuss it with him. If you will excuse me."

Kenneth watched as Nurse Sharon pushed the tray ahead of her down the corridor. He looked at the door again and shook his head.

The two old men watched him as Kenneth crossed the room and sat down in the chair. He glanced at his watch and then looked at the lamp on the night-table between the beds. Beside it was a box of Kleenex and an empty glass. Kenneth cleared his throat. "Are you happy, Uncle Ed," he said, still looking at the lamp. "I mean are you content being here?"

Mr. Doyle shifted on the bed and turned to face the wall. Kenneth's uncle drew the blanket further up around his chest. There was a clicking sound as his false teeth moved back and forth in his mouth. "This is all the home we got," he said.

Kenneth looked up at the wall. Above the beds was a wooden crucifix. He stared down at his hands. "I am confused about things, Uncle Ed. I am finding everything in my life very confusing."

It was quiet for several moments.

When he glanced up again Kenneth saw the moisture gather

ing behind his uncle's glasses. He looked away towards the window. The fly was no longer there. Outside, against the slope, a light breeze was moving through the tall grass.

Kenneth crossed the room and stood beside the bed. "Mr. Doyle remained facing the wall." Kenneth hesitated. His uncle looked straight in front of him. He touched the old man's arm lying across the top of the blanket. "I guess I should be going now, Uncle Ed." His eyes rested on the veins on the back of the old man's hand. "I'll come back to see you again."

His uncle's head turned slightly. The corner of his mouth trembled. He lifted his arm from the blanket, reached out and held onto Kenneth's arm. "Your Dad ... was a fine man." Kenneth nodded. The fingers pressed tightly into his arm below the elbow. They seemed to reach down inside him. Kenneth heard himself speak.

"I'll come back, Uncle Ed. Next week. I'll come back to see you next week." He drew away. He gave a sidelong glance at the other bed. Mr. Doyle watched him as he moved toward the door.

Kenneth walked quickly down the corridor. Constriction filled his chest. Another nurse looked up at him from the desk at the nurse's station. The clock over the desk indicated that it was almost five. His sister would be waiting. Kenneth hurried along the corridor past the reception area. A middle aged man in a dark suit, standing in the doorway of an office smiled and nodded at him. Without acknowledging him,

Kenneth pushed open the glass doors.

The sun made him squint. He breathed deeply. The breeze against his skin was damp. He knew he was perspiring. Kenneth's car was the only one in the parking lot. He stood beside it looking back at the main pavillion. It was perfectly still. Kenneth brought his hands up over his face. "Dad," he said out loud. "Dad." He got into the car and drove away.

Children were playing on the street. Kenneth honked the horn. A front door opened and his sister came out on the porch followed by a woman and a little boy carrying a plastic fire engine. From inside the house a dog barked. Laura bent down to pat the little boy on the head. She came down the stairs toward the car. Kenneth reached over to open the door and Laura slid across the seat. "I can take just so much of Beth's little brats," she said, smiling through the window and waving.

Kenneth edged out into the heavy traffic moving towards the city. Laura leaned back against the seat, brushing a strand of hair from her forehead. It was quiet except for the sound of the traffic. She glanced over at Kenneth. "Is everything all right, Kenneth?"

He looked straight ahead through the windshield. A siren wailed and an ambulance sped past them.

"Sometime before you leave," Laura said, "I'd like you to come over to the house and clear some of your old things out of the basement."

"I've decided not to go."

"What." Laura raised her hand to her neck.

"I said I'm not leaving now." Kenneth's voice rose. I've decided not to take the teaching job out there."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet. I'll work something out. I can probably get a teaching job here."

There was a long silence.

"This is all very sudden, isn't it, Kenneth?" Laura shook her head. "I know what you are going to do, Kenneth, don't think I don't. You always held back, always needed to be pushed into everything. Now you've finally pushed yourself into something, haven't you? He made you feel sorry for him just like Dad. You're going to keep going out there and take him food and pills and sit in that dead place with him just like Dad. And pay all the bills too I suppose. You'll become just like Dad." She began to cry. "Is that what you want, Kenneth?"

They sat quietly for a few moments. Kenneth glanced at his sister's face. "Does it make any difference," he said, "what either of us wants? He's an old man. He's alone. There is no one else. You said that yourself."

Laura leaned forward and slowly picked a piece of lint from her skirt. "I thought I knew you, Kenneth. I thought I understood my own brother. I guess I never did."

Kenneth eased the car into a faster lane as he approached a toll booth and crossed the bridge into the city. They did not speak to each other the rest of the way home.

AN AFTERNOON'S WAIT

He felt uneasy sitting alone in the quiet pub at three o'clock on a Thursday afternoon with nothing to do now but wait. Maybe she wouldn't come. On the phone he had left it up to her, had told her that he would be waiting when her last class was over. But maybe now it was all over between them. He watched the entrance, willing her to be here. He pictured her coming through the door. A beautiful girl with long, dark hair falling loosely around her shoulders and a little out of breath with her cheeks slightly red from the cold. Later, he would take her to that cozy Italian place on Mountain Street they both liked so much and banish the Montreal winter and everything that had happened today.

He wished now that he hadn't made such a big deal about this job. She had sounded disappointed on the phone. She had a right to be disappointed. He was the one who had built up her hopes. She told him that she was confused, that she needed time to think. The awkward silence that followed hinted at the distance beginning to separate them. No, he said to himself, she won't come. It was all over. Still, he waited.

Alex Coulter pushed aside his notebook and the paperback copy of *Ulysses* and slowly poured out the remainder of his beer. Foam dissolving on the rim. Salt taste. The brass, brown depths of the glass. Was that something from Dylan Thomas? He looked at the notebook; she had always asked him to read his work to her. But he hadn't worked on any new poems in weeks.

The noisy lunch hour crowd was long gone. The toothless barman who looked like one of those carvings of Gaspé fishermen, was drying glasses and talking, in French, to Billy, the tall thin waiter Alex had gotten to know by name in the two months he had been coming here. There were few other customers except three regulars at the same table at the rear of the room beside the bare stage and an old guy sitting two tables away from Alex. Nursing a pint and coughing into a dirty handkerchief, he had been watching him intently since Alex came in an hour ago. Alex had never seen the man before and paid no attention to him. He had more right to be in here than this old guy. After all, he thought, isn't this where he and Elaine had first met?

One evening Alex had come in with Malcolm Saunders, a

friend of his who went to McGill. He had placed six of Alex's poems with a little magazine and arranged for him to read his stuff in a couple of coffee houses.

She was with a few other students that Malcolm knew and they had all sat together around a table in a corner. Alex gulped his beer as Billy and the other waiters moved nimbly through the tables with loaded trays. Alex knew he was on his way to getting drunk; the edges of the room were already softening. He half-listened to the bits of conversation near him, watching her from the corner of his eye. White blouse open at the neck and tucked loosely into a long, peasant skirt. Casually flipping a matchbook cover and not paying attention to anyone.

In the men's room, he tried to sound disinterested as he stared at the graffiti covering the tiled wall above him.

"Why didn't you introduce her to me, Mal?" he had finally asked.

"Who, the big blond at the bar? I wouldn't mind knowing her myself. Didya see those boobs. Man, she must be Swedish. A fuckin' Viking goddess!"

"The one at our table. Black hair. Long. Carrying one of those Indian shoulder bags."

Malcolm smiled sleepily, glancing down into the gushing urinal. "Fuck, that's a relief!"

Someone started singing in one of the cubicles.

Alex studied himself in the mirror. Sandy hair drooping down over his forehead. Was he going bald? Long, thin face.

Horse face, that's what he had. He looked like a goddam horse! Maybe he should start growing a beard.

"Come on, man!" he said. "Big shot on campus and you don't know WHO she is?"

A toilet flushed.

"Elaine." Malcolm's head nodded decisively. "Elaine Barrett. I think she's in one of my classes. . Poli Sci. Christ, I dunno." He staggered over to the sinks, groping for his fly. "Want me to fix you up, Casanova?"

"Don't do me any favours!"

"Fuckin' sharp chick, man!" Still trying to locate his fly, Malcolm was suddenly seized by a spasm of laughter.

A local group had just finished an over-amplified set, and were drifting toward the bar. The hubbub of talk and laughter picked up as the juke box switched on and couples moved onto the dance floor. At the end of their table, Malcolm waved his arms wildly.

"Someday this guy here is gonna be a famous poet," he called out over the music. "We're all gonna be saying we knew him when!" Malcolm patted him repeatedly on the arm and Alex brushed him off.

"What kind of poetry do you write?" she asked suddenly, smiling at him as she lit another cigarette. "I'd love to hear some sometime."

Alex felt that he was floating, simply gliding and brimming.

"The best!" Malcolm bellowed. "This guy is a goddam

genius I tell ya!"

Alex examined the wet circles on the wooden table, wishing he could trigger a trapdoor underneath that would conveniently remove Malcolm Saunders from his sight. He wished now that he hadn't drunk so much.

He looked into her face framed by the black hair. Crow's wings. Hazy. Soft smile. He inhaled the fragrance of her. Beautiful, he thought, his head swimming in the Moody light. " 'She walks in beauty' " Alex recited, " 'like the night/ Of cloudless climes and starry skies;/ And all that's best of dark and bright/ Meet in her aspect and her eyes!' "

"That's terrific," she said, smiling. "But I hope you do a little more than plagiarize Byron."

Alex laughed.

To escape Malcolm he asked her to dance. They had talked about anything and everything. She laughed at his jokes and buried her face in his shoulder. He couldn't believe that anyone so beautiful could be interested in him. Afterward, he took her home in a taxi and kissed her in the light under a streetlamp. That had been the wonderful, marvellous beginning of it.

"Are you a student?"

Alex glanced at a cigarette burn in the checkered tablecloth beside his notebook. The old guy was talking to him now. Alex hoped that he was French so that if he said anything,

Alex could politely shrug his ignorance of the language and be left alone.

"Do you speak English? I said are you a student!"

Alex shook his head and lit another cigarette. No, he wasn't a student. He had dropped out of UNB after his first semester. One of his English professors had told him he had talent and that was all he needed to hear. At nineteen he thought it was time to get out and experience a little more life than he could see around Fredericton, New Brunswick.

At first, Montreal had stunned him. Knowing nothing, he took a room on Milton Street near McGill in what Malcolm called "the Ghetto." It was cheap; a sink, closet, hot-plate, a narrow bed with a defeated mattress and a resident colony of roaches. But it satisfied his idea of what a struggling writer's garret should be like.

Immediately, he had taken to the late summer streets carrying his freedom like a heavy suitcase with no place to put it down. Walking down Ste. Catherine, along Crescent and De Maisonneuve. Looking at women, all kinds of women. Beautiful and brasless. Legs beckoning ardently - swell of bare calves - he could hardly stand it. The curve of dress over hips, hair tumbling against soft shoulders, the smell of perfume as he brushed past someone at a metro kiosk. Sometimes he would follow a girl in a topcoat, creating her in his mind - elegant walk, lean, dancer's body. (Hi ... I'm Alex ... hello there ... my name is) He couldn't speak.

Love had spilled from the facades of elegant boutiques

and bistros, places he hadn't dared to enter. But then he met Elaine and it had seemed that the whole city was made for them.

"Have you got a girlfriend?" It was that old guy again. Why didn't he drink his beer and keep quiet?

Alex turned toward the man, a little reluctantly. "I don't have a girlfriend," he said, brushing back his hair nervously.

"How come a good lookin' kid like you don't have a girlfriend?"

Alex held up his empty glass. He didn't feel like getting involved in any discussions with this guy. And maybe after tonight what he said might be true. Maybe he wouldn't have a girlfriend.

"Hey, Billy," he called. "Another Molson."

Sitting there waiting, his mind reverted to the thoughts that never seemed to leave him now, slippery disturbing thoughts that revolved around his feelings for Elaine. He thought of little else lately. He knew her parents disliked him because he didn't go to school - he didn't work. He wrote poetry which was the same as doing nothing. They usually met on neutral ground downtown because he didn't want to take her to his room full of roaches. Alex loved walking beside Elaine knowing that other men watched her and envied him. But he was uncertain of himself and sometimes thought she was only infatuated with him because he wrote poetry or because he was someone with whom she could defy her parents. He felt that he had

to take her to places he really couldn't afford. She objected to him spending so much on their dates but he always shrugged it off, although the money he had saved from school and filling potholes last summer for the Department of Highways in Fredericton was almost gone.

"We all think we give women the gift of our cocks," the old man shouted, his eyes wild and staring. "But they chew us up inside them and spit us out!"

He was wrong. It had never been like that with Elaine. Alex looked around at the empty tables, the dim carriage lamps and the Spanish murals that covered the walls of the pub, remembering the first time they had made love.

Late one Friday night after a party they had gone back to her house. Her parents were away in Kingston for the weekend. Alex had touched her hair with his hand. He felt relieved because he knew little about love-making. He had been worried that he would do the wrong thing. She would burst out laughing because he was so inept. He had been intoxicated. Full. He felt his arms going around her. Soft and naked. He kissed her again and laughed.

"Hey, what's so funny!"

"You."

On a bureau there was a baby portrait of Elaine cuddling a Panda and another of her in ballet costume.

"My opening and closing night," she said. "I sprained my ankle in the middle of 'The Teddy Bears' Picnic'."

"You were cute."

"This is incredible, Alex! Really incredible!"

"What is." He sat up in her bed, propped on his elbow, examining her black bra abandoned over a chair-back. The blankets were piled at the bed's foot, the loose sheet covering her legs.

"Us, silly! My folks would have about two hemorrhages apiece if they knew we were here like this."

"Like what," he said, reaching towards her.

She giggled. "Alex, there's something you should know. Look at me."

"What is it?"

"Look closely. At my eyes."

"For crissake, Elaine, what's the matter?"

She looked over his shoulder at a bookshelf on the other side of the room. "My left eye is larger than my right. And they're not the same shade of brown." She pointed. "See. This one's sort of, well, greenish. I'm thinking of having glass ones installed."

Alex grinned. "That's nothing, kiddo. Feast your deformed peepers on this." He yanked away the rumpled sheet from around his legs and pulled himself to his knees.

She covered her mouth. "Oh, my god, I don't know if I can live with that!"

A raspberry birthmark, the size of a silver dollar, formed an island on his left buttock. He sank back against the pillows again, feeling her warm breath against his neck.

"What are we going to do, Alex?"

He studied the ceiling. "I'll get a job. Then we'll get a place of our own. Have your folks over for Sunday dinner to visit their dozen grandchildren."

"You make it sound so easy. What kind of job? And what about your own work?"

"I'll become a working-class poet. Swinburne among the stevedores."

She frowned. "Will you please try to be serious."

"I am serious," he said, wrestling her back down into the bed.

She brushed some hair back from his forehead and suddenly buried her face in the pillows and began to sob. Her swift change of mood baffled him.

"Elaine? What's wrong."

"Nothing." She sat up, wrapping the sheet around her.

"Are you sure?"

"I had a fight with my folks," she said finally. "About you. About us, I guess. They wonder how serious we are about each other." She looked down at the foot of the bed. "I don't think I've ever seen my father so angry. He actually came out and demanded to know if my young poet friend had any real prospects."

"And how do you feel?"

She looked at him.

"I'm serious about us," he said. "Are you?"

She shook her head. "Sometimes, I'm not sure about anything."

Later, Alex watched her sleeping with her head resting on her arm and her hair spread out over the pillow. He wanted to shout. Her beauty hurt him and he could not understand why. He stared at a portrait of Elaine and her parents taken at a beach resort. All around him the quiet house seemed to isolate him in darkness and doubt. A cold unreasonable sweat came out on his body. He would have to prove himself to them. He knew he could probably get a job as a busboy or a shipping clerk but that would never be enough. He would have to become a man with real prospects.

Alex slowly sipped his beer but he wasn't enjoying it. After three weeks of filling out application forms and checking the newspapers he had begun to worry. He avoided Malcolm Saunders and the McGill crowd. Although Elaine's long, brooding silences disturbed him, he hated to leave her in the evenings. Everything, he told himself, would change if only he could get a good job and they could have a place of their own.

He would wander back to his room and, in the dark, look at the old woman in her window across the street, dreamily, stroking her Siamese cat. All around him doors banged; there were strange scratchings in the walls like something trying to claw its way out. Alex wondered what it was about life that made it so difficult. You were always on the edge of uncertainty - at least most of his life had been like that. Then, sitting in the YMCA cafeteria yesterday morning, stirring his cold

coffee, he saw the ad in the Gazette.

INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHING CO.

OFFERS

REWARDING FUTURES

A rewarding future. Alex called right away and a girl's eager voice inviting him to an interview with a Mr. Bronstein was the friendliest and most encouraging he had heard. He was so keyed up he didn't ask what the job involved. He often dreamed about some sort of Literary career. He just knew this job would be a good one and that it would be his. He held the phone in his hand in the dim hallway outside his room. From the grimy walls the poster faces of Joan Baez and Che Guevara stared down at him. Upstairs a stereo throbbed through the floor; in the basement, Garneau, the janitor, bellowed. He called Elaine and told her to meet him at the pub. They would celebrate; he was about to land a terrific job.

Leaning his long, skinny frame into the cold this morning, Alex dodged the droppings of neighbourhood dogs in the snow along Milton Street and cut through the campus. His jacket was too thin; already dampness seeped through the bottoms of his army surplus boots. He would get himself some good clothes with his first paycheck.

Malcolm came down the steps of the Arts Building.

"Hey, Casanova, where have you been bedding down lately? Don't wallow with the peasants anymore? Christ, that's some sharp chick you got, man. How does an ugly bastard like you

bag a piece like that?"

Alex told him about the interview. "Come on over to the pub later," he said, grinning. "I might even buy you a brew."

Malcolm blew into his cupped hands. "You are one lucky sonofabitch," he said.

Alex boarded a crowded bus that climbed the steep streets leaving the wall of downtown buildings to drop away behind him. He gazed through the icy window and saw himself rising in an express elevator to the top floor of an imposing office building. Greeted by the smiling, pretty secretary on the phone and ushered into a carpeted office. Deep leather arm-chairs; massive glass ashtrays. Bronstein, senior editor, International Publishing Company, leaning across a polished desk to offer him the golden handshake and to discuss Alex's rewarding future.

Alex tugged his frayed, shirt cuffs up inside his jacket. The bus rocked and jerked along. It stopped at almost every cross street, taking on and discharging passengers. He was aware of a big woman sitting beside him holding a rumpled shopping bag that smelled of old clothes. He looked at his watch. Nine thirty-five. His appointment was for ten; he couldn't be late.

"Van Horne," he said, turning towards the old woman. "How far is that from here?"

"M'sieur?"

Oh, God, he thought, she's French. She doesn't know what I'm saying.

"Van Horne," he repeated, carefully. He had never been in this part of the city before. "That is where I want to get off. Van Horne."

The woman drew her double chin down into the collar of her heavy, gray coat. "Cote des Neiges," she muttered, her hands tightened around the straps of the shopping bag.

A few minutes later, Alex leaped to his feet and pulled the signal cord. "Excuse me."

She didn't move.

"Madame!" He heard his voice catch in his throat. Heads turned in his direction. "I have to get off!"

The bus swerved towards the curb, throwing him into the aisle. He lurched out the rear door. He saw the woman's face in the window, glaring at him, framed in contempt. The cold cut through his jacket. He realized that he must have made a mistake, must have gotten off at the wrong stop. The bus lumbered away, dragging cold behind it. It was beginning to snow.

There were no big office buildings here. He walked along past an Esso station, a shabby fruit store and the window of a travel agency where the dusty poster of a girl in a bright yellow bikini invited him to relax and BREAKAWAY TO THE BAHAMAS. The broken sidewalk ended in a makeshift fence surrounding an abandoned construction site. The pitted and scarred wall of the only remaining building looked as if it would topple into the jagged hole blasted beneath it.

Alex climbed the sagging stairs to the second floor. It

was like one of those seedy hotels in gangster movies, he thought, where hoods on the run hide out and bodies wait to be discovered in darkened halls.

There was a girl drinking coffee and reading a paperback behind a desk in a dimly lit office. Alex showed her the ad. Maybe the address was wrong. She could probably tell him where he had to go. She didn't look up as she set the styrofoam cup on the blotter in front of her.

"Mr. Bronstein is a little late." She opened a drawer and put the book inside. "Want to wait in there?"

Alex sat at the rear of a long row of tables. A roomful of people like refugees, talking, coughing, rustling newspapers and scraping chairs. Waiting. Why was he sent in here with them? The ad formed a tight ball between his fingers and dropped to the floor. His shirt was damp against his skin; he didn't bother to pull up his frayed cuffs. Through the window he saw the gray hump of Mount Royal, the faint outline of the Cross on its summit. This was not what he had expected. The impulse to leave gripped him and he thought of Elaine.

The photographs suddenly spread out in front of him showed high vaulted ceilings, amid an eruption of colour. Blue sky and white light. Bearded, robed figures. Men scurrying on scaffolding suspended between massive columns.

"Orthodox churches. I paint them. All over Greece. This is me as you see here. No work now. No work for George Papadopoulos."

Alex looked at the scar on the back of his hairy hand as the man gathered up the photographs.

"No work!" he said again.

Alex's head throbbed.

They were all drawn to attention by the voice that carried to the back of the room. "Bonjour. Nice to see so many bright faces out on a morning like this. That's the spirit we like to see."

Alex stared at the checkered sports jacket, the green tie, the heavy volume placed on the table in front of the blackboard. The large man wearing hornrimmed glasses wrote MAX BRONSTEIN on the board. Dusting his fingertips before placing them back on the book, he cleared his throat and nodded like a professor about to launch into a laboriously prepared lecture.

Glancing at the snow slanting against the windows, Alex felt the voice fade. He was alone, trapped in some isolated winter outpost, where no one could rescue him.

"It's teamwork that's the all-important factor," Bronstein's voice droned on.

Traffic noise, someone shouting in the street. "Maudit anglais. Krisse-la."

"I know a guy was making \$800 a month. Straight commission too. He's one of your top executives in Toronto today."

Alex looked at the dirt encrusted on the baseboards under the window. Elaine and her parents. Cushioned by comfort.

"What do you think, young fella?"

Papadopoulos tugged his sleeve. "He's talking at you, mister."

Bronstein nodded. "What do Coca Cola and Kleenex have in common?"

Someone coughed.

Alex felt like a kid caught without his homework.

With his hand held up to the side of his face, Papadopoulos muttered, "They are all full of the shit like you, mister."

"No prompting there," Bronstein said.

Alex shrugged, looking down at the top of the table.

"Brand identification!" Bronstein held out his arms as if embracing the room with his oracular wisdom. "And that's what we want for UNIVERSAL ENCYCLOPEDIA!"

Alex sat and waited and watched the big, spinning flakes dissolve against the windows. He felt like a fool. Alex Coulter, part-time poet and full-time encyclopedia salesman. Confusion and doubt and irresolution grew inside him. His thoughts swirled back to Elaine again. An encyclopedia salesman.

Then, he was standing at the door with people brushing past him on their way out. Bronstein erased the blackboard in quick, sweeping strokes.

"You coming back, mister? For the training programme?" Papadopoulos looked at the pink application card in his hand that Alex had not filled out. He slapped Alex on the back.

"No more churches to paint for George Papadopoulos. I sell books now." He grinned at Bronstein. "Make lots of money."

Out on the street, Alex watched Papadopoulos, bull-like shoulders hunched into the biting wind, make his way through the sluggish traffic and disappear around a corner. Snow drifted off the tops of sidewalk snowbanks, spiralling up and over intersections where cars stalled. Alex slowly wandered back the way he had come, wanting the cold to numb him, wanting to lose himself in the snow that had begun to swirl into a blizzard.

The old guy was slumped over his table snoring hoarsely. In a little while when the pub started to fill up for "happy hour" Billy would wake him and put him out. Alex placed the paperback *Ulysses* on top of his notebook. He would have to start working on his poems again. A couple of businessmen had come in and were sitting at the bar.

That phone call earlier this afternoon had been the most difficult one of his life. Her mother had answered and he felt the cold edge in her voice when he asked for Elaine. Why had he made such a big deal about the job? He couldn't lie to Elaine. He had told her everything, holding the receiver in his sweating hand. That long, brooding silence. "I'm so confused, Alex. They're my parents. I need time"

"I'll be waiting at the pub later, Elaine. Everything will work out. I'll be waiting. Please ... come ... " He glanced at his watch. Four-thirty. It was all over. He had held the phone in his hand and she wasn't there anymore. She wouldn't

come. Alex closed his eyes and rubbed them with his fingertips.

"Hey, how about that beer you promised me?"

"What?" Startled, Alex jerked his head up.

Malcolm sat down opposite him, sweeping a scarf from around his neck and dropping a stack of library books on the table.

"I see you're hard at it too, slave," he said, grinning.

"How did the interview go?"

Alex looked down at the menu propped between the salt and pepper shakers. He had forgotten about Malcolm. Smug, easy-going Malcolm. My friend and nemesis, he thought. Summoned by me.

"What's the job?"

Alex swallowed hard; he felt himself become rigid. "It's with a small publishing company." He shrugged and brushed back his hair nervously. "A junior editing position. Nothing spectacular."

"Fantastic, man! Since when have you been so modest. Calls for a toast. Hey, Billy. Deux Molson."

Malcolm leaned forward and shook his head, the wide grin spreading across his face. "You are one lucky son of a bitch!"

Alex glanced quickly at the entrance and then examined a painting of a matador confronting a bull on the opposite wall. Why was it so easy to lie to Malcolm? Because guys like Malcolm Saunders didn't come from a backwater like Fredericton. They didn't live in rooms filled with roaches; they didn't have

holes in their shoes. They had parents who pushed them through McGill and put money in their pockets whenever they wanted it. Cushioned by comfort. Guys like Malcolm Saunders would never have to sell encyclopedias door to door. That was something to have a good laugh over.

"A bunch of us are going up to Tremblant this weekend," Malcolm said.

"What?"

"You and Elaine interested in a little skiing?"

Suddenly he hated Malcolm Saunders.

Billy put the beer down in front of them.

"Let's chug-a-lug this one and split, eh?"

"I don't want to go just yet," Alex said.

"You waiting for someone, Casanova? Anyone I know?" He smiled and took a long swallow of his beer.

If he had a knife he'd plunge it into Malcolm's chest.

"La belle dame sans merci," said Malcolm, gazing up at the ceiling.

The confusion of the day swirled through Alex's mind like the snow outside: Bronstein, the job, Malcolm, Papadopoulos and his pictures of Greek churches. Elaine.

"That's one sharp chick, man!" Malcolm said, looking towards the door. "I wouldn't mind waiting for someone like that myself." He shook his head again incredulously. "You've got it made!"

She was coming slowly down the room between the empty tables looking around a little nervously as if she had come in

here for the first time and was uneasy about who she would meet. A beautiful girl with flushed cheeks in a brown suede coat and high leather boots, melting snowflakes glistening in her long hair.

Billy and the barman watched her.

Alex felt a hollow ache pushing up inside him.

She saw him and a slight smile flickered on her face.

Suddenly, staring at her, Alex realized what he had always known. He loved her; she had come. No matter what happened she was here now.

"Hi," she said, giving a quick sidelong glance at Malcolm and looking intently at Alex. "You okay?"

VISITS

We sit alone together at the kitchen table at ten o'clock in the morning, drinking. My father's hand reaches in front of me. It is thin and bony with small, brown liver spots. I watch it fumble for the bottle of Cutty Sark. His wife has gone for the day to give us some time together. She has left lunch, that I know he will not touch, on the kitchen counter. He pours the Scotch over ice in a juice glass. His hand trembles.

My father looks shrivelled inside the cardigan and baggy trousers. His teeth are out and his mouth sinks at the corners. The bones under his eyes show through the skin. His hair is

almost completely gone now except for a few gray strands combed, carefully, back over his pink scalp.

There is a photograph on the sidetable in the living room showing him in his Chief Petty Officer's uniform in front of our old house on South Street, circa 1950. He is smiling at someone on the porch. About five years old and frightened, I stand beside him, clutching the handle of a wooden wagon. My father remained boyish well into middle age. A big man with solid shoulders and curly red hair. I was told that Earl "Red" McLeod had boxed in tank towns all across Canada during the Depression and was a contender for the Empire Middleweight title. He had played semi-pro baseball in the States before a bad ankle sent him hobbling home. I never knew how much of this was true, how much made up for a son to grow into.

"Did Ellen call you? Did she tell you to come down this time?" His voice, stubborn, challenging, hard-edged, is the voice I remember before he'd hit me across the ears and lock me in the cellar.

"It was a spur of the moment thing, Dad. I just came. I wanted to."

"You're sitting there like a kid waiting for something to be explained to him."

"Is that how I look to you, Dad?"

"You want something from me, don't you, Bobby?"

"I don't know, Dad. You're right, I want - I just don't know what I want."

He studies the picture of Peggy's Cove on the wall beside a spice rack. Breakers crashing over massive slabs of rock. An infinity of water.

"I always liked going down there. Beautiful spot. You could stand out there on those rocks and think you were at the ends of the earth. We used to go a lot when you and Ellen were kids until you almost got swept away once. Nearly scared your mother to death."

"Were you scared, Dad?"

He moves his hand along the edge of the table. "Where is my granddaughter, Bobby?"

"The separation was a little messy, Dad." I stare at the ice cubes drifting in my glass. "We more or less agreed that Melanie should stay with Linda and her folks in Ottawa for now."

"What are you doing with yourself?"

"Nothing much right now, Dad. I kind of decided I wasn't cut out for the insurance business after all. Everything they say about Toronto is true, you know. It's a regular rat race up there. I'm sort of scouting the job market right now, looking things over."

"You should look your life over. You're not a kid anymore."

The electric clock over the refrigerator makes a faint whirring sound as the long second hand makes its slow trek around the dial.

"If your mother were alive, I don't know what she'd say."

"We wanted to see you started out right."

I nod, looking away. "Sure, Dad. I can understand that. I'm just a little at loose ends right now."

"You were always at loose ends, Bobby. I didn't give a damn if you didn't do so hot in sports or drifted around trying to find yourself. But when are you going to grab hold? The world's not going to wait. You're going to be left, boy!"

From the window, the January wind blows off the tops of snowbanks, draws the sky closer down.

"We need some lights on, Dad?"

"I can see okay. You feel like you're in the dark?"

"There's enough light, I guess."

He starts to cough again, deep spasms that shake him and make his eyes water.

"You all right, Dad? Anything I can get you?"

"It's just a touch of cold." His glass comes down on the table and the ice cubes ring.

My sister Ellen and her husband drove me here from the airport yesterday. Sobbing in the back seat, Ellen told me how much he has been going downhill in the last couple of months. The therapy at the hospital twice a week is only routine. The doctors can't or won't say how long he has left.

"A man gets my age he deserves a little rest, a little comforting. That's why I married her, Bobby, and I don't need to make excuses. Agnes is a religious woman; she's had a hard time of it. Buried two husbands already. She deserves better."

He watches the wind blow through the bare trees, hurl snow against the house.

My mother was short, stout, rosy with a loud voice. I could find no trace of her in the brittle, bird-like woman, wearing an apron decorated with daisies, who smiled at me across the supper table last night. A white linen cloth had been placed over the cracked oilcloth and a cut glass vase with three white carnations and a decanter of sherry were on the table. "You call me anything," she had said, "except Aggie. Earl calls me that just to get my dander up. You like rabbit stew? Ellen says you kids practically grew up on rabbit stew."

They had been married six months and this was the first time I had met her. I wasn't invited to their wedding. At their age, they said, they didn't want any fuss. Last night I had stared down at the gray meat and the soggy dumpling on my plate.

"You can certainly tell you are your father's son," she had said. "I noticed the resemblance right away."

I could not speak. Denying her made me feel as if I had reaffirmed my love for my mother.

Later in the evening, after my father had fallen asleep drunk in his chair, she said, "Your Dad told me he wished I was the one he'd had with him all his life."

"You don't have to like her," he says, and I can see his face folded in on itself in an unyielding weariness. "She's not your mother. And I guess this is not your home anymore."

"That's not very fair, Dad."

"What's fair got to do with anything?"

"I like coming down for visits. I look forward to seeing you."

He glances at the table and says, "Do you, Bobby."

In the darkness of the living room, my father stands bewildered, staring at the blank television screen.

"Agnes doesn't like me going out much but I always hated being cooped up. You want anything to eat, help yourself."

He sinks into an armchair, his fingers picking at one of the lace doilies on the arm.

"I miss the baseball," he says, and in the chill that settles around us, I remember those sweltering summer vacations in Boston and New York. My mother was left, as if by arrangement, to wander through the stores, and I was taken along to the ball parks. Once, going out to Yankee Stadium, he ran ahead to catch the subway, leaving me stranded on the empty platform. I didn't know where to go; I didn't have anything except the useless subway token. I was half hoping he would hurry back, half hoping I would never see him again. He was suddenly there where I stood beside a candy bar machine, cuffing me around the neck. A stupid kid who didn't know how to put a token in a turnstile. After the game, he bought me a Yankee pennant at a souvenir stand. "Don't tell your mother I almost lost you today," he had said. Back at the hotel he told me to show it to her, a tribute to a father who knew how to show his son a good time. I said I had lost it.

I can hear him rattling the basement door, slowly descend

the wooden steps. The slapping sound of his scuffed, brown slippers is replaced by the heavy thump of boots. He comes back into the room wearing a mackinaw and an old, felt hat. His neck is thin, rigid. He holds out a set of keys.

"What are these for, Dad?"

"Turn the car over. It's probably stone cold. I'll be out in a minute."

"You want to go out, Dad? There's a bit of a storm out there. If it's something at the store I could get it for you."

"I want to go somewhere."

He insists on driving. It is still snowing. He gropes for the switch of the windshield wipers and turns them on as we make our way, slowly, through familiar, residential neighbourhoods of gray, flat-fronted houses with their lace curtains pulled closed. The streets, surrounded by wall-like snowbanks, are deserted.

Out on the highway we pass roadside restaurants, the rusting shells of abandoned automobiles piled in front of yards, and signs telling us how far we have to go to leave Halifax behind. Suddenly, he pulls over onto a clearing in front of a service station and, bending over the wheel, begins the useless coughing again.

I look out through the windshield to allow him some privacy, some space for what he does not want me to see. An old German Shepherd, curled up under a flaking, metal sign

that says DRINK CANADA DRY, gets up and, shaking himself, prances across behind the gas pumps and disappears through a garage door.

"You drive, Bobby," my father says, and I feel his voice slipping on the edge of an uncertain surface.

"I'd better get you back, Dad."

"No. Just drive. I'll tell you where."

St. Margaret's Bay. Tantallon. West Dover. Stunted trees burdened with snow, boarded up fishing shacks, chunks of ice hitting against the pilings of wharves. A boy with a hockey stick slaps a puck against the side of a barn. My father watches the black wires overhead wave in the wind.

There is a wooden church with a cemetery beside it. A twisted iron fence, weathered headstones. The Atlantic, gun metal gray, shows frothy bursts of long breakers. Salt air seeps into the car, cold and damp. A lighthouse appears on the end of a withered arm of rock. This Nova Scotian landscape, shaped by successive ice ages, is more desolate, more primitive, than I remember. Huge boulders, like a giant's play blocks, rear up along the highway, perched, precariously, on top of each other or strewn over the frozen ground. I am afraid that they will suddenly become dislodged and crush the car or that I will lose control on one of the hairpin turns.

"Pull in here."

The parking lot at the entrance to Peggy's Cove is full. I inch slowly up the narrow road that snakes between sheds converted into artists' studios and little houses clinging to

shelves of rock with signs that say either PRIVATE PROPERTY or GENUINE ANTIQUES SOLD HERE. I start to pull into a driveway to turn around when he suddenly shifts in the seat beside me.

"In there, Bobby."

I park beside a gift shop near a wharf strewn with lobster traps, marker buoys, coils of rotted rope. A dory, its keel damaged, is secured to the wharf. On a pier on the other side of the inlet two men in black oilskins gut fish, tossing away the scraps. Seagulls wheel overhead, crying, dropping to retrieve what they can find among the rocks.

Ahead of me, moving unsteadily through the crowd milling around the door of the gift shop, my father takes the twisting path that leads out to the whitewashed lighthouse. Watching him, I lose my footing and stumble into a pool of muddy water slimed with seaweed. The cold and dampness seep into my shoe and anger, sudden and cold, makes me shout: "We better go back."

Through the crowd, the slight figure in the mackinaw climbs over crevices and around shoulders of rock on the other side of the lighthouse where the huge, black water-soaked slabs drop off, sharply, into the ocean.

The wind cuts through my jacket. "It's a little cold out here, isn't it?" My voice is drowned in the roar of the breakers.

My father stands there on a huge ridge of rock, poised between sky and sea, a dark shape, his face turned away, the

wind catching the ends of his thin hair.

"Let's go back now, Dad."

Children clamor around the rocks, leaping and shouting.

A girl with a camera nudges me out of her way to get a better view of the lighthouse.

"Could you just help him down, please?"

I turn and look at the woman indicating a little boy, near tears, sitting on a ledge, his round face framed by the hood of a red nylon snowsuit. I lift him down and, pulling away from me, he scampers off to watch a motorboat, its engine chugging as it bobs against the waves and disappears around the point leading into the sheltered inlet.

I stare for several moments as if hypnotized by the swirling foam that splashes up almost to my feet.

"Dad?" I feel my voice drop into the retreating roar of water beneath me.

He is gone. I hurry back the way we have come, scanning the crowd drifting back towards the lighthouse. I climb a water slicked ridge of rock, wide as a whale's back, up where the breakers begin to recede along the miles of foggy coastline.

"Dad?" My voice is lifted and carried off in the wind. I scramble past people who watch me and turn away.

"He must be crazy."

"Get himself killed like that."

My mind, feverish now, sees his body falling away from me, twisting in the surf, pulled out and then smacked, limp

as seaweed, against the rocks.

The wind is stronger now, my legs begin to ache. I don't know how long I have been out here. The tide, edging in, sends the spray farther back over the rocks. It is getting dark. Dark and cold.

I hurry past the lighthouse, down along the twisting path to the wharf, hoping the cold has sent him back to wait for me in the car. He is not there.

Exhausted, I stare, dumbly, into the dimly lit windows of the gift shop. It is piled with cheap paintings, seashells, coloured beads, postcards, an assortment of wooden pull toys, miniature lobster traps and imitation sou'wester hats. In the clutter of an aisle, a thin old man in a mackinaw a size too large for him examines the price marked on the base of a wooden carving.

Inside, I wait beside a rack of postcards, watching him. The old man notices me and scowls.

"Where have you been! You look terrible."

I run my fingers through my damp hair and stuff the ends of the scarf back into the collar of my jacket.

He holds up the carving of an old fisherman. "How about this for Agnes?" he asks. "She always goes for these knick-knacks."

This I realize, is the man I have been looking for. This anonymous old man. Maybe all my life I have been looking for him. A stranger in a crowd. Did it matter now that this stranger had never really known me, that I did not know him?"

Tears begin to burn my eyes. "Dad ... I'm sorry."

"What the hell are you sorry about, Bobby? I knew you'd show up sooner or later." Scowling as he is jostled by customers near the counter, he cradles the carving against his chest. "I'd better put it back. I'll never get through this mob."

"Here, let me take it."

Later, as we drive back along the twisting highway, the weather turns milder and ribbons of fog float across the headlights. Raindrops spit warnings against the windshield. Clearing his throat, my father shifts his weight, uncomfortably, as if to shake off the burden of his wasting body.

I look out into the dark as the rocks and breakers recede behind us. "In a couple of days I will be on a plane, back to Toronto. I will call Linda, I know now, because I will want to hear the sound of her voice. I want a sense of beginnings to return."

I believe that I have made my last visit here. But when my father is gone I will remember all the things I could and didn't say. All the things I ached to tell him but couldn't find a way.

As he sits beside me on this desolate highway near Peggy's Cove clutching an overpriced wooden carving in a paper bag, I wonder what I will remember of my father. His quick temper, his fondness for drinking and sports, his laugh? Possibly. But I can say nothing now because a tight fist constricts my throat. The night is closing around us. In

this moment the world seems to disappear before my eyes and
all I see before me is the wide deep expanse of space.

THE SHORES OF TIME

The first thing he noticed was that the beach was crowded. It had never been like this years ago when they came with the kids on Sunday afternoons just like this one. That was all right with him. He wanted to see people having a good time, and to immerse himself again in the frenzied activity of the beach. Already he could hear the surf pounding the shore and the shouting of the crowd. He inhaled the salt air and a wave of excitement washed over him. His wife waited, impatiently, on the gravelled stretch of high ground that looked down over the beach and was used for a parking area. She watched as he removed the two aluminum and plastic chairs from the trunk.

of their Chevy.

"Howard," she said. "My feet are hot. Let's get back in the car and go home."

Hunched over, struggling to disentangle the chairs, he considered the tomb-like silence of the house and the feeling of emptiness it gave him now that the last of their three children had grown up and were gone. He knew that Gladys felt it too. Last week, the day after they had seen Todd, their youngest, off for Toronto, he had come home a little early after showing a client a new piece of cottage property. He found her sobbing at the kitchen table. She stayed in the house most of the time now by herself. She needed to get out more. He did not regret his decision after lunch to steer her away from the television and drive the twenty miles out here to the beach.

"You can sit down and relax soon as I get these bloody chairs out!"

"Watch your language, Howard!"

He turned around to say something else to her and found himself staring down at a little blond boy of about five clutching a yellow, plastic pail. The boy's protruding stomach, as round and brown as a miniature Buddha, hung over his napkin size bathing suit.

Howard tousled his hair. "How's the water today, sport?"

The boy squinted up at him as he probed his nose with a finger.

"What have you got in your pail?"

Howard peered into the pail. "Oh, doubloons! Pirate treasure!"

The boy stared down into the pail and then gave Howard a puzzled look. The corners of his mouth turned down. "These are shells," he said.

The boy's mother appeared from between two parked cars and called him. She glared at Howard as if he were some kind of dirty old man. The boy waddled away, swinging the pail.

He finally wrestled the chairs from the trunk. The stitching on the seat of the blue one was badly frayed. He had not noticed that when he brought them up, hurriedly, from the basement after lunch. Leaning them against the bumper, he looked in the trunk again.

"You want the blanket, too?" he asked.

There was no answer. Gladys was already walking ahead past the row of parked cars. He folded the blanket under his arm and picked up the chairs.

"For someone who wants to go home," he said, catching up to her, "you're awfully anxious to get down to the beach."

"Well, the sooner we get sunstroke the sooner we'll be able to go home."

Gladys started down the rocky incline toward the beach. "Look at this," she said. "All these beer cans and broken glass everywhere. It never used to be like this."

Howard was not listening. Shielding his eyes, he was looking out over the beach like some far-eyed conqueror. The blue-green water broke in short, frothy bursts against the

white sand. There were gentle puffs of cloud and sailboats that seemed to be pinned to the horizon. All along the crescent of beach, shaped like a horseshoe between high granite outcroppings, tropical looking umbrellas and blankets blossomed under the hot sun. People with transistor radios were there in force. Responding to a primitive tribal urge, they lay in little groups bordered by their belongings: lunch baskets, thermos jugs, sandals and towels. All the gods and goddesses with perfect, overall tans.

A tall girl in a peppermint striped bathing suit pranced by, going just fast enough to be eventually overtaken by the two boys chasing her.

As she leaned against the granite boulders for support he noticed how Gladys' body had thickened with the years. She wasn't touching up her hair anymore either. Although she had tried to keep her weight down when Corrine and Erica were born, she seemed to have surrendered to nature after Todd. He moved down alongside her and, shifting the chairs under one arm, put his free arm around her waist. He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

"Howard Webster!" she said, sharply, pushing him away. "What's gotten into you? I think you've had too much sun already."

No sooner had they laid a territorial claim to one of the few remaining stretches of sand than Howard realized how young everyone was around them. Toddlers with plastic toys, teenagers parading in twos and threes, colonies of bronzed

young men and women with wrap-around sunglasses, an occasional young mother bouncing a sun-bonnetted baby in her lap.

Howard pulled his shirt down to cover the bulge of fat that spilled over the waistband of his tight bathing suit. He had put the suit on, impulsively, after finding it under a stack of shirts in the bottom drawer of his dresser. But he had gone searching for it, he reminded himself. He had planned to put it on as soon as he decided to come out here. "Who knows," he had said to Gladys in front of the bedroom mirror as he struggled to get it up over his hips. "I might just go in for a little dip." She had eyed him, skeptically. "You haven't been near the water in years," she said. Sitting now in one of the chairs, he pushed out his thin legs, tentatively, and worked his heels into the warm sand.

"I suppose you didn't even bring any lotion?" she asked, adjusting the brim of her enormous, straw hat.

"What?"

"Suntan lotion. Look at you. You're as white as a ghost. If you don't have some lotion on you'll crisp up like a strip of bacon."

Not far away three boys were wrestling a girl about Erica's age, in a pink blouse and blue jeans, toward the water.

"Don't," the girl screamed, savouring every minute of her ordeal. Her elbows were held high and juttied out, her body was arched back and she dug her heels, protestingly, into the sand as they dragged her to the water's edge. They got her into it up to her thighs. "Stop it," she squealed happily.

"Don't you dare throw me in!" They threw her in. She bobbed up, a delighted, dripping nymph, and started flailing them all with great silver sheets of water.

Howard smiled at the little drama, a ritual that must have been repeated, endlessly, on every beach since time began.

"It causes cancer anyway," his wife said.

"What does?"

"Too much sun. Causes skin cancer. I read it in the *Reader's Digest*."

She removed the rubber band which marked her place in her library book and took out her glasses from her straw beach bag. He had not brought anything to read although he had promised himself when he had time to get out some of his old college books and have a look at them again.

"I was thinking about an old prof of mine a couple of weeks ago," he said. "I was trying to give a little of the old fatherly advice to Toddie that he wasn't even interested in hearing. This guy gave a course in the Classics. His name was Devane. Everyone called him Father Divine. Wore the same rumpled charcoal suit all the time. Soft spoken with thick glasses and stooped shoulders. The original absent-minded professor. Everyone laughed at him. But he loved to teach. He had me reading Homer and Sophocles as if my life depended on it. Now I can't even get through a magazine."

"I still don't know why Toddie had to go to school up there. He could have gone to Dalhousie."

"He wanted U of T, Glad. It was his choice."

He turned and slowly scanned the beach again. He was disappointed too that his son had not decided on a Maritime university, perhaps to stay at home a little longer. His attention settled for a minute on a kid gouging the wet sand with a red, plastic shovel. When he was that kid's age he had wanted to be a pirate. When they visited his Aunt Monica she had always reached down the big conch shell from the mantle and, holding it against his ear, asked him if he could hear the sea. He would nod, his eyes wide, intent on the deep, hollow roar from within the shell. It was heavy. The inside was white and pink and pearly smooth. The outside was pitted, rough. He had loved his Aunt Monica. She always smelled of lilacs. She would give him chocolates, peppermints, from the glass dish on the table. When he had said he wanted to be a pirate everyone laughed. His Uncle Morton called it a noble ambition. And when Aunt Monica's little girl, Allison, had said she wanted to go with him on his pirate ship and hunt for buried treasure too, he had turned red and said, "Girls aren't allowed on pirate ships!" "I don't care," she said in a sing-song voice, bouncing on the sofa. "Pirates aren't real anyway. I'm going to marry a rich man when I grow up and have a million trillion dollars!"

He supposed that kids today wanted to be skydivers or astronauts. When he had asked Todd, who was a serious, industrious boy, his son had given him a slow, queer look and said, "Aw, come on, Dad, don't be so square!" At the airport he had not embraced his son, had not wanted to appear square. But

after shaking his hand and watching Todd disappear through the glass doors of the departure lounge, he had silently blessed his son and wished him well.

Two small boys came by on their way to the water. Howard grinned and called to them. "Hey, fellas, been in yet?" Their bathing suits were dry.

They stopped and observed him. Then one of them smiled and shook his head.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Go on in there and get those suits wet!"

Both boys gave him silent smiles, their eyes shifting to Gladys who sat stiffly in her chair with her head bent in the huge straw hat. Soon they moved on. Howard folded his arms and looked out at the blue water. Far out the sails were starched and white. A pirate. A noble ambition. He closed his eyes.

Devane was an old man even back then. He must have died years ago. Passed away. Gone. That was the word his mother had used referring to Aunt Monica. His mother certainly had had a flair for the dramatic. She had reminded him of Katherine Hepburn in those old movies with her keen, brittle intelligence and quick, nervous energy cajoling capable but reticent Spencer Tracy into high offices in the service of the nation. But his father had been no Spencer Tracy to play opposite her. At twenty-five he was all he would ever be, a small town hardware salesman. When his resistance became too strident and threatened to upstage her, his mother simply

went into the living room and played the piano in the dark. She had a way of editing the events of their lives, shaping them into a performance. He had been almost seventeen then. He remembered standing at the top of the stairs, a reluctant extra summoned to stage center from the sanctuary of his room. Looking down into her astonished face where she stood in the hall still holding the telephone in her hand. "Oh, my God, Howard," she had said, her hand moving to her throat as she caught her breath. "Your Aunt Monica's gone!"

Bob MacDougall was gone too. A month ago. He had not said a word about it to Gladys for fear she would worry that the same thing could happen to him. She was a worrier. She woke at night, worrying. He and Bob MacDougall were about the same age, he guessed, and had started at Ballantine Realities at around the same time. They had never been friends. MacDougall was loud, pushy, a back stabber. The office kidder who liked to think of himself as a lady killer. He wasn't kidding anyone now. He remembered the morning they were all told and the quiet that had suddenly fallen on the office as if the boss had just announced that there would be no Christmas bonus this year. At coffee break, Collins had tapped his breast pocket with a decisive finger. "Ticker," he had said, making a wry face. Howard remembered the moment because it was as if Bob MacDougall himself were launching into one of his off-colour jokes. "Ole Bob went out like a light. They say he was banging one of the girls down in the accounts department. He even had a waitress at one of the drive-ins on the string for

a while until his wife found out. All that fluff probably wore the old guy out."

Howard bent over and brushed away a black ant scurrying up his thigh. He had never been unfaithful. The only woman he had gone to bed with consulted the *Reader's Digest* for the terrible things that could happen to people who exposed themselves, senselessly, to too much sun. The mother of his three children. He had never been unfaithful. He wondered what that meant in this post-pill paradise where instant pleasure was only a swallow away.

A tall boy who had just jogged up from the water stood towelling himself above the bright yellow blanket on which his girlfriend sprawled luxuriously. She was wearing a scant, white string bikini and had caressed herself with oil until her brown skin shone wetly. She seemed annoyed by the boy's presence and the shredded droplets of water that sprang from his glistening skin. He grinned at her as he worked the towel down over his broad shoulders and the pale triangle of chest hair. Then, tossing the towel into a heap, he sank to her side, suddenly a slave eager to satisfy the whims of his queen.

To be young again, Howard thought, watching them. But when he had been young, he was not like them. He had not been good at games, was always relegated to being an awkward sideliner, thinking that life would come with being grown up just as now he seemed to think it went with being young.

Howard slumped back in his chair gazing down the long distance of years. He had never thrown himself, passionately,

at any woman's feet. Love, like life, had been a distant adventure, a rumor never allowed to fully reach his ears. He had drifted into marriage in much the same manner as he had drifted into the real estate business after college. He had to settle down, and he did what he thought was expected of him.

In his final year of high school though he might have thrown himself at the feet of Marion Spencer. But lacking the necessary aloofness, the casual flippancy of his generation, he could only allow himself to be eventually goaded by his older sister into tagging along on one of her weekend beach parties. He had had nothing better to do anyway. Marion Spencer was there but he couldn't understand why. She laughed less than the other girls. She was beautiful, tall and graceful, already a woman, while the others were still gangly adolescents. There was something different, excitingly superior, in the way she flipped her long dark hair back from her ears and sat hugging her knees. With the conviction of an honour student announcing that Stockholm is the capital of Sweden, he told himself that he loved Marion Spencer. He had inhaled the fragrance of her along with the salt air and had a sudden remembrance of the freckles going down from her bare shoulders into her black, bathing suit. He had been suddenly released from the net of giggling girls as they sat around that fading beach fire. The dimming light had seemed to catch him up in the spell of his own fantasies and dreams of love. But in those dreams he saw her racing away across the sand, evasive and female and pleased. And as she flung herself at her future, sur-

rounded by boys bolder than he would ever be, he caught a glimpse, painful and joyous, of the pageant that would always leave him behind.

Howard's hands jerked in his lap and blood rushed against his skin. Without knowing it he had become thirsty.

"I want something to drink," Gladys said suddenly. "An Orange Crush. No, a Seven Up. I want a Seven Up." She twisted around in her chair after depositing the book in her straw beach bag and gazed along the stretch of sand. "There's a canteen down there," she said. "Where that awning is. See it?"

The sunlight, stronger in the middle of the afternoon, drew his lids down. The sand at his feet, collected around a partially buried candy wrapper, seemed to separate into individual hardened grains that pricked his eyes.

"If you want something, go for it yourself!" The sudden harsh sound of his own voice surprised him. Had he really said that?

"And what are you going to do, Howard? Are you going to just sit there baking all day in this oven?"

Embarrassed, he did not answer.

Gladys stood up, brushing away sand and smoothing her cotton housedress. Staring at him from under the brim of her hat, she left him there and began to pick her way unsteadily through the sunbathers towards the white, clapboard canteen at the far end of the beach.

A girl reclining several yards away with her cheek resting

on her folded arms changed position, suddenly revealing a winter white gathering of flesh around her breasts. Then, arching her spine, she bent her arms behind her to re-fasten the bikini top. Her sunbleached hair fell forward across her face as she sat in a kneeling position, adjusting her breasts in the bra cups. Howard shifted in his chair and she quickly draped a towel around her naked shoulders. She stared directly at him, momentarily affronted, and then smiled appreciatively at his attention. He wanted to grin and wink at her like a beach boy acknowledging beauty but instead pretended to be searching for something in Gladys' bag.

The choked whimpering of the kid with the plastic shovel jarred him like a sharp blow against the side of his face. Collapsed in his drooping wet bathing suit sugared with sand, the kid watched, helplessly, as a bigger boy with a cigarette stuck behind his right ear, trampled the walls of his sandcastle.

"Come on," Howard said, with a sharp intake of breath. "That youngster is not doing anything to you!"

The boy eyed him boldly, measuring him. He plucked the cigarette from behind his ear and let his lips curl back in a derisive smile.

"Take it easy, eh Pops. You don't own the goddam beach!" He lit the cigarette, sending the burnt match spiralling from his fingertips and sauntered away, churning up the sand. Howard's eyes followed him, looking around to see if anyone was watching. Pops! He was only fifty-eight. What did that

kid mean calling him Pops!

He stared at the soggy remains of the sandcastle; the kid with the shovel was gone now too. He took off his shirt, folding it over the back of his chair and looked in the direction that Gladys had gone. She was no longer in sight. He should have gone after her, apologized for the testy way he had spoken. But sometimes she irritated him. Since the kids, Gladys had retreated from him sexually, had withdrawn into herself. He wanted to find something they had shared like those happy weekends at the beach. But they were unable to find it here, he realized now, and he no longer knew where to look.

Howard blinked and stood stiffly and pulled in his stomach. He had made up his mind to go into the water, at least to get his feet wet so the day would not be a complete loss. His legs were ridiculously thin and pale. He felt exposed and vulnerable and wished that he were wearing sunglasses to shield him for the ordeal of walking through the sun-bathers to the water's edge. His shoulders, lobster-red where the sun burned them, trembled in testy anticipation of second looks. But there were no second looks. There were no first looks. He was nothing more than a paunchy old duffer in a too tight bathing suit. Pops!

The sun dazzled his eyes. The umbrellas and beach blankets were brighter, gayer, bolder than ever. The volume of sound against his ears was like the roaring of a fire in a furnace. He knew that he had had too much sun. It lashed his back,

punished his arms and legs. The skin around his temples was drawn tight as if a chord were squeezing his skull.

There were tangled clumps of dried seaweed and brittle bits of broken shells. When he moved onto the wet sand, it felt wonderfully cool against his feet. A wave pushed by one behind it slid so far up the beach that his legs were delicately shocked and soaked. He pulled back, looking around, and then ventured forward again. He glanced down and for a few seconds his ankles glittered in the ripples of retreating water. A couple of toddlers with an inflated, polka dotted sea-horse pummeled the water nearby and the cold spray made him shiver. He edged slowly into the surf and each successive wave knifed against his hot skin.

Howard looked out over the undulating surface that ran to the horizon like a sheet of sapphire silk, studded with little barbed white sequins for sails. He was watching the billowing thrust of a small schooner in the middle distance when he suddenly observed the face in profile, the features as pure and delicate as a goddess on a coin. She appeared abruptly from nowhere, rising up out of the water like a vision. Her long, dark hair was swept back in the faint breeze. She was tall, slender, her arms and shoulders pale against the sculpted black bathing suit. Standing perfectly still in the water that rose up to her thighs. Solitary, alone, as if there were no connection between her and the frenzied activity of the beach. And then, suddenly, as though at something remembered, some impulse, with a hand on her hip, she turned the

upper part of her body in a beautiful, sweeping motion. She looked over her shoulder toward the shore and smiled at him as if he were the only one there.

Blood rushed through his body. A dull pain throbbed behind his eyes. Dazed by a dizzying panic, he moved out into the water that climbed up over his waist. The distance between them seemed to diminish and then she was even farther away. Seized by a longing that tugged at the net of his nerves, he had an urge to call out, to shout. But something closed the chords of his neck. He held out both stiff, trembling hands. He could feel his arms going around her. She was gone. Squinting against the sunlight that seared his eyes, he frantically searched the blue-green troughs of waves building to break against the shore.

He was dizzy. Falling. He felt the weight of water against his chest as a tight, coiled pain. He touched the ribbed bottom with his toes. The water wrapped around his throat. The pulse of the current caught at him. He thrashed out, flailing the water as if beating it into surrendering what it had taken.

"You're all right now."

"Take it easy, Pops."

Shouts. Voices. Calming voices. Voices that soothe a frightened child in the dark.

"We've got you now.. You're safe."

They thought he was drowning, drowning himself. Fear emptied his chest. He was waist deep now. His hair was drip-

ping, water running down his face. He trembled, pulling away from the grasping hands.

"She was there," he yelled. "Didn't you see! She was there!"

"There's nothing there, fella. Come on now."

"Wait. Please. Wait!" he called, stumbling forward, falling again.

"He's delirious."

"Get hold of him!"

The voices came distantly to him now like the deep hollow roar within a conch shell. He doubled over, coughing, retching on the salt water.

"Come on, Pops. It's a little late for a swim. Let's go back, eh?"

They had turned him around. He faced the beach again that seemed small and remote now with the beginnings of the soft, golden bronze of evening. The crowd had thinned and only a small curious group rimmed the sand above the low tide mark to watch what was going on. His steady, even breathing returned and the strength came back slowly to his legs. He looked straight ahead. Something had been released inside him, something that had pulled him down inside himself.

Gladys was there at the edge of the water being held back by two men. He felt a sting behind his eyes as he looked at her, pointing, gesturing, her face filled with fear. He wanted to go to her, embrace her, reassure her. He straightened up, brushing the water from his face, feeling cleansed.

Then he broke free of the voices and the grasping hands and, thrusting his legs out in front of him, he made his way back to the shore.