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**Selective Memory
Ten Short Stories about Avoidance**

Jessica Argyle

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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

February 1998

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ABSTRACT

Selective Memory: Ten Short Stories about Avoidance

Jessica Argyle

This body of work is linked thematically rather than stylistically. I have used three kinds of short fiction to depict states of withdrawal and avoidance. Postcard or 'sudden fiction' employs a narrative short-hand and focuses on tone, voice and situation, often at the expense of plot and characterization, though not excluding either; the short tale or yarn, which is often an extended anecdote that is driven more by idea, situation and mood (the fantastical, the surreal) than by individual psychology or causality; and conventional realistic fiction, which explores character through that complex of social interrelations we have become accustomed to calling plot.

Some methods used to avoid facing loss are alcohol, religion, emotional and sexual affairs, cigarettes, cars, travel and even hobbies. Most of my characters perform tasks whose actions mimic participation, but whose true purpose is to shield them from emotions that are too painful to risk exploration.

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Pushing a String

I'm putting Vic's poster back up when the doorbell rings. They wouldn't let him out *this* early. It must be Janet. Maybe bringing me another self-help book.

Janet is my next door neighbour. Occasionally I skim through her offerings. I am of the opinion that they could all be written in 10 pages on the outside. Mostly rehash, and I enjoy telling her that. I smooth the poster's glossy surface and stick in the last tack. I miss the old raving Janet. I allot her 20 minutes out of respect for when all we had was each other.

Janet would never put up with a man on a 2-day furlough from rehab. She has made this plain to me. But I can sense that she is beginning to warm to him.

I won't camp it up for her today. I won't parade wardrobe possibilities or answer my door in a black bra.

All this getting better is taking its toll on my nerves. Vic showers me with slogans impossible to argue with. He carries around a medallion that reads "Of joy or sorrow we have no measure." You don't argue with a rehab man. He mouths *I'm doing my best* in this limp voice whenever I take issue. I can't get a rise out of anyone these days. I speak, their eyes glaze over. When Janet stops in, I catch them exchanging looks.

Janet and Vic have become remarkably similar. They both *what do you think and how do you feel* me to death. It's enough to make you pine for astrology.

Vic tries to warm me up before sex but it takes its toll. I can tell. Afterwards he smooths my hair and rummages for words that have nothing to do with me. He used to grunt like a spent beast in the fury's wake. Now doing anything with him is like pushing a string. The last time he sloganned me right after sex I said, *How very proZAYic*. He doesn't respond so I say, *Don't you get it. It's Prozac not prose*. He coolly informs me that sarcasm is a form of anger. *And that's the best thing about it*, I say, my teeth bared.

He's not here yet but the idea of him is all over the place

I open the door and Janet is holding bright yellow flowers and I say *Have you ever noticed that the more delicate the flora and fauna the worse it stinks when it rots. Take chicken for example. .* and she looks at me with love and infinite patience and I feel ashamed. *Thank you, I mean* and for one second I crave the liturgy of her tired salvation but before I know it I say *All I know is that I won't be 70 until I am 70 and maybe not even then.* And when I reach for the flowers and she tells me they aren't for me for one instant I believe her.

I Thought We Were Friends

She pulled her Anne Klein coat closer to her body, chilled by the wind assailing the thin fabric. Inside the lapel of her coat she sheltered the heads of newly purchased white lilies. Her pace quickened as she closed in on the depanneur. She ignored the sardonic expression on the kid's face when he looked up and saw her. She had worn lipstick and eyeliner for the occasion. She looked good enough to get credit. The thought made her effusive. Healy's gaunt form shadowed the beer fridge. She walked past him to the wine section and chose two bottles of red. Let *him* discover her. Just before she opened the door to leave, he lifted his head. He shouted across the small store.

"No ticket?"

"Not yet."

"How about alimony?"

She walked up to him, irritated.

"Jesus, keep your voice down. It's not called alimony until you're officially divorced. Anyway, I got it yesterday but haven't cashed it yet, and the tickets should be here any day now. I think I'll just relax with a glass of wine. If you like we could continue this conversation in my room."

She walked around the corner, back to the narrow dead-end street that served as a cut off from the city proper. A u-shaped area that seemed tacked on, an afterthought. The light dimmed in this cavity. The buildings were mostly converted into rooming houses. There had been some talk of tearing the area down but then it seemed to end from lack of interest as far as she could make out. It was too cold for the winos to be in the landings outside. They were probably in the furnace rooms. There was a real smart bite in the air. She wondered why the neon signs were kept on in the day. It wasn't like the landlord to throw away money. Must be real cheap. He should get the 'R' in 'Rooms' fixed though. It's been blinking for the last while. As long as I've been here, she thought. Blue and red with little white bulbs around it. Gives the street some character. The blue cast a fluorescent glow onto the vacant opening of the alley. Like a t.v. screen left on in a warehouse. She opened the green tin door and stepped inside. The postman had come and gone; she could see mail in some of the other boxes. She closed her eyes and tried to remember the visualization technique she had read about. A manilla, no, a long white envelope with her name in laser print. She could tell the box was empty before she put her key in

the lock. She closed it carelessly, unnerved by her desperation, and went up the burnt orange shag carpeting on the stairs to room 214.

She liked this room. It looked exactly like what it was. A seedy hotel. Only this one hadn't run to seed, it started out that way. Wood veneer tables on spindly legs. Industrial yellow carpet. She had been here two weeks, though, and the novelty was beginning to wear off.

She put the brown bag with the two bottles of wine down on the table and took her jacket off. She sat on the bed. Afraid that a thought might sneak up on her, she quickly rose and opened the kitchen drawer, looking for the corkscrew. In mid-curse, she remembered that they were screw tops. Thank God. She opened one and took out an oversized, hand-painted long-stemmed crystal goblet. They were almost exact replicas of the ones in Kilroy's book. She filled it to within half an inch of the top. Now she could sit down. She watched the play of light filter through the wine, turning it a transparent scarlet. So pretty. Such an intensely peaceful colour. She took a long draught and contemplated the dwindling of the light outside. One glass and then she'd be ready to deal with Healy. She hoped he'd come straight over and not stop at his place first. She stood up and took another long drink. It moved through her body like a warm stream, coating all the raw nerve endings, moving upward and down, flushing her face with pink heat.

Not in style anymore, she thought. Neither is waiting for a letter that never shows up. Not in style at all to guzzle back booze. I'm an old-fashioned girl. Red

wine and tears and lots of looking back. Still, I've come a long way. A lot to be grateful for. At least the histrionic phase seems to be over and the last time I blacked out I came-to in familiar surroundings.

She took a short sip and allowed some liquid to seep into her lips. It takes a long time to get it right, to get real comfortable. She leaned back and giggled nervously remembering that there was no back rest to lean into and the wall was a long way away. Falling back in space. The curious mixture of abandonment and restraint of the ardent drinker committed to the long haul. Seeing it through.

The only things she brought with her were the three novels and the correspondence. Re-reading the passages about his take on feminism was a treat she was saving for later. The second bottle. She wanted to be prepared. She had another week to go. That was the deal. A month exactly. Not a day more. It would be just like him to wait till the last day to send the bloody tickets. He might even have booked into these crummy rooms and be watching her for all she knew. After all, the only picture she had of him was on the back of the jacket of the last novel he had published. Five years ago. And who knew how old that picture was. She knew better than to trust her memory.

She first discovered his writing through an ex-lover who owned a second-hand bookstore.

"Have you ever read any Kilroy?" Rufus asked. He was pretending to be interested in something other than her body.

"No. Never heard of him." So was she.

"You might like him. He's really twisted."

And so she had bought the first novel of his trilogy (at a discount, of course). That night she lay on the couch wondering why she had bought a book about football and guys and booze. She couldn't put it down. There was something in the way Kilroy set you up. Something in the way she never knew when his writing would descend like an annoying minor headache distracting her from any hope of dealing with the housework. She couldn't figure out what was so rivetting about his style, why she found herself saying "asshole" out loud or why the passage about the touchdown made her like men again for the duration of an entire paragraph. He would lose it sometimes and whole sections of the book would dissolve into incoherent bitter rambling. She had tried to get John to read him, but he was always too busy. Even after he had hired Kilroy he still hadn't read his work. Her reverie was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Healy, is that you?"

"Tis I. Please to open the portal."

A quick gulp by way of fortification. She emptied the rest of the wine down her throat and put the glass into the hollow of the highest cupboard.

A piece of yellowish linoleum flapped back into place with the closing of the door. Two cheap wine glasses were retrieved from the shelf overhanging the sink. She filled them up halfway. Healy looked beaten, his face still raw from the wind trilling about the streets. She held out a glass to him, her eyes shining,

"I don't mean to sound so energetic. I can see you've had a bad day. Anyhow, I've got a glass' worth of hope on you. Not the same person I was a half hour ago. Sometimes this stuff is still magic. Today it works."

"God, I envy you that. I've gone beyond that state. It's about 5 to 1 now. Pretty lousy odds. Still though I enjoy the feeling of substance that a glass in hand lends to a conversation. Tea would probably have the same effect on me but I'm not quite ready to give up the illusion."

Remember. Remember sitting in the green chiffon by the fireplace misplacing the glass. Waiting for someone to bring her the promised refill, feeling as insubstantial as the flighty green fabric. The solidity of the glass in hand, the cold anchor. Those were the days of discovery when she could still turn into an Italian film star after the second drink. When she wouldn't leave the room, denying her bladder until the last possible minute, so generous was her spirit, so notable the void her absence would create. Then they would come, the suitors, disguising their admiration, some sardonic, others with a sharper edge. She saw through it all. She twirled her glass, the ice cubes crashing into each other, colliding in a dance of avoidance around and around in her glass. She would raise it to her right eye and squint through the amber into the fire.

"You're doing it again. You've gone off somewhere and made me disappear. Really, my dear, you owe it to me to at least share your thoughts. Not all of us can drink alone. Particularly when there is someone else in the room."

"I was just re-living my other life. The one I shall never return to."

"The one that drove you to this one."

"Maybe it's the same one you came from. The funny thing is that I can see you walking into the living room I was imagining. You see I may have met you there, but I never would have gotten to know you. I never got to know anyone. I just kept meeting me over and over again."

"What you seem to forget is that I'm not running from another life. And I can honestly say that I'd never drink such cheap wine alone. 'Tis testament to my devotion, my dear."

She stood still and watched the scene recede, herself looking at Healy, Healy leaning on the sink, his legs crossed, dusk like a fine fog blurring the objects in the room, one into the other. Like an old photograph drained of colour. One more drink to harden the image. Another glass of wine to observe it. To turn it into art.

Healy turned the overhead light on.

"Don't lets get gloomy now. My day was long enough." Healy's voice was strained, irritated. Her neck stiffened and she blinked her eyes as if coming out of a fugue.

"It's just the effect of the fading light and a little too much wine too fast. I don't mean to lay anything on you."

Hopelessness permeated her voice.

"Go." said so quietly he could barely make it out.

"Did you say go? I don't think you'll be going anywhere for a while, my love."

"Actually, I'm the one who suggested the date. I thought it would be fun to wait for him again. I wanted to give him the option of the exact time and place we would meet. Of course he's sending the ticket. I sent him my picture."

"Why don't you show me the letter he wrote back to you? You must have brought it."

His hands were thin and claw-like, bloodless where they clasped the glass. It was the first time she noticed how brittle he was. Everything about him was spare, diluted.

"He never wrote back, did he? Maybe he never wrote at all."

His eyes circled her. His mouth a set horizontal line. He was waiting for something, cornering her, taking his time, drawing out his stare, comfortable in his austerity.

"You don't know what you're talking about. He was crazy about me. You should have seen us together. We were like Scott and Zelda. He'll meet me at the station like we used to do. I love meeting him at the station, watching the trains coming in and going out. Seeing all the people meeting each other, excited and anxious. That's the best part. Before they get used to each other and start to be nasty. Not that they always do, just that sometimes...." Her hand went up to her mouth. She laughed, too loud.

"Anyhow my love, my door is always open. You must remember where you woke up this morning. Or was it afternoon?"

She tightened her hand around the glass.

"You're so goddamn middle-class. It's just company, company I want. It's pathetic. You're beginning to remind me of John, my ex."

Waiting for him to come home with company, warning her not to 'overdo', that it was a business meeting, informal, not a social occasion. His mouth set in a stinging straight line when she opened the door in a sheer chiffon dress, jet beads sewn on in strategic places, oversized martini in hand with an oversized olive in it, like a frame from the Thin Man series, black and white. Jealous 'cause he doesn't know how to have a good time. Finding the bottles she hid. Always watching her, but never talking.

"Earth to Faye. Earth to Faye. Thinking about John or, let me see, maybe Kilroy. You know, the guy who is so madly in love with you he hasn't sent the tickets."

"I did know him when he came into the room. He was with John, doing some hack work. You could tell John had no understanding of him. He just looked different. And then I remembered the picture from the dust jacket. Second hand, you know."

She sat down and reached for the bottle of wine, now half empty and poured some for herself. Gesturing with the mouth of the bottle, she pointed it at the other chair, "sit down."

"You know when you've always known that something big was going to happen to you, you just don't know when. Well, I knew the minute I saw him, that he was the big thing. We just understood each other right away."

He moved some clothes off the chair and put them on the bed. The chair creaked as he eased his long frame into it.

"Wouldn't you rather come to my place? At least I have a couch."

"Not after that last comment about where I woke up today."

The room had been done in fossil colours, greyish lavenders, chalky greens. He fit in perfectly. He looked like an exotic lizard, heavy shrouded eyes, slow, deliberate movements. He knew about the ginkgo tree, he was the only one who knew how old it was, how long it had been around. Art Deco and prehistoric, and John never commented. Well, anyway, she could tell that Kilroy wasn't at all interested in discussing the 'market'. John put up with him, cutting him short, muzzling him with artful diplomacy. He didn't mind about her affairs, only not too close to home darling, and remember, no colleagues. I broke the rule that night, although nothing happened right away. I wanted to have fun, to give myself over to joy. I had my fish cigarette holder, carved from whale-bone which always irritated John. I didn't care what they thought when Kilroy came over and put a cigarette into its open mouth.

"I'm beastly uncomfortable and your eyes are vacant. I'll see you later."

He got up and the wine bottle, almost empty, rocked slightly. Her hand darted out to steady it.

"Oh, don't be such a bore. Should we talk about *your* marriage, why it failed?"

"It failed because we were both selfish. Simple."

"Well, John was selfish and I was starving. He made a lot of money and bought a lot of things for me and that's all he ever gave me and then he got mad when I began to like the things more than I liked him. Kilroy gave me something else."

"If it was all so perfect, why didn't you stay?"

"He had his work, and besides, he drank too much. We drank too much."

"You're not exactly on the wagon now, my dear."

"Just preparing myself for the meeting. He's taking some time off. All he has been doing is writing. Anyway, what else is there to do?"

She wasn't really just waiting, she was observing herself, fascinated by the prospect of a new intrigue. She knew that Kilroy was just marking time, he could do anything he wanted. It was John who was the lost soul, marrying her when she was barely out of her teens and he a decade older. What a long decade it was. She thought of herself as his blank canvas, it was up to him to paint in the colours.

"It was as if I had inhaled the moon and all of me was translucent. The light was low and there was nothing John could do about it. I had changed all the light bulbs."

After that night nothing was the same. I met Kilroy anywhere he wanted to. He always asked me at the weirdest times. Almost as if he were testing me. Well, John got rid of him on some pretext, something about his work not being up to snuff, and that's when we began the affair in earnest."

"The boss's wife. How banal."

Healy's face was in three quarter. His lip was curled into a sneer. The expression reminded her of Kilroy. He used to look at me like that, she thought. Almost as if he doesn't like me. She rose quickly and reached for the empty wine bottle. Healy leaned forward and caught her wrist in his hand. She wrenched it free.

"Let it go. I can't bear the sight of an empty bottle. I just want to throw it out. Destroy the evidence."

"What a strange little duck you are."

She didn't hear him. She had the second bottle in her hand and was trying to unscrew the top. It was stuck.

"Cheap things. I can't wait to get some good wine."

"It may be a while before that happens unless your dear hubby will have you back."

"What are you talking about? I thought you were my friend."

She gave the bottle a sharp twist and then let out a shriek. The thin metal jabbed the fleshy part of her thumb and blood began to form thin red lines in the

creases of her wrist. Still she stood there determined, grappling with the bottle, her face in a grimace.

"Here give it to me. Put your hand under cold water."

She stood straight clasping the bottle, not moving. Healy got up and took it from her hand and turned on the kitchenette tap. It spurted rust coloured water.

"It'll run clear in just a minute. Are you okay?"

Angry tears in her eyes mingled with eyeliner. She turned from Healy and took two steps to the faucet and put her thumb under it. He looked at her with a sad little smile and went into the bathroom and returned with a piece of wadded-up toilet paper. The cut was fairly deep and the blood ran rich and red against the chill whitened flesh. Healy held it up and inspected it before he wrapped the toilet paper around it, applying pressure.

"I can do that. Just open the damn bottle."

"All right, all right. Sit down."

He opened the bottle with one short twist and she looked at him shyly and sat down.

"Thanks. I'm a lot of trouble for a new neighbour and you're being kind."

"And all this time I thought you were the one being kind, putting up with my company." He smiled when he said it.

"Kilroy said the same thing to me once, only he wasn't smiling." She wondered why she told him that. She reached out and took the glass that Healy had put in front of her and picked it up with her left hand and drank greedily.

"Here's to friendship, to us, the battle-weary comrades-in-arms. More wine please." She giggled but it came out a thin string.

"Your trouble is you don't know how to do anything."

You can't do anything right. Why don't you take up a hobby? I'm sick of all your fantasies. You're just a drain on my energy.

"You shouldn't drink so fast. It's early yet. Your face is beginning to change."

She didn't hear him. She was wondering whose voice she had imagined. Was it John's or Kilroy's? Oh dear, she thought. I've gotten them all confused.

She got up and walked over to the window, smeared with fingerprints, streaked with weather from a hundred seasons. She could barely see out of it. The windows across from her were dimly lit and she could not see anything but vague shadowy figures moving slowly inside. Healy had lapsed into silence, his head was tilted downwards, his hands twirling the stem of his wineglass which had captured the childish image of a sashed window rolling in waves in the distorted bubble of glass.

"I'm grateful for your company." The words came tumbling out of her mouth too quickly as if she were conscious of being disbelieved.

Healy looked suddenly older. The waning light shaded the lines around his mouth with shadows. Deep hollows under his eyes obscured their expression. He got up again, straightening out his pants legs by pulling the fabric down from under the knees,

"Some people do really live here..." He pointed to the window across from hers. "Oh, never mind", and made an excuse about having something to do, someone to call and offered up an invitation to go over to his place later without much conviction. He pointed to the bottle of wine,

"You have company."

It was a cruel remark, but she didn't flinch. She had heard it before, and realized with surprise that she had been waiting for it. He knew that making it served as a guarantee that she wouldn't be over later. They were silent as she handed him his jacket. He bent down and turned her hand over in his, kissing her palm with the frailest of kisses, gently closing the door behind him. She looked out the window, surprised to see him walking in the direction of his apartment. It was almost as if he hadn't been there at all.

She stayed up most of the night, sitting at the table. She re-read the letter from Kilroy and wondered what she had thought she had read before and left it opened on the table. It wasn't even as good as his fiction. She waited patiently, almost lighthearted, her recollections slowly giving way to hope and faith in the future. Her visions were so intense that she no longer saw the white envelope on the table, or felt the chill in the air of the gloomy room. In the morning she dressed with care and packed the small suitcase neatly before she left. She had forgotten the wine glasses and left them in the cupboard standing side by side, one clear, the other red-stained. The letter remained on the table, face up like an outstretched palm. No one was in the halls or on the stairs when she left. She

passed the row of mailboxes, tin caves with no mystery to impart, and walked on to the street without quickening her pace. As she rounded the corner and passed the depanneur, Healy spotted her. He was business-like in his good black trench coat, tucking a newspaper under his arm. Her eyes gave him no sign of acknowledgment or good-bye. He called out to her and stopped in the middle of her name, his shoulders slumping as he released his breath. The suitcase was light and offered no hindrance to her quick steps. Once out of the u-shaped hollow, the traffic was heavier and she mingled easily, matching her rhythm to the other pedestrians' purposeful gait. She was going to the train station. There were lots of places she could go. The thought filled her with sentimentality and kindness for the people she walked among. She would go to the train station and decide once she got there. She was off on an adventure where anything was possible. Something really important was going to happen to her. She just knew it. She would look at all the schedules and sit in the long polished wooden benches in the station. She would be comfortable there.

A Dubious Strategy

She met him at the second meeting she had gone to. It was even more tense than the first, the confessional atmosphere almost unbearable. The guest speaker was nearing the end of her talk. She spoke about how she could now accept that she hadn't been a bad mother, she couldn't possibly have known that her husband was as sick as he was. She had found the two of them dead in her bed, a rambling note of stark Godfearing righteousness pinned to her daughter's bloody blouse. A gun was at the foot of the bed. Zoe wondered if the child had known what was going to happen. That scene turned over and over in her mind, oblivious to the resolution. The therapist who helped her cope. The church she now belonged to. The new man in her life. Like a scene carved out of a book or the pitch-point line of a poem, it wouldn't let Zoe go. They knew. He knew best of all. It was on his face when he brought her a coffee, black with two sugars. Zoe

never asked how he knew the way she took her coffee. She was tired of all the explaining, the trying to understand.

They had all gone out after that meeting. Some had been coming here for four or five years. Some of them seemed okay, she was willing to try to believe in them. John sat opposite her. He cut into the conversation;

"Nobody will ever quite understand how you feel. You're going to have to go through this alone. I've been coming for two years now, once a week. It helps me, but don't expect too much from us. We're victims of a personal holocaust, but the only principle involved is insanity. Battalions of the walking wounded, different memories of the same war. Really though, we're all on our own."

A middle-aged woman in a bright flower spattered dress glanced at John, raised her head and settled her eyes on Zoe. She did not smile.

"John is a little cynical, some of us have moved on. We come for ourselves, but at a certain point I think the focus shifts. We're really here to help new people. As we have been helped." She ripped off a corner of the flap of her cigarette package.

"My name is Georgette. Call me if things really get bad. No matter what time. I don't work."

Outside the restaurant the little group disbanded with hugs and promises. Georgette touched the wire of her glasses to the bridge of her nose and resolutely took Zoe's hand in both of hers.

"I meant it when I gave you my number. Use it. It's going to be okay."

John's eyes betrayed him. He was listening to Brian, something about a police report. Brian was on a roll. He spoke without pausing, quoting numbers. An eight-to-ten-year sentence. Four children. Twelve years of marriage. One leg was outstretched, ensnaring John in an invisible circle. Zoe turned away, her hand at her throat, tugging at her scarf. She walked into the sharp spring air.

"Zoe!"

She turned back, unnerved. John's eyes were wild, almost pleading;

"Can I give you a lift home?"

"Thank you, but I want to walk. Winter is finally over and I want to take advantage of it."

"Which way do you go? I'll walk you."

Brian quickly folded his hands in his trench coat pockets and turned to look at Zoe.

"It's getting dark. Maybe you should let the man take you home."

Zoe thought she saw the suggestion of a leer cross his mouth, then mutate into a benign smile. John walked up to her, proprietorial. He saluted Brian and bowed in front of Zoe.

"Which way does Madam wish to go? Shall it be the scenic route or are we in a hurry? Your wish is my command."

Zoe liked his confident bluster. She tried to laugh but it came out a thin squeak. He linked his arm through hers. They headed toward the park. She lived about ten blocks from the restaurant, but hadn't walked through the park since

autumn. She wanted to see the buds on the trees, the second surfacing of bulbs, Irises.

"Why didn't you bring your husband? You did mention that you were married."

Zoe wanted to tell him everything. About how she didn't want Steve there. The half-truths she told him to keep him away.

"He has his own way of dealing with Amy's death. He's very close to his family. He sees a counsellor. He wanted me to go with him. I did once, but she seemed so righteous. I felt I was under glass. She asked me for permission to tape the sessions. I never went back. He likes it though. So he goes there and I guess I come here."

She gestured behind her. She saw their shadows linked on the dry pavement. Joined at the torso. They walked into the wind, into the park on the grass. A lock of Zoe's hair with a bobby pin at the end catapulted in her face. They stopped at a bench in the park and Zoe started talking. She spoke for what seemed like eons. About how she had rejected her husband and his subsequent drinking. After a while he stopped asking questions. He sat on the bench, passive, raising his hand to smooth back her hair in the wind from time to time. She talked about her dead child. She poured a torrent of images into the silence, into his open hushed face. The young couple with a child moving into the middle-classes with their new house, their endless appliances. The hit and run. The funeral. The partial licence plate number. The abandoned search. The worst

memories coming out first. The locus of death. Then the fanning out. The before and after. The night grew colder. When he took off his gloves and put them on her hands, she didn't flinch. She was in the middle of telling him about the sculpture that Amy had brought back from class when she was eight years old.

"It was a sculpture of a house made in clay. The house looked like it was throwing up. It was swollen in the middle. Around it were tennis rackets, washing machines, all sorts of stuff. Steve and I wondered where she got these ideas. She was so young. It's one of the things I saved. Something she made for me. Not something I bought for her. One of the things that is completely unique to her."

She raised a golden corduroy knee and rubbed it against the side of a black flannel thigh. She felt the fleecy warmth of his gloves on her hands with a surge of gratitude. She took off his glove and placed her forefinger in the middle of the indentation in his chin.

"I like you and you like me. Now you can walk me home." The glove rested palm up, forgotten on the edge of the park bench.

They didn't kiss on that first evening. They hardly spoke on the way home. She carried his movements with her against all the banalities that cushioned her world. Common place words shattered against the memory of a faint touch at her temple, rearranging her hair. Blue eyes appropriating the line of her jaw, steadfast, hungry. John, on the bench in the deserted park leaning over to catch her words, forearms on his thighs, thoughtful. Listening. She swept

through the supper time question and answer period with Steve like a zephyr, cool, generous.

There was no discussion. Zoe merged into John as easily as spring tumbled into summer. Sex was an afterthought. A punctuation mark. Like hearing a familiar tongue in a foreign land. Sometimes she wondered why he rarely spoke about the death of his son during a bungled break-in. His eyes would cloud in his thin face when she asked him for details. Zoe felt his sadness woven into his measured movements, his stillness. He came alive when she spoke. He would give her openings, sit back and listen, graze his fingertips over her face between images, her words rebounding into her body. They met Wednesdays after the meeting and Fridays until 9:00 when the shops closed. She wore her hair tucked in tweedy caps. She bought riding boots and simple white blouses. The opposite of her silky, pastel work clothes. She bought him striped sheets in shades of green and brown. He was gentlemanly with her, removed, so different from Steve.

Steve was accommodating. They were kind to each other. He didn't seem to notice the new clothes. After work she came home to find the apartment polished and vacuumed. She would make the simple dinners he liked, shepherds' pie, lasagna. He would sit at the table, appreciative, and ask about her day. They spoke a lot about work, his engineering contracts, her job as a loans officer. Clothes were retrieved from the dry cleaner's on time and hung neatly in his closet. The house was stocked with coffee, all the mechanics of

consumption. He was frustrated with his work and usually brought his briefcase home. After supper they would chat, then he would retire into the spare room and take out his paperwork. Zoe would read, fall asleep on the couch, wait for Wednesday. Their agreement was tacit. They skirted around the topic of sex. Steve said that his therapist said that they were going through a dry spell. Don't dwell on it. It'll come back in time. Once the job stress abated. Zoe agreed quickly, curtailing the discussion, afraid of the inevitable banal suggestion of the romantic weekend. She empathized with his tough work load.

Wednesday. On her way out of the meeting, she leaned against the long coffee table and fidgeted with the oversized red scarf her mother had given her on her last birthday. She tucked it into the inner lapel of her jacket and checked the line of her fingers in black leather gloves. He was moving, businesslike, through the tunnel of bodies, his eyes raised to lock hers.

"Coffee?"

"My place?"

"Let's go."

Zoe brushed against Georgette emptying ashtrays into Styrofoam cups.

"Sorry, I didn't realize it was you."

"I've been waiting for your call. It's important to talk to somebody neutral. I'll be here when you're ready."

Zoe felt her kindness and wondered why she couldn't respond. She opened her mouth to say thank you but Georgette cut her off with a wave.

"You can't escape it. It's okay though, everyone tries." She motioned to the open door. "He's waiting." Zoe couldn't return her smile. She quickened her pace to catch up with John.

He carried his coat folded over his left arm like a limp body. She walked on his other side. The air was frigid with a sting. The promise of winter.

Zoe spoke instead of taking his hand;

"You have become my only friend. The last refuge."

She talked about a serial killer in the North End;

"It happened to someone else. They found the body last week. It's hard to know for sure. They guard that information from everyone. We'll probably only know if he's the one when the case is over. Maybe never at all."

"This radical prying is over for me. It's all just bullshit. It doesn't work. Even this place doesn't work for me any more." He nodded his head backward toward the church.

"I'm glad you came tonight. I can't bear the new ones. They really believe that they'll get over it. That one day they'll be healed forever and never have to look back. I only come for you."

"I can't stay long. My husband thinks I'm obsessed enough with death as it is. We've stopped talking about it, though."

"That's what Jamie kept harping on before she finally left me. Maybe she saw Jason in my eyes, maybe just nothing at all."

She had removed her boots under the kitchen table as she was speaking. He looked at his coffee cup, eyes downcast, staring without focus. She lit a cigarette, pointedly staring into the bleeding blue of his eyes. She started unbuttoning her coat, her gloves still on.

"You finish it."

Wordless, he leaned over, into her and began the slow-motion dance. The shedding. A pink nipple swung out from beneath the red shroud of scarf. He met her eyes with a look of shock, then a quick smile formed as fast as it faded. She stood up and he followed, his hands all the while plucking at the cold black plastic of the buttons, coaxing them out of their thick woollen pockets. The coat fell to the floor. She sat on its lining, absurd in pantyhose, gloves and scarf. She reached under the table and pulled out her purse, the movement ludicrously twisting her torso. An inch of flesh rolled out above the elastic of her pantyhose. She unzipped her purse and waved a white blouse in the air like a flag of surrender.

"I took it off in the bathroom of the church. My silent contribution to the meeting. I couldn't quite manage the garter belt. Next time."

Her eyes narrowed as she looked up at him. Waiting. He pushed himself away from the table with taut palms. She reached up and began to unbuckle his pants. He stood up, his arms hanging limply by his sides. He looked down at her dark head, her gloved knuckles.

They told each other that it wasn't a good idea for John to keep taking her home. Steve might see them together. She would call for a taxi and have it drive her around the block and give the driver five dollars for his trouble. She liked walking home. It gave her time to move from one life into the other. Time to let the air smooth the animation from her face. To settle it back into blankness.

She walked by the silent park on the way home. Dark green shadows on the ice formed pools. Beyond the fence, denuded maple trees struggled in the wind under their burdens of ice-encrusted snow. A hot air grate trapped the heel of her shoe. She eased her foot out of her pump and bent down to retrieve it. She glanced around in the silent grip of someone's presence. No one was there. Cold air on her calves. She stood on the periphery of the park staring at the fence. She remembered being out on Halloween as a child. Her mother's voice warning her not to put her tongue on frozen metal. The same irresistible urge to do it as she had then. She would have to scream but she didn't know if she could if her tongue was stuck. She would have to wait for someone to come by to save her. Something was there. The dry rustle of cardboard. She pecked out her head, her eyes spearing a lone pine tree. The entire bottom of the tree was covered in pine branches. Peering out from underneath was a cardboard floor. The night cast a giant round shadow. Tucked inside the pine branches was a cart on its side. Someone was struggling to set it right. She walked within a few feet of the tree and held her gloved hand to her throat, tightening her scarf around her neck. Her voice sounded loud to her own ears:

"Are you all right? Do you need any help?"

Silence. She saw a hand flicker, back into the silent enclave. She moved in closer. Shrouded in a brown blanket, a strand of white hair jutted out from its hood. The air was punctured with a sudden cry of capture.

"No, no, I don't want to hurt you."

Her own voice reassured her. She wanted to help. She wanted to fold herself in with the frail white lady under the tree and share her blanket. She wanted to be warm and never go home again. The woman's feet were wrapped in layers of plastic, an unfurled roll of saran wrap. The yelp. Again. She turned away, embarrassed. She had been staring.

"I'm sorry. I'll leave now. I won't tell anybody I saw you here. I promise. Tomorrow I'll come by and bring you some food."

She walked away backwards for a few feet, then turned and waved, a small heavy smile on her lips. The white lady had retreated into the limbs of the tree.

Walking away quickly, all thoughts of fear left her. The sky had blackened. Streetlights were scarce. Passing the Portuguese bakery, she saw Mrs. Pereira's sturdy form beginning to form large dough balls for tomorrow's bread. Another block and she would be home. The buildings had taken on an early 60's sameness. Utilitarian brick. Pausing in front of her building, she looked up at windows facing the street. A light on in the third window, off in the fourth. Rows of windows outlined in green, stacked above one another. The one

next to hers had ivory verticals. A sheet tacked across the one below. Hers had pale blue curtains. Her halfhearted early efforts to break uniformity only highlighted it. The light was on. She put her key in the outside door and pressed the button for the elevator. She prepared herself for the sickening wrench of the elevator's ascent and watched the red light flashing, distorting the cut-out numbers. The elevator jerked to a stop at the seventh floor.

The carpet dazzled her. Concentric geometric circles of red against black collided in a phosphorescent tinge. Purposeful steps. Key in door.

"You home?"

A faraway staccato voice,

"In the bedroom."

She shed her coat and walked into the bedroom. He was sitting up in bed. It was going to be a long night. He was not even pretending to read. A half empty bottle of wine on the nightstand. Stubbed out cigarettes. Only the ochre of filter. No whites.

"Let me get out of these clothes. I'll just be a minute."

"Grab a glass. Join me in my silent vigil. Let's have a celebration. Just you and me doll. Just you and me."

He watched her move toward the closet and pull out the blue terry cloth. A silent pile of red and white at her feet. She stuffed it all into the laundry bag.

His head swayed slightly.

"Don't those get dry cleaned? You're usually so careful about things like that. So meticulous. Go grab a glass."

Wine. A little pool of ruby warmth. A soft window of light played on the glass. He rolled over and held his glass up to hers.

"A toast to Zoe for being decent enough to come home to her prince before midnight. Did you lead the ladies tonight? What was the topic? Death in life? Or maybe about the difference in how men and women mourn? For chrissakes it's been three years. Three years of tears and looking back. A year of selling the house and moving. Another to remove all traces of Amy, to dismantle the mausoleum. I can't handle any more recovery. When does it all end? How will you know when you're better?" His head trembled with the effort. His breathing was raspy. Air whistled in his lungs between takes. She took a sip of wine. It tasted rancid, old. She placed her glass where his had been and lay on the pillow staring at a water mark on the ceiling.

"I'm tired. I don't want to go through this again. I don't have the strength." Her voice was small. Cliches swirled about her ears. Let's not fight. It'll be okay. Things will get better. Her chest wall touched her lungs. Her heart ground beneath the burden. Damp pubic hair. A flaccid stream of lukewarm wet. Shallow walls release dead seed. Another makeshift night. Another reprieve.

She overslept. He was gone when she woke. He must have silently padded about the house, dressed in the bathroom. She felt drugged, musty. The wine bottle was gone, the ashtray gone. She had been in a deep sleep. She got

up and surveyed the room. Light dust illuminated black tables, melamine dressers. Sprinklings of dust fell in slow motion, caught in a shaft of light. She wandered into the living room and picked up the phone. She dialed John's office number;

"Hi. It's Zoe."

"I'm busy right now. Give me ten minutes. I'll call you back."

"Okay. Bye."

She heard the click of the receiver and sat in the yellow armchair, exhausted. She folded herself into the blue terry cloth robe and closed her eyes. Cigarettes. Where did she put them? She walked back into the bedroom and retrieved the pack. She lit one and watched the steely smoke undulate against the green of the walls. It crawled up the bookcase, the leavings of a ghost. Then gone. The phone rang.

"Hello."

"I called your work. What happened? Are you sick?" It was John.

No answer.

"Zoe. Are you all right? Answer me." There was a distant panic in his voice mingled with weariness.

"I guess I just forgot. It's still early I'll call as soon as I get off the phone with you. Are you busy tonight? Can we get together?"

"Look Zoe, I really do want to talk to you. I've had to for a long time now. It's overdue. Let's wait till Wednesday. After the meeting."

He was leaving. She knew it. Shared grief was as capricious as Eros. Maybe more so. Ashes to ashes. She dressed against the cold, layers of T-shirts and sweaters. Leotards and socks. She walked to the closet and swept up dresses, blouses, jackets and dumped them into a pile in the middle of the living room. Pink silk, worn once. Silver sequins on the collar of a shift she wore to the office Christmas party trapped light coming in through the picture window in the living room. The garbage bags were under the sink, a new box. Two to stuff the mute mess of clothes into. Only a few blocks. First to the store for some food, to leave it there, under the tree.

She lifted the bags and tried to hoist them, one over each shoulder. They were heavy, uncomfortable. Then she remembered the small wire shopping cart she had never used hanging on hooks in the hall closet. The bags fit nicely. Cold wind bit into her face. The cart whined, its wheels stiff in the brittle air. She passed by the bakery and stopped but then she recognized the office manager of her building being served by Mrs. Pereira's son and turned her head and moved on.

The park was empty though it was midday. Office workers, high-schoolers confined themselves to the margins of the park. Beyond the fringe the abandoned benches sat sentinel to the empty tennis court, the field flush from yesterday's snowfall. A Styrofoam cup caught in a cold gale knocked against the chain fence, broken. A blunt bass line in the shrill wind.

Zoe moved in closer dragging her cart behind her, the wheels frozen, digging into the snow. No one was there. Parting the thick pine branches, Zoe stepped easily inside. Some of the middle boughs of the tree had been broken off. One side of the trunk was covered with newspaper secured with a strand of wool. The cardboard floor was partially folded. Zoe spread it, covering the ground up to the furthest tip of the bottom branch. She pulled her cart into the enclave and sat, leaning against the trunk. Light filtered through the needles of the tree's outstretched limbs. She took her gloves off and held a taut hand away from her face, watching the frolic of light on her fingers. Moving them in an arc to capture it. She was startled by how warm the windless shelter was. She reached into her coat pocket and took out her cigarettes and lighter. Her vision grew blurry. She laid her head against the trunk of the tree, her arms around it as silent convulsions racked her body. Visions of Amy converged in the patterns of pine needles. Scenes from another life multiplying on the cardboard floor, fading into the air. She lit a cigarette and stared at the cart with the garbage bags piled up. The meagreness of her offerings. Flimsy silk against a cold wind. The grief she poured into John and demanded he meet, sadness for sadness. The attachment to trivia, outlines of a life, the schedule that she presented to Steve. Her physical presence. All they expected from each other. Their silent consent not to interfere. Even when wine carried him on a wave of disclosure, their unwritten oath cut into his reverie. Its immutable weight gauged in the dullness of her eyes. He never saw it through. She stayed in the refuge all afternoon.

Tabulating her life. The columns of gains against the losses. If she didn't have a job, she wouldn't need the clothes. A husband requires a lover. Each cancelling out the other. All the dubious strategies for self-defence. Each taking over where the other had left off, guaranteeing their failure.

"I couldn't have done it otherwise. I couldn't have done it otherwise." Her small voice rich in the hollow place.

She left the cart with the clothes in the silence of the tree and walked home, wrung out. Onto the streets now thicker with traffic, bands of roving schoolchildren. She moved amongst respectable women, with purposeful gait carrying bags of groceries home. She knew she had to talk to Steve. She had to show herself to him. She had to begin the ending.

"Come, Georgette said. Come for yourself. It's a start. Nothing replaces time, but it's a start. I'll meet you there."

He was sitting in a chair three-quarter profile. The blues of his eyes had begun that slow melt into the whites. Like a face in the rain. Sitting on a splintering chair, salt-stained boots, all that she knew she hadn't done bore down on her like a weighted collar. This was a truth woken from a trance on her left shoulder. A feigned lightness leading inexorably to her own unravelling. It was time to go. It was time.

Georgette sat next to her. The room was large and hollow. Tangled droning at the front. She had to be here. She had to see it through. She needed

a connection in more than blood and flesh to round out the detached profundity she felt. Something to make it hers. Something no one could touch. She was luxuriating in the afterglow of determination. Drinking in her own release, she began her odyssey with safety. As the arc of his body curved toward her, she turned from the face that sought hers and breathed air that had become her own once again.

Messengers

Strangers give me answers to dangerous questions. We begin and end at the centre. I never miss them when they go.

A stranger once warned me that turning 30 would be hell. What she didn't realize is that I have been trained to dread things long before they occur. But no one warned me about turning 31. *What*, I thought, *there's more?* It took me years to get over 31.

I can tell these things to strangers.

I like to time things so that I get there on the nick, the very edge of possible. En route to India with Aaron, I waited for our names to be called before going into

the duty free and sampling French perfume. Aaron was drunk so it was easy. By the third call, I had a bottle of well-aged Scotch and a crystal decanter of *Je Reviens*. They drove us out to the plane and when we got there the stewardess motioned us to the left. They handed us a glass of fake Champagne. I was on the very threshold of First Class.

When we got to India, I pined for home. I went to the poste restante no more than twice a week. Once I got a letter from my mother about Karen Carpenter's death from anorexia. The whole letter was about this. She wasn't giving me a message, I never had weight problems one way or the other, she just didn't know what to write.

My family has a long history of hooking up with strangers. No sooner do we board than someone sits next to us and strikes up a conversation. Guaranteed. Sometimes there are vacant sets of seats but still they are drawn to us. I put my purse or a book on the seat beside me to discourage them but it rarely works. This happens on trains too.

When I returned from India and Aaron left, I took the train to Toronto. I wanted to be alone. I had escaped a roach-infested apartment and brought my knitting with me to discourage conversation. A beefy red-faced salesman sat next to me, willing me to attention. I took out my knitting and saw a dead roach suspended in

the mohair. I extricated the roach from the wool and snuck it in the salesman's pocket. I imagined scenarios all the way to Toronto. The thought made me expansive enough to talk the whole way there.

I used to be incredibly beautiful. People who knew me then still treat me with reverence. At the time I thought, *good, I have experienced being incredibly beautiful.* When my face began to change but before I disappointed my friends, I saw Ava Gardner on TV and she said, *One day you wake up and look in the mirror and an old broad looks back and there's nothing you can do about it.* Every morning I look for someone new.

Liminal

Andrea woke early, waiting for the first column of light to swell the white-on-white of her bedroom curtains. She lay in her blue lit quilts and in the extravagance of half-sleep, turned to the mirror and put flame to cigarette. This act filled her with a curious sense of luxury, the smoky trail opaque in the first light.

Her small apartment was plastered with mirrors. She had given away the bronze masks, the silk wall-hangings, the hand-knotted carpets that never really evoked India, only the difficulties of the acquisition. They reminded her of pillage, but still, the hoarding instinct had slowly re-insinuated itself. The evidence could no longer be ignored. Drawn to mirrors in shop windows, she had unmounted mirrors in her closets, a bevelled monstrosity in her locker room. In her last apartment she cut an oval mirror into splintered ellipsoid shards and

placed each piece in proper sequence to form a shattered oval. She left it there, stuck up with poster tape, an artful mock up, a stylized shattering.

Andrea made many plans to return to India, but something always came up. Maybe her father was right about finishing her teaching degree. Boxes of scarves and jewellery remained in his basement. To get to his house she had to pass the boutique she once spoke of renting. Even after it turned into a photocopy shop, her father referred to it whenever she visited. She couldn't imagine playing the expert. Jaipur colours under glass in a small boutique in Montreal, colourless faces matching the streets drained of pigment enquiring about prices, washing instructions. She stopped answering the phone at supper hour, when his irritation seemed most fierce. Time, she needed more time to understand what he meant by " the rest of her life".

Andrea felt a quiet joy in rediscovering winter in the park. Mornings were the best time to walk around the mountain as there were very few chance meetings on the snow-packed footpaths leading into the hills. The incongruity of a mountain in the middle of the city filled Andrea with delight. She had lived around it for almost 10 years, never straying more than five or six blocks from its view, but only last year did she see it in what she had come to think of as its essential mode, the cloak of winter. She watched herself layering on sweaters in the hall mirror .

It was mid-February and the city had started up again after a paralysing snow storm that was just now beginning to be cleared away. Andrea had been

kept up most of the night by the dull staccato of tow trucks, the shrill of obscure sirens. She slumbered to the rhythmic bass of a giant mechanical shovel thudding in time against the frozen gutters below her bedroom window. She was hyper-receptive from lack of sleep and absorbed everything; the rose lit rectangle of sidewalk outside the flower shop, the grey-green shaft of alley spilling paper bags and pigeons onto the sidewalk. The white-aproned Greek depanneur owner caught her studying his movements and halted, framed inside his window, his thick hairy fingers delicately arranging a pyramid of pecan rolls.

The day was cast in essentials, snow blurred architecture lured her eye to release in colour printed signs, specials of the day. The sound of traffic receded from foreground, gradually taken over by the dry crackle of her steps as she headed deeper into the park.

Nearing the parapet, Andrea came upon ice-sculptures made during the storm. A huge swan probably destined for the centre of a grand hotel banquet stood next to a partly rendered glass soldier. In the distance Andrea made out two figures, the first pulling a toboggan with a 7-foot block of ice as passenger. She couldn't identify the sex of the person doing the towing and decided to wait to quiz them about the circumstances of the work. As she came into view, Andrea noted with some satisfaction that the she and woman wore almost identical winter attire. She took off a thinsulate glove and traced the indentations in the line of the swan's wing and smiled at the woman pulling the ice block.

"Do you need any help unloading it?"

She followed the sidelong movement of the stranger's eyes and the sudden rubbing together of her palms, at first thinking that she may be cold, and then Andrea traced the line of her vision and she saw Malcolm.

Later that same day before she could bring herself to look at the photo he had given her, she remembered chancing upon his first exhibition. She didn't recognize the photographs at all. Only when she read the blurbs beneath the pictures listing time and place did she realize that they had taken almost identical routes through India. Had she blanked out these images when she passed them? Had he lived that differently from her? The beggars took on an archetypal vitality. The ill-defined clothing reminded her of death shrouds. It rippled and shimmered in this photograph, the fissures in the feet of a subject like a parched desert, clear, the definitive conclusion to the man. She took in about half the pictures in the display and was on her way out when Malcolm spotted her.

"Andrea. My god, I don't believe it. Did you like it? The one of you?"

He was surrounded by smiling friends wearing expensive shoes and jackets without ties.

"This is Andrea" He presented her to his friends with a grand sweeping gesture. "She designs jewellery. I met her in India."

He reached for her hand and pulled her to him and kissed both cheeks. The group backed off and smiled in congress.

"The photographs are marvellous. I was going to come back tomorrow. I didn't have time to see the one I'm in."

"I'll be here. Can you come around one? I'll bring you a copy and we can have lunch."

The next day she dressed with care in front of the three-way bedroom mirror, a pile of rejected clothes in a mute lump on the bed as background. They had lunch at a Thai restaurant, the tropics inserted in a glass casing, exhaust coloured snow a thin outdoor frame. He had a manilla envelope in his hand and placed it on her side of the table. They reminisced about India. Andrea, angry at herself for being so uncomfortable, remained vague about what she was doing. It was easy to direct the conversation back to the subject of his accomplishments. Over coffee and dessert, a pretty girl in her mid-twenties came over. He was becoming a celebrity.

She met him in India, at a silk house in Benares, sitting cross-legged on a sheet-covered floor handling silk brocades, staring intently into a sheaf of papers, his fingers rubbing fabric together. His American accent drew her curiosity. Later that same week she saw him being chased by tribes of children, his camera cradled in the crook of his elbow. A long red scarf twisted around his neck, rigid in the air behind him, a lanky boy's hands just missing its fluttering hem. She recognized the fabric from the Mehta Brothers' shoppe that she had met him in. The light playing on the weave turned it a shimmery eggplant,

brilliant red when seen dead on. This scene occurred by the burning ghats of the Ganges in that same city, and is obscured by the smoke billowing up the clay hills, curling about the tangle of thin brown legs, blotting out the fray seen through a ghostly fog. He later published this illicit film of the ceremonial cremations in a downtown cultural centre and it drew a fair interest. This, and his subsequent studies of India, formed the foundation of his success. She recalled only the spectral scenes behind the public offerings, wafting like so many incense shrouds, an invisible host. He appeared again in Jaipur as she wound her way westward to Delhi. She had been in India and Nepal for three months now and irritation was setting in. It had taken three days to negotiate the interminable bureaucratic ritual of air mail and customs, the most palpable legacy of the Brits. The rail bunks seemed harder to sit on, her bones were sharper, and in the long journey back to Jaipur she could not find a comfortable position and kept shifting her weight from one bony buttock to the other. Short with taxi drivers, she argued over five or ten paisa. She was tired of being forever the foreigner.

The last leg of the journey was reserved for Jaipur, the pink city. She relished the comparative uniformity of the architecture. Built in one fell swoop in 1729, it was young by India's standards. Like so many national constructs, its very existence was a testimony to love, this time for a woman destined to become the Maharanee. Situated in the midst of the badlands of Rajasthan, the entire city was made of pink granite, a chalky faded raspberry tone that

appeared to be on the brink of crumbling into dust. Towers and citadels seemed made of huge blocks. Like a child's drawing, omitting detail and definition, a fairy land of vague form and diminishing clarity. Barred windows kept half-wild monkeys out of hotel rooms. The screams of tormented peacocks echoed through the courtyard, punctuating the air with sounds of souls possessed, trapped in another dimension.

Andrea made her way from the train station halfheartedly trailed by a group of beggars in white shrouds, looking through her with deadened eyes. She was too exhausted to reach for coins. She shooed them away with a vague sense of humiliation and fraudulence. The sweat-hardened cotton scarf about her throat threatened to strangle. A urine cloud wafted about her nostrils as she settled into the taxi to the hotel.

She fell into a dead slumber and awoke at midnight, panicked, disoriented. She rose and started the bath, discovered a full cake of soap, and scrubbed her pallid flesh. After hanging her cotton tunic and pants out to dry she fell into the second, the refreshing sleep.

She awakened to the din of birds gathering in great clusters on the giant peepul tree. By the time she dressed and wandered out to the hall they had settled into silence, nestled in its branches. Their wings descended like small fresh leaves, their heads neatly sheltered in the folds.

She sat at the lacquered white table relishing the last of the lemon tea and curds for breakfast, luxuriating in the newly rising sun and the absence of

people about her. She planned to go to a book store and get a secondhand novel and wander around before shipping the goods off and heading to Delhi to catch a plane home. She heard a rhythmic tapping on the stone floor above her. She looked up before he called down in an accent which she hadn't realized how much she had missed. It was distinctly American, familiar, reassuring.

"I've seen you before. Can I join you?" There was nothing to do but yell back.

"Sure."

He descended the iron stairs with lumbering elegance and stood in front of the wobbly table and bowed;

"I see memsahib has finished her breakfast."

"Curds and tea. How about yourself?"

"Yes, earlier still. Shall we order another pot of tea?"

His eyes were the colour of sultana raisins in the sun, the pupils ringed by yellow suns. His smile was slow and rich, seductive and warm. It travelled slowly up from his chin and didn't stop until it reached his hairline. His easy familiarity evoked the melancholy of long days of exile. He drummed his fingers against the table, his eyes meeting hers on the last note. She felt loose-limbed, unpinioned, her customary reserve momentarily forgotten. Yes, she thought, yes, I'd like to sleep with him.

They made plans to meet before the sun was high. It was the day of Holi, a Hindu festival which, from Andrea's private perspective, consisted of bands of

children throwing balloons of dye onto unwitting pedestrians. They started before midday walking through the wide British built main street flanked by pink granite citadels, the sun raging and outlandish in a dead blue sky. The street swirled with colours that could only be found in India. Brilliant limes and oranges curiously harmonized with hot pink saris and gold-trimmed purple scarves. Women of all ages in Rajasthan bared their midriff, something unheard of in most of the country. India's traditional mistrust of the body was lost on Jaipuris. They passed toddlers, shocking in their dextrousness, molten eyes ringed with Kajal, their expressions at once serious and self-contained in smooth skin the colour of coffee. One of a group of sari'd western girls tugged at the waist folds of her dress, her gait awkward beside the easy grace of laughing Rajasthani women. Bicycle rickshaw drivers beseeched them from the sides of the street. They seemed to have been formed by the job, elongated brown shins, a bulge of calf muscle showing just below their knotted white dhotis. Pariah dogs darted artfully between the smoke-sputtering mini cabs and sacred cows moving in all directions at once. Merchants carried huge brass jugs. Boys with mirrored and embroidered vests sat on the ledges of the buildings, their clothing smeared and torn. A plastic bubble hovered in the air, suspended for an instant over an open-backed truck with a monkey hanging off its side, finally exploding in a vivid puff of mustard smoke against Andrea's shoulder. It felt like a rock when it hit. Malcolm immediately looked for the source and a gang of boys ran away excited and chattering. They stopped in the middle of the road when another balloon

tied at either end ruptured majestically on the side of his face, blinding him and dissipating into a purple cloud, settling onto the white of his collar. Malcolm's helpless grimace, his palms covering his eyes, roused the gang's boldness and soon they were barraged with multicolored dyes catapulted from their secret boys sanctuary. Andrea was about to grab one of his rigid wrists and make a run for it when she heard a deep voice yell from the ledge;

"Madam, sir, please wait. We are coming down." A large middle-aged man beseeched them. "If you please to wait."

The more Andrea rubbed the deeper the colour seemed to penetrate the delicate lemon cotton fabric of her tunic. Blue and green toes stuck out from her sandals. She ran a yellow hand through her hair and it emerged as orange. They were covered with colour as Mr. Radashamji solemnly lumbered over to them holding two adolescent boys by the backs of their collars. One of the boys had lost a sandal. It looked like a scene from an oriental version of Oliver Twist, the scruffy boys' gangly legs resisting the old man's firm piloting. The terror in their eyes was quickly replaced by subdued meekness. The older boy addressed Mr. Radashamji.

"Please, do not look to my brother to blame. It is I who did this wicked thing. Sir, what may we do? It is your pleasure."

Andrea's protest was drowned in her throat by Mr. Radashamji's palm facing the boys, his index finger pointing upwards in waving sideways motions.

"No, you must let them decide what is to be done to you. You do not have to apologize to me. I am still clean. Have you not done enough damage to these people?" He looked at Andrea and Malcolm. "They are only just children. They have no parents to punish them. What are we to do with these hooligans?"

The boys were stalwart, their shoulders had straightened. They were silent, awaiting sentence.

"Look at us, we look ridiculous." Malcolm recovered, took a step back and threw up his hands in mock despair.

"Yes sir, this is quite true, quite true, but nonetheless you must do your duty. Shall we deface these two boys with their own handiwork? Shall we make them as blue as Krishna?"

The younger boy relaxed and stopped struggling. His brother began to get down on his knees.

"Get up. Get up." Mr. Radashamji's words were sharp.

"You don't have to get on your knees, for God's sake. It's only dye. It'll come out and nobody got hurt. Just be careful next time."

"We apologize for any offence." Said in formal unison as if it were a stock phrase, often repeated. With that the boys made namaste and slowly backed off, their dye splattered faces bobbing in tandem to their praying hands.

"We should have given the little bastards ten years hard labour." Malcolm started and then she watched his dazzling smile begin to form. Painful at first, once it achieved its full power, the boys slowed their gait and Malcolm called

out, "Wait" and before she realized what was happening she heard the shutter of his camera click five or six times.

"They will doubtless have many years hard labour with no education and no parents to teach them right from wrong." The old man spoke without rancour or sadness. "Let me introduce myself. I am Mr. Radashamji. May I know your names please?"

She followed Malcolm to Mr. R.'s chai place where a chillum was passed around and they got silly and giddy. She didn't care about changing clothes anymore. They passed the stalls of flowers, spilling out in garlands strewn together. Malcolm watched her lean into the flowers and wiped off some dye on her nose and looked at Mr.Radashamji.

"Don't you think she's pretty in Pink?"

That sent them into paroxysms of laughter, Mr.Radashamji belching, trying to catch his breath.

"I love a man in blue."

She rolled her sleeves up and wrapped her scarf around her head to keep her hair from whipping her face in a suicidal rickshaw driven by another friend of Mr.Radashamji's. Malcolm had won the vote for the zoo and in a stomach-churning journey, they headed for the outskirts of town. Mr. Radashamji yelled at Malcolm in the wind.

"See that picture of Ganesh between the handlebars? Always check for a fresh flower. If it is not there do not get in. Be warned, he is the traveller's god.

Without the flower it always means that the man is mad. He has given up on life."

Malcolm faced Andrea.

"Only a foreign god could save us now."

The zoo was makeshift, the bars rickety, the animals lackadaisical, bored. They tramped around the uneven grounds as Mr. Radashamji kept up a lively commentary. Andrea commanded her leaden feet to move, enjoying the effort. A dull dressed family passed them and the woman pointed at Andrea and laughed. The rest of the family examined her intently, staring with open curiosity. Malcolm was staring at a horselike creature who appeared to be impersonating a gazelle. His antlers were tied to his head with what looked like a filthy dishrag, ineptly knotted under his chin. Mr. Radashamji stopped in front of a cage and was refilling his chillum, his head moving from side to side as if on ball bearings, muttering to a large black gorilla. They sat on the parched grounds and Andrea took small puffs of the chillum and Malcolm took pictures from time to time. Mr. Radashamji belched and spoke of his adventures with westerners, lamenting the demise of the hippies, philosophizing about the junkies whose countries refused them re-entrance when they had sold their passports. Malcolm half-heartedly asked him if he was married and immediately an invitation was extended for dinner that same night.

Mr. Radashamji put on a suit for the occasion. Andrea wore her best Punjabi tunic with carved brass buttons around the hem, a Kashmiri chain stitch

scarf about her head and shoulders. Malcolm was casual in burgundy cotton. When they handed a garland of flowers to Mrs. Radashamji, she held it out in front of her and laughed. Mr. Radashamji was trying to suppress his giggling. Some oriental faux pas had been committed, the nature of which was never revealed to her. Mrs. Radashamji disappeared into the kitchen behind a beaded entrance. The same plaster walls that the whole city seemed made of surrounded them. They sat cross-legged around a round brass table, Mr. Radashamji whispered something about a chillum later. The steaming plates began to multiply on the table, wafts of coriander, cumin, mingling with the potent musk of the rose garland. Malcolm beseeched Mrs. Radashamji to sit with them and she knit her thick eyebrows together and spoke to her husband in quick quizzical lilt. Mr. Radashamji spoke for her,

"My wife is very traditional and will not eat until we are through. This is our custom."

Andrea bit into a pepper and her mouth caught fire. Mrs. Radashamji saw Andrea's eyes well with tears as she was racing with a plate of chapatis and called out something sharp to her husband.

"She is making lassi, it is the only cure for the spice we Indians hold so dearly. She is angry at me for not telling her your condition."

When the meal was finally over, both Andrea and Malcolm stuffed from fear of offense, Mrs. Radashamji finally joined them. She pointed at Andrea's brass buttons and said "Gold?" Mr. Radashamji laughed. Andrea looked

shocked. Mrs. Radashamji smiled demurely through her furrowed brows. Malcolm looked away. Mr. Radashamji spoke to his wife in rapid Hindi, his hands fluttering, leaving trails. His wife stood still all the while, her eyes moving over Andrea's clothing while her husband spoke. Andrea felt fraudulent, exposed. Mr. Radashamji spoke, his voice low, his head bent,

"You do not, by any chance have any foreign perfumes or things of that nature? My wife, she is always bothering me about foreign goods."

"Perhaps we can find something. Maybe tomorrow."

"Even an empty bottle I can fill. She will not know the difference."

The evening petered out. Mrs. Radashamji speaking loudly in hostile tones, Mr. Radashamji translating. Malcolm and Andrea said nothing to each other, all three spoke only to Mr. Radashamji. In the rickshaw back to the hotel Andrea and Malcolm exchanged stock pleasantries, each eager for solitude. She never encountered him again until her return to Montreal.

Andrea bent her head just in time to avoid Malcolm's glance. He was irritated, adjusting his camera equipment. The woman in down had opened her mouth to speak as Andrea lifted her gloveless hand in mute goodbye and turned away.

She got home and looked at the picture. He must have photographed her in the courtyard of the hotel in Jaipur before calling down to her. She was being served by a waiter in traditional garb whose sneakered feet could be seen under

the glass table emerging from the white fabric, next to her camel skin clad ones. The angle of the photo caught the waiter's vacant smile as he bent over her, removing the empty bowl of curds. Her face was expressionless. The same void stare appeared on the faces of the staff members, watchful, without animation. The waiters behind them were giddy, gesturing at each other, demonstrative. There was a sombreness about the weather that cast a momentous quality to the photo, a trick of mirrors, a cancellation of light, or had her memory defeated her? She put the picture back in its envelope and made a pot of tea and brought it to the table by the living room window. The day was bleak and sunless although it was still midmorning. Over and over again the bus emerged from quivering air and swooped down upon the lines of commuters, their faces mummified under layers of hoods and scarves, fixated on the point of the horizon that anticipated the bus's arrival. Occasionally a few ill-dressed youths descended upon the orderly queue in blatant disregard of the cold. Their ears, bright red, stuck out like flags from another country. Ungloved hands, exposed throats announced their contempt for the power of the plummeting temperature. The expressions on the faces of the other passengers had been diminished by the season into a range of grimaces. Panic overlaid by a veil of stony composure; as if any change in expression would only bare more flesh to the winds.

The Right Thing

Calvin made his first mistake when he told one of his sisters that he thought there might be some MicMac blood in the family. Kelly and he were reminiscing about childhood when the conversation bent. Calvin swivelled his chair, looked at Kelly dead on and said, *Nanny came from New Brunswick where there were a lot of MicMacs. Don't you remember her great black eyes and straight black hair? Don't you think it's strange that her brother and sisters were fair? She stood right out.* Kelly told Debbie, so now two sisters knew.

Earlier that week mom visited Debbie and mentioned that Calvin had asked her what his paternal grandmother's last name was. *I wonder why he would want to know?* she said. *Maybe he is doing some sort of family tree.* She gave him the wrong name by mistake but it didn't matter: the right and wrong names were both English.

Debbie had an idea: on the off chance that he was right, Vicky, the third sister, would not have to pay for her children's University. So she called Vicky and Vicky said, *Calvin's weird but you never know* and said her ex-husband's mother's heritage was another mystery. *There's no real danger of the girls going to University, but still, it's something to consider.* Both of the girls were blue-eyed blondes.

This was a happy family, not easily threatened. They enjoyed the closeness of early poverty and had a long history of frustrating the designs of pushy social workers. Vicky's imitation of Mrs Small, the social worker bent on reform, was a family classic. She would sit in the armchair and take a Kleenex out of her mother's old patent leather purse and tearfully say "I don't think there is anything I can do with this family," and they would all roar with pride on this past triumph. They didn't scare easy and no one had ever put any pressure on any of them to be successful so they could enjoy this new idea. None of them worked so they had plenty of time to indulge in their favourite hobby: Let's Figure Out Calvin. His birthday was over a month off and they were already making plans.

Kelly thought it would be neat to be part MicMac, *a sense of culture*, is how she put it. Debbie was more attached to her Scottish side and wondered if they had a *right* to speculate but didn't dare mention it, and Vicky didn't care much either

way. *What's the difference*, Vicky said. *Nobody really knows where the women in the family come from. Trying to figure it out just sounds like a lot of work to me. Let's face it, we all come from a male line.* Debbie was miffed that Vicky brought up this angle. She considered herself the family defender of women's rights.

Calvin stopped talking when the sisters questioned him more intensely. Kelly got irritated when she caught the tail-end of a phone call. *Who you talking to Cal?* But Calvin only replied, *No one you know* and refused to discuss it. She told Debbie and Debbie told Vicky. They decided to turn it into a joke. Their biggest challenge was to get mom in on it.

Kelly offered to get an application for Aboriginal status from the government and wrap it up like a diploma with a fake wax seal and a red satin ribbon. Debbie got flustered when she asked the girl in the book store for *something on Indian ancestral rites*. The girl behind the counter (who couldn't have had more than five years on her niece) smirked and replied, *and which First Nations people are you searching for?* Mom, who had already decided to knit Calvin a sweater, was on the very edge of committing herself to putting an Indian head on the back. *It's a lot of work*, she said, *but I found an old pattern from the fifties in the basement.* Debbie got nervous at the idea of Calvin walking around with this silly image on his back. She imagined it resembling the old CBC test pattern which had quietly disappeared sometime in her late childhood. She called Vicky and Vicky agreed.

Vicky wanted to make Calvin an Indian birthday dinner but got disheartened when all she could remember was something about pemmican.

At the last minute they all backed off. Mom put the knitting magazine back in the basement, Debbie displayed the book on her coffee table and Kelly never contacted the ministry.

When his birthday arrived Calvin got a framed photo of himself and his Italian girlfriend, a science t-shirt, and an Aran sweater from his mom.

Definitions

A year ago, when she was eleven, she noticed her breasts. She was wearing a thin strapped t-shirt when Calvin said, "Hey, you're getting big there." He pointed to her chest.

"None of your business." She glared at him, got up from the table and went into her room and picked a blue sweat shirt from a pile of clothes heaped on her bed. It was around this time that her mother brought her a bra home. Robin stashed it between her mattresses. Whenever her mother tried to discuss it with her, Robin would harden her eyes and blank out the monologue. White noise.

The second time she noticed her breasts was when she was running against time in the school gym. She had on regulation bloomers and a white blouse. Her thighs were muscular, bulging above her knees. She would put her stringy brown hair back in a ponytail, intent, determined to beat her old record.

There were always kids in the stands, hanging around, waiting for their turn, waiting for a friend to finish. Two guys from the other grade six class who she didn't know that well were yelling her name. She was used to having a rooting section. She was fairly well known in the small school for her athletic talent. They yelled "Run, Robin, run." She ran all the harder, playing to the audience. It was only when she circled them again that she saw their smirks. One of them made a horn of his hands and yelled into it as she passed, "Look at those tits bounce!" She stopped, dead in her tracks, then leapt into the stands and cracked him across the head, hard.

"Fuck off, get out of here."

Mr Rutherford, the gym teacher, blew his whistle. The two boys scampered out. He walked up to Robin and put his hand on the back of her neck. All he said was "Go home. You can come back tomorrow after school. Don't ruin your record. I want you here at four o'clock sharp." Mr Rutherford had a bean shave. He was a tall thickly-muscled fellow with piercing light blue eyes. Of all the teachers in the school, he was the only one the kids respected. At least the kids that Robin knew. Even the drop-outs. When he walked into the yard after school, kids would hide their cigarettes, or stop slouching on the stairs.

Robin left the school gym and walked home without bothering to change. No one was home. Robin reached over to pull out a hand mirror from her night table. She pulled up her sweatshirt and held the mirror on a slant above her

breasts. They were there all right. Swollen mounds of flesh, hard, with painful looking pink caps. Fascinated, Robin stood up, mirror in hand and surveyed the damage. Her body was out of control, jutting out in strange angles, inviting stares and mockery. She felt victimized. They could no longer be ignored, that much was obvious.

Then she remembered her brother's hockey tape. She raced into Calvin's room and scanned the floor. She opened the closet and found his hockey stick and mask. No tape. The drawers in the captain's bed. She pulled the top one open and there it was. Thick and black and plentiful. Grabbing her prize she left his room and headed for the bathroom. Locking the door behind her, she laid the roll of tape on the toilet seat and took off her sweatshirt. She rolled the tape in a long strip under her breasts, around her back, working upwards in a criss-cross pattern, between her breasts and under her armpits until she was completely covered, checking the tension by bending her elbows and moving her arms like wings at the shoulders. She put her sweatshirt on over her work and got up on the ledge of the bathtub and leaned over to look in the mirror. Nothing showed. She heard footsteps, a door closing.

"Is that you Robin?" Her mother's voice.

"Just came in from gym practice, mom. What's for supper?"

"Spaghetti. Don't forget, you're babysitting tonight."

She left the bathroom with the tape tucked in the elastic of her pants and headed towards her room. Her mother was putting away groceries. She stashed the

black tape between her mattresses on top of the bra her mother had bought her and whipped off her sweatshirt and put an undershirt on. She felt solid and strong and hard. Like an athlete. Like King Kong. She beat her fists against her chest and mimed a silent jungle cry. She retrieved her sweatshirt from the floor and put it on over the t-shirt. Nice and loose on top and smooth underneath.

Mrs. Hickey had called again. Her mom relayed the message to her. She had to babysit Tammy after supper. Tammy lived next door. She was five years old, an only child. Robin loved to babysit her. Tammy's skin was the colour of Greek honey. Her eyes looked like new leaves in the sun, just the slightest tinge of green, unripened. The Hickeys lived in the building next door. They both had raised concrete blocks with brick-patterned wallpaper on the sides housing lopsided plastic plants covered in thick brown dust. Most of the buildings on the street were red brick, four- storey jobs with industrial green lobbies. Sometimes Robin would sit in the lobby with a friend, maybe Eric or Manfred, and trace her initials in the brown dust.

The sun was beginning to set, though it was only 5:00. She pulled back the curtains and looked out into the alley separating her apartment building from the Hickey's. Dirt covering the window blurred her view of Mrs. Smail's washing strewn on a line attached to the balcony above it. Some of the pants in the middle of the line had sagged and were touching the floor of the balcony. Old Mr. Grail, whose wife had passed on last summer, was sitting on a woven yellow plastic chair. He seemed transfixed, as if glued to the seat, the chair nailed to

the floor. Robin left her bedroom just as Calvin came racing in. He slammed the door shut and a great gust of sweetish cooking odours followed him indoors. The sound of heavy footsteps and creaking doors and whiny children lit up the building.

"Got another detention, Calvin?"

"Look who's talking. You're the one who's always getting into trouble."

Their mother was just putting the stiff noodles into boiling water. She turned around, her face pink from the steam;

"You kids. Stop bickering. Robin, you set the table. Calvin, don't you have any homework to do?"

"How come I always have to set the table and do the dishes? Just because he's a boy, he doesn't have to do anything. It's not fair." Robin stuck her foot out as Calvin tried to make a silent getaway through the kitchen doorway.

"Look what she did. She's always trying to get even. I could've banged my head."

Robin smirked, "I wanted you to fall on your ass. You think you're so clever. Always getting out of working. Always ..."

Her mother's voice cut into Robin's,

"We don't swear in this house. If you weren't babysitting tonight I wouldn't let you go out at all. You set the table because I *tell* you to. That's all. Do you want to grow up to be a total slob? Who's going to want you then?"

Robin knew what that meant. Men. The big payoff. She didn't care. She was going to be a great athlete like the Amazons who cut off their right tit so they could shoot their arrows better. Men would be scared of her. She refused to take gym with the girls with their stupid callisthenics. Their 'one, two, one two'. She couldn't think of anything more boring, more demeaning. They got so stupid when they were around boys. Somebody even told her that Sherry put Kleenex in her bra. Who could be so dumb. These girls had no personalities. It seemed to drain out of them the minute a cute guy came around. They made her sick.

"All right, I'll set the stupid table."

Her mother opened a can of spaghetti sauce and glopped it into a small dented pot. She had stopped talking. It was going to be another strained supper. Robin set the table, three plates instead of four. Dad had been gone for two years now but it felt like yesterday to Robin. Just before he left, Jackie had come up to her right in front of the schoolyard and told her she had seen her dad coming home from the tavern drunk in the middle of the day. She remembered the feeling of heat on her face. She hated Jackie for telling her about her dad. Later she made some excuse to start a fight with her and smacked her around the schoolyard. Was there ever a stink when Jackie's parents found out. They called her mom and even talked to the principal of the school. Robin just pretended to ignore the whole thing. Her mother had tried to ground her, but Robin would tip-toe down the hall and sneak out at night. Whenever she passed

Jackie in the hall, she would hold her head up in mock-princess attitude, her eyes staring regally into a distant destiny above Jackie's head.

She had some good memories of her dad, though. Like when they went up to the grandparent's cottage in the Laurentians. That was the only time she ever saw her dad relax. He claimed to read only non-fiction and talked all hours about conspiracy theories. Robin would nod from time to time, pretending she knew what he was talking about, happy that her dad wasn't so sad or distant. The year before he left, her mom got more and more nervous, ordering Robin to tell anyone phoning for him that they hadn't seen him in weeks. Eventually her mother gave him bus fare to go to Fort MacMurray to work on some project with a promise to follow him out later with the kids. They never heard from him again. All her mother had to say was that she was glad he had left. She was fond of saying that she didn't have two kids, she really had three.

"Calvinn ... Time to stuff your fa-ace."

Her mother glared at her,

"I don't know what I'm going to do with you, Robin."

Nothing, Robin thought. Absolutely nothing.

Mrs Hickey opened the door wearing a black nylon slip. One of the straps had slipped off her shoulder. Her heavy breasts drooped under the shiny fabric. Robin was fascinated by the tiny rivulets of creases fanning out above the

separation of her breasts. She averted her eyes, but not quickly enough. Mrs Hickey pinned Robin's face with her eyes, her mouth cast in a lazy smile;

"I guess you never saw a woman in her underwear before. Your momma's a lot older than me. I still got some juice left."

Robin closed the door behind her, afraid the neighbours might see them. She felt implicated. A vague sense of shame coupled with irritation. She stared at Mrs Hickey, her head tilted with scorn,

"Where's Tammy?"

"She's out with George and Mr. Campbell at the Orange Julep. They should be back soon. Don't you worry. C'mon, help me decide what I should wear tonight. Soon you'll be wearing nice dresses too. You'll see. George and I are going out. Once a month. He's very religious, we only do it once a month. And tonight's the night."

"Can I get a glass of water?"

Robin was terrorized at the thought of watching June Hickey dress, of having to zip her up and listen to her detailing her sex life. It was getting worse. She had never told her that they 'did it' once a month before. She didn't want to hear any more.

"Robin, come help zip me up."

She went back into the yellow satin bedroom. Mrs. Hickey looked like one of those paintings of tropical women that she had seen pictures of. Her hair was fine and dark and wavy and tumbled over her shoulder blades in the back. She

held in her breath as Robin struggled with the zipper, careful to press back the bulging skin. She looked out of place to Robin, spilling out at the seams in the tight navy cocktail dress. A bolero jacket completed this absurd picture. The tight skirt made Mrs. Hickey walk in short choppy movements like a chicken. Robin was sitting on the yellow satin coverlet when she heard voices in the hall. Mrs. Campbell rushed into the bedroom.

"Getting a few lessons, Robin? June you look sooo sexy."

Mr. Campbell followed, letting out a long, slow raspy whistle.

George Hickey locked eyes with Robin. He always looked angry and made Robin feel like an intruder. She got up and went over to Tammy, who was standing behind her father.

"C'mon Tammy, let's go into the living room."

By the time they left, Robin felt drained. She decided that this was the last time she was going to babysit Tammy. Once she had gotten Tammy bathed and changed into her flannel nightie and put her to bed, Tammy asked her to tell her a bedtime story. Robin made up stories of ghosts and demons, of houses burning down. She went on and on, inspired by the fear in the little girl's eyes. Even when Tammy yelled, "Stop. Please!", Robin didn't listen. It was only when Tammy became hysterical that Robin realized what she had done. Tammy's face was red and bloated. She looked at Robin with terror and started crying for her mother. Robin finally quieted her down to a whimper by singing to her. She took out a children's book and read her a story about baby lambs and Tammy finally

fell into an exhausted sleep. Robin went into the living room and stared at her feet, in shock, trying to figure out what had happened. Flooded with remorse and anger, she stayed in that room, barely moving, until she heard a flurry of heavy steps and raucous laughter on the hollow marble steps. She quickly picked up a movie magazine and opened it in the middle.

Mr. Campbell's nose and forehead was flushed bright pink, the skin around his eyes a deadly yellow-white. He trailed behind Mrs. Hickey, both his hands on her shoulders. George Hickey bolted ahead of them, catching himself in mid-weave, and stood directly in front of Robin. He jammed his hands into his pockets and held out a ten dollar bill.

"Was everything okay?"

"Yes sir. She went to sleep at 8:00," Robin lied.

She took the money and closed her fist around it.

"Good night. I gotta get home now. My mom's probably waiting up for me."

"We'll call you soon, honey."

Laughter followed this remark and pursued her out the door. She bounded down the steps out the door and didn't stop until she got home, breathless.

It was soon after Robin refused to babysit that the trouble began. She would be sitting on the school steps with the guys when Mrs. Hickey would open her window and yell out of it,

"Slut. Dirty little slut."

They would stare across the fence, across the thin patch of yard, flick their eyes for an instant on the small agitated figure in the window, then quickly look away.

Manfred would move his foot close to hers and shrug his shoulders;

"Just ignore the crazy lady, Robin. Everyone knows she's nuts."

Eric would threaten to beat her up.

"Someone should just smack her in the face. That would shut her up."

Robin couldn't tell anyone what Mrs. Hickey spoke about when she babysat Tammy because she had no words for it. It was only the next morning when Robin got up early and saw Mr. and Mrs. Campbell going through the back alley in their party clothes that she figured out what all four of them had been doing. By then it no longer mattered. They should have realized that their secret was safe with her. Her revulsion guaranteed its protection. Robin drew into herself slowly, becoming less competitive, more secretive. She sensed that she was up against something of enormous power. That summer she went through the motions, already nostalgic for a time that she was still a part of. Something indefinable had changed in the way her male friends treated her. They seemed protective, offering unasked-for advice. She was jealous of their drawn out freedom, although she couldn't define it at the time. They moved away from each other imperceptibly, inexorably.

Next year was high-school. A time to negotiate the space that was lost. A time to redefine the past. Inevitably the items between her mattress were

exchanged for others, the tape for a journal, the bra for a package of cigarettes. She left that world with the same finality and determination with which she would enter the new one and the next after that. Learning the rules.

Withdrawal

I was smoking too much. At work I took unauthorized breaks and headed outside to sneak them. Sometimes I lit up in the staff washroom. When I found myself teetering on a roller chair in the office after everyone had left, using a pencil to disable the smoke detector, I knew it was time to take stock. I decided to stop smoking. Right then and there I made a pledge to formalize the deal with myself. I didn't want to wake up one morning and find my life rotted out by my own hand. I had to face it. The strange thing is that I had never really pondered it before despite slow curls of pity on the faces of colleagues and friends. I felt sorry for them, for their intolerance. It was easier than I thought. I had a pleasant hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach, like losing weight. I kept one cigarette and threw the pack away. On the bus ride home I reached into my pocket to touch it whenever anyone got too close. The bus driver smiled at me. I enjoyed denying the ravings of the body. It felt like an exorcism. The first day passed into a rather euphoric night.

I really was withdrawing. By day three I was floating. My boss said "You can't float forever. Either you smoke again or you stop de-toxing. That's all there is to it." My boss wore charcoal pants with a matching Chanel jacket when she spoke to me. She looked great.

I went to my parents where I would be safe. There were no ashtrays. My father had quit two years ago. Just like that, he said, and without any nagging from my mother. My parents never spoke much at dinner. Just before dessert my mother used to place my father's gift ashtray in front of him and he would light up. The smoke would cloak the three of us in a gentle mist.

Just before dessert I snuck up to the bathroom for a smoke. The door was open and there he was. My father, caught in the act, yellow smoke high-tailing it out the open window with the pressure from the opening door. I let out a little shriek and he jerked his head back. I dropped my cigarette on the blue tile. We both stared at it. He got up from the toilet seat, threw his butt in and flushed it. We watched it swirl around and around. The toilet gulped just as I bent down to pick up my cigarette. I was about to put it in my pocket when he said, "Oh just light it, for God's sake." Too late. It was paralysed in my hand. He flipped the lid back on the seat and motioned me to the throne. I thought he was going to leave but he took out his pack, lit two cigarettes and handed one to me. He smiled and

said, "You're too young to give me a lecture and I'm too old to listen." I wasn't used to us being on the same side. It seemed unnatural, made my stomach drop. What he didn't say was, "Your mother and I are thinking of splitting up." What he did say was, "I'm thinking of leaving your mother." I sat on the beige plush and tried to smoke in this new information.

I didn't know what to say and so I did this one distinct thing: I blew a smoke ring at him leaning against the window sill. It wafted about his nose and got pulled out the window in a long dreamy oval. And then he said, "Your mother won't mind. She's drifting, stopped caring about a lot of things." My father spoke of my mother in softly spinning nostalgia, the music of movie endings. So I took in his secret, in deep inhalations, gathering strength for the long march down the carpeted stairs back to the dinner table. He released twin tunnels of smoke from his nostrils and threw his head back. Then he left.

"Mom, this pie looks great." High treason on my face.

My father and I never let our eyes meet over the blue and white china, my mother's bobbing silver-streaked head. She stopped dyeing her hair about five years ago, gone were the plastic mitts gobbled with brown muck, the fouled towel. Trickery just to look normal. There was no doubt about it, my mother had arrested the long slide down into caricature. She stopped just short of looking

like a female impersonator. I watched the cigarette packet outlined and then receding in the blue of his breast pocket as he moved along the table picking up dishes, condiments. Clearing up. My father liked secrets.

"You never liked pumpkin pie before." She looked from me to my father. From opposite ends of the table my father and I did this one identical thing: we looked away from her.

My mother offered to drive me home. She didn't go to the bathroom to put on lipstick. That was another new thing, no more powder or lipstick, no checking in the rearview mirror and dabbing at the corners of her mouth. "We're off," and she slammed the stick out of park. She was an aggressive driver, looked for trouble on the road. Whatever her secret frustrations were she let the road put right. She didn't put much stock in my decision to go to college but she sure insisted on me getting a driver's licence, one of the few things she was passionate about. I remember getting dumped by Jimmy Whittaker in my last year of high school. I didn't make it to supper one week. On the seventh day I was listening to sad rock songs in my room with the headphones on when she opened the door a wedge and tossed me the keys to her car. Those were the two things in which she believed, her home and her car. She took long winding trips and came back with things like one notepad or a fridge magnet. Once home she was calm, generous even. No booze, no men, no hobbies, and she never

smoked. I wanted another cigarette. I asked her to let me off downtown because I couldn't stand the idea of being alone in my apartment. She let me out and disappeared in a great gust. Through the exhaust I saw a store that sold cigarettes. I lit one up right away and gave the rest of the pack to a beggar. I was determined to stop.

I went shopping downtown to be among crowds of active people. I bought bright coloured shorts and sports stuff that I couldn't afford and never wore. But the stores were full of people in matching ensembles and suits snatching at coordinating accessories before elbowing off to make money.

People need to layer themselves before they are willing to deal with each other.

I threw the clothes on the bed and tried them on in front of the mirror turning this way and that, standing on my toes to make my legs longer. You only have to sit in a cafe for 10 minutes to see that people have to be demented to pair up and deaf to stay involved and I would wear sunglasses all the time if it didn't look so pretentious.

It rained so heavily the next week I wondered if it would ever stop. I didn't hear from either of my parents and I imagined water seeping into the foundation of my mother's house, rotting the walls. It was logical to worry, I told myself. The

house was built on filled-in swampland and they had problems with seepage in the past. TV images of canoes floating down main street flickered through my head. My mother would be one of the stubborn ones who wouldn't leave, she would sit out on the porch on a plastic patio chair arms folded and close herself in on the top floor if anyone came around to convince her of the dangers of staying put. My mother believed in staying put.

We had a company meeting when I left my body. I floated up around the ceiling and looked at all the heads facing the same direction and when I saw my own I got scared and then irritated. I saw my head turn toward the guy sitting next to me and heard myself say "Oh shit, I've left my body again." I don't know why I said "again", as this was the first time. I had to re-enter my body or it would die and so I came back down. I was angry at being stuck in that room and as the day wore on I got more and more irritated. After the meeting I went to the staff washroom to be alone but it looked so bleak that I didn't linger. Back at my desk I turned the ringer down and let the voice mail record the warblers. I faked a call and left early.

My timing was off. I arrived at the bus stop at the height of rush hour traffic. The bus was packed. I stood next to a giant baby carriage impossible to pass. Another baby screeched, its face deep purple. The light changed from red to green and the bus didn't move. A large blonde girl got on with a bad transfer and

began to argue with the driver. A woman wearing a rabbit jacket leaned into me and the smell of wet chemicals made me gag. A man with thin gray hair was seething. He lit into the woman with the lousy transfer, "Get off the bus." I was standing over him, he was so short. His scalp had formed a peninsula, his hair was moving further and further from the mainland. It would soon become an island. I laughed and then I wondered if my teeth were yellow. I calculated the cash in my purse against the price of a taxi. No, I might need cigarettes. The seated passengers didn't dare look up, afraid of the woman with the baby. She hoarded her child like a shield, daring everyone to look at it. That night I crashed.

When I called my mother I didn't ask if she was alone and she didn't tell me. She told me that my voice had gotten higher since I quit smoking. "You sound better without them. There's lots of things in life that aren't worth the bother." Her voice only filtered through for an instant before it trailed off.

I never remember what she says until much later.

I couldn't stand the house closing in on me so I decided to go to a bar. I made myself up carefully although I was not in the habit of going out. There was a comedy place a few blocks from me and I thought 'Why not?' I won't be noticed there, lots of people go out alone.

Fine Lines

My grandmother would have been ninety-five this Christmas eve. She died in a nursing home. She had been there less than a year. Just before she died, she told my mother that there was no such thing as God, that it was a fairy story. My aunt was scandalized.

My grandmother came to Sudbury in 1926 from Hungary. When I was a teenager, I used to tell people she came during the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. I made up elaborate stories about how she insisted on taking all her heavy furniture out of a small village in the mountains. Most families on the train had nothing but heavy suitcases tied up with string. I got so involved that I could see the little girls. They wore coarse print dresses with boys' shoes worn over bulky woollen socks. The story had a happy ending, though. Through sheer force of my grandmother's personality she was able to take all her grand dark furniture with her. Not so much as one china figurine was broken on the voyage. The

cumbersome furniture also served as a hiding place for revolutionaries to cross the Hungarian border, safe from the flashlights of the guards in the secret panels of my grandmother's massive bookcases and credenzas. It got tricky when my friends asked me all the details of the trip, especially when I described the rhythmic rolling of the train and how it broke down two miles from the border. I sometimes said that my mother was there, sometimes not. The important thing was my grandmother.

My grandfather was a passive, solid figure. He spent the first flush of youth somewhere in Russia, cooking for the Germans. He escaped by hiding in a barn. I imagined him sleeping with the farm woman who sheltered him while fellow Hungarian prisoners met in a square with the promise of freedom. They were all shot except for him. My time sense was skewed. This really did happen but it was during the first, not the second, world war. He was actually sent to Siberia and freed by the Bolsheviks. The country was in such disarray that all political prisoners were let go. This was after the Tannenburg battle in 1917 in the thick of the Russian Revolution. There was no transport provided for him and so, he walked through Russia, back to the small village. The Hungarian Army paid him for his services, so he had a fat pay envelope in one pocket and a picture of his sweetheart in the other. He teamed up with another Hungarian whom he met on the way home and spent the evening with this fellow talking about how he was going back to the village to marry the girl in the picture. When he woke up, he was bootless and his companion had fled. The story goes

that this same man fell in love with the girl in the photograph and beat my grandfather back home. By the time he returned, the girl was gone, having married this man and gone to live with him in another village. I imagined my grandfather resigning himself to his eventual marriage, disallowing himself the luxury of wistful remembrance.

My mother saw her father as a hero. According to her, she was his favourite. She used to sit on his lap and take puffs from his pipe when she was a child. When I asked for more details, she would say, "Oh, never mind, he was just a peasant." She didn't talk much about him. I sensed that she wanted to keep the good memories to herself as if fearing that their warmth would be diffused by exposure.

My grandmother never let my grandfather forget that he was her social inferior. Men were in short supply, and so she was forced to marry my grandfather, although she was a landowner's daughter and he was just a labourer. In the more than 60 years that she lived in Canada, she seemed completely unaffected by the attitudes of her adopted country. I always had a sense of being transported to a foreign set of rules in her house that would brook no rebellion. She made crocheted baskets stiffened with sugar melted in water and made my mother sell them door to door in Sudbury when she was growing up. When I asked her how she felt about it, she only said, "Nanny made me sell them. I didn't have a choice." My mother gave me some of the crocheted clusters of grapes that she draped over armchairs in her living room. I still don't

know what to do with them. They don't fit in anywhere. They are too exotic at the same time as too homey to work. I feel sad when I handle them. I think of all the misplaced energy spent in their creation. They remind me of frustration.

My mother told me that Nanny used to go to her Hungarian friend's house in Sudbury with a spoon and a piece of newspaper in her pocket of her apron. When Mrs. Kovaks left the room, Nanny would put the newsprint on top of one of Mrs. Kovak's pieces of crochet and rub the spoon in her hair to get the grease on it. Then she would rub it over the paper and get an impression of the design. Later when Mrs. Kovaks visited my grandmother, she would see her designs scattered around nanny's house, only more fancy and colourful. Nanny never said a word and Mrs. Kovaks never asked.

When my parents separated in the mid-sixties, my mother took us to stay with her parents until she could decide whether or not to leave my father permanently. We stayed for a full summer before coming to Montreal. That summer is shrouded in gauze. I remember the days as relentlessly bright, fading out at the edges. I spent most of my time alone, outside, in empty fields. Whenever I got a chance, I'd sneak into my grandmother's garden and marvel at the showy vegetables, the oversized cabbages, the bursting tomatoes. I don't remember spending much time with my brother and sisters.

Inside the small polished house, everything was always in order. The blue floral print of the sofa and chair clashed with pink and green doilies on glossy tabletops. Crocheted clusters of grapes hung from the shelves inside the china

cabinet. Fragile burgundy teacups teetered on thick, cheap, anniversary plates with faded gold lettering. My mother told me they were Made in Japan, a euphemism for worthless, mass-produced. My grandmother was always in the kitchen, banging around in navy-blue orthopaedic-type shoes on the gleaming linoleum. She fed us murky soup with boiled potatoes and sausage floating in the middle of the bowl. We ate endless plates of steaming cabbage rolls in a red speckled creamy sauce with clumps of tomato in it. The only concession she made to being in North America with regards to food were the marvellous crates of Eskimo soft-drinks. There were two bottles placed on the table at every meal, even breakfast. They had ruby red contents, lime greens, cloudy yellows. I was awed by the wealth of soft drinks that seemed to be available upon request. Once my brother and I took two bottles into the field and gulped them down. We buried the empty bottles. My mother disapproved of them so we never had them at home.

Everything revolved around food. My mother was always setting the heavy oak table, getting napkins, doing dishes, talking to her mother in Hungarian. To my ears, this was an embarrassing-sounding language. My mother's voice seemed strained, a mixture of high-pitched and guttural. A resigned pleading punctuated with shrill silences and the muffled thud of porcelain placed on wood. I always tried to finish my meal before my grandmother sat down. She would stare at us with cutting blue eyes and harrumph and then say something short to my mother in this husky tongue. My

mother seemed to labour over the language, drawing out the syllables. My grandmother would flip her head backward, her pitch-black bun loosening as she picked up her soup spoon. She would make gestures toward us, addressing my mother. When I asked my mother about her own childhood, all she said was, "I was lucky, Nanny ignored me." She warned us that her mother had never learned to speak English, but I wasn't convinced. I imagined that my grandmother spied on us, that she knew what we were saying. She took on a mythic stature for me, that summer. She seemed trapped in another world, a wilful prisoner with rules which I could never hope to understand.

Soon the kitchen clattering would begin anew with my grandmother's rising and we were ushered out of the house to play. Sometimes my grandmother would come to us in the field near the house with her hands behind her back. She would pick one of us and stare intently, the corners of her mouth set in a curl. She would say, "Bugs." This was the only game she ever played with us children. When I was chosen, I would stand there mesmerized with fear and excitement. I would recite a silent *eenie-meenie-miney-moe* and earnestly point to one of her arms. She would bring her clenched fist forward in slow-motion and with lightning speed, open it in my face. If I was lucky, a sticky, striped candy appeared wrapped in cellophane. I would grab it out of her hand while we both squealed with laughter. If I wasn't lucky, I only realized it a split second before some horrid insect with dozens of eyes would fly into my face. I would shriek in panic, my grandmother's horrible laughter looping the terrified

insect. Wordless, she would turn slowly and head back to the house. I would stand still, hot with shame and frustration. I never thought of getting even with my grandmother. I understood that these were her rules. She never cheated. I always got what I picked. I was awed by her fearlessness at finding and handling these repulsive pests and abashed at my own cowardice. They always had wings.

My mother made blanket statements like 'she was lucky, she got a good job', or, 'poor thing, her husband cheated on her'. I rebelled against the notion that greater forces were at work that you couldn't do anything about, while secretly fearing that it was true. She used that phrase often; so-and-so was 'lucky', as if it was the roll of the dice, a trap that could not be gotten out of.

I used to combine truth with fiction when I later told grandmother-stories to my friends, after we had moved to Montreal. I must have thought of her as sad. I only know this because when I was about 12 or 13 I would say, "The only day my grandmother was ever happy was on Thursday. That was the day that she would travel 30 miles to a small town to visit her lover." I invented a complex and detailed scenario about her brushing her raven hair into wanton luster hanging down her back. She would cover it with a gauzy pastel kerchief, safe from the neighbours' prying gazes. She would leave the house as soon as my grandfather left for the mines and not return until sunset. She would bring us back store-bought candy and hum haunting melancholic strains around the house, oblivious to domestic disarray. My mother would look on in silent

censure. When her secret lover died, she asked my grandfather's permission to attend his funeral. She has worn black since 1974. Later on, when I found out about my grandfather's affairs, I cut this story out of my repertoire. I had already figured out that my grandparents barely tolerated each other. They didn't sleep in the same room. My mother later told me that even when she was growing up, they had separate bedrooms. I wanted my grandmother to rebel. I wanted her to have a secret sensual life, to be wanted. I had to know that it was possible to change the 'luck' that my mother was always harping on.

My sister and I slept in a room between my grandparents' bedrooms. We waited, huddled in our blankets, until we heard my grandmother rise. Once, when my sister left early to go somewhere with my mother, I heard my grandmother's breathing through the thin walls. I put my ear to the wall and she seemed so close by that I got scared. Her heavy breathing stopped and I was sure that she was listening to me.

That summer, my grandmother's presence shadowed my movements, filled me with dark wonderings, incompleteness. I was more cautious, self-conscious. I did not linger in the bathroom after my bath, posing in the mirror, wondering when time would transform me into the object of men's obsessions. My sister and I spoke in hushed voices, more conspiratorial than usual. My mother was short with us, on the alert with warnings to be quiet, or clean up. I felt fraudulent, as if I were posing as a child. I was already creating different scenarios for my own life, revising my grandmother's. I was grateful for this

disguise. I wanted to keep her life at one remove from my own. I never dealt directly with her as she pretended not to speak English, so my fantasies came more easily. I was unwilling to apply the same decrees to her life that ruled other people's. I was afraid of what I would find. Later I became uneasy when my mother told me that when Nanny reached her nineties, she would sit on her couch with the TV droning or for hours on end. I imagined day fading into evening, darkening into night. A solitary figure, cast aside in time, exiled in the cold north. Everywhere lay the threat of exposure, imminent failure solidifying into everlasting boredom. I polished my family's life into a high patina, buffing the raw edges into fine, smooth planes. The grain finally acquired a luster that never was.

Later, when we had all but lost touch with my grandmother, I heard stories about her, usually from my aunt. The one I remember best happened in winter. My grandfather had died and my grandmother was in her eighties. She still lived in the small house in Sudbury. We never discussed how she managed to keep it running by herself. We pretended she was indomitable, fuelled by bitterness and determination. We told stories about her hardy spirit. We laughed at her always getting her way. Her house was at the end of a dead end street. There was a bus stop across a field opposite it. She would wait there, the door ajar, cast in silhouette on frigid winter nights. My mother said that when she saw a strapping young man approach, she would gesture to him with crooked finger. They would always obey. She would silently hand him the shovel and point to the snowed-in

driveway. She would close the door behind her. I loved those stories best. They told me what could've been. She *did* have a spirit. I took that as proof positive that it was possible to defy convention. I cherished the idea of her as a driving force, self-reliant. I didn't yet know that it was possible to extract revenge on the peripheries of a life. That children and strangers were the best candidates for reprisal. Strangers don't matter and children don't tell. My mother knew that her mother was angry, unhappy. It was a mistake to take it personally. Anyway, there was nothing you could do about it.

My grandmother had excellent health until last year. Then, she seemed to fail all at once. She claimed that she no longer had the use of her legs, although the doctors could not find anything wrong with them. She developed aggravated arthritis. Soon my mother and her brother and sister began to consider the possibility of putting her in a nursing home. We speculated on how she would deal with the other patients. My mother said that she hoped Nanny wouldn't be thrown out. We were surprised when she didn't rebel. It didn't fit in with the picture we had painted of her as fiercely independent.

My grandfather died about 20 years before my grandmother. All my mother told me about what Nanny had to say was that she refused to be buried next to him. She said that fifty-five years was long enough to be with any man. She shouldn't be expected to be beside him on into eternity.

Nanny died quietly in her sleep with the TV on in the nursing home. She thwarted my aunt's plan to bring in a priest to give her last rites. They decided to

cremate her body. The ground was frozen so we had to wait until spring to bury her urn next to my grandfather's. My aunt says the plot is paid for and anyway Nanny won't know the difference. My mother keeps her mother on the bottom shelf of the TV stand in the living room, waiting.

A House by the Sea

When I hooked up with Elaine, we raved into the evening about all the important dailiness. I would relate the events of the day and she would say *Okay, now tell me what really happened*. It was never an incident, it was a thought, a spark, an image of a pigeon one day, a dirty child the next that set the world on its tail and turned it all sideways.

She had a bone to pick with the church, called herself a Recovering Catholic. Much as I loved her, and I did love her, it gave me the willies when she moaned about how she had been fooled and tricked into everlasting guilt. I never had a problem with the nuns. I was grateful for the sense of ceremony around every little thing. When I was a kid in a small town convent school I especially looked forward to Fridays because Friday was confession day. Every Friday I told father

Malarfy that I was an angel and flew over his house at night. He made me say a few Hail Mary's but he always forgave me. Now does that sound like a mean-spirited man to you? Not many men in authority would let you think you'd one-upped them. That much I have since discovered.

We left the small town in '79 and came to this godless city. That's what mom always called it. We went to school with the Protestants and almost flunked a year on account of we had studied Catechism and not math. Elaine was upset that I refused to drum up any bitterness about this but I told her that I have since pondered questions of the spirit more often than worried about taxes or considered the marvels of geometry.

Elaine thought different. She had lived in the city all her life and had gone to *the* Catholic school. She remembered her years at Sacred Heart as highly competitive, a set-up of servitude whose ultimate aim was to replace reverence for god with reverence for a man. She wasn't big on universities either. I'm sure she saw the Catholic school of the past the same way she saw the university of today. In many ways she was right; neither prepares you for what working people like to call the real world.

Our place was always a mess. She came from money where the hired help did the dirty work. I came from misery where no one did it. It was all the same in the

end, from opposite ends of the spectrum, we arrived at the same level of incompetence. We used to laugh about it.

We argued about everything. The truth of the matter was that I could take her side as easily as I know she could have taken mine, but these small disagreements gave so much fire to our conversation that we clung to them with reverence.

Two weeks before our first Christmas together I saw a perfect tree at the corner lot and called Elaine. We tugged it home in the postcard night and bought lights that neither of us could afford the next day. We sat up till dawn many nights in those two weeks with the tree lit. And then at 4 on Christmas morning she knocked at my bedroom door, and I woke to her slender figure floating a down duvet like a cloud over my blankets.

The two years we lived together she began to paint again. We weren't kids, we were looking down the barrel of our fourth decade when we finally achieved youth.

And then one cool fall evening we walked to the store in our leather. An evening when the night comes in like a shark and the leaves are swirling and anything seems possible. I was seized with an overwhelming melancholy, a pitch-point

welling, pulling me to the high crescendo where sadness is indecipherable from joy. And Elaine with her wise oblivion looked up from listening to the quiet tap tap of our footfalls to say *Anything is possible, Anna Marie, anything is possible.*

And we imagined a world in a house by the sea. A house alive with music and art, walls plastered with black and white photos and sleepy tabbies in the barn and warm horses up the pathway. We never had to marry. Ours would be the way of quiet insurrection; we, the splendid subject of whisper and rumour. We would take lovers and discard them and be discarded and spend our pain in words and paint and filter it through the soft rhythmic logic of music. But always, always we would stay together. Neglected children would have keys to the house and they would steal and we would forgive and play cherished eccentric to their world weary adolescent. We would fight and make up and if we wanted we could wear our stained terry cloths all day long without a look, without reproach.

The church was long behind us so we felt safe enough. Our friend Dave had joined what he called the community of meditators. *Non-denominational* he said and *nothing changes, no great revelations* and that hooked us both though we waited months before going.

Elaine was a sucker for setting and I a fool for architecture and this place had it all. Given to the Benedictines at the turn of the century, the mansion was tucked behind bush on top of a hill. It looked out on a vast expanse of city but when the city looked up it saw only darkness.

And when we left that first evening down the stone pathway we snipped ivy in a slow motion trance and there was nothing we didn't notice. Dave was right, everything was the same only more so. The last thing we would have trusted was promises. Twice a week that winter and our secrets burgeoned. On New Year's we went to a party and left by silent consent at 5 minutes before midnight. At midnight we were in a taxi speeding home. At midnight we were in motion.

I think it was the ordinariness, Father Lawrence speaking about waiting in line for airplane tickets, traffic, noise. Father Lawrence in medieval robe and rope who spoke about dying. I dreamt of curling into my wing chair listening to the soft cadence of his voice turning incident into fable. I was hungry for the sound of the wings of insects. I desired only to listen. I stopped waiting to speak.

We became slowly quieter. I went to the store where Elaine once lusted over a set of silver dessert-forks and knives with mother-of-pearl handles and bought them for her birthday. She opened the package slowly, peeling the tape, careful not to tear the paper. When I came back with coffee I saw her figure under soft

light, legs curled, head bowed, like a human question mark as if to say *what for, what would I need these for?*

And the slow turning away, the invisible lock, me picking up the cat trying to paw its way into her room. For an entire season I did not hear her words but listened only for their tone. I peppered our short conversations with stories of cult kidnappings, left articles lying around. She hadn't changed her schedule, she still went twice a week. Frightened, I had stopped completely by then. When I spoke to her, I felt rushed, as if I were talking into the hated answering machine that was left on throughout the day. I never let her answer.

Finally I broke the stalemate. I had just ushered George out of the house after refusing to let him shower, afraid of him leaving pubic hairs or a soiled towel on the floor. It was late when she arrived and I confronted her at the door. *You've stopped painting. You haven't picked up a brush in months.* I couldn't stop myself. I didn't want her slow hooded eyes to staunch my words. *I don't understand your attachment, you haven't even sinned properly enough to qualify. You can't just cut out the middle and have nothing to repent. Everyone knows that sinners make the best saints. You know what I think, I think you're just not up for sinning.* And then I hit home. *Who knows why Father Lawrence qualified. You might want to ask him that.*

The next morning I found a slip of paper under my door. *The monks left last month.* And I was confused by my sudden sadness. I had forgotten how much I once enjoyed going.

The lease was ending and we had to send in our notice when she introduced me to Kevin. They were moving in together and I hadn't even met him. After he left she tapped on my bedroom door and said, *I didn't think you would like him. I was afraid to introduce you. I was scared.* And all the questions barely formed, melted in that moment, he had never gone to the meditation classes. She met him at a store.

I still get hand painted cards from Elaine on Birthdays and at Christmas. I don't put them in the Elaine box. She makes Kevin sign them.

I had a dream last night that we were all together. All the characters from those long forgotten days. I try to remember things we talked about that were so important and when I can't, I listen for the sound of our voices.