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**LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ
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Paper Dolls and Other Stories

James Douglas Willett

OA Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Paper Dolls and Other Stories

James Douglas Willett

Paper Dolls and Other Stories is a collection of eight short stories which are set, with one exception, in towns along the southern side of the Gaspé Peninsula, beginning at the neck of the Matapédia Valley and stretching along Chaleur Bay to Port Daniel.

The stories explore such themes as loneliness, loss of innocence and the discovery of evil. "J. Sweeny & Son - General Store" depicts the life of a lonely storekeeper trapped by circumstances and his own weaknesses. His situation is contrasted with that of tourists who are free to move about, and whom the storekeeper sees daily. Five other stories have youths as their central figure and deal almost exclusively with the loss of innocence. In each case, the secure world of childhood is lost because of a single tragic event, or a series of happenings.

"Paper Dolls" and "Lords of the Upper Floor" are narrated by college students remembering instances from their past. "The Elnu" deals with a Micmac, confronted with a hopeless dilemma. "Father Dolan's Miracle" presents an aging priest, revitalized as a result of an improbable miracle.

"The Good Neighbor" is the only story in the collection which does not share a common setting. It takes place in Montreal, but has as its main character the same adolescent who appears in "The Storm." The main characters in the stories presented here see their lives change radically because of their experiences. As a result, their lives can never be the same afterwards.

This thesis is dedicated to Ernie
who has always recognized the value
of hard work, and to Maureen and
Elizabeth who encouraged it.

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As the car crested the hill, Karen was startled by the beauty of the view which stretched out below her. She yelled at Mike to stop. Before the car had come to a complete halt, tires spewing gravel on the soft shoulder, she had her camera in hand and door open, ready to step out.

"Look," she cried. "Just look at this view, Mike. It's incredible! I've never seen anything like it." As she spoke, she indicated with a wave of her arm the scene about her.

At the bottom of the hill, a wharf, grey-white and piled high with lobster traps, extended into a small bay. The bay, green along the shore and deep blue at its center, was dotted with undulating specks of white, gulls riding the waves in search of bits of scrap thrown into the sea by fishermen cleaning mackerel on shore. Behind them, lining the rocky beach and draped over poles, hung heavy nets drying in the sun. The bay was framed by towering red cliffs on its far side. The horseshoe-shaped beach was strewn with driftwood.

To her left, Karen could see farmhouses and barns. The houses, painted white, had red or green roofs. The barns were mostly a weather-beaten grey; a few were painted red. Cattle and sheep grazed lazily on sloping, green pastures. Off in the distance, behind ripening corn and oat fields, was a thick stand of trees and the blue-blurred outline of

a mountain range. The outer edges of the mountains seemed fastened directly to the sky. Looking back towards the bay, Karen wondered how best to get an angled shot of the bay that would also include the natural slope of land into the sea.

By the time Mike had set the emergency brake and turned off the ignition, Karen had walked ahead and was leaning against a roadside telephone pole, absorbed by the scenery.

Mike caught up to her, nudged her shoulder and complained, "Sure is hot today, eh? Good thing the car's air conditioned. We'd really be sweating it out."

"Feel the breeze off the bay?" Karen inquired, without turning to look at him. "It's so fresh and clean. Salt and freshly cut hay. Sweet. Something else, too. Can't make out what it is."

"Manure," Mike responded, as a farmer drove by hauling a load of fertilizer behind his tractor.

Karen ignored the remark. She knew Mike was still upset with her because she had insisted they take a three day tour around the Gaspé peninsula, instead of attending the weekend dentistry convention in Hamilton. He'd been making silly remarks ever since they had begun their tour early yesterday morning. She decided she'd ignore his childishness a bit longer. He wasn't used to not getting his own way. He'd soon learn, though. She was determined that things would be different once she started working permanently with Corrine.

"God, it's beautiful. It's so peaceful," Karen gestured about her. Look at those clouds. What's that painting by Constable? Shit, I can't remember. C'mon Mike," she prodded, "you remember. We went to that exhibition at the Toronto gallery last April."

"I wasn't there," Mike replied; "you and Corrine went. I was in Vancouver. Remember, the big convention? They were illustrating new surgical procedures for..."

"Cloud Study. That's it! Cloud Study," Karen interrupted. "Look at them. They're like huge bunches of piled whiteness. If they're not Constable clouds, I don't know what is. You can almost reach out and touch them — I've got to get a shot of them. The light is absolutely perfect. A few more frames like this, and Corrine will have to use a couple for her book. She still needs some for the Quebec section."

"Karen," Mike noted, "I don't know if I'd take that travelogue of Corrine's too seriously. She has enough just to make ends meet at the photo studio. Why she encouraged you to take those photography courses last year, I'll never know. She can't afford to pay you..."

"For Christ's sake, Mike. Lighten up, will you? She's already given me lots of work taking portraits and stills. She's got a contract coming up with Eatons for a whole series of layout stuff. She's damn good at what she does, and her publisher said if she had the travelogue ready by September, they could get it out by Christmas. I don't

know what else you want. You don't want me to work full time, so I work on assignment for Corrine. It doesn't matter anyway. You're at the office until eight or nine every night."

"Karen, be fair now. You know how difficult it is to establish a practise. And I thought we agreed you wouldn't work until Jennifer was old enough for regular school. I don't like the idea of her being with your mother."

"You didn't want day care. Besides, Mother's great with kids, and you know it. She raised five of them, didn't she? Jennifer is just as well off with her. It's only three mornings a week, Mike, for crying out loud." She didn't bother to tell him that Corrine wanted her full time once the Eatons contract was signed. She had learned that it was better to feed things to Mike in small doses. He was a bit like Jennifer in that respect, she thought. She'd already arranged for day care next month. She'd tell him that, too, when the time was right.

Gulls swooped against the blue of the sky, skimmed along the tops of the far cliffs, and dipped sharply over the bay. Even from this distance, Karen could hear their high-pitched calls. She watched the clouds sail by above them. Sighing, she returned to the car. Mike was already sitting in the passenger seat, impatiently thumbing through the latest edition of the Canadian Dental Journal. Slipping behind the wheel, Karen released the emergency brake and pulled off the shoulder onto the road.

"Drive carefully," Mike cautioned her without looking

up from his reading; "I think the car already has a few scratches from the gravel."

Karen gripped the steering wheel with both hands. She didn't like the BMW. Mike had insisted they buy it because it, "Helps to look successful." She had been perfectly happy with the old VW Rabbit. It suited her just fine. Now she rarely drove at all. Mike wouldn't let her take the new car downtown. He was worried she'd scratch the paint or something. She still felt Mike had traded because it made getting to Corrine's shop more difficult for her. Just the same, she felt guilty thinking him capable of such a thing. But it would be just like him, she realized; he liked the idea of her barefoot, pregnant, and all that crap. She tried to steal furtive glances at the rolling landscape, but every time she looked about, Mike saw her from the corner of his eye and told her to keep her eyes on the road. She felt he was punishing her by making her drive. He knew she couldn't look for good shots from behind the wheel.

At the sharp turn at the hill's base, Karen lost sight, momentarily, of the wharf. It was obscured by a row of tall elms which bordered the road. Bolted to one of the trees was a hand-painted sign. Karen could just make out the faded black lettering: "J. Sweeny & Son - General Store."

"Pit stop, Mike," she announced, as she pulled suddenly into the gravel driveway. "I'm thirsty and I need more film. They should carry 35mm here."

Mike yelled at her not to turn so sharply on the gravel:

"The rocks kick up and chip the paint," he explained.

"Yes, I know," she answered.

Karen swung her long, slim legs out from under the steering column. As she stood and glanced about, she noticed that the tip of the wharf was visible from between a tree and the end of a storage shed. At least she assumed it was a storage shed. It was too small to be a home, and it was painted a yellow just like the store, as well as a couple of smaller sheds. The bay seemed a deeper green from here. The smell of salt was stronger than at the hilltop, and the cry of gulls more distinct, although she couldn't see any. She smelled hay, and again the same odor she couldn't detect when they had first stopped. There was another sound, too, coming from somewhere behind them, a shrill creaking which seemed to stop and start again every few seconds. Glancing back towards the road, she noticed the signboard swinging from its rusted hinges. Karen shivered. She felt goose-bumps on her arms and legs. It was the same reaction she had whenever someone twisted a spoon in a sugar bowl, as Mike sometimes did, at the breakfast table. She shivered all the more just thinking about it.

* * * * *

Vincent Sweeny watched through the smudged and dusty store window as the dark blue BMW glided into view. He noted the Ontario licence plate. As the girl stepped slowly from the car, Vincent felt his interests sharpen. She was tall. Her long brown hair was collected into a pony tail.

It seemed to suit her. She was wearing a light top, jean shorts and sandals. He watched her as she looked about. She was very pretty.

The bell hanging just above the door frame rang as Karen pushed open the heavy, wooden door. Vincent watched her step inside, blinking, in an attempt to adjust to the cool inner darkness after the sun's bright warmth. Vincent felt a familiar stirring as she stood silhouetted in the doorway. Her tanned legs seemed strangely luminous with the light from the opened doorway pouring in behind her. Vincent could see the outline of her breasts through the thin material of her blouse.

"Anyone here?" Karen called out, stepping deeper into the store. Seeing Vincent, she smiled and walked towards him. She had a friendly smile. Her face seemed to light up with it.

"Do you carry 35mm film?" she asked.

"Yes, I do." He smiled back at her. "Black and white, or colour?"

"Hmm..." she thought for a moment, "give me ten rolls. Five of each, please."

"And some cokes, too," Mike called from just inside the doorway.

Vincent, unaware of Mike's presence, was surprised by the sound of his voice.

"Where's the cooler?" he demanded. "All right, never mind, I see it now."

"What town is this?" Karen asked, watching Vincent count the rolls of film.

"Port Daniel. It's pronounced 'Purdanyul' around here, though." Vincent tried not to stare at Karen's breasts as she leaned over the counter towards him, resting her elbows on its glassed top.

"It's very pretty. Smells nice, too. I could smell the salt air from the bay and the freshly cut hay. There was something else though. A sweet odor. Familiar, somehow, but I couldn't pick it out."

"Oh, that's probably coming from the saw mill. Fresh cut lumber and slab wood. Sort of a mixed smell of pine and sawdust. You can't see the mill from the old road, but if you follow the new one back, you'll see it. Halfway up the hill. It's not running today. There was an accident there yesterday, so it's closed for a few days. Usually can hear the whine of the saw down here."

"Well, that explains the scent, then."

"Where you from anyway?" Vincent asked, not really caring too much, but wanting to keep her there, leaning over the counter, close to him a little longer. She smelled good. Some kind of perfume, and the smell of Noxzema as well.

"Toronto...well, Mississauga actually."

"Oh, yeah? Nice place," he replied, remembering how much he disliked it. "Been there a few times. Used to drive my mother up to see my aunt before she died."

"Your mother...sorry," Karen replied.

"No, no...mother is fine. She'll live forever. Aunt died. Cancer." As Vincent placed the film on the counter, two rolls fell to the floor. Bending to pick them up, he found his eye level with her breasts.

Karen straightened up, a little smile on her face, yawned and looked around her. She realized that Vincent had been watching her since she walked into the store. She was a little annoyed, but pleased at the same time. Mike hadn't looked at her in that way for a long time.

"Geez," she said, "this store is quite old, isn't it?" She hoped he would tell her a bit about the place. She was already thinking of taking a few shots from outside, and some local colour might help in deciding how best to frame the shot. She liked hearing about old things, and talking to country people was interesting. Their lives were so different. She wondered what it was like living in a small place where one knew everything about everyone else. Besides, she reasoned, the longer we talk, the more impatient Mike will get. She had decided to annoy him for a while.

"Well," Vincent responded, "I guess you could call this place old. It was built over a hun' red and twenty years ago. This used to be the post office. My grandfather ran it. When he lost the gover'nment contract, he turned it into a store. My father took over when he died. My turn, now. As you can see, we carry a little bit of everything: hardware, groceries and clothes. Shed out front is used to

store feed and stuff. People around here don't have much use for them there big department stores. New one up the bay a bit, at Paspébiac. You must've passed it a while back. Families been comin' here for generations. This used to be a pretty good tourist stop a while back, but business dropped off when they put the new road through. Don't get more than two, three cars a day now. Too much trouble. Everyone's in such a hurry. No time for side roads."

"I guess that's true enough," Karen agreed. "I suppose your boy will take over from you. Make it four generations."

"No, 'fraid not. I'm not married. Just my mother and me here. Probably sell the place when she dies."

"She's going to live forever, remember?" Karen smiled.

"Ah, yes," Vincent laughed, "ain't that a sorry fact?"

"Karen," Mike broke in, "we'd better get going. I'd like to get to Percé by dinner time."

"Percé," Vincent exclaimed, "I don't see why everyone's in such a rush to see a big rock with a hole in it. I suppose it's okay, but you want to see something real nice, you go out to the point here. We gotta nice lighthouse there. Sits right atop a' eighty foot cliff and stares at the A'lantic. Nothing but rocks, water, and birds. You can see forever. Surf pounds her heart out, and spray flies all over. If you look in this way, you can see the bay and almost the whole of Port Daniel as it stretches along the shore line. Better'n Percé any day of the week, I'll wager. Course, I haven't been out there myself in years, but I hear

the town council fixed it pretty..."

"I don't know," said Mike. "We really..."

"Would love to see it," interrupted Karen. "Where is it, exactly?"

"Well," answered Vincent, "go back the way you came a bit. Take your first left, a gravel road, and drive until the road stops. Follow the dirt path; it'll lead you right to the base of the lighthouse."

"Gravel road," Karen responded, her face beaming. "It sounds absolutely perfect. Bet I'll get some great shots, too." Already she could picture Mike's face as the BMW navigated the dirt road, kicking up sharp stones at every turn.

"You'll get lots of great pictures," Vincent claimed.

"Come on outside," Karen asked. "I'd love to get a shot of you in front of your store."

"Mother's store," Vincent laughed, "I just work here."

"Be yours one day, though."

"Doubt it," Vincent smiled. "Remember, we've agreed, mother will live forever."

Karen, laughing, led Vincent around the counter. He could feel her fingers touching the soft flesh of his upper arm. Her hand felt warm and soft. At the doorway, he stopped and let her go ahead. As she stepped into the yard, he admired her firm bottom, cupped in tight shorts.

Once outside, blinded by the sudden light, Vincent blinked and allowed himself to be lined up beside the sign-

board. Karen, in framing the shot, asked Mike to move the car.

"Wouldn't do to have a brand new BMW in a picture beside a building that's over a hundred years old, now would it?"

"A hundred and twenty," Vincent corrected. He stood patiently, smiling, grateful that the sun was once again behind Karen. Looking at her body, he wished they could stand there forever.

"Strange looking fellow, isn't he?" Mike said, comfortably settled in the driver's seat. "Looks a little like an oversized mole, squinting and grinning in the sunlight. Has an overbite, too. Did you see?"

"That all you notice, Mike, other people's bicuspid?"

"Not all he noticed, though, eh? I saw him ogling you. You put on some show, too. Leaning over, so he could see down your top. You were just trying to get me pissed off. I know you. Well, it didn't work."

Karen didn't say anything. She was looking out the window, smiling. She tried to picture what a gravel road might do to the paint of a new BMW. She watched for the turn-off to the lighthouse.

* * * * *

"Vincent, Vincent?" The shriek of his mother's voice coming from the passageway into the kitchen behind him made him jump. Vincent cursed softly and turned away from the window where he'd been watching for the BMW.

"Yes, Mam, what is it?"

"Who was that? I thought I heard the bell a while back. Hope it wuz the Cormiers to pay their account."

"No, Mama. It wasn't. Just a couple of tourists. Bought some film and a couple of drinks."

"Well, if Marie Cormier comes in today, don't you give her any more credit. I checked the books yesterday. She owes almost seventy dollars now. Your faddur never let anyone go past fifty, tops."

"I know, Mama. You tole me all this yesterday. You always tell me the same damn'd thing."

"Don't you swear, Vincent. You been lettin' the bills run up again. And 'nother thing, the store's a durn'd mess. Needs to be mopped and the windows cleaned. Poor John, rest his soul, if he could see the place now."

"I'll do it, Mama. I'll do it. Just as soon as I can get some free time." Vincent wished she'd wear her upper plate. She slurred certain words without it. He was finding it more difficult to control his temper with her. She seemed to get more demanding every year. He wished his sisters had come home this summer. At least with Rose and Anna here, she seemed more distracted and left the store to him. Maybe she'll decide to visit them next month for a couple of weeks, he hoped.

"Free time...free time my foot. You sit behind that counter like you grow'd roots. You mind what I says now. When Elma-Mae McPherson comes in, you send her right on through to the front parlor. She's suppos'd to come by to help with that quilt I'm working on fer next month's bazaar."

Vincent said nothing. At least she had changed dresses.

It was better than the tattered yellow one she usually prowled around in. It was the last gift his father bought her before he died. It had been a bright, flower-print once, but too many washings and constant wearing had turned it into a shroud. Christ, he thought, she'll be eighty-three next month, and she's got more energy than I ever had. He wished she'd sit down and stay quiet for a day or so. She was beginning to get on his nerves.

"Vincent, Vincent, goldurn you. I'm talking to you. Stop yer ev'rlasting dreamin' and wake up!"

"I'm awake, Mama. I was jus' thinking. Why don't you wear some of the dresses Anna and Rose send you?"

"Dresses, you call them dresses? New-fangled styles. Zippers up the backs. Wrong coloured prints. Never the right size. Yer faddur always got the right size and style. Buttons on the front or back, not zippers that pinch yer skin."

Vincent bit back a reply, knowing further argument was useless. She hadn't worn anything new since the day his father died twelve years ago.

"Twelve years ago," he muttered. "That's hard to believe. Plus the five when he first got sick. Shit - I was twenty..."

"Vincent, Vincent! What you muttering about? Can't hear a thing yer saying. Tell Elma-Mae when she comes in where to find me. Don't forget..." her voice trailed away as she turned and walked back through the dark passageway.

Vincent wished she'd leave the store-minding to him.

The customers were beginning to make fun of her. It wasn't anything too obvious, yet. Just slight smiles and sly winks, especially between Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Culver, the old gossips. They giggled and poked one another whenever they saw her checking the account books, or heard her nattering away about one thing or another. He found it all a little embarrassing. He was still thinking about his mother when the door bell broke the quiet of the store.

"Dearie, dearie," cried Mrs. McPherson. "Lordy, it's dark in here. You're gonna hafta put in more lights, Vincent. I'm gonna fall one day, sure as God Almighty made little green apples. I'm gonna trip over somethin'!"

'Half-blind old fart,' Vincent mumbled, still annoyed by his mother's interference. 'Break your dearie old neck for all I care.' Louder, he called out, "Here, let me help you 'round the freezer. Careful now," he cautioned. "Watch your step."

Vincent led her down the narrow, darkened corridor, through the kitchen, past the dining room, and into the parlor which looked out towards the bay. Depositing her in his father's favorite wicker chair, directly opposite his mother's bentwood rocker, Vincent glanced out the window. Through a gap in the thick foliage of the front yard maple, he could see old Sandy McPherson rowing for shore. He knew it was Sandy because he was always the last one in, a good two hours behind everyone else. Vincent watched as he laboured over his oars and felt sorry for him. Probably the only bit of

peace and quiet he gets, he thought. Can't blame him for not hurrying in. Turning away from Elma-Mae, he started for the parlor door.

"Thanks, dearie," she cooed.

"Be a good boy, Vincent, and get us a cup of tea, would you?" his mother asked sweetly.

"Black, dearie, not too strong now, and just a little sugar," said Mrs. McPherson, settling deeper into the chair.

"Now, dearie," Vincent heard her say, "do you know what Alice told me last week 'bout Isabel Jones. No, well, I declare."

* * * * *

Vincent stood in the center of the high-ceilinged store, a mop hanging loosely in one hand and an aluminum pail, full of hot, soapy water, held firmly by its wire handle in the other.

"Let's see," he muttered to the mop, "twice a week for seventeen years. Judas H. Priest. That's a lot more than I care to figure out." The wire handle cut into the soft flesh of his right palm. He opened his hand and the pail crashed to the floor. Water splattered on the cuffs of his tan slacks and the toes of his green, plaid slippers.

"Seventeen years a doing this." Shaking his head, he gestured with the mop about the store. He stood for a moment, waving the mop about. Sighing loudly, he placed the mop's head under his left elbow and leaned against it. "Sure would be nice," he spoke softly, "to have someone like

that girl who was in here today to talk to. -Could help out in here, too." He remembered her smile and the way she looked standing in the doorway with the light all around her.

The rounded end of the mop slipped along the smooth surface of the floor. Stumbling, Vincent managed to regain his balance. "Damn," he mumbled, walking to the back of the store, "sure was a beautiful lady. Wonder where they're at now?"

He always started his mopping up in the hardware section. He liked the smell of the oiled leather goods hanging from their hooks, and the faint gleam of the screws and nails as they peered out from their rows of numbered bins. Noticing that they were running low on fence staples, he made a mental note to get more from the storage shed.

Just as he had taken the first swipe at a dusty corner, the bell jangled, "Damn that door," he cursed. Recognizing little Danny Cormier, Vincent put down the mop and walked quickly towards him.

"How's your father today, old buddy? He staying off that busted leg of his?" Vincent asked.

"It's purty sore, Vince. Père, he sez, 'the ol' leg garçon, she not wot she use to be. She hurts lak red-hot poker shov'd up th' derrière.' He sez he not gonna stand unner no mo' goddam'd arbres, at least not wiles that ol' fou Henri, he cuts da wood."

Vincent, laughing, asked, "Well, what can I do for you? As you can see, young man, the store is entirely yours. Just want to browse, go ahead. You can talk to me while I finish swabbing the deck."

"Non, non, Vince. Mère, she in auffle hurry. She write down t'ings for me to get. She sez you chargé t'em to her 'count, okay?"

"That's fine, Danny. You tell your mother, not to worry. Charge as much as she needs to. Your dad'll pay whenever he can. Remember, this afternoon you have to do the store windows. I'll give you the contract for the summer. Inside and out, once a week. I'll pay you five bucks for it. DEAL?"

"Deal! You wantta shakes?" Danny asked, extending his hand across the counter. Vincent had to lean forward to reach it.

"Take some of those," Vincent ordered, checking the passageway for his mother before pointing to the open bubble gum jar, "for your brothers and sisters. And here, here's an apple for you to eat while I fill the order."

"Sure t'ing, Vince," Danny replied, wiping his hands on his T-shirt before reaching into the gum jar. "T'anks, t'anks a lot."

Vincent, busy in the canned goods section, watched as Danny grabbed a second apple from the top of the basket and jammed it into his jeans' pocket. That one's for Alphonse, Vincent thought.

"Hey," Vincent called out and laughed as Danny jumped and looked up, frightened, "isn't that the same leg Alphonse broke a couple of years ago?"

"Sure t'ing, Vince. In th' hiver, th' ol' black mare,

she kick heem purty good." Danny shoved the bubble gum, except for a single black one, into another pants' pocket. Vincent watched as he rolled the black ball between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. Tossing it into the air, Danny bent his head back and caught it expertly between his teeth. He sucked at it until all colour was drained from it and then pushed the gum, like a wad of tobacco, with his tongue and right thumb, until it fitted comfortably on the inside of his left cheek.

"Here you go, Danny. Sure you can carry this bag? It's pretty heavy."

"I be fine, Vince. Père, he sez I strong lak bull, jus' lak heem."

"All right, I'll open the door for you. Tell your father to stay off that leg now, you hear? It won't heal properly if he tries to work on it."

"I tell heem, Vincent. He lak you. I make heem listen bien à moi."

Vincent watched Danny through the store window. Struggling with the groceries, Danny wrapped both arms around the bag and hugged it close to his chest. Vincent smiled at the bulges in Danny's pockets. "Enough bubble gum," Vincent laughed, "to last the week."

Just as Danny reached the roadside, a blue car flashed by. Vincent was sure it was the BMW. He wondered how they liked the lighthouse. He knew they were there long enough to get a few good pictures. He smiled at the memory of the

girl leaning towards him over the counter.

Vincent whirled around at the sound of metallic clattering and the cries of Mrs. McPherson and his mother. "Oh, Christ," he yelled, "the bloody mop and pail."

"I tole you, dearie. I said I was gonna fall in here," cried Mrs. McPherson, struggling to her knees. "It's too dark, Vincent, I tole you so! I just hope I haven't brok'n anything. Oh dear, look, my stocking. It's torn. I'm bleedin'. My leg is cut. Vincent, call Dr. Campbell."

"It's okay," soothed Vincent, helping her to her feet and sitting her in a captain's chair beside the bread rack. "You've just scratched yourself a little. I'll get the iodine. I'm terribly sorry."

"Durn'd fool thing to do, Vincent," his mother scolded. "Leavin' a pail and mop like that in the passageway. Yer faddur wouldn't of done that. The neighbours 'll think it's not safe to come into the store. Could of been me, too. Yer gettin' awful careless of late, Vincent. Awful careless."

Vincent picked up the discarded mop and wiped up the spilled water. Holding the head of the mop over the pail, he slowly twisted it between his clenched fists. He knew his mother was right. He was absent-minded lately. He spent more time daydreaming than anything else. He didn't know why. He thought of Eileen. It was the first time he had thought of her in a long while. Maybe it was because of that girl today. The way she smiled. She reminded him a little of Eileen.

The doorbell clanged. Vincent straightened up slowly, wiping his hands along the sides of his trousers as he did so. He put the mop and pail in their nook beside the telephone.

A man, wearing white Bermuda shorts and a red sport shirt, squinted in his direction. A 'Snappy 20' Canon dangled from the strap around his neck.

"Can I help you, sir?" Vincent called out to him.

"Yes, I'm afraid we're a little lost. Irma - my wife - was supposed to watch for directions. Gave me a wrong turn somewhere. We're heading for Percé. Could you tell me how to get back on track?"

"Certainly," replied Vincent, "just keep going east along this road, about a mile further along you'll come to the 132 junction. That'll take you right there. About an hour or so from here, all told."

"Thanks, thanks a lot."

Vincent watched through the window as the man squeezed behind the wheel. The camera got tangled between the wheel and his belly, and he angrily tore it from his neck and threw it on the seat beside him. Saying something to the woman beside him and shaking his head vigorously, he spun the car back on the highway heading west. Vincent waited a few minutes and the car, a green Oldsmobile, sped by, this time going east.

Just as the car disappeared around a corner, his mother, whispering apologies, helped Mrs. McPherson to the door. A

half hour later when his mother called him for lunch, he was still standing staring out the window.

"You kno' what Elma-Mae tole 'bout that Isabel Jones down at the station?" his mother asked between mouthfuls of Irish stew.

"No, what did she say?" Vincent asked, half-listening.

"Well, it seems she done got herself pregnant."

"I doubt very much if she done it all herself, Mama."

"You know what I mean, Vincent. Don't you be cute, now. Some say it's the young Culver boy that's 'sponsible. And here his mama wanting him to be a priest."

"Guess she'll have to settle for a minister, now."

"That's not funny, Vincent. Bad enough he got her pregnant. You don't have to joke about him losing his religion, too."

"Mama," Vincent said, "I'm really not interested in all the local gossip today."

"All right, Vincent, never mind. Here," she said, handing him a cup of tea.

Vincent lifted the cup to his mouth and drank. Gasping, he spat the tea back into the cup.

"Too hot, son?" his mother asked sweetly. "Here, take this water fer it. Kno' what else Elma-Mae said?" Without waiting for a response she continued, "They want to get married, but Father Sullivan won't marry them. Elma-Mae said it 's because they had relations before..."

"For God's sake," Vincent yelled, "will you stop the

blasted gossip. A couple of old hens cluckin' away. How the hell does Elma-Mae know..."

"Don't you swear..."

"I'll damn well swear if'n I want to. You make me so dam'd mad sometimes, Mama. All this gossip...nothing but half-truths and outright lies. You got nothin' better to do. You and Elma-Mae McPherson."

"See here now, Vincent!"

"Oh, c'mon, Mama, you know it's true. Half of what you hear, you'll discover tomorrow; was someone's invention. And the other half 'll be badly exaggerated. It was the same with Eileen."

"Eileen! You still upset by all that? Vincent, that was before your father even died," his mother looked at him in surprise. "That's what been bothering you lately? Eileen?"

Vincent didn't say anything more. He ate the rest of his meal in silence. His mother cleaned up the dishes, but before she retreated to the parlor she reminded him, "The floor, Vincent. You still haven't finished mopping the store. And the windows, too. I don't know how you can see out them. They're full of grime and dust."

Once safely inside the passageway, Vincent took the scrub pail and filled it once more. He shoved the mop along dusty baseboards and over the hardwood floor. He was still mopping twenty minutes later, sweat running down his back and wetting the top of his pants, when Danny came in to

start cleaning the windows. He barely spoke to the boy, being so annoyed with his mother. She was right again. His peculiar behavior lately was because of Eileen. He'd been trying not to think of her. He hadn't thought of her that much in the last few years. He was surprised that it could still bother him sometimes as much as it once did. Vincent was sure he'd gotten over everything, but the old feelings came rushing back today. He was sure it was because of that girl this morning. She looked so nice and was so friendly. He wondered what it would have been like to be married. And maybe to have a boy, like Danny, to take over some day. That was bothering him, too. Who'd take over the store when he was old and sick? The sound of the door bell interrupted his reverie.

* * * * *

Vincent enjoyed this part of the day most of all. With the store closed for the night, time was finally his own. He knew, without looking at the electric clock hanging on the wall by the passageway entrance, that it was exactly ten minutes after eight. Flicking off the lights in the store, he carefully walked through the darkened passageway into the yellowed light of the kitchen. He checked the side and front doors of the house to make sure they were locked securely. The doors were seldom used and in all the nights he had checked them, he had never found them unlocked. He had never considered not checking them; it had become part

of his routine, and not doing it always ended in his having to come back downstairs again just to make sure some invisible force hadn't slid the deadlocks from their moorings.

Shutting off the kitchen light, Vincent crept up the back stairway to his bedroom which was directly over the kitchen. He was careful on the eighth step: it was loose and creaked loudly if treaded on unevenly. The last thing he wanted was to wake his mother who stirred at the slightest sound. He placed the toe of his right foot gently against the edge of the step, close to the wall, and slowly allowed the full weight of his body to rest on his arched foot. Cautiously, he raised his left foot until it rested precisely in the middle of the ninth step. Transferring the weight from his right foot onto his left, he heard the stair groan quietly. Sighing with relief, Vincent walked up the remaining four steps into his room.

Light from the quarter moon filtered through a window and splashed in uneven patterns throughout his room. Standing as he was at the head of the stairs, Vincent could see the crescent through the window. Walking to the window, he stood for a moment looking out over the bay. The angular shadow of the wharf reached out to sea, its beacon gyrating weak yellow flashes. In a continuous cycle of light and darkness, gleaming breakers dipped, disappeared and rolled back into view again. Vincent usually felt comforted by the sight of it, but tonight he felt only a vague feeling of unease.

Standing at the window and staring out into the darkness, he wondered where the girl had stopped for the night. "Probably at Ste-Anne-des-Monts, or Matane." He spoke quietly; "they're probably following the St. Lawrence up as far as Montreal. No sense in them coming back this way. They've already seen everything along the Chaleur Bay. What did he call her? Kara, no...it was Karen. She had a quality about her, just like Eileen. Made you feel good jus' being in the same room with her."

He turned away from the window; as he did so, he bumped into the redwood bureau and knocked a book to the floor. Instantly, his mother's voice called out from her room next to his. "Vincent, is that you, Vincent?"

Vincent didn't answer. He knew she'd fall back to sleep in a minute or two. Being next to her, he had learned how to walk about his room without causing the floor boards to creak. If they did, she was awake and wondering what he was doing. He'd considered moving into Rose and Anna's old bedroom at the far end of the house, but he couldn't see the bay from there or the lights from the lighthouse at night. Besides, he liked the breeze off the bay. He could smell the salt air now. He could also detect the faint odor of cut hay off the fields and the sawdust from the mill. All these things had become familiar to him. Moving into another bedroom would just have upset his routine. Besides, he considered, his mother slept better when she knew he was in his room. If he changed bedrooms, she'd be awake half the

night. He'd rather her sleeping in the next room than walkin' about all night. He wondered how lonely she felt since his father's death. That was why she poked around so much; she didn't have anyone else to talk to, except Elma-Mae. She and father used to talk for hours. Hadn't he listened to them every night since he was a child?

Vincent stared at his reflection in his dresser mirror. He rested his arms across the bureau top and studied the face peering back at him. It seemed the older he got, the more he looked like his father. His face was smooth-skinned. Darkening circles under his eyes were made worse by the shadowed room. His chin, the Sweeny chin, was doubling and his receding hair looked even thinner than it was. Tilting the mirror downward at a slight angle, Vincent backed away from it. His body was pear-shaped and flabby. He hadn't taken much care of himself since he and Eileen broke up.

"You, Vincent," he spoke to the mirror, "you were too much of a coward to go with her. What kept you? Rose, Anna, and Mama. All their talk of responsibility to father, to the store. Where are Rose and Anna now?" he asked the dark reflection. "Comfortable," he saw it answer, "with their families a thousand miles from here. Christ," he called out louder, "it's not their fault. Can only blame myself."

He turned away from the mirror and walked to his reading chair in the far corner and slumped into it. The ticking of his alarm clock seemed loud in the sleeping house.

"Forty soon," he whispered to the floor. His throat felt dry. He sure was feeling peculiar lately. He felt he was losing control. "This is foolish," he whispered again. Vincent wanted a drink of cold water, but he knew the sound of the cold water pipes in the bathroom would reawaken his mother. He reached across to the small table beside his chair for his water glass. As he raised it to eye level, the light from the window revealed a little left in it from the night before. The warm water tasted a bit stale, but it wet his throat, and he felt better. The ticking of his clock seemed to grow louder in the stillness about him.

Vincent leaned back in his chair, the nape of his neck pressing against the top edge of it. His legs felt cramped and he stretched them straight out. Closing his eyes, he tried to ignore the clock's ticking. It stopped suddenly; he had forgotten to wind it again. The sound was replaced by an angry buzzing. A house fly, trapped on the sticky fly paper hanging near the window from the ceiling, struggled to free itself. Vincent got up from his chair and walked over to it. Reaching up, he gently eased the fly from the trap. Cradling it in the closed palm of his left hand, he could feel the fly's wings beating feebly against the walls of his hands. He opened the window wider and slipped open the screen. A slight breeze brushed against him. Slowly, he relaxed his curled fingers. He watched as the fly felt the breeze and flew off into the night.

Crossing the room to his bed, Vincent sat down heavily

on its edge. With hands folded between his knees, he looked as though he was going to pray.

"I should have left with her," he mumbled to the floor. "I should have gone away with Eileen. It wasn't Mama's fault. It was mine. I should have known they'd never accept her. Her being Protestant and older. I wonder how old her son would be now, thirteen or fourteen I guess. Sure was a cute kid, though. Looked just like Eileen with his blue eyes and blond hair.

"Eileen," he mumbled again. "I shouldn't 've let them talk me into staying. She sure couldn't 've moved in here. Mama wouldn't 've given her a moment's peace. Eileen knew that. I didn't then. I should have insisted on it, though. I was afraid. That's it. I was afraid. 'Fraid to take a chance. Now look at me!"

Undressing quickly, his clothes falling in a pile on the floor, Vincent crawled into bed and pulled the cotton sheet up to his chin. Running his hands over his rounded belly, he closed his eyes and tried to picture Eileen naked beside him. But he couldn't picture her clearly. Instead, he saw Karen outlined in sunlight. Imagining the touch of her breasts against him, a sensation, strong in him now, caused him to moan softly. His right hand moved between his legs as he breathed in short gasps. Karen floated in front of him, bending towards him, smiling. Taut against the thin material, he could see her nipples. Turning, she walked away from him. He watched the sway of her hips as they moved,

slowly, up and down, back and forth.

Outside, the clouds which had shrouded the moon moved away, and a stream of light from the window danced across the bed.

* * * * *

Karen had just finished arranging her picture display out on a studio table when Corinne came in.

"Finished?" she asked, smiling.

"All done," Karen answered. "Come and take a look."

"God, you've got some great shots here, kid," Corinne said enthusiastically as she studied them. Absently, she asked, "By the way, how's Mike? He recovered from the trip? The office still there when he got back?"

Karen laughed, "Oh, yes. He's still catching up on postponed surgery. Says our mini-vacation set him back a month. He forgot he had planned to go to that Hamilton convention. I reminded him. He's having the BMW repainted. Seems the rough gravel roads we travelled on chipped a bit of paint. But he's happy. Got a call yesterday. They want him to present a paper on root canal work next month in Montreal. He's tentatively titled it, "Canal Work Without Trauma."

Corinne laughed, "Real exciting stuff, eh? I can't figure out how you two got together."

"Can't either," Karen replied. "He's okay, really, Corinne. It's just that he loves dentistry. When I told

him you'd signed the Eaton contract and I'd be working full time, he damn near swallowed his caps. He's over the shock now, though. He even likes Jennifer's day care. They've asked him to demonstrate good dental hygiene to the kids."

"Look at this, Karen," Corinne instructed. "The colour in this shot is fantastic."

"Yes, it's a good one. It's taken from a little place past Percé, Coin-du-Banc. It gives an unusual view of Percé Rock from a distance. The sky's so blue. The contrast between sky, rock and beach is really quite amazing. And here," Karen explained, holding up a picture of three hills. "They're called 'The Three Sisters,' I think. Magnificent, aren't they?"

"Certainly are phallic, dear," Corinne smiled. "Is that why you took them from the beach looking straight up?"

"This one's my favorite," Karen said, ignoring Corinne's comment, and pointing to the shot of the lighthouse. "It's from a coastal fishing village, Port Daniel, or 'Purdanyul', as the locals call it. Had a lot of fun getting that one. Least I did; Mike wasn't too excited about it, though. We had to crawl down those cliffs and wade out to a huge boulder. Spray soaked us. Took the shot looking up towards the lighthouse from the water. Looks like it was taken from a passing ship, or something, doesn't it?"

"It sure is rugged," Corinne acknowledged. She studied it intently. The lighthouse seemed to perch precariously right on the edge of the cliff. The whiteness of its paint

gave the illusion of life. Gulls circled high above its, glassed dome. She thought it might do for the lead picture in the Quebec chapter of her travelogue.

"It was a beautiful spot, Corinne. I think Mike even thought so. I just stood on that cliff and breathed. The whole Atlantic's spread out there. I didn't want to leave it. It was so peaceful." Karen smiled thinking about it.

"What about this one?" Corinne asked, pointing to the picture of the store and Vincent standing in front of it.

"Oh, that's the storekeeper that told me about the lighthouse. He kept trying to look down my blouse. Friendly sort of fellow. Seemed a little lonely, though. Loved to talk." Karen picked up the picture. Vincent stared back at her. The store was centered well, but there were too many shadows in the background. She was about to throw it out, but something about it made her hesitate. There was a strange, haunting vulnerability about the old building. There was even a faint suggestion of it in the storekeeper's face. They seemed to complement each other, somehow. She carefully placed it back in the pile with the others. Corinne had already picked up another and was examining it closely.

The Elnu

Jason had come for Sarah. Not finding her at the house, he hoped he'd discover her on the beach watching the ending of the day as they usually did whenever he was home from the American fishing camp on the north branch of the Cascapédia.

Struggling through waist-high reeds and grass at the edge of the reserve, Jason finally broke into the clear and felt the pebbled, brown sand beneath his feet. Beachwood, abandoned by the sea in the spring when the tides were high, lay scattered about. When they were children, Sarah used to pretend that the wood was sent by the creator, Gluskap, as a reminder of the destructive power of his twin and enemy, Maslum. Once she had pointed to a gnarled branch that lay half-buried in sand, "There," she had said, "is the club Gluskap used to shatter Maslum's skull." They had pulled the twisted wood free of its resting place and carried it to a place of honour on a boulder far from the water's edge where it could not be washed away even in the highest tidal surge. They referred to it always as Gluskap's club. Jason could see it now, stripped of its bark and shining pale in the fading light.

The tide was out. A decayed pier with rocks bleeding from its broken cribbing, foundered in the clay and muck. The bottom of its main shafts, spotted with mud and stained black, contrasted sharply with weather-whitened tops. Jason wished the tide had been high. It concealed everything and

made things seem better. Without Sarah beside him, the beach was empty and cold. He felt vulnerable.

Leaning against the base of a tree, Jason shivered and hunched his shoulders together. The evening was cold, and he had forgotten his jacket at the house. He crossed his arms over his chest and shoved his hands beneath his armpits. The fresh smell of salt and seaweed was carried to him, and he felt better knowing the tide was changing. Now that he had returned for her, Jason hoped things would be better for them. He stood for a long while, motionless, with his back pressed against the tree for warmth, thinking about Sarah. He was unaware how the passage of time changed the shadows on the sand around him.

Jason smiled at the image of her pressed close to him as he lay awake in the night beside her. He could see her dark hair spilling over her naked shoulders. The last of the sun was slipping behind the mountains which were colourless in the distance and the dying of the day. Low hanging clouds flared orange and red. It looked as though the horizon was burning. Jonathan called this phenomenon Alkuntam's - the sky god's - Farewell. Jason felt replenished by its beauty, yet he also felt strangely empty. It was as if a great sadness had swelled deep within him and clothed itself with his heart. He knew it was because it was the first time he had witnessed Alkuntam's farewell since Jonathan had died. In the three months since Jonathan's death, Jason had not seen Sarah. He tried not to remember what had happened the

last time he had been with her.

He closed his eyes and forced the image of a younger Sarah to come to him. He watched as they walked along the beach, laughing and talking about the days still ahead of them. Whenever he remembered Sarah in this way, she was always dressed in white. He could see her clothing clinging closely to her, and the curve of her hips and breasts against the light material. His body ached with his need for her, and in his mind he watched her walk slowly towards him. He knew her body would feel smooth and soft to his touch. Standing there, he remembered how the words used to spill from her, and as they splashed around him, he delighted in their flow. He wished he could freeze these visions of his homecomings forever in his mind, but they were flawed now with the memory of his last visit. He wondered if she'd ever greet him in the old way again.

Jason took a cigarette from his pack and lit a match by snapping its head along the rough bark of the tree. The sulfur burned brightly for a moment. Its acrid smell hung in the air. Shielding the flame in cupped hands, he touched it to the tip of the cigarette and inhaled deeply. He tilted his head back and let the smoke escape. An air current curled it lazily above his head. Dropping the match, Jason watched it burn out on the sand. Slowly, with a quiver, the match twisted and died.

He was worried about Sarah. He should have let her know he was coming back. He was sorry he had treated her so badly.

It had been because of Jonathan. Nothing had made any sense. He was angry and hurt then. In his confusion he had struck her, and hitting her had made everything all the more bewildering.

In the time since this had happened, Jason had come to realize that his anger went beyond Jonathan's death. Sarah had begun to change long before the old chief's dying. She complained of being bored and that there was nothing for her on the reserve. Because of his preoccupation with Jonathan, she claimed she was being ignored. He tried to explain that Jonathan was an old man, and it was important that he have someone to teach about the past. "But," Sarah had cried one night, "the past is dead and better forgotten. Micmacs should live in the present." She refused to go with him any more to visit Jonathan at his cabin as they had when they were children.

Dropping the cigarette at his feet, Jason looked down the beach and then up towards the mountains. His eyes found the darkened mouth of the Cascapédia where it emptied into Chaleur Bay. His gaze drifted up to the caverns and the old burial grounds. Jonathan, he thought, was up there with the spirits from long ago.

He was frightened and alone. Being away had not lessened his fear, or his hurt. He wished he had found Sarah. She had been right. He'd almost forgotten her needs. He had to tell her that. Jason called out to her in the darkness, but the sound of his voice faded away unanswered.

He knew where to find her. It was as if he had known all along, but had been too frightened to admit it to himself. He would go to her and make things right again. They were good for each other, and together they could make things better. All they had to do was get away from the reservation for a while.

Turning away from the darkening mountains, Jason retraced his steps along the beach. In the gathering night he stumbled over the charred remnants of an old bonfire. Log butts lay covered in ash and soot. He kicked at them as he passed, and a fine grey dust settled over his boots and jeans.

As he followed the path to the flatlands, clouds veiled the moon. The narrow trail was rutted deep from rain and run-off. He stopped for a moment at the reservation boundary and then quickened his pace. It seemed as if something unknown was forcing him along, and hurrying his steps with an urgency that alarmed and puzzled him.

An hour later Jason reached the town. He walked the few short blocks and stopped in front of the two-storied Grand Hotel. Faded white paint peeled from its sides. The top row of windows, stretching around the building, was dark and stared blankly back at him. He thought he saw movement in some of them. A few teenagers stood on the verandah, cigarettes hanging from the corners of their mouths. Jason recognized young Billy Rivers and wondered when he had started coming here. Jason was conscious of Billy's curious stare as he walked by him.

Pushing the hotel door open, he stepped inside. After the freshness of the night air, the smell of the place almost sickened him. It was the smell of cigarettes, dried urine, stale beer and sweat. His eyes burned from the smoky haze which hung about the room. The bar was crowded and noisy. Shoving his way to the back of the room, Jason found a table and sat down. Signalling to a waitress, he ordered a beer. Smiling, the girl placed the drink in front of him. It tasted flat and warm. He looked about, hoping to spot Sarah, but he couldn't see her in the crowd. He noticed a few of her friends sitting at another table, and when he glanced their way, they quickly looked away.

A country tune blared from the juke box. A man, wearing a red plaid hunting shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots, and holding a full stein of beer in one hand, was drunkenly dancing alone in front of the juke box. As he finished a series of spins and tap steps without spilling his drink, the crowd gathered around him clapped and cheered loudly. When the man turned to go back to his seat, someone tripped him. He fell headlong into a chair. His beer stein clattered to the floor splashing beer all around. The crowd laughed and applauded louder still. At the far end of the room, Jason saw a group of men playing pool. They were shouting at one another. Jason, from his position, couldn't hear what was being said. One waved a pool cue at another, and Jason watched as a waiter moved closer to them.

There were only a few other Micmacs in the bar. Jason

recognized a couple of faces, but some were new to him. He thought they might be from the Restigouche reserve, or maybe from one of the reserves in the States. Usually quite a few visited for the summer. Besides, it was good business smuggling cheaper American cigarettes over the border crossings and taking salmon back. The customs officers rarely challenged Indians. As long as they stayed away from drugs, they could pretty much come and go as they pleased. Most of the Indians picked up quite a bit of money selling the cigarettes to the local stores and bars. The white bar owners welcomed their business, as long as they didn't cause too much trouble.

Most of the crowd were local loggers and farmers. Jason sensed a tension in the room. The pool players were still arguing. Those pressed close to the bar seemed restless, and he knew they were waiting for something to happen. There were usually a few fights. That was why Jason disliked coming here. Watching the locals arguing over the young Indian girls made him feel helpless and bitter. He had discouraged Sarah from coming here. But when he was with Jonathan, she had started coming with friends. There wasn't much he could do about it.

He had found her here the night Jonathan had died. She was drunk and did not want to leave her friends. When he told her of Jonathan's death, she had shrugged and said he had died a long time ago when Indians still rode the plains after buffalo. Her friends had thought her remark amusing.

Jason had slapped her and forced her to leave. All the locals laughed and jeered when he walked her out the door. Jason remembered how ashamed he had felt.

Through the night of yelling, Sarah had screamed out at him again and again. "You go to Jonathan and then to the fishing camp. I'm always alone. I hardly ever see you. I'm glad he's dead. Do you hear me? I'm glad."

Jason had forced her to drink bitter coffee, and it had made her sick. She vomited over him, and it smelled of bile and liquor. It was the smell of this place. Jason had bathed her and put her to bed. She had cried for a long time in the night. Jason remembered watching her after she had finally fallen asleep. Her hair, long and black, spilled out over the side of the bed, almost touching the floor.

He had left her like that and returned to the fishing camp. He had needed to be away from here where he could think and decide what was best for them now that Jonathan had died. He had known time would help ease the pain of his dying, and until it had passed, he would be no good for her. He had decided that it was better for them to leave the reserve, and he had come home to tell her that.

Jason, suddenly, was filled with the fear that in his absence Sarah had left him. It would be just like her to leave without waiting for him. He stood and started towards the exit. It was then that he saw her. At first he didn't recognize her, but as she staggered on the landing of the second floor stairway, next to the exit, he realized it was

her. She had cut her hair and dyed it a light brown. Her mascara-streaked face looked grotesque in the filtered smoke of the room. She was drunk and held onto the arm of a man for balance.

Jason recognized the white man. It was Tyler, one of the local mill workers. He was always fighting and making trouble for the Micmacs. Jason tried to curse, but couldn't. He burned with the heat of shame and the rage that was rising within him.

Jason waited at the foot of the stairs. Controlling his fury, he called out to her. She looked up quickly. Her mouth opened, then closed, and her face whitened. A sound, like a sigh, escaped from her. Finally, her eyes opened wide. Jason stared into their brown softness and said nothing.

Tyler grinned at Jason. He shoved Sarah roughly towards him. She stumbled on the bottom step and fell. Jason ignored her. He looked at Tyler, waiting for him to move first.

"Well, well," Tyler exclaimed, breaking the silence between them, "if it ain't the big man come out of the woods at last. Back to git her, eh?" he asked, nodding towards Sarah who was struggling to her knees.

The crowd gathered behind Jason. He knew that this was what they had waited for so expectantly. He hated them. But most of all, he hated the white face that was staring back at him smiling. He held his hands tightly to his sides, wanting to break and crush the leering face in front

of him, but knowing he had to wait for Tyler to strike first.

"Go on," Tyler hissed; "take her home. Clean her up. I've finished with her, half-breed. Just like the last time." Tyler spoke loudly, confident because the crowd which pressed in behind Jason was encouraging him. Tyler, seeing the anger twitch in Jason's face and mistaking it for fear, taunted him again. "C'mon, injun. Take yer squaw bitch and git. Look, she's crying. Damn'd good piece..."

As Tyler spoke, he glanced in Sarah's direction. It was the moment Jason had been waiting for. He lashed out and the blow caught Tyler just under the chin, driving him backwards. Before Tyler could regain his balance, Jason was on him, pummeling him with short, jarring jabs. Dazed, Tyler shouted for help and Jason felt arms about him, pulling him away and firmly holding him.

"Bastard," Tyler screamed from between cut, bloody lips. "Fuckin' red bastard." He slashed a fist straight into Jason's face. Jason felt his nose splinter. Blood gushed out.

He looked at it in surprise and felt nothing. Pretending to fall, he felt the arms holding him loosen their grip. He charged towards Tyler. Hitting him with the full force of his body, chest high, he propelled him backwards into the metal railing of the staircase. Tyler's head smashed against it. He moaned once, and slumped to the floor. Jason watched as Tyler's eyes rolled back and his body went limp.

He turned and ran for the door.

* * * * *

Jason didn't know how long he had been running. Following the trail through the flatlands and down the hill to the beach, he held his arms instinctively in front of him. He caught the sting of branches on his forearms. The blows from the branches felt good. It was better than the numbness he had felt in the bar. He cut through the woods, running effortlessly, and angled towards the beach, gaining the time he needed. He knew they would soon come after him.

The last mile to the mouth of the Cascapédia was downhill. It was difficult not to slip on the smooth undergrowth of ferns and flat stones. Beginning to breathe more heavily, his weight pushing forward on the balls of his feet, Jason felt the sand under him and slowed his pace. The tide was in, but he couldn't smell the salt of the sea through his broken nose. Waves flashed white along the shoreline. He could taste blood in his throat, and he spat it out as he ran. The rage he had felt was slowly leaving him, and he gulped in mouthfuls of air. Passing Gluskap's club, gleaming in the darkness, he decided he would go to Jonathan in the river valley and the mountains above it.

Once at the river's mouth, Jason followed the Cascapédia inland until he passed the tidal reaches of the sea. Locating some shallows, he crossed where water rushed over jagged rocks. Stopping in mid-river, he knelt to wash the blood

covering his face and arms. The water's coldness felt good. Tearing off his stained shirt, he threw it into the river and watched as the current carried it away. Jason waded the river, keeping close to its edge, until he was sure that they couldn't easily follow his trail.

When he left the water, he quickly found the path to the caverns. The ascent was difficult, and he had to stop often to catch his breath. He felt dizzy and light headed from loss of blood, as well as from all the running and climbing.

At the rocky ledge, just below the base of the caverns which overlooked the valley and the river that wound through it, Jason collapsed and slept.

When he awakened two hours later, the stars were alive in the sky. Lying on his back, staring up at the flickering dots of light, he remembered the evening Jonathan, sitting on this same ledge, had told him the story of the stars.

Jason picked out Go Gwadane Glo Go Wete, the star that lights the northern path. He recalled the story about the three Micmac youths Jonathan had told him about long ago who embarked by canoe to catch Moukinne, the Bear, but who failed and were frozen forever in the sky. They became the North Star's protectors and just below that star, Jason located the three smaller points of light and tried to imagine, as he had when he was a child, that the boys waved down to him.

Directly above his resting spot, Jason spotted

Mouhinchiche, Little Bear, and to the left of that cluster, he saw Ohtadab'an, the morning star of the eastern sky. As he sounded their names, they rolled from his tongue down into the valley beneath him.

Jason remembered other tales Jonathan had told him as well. There was Gluscap, the creator of the heavens, who watched over all things, and Wisakedjak, the wizard, who helped in the transformation of living things into the world of spirits.

Thinking all this, Jason pictured himself and Sarah sitting as children at Jonathan's feet while the old chief taught them the ways of their people. Jason cried out to him, but the only answering call was his own echo, and it came back to him sounding hollow and empty.

Sitting up, Jason stared at the valley below him. Outlined by the moon, he could easily trace the ribbon of water as it twisted its way along the valley floor. Downstream, a dark shadow, almost like a knot in the ribbon, was Jonathan's island. He saw how the river parted around it.

Jason stood, groaning slightly because of the stiffness of his back from lying on the hard ground. His nose ached, and there was a dull throbbing at his temples. He disappeared inside the first cavern. A moment later, he returned, carrying a furled blanket. He slipped the rifle from its covering and snapped the breech open. It was empty. He cursed and snapped it closed. As he sat again on the ledge, he cradled the gun in his arms. He saw his name engraved deep

into the stock. Jonathan had burned the letters into it the day he had given the gun to him. It had been a gift to honour his first big kill. He had been thirteen that November. He had killed the moose with a single shot which entered just behind its shoulder and exploded in its heart. It seemed so long ago. Jonathan was dead now. He had died when the snow lay deep on the mountain slopes, covering everything in its whiteness.

Jason cried in the stillness about him. He was alone, more alone than he had ever been. He cried because of Jonathan's death and because he had lost Sarah as well. He willed the memory of Jonathan to him to ease his hurt.

He was a child again, and he felt Jonathan's gnarled hands guiding him as he strung the webbing of a snowshoe. He heard Jonathan's voice explaining how to tie the knots so that they would neither slip nor break under strain. It seemed to Jason that he could also hear the sound of rain on the thatched roof of the hut. The smell of pine was heavy about him, and in his mind it mingled with the smell of the greased leather. He listened again to Jonathan's soothing voice as he retold the legends of his forefathers, the Elnu, the name the Micmacs called themselves long ago on Miscou island before the coming of the pale ones. It was there, Jonathan claimed, that Gluscap scooped up a handful of clay and shaped the first man the world ever knew. It was the beginning of the Elnu, the people.

Jonathan taught him many things. Without his patient

guidance, Jason knew he would not have learned about his heritage. Because of the old chief, he discovered pride in being Indian. The others had laughed at Jonathan and made fun of his refusal to live in the white man's world.

Jonathan said that it was his responsibility to hand down the Elnu history and way of life. He had picked Jason to be his pupil because as a child Jason had been curious and different, somehow, from the other children, and because Jonathan had known the boy's mother when she was a child as well.

Jonathan left the reserve and moved to the small island in the Cascapédia because he could no longer tolerate the things he saw on the reserve. "They have lost their dignity," he had said to Jason. "All they want to do is to make sweet-grass baskets for the tourists and to get drunk on their profits in the town. Without dignity, a man might as well ask Gluscap to carry him to the next world."

By leaving it all behind, Jonathan had killed the things that shamed him. Jason knew that not all the Indians were as bad as Jonathan thought, but he knew that the reserve was becoming more shameful every year. Buildings were left to rot and garbage piled up behind tar-papered homes. Money that was meant for paint and siding was used for other things. Every year more Indians relied on the government for support and every year the line of women and children needing food and clothing grew longer outside the Band Council building. It was a hard thing to see, and yet there seemed to be no

way to stop it. He didn't blame Jonathan for leaving. He had been a figure of scorn for too long. He could no longer withstand the anger and hurt in witnessing the dying of his people. Jason understood this, even though no one else appeared to. Maybe it was because they shared the same dream that one day the Elnu would be strong and proud again.

In the darkness, Jason remembered Jonathan's sickness in the last of his winters. He heard the sound of his coughing and saw himself spoon-feeding the old man warm milk as the snow piled high about the cabin, and the birch fire crackled loudly in the barrel stove.

Jason cared for him all that winter. He worked Jonathan's traps and skinned the beaver and otter catches. Pelts lay stiff and frozen in the shed, waiting for the spring that Jonathan never saw. He died while ice still covered the Chscapédia. Jason knew Jonathan would have been honoured had he known that the river, frozen, had waited for him. Jason could see Jonathan before him, coughing and spitting blood, and loudly praying for Gluscap to come and carry him from the land of shadows to the land of light and the Elnu of old.

When Jonathan had taken his last breath, Jason had rubbed the old man's frail body with beaver oil and dressed him in his burial clothing. He carefully fastened the leather leggings, decorated with porcupine quills, about Jonathan's legs and placed beaded moccasins on his feet. Jason then wrapped the sun-robe, the one Jonathan had sewn from beaver

skins, around his body.

Jason had laid the old man gently on a bed of fresh pine boughs in the middle of the cabin. At Jonathan's head, he placed his tobacco and fine bone pipe. His favorite knife, rifle, and snowshoes were put at his feet. He blackened both their faces with soot from the stove and sprinkled fine, grey wood ash over Jonathan's body. Chanting the death song, Jason had lit the funeral pyre.

The cabin had burned for a long time, and Jason had not left the area until all that remained were smouldering, charred remnants. These he scattered in the four directions. The snow was stained black all around. He knew that the ash and soot, which had spewed into the air contained the soul of Jonathan.

Gluscap carried his spirit high over the valley, and into the land of light beyond the darkness. He knew, too, that with Wisakedjak's magic, Jonathan had mysteriously become part of the water, the sky, and the earth. Wisakedjak made the boulders, trees, and clouds transform themselves into vessels which captured tiny parts of Jonathan's spirit as it rose with Gluscap in the smoke and wind. In this way, Jonathan had become a part of this world, as well as the world beyond.

It was this Jonathan that sat now and counselled Jason. Turning to him, and in a small boy's voice, full of wonder, Jason said, "Tell me again, grandfather, how did Gluscap create the Elnu?"

Jonathan's voice, deep and resonant like the voice of a young man, answered. "Gluscap waved his hands about and we sprang from the earth like the trees, the grass, and the flowers."

Again the boy's voice sounded: "And how will we die?"

The only answer was the sound of silence, and it was carried up to him from the valley floor on the back of the wind.

Jason felt cold again and reached about in the darkness for the blanket he had taken from the cavern. As he did so, he noticed a movement on the trail beneath him. Sarah called out to him and scrambled to the ledge beside him.

"I was watching you," she said, "from below. I could see you outlined in the moon's light. I heard you call to Jonathan."

As she knelt beside him, Jason noticed her face and arms were scratched from the climb. She shivered in the cold of the night. He held the blanket open, and she sat closer to him. Sitting with their bodies touching, they felt each other's warmth.

"Why," he asked her, "did you cut your hair?" It seemed important to him. Seeing it cut short and dyed had shocked him. It made her look more white than Indian. To him, this had been more an act of betrayal than being with Tyler.

"Why?" he asked again.

Sarah didn't answer. Instead she said, "Tyler's dead." She said it without emotion.

"I know," Jason responded.

"They're coming after you, Jason."

"I know that, too," he said.

"I'm sorry, Jason," she began; "you were gone so long. I thought you wouldn't be back. I was frightened. I thought you hated me because of the hotel, and because of the way I acted about Jonathan. Jason, I know I've hurt you. I've shamed both of us. But I..."

"Hush," he soothed her. "It doesn't matter. We're together now." As he spoke, the first pale light of dawn coloured the clouds.

"Yes, it does matter - to me, To us. More now than ever before. I have to explain it to you." Sarah was crying. She wiped away her tears as she spoke. "I've loved you since we were children."

The sky grew brighter above them while she cried, and the words poured from her.

"Listen to me, Jason," she pleaded. "Listen. I've always had to share you with Jonathan. I've never had you to myself. Not once in all the time we've known each other. You hold back so much. You give in small pieces. There are parts of you I've never touched. You're just like Jonathan was. You think it's weak to show your love for someone. You think love robs you of strength. Those were the thoughts of the warriors of old. We have no battles left to fight."

"Hush," he said again, as he watched the rising sun.

"Do you remember," he asked her, "the sun prayer Jonathan

taught us as children? As the first ray of morning light touched the eastern sky, he would put on the sacred beaver robe and chant: 'Niscaminon hignemouy minem narcodam'...?"

"Yes," Sarah sighed, picking up the prayer in English: "Father of the day, give us something to eat. Protect our family. Give us power over enemies. Help make our hunting and fishing successful. Grant us, most of all, long life and happy memories.

"He repeated it at sunset, too," she explained; "only this time he faced the western sky and bowed to the sun as it slipped behind the mountains. I don't remember it in Micmac...I'm frightened, Jason." She turned her head to look into his eyes as she spoke. "I left just as they were getting ready to follow you. They have rifles, and..."

Jason silenced her by placing his fingers against her lips. He spoke, hoping she would understand what Jonathan had meant to him. "When I was five," he whispered to her, "father took me to the hospital. I had fallen and hurt myself. I was frightened and wanted to go home, but father handed me to this nurse. I screamed and kicked as she took me away from him. She was dressed in white, and she put me in a white room. She clothed me in a white shirt and covered me in white sheets. I thought I would be blinded by the whiteness."

As he spoke, Sarah marvelled at the transformation in him. Somehow his voice became the voice of Jonathan, and it was as if Jonathan, magically, had entered into him. She

was more frightened than before.

"I yelled for father," Jason continued, "but he had gone. I remember white lights and people. Everyone was dressed in white, and they were wearing white masks. I screamed that I did not want to die. Mother had died in a hospital, and I was frightened I would, too.

"When I awoke, it was day, and light was streaming through the window by my bed. Jonathan was standing at the door. He told me everything was going to be all right. I never saw my father again. He left the reservation and never returned. After that, there was only Jonathan. I called him grandfather, sometimes, because he cared for me like a grandfather would. I was afraid when I returned for you, and you weren't home that you had left me, too."

The sound of voices, and the barking of dogs drifted up to them from the valley floor. Jason helped Sarah to her feet and together they peered over the ledge.

"Jonathan told me once," Jason said to her, "that without dignity we should pray for Gluscap to come. I think he was right."

Sarah turned to face him, unsure what he meant. In the movement, some stones were nudged loose from the ledge and they fell, bouncing, from boulder to boulder, down the mountainside. They listened to their fall.

Jason kissed her quickly on the forehead, the way a brother would kiss a sister, or a father a daughter, and stroked her shortened hair. Sarah looked at him for a moment,

but he did not return her stare. She turned away from him then and walked towards the caves. She did not look back.

Jason glanced up at the deepening blue of the sky and carefully leaned over the ledge. With a sudden surge he was gone. In his fall, Jason saw faces rushing towards him - the face of Jonathan, sad-eyed and pale, was followed by Sarah's face. She was smiling at him, and he reached out to touch her long hair.

The Storm

Billy had been walking along the old logging road since ten that morning. The sky was curiously drained of colour. Had he noticed this, he might have called the dog to his side and turned back realizing a storm was building, but he was distracted by his thoughts. It was unusual for the boy not to observe the things about him; he was one of those who normally saw and noted everything.

The road, overgrown with alders and covered by dead brush, climbed haphazardly up the mountainside. Behind him, receding more into the distance with every step, was the bay. The pastures below him were various shades of green. Cattle and sheep grazed in them, but from this height they were just spots of black and white. Beyond the fields lay the village and then the bay.

The cliffs at Gull Cove were a mere line from this vantage point. Looking down, it seemed that the bay, the village, and the pastures were all nestled close to the mountainside, but this was an illusion. It was over eight miles from the mountain base to the bay, and from this distance the land seemed to drop suddenly into the sea.

Billy intended to climb as far as last winter's cutting before stopping to eat the sandwich that was wrapped in brown paper and stuffed in his jacket pocket. The boy was already thinking about the water in the deep spring there. He and his father had found it in a stand of white birch

last December while cutting cord wood, and he remembered having to chop a hole in the ice around the outlet so he could squeeze the water pail into it. He could taste its sweetness now.

The boy carried a single shot .410 with him. Its stock was pushed up under his right armpit, and the loaded breech hung open over his wrist, the barrel pointing towards the ground. He was comfortable carrying it this way, and although the breech pinched his wrist a little, he hardly noticed its weight. His father had taught him how to shoot quickly and easily from this position. All he had to do was bring his left hand up sharply on the barrel, and the breech would snap shut. In the same motion he would bring the gun to sight and slide the index finger of his right hand gently onto the trigger. He practised the movements now. After years of drill, he no longer had to think about what his hands were doing. He repeated the action until his fingers ached. Finally, tiring of it, he unloaded the gun with his right hand and played with the shell by rolling it along the tops of his fingers as he walked.

Every few minutes his dog Hunter, off somewhere in the bushes, would break into peals of excited, hoarse barking. The boy's father always claimed that the dog amused more rabbits into hiding than he ever frightened into the open. Billy had no choice but to agree. Hunter had always been far too noisy and clumsy ever to be a good game dog. As a child the boy had called the dog Red, but the boy's father

had renamed him Hunter as a joke after a deer had been scared off by the dog's impatience.

Billy always felt responsible for the dog's failings. "After all," he admitted out loud, "I'm almost as bad." It was one thing to practice with a rifle, but it was quite another to use it on live game. When it came to killing something, Billy always held back. The dog had sensed his reluctance a long time ago, and Billy could never have trained it to hunt, even if he had wanted to. The only reason Hunter was still around was because he was good at rounding up the milking cows from their afternoon graze. As his father constantly reminded him, "Every animal has a purpose, boy. If it don't have a use, it ain't worth keepin'."

Billy was always at odds with his father about farm animals. It saddened the boy to see a spirited colt being transformed into a plodding work horse. As a child, Billy had even hated being taken to the circus. The caged and well-trained animals always seemed something less than alive, their routines more tragic than comic. He remembered the first time he had read Earle Birney's poem, "The Bear on the Delhi Road," in high school. He could almost see the men now, flicking the stick in the face of the bear they had brought down from the mountain to teach to dance. He had sensed that both man and bear were somehow doomed by the tranced dancing of men that Birney described. The feeling had stuck with him, and it seemed to him that any animal man had contact with was lessened by the experience.

This morning's butchering was the main reason Billy was out on the logging road now. When his father left the house to pick up Phil Jones, who his father claimed was "The best dam'd sticker in the whole darn'd county," Billy had slipped the gun from its rack and escaped to the quiet of the woods.

He had only thought to take the gun at the last moment. He could always use it as an excuse that he was hunting rabbits or something. It was better than being accused of wasting the entire morning. Besides, he reminded himself now, with only two bull calves to slaughter, his presence wasn't really needed. As long as he was home in time to help with the mid-afternoon fishing, everything else would be soon forgotten. It wasn't as if it hadn't happened before.

Billy had grudgingly accepted the fact that bull calves had to be killed and sold for veal. He'd been told often enough that they weren't worth much full grown when you considered the cost of feeding and caring for them. Still, to see them locked up for weeks at a time in their dark stalls always reminded him of the circus animals in their cages.

Billy remembered witnessing his first slaughter. He'd been so frightened by it, he'd run and hidden in the root cellar until his mother found him and coaxed him out. He couldn't have been any more than six or seven. It was his mother who had explained why the calves had to be killed.

He always had trouble understanding how the father he saw holding the skinning knife, could be the same father he saw gently helping a cow with a troubled birthing. More often than not, it was the same calf that eventually ended up on the butchering block.

His mother understood his feelings about the whole thing in a way his father never could. This morning, when she spotted him easing the gun from its rack, she had simply told him to be careful and to get back in time to tend the nets with his father. Then she handed him the sandwich she had made and wrapped for him. She had known all along what he had planned. She seemed to know all his moods, often before he did.

The calves weren't the only reason Billy had decided on his little hike. He'd received his acceptance from McGill a few weeks ago. The letter had also notified him he'd won a full scholarship. He'd run all the way home from the post office to share the news with his mother. He watched quietly as she read and reread the letter. After the third reading she had broken into tears and cried, "I'm proud of you, Billy, real proud."

He still hadn't found a way to tell his father that he planned to leave. His mother had warned him about it, too. "Have your arguments well rehearsed, Billy. You can't expect Will to give in without a fight. His whole life has been this farm and the fishing stand. That's all he's ever known. And his father and grandfather before him. You're his legacy, his hereafter. It's not easy for a man like

Will to see that threatened. Your going to college will mean his dream is ending." Then, winking and attempting to mimic his father's deep voice, she joked, "A man needs a strong back for this life, boy. A strong back and a weak mind. Not t'other way 'round."

With the butchering and everything, it seemed a perfect time to slip away and consider the best approach to telling his father about his decision. He knew that however he put it, his father would be hurt. He needed this quiet time alone now to figure it all out. Besides, he reminded himself again that it was nice to have some free time, even if it wasn't a Sunday. The whole summer had almost slipped by, and he hadn't come up here once to sketch. He missed the sight of the pastures from up here, and the blue of the bay.

Standing there, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his right hand, Billy decided he'd tell his father that afternoon while they were out fishing and cleaning the salmon nets. At least, he thought, they'd be alone and whatever was said could be said privately. He had to admit, though, that it would be nice to have his mother backing him up. But if he had any chance of making his father understand, he knew he had to talk to him alone. His father would expect that from him. It was the way men dealt with each other.

"If," Billy thought out loud, "I only had mother's tongue." He smiled at the sight of his 5'1" mother confronting his 6'3" father. He could see her now, wagging her

finger angrily in his father's face while Will, frustrated because of his inability to stand his ground in any verbal battle with her, sadly shook his head. Muttering her name over and over, he'd flee to the relative quiet of the barn to collect his battered thoughts.

Billy still found it strange, sometimes, how two people so different in every respect could ever have married. Even though the MacPherson and Davis families were Newport pioneers and had helped settle the town over a hundred and fifty years ago, any similarities ended right there. The fact was, Alexander Davis, Margaret's great grandfather, was the first storekeeper in Newport's history. It was he who gave the tiny fishing port its name in 1852. It was from the founding Davis that Margaret had inherited her energy and cleverness. She was small, almost frail-looking, but she had a quickness and spirit about her that Will had come to admire, if somewhat begrudge at times.

For her part, Margaret had come to love Will's goodness and to respect his stoic approach to life. Their relationship had achieved a certain solidity despite their differing personalities. Margaret was realistic enough to admit that her life lacked excitement. There were no ups and downs in it. It was Gibraltar solid, like Will himself, and she took a great deal of comfort in that. If Margaret had any regrets at all, it was that she wished Will could be more demonstrative with Billy. She realized that he was not given to open displays of affection, unlike herself, who

kissed and hugged at every opportunity. He seemed so distant from Billy at times, although she knew he loved him dearly.

At forty-two, Will had all but given up hope of ever having a son, and Margaret's late pregnancy had frightened him as much as it pleased him. He found it difficult to adjust to the new intrusion in his life. As Billy grew up, Will knew he had to hold back, as he did with any young colt, until it outgrew the skitterish stage when it could be properly trained without a needless loss of energy. Margaret was better able to handle free-spirited things, and he was content to let her manage Billy's early upbringing. Her enthusiasm and open approach, Will realized, was what a young boy needed. He was satisfied to watch for a while from a comfortable distance.

It wasn't until Billy turned ten that Will began to take an active interest in his son. It was the age a father could begin teaching a boy the proper way of doing things, the way his father had taught him.

Margaret felt that Will had missed so much by not being more involved with Billy when he was a child. Yet, secretly, she was pleased that she had him all to herself. Whenever Margaret held Billy as an infant, the greatest feeling of warmth and contentment settled over her. She could only compare it to the feeling she had whenever she sang at St. Andrew's, and the organ music caused the stained glass figure of St. Elizabeth to tremble in its window niche above the

choir loft. It was she who had encouraged Billy to paint and draw when she noticed that he had a special interest in it as a child. When he was older, she recognized in his etchings a fine eye and an unusual ability. She felt they shared a similar artistic bent, and through it they forged a special bond.

Billy had come to the clearing, the remnants of last winter's cutting. Stumps, half-hidden by brush, dotted the area. Just as Billy sat on one, Hunter bounded by barking lustily. A couple of partridge were flushed from the underbrush. Billy was so startled he didn't even raise his shotgun, much less load and fire it. He had dropped the shell the moment Hunter had raced by. He cursed the dog, knowing that had his father been there one or two birds would have been hit. Guiltily, he knew that his father would have given one of his quizzical, almost hurt, looks.

Billy remembered what had happened here last winter. While he was trimming branches above his head, the saw had jammed and the chain snapped. It had barely missed hitting him. His face white with the closeness of injury, he had thrown the saw down in fright. His father simply picked the saw up, refitted a new chain, and placed it at Billy's feet without once looking at him or saying a word. Billy felt the gesture was meant as a rebuke. It was as though his father had said, "Watch what yer doin'. Don't be so careless. Git goin', now. No time to sit n' fret."

He recalled the quiet of the snow-shrouded woods and

how the sudden snarl of the chainsaw ripped the silence apart. Billy hated the saw and was frightened of it, but his father insisted he learn how to use it properly. At the end of each day's work Billy's arms ached, his ears were filled with a constant ringing, and his fingers felt numb from the vibration of steel on wood.

It seemed to Billy that he was always disappointing his father in some way. He wished he was more like him. He envied his strength and quiet confidence, and always felt a little helpless beside him. But even physically they were different. He glanced down at his hands. Small and finely shaped, they resembled his mother's, and, like hers, they were never still in conversation. They moved from point to point with emphasis and voice all their own, so unlike his father's, which usually were buried deep in his pockets, or held awkwardly at his sides like wooden blocks whenever he spoke. His father called their hands nervous, but his mother always referred to them as expressive. Watching mother and son in conversation, Will once admitted, "Was like watchin' a flock of birds settling in fer the night."

Around his father, Billy was always conscious of his hands and tried to keep them as still as possible. Curiously, Billy observed, despite all the hard chores he had to do, his hands weren't even calloused. They were like the hands of a child, not those of someone on the doorstep of manhood. They were a constant, physical reminder that he could never be like his father.

Every free moment Billy had, he spent off somewhere sketching the things he saw around him. His pictures were proudly displayed by his mother in every room in the house. Will seemed to take little notice of them. Showing pride in things was nothing but conceit to him, and he would have none of it. If Margaret wanted the boy growin' up thinking he was special and above everyone else, he wouldn't add to it by commenting on the process. He had to admit, though, that the sketch of the beached and broken rowboat at Gull Cove was a mighty fine piece of work, no matter how you looked at it. He was glad Margaret had hung it in the bedroom, but it wasn't something he planned to admit to. Besides, he thought, painting was a good pastime, but not something a man could make a living from. He hoped the boy would sleep more and draw less, then maybe he'd grow a bit more.

Billy often tried to imagine what it would be like to possess his father's powerful hands. In a reckless moment one night last winter, when his mother was out at choir practice, he challenged his father to an arm wrestling match. Will, laughing, had initially refused the invitation even though he was secretly pleased by it. Billy had pestered him until Will gave in just to quiet him. Sitting across from each other in the kitchen at the heavy oak table, they carefully positioned themselves. The moment Will's hand closed about him, Billy felt himself being

swallowed. Half-trying, Will won the contest easily. Embarrassed by even the memory of it, Billy felt his face redden. He had never mentioned the episode to anyone, not even his mother.

Billy searched among the dried twigs and moss at his feet for the cartridge he had dropped when Hunter had raced by. Finding it, he stood quickly, and in the sudden movement felt light-headed. Points of darkness shimmered in the air before him. It was very humid. Wiping the perspiration from his forehead again, he whistled Hunter to his side. He pulled the sandwich from his pocket, unwrapped it, and began eating part of it. The second half he placed on the stump for the dog.

He was just about to look for the spring when he sensed a change in the wind and realized a storm was moving in from the bay behind him. He turned and looked down the mountain road. The farmhouse, barn, and assorted sheds were just specks of white and grey. Storm clouds had gathered above the harbour and the sky was growing dark. He whistled for Hunter a second time and started to run down the trail. The sky grew darker still. It was much later than he had thought.

By the time they reached the rail tracks a few miles from the farmhouse, Billy knew that he wouldn't make it home in time to help with the nets. Lightning tore through the low-hanging cloud cover over Gull Cove. He watched as

the storm clouds piled higher above the bay. Thunder rolled inland towards him. Alarmed, he realized that it was building into more than just a summer squall. He had forgotten how unpredictable the weather could be early in August.

He hoped his father would finish up before the storm peaked. He knew how rough it could be out on the bay in an open dory. The thought of it made him feel strange and nervous in the stomach. If only the wind would hold off a bit longer.

Just a quarter mile past the tracks, it started to rain, lightly at first, but within minutes it became a steady downpour. Billy felt Hunter close on his heels and glanced back at him. Covered in burrs and with his long hair matted in wet knots, the collie whimpered in protest.

"Never mind, fellow," Billy responded in sympathy. "Soon you'll be curled up behind the woodstove. The smell of you drying out ought to drive Mom crazy." The boy spoke softly, but the dog seemed to sense some change in him and remained at his heels.

As they crossed the barnyard, rivulets were beginning to form in the soft ground. Billy's running shoes picked up chunks of mud, and he had to scrape them against the rusted skate blade attached upside down to the back door-stoop before he entered the house. Hunter, after shaking himself vigorously at the doorway, followed the boy in and sighed with contentment as he eased himself onto his sleeping

blanket behind the kitchen stove.

Billy closed the door and then placed the shotgun in its rack above the door frame. He knew the gun should be dried and cleaned, but it would have to wait until later. He made a mental note to clean it before his father discovered it. He stripped off his wet denim jacket and jeans and tossed them over the hot water tank beside the pantry door.

Walking over to the clothes-closet, Billy hauled out his rain gear and pulled on his heavy, black pants and mackintosh. Kicking off his wet runners, he slipped on his rubber boots. They felt warm against the cold of his feet.

He heard his mother call from the front parlor. Billy knew she'd be sitting at the window watching the storm out on the bay. "Billy," she called out again. "Billy, is that you?"

"Yes, Ma," the boy answered as he walked down the hall towards her.

The parlor was in darkness, but from the hall light Billy could see his mother sitting in the wing-backed chair in front of the window. She sat rigidly, her hands gripping the arms of her chair and stared out at the bay. Even from the doorway, Billy could see the bright flashes of light low over Gull Cove.

"Billy," she said, turning her head towards him, "go down and wait for your father. He finished with the calves

early and left for the bay over an hour ago. He'll need help pulling the boat up when he gets in." She spoke quietly, but Billy felt the anxiety in her voice and knew she was upset he hadn't been home on time. The nets were always checked earlier than usual if a storm threatened, and he realized he should have spotted its approach long before he did.

Another flash of lightning hung in the air for a moment, and before his mother could turn back to the window, Billy noticed the worry lines on her face. For the first time he was aware how old she was getting. She seemed even to have aged since he last saw her this morning. Perhaps it was just a trick of light from the eerie glow outside.

He found himself wondering how often she sat like this in a storm, waiting and not knowing what the wait would bring. It seemed to him that he was seeing a different person now, someone, who beneath her usual smile, always waited and watched in the grim darkness. He wanted, suddenly, to hold her close and tell her that it was all right, that his father always returned safely to her, but before he could, she spoke to him in that quiet voice which seemed to echo strangely in his head. "Go now, Billy. Quickly. He'll be needing help now." Billy turned to go, uncertain whether she had spoken, or if he had simply imagined it.

Outside, the rain was falling heavily. The yard was a flood of water which ran freely into the drainage ditches that led to the lower field. Billy fastened the metal snaps

on his rain coat, pulled the hood up over his head, and tied the drawstrings tightly under his chin. Cloaked in foul-weather gear and buffeted by the wind, he felt helpless and alone with his fear. The thought came to him that the sea had always conspired against people like his father. It didn't care whether you loved it or not. It was always bending you to its will. He remembered the old circus bears he used to see. It didn't matter how well or poorly you performed - you were always led back to the same caged existence. He remembered the tranced dancing of the bear on the Delhi road. His father was like that bear, he thought, and the sea was his cage.

He could sense his mother watching him as he reached the footpath which dropped slowly to the beach. The black sky grew suddenly nearer, and Billy felt himself being swallowed by its bleakness. He shivered and pulled the heavy coat, like a shroud, closer about him. He quickened his pace, slipping on the muddy, sloping trail as he did so.

Billy felt the wind against his face, lightly at first, then a full-blown gust pushed him back. It was coming straight in from Gull Cove, sweeping over him and tunnelling its way to the mainland in a rush of sound. Billy had to lean forward to make any progress against the continuous force of it. He saw the faint glow of lights below. They were stationary and so he knew they were lights from the men on the beach and not from boats struggling to shore. Billy prayed that his father had made it in.

On the beach, a cluster of men holding lanterns huddled together, partially sheltered from the storm by a large boulder. They were standing in the lee of it, so the wind coming off the bay deflected over them and left a small pocket of stillness in its wake. The pale yellow light from soot-blackened glass gave their faces a haunted look. His father was not among them.

They would wait like this, silent and huddled close for warmth, their backs to the wind, like cattle waiting out a storm, until the last of them was safely harboured. Ignoring their accusing glances, Billy stood apart from them and watched the surf thrash along the shore. The slap of water against the wharf's cribbing was barely audible over the low wail of the wind, and in the darkness constant streams of white spray were driven high into the air.

Billy thought of how his father stood at this same spot in the midst of a squall to listen to the wind and sea. A look of absolute calm would transform his father's face, while he stood terrified beside him. Standing there, alone, with the other men hidden behind him and the sleet biting into him, Billy felt powerless and small against the swelling storm. Struggling to control himself, he called out to his father, but his words were drowned in the surging wind.

To quiet his terror, Billy remembered the day his father had brought Hunter to him as a pup. It was on his sixth birthday, over ten years ago. His father had looked awkward and embarrassed handing the dog to him. Covering his embar-

rassment he had ordered, roughly, "Take care of it, boy. It's your'n now. Yore responsibility." Billy was surprised by the freshness of his memory. He hadn't thought of it in years. The gift had helped ease the pain of his grandfather's death a few weeks before.

The night passed slowly, and to help mark its passage, the boy let himself remember other things. He felt his father's strong hands under his arms lifting him from behind, and closing his eyes, he seemed to hand in mid-air for a moment. When he opened them, he saw the face of his grandfather in the open coffin, and he heard his father's voice whisper to him softly, "Billy, Billy. Look at him good, now. Y'ain't never goin' to see him again."

Billy remembered running, crying, from the parlor. He had nightmares for a long time afterwards. In them he saw himself trapped alone in the parlor with his dead grandfather staring through the darkness at him. When he woke, screaming in the stillness of his room, he always found his father sitting quietly beside him. He had never remembered that before. It was as if his father knew when he would wake, terrified by the night.

It was shortly after this that his father had given him the dog. With the animal sleeping at the foot of his bed, the nightmares had stopped. Thinking about it now, Billy realized that his father, like his mother, also seemed to know what he needed most.

With the first gray streaks of dawn, the men rolled

the boats out. The shore was littered with seaweed, floats, and driftwood. Bits of broken board bobbed close to shore. They looked like the concave ribs of a boat. Sitting in the bow of the Langlois dory, Billy tried not to think what the boards might mean.

When they reached the salmon stand, the men began checking the head net by pulling the boat along the float rope. Billy remembered the look of quiet pride that brightened his father's face every time they emptied a heavy catch into the bottom of the dory. Their stand had always yielded the season's best harvest. It had something to do, his father had explained to him, with the way the sea currents converged just to the south of the stand. Will had even netted a forty-eight pounder once, a record for a single salmon netted in that area. Billy had been shocked to see that when held aloft, the fish was almost as long as his father was tall.

Billy had missed out on that one, though. He and Pete Sullivan had taken time off and gone trout fishing back at the creek. His father had been so pleased about the salmon that he had even forgotten to scold Billy for not helping with the nets that day. When Billy saw the size of the fish at the icehouse, his father insisted a picture be taken of Billy standing over the catch. The photo, yellowing and turned up at the ends, still clung to the edge of Billy's mirror, where he had taped it three years ago.

The men had stopped their forward motion. Something

heavy was tangled in the net. No one spoke as they hauled it toward the surface. Billy caught a glimpse of something white in the water.

"Only a porpoise," Frank Langlois yelled out to him.

The fish had to be cut from the net, and Billy thought that the tear would require a few hours work back at the fishing shed. Of all his chores, Billy enjoyed net mending most. It was a job that was saved for the slow winter months, when the weather wouldn't allow wood cutting.

Sitting there in the bow of the boat, feeling himself bobbing up and down on the swells, Billy recalled how he would trudge across the winter barnyard to the fish shed. Inside, his father sat on an upturned crate splicing rope. The shed, smelling of seaweed, mildew and creosote, was snug against winter drafts. Sometimes, the small wood stove would glow red, and they'd have to move away from its heat.

They'd sit for hours readying the gear for spring. Billy always mended the smaller tears because his hands could always work the difficult knots more deftly than his father's outsized ones. With years of fishing in the cold salt water of the Atlantic, his father's hands, as strong as they were, were stiff and sore from arthritis. Most of the fishermen suffered from it early. It was something accepted without complaint. Billy felt his father's gnarled hand rest on his shoulder as he leaned over him to place a coil of rope on its peg.

The men stopped now every few feet to free an untied

section of net from bits of driftwood. Once they untangled part of a lobster trap that had been swept from its mooring. Someone was fishing lobster out of season; but it was not uncommon and so the men did not comment on it. Billy stared down at his feet where the debris had been collecting. The porpoise's lifeless eyes stared back at him. Billy turned his head away.

The boat had come to the end of the bar net, and still there was no sign of his father. Billy saw Frank Langlois point towards Gull Cove and remembered that a few years ago Frank and his father had found Jake Sullivan's body there after it had washed ashore. Jake had drowned while setting his lobster traps. He had been caught in a squall, too. Billy recalled that the coffin had been closed because Jake's face had been torn up from the surf's undertow. Someone said crabs had been at him as well.

Billy had rowed out here alone last summer. It was from almost this same spot that he had sketched the picture which hung in his parent's bedroom. Ragged outcroppings of rock scarred the small bay. The boulders on the beach, even from this distance, looked large.

The boy wondered why his father liked the sketch of this place above all the others he had drawn. Maybe it was because in it he could imagine the sound of the waves as they swept over and around the rocks. It was rough, yet peaceful somehow. Maybe, he thought, the place was similar to his father after all. It was remote, like the peak of

a distant mountain, and hard to reach, but it had an inner peacefulness about it, too. A kind of hidden strength. For the first time since the storm began, Billy wept while the men in the boat pretended not to notice.

As they neared the beach, carefully maneuvering the dory between the outcroppings of rock, they spotted his father's boat. It lay, partly concealed, behind a rock. Its port side had been stove in.

Clearing the last of the boulders, they saw the boy's father huddled in a cluster of tree roots and rocks on shore. Spotting them, Will waved weakly in their direction.

While the men helped his father through the surf and into the boat. Billy was shocked to see how frail he appeared. It occurred to him then that beneath all his father's strength, there had always been a kind of helplessness too. As helpless as I feel - he feels that, too, Billy thought.

As Will sat shivering in the stern, Billy removed his warm mackintosh and draped it gently about his father's shoulders. Billy nodded to the men, and as they rowed from the cove towards home, he looked up at the mountains in the distance. He saw how the hills flowed towards the bay and fell gradually into the sea.

Father Dolan's Miracle

Harry Hardy was one of those who believed it was impossible to get a good start on the day without first having a decent bowel movement. He was in the process of doing just that when he noticed the unusual shadow on the floor between his feet.

"Jesus Christ," he bellowed. "Jesus Christ, git the hell up here, Martha!"

Martha, busy frying eggs and bacon and accustomed to her husband's bellowing, ignored the fuss.

"Martha, God Almighty, Martha. Will you git up here, now!"

Martha, shaking her head and muttering, "How's a person gonna get th' breakfast done," turned off the burner, removed the frying pan from the hot element, and, still holding the greasy spatula, made her way up the narrow staircase to the second floor washroom.

"For lands' sake, Harry," she cried as she poked her head around the opened door; "you done let another ripe one off in here. Now you spray when yer finished," she ordered, waving the spatula in front of her face as she spoke. "I bought some new pine scent fer..."

"Look here, woman. Look between my feet. What do ya see?" Harry demanded.

Martha looked at him suspiciously. "What game you playin' at now, Harry? Yer up to somethin'. I know you.

Just when I git over there, yer gonna let go a fart now, ain't ya?"

Exasperated, Harry yelled, "For God's sake, woman, stop yer everlastin' yappin' and look at this." Harry stood as he spoke, pulling up his pants and buckling his belt as he did so.

Martha, still not sure what Harry was going to do, didn't move from the doorway.

"Martha," Harry cajoled, "come over here, please, and look at that." He pointed to the floor, almost at the toilet's base.

Martha, convinced that Harry was definitely up to something, walked cautiously towards him. She held the spatula out in front of her like a sword, "I'll swat ya with this if you do anything stupid," she warned.

Harry stepped aside to allow Martha to squeeze in beside him and the edge of the bathroom sink. He pointed to the floor again. His face held a puzzled, almost pained expression.

"Well, what d'ya make a that?" he asked as Martha stared at the shadow on the floor.

"Don't make nuthin' out of it," she said. "Just a stain or somethin'."

"Look again, Martha. For Christ's sake, look carefully!" Harry stroked his chin, a habit of his when he was confused by things.

Bending down lower, watching Harry out of the corner of

her eye, Martha still expected him to pull one of his practical jokes. As she examined the shadow, it seemed to take shape before her eyes. She noticed the rough outline of a man's bearded face. Patches for the eyes and mouth seemed to be darker than the rest of the outline. The face was framed by a larger shadow, possibly long, uncut hair, she thought. Circling the head was what appeared to be a thin ring of lighter shadow.

"Jesus Christ!" she whispered, finally.

"Exactly," agreed Harry.

"Oh, my God," Martha moaned. "It can't be. It just can't be, Harry!"

Harry was by nature a man who trusted his eyes and heart more than his head, and he found it easy to accept the fact Christ was staring up at him from his bathroom floor. Faith, for him, had always been a matter of quick and unquestioned acceptance. Suddenly conscious that he had forgotten to flush, Harry pushed the rickety lever and the sound of gushing water filled the small room.

Martha, standing with her mouth open, and an astonished expression on her face, absent-mindedly crossed herself with the spatula. Grease spots dotted her white blouse, just above her left breast.

"Well, Martha," Harry inquired, "cat got yer tongue?"

Martha, eyes blinking rapidly, still couldn't answer.

"We both can be seeing things. That there is bloody miraculous. That's what that is. . . Miraculous!" Harry

zipped up his fly as he spoke.

Martha, her eyes bulging and her mouth opening and closing like a grounded trout, managed a feeble, "Miracle," in reply. While she stood there, gazing down at the floor, she thought she saw the image move and dropped the spatula in surprise. It flipped end over end as it fell and clattered loudly when it hit the bathroom floor.

"Harry," she whispered, her eyes fluttering like two stunned butterflies, "Harry, we gotta do somethin' about this. It's not right. It's just not right, Harry. In the bathroom ... For God's sake, Harry!"

"Martha," Harry replied in his usual practical fashion, "if Christ could live with lepers, prostitutes and murderers, I think He can live with our facilities. After all, He was born in a barn, wasn't He?"

Martha bent down and carefully pulled her favorite spatula to safety. A single spot of grease had collected just under the right eye of the figure. Concealed by shadow, neither she nor Harry noticed the spot which was beginning to soak into the dry wood floor.

"Harry," Martha whispered again, as if afraid the apparition would overhear her, "we've got to do something about this. We can't just leave it here like this?"

"What do you want me to do, woman? I can't very well ask it to get up and move somewhere more convenient, now can I?" replied Harry sarcastically as he stroked his chin vigorously.

"Don't you talk blasphemous, Harry Hardy," Martha scolded, finding her full voice again. "You know very well what I mean. We got to tell someone about it. The town'll think we're crazy, you know. The Church, Harry. The Church has got to know about this. It's their right."

Martha was leaning unsteadily against the toilet tank as she spoke. She pointed towards the shadow with the spatula. "Father Dolan should be called right away." She crossed herself once more with the spatula and slowly backed out of the washroom. Harry followed quietly behind her.

Father Dolan shook his head angrily as he made his way across Harry's recently ploughed front field. He leaned his tall, angular body into the chill April wind and pulled his top coat closer about him. He stumbled over one furrow and almost turned an ankle over another. "Silly woman," he muttered, annoyed that his favorite breakfast - pancakes and sausage - had been interrupted. It was difficult enough, he thought, to get Mrs. Mackenzie to make the things without having Martha Hardy carrying on over the phone about a blasted emergency.

"That fool of a husband probably got himself locked in the bathroom again," he grumbled. "Probably had a heart attack in there. No," he reconsidered, "if he had a heart attack, she'd have called Dr. Campbell. Who'd want a priest before breakfast in the morning?" he questioned the muddy field. "Something about a miracle. She sure wasn't making much sense. Probably had her breakfast already, too."

Martha, waiting for him at the front door and with spatula still in hand, practically pushed him up the staircase. He stumbled over the first few steps, and by the time he reached the bathroom door he was out of breath.

"In there," Martha ordered, as she shoved him ahead of her.

"Martha, for gracious sake, what are you doing?"

Father Dolan protested.

"In there," she repeated, "He's in there." She propelled him through the doorway.

Bewildered by Martha's strange behavior, Father Dolan found himself looking at an obviously healthy Harry, who stood, holding a lighted candle Martha had given him minutes before, facing the toilet bowl.

"Harry," Father Dolan queried in his gentle voice reserved for confessionals, "Harry, have you taken leave of your senses?"

Harry, feeling a little foolish about the candle, nodded sheepishly in the general direction of the toilet bowl. "Look there, Father," he whispered.

Father Dolan, more to humour someone he thought had suddenly lost their mind than anything else, leaned over the toilet bowl and peered in. "It's just water, Harry," he said as gently as he could; "it's just water." He tried to remember the last time Harry had been to confession.

"Not in there, for heaven's sake," corrected Harry.

"On the floor, Father, on the darn'd floor "

Father Dolan, trying to retain his patience and ignoring the grumbling in his stomach, smiled benignly at Harry and looked down at the floor.

At first, Father Dolan saw what he thought was only a water stain, but the more he looked at it, the more it revealed itself. Almost without realizing what he was doing, Father Dolan knelt before the toilet and slowly made the sign of the cross.

Harry blurted out, "It's a miracle then, Father? A real miracle, and right here in Escuminac, too!"

Father Dolan ignored Harry and continued to gaze at the floor. Wordlessly, he bent forward and gently touched the image. He snapped his hand back as though it had been burned. "Look," he said, "it's crying."

Martha and Harry crowded in behind him and looked over his shoulder. Just under the right eye was a single tear. It looked fresh. They hadn't noticed it before.

"He cried when you touched Him, Father," Martha said softly.

"I've got to inform the archdiocese in Quebec City right away," Father Dolan said, without once taking his eyes off the vision. "Bishop LeBlanc must know of this."

"See, I told you, Harry," Martha cried excitedly. "I told you the Church should be informed. It's a miracle, all right. We've been blessed. God has chosen to reveal Himself to us. Isn't that a wonderful thing, Harry?"

Harry had been holding the lighted candle all this time

and was finding it more and more difficult to contend with the hot wax dripping onto his fingers. "Yes, Martha," he readily agreed, "it is a very wonderful thing." Unable to hold the candle any longer, it dropped with a plop into the toilet bowl. While he was fishing it out with Martha's spatula, Father Dolan left to make his calls.

Later, sitting in the quiet of his study, Father Dolan didn't quite know what to make of everything. On his return from the Hardy house, he had been quite convinced that what he had witnessed was real enough. Hadn't he touched it and felt the warmth beneath his fingers. It had the same texture as a living, breathing face. He had been quite startled by this. That was why he'd pulled his hand back so quickly. He imagined he could feel the silkiness of its beard under his fingers. It was a remarkable likeness, he thought. The longer one looked at it the more real it seemed to become.

The talk with Bishop LeBlanc hadn't been very useful. "The old stuffed shirt," Father Dolan mused. Even he had known that there would have to be a "quiet investigation of the phenomenon." "For God's sake," Father Dolan cried out, banging his hand down hard on the polished surface of his desk, "'the phenomenon!' Not revelation, vision, apparition or manifestation. Not even a lousy miracle. A 'phenomenon' it is for now."

"We can't be too hasty, Patrick," Bishop LeBlanc had cautioned in his perfect English. "You know how these matters

are, eh? For the sake of the Holy Church we must proceed slowly. We must be absolutely certain of its authenticity."

The use of the plural "we" always amused Father Dolan. Whenever he spoke to the Bishop it was always "we." Bishop LeBlanc liked pontificating, Father Dolan thought. It wasn't that he disagreed with him. In fact, he knew all too well that haste in these things could leave the Church with a nasty black eye.

It had happened before. Why, he remembered reading, somewhere in Texas last month people flocked to see the image of the Virgin herself - formed by a porch light reflecting off the bumper of a parked car onto the side of a house. He remembered the incident distinctly now. He had even saved the clipping. "Yes," he spoke out loud, "it was a 1975 Chevrolet." People lined up for blocks with their young and sick. He recalled everything clearly now. One old woman was trampled in the excitement when someone inadvertently shut off the porch light late one night. The fuss died down rather quickly, though, when a bunch of teenagers rocked the Chevrolet out of position. The owners could never locate the exact spot again.

Father Dolan ran his fingers through his gray hair. Lately he had begun to grow tired of the daily ritual his parish demanded. He doubted his abilities and his strengths. Sometimes he even doubted his faith. Hadn't he, in fifteen years, helplessly watched as his flock dwindled from six hundred strong to a mere one hundred and twenty-six poor

souls? He could barely make ends meet. Last month he couldn't even come up with Mrs. Mackenzie's full salary. What with birth control, abortion, gay rights and female activists siphoning off his flock, not to mention a Polish pope occupying, temporarily at least, St. Peter's throne, it was enough to dishearten any man. Today, though, today was different. Looking at that face, he had felt the pulse of faith quickening within him.

"Why couldn't this one be real?" he asked the empty room. "Harry Hardy's bathroom is just as likely a spot as Mary Ibarra's 1975 Chevrolet. If that can be believed, so can this. By God, it's time to bring St. Michael's back to life."

"Martha," Father Dolan bellowed into the phone, "Martha, Bishop LeBlanc said that ... compared this to a supernatural phenomenon. Yes, Martha," Father Dolan smiled, "that means it's like a miracle. But you listen now. The Bishop is going to send someone down to investigate, just to verify things, so you keep it real quiet for now, you hear, Martha?" Before he hung up, Father Dolan could hear the click of half a dozen other receivers on the party line.

Father Dolan sat back in his armchair and smiled broadly. He knew that word would get around quickly. Martha, God bless her soul, couldn't keep something like this a secret. By noon he expected people to be lined up outside the Hardy house. They'd gravitate soon after to St. Michael's.

It was going to be a busy day after all. Suddenly ravenous, Father Dolan went off in search of Mrs. Mackenzie and fresh pancakes.

At one o'clock, Father Dolan had already counted twenty-five cars in the Hardy yard. People were standing outside, talking quietly in groups of three and four. For the first time he was grateful the manse was next door to the Hardy farmhouse. Human nature being what it was, he knew that within a short time the crowd would begin to make their way to the oak doors of his church. It was time to prepare for the confessional.

By supper time, Father Dolan had blessed and forgiven a large proportion of Escuminac, many of whom he had not seen since Christmas. Quite a few members of the St. Jean de Brébeuf congregation had been by as well. Most were quite excited by the vision and were very generous in their newly found spirit. The poor box in the front of the church was full, and vigil lights glowed merrily in their neat rows next to the altar.

The following day was even busier. Carloads began arriving from the neighboring towns of Pointe-à-La-Garde, Nouvelle and St. Omer. By Thursday, busloads pulled in from as far away as New Carlisle and even Chandler. Schools were organizing special field trips so that everyone would have a chance to see the miracle. Father Dolan had to call Father Bertrand and Brother Calumet in from St. Jean de Brébeuf to handle the overflow. Even with the three of them, there

were long lines outside the church, and it was late at night before everyone had been given penance.

Some of his parishioners complained to Father Dolan that the whole thing was mighty suspicious. They wondered what Harry was doing with the one dollar admission fee he was charging each adult. Father Dolan assured them that the fees collected would be used to help put a new roof over St. Michael's, one that had been badly needed for some time now. He was a little dismayed, though, when Martha began selling candles for vigil lights for twenty-five cents each. He relented, however, when her proceeds were added to Harry's and delivered promptly at eleven-thirty each evening after they had closed the bathroom shrine for the night.

Father Bertrand compared all the excitement to the manifestation that had occurred over forty-eight years ago in a small French village, Anse-aux-Gascone, about ninety miles down the bay. "Two young girls claimed to have seen the Holy Virgin herself," Father Bertrand recalled, "wandering through their father's cow pasture. She spoke with them and warned them that the world was in danger. The archdiocese consecrated the site and a grotto was built. That was in the summer of 1938. I was only fifteen then," Father Bertrand sighed, "it was an exciting time."

Father Dolan had visited the site once, the first year he was assigned to St. Michael's. He remembered the small white marble statue and the single rose embedded in glass at her feet. Cows still grazed in the field all around her,

but the statue was protected by a three foot wall surrounding it. While he prayed at the site, tourists stopped and took pictures. He was even included, still at prayer, in some of them. Perhaps St. Michael's, too, would become famous. Maybe after the new roof, they could work on getting one of those special organs all the larger parishes had.

At nine o'clock the next morning, just as he was eating the last of his sausage, Father Dolan noticed the red and blue field truck belonging to CKAN Television in Carleton stop in front of Harry's place. He hurriedly wiped his mouth and hands with Mrs. Mackenzie's dishtowel and rushed out of the house.

When he reached the front porch, Harry was standing on the top step before the television camera answering a reporter's questions. Dressed in his Sunday brown suit, Harry looked self-conscious and more than a little uncomfortable. He kept shifting his weight from one foot to the other, and the camera man had to yell at him twice to stop scratching at his chin.

"I was just going to the bathroom," Harry explained in the tone of one who has repeated the same thing too many times, "and I looked down on the floor and saw the face of Jesus."

Martha, standing just behind him, peered over his shoulder and added in a shrill, excited voice, "Harry called me upstairs and I couldn't believe what my own eyes were seeing. I told our priest right away and a few friends. More and

more people keep coming..."

"Yes," interrupted Harry, "and some people cry when they see it..."

"Someone put a small gold cross in there. There's even a Bible and some holy water.. Lots of people leave their rosary, too," Martha added.

"And," the reporter questioned, "the apparition itself is weeping, is it not?"

"Yes," Martha responded reverently, "a single tear, always fresh, rests under His right eye."

"He's crying for all the sins in this world," Harry added, righteously.

The reporter approached Martha and held the microphone directly in front of her. "Mrs. Hardy," he asked in a deceptively kind voice, "is there any truth whatsoever to the rumour going around that this image might be caused from adhesive on the back of some old linoleum that, until recently, covered the floor?"

Martha looked shocked. Red-faced, she stuttered and finally blurted out, "Who...who told you that? That's crazy. I did tear up some old oilcloth a week or so ago, but there was nothing on the floor then..."

"That's right, young fella," Harry broke in. "What you trying to do? Doubting Thomas, that's what you..."

"I'm not trying to do anything, Mr. Hardy," the reporter stated. "The question remains, what are you up to?"

Father Dolan pushed his way through the crowd which

had gathered along the bottom of the porch. "Just a minute there," he called out loudly. "Hold on a minute."

The cameraman, spotting Father Dolan's white collar, quickly focused on him.

"You are?" the reporter queried.

"Dolan, Father Dolan."

"Ah, you were the first church official to witness this so-called miracle?"

"No...I mean, yes, I saw it," Father Dolan answered, "but I don't have the authority to speak for the Church."

"You're a priest, aren't you?"

"Of course. But I'm not trained in these matters. I saw what appears to be the outline of the face of Christ. I can't say how it got there, or when, exactly, but I do know that Martha and Harry here, who have been members of St. Michael's all their lives, wouldn't knowingly deceive anyone about something of this magnitude. If they say it appeared without their knowledge, then I accept their word..."

"But surely," the reporter objected, "there must be some logical explanation for it. A water stain perhaps, old wax..."

"I can no more explain this, than I can the Shroud of Turin," Father Dolan insisted. "I am not qualified..."

"No, I guess not," the reporter cut him off. "I've often looked up into the clouds and seen various shapes, even in the form of demons, but they don't mean anything. Some people get excited. I guess what you believe depends

on how hard you're looking."

"Perhaps," agreed Father Dolan, "but I, for one, don't often look for Christ on bathroom floors. In the clouds, I could understand. In the clouds, God is to be expected. One expects other things from a toilet."

"What are you saying, Father?" the reporter asked.

"I'm saying let us wait for official word. I'm saying let us not imply other things. Bishop LeBlanc has promised to send the appropriate people. Until then, let us be patient." Father Dolan couldn't believe he used "us" in the same way Bishop LeBlanc would have. Embarrassed, he hastily retreated into the house.

Standing in front of the Hardy washroom, Father Dolan hesitated before going inside. What did it matter if it could be proved authentic or not? Wasn't it enough that there might be room for doubt? Was there that much difference between a cow pasture in Anse-aux-Gascons and a washroom in Escuminac? But you want this too badly, he thought.

Last year in Warsaw, he reminded himself, thousands lined up to see an image of the Madonna on a tree trunk. In Ireland, not long after, it was reported that a statue of the Virgin Mary moved. Moved! That it actually bent slightly forwards and backwards. What was it they claimed was responsible for the 'phenomena?' Was it because heated air around the lighted halo caused a shimmering effect, or was it shock waves from a supersonic Concorde passing overhead? Did it matter what the cause was, if any? It was enough that.

people were wondering again. It was enough that some found peace and consolation in it.

Whether the Church officially sanctioned the image here was not important either. It was important that people at least doubt a little; that they wonder a bit at the probability of it all; that they look at the clouds once more. These are the things that matter most, Father Dolan admitted to himself just before he pushed open the bathroom door.

It was his first visit since everything had gone public. Harry had redecorated a bit. It looked as though Martha had helped out, too. A box had been built over the toilet and then covered with blue velvet. On it rested a small vial of holy water and a leather bound Bible. Between these two icons rested a large gold cross. Draped over the side of the sink were a number of rosaries. Soft lights played across the shadow on the floor.

Father Dolan stepped closer. He wanted to touch the weeping face again. He wanted to feel its warmth once more. Perhaps he had only imagined it. As he bent closer, his hand outstretched, he heard voices behind him. Harry was loudly escorting the television crew up the narrow stairwell. Equipment banged against the walls, scraping away the paint. Father Dolan backed away. It would have to wait, he sighed, for another time.

That evening, watching the Hardys and himself being interviewed on the six o'clock news, he had to admit the whole thing sounded quite ridiculous. When they flashed close-ups

of the bathroom across the screen, the blue velvet masking the toilet looked more than a little garrish under probing camera lights. The Bible and cross seemed pretentious and in poor taste. The image itself, bathed in bright light, looked faded and fake. He felt a little sick to his stomach, but then he remembered the feel of the figure under his touch, and he knew that that was impossible to forge.

The phone rang ten minutes after the broadcast. Bishop LeBlanc was furious. He demanded to know why Father Dolan had consented to being interviewed without the proper approval, and why everything had been made public before the official investigation. When Father Dolan explained how difficult it was in such a small place to keep these matters quiet, Bishop LeBlanc accused him of incompetence and slammed the phone down hard in its cradle.

Early the next morning a couple of priests from the archdiocese arrived. They were young and earnest looking. They efficiently cordoned off the Hardy yard and disappeared inside the house. Two hours later they re-emerged, blinking in the sunlight before they climbed inside their dark blue sedan and drove off. Neither of them made any attempt to speak to Father Dolan, who had waited patiently outside the Hardy house while they worked inside.

Listening to the late evening news that night, Father Dolan discovered that the archdiocese had pronounced the image a hoax. Tests done on the single tear proved to be bacon fat, and although the origin of the figure itself

couldn't be verified, it was believed to have been caused from worn linoleum adhesive, or possibly a water stain - perhaps even a combination of both. Bishop LeBlanc himself appeared on camera briefly and talked with great sincerity about preserving the credibility of the Church, and how one had to be constantly on guard against charlatans.

Harry Hardy called after the broadcast to assure him that he and Martha had nothing to do with the grease and how it had gotten there was a complete mystery to them. Martha, crying, got on the extension and said that she and Harry were no charlatans, whatever they were, and that if he doubted them, too, he should come over because the vision seemed to be changing in some way.

By the time Father Dolan entered the Hardy house, Martha had her tears under control and was more angry than hurt. Harry, red-faced and picking at his chin, said he'd never watch CKAN again. "It's a lousy station anyway," he declared. "Don't even carry the wrestlin' matches."

Together they walked up to the bathroom. Father Dolan noticed that all the religious trappings had been removed. When he bent down to examine the figure, he saw nothing. The only thing that remained was the single spot where the tear had been. Father Dolan rubbed his index finger over it. It felt oily. Curiously, the area immediately around it was warm, as if it had just been heated. The floor surrounding the spot felt different in texture from the rest of the surface area. He looked up at Harry and Martha. Harry's mouth

hung open in surprise. Martha started to cry again.

At ten o'clock Sunday morning, just as Father Dolan was putting the finishing touches to his eleven o'clock sermon, a dark blue sedan pulled up in front of his study window. He recognized the two young priests of the day before; the third one wasn't familiar to him.

"Bishop LeBlanc," one explained to him once they were sitting comfortably in his living room sipping Mrs. Mackenzie's tea, "thinks it best you come with us to Quebec. He thinks that, under the circumstances, an extended retreat would be good.. "

"I don't need a rest," Father Dolan objected.

"Nonetheless," the young priest smiled kindly at him, "we have our instructions. Father Cleary here," he said pointing to the third priest, "will take over St. Michael's for a while."

The drive to Quebec City was a subdued one. Normally Father Dolan would have enjoyed the opportunity to talk to two young priests. He usually welcomed the chance to feel the younger generation out, but these two sat, stoney-faced, in the front ignoring him as best they could.

Forty miles outside the city limits, a report on the car radio informed the silent priests that in Ste. Marthe-sur-le-lac, a small town just north of Montreal, a statue of the virgin in a private chapel was said to be crying tears of blood.

Paper Dolls

The summer I turned seven we used to go riding, Benny and me, almost every day. They weren't real horses of course, only stick ones, but to us, they had long flowing manes and sweaty flanks, and we'd gallop silently, side by side, for miles in the dusty barn.

Benny was my great-uncle. That summer we moved from Toronto back to my father's home town; he was just about my best friend ever. It was the week the lilacs bloomed and their scent was everywhere. I remember climbing from the car and seeing all the bushes that grew beside the house and barn.

We lived with my grandmother for the first few months until my father found work, and we could get a place of our own. My parents fought a lot that summer. My father had left a good job behind in Toronto, and it was like they were starting all over. He kept telling my mother that things would work out, but she didn't know what to expect, and she missed her family and friends she had left behind. Once, in the middle of an argument, she lost her temper and threw an empty soup can at him. The sharp, half-opened top cut into his ear. I remember the doctor stitching it up in the kitchen, and my father cursing everytime he felt the needle.

Maybe that's why I spent so much time with Benny. When I was outside with him, I didn't have to listen to the arguing in the house. The fact that Benny was deaf and dumb only

heightened my interest in him. He had long dark hair growing from his ears and nose which used to fascinate me. My great-grandmother would trim them about once a month, but they always grew back. When Benny laughed, or roared in anger, you could see he was missing most of his teeth, and whenever he ate, he made funny chewing sounds. Peppermints were his favourite candy, and he made loud sucking noises when he had one. He always kept a pocket full of them, and if you were extra good, he always shared them. He smoked Export A cigarettes, which he got every Christmas from the men down in the mill shop who used to let him sit around while they worked. Benny never inhaled when he smoked. Sometimes he'd accidentally swallow smoke, and he'd choke until his eyes watered. I don't think he liked smoking much, but it made him feel like he was one of the men, and whenever they lit one up for him, he sat there, very proud, and smoked with them.

Benny was known by just about everyone in the area. The whole village sort of looked out for him. Once, a few years before we moved to Chaleurs, Benny went to help a neighbour load firewood in a back woodlot. Somehow, he managed to wander away and got lost. The entire town spent all day looking for him, but Benny stumbled upon an old logging trail and followed it out to the next town. He must have walked over twenty miles. Someone spotted him in their field, and knowing who he was, drove him home. Benny, not realizing he had been lost to begin with, couldn't understand what all

the fuss was about and why so many people were waiting in his yard when he finally got home.

It was funny how he was with me that first summer because he didn't like kids very much, especially young boys. They seemed to make him nervous. I was the only boy in the village he'd let come near. Of course, the boys teased him a lot. They found Benny an easy target. At fifty, he couldn't move as quickly as he once could and they knew that, if they kept a certain distance, they could make faces without fear of being caught by him. They had to keep a careful watch out for my great-grandmother, though. If she saw them, she'd chase them out of the yard with a broom, and if they were unlucky enough to fall, she'd whack them once or twice across the backside with it. I don't think she ever really hurt them, but they'd get up screaming and crying as if they were being beaten to death. For an old woman, my great-grandmother could run pretty fast.

She and Benny took pretty good care of one another. Whenever she was sick and thought she was dying, which was about once a year, Benny would sit for hours outside her room on a hard-backed chair until someone would shoo him out of the house. He'd always sneak back in whenever he could. Once they forgot about him, and he spent an entire night sitting outside her bedroom door in the darkness. He had lots of practise at sitting there because she didn't die until she was ninety-nine, just five days short of her hundredth birthday. A couple of days after we buried her, a telegram

arrived at the house from Prime Minister Trudeau congratulating her on her long life. She hated Trudeau anyway, and had always called him "that damn'd communist."

Maybe the reason Benny took me under his wings so readily that summer was that he sensed I was lonely. My mother and great-grandmother were usually busy and left me alone to entertain myself as best I could. Maybe Benny was lonely, too, and because of it could recognize when other people were lonely as well.

On the first rainy day that summer, Benny poked me in the ribs and made signs that I was to follow him. He had some type of problem when he walked. I always had to run to keep up with his long, staggering strides. He was always in danger of losing his balance, and he'd often stumble over things. I remember he always had cuts and bruises over his arms and legs. He must have slipped three or four times on the wet path to the barn, and I had to help him up each time. By the time we got to the stable we were both soaked to the skin. Just inside the door, he motioned that I was to close my eyes. Taking me by the hand, he led me across the floor. When I opened my eyes, I saw the stick-horses right in front of me. There must have been eight or nine of them. Each had their own stall, reins, oat boxes, mangers and water buckets.

Benny stepped in beside the first one and started making petting motions with his hand. He indicated that I should do the same. We moved from horse to horse, repeating the

same silent routine until he was satisfied each animal was used to my scent. By the time we had finished, even I was convinced I could feel their trembling sides and smell their sweet, sweaty odor. Grinning like a Cheshire cat, Benny handed me the reins of one and signed that I should ride. That was the first of our many jaunts that summer.

Benny loved everything about horses. When we weren't riding, he'd sit for hours polishing the old leather harness that hung in neat rows on wooden pegs along one of the stable walls. The harness must have been over fifty years old, but it still shone and felt like new. It had an oily, musty smell to it that I always associate with rainy days.

My great grandmother told me once that Benny used to help his father drive the team when he delivered mail to the villagers and to the farmers in the concessions.

"Benny was younger than you are now," she had explained.

"One morning we found him lying face down on the stable floor. One of the horses had kicked him in the head."

She gave me the impression that this was why Benny was as he was, but my father told me later that Benny was born that way.

On nice days, Benny would let me help him stack firewood; that was how he made a little pocket money. A few families in town paid him to split and cord their winter's wood. As awkward as he usually was with everything else,

for some inexplicable reason Benny could split wood better than anyone I ever saw. He had a smooth, powerful swing, and he never missed his mark.

Benny always watched me closely when I stacked the split pieces. It was as if each separate piece had an exact place in the cord, and if he wasn't happy with my work, he knocked the entire row down and made me start all over again. I don't think a single cord he piled ever fell down. When he finished stacking, it was as if each piece had been glued in place. The end product was a solid wall of wood. He never allowed anyone else to work with him, and it was unusual for him to accept help. If anyone touched his wood without his permission, he always chased him away.

On the days that there was no wood to split and stack, or if it was too wet to work, we slipped out to the old barn. With our riding over, the horses fed and watered, and the harness polished, Benny would get out his pile of old catalogues. Together we'd cut out paper dolls.

Next to his horses, paper dolls were what made him happiest. Most of his cutouts were pictures of women. They were usually young and pretty. Some of them used to remind me of pictures I had seen of my great-grandmother when she was a young woman. I was only allowed to cut from the toy sections.

Since Benny couldn't maneuver the scissors into the

more difficult angles, he usually cut his figures out in large circles or squares. I was a little better at cutting and therefore took longer with each cutout. Consequently, he always managed to fill his shoebox long before me. Sometimes, when he giggled strangely and got red-faced, I knew he was in the process of cutting one out from the lingerie section. Occasionally, he'd laugh loudly and hold a particularly attractive doll out for me to see. I'd pretend to be angry, and to tease him, I'd shake my head and sign, "shame on you," by rubbing one index finger back and forth along the other. He thought this was great fun, and he'd laugh, sometimes so hard he'd drop his scissors into the shoebox, and they'd disappear under hundreds of women clothed only in their underwear.

The filled shoeboxes were always stacked neatly along special shelves one of the neighbors, Mr. Steele, had made for him in the barn. Benny had rows of boxes piled one on top of the other, just like cordwood. He wouldn't allow me to put any of my finished boxes with his. Often, when he wasn't looking, I'd slip one of mine in with his, but he'd always spot it and remove it immediately. I could never fool him. It was only much later that I realized he always gave me the most battered boxes to use, the ones that could easily be identified.

I think that just about everyone in our tiny village saved old magazines, catalogues, and boxes for him. There wasn't one outhouse that Benny didn't check out once or twice

a week just to make sure that possible material wasn't being wasted. The fact that most of the outhouses were only used as storage sheds didn't deter him from his weekly scouting treks. If ever he found a magazine or catalogue, he'd bound out of the door, holding it high above his head in triumph, yelling "Ford" as loudly as he could.

Fords were his favorite type of cars, and one of the men from the shop had taught him how to say it. It was one of two words he could say, and it was reserved for those occasions he was most excited. The other word was a sort of long drawn out "Maam" that he used when he was angry or frightened.

It seemed that as long as Benny was awake, he had to be doing something. At the end of the day I used to be exhausted just from following him around. In the fall and winters when it was too cold to work for long periods in the barn, Benny moved his catalogues into the house. Everyone in town knew spring had arrived when Benny loaded up his finished boxes in the wheelbarrow and moved them to the stable. He was their dependable groundhog that threw no shadows.

He had a way of handling each box as if he were holding the holy sacrament itself. Each one was placed carefully and gently into its proper place, and with each fitting, his face would glow with satisfaction and accomplishment. The same look would come over him when he corded wood. I think each ritual fulfilled some unconscious need he had. I can almost see him now, bending over each separate box with the

sunlight from the cracks in the barn roof spilling around him as he worked on his paper dolls. He always continued cutting long after I had stopped.

Towards the end of that summer, I became friends with some of the other village children. I began spending less and less time with Benny. He never seemed to mind this, though. Whenever I signed that I was going out with the other kids, he'd smile and nod, happy that I had found some friends. I began to suspect that he preferred to be by himself and that I was just a momentary change in his life that had been tolerated, more for my sake than for his. For some reason, this thought began to bother me more and more.

One day, when Benny was chopping wood for Mr. Steele, some of the boys dared each other to play tricks on him. Everyone took turns running out from behind the woodpile and making faces at Benny in the hope that he would get angry and chase them. Benny simply ignored them and went about his work. Wanting to impress my new friends, I suppose, I told them about his penchant for neatly corded wood. I watched as they knocked over all the wood Benny had so patiently stacked that morning. Seeing us run away, Benny flew into a rage and chased after us yelling "Maam," and throwing pieces of wood at our fleeing backs. When he recognized my red jacket, he stopped abruptly and turned back. Over my shoulder, I saw the look of confused hurt on his face.

The next day when Benny went out to get an armful of

wood for the kitchen stove, I followed him to the woodpile. I tried to apologize for my part in the incident, but he waved me away. I signalled once more that I was sorry and bent down to help with the wood. As soon as I touched the pile he roared, "Maam, Maam," over and over again, and swung a stick of firewood at my head. I was so surprised at the look of utter hatred on his face that I forgot to duck. I realize now that it was as if everything that had ever frustrated or hurt him had suddenly been unleashed in that single blow. The cut in my forehead required eight stitches to close, and I fainted when the doctor started to sew me up.

Benny was forbidden use of the barn for quite some time after that. My father even put a lock on the stable door to make sure that he couldn't get in to play with his horses, or his paper dolls. Benny didn't like it much, but he tried not to show how much it bothered him. He spent more time down in the mill shop with the men, and even neglected his wood cutting and cording. He never once came into my room to see how I was the whole week I spent in bed. I think I hated him more for that than for hitting me.

The first day I was able to move around without getting sick or having headaches, I sneaked out to the barn when no one was watching, and crawled into the stable through a rear window. I don't think I had any idea about what I was going to do. I just stood there for a few minutes and stared at all the stick-horses and rows of boxes.

The neatness of it all infuriated me. I kicked all the

horsestalls apart and broke the stick-horses in two with the back of an old axe. I even scattered the buckets and hay all over the barn and then attacked the harness by knocking it off its pegs and onto the dusty floor. Not satisfied with that, I took my anger out further on the paper dolls. Tearing the cover from each box, I threw the contents high into the air and watched them spread all over the stable floor. It must have taken me an hour to empty all the boxes. When I had finished, I felt drained and yet, somehow, fulfilled. Thinking about it now, I guess I must have felt the same way Benny did after he struck me with that piece of birch wood. It took Benny days to clean up the mess. He never let on that it had ever happened, but he never invited me into the barn again.

Just before school started that September, we moved into our own house in the village. I rarely saw Benny, except for family gatherings. I sat at opposite ends of the table from him then. He never bothered to even look my way. All through elementary school, I managed to avoid him as best I could. We moved to Bathurst, New Brunswick when I was in grade seven. Two years later my great-grandmother died. She had been sick all winter, and in the spring when the lilac trees all around her house were beginning to bud, she got double pneumonia and was never able to recover. The doctor said her heart just gave out. Since no one else had the extra room for Benny, they boarded up the old house, and he was moved into a nursing home. He must have been about fifty-

six or seven then.

Benny just sort of wasted away after that Rheumatism confined him to a wheelchair, and he never got outside much anymore. He used to sit in his small room that smelled of disinfectant and medicine and watch television all night long. He couldn't hear the voices, but he'd laugh at anything he thought was funny. His favorite program was Wednesday Night Wrestling, especially when the midgets were the main attraction.

During the day, Benny didn't do much of anything. He'd sit and stare out the window for long periods of time. Sometimes he'd motion that he wanted to build a place of his own; sometimes, when he saw a horse in the field across the road, he'd get excited and his face would light up for an instant. Whenever we visited him, he occasionally didn't know who we were; at other times his eyes would shine in recognition. He seemed to have forgotten all about our differences. I'd sit beside him and help him cut out his dolls again. He had great difficulty cutting now, and he tired easily after one or two cutouts. The nursing staff wouldn't let him smoke anymore either, and he couldn't eat peppermints because he choked on them.

He died quietly in his sleep one night five years after he had moved into the home. The whole town turned out for his funeral. He was buried beside my great-grandmother. Maybe because it's spring and the lilacs are in bloom, I find myself thinking a lot about that first summer

Last night I dreamt of Benny. It was the same dream I used to have soon after we moved to Bathurst. I'm standing alone in an old barn. Shafts of sunlight squeeze through the holes in the roof and tiny trails of light crisscross above my head. As I look upward, paper dolls, like snow, begin to fall all around me. They fall continually upon the cutting table and upon the harness lying on the dusty floor.

The Good Neighbor

Billy MacPherson studied the house before him. He noticed that the homes on the street were of similar design, but there was something different about this one. He liked it. It reminded him of the MacInnis place next door to his Port David home. Maybe it was because creeping ivy covered its front, almost concealing the brown brick underneath. Even the large bay window was partially obscured by the laced network of vine. He checked the address again. It was the correct one all right.

The steps to the verandah were tilted at an odd angle. Part of their support had weakened and fallen away. The stairs moved slightly under his weight. It was a little as he imagined walking up the gangway of a ship must feel. The porch's floorboards seemed solid enough, but they needed a fresh coat of paint. The old coating of grey was blistered and was peeling away from the wood. Billy figured it was because it lacked drainholes for the rain water.

Placing his backpack next to the doorway, he took a handkerchief from his shirt pocket and mopped the perspiration from his forehead. Although it was early in September, it felt more like mid-July. He wondered if he'd ever get used to the city's heat and noise. He couldn't believe all the cars which clogged the Montreal streets. He was sure the taxi driver was going to kill them both the way he cut off other drivers, and nudged the rear bumpers of the cars

in front. His head still rang from the shriek of horns and squealing tires. This street seemed a backwash of quiet, though. He noticed on his walk from the corner that it had a lot of large, leafy maples. It looked almost like a small town lane. He relaxed a little.

Billy's feet hurt and he felt tired. He wasn't used to walking on cement sidewalks. Port David didn't have any. In fact, he remembered when the main road hadn't even been paved. This was the fifth place he had looked at so far this morning and about the twentieth in the last two days. The rest had been either too expensive or just too run down. Some were filthy firetraps. Billy found this shocking, especially when compared to his mother's spotless home. Billy smiled, imagining her reaction. "Not even fit for a cat," his mother would have claimed, shaking her head in disgust. Even though this was farther from McGill than he wanted to be, which meant he'd have to take a bus every day, Billy knew that if the room was acceptable, he'd take it.

It really did resemble the MacInnis house. It shouldn't be too expensive; the lady at student services had said that rooms would be cheaper farther away from the campus. His scholarship only covered the cost of tuition, and he knew he'd have to watch what he spent on room and board carefully, if he wanted to get by without having to work part-time. It wasn't as if work bothered him; it was just that he wanted to spend all his spare time studying and sketching. He'd already seen a number of places he'd like to paint, and he'd

heard that the view from Mount Royal was something he should see. He'd already decided that whenever the leaves turned, he'd pack a lunch and spend the whole day up there.

Everything had seemed a blur of confusion to him since he'd arrived. He couldn't get into half the courses he wanted to. "Full up," his advisor had explained; "you should have come for early registration in August." When Billy explained that he was from out of town, his advisor simply admonished, "Too bad, now you're stuck with the leftovers.

Come to the table earlier next semester." Billy had intended to register early. They had mailed all the necessary forms to him, but in the excitement following his father's fishing accident, he had missed the deadline. He had been so busy handling the haying, he hadn't even thought about it. At least he had been able to get into one course he thought he'd like.

Billy hoped the room would be clean. All he wanted to do was sleep until classes started tomorrow. He couldn't afford too many more nights at the YMCA. It was full of noisy students anyway. They must have played ball hockey in the hallway outside his room until three or four in the morning. He'd just fallen asleep when a garbage truck, gears grinding in the alleyway beneath his fourth floor window, jolted him awake before dawn. At first he thought it was Arthur MacInnis starting up his pulp truck next door, but when his mind cleared, he remembered where he was. He was so tired he felt as if he had been threshing oats all day.

and here it was only ten in the morning.

He'd had his fill of the "Y", all right. Besides, they had warned him at student services that sometimes they had complaints from other students about gays that hung out there, but Billy hadn't noticed any. The thought made him uncomfortable, though. The only homosexual he'd ever heard about in Port David was a teacher the board had hired from Ontario one year. When they discovered the teacher's past, he was gotten rid of pretty quickly. His father served on the school board, and so he had heard all about it at home. Billy remembered all the rumours that had floated about. He had been a good teacher, though, and had encouraged Billy to keep drawing. Still, the thought of it made Billy's flesh crawl. He didn't want to spend another night back at that place. Not if he had anything to say about it.

Putting away his handkerchief, Billy leaned forward and rang the doorbell. He waited a few moments and pressed the bell again. When no one appeared, he knocked loudly on the wooden door. The three slits of glass set into the top door panel eyed him indifferently. He couldn't see much through them. He thought he saw the front drapes open a little and then close again. From behind the door, he heard the sound of coughing. A voice, he couldn't tell if it was male or female, young or old, called out to him, "Whatta ya want?"

"The room...you've got a room to rent, haven't you?"

Billy shouted through the closed door.

"Oh...the room. Yes. Just a moment, please " Billy

thought the tone of voice had changed. It sounded gentler, somehow.

The sound of locks being snapped open echoed through the door. Billy picked up his backpack. "Hello," he called out as the door swung open.

"Hello right back at ya, young fella," a woman answered. She was short and thin. Her smile was very pleasant. Billy thought she was probably in her early sixties. "Sorry for taking so long," she apologized. "Saw you standing out here from the sitting room window. So neat and tidy-looking. Thought you was one of those darn'd Mormons. They're always canvassing the area. Great doorbell ringers they are. Had two of 'em by here just the other day. Can't get rid of 'em once they get in. Worse than silverfish. You Catholic?" she asked without waiting for a reply. "One of 'em said, 'We have found the Lord.' I told him I wasn't aware He had been lost and slammed the door." She looked Billy up and down suspiciously. "Sure you're not one of 'em, eh?"

"Anglican," he assured her, laughing. "We found Him some time ago."

"Ah, you're good as Catholic. Almost, anyway. Don't really care what religion you are. Long as you're not out to save the world. Can't stand people on a mission when I've vacuuming that needs finishing. Handsome lads they were, though. Clean-cut. You look like one of them, you know. Fresh-faced, sort of. Well, c'mon in, boy. Can't see the bloomin' room from there. Think you'll like it.

Big and bright. Used to be my son's. He's got the small one now. He's home for a bit, Tom is. Between jobs. Got another room, too, but it's rented out. Nice quiet fellow. He and Tom been friends since they was kids."

Billy trailed behind her. The words poured over her shoulder and seemed to bounce off the walls and echo down the hallway. They made their way deeper into the house. Billy noted that the walls were clean and white, the floors varnished and well-kept. The woman pushed open a doorway and stepped to one side. Pointing into the room she said, "Well, g'on in, boy. Don't be shy. Take a look at it. By the way, my name's Boyd, Mrs. Boyd."

Billy liked the room immediately. It was large and clean. It's only window faced east. Sun streamed into it and made the varnished floor glow. His bedroom at home, smaller than this one, had an east window, too. He loved the warmth of the sun on his face in the early morning. A writing desk was placed directly in front of the window. Pushed against the west wall was a wrought iron bed. There was also a small dresser and mirror which looked as though it had recently been refinished. An old-fashioned wardrobe took up most of the north wall. Billy thought it was made of maple, but Mrs. Boyd noticed him studying it and said, "Oak. Used to be my grandmother's. Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes," replied Billy; "it's almost identical to the one in my parents' room at home."

"That so," Mrs. Boyd smiled.

Billy found Mrs. Boyd a little like his own mother. Both smiled a lot, and both used their hands when they spoke, although Mrs. Boyd's weren't as graceful in their movements. Billy thought of his mother now. He hoped she was managing all right. Since the storm, his father's recovery had been slow. Spending the night in the rain and cold at Gull Cove had given him pneumonia, and he still suffered from a heavy cough. Billy was worried about them both. His mother had changed a lot since the night it had happened. She had lost some of her vitality and often looked tired and worried. Billy knew that until his father recovered entirely, she would suffer quietly along with him. He wanted to postpone his leaving until next fall, but she had insisted he leave as they had originally planned. His father had agreed with her.

"Don't worry about me, boy," his father had said; "I'll be up and about in a few weeks. There's not much to do anyway. You've about finished everything up for the fall harvest."

"Yes," his mother had reasoned, "that's true. You've got to go, Billy. If you stay another year, you may decide not to go at all. We'll manage. Will and me have done it before. The young Langlois boy said he'll help out until your father gets his strength back."

"Washroom's right across the hall," he heard Mrs. Boyd saying. "Real accessible from this room. C'mon, I'll show you the kitchen and the rest of the house. Have a big

stuffed chair I'll move in here. It's great for reading. You look like the reading type. It's only cluttering up the sitting room anyway. Mickey, my other boarder, has one just like it in his room. He's a reader, too. Chairs are a bit worn, but as comfortable as a old pair of slippers. Alvin, Alvin's my late husband, bought them just after we got married."

"That'd be fine, Mrs. Boyd," Billy said as he followed her down the hallway toward the kitchen. "I've decided to take the room, if the price is right. I can't understand why someone hasn't already rented it."

"Oh," Mrs. Boyd replied, "it was rented out to a young fella in August. But he just up and left without a word last week. Had paid up for the full month, too. Strangest thing. Tom couldn't figure it out either. Had a good job and everything. Worked at Armstrong Cork on Decarie. They make floor tile and stuff like that. Said he wanted to rent for a year. By then he figured he'd have enough saved to furnish a place of his own. Real quiet fella. Minded his own business. Wasn't any trouble at all. Just up and left in the middle of the night. Not a word to anyone. Maybe he got fired or something."

"Anyway, rent's forty a week. You'll find Mickey, next door to ya, a good neighbor. He keeps decent hours. Room's neat, and he picks up after himself. Can't find work, though. Just too old for anyone to take a chance on. Imagine that. Too old at fifty-one. Gets a small pension from the army

and is on welfare. You'll like him. Tom, too. Tom just got home from James Bay a few months ago. Work's finished up there. Worked in payroll. Smart boy, my Tom. No blue collar labour for him. He's waitin' to hear from his old construction company. They've another contract coming up. In South America, yet. My Tom's been all over the world. Africa, Asia, Iran - you name it, Tom's been there."

Billy followed Mrs. Boyd about the house as she talked. They agreed that he could use the kitchen from seven until eight in the morning and after six in the evenings. She and Tom were late risers and so they only breakfasted around ten. They liked to eat supper at five. She showed him his cupboard and refrigerator space and told him to make sure he washed the dishes after he'd finished eating. Since the other boarder, Mickey, ate most of his meals in his room, there wouldn't be any conflict with his timetable. Mrs. Boyd also invited Billy to watch television with her in the evenings whenever he wished, "Mickey's got his own set and Tom usually spends the nights with him watching television or playing cards. They're usually still at it long after I go to bed. I get lonely sometimes with no one to sit with, so if you've a mind to, you're more than welcome. Alvin and me used to sit together all the time before he died."

Billy adjusted to the routine of the house fairly quickly. He was up at six every morning, hours before everyone else, and had the house all to himself. When he

returned from working in the library at six o'clock, Mrs. Boyd was usually in the front room listening to an early newscast and knitting. Mickey and Tom either went out for a few beers after supper or spent the evenings together in Mickey's room. Billy ate by himself and then read or studied in his room before going to bed. Because he liked to get up early, a habit he had acquired from his father and farm life, he was usually in bed by eleven. Sometimes he watched television with Mrs. Boyd for an hour or so, but other than that, he was content to stay undisturbed in his room.

He was sitting at his desk one evening, about a week after renting the room, when he heard a light tapping at his door. He turned about in his chair just in time to see a man poke his head around the partially opened door.

"Hello," the man called out. "I'm Tom. Thought it was about time I welcomed you. Every time I stop by to say hello, you're either out at classes or sleeping."

"Please, come in," Billy replied. He noted that Tom was of medium height, but had Mrs. Boyd's wiry frame. His hair was brown and wavy. When he smiled, Billy could tell he wore dentures. His top lip seemed to curl in unnaturally at the corners of his mouth. When Billy stood and shook his hand, he noticed that it felt damp and warm. He seemed nervous. Tom's face was pock-marked and sallow. It looked as though he didn't get out in the sun much. The skin above his eyebrows was pulled tight across his forehead. His

voice had a nasal sound to it which Billy found irritating.

"So, how do you like it?" Tom asked.

"Fine," Billy replied; "everything is going well. The traffic takes a little getting used to, though."

"Where you from?"

"Small town, Port David, on the Gaspé coast."

"That so. I hear it's real pretty down there. Never visited it myself, but my wife used to know someone from New Carlisle."

"It's only about twenty-five miles from my home. Next door neighbors, almost. I didn't realize you were married; your mother never..."

"Divorced, actually. Wife left me. Took my little girl and walked out on me. Haven't seen my daughter in over ten years. She's about twenty now. They're somewhere in Vancouver now. Tried to find them once. Even hired a detective, but couldn't afford to keep him for long. Gave up lookin' after a while. Hell with her. Be nice to see my girl again, though."

"I'm sorry. It must have been difficult for you."

Billy found Tom's habits similar to Mrs Boyd's. Both talked quickly, as if afraid someone was going to cut them off, and in short phrases and sentences with barely a pause in between. Tom's hands jerked about as he spoke. He occasionally stabbed at the air with a forefinger, almost as though he was lecturing a young child.

"You a student?" he demanded.

"Yes," Billy answered.

"Where?" Tom asked.

"McGill," Billy responded, trying not to sound annoyed.

Usually, Billy enjoyed talking to people, but Tom's questions, posed almost like an interrogation, were beginning to get to him.

"What ya study?"

"Art," Billy answered, trying to anticipate the next question.

"Really?" Tom sounded interested: "Liked art myself in school. Course, I only got grade ten. Math was my favorite subject. I still work with figures. Work in the payroll office. Off now, though. Have something lined up. Company's got a contract in South America. Hoping to hear from them any day now."

Billy watched Tom as he spoke, his finger constantly probing the air, emphasizing every second word. He seldom seemed to look directly at Billy. Tom's pale blue, watery eyes glanced above Billy's head, then to his right and left, but never directly at him. It made Billy very uncomfortable. When Tom stared over Billy's right shoulder, Billy forced himself to keep from turning around. He felt as though someone was standing behind him. When Tom wasn't stabbing at the air, he brushed his right hand through his hair in a nervous, hesitant way.

"Went to Daniel O'Connell High, just a few blocks from here. Boys' school. It's a co-ed, private school now.

Was run by a bunch of brothers when I went. Presentation Brothers of Ireland. Shit, they was a tough bunch. Long-robed, monkey faces. Hell of a place, O'Connell was. Mick, he went there, too. Couple of years ahead of me. We was friends anyway. Always have been. Grew up together. Mick, he used to live down the street. Funny thing, us being together here now after all those years. Like we was kids again."

Tom sat on the end of Billy's bed. For a moment he didn't say anything. He ran his hand through his hair a couple of times. "Know what old Irenis, one of the brothers at O'Connell, did to Mickey? Old Irenis, musta taught there for sixty years. Tough old buzzard. Dead now. Guess there is justice in the world, after all. Anyway, Irenis caught Mickey with this girlie magazine and gave him a swat across the side of the head. Dam'd near tore Mick's head off. Then he picked poor Mick up. Irenis was the size of a tree. Picked him up and hung him by his ankles out the third floor window. Said he'd a good mind to let him drop, so he'd suffer in hell for his evil thoughts. Mick was screechin' and hollerin' so loud we could hear him in the grade nine class on the second floor. Darn'd near shit himself, he was so scared. You ask Mick if that ain't true. Go ahead. Ask him!" Billy felt Tom expected him to do it immediately. "Mick says he still gets nightmares about it," Tom continued. "Think it made Mick's stutter worse. They used to give him a hard time about that, too. Irenis said-

stutterin' was a sign of the devil."

"Sounds like it was a tough school," Billy commented. He hoped Tom would leave soon. He still had some reading to finish for tomorrow's classes, and he wanted to write a short letter home.

"Tough," Tom repeated. "It was God awful. The whole school was full of the worst kids on the island. They sent 'em to O'Connell when no one else would take 'em. Kids got beat up by other kids almost everyday. When they weren't getting beat on by each other, the brothers got their licks in. Lots worse things happened there. Things you wouldn't believe could happen in a school. The old basement was a maze of tunnels. Some of the older guys used to drag the younger kids down there. Make 'em do all kinds of things."

"What sort of things?" Billy asked.

"Just things," Tom said, looking past Billy's shoulder again.

"The older boys used to beat up on us, too," Billy said. "But the teachers never let them get too rough. They'd steal our dimes for soft drinks, sometimes."

Tom didn't say anything to this. He just sat there, his blue eyes staring past Billy, and ran his hand through his hair. Billy thought he looked ill. Suddenly he blurted out, "Mick and me, we go back a long way. He's fifty-one now. I'll be forty-nine in November. Time flies, eh?"

"You don't look that old," Billy replied.

"Ya, I know. Take after my mother's side. Slight of build and young looking. Mother's seventy-five. Looks ten or fifteen years younger."

"They say I look like my mother's family, too," Billy said.

"That so," Tom replied without much interest. "Poor Mick. Got fired from his last job, you know. Worked for a security company. Got drunk one night and smashed up a company car. Was in the hospital for months. Almost killed himself. When he got out, he had nowhere to go. Persuaded mother to rent out a room to him."

Billy moved towards the door, hoping Tom would take the hint. "Mother tell you about father?" Tom inquired, ignoring Billy's gesture. "He died a couple of years ago you know. Terrible thing it was. Was all crippled up before he died. Fell down the basement stairs. After the accident we used to have to push him about in a wheelchair. Couldn't speak. Couldn't do anything. Paralyzed. Just like a baby. Had to feed him, change him. Everything. Mother wouldn't put him in a nursing home. Looked after him herself. He was a locksmith you know. Had his shop downstairs. All his tools and stuff are still there. I'll show you sometime. Don't go down there much. These old basements give me the creeps. Lovely funeral, it was. Hundreds of people. Hit his head when he fell, you know. Was unconscious for a long time. Never was the same when he came to." Tom sat still now, even his hands lay quiet in his lap.

Billy felt sorry for him. Other than Mickey, it didn't appear he had many friends. The fact his father had also been hurt in an accident made Billy feel even more sympathetic towards him.

"My father was almost killed last month," Billy said. "He got caught in a storm while out fishing. His boat got smashed up on the rocks, and he had to spend the night stranded in a cove. Got pneumonia and almost died."

"That so," Tom said without looking up. "Guess he was pretty lucky, then."

"Yes, he was. I thought he had drowned. Don't know what we'd have done if he had."

"You'd go on," Tom said. "Just like me and mother. She had to rent out rooms, but she's doing okay. More than okay if you ask me." Tom stood up suddenly. "You're young and innocent-looking. Don't suppose you'll be any trouble. I can usually tell right off if someone's gonna be trouble. Pay yer rent and keep reg'lar hours. Don't drink, do you?" he asked.

Billy, taken aback by the sudden change in tack, mumbled a quick, "No."

"That's good," Tom responded, moving towards the door. "You take Mick now, he does. Jus' sits in his room day after day, drinkin' and watchin' television. Reads, too. Forever reading history books. Bet he knows more about World War Two than most professors. He was in it, you know. Got discharged after he came home. Got the old boot, as they

say. Got into some kind of trouble over there, but because he won a few medals, they gave him an honourable discharge. Even gets a pension from them now. Was wounded, too. Between that and welfare, he gets by. Too bad they released him. He loved the army. Wanted to stay in after the war. Fought in Italy. Ask him about it. He's got lots of stories about the army. You know, I think you're gonna be okay. We'll be good neighbors, you'll see."

Billy found it unusual that after living in the house for almost two weeks, he had yet to meet Mickey. It was almost as if Mickey was deliberately avoiding him. In the evenings, he could hear Mickey and Tom moving about in the room next door. Sometimes he could hear them arguing while they played cards. Often, he wanted simply, out of curiosity, just to drop by so that he could see what Mickey looked like, but he was born and brought up with the country belief you didn't go anywhere you weren't invited, even if it happened to be a room next door. Privacy was something you respected. He usually fell asleep to the muted sound of Mickey's television coming through the wall. Occasionally, he was awakened long after midnight by strange sounds. Once, he heard what seemed like a persistent banging on the outside wall. Whenever Billy got up to investigate, the sounds stopped and so he never discovered their source. He figured it was probably a loose board in the eaves that banged in the wind.

Sometimes, Tom dropped by for a minute or two, but Billy discouraged lengthy visits with the excuse that he had a lot

of work. Surprisingly, after his initial outburst of information, Tom left him in peace. It was as if he regretted talking so openly at first and had, somehow, said too much. Whenever Mrs. Boyd invited him to sit with her in the front room, he'd listen to the late news while she knitted beside him. She didn't seem to want to talk much, but was content just for the company it gave her. "Hate sittin' alone," she would say. "It isn't right for people to sit alone in a room. That's why Mickey and Tom spend so much time together, you know. Since Alvin died, I find time long in the evenings." Billy felt sorry for her, and tried to join her for a half hour or so after he finished his work. When Mrs. Boyd talked, it was usually about her husband and their life together. She would often serve Billy a cup of tea in the evenings, and he'd sip the lukewarm liquid while he listened to her reminisce about her younger days. Like his father, Billy preferred his tea strong and hot, but he never said anything to Mrs. Boyd about it. She always made such a fuss, pouring it out for him. He felt it had been a nightly ritual with Mr. Boyd.

One morning, after he had finished shaving and showering, Billy met Mickey in the hallway outside the bathroom. "B-Billy," Mickey said, "t-thought you'd never get out of th-there; my bladder's gonna burst. How about a c-coffee before you leave for class? Been wanting to m-meet you for some time, but you're always gone in the d-day, and I figure you're too bu-busy studying at night."

Billy noted that Mickey was almost as tall as his father and was barrel chested as well. His voice sounded strangely rhythmic, despite the stutter. His face was ruddy, like a man who worked outside all the time, yet Billy knew Mickey rarely went out. He seemed content to stay cloistered in his room day and night. His nose was veined and bulbous. It reminded Billy of Karl Malden's, his father's favorite actor. Somehow, Billy couldn't imagine Mickey and Tom being good friends. They seemed very different.

Sitting across the kitchen table from him, Billy watched as Mickey blew into his coffee mug.

"Hot," he mumbled in apology. "You sure make it hot, young fella. I'm not usually awake th-this early. Too much b-beer with Tom last night, I guess. How do you like him, b-by the way?"

"He seems nice," Billy replied politely.

"Talks a lot, though, don't he?" Mickey laughed. "Like a fau-faucet that's been left runnin', sometimes, eh? He m-means no harm. Always b-been the nervous sort. I remember he used to g-get into trouble for all his talk at school. Ju-just that we d-don't get to see m-many people. T-tend to run on when we d-do. You'll have to overlook it. Don't mean n-nothing."

"You went to Daniel O'Connell with Tom, right?" Billy remembered.

"Tom t-tell you about that pla-place?" Mickey asked.

"Guess h-he do-does talk a lot. Don't b-believe h-half of

wh-what he says. What d-did he t-tell you a-about it an-anyway?"

Billy thought that Mickey's stutter seemed worse than it was before. "He said," Billy answered, "that some teacher held you out a window and threatened to drop you."

"Tom told you th-that? Ire-Irenis, the b-bloody bas-bastard!" Mickey seemed to spit out the words. "Tom shou-shouldn't of told you th-that." Billy noticed that Mickey's expression had changed. His face became harder, almost cruel. "Tom h-had f-far worse things hap-happen to him th-there." Mickey looked into his cup as he spoke.

"What sort of things?" Billy asked.

"Just th-things.." Mickey wrapped his two hands around his coffee mug as if they were cold and needed warming up. It was a habit Billy's father had, and to see someone else do it made Billy feel strange, almost as though someone had stolen something from him. He remembered that whenever his father's hands covered his cup, steam escaped through his fingers. As big as he was, Mickey's hands weren't large enough to cover the mug completely. This pleased Billy.

"They picked on T-Tom a lot b-because of the way he is." Mickey spoke softly and glanced at Billy, as if he expected some sort of response. When Billy said nothing, Mickey continued, "You know. He's different. He's always talking and brushing at his h-hair. His hands are always w-waving about, a finger pokin' in front of your n-nose. The other g-guys used to t-tease him. I was big-bigger and older.

Used to t-take up for him. Even the brothers used to t-torment him. I-Irenis was the worst. He said s-something nasty to me a-about Tom in c-class one d-day. I g-got mad and call-called him a sonavabitch. That's why he hung me out th-the window like a r-rag doll. Made me b-beg to get back in. I never told Tom what he s-said. Tom th-thinks it was a-about a d-dirty magazine he c-caught me with," Mickey stared at Billy.

"Never thought they were like that," Billy said, turning away from Mickey's stare. "I always heard they were excellent teachers."

"Some were," Mickey answered, "some w-were real mean. They all l-liked the cane, though. Irenis was the worst. Can you imagine a t-tough old bird like him having a name like Irenis," Mickey laughed. He seemed more relaxed now, and his stuttering wasn't as bad.

"Tom told me he was married once," Billy said. He could never picture Tom, for some reason, as a husband and a father.

"Ya," Mickey replied, "his w-wife left him a while b-back. Took the kid and cleared out. Good th-thing, too. She was a b-bitch that one. Never gave Tom a mo-moment's peace."

"Tom looked for them for a while, though, didn't he?"

"Oh, yes. He did," Mickey said, staring into his coffee again. "He tried to f-find his d-daughter. Loved that k-kid. Would do anything for her. Still b-bothers

him. He always talks about her to me. Wonders what she looks like now. It w-was just after they left that it happened; you kn-know." Mickey pushed his chair away from the table and stood up.

"What did?" Billy asked.

"His father's accident, of course. Didn't he t-tell you about that?"

"Well, yes. He said his father fell down the basement steps, but I didn't think it happened just after his wife left him."

"Two days after. He and his father were s-standin' at the top of the b-basement steps. They was arguing 'bout Susan's l-leavin'. Alvin said it was T-Tom's fault because of what he was do-doing." Mickey looked at Billy, and again Billy felt that he was supposed to respond in some way. Instead, he poured himself another cup of coffee.

"Anyway," Mickey continued, "one thing led to a-another, and they started shovin' at one a-another. The old man fell down the stairs and b-banged his h-head on the cement f-floor. Wasn't T-Tom's fault," Mickey added quickly. "The old man just w-went too far. Was always after T-Tom. You know, he k-kicked Tom out of the house after grade ten. Wouldn't let me c-come around then either. Said I was a ba-bad influence on him."

"Mrs. Boyd talks a lot differently about him," Billy said, recalling her evening conversations with him.

"Mrs. Boyd talks differently a-about a lot of things,"

Mickey said, suddenly angry. "Don't you b-believe what she t-tells you, the old go-goat," he cautioned. "Tom was her little b-boy. She b-babied him something awful, and now she c-can't get over how he turned out. She always wanted him to be a pr-priest. Imagine that," Mickey sneered. "Tom a priest. He hasn't been inside a ch-church since his father's fu-funeral, and his last confession w-was when he was a k-kid."

"That's how they f-found out about half the stuff that used to go on at O'Connell, you kn-know," Mickey continued. "Old Father B-Britt at St. Augustine's, the Boyd's church, he's as bad as Irenis was. He told Alvin 'bout Tom's confessions. That's when he was k-kicked out of the h-house. Tom worked for construction companies after that. Never d-did any heavy work. Trained in the p-payroll office. Always wanted to go to col-college, too. Only reason Mrs. Boyd rented out the rooms to us was to make amends for lettin' Alvin t-turn him out in the f-first place. She's hoping to g-get Tom back to the church. Then she c-can die happy. 'Cause I'm his clo-closest friend, she thinks I'll encourage him as well."

"Why did he come back, then?" Billy asked.

"- Couldn't afford to go anywhere else. She's got him by the short 'n hairy ones. Tom's unemployment ran out, and he's not gettin' much from welfare. Least I g-get a little more 'cause of my pension. Tom k-keeps up the pl-place for extra money. She's p-pretty tight. T-Tom figures most of

the money f-from his father's insurance will go to the church. She spends every afternoon d-down there prayin' and lightin' candles. Only reason she r-rents out the th-third room is b-because she can g-give more to the church. Father Britt's g-got her convinced it'll s-save Tom's soul. Tom figures if he sticks around, she'll leave him a little, too."

"Why is it so important he go back to church?" Billy asked.

"My, you are c-country, aren't you?" Tom grinned. "I didn't think there was any more of you left out there."

"What do you mean?" Billy demanded.

"Forget it, okay. Look, you're a n-nice kid. One of the rea-reasons Mrs. Boyd likes you is 'cause you remind her of Tom when he w-was about your age. Maybe you c-could talk to her? Tell her how m-miserable Tom is. Maybe if she c-could loosen the pur-purse strings a little, T-Tom might go b²back to church for her."

Billy felt his face flush in anger. "This your idea or Tom's?" he demanded.

"Don't get yer d-dander up. Tom d-don't know a thing a-about this. Don't you t-tell him nei-neither, okay, Billy, please? I'm just worried about h-him. I thought you understood the s-situation here. I guess I was wrong."

"Yes," Billy agreed, "you were wrong. I'm not going to ask Mrs. Boyd to do anything. You and Tom want money, speak to her yourself. Don't come to me from now on."

Billy suspected that Tom knew more about this than

Mickey let on. He doubted if Mickey would approach him entirely on his own. Still, it was hard to say. They were both a little strange, though. He vowed he'd be more careful about what he said to either of them again. It was true; he really didn't understand what was going on. He'd watch himself from now on.

That evening, after he had gone to bed, he could hear Tom and Mickey arguing through the bedroom wall. Someone turned the television louder, and their voices blended in with the sound of the evening news.

A couple of nights later, while studying in his room for a test, Billy heard Tom yelling from the front room. "Christ, my goddamn'd head. I can't breath in here. Open the window for God's sake, mother."

Mrs. Boyd yelled back, "Don't you touch that window, Tom. You want fresh air, go for a walk. I pay the heating bills here."

"Yes," Tom shouted, "you pay them. You're so tight you squeak. It's the end of the month, and I'm flat broke. Even Mick don't have money for a beer."

"If you want beer, Tom, go get yourself a job. You've been here now for a year. Have you applied anywhere for a job? Has Mickey? All you want to do is sit and drink your life away. Drink and only God knows what else you do together."

"You be careful what you say," Tom cautioned. "You just be careful, or else."

"Or else, what?" Mrs. Boyd demanded. "You'll push me down the stairs?"

"What are you talkin' about? That was an accident, and you know it. What are you tryin' to pull?"

"I'm trying to get you to beg for forgiveness, Tom. For everything. When I die, I want to know you've been forgiven. That you've..."

"That I'm clean again, mother?" Tom shouted. "That I'm innocent? A little boy again? Like Billy? Is that it, mother?"

Billy could hear Tom sobbing now. He opened his bedroom door and walked up the hall towards the sitting room. He thought that Mrs. Boyd might need him. He wanted to be close by just in case. When he looked into the room, Mrs. Boyd was sitting in her sewing chair, her back to the door, and Tom was kneeling on the floor beside her. "I'm sorry," he cried; "I'm so sorry. My head hurts, mother. Please, I need a beer or something."

Mrs. Boyd pulled him closer to her. "Poor Tom," she whispered, "poor Tom. Tom," she said, louder now, "they're having a mass for father. This Sunday. You'll come, won't you? It would mean so much to me. Father Britt won't be there. Father Lacey will be giving the service. I'll ask Billy to come, too. You like Billy, don't you Tom? I know you do. He's so young. Look," she said, "I've been meaning to pay you for that fine job you did finishing that bureau in Billy's room. I meant to give you a little extra for

that, but I forgot. It's a nice little check, Tom. You'll come, won't you? To confession afterward, too?"

Billy walked slowly back to his room and closed the door. A few minutes later he heard Tom going out and then return to Mickey's room. They talked and laughed for a long while that night. When Billy woke up, briefly, at three in the morning, he could still hear their voices above the sound of the television.

St. Augustine's massive oak doors gleamed darkly in the morning sun. Billy stood inside the entrance and tried to adjust to the sudden absence of sunlight. He watched as Mrs. Boyd crossed herself at the door, and reaching the first row of pews, she bent and quickly genuflected. Tom stood awkwardly beside her, his head bowed meekly. Billy felt uncomfortable. He had decided not to come if Mrs. Boyd asked him, but when she approached him yesterday and explained how much it meant to her and how it would have pleased Mr. Boyd, he had second thoughts. Besides in the country you helped people when they asked you, even if you might not like doing it, but he felt a little like a pawn being moved about by random forces. Still, he was curious about Tom's reaction and watched him closely.

Mrs. Boyd knelt in prayer, holding her rosary between tightly cupped hands. She closed her eyes and soundlessly mouthed a prayer. Tom sat rigidly, his back pressed against the wooden pew. He squeezed his hands under his legs in an attempt to quiet their nervous movements. His lips stretched

tightly across his teeth. Sweat beaded his forehead. Sighing, he tilted his head back and stared at the church's ornate ceiling. He seemed transfixed by the golden-leafed dove engraved into a recess in the centre of the domed ceiling. Tom's eyes finally swept from the outstretched wings down to the tabernacle and rested on the flame-quivering red candle. Mrs. Boyd groaned as she rose from the kneeler. She settled herself comfortably beside her son and waited.

A solemn-faced priest stepped out from the sacristy. Billy heard Tom gasp, his face whitened. "You said Father Britt..." he whispered furiously to his mother.

"Shh," Mrs. Boyd soothed him, "the mass is beginning."

Tom's eyes opened wide as he watched Father Britt lift the golden chalice high over his head. Taking a soiled handkerchief from his pocket, Tom mopped at his forehead and wiped at his hands. He seemed to shrink into himself as the service continued.

"Take this, all of you," Father Britt spoke loudly, "and drink from it...This is the cup of my blood." Billy was sure Father Britt looked directly at Tom as he spoke. Tom jerked his head to one side and gazed at the figure of Our Lady cut into the stained glass window. Holding the Christ child in her arms, she stared back. Her robe shone red and white. Chained at her feet, with orange flames licking around them, were the figures of two naked men. The window seemed to come alive and light seemed to dance from it as the sun outside grew brighter.

Billy stood and quickly left the church. Tom had grown very pale and sat rigidly in his seat, oblivious to everything except the figures which blazed beside him.

The next night, Billy was awakened by the same thumping sounds on the outside wall he had heard before. He lay in the darkness and tried to ignore their sound. He thought he could hear moaning as well. Getting out of bed, he walked out into the hallway. The house seemed still, the sitting room empty and dark. A sound, like someone groaning, came from Mickey's room. The door was opened a little, and Billy peered in. Flickering light from the television screen gave the room an eerie setting. A small table in the middle of the room was piled high with beer and wine bottles. Looking deeper into the room, Billy could see the naked figures of Tom and Mickey. Tom, bent over from the waist, was crouched down on the bed. Mickey knelt between his legs. Suddenly, Mickey thrust upward, and Tom groaned loudly. The bed banged against the outside wall. Their shadows writhed grotesquely along the walls and ceiling. Mickey, seeing Billy standing at the door, smiled and thrust upward once more. Billy knew he had to leave, just as others before him had left, but for the moment, paralyzed by shock, he could only stare helplessly into the room.

Berry Picking

When Steven Miller awoke, he knew immediately that something was wrong. It took him a few moments to realize that the house was unusually silent. For as long as he could remember, except on Sundays, he was always awakened at seven by the sound of stove lids being banged about in the kitchen below his room as his father started the breakfast fire before leaving for work at the sawmill.

Because he usually fell asleep and awakened to sound, the absence of it puzzled him. Even the slightest noise carried easily up to him through the hot air duct on the floor beside his bed. Sometimes he fell asleep to the sound of pots being scrubbed and put away and to the sound of water running in the sink and then slowly draining through the pipes; sometimes it was to the sound of the radio and his mother's favorite music or to the sound of loud static as his father thumbed the radio dial in search of the latest news bulletin. More often than not, though, as he did last night, Steven rode to sleep to the sound of his parents' voices.

There was another route for these sounds as well. If he neglected to close the stairwell door which opened directly into his bedroom, the muted noises filtered up the staircase and emptied into his room. Sometimes the sounds seemed to come from the very walls themselves. This effect, combined with the moving shadows on the ceiling, caused Steven

to imagine his room as something which lived and breathed. He was certain shadowy figures jumped, murmuring, from the windowsill and limped across the ceiling. He'd cover his head with a pillow until he was convinced the apparitions had found their way into the darkest recesses of his closet, and all was still.

Sometimes, when the whispering movements were too frightening, he'd lie on the floor spying on his parents through the grates of the air duct. If they happened to be sitting at the kitchen table, he could see and hear them clearly, but if they moved on to the windowseat, which they often did, he could see only the bottoms of their legs and feet, and their words became indistinguishable. However, he could hear them speaking clearly even from there if he crept over to the stairwell door. He rarely did this because the floor creaked terribly, and he knew they'd be angry if they discovered what he was doing.

After watching an episode of "Rat Patrol" on television one night, a series about W.W. II desert soldiers, he considered the duct as his personal listening post. The doorway location, he pretended, was behind enemy lines and therefore all but inaccessible. The only time Steven dared risk a foray into the murky expanse of this personal no-man's land was on very special fact-finding occasions - Christmas and birthdays. The information gathered on these important missions was well worth the nerve-wracking crawl it took to get to the open doorway.

Lying awake, uncomfortable with the silence beneath him, Steven stared out his bedroom window. The sun sat framed in the upper left-hand window pane, so he knew it had to be at least seven o'clock, if not a little later. Since his father wasn't up, something else had to be responsible for his waking. Suddenly, as the sun climbed from the top frame, he remembered what it was that caused him to awaken.

Elizabeth had promised to take him berry picking today. She had promised to take him twice before, but once it had rained, and the second time she called to say she wasn't feeling well. When she called again yesterday to ask Steven if he'd like to go, he had made her swear that she wouldn't change her mind again. Even now he suspected that she'd call at any moment to cancel a third time.

Before Elizabeth had moved to Toronto, nothing had ever caused her to go back on her word. Sometimes he wondered if something was wrong. He recalled the day two summers ago when they had even picked strawberries in a downpour. She told him that a little rain would simply free her from having to wash them later. She laughed at the sight of the red mush they discovered in their pails after the long walk home.

He remembered other berry picking trips as well. The passage of summer months was always measured for him by these excursions to the back meadows: strawberries and chokecherries in June and July; raspberries and gooseberries in August; blueberries - his favorite - always ripened in late

summer and early September. He always associated the start of school and the end of summer with the smell of freshly baked blueberry pie.

He remembered the stories Elizabeth used to tell him, and the silly songs they sang together. But what he remembered most about those past outings was the feel of the berries as he squished them, one by one, against the roof of his mouth. The best part of the day was when they had finished picking, berries spilling over the tops of their pails, they'd sit beside the brook to eat their lunch before heading home. While he filled his bowl, Elizabeth would retrieve the jar of cream from the stream where she had put it to keep it cool. With Steven watching closely, she'd cover his berries with the rich liquid. She always laughed at the way he greedily ate them, the cream oozing from the corners of his mouth and sliding down his chin. His mouth watered just lying there thinking about them. He hoped his father would get up soon; he really was hungry.

To keep himself from thinking about his empty stomach, Steven thought about Elizabeth. She had definitely changed in some way. Summers with her had always ended too quickly, but this one had been long and wasted. School was about to start, and he had hardly seen her at all during the vacation.

Elizabeth was his mother's youngest sister and his favorite aunt. The fact she was young and pretty had a lot to do with his liking her. She was tall and long-limbed and very graceful. He loved to watch her walk into a room. She

had a way of carrying herself that made everyone sit up and take notice. Her hair was cut short and would have looked manly on anyone else, but it suited her and somehow made her more delicate.

What he liked even more about her was the fact that, although she was a girl, she could play catch just like a boy. Elizabeth wasn't like anyone else he knew. She had the nicest laugh he'd ever heard. It sounded soft and light, just like the melody from his mother's music box. Her green eyes sparkled as the laughter spilled from her, and even if he didn't want to smile, he couldn't help feeling good inside himself when he was with her.

The few times he had seen her since her return she seemed distracted and distant. He was confused and aware of the difference, but he couldn't figure out what it was. She still looked the same, only she didn't laugh as often, and when she did, it didn't have any music to it. His parents talked a lot at night about her, and although he listened carefully from upstairs, he couldn't overhear much, except her name being mentioned.

He sat now on the edge of the bed, thinking about the way she used to be. She told wonderfully imaginative stories about squirrels, rabbits and foxes. The stories were another reason Steven had quickly grown to like her. The day Elizabeth had moved in with them two years ago, she had made a secret pact with him and swore him to absolute secrecy about it. Steven was five then, but he remembered it as if

it had just happened. She promised that if he agreed not to call her Liz (which she detested because the boys always teased her about it when she was young by saying that it was short for lizard) she'd always call him Steven and not Stevie, a name he hated because it made him sound like a baby. From that moment onward, Steven knew they would get along just fine.

Elizabeth worked as a file clerk at Consolidated Lumber, the same company his father worked for and the biggest employer in Matapédia. In her free time, Elizabeth wrote children's stories which she always read to him before sending them off in the mail. More often than not, the stories would be returned to her without a word of explanation. Sometimes one would come back with comments scribbled in the margins, and Elizabeth would get very excited. Steven could never understand why she was so happy about those few words. The fact they were returned seemed to him a pretty good indication they weren't liked, but he thought they were grand and was always asking her to read him more.

At one Sunday dinner, Elizabeth announced that she had decided to move to Toronto.

"It would be better for my writing," she had explained, "if I were closer to a major market."

"Nineteen's far too young for a girl to be going to places like Toronto alone," the boy's father argued.

"Wait," he recalled his mother pleading, "until you're at least twenty, Liz. Just one more year."

"No," Elizabeth had countered, "my mind's quite made up. One more year won't change anything. I've thought about it for a long time now. I've got enough money saved to get me there and keep me until I find a job. If I can file here, I can just as easily do it there. It's my only chance, and I'm going to take it."

Steven remembered the argument the three of them had that night after he had gone to bed, and for the next week. The night before she left Elizabeth spoke to Steven in his bedroom. He cried and asked her not to leave.

"You'll understand, Steven," she explained patiently, "one day when it's your turn to leave."

Steven didn't think he would. He missed Elizabeth very much. There weren't any other children in the area his age, and because his mother was busy with housework and the extra baking she did to bring in a little more money, he was often left alone. When Elizabeth lived with them, Steven would sit quietly in her room while she wrote; now he sat at her desk by himself and pretended she was watching him.

Elizabeth wrote to them often. Steven waited anxiously between letters. She had found work as a proofreader at a small publishing firm, and she took a whole page to explain to him exactly what a proof reader did. She was also taking a course at night in children's literature at a university there and was liking it very much. Once, she called to say that one of her stories had been accepted for publication. Steven was very happy for her, but at the same time he knew

that the likelihood of her returning to him was very small, so he couldn't be completely happy about her success.

Elizabeth described to him in great detail all the things she saw and heard. It sounded very exciting. He also overheard some of the things she wrote to his parents when his mother read the letters out loud to his father after Steven had gone to bed. Some of the things didn't sound so nice.

At night, when he couldn't hear what his parents were saying and he wasn't tired enough for sleep, Steven would try to imagine buildings that reached into the clouds and the C.N. Tower which went beyond them. It all seemed so improbable to him. The tallest thing he'd ever seen was Mr. Collin's corn silo, and that wasn't much higher than the big oak tree which grew in their orchard.

Elizabeth had written that she'd been to the top of the tower, and Steven wondered where she'd ever found the courage to do it. He had tried climbing the oak once, but halfway up, he had grown frightened and had to be helped down by Elizabeth who had heard his cries for help. He got dizzy just thinking about how Elizabeth must have felt seeing the world exactly as God must see it.

Toronto, he recalled from his parents' private conversations, was also a city where young children were kidnapped and never seen again. Often their bodies were found in empty parking lots and abandoned buildings. Judging from his parents' hushed tones, awful things had been done to them.

He could never discover how they died because his mother either spoke very quietly or moved to the windowseat. He did overhear his mother say that something might happen to Elizabeth because she was pretty and lived alone in the downtown area, but Steven knew that no one would ever harm her because of her special laugh. Besides, everyone liked her.

Sometimes, Steven would fall asleep while lying beside the grate trying to hear everything his parents' said. Once he failed to awaken on his own, and his mother found him in the morning curled up beside the open duct. She thought he had fallen out of bed and had simply remained where he had landed. Realizing how lucky he was at not being caught, Steven vowed to be more careful in the future.

Steven, despite the bad things, often thought about visiting Toronto. The best thing about it was the fact the city was the home of the Maple Leafs, his favorite hockey team and Lanny MacDonald, his hero. He had a big coloured poster of him tacked to the inside of his closet door. One day Steven hoped to play for the Leafs; he'd center MacDonald and together they'd win the Stanley Cup. But he tried not to think about that too much because he figured if you thought about things like that too often you kept them from coming true. When he got older, he knew he'd have a moustache just like Lanny's, and whenever he skated fast, it would quiver in the wind.

Elizabeth had gone to the Gardens for a game. She had sent him her ticket stub in one of her letters to him to

prove it, and he had put it in his special place with his prized collection of hockey cards and team pins. He'd go to Toronto one day; he was convinced of that. He'd climb the C.N. Tower, and he'd visit Maple Leaf Gardens. From high in the gondola, he'd watch the players scurry about beneath him like angry bees. He'd see Toronto all right, only he'd keep away from parking lots and deserted buildings.

A few nights after he had been found sleeping on the floor, Steven overheard his mother saying that Elizabeth had met someone at an office party. His name was Ernest Harding. Elizabeth said it was a name to remember. He was a serious writer, she said, and although he was in his late twenties and had only published a few short stories, he was going to be famous one day. Elizabeth said he was quite tall, very handsome, and terribly witty. Steven was very jealous of Ernest Harding, and whenever Elizabeth wrote about him, which was often, Steven would cover his ears with his hands, so he wouldn't hear his mother reading about him.

Four months after she had first written about Ernest, Elizabeth phoned to say they had gotten married. Steven's mother had been very upset. He had never heard her cry before, except when his grandmother died, and he felt guilty about listening to her from his room. "She's too young," she cried. "She's far too young to get married, John. Why did she have to get married now? Why?" she kept asking over and over again.

His father, who seldom got angry about anything, slammed his fist down on the kitchen table and upset his coffee mug. "She's been like my own daughter," he yelled. "If any city fellow thinks he can just take over Liz's life without an if you please, he's got another thought comin'." He called Elizabeth back and told her this, but it hadn't changed anything as far as Steven could see.

A week later they received a letter from Elizabeth. She tried to reassure them about Ernest, and said that once they had a chance to meet him, they'd feel differently. She and her new husband planned to move back to Matapédia for a little while. She asked if they'd look for a place for them to rent and wondered if the Miller house was still available. Ernest needed a quiet place to finish his novel, and the Miller homestead, secluded as it was, would be ideal for their needs. She figured that within a short while, the book would be finished and they'd return to Toronto. Elizabeth had saved a little from her salary. Besides, she argued, she could always get her old job back at Consolidated Lumber, couldn't she? They'd be home by the end of May, and she hoped that Ernest would be made welcome. She didn't write after this, and Steven read and reread her old letters to him until he practically knew them by heart.

They arrived in late April; there were still patches of snow on the ground, and Steven was allowed to stay home from school to go to the train depot to meet them. Steven

had been very cold waiting on the station platform. When they stepped down off the train, he ran to Elizabeth, and she kissed him quickly on the cheek. She seemed nervous as she introduced Ernest to them. His father shook hands with him, but they stood about awkwardly, not saying much while they waited for the luggage to be unloaded from the baggage car.

Steven couldn't help but notice that Ernest was even taller than his father who, he thought, was at least six feet tall. Although he wasn't a heavy man, he looked strong. He had dark eyes and Steven noticed that his fingers were stained yellow from nicotine. He smelled like cigarette smoke, too. He didn't smile much, and when he did, Steven noticed that it was a quick smile that hid most of his teeth. Yet, he was handsome. His brown curly hair was cut short and brushed neatly into place. He had a habit of pulling at a few strands which hung loosely over his forehead. Steven thought that he might be a little nervous, too.

When the luggage was finally ready, Steven bent to pick up Elizabeth's portable typewriter, but Ernest grabbed it from him.

"It's too heavy for you, boy," he said roughly. "You might drop and break it."

Steven looked at Elizabeth when he said this, but she lowered her eyes and looked away. He decided he wasn't going to like Ernest. He always carried Elizabeth's typewriter for her, and he didn't like being called a boy.

The ride from the station to the house was a quiet one,

and Steven wished that his mother hadn't prepared a welcoming home dinner for them. He didn't know if he wanted to sit through a whole meal with Ernest at the same table. After all, he had taken Elizabeth away from them. If it hadn't been for their marriage, he'd still be her special friend. At least she was home now. That was something to be thankful about.

"Well," his father asked as soon as they had settled down at the dinner table, "what are your plans, Ernest?"

"John," his mother protested, embarrassed, "we haven't even said grace yet."

"No time like the present, I always say," his father smiled.

Steven could never remember his father saying any such thing.

"You know, Ernest, Elizabeth is very special to us," his father continued. "You understand, her welfare..."

"Mr. Campbell, I understand your concern," Ernest interrupted. "Our plans are really quite simple. As soon as my book is finished, we're going straight back to Toronto."

"I realize that, but what of Elizabeth? Seems to me she gave up what sounded like a promising career so that you could finish your novel. What about her work? What are you going to live on?"

"John," Elizabeth broke in, her face flushed red, "this really isn't fair. You've just met Ernest. You don't have a right to ask these things."

"Liz," Ernest smiled, "it's okay. I don't mind. I expected the questions. Elizabeth agreed to support the both of us until my novel is finished. I expect it will take a few months of peace and quiet to get the bulk of it out of the way. After that, I'll support her while she works on her stuff. We've both agreed to work it this way. Right, Liz?"

"That's right." Elizabeth quickly agreed. "Six months, tops. I can always pick up where I left off in Toronto later. My stuff's only kid stuff anyway. Ernest's novel is going to be big. He'll be famous because of it. Just you watch. You'll be saying, 'I knew him when.'"

In the three months since her return, they hadn't seen much of Elizabeth. She was busy working five days a week at the sawmill. On weekends she typed clean copies of Ernest's work for him. She thought he'd have a first draft by early November at the latest, and they'd be back in Toronto in time to join his family for Christmas.

Once, on a Saturday, she visited Steven and started to tell him a new story, but in the middle of it she stopped suddenly, and just sort of sat and stared strangely at him. It was as if she didn't see him at all. Steven found her pale and sad-looking. He thought she needed to get out in the sun more. She was working too hard.

Last night he'd overheard his parents discussing her, as they often did lately. He could see the top of his mother's head from the grate as she spoke to his father.

She was finishing her ironing, and his father was sitting at the table having his nightly coffee. She sounded very worried.

"She doesn't look well, John. She's not eating proper or something."

"Workin' too hard, if'n you ask'd me," his father replied.

"It's more than that, John. Just seems to me that there's something not right with them. She used to tell me everything he did and said. She's mighty proud of him. Thinks he's going to be the next Michener or something."

"Ha! Rather he were Louis L'Amour. Then he'd be doin' somethin'."

"She told me a while back that Ernest was having some problems with the last few chapters. It was worrying him something fierce. He wasn't acting normal and was awful quiet about it. Won't even talk to her about it."

"Well," his father claimed, "I've been given the cold shoulder, so there's not much I can do."

"I know, but she must find it hard, John. With all the work she does, plus the fact that Miller place is a big home to keep up. You know her; the whole place probably shines from top to bottom."

"Wouldn't know 'bout that, hon. Seems we don't get invited over much."

Steven tried to stay awake, so he could hear more, but he drifted off to sleep and dreamed that his bedroom walls

were whispering to the shadows hiding in his closet.

Today, Steven thought, would be different. He'd have Elizabeth all to himself, and they'd recapture the magic of other summers. She would laugh, too, just as she used to, and words would spill from her just like the berries from his pail. Thinking of all these things, Steven noticed the sun had climbed even higher. His parents were very late in getting up. He bounded out of bed, dressed and was almost down the stairs when he heard his father at the stove.

"Big day today, eh Stevie?" his father greeted him. "You pick lots of big juicy ones for me, okay? Your Aunt Liz makes the best berry pies of anyone I know." Steven saw his father nudge his mother playfully as he said this.

"Slept late, son. First time I've done that on a work day for a long, long time." Again, Steven watched as his father nudged his mother and smiled at her. "No time for breakfast," he added on the way out the kitchen door.

Steven thought his father sounded more cheerful than someone should considering the prospect of a long morning's work on an empty stomach. He glanced at his mother. She had burnt a piece of toast and busily tried to scrape the black from it. He thought that they were both acting very oddly. They kept looking at each other and smiling.

Steven was too excited to pursue the matter further. By the time he heard his father's pickup roar to life, he was already eating his second piece of toast. He was out the door before his mother had time to tell him it was still

a little early for berry picking. The dew was still heavy on the morning fields.

Steven almost tore his pants climbing the wire fence at the bottom of the hill. He had taken the shortcut through the oat field instead of walking along the main road, and his pants were wet from the waist down. He didn't care; he knew that the sun would dry them on the walk to the berry patch. He knew, too, that once they reached the meadow, Elizabeth's sadness would fall from her like afternoon shadows. More than anything else, he wanted to hear Elizabeth's laughter again. It seemed so long since he'd listened to her tell him one of her stories. He didn't understand adults very well. This morning he couldn't figure out his parents either. They eyed each other like a couple of school children at recess. Steven wondered what had been so funny. He wished he knew what was wrong with Elizabeth, too. He didn't seem to know what was going on with anyone around him anymore.

When he knocked on the Miller door, no one came to answer it. He opened it slowly and stepped into the kitchen. He was surprised to find the fire dead. Elizabeth should have been up by now. Then he remembered that on Saturdays she always slept in a little later. Unlike his father, she had the day off because the offices were closed on weekends. She didn't have to get up early just to go berry picking. It seemed to be the day for sleeping late. He should have as well, he thought.

Steven was about to go back outside when he heard voices from upstairs. He wasn't sure, but Elizabeth sounded upset. Almost without being aware of what he was doing, Steven found himself stealing up the kitchen stairwell. The voices were clearer now, and he could tell that Elizabeth was frightened.

"Don't," he heard her call out. "Not that way, please. Ernest...you know I don't like that." Her voice sounded small and seemed to come to him from far away.

Elizabeth said something else he couldn't hear which was followed by the sound of a sharp clap. She cried out then, "Easy, just go easy for God's sake."

When the sounds grew louder, Steven crept downstairs and out to the woodshed. He waited a long time before he saw Elizabeth walking towards him. She was carrying the picnic basket over one arm. Her face was very pale, and it looked like she had scratch marks along one cheek. She had tried to cover them with makeup, but he could see them anyway.

Steven didn't know what to say to her. He thought he might cry, so he looked into the basket.

"I haven't forgotten anything," she said, her voice strange. "I brought the sandwiches, cookies, and look, I have the jar of cream, too. I bought it fresh yesterday."

Steven wasn't listening now. He tried to walk as quickly as he could, hoping the hardness in his throat would go away. He felt dizzy, just like he had when he'd gotten

stuck in the oak tree that time. It seemed to him that he was looking down from a great height. He stumbled and almost fell.

"Slow down," she called out behind him. "The berries aren't going anywhere. Wait up, Stevie, I'll tell you a story..."

"I don't want to hear it," he yelled back at her, "and my name's Steven, not Stevie!" He ran farther ahead of her.

"Oh," was all she said, her voice sounding small and lost again. The single syllable seemed to trail in the dust behind him and he stumbled once again.

They walked the rest of the way in silence. When they reached the tiny brook that ran through the meadow, Elizabeth forgot to put the cream in to cool, and Steven had to do it.

He watched her closely all morning long. She sat in one spot, staring at the pail in front of her, occasionally dropping a few berries into it. Steven picked more quickly than usual and tried not to think about the things he had heard.

At lunchtime, Steven pulled the cream from the stream and sat down beside her. Elizabeth hardly noticed him. He took a bowl from the basket and filled it with berries from his pail. Slowly, he poured the liquid over them. Elizabeth watched him without saying anything. She had a funny expression on her face.

Steven had just swallowed his first mouthful of berries when he saw her shoulders start to shake. She sat with her

face in her hands and her shoulders shaking, crying silently while he ate his berries. They didn't taste anything at all as he remembered.

Lords of the Upper Floor

I can see the school clearly before me. The red-bricked, two-storied, rectangular box with its double rows of yawning windows held more than four hundred students in my youth. At the sound of the morning bell, twenty teachers all ran as one to lock us in. It was the only way they could keep us there.

Jake Wilson, Tommy Elks, Rodney Smith, Gary Roberts and I were labelled, almost from the very beginning, as the school misfits and troublemakers. It was a distinction we tried our very best to promote. By the time we climbed the stairs to the second floor and grade seven, our reputations had solidified quite nicely. We soon convinced ourselves that we owned the upper floor. Don Quixotes all five, we crusaded against anything we felt unjust or repressive. If ever the need arose, we were more than willing to tilt away at half a dozen windmills at once.

As Jake put it one day while drawing up battle plans for our next campaign: "It's our born duty to lash out at nut-grinding conformity." Jake had a way of saying things that would stick with you for a long time. He planned most of our adventures and could get away with just about anything. I think it had to do with his wide-eyed innocence and infectious laugh. It seemed that Jake was always laughing at something. Teachers would lecture him sternly one minute over some falling-out and the next he'd be telling

them some silly joke. As I think back on it now, we approached our quest with an exuberance that can come only from youth.

It wasn't as though the school didn't try to curb our antics. We were subjected to many inquisitions, as Jake called them. Before we managed to graduate, we had all been suspended at least once for our misguided escapades, and some of us more than once.

Tommy and Gary were asked to leave for a couple of weeks when we were in grade nine for wiring our science teacher's metal stool. No one would have known for sure who had been responsible for the deed had the two of them not stepped forward to take the heat off the rest of us. I still remember, fondly, the look on the teacher's face when he flicked on the master switch to activate the air compressor for that afternoon's experiment. Mr. Leone, the poor man, had spent two entire classes getting everything set up for his little demonstration in centrifugal force. His eyes got really big at first, and then he sort of toppled from his stool as though someone had pole-axed him. Thereafter, we called him Hot Pants. Some of the guys said he even wet himself, but I didn't notice that. I was pretty busy trying to look innocently amused. When he managed to gain his composure, Mr. Leone wasn't too pleased. It was funny, though, and it was a learning experience for all of us. We never wired his stool again, and he never again made a sarcastic remark in class about Gary's weight, which is what had prompted the retaliatory measure in the first place.

When Tommy and Gary returned, the faculty decided that it would be prudent to separate our group. Since there were two grade nine classes that year, it was relatively easy to arrange. Tommy, Gary, and I were put in one class, Rodney and Jake in the other. This suited our purposes perfectly. Now we had two classes to entertain. By Christmas, Mr. Gaspeil, the school principal, had decided the future of one class could be jeopardized, but upsetting a second was too much to bear. Reunited, we vowed to make ~~it~~ for lost time.

Much to our delight, Miss Lowery was appointed our new homeroom teacher. Usually we sat at the backs of classes, for it was here that we could best be ignored. However, for Miss Lowery's lessons we jockeyed to get front row seats. She had the most wonderful legs imaginable. They were made all the more remarkable by her mini-skirts, and by the fact she'd often perch on the edge of her desk, long legs dangling, while she taught. Sometimes, if the gods were really kind, she even sat on the corner of my desk.

Those shapely limbs became the source for many adolescent fantasies, especially Gary's. Because of his weight, Gary had a lot of trouble attracting girls. Knowing this, Miss Lowery would make a point of often resting on the corner of his seat. Gary always turned a deep red and shifted about uncomfortably in his chair whenever this occurred.

The sole thing the five of us ever argued about was who would get the desk directly facing her. The only fair approach to our dilemma was to draw straws to see what day

we would have our moment in the sun. I drew Mondays. It was the only time in all my years of school that I eagerly anticipated the start of each week. Even now at 8:45 on a Monday morning, I'm apt to stop whatever I'm doing and stare fondly at the nearest clock.

Mondays, not surprisingly, were the only days I was consistently on time for class. Usually, I was at least ten minutes late for first period. Hell, I even attended Monday homerooms, a near impossible feat until that year I am, however, despite Miss Lowery, unofficial record holder for more late slips than anyone in the entire history of New Richmond High School. In the space of two short school years, I accumulated one hundred and twenty-three of them. I also was suspended a few times in my single minded pursuit of this remarkable record. If it hadn't been for Miss Lowery, may she always stand tall, I would have collected at least another twenty-five. Some of my most exciting moments in high school have had their basis in those few seconds it took that outstanding woman to cross or to stretch those evocative gams into a comfortable position. When she stood, we all seemed to stand with her in one shuddering motion. Mondays will forever be a thing of beauty for me.

Some of the other teachers used to wonder how someone so young and inexperienced as Miss Lowery could control the five of us so well. We realized quickly that as long as we were quiet and handed in our weekly assignments, we'd be allowed to occupy our front row seats. All Miss Lowery had

to do was to wear her mini, or a dress with a suitable slit up the side. She always remembered to wear our favorite outfits. As a secondary consequence, we did remarkably well in history that year.

If Miss Lowery was our special love, our special target for persecution during our last few high school years was not a teacher, oddly enough, but a fellow student, Andrew Mithers. I guess, looking back, that the only real difference between Andrew and the rest of us was the fact he carried a Gideon in his hip pocket instead of a Ramses, both very useful items in their own peculiar way. Of course, we never used our prophylactics until much later, at least not in the way they were intended to be used, but we carried them about anyway. It made us feel more manly and sure of ourselves to have them. Besides, they were great when we filled them with water and dropped them down the stairwells on the heads of unsuspecting virgins.

Andrew was at his best a very religious fellow, and at his worst, a raving fanatic. The rest of us didn't know what we wanted to do when we finished high school, but Andrew's destiny was foreordained, or so he informed anyone willing to listen. Come hell or high water, he knew he'd find an empty pulpit somewhere. We wouldn't have minded his sanctimonious clap-trap except for the fact he was always trying to convert one of us to the straight and narrow. I suppose he had our welfare at heart. I'm sure he prayed for the five of us, the unholy ones, often. I'm convinced that in

his private Gethsemane he must have shed a few tears for us.

I always suspected that, secretly, Andrew wanted to be like us, but just didn't know how. No one could really penetrate all the religious hoopla to find out what he was really like. Not that we tried very hard. Whenever we thought we saw a faint glimmer of hope under all that heavy armour, the Christly soldier would come marching out again, shouting his hallelujahs and hosannas to the highest. At least that's how we saw him.

↳ Most saw Andrew quite differently from the way we did. Tall, athletic, broad-shouldered and slim of waist, with his curly black hair cut short despite the Beatle craze, Andrew seemed the epitome of neo-conservatism. Parents spoke admiringly of his many qualities, and girls seemed attracted to his natural good looks. Mothers always smiled and nodded hello whenever they saw him. They recognized early that he was their daughter's safe harbor. But Andrew, not interested in the world of the flesh, was above all physical temptation. Meanwhile, long haired sandal-wearers that we were, we couldn't manage to attract a girl no matter what we did. Rodney's waving of water-filled prophylactics at school dances only served to drive our quarry further away. Andrew's blind indifference to the objects of our desires frustrated us all the more.

In addition to his strong moral fibre and fine physical attributes, Andrew was also scholarly: this drove us further up the wall. When we weren't sitting at the front of Miss

Lowery's classes, we were subjected daily to a back row view of Andrew's wildly-waving left hand. Why it was always his left hand, we could never figure out. At any rate, he seemed always to be signalling in God's direction. We'd be forced to listen in disgust as he remembered all the irregular verbs, explained complex geometric formulae and atomic structures, not to mention his correct quoting, down to the very last punctuation mark of Mark Anthony's monologue: "O, pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth/That I am meek and gentle with these butchers!" The fact he'd managed a quick look at us as he uttered these lines didn't especially endear him to us either. He was the yardstick against which we were invariably measured. We always fell way short of the mark. God, we despised him.

Andrew never courted trouble. In comparison, teachers tracked us down with a frequency that astounded even us. It was a rare day indeed when one of us wasn't decorating the empty space outside Mr. Gaspell's door. Whenever our principal discovered us, he'd greet us with his usual benediction - what Jake called, "The laying on of hands routine."

While the rest of us wasted precious time playing ball or hockey, depending on the season, Andrew was busy cementing the foundation for his mission. He taught Sunday school, gave special Bible readings, went to Sunday services and mid-afternoon meetings, as well as holding youth encounter sessions. He was president of the Young Christian Association, in addition to the school's Bible Study Club. He

lived and breathed in a world separate from our own. Sometimes we'd call him the Saint or the Pope, even though he wasn't Catholic. Everyone considered him special and gifted. We thought him demented and were continually probing for that one weak link in his chain that would bring everything tumbling down and expose him to all. In the meantime, we had to stand by while he went about his business of remaking the world in his own image.

In grade ten, Andrew intensified his drive for our souls. His specialty became washroom conversion. Before the year was out, Gary had dubbed him, 'St. Urinal Baptist.'

When Andrew extended his territory into the second floor washroom, he was attempting to annex our personal domain. The boy's lavatory was our refuge from angry teachers and late assignments, and it was here that we congregated whenever the opportunity presented itself, whether for a quick smoke or a sports rap, which was our own particular brand of religion. Heaven help those who invaded our privacy. If any of our schoolmates lingered too long in the toilet, we encouraged them to finish quickly and helped them out the door.

Andrew, wisely, never ventured inside when we were in residence. Somehow, he always seemed to know when we were there. I suppose it wasn't surprising, considering his connections with an all-seeing God. Rodney often accused him of trying to usurp our sanctuary for his private chapel, but what Andrew used it for was only his personal bulletin board.

Every Monday morning we'd find our meeting place littered with spiritual messages. No doubt the timing was a direct result of Andrew's Sunday renewal therapy. 'Jesus Saves,' in block letters, would greet us from the bathroom door. 'Call on Christ now!' clung to the toilet tanks. 'Repent, Ye Sinners' grinned at us from above the urinals, and 'Guilt is a Heavy Burden' would stare at us from the wall mirrors above the sinks. Pamphlets were strategically placed on the window sill just in case we wanted to read a little while fanning cigarette smoke out the opened window.

Andrew's notices amused us a great deal. With his ministrations salving our souls, and Miss Lowery's legs titillating our flesh, Mondays became a weekly high-water mark. We eventually devised a game to make use of the assorted literature. We'd stick the fliers at different heights in the urinals, stand back, and take aim. Tommy was the champion. He could hit the highest target from a distance of about ten feet. His urinary powers were a source of constant amazement to us. With regular practice, the rest of us improved our aim considerably.

As a consequence of Andrew's less than subtle methodology, sometimes when we met him in the hallway, Rodney would hold up a tiny vial of urine and bellow out, "Hey, Pope, ya want some holy water?" Andrew would simply glare, and wagging an admonishing finger in our direction, he'd prophetically warn us of slow syphilitic physical and spiritual decay unless we changed our ways. After three or four such chance encounters,

Andrew began to avoid us. His zeal had found a new focus.

Once, while arriving late to class for the third consecutive day, I had the opportunity to witness first hand Andrew's new audience. He had cornered a group of unsupervised grade six students working on a history project in the library. He spoke to them about the joys of knowing God and the dangers of heavy petting. God knows, he had the voice of a minister, and he knew how to thump a table. How he pleaded and cajoled those horny little youngsters! I doubt if there was a poor bastard among them that wasn't scared out of an erection until the age of twenty-one, and even that was probably a sorry sight to behold. When Andrew left, there were a few suppressed giggles and a lot of red faces.

Towards the end of that year, he found yet another source that might benefit from his selfless devotion. He started calling on Beth McDermot. Beth had quite a reputation. It was said that she had initiated quite a few of the grade eleven guys into the joys of manhood. I remember her well from my final year of school. She had to repeat the senior grade for the second time. I soon found myself in her open embrace, and the first time I was alone with her in the baseball dugout after practice, I got a little excited and was a bit premature in my undertakings. I was embarrassed about the mess I had made of things, but Beth wasn't bothered by it at all. She seemed quite used to it and knew exactly what to do. As a result of this encounter, I

became known as Dugout Pete, thanks to Gary's pastime of giving nicknames to everyone. But when Andrew first became interested in redeeming her, I knew her only by reputation. We were, as I recall, surprised Andrew would risk being seen with her. But then, Christ walked with prostitutes, and anything Christ could do... Knowing Beth as well as I eventually came to know her, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he was the one converted. We all thought that was what he really needed. One good lay, and he'd be ready for the next world. I didn't find out until grade eleven, during one of my after practice sessions with Beth, that when he wouldn't stop pestering her about going to church, she threatened to spread the rumour he was sleeping with her. We wondered at the time why he seemed to give up so easily on her.

The summer before I graduated, I got to know Andrew a lot better than I ever thought I would. My grandparents lived near him and when my grandfather got sick early in July, I moved in for a few weeks to help my grandmother out. One day while I was weeding the vegetable garden, Andrew happened by and invited me for an afternoon swim in the river. I figured, since I was going to be around for a while, it was a good chance to meet some other guys from the neighboring town. It turned out I knew most of them from hockey and baseball anyway, and we got along pretty well. We made it a habit to meet every afternoon for a swim if it wasn't raining. After the initial swim, Andrew seldom showed up. He

was, despite his athletic build, a weak swimmer and could barely keep his head above water. He usually paddled about in the placid back pool while the rest of us fought against the current to cross the river. I suppose that's why he chose to stay away for the most part. No one seemed to miss him much.

When he called one day to ask if I'd go hiking up to the caverns with him, I found myself saying I'd go. I don't remember why; perhaps the other fellows weren't around and I was bored. I guess I was beginning to feel a little sympathy for him as well. Andrew didn't have any friends that I could see. Besides, I'd wanted to climb up to the caves all summer, but didn't know the trail.

We didn't talk much on the way up. It was a steep climb and we needed all our strength to get up the mountain. Once we reached the summit, we sat on an overhang which looked out over the river valley to eat our lunch. The air was absolutely still. The view was well worth the climb. Stretched out under us were the tops of trees. They formed a green carpet below whose outer edge was faulted by the dark seam of the valley roadway. Running parallel to the highway was the river. Its waters shone blue when touched by the sun.

I was just sitting there enjoying the view and thinking that maybe Andrew had a few good things going for him after all. It was then that Andrew leaned over and whispered in my ear, "He called out to me here."

"Who?" I asked innocently.

"God," came the quiet reply. "As high up as it is, He told me to jump and He would save me."

I looked about for signs of a burning bush. Finding none, I tried not to let my disbelief register too obviously on my face.

Andrew was blind to my reaction. With his face turned upwards into the sun, his eyes half-closed, he continued speaking in a rapturous voice. "God made the trees stretch out their boughs to break my fall. I landed without a scratch on the forest floor. It was His way of telling me that I was special to Him."

Great, I thought, so I have to be the one stuck on Mount Sinai next to the reincarnation of Moses himself. Before he could be handed the tablets, I inched away from the cliff. Once clear of the overhang, I descended the slopes of that hallowed ground as quickly as I could.

A final episode a few days later convinced me Andrew was beyond redemption. My new friends and I had just finished swimming and were in the process of getting ready to leave for supper when Andrew came by and informed me we had to talk. I was about to protest, but when I turned around, the rest had disappeared up the path from the river.

"You didn't believe me," he said quietly. "I'll show you that He watches out for me."

Before I could stop him, he plunged headfirst into the water. After paddling about thirty feet, the current caught

him and forced him under. Terrified, I looked about for help. There was no one within shouting distance. For an instant, I imagined myself staring down at his open coffin, trying to explain to everyone gathered around how all this had come about. I dove in after him.

Catching up to the sputtering disciple, I pulled his head out of the water and allowed the current to carry us to the shallows. I dragged him ashore and flung him on his back. He gagged and vomited. Resurrected, his eyes fluttered open. We were both shaken and pale. After resting for half an hour, we found a crossing and silently walked home.

One evening a couple of weeks later, while walking by the Baptist church, I heard Andrew's voice speaking quite loudly. Curious, I crept up and looked through an open window. Andrew was talking passionately about God to a group of kids sitting at his feet. Reverend Walters and Mrs. Walters sat nearby, smiling and nodding happily. Andrew told them how God had saved his life twice. Once, about three years ago, when he had slipped from a rocky cliff, and yet a second time, not long ago, when he had gotten a cramp while swimming.

At the end of the summer, Andrew left to attend a seminary in Vermont that Reverend Walters had recommended. I never saw Andrew again. A few years ago, I heard that he had joined a cult of some sort whose lifelong mission was to locate Noah's ark. I suspect Andrew is out there somewhere,

falling off mountains still.

As for the rest of us...Tommy - Tommy Elks was expelled from school in grade eleven, two months before graduation. He cut his hair, Iroquois style, in protest over the school's new ruling that hair shouldn't be worn more than an inch over the collar. He was always proud of his long, black Indian tresses which he wore in a pony-tail. It didn't help that after he cut it, he carried the remains in his belt like a scalp. Mr. Gaspell was going to let him come back in time to write his final exams, but Tommy, who also played on the school's ball team, got Beth in trouble and married her. They still live on the reserve. They have five kids now. They named one, Pete, after me.

Jake - poor Jake. He was killed in a car accident during his last year at McGill. He was studying civil engineering. Tommy, Rodney and I were pallbearers at his funeral. Reverend Walters gave the service, and Miss Lowery read a prayer. She wore Jake's favorite black dress, the one with the slit up the front to the knee, and his favorite pearl necklace. She looked as good as ever, and not even the Reverend took his eyes off her as she spoke.

Gary Roberts, the brightest of us all, never did manage to find a girlfriend. He got caught up in the late sixties' drug craze and lives now in another dimension. I visit him sometimes, but he doesn't know me. And Rodney Smith, good-old-prophylactic-waving Rodney. He's a gynecologist in Sudbury and is doing just fine. I saw him at our tenth high

school reunion. He spent the entire night dancing with Miss Lowery.

As for me, Pete Jacobs, well...I teach in a red-bricked, rectangular box with two rows of yawning windows. I figured that since I had so much fun as a student, teaching would be a lark. Last week I had to suspend Doug Elks, Tommy and Beth's oldest boy. He and another grade six student plugged all the toilets with chalk brushes. I can hardly wait until next year when he climbs the stairs to the second floor.