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**LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ
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The Dancing Hyena:
a novel

Frances Bauer

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

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for the degree of Master of Arts at
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ABSTRACT

The Dancing Hyena: a novel

Frances Bauer

Joan Fischer goes out one night to buy shampoo. When she doesn't return, her husband, Vern, a doctoral student in psychology, is left to cope alone with their ten-month old son. Nineteen months pass. Vern Fischer finds a girl-friend, takes in a boarder, finishes his studies, and slowly gives up hope of ever seeing his wife again. Then Joan comes back, and tells him a story he cannot believe. His conviction that she is crazy puts an additional strain on what, according to her, was never a very viable marriage anyway. They part; Fischer goes off to a teaching job in Calgary, while Joan remains in Winnipeg and takes an apartment with her sister.

For the delight and entertainment of
Thomas, Judith and Jane,
and also for Emily and, of course,
Elizabeth

Author's Notes

The author is very much indebted to the following persons for their help in the preparation of the book: above all, to Elizabeth ~~the author~~, who, with kindness, wisdom and grace, steered the manuscript through a long and difficult development; to Sarah Finlay, who typed the first drafts and whose enthusiasm for the hairy plot line often gave me much-needed courage; and to Diane Kirkey, who typed the final draft so cheerfully and well. In addition, I owe a debt of thanks to the many friends and family who were from time to time subjected to accounts of my struggles or to actual excerpts from the work in progress, all which they bore with great patience.

In the sixties there really did reside, at the Assiniboine Park Zoo in Winnipeg, a spotted hyena of undetermined sex named Windhoek. I have taken the liberty of declaring Windhoek a male and endowing him with a mate, an "auntie" and two female offspring, all of them fictitious.

As for the human beings in the story, they are all fictitious too, as is the story itself.

Readers are particularly warned that eating red carnations is not a tried and true method of recovering one's lost humanity.

PART ONE

Chapter 1

Werner Fischer had dozed off with a book on his knee. Illumined by the reading lamp his bald pate glowed in the untidy nest of what was left of his hair. It had been black once but what remained now was grizzled and brittle-looking like the tendrils of a vine in winter. A jangling sound waked him and his hand shot up reflexively to push back the glasses that had slipped down his nose.

"Joan?" he called. The sound that had waked him was the ringing of coat hangers against each other. It had come from the region of the hall closet.

"Joan?"

"I'm just going out, I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Where on earth?"

"The drugstore." She poked her head around the doorway and smiled wanly. She was wearing the old camel hair coat his mother had sent. Charity! It hung nearly to her ankles.

"What are you going there for?"

"Shampoo." She fingered a strand of her long dark hair. "I want to wash my hair. It's filthy. It even smells."

"So pick up some beer too, why not?"

"Can't. Not enough money."

"Oh, balls. Write a cheque."

"No money in the account, sweetie. Vern, I must hurry. Fox's shuts at 9."

He'd told her she should have the coat made over. She'd said she would, but hadn't. It looked awful and it was a good coat really; cut to size it would look very nice. Such a waste! He called after her: "Get beer then, instead of shampoo. It's Saturday night. Joan! Do you hear me? You can even wash your hair with beer. My sister used to!"

He heard the click of the back door as she shut it quickly behind her.

"Scheisse, scheisse," he muttered. He resumed reading. He was just beginning to doze again when the doorbell chimed.

The Fischer's apartment was long, like a railcar, with the kitchen at one end and the living room at the other. Fischer made his way down the dark hallway. It was probably a Jehovah's Witness or a kid selling chocolate bars for his school. People weren't supposed to solicit in the building but they did anyway. On the other hand, it might be those new girls from downstairs. He and Joan had chatted with them a few times, urging them to drop in. They'd moved in a week before school started. They were studying Interior Design or Pharmacy, something like that.

Waiting on the threshold was his friend Rajendra. He held a case of beer thrust forward like an offering.

"Did you meet Joan on your way?"

"No, I did not. Are you going to invite me in all the same?"

"Of course! Raji, I beg of you, do come in!"

Fischer stepped back and made a little flourish, like the beginning of a bow.

"You are perhaps expecting somebody else?"

"No, no."

"You had the look," declared Raji. He stowed his gloves in his pockets and began to work at the stiff buttons of his overcoat. It had a fur collar, turned up to protect his ears and chin.

"It begins to be winter," he said. "Brrr! After a few weeks I will be used to it, but the first cold every year is a shock." He unwound from his throat a long silk scarf, yellowed with age. Folding it meticulously, he smoothed its fringes and laid it on top of the coat he had placed neatly across the sofa arm.

"Every year at this precise time I am thinking I should have stayed in India! Such an absurdity is your Winnipeg weather!"

"Hardly my Winnipeg weather, old chap."

"But Germany no doubt much the same?"

"Oh, no. Not so extreme. Not Hamburg anyhow."

Fischer carried the box down to the kitchen. Joan had washed up for once. He found the opener and a glass for Raji. Then he pointed to the baby's room and laid a finger across his lips. Raji understood. The baby was

sleeping. They carried the beer, the opener and the glass to Fischer's room.

It was both his bedroom and his study. In one corner was a double bed with the legs removed. Roughly made bookshelves ran the length of the wall to the right of the door. Raji sat down in the rocking chair beneath the reading lamp. Fischer sat on the mattress with the box of beer at his feet. Raji stretched out his legs and rocked experimentally; the chair creaked and a beam of light swept across his face: a plump firm face, wood-brown and clean-shaven. The eyes were prominent, and the lips were the colour of those little plums called Zwetschen, from which German mothers make cakes.

"I'm not interrupting your studies, I hope?" Raji ventured, picking the topmost book from the heap of books beside the rocker. He noted the title with raised eyebrows and replaced it quickly. The Physiology of Brain Function. He taught economics himself. His major interest was the taxation system. Fischer passed Raji an opened bottle. He was grateful for the interruption, he said. He'd studied all day. Enough was enough. It was Saturday night. One needed a little fun, nicht wahr?

"Just so, just so." Raji sipped his beer and giggled. "A little fun," he repeated. "That, Vern, is exactly what I had been planning tonight for myself!" He gazed up at the ceiling, an expression of innocence unaccountably flooding his moon-like face. Fischer began

to pick at the label on his bottle. "I have a lady friend named Sally," Raji said. "You have not had the pleasure of meeting her, alas. I must introduce you sometime. Her husband, now an engineer, was my student in my first year of teaching. This is how come I know her so well. Engineers naturally are often being called away, so Sally and I sometimes - when he is away - are having just that, you understand - a little fun." He lifted his glass but didn't drink. His protuberant dark eyes peered mischievously across the glass at Fischer.

"Oh," said Fischer.

"You are thinking I am not a very nice man. Right?"

"No, no - not at all," Fischer assured him, not quite truthfully.

"Carrying on with the wife of my friend, the engineer. Not very nice, you are thinking, Werner, if I am not mistaken?"

"Well ..."

"It is very innocent, the fact is. We were planning to have dinner tonight when Sally called. Her sister in Regina is breaking her hip, just like that! Slipping on the ice, which they have there already. So Sally is going off to Regina, and I am thus alone after all."

"You don't expect me to believe you were just going to have dinner?"

"And not any little fun afterwards? Oh, ho ho ho! Hee hee!" Raji sipped his beer between giggles, and then passed a hand across his thick black hair.

"The innocence, dear boy, is in the intention. Let me explain. Number one! Am I wishing to take Sally away from her nice engineer husband and marry her? The answer is certainly 'No.' Number two! Is Sally dreaming of leaving her husband and marrying old Rajendra instead? I am assuring you, she is not. Number three! Is her husband completely alone when he goes to work on some project in Flin Flon or Churchill or wherever?" Here Raji paused, gazing at the opposite wall as if seeking the answer among the wooden panels.

"Her husband is being a fine man, strong, smart, in good health. A non-smoker, and only a moderate drinker. Be the judge, then, Fischer. Would this lusty young engineering man not occasionally be enjoying the charms of those Flin Flon girls?"

"You can't be sure, can you?"

"Ah! There you are wrong! He has been intimating as much to me on several occasions when Sally was not present."

Fischer peeled off a long ragged strip of label and rolled it into a ball which he pushed through the mouth of the bottle. "Still," he protested, "your friend would not be happy if he learned of your carrying on with Sally, would he? He'd be furious. He'd feel betrayed. That's

the point, Raji. That's why what you are doing is frankly piggish."

"He is never even suspecting, my friend. An old fellow such as myself with his Sally - pah! More likely one of those young interns at the hospital where she works. If he is never finding out, what harm?"

"Not to mention your own wife and children!"

"Now, now, now! You know I am not ever sleeping any more with my wife! She is having an affair with the Home and School Association presently. She is its lady president, she makes speeches and holds meetings and writes proposals and such. I am not counting for anything with her any longer, not for two cents. Try to imagine my position!"

"I'm sorry," said Fischer. "I mean about your wife." He opened another bottle. Would Joan bring beer, now that it wasn't needed? Where was she, anyway? She should have been back by now. Well, there must be a line-up at the beer outlet. Too bad he couldn't get a message through to her. He picked away at the new label. The vivid red reminded him of something, he couldn't think what. He was on the edge of remembering when Raji said: "How are your studies progressing?"

"Not bad. I write comprehensives in December. Dread them; I'll be glad when they're over. At least they'll be over before the Christmas break. It would help if I hadn't started my research, though. I've been testing

rats since August. It takes a lot of time."

"Ah, yes. And do you like this testing of rats?"

"It's very boring."

"And you are going to be making a career in this boring business?"

"Well, that's not how it'll work out in the end, Raji. When I'm a prof I'll have students to do all my testing, you see? Figuring out the experimental design and the hypotheses are the fun part. It's only the actual testing that gets boring. It's so repetitive."

"Jobs are invariably repetitive." Raji poured the rest of his beer into his glass and sipped at it daintily. Fischer leapt suddenly to his feet. "Let's have a bit of music," he declared.

The phonograph was on the floor in the far corner. The records leaned up against it. There weren't a great many. When he had money, he'd get a decent machine, and all of Bach and Mozart. He drew the Goldberg Variations from its sleeve and wiped it with a dirty yellow cloth. Before setting the stylus down, he blew at it to remove a little clot of dust.

Raji leaned back in the rocker. Fossil, one of the Fischer cats, had made herself at home on his lap. She and the Professor looked equally serene. How amazing, Fischer said to himself. How does he do it - get girls all the time? When he's so smooth-skinned and giggly, so babyish? And then to enjoy Bach on top of it! Nu, it was

too much!

His father detested Bach. Verdi and Wagner, those were his great loves. His father once made him sing that aria from Don Carlos, for the maid, of all things, and in the middle of the night. His mother had gone off to Brunsbüttel; she'd done that now and then. His father had fetched him out of bed and stood him up on the big dining table in his house shoes and offered him chocolate for singing. The maid had laughed afterwards in a friendly way and carried him back to bed, and he'd smelled the wine on her breath and been glad his mother wasn't there. He knew the maids weren't supposed to have wine.

"And Joan, she is well, I hope?"

"OK, yes. But she should have been back ages ago - she just went to the store."

"And the baby?"

"Ooh, he's a wonder," Fischer said, his eyes sparkling. "Crawls already and nearly talks, too."

When Fischer suggested chess, Raji's eyes shone with pleasure. With great ceremony he lifted Fossil from his knee and rearranged himself on a cushion on the floor. Fischer unrolled the board and set out the pieces. "I am feeling certain of winning tonight for a change," Raji told him. "I am sometimes being suspected, you know, of what is called the second sight."

"Unfortunately for you, I don't believe in second sight," countered Fischer.

Fischer was a shrewd player and quickly won the first game. Raji giggled richly, slapping his knee and shaking his head. "You've got me again!" he declared, "How do you do it?" They began a second game. This time Raji knit his brows and exerted himself, thinking long before each move while Fischer rolled cigarettes and stared at the smoke drifting up. Where was Joan? With whom? The record, forgotten, scraped under the needle.

Raji advanced his knight, and Fischer saw he had fallen into a trap and would lose his queen. His interest in the game was immediately piqued.

"What a dumb mistake!" he said.

"Tut, tut, Vern. It is impolite, don't you think, to be implying that my success is only your mistake?"

RajiIt was a mistake all the same," insisted Fischer, forced to make the sacrifice. It was not just the loss of his queen that was the problem; he was now in a weaker position altogether, having never castled. His queen's rook was pinned in by Raji's offensive, and his king's bishop had been lost early in a trade-off. The game dragged on; he made more mistakes; he watched helplessly as Raji's forces were positioned for a kill. For three moves Fischer staved off the final checkmate by blocking and sacrificing, first a knight, then his queen's bishop, finally a pawn. Then it was done.

"You must be worrying about Joan," Raji said generously.

"Yes," said Fischer.

Raji pushed up his sleeve and inspected his heavy gold watch. It was nearly midnight. The game had taken nearly two hours.

It's not like her not to call," said Fischer. "Not like her at all."

"Check the telephone. Perhaps the receiver is not on properly."

"I'm sure it is."

"Your cats may have dislodged it."

"That's not possible. It's a wall phone."

"Sometimes calling is awkward. Maybe she is visiting Louise and Louise is in one of her states. You know how she gets." They launched into the usual discussion of Louise and her parade of ill-assorted lovers.

"You're sure you didn't have a quarrel?" Raji asked finally.

Fischer shook his head. The cats paraded to and fro with worried faces, knocking the chess pieces about.

"Scat," said Fischer. "Your mummy'll be back soon." He began to put the chess away. "If Joan were home now," he mused, "she'd probably be asleep already. Nicky gets her up pretty early, you know." The possibility that Nicky might be getting him up instead struck Fischer for the first time. "Maybe we'd better have a look for her," he said. "Maybe she's just downstairs; I don't think their phone's connected at the moment. They're cute girls,

anyway; it'll be a chance to introduce you. Come on."

The Roslyn Apartments had been built at the turn of the century as luxury accommodation, and consisted of an east tower and a west tower, laced together by catwalks. It stood just south of the Osborne Street bridge, challenging the new high-rises along River Avenue. The Fischers' apartment was on the fifth floor of the east side. Since there was only one elevator they had to use a catwalk to cross the abyss between the towers, known politely as the courtyard.

Raji and Fischer crossed the catwalk hastily in the cold October air. The elevator was a gilt and mirrored cage which reminded Fischer of the quaint illustrations in a book he'd once read about time machines, bathyspheres and other like marvels. It was noisy, too; even over in the east tower, the days and nights were punctuated by the clanking and creaking of its chains and the thump-bump of its halts.

They stood outside the girl's apartment, Fischer clutching his beer bottle. He bent his ear to the door (solid oak, the varnish dark with age, the original brass numerals long since replaced by cheap lead ones) and caught the whine of Bob Dylan singing "Mr. Tambourine Man". He also heard a hesitant nervous laugh he felt sure was Caroline's. He knocked sharply twice. There was a groan. Caroline herself opened the door. Past her dreamy and disheveled head, he glimpsed a boy in a bright blue tee

shirt sprawled on the sofa.

"This is Raji," Fischer said. He made no attempt to squeeze through the half-opened door. "Raji, Caroline Forbes." Stiff smiles were exchanged.

"We were really looking for Joan," Fischer explained quickly. "You haven't seen her?"

"Not this evening," said Caroline. "Was she planning to drop in? This," she went on, inclining her head towards the young man, "is my friend Tony."

"She went out to buy something around 9 and I haven't heard from her since. It's not like her not to call. I thought she might have stopped in here, and I knew your phone was out of order, so we just came down."

"Oh, it's fixed now," Caroline said. "Is the baby all alone?"

"Well, yes. He's asleep, of course, but I should get back. Sorry to have bothered you."

Fischer gulped down the rest of his beer in the elevator and adjusted his glasses. "So much for that!" he said gloomily. On the catwalk, though shivering with cold, he paused and leaned over the railing. He let his empty beer bottle drop. After what seemed an age, it shattered, and a light flicked on in one of the ground floor windows.

"Come on," said Raji, taking him firmly by the arm. "You are either drunk, Fischer, or more worried than I thought!"

"Not worried, old chap. Not drunk a bit."

Raji steered him down the corridor to the apartment. "Just really pissed off, that's all," Fischer explained. While Fischer opened more beer, Raji phoned Louise, but she hadn't seen Joan all evening. "Any idea where she might have gone?" he pursued. And lowering his voice: "Has she been seeing anyone, you know, on the side? Anything like that?" Louise expressed great doubts on this last score, but agreed it was very peculiar that Joan hadn't called. Perhaps the police should be alerted? "There were two rapes under that bridge last spring," she reminded him.

Raji conveyed all this to Fischer who sat cross-legged on the mattress, looking desolate.

"The police be damned!" Fischer said thickly. "Joan would be sure to walk in as soon as they got here, and that would make me look pretty stupid, wouldn't it? After all, it's Saturday night. It's not even that late. She probably met someone at Fox's, her sister Phyllis maybe, or some old family friend. It's fucking inconsiderate of her not to call, but maybe she was mad at me for some reason. You know how women are, Raji. I wanted her to buy some beer when she went out and she gave me a long story about how there was no money in the account. It would be stupid to call the police just because she's pissed off and doesn't bother to phone. Don't you agree?" He drank half a beer in one draught.

"But if she's been hurt or raped or something,

surely . . ."

"Listen. Would Joan get raped? It's cold out there. It's the wrong season, I tell you."

By and by Rajendra left and Fischer fell into bed. He checked the baby first, and pulled the covers up over him. He locked the doors. Joan had a key, and he'd hear her anyway when she came in. Should he lie awake, worried and fretful? What would evoke the most remorse in Joan and what would put himself in the best light? He thought of all her faults and the more he thought about them the clearer and more numerous they seemed. She was lazy. She was self-righteous and argumentative. She was critical of him. She nagged. She couldn't manage money. She dressed badly. Were it not for her he would surely have completed his Ph.D. by now. And the apartment! What a mess it always was! Not that he cared on his own account, but the poor child shouldn't have to crawl about on dirty floors! It didn't take much, did it, to wash a floor? In his parents' house, the white tiles in the kitchen were washed every evening. It was the work of five minutes. And how tasty his mother's meals! Even during the war, when the simplest ingredients were often lacking, meals at home had been a thing of significance, not a slapdash affair of tins and burnt thises and thats.

The creak of the elevator broke through the stillness of the night. He sat up to listen. It creaked away again. He listened a long time, but no footsteps

followed. He wondered if that horrid boy were still with Caroline, and obscene visions of sadistic copulations came to him unbidden, like vermin. Perhaps after all he should call the police? Or the hospitals? Or someone? Joan's Uncle Herbert? "God forbid!

Nu, something serious could have happened. It really was unlike her not to call, whatever her other failings. Everyone agreed it wasn't like her. She wasn't vengeful or negligent in that particular way. He could imagine other women resorting to such meanness, but not her. His Joan! How could he have blamed her for a minute? What had possessed him? He sat bolt upright in bed, rubbing his eyes and fumbling for his glasses. He was suddenly sick with yearning. He clasped the pillow, and thought of her thin pale face, her dark eyes, and the little scar just below her nose. He thought of their perfect little son asleep in the room off the kitchen. Poor kid! His Mama might be lying raped and murdered under the bridge, not a hundred yards from home! Two rapes there last spring! The women hadn't been murdered, though, and a man had been arrested. He must surely be in jail. Not that there couldn't be others like him roaming free - that little pig downstairs was a likely type. Oh, poor Joan! Werner Fischer looked impulsively towards the doorway as if willing her to appear.

She might be alive but unconscious, moaning softly in an oblivion of pain. He would go himself and search the

river banks. He would find her. He would rescue her.

He pulled on his trousers. The high ruthless October wind soughed in the trees. The baby lay with his thumb curled near half-parted lips. He must be spared the sight of his mother, abused and maybe dead. Someone must come to babysit, then; also in case Joan returned or called. It was half past two by the clock in the kitchen. Fischer put the kettle on. At twenty to three he made a cup of instant coffee. The building was quiet. He looked out the window of his son's room. Most houses were completely dark. It was late now, even for Saturday night.

He thought of calling Rajendra back but it would be better to leave Nicky with a woman: he sometimes made strange with men. Caroline, he thought, or Jennifer. They were the obvious ones. They were close, right in the building. He dialled, hoping it was true that their phone was fixed again. It rang. He prayed that Caroline would answer, and she did. When he opened the door for her five minutes later, he saw with relief that she had come alone.

Fischer puffed on one of his home-rolled cigarettes as the elevator glided down. His hands trembled; the gilt-framed mirror showed him a haggard face, and bloodshot eyes. Osborne Street was deserted. From the downtown area north of the bridge the only sound was a faint sigh as if the city itself were breathing in sleep. The sky was cloudy; few stars glinted; the moon, three-quarters full, came and went.

He made his way down the narrow path to the river. There was an old tree there, bone white, its bark completely stripped away. He and Joan had often seen hundreds of pigeons perched in it. The ground around it, and the tree itself, smelt strongly of their droppings. Swallows and pigeons roosted in the struts under the bridge and stirred uneasily when he passed. It was very dark there, though sheltered from the wind. He regretted not having thought to bring a flashlight. He struck a match and saw, scrawled on the bridge's underside: 'Jesus Saves' in faded red paint. Around this hopeful message there were numerous others, some religious, some obscene. Most were chalked initials linked by a simple 'L' or enclosed in a clumsily-drawn heart. The river was much higher than it had been in the heat of the summer, the last time he'd walked this way. He had to stoop at one point, and look for stones to step on to avoid wetting his feet. He followed the gravel flat for about ten yards. Then it gave way to thick chokecherry bushes and willows that stopped him in his tracks. The moon appeared and danced on the black water like a live thing. The wind was strong and the river resisted it, like a bird holding its feathers close. He pulled his jacket tight and scanned the opposite bank. It was the more likely place for mischief; the river paths went for miles on the north bank. Nu, but it was hard to imagine anyone luring Joan there against her will. They would have had to cross the bridge, as he was doing now,

and at nine in the evening there would have been a lot of traffic. She must have gone of her own accord - attracted perhaps by the call of some bird she wanted to see - and then been attacked.

He stumbled on the downward path and only avoided falling into the water by catching hold of a young tree. The ground was slick from the heavy rains of the previous day. He sucked his hand where he'd grazed it against the bark, and turned, glancing systematically up and down the bank. In between the clumps of brush the paths ran like a maze. It was here that Joan had introduced him to the catbird, that arch-deceiver with its neat gray body and the small red flash atop its well-groomed head. The only sounds now were the murmurous lap-lap of the river and the piercing shrieks of a nighthawk. Not a single vehicle had crossed the bridge. Winnipeg truly belonged to those who followed Ben Franklin's dictum about early to bed, early to rise. Even on a Saturday night there wasn't a club or a restaurant that remained open at this hour.

Suddenly he stopped. A foot shape, a dark bootlike thing, protruded from behind some bushes. His heart began to pound. He approached cautiously, knowing it wasn't Joan - she had no such boots - but fearing to meet her assailant. The wearer of the boot must be lying down. Was it only some derelict, sleeping it off on the damp cold ground? He skirted the bushes, to make his approach from the other side at a safe distance, and saw nothing.

Stealthily he drew closer. Oh, there was the boot, all right, but not its owner! He picked it up: it was heavy as stone, completely sodden, the sole and upper no longer fully joined. Laughing weakly, he dropped it. The proverbial catch of the unlucky fisherman! He turned back to explore the bank in the other direction. He tried to roll himself a cigarette, but his hands were too numb and stiff, he thrust them in his pockets instead. Though he felt that further searching was hopeless, he was compelled to go on, if for no other reason than that he had bothered Caroline and got her up to babysit. What would Joan be doing, he wondered, if he had disappeared?

He persevered in his exploration of the north bank, shivering with cold and no longer with any expectation of success. An empty whisky bottle, half-submerged in mud, shone in the curious light. The dark had begun to lift. A cold gray band widened on the horizon, and the moon lowered and paled. Gazing up at the sky he saw, before hearing their resonant barks, a skein of Canada geese. He listened gratefully to their brave chorus. How Joan would have loved to see that! They had planned to go to Delta and spend an entire week watching the migrants, thrilling to the beat of hundreds of thousands of wings. They would go next spring, he decided. No matter what. She couldn't be dead, his Joan, he concluded unreasonably, since the geese still flew. Perhaps she had even now come back while he had been

searching for her among the dank growth and litter of the
river bank. With hope in his heart he turned homewards.

Chapter 2

A few hours later Fischer was again privileged to hear the cry of geese. It was early, barely light, and he was attending to the baby. For a long time he had been aware of Nicky's cries in his dream; they had been nothing to do with him and he had slept on, worn out from the exertions of the night.

Joan had not come back. Even in his sleep her absence had been tangible and impinged on him, like the echo in a room emptied of furniture.

The moment he offered the child its bottle of milk it ceased howling and he heard the geese. They were flying over the city in the cold dark dawn, following the river. Nu, migration was a strange thing. There were many theories about it. What caused it really? Changes in the number of hours of daylight, or the polarized rays of the sun? The earth's magnetic field? What part was played by hormone levels? By early experience? It was a mystery. Science might work out all the whys and hows one day, but it would still seem a mystery, and amaze.

He pulled up the side of the crib with a jerk and stumbled back to bed. He wept for a while, mourning Joan, then slept fitfully until roused once more by the baby's cries, punctuated this time by thuds and squeeks and an unnerving rain of crashing sounds.

Nicky was in a standing position, shaking the bars

of the crib. His sleepers sagged, giving him a dwarf-like appearance, and the floor of the room was littered with things he had hurled in his fury. The baby bottle had broken into a million bits.

"Bad boy!" said Fischer, picking up a chunk of glass and gesturing with it. "Bad boy!"

The child resumed his rhythmical screaming, rocking back and forth. The crib began to roll away from the wall as he rocked faster and faster. His screams were reduced to short angry gasps. Fischer, seething with rage, gritted his teeth and swept up the broken glass. The floor would need washing before the baby could play on it safely. While he swept he lectured the child on the hazards of broken glass. His words sounded false even to himself. Damn it, where was Joan? Why on earth did she use glass bottles anyway? Wasn't the kid big enough to do without a bottle altogether? He staggered out to the garbage chute. The phone rang, inspiring Nicky to pitch his screaming higher, in a sing-song of outrage. In one complex motion Fischer slammed the back door and answered the phone.

It was Norm Onyschuk, his thesis supervisor. A new shipment of young rats had come in Friday; they had planned to operate on them Sunday morning. Now it was Sunday morning. He explained his situation to Norm as quickly as he could. He could tell Norm didn't quite believe him.

He fed Nicky a whole jar of sweet potatoes. The

poor kid was really ravenous. Probably hadn't had enough supper. He wondered what Joan had fed him the night before. It seemed weeks had passed since then. While he spooned the bright orange slop into the baby's mouth, the two cats milled around, rubbing against his naked legs, leaping on his lap, and batting the spoon. They were hungry too, of course. Fischer saw his chance for a quiet cup of coffee postponed indefinitely.

The police, he thought. He'd have to phone them. He'd promised Norm he would. He removed his glasses and wiped the sweet potato splashes off on his sleeve. He hated people in uniform. Doctors, policemen, streetcar conductors, nurses. When such a person turned out to be human after all, like his dentist, Dr. Weinstein, it was a wonder. Fischer had become Dr. Weinstein's faithful advocate. He was alert to any suggestion of dental complaint amongst his acquaintances and at the merest hint, he recommended Weinstein.

He gave Nicky a chocolate cookie to keep him happy for a moment and went reluctantly to the phone, then had to hunt the number in the directory.

"My wife's disappeared," he said. "Since last night, about 9."

A male voice explained that they didn't usually investigate missing adults until 24 hours had passed.

"Bloody hell," Fischer snarled. "There've been rapes in this neighbourhood and my wife's just vanished!

Left me stuck with the baby, too. It's not like her."

So the police came. The doorbell chimed and Fischer shuffled down the long hallway and there they were. For a minute he thought they had come to take him away. They were so awfully tall. When they looked down at him he squirmed. By the time he invited them in they were in already, standing expectantly, staring about. His palms grew moist. The younger of the two had a moustache like a wild west villain. The older one had short grey hair and looked like the teacher at the Erikaschule. The teacher's name had been Blumenthal and he'd had a pretty daughter, Eva Blumenthal, with freckles and big teeth. One day the Blumenthal family had disappeared. The policeman's name was Grace and he spoke with a hint of a British accent. If he had any daughters he didn't say so.

They sat at the table in the kitchen and asked lots of questions. Fischer did his best to answer truthfully and to keep from fidgeting. He offered to make coffee, and when they declined that, offered tea. That wouldn't happen at home. He couldn't picture his father drinking coffee or tea in the morning room with two policemen while the maids listened at the keyhole and Fritz the gardener cowered outside beneath the window. Besides, when his mother ran away, which she did at least once a year, his father just waited a day or two and then went and fetched her. During the war, he went by train or by boat but later he used to take the light blue Opel. And there

his mother always was, at her parents' farm in Brunsbüttel, waiting to be fetched back. When she got back she would be coy and laugh a lot, turning her head away from you, her grey eyes full of secrets and mischief.

Where Joan might have run to he had no idea. He pressed his thumbs together and bit his lip while Rogers, the one with the moustache, took notes. He wrote down the names and addresses and phone numbers of Rajendra, Louise, Joan's sister Phyllis, Joan's aunt and uncle, and her employer. Grace studied a photograph of Joan. It was a picture taken last summer in the park; she stared out of it, faintly, almost sadly smiling. She'd been depressed that day and he'd gone with her to the park and tried, but failed, to cheer her up.

"In cases of involuntary disappearance, we look for motives," Grace said. "One is foul play. We can't rule that out. Your own search of the area around the bridge indicates that you realize that. Another possibility is kidnapping. The usual motive there is money."

"We haven't any money," said Fischer. "You can see how we live." He gestured vaguely at the walls, badly in need of paint, and at the unmatched dishes that cluttered the old, chipped enamel table. "We're both students."

"I grant you that," said Grace. "But you do have relatives. Tell us about their financial standing in a

general way, beginning with Mrs. Fischer's family."

"Joan was born here, as I mentioned. Her family moved when she was eight or nine, first to Toronto, then to Montreal. Her parents still live in Montreal. They have no money - her father likes to play the horses, you see - and her mother works. Joan's younger sister, Phyllis, lives here in a rooming house on Wardlaw Street. She was living with us until two months ago."

"Did she move out because of a quarrel? Anything like that?"

"No, no. Just wanted to be on her own. You know how kids are these days."

"You mentioned an uncle? Father's brother?"

"Herbert Hale. He's in insurance - works for that company across the bridge. Where they have the big Christmas tree every year."

"What's his position there?"

Fischer shook his head. "I don't pay much attention to these distinctions."

"Must be one of the top brass if he has a Tuxedo address. Have you been to the house, Mr. Fischer?"

"Oh yes, several times. They invite us for dinner. Thanksgiving, Christmas, that sort of thing. It's a rich man's house. Wall to wall carpets, dishwasher, copper pots hanging on the kitchen walls. Big original paintings with little lights on top."

"Do they ever help you out?"

"They gave us a hundred bucks when Nicky was born."

"Nothing regular?"

"No." He wrinkled his nose. "All he got regularly from Uncle Herb was a lecture on the virtues of thrift and the high cost of tobacco."

"Would you take it if they did?"

"I never thought about it. I guess so. We could sure use it."

"You don't care for your wife's relatives much."

Grace smiled in sympathy.

"Oh, I like Phyllis. But the Hales - well.

They're a stuffy lot. Very bourgeois, you know. We're just not that type."

"Another world, eh? What about Mrs. Hale?"

"I like her better than Herbert."

"I mean, what's her full name? She might have money of her own."

"I think she does. I recall my father-in-law once referring to 'Julia's damned money.'"

"Could be Julia Latimer."

"Sounds like it," Rogers assented. "We can ask. The Latimers," he explained for Fischer's benefit, "made a fortune on the grain exchange. That's where most of the smart money's come from, in this part of the world."

Grace finished his tea and began to stroke Fossil, who had curled up demurely in his lap. When had Fischer or

his wife last spoken to the Hales?

"It's been ages."

"Thanksgiving is a week from tomorrow. You mean you haven't been invited?"

"Not yet, as far as I know."

"Is that unusual?"

"Oh, I don't think so. I don't think they ever invite us very far in advance. Probably they hope we'll have other plans. It must be as much of a bore for them as it is for us - though they seem to like the baby a lot."

"Would the Hales be likely to pay a ransom demand if your wife had been kidnapped?"

"I don't know. Herb's tight, but Julia's soft. I've no idea, really. But they have a daughter of their own." I mean, if their money was the motive it would make more sense, wouldn't it, to kidnap the Hale girl? Besides, what bothers me is, kidnappings are usually planned. The victim's habits are studied and so on, and the kidnapping is done when the victim is at some particular place at a predictable time. Joan wasn't exactly in the habit of going to the drugstore at a quarter to nine on Saturdays, if you see what I mean."

Rogers and Grace agreed this was a very good point, but stressed that occasionally kidnappings were opportunistic rather than planned. Was there any item of Joan's apparel that could have suggested access to money? Did she look particularly smart or chic?

Fischer shook his head. "All she had on of worth," he said, "was her wedding band. Most of her clothes are hand-me downs."

"But a pretty face, for sure. One of those faces," said Rogers with unexpected wistfulness, "that always reminds you of somebody else you used to know. That could be the key," he added sharply. "A case of mistaken identity."

"She had a scar from a harelip," said Fischer. "You can't see it very well in the photo."

"Good to know that. Mmm, well, let's get back to the relatives. Any others?"

"Just a cousin of her mother's. Nice chap. Looks like Jimmy Stewart. I forget his name. But he's not rich anyway."

Having done with Joan's family, they turned to his. There was only his older brother Georg in Brazil, and his parents and sisters in Hamburg. His father had wanted him to go into the business - import/export, dried fruits, Cuban tobaccos, that sort of thing - but he'd refused and come to Canada instead. He'd had to get away, not to be stifled.

"Would your parents pay a ransom for your wife?"

"I've no idea. The money's tied up in land and buildings. And the business. Also, they were opposed to the marriage."

"Really? Any special reason?"

"They thought Joan looked Jewish. They've nothing against Jews but thought it was - uh- impractical to look Jewish in Germany."

"Ah, yes, I see. We'd like to check the mailbox before we go," said Grace. "In case there's a message."

"Joan's got the only key, I'm afraid."

"The superintendant will have a duplicate. You needn't bother to come down, Mr. Fischer, we'll see to it. If there's a message we'll come back up and show you, if there isn't we'll get on with the job. Call this number and ask for Sergeant Williams if anything comes up in the meantime." Grace handed him a piece of paper.

"Suppose it is kidnappers, and suppose they call me . . ." Fischer began. "What should I say to them?" "einstallment plan, if they ask for it. Don't let on that we're involved. Lie if you have to. But tell us, anyway. By the way, we checked your telephone. It's safenoi taps." Grace reached across the gate and patted Nicky's head. "Beautiful baby, isn't he? He's taking it all very well, too. You just try and do the same, Mr. Fischer. Hopefully we'll have your wife home with you in no time."

Fischer leaned against the kitchen door, took off his glasses, and drew his arm across his forehead. Then he replaced the glasses. They were foggy with dirt, but he didn't care. Joan usually washed them for him. Perhaps she would come back to do it, if he left them dirty.

He mashed a banana for the baby's lunch. Nicky ate greedily, smacking his lips and wriggling all over like a little animal. "Such happiness, and in the face of tragedy!" Fischer teased. "'Nana!' Nicky answered. "'Nana! 'Nana!' He yawned, showing his three teeth.

While the baby napped, Fischer tried to study. The text swam before his eyes. He was reading about the theory of the memory trace. Could it exist? If it could, where was it? How did it get established in the brain? The lightbulb in his study lamp made a tiny sizzling noise that grated on his nerves. The cat Schiller tried twice to occupy his lap, missing Joan, who was his favourite. The rocking chair creaked. He wished he knew how the police were getting on. He kept expecting them to phone. They'd looked all around the apartment, even in all the cupboards. He'd worried about the mess at the time - not wanting them to think ill of Joan - but now the real reason for their snooping struck him. They'd been looking for her! Well, he was bound to be suspected, wasn't he? He could just hear Grace putting the question to Aunt Julia: 'Do you think, Mrs. Hale, that Mr. Fischer is capable of murdering his wife?' And Aunt Julia simpering back: 'Really, it's very hard for me to say, you know, but he is a rather strange young man, sort of different!' She was bound to add, after a thoughtful moment: 'And of course he's German, too!'

It was hard not to blame Joan herself for the

situation. The police had assented far too easily when he told them he was sure she'd not run off with anyone. How sure was he? How sure could he be? How could any man ever be sure, come to that? If Joan were going to do such a thing, why should he have guessed about it? She was quite clever enough not to leave clues. Possibly she was passionately in love with someone else and had been planning her escape for some time. She had numerous opportunities for meeting other men. Last month, for example, she had gone to Dr. Weinstein. He was not an unattractive man and a dentist could get work anywhere. What would stop them from running off to Arizona or Hawaii or Singapore to live, away from this beastly cold climate? Fischer rose and went to the telephone, intending to apprise Grace of the possibility of such a liaison. The weight of the receiver brought him to his senses. If Joan had been kidnapped, which seemed much more likely, how could the kidnapper phone if he kept the line busy?

On the other hand, if Joan really were having an affair, wouldn't she have had to confide in someone? Phyllis maybe? Or Louise? Sooner or later the police would learn about it. He could anticipate sympathy from Constable Grace. 'I'm truly sorry, Mr. Fischer,' he'd say. 'These things do happen. We're all victims, you know, of the female sex.' Rogers would probably smirk, imagining himself safe from deceit of that kind. Well, he wasn't safe, was he? No man was.

Late in the afternoon Aunt Julia called. "Oh, Vern!" she exclaimed. "What a terrible fix to be in. Constable Grace told us all about it, and Herb was wondering if you'd thought of calling Joan's family?". No, Fischer was reluctant to involve them at this stage.

"I don't wonder;" Aunt Julia went on. "You must be just sick with worry. And trying to cope with the baby, too! What I wanted to suggest was that we take Nicky for the next few days, you must have so much to do. I could drive right over and fetch him; we've already set up Hilary's old crib in the guest room, and Hilary herself has unpacked a box of toys. What do you think?"

Fischer was stunned. His instinct was to say "No" because he preferred to have as little to do with the Hales as possible. On the other hand, they had taken a lot of trouble with the crib and toys. Hilary was fourteen, and the baby liked her. If he said "No," Julia and Herb might think he didn't trust them, or might suspect that he wasn't grateful. That would be awkward if he had to ask them to pay a ransom for Joan. So finally he said, "That's very kind, Julia. Very thoughtful. I'll pack up Nicky's things right away."

Grace and Rogers dropped by again about eight in the evening. Joan had indeed gone to the drugstore, they reported. Mr. Fox, the pharmacist, remembered perfectly. She'd bought shampoo and cashed a cheque for five dollars, postdated to the following Tuesday. She had seemed to be

alone in the drugstore, an elderly couple being the only other customers at the time.

"She must have been intending to buy me some beer after all," said Fischer wistfully. "That would explain the cheque."

"She's not in the hospitals, and she's not at the morgue," said Constable Grace. "All cars are on the alert, and everything possible's being done. Oh, one last thing. Unless she travelled under an assumed name, she hasn't left Winnipeg by air or by rail. That baby asleep?" he concluded. "It's awfully quiet."

"He's gone to his aunt's for a few days."

"Well now, that's a help to you, I'm sure. Just don't give up hope. Get a good friend to come over and keep you company, is my advice. Brooding won't help any."

On the strength of this counsel, Fischer rang Caroline and Jennifer, who came up for coffee.

"She must have intended to buy me some beer after all," he told them, and began to weep quietly behind his glasses.

Chapter 3

Many people went to Winnipeg's Assiniboine Park that Sunday to take advantage of the fall sunshine. The sky was a scrubbed, sheer blue and in the middle of the picnic grounds stood a mountain of leaves, seething with children. A couple turned to watch for a moment. He was tall, sandy-haired, with a full expressive mouth. She leaned her head against his shoulder, and her dark plaits fell against his leather jacket.

"Race you to the woods!" cried the girl and took off. Caught off guard, the man sprinted after along the walk. He should have been faster, he should have overtaken her, it should have been easy with his long legs - but he stubbed his toe on a stone. She gained the woods before him and leaned against an oak tree to catch her breath, laughing at his frustration.

"Who do you think you are - Atalanta?"

"Who's she?"

"Some Greek goddess who ran very fast, faster than any of the guys. She agreed to marry whoever defeated her in a race; but the ones she defeated had to pay with their lives."

"Ugh," said the girl. "She sounds a proper bitch to me. Should I put you to death?"

They linked arms. They were nearing the zoo, and as they made their way through the woods the peacocks'

cries and lions' roars came closer and closer.

"By this time next week there'll probably be snow on the ground," the man said. "I bet you've never been to the zoo in winter."

"It's open then?"

"Sure. It's always open."

They passed the porcupine cages and followed the path by the pheasantry. The colourful birds winked and strutted in narrow gardens furnished with dwarfish dark shrubs and logs whitened with age and dung. A crowd in front of the centre cage was watching the peacocks.

"Where do they put the animals in the winter? They can't all stay out in the cold, can they?"

"A lot of them can. The cold just makes them grow heavier coats."

"Is there anything you don't know?" laughed the girl, nuzzling his neck. He made a tragic face. "Lots and lots of things," he said. "Did I ever tell you that I flunked grade 5?"

"You!"

"Yup."

"Goodness gracious; how come?"

"I hated my teacher that year, and my dog was hit by a car, and my kid sister was born - it was a tough year."

"You've made up for it, now."

"Yup," he said, grinning. "I have you, don't I?"

And we're on our way to see my favourite beasts. And when we get home, we're going to do all sorts of lovely beastly things." He bent his head, nibbled her ear, and whispered: "Such beastly things!"

Her pale cheeks flushed; they stood in the middle of the path at the end of the pheasantry and kissed, while the Sunday crowd pushed past them, disapprovingly.

The tigers were in a large circular enclosure roofed with heavy wire mesh. Signs posted at intervals proclaimed: "Dangerous Animals", "We bite", "Do not cross the barrier fence". Between the barrier fence and the enclosure was a path overgrown with weeds.

Only one tiger was visible; she lay extended upon a huge silvery log, her limbs lazily disposed, her thick tail drooping languorously. She yawned, her teeth a row of pale gold scimitars.

The crowd ringed round the barrier fence watched in fascination, thrilled by the sight of the creature's teeth. She was awesome in the dappled light. The people hoped she would leap, or stretch, or even growl; but the tiger seemed determined to doze.

"I bet she's bored," the girl remarked; the man nodded agreeably.

Suddenly the crowd stirred. At the end of the enclosure, on a wide cement platform, was a small house made of concrete blocks with three narrow openings in the façade. Two were empty, but in the other there stood a

second tiger, his forefeet furred and solid, his legs tensed to spring.

The people sighed with satisfaction. The second tiger leapt down from the porch of the house, his flanks quivering, the slack of his belly swaying, his tail trailing behind.

He stretched. He licked one forepaw. He bounded onto the log. He was paler than the first tiger, his fur a lovely caramel-streaked cream; he advanced up the log while gazing over the crowd. The set of his head was regal and mischievous, and his flashing eyes were the colour of tangerines. The first tiger drew up her feet and waited, head lowered, her back to the other, her tail swinging like a pump handle. Then she dropped to the ground and ambled over to the water dish. She drank noisily, to show that she had only ceded her place in response to thirst. The pale conqueror, stretched out upon the log, yawned in his turn, blinking and gazing at the people with a serene expression.

A chap in a plaid bush jacket swung his leg over the barrier fence and thrust something through the wire.

"Here, kitty, kitty," the fellow called softly.

"Here puss! Here kitty, kitty!" The tiger raised her head from the water dish and licked her lips.

"What's he got?" asked the girl.

"A crust, I suppose. Or a bone."

The crowd was compelled to watch. It looked from

man to tiger, from tiger to man, its expectations building breath by breath. The man's face was close to the heavy wire, his feet lost in the weeds. His children leaned over the barrier rail to encourage him.

"Puss, pretty puss!"

The tiger paused and regarded the man briefly. She began to pace. Six or seven strides north, when she rubbed her fur against the wire well away from the intruder, then six or seven strides south, her head lowering a little each time she made the turn to repeat the circle, forth and back, forth and back.

The crowd was caught now; it was getting what it had waited for, it held its breath, silent, intent. Only the man spoke, coaxingly, insinuatingly, fingers stiffly closed on his offering: what appeared to be a bone from a steak. (He must have planned the whole scene last night at supper, thought the girl. Serve him right if she bites him.)

"Here kitty, kitty, nice bone for a kitty!"

Each time she passed the tiger came closer, her great feet thudding softly in the hardened dust, her shoulders grinding like wheels. Then there was a scream and the man pulled his hand back. It was spurting bright blood. He thrust it into his mouth, bloodying his face. He moaned. A woman helped him step back over the railing. His children looked stricken. The crowd began to babble and mill, embarrassed by the weeping of this grown man who

had seemed so tough in his bush jacket. A policeman and two keepers came running. The man, half his forefinger missing and his thumbnail crushed, was led away. His plain wife and three scared and sobbing children followed. An older couple clung to one another, their gait slowed by age. As they turned away they gave a contemptuous look at the tigers.

"Ungrateful beasts!" the old man told his wife churlishly. "Should be shot!"

"They will blame the tigers," the girl complained.

"If that chap had read Blake, he'd have more fingers now," the man told her. "He'd have had a healthy respect for wildlife, and kept his distance."

The girl nodded wordlessly, trying to recall the lines of Blake's poem. "'In the forests of the night,'" she said, and faltered. The man took it up:

"Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?"

"Since this is a zoo, he probably thought they'd be tame," she suggested. The incident had had a sobering effect upon her. A stupid mistake had been made. Blood had been shed. It annoyed her. That, and the old man's remark, and the fact that they'd just stood and watched, bewitched like sheep, when they might instead have warned the fellow (who probably wouldn't have listened, but that

wasn't the point).

"We might as well see the rest of the zoo as we're here," the man said.

They resumed the tour without enthusiasm.

The polar bears were bathing despite the nip in the air. The grizzly rose on his hind legs and caught at peanuts and bits of apple thrown to him by children. The couple moved silently through the throng, hand in hand. They regretted their lost gaiety but, sensibly, did not pretend about it.

At the road near the moose enclosure they waited for an SPCA van to pass. Then they looked in turn at the zebras, the mouflon sheep and the camels.

"See," said the man, pointing. At the back of the camel enclosure a keeper in green coveralls was combing the camel's coat with a garden rake. The camel's fringed eyelids went slowly up and down. It swayed, enraptured.

The girl was the first to notice the puppy. It was in the arms of a chubby teenager who, with her friends, had also stopped to watch the camel having its hair done. She pointed, then exclaimed: "Good heavens, the tall one's my cousin!"

They approached the group, three girls and a boy, clustered around the chubby girl with the puppy. The puppy peered over its owner's shoulder. He was round with brown liquid eyes and thin floppy ears, a patchwork of white and golden brown.

"Hi Hilary," said the girl. The teenager turned, handsome rather than pretty, and as tall as a man. Her light brown hair was held back from her brow by a wide dark ribbon.

"Joan!" she cried happily. Then: "Oh, Phyllis, it's you, I'm sorry!"

"That's okay, people always mix us up. Hilary, this is my friend Andrew. Andy, Hilary." Hilary broke away from her group and joined the couple. "Tell me," she began. "What do you think of this business with your sister?"

"What business?"

"Oh. I assumed you knew. I'm sorry, Phyl. Your sister's disappeared."

"But I just saw her on Thursday!"

"She went out to the drugstore last night and never returned home. We don't know where she is. Maybe you have some idea," Hilary added hopefully. She looked studiously at her cousin. Andrew watched and wondered. He knew Joan only slightly and had never heard of Hilary before. She had presence, that one. And what a marvellously deep voice!

"Let me get this straight, now. Joan went to the drugstore, Fox's on the corner that must have been. Last night. And never went home?"

"That's right."

"How do you know?"

"Vern called the police. The police came to our house and told us." Turning suddenly to Andrew, she said: "You'll keep this to yourself, won't you, Andrew?" Catching his nod of assent in the tail of her eye, she leaned her face down close to Phyllis's and whispered: "They suspect it may be kidnapping."

"No," said Phyllis. "No. Why Joan? It's too . . . too silly for words! And Vern calling the police! Jesus, that's hard to credit, you know. He absolutely hates things like that. You're not making this up, are you? No, I can see you're not. How awful!"

"Yes. It's awful."

"Kidnapped. It's idiotic. Have there been any notes or calls for money?"

"Not yet."

"Anything could have happened, then."

"Anything, yes. Do you think she could have run off with a boyfriend?"

Phyllis shook her head slowly. Joan, a lover? No. She would have known. If she hadn't known, she would have guessed. She made for a bench and sat down, racking her brains.

"Do you think she could've gone to Montreal?"

Hilary persisted.

Home to mother? Oh, no, not Joan. She'd wanted to leave home since age ten. She and Dad never got on. She'd moved out at seventeen. She'd never go back, not as

long as Dad was there.

"Was she happy with Vern?"

"Oh, well - not ecstatically happy. In fact, she's been pretty depressed since Nicky was born."

"We're taking Nicky for the time being. In fact, I promised Mum to be back by four. It must be near that."

"I've a car parked over by the Conservatory," Andrew offered.

"Oh, thanks, but we're just across from the park; I can run it in minutes."

"Another Atalanta," he remarked, watching the tall figure dash away. He sat down on the bench beside Phyllis. "Like a Coke?" he asked her. Phyllis nodded blankly. On the far side of the concourse some men were busy in one of the enclosures. A small crowd stood watching them. So many people, all of them not Joan. She tried to think of where her sister might be. Joan was five years older than she was, so Phyllis was used to her doing things that she couldn't understand. It hurt all the same. It had always hurt. But this situation could not be Joan's fault. Joan wouldn't do that to her, not now, not after all they'd been through together. Joan wouldn't abandon her - or Nicky - or Vern - without a word or clue. So that meant it was something that had happened to her, some unforeseen and unpredictable thing. The man in the bush jacket. That type. Something like that, coming down on Joan, a crazy person.

She knew what Joan would do if she'd been attacked. She'd scream. She had the most appalling scream, absolutely blood-curdling. She didn't do it often - didn't have to - the mere threat was enough. No one could put up with that wailing for long. For a moment Phyllis took comfort from that thought, then she swallowed hard as the scene completed itself: Joan's mysterious assailant choking her to shut her up. So there was a real danger that Joan might be already dead! That was the most painful thought of all. She didn't want to think it, let alone believe it. She felt lost, lost. Joan could be anywhere. She could be here, at the zoo, or on a train headed east, or nowhere and dead.

Andrew came back with the Cokes. He sat down beside her, on the edge of the universe.

"I'll take you home. There'll be things you'll want to do," he said, his voice hollow, a voice out of nowhere. Then quite unexpectedly: "I'll pray for you."

"Will you? Really?" She could hardly pray herself. She'd broken with all that. The notion of God - dispensed with it - it just wasn't there. But the impulse was there - she looked at her clasped hands - like a broken telephone. How brave of Andrew, she thought. How sincere. She thought of others who might pray. Hilary's parents went to church but she couldn't be sure of them. Granny would pray, long and hard, her gnarled hands neatly folded. Their mother might pray. She'd given up her religion years

and years before, but prayer was a habit, it might come back.

And Andrew. She took his hand gratefully in hers. What a dear kind silly fellow he was!

Chapter 4

On the Monday Fischer wakened with the sensation of falling onto his bed from a great height. He clutched at the bed-clothes, and slowly opened his eyes. It was nearly eight o'clock. Ordinarily, Joan brought his coffee at half past seven. There was no Joan now. Tears began to blur his already blurry vision. He leaned over the edge of the mattress and fumbled for his glasses. Schiller, the big grey tom cat, protested the upheaval and leapt down, stretching and luxuriating in an oblong of sunlight.

Joan's father had rung up from Montreal at a few minutes past ten the night before. Uncle Herb had alerted him to the situation. He wanted to know if there was anything he could do. The offer to help was merely for form's sake. "Where do you think she is?" he asked pointedly. "Bugged off with some other chap, or what?" Fischer felt he was being held accountable for his wife's disappearance. If he'd been a better husband she needn't have run off. If he'd offered to go get the shampoo, it might never have happened. Now Nicky was gone too. The floor of Nicky's room was strewn with broken arrowroot biscuits, and a soiled diaper dropped by the crib the day before was smelling very rank. He should call the babysitter and Kennedy Books where Joan worked. Schiller and Fossil paraded to and fro and demanded to be fed. He rolled himself a cigarette and eyed them malevolently.

They could wait until he'd got the coffee made. They rubbed against his legs and Schiller jumped up on his lap, digging claws into the delicate flesh of his thigh.

The telephone rang. It was Grace, to say there was no news. At least Grace didn't seem to blame him. Damn his father-in-law . . . Fossil yelped suddenly. He had stepped on her tail.

He gave in and fed the cats.

The bus was crowded. He pushed his way through knots of passengers until he found a narrow space on the seat at the very back. It was a squeeze but it gave him the illusion of safety.

A slim older woman with silvered hair and rimless glasses teetered near him, hanging on to the railing with one gloved hand and clutching an expensive-looking handbag with the other. Was she hoping that he'd surrender his seat to her silvery hair? Why pick on him? Blast the woman! If women were going to be so liberated that they ran off every other minute, let them learn to stand in buses. He'd stood often enough. It wasn't his fault if Joan had been murdered, and it wouldn't be his fault, either, if that old dame toppled over with heart failure. She shouldn't take buses at this hour if she needed a seat. Who did she think she was, anyway? She was just a dried up old stick of a woman whose husband had probably left her

decades ago.

He'd made himself no lunch, and had only coffee for breakfast. All he had in his pocket was thirty cents. If only he would have finished his studies, he'd have a proper job and enough money to come and go on! If he worked very hard he might finish by next summer. It all depended on luck; on batches of rats not dying of sickness; on Norm being satisfied that the populations tested were large enough; on his own compulsive nature not insisting on exploring the highway and byway of every theory. Now it was virtually winter. The cold always sapped his energy. Some people were wearing winter boots already. It could snow anytime. Joan might be caught in a blizzard with only her old shoes on. Unless she had flown to Hawaii with that dentist, of course. Unable to find any clean socks in his own drawer, he had taken a pair of hers. She always got mad at him for doing that. She said his long toenails put holes in them. What did it matter? She might never need them again.

The bus finally turned into University Drive. Wheat fields everywhere. Cows in the distance. The stench of the sugar beet factories. Students who were late for a class tried to push ahead of the others. He followed the thin old woman with the expensive handbag. When she headed into the Arts Building he suddenly realized who she was. Head of Slavic Languages, something like that and a personal friend of the well-known writer, Laurens

VanderPost. She'd introduced him when he'd come to speak. Too bad he hadn't offered her his seat, after all. She might know all sorts of psychic types if she knew VanderPost; that could be helpful in locating Joan. Not that he believed in that sort of thing. It was just something to bear in mind.

Students were rushing everywhere in little groups, their cheeks rosy from the cold air. They looked abominably well. A few wore glasses but none were bald. He hurried along to the Isbister Building where his lab was, his head lowered, and noticed the stiff sparkle of hoarfrost on the grass and the thin gloss of rubber ice on the puddles.

"Hey, Fish!" Debbie, the departmental secretary called out, as he tried to creep through the office unnoticed. "Did you get the message I left for you the other day?"

"It was just Joan. I looked for you upstairs, but you weren't there, so I stuck it on the door of your carrel."

"Oh."

"She wanted you to pick the baby up from the sitter's or something."

"What day was it?"

"Friday, of course."

"Joan didn't call this morning?"

"Not that I know of. Say, you look half asleep."

Was it a good weekend, or was it a good weekend?"

He chuckled weakly. "If Joan does call, please interrupt. Even if I have the 'Testing' sign up. OK?"

"Sure thing, Fish. Anything wrong?"

"Oh, it's just the baby, you know, he's a bit under the weather. Joan's taking him to the doctor this morning. She promised to call me after." This lie gave him enormous pleasure. He turned abruptly away, in order to savour the fantasy that it was the truth, and realized he had neglected to call the bookstore where Joan worked. Debbie was fitting a letterhead into her typewriter. He asked sheepishly if he might use the phone.

The lab was a small windowless room with a ventilation plate in the upper right hand corner. A white formica counter with a stainless steel sink set in it ran along the wall. The cupboards above and below the counter were painted white; with their shiny chrome pulls, they looked as if they belonged in a low-cost suburban bungalow. A roll of paper towels stood on the counter-top beside a chipped saucer on which there was a wafer of dessicated yellow soap. The T-maze was on a table in the centre of the room. He had built it himself and was proud of it. The grids on the maze floor were electrified. By pressing the switches at the edge of the table, he could cause a mild electric current to flow through, to the discomfort of

any rat who took a wrong turn. A correct turn consisted of choosing the arm of the maze at the end of which a black square was displayed, or, for half the rats, a black circle. It was necessary to guard against any inborn preference rats might have for either shape. The circle and the square were shifted from side to side in accordance with a random number table. If the random number were even, the choice figure was placed on the right; if odd, on the left. While Fischer was running a rat through its daily ten trials, the lab door was kept locked and a 'TESTING' sign stuck up with sticky tape. The only light on at such times was the light in the maze itself. The object of the testing was to see if rats with varying degrees of damage to the visual system could actually learn to discriminate between the circle and the square. Fischer's supervisor, Norm Onyschuck, was enthusiastic about the experiment. It promised to clarify a number of key questions.

Fischer went to the animal room and opened the small mesh cage reserved for rat number 32, a circle rat with lesions in the visual cortex. His private name for number 32 was Picasso, because he was a visually clever rat and had mastered the discrimination easily. Picasso squeaked with pleasure when he saw Fischer. Fischer picked him up and held him close to his chest, petting him and crooning to him, while the pink nose wiggled and the whiskers twitched.

He put Picasso in the start box, and verified the positions of the circle and the square. The rat sniffed, blinked, and began to groom himself. The hand of the stopwatch jerked back, a second at a time. A rat who failed to leave the start box within 30 seconds was shocked. After 27 seconds, Picasso moved to the left-hand lane, peered down it and danced over to the other lane where the circle was. Gott sei dank! Picasso chose the circle better than nine times out of ten, a stellar performance. If rats dawdled they had to be shocked. Shocked, they tended to defecate. Then Fischer had to clean the maze between trials. Shock also made the rats skittish so that they tried to nip him, when, at the end of the session, he carried them back to their little wire cubicles in the animal room across the hall. That day Picasso's performance was particularly pleasing. It seemed to be a good omen. Like rat number 32, Joan was clever; faced with tricky choices, she would probably make the right ones. He was lucky to have married her, and not that girl he'd been dating when he first met her. Linda had been pretty but not nearly so smart.

After testing eight rats he ran into Norm in the animal room. Norm was short and rugged, with close-cropped black hair - a brush cut really - and terrible skin. A mixture of toughness and frailty, a man who got the shakes if he forgot to take his pills.

"Good to see you here, Vern. Joan back?"

"No."

"Oh, gee, that's dreadful. Anything I can do?"

"Got any tranqs?"

"Sure thing, pal."

Norman dug past his lab coat into the pocket of his pants and pulled out a small glass bottle. He spilled half a dozen Valium into Fischer's palm. "Let's go for lunch later. My treat. Least I can do," he concluded.

At the Golden Gate, Fischer ordered a hot roast beef sandwich and a beer. Surely some news of Joan's whereabouts would come before the end of the day! The restaurant was crowded with varsity types. He looked them over, seeking Joan. Perhaps she'd never been to the Golden Gate. He didn't know.

"What's the matter? Want another beer?" Norm said.

"No thanks. Just looking. Just in case. I mean she could be anywhere, right?"

"Don't know what I'd do if Marion disappeared like that. And we don't even have kids! I'm surprised you came in to work today."

"The police thought I should."

"Good for you to keep busy. Keep your mind off it."

"I guess so."

"The rats I operated on yesterday are doing nicely. Only one died. Lesion too radical."

"Poor bugger."

"Sure. A lousy life. Nasty, brutish and short, as someone said. Hobbes, eh? But rats, they don't know any different," Norm added happily. He didn't give names to the rats like Fischer did. That sort of thing was the beginning of the end. Fischer'd move on to something else eventually. It was a matter of taste; of not wanting to see the suffering of others. Norm knew all about that. He had his own nightmares.

"It's necessary work," he said sternly. "Vital for medicine."

"Joan once saw Rumsky's lab, in the Smith Building."

"The cancer research man?"

"Yes, that one. She took his embryology course last year. Anyway, one day he showed her his lab. There were three colony cages full of white mice with tumours all over them. The cages," Fischer continued, "hadn't been cleaned for six months. The mice were a foot deep in their own dirt."

"Inexcusable. Lucky he didn't lose'em all to disease. Ruin the whole experiment." Norm shook his head disapprovingly, pursing his lips.

"Rumsky's lab assistant had quit - the man has one of those beastly explosive tempers, you see - and Rumsky hadn't found a suitable replacement. Joan was appalled. Some of those mice had tumours as big as themselves."

"Wee, sleekit, cowrin, tim'rous beastie."

"Hunh?"

"Burns. 'To a Mouse'. Scots poet. Read him.

You'll like him."

The only message in Fischer's box was a call from Rajendra. He pocketed the message slip. Raji wasn't likely to have any leads, but it would be nice to talk to him. It would pass the time. Couldn't very well call on Caroline and Jennifer every evening.

Fischer donned his lab coat and went through the motions with the remaining rats. Debbie was packing up to go when he emerged at last from the lab.

"You look awful," she said flatly. "You coming down with something? Or is it trouble, Vern?"

"Alles ist weg. Why trouble?"

"Some policeman called about an hour ago, a guy with a girl's name."

"Must have been Grace."

"Yeah, that's it. What's up, Fish?"

"It's Joan. We can't find her. She's been missing since Saturday, actually."

"No, kidding," she said, giving Fischer a queer look. "Yqu poor mite, you."

He dialed the number Grace had left for him but Grace wasn't there, so he explained his situation to the

stranger. Would he hold the line, please?

He held on. Shaking, aching. Praying almost, under his breath.

"Mr. Fischer?" Fischer croaked an affirmative. "Grace just left. Williams here." Throat tight, guts heaving. Fearing the worst. It was only her handbag, found on Wardlaw Street behind a hedge. Wallet, papers, shampoo, all there. Paw print on the outside. Muddy dog probably.

He rang down.

Wardlaw Street. He'd walk up there later and see for himself.

Chapter 5

Fischer dragged the laundry bag out of the cupboard and spilled the contents onto the floor as he had seen Joan do. He was trying to figure out how to sort it when his eye was caught by something green.

They shouldn't be there!

But there they were, the cords she'd been wearing that Saturday!

He held his breath, as though waiting for the miracle of Joan herself emerging from the heap of soiled clothes. He'd told everyone she'd been wearing those cords that day: he remembered so clearly her standing at the stove, stirring the macaroni for supper. He'd slapped her bottom affectionately and it had been a green corduroy bottom. What were those pants doing here now in the laundry? Had she changed her clothes that night just to go to the drugstore? What could that mean?

There was only one simple explanation: she'd dressed up to meet a lover. Ecch! cried Fischer. It was clear, all so clear! A lover with a fine car, impeccably attired, waiting just around the corner on Wardlaw Street. He'd enfolded Joan in his arms, his fur collar warm against her cheek, their kisses hot and lingering. 'Surprise, surprise!' her lover said, gesturing at the back seat of his Mercedes Benz. Valises waited there, packed with lovely new clothes for Joan such as she'd never had before.

And a new handbag naturally, of snakeskin, some crisp new bills already placed inside it. 'You never need to feel poor again, my darling!' said her lover. New identity cards, a false passport, a fine white handkerchief and a flask of imported scent. The lover relieved her of her old handbag, her old life, tossing it over the nearest hedge. Then they drove away, the Mercedes roaring in the moonlight.

Fischer felt the strength draining out of him; he lowered himself to the floor, clutched at his head and let the tears flow. He flung off his glasses and pressed at his eyes with fists clenched in grief and rage. He moaned. "Damn, damn, damn!" he cried, anguished. How could she have done it! Tears wetted the cuffs of his shirt. He pounded his fists on the floor, left, right, left, right, like beating a drum, then together. With each blow the grit from the floor bit into his flesh. At last he rolled backwards and lay inert, his sinuses congested, tears seeping out between his swollen lids and running hotly into his ears.

He hoped she'd be miserable. He hoped she'd be happy. He hoped her lover's cock would fall off. He fell asleep on the floor and dreamt that his left leg was really an umbrella; he struggled to open it, but the works were rusted and, in the meantime, a dream rain fell down on him in torrents.

He was cold and stiff when he awoke. The light

had shifted in the room. His head ached. He splashed water on his face, which was puffy, and on his hands, which were sore and bruised. He felt foolish and ashamed of his solitary outburst. He knew Joan hadn't got a rich lover. She was a shy person, almost awkward with men, and rather self-conscious about the little scar above her mouth. Whenever he complimented her on her appearance she seemed overwhelmed - surprised and delighted as a child admitted to grown-up company.

He picked up the green cords and immediately noticed a small stiff stain in the crotch. That explained why she'd changed: her period had come. She'd even mentioned it after supper, but he'd forgotten completely. Now he'd have to tell Constable Grace that she'd been wearing jeans after all. He dutifully phoned in this information: then set about cleaning the flat.

At three o'clock the doorbell rang, and the Hale family trooped in with Nicky. Fischer had resolved to have his son home again. All week the flat had been too quiet, like a ghost town. The least he could do for Joan was take care of their boy himself. Julia had pointed out how much more time and energy he'd have for his studies if Nicky stayed with them. She'd refrained from saying that the Hale home was better for a child, but Fischer supposed she must think it and a little hurt feeling had smouldered in his breast, as well as a nagging doubt. He stuck to his

guns, however. Nicky was his.

And if he let Nicky go, he'd have no one, no one at all, and nothing left of Joan herself but memories.

Herbert Hale stood aside to let his wife and daughter precede him through the doorway, then ducked his head and entered himself. In his large presence the apartment seemed to shrink. He moved cautiously down the hall to hang his coat, scanning the ceiling and walls for light fixtures and other projections hazardous to the over-tall. He relaxed visibly when he saw that he was safe. Straightening his back and standing at full height, he beamed down at Fischer. "Nice place," he remarked. "Nice of you to invite us, Vern. Your son is a grand little guy, we loved having him visit."

"I . . . it was a real help to me," Fischer stammered. Fischer darted about, unsure whom to take care of first. Hilary had rescued Nicky from his snowsuit and was letting him crawl about the living room. Fischer babbled some nonsense at the boy to try and make him laugh, but without success. What had induced him to invite the Hales for tea? Tea! He never drank it himself. He'd bought a day-old cake for the occasion, but now he debated whether it was good enough to serve. Perhaps he should have made sandwiches, cucumber sandwiches with the crusts off. Wasn't that what would be expected by people who hung portraits of the Royal Family in their bedroom? Julia was at his side, smiling at the baby. "What a little joy!" she

crooned. "Oh, what a sweetie-pie!" She rotated her finger above him and then poked his tummy so that he exploded with mirth. "I'll just put the kettle on," Fischer announced, rushing off down the long hallway. Joan had often wanted to have the Hales over and he'd always resisted. Now he'd done it and she wasn't even here to see!

"Maybe I can help," Hilary offered, miraculously appearing in the kitchen.

"If you want to. You can cut the cake."

"Oh, dear. It looks scrumptious, Vern, but my parents never eat between meals. Daddy's weight, you know. He's always having to watch it, on account of his back and his heart."

"Wouldn't you like a piece yourself?"

"Perhaps a teensy sliver. If I could eat it here in the kitchen? Poor Daddy, I don't want to tempt him, he finds it so hard to restrain himself."

"He looks like he could do anything he put his mind to," Fischer said.

"He's an awful softy about food." Hilary cut a sliver of cake and ate it with her fingers. Fischer wiped off an old tin tray and put out the mugs and spoons. "I have no cream," he said sadly.

"Milk's best in tea. Mum and Dad drink it black anyway."

"Maybe they'd prefer coffee?"

Hilary shook her head vigorously. Their coffee

intake was strictly rationed. "Nerves, you know," she explained. She cut herself another sliver of cake and ate it with gusto. Fischer rinsed out the teapot and speculated whether to use three bags or only two. "Two's plenty," Hilary counselled. She had dispatched a quarter of the cake by now and Fossil had spread herself out on the table and offered her tummy to be scratched. Hilary cast a critical eye at the tray. "All you need now," she said, as she obliged Fossil, "is a saucer or something to put the bags on once the tea's steeped, a jug of hot water, and a lemon if you've got one." When Fischer looked stricken she was quick to assure him that the lemon was of no account, absolutely of no account. "But hurry," she urged. "If I'm not separated soon from this scrumptious cake I'll get a ghastly case of spots."

Finally all was ready. Hilary offered to carry the tray and Fischer followed with the teapot. He felt quite taken over. He thought it must be lovely to have a daughter who was protective of one's health, an asset in the kitchen, and pretty to boot.

Herbert Hale had taken the straight wooden chair near the window, which was neither very comfortable nor of an accommodating size, but at least promised support to his back. Nicky sat at his feet, playing with his shoe laces and giggling uproariously whenever a foot jiggled. Hilary set the tray down on the windowseat near her father. Fischer stood in the middle of the room, smiling vacantly,

the teapot clasped to his bosom. Julia beckoned him to join her on the chesterfield. "Let Hilary pour out, Vern, it's good practise for her," she urged. With some reluctance he surrendered the teapot, apologizing under his breath for the make-shift lid. "But how wonderfully clever!" Hilary exclaimed. "To use a jar top, and it fits perfectly! Kraft Miracle Whip - you'll have a cup, won't you, Mum?" In mortified tones Fischer embarked on a lengthy account of why the teapot lid had not so far been replaced, and ended by confessing that it had been Joan's idea to use a jar top. At the mention of Joan by name the mood in the room darkened. Nothing had turned up since the discovery of the handbag. Herb gulped his tea, pondered the wretched mug in which it had been served to him, and fixed Fischer with a stern eye. "I rang my brother Jack last night," he told him. "I wanted to see how they were getting on down at their end. Jack's taking it very well on the whole, but Barbara's terribly broken up, I'm afraid."

"They were pleased when we said we'd be seeing you today," Julia interjected. "They send their love."

"Jack was all for getting on a plane and coming out here, in case there was anything he could do to help. I discouraged him, frankly. I told him everything possible's being done to find his daughter. Which it is, in my opinion. What do you think, Vern?"

"I agree with you, I don't see how my father-in-law could do anything constructive here," Fischer

said. "But on the other hand, I've very little confidence in the police. They're friendly and all that. They do what they can. But they've no deep personal interest, if you see what I mean. What's Joan to them?" he spat out finally.

Herbert Hale raised his eyebrows. He put the ugly mug down on the windowseat and pressed his vast fingertips together. His chair creaked as if he'd grown heavier all of a sudden. "Is there anything in particular you think the police should be doing that they haven't done?" he inquired artlessly. "Anywhere in particular they should look?"

"Why haven't they dragged the river? We're so close to it, it's practically at our back door! If I were them, it'd be one of the first places I'd search! Joan loves the river, you know. We used to walk along the river paths and sometimes she'd put her hands up, like blinkers" - Fischer raised his own hands to illustrate - "she'd blot out the buildings and everything that was part of the city. She'd seek out little views and angles from which to pretend she was somewhere in the country instead."

"So you think that that night she went down there?"

"I don't know it for a fact, obviously. But I think the police should regard it as a serious possibility."

"I daresay Joan could swim," Julia hazarded.

"She'd have had enough sense to stay clear of the edge, too, I'd think, especially in the dark. Unless -"

"Yes, unless she was pushed," said Herb quickly. His chair creaked even more ominously than before, and Fischer leapt to his feet and went to fetch a sturdier one. The Hales took advantage of Fischer's momentary absence to exchange meaningful glances, which Hilary, who was playing on the floor with her young cousin, was quick to perceive. "I don't think Joan's dead," she blurted out. "I dreamt about her the other night, and in the dream she was happy and laughing at something."

"Dreams and hunches aside," Herb said portentously, "Winnipeg's police force is very dedicated and thorough. They'll be following up every lead and report between here and Timbuctoo. Every other force in the country, on the continent in fact, will have been alerted. Sooner or later Joan will be found. I personally don't think we can ask for more than that."

"Of course, you're right," Fischer acknowledged. Deep down he felt it to be terrible and shameful that his wife's disappearance had become such a public property. He had failed in some way. If he'd been a better man he'd have found her himself, rescued her himself, and no one else would have needed to know.

"We mustn't give up hope," Herb concluded piously. "That's what I tried to tell Jack and Barbara."

"Poor Vern," said Julia, patting his hand. "You

mustn't forget to take care of yourself, dear. You look quite frazzled and worn, and no wonder, I say. You need a nice shoulder to cry on."

"Oh, Mother! You always think crying makes things better automatically!"

"It very often helps, dear."

"I cried earlier today," Fischer declared, largely for Hilary's sake.

"I bet you anything you felt better for it," Julia chirped.

"Yes," Fischer agreed politely. "For a little while I did feel better." And he winked at Hilary.

Chapter 6

Fischer stepped out into the snow and stared angrily at the flakes swirling like bits of gold in the yellow light. When Louise had invited him to supper he'd accepted at once. She'd been the Fischer's good friend ever since their arrival in Winnipeg three years before. He and Joan had spent countless happy evenings in her apartment. On a few occasions she'd even come to theirs, though she rarely went out, preferring the role of hostess to that of guest. At first Joan had found her intimidating: Louise was so much older, so beautifully dressed, so accomplished. She'd soon warmed to her, however, for Louise was very generous to people she liked. She charmed them, praised them, encouraged them in every way, and so sincerely that you couldn't help but be captivated. The one tragedy was that she'd never married. Fischer hadn't been able to figure out why - until tonight. He shook his head at the thought and stumbled through the snowdrifts that had piled up on the path he always took from Stradbroke to Rose Street. Tonight Louise had looked stunning, as always. She'd worn a silky blue dress that hugged her figure like a second skin. Naturally they'd flirted. They always flirted. Louise really enjoyed flirting and had transformed it into a high art. Over a candlelight supper they talked at length about Joan. Not where she could be, so much, but how she had been. It was

clear that Louise had little hope left that Joan would be found alive. After all, she'd been gone a full four weeks. Nevertheless, the conversation had been soothing to Fischer, almost comforting - a real appreciation of Joan. Her delicacy, her sensitivity, her wit. Her artlessness. It had almost brought her to life - Louise's tender account of her first meeting with Joan at a reception for new students. How Joan had lingered by a table furtively eating cookies the entire afternoon. Her innocent, child-like hunger: so different from Louise's own. Fischer plodded crossly down Rose Street, his parka hood thrown back, his gloveless hands thrust deep in his pockets.

After supper he and Louise sat in the living room. She forsook her favourite chair and joined him on the sofa. "Werner Fischer," she mused. "I used to think it was a funny name. I thought, in fact, that you were quite an odd little man, I really did. But you're tough, Vern, and sweet, too, and you don't seem odd to me now." Moving closer, so that her perfume filled his nostrils, she took his hand and placed it squarely in her lap. She stroked the backs of his fingers. He was at a loss for words, but aware of her smile. When she said, "Kiss me, Vern" he turned his face obediently to hers. He felt like a wooden puppet. They'd kissed before, but not like that. "Don't you like aggressive ladies?" she chided, trapping his hand hard between her thighs. He mumbled something about never

having been unfaithful to Joan. "Joan has nothing to do with it," she countered. When he withdrew she gave him a withering look that reminded him of his mother when he'd failed her in some way. Contempt, that's what it was, and it turned the whole evening sour. It unmanned him. She must hate men. As he left Louise's building, his breath fumed in the cold air, the white puffs giving form to his sense of outrage.

Fischer had been so absorbed in thoughts that he hadn't glanced at the car that had revved up when he emerged from Louise's building. The driver was a man named Sampson. When Fischer headed for Rose Street, Sampson turned onto Osborne and drove a course in parallel with his quarry. At Rose and River he lit another cigarette, one of many he'd smoked that night, and took a quick swig from a mickey he kept hidden between the seat cushions. Fischer started to cut through the service station lot at the corner, and Sampson drove slowly around to Roslyn, pulling in just opposite the apartment building where Fischer lived. He got out of his car and made a pretense of brushing snow off his rear windscreen. Over the roof of the old Chevy he watched Fischer come slouching along, deep in thought. Then a funny thing happened. Fischer stopped suddenly and wheeled about. Sampson wondered if he'd been spotted, but actually Fischer'd never looked his way, not once. He'd looked up at the service station banners

puffing in the wind. Sampson knew about the banners; everyone knew about the banners. What he didn't know was the fact that their message - "Put a tiger in your tank" - had reminded Fischer of his sister-in-law, and that Phyllis had reminded him of Wardlaw Street and Joan's handbag. Disappointed that his evening's work was not done, Sampson jumped into his car and reversed illegally so he could keep Fischer in view.

Fischer crossed Osborne and stopped in front of the drugstore to study the window display. It was not a very imaginative effort. In front of a pyramid of boxes of disposable diapers were two pyramids of smaller red boxes containing trusses and bandaids. A small dirty sign taped in the corner of the window read: Urinalysis Pregnancy Test: Results in 24 Hours. Fischer took his time. Hadn't Joan on that fateful evening passed this same display?

He followed her faded footsteps. At the corner of Wardlaw, in front of the place where her purse had been found, he stopped again. A pale light showed in an upper window, a narrow golden band between the pillow of snow on the sill and the lowered blind. He whistled the theme from a Bach partita rather piercingly; it was the melody they'd used as a signal. He closed his eyes, picturing her. A car passed him, the sound of it muted in the snow. He opened his eyes again. A man and a dog were approaching. The dog was a big black Alsatian. There had been a pawprint on Joan's purse. Was this the beast that had made

it? Bursting with hope, he hastened on.

"Good evening!" he called. "Lovely evening, isn't it?"

"Lovely," the man agreed. He was older and taller than Fischer. In the curls of his black persian lamb hat the snow winked like diamonds. The shoulders of his overcoat were mantled with snow, as was the dark dorsal hair of his companion. The dog wore a stout collar studded with stars.

"Perhaps you can help me," Fischer said. "You and your dog must have walked along this street before, and possibly you may have seen something a few weeks ago. On the tenth of October my wife's purse was lost here. It was a Saturday, like now. Probably about nine o'clock, give or take a few minutes."

"I have never found a purse, my dear sir," said the man, making to move off.

"No! No! Please wait! Or I will accompany you if you don't mind, a few steps of the way!"

The man stood tall and sniffed the air appreciatively. He walked with long graceful strides, the dog padding along at his heel, while Fischer kept to the man's side and explained that the purse had been found with a pawprint on it, under a hedge.

"Bismarck is not a purse-snatcher either," the man said archly.

"It's not the purse I'm concerned about," Fischer

explained. "It's my wife."

"So much the worse for you, then."

"She simply disappeared. Without a trace, except for that purse. It was found just there - behind the hedge of this very house," Fischer continued breathlessly. "A young woman with long dark hair. A little scar here," he added, touching the place below his nose. "Wearing a camel hair coat a size too large."

"I am terribly sorry, sir. Perhaps the police . . ."

"They're on the case, of course. It was even in the Free Press."

"If the police are involved, they'll do all that can be done. As for me, I think it unlikely that I was walking here at the time you mentioned. Bismarck and I usually take our little constitutional after the ten o'clock news." For the first time the man smiled, but it was a dismissive smile. He turned sharply with an abrupt "Good evening" and strode back in the direction from which they'd come, the faithful Bismarck at his heel.

Fischer stared after them. He wanted badly to smoke. Equally he wanted to follow the dog and the man, suspecting they knew something of Joan despite the man's denials. He began to cross the road, not having made up his mind. The pair retreated quickly down Wardlaw Street. Fischer hurried after them on the opposite side of the road, concealed by parked cars with their burden of snow. He again failed to notice Sampson, and gave only a fleeting

glance at the house where Phyllis lived. The upper window was dark. Phyllis would be out, then, or already asleep.

Not once did the man with the dog look back. Fischer dared not whistle, and made sure that his boots didn't squeak too much. By and by he heard the sound of an engine some way back, as Sampson sorrowfully resumed the chase. Sampson had made the following notes:

"10:56 p.m. - Stopped man with big dog. Words exchanged.

F. reversed direction, accompanying man and dog nearly to corner . . ."

The detective yawned. He would have been the first to admit that his notes were not very revealing.

Fischer crossed Nassau Avenue, turned up Daly Street and continued along McMillan. He was aware of the sound of a car but dared not take his eyes off the dog and the man. Occasionally the tail of the dog swung back and forth joyfully: when the man spoke to him, perhaps. Fischer would have given much to know the words the man had uttered.

Quite suddenly, though no more than half a block ahead, they vanished. Fischer gaped in disbelief at the empty street. Then he ran. Clearly they had turned in, or rounded a corner, and he must be lively or he would lose sight of them altogether. Sampson had long since divined that Fischer was following the dog and the man, but he, too, had failed to note the exact point where they had changed course.

Fischer ran clumsily to the next cross street and stood peering down it for a long time before shoving his hands, red with cold, back into his pockets. With a shrug he acknowledged failure. He turned dejectedly onto Arbuthnot with the intention of backtracking along the river and thence home. First he cleared the snow from a space on the hood of a parked car, laid out his tobacco pouch and fumbled for the papers and his Rizla roller. When the cigarette was made, he cupped his hands around it and struck a match. Sampson rounded the corner, driving slowly. Fischer stared at the car. His heart contracted painfully in his chest. He remembered the faint murmur of tires on snow. The car that had started up when he left Louise's. Now the car pulled into a parking space near the corner of Arbuthnot and the Crescent. Yet the driver remained in it: no door slammed, no person hurried here or there. Fischer threw his cigarette into a snow bank and stalked off again towards Wardlaw. He was impatient now to be home. He took long rapid steps, like someone late for a train. He pulled up the hood on his parka. It was full of snow and a hundred icy drops began to course down his neck. It was worth it; it made him feel hidden. Now and then he took a backwards look. At the cross streets he looked down towards the river. The car did not appear. He was not being followed after all! He kept up his fast pace, humming a little, past Hugo past Daly Street. A car approached, not slowly this time. He felt convinced it was the very same car that had

dogged his footsteps for the past hour.

He passed Fox's and crossed River with the lights. He was now only a few yards from home. A car approached, heading south. He watched it turn onto Roslyn. It pulled to the side and came to a halt.

He began to tremble. His knees wobbled. The trembling made him aware of how cold he was. His feet were wet, and the snowy parka hood had chilled his head and neck. He was frozen and afraid. He crossed Osborne. It seemed to take forever. He kept one eye on the car, one on the door of his building. His stomach had knotted up again, and he wanted nothing more than to be safe in his own place with the doors bolted. He had given little thought to Caroline but he thought of her now. She would be there; she was babysitting Nicky. She was safe: someone to whom he could explain and someone from whom he had nothing to fear.

He pushed the elevator button and waited. A man entered the building. It could have been anyone. Fischer's glasses were fogged, he couldn't hope to recognize the driver. The man read the names on the mailboxes; then began to mount the marble stairs. He didn't look at Fischer. Fischer craned his neck to see how far away the elevator was. It was still three storeys up. He made for the stairs. At the second floor, he saw it go by with the man in it. He darted along the passage that led to the catwalk. Once in the east block he went out of the building and stood behind one of the concrete pillars that flanked

the Roslyn Street entrance. The car across the street was empty, as he'd guessed it would be. The tiger banners in the service lot flapped in the wind. What a fool he was. If only he'd gone straight home!

He braced himself between the pillar and the brick, hoping to control his shaking. He couldn't believe Grace would have ordered him followed. The police had given no sign of suspecting him. So who was this man and what would he do when he got him? Perhaps he was the person who had abducted Joan! If that was the case, Fischer should turn right around and seek that man out!

The man he had seen in the entranceway had been big and strong. He probably had a gun. Fischer braced himself with renewed force, for his shaking was violent now and his teeth chattered. His mind reeled.

If these people had Joan, he must go with them. He stared at the car, as if it had the power to reveal his wife's location. It didn't cross his mind to search it. It would certainly be locked. Besides, he was afraid. He was also terribly cold. His discomfort, however, was as nothing compared to his awful sense of mission. He must go back to the man. He must make him take him to Joan. It was his duty to find her. This might be his one and only chance.

He pushed back in through the heavy doors and began to climb the stairs. He felt like an idiot. The man might leave and he might miss him. Perhaps he should have stayed near the car. It was too cold out there, however. Faster

and faster he drove his legs, like pistons, up past the first floor, up past the second floor. Pains pierced his chest, his parka felt like lead, his toes burned as his circulation returned. His breath came in small sharp gasps, up past the third floor, up past the fourth floor, and at last to the fifth floor! The corridors yawned darkly. His glasses were foggy and bespattered, breaking up the dim light. He groped and plunged through the familiar corridors of the east block, then tore across the catwalk. He felt the catwalk sway. The two towers swayed too, and threatened to crash together; there was a bang but it was only the slam of the door sucked to by the wind. And there he was: the man. A man at any rate. Fischer wiped his glasses. The man was waiting for the elevator to come up again.

"You were looking for me," Fischer burst out in a thin breathless voice. There was a smell of whisky when the man spoke. The elevator was grinding upwards. It was nearly there.

"I beg your pardon?" Sampson said, buying time.

"I said, I believe you were looking for me. Me, Fischer."

Sampson took care to look bewildered. "No", he lied. "Looking for you? Do I know you, Mr. . . . Ah . . . I didn't catch your name, I'm sorry."

"Fischer. Werner Fischer. Husband of Joan Fischer. The man you abducted."

"I'm afraid . . ." Sampson began.

"Take me to her! Please!"

"You must be crazy, mister."

"Take me to her! You must! Oh, you can't imagine! I know you have her. You followed me. In that car. Up and down Wardlaw. Ever since Stradbroke. I'll go quietly. I don't care where, so long as my wife is there." Fischer had caught hold of Sampson's sleeve. The elevator clunked to a stop.

"I'm afraid you're very much mistaken," said Sampson in tones of genuine sorrow. So he had been spotted! Damn it all! He was definitely losing his touch! "Listen, pal," he told Fischer, "I haven't been following you, I assure you. As for this Joan you speak of - I don't know why you should think I know her. I'm a peaceable family man."

"Wait! Take me with you!"

"You've got the wrong guy, mister. See here, let me go, now." Sampson shook himself abruptly and Fischer let go of the coat sleeve, but seized the elevator door. Sampson stepped onto the elevator, on his bland face the expression of patience sorely tried. Fischer held the door open. The man was cornered now. He gazed at him, willing him to speak. "You must tell me about Joan. You must. Just think how I feel. Can't you do that, at least? What kind of brute are you?" He paused. Sampson was giving him a level look. Sampson was saying nothing.

"I know it was you," Fischer continued. "You were

after me. What were you here for, if you weren't after me?"

"That's easy," Sampson said. "I wanted to see my sister Alma. In number 54. Not that it's any business of yours. Now, kindly come in or else release the door. It's late."

"Swear you know nothing of Joan!"

"I swear it."

Reluctantly Fischer released the door. He watched the elevator descend. He felt his last hope had been torn from him.

Suppose the man had lied?

He shouldn't have let him go so easily.

Oh, if he'd only had a gun! Not that he knew how to use one. Oh, how ill-prepared he was! Helplessly he watched the elevator's descent. The door groaned open. Tiny far-away footsteps with a hint of squelch scuffed away. It made no sense. It was crazy. Fischer staggered through to the catwalk. Caroline was waiting! Ah, Caroline!

He leaned dangerously far over the balustrade and was sick.

Chapter 7.

The child wriggled as he was carried up the icy path. Fischer had never visited the Hales without Joan before. Now that he was there on the threshold he thought with pleasure of the big fireplace in the library, the smell of pine logs burning, and the dinner Julia would have ready. When she invited him she said: 'You'd better accept, Herb has an interesting proposition for you'. His curiosity was piqued, he had to admit.

The big door opened and Hilary reached out her arms and took Nicky. Within all was warm, bright and gay. Hilary herself was radiant, dressed in a blouse with puff sleeves and a skirt of schottentuch.

"Better take your shoes off," she said. "They look wet."

"I've an awful feeling there's a hole in my sock."

"Hang on, then. I'll get you my old moccs to wear." She tore up the stairs two at a time on her long shapely legs, leaving him once more holding his son and a long thin package that contained two pink roses, all he could afford. He wondered if Herb's proposition would make the investment worthwhile.

"Try them," said Hilary. "You can keep them if they fit."

"Oh, I'll just borrow them." Fischer squeezed her arm. "You're very kind, very beautiful, too." She winced

inwardly at his touch. He showed her his package. "One is for you," he explained. "And one for your charming mother."

Bowing quickly, he kissed her hand. It was an awkward gesture. She had Nick in her arms and the child was exploring her ear with his fingers. Moreover, Fischer had never kissed her before. She escorted him into the library. The moccasins made scarcely any sound on the carpet. She repeated that he must keep them. The thought of putting her well-groomed feet where his had been, however briefly, was disturbing. She would have liked to wash his kiss away, too, but at the same time she warmed with gratitude that he had thought her worthy of it. In the library the fire blazed in welcome. To put her guilt to rest, she offered him a secret. She had planned all along to tell him anyway.

"You must promise never to let on," she said, darting a glance over her shoulder.

"I promise."

"Cross your heart."

"Cross my heart and hope to turn into a toad if I tell," said Fischer.

"Well, then." Hilary bent towards him and lowered her voice: "Father had you followed by a detective. They don't know I know. But I know lots they don't think I know." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "You were followed about for a whole week," she said. "Father wanted to be absolutely certain you were innocent. I don't think he really mistrusts you, he just felt he had to be sure."

Please don't hold it against him, Vern, it's that dreadful business he's in, you know. Before getting to be vice-president he worked his way up. You should hear the tales he tells of fraudulent claims. Anyway, after a week he got a report that dispelled all his doubts. I heard Mother and him discussing it. It was all mixed up with talk about Uncle Jack and Auntie Barbara. I think Daddy half-hoped, you know, that something would turn up against you, so that he could adopt Nicky. He thought Jack and Barbara would have let him."

"Oh my God," said Fischer, sickening at the thought.

"Don't think ill of him, Vern, please. He lost a little boy before I was born. Gordie died of leukemia when he was just three and a half."

"Joan mentioned it once. I'd forgotten." He looked at his son. The boy was trying to make a top work. Herb would have given him a good home with every advantage.

"Promise you won't think ill of him," Hilary said again, and touched his arm.

At that moment they heard the step of Herbert Hale in the back hall. "Do you know what this 'proposition' is all about?" Fischer whispered. Signing that she'd talk to him again before the evening was over, Hilary shook her head.

"We'd better find Master Nick some other toys, I think, that old top's not much fun! Come along, Nicky-boy!"

She swept the child up in her arms just as her father strode into the room. Herbert Hale smiled warmly at Fischer and laid a giant arm lightly across his shoulders. "Flowers, eh?" he said, eyeing the thin damp parcel. "Come on out to the kitchen. Julia can take care of them and we can get ourselves a little drink."

Fischer mulled over Hilary's information as Herb steered him along. So that man had been a detective! Well, at least Herb wouldn't know how he'd thrown up over the railing; the guy had gone by then. So Hale didn't know about Caroline, either. How she'd felt his head when he said it ached, how her long cinnamon hair had brushed his face, awakening his desire! How he'd pulled her closer. How she'd yielded, so beautifully.

They carried their scotch into the library. Hale bent down carefully, protective of his back, and added another log to the fire. Then he eased himself into his favorite chair. The two men sipped their drinks in silence and watched the flames bite into the fresh log, sending up fountains of blue and orange sparks. "This is the life, eh?" Herb sighed happily. "How've you been managing, Vern? Studies progressing despite everything?"

Fischer affirmed with a nod that they were.

"I went into Kennedy Books the other day," Herb continued. "Had a little chat with Mary. She's a fine person, isn't she? Very, very fond of Joan, too. Misses her help, of course, especially now with Christmas, just

around the corner." Herb paused, feeling his way. "It struck me," he said, "that apart from missing Joan and being extremely worried, as indeed we all are, you must be short her bit of income, too. The rent isn't any less just because she isn't there, is it? The babysitter still has to be paid. Mary tells me Joan took home nearly \$100 a month. That pretty well paid the rent, I should guess." -

"Yes," said Fischer with faint disgust. He might have known Herb would talk about money! "Julia and I feel we'd like to help you out." Herb went on. "See you get on your feet. We think Joan would appreciate that, and we're doing it for her sake, too, not just for you. So," he said, smiling easily, "I've got a cheque here made out to you in the amount of two hundred dollars. As long as Joan's gone, and until you get your degree, there'll be a similar cheque, for one hundred dollars, on the fifteenth of every month." He passed the pale rectangle to Fischer. "Better see if we spelt your name correctly," he added. He rubbed his ample chin. His eyes twinkled.

"I'm stunned," said Fischer, gazing at the cheque. "I'm very grateful, you can't imagine. This will make a great deal of difference," he ventured lamely.

"Name right, Vern?"

"Perfect. I can't thank you enough, Herb. You and Julia."

"Say no more, my friend. No. Tell me one thing, Vern. What were you called at home? 'Vern', like here?"

"Usually. Sometimes - when my mother or father wanted to make a point - they'd call me 'Werner'."

"Do you like your name? I guess that's a funny question, the sort of question kids toss about, but I've never liked my own name much. 'Herbert' - there's something namby-pamby about it, eh? Silly for a great big guy like me." He tapped his thigh, as if its girth gave him special pleasure. " Seems to be the way the 'e' is pronounced, and your name has the same 'e' sound in it. 'Herbert', 'Werner'. See what I mean?"

"You're right. 'Werner' is a bit 'namby-pamby' too, as you say. Names are queer. I used to wish I was called 'Klaus' - one strong syllable! Incorruptible! It would be hard to change names now, however."

"I had a yen to be 'Gordon'. Don't know why."

They fell into separate reveries. What was the connection between the detective and the money? Or the money and their Christian names? Perhaps there was no connection. His mother used to station herself on the wide stairway at home and holler for him. Her voice resounded from basement to attic: "Furr-nee! Furr-nee!" She used to call for everyone that way except their father, and expect them to come instantly. In his memory the names of their servants and even his sisters and brother only came to him now shaped by his mother's imperious tones: Al-fried! Ge-org! Ag-nes! What a relief it had always been to hear another called, and not himself!

At dinner he and Hilary exchanged meaningful glances. She had Nicky beside her. As she fed him, her own mouth opened and shut like a fish's. Did she know about the money? It was blood money, of course. It eased Hale's conscience. It would be interesting to know what the detective had cost him. And whether he'd been hired by Herbert Hale or by his alter ego, the indomitable Gordon.

Hale carved the joint. Julia served the vegetables. Nicky chortled happily and Fischer explained all about the comprehensive exams, which, because of the trouble with Joan, he'd put off till the new year. After that the conversation turned to family matters; Joan's sister Phyllis, her parents in Montreal, her grandmother who was now in a nursing home, and Herb's aunt, who was planning to move back to Winnipeg when she retired. It meant very little to him, they were people he hardly knew, except for Phyllis. Nicky reached forward for his cup and Fischer hurried to his side; Hilary was helping to clear. He held the cup; the child blew bubbles into his milk.

"Drink nicely," said Fischer.

"Me dink."

"Nicely."

The child complied. Oh, what a good boy he was, so clever, so obliging, and his hair like fine silk!

"He'll be walking any day now; then he'll be a handful," Herb warned. His voice quivered with pride and love, and something else, a kind of pain that made Fischer

turn his face away and remember the son that had died. Instinctively, he would have liked to staunch that pain, had he but two Nickys. On the other hand, Herb still had his wife, and a beautiful daughter who adored him. Fischer didn't know if he still had a wife, or whether he'd ever have a daughter. And Nicky might - but no! He wouldn't allow the obscene thought to surface in his mind, he pushed it back, back, back: for here was Herbert Hale, so many years later, still keening with the pain of that loss.

If Joan were really lost to him, how would he be feeling in fifteen years? He shuddered to think.

Chapter 8

The Hales' money made it possible for Fischer to give a Christmas party, as they had done the preceding year. He cherished the fantasy that Joan would come home while the party was in progress, drawn by so many thoughts of her vibrating simultaneously through the ether. He made a point of inviting anyone who had attended last year's party, and also anyone who was particularly attached to Joan, like Mary from the Bookstore, who had never been to their home before. It was a strange gathering, of mingled and not always compatible interests. He had even invited Fred and his wife from the grocery store, for they always asked him if he had had any news, and, unlike so many, seemed sincere and unembarrassed in their persistent interest. Louise, Raji and Caroline helped with the preparations, and acted as surrogate hosts, taking coats, showing people about the flat, and helping to set out the food. In the front room Janusz and a Mexican friend played guitars. Sometimes Janusz sang mournfully. Nicky crawled among the many legs or was borne aloft in someone's arms, chortling with glee. Fischer himself circulated between the various groups, at first smiling mechanically, and then with a strange intensity. How pleased Joan would be, if she knew they had come! he invariably remarked. He didn't tell anyone that he expected her at midnight, but as that hour approached his excitement turned even more feverish. He seemed to hear her

name spoken everywhere: 'Joan! Joan! Joan! Joan!'

bouncing up and down like a ball tossed from one to another.

"You're thinking about her, aren't you?" Caroline pressed against him and planted a kiss on his mouth.

"Sure I am. How can I help it?" he replied happily, the colour rushing to his cheeks. At ten to twelve he found himself in conversation with one of the psychology department contingent.

"I never realized you had such a big place, Vern. You could rent a room or two, you know."

"I suppose so," said Fischer.

"Sure. Take in a few extra bucks. Why not? Do you know Yoshi Itubi? Student from Japan?"

"I've seen him around the department. He's working with Malik, isn't he?"

"Not yet, he isn't. Doing make-up courses. Japanese government scholarship. Needs a place to stay. Been staying in residence but not happy there, too noisy. Very studious young man. Not so young, either. About your own age. If you want, I'll put him onto you. Up to you, of course. You may prefer not, right?"

Fischer nodded his head affably, his ear straining for the sound of the elevator. He broke away and went to look at the clock in the kitchen. There were people everywhere, even in the pantry, even in Nicky's room. The cats were hiding under the crib, distressed by the invasion.

"Nice party, Vern," people said as he made his way

through the crowd. "Really a great party!"

It was twelve-oh-five by the clock. Gott im Himmel, he felt a need to be alone. He went out on the catwalk and watched the smoke of his breath drift upwards towards the stars. He thought of that first night, how he'd dropped the beer bottle, and of the night he'd been sick. He pulled a coin from his pocket. "Heads, she'll be found," he said, tossing it up at the sky. He missed catching it, and it slipped soundlessly over the edge.

Yoshi Itubi moved in just before New Year's. He occupied Phyllis's old room. At first Fischer saw in Yoshi a student such as he himself had been when he'd come to Canada - what was it? Ten years before? Yoshi's mastery of English was minimal. Fischer had read English books when he first arrived and gone often to the cinema. He tried to persuade Yoshi to read Alice in Wonderland, but he wouldn't or couldn't - it was foolishness, Yoshi declared haughtily, a story for babies - did Fischer think he was a baby? He was no baby, he said. He was a man. Couldn't Fischer see that?

Yoshi was short and slight; he looked about 18, though he was nearly 30. The psychology department was very pleased that he had moved in with Fischer, and Fischer himself was pleased to begin with. The money Yoshi paid for room and board was a big help, and the truth was that for just himself and Nicky the flat was too large. Fischer had

thought of moving. But what if Joan were to return? How would she find her way home again? He would be moving anyway in due course. He'd begun applying for jobs. He'd bought a new suit, to wear to interviews, as soon as he'd passed his comprehensive exams. He would have to visit universities in other cities. He expected to complete his research by July. The thesis could be written anywhere. It was the last hurdle.

Another reason for staying in the Roslyn Apartments was Caroline. They had grown closer. It was an odd relationship in which Fischer was not quite a full participant, because of his bursts of hope about Joan. On the other hand it was very necessary to him. Yoshi was curious about Fischer's women. He disliked and disapproved of Caroline, and saw her as little better than a prostitute. He pointedly refrained from speaking to her. They were baffled by his attitude.

"Canadian woman bads, I think," Yoshi opined one night at supper. He spoke only to Fischer, ignoring Caroline.

"Why do you say that?"

"I have reasons," Yoshi muttered darkly. "They not like Japanese womans. Japanese woman very good, very good. Not copulating except with own husband."

"Well, Caroline has no husband."

"So? Then she shouldn't copulate. Very bad. Very dirty womans."

"I resent that, Yoshi," Caroline interjected.

"I not speak to you, do I? I speak Fischer. You not interrupt! You bad womans shut up!" he brought out triumphantly. He turned back to Fischer, leaving Caroline dumbstruck at his rudeness. "See here, Fischer. This Joans woman, your wife. You married to her, right?"

"Of course."

"So! You know!"

"I don't see what I'm supposed to know, Yoshi."

"Simple. That you marry, then copulating okay. Not so very good, maybe, but okay. Anyways, this Joans, where she gone?"

"I don't know."

"She disappeared one night," Caroline offered.

"How you cannot know? You being big foolishness I think, Fischer. How your wife go alone on street, you not know where? You see, she bads too. Canadian woman all bad."

Notwithstanding his narrow views on the subject of Canadian women, Yoshi was convenient as a babysitter, provided Nicky was asleep. He was quite content, then, to have Fischer go out. It gave him an opportunity to raid the fridge. Fischer soon discovered the price he was paying for his bit of freedom - one night a half a pound of cheese and all the oranges; another time all the eggs and a quart of milk. He began to observe what Yoshi took for his lunch to the university. Never once did he take bread: always

cheese, eggs, meat and fruit. Sometimes vegetables, but never bread. At supper, too, the one meal they ate together, Yoshi avoided rice, potatoes and pasta. He was shocked at the quantities of rice Fischer ate. One night they argued about it. Yoshi insisted starchy foods were unhealthy. Fischer said a diet like Yoshi's wasn't healthy, either, and was too expensive besides.

The professor who had brought them together waylaid Fischer one day a couple of months after Yoshi moved in.

"What do you think of him?" Mike wanted to know.

"He's a bit strange," said Fischer guardedly.

"Still a big language problem, eh?"

"Yes," said Fischer.

"He's not doing very well in his courses."

"He studies all the time."

"Is it just language holding him back, do you think? That's what we have to figure out. He seems to have trouble with so many basic concepts. He's a dead loss in abnormal psych. Even in stats where you'd expect him to have an easier time, he asks irrelevant questions and muffs everything. Some of the other students have complained."

"Really?"

"Some of the girls. He seems not to like girls. Gets very annoyed if they speak up in class. That sort of thing. We have to decide whether the problem is language and culture or more a personal thing, you see. If he's not going to make it, do we give him another chance, or send him

home? I'd like your opinion. It would carry a lot of weight with the committee."

Fischer promised to give the matter thought.

In fact, he did better than that. He invited Bill and Miko for supper. Though born in Canada, Miko had spent two years in Japan with relatives and had also entertained numerous Japanese visitors. She was very charming to Yoshi and Yoshi was not at all rude to her. He did resist having a lengthy conversation with her and Bill in Japanese, however, on the grounds that that would be inconsiderate to Fischer. As agreed, Fischer called Miko the next day to see what she thought.

"He certainly has great admiration for you, Vern."

"Yes, but is he crazy?"

"Well, crazy is a strong word. He didn't talk much, either," Miko went on, "but my impression is that he is quite odd. He means well, though, and he's really trying to adjust, too. I don't want to say anything that would be unfair to him."

"Would you consider him a typical Japanese man, Miko?"

Miko's musical laugh bubbled into his ear. "No," she exclaimed. "No, I certainly wouldn't say he was typical! And neither would Bill, and he knows nearly as many Japanese men as I do!"

"That's a big help, Miko, thanks."

"Now wait, Vern. There's something important I

still must say about this poor fellow. He does have enormous pride, we Japanese all do, and he'll take failure extremely hard. If there's any way, Vern, should it come to that: any way for him to save face: if you can somehow arrange it, since he respects you so . . . could you try to do whatever, Vern?"

Fischer promised to do his best.

One night he and Caroline went to see The Seventh Seal at the film club. It was a film he had first seen with Joan before they were married and Joan had loved it. Fischer was especially moved this time by the reunion between the knight and his wife. Just such a reunion as he might wish for between Joan and himself, he thought mistily, imagining that Joan, too, was in some sense playing chess with Death. He and Caroline were silent as they made their way home. It was not very cold; the thaw had begun; the river ice was beginning to break up. Caroline had seen the film for the first time; she was remembering the face of the little witch who had consorted with the devil and been burnt at the stake; The witch looked a bit like her sister Jennifer, and she was sorry that Jennifer had not gone with them. She guessed what Fischer was thinking. She always knew when he was thinking of his absent wife. She squeezed his hand. "Nearly home," she said.

"Coming up for tea?"

"You want me to?"

"Yes. Sure."

Fischer pushed open the kitchen door, and there was Yoshi, looking very glum, an open book on the table in front of him. He appeared not to be reading. His skinny arms were folded across his narrow chest, and he peered down his nose at Fischer in his loftiest manner.

"Fischer," he began, "somebody bust my light. It not work. All evening I sit here, impossible to study."

"It's probably the bulb, Yoshi. Did you try putting in a new bulb?"

"Bulb? What is 'bulb'?"

"The part that lights up."

"I am telling you, it not lighting up. That whole point, Fischer. Why you not listen?"

"I'm listening, Yoshi. Calm down, for God's sake." Squatting down, Fischer rummaged in the cupboard under the sink. "This is a bulb," he said. "Bulbs burn out. When they do, you put a new one in."

"In Japan, bulbs not burn out."

"Course they do, old boy. Come on. We'll try this one." He stormed down the hall to Yoshi's room. The air within was heavy with the smell of pomades and hair oils. He replaced the bulb and the lamp came to life.

"Amazing!" said Yoshi. He turned it on and off a couple of times to make sure. "Amazing!" he said again. It was his latest word. The week before his word had been 'claustrophobic': the one notion from his abnormal psych

course that he hadn't found objectionable.

Fischer showed him the old bulb. "See," he said. "It's black. And if you shake it, it rattles. No good anymore. All used up. Garbage."

"Never, in Japan such a thing, Fischer. Canada bad country, bulbs break, no good. Nothing last."

"You must have led a very sheltered life, old chap."

"Sheltered? What means 'sheltered'?"

"I'd tell you some other time. I must get back to Caroline."

"How was film?"

"Great!"

"What it about?"

"I'm sorry, Yoshi. I must get back to Caroline."

"No Fischer, wait. Please."

"What is it, then?"

"Tell me about film."

"Goodnight, Yoshi."

"Fischer! Fischer! Wait, I have to tell you something important!"

"Tell me tomorrow."

"It about Joans."

"Joan? My wife?" Fischer demanded with desperate urgency.

"No. I joke only. See how you stop, pay attention. No. Not about Joans. I fail stats test,

Fischer. Very bad test." He stood in the doorway, his head bowed in shame, his fingers lacing and unlacing nervously. "Very bad place, this university, this country. I think I be going soon, to brother's place, in Michigan. You come too?"

"No, Yoshi. I'm sorry you failed. But everyone does fail stats at least once. You're bound to pass next time, don't worry."

Fischer hastened away. Caroline had made tea and taken it into his room and put a record on.

"That stupid man," she said. "He seems crazier every time I see him."

"He might be leaving. Going to Michigan. He flunked a test."

"Good."

"Wants me to go with him!"

"Of course."

"Why 'of course'?"

"He's in love with you, silly. Or something. Anyone could tell you that. It's obvious."

"He isn't."

"Sure he is. He probably doesn't know it, but he is. Anyway, let's not talk about him. He gives me the creeps." So they sat side by side on the floor, leaning back against the bed and listening to music. Fischer had bought a new stereo on the installment plan and quite a number of new records. He let Yoshi use the old phonograph

and some of the old records. They heard it now, Chopin being pounded out, intruding on their Mozart.

"He's playing that too loud," said Fischer wearily.

"I'll have to tell him."

"I'll go home now," said Caroline. "You won't get any peace if I stay."

In the days that followed Yoshi failed more tests and grew increasingly morose. He condemned the professors, who had not taught him well enough, and bathed with increasing frequency. His baths were a great and terrible ritual of steam and unguents. Clad in underwear and a robe, a toilet bag wedged under one arm, he would pad down the hall, his thong slippers slapping the linoleum smartly.

"Fischer," he said. "I take bath now. OK?"

"Just don't be too long, Yoshi. And don't forget to put in the plug."

"No worry, I know about plug."

The first couple of weeks he had not known about the plug. He had let the water run and run. Steam had seeped beneath the locked door like smoke, and after an hour Fischer had pounded on the door, alarmed. Yoshi had not heard above the roar of the tap. He emerged some time later, pink from heat, his eyes shining, steam trailing him like a flock of ghosts. The building superintendant had complained: Yoshi had managed to exhaust the building's entire hot water supply.

Now instead of twice weekly he bathed daily, in an

effort to wash away the taint of failure. But he was cheerful when he spoke of Michigan. The women in Michigan were good women, he claimed, obedient and reliable like Japanese women. Michigan weather was much better than Winnipeg weather. Professors were smarter and taught better. Attitudes were idealistic, not materialistic. All this must be so, for his brother would scarcely live there otherwise, and his brother was happy and successful and ran an important laboratory for a pharmaceutical firm. Light bulbs, he suggested, were reliable and long lasting in Michigan. Day after day he dropped little hints to Fischer about the glories of the promised land, pronounced 'Meetcheegun'. He insinuated that Fischer should abandon Winnipeg, which was a veritable Sodom and Gomorrah.

"In Meetcheegun, music more beautiful," he declared. "You come, Fischer. Bring baby, too. Babies not get sick hardly ever in Meetcheegun."

Fischer gave up arguing, for one day Yoshi had challenged: "How you so sure, Fischer? You been in Meetcheegun? You ever went there?". And Fischer hadn't though he'd once trekked west to Colorado, camping with a friend.

"Never there! So you don't know, Fischer. My brother there since years. He know."

"And your brother wrote that light bulbs last forever there?"

"Not forever, Fischer. Who need forever? Do we

live-forever? I get brother's letter. I read to you." But the task of translation was too hard, and he couldn't find the passage he wanted or the English words to render it effectively. "Believe me," he said, folding the letter carefully and returning it to its envelope. "I tell you: I ask my brother to write to you personally, in English. You see then."

The school year ended. Yoshi passed two courses barely, and failed in three others, but was not formally dismissed from the university. Remembering his promise to Miko, Fischer told the committee Yoshi would go of his own accord, and that it was essential to let him save face. The weeks went by, however, and Yoshi kept turning up at the department, expecting to continue his work in Malik's lab where they dissected rats reared under various conditions and weighed their organs.

Finally the committee put pressure on Fischer. One or two faculty members had broached the subject of Michigan, informally and conversationally, and had only a non-committal response. "Are you sure he's going to leave?" they demanded. "We need to know for sure. He seems so vague."

"I'll tackle him on it tonight," Fischer promised. He resented having to do it. He regretted taking Yoshi in in the first place. If Joan hadn't disappeared, he'd never have got into this Yoshi mess. Notwithstanding, he steeled himself and put the question at supper that night.

"When I go?" Yoshi coughed. "You need to know, Fischer? But you don't understand, I guess. I can go anytime, but I waiting for you. Without you, I not go, my friend. I wait. No problem."

"But I'm not going. Not ever, Yoshi. It's no use to wait."

"Don't say, Fischer. Please. Of course you come. Best opportunity for you. Good universities there, you take good job, I work in lab and study. Nicky, you and me, we all be together, like a-family."

"I can't, old chap. Joan, you know. I'm married. I have to find her."

"Joan matter more than me, Fischer?"

"I'm afraid so, old chap."

"So. A bad womans more important than a man?"

"She's my wife. The mother of my son."

"Ah, so. Son I can understand. Son matters," said Yoshi generously, though he regarded Nicky with some distaste. "But woman more important than man, that wrong, Fischer. That crazy. You make mistake. Think about it, then change your mind."

"No I won't, Yoshi. I don't want to live with you. That's that."

"Fischer, you make me very sad."

"I'm sorry, old chap."

"Please think some more."

"It won't do any good. Believe me. The best thing

is for you to go, to go soon. End of this month, in fact. Get your career off to a good start, eh?"

"Yes, I see. So I go. End of this month." He sniffed bravely.

Yoshi's appetite fell off sharply. He began to decline seconds, then he began to take less and less, then his meals were simply picked at until he was barely taking two mouthfuls at a time.

"I bought my ticket," he said, "for Michigan."

"Good!" said Fischer.

"I fly on thirty of June, week tomorrow."

"That's terrific, old chap. You must be happy."

"I try," Yoshi said simply.

"I'm worried about him," Fischer told Caroline.

"He's so skinny. And pale. He never plays the Chopin record now. He doesn't read, either. I don't know what he does in that room of his. He won't even open the windows, and it stinks like a perfume factory."

"He's mourning you. He loves you. I told you that months ago."

"Oh, God," said Fischer. "I find that very hard to believe!" But somehow, he did believe it. It filled him with pity, and worse: a kind of cheap contempt.

The night before his departure, Yoshi put his hand on Fischer's arm. He had never touched him before, and instead of looking at him, he stared at his own hand.

"Fischer," he said. "Say you come some day to

Meetchee-gun to live. Say, tomorrow you come."

"I can't, old chap."

"I not like travel alone; Fischer. You my only friend."

"I'll write to you," Fischer promised. But he didn't ask for the address. Yoshi sighed painfully and took his hand back.

"I pack," he said after dinner. "In case I not see you before I go, goodbye, Fischer. My plane very early. Five in the morning, very early."

"Someone's taking you to the airport?"

"Oh, yes, for sure. No worry, old chap."

"Okay, old chap. Good luck. I'll write."

The next day when Fischer went into Yoshi's room to open the windows and air it out, he found a square flat package wrapped in Christmas paper propped on the chair. The chair had been placed right in the middle of the room. The parcel had a note attached in tidy, tiny, hard-to-read script: "Fischer: many thanks (you) for everything. I will not stop to hope I see you soon in Michigan. Your friend, T. Itubi." The package contained a new recording of the much-beloved Chopin.

Chapter 9

The plane had already begun its descent when Phyllis snapped her book shut, and dared to think of arriving. Through the porthole-like window she saw the St. Lawrence thrusting blue through the red and gold land. There was the many-coloured mountain, there the Shrine, there the unmistakable bath-house blue of the terminal building. She had forgotten how glorious the Quebec landscape could be in October. In Winnipeg the trees were already stripped and the hardened ground was rimed with frost. The other morning it had snowed. It made Phyllis ask herself why she stayed there.

The plane thudded down, the wingflaps dropped and whined. People pushed into the narrow aisle and struggled to reach coats and parcels stowed overhead. Phyllis took down the smart navy wool Louise Huddersfield had given her when she decided navy made her look too severe. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind passing me that camel hair," an old lady asked. Phyllis did so. The coat reminded her of something, she couldn't think what. When the plane's doors opened she moved forward with the rest. That glimpse through the window had excited her. She walked briskly along the corridor, heels clicking. She collected her little suitcase. Over by the exit doors, gazing, it seemed, at the parking lot, was her father. When Phyllis reached him he swung about and said accusingly: "There you are finally!

Your plane was late!" She stood on tiptoe to kiss him and scolded playfully: "Don't be mad at me, Boss: I wasn't the pilot!" He flashed an appreciative smile and relieved her of the suitcase.

"Your mother's at home. She said she had a few things to do at the last minute. I thought we might stop at Ruby's on the way. Pick up some grub. 'Course, if you don't feel like Chinese, there's always tomato soup and tuna sandwiches."

"What a choice!"

"Your choice. Your mum said it was all the same to her."

"What about you, Dad?"

"Doesn't matter to me, girl. If you fancy a tuna sandwich I'll just get enough Chinese for your mother and me."

"Oh, you just dare!" Chuckling and grinning, she slipped into the familiar blue Pontiac. Into the front seat, not the back like last time. The memory of last time buzzed around her head like a fly. Would Dad notice it? Was he remembering too? Phyllis tried to brush it away, to hang onto the pure present for just a bit longer. But once roused her sense of loss was keen as hunger:

"It's really wonderful to see you, sweetheart," Jack Hale interjected, patting her knee. "You look sharp in that coat."

"Thanks, Dad."

The car roared along Côte de Liesse past the old orphanage. How often as kids she and Joan had pretended they were orphans! How many sudden and painless deaths they'd imagined for their parents! Now it was Joan who was gone. In Winnipeg, Phyllis had almost grown used to the idea. In Montreal it devastated her anew. It was like being cut with knives. She looked quickly at her father, at the firm line of his jaw as he concentrated on the driving.

"You okay?" he said.

"Yes." She was, in fact. His voice had been enough to soothe the wounds. She still loved being his girl.

Jack Hale, tipping sweet and sour onto his wife's plate, said? "Why don't you tell Phyllis about your plan?"

"Oh, there's lots of time for that! Phyllis will be here for days! I'd much rather hear about her life." And turning to Phyllis: "You have a new job, don't you?"

"Yes. I'm a receptionist at a medical clinic."

"How do you like it?"

Phyllis shrugged. "It's a job. It's not interesting the way my other one was. It won't go anywhere, it's just until something else turns up."

"Have you thought any more about university? Have you thought about what you'd like to do in the end? You know how delighted your Dad and I would be if you came back, Phyllis!"

"I know. I'm not ready."

"Barb. Barb, tell Phyllis about the house."

"House? Did I hear right?"

"Your mother's planning to buy a house."

"Planning, well, as usual your father exaggerates.

'Dreaming of' would be more accurate." Barbara Hale's eyes sparkled with pleasure. Phyllis noticed how much she'd aged. There were grief lines that hadn't been there fourteen months ago. There were places where the dry and finely quilted skin had gone slack over bones that seemed too big and heavy for so small a woman.

"This flat was perfect while you girls were at home, but it's really too big for just Jack and me. Isn't it, Jack?"

"If you say so, dear." He smiled knowingly at his daughter. "I'm going off to have a bit of shut-eye," he confided. "Give you two ladies a chance to get caught up." They waved indulgently after him as he crept from the room.

"We've been in this flat ever since we came to Montreal. Ever since you started grade school, Phyl. That's a long time, more than twelve years. And it's not cheap, either! Rent! Month after month we've paid rent and there's nothing to show for it. For the same money we could have a little house with a garden."

They'd had a garden in Winnipeg. A little garden with a big oak tree in the corner of the yard. Joan used to climb up in it and read her book. Outside the back fence

grew hollyhocks; and the milkman and breadman went up and down the lane in horsedrawn wagons. One of Phyllis's first moments of glory had been a ride on the horse of Jimmy 'the milk'. Joan, too big at ten for such treats, had perched on the back fence feigning disinterest but really filled with longing. It hadn't occurred to Phyllis until then that anyone as old and important as her sister could actually suffer from longing, but there was the proof in Joan's bitter-sweet smile and melancholy glance. And if Joan could feel that way, maybe ~~even~~ Mummy and Daddy could, too - so, she, Phyllis, was not the only one! She'd sat up taller upon the huge black horse, marvelling at the feel of its great muscles rolling beneath her. It was as if from that lofty seat she'd glimpsed her whole life spread out through time; she breathed in the pungent horsey smell like a guarantee of wisdom.

"You won't remember our garden in Winnipeg," her mother said. "You were too small. I used to grow corn, radishes, sweet peas, lettuce. At the side of the house a pink climbing rose. You could sit by the dining room window and smell its perfume." She fell silent, remembering.

"Would you mind very much if we moved? This place was your home for so long."

"A new place will be home soon enough with you in it," Phyllis assured her.

"I thought you could help decide what furniture to keep. And maybe - you know, your sister left all kinds of

things here. I haven't had the heart to go through them."

"I'll do that if you like."

"That'd be grand, it really would. I do try to be brave about Joan. I know Jack thinks she's dead, but I can't help hoping. She was always such a strange child, you know. When she was little I sometimes wondered if she hadn't got mixed up in the hospital: that really can happen. But of course she hadn't. Apart from her defect she was a Hale through and through. I was just so unused to children, having been the youngest myself."

Phyllis had cleared out three of the four drawers of her sister's old desk. She'd set aside the letters from her mother's Aunt Martha, in case her mother wanted them, but thrown out years of flotsam and jetsam in the form of Christmas cards, postcards, brochures, theatre handbills and a battered old map of Laurentian ski trails. What she couldn't bring herself to throw out she put in a box for the Salvation Army: pens, pencils, a serviceable six inch ruler, a tin box for mathematical instruments empty except for a protractor and a one-cent stamp, a jar of buttons, and a pattern for a shirtwaist dress, never opened. Joan had probably intended to take up sewing and never got beyond buying the pattern.

The fourth drawer was not going to be so easy. It was there that Joan had always kept the things she regarded

as private. Phyllis had saved it till last and would have saved it forever, had that been possible. The very thought of opening it made her pulse race. She brewed a fresh pot of coffee and fortified herself with cinnamon toast. She told herself not to be silly. She could dump the contents into a cardboard box and put the box out with the trash. She need never look, never violate the taboo.

But suppose Joan came back? Suppose she wanted the stuff?

Well then, said the voice of reason, pack it all in a box without looking at it and save it for Joan. Phyllis smiled. That made sense. That was unarguable. No taboos violated, nothing thrown away. Everything solved. A neat package, a box taped up with wide strips of brown paper tape and labelled with blue marking pen: Joan's Private Things.

Joan had been eighteen when she moved out. Phyllis had been only thirteen at the time and for more than four years she'd lived in this flat and never opened the fourth drawer. Well, once she'd peeked, but it made her feel so queasy she'd done no more than that. Now she had a sense of loyalty to the frustrated teenager she'd been then. She remembered a period of bitter loneliness, she used to sit sometimes on the floor in Joan's abandoned room and talk, just as if Joan herself were locked up in that fourth drawer, in those diaries and notebooks and whatever it was Joan hid there. She'd needed to believe the Joan they harboured was - well - her friend, not just her big sister.

The fear that maybe that wasn't so had helped to keep her honest, of course. What worse thing than reading through a diary and finding you weren't even mentioned! Phyllis laughed. Was she still afraid of that? Was Mum afraid of that, too? No, a mother would probably get mentions enough in her teenage daughter's diaries - they just wouldn't be very kind ones.

Phyllis carried her cup and plate out to the sink. It hardly mattered whether, as 'kid sister', she'd played any part in the diaries. Joan had been her friend in the end. Nothing could take that away. And she was Joan's friend now: what would have been betrayal once was now an act of friendship.

She eased the fourth drawer open carefully and removed the first item. It was a chemistry notebook. Mysterious formulas and boring lists: the characteristics of acids, bases, metals. Tests for this and tests for that. Joan's handwriting was round and child-like and sloppy. You could see how she started each class out by trying to be neat. Then at a certain moment her notes became a scrawl of odd unconnected words as she drifted off in a daydream. There were doodles in the margins, too: little stylized drawings of cats, rabbits, dogs, birds in flight. Miniature landscapes, carefully crosshatched. There were parts of people - ears, elbows, hands - obviously sketched from life. There were ballet dancers, lots of ballet dancers. And feet and legs in balletic poses. Joan had taken ballet for a

couple of years. They'd all gone to see her clump around the stage ungracefully in a pink tutu. She started to go to the left when everyone else went right, flushed a hideous raspberry colour, and never got back in step.

Poor Joan.

The diaries were under all the school books, along with a lot of ballet programs and two well-thumbed books about the dance. Oh, poor Joan. She really had been hooked on it. Chem and trig and Latin hadn't even been in the running!

There were four diaries and a large exercise book full of long quotes from books Joan had read - Sartre, Camus, Simone Weil and a score of others. The diaries were closely written in coloured inks. Phyllis read a lot of bits at random. They made her sad, they were so adolescent and self-obsessed. They made Joan seem pathetic and even rather repellent, and Phyllis knew her sister hadn't been nearly as silly and awful as that! She sat back on her heels and gazed at the now empty drawer. What made Joan always be so hard on herself? In one diary entry she berated herself for a whole paragraph for making some minor error in a math exam, then in the next paragraph she tore herself to shreds for so much as caring about a mark. It was crazy.

One night Jack Hale went out to a meeting and Phyllis and her mother made a simple meal of boiled eggs and

toast and played cribbage. Neither had played in ages and now and then one would suddenly recall yet another rule and they would both laugh and exclaim and move their matchstick pegs a few more holes closer to the finish line. Phyllis's visit was nearly over. They'd talked about Vern and Nicky, about Phyllis's break-up with her most recent boyfriend, and of course about Joan. Barbara Hale had suggested that Phyllis take Joan's treasures back to Winnipeg with her, but Phyllis declined instinctively. She was sure they held clues to the adolescent Joan but doubted their relevance to the missing adult. Barbara Hale seemed just as glad to keep them herself. Joan's things had fitted neatly into a sturdy square box that had originally contained a light fixture. The box was compact enough to fit easily on a shelf. Phyllis imagined it there in her parents' new house, high in a cupboard next to a pile of hats. Every morning when her mother took out her clothes for the day, she'd glance up at that box and silently say: O my dear, my dear! If Joan were never found, Barbara Hale would gradually assemble all her best memories of her poor lost child, and Joan's existence in her mind would become a rare and precious secret, cherished like an old-fashioned jewel which can no longer be worn without embarrassment.

Vern had Nicky, after all, as his 'secret Joan'. That was clear. Now Mum would have the box. What did she Phyllis, have? Why, nothing: no surrogate sister, no private memorial. Nothing.

Or perhaps something even better. For she,
Phyllis, still had hope.

PART TWO.

Chapter 10

Bobby O'Neill, when he retired from the zoo at the age of sixty-five, was hired back as a night watchman. A new uniform of blue serge with silver-coloured buttons was given him in exchange for his old zoo greens. He was grateful; he didn't like to be idle. The pay was less than it had been when he was a keeper, but it sufficed. Having a job was the main thing. Even in the Great Depression he'd never been on the dole for more than a few weeks at a time.

He checked in with the senior keeper at ten each evening, and left when the first shift came on in the morning. The senior keeper advised him if there was anything in particular to watch out for. In May, for instance, there were hoofstock births: moose, caribou, whitetail; Père David's deer, muledeer, black-tailed deer; red deer, sikas, saigas; and camels and zebras. About half could be relied on to produce in any given year; two nights back a Père David's deer and a caribou had come into the world within an hour of each other.

Bobby enjoyed the work, though he felt lonely sometimes, trudging the paths and laneways of the zoo, making sure that all was well. Not a soul to talk to, except the odd creature that was active at night - the coons, for instance, or the hyenas, or the round-eyed lemurs. He'd never held much with conversing with animals anyhow. In his jacket pocket he stowed his tobacco pouch,

and in his hip pocket a small flask of whisky against the solitude and the evening chill. He took his first nip between the tigers and the bears, and his second at the bend in the road where the bison were. It was the bison, they said, that had been the start of this zoo. At night the great brutes were as sedate as rocks, some lying down, some standing unmoving yet always alert. He called out to them softly every night as he swigged his whisky, satisfied if a tail twitched in acknowledgement, or a great head turned to stare. Then back down the other side of the road, where he paid special attention to the area where the moose were kept, since some blighter had poisoned one two years before. It was easy for folks to come in after hours, and make nuisances of themselves. Bobby kept a sharp lookout; especially on the old road where it ran parallel to the river. There was lots of cover there, and easy access. He followed the path that looped around the cages, under the trees. The cages and enclosures were old and due to be replaced by a big round house divided like a pie. Lynx, bobcats, skunks and so forth would each get a wedge, with accommodation inside and a yard outside. Even the hyenas and cougars were going to be moved to a new house, and there was talk of putting up a restaurant on the old site, with a second storey view of the river.

There was a rustling noise in the bushes: night herons, most likely, or mice. The river was only a couple of hundred feet away, and noises always sounded louder in

the dark. Bobby halted, his head to one side. Then discerned, a few feet ahead, behind some shrubbery - but no! Couldn't be, he thought, not that. He must have taken a nip too many. Must quit the stuff if this kept up. He said nothing. You don't holler at visions.

The pale shape went still, but remained in place, not floating away or dissolving like a proper vision should. But, oh! How lovely she was to see! Many long years it was since he'd seen a young lady without her clothes, save in pictures!

He rubbed his eyes, but still the shape persisted.

"Who are ye?" he called finally.

There was no reply. He approached, his eyes not leaving her for even the space of a blink, lest she disappear.

"No clothes," he observed fatuously. "Very strange for a young woman to go parading around the zoo at night with no clothes, wouldn't ye say?"

She was hugging herself, not, apparently, with the intention of concealing anything, but because of the chill.

"All alone?" he asked firmly, calling up some powerful sense of duty and the proprieties to counter the disturbance to his senses.

"Are ye all alone?" he repeated. He took his eyes off her and peered in all directions. A light breeze played overhead; pine needles clicked; tiny sounds: mice in the brush, the hum of midges, the whirr of bats. A nighthawk

screeched several times high over the river, flashing his wings, and vanished. The girl's teeth began to chatter. She sighed.

As soon as he put his jacket around her, she seemed to relax. She stopped shivering and pulled the garment closer, smiling nervously.

"Who are ye?" he repeated. "What happened to ye?" Instead of replying she gaped and shivered and let her tongue flick over her lips. "Poor girl," he soothed. "You're probably in - what's it? - a state of shock. A drop o' whisky might help." He proffered his flask. She hadn't put her arms through the sleeves, just wrapped the jacket around her, and he assumed that was why she was reluctant to reach for the flask. So he held it closer. "Take a swig, do; it'll warm ye up in no time flat," he urged. She wrinkled her nose. Then shook her head. He screwed the top back on. He would have liked a swig himself, but was unwilling to drink in front of her unless she partook, too. The night wind picked at his shirt sleeves, while he tried to decide what to do about her.

"We'll have a look for your clothes," he declared, shambling over to the trees where he'd first seen her. "Not that I begrudge ye my jacket, lass. But ye must be wanting your own clothes. Come on, now. Help old Bobby find 'em." He stopped and parted the branches of a low bush, beaming his torch over the dark ground. "Nothing here," he remarked cheerfully, and circled the shrubbery, repeating his

investigation on the far side. "No luck so far," he called out. He scrambled about, stooping, peering into groves of little trees, scanning the horizon, and then glancing over his shoulder to see what the girl was up to. She stood hunched up in the jacket, watching him.

"Perhaps ye don't speak English? Or maybe you're not quite all there in the head, eh? Poor wee lass." He pointed at his own head enquiringly and thought he saw her smile.

"Come on with me," he called. "This way!" He gestured with his arm, nodding, and made off in the direction of the concession area. "Come on, lass, nothing's goin' to eat ye. You're safe as 'ouses wif ol' Bobby." She began to pad after him in a clumsy flat-footed way.

'Totally daft,' he said to himself. 'Poor creature. And some bloke's probably gone and took advantage, and left her without clothes for a lark. Some blokes'll do any damn thing for a lark. It's a wicked world.' Under the lamp standard near the shut-up snack-bar he was able to get a much better look at her. Her face was dirty, and her long hair dangled in greasy strings; she hadn't taken a brush to it ever, by the looks of it. God only knew where the poor thing belonged.

"Now listen carefully," he told her. Her wide eyes fixed on him steadily, she looked not so much stupid as dazed. He noticed a fresh gash on her shin; the blood had run right down to her toes and was caked with dirt.

"Somefing nasty's after happening to ye, lass, and I reckon ye need more help 'n I can give ye. So I'm going to ring for help, and then we'll just wait for it to show up, OK? Ye might want to sit down in the meantime." He gestured towards a bench and a picnic table. In the phone booth he kept the door ajar with his foot, and dialled the police. While he was talking she circled around to some bushes; he could see her unkempt head, floating like a ragged moon above the tangle of the bush; then it disappeared. "Hang on a sec," he whispered. He held the receiver away from his ear and stepped out of the booth. She had made her way across to the camels. She stood in front of the fence, presumably staring at them. One of them got up and lumbered towards her, then ran away again:

"OK, Sarge. She's just looking around, I guess. But hurry, and bring a blanket."

About ten minutes later a police car drove into the zoo area. The sound of its approach was audible over quite a range and disturbed a few of the birds and animals in their sleep. A peacock wailed and fell silent. Bobby had induced the girl to sit beside him on the bench. He put his arm around her, and prattled on, unsure about how much she understood. He hoped she wouldn't try to run off when the police arrived. She never made a sound until she sneezed suddenly, three times in quick succession. Then she said: "Oh."

"Oh? Oh, lassie, if ye can say 'oh', ye must-be

able to say other things too, eh?" She giggled softly, observed her filthy bare feet, the left one streaked with blood, and then said 'oh' once more, as if the whole thing were a huge joke. He liked the feel of her beneath the jacket; her back seemed to melt against his arm. The timbre of her voice when she giggled gave him such pleasure that he was sorry when he heard the approaching car. Its lights dimmed as it veered into the concession area. The girl stiffened. "Everything's goin' to be just fine," he assured her. "Don't be frightened, lass." He had warned the police to be gentle. The officer in charge squatted on his heels and asked the girl to come with them in the car. He asked her a few questions, in a slow respectful voice, as if the questions themselves were the very answers he wanted. The girl studied the policeman and the policeman studied the girl, old Bobby keeping his arm around her for reassurance.

"Will ye let me know, Sarge, what ye find out?" he asked when she was wrapped snug in the blanket, and the police had induced her to sit in the back seat. Bobby had his jacket back. It was warm from her, and in the exchange of the blanket for jacket he had had a better look at her. Her tiny nipples were pointing in the cold and he thought she was beautiful, despite the dirt and scratches and a strong animal smell. But he felt bashful now that she was in the car. He wanted to kiss her poor little face, but he confined himself to stooping down, vaguely patting the edge of the blanket, and wishing her good luck.

When the car was out of sight he had a much-needed swig from his trusty flask and continued his rounds. He was distracted and dreamy. Only the musky smell she had left on his jacket prevented him from concluding that the whole thing was just his imagination.

Chapter 11

She woke in a bed with stiff white sheets and a milky green coverlet. The pale light in the room was also greenish, taking its colour from the curtains that were drawn tight across the windows. A neighbouring bed was occupied by an old woman, her breathing punctuated by wheezy spasms. The two beds opposite were vacant.

She slid her hand down under the sheet and explored her left leg which was stiff and tender. A square of gauze had been loosely taped over the wound. She traced the edges of the adhesive tape with her finger until a map of it formed in her mind. She felt very weary. She had swallowed a little yellow pill the night before. She hadn't wanted to take it, but the nurse had been insistent and told her she would have to have a needle if she wouldn't swallow the pill. She had said this first in English and then repeated it in German and French. A second nurse, mimicking the intonation of the first, had spoken in a fourth language, probably Icelandic or Ukrainian.

She heard footsteps in the room and became suddenly alert. The curtains parted with a whirring sound, and the window was eased up. A thermometer was thrust between her lips and her wrist was seized between strong able fingers. She opened her eyes and saw a tall big-boned girl with a wide face and corn-coloured hair bunned up beneath a starched cap. The nurse worked quickly; said a brusque

unilingual 'good morning', and passed to the neighbouring bed.

The astonishing thing was that she was there at all. It certainly hadn't been part of her plan. Not that she'd had a plan exactly. She felt the eyes of the old woman eating her up with curiosity and kept her own eyes tight shut. She breathed like one asleep while her mind tried to make sense of her situation. She was free now. She was herself again. Yesterday she'd recognized Hilary in that crowd of girls, and that had started it. But she'd been afraid to speak last night, unsure how her voice would sound. She hadn't wanted to scare that sweet old man who'd found her.

Her shoulder was gently shaken. "Breakfast!" said the nurse. "Time for breakfast, young lady!"

"Good morning," she said, and sat up.

"Scrambled eggs today. Eat up before they get cold, dear."

Her elderly neighbour was eating already. She introduced herself, flashing one gold tooth. "Vera Bickadoroff," she said.

"Who're you?"

"My name's Joan," said the girl from the zoo.

"Well, Joan. What are you in for? Or don't you know?"

"Nothing much. I've a scratch on my leg. I'll probably go home today."

"Ah, lucky you!" Miss Bickadoroff began to catalogue her own ailments. Collapsed vein. Hemorrhoids. Weak heart. Headache. Cataract, left eye. Sore feet. Fallen arches. "But," she sang forth proudly, "I've still got most of my own teeth."

Her own teeth, Joan thought. Have I my own teeth? Have I my own body? She ran her tongue over her teeth. When bathing her the night before, the nurse had noticed hair around the wound on her leg. She'd never had hairy legs, and anyhow it was only in that one place - where the blood had caked around the mouth of the gash: long dark coarse hairs.

She excused herself and found the bathroom. She peered at her face in the small square mirror. The little tear in her earlobe was still there. Also the scar under her nose. She peeled back the gauze on her leg; a single hair had stuck to the bandage, but the rest must have washed away in the bath. She pressed the adhesive tape back. One hair was not much proof to offer Vern.

In the early days she had worried a lot about Vern, but not lately. Was he still in the same apartment? Was he still in Winnipeg, for that matter? He might have killed himself. That would explain why he'd never visited. Then there was Nicky! He must be so big now! She began to feel excited about going home, what a long time it had been!

How would she ever explain? She couldn't even explain to herself. It had happened. It. She stood

outside herself and contemplated the sequence of happenings, trying to see them as Vern would see them in her telling. She would just have to tell the truth and hope for the best.

A sharp knock on the bathroom door, then the door was flung open -

"What are we doing all cooped up in here, young lady? Doctor to see you. I hear you've found your tongue, so now you can tell us a few things about yourself."

The doctor was young, no older than she was. He was badly shaven, and wore glasses with thick dark frames. He sat awkwardly in the chair by her bed.

"Let's see," he began, "we'd better get this form filled in right at the start." She recited her vital data, slowly, spelling 'Fischer', and giving him time to write it down.

"Now tell me about last night, Mrs. Fischer."

"Well, I climbed a fence - quite a high fence. There was barbed wire on top and that's how I hurt my leg." This was not the beginning. She had decided against telling the whole truth, even though she liked the doctor. He liked her too, but could still decide she was crazy; they would keep her there. And she needed to be free.

"What fence was this?"

"A fence at the zoo."

"Ah, yes." The doctor pulled off his glasses and squinted at her. "What were you doing in the zoo climbing fences after dark? Or maybe it wasn't after dark? Seems a

queer thing to be doing."

"Hardly the thing to attempt on a daily basis,"
Joan said agreeably.

"Well?"

"Well?"

"Why were you doing it?"

"To get to the other side, of course."

"Of the fence?"

"Yes."

"Maybe I'm not making myself clear," said the
doctor. "Why did you want to get to the other side?"

Joan was silent and thoughtful for a moment. The
doctor waited, twirling his pen like a little baton. "I'd
got shut in by mistake," she said at last. "I couldn't see
any other way to get out."

"Well, it's very unorthodox. Probably illegal. I
should hope you won't do it again. Dangerous, too, getting
yourself cut up like that. Is your leg sore?"

"Not very."

"No trouble walking?"

"No."

"Good. Now the next thing - apparently you
wouldn't speak last night. Wouldn't or couldn't. Did you
understand what people said to you?"

"Yes, I did."

"But you wouldn't speak yourself. How come?"

"I'm speaking now," Joan pointed out. "Does it

really matter that I wouldn't speak last night?"

"It's a bit odd. Suggests - well, some kind of trauma, perhaps, or maybe a paralysis. An unusual symptom. Cuts a person off. Has it ever happened before?"

"Not that I can recall."

"It can't have been very pleasant."

"No, I guess not."

"The report says you weren't wearing any clothes. You could have caught pneumonia, you know. Or been arrested."

"Yes, I suppose."

"Did someone force you to take your clothes off? Were you interfered with in any way?"

"Oh, no," Joan assured him. "Nothing like that."

"I do get the feeling you're keeping me in the dark, Mrs. Fischer. Holding back some important fact that would help to explain things." The doctor gave her a hurt look. She shrugged sympathetically. "I feel fine," she said. "Can't I go home now?"

"We'll have to have someone pick you up and identify you. We'll try Mr. Fischer," said the doctor with resignation.

Miss Bickadoroff was leaning over towards Joan's bed. She'd been speaking for some time before Joan tuned in.

"...Nosy parkers, the lot," she said. "How could I tell 'em what my mother's parents had, if you please? They

died in Russia, could have had anything, plague, TB, cancer, heart failure. In those days death was the natural end, that's all. You got old, you got sick, you died. What difference if it's plague or heart? But these nosy parkers today think anything can be inherited, see. It just gives them an excuse to pry. I told 'em, anyhow. Said my father died of rage and drink, and his parents before that in the famines, and my inheritance - huh! was two table cloths and a tea pot. That shut 'em up. Lazy fellows thinking they can find out what ails you by talking history instead of looking!"

Joan yawned ostentatiously and pulled the covers up to her chin. "I think I'll have a little nap," she said, hoping her neighbour would be quiet for a bit so she could think.

Chapter 12

For Fischer it began like any other day.

"Are you taking me to Mrs. Woods', Daddy?"

"No, Nick, it's Caroline's turn."

"But she's not here this morning!"

"She'll be up soon. Finish your Apple Jacks!"

"Do you have to go to your lab?"

"Yes."

"Can I come and see the rats?"

"Not this morning."

Fischer glanced up and realized the boy had finished his cereal. "Go and brush your teeth," he told him. "Caroline'll be here any minute."

The telephone rang. Nicky stalled, leaning against the doorway on one foot and rubbing the other foot up and down his trouser leg. Fischer glared at him sternly, mouthing silent threats as he reached for the phone. He said 'Hello' through clenched teeth. A minute later his jaw dropped and his knees began to wobble. He dragged a chair over from the table and sat down slowly. His brow furrowed, he had difficulty grasping what was being said. By and by he mumbled some reply and the other party hung up; but he just went on sitting there clutching the receiver. When Caroline came in a few minutes later to collect Nicky, she found him staring in perplexity at the mouthpiece.

"Morning, Fish," she said. "What's the matter?"

"Joan's in hospital. I have to go and fetch her."

"Joan? You mean, Joan, your wife?"

Fischer nodded.

"Goodness! So she's been found! Oh, Vern, I'm so glad for you! Why are you looking so glum?"

"I don't know." He stood up and replaced the receiver. "I can't decide whether it's really her. After all this time someone tells me she's in hospital! Why wasn't I told sooner? Don't you see? It smells queer. It doesn't make sense. And on top of it all, they want me to bring her clothes. As if I were going to get a new baby instead of a grown woman. Jesus, Caroline, it's been nearly two years!" He put his head in his hands. He sighed. "Can you lend me money for a cab?"

Caroline pulled a five from her wallet. "Didn't they explain? Didn't they tell you anything?"

"She has a scratch on her leg. She may have had an attack of amnesia."

"You didn't speak to her?"

"No."

"You don't suppose it's someone playing a prank, do you?"

"I don't know what to suppose."

"It might not be her at all."

"I know. That's what's so scary. They want me to identify her. And . . . well, you know, it's been a long time. She may have changed. I . . . I can't quite

visualize her. Suppose I make a mistake? Suppose I bring someone home and she turns out to be the wrong woman?"

"Oh, that won't happen, sweetie."

"It might. You know how terrible my eyesight is, and my memory's not so great, either. And I got rid of all her pictures, one day."

"You never told me."

"I burnt them, in a kind of ceremony. I don't know why. It was sort of a substitute for a funeral, I guess." He looked helplessly at the floor.

Caroline put her arms around him, pushed him gently back onto the chair and cradled his head, taking care not to dislodge his glasses.

"I hate hospitals!" he whimpered.

"Everything'll be fine, you'll see."

"Nearly two years she's been gone, and only now do they call me! Why? And the police said they'd checked the hospitals!"

"There, there."

"Why do these things always happen to me? Can someone tell me that?"

Nicky roared into the kitchen on his red pedal car. He looked at his father slumped in the chair by the phone, and at Caroline bent over him solicitously. "Is my Mummy coming back?" he demanded. "My very own Mummy?"

"Maybe, Nicky. We hope so," Caroline replied.

"Wow! I'm gonna stay home and see her!"

"No!" said Fischer decisively.

"But I never saw her!"

"You did, you just don't remember. She'll be very tired. She's been sick in the hospital."

"Is she going to die, Daddy?"

"Of course not."

"You told me everybody died."

"Ah, well, yes. That's true. But she won't die today. Not tomorrow either, probably not for years and years. Now get ready, damn it. Caroline's waiting."

"When my Mummy comes, I'm going to let her have a ride on Johnny!"

"She'll be too big to ride Johnny, I'm afraid."

"Why?"

"Your Mummy's a big person, like me and Caroline. A grownup."

"Maybe she got smaller now."

"I don't think so."

"But maybe," insisted Nicky.

Fischer's taxi swung onto Bannantyne and the General Hospital came into view, its clean red brick screaming its newness among the little clapboard houses. Within those walls lay a woman who was either Joan or not Joan. He paid the fare and pushed through the doors into the lobby, hugging the bag of clothes. If he'd known Joan was here, he could have visited. He could have brought

flowers, chocolates, books. He could have explained to people.

He joined the crowd waiting for the elevator. When it came he made way for an orderly pushing an old lady in a wheelchair. It made him feel virtuous. Once inside, he pressed back against the wall. He was perspiring heavily. At every halt his stomach leapt up unpleasantly. People flowed in and out in a tide of smiles and good mornings. They were all strangers to him, but he knew what they were like because of their sensible shoes and well-scrubbed faces. They represented a world in which wives were comfortably predictable, a world to which he secretly wished he belonged. On the fourth floor two doctors in green smocks got on, tainting the air with ether.

"Just like poor Henderson," said the first doctor.

"Yup. It's a real shame. So hard on the family," said the second doctor. They came to the sixth floor. Fischer got off.

"That way," said a nurse to whom he whispered the desired room number. Suppose he didn't recognize her? Suppose she didn't recognize him? With hunched shoulders, he made his way down the last stretch of corridor. The first person he saw was old Miss Bickadoroff. His heart fluttered; he went cold all over. Then he saw Joan. She was sitting on the far side of the room, near the windows. She turned her head slowly and their eyes met. They smiled experimentally as he hurried towards her.

"Vern."

"Hullo, Joan."

They kissed. They peered into each other's faces. They both began to voice a question in the same instant, fell silent and kissed instead of speaking. Fischer darted little glances around the room, looking for clues; there was only Miss Bickadoroff, pretending to read a book. Joan's face appeared beautiful to him, scar and all. He stroked her cheek. "Dear Joan," he said sadly, sadness welling up in him unreasonably, it should have been joy but he felt doomed, glad to see his wife alive, young, beautiful, but sorry he was so inadequate himself, bald, beer-bellied, half-blind. And too stupid ever to have searched for her in this particular room before. "Oh my dear," he stammered, "I finally got my Ph.D."

"Congratulations."

"I've got a teaching job in Calgary. We're moving in August."

"Splendid. How's Nicky?"

"Fantastic. Very grown-up for his age. Very bright."

A nurse with corn-coloured hair and big teeth strode into the room. "Mr. Fischer?"

"Yes?"

"There are some forms to be completed before you go. They're at the desk. If you wouldn't mind, perhaps while Mrs. Fischer is dressing?"

"I'll come in a minute," he said, not taking his eyes from his wife as she unpacked the clothes. Those old green cords, that unspeakable pink velour top.

"I was in such a rush," he said apologetically.

"Oh, it's not that, sweetie. But there are no shoes."

"Oh, God, how stupid of me!"

"And these socks - where did they come from?" Joan held them up and he saw the huge holes in the toes. "Never mind, we'll be home soon!" she reassured him.

"I've some spare socks, nice white cotton ones," interjected Miss Bickadoroff, laying down her book.

"They're in the bottom drawer of this night stand. I'd like you to have a pair, I really would, dearie."

"That's awfully kind, but . . ."

"No buts, now. Please take 'em. Do me the honour."

Chapter 13

"How wonderful to be back!" said Joan. "To see you, the cats, the apartment - the streets - just to be here! Only Nicky is missing. Can't we go now and fetch him?"

"Mrs. Woods wouldn't like it. She has a routine with the kids. If you disrupt it, you disrupt it for everyone."

"Surely she wouldn't mind this once!"

"Well, but I would, sweetheart. I want you all to myself for a bit. I want to hear all about where you've been." Fischer put his arm around her. They were standing in the living room, admiring what Herb had once called their 'marvellous view'. They had talked very little on the ride home; Joan had gazed out the car window, enraptured by the passing scene. She looked thinner, younger than Fischer had expected, and had gone about touching and naming things, as if amazed at their continued existence. 'The same old elevator!' she'd cried in delight. 'The catwalk!' And 'Oh, were the kitchen walls always pink? I'd forgotten completely!'

Now she leaned against him and said she wanted to be alone with him, too. "Look," she commanded, pointing down at the drugstore on the corner. "That's where it all began. That night." She pressed his hand, and a few moments later they walked out onto Osborne Street in the sun. Fischer looked regretfully at his wife's feet. He

should have found her shoes for her. Joan walked with a light merry step, seeming not to mind. At the corner where they had to wait for the traffic lights she peeked up at him and said:

"How worried you look, Vern! Or maybe your face is narrower. Maybe it's just those new glasses; take them off a moment so I can see."

He obeyed, and the world fell instantly out of focus. Joan's face became a pale smudge that could have been anyone's.

"Well, what's the verdict?" he demanded.

"You really do look a bit older, my dear. More worry lines."

"I had a lot to worry about," he remarked gently, putting his glasses on again and taking her arm as they made their way across the street.

"I'm sorry about that, believe me." Joan peered into the windows of Fox's Drugstore where she had gone that night to buy shampoo. Then she said, as if searching for some particular thing, "Remember all those myths and fairy tales in which people turn into wolves and frogs and things?"

He nodded, frowning slightly.

"What would you say," she tendered, "if I told you that that night I turned into an animal?"

He sought her eye and smiled in a fatherly way.

"Come, come. You wouldn't expect me to believe a thing like

that," he chuckled. When she didn't laugh back, he swung her hand, as he might have swung the hand of a child, and marched her all the way to the corner.

"That night, after I'd bought the shampoo, I had an urge to run," she went on. "Remember Twin Falls? Remember when we climbed right to the top? It was a clear day just like this. We followed a narrow winding path; I kept having to rest, but finally after what seemed hours we arrived at the summit. There was a stupendous view. We watched an eagle soaring over the valleys. I had a strong feeling that if I spread my arms they'd turn into wings. I was convinced I too could soar like a bird, from peak to peak."

"A kind of vertigo," said Fischer.

"You felt it yourself. You said so."

"Yes, but what does it matter now?"

"The point is we didn't try to fly, Vern. We stepped back from the edge, we went back to the path. We assumed that if we tried to fly, we'd just fall."

"Well, we would have fallen!"

"But we didn't try! That Saturday night, however, I gave in to an impulse like that - a sudden urge to run. I ran along Osborne, and then here, on Wardlaw. I felt very daring, dashing through puddles, not caring if my shoes got wet. When I slipped on some wet leaves near the corner, I landed - don't laugh - on all fours."

"And lost your purse," Fischer put in.

"I didn't want to be burdened with it. I kicked

it under a hedge after I fell. Then I just ran, like the wind, Vern, it was so exhilarating! Look!" Suddenly she tore her hand free from his and took off down the road, her dark hair streaming out behind, her bare feet heedless of the rough sidewalk. He ran after. It made the sweat trickle into his eyes; it made his glasses slip. Once she glanced back and he thought he saw an exultant look on her face. It unnerved him. "Joan!" he cried.

She halted, hugging herself and stooping to get her breath back. He wiped his brow. "Your leg," he stammered, staring at the thin stream of blood. Taking his handkerchief Joan wiped it away, explaining that it was only a small scratch, that she'd be fine, that they hadn't much further to go. They were going, she said, to the Cornish Library.

"The Cornish Library?"

"The little library near the Maryland Bridge," she explained. "That's where I ran to, that night."

"That's a long way to run, Joan."

"It was different, then. I didn't get out of breath then. And I was down on all fours, not awkwardly with my tendons pulling too tight, but naturally. Try to picture me running, Vern, through these very streets! It was fall, the pavements were wet, the trees nearly bare. You could feel that winter was close, there was that sharpness in the air we always have first. It was dark, too. I don't know what made me go down to the library,

exactly. I went to school near there when I was very little. It's just on the Point, across from the Misericordia Hospital where Nicky was born. As a child I used to ramble along the river paths there and climb the trees." In a mist of green, he saw a small brick building with a steep-pitched roof and gables, ivy half covering its facade. He couldn't remember ever noticing it before.

They passed through the gate. Joan bent her head and drank from the fountain beside the path.

"I guess it's quite an old building, for Winnipeg," she mused, drawing her sleeve across her mouth. "My parents came to this library when they were children."

The air was pungent with the scent of lilacs. Hand in hand they followed the path between the row of lilacs and the ivy-covered wall to the little park that sloped down to the river's edge.

"I got so very hot that night from all that running," Joan explained. "Great waves of heat passing over me as if I'd been going through fires. It made me terribly thirsty. The fountain wasn't working then, of course, they'd turned it off because of the danger of frost. It seemed only natural to come here and drink from the river."

They stood side by side beneath the oaks and gazed at the water. The sun gilding its surface and the new green mirrored along its banks gave the river a benign appearance. On the far side were the stately mansions of Wellington Crescent, their slate roofs burnished in the sun. Fischer

was reminded of Hamburg. He squeezed his wife's hand. "It is a very pretty spot," he said. "Why haven't we come here before?"

A red canoe flew along the water and disappeared under the bridge.

"Go on, Joan. I didn't mean to interrupt. You came here and drank."

"Yes. I'm looking for the exact spot. But the river's higher now. It was here, I think. Yes." She squatted close to the edge and caught sight of her reflection, murky and broken in the lapping brown water. Her full dark hair, her high forehead, her slightly irregular mouth. She held out her arms like a diver and saw her reflected hands fluttering like white birds. Mud pressed up between her toes.

Suddenly Fischer seized her under the arms and dragged her back. "You were sliding forwards," he said, almost angrily. "Didn't you notice? I was afraid you'd fall in."

"I wasn't afraid," she retorted. "That night I swam here. I jumped in to cool off, and swam all the way across. Of course," she added contritely, "I probably couldn't do it now."

"I should think not! It's very broad and full of whirlpools and you were never much of a swimmer. Come - let's sit up there in the sun." He helped her rise and they clambered up the bank to a little knoll where Fischer spread

his old tweed jacket on the ground. "Now," he challenged, trying to suppress a smile, "tell me again about swimming the river."

"I did, I swear it."

"Nu, dear girl, in a dream perhaps!"

"Oh no! For real! I got wet through. It was marvellously cold and refreshing. You keep forgetting, Vern, that I was not as you see me now. I'd changed. I was an animal. Those waves of heat had something to do with it."

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her back against him, so that her head rested on his chest. He rocked her, hoping to gentle the tension out of her. His challenges had made her tense. What did it matter, really, if her story was a bit fantastic? At least she was back, and unharmed! "I went down to the river to look for you that night," he told her. "There'd been two rapes near the Osborne Bridge, a few months before. I was so afraid you'd been hurt! And here you are, safe after all." He kissed her head; he covered her hands with his own.

"You must just take it on faith, about swimming the river."

"I know, I know."

"You don't know, Vern. You think you know, that's what makes it so hard to tell you."

She broke free of him and sat by herself, hugging her knees, her face hidden. Fischer rolled cigarettes and

offered her one. Wordlessly she shook her head.

"You're tired," he said with forced calm.

"I'm not," she shot back.

"Please, then. Tell me the rest."

"Oh, well. I ran off to Florida with our dentist, actually. I couldn't face the prospect of another Winnipeg winter."

"No, dearest, no. I saw Weinstein several times while you were gone. Don't be a tease, Joan. Tell me the truth." He knelt in front of her and tried to pry her hands loose from her knees. Her hands were stronger than he expected; he overbalanced and nearly tumbled down the slope. She looked up. Her cheeks shone with tears. "I don't think it's going to be any use," she sniffled. "If only I could show you. It was all different that night. I was changed into something very strong and powerful. I know it sounds unbelievable, me swimming the river and all that. If only you could see for yourself, Vern!"

"Just tell me," he urged. "I'll listen. I'll try to understand. I won't interrupt. I promise." He settled with his back against a nearby oak tree. He thought of fishing. It was like playing a fish, getting Joan to talk. Her mouth even opened and shut like a fish's mouth. He was watching the sunlight dance in the tangle of her dark hair when she resumed, in a voice at first urgent, then subdued. Now and then he rolled a cigarette, now and then she turned her face to his. The little scar under her nose reddened,

paled, reddened again, as it had always done. The sun moved across the sky and began to dip westwards and once they carried the jacket higher, out of the gathering shadows. Two women with library books crooked in their arms waved to them from the path and called a greeting, thinking to themselves: Those must be hippies, look at that girl's bare feet. Fischer listened without questioning or interrupting. He let the flow of Joan's words become, like the lapping of the waters and the rustling of new leaves and the lilac-scented air, a part of that charmed place. Then he saw the man with the dog Bismarck. The man tipped his cap. The dog sniffed and glanced. Fischer suppressed a desire to introduce his new-found wife. For possibly it was a different dog, a different man, not the one in the Persian lamb hat, and he thought, as Joan rambled on: how time passes, and how we endure. He had endured, she had endured, and the man, and the dog. For they were the same, he was sure now, by the way the dog kept to heel and by the stiffness of the man's gesture lifting his cap, just so, as if it were made of lead. But it made Fischer feel cheated, that Joan could not be introduced, because there was no simple explanation for either her disappearance or her return.

PART THREE

Chapter 14

Running in her too-long coat she slipped in the leafy muck and instinctively threw her arms forward to break the fall. But she didn't fall, exactly. In that split second of imbalance she refused to fall. Instead she bounded forwards as if on great springs. She was delighted by the success of this strategem. A heat blazed in her breast. Her legs and arms pumped with an almost inexhaustible energy, carrying her along street after street. The pavements flowed beneath her, waves of heat flowed over her. She half-expected the wooden houses to burst into flame as she passed, so marvellously hot did she feel! A shadow leapt up afresh in each new pool of light from a street lamp. She knew, despite its queer four-footed shape, that it must be the shadow of herself. When at last she halted by some overgrown honeysuckle bushes, her breast heaving deliciously from her exertions, it was only because she had reached a major thoroughfare and must mind the traffic. She wasn't tired. She felt she could run all night. But for thirst, she had never felt better. Then she remembered the library fountain purling silver in its white basin, and crossed the road. Alas! The fountain was closed up for winter! She licked at her dry lips with a thickened tongue and, in a flash of inspiration, bounded down to the river's edge. There she crouched and lapped at the water dog-fashion. It tasted soapy, but was cold, it soothed her

burning throat. Hoping to cool her fiery skin, she plunged into the current, her head held high, her limbs tearing at the water. Whirlpools sucked and drew and snatched at her feet and flanks. There wasn't time to feel anything but amazement as she gasped from the cold and the unaccustomed effort. After a lengthy struggle she gained a footing in the shallows and scrambled out on the far bank. She shook herself. Water flew from her body, striking stiff stalks of milkweed and burdock in hundreds of tiny sharp reports. Her skin rippled and throbbed. She ran along the lower bank and warmth returned: first timid lines of heat and then lovely engulfing waves. Bounding up a slope she found herself on a lawn overlooked by a big stone house. It was the back of a house she knew, though she had never been inside it. It had once belonged to a prominent family with which her mother had claimed acquaintance. There was a light burning on the porch. The lawn was well-kept. The shrubs in the borders were dressed in tidy burlap coats against the coming winter. She was acutely conscious of being a trespasser. Did the Ashfords still live there? Her uncle would know. She would ask next time she saw him.

She crept around to the front of the house, keeping to the shadows. There was light in the lower windows and, much muffled, the sound of voices. The whole property was bounded by a wall of fieldstone, except where it descended to the river. The iron gates were shut. She approached and studied the fastenings. They would be easy to open, but

could she risk the creak of the hinge, the clang of the latch?

She retraced her steps and went back to the river. There were other houses, other gardens. She rounded the end of the stone wall and once more ascended the bank, dislodging with her foot an old tin can which rolled down to the water with a splash. She stood still and listened, then proceeded once again through the shadows, past lit windows and dark ones. The gates here were open to the street, but she paused, scenting something irresistible. At the side of the house there was a green rubbish box. An explosive smell rose from it - roast goose! Saliva flooded her mouth. She approached the box, lifted the lid with her snout and seized in her jaws a parcel wrapped in newspaper and tied with string. The lid thudded shut when she withdrew the still warm parcel. She charged the open gate with pounding heart. She ran all the way to the street corner and, flinging herself down on the grassy boulevard, tore the parcel open. Ah! Inside was meat and fat and skin, and bones that crunched like nuts! In the cavity of the goose was the fat onion put in for the roasting, heavy with juices. She ate it all, save paper and string, and rolled happily on the grass, belching. Two cars drove by. The sight of them gave her pause. She had trespassed. She had rifled the garbage on Wellington Crescent. She gulped back a feeling of shame - to think she had actually eaten garbage! What had possessed her? What would Vern say? She had to buy beer

still! She had to get back and wash her hair!

She trotted purposefully over the bridge. The lifesaver was in its box. What a risk she had taken, swimming the river! But she didn't regret it. Nor her amazing run. Trotting along, her belly swayed from side to side, the remains of the goose lying lumped in her gut. She hadn't given any thought to her appearance. Now she became aware of her mouth. Something was different. Not a single thing, like the little pit after a tooth is pulled, but the jaw, the teeth, the palate. She passed her tongue over her upper lip, and found the familiar scar. Well, it must be a dream. That would explain the raid on the rubbish box, the swim, too, she reflected sadly. She wanted to claim the swim as something she had really done. Even the goose carcass gave her, beneath her shame, a curious satisfaction; she heard a little inner voice reminding her she had managed, she had fended for herself. And if you were going to eat garbage, Wellington Crescent garbage was bound to be the best Winnipeg had to offer, wasn't it?

She passed around the front of the hospital. Nicky had been born there. She had loved being pregnant. The way the baby had moved in her fortress-like body; their silent, secret communions. Birth was a rending, a tearing away. And that nasty nurse. And how shattered she had been, and the shame! There now, a perfect little boy! One two three four five, his fingers, his toes. Perfect! You must be so happy! So proud! So that she tried to compose the face of

happiness and pride, to hide the emptiness nobody mentioned, nobody else felt. Vern guessing she was hiding something, Vern looking at her strangely. What was it, he said with his eyes through his thick glasses, what was it? Was she not pleased? Was the child someone else's, didn't she love, was she an unnatural mother? Silently questioning, digging, and then impatiently: What have you been crying for?

She trotted along. She couldn't think of that nurse without rage. She thought, I could find her now and give her a fright! Somehow aware that her appearance was frightful. If you hold poor baby like that he'll be sick. If you uncover him like that he'll catch pneumonia and die; then, won't you be sorry!

She trotted along the damp dusky streets, enjoying the smells. Smells playing like chamber music: wet wood and rotting leaves, the aroma of panfry sneaking out windows and embroidering the old brick and stucco. Here and there the pungency of animal waste, until, barely conscious of herself, she squatted and made water. Cars reeked of metal, rubber, gasoline: all fumes of death, a funeral march, speeding along the sodden slick asphalt all the way back to Wardlaw Street and the scent of dead gardens and sagging porches. Damp canvas cushions and cocoons glistening in hedges, the small stink of worn-out paint peeling on porch pillars and picket fences. Somewhere, piney chimney smoke. She had slowed her pace, not forgetting her errands but entranced by the olfactory wonderland. Even unwashed

curtains sounded a pretty note in a minor key in the symphony of fragrances. A van drew up to the curb and two men got out. One of them held a piece of beef liver, raw, red in the lamplight, an arresting smell like a burst of kettledrums. She moved her nose, the better to trap it in her greedy nostrils. The man called 'Boy' but she scarcely heard. She was invisible to herself. She approached stealthily, unknowing, her whole being in the liverish lump that dangled from a gloved fist. A tidbit was tossed her way. It quivered on the cement. Ambrosia on her tongue. Something, a little voice at the back of her head, warned her to be careful. She was too distracted to listen. She approached, it was a rare day indeed, she had not known there was such bounty in the world! 'Good boy,' the man said when she took the liver and the chain slipped over her head and was pulled tight. Her concern was with swallowing first; and then it was too late. She was caught. Outraged, she tried to howl, to protest: the chain got tighter, pinched her throat, a plaintive squeak was all she produced. One man pulled the chain, the other pushed her, up, up, into the van. There were cages in the van. The whole interior stank of urine and fear. When she was shut in one of the cages the chain finally slackened and she tried to speak; but the men had already jumped down and slammed the door.

Chapter 15

In the sudden dark she called out, as loudly as she could: 'Hey, I've got to get home!' A raucous whoo-ooop followed by a high giggle, and off in some other corner, abject whimpering. She was not the only prisoner in the van; there was a dog. The dog was afraid, and the smell of fear was itself frightening, like the smell of hairs burning. The van jerked forward and once more she called out that she must go home, that she was Joan Fischer for whom husband and child were waiting. The metal of the van threw back the sounds, the whoo-ooops and the cackles and the giggles: nothing like words.

Words wouldn't come.

The dog continued to whimper and stink. She braced herself in the narrow wire cage against the lurching of the van and concentrated on the small luminous rectangle which was the window into the cab. The chain collar slid from side to side. Her own fear began to uncoil in the pit of her stomach, where lay the lump of liver and the remnants of the goose. She fought it by staring at the play of lights against the window. Tongues of terror darted notwithstanding into lungs, limbs, throat and bowels. She kept the fear out of her head by talking to herself. Imagining what she'd say to Vern, now that she was truly late. She'd explain that it wasn't her fault, she'd been lured, tricked, kidnapped in fact, and with a dog! When

they arrived wherever it was, she'd ring him, she'd get home somehow, she'd take a cab with the beer money. She'd tell him how good it had felt to run like that, and then to swim; how humiliating it had felt to be chained and caught. The van flung her hard against the wire like a package. They'd made some stupid mistake, of course, it was all a mistake. Mind you, she'd stolen garbage, if you could really call that stealing: such a neatly wrapped parcel, too, like her grandmother used to make. But the swimming, the whirlpools, yes, she'd tell Vern all about the whirlpools, oh! and the fragrances the odours in the streets, better than a lightshow!

She reached up to remove the chain and found her hand stiff. Her fingers could splay and relax, but not bend and take hold. Their clumsiness was like that of a hand numb with sleep fumbling for a switch. It sometimes happened when she slept on her arms. She waved the hand, shook it, to make the sensitivity come back. Then she tried to bite it. Oh. Hair. And big blunt nails. And pads. In brief, a paw. The brakes of the van screamed in the dark, the dog complained, he even piddled, and she let the paw go to steady herself. A paw, Vern, now of all the rum things, that takes the cake, or words to that effect. She recalled the earlier feeling of her mouth being different the teeth for instance so big and the length of the jaw, so long, clothed in massive muscles. Between the jaw and the ear,

that sensitive spot, where the glands are, where the ache comes. That seemed bigger. Saliva in floods. It wasn't as if, you know, I hadn't eaten supper, you saw me wolf down my macaroni, you know, Vern.

But the chain, she must get rid of it. She reached up again, pawed at it, lowered her head and tried to slide it off. ~~It~~ caught on her ears. Shake shake shake went the head. It was only a slip chain. The paw caught it, lopped it, she was free. The chain crashed to the floor. Tangled in the wire of the cage. Glinted briefly in a flare of light from the window, went out like a candle as ~~the van~~ took a corner. Surely, surely they must be nearly there and she could call! Everyone was allowed one call, and moreover she wanted her hands back (whatever drug was in that liver, they'd pay for this, the crazy bastards, by god they would!) so she could dial the numbers.

They slowed and stopped gently, the handbrake rasping, the van rocking with the doors thrown open, the men jumping out. The dog strangling on fear, piddling, maybe it, too had been tricked, ah poor thing. If I could comfort it, say, There there, fellah I always talked to dogs I met on the street I always thought, how nice to have a ^{dog}, someday when Vern is working and Nicky bigger and we have a house of our own somewhere a good smart loyal dog.

Light fell on her eyes like a sledgehammer. A torch the man had.

The dog was uncaged and led away.

'Hey, Joe, I might need help with the big one, eh?'

'I'll be back in a mo'.'

It was a gravelly night. The sweaty man jumped up and shone his torch at the chain in a heap on the floor. While she had him alone, she said: "Perhaps you'd care to explain just what . . ."

"Take it easy, Boy."

"Oo whoo oowhoo-ooop!"

"Everything's gonna be alright now." He had big yellow gloves on. The leather, a funny kind. Foreign. An exotic smell nearly vegetal beside the odours of dog and cat. Oiled yellow leather. Lanolin, like she'd smeared on her nipples when.

"He slipped his chain," the man said, as the truck rocked with the second man's weight. Once again she tried to speak. A singing giggling giddy outburst; it made her blush, it made her nearly weep with shame. "Gawd, what an ugly mutt," as the cage door opened and the chain dropped over her head, they were too quick, it wasn't fair, they must do this all the time, what a racket, innocent people abducted and made asses of and the chain back how humiliating.

The chain tightened on her throat. She jumped down on the gravel and then stood her ground.

"C'mon, Boy," said the man impatiently, and the other scratched her neck with thick gloved fingers. "C'mon, Boy, atta Boy." Chain pinched her throat, while the voice

compelled, hypnotic and syrupy, stilling her rage and seeming to promise; so she went. The three of them crunched across the dark yard and into a building. A sense of helplessness like in an airplane, when you're just a passenger, what could you do but ride it out maybe the engine would fail, but you couldn't help it, you knew nothing of engines, and meanwhile the view from the windows.

The men were a bit nervous of her, especially the one in the leather jacket smelling of beer, perfume, sex, you name it; he kept looking at her, half-scared and finally said, "That's the weirdest damn dog! I'm not sure it's a dog at all, Joe."

She recognized the place at once. They'd got Fossil there when she was a kitten. "The silly-looking one," she'd said pointing it out in a knot of kittens, Vern assenting, and their naming it 'Fossil' because of her markings and serious wise eyes. There was the long lino hall and off it the rooms where the dogs and cats were held until claimed or. Her brain choked on the 'or.' Because you scent the 'or.' The dustbane, the leather jacket, the living breathing terrified stink of animals in cages didn't quite cover it up, that soft rotten fragrance of dying. You could die here as easy as; and most did, to judge by the posters pinned up on the walls. Posters urging the neutering of pets (but she wasn't a pet!). Begging contributions (she'd contributed \$15 one year). She peered up. The dustbane hurt her nose, but the deathsmell pinched

her heart. Oh Vern, she thought, Oh Nicky! And she pleaded with the men, but again the terrible unwordlike sounds, indecently loud indoors, like a bad joke, making the walls throb. And Joe said, "Probably one of them fancy foreign breeds, kid. Probably belongs to some rich type over on the Crescent. Guy there kept a leopard once, before your time, drove around in his car with it. We'll put him in number 11. Don't forget to fill the water dish."

She was led into a room filled with cages in a range of sizes. The occupants blinked at the sudden light. Puppies nosed the wire and begged for attention in high plaintive voices. But most of the dogs were, like the dog in the van, sick with terror, pining for the homes they'd lost. She had never known a place so melancholy and forlorn. Even the man fumbling with the lock on cage 11 was not immune: his demeanor softened, his head tilted in apology: What could he do, he seemed to say, he couldn't adopt every homeless dog. The world should be different, maybe, he was sorry, yes, very sorry, yes. Still, he shoved her into cage 11, muttering comforts, reassurances, expressions of hope, as if such spells could work in her case, when she was a woman, who had no owner, who had somehow been tricked (she reverted to that theory) into assuming a different shape, a not-quite dog shape. She lapped at the water in her bowl, washing the dustbane out of her throat. She read the headlines on the newspaper beneath her feet. Then the lights went out and the door shut and

the protests began. The dogs knew she wasn't one of them; she was a non-dog. Worse, she was a scary non-dog. Their bowels loosed a stench of fear and misery. Feet clawed and tore at newspaper; low menacing growls ricocheted from one to another until one voice louder than the others began to bay long brassy notes of objection. She felt accused by the swelling cacaphony; she talked back, in giggles and shouts; she whooped her innocence in accents that made them cower and flinch. She heard them giving ground. But they were many of a kind; they soon rallied and there was a crescendo of barks and howls and growls as they taunted her, the non-dog. Until the door was flung open and the man framed in the lit doorway said: "You quit that racket, the lot of you, this minute." There was authority and threat in his tones, the promise of kicks, beatings, death. The dogs owed him obedience. One after another, they lay down in their narrow cages, muttering arguments under their breath. And she lay down herself, suddenly weary, her head on her brand-new forepaws, thinking of her husband and hoping the nightmare would end. And Vern, that he should have success, and Nicky grow healthy and happy to adulthood, and those dogs, and my dear sister, she thought, a litany of little prayers, and myself awaken whole once more, my hands, my own face and home and and and. In her dreams she was home, she was herself and Vern was pleased about something, some dish she had cooked perhaps. They were of one mind in the dream, all the tensions gone between them: his evasions and her

misgivings, all was healed. It was a long mixed-up dream, Phyllis and some people she didn't know and a messenger boy with a parcel and even a nurse. The nurse she hated was part of the parcel, which Vern took, saying in a hoarse voice, "I'll take care of all that for you". He pitched it in the river at the spot where there were whirlpools and she felt a great burden lifted from her and wakened in a happy frame of mind, secure in Vern's love.

Then it was morning. A dull light fell from a row of windows high in the room and the dogs were stirring in the dirty faint light in their separate cages, and she thought, so I am here still in this place. The daylight made everything more real. It didn't feel like a dream. With the light moving along the wall of cages, she reasoned clearly. She began to examine herself. Her paws tasted peculiar between the toes. She cleaned all her feet thoroughly with her tongue and teeth. Her fur was dappled, irregular brown spots on a yellow ground, and smelling still of the river. She had a long skinny brush-like tail, black for the most part and quite mobile. Most astonishing, however, were her privates. Had she changed sex as well as kind? For there was something small and black and pendulous. She cleaned it scrupulously, and the scrotal sac behind it, and her anus, and noted the calming, even tranquillizing effect of this part of the grooming exercise. In the strengthening light she observed a corpulent beagle in the cage across from her, similarly engaged, and she

thought of how Vern rushed in the morning when he shaved, and when he brushed his teeth, while she herself dealt ceremoniously with her long dark hair, brushing it with long graceful strokes, enjoying the feel of the brush on her scalp, the contentment.

There were burrs caught in the stiff black hairs of her tail. She picked them out with her teeth. Her toilet complete, she got to her feet and, by turning her head, tried to glimpse herself over her shoulder. To figure a pattern in the spots. What she might resemble. Nothing so much as a crude drawing in crayon by a small child. She wiggled the ears she could not see. She clapped her tail between her legs in a gesture that was both humble and comforting.

The beagle began to pace to and fro, his legs bowed with his own weight. In the next cage a terrier bitch leaned against her empty water dish and yipped fretfully. They ignored the non-dog in cage 11. Like them, she was behind bars. The hunger in her eye was something they understood at this time of the day. They waited. Food would come; they were used to waiting, their lives consisted of waiting, all that was worthwhile - bones, walks, praise, love - had to be waited for.

The non-dog nursed her hunger on fantasies of goose, not scraps but whole geese, enormous geese as big as bedsteads, dripping with fat. It made her teeth chatter and her nostrils flare. Her nostrils opened up to inhale the

world, a world of giant geese, tender lambs, fatted calves. Puppies, she thought, scenting the milky aroma of puppies and puppy turds. Saliva flooded and dripped as she parted her not quite lips to taste the sweet stink of turd, to relish and savour, oh Vern she said inside herself, in her whispering way, oh Vern, turds, who would have thought, piquant and smooth as sour cream, and in a brief revulsion she coaxed herself in her own voice with visions of hot buttered toast, but was not convinced.

The door creaked open. A trolley was wheeled in. A boy in overalls scooped chow from a big red and blue bag into steel bowls. She crunched the vague tasting food in haste and found her hunger aggravated. She stared hard at the boy's back and made a low cajoling sound; the labial 'm' was beyond her but she managed 'ore'. 'Ore,' she growled, and 'ore' again until the boy turned to see what the rumpus was about. He was a kind-looking chap with tousled hair and sleep in his eyes. He peered through the wire at the growler, he furrowed his brows in genuine puzzlement, and then, oh miracle of miracles, threw two more scoops in the empty bowl.

She loved him suddenly.

She chattered as he unhitched the water bowls, carefully moderating the sounds, trying to impress them with the shape of English syllables, to convey without haste or rage, her plight: that she was a woman, that some quirk of chance, that her real self, and could he, and would he, she

implored, snout pressed hard between the squares of wire. The fed and watered dogs paced expectantly, in a sort of dance step or sideways shuffle, pivoting in their narrow cages and constantly watchful.

The boy dragged the trolley out. Eyes swivelled doorways. Dogs whimpered, pleaded. Then back he came with a leash and lead out a big scruffy shepherd. Then another. And another. Three dogs lead away, and willingly, by the kind boy.

She pressed her body to the back of the cage. Only nose reached out, alert for the smell of death. And how could he, that kind boy! And the dogs, were they so stupid that they went willingly to the gas chamber? She would not go. She would fight and bite, and tear him limb from limb if need be. Her love for him had evaporated. He had become the enemy. She skulked and plotted and fumed. There was Nicky, his eyes brown and bright like hers, his golden skin, his small body curved into hers in satisfaction, his little sticky grasping fingers. Yes, she would kill. She clamped her jaws and listened to the crash of her own teeth, like bulldozers.

But after a time the three dogs returned, smelling of the outdoors, of Sunday morning, of church bells and withered grass and damp cement. She looked at them hard. They were the same dogs. They were alive.

Perhaps on Sundays? Perhaps on Sundays they were all let live?

But those dogs had known. That meant yesterday, possibly the day before yesterday.

The boy opened her cage. He had acne: big red pustules around his mouth reeking of adolescence, of greasy french fries and furtive masturbation. She went willingly. Both curious and determined. She whispered inside herself, Nicky, this is my chance. Don't cry, sweetie, she said. Mummy's coming.

Chapter 16

The boy lead her across the gravelled area, through a pair of high mesh gates and into a small yard about the size of a parking space.

She made a circuit of the tiny yard, nosing along the footings, pawing gate and wall and floor. The packed earthen floor sloped gently to a drain in one corner. The concrete block walls were higher than a man. The gate was heavy steel mesh in a steel frame. Pacing out figures of eight she tried to work out how to escape, while a flock of starlings wheeled overhead and a distant train whistle sounded.

There was a jagged break in the wall, where mortar had yielded to the extremes of climate. She explored the fissure then leapt up and pushed at the blocks that looked as if they might have been loosened. Not a one of them budged; nor was the crack wide enough to offer any toehold.

She made springs of her muscles the way cats do, and repeatedly leapt towards the top of the wall. Her best efforts earned her no more than scraped pads, a bruised shin and an occasional glimpse of untidy backyards. She sniffed at the drain. It could not be enlarged without removing the metal pipe. Not a job to be attempted without tools! Oh Vern, she sighed. Oh Nicky! Unseen pigeons murmured and cooed; the dog in the adjacent pen whined and barked in alternation. She licked her bruised shin and thought about

the gate. Any small child could have climbed it in a trice. Standing on her hind legs she studied the fastenings. There was a simple latch on the outside, and no padlock. If she could get her paw through the slit and lift that latch . . . oh, how easy for a creature with hands! The dog next door yelped in frenzy, hearing the gate rattle. She eased her paw through the narrow opening. She bent paw towards latch. The effort was intense. Her blunt nails clicked uselessly upon the gate post. She strained the foreleg in an attempt to achieve the necessary angle. Pain in the abused limb brought tears to her eyes. She growled in frustration at the gate, the howling dog, the sky, the too-solid wall.

The dog had discovered how to pitch his barks so that they echoed. She whooped at it, briefly drowning its hectic noise. Then tried with the other forepaw to loose the hateful latch.

It was hopeless.

The angles were wrong.

But could she not correct the angle?

Widen the mesh?

She stood on three legs and flexed the right foreleg, plotting an intuitive geometry against the latch. Her target was the mesh three or four inches to the right of the slit. She used her snout first, hoping to pry the opening wider, then seized the mesh between her teeth, pulling, twisting, grinding. The steel yielded a little. The diamond-shaped opening became rounder. What was needed

was to break the wire at some one point. She struggled to get her large grinding teeth around it. She worried away at it. Her gums bled and her teeth sang and the dog next door clamoured for its master.

She lowered herself to the ground, to rest. Vern, she said, Vern, I am trying to bite through steel, can that be done? She visualized the old wire cutters in the shoebox under the sink.

Running her tongue over the mesh she found the roughened spot her teeth had made. It might have scratched skin, caught threads. She tried to slip the paw through the rounder opening, knowing it would not go, needing however to delay the moment of grinding. Damn steel, she thought, her jaws straining, the shiver-making noise hideous in her skull, worse than a dental drill. The muscles tautened in her neck as she twisted her head, to twist her jaws, to twist the mesh, to break the steel which would not break. If the opening were a mite bigger, she would get a better grip; but if she could get a better grip, she could make the opening bigger. Her legs braced like pilons, she thought of her child and tried harder. She chipped a tooth. The damage to the steel was insignificant. A microscopic knick with a jagged edge her tongue could feel but her eye not see. She lay panting on the ground and explored the damaged tooth, the bleeding gum and her wounded vanity. Foiled by a simple latch! Caged in a place from which any three year old could have escaped! She clapped her tail between her

legs, humiliated. The dog let out a long thin mournful howl. She tried to think;

Her tail.

Her tail! More pliant than a paw!

She backed up to the gate. She raised a hind leg, cocked a toe in the mesh. Inched backwards on her forepaws, while her hind paws groped. Blood rushed to her head. She stiffened her tail, probed the mesh, reared her buttocks to bring the tail closer to its object. Overbalanced and somersaulted to the ground.

The theory was sound; the tail had brushed the mesh if not the latch. She prepared for a second attempt. She concentrated on her breathing, her balance, trying to picture herself in that queer upside-down back-to-front position. Only by a great effort of will did she succeed in inserting the tail through the mesh, like threading a needle in the dark. When she tried to curve it sideways, the tail slipped out. Once more she inserted it painstakingly through the mesh, arched her forepaws, pressed her hind-quarters back, briefly lost one foothold, swung the tail desperately this way and that. She strained her ears for the sound of the latch; but the tail had not moved with precision enough to engage it.

Oh, unmerciful gate! Oh, unmerciful shape! She lowered herself ungracefully in near despair. That so simple a thing should be beyond her!

She heard the footsteps of the pimply boy crunching

along the gravel and the wheeze and squeek of the hinges of the first gate. The boy was whistling a pop tune. He had come for the noisy dog. What was the tune, then, Vern whistled it, "Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64?"

She could always knock the boy down before he got the leash on her, but there would still be the other gate. And if he didn't return, wouldn't someone come? There were other men. The boy would cry for help. Much better to persuade him, to lick his hands, plead. . . or better still, write down her message!

She retreated to the depths of the yard. She made a long shallow scratch on the hard earth, then another and another and another: I AM. It was a slow business. Could he read it? Would he see it? So little time! A door opened and shut. The footsteps tramp-tramped decisively across the gravel.

I AM M
The first gate opened and shut.

I AM J
Would she have time to scratch her phone number?

I AM JO
So they could phone Vern and tell him to come and take her home?

I AM JOAN

The boy pushed through the gate. "Time's up, fellah," he said, reaching for the end of the slip chain. Fellah. Fellah. How would Vern . . . even Vern . . . know who she was? And for the first time it struck her that her prison was not this tiny yard or cage 11) or the short lead so swiftly clipped on the chain collar: her prison was her unmercifully strange shape, the great hairy body she had somehow slipped into being.

She walked with her head down and her tail between her legs, saw her huge paws lift and fall, lift and fall. Those paws that had failed with a simple latch. Joan Fischer did so many things that those paws could never manage!

They couldn't make coffee.

Carry Nicky.

Wash the dishes.

Buy the groceries.

Mend Vern's socks.

Not like this could she fold diapers, chop onions, sleep with Vern.

Shame overcame her; beneath her crude spotted coat her skin flushed. She only half-heard when a man's voice said to the pimply boy: "That's no dog you've got there, son."

The boy stopped, pulling the leash up short to halt

the non-dog. Which glanced up hopefully at the man who had recognized her non-dogness.

"Look at its massive head, look how its back slopes," said the man. "I think," he went on, "it's what they call a hyena. I'm going to ring the zoo and see if they want him."

So the pimply boy lead her out again and up into the van. A small metal plate glinted in the meagre sun. The legend engraved on it read: Body by Fisher. She crouched in the cage, and the words reverberated in her head all the way to the zoo: Body by Fisher, Body by Fisher, Body by Fisher. It was, after all, very funny.

Chapter 17

Fear began to writhe in her gut and work its way up into her head. She was no longer Joan Fischer. She was no longer the wife of Werner Fischer, the mother of Nicholas John. Had she finished scratching her message, it would have been a lie. She was lost. Joan Fischer née Hale had lost herself. Imprisoned now in a battered cage in the back of an SPCA van, she rode towards a new and terrifying imprisonment.

She remembered zoo visits as a child, her father hanging on to her tightly as she peeped through the stout iron railings into the bear pits. The bear pits had been replaced since by attractive terraces. She and Vern had gone, when she was first pregnant. An enjoyable outing, though Vern was gently scornful, and carried on about Hagenbeck, his childhood zoo. But Winnipeg or Hamburg, it was all the same: zoos were places to be visited, not to be lived in. You admired the hugeness of the moose and the antics of the monkeys. You wondered if the animals minded, remarked on the cleanliness, their glossy coats, their apparent air of well-being, were on the whole amused, and went home again.

She knew nearly nothing about hyenas. She didn't even know whether the zoo had any. They were said to be ugly. She'd never been a knock-out like Phyllis, but she wasn't ugly either. Surely she'd wake up soon and find she

was really safe at home in bed, with Schiller and Fossil curled up beside her, purring like engines!

She shut her eyes and let herself drift. She prepared for that longed-for awakening. She prepared to see motes of dust hanging in strips of sun while the refrigerator groaned to life. She would waken and make herself a sandwich. She would have a sandwich and a glass of cold milk. All would be well. It was the weekend.

The van braked suddenly. Assailed by nausea, she heaved and brought up a thin stream of vomit. Car sickness. It had plagued her as a child. She heard the driver yell an obscenity out his window, and the van shot forward again.

Finally they arrived.

She was lead out into the plangent air. She cleaved to the jean-clad leg of the pimply boy who idly scratched her neck. She sniffed cautiously. The scents were many and pleasing: the sweet flesh of grain eaters and grasseaters, the raunchy smell of eaters of flesh. She became aware of hunger, like a presence within her. Glimpsing a flock of goat-like animals behind a distant fence she longed to hunt them, to bring one down with swift, sharp bites to the groin.

Two men in green uniforms were talking to the boy. She listened without looking up at them, as if looking men in the face were no longer permitted. One of them said, "I don't know of any pet hyenas, but it seems so tame it must have belonged to someone." He had an accent like Vern's.

The pimply boy replied that the SPCA had no facilities for that sort of thing and would refer any calls they got.

The men in green led the way to the side entrance of a house. She knew the front of the house had been converted into a big cage, but she couldn't recall what lived there. Whatever it was, it made the back of her neck prickle. Inside it smelt of danger. They mounted the stairs and the danger came closer and closer. All her newly-acquired instincts urged her to flee while there was still time, and at her first glimpse of the lion, she bolted without thought. The boy was thrown off balance and lost his grip on the leash. The lion roared as she barrelled all the way down the stairs. She found herself in the basement. A heavy pink-faced man was scooping feed into a pail. "Easy there," he said, not breaking his rhythm. She crouched behind a row of feed bins, her hair bristling, her tail low. The lion was bellowing, but was not coming after her - he was caged, of course, but that knowledge did little to assuage her fear.

Suddenly she caught a whiff of something - meat! Good red meat! Hunger began to vie with her fear, and she was just beginning to edge towards the smell when the keepers and the SPCA boy clumped down the stairs in full pursuit. Backing away from them, she gave an ear-splitting chuckle. They froze in their tracks. The pimply boy went dead white. "Just be still," cautioned the keeper with the German accent. "Don't provoke him." Impressed by her own

power, she shrieked and gibbered and the men shrank back, scarcely daring to breathe. In a flat quiet voice the pink-faced man said: "There's half a side of beef in the cooler, mates. Let her find her way to it and shut the door after. It's not cold enough to do her any harm, and she'll calm down by and by."

She waited for her three pursuers to digest this wise advice. She was in no doubt about the location of the cooler - apart from the heavenly meat smell, there was a decided draft on her left hip. Keeping watch out of the corner of her eye, she turned cautiously, nosed through the door, and tore the beef from its hook. She heard a voice scold: "You're not supposed to leave the blooming thing open, Kai," followed by the retort: "Bloody good job I did this time, isn't it?" Then there was a solid-sounding click and the cooler door was shut tight.

She was plunged in darkness; but she had the meat; nothing else mattered. She covered it with her body. It was hers. She sank her teeth into it. She bolted it chunk by chunk. Her cells sang anthems of praise to it; she talked to the meat as she ate, aware of its life; not the life of the old milk cow it had been; but the suspended life of the cells, that very low frequency hum, the holding pattern of organic matter. The proteins which constituted and reconstituted, making new flesh, new energy, brightness of eye, keen-ness of ears, speed and stealth and dreams and the flaring of nostrils. She bolted great gobbets of raw

cold, buzzing flesh.

The ribs of the old cow poked her in the belly. Her own belly swelled. It spread sideways like a pool. It laved the meat she swallowed in warm busy juices. She heard the cooler's motor begin and murmur and then fall silent. She ate her fill. She ate the death of the milk cow and the life of the cells and her belly filled and spread and took on weight. There was more meat and she would have liked to eat all of it. When she couldn't swallow another bite, she lay there enjoying the smells: damp wood, old burlap; milk and meat, carrots and onions. She was sated, she could only inhale now and she breathed in deeply, in the ripe cold. She was full, her belly drooped, it rested on the remains of the old cow whose death she had eaten. She was sated as never before. Her ear drums pulsed with contentment. We are mortal, she thought as her belly churned away doing its work and her heart pumped not only for itself but for the vanished cow; the world was one cow less, the cow had surrendered her cow-ness. She sank back, pillowed against the ribs which would be eaten by and by in the cool aromatic dark. She dozed. She had defeated the lion. She had eaten his kill, made it her own. She was safe in a dark den, with her treasure. Her hind feet pressed hard against sacks of carrots and onions. While her belly worked she rested and dozed and dreamt, not of Werner Fischer, but of vast gold and green spaces and the touch of grass and the songs of stars and the general endlessness of everything.

Chapter 18

Later she remembered a moment of stern alertness, a flood of light and something stinging her hip. Darkness and oblivion followed. A sense of helplessness merged with her grandiose feelings of satiation; then nothing.

She woke with burning thirst in a place stinking of wildcats. Oh Vern, will I never see you again! she said. Yearning, however improbably, for a strong hot coffee, like a drunkard coming to, her head immense, a cavern of echoing pain. She staggered through straw, through an opening, into an open yard, and found the water at once. It was sweet and cool. She drank. She dunked her whole head in it, she snorted bubbles into it. She sank back. She was weak. Her legs folded. She held up her head, she sniffed. Cat. And something else, not far off. A smell like the taste between her own toes.

"Whoo-ooo-ooo-ooop!" came across a great distance.

The moon danced on the surface of the water dish. That was like something. It looked like a full moon. She lapped at it. She drank the moon. Bless the moon, clean sweet cool as it floated down her throat. She hunched her shoulders, eased them again, in a kind of shrug, and slept.

The next time she wakened, it was to the piercing cries of peacocks. She listened to their different voices: to assure herself they were indeed outside her head. She had used to like watching birds. She'd not been very good

at identifying their calls, but listening now she heard a jay, and crows, and the soft drawn out song of warblers. And much louder than the rest, peacocks.

She got to her feet. Her tongue was still thick. She lapped at the water. It tasted rubbery, having stood in its big rubber dish so long. She became aware of being watched. Across a stretch of yellow withered grass, beyond a double fence of heavy wire, two creatures. Not very prepossessing. One had a raggy ear, the other a bloated, sagging belly. Their broad dark snouts were slightly raised, to catch scent of her. Their tails, similar to her own, were arched up over their backs and looked like old feather dusters. The two approached their side of the wire, walking shoulder to shoulder, their gait matched, as if they were pretending to be twins. It unnerved her. She found she was frightened, despite the high double fence. As if she didn't believe in the power of the fence, as she had somehow not believed in the bars of the lion's cage. She lowered her head, and curved her own tail between her legs. Back and forth along the wire went the two strange animals, always keeping pace with each other and always fixing her with black sinister looks. At last she could stand it no longer; she scampered around to the far side of the small wooden house where she could not be seen. She heard their growls of annoyance, but made no reply. She had stumbled on the latrine of the former occupants. It gave her considerable satisfaction and relief to cover the nasty

smell of cat with something of her own.

The yard was not a bad size. She made the rounds several times, taking care to avert her gaze from the old busybodies next door. There appeared to be no way out. The wire was a heavier gauge than that of the gate at the SPCA, and was everywhere in perfect condition. At the rear of the property there was a gate which was not only latched, but chained and padlocked. A small wooden house stood on a slab of concrete. Fresh straw covered the floor and it was there that she'd slept. She noted the narrow little paths the cats had made through the grass, and deduced that they had been small cats. A section of tree lay some few paces from the house; it showed signs of having been used as a scratching post and a perch. She marked the long grass with her own scent, a clean odour like Sunlight soap, and settled down on the far side of the log. She was not unaware of the others. Even though they were out of sight, their restlessness was compelling, almost contagious. She had to force herself to think of the world beyond the wire, the world of Joan Fischer, of Vern, of Nicky. There was a long dirt road; there was a stretch of rough grass; there was a gravelled path. At what appeared to be the end of the road there were houses and yards, and a certain amount of movement and stirring, the sound of creatures pursuing their morning toilet. At the far side of this road lived some large animals with hooved feet; she heard one snort and stamp. She tried to figure out just where she was. The

road, she realized, must curve to the right, and lead past the deer, the moose and the bison. Then around through the park and out the gate at the north end; or you could take a turn back and go out by the east gate which was very near her uncle's house.

On her left was the river, which she could smell and hear but not see.

The sun broke through the trees, and at almost the same moment an old Blue Studebaker sped along the road followed by a grey Volvo, followed by a black Ford. The cars all halted somewhere behind her to the right; and then she heard the lion roar.

'Now there,' she said to herself, 'is another missing piece, for yesterday I was there where the lion is and today I am here in this old cat garden.'

She searched her memory but it contained nothing that explained her translation from the lion house to her present abode.

Except the sting.

She licked her lips. Yes, her stool had had a chemical taint. So she had been drugged! Well, that was just dandy! Maybe that explained everything! When the drug was all worn off, perhaps she'd be Joan Fischer again; wouldn't that give all those bossy men something to puzzle about!

She fell into a doze with the sun warming her mottled flanks. And dreamt of the milk cow.

They were standing on a bright green hill cut out of cardboard, she in a blue dress with puff sleeves and a frilled pinafore, the milk cow in flat black and glossy white. "Hurry, hurry!" she said to the cow. "If my father catches you he'll turn you into a race horse!"

"Not with my figure, honey," said the milk cow, moving over the brow of the hill at a leisurely pace.

"If my husband catches you, he'll cut up your brain!"

"Nonsense," said the cow. "I'm dead and gone already. You worry about yourself, dear. Just look at you, now!"

At that moment the pretty blue dress and the white pinafore fell off and blew away down the green hill; they were only cut out of paper, after all, and had been held on by folded paper tabs. She was very relieved to see she wasn't naked underneath. She was clothed in pretty spotted fur, just like the people next door.

Chapter 19

When she wakens again, it is to see that two men stand outside the wire watching her and speaking in German. One is rubbing his hands as if trying to wash them. She tries to follow their conversation, but can't; her own German is too bookish for their casual shoptalk. But she does recognize the young keeper, Rolf, and Dr. Helmut Feder, the Director of the zoo. Feder she knows only by sight; he was Mary's customer at the bookstore, and Mary always served him herself. Now he has given her a name: that much she can make out. "Brehm!" he calls to her.

"So, Brehm, wie geht's?"

Now that she has recovered from the drug she feels obliged to do something about her situation. Poor Vern must be frantic! However is he managing? And how is Nicky? At the bookstore they'll be wondering why she's not at work helping to unpack the pre-Christmas orders. Her essay on Holderlin lies half-written on her desk. It's due soon. So why has her body played this absurd trick on her? And how can she undo it? She's never heard of such a thing happening. Her memories of Apuleius's Golden Ass are vague and second-hand. She'd always meant to read it. In any case, she's a hyena, not an ass; rather, she's not a hyena, she merely looks like one. In fact, she reminds herself, she's really a human being trapped in a hyena shape.

She paces along the fence and lets the voices at

the back of her head argue about how it happened and how to undo it. Perhaps if she reverted to walking on two legs? She tries this. It's awkward and tiring; she keeps it up while her inner voice chants: you are human! You are human! The creatures next door growl at her. They do their terrifying little togetherness walk. She ignores them only with effort, by telling herself that there is a fence, that she's safe. In the meantime her hind legs smart from the strain. Her grandmother in a similar situation would pray. Had she but faith! At least praying would be easier than this parading about on hind legs!

She sinks to the ground. She examines herself. Not a single toe has reverted to human form, not a whisker.

What next?

Who can help? Oh, Mummy, help me! It's years since Mummy helped with anything, but her inner voice in anguish turns to Mummy all the same.

Not that her state is without advantages. She's very strong. Her senses are keen, the world is vivid and intriguing. She's given up smoking perforce. Her mind ranges over all the sources of possible help. She thinks about Mowgli the wolf boy, Merlin the great magician, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. None of these cases is quite like her own, none quite fits. She composes an imaginary letter to Dear Abby: "Dear Abby, The other night I was somehow changed into a hyena. Now I'm an exhibit at the zoo. My husband and son need me, my sister misses me, I want to

change back. What can I do? Signed: Desperate in
Winnipeg."

She begins to laugh hysterically, and her spirits plummet. Who can share the joke? Silly as it is it wants to be shared, like all jokes. Her busybody neighbours giggle as if they have understood, but she ignores them. They don't yet count.

Fresh water is brought by a man in high rubber boots with red toes. He dumps out the old water and fills the big rubber dish from two pails. Brehm cowers behind the log. When the man padlocks the double gates and retreats down the path towards the lion house, she sneaks up on the big rubber dish and takes a long drink. Later meat is brought. A truck drives right up to the wire, and a keeper tosses the meat over the fence. The keeper calls each by name as he throws their portions:

Henry!

Windy!

Brehm!

Henry is the one with the sagging belly, Windy sports a ragged ear. She, Joan, is Brehm. The meat is more of the old cow she ate yesterday. The three hyenas bolt their portions near the double fence that keeps them apart. They hold their growls until the meat is gone. First things first.

Brehm decides to ask for help, despite not believing that any of the men can really help her. She must satisfy her conscience. She must make an effort to return to the real world. She is needed there.

She explores the cat garden with an eye to finding a place where a message will be noticed. It has not taken her long to get to know every ant-hill and every blade of grass. The smell of cat is already fading and being replaced by her own. She is making herself at home.

There is a spot of bare earth under the log, and another near the gate. Since nothing will be noticed under the log, she opts for the gate. The keeper may see it while he fiddles with his keys. Windy and Henry stare while she labours. As she puts the final stroke on the 'H' for 'HELP', Windy begins to scratch frantically at the ground near the dividing fence. Then Henry joins in. They scratch and sniff, as excited as treasure seekers. They bump heads, they whoop! Brehm approaches the fence with caution. It smells lovely, whatever it is. She scrabbles at the ground on her side. What is this treasure? Their scents mingle, hers and the others', but there is nothing to see, no bone is dug up, no tunnel is created.

Impulsively they scratch the yellow earth, whuffle at it, whuffle at each other. She offers her face close to the wire and sniffs bravely; the others reciprocate. They are not so bad after all, when they're not walking side by side in that awful collusion. The game goes on for a time.

Then she returns to the task of writing 'HELP'. One foreleg tires and she tries the other with the result that the 'P' comes out backwards. She doesn't care. She feels virtuous. She has taken steps. She has done what she could.

Towards evening there is a storm. It rains hard and cold. She feels the coldness on her nose, but nowhere else. Her coat is heavy and warm; inside it she remains dry. Odours intensify. She lies in the weeds near the dividing fence, nose reaching up to the magic, drinking it in: the fragrance of mud and decay, of old birds' nests, of pitted rock, of manure. She follows one melody, then another. Windy and Henry amble over, woof at her. They hear the shouts of men above the dinning rain and the clatter of downed tools. Shovels and pitchforks thrown together, their sharp metallic tang muted by distance. Trying to catch the words of the men, she hears another voice. She turns sharply. Then it's gone. An old female voice. Perhaps she just imagined it? All she hears now are scurryings in the underbrush and the mew of gulls overhead.

Suddenly there's lightning over the river and a smell of sulphur and nitrogen explosive as a brass band. She crawls into the little house and lets the beat of the rain on shingles bring her memories of other storms.

There came a crisp cold day of brilliant sun. Late migrant ducks plodded across the sky. A thin frost furred the ground. She approached the common fence and performed the sniffing ritual with Windy and Henry, wondering if they, too, had been human in an earlier phase of life. All three lay down in the sun and in the chill of the morning she could feel the warm rays emanating from Henry's body. They spent more and more time lying near each other; sometimes she heard a voice in her head which was not her own inner voice nor yet the voice of a keeper. In time, she accepted it as Henry's voice.

After the arrival of cars, the appearance of the zoo truck and the burning off of the hoarfrost, people began to come. There had been few visitors until now. But with the sun so bright many came.

Thoughts of rescue teemed in her brain; she paced back and forth along the fence, scrutinizing the visitors. Was Vern among them with Nicky in the stroller? Or, if not Vern, then possibly Phyllis, or Esther come to take pictures, or Theresa and her kids, or Uncle Herb or Mary and her friend Flo? She paused to catch what Henry was telling her. Why, Henry asked, was she so excited by that handful of spectators? This is nothing, Henry assured her, the big crowd comes when the sun is higher, we're used to

it. Besides, she added, people don't like us. They used to come to see the lynxes and not us at all. We are despised, said Henry, and Windy confirmed her statement. So Brehm lay down again beside the common fence, but retained her view of the concourse and watched the little knots of zoo-goers making their way from exhibit to exhibit. She hadn't mastered the queer half-gestural half-telepathic mode of speech at which Henry was so adept and responded to her questions with a sort of stubborn shrug, the equivalent of 'just because.'

She saw couples with children gathered around the picnic tables. They unscrewed thermos bottles, distributed sandwiches and fruit or bought hot dogs at the refreshment stand. The aroma of popcorn floated on the air. Henry and Windy dozed and dreamt, but Brehm by force of will kept her eyes open and studied each human form, her heart leaping with hope when there was someone who stooped, or a balding man wearing glasses. She was amazed, as the hours twittered away, that there could be such quantities of people who were not Vern.

Sometimes people did come and stand close to the wire discussing the ugliness of hyenas in slangy tones. They made phony laughing noises, trying to incite them to laugh back. Brehm, nervous from her long vigil, whoo-ooped and giggled while running to and fro. Two teenagers with their girl-friends hooted and slapped each other on the back; they said, 'Whaddid I tell ya?' and 'Whaddya know!'

Brehm felt embarrassed at having made such a spectacle of herself. The sharp edge of Henry's disapproval was like a nauseous smell. Clapping her tail between her legs, she retreated. There was this side of the wire and that side of the wire and that side was best ignored if dignity were to be preserved. Windy flicked a tail, Windy conveyed that he didn't hold such clowning against her. He, too, liked people. He had belonged to a man once. The man had healed his wounds. Apart from the torn ear there were scars beneath his fur which sometimes twinged depending on the weather.

One morning the truck drove along the rough track behind their enclosures. Windy and Henry on their side and Brehm on hers rush back behind the little houses to see it. The truck is loaded with bales of hay and straw, and buckets of pellet food for the hoofstock. Two keepers jump down. They lift a big black box off the truck. Ken unlocks the gate of Brehm's enclosure and the long black box is carried in and left there, with one end open. It's empty, but it reeks, most recently of goat. Brehm circles it warily. Why has she been given a narrow box, stinking of goat, cat, and even stranger things she can't identify? She squats by the box and sprays some of her scent on it, not because she wants it for herself, but to smother those

alien smells. Then she lies at a safe distance and watches it, as if half-expecting a creature to materialize from the darkness within.

When Ken brings the meat that afternoon he comes right into the yard and throws it deep into the box, to feed the invisible creature that lurks there. Brehm growls at him. Where is her portion? It isn't fair! And fresh rabbit, too, practically her favourite! Ken says, "Sorry, old boy." You'll have to go in and get it, that's all." He stands safely behind the gate and waits. "Go on, Brehm," he urges. "Go in the box. It's moving day." Brehm feels Henry looking at her. She and Windy have already gobbled down their meat and are sucking the taste off their teeth. Brehm skulks around the box. She cocks an ear. She sniffs. The rabbit is still there, it hasn't been eaten. It's freshly killed, too, she can scent its warmth.

"Go on," Ken repeats soothingly. "You won't be sorry. No one's going to hurt you."

She puts her head in and tries to reach the rabbit with an extended forepaw. What a long box! And so dark! Only a little light coming through narrow slits.

Backing out she lies down near the open end, where she can best smell the delicious rabbit. Her stomach rumbles in protest. Saliva drips from her half-open mouth.

"Good fellah, no one's going to hurt you," Ken says again. Then, in an urgent tone: "Better get that rabbit before it runs away on ya!"

Casually she turns her head and rests her chin on the box floor.

Then she walks right in. The space is too narrow to turn around; by the time she recognizes the fact that she'll have to back out with her dinner, the door has been dropped shut.

She howls piteously.

She hears Ken locking the gate, whistling to himself, tramping off down the path.

It isn't fair! she screams. She eats the rabbit and crouches to lick the place where its blood has oozed onto the wooden floor. She realizes keenly the irony of the situation. The rabbit, a young buck, is now just a lump in her gut and well beyond screaming. So she howls for them both: It isn't fair! It isn't fair! It isn't fair!

Henry and Windy giggle mournfully in response.

Chapter 20

Men come after a while and hoist the box high in the air. They bear it along slowly like a coffin. She can see nothing but thin stripes of winking light.

They don't go far. The box is lowered and opened at the head end. The men depart, except for Ken and Feder who linger near the fence to watch what will happen. Brehm has not yet managed to get any message to Feder. The rain washed out her first effort. Two later efforts were unnoticed by the keeper. Then she forgot. There has been so much else to do; or so it seems.

Her confinement in the box and the disruption of routine jolt her into thought. She now remembers having heard the move discussed. What was Feder's word? Acclimatization! He talked it over with the keeper, debating whether the time had come. Ken had been concerned to move the lynxes back. Still, she is surprised, even outraged, as if their words had registered in her brain without the meanings. Oh Vern, she whispers, I get stupider every day!

Henry and Windy survey the box with understandable suspicion. Everywhere is their scent, which she had found so pleasing from her own side of the wire. Now it terrifies her. She has learned to believe in fences.

Perhaps she will stay forever in this long narrow box. Even as she toys with the idea, one paw with ideas of

its own pushes out and touches the alien soil. She keeps her head low, so she cannot see the others skulking by their little house. It is a bigger house than her own next door. Hyenas, after all, are bigger than lynxes.

She scratches the earth and sniffs. It's a ruse, a gesture, a pretence. It announces that she is perfectly confident and eager to play. In fact she is exhausted and wooden from fear.

Windy and Henry walk away, shoulder to shoulder, in perfect concert. They hold their tails up like flags as they walk. They pace a wide circle around the box and its mole inhabitant, pausing downwind to sample the scent of this curious intrusion. An amalgam of goat, wood, hyena. A fantasy creature. Windy snorts and groans. They resume their walk, look at the half-hyena half-box, and turn away. Brehm is compelled by something in Henry's stance. As the newcomer, she senses she will have to make the first approach. Miraculously her wooden feet take step after slow step. Her tail relaxes; she is not, after all, such a poor specimen. Henry stands sideways and appears to be looking at something a long way off, in the bushes perhaps, down near the river. Suddenly Windy wheels around, snorts, and gives Brehm a savage nip in the shoulder. She doesn't react to the pain. She doesn't take her eyes from Henry. She sniffs Henry's face: her open mouth, the side of her head, her flank. She makes lowing sounds expressive of her admiration. This is no sham; she realizes she does admire

Henry, despite or even because of her sagging belly. Henry remains as motionless as a woman at a dressmaker's fitting. When at last she lifts her leg, Brehm sniffs and licks beneath it: the distended member and the flaccid pouch, even the loose dry dugs. Then she lifts her own leg. Henry's attentions are perfunctory, but Brehm is grateful nonetheless. Her body has not lead her astray, it has known the exact degree of deference necessary for this dance. Windy follows suit and the ceremony is repeated.

For the first time Brehm is with her own kind.

The lives of the three hyenas soon fall into an agreeable routine. Brehm and Henry vie for dominance, but only as a matter of form. Henry is so much older and wiser, and Brehm still has so much to learn about being a hyena: so there's no real contest. Hours are spent just lying about together. The area in front of the house is their favourite spot. But if there's a wind from the east or sounds of activity from down by the river they pick their way around to the back and stretch out near the big gate. The long box was taken away shortly after the successful introduction of Brehm. The only reminder of it is a faint flattened oblong in the withered grass.

Several times each day they play and tumble, puppy-fashion, but with convincing snarls and giggles. Windy is the usual instigator. Low on the totem pole, he

often finds himself left out. Henry is sensitive to his vulnerability. She will raise her head suddenly, seek him out, bound over and greet him warmly, sniffing his parts with reassuring enthusiasm. Encouraged, he will scratch the ground to start a new game of scratch and sniff. Brehm is puzzled by this game until she realizes it's just that: a game. They never tire of it. And always at its height there is that lovely feeling that anything might happen, and that after all the universe is nearly perfect.

Brehm has managed to convey that her interest in weekend visitors stems from her attachment to a lost mate, Henry tries in vain to comprehend. How could Brehm have deigned to mate with a human? How do such spindly awkward creatures perform the act?

Each takes some interest in the world beyond the fence. Henry and Windy will race around the house to confront a flock of waxwings settled in a bush. The birds are soon wise to the fact that they are quite safe, though not four feet from three voracious carnivores. They stay several days in the vicinity, fattening up for the journey south, hopping and twittering and teasing their bloodthirsty admirers by occasionally perching on the upper levels of the wire, just beyond reach.

Snow came one night. Sharp wet specks pinged their noses and flecked their coats. By morning when the

wind fell, it began to snow in earnest. Large soft flakes wafted down to melt upon reaching the ground or a hyena's warm black nose. Flakes nestled between blades of crabgrass, brief jewels in a drear landscape. The hyenas lay with their mouths agape, smiling like shepherd dogs, catching the snow on their tongues. Best of all were the flakes that floated to the back of the throat and burst against the palate. It was like eating stars. From all over the zoo and from the hidden river they heard the rustlings and whisperings of other snow-bewitched creatures, the click of hooves and snap of pinions as they danced and pranced and flew.

In very inclement weather the hyenas took refuge in the house, curling in straw like lambs. They slept much and had fitful or gratifying dreams. The dreams, trapped somehow by the rafters and the snow-laden roof, lingered upon waking. Then instead of a snowbound world they looked out at golden vistas of swaying fragrant grass pulsating under a brassy sun. They heard the beat of hooves, hundreds of hooves, thousands of hooves. They were warmed by this dream. They drowsed and lingered in it, noses pressed randomly in each other's flesh. By and by, overcome by restlessness, they rose as one from their straw bed, shook off the fetters of the dream, and stared resentfully at the bitter blistered snowscape and the high steel fence that held them there. Their leg muscles twitched and that urge to run filled their brains like

drunkenness. They careened in circles, making the snow fly and crunch and churn. They leapt up on the roof of the house, accessible now that the snow was banked hard up against the walls, and with quick restive eyes measured the distance between roof and fence-top. It was everywhere too far. No one attempted the leap. Hot in their thickened coats, they dug holes through snow to the frozen ground and hid from each other.

Brehm scratched no message for Feder. It wasn't possible, despite the snow: scratching was an invitation to play, never refused. Feder came nearly every day, but they ignored him. He never brought meat, or straw, or fresh water. His tone was patronizing. He inspired no respect, even when he wore the big green coveralls and parka of the keepers, and the high rubber boots with red toes. He didn't smell like a keeper. He perpetually rubbed his hands together and cooed like one of the ubiquitous pigeons that hung about in hopes of a free meal.

One day Henry caught a squirrel, dazed by sleep and cold. Brehm and Windy were thrown together in the misery of envy. Food mattered to them all. There never seemed to be enough. A little each day, a brief exhilaration when Ken or the other keeper came with the bucket, a Hurrah! in each belly. The belly never learnt that so little was all - until tomorrow. Every day it hoped for a real gorge; every day it shrank in disappointment. Brehm tried to remember the magnificent

feeling of satiation she experienced eating the milk cow. It was gone, like the memory of a path. She only knew it was possible. Like other possible things, it was made impossible by the high overhung fence. In easy range were hordes of delicious creatures to be tantalized by: goats, camels, deer, kangaroos, zebras. The air carried their delectable scents through the "windows" the hyenas deliberately left in their space whenever they marked their ground: unscented stretches to admit the zoo news. In the bitterest cold it was occasionally the news of death. They heard the harsh eerie cry of a wild deer that broke a leg in a far pasture. They followed its dying through a long bitter night. It made them restless; they ran back and forth, longing to eat it. They felt its agony and recognized the precise moment when its pain ceased, as it yielded to cold and entrapment and drifted into the winter sleep from which it would never awaken.

The next day a truck drove off to find the dead deer. The whine of a machine was followed by the unexpected fragrance of a bleeding tree. Then the wind changed and brought them the stink of bird droppings and bears instead.

The dead deer was fed to them over a number of days. Brehm alone deduced what must have happened: how a tree fell in the dreadful wind, how it broke a fence, how the deer stumbled in the fallen fence and was unable to get up again. The keepers found him frozen and broken. They

cut up the tree, to move it; they repaired the fence; then they cup up the deer. It had brittle bones, the stringy flesh of the old and undernourished. But it-tasted of freedom!

Brehm made a study of the trees near their enclosure. She was unable to explain to Henry this sudden preoccupation. Trees cannot be eaten by us, Henry indicated, and was irritated when Brehm agreed. There were frequent failures of communication, gaps in their understanding of each other. Brehm was sometimes tempted to let the unhyena-like part of herself be forgotten in the interests of domestic peace. Then she saw, one visitors' day, the familiar figure of her sister. Phyllis was wearing a purple hat and walking beside an older man. She whooped and chuckled, giggled and whined. Henry and Windy rushed about whooping too; even the lions roared, demanding that the hyenas' rumpus be explained.

Phyllis and the man hastened towards the lions, delighted by the majesty of their roaring. They were deep in conversation. They didn't even glance at the hyenas. Brehm, straining to catch what they were saying, was rewarded only by the dulcet chirp of Phyllis's laughter. The man had doubtless said a funny thing. She gulped and lowed and made her longest most inviting sound; but the two passed from view.

Henry importuned her with a question: was that her mate who didn't so much as glance? Brehm snarled a

negative. She was in no mood for Henry now. She'd rather be left alone. She whimpered to herself, she mourned. She observed the purple hat turn and walk up the far side of the concourse. The older man had linked her sister's arm. Surely he was too old for her, surely he was old enough to be their father? Brehm yielded to a sisterly indignation.

She lay by the fence staring fixedly as darkness fell. The concourse was quite empty; the keepers' cars had driven away, leaving only the night watchman with his bit of whisky in a hip flask.

Brehm would have been glad of the comfort of tears but tears were not in her repertoire. Instead she emitted a thin sound, half-hum, half-sigh. Henry and Windy respected it. It was the song of loss, familiar from their earliest days. They stretched out side by side, sombre and stolid. When Brehm, heavy-footed and with drooping tail finally sought them out, they greeted her gently and offered the solace of their hot smelly bodies.

Chapter 21

After sighting Phyllis, Brehm became more vigilant than ever. Walking up and down beside the fence she wore a path in the hard grey snow. Where she was accustomed to lie and stare across the concourse into the distance, a hollow formed. Few visitors came because of the cold; fewer still bothered to look at the hyenas. She watched, tense in expectation, longing especially for a glimpse of Vern.

Windy approached her one day as darkness was falling. His step was hesitant, his ears flattened back, his tail between his legs. He pawed the ground and dashed off, like one who was startled or afraid. He wasn't ordinarily afraid of her, and she wasn't doing anything aggressive. Once more he approached, diffidently, even shyly: and retreated in haste when she turned her head.

She awoke later because he was nuzzling her. She growled at him to leave off, but he soon woke her again. Annoyed, she stomped out of the cozy house and bedded down in one of the hidey holes they had dug in the snow. Her body ached. She fell asleep and dreamt of Vern and of being Joan.

Windy pestered her all the next day, and the day after that. The ache in her body changed; it became more local, a kind of warm twitching along her flanks, a swollen, hot, shivery feeling. There was no mistaking it.

She was in heat. Feder spent hours observing them. If one of the keepers came with him, Feder addressed him only in whispers. He kept his hands deep in his pockets instead of rubbing them together. When Feder was there, Brehm invariably rebuffed her suitor, unwilling that their amours should be seen by that absurd little man.

For amours they had become, and for once it was Henry who was left out. She no longer had heats, she confided in her mute and inimitable fashion. Her ovaries had been eaten away by a beast within. There was no pain, but her strength was gone. She would never again bear young.

Young, Brehm whispered as she washed herself following one of their amorous episodes. Young. When Windy bounded over, refreshed from a nap, she howled and snarled and chuckled crossly and flung at him with snapping jaws. Young, she whoowapped, I don't want your young.

She tried to picture Nicky. She raged. She rolled over and over in the snow; she dug a frenzied hole and hid in it.

Windy, puzzled, attacked Henry. Look, he seemed to say. She's your friend. Make her see sense.

Henry snapped back to put the young fellow in his place. Then she lay across the doorway perfectly serene. It was not her heat; she wasn't lovesick. Age did confer some advantages. She dozed and indulged her favourite dream of the golden grass and the thundering hooves, which

had been bequeathed to her by a wild-born aunt in her cubhood.

Windy circled the hidey hole where his beloved pined vainly for her son and husband. He saw her twitching, he saw how she could not stand to look at him. He registered with joy her whimpers of desire, and with all the cunning he could manage he crept up behind and nipped her fiercely on the nape of the neck.

She shot out of the hole like a ball from a cannon, shivered with passion from his bite. Her scent had reached its full bloom. Round and round they chased while Henry dozed on the porch, luxuriating in her non-involvement, only the teensiest bit regretful.

Windy fell upon Brehm. That inner voice that cried 'Resist!' was choked off as she received his weight and thrust. Her whole body hummed and rejoiced. She and he dodged and parried, flirted and teased. They sailed through the air like a multitude; their feet drumming the ground became the feet of a vast clan of their kind. His seed sang in her womb like a trumpet, and her blood sang back in golden notes of welcome. Their eyes, lit by the sun of their passion, glowed like coals. They laid the world waste, to have the fun of making it all anew.

It began to snow.

Clouds dispersed.

The moon gleamed, a golden hook dangling from the sky.

She had conceived. She became demure, the guardian of an embryonic new age. Well, she said to herself. Well after all, why not?

After her heat, Brehm became Brehma; for Feder knew now that she was female. That was the way it was with hyenas; even so had Henry become Henrietta, though no one much bothered with saying it.

Snow dissolved into mud. As the buds swelled up, so did Brehma, while from many quarters in the zoo came the ripe odours of birth.

The hyenas wallowed in the mud and had daydreams about the mild flesh of lambs and their slim unfinished bones.

Birds returned, and also those creatures that had slept the winter through. Skunks and 'coons were on the prowl, thieving eggs from nests by the river or succulent bites from a camel's afterbirth.

Brehma's yearnings for the shapes of her human past were tempered by the feel of the two cubs growing inside her. Henry became mellow, remembering her own children. She liked to lay her head against the belly of her friend and hear the music of tiny hearts beating. She and Windy made a point of licking Brehma as often as possible, so they could enjoy the taste of her hormone-

rich secretions. If they took notice of her extra large portions of meat, they didn't make any serious attempt to deprive her of them.

Spring brought more people to the zoo. Brehma tried to keep up her vigil. She saw a girl from her German poetry class; she recognized a judge who had been her customer at Mary's book shop. But quite often, she drifted into sleep despite the visitors.

Feder came often. He was tickled pink, he told people, that they had succeeded in breeding the spotted hyena. He rubbed his hands together, his face split into a hapless grin. Sometimes he toured parties of school children around the zoo. Down the path they came in long crocodiles, lunch pails by their sides, wearing vivid raincoats in case of rain. Feder hovered near their teacher and whispered things to her that the children were too young to hear. Brehma didn't take offense. She was too pleased by the goggle-eyed kids to care what Feder said. For older groups he gave a mini-lecture full of facts and oily insinuation: Hyenas were not cowards and scavengers, as long believed: lions, in fact, were more likely to scavenge hyena kills than vice-versa. That beige one was pregnant; he had been able to note the dates of mating, so rarely observed by humans. There were disagreements about the gestation period. It was between twelve and nineteen weeks. They would see. Finally, had they noticed that the pregnant one appeared to have male

organs? So, too, with old Henrietta, the larger female lying beside her. Hyenas had been suspected of being hermaphroditic since the time of Aristotle. They weren't, he assured his audience. Science had proven otherwise. Still their sexual mimicry was unique, and so far unexplained. Intriguing, wasn't it? Inevitably he rubbed his hands at this juncture, and noted with satisfaction all the blushes on the wholesome faces of his listeners.

Brehma had grown so accustomed to her organs that she'd forgotten her initial bewilderment on discovering what passed for male appendages. Gender wasn't terribly important in day-to-day life. Didn't everyone have to eat, drink, sleep, dream? Why, she'd not speculated even once on the sex of her unborn! How unlike a human mother! She began to lick her belly. Within, the cubs wriggled and squirmed in response, putting tender pressure on the bladder, gut and muscle of their dame.

Feder and Ken held long discussions on whether to separate the hyenas for the birth. They were afraid that Windy or Henry might eat the babies. On the other hand, Henrietta had reared her own cubs in the past and might be able to give the inexperienced mother some encouragement. Knowing precisely when to expect the birth would have been a big help, but this was precisely what they didn't know. Then there was the problem of where to put the others. Few

enclosures were high enough or sturdy enough to withstand the power of a hyena's jaws. True, they could move the lynxes, but since they, too, appeared to be expecting babies, that was not a good solution. In the end Ken's view prevailed; the three were left together, but instructions were given to all keepers and night staff that they be closely watched.

The days grew warmer; trees burst into leaf. The voices of the newly-hatched and recently-born sounded in every quarter: bleat of lambs and bray of baby camels; peep-peep of pheasant chicks; tin-whistle calls of ducklings. There was rarely a day now that visitors didn't come. Since word had spread that a hyena was pregnant, more and more people followed the path to their enclosure. The groundsman even placed a bench in front of it. An old lady began to come there regularly to eat her lunch. She always wore lavender cologne and talked to herself. Brehma couldn't take her eyes off her. Whether it was her perfume, or the scent of tea from her thermos, or the fact that she chattered to herself she could not have said. The bench lady had white wispy hair, sometimes hidden under a paisley kerchief. When she had eaten her sandwich she folded the wax paper carefully and put it back in the paper bag. Then she licked her fingers.

Brehma began to get ideas about this woman. Had she some special interest in hyenas, and in her particularly? Was she a kind of witch? Did she know Brehma's true identity? Perhaps she would magically transform Brehma into Joan at some appropriate moment. How otherwise explain the creature's faithfulness? There was neither shade nor shelter near the bench, nor anything to see but the hyenas and the lynxes.

On those rare days when the bench lady failed to materialize, Brehma worried about her. Had she had a heart attack? Been knocked down in traffic? Windy was curious about her, too. He'd lie down near his one-time mate and they'd both gaze at the mystery woman for hours.

They decided she ought to mate with the nightwatchman. He looked as old as she, and the lavender scent she always wore didn't quite conceal the smell of spirits they associated with old Bob. The only problem was getting the two together: she came only by day, he came only by night. Brehma conveyed that even if those two old bodies were to mate, they'd do it in private and none would ever know. Moreover, the old woman, like Henry, was past bearing young.

The cubs were born one morning just before the sun rose. Windy and Henry were warned off by growls from the mother, who had had the foresight to give birth in the house. She devoured the afterbirth and licked the two babies squeaky clean. They crawled about in their dark

wrinkled skins nuzzling and making little chuckly squeals until she let them nurse. Kneading her belly with their tiny but powerful forepaws, they tugged at her nipples until sated. As soon as they were asleep she disengaged herself and stood in the doorway. She was parched. Feder, Ken and old Bob were watching outside the fence, lit from behind by the rising sun. She had heard the cars arrive, so their presence was no surprise, merely an annoyance. Henry and Windy, who had been lying down when she stuck her head out, jumped up and approached her. Her tail rose stiffly over her back, she bared her teeth; the hairs of her mane bristled.

The other two stopped in their tracks and squealed in a placatory manner. Brehma grunted back in fierce negatives. Keeping them in view, she drank, grunting from time to time to remind them to keep their distance.

Then she rushed back to the house where her babies were stretched out across the doorway, and slept until roused by a cub trying to climb on top of her.

Chapter 22

In the heat of midsummer, all the zoo smells were amplified; a mighty chorus of olfactory throbs, beats and sighs and a baseline of steamy dung.

The keepers went with barrows into every pen, scooping up the dung. The hyenas' latrine was cleaned once a day. When they had had bones to eat, their droppings were white and glowed in the dark. The cubs sometimes played with the bones, dragging them importantly from one spot to another. Brehma had lost track of their age; the days slid into one another like raindrops into a puddle. Their coats were lightening; they now scabbled up and down the step with ease. They scraped holes in the ground.

Besides the zoo smells, there was the smell of the river. That's where they would have headed first if the fence had disappeared: straight through the bushes, down the bank and into the cool brown wet. Sometimes they lay on their backs and stared up at the gulls, white and silver, with pink feet.

Whenever they scratched, fluff came away. They all had fleas. The fleas tasted bitter. As a child, she had once bitten a grasshopper on a dare. The cubs pounced on grasshoppers, bees, anything. Orange-winged butterflies, iridescent dragonflies and gnats in clouds passed easily through the wire and sometimes drank from the big rubber water dish - if the contents hadn't been spilt

first. The cubs waded in it. Even Henry, to ease the pains which had started up again, sometimes sat in it, or overturned it and rolled in the bit of mud she was able to stir up.

In the middle of the day there was competition for the meagre shade - a strip by the side of the house and the cement porch. The cubs might settle in the shade of Henrietta and their mother or dig down to the damp earth where it was cooler. Sometimes it rained. That was best. They made wallows. They let the mud soak into their pelts and soothe their itchy fleabitten skins.

Dr. Cooper came regularly, carrying a black bag, accompanied by Feder, rubbing his pink hands. They mistrusted Dr. Cooper at first, on account of the smells in his clothes. Brehma recognized the smells of sterilizing alcohol, gelatin suppositories and ether; she knew he was a vet. It crossed her mind he might help Henry, who was dying, albeit slowly. But he had eyes only for her and the cubs. He weighed each cub by picking it up by the scruff and dropping it in a box. Brehma watched the needle jump on the dial; she'd had a scale like that for Nicky which someone had loaned her. One cub was bigger than the other, but she didn't need a scale to tell her that. The bigger one, said Feder, his fat cheeks glowing, was probably female. Dr. Cooper wrote the weights down in a little book, asked a few questions of Ken, and went away again.

One day he did look at Henry. She'd lost weight;

her eyes were dull; she'd shed so much that little patches of scruffy skin could be seen.

"Probably old age," said Feder. And added, "She hasn't bred since coming here from Krefeld four years ago."

"We know Windy's a fertile male, so that shouldn't happen unless there's something wrong internally."

"She's nearly twelve years old," said Feder.

"Still. She looks very poorly. Get me a stool sample and next time I come, have her sedated if you can, and isolated from the others. She looks like she's in pain," concluded Dr. Cooper; and Feder, who'd been about to protest, shut his mouth and nodded in agreement. He'd already written Henry off. He had Brehma now, and Henry had never bred for him. When the cubs grew up, the enclosure would need to be enlarged if they were to keep them both and that was an expense. Brehma attended closely to everything that was said. She was fond of Windy; she adored the cubs, of course; but Henry was special. She could practically talk to Henry.

The stool sample was collected; and one day Ken brought a small freshly-killed guinea pig and threw it over the fence for Henry. It must have been drugged, for it made her very drowsy. Men were able to push her into a long box with bars in both sides. When Dr. Cooper came he reached through the bars and felt her all over. He took blood samples with a long bright needle. He looked in her mouth. Bleary-eyed, she submitted, barely able to stand.

If only he could smell, thought Brehma. She could smell Henry's sickness without difficulty. It was a glossy dark-toothed odour, weedy and tough. She watched anxiously through the fence, while the cubs leapt at her flanks and nipped at her legs, wanting to nurse.

"It might be an infection," Dr. Cooper said at last; he was startled when Brehma lowed suddenly. She groaned; she whooped; she pawed the ground. Feder and the vet stared at her and made soothing noises which only exasperated, and finally she screamed, "It's cancer, can't you tell?" But it came out as a hideous giggle. Henry shot her a sad, bewildered look. Brehma walked away. Unthinkingly she flopped on her side and the cubs fought greedily over her leathery tits.

If only I could speak properly, she whispered inside herself. Then surrendered to the lovely feel of milk pumping out while her womb and all her private places pulsed in secret blissful fervour.

The cubs did everything the grown ups did. They lifted their legs to be greeted; they squatted and tried to spray scent, though they couldn't actually make any yet. They rolled and tussled and chased. They shared the dream of the golden grass, their mother's dreams of people, and Henry's dreams of her death. Henry was looking better; the medicines the keeper hid in her food were helping. But she

dreamt often of a huge grey beast with a large horn. The beast was as big as the sky, her legs vast as trees. Her horn poked Henry and caused nasty twisting pains. Trapped in the dream, Henry shrank from the probing horn, growing smaller and smaller until she was no bigger than an ant. Then she woke up and realized she was not yet dead. Brehma woke up, Windy woke up, the cubs woke up. They all took note of the fact that Henry was not yet dead; they whooped and giggled and called, as if calling others of their clan to a feast or a celebration.

At night, old Bob would come round to investigate the racket. "You lot," he said. "Stirrin' everyone up like that. We'll have complaints, mark you. 'N' not just from Tuxedo, from over the river even, from Fort Garry even. From Charleswood." He'd take a swig from his flask and saunter off.

The nights were best. Bats chittered, night hawks screeched, and the grasses swayed to the thud of little feet. They could hear fish jump in the river.

The cubs started to dig a tunnel to the land of the golden grass. But they hit rock.

Feder gave them names: Diamond and Goldstar. Diamond was the leader. They liked to peer through the wire at the lynx kittens. When the mother lynx screwed up her face at them and spat, they ran away.

One day they saw young dromedaries being taken from their herd on the other side of the concourse. Three

keepers struggled with each baby. The babies were already taller than men. The hyena cubs were fascinated by it all. They ran at the fence and shoved their noses at the wire. Too young to hunt, they could at least dream.

The dromedaries put up a real fight. Their mothers screamed at them to come back; the babies bawled and wailed. Each had a rope around its neck; one keeper pulled the rope, two pushed the hindquarters. The cubs wanted to know why they couldn't get out and chase the dromedaries? Why was the fence there? There was no fence in the land of the golden grass, why here? Wouldn't they all like a nice feast of baby camel? The dromedaries defecated. Their manure smelt of milk and hay and flowers. The cubs badgered their elders, nipping at their legs, convinced the grownups had the means to make the fence vanish. What good were grownups if they couldn't do that? They began to dig another tunnel, not to the land of the golden grass this time, but to the fringe of weed outside the fence. They dug and dug. The dry hard earth flew back between their legs. The yellow dust clogged their nostrils, mouths and coats. The grownups slumbered. Diamond scraped at something hard and unyielding. It wasn't rock, it was too smooth. It was too narrow.

She jumped down in the hole and wrestled with it. She got it in her tiny jaws, while Goldstar circled the mouth of the hole and pleaded to be allowed to try, too. Whining, Goldstar woke her mother. Brehma looked down at

— Diamond and roared at her.

Diamond clambered out.

Brehma circled the hole and saw something glinting, shining, something long, what was it? A snake? She pawed it and knew.

It was fence.

There was fence under the ground.

"Make it go away!" shrieked the cubs.

Brehma lay on her side, defeated. She was angry. Who had put fence under the ground? It was indecent! It was unfair! How could her cubs learn to hunt? They would blame her forever for failing them in this. She sulked over it for days, long after the dromedary babies stopped bawling, long after the cubs had forgotten.

Henry comforted her now, because her own pains had subsided. The gist of it was, said Henry, that mothers all fail in some way. Remembering her bonny little boy, Brehma could only agree. They pressed their big smelly backs together and were somehow soothed.

One evening there was music. Brehma cocked an ear. Real music! It must be from the bandstand in the middle of the park. She pictured the people spread out on the grass in the green light of evening. Couples leaning against each other, families swaying gently in time, the polished brass on the bandstand weaving a dance.

She'd forgotten about music. It was one of the things that had drawn her to Vern: that he had had a musical education and could teach her. She had had fantasies of learning an instrument. Her childhood had slipped away ungraced by music lessons. Her mother had had to take piano herself and hated it. Besides there was never any money for lessons or instruments. All the money was needed by their father, for betting on the horses.

She listened to the lovely measured notes riding the air like unseen birds. She loved softly in time. What music was it? Names had lost their importance. The question 'who?' required a picture for an answer, or a chorus of smells. Important things were felt, not named.

But since names had had such significance when she had loved music, she made a particular effort to recall composers' names, to decide how Vern would have identified the music she was hearing. They were all men, she remembered that. Vivaldi and Chopin and Wagner and Verdi.

Oh Vern! Wouldn't he ever come to see her? Why didn't he come?

Then she remembered: Vern didn't know she was there.

No one knew.

How could she ever have forgotten that?

Chapter 23

Brehma had learned from Henrietta the art of telling stories without words. You did it by lying in a cozy huddle. You took a big breath, like a sigh, and let all your muscles slacken as for sleep. Then the inner voices began their work of picture-making. The cubs never tired of it; again and again they wanted to be told about their little two-legged brother who had no coat; about their mother's cubhood as a human being; about the milk-cow. From Windy they learned how lions roamed the land of the golden grass, and how they had hurt him when he strayed from his mother's den. They came to love the man who had rescued him and tended his wounds. They accompanied him as he retraced the journey that had brought him to the other end of the world where even the stars were different. Windy had travelled in a cage in a machine that made a noise like thunder and smelt like the brackish water that caused belly ache.

Henry remembered stories her wild-born aunt had passed on. These were the best of all. There was a time, said Henry, when there was no grey beast, and no babies, either. All the creatures that were simply were and went on being, day after day, season after season. There was wind, of course: the wind that is the elder brother of the grey beast. When the wind grew cold, trees shed their leaves and fruits, flowers crumbled, and nearly all the

green things withered and slept. In spring they awoke, and what a treat their fresh new colours always were, and how marvellous the aroma of their growth! Stretching themselves up out of the ground, they paid homage to the sun and the makers. One day an animal - it is said to have been Fisi, the hyena - approached a tree that was encircled by tender young offspring. How, Fisi wanted to know, did there come to be young trees? What did the tree do? And the tree replied: "I make seed, and the seeds grow and become baby trees which will one day make seed in their turn." But how did it make seed? asked Fisi. For Fisi had had a little quarrel with her kind and was feeling lonely. The tree was unable to explain how to make seed. "How do you breathe?" it demanded. "I just do," said Fisi. "So do I just make seed," replied the tree.

Fisi returned to the other hyenas and said: "Tree knows how to make seed, it's just like breathing. So tree gets young trees in the spring. Why should we not make seed and get young?"

"Why not?"

"Why not?"

"Let's ask buzzard, who has travelled far and knows nearly everything!"

So they sought out buzzard, but buzzard could not tell them how to make seed. The hyenas and buzzard went and asked kudu; but even kudu didn't know how to make seed. The hyenas, buzzard and kudu all went down to the river to

ask crocodile. Crocodile yawned and thought about the question and the others waited patiently, for indeed they had all the time in the world. But crocodile finally concluded that the question was beyond him, even though he gave it long thought. He suggested that they go together with all the other animals and ask the makers. It was a long journey to the top of a very high mountain, but that didn't worry them since there was no grey beast then and they really did have all the time in the world.

Fisi the hyena was chosen to speak, since it was she who had thought up the question. "Makers," she said, "please tell us how to make seed, so that in springtime we can all have pretty children, like tree."

The makers mumbled and jumbled for a week and a half, while everyone waited patiently. "Do you all want children?" they asked at last. And nearly all the creatures cried out that they did, though a few said they didn't really care, one way or the other - turtle, cuckoo bird, and quite a few fishes.

"If you wish to make seed and have children," said the makers, "there are two things you must do. First of all, you must divide into male and female. Second, you must welcome into your midst the grey beast who is sister to the wind."

For a week and a half the animals conferred. The

truth is, they could all imagine having children, even those who didn't care, because children were just like themselves, only prettier, littler and cuter. But they couldn't figure out male and female, and they couldn't begin to figure out the grey beast. "Males and females mate," said the makers. "That is how young are made. Go to sleep - we'll send you a dream about it." So all the creatures slept and dreamt about mating and woke up feeling very enthusiastic. "We liked it," they told the makers. "We want to be able to do that again and make young."

Fisi protested. What about the grey beast? Didn't they need to know about her before they made a final decision? Some of the animals listened to Fisi but most were too eager to try mating again. However, the makers agreed to send a grey beast dream to any creature who slept. Fisi slept, and a few of the others - buzzard, bat, jackal, rat, catfish - and the grey beast visited all their dreams. Those who stayed awake worried, because the dreamers squirmed and yelped and shrank and writhed and groaned, and a few of the dreamers woke themselves up before the dream was over; but not Fisi: she slept bravely on until her body was stiff and cold. "Leave her in peace," said the makers. "She will waken by and by." And she did. Then all the animals wanted to know if the grey beast was too dreadful. Fisi thought for a long time. She thought about the pleasures of mating, and of the terror she'd felt when the grey beast poked with her horn. It was

the longing for young that decided her, however. "The grey beast is only as terrible as children are wonderful," she said. "I think we should take a vote on it." So a vote was taken and an overwhelming number voted in favour of the change.

"Very well," said the makers. "Now some of you must volunteer to be males." And they explained that the seed of the tree came to life in the earth, and that each young tree had a tree for a father and the earth for a mother. And so it would be with us, too.

This was confusing to think about, and at first all the animals volunteered to be males, since they wanted to make seed. So the makers explained once more that it was from the bodies of the females that the young would spring forth, as the trees spring forth from the ground. Then, of course, all the creatures wanted to be females. "Take your time," said the makers. "You still have all the time in the world. But each kind must choose some to be male and some to be female, before the change can happen."

In some cases, agreements were made to share the babies between the sexes. It was so with wolves and ostriches and seahorses, and numerous other creatures. In other cases, the voluntary males were to be compensated with brilliant plumage, or great manes, or beautiful horns. Among the deer, the camels and the horses, the males were to be served by the females as if they were kings, while in yet other groups the members simply drew straws, and those

with the short straws had to be males. It was so with us: and poor Fisi, who had started it all with her question, drew a short straw. She was so disappointed that her best friend agreed to be a male in her stead. The makers were impressed by this generous act, and that is why our kind was rewarded by having males and females that look exactly alike. After many days of discussion, each group had reached some kind of resolution of the issue of who would be males and who would own the babies. Then the makers decreed the males to be male and the rest to be female, and everyone walked, flew or swam down the mountain and returned home.

The first to have babies were the mice. All the other animals went to have a look, and oh! What a disappointment! The mouse babies were naked and pink and looked more like grubs than babies: they had none of the charm of young shoots and leaves in the spring. The proud mother thought they were beautiful, however, and was shocked when a fox offered to eat them up and get rid of them. There were many births after that, and it seemed that everyone was delighted with her own offspring. In the excitement of mating and birth, they all forgot about the grey beast.

She came first to a family of rabbits, and the unhappy survivors called an assembly. They said the grey beast was intolerable and must be stopped.

"Well," said Fisi, whose children were big inside

her and due any day, "we could go to the makers and ask them to put everything back the way it was." At this, there was a terrible outcry. For so many creatures had or were expecting young that they could not bear the thought of going back to the old ways. And secretly, each one thought that perhaps she and her kind could find a way to be safe from the grey beast. Of course, no one was safe from the grey beast, and in time she visited every kind, from the tiniest bug to the biggest whale. Many of the animals blamed her visits on the hyenas, because they thought she had escaped from Fisi's dream. They believed that if Fisi had taken care to stay awake, the grey beast could never have made a home on earth. Only a few creatures like the buzzard remembered how it really was. All the others, to this day, regard hyenas with special loathing.

"And now," Henry concluded, "you must let me have my nap."

Chapter 24

Diamond pounced on Brehma's portion of meat. Snarling and snapping, Brehma chased her off. The cubs were left with half a bone to gnaw at; until Windy crunched it up. Next day, Ken, who had noticed, brought meat for the cubs, too. The feeding was always in order: Henry, Brehma, Windy. Now Diamond and Goldstar were added to the routine. They each got a guinea pig. But continued to nurse.

Henry's health improved steadily. You could smell the sickness but it was no longer putrid; just a slumbering presence. The big grey beast visited her dreams less often.

One day the bench lady wore flowers. There they were, pinned on her dress front. White daisies. The wrong flowers, Brehma needed red ones. Why? Well, because. It was just something she knew. Stretched out in the shade of the house she dreamt about red flowers. The land of the golden grass was filled with them, from horizon to horizon, a waving, singing red sea.

Beyond the zoo in gardens everywhere things grew big and full and ready to be harvested. The air was streaked and dotted with the fragrance of it all. Cabbages smelling like pepper. Sweet apples and squashes, pumpkins and tangy onions.

The leaves turned. The days shortened. There

were big storms, the sky riven by lightning, the river swelling and leaping between its banks. Forsaken nests were blown from trees.

The bench lady wore a camel hair coat and carried an umbrella with a broken spoke. She came on all but the worst days; but she never wore flowers again. Constantly she talked to herself, as if someone was really there beside her. She would droop her head and give a sidelong glance at her invisible companion. Brehma sniffed deep, the fine harmonies of lavender, tuna fish, tea, gin, mud and camel wool. And, she fancied, something else - the smell of Werner Fischer's mother, whose coat she imagined it had once been. And even the smell of herself, of Joan, seemed to be lingering in the matted wool.

The cubs nursed all through the winter, and Brehma began to feel used. If mothers failed cubs, it was equally true that cubs failed mothers. It was not failure precisely. It was the illusion of sufficiency which couldn't be sustained. There were times when other things mattered more. All kinds of things did matter. It was the most ordinary things which gave weight to life.

The smells in the air.

The easing of the bowels.

Eating.

Dreaming.

Camel hair coat notwithstanding, the bench lady disappeared with the cold weather.

So did the fleas.

All of one winter afternoon Brehma dreams of red flowers. They are brilliant as blood and dark as hidey holes on a moonless night. Henry shares and does not share this dream. She watches it, as she might watch something beyond the fence. It makes her uneasy; she noses Brehma to wake her up.

Windy imagines the red flower is like the man who rescued him. Henry says: No, it's like the grey beast's horn. Brehma shakes herself awake and goes in search of the cubs; she knows somehow that the red flowers are like her dugs; they nurture. The cubs are handsome and nearly old enough to wean.

Spring comes again. The year is round, the year turns, time is no endless ribbon or track, bearing space along it endlessly; it's an egg. In the egg are all the clans without distinction: the clan Henry made, the clans of Diamond and Goldstar as yet unborn, and the clans of zebras, lions, camels, each like a mist of gnats, or stars, or rain drops.

Feder wears a bandage on his arm. He fell one day and sprained his wrist. He smells of liniment. He kicks at the edge of a patch of porous spring snow; he's impatient for the warm weather. It comes at last. The first dragonfly skims the surface of the waterdish. Kinglets flirt and peep in the tree tops. Goldstar, digging, finds a fat worm which pulls itself deeper into the ground to escape her gigantic tongue.

The groups return, Feder's lectures resume, and there is the bench lady, wearing the camel hair coat and carrying her old net bags.

On a sunny afternoon a troupe of girls comes down the path. They are all wearing grey skirts and navy blazers and rubbers over their shoes; they are big girls, big enough to carry purses full of make-up and contraband cigarettes. Among them is Hilary Hale.

She has filled out. Her dark bobbed hair curves about her ears, her dark eyes flash in conspiracy with her friend. Her new breasts strain against the straight lines of the blazer. The tallest of the troupe, she wears a red carnation on her lapel.

Brehma goes to the fence with mincing steps, her head held high. She cannot feel her heart pounding. She is floating somewhere above her own head, she is the invisible watcher, the gilded dragonfly on wings of nerve. The smell of Hilary is like a fine net flung over her. She crouches near the fence and tries to catch her cousin's

eye. She licks at the tall crabgrass.

The flower is loose anyway, the pin has slipped. When Hilary reaches up to push back her hair the carnation falls to the ground. She lowers herself modestly on bended knee as girls are taught to do and retrieves it; but its frayed pierced stem cannot be repinned. Sniffing it once she tosses it at the fence towards the strange beast nibbling the grass. She and her friend stifle giggles while their teacher glances severely. The teacher cannot see what was thrown: only the tail of her eye spied a movement. She thinks: Perhaps it was an insect whizzing by, Hilary is normally so well-behaved. In any case, Brehma has eaten the evidence and now stares at Hilary willing her to notice: to think of Joan: to think.

When the troupe turns away, Hilary does meet Brehma's eye. She smiles suddenly, for no reason, and for no reason, remembers her vanished cousin.

Goldstar bunts at her mother's flank, rootles for the tit and is refused. She wrinkles up her nose, whoops and chuckles despairingly, throws a fiendish tantrum. Windy and Diamond watch with interest. Will Brehma yield? Goldstar dances about in circles, making attacks on her mother from several directions; but nothing avails.

Shortly afterwards Ken brings their meat. The

first portion goes, as usual, to Henry. Brehma plants a foot on her own meat and sniffs it without eating. As soon as Ken leaves, she abandons it. Windy and the cubs have a tug of war with it.

Brehma finds Henry dozing in the long grass at the back. She lies beside her and they sleep until sundown. They waken in a wreath of dreams and perform the greeting ceremony by way of farewell. No one knows for sure what will happen, but something is bound to.

It begins as a prickling in the nose. Brehma thinks of the feel of a man's bristly chin. Her father in her childhood used to threaten her with whisker rubs. Her blood races. She wonders if she will shrink, like Henry in her dreams of the grey beast, and ant-like simply crawl under the fence. But no. When the prickling starts in her hindquarters, she rises on her hind legs. Her hands grasp at the stout wire. Too tough to be bitten through, it easily supports her weight. She climbs at the back, near the double gate. At the top she parts the barbed wire carefully and eases her way between the strands. She doesn't even notice when one of the barbs gouges her left shin, so intoxicating is the wide fenceless view: clear to the river, a dark tarnished silver under the pale evening sky.

She swings down, jumps the last few feet, lands on all fours. But rises. Two-legged. Not quite aware yet of her nakedness. Uncertain where to go - home? How? Her

unprotected skin is vulnerable. The heat of transformation has left her shivering and chilled.

She takes the path around the enclosures. She will miss Henry. She will miss the others. A sharp stick pricks her foot. Freedom is perilous, and this frailer, feebler body fills her with doubt. The path turns by the old road. The river gleams. And there, suddenly, witless with disbelief and haloed with whiskey, is old Bob.

PART FOUR

Chapter 25

Werner Fischer waited. The woman who was his wife sat on the edge of his tweed jacket, hugging one knee and staring into the middle distance. She looked too young to be anybody's wife or mother. She peeked across her knee at him, then jumped to her feet. He got up himself, somewhat stiffly and cautiously. He shook the jacket and brushed away crumbs of leaf and shreds of grass. He caught a ladybeetle and let it crawl along his finger. When Joan blew on it it flew away.

"Do you know who Brehm was?" Fischer asked. "He wrote a huge book on the lives of animals: Brehm's Tierleben. We had it at home. Sometimes I was allowed to sit and look at the pictures."

"Allowed?"

"All the bookcases were kept locked. I couldn't just take it out whenever I pleased." He'd had to scrub his hands first and then sit in the big armchair with the scratches in the plush, made by Uncle Otto. Uncle Otto came every Thursday to talk with Papa, and always his fingers curled and uncurled against the plush, until it was quite worn away in those places.

He'd admired Uncle Otto.

"I didn't have the freedom of kids today," he explained, putting a protective arm around Joan. He longed to kiss her dirty bare feet. They made so little sound on

the hard paving, and kissing was easier than talking. His mind was a useless blank. There were so many things he should be saying. Things Joan must be waiting to hear. Reassurances. He winced. In the flux of his thought details surfaced only to slip away again because he couldn't find the words for them.

Drawing away, Joan reached skywards in a long and satisfying stretch. She yawned with evident pleasure. "You'd better go straight home," said Fischer. "You must be awfully tired. You can have a little rest while I get Nicky from the sitter's." He held out the keys. Joan looked as if she were going to protest. Then she took them and grinned. "See you," she flung out, stalking off, fists buried in the pockets of her cords, shoulders slightly hunched. Fischer felt doubtful and humiliated, as if he'd just failed in some very basic and unexpected way. It was such an unprecedented situation. His wife had disappeared for a year and half and come back mad. Maybe if she were large and flamboyant and mysterious like Louise it would be understandable . . . but calm, retiring Joan? Whenever they had a fight she didn't usually scream and yell, she just crept away to have a good cry. Did she know she was mad? Did she have any idea how sick she really was?

He rang the sitter's bell.

"My, my," Mrs. Woods said, peering about. "After what Nick told us, I thought Mrs. Fischer might be with you."

"She's resting. She's very tired."

"She's well, I hope?"

"Yes, thanks."

"I'll never forget the day Mr. Woods came home from the war - he was in the navy, you know. I hadn't seen him in four years, Mr. Fischer. It was a shock, I can tell you! Not that we weren't pleased with each other, but it was somewhat strange all the same."

Joan let herself in with the key. It was queer that the kitchen seemed so much smaller than she'd remembered. The corridors were darker and narrower, too. She lay down on the bed in Fischer's room and Schiller, the cat, jumped up and began to sniff at her. A flowery scent rose from the bedclothes, and she wondered if Vern had taken up using cologne. A long hair spiralled out from under the pillow. She took it between thumb and forefinger and held it to the light. It had a definite reddish cast. She flicked it and watched as it drifted slowly downwards through the air. Schiller rubbed his head against her as if to console her for something, and began to purr.

"Push, Dad! Push faster!"

Fischer planted a foot on the molded plastic bumper of Nicky's pedal car and pushed. How would they get into the apartment if Joan had run off again? He'd given her his only key. Nu, why should she run off? Barefoot,

tool. Of course she wouldn't. He gave the car another push. Although Nicky was impatient to see his Mum, he hadn't asked Fischer to carry him. No doubt his true feelings were mixed: a compound of impatience and dread. Fischer thought of his own mother, whom he certainly had both loved and feared. Nicky hadn't seen Joan since he was ten months old; he had no conscious memory of her at all. Even so he would have feelings. Some kind of feelings, all mixed up with his feelings about himself. Fischer's mother had seemed like a queen: she'd inspired homage as much as love. That was why his father fooled around with the maids. They were all round, meek, mischievous girls from the country, clothed in homely fabrics that were soft to touch. They didn't require homage. In marrying Joan, Fischer'd gone his father one better. Joan was clever, but just as unsophisticated as those country girls.

At the intersection Nicky clambered out of the pedal car and took his father's hand.

Such trust!

Fischer wished he'd thought to warn Joan to say nothing to the child about where she'd been (where she thought she'd been). He hoped she had enough sense. In fact, she shouldn't tell anyone else at all about that crazy hyena business. Fischer squeezed the boy's hand. "Nearly there," he said cheerfully.

"I hope she's like Maggie's Mum," Nicky confided.

"Why?"

"Her hair's all gold and curly. She's got pink shoes with pointy toes."

"Your Mum has smooth dark hair and bare feet. We'll have to buy her some shoes tomorrow."

"Pink pointers," said the child solemnly.

As soon as Joan heard the grinding of the elevator gears and the clang of the gates, she dashed out to the catwalk. A moment later the opposite door opened and, with a thump, Nicky negotiated his pedal car over the step.

"Hi, Nicky."

"Beep, beep! Beep, beep!"

"Say 'Hi' to your Mummy, Nicky."

Joan helped him up the next step. How big he'd grown! His fair hair had been clipped short and he no longer looked like the baby she'd pictured for nineteen months. She sensed he was wary of her. He zoomed around the corner into the apartment.

"Are you really my Mummy?"

"Yes, Nicky."

He looked up sceptically. He furrowed his small brow. "This is Johnny," he said, stroking the hood of the pedal car. "You can give him a kiss if you like."

Joan bent to kiss the pedal car. "You don't need to kiss me," Nicky said, anticipating her next move. Then:

"Are you sure you're my real Mummy?"

"Yes, Nick, perfectly sure."

The boy pedaled off down the hall, then stopped abruptly. The way was blocked by a pile of boxes. "How can I get past all this junk?" he hollered.

"Nicky, that's no way to talk. Come here and kiss your Mum. I'll put that stuff away in a little while."

Fischer planted his hands on Joan's shoulders, nodded at the boxes, and said: "You should have rested."

"I tried, but I was too excited. So I hunted for my shoes."

He gazed into her eyes. He wanted to convey without words that his love would heal her if she'd only let it. She squirmed free. Nicky was watching crossly. Fischer swept the child up in his arms and said: "This is your Mum, Nicky. Give her a nice kiss."

The child glared.

"Don't," said Joan.

"Don't what?"

"Make kissing me a chore."

"It's good manners, that's all. He really wants to kiss you. He's just putting on an act. Right?"

Fischer poked the little tummy. The boy giggled. The kiss was forgotten and Fischer put the boxes and stuff back in the hall cupboard.

No mention of Joan's long absence was made at supper. When she expressed a wish to contact her family in Montreal, Fischer urged her to wait until Nicky went to

bed. He put his son through all his paces and invited her admiration. Already Nicky could read a few words, add simple sums in his head, and do comic impressions of various friends. He giggled like Raji; then draping a small blanket around his shoulders he minced about on tiptoe, being Louise Huddersfield. His rendition of Uncle Herb was the funniest: he tucked down his diminutive chin, hunched his shoulders, puffed his belly out and, in the deepest voice he could manage, said: "Weel, Vern, how are things going, eh?" At last his energies began to flag: he buried his face in Fischer's lap, stifling a yawn and protesting that he wasn't a bit sleepy yet. When Joan bent over the crib to say goodnight, he gazed uncertainly up at her, rubbing at his eyes with his fists. How many questions, she thought, must lurk in his heart! She pressed a kiss to his forehead and smelt the sweetness and sunshine in his hair.

The telephone was in the kitchen, and Fischer motioned her to wait just a little longer, until the child was well asleep, before making her calls. He offered her a beer. She shook her head. In the living room they curled up at opposite ends of the chesterfield. Fischer lit a cigarette. "When did you quit?" he asked in a falsely casual tone.

"Hyenas don't smoke, Vern. I didn't even miss it."

"I've been wondering if I dreamt this afternoon."

He ran his finger around the lip of the beer bottle. Joan knew that any minute he'd start to peel the label. "Why?" she said artlessly.

"Why? I should have thought that would've been quite obvious. You must realize, Joan. In fact, I'm positive you realize just how unbelievable this hyena business is. People don't turn into animals. They just don't." She didn't contradict him, and, reassured, he continued. "Think of a simple little thing like the chromosome, for instance. We have one chromosome number, hyenas have another. Our genetic codes are different. Think of the material basis of memory: we know there is something like an engram or memory trace, even if we can't describe it exactly yet. A physical pathway right in the tissue of the brain: that's what memory is. No hyena could ever have your memory, nor you his." He shifted closer and took hold of her hand. "You do see it's impossible, don't you? You're a human being, dear. You always were. You always will be."

"I didn't think you believed me." Absently, she rubbed her nose. "I'm not sure where we go from here. Suppose I could give you some evidence, some proof? . . . I saved a hair, you know, Vern. A genuine hyena hair. If I give it to you, you can have it examined at the zoology department."

"Oh, Joan! Joan!"

"You could phone the zoo, too, and ask if there's

a hyena named Brehma missing since last night."

"Joan, you don't seem to understand. That wouldn't prove anything! Anyone might have got hold of a hair! Just as anyone might have learned there was a hyena missing: or worse, arranged for it to be missing!"

"You could even talk to Hilary about her red carnation."

"That, dear Joan, that takes the cake! To claim that you've been turned into an animal is one thing, but then! To go on to say you got your human shape back by eating a red flower! I mean, really, it's too much." He shook his head. "You weren't born yesterday, Joan. You said you weren't sure where to go from here. Well I've given that considerable thought. I can see that you really do believe you were a hyena. So that's my starting point: your belief. What, I want to know, has caused you, a normal, sane young woman living in Winnipeg in the twentieth century, to suppose such a bizarre thing about herself? That's my first question. My second question, naturally enough, is where were you really for the past nineteen months? Finally I'd like to know who's to blame. I'm convinced somebody must be, and it doesn't seem to be me or you." He paused to assess the effect of his words. "Personally, I think you were drugged," he said. "Probably LSD or something."

"I thought I was drugged when I was being taken to the S.P.C.A."

"Did the hospital detect anything odd in your vital signs? Traces in your blood?"

"I don't think so."

He seized her hand and began to search her arm for needle marks. In vain. "Looks like they didn't even take a blood sample!" he announced. "What about your urine? Did they check that?"

"I don't remember. I wasn't sick, you see. I think the police just took me there because I had no clothes and wouldn't talk to them. It was purely a matter of convenience, I'm sure."

"Idiots," he muttered crossly. "Well, it can't be helped. But I want you to get checked first thing tomorrow. A complete medical: blood, urine, reflexes, the works. Will you do that for me, Joan?"

"It can't do any harm that I can see," she said doubtfully.

"Then, a neurological examination would be in order, I think. And maybe a psychiatrist."

"I thought you didn't believe in psychiatry."

Fischer smiled patiently. "Don't get me wrong," he said. "I don't think you're crazy. But there are nineteen months to account for. And an elaborate fantasy. Psychiatrists do sort of specialize in helping people to remember what they've forgotten."

"So I'll have this check-up, and a neurological examination, and see a psychiatrist. But Vern, I do hope

you realize nothing's likely to come of it?"

"Don't be so sure, sweetie."

"Can I phone my parents now?"

"It's after midnight in Montreal. Don't you think you should wait? You know they always go to bed at half past ten. And there's another point we have to straighten out. That is: what do we tell people? That's really why I didn't want you ringing everyone earlier, because they're all going to want to know where you were. I've taken your crazy story pretty well, I think - but can you imagine your parents' reaction?"

"I have to tell them something, Vern. I can't just say I'm back."

"You could tell them you can't remember what happened exactly, or where you were. They'd accept that for the time being. It'll be enough for them that you're alive. You know, we all had about given up hope."

"That's one more reason why I wish I'd called Mum and Dad this evening."

"One more day won't make much of a difference."

"But I hate the idea of lying, Vern. I was never a good liar. And they'll be hurt, too, if they find out I didn't call them first thing."

"My poor dear." He tipped up her face and kissed her on the mouth. "You don't want everyone thinking you're a lunatic, do you?" he said gently. Joan didn't answer. She stared at the hideous yellow carpet and sighed. She

was exhausted. She'd gone virtually the whole day without any of the little naps to which hyenas are accustomed.

Fischer tore off the last shred of label and began to rub his thumb over the glue lines. "Come," he said. "Let's go to bed and sleep on it."

"Would you very much mind if I used the spare room for now?" Joan said plaintively. Fischer traced her cheek with his finger. "No darling, no. I don't mind," he said. "You must take all the time you need."

Chapter 26

Fischer lay in the dark with only Fossil for company and thought over the events of the day. Why had Joan imagined she was a hyena, instead of something more attractive, more domestic? Hyenas were so loathsome and vicious! He couldn't bear to think of Joan that way. On the other hand, she might easily have been a dog or a cat: loving, loyal and familiar. It would have been a much easier fantasy to have, too. Everyone knew what dogs and cats were like, but most people had only vague and unpleasant notions of hyenas. He scratched Fossil's neck a certain way, which made her arch up into the curve of his hand, purring like mad. He played with the idea of Joan as a cat, leaping and scampering hither and thither, climbing at a run all the way up the drapes. He thought she'd be like Fossil and hide when visitors came, instead of shamelessly paying court to every new person, like Schiller. Nothing, he resolved, would ever convince him that she'd been a hyena. And to think she'd actually talked about 'proof', as if such a thing could be 'proved'! All it could ever be was disproved

Disproved, he thought when he wakened next morning. Maybe he should take that hair she claimed was a hyena hair. Maybe he should call the zoo, talk to her cousin about the carnation . . . Joan might be mad, but she didn't actually seem to be irrational. After he'd dropped

Nicky off at the sitter's, he ducked into a phone booth.

"Assiniboine Park Zoo," bleated a bright female voice.

"Can I help you?"

"Someone told me that a hyena escaped from the zoo the other night."

"Yes, sir. Hold the line please, Dr. Feder will speak to you himself." In the kind of oily German voice that made Fischer cringe, the director of the zoo inquired whether he had been troubled by strange noises or by a beast getting into the garbage. Or had he actually sighted Brehma?

"So there really is a hyena missing?"

"Ja, but do not worry, this Brehma is a very tame one. If you could provide your name, sir, and your address . . ." Fischer replaced the receiver and fled. He was trembling badly. It took him several moments of deep breathing to calm himself. When he arrived at Raji's building he stared at it in wonder, no longer able to remember why he'd come. He racked his brain, his finger hovering by the doorbell. Of course! Raji was going to lend him money so Joan could get some shoes: she couldn't go off to the doctor with nothing on her feet.

Raji put the kettle on for tea. "My preferred time for being at home is when my wife has gone to her work and all my children are gone to their school. Then it is so peaceful!" Raji gestured at the couch which was strewn

with exam books, texts, class lists and newspapers.

"That," he declared, "is the only problem. To have all this peace, and to have to be spending it marking papers. Instead of just reading and reflecting." He poured out the tea. He was wearing a shabby dressing gown over thermal underwear and he hadn't shaved. "Now that Joan's back," he said coyly, "what will you be doing about Caroline?"

Fischer shrugged.

"You are going to have to choose, old man. Only people like me can keep more than one woman at a time!" He giggled and Fischer smiled woodenly. "How is Joan, anyway? Where was she?"

"I don't know. She doesn't know herself."

Fischer looked away quickly and felt guilty, as if he'd told a lie. Raji made a 'hmm' noise through his nose. Fischer longed to confide in someone, but he couldn't bring himself to speak the damning words. Instead he said: "A hyena is missing from the zoo."

"Oh, really? I hadn't heard. Is it in the paper?"

"Someone told me. It may well be in the paper, I just haven't read it."

Raji rubbed his unshaven chin, closed his eyes and tilted his head back. "That is very curious," he said at last. "About this hyena I had not heard - as you can see, I'm quite far behind with the newspapers, I'm saving them all till I've got my grades in. But I do recall that quite

a long time ago now a hyena turned up. Mysteriously. No one claimed it. That was in the paper at the time."

"How odd," said Fischer in a dry little voice. Excusing himself, he took the money Raji was lending him and issued Raji an invitation for dinner 'soon', when Joan was more settled in.

"I just might be giving Caroline a call," Raji teased. "Just in case she is looking for a new boyfriend." He giggled melodiously and waved goodbye.

Chapter 27

Joan was nervous about her first appointment with the psychiatrist. Vern had wanted her to see a hypnotist who was a friend of Norman Onyschuk's - he thought hypnotism would be quicker than therapy. When she chose instead to go to Dr. Crosby, whom her uncle knew by reputation, Vern was quite annoyed. Now she wasn't sure it had been worth making a fuss about. Perhaps she should have given in to Vern since it seemed to matter so much to him. She was sitting in the clinic waiting room beside a woman with a little boy. By the watch on the woman's wrist she saw that it was not yet three o'clock. She could still leave. There was still time. But she knew she wouldn't. To change her mind now would only annoy Vern further.

She listened to the mother and son chattering amiably about going to a cottage for the summer. The boy wore glasses and a patch over one eye. He was only a year or two older than Nicky. The mother's face glowed with a soft, absorbed fondness, and little darts of joy flashed from the boy's one good eye as they spoke.

When pregnant with Nicky Joan had prayed: let there be nothing seriously wrong. A harelip, a club foot - but nothing that couldn't be fixed, lived with, loved. Convinced, then, that love was a consequence of perfection.

Nicky had been a perfect baby. They had counted his fingers and toes when he was born and she had been

impatient to see his genitals and embarrassed to say.

Two days later she unwrapped him during a feeding. His soft tummy had mushroomed over his sides like risen dough. The nurse got cross when she saw, and said the baby would get pneumonia and die if she weren't careful.

They had anaesthetized her and cut her and deprived her of seeing him born. That hadn't been necessary. She knew even then that she would have stretched.

To come to and hear a baby crying and be angry, thinking it was someone else's baby in her delivery room! And then not seeing him naked!

It had certainly been different with the cubs. She'd felt huge and powerful during their birth; she felt she could have tackled lions if need be. Or flown clear over the fence. Black and wobbly and tasting of salt, their dark skins had moved over their bones when she licked them.

Nicky had had a bandage over his navel. And a helpless neck.

A man said: "Mrs. Fischer?" in a cool, business-like voice, and she leapt to her feet. He nodded to her to follow and strode purposefully down a long corridor. Once the office door was shut, Dr. Crosby indicated a couch covered in light brown leather. The head end rose at an angle and there was a pillow on it in a clean striped case. There was also a brown leather bucket

chair that stood opposite the big orange chair near the desk.

"Must I lie down?" she asked.

"It's up to you."

Joan sat in the bucket chair. Crosby stretched out his legs and crossed his ankles. He was a nice-looking man. He had a black beard and thick black hair, dullish soft black, not glossy. He held a pen poised over a filing card. The beginning was easy. He wanted her full name, her address and phone number, and her date of birth.

Marital status. Children.

"Have you any children, Mrs. Fischer?"

"Nicholas is two and a half." Crosby jotted this down quickly and looked up. "There's two others," she went on. "I'm not sure whether to count them." She waited for Crosby to challenge this curious statement, but he was silent. So after a while she said: "The two others. They're not human children. They're hyenas."

Crosby made more notes and turned to her again. He was thickly built, but muscular and stocky, not soft, and his black beard was neatly trimmed. "You want to count them?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. But I'm not sure if I should."

"It's up to you."

"Then count them for now." She felt a twinge of guilt, as if her decision was somehow disloyal to Vern. But Vern was not there. It was between herself and her

doctor. Studying Crosby again her eye travelled upwards from his stylish loafers. He was wearing a coloured shirt with short sleeves and his arms, hatched with curly black hairs, were quite tanned though it was only May. Did he go south in the winter? Did he perhaps have Indian blood?

"Why have you come?" Crosby asked. "How do you think I can help you?"

"My husband believes I've had an amnesic fugue. He thought I should see a psychiatrist, and my uncle, Herbert Hale, suggested you."

"What makes your husband think you've had a fugue? And more important, what do you think?"

"I disappeared," Joan said. "At least, that's how it must have seemed to Vern." Crosby listened attentively while she summarized. He maintained an expression of mild interest which never varied and which reminded her of her mother when she was very little. She longed to engage his attention and despaired of doing so. "Vern's theory is that I couldn't have changed into a hyena because it's impossible. Therefore something else happened which I've forgotten or suppressed. You're supposed to help me remember what."

"But you don't think I can because you really did change into a hyena and you remember all about it."

"Well, I suppose," she said, torn by the conflicting demands of truth and good manners. "I mean, there are lots of things that I find quite puzzling. It

ought to be impossible. Before it happened to me I never would have believed it, and now I really do wonder about myself. . . ."

"You wanted two hyena cubs to be counted among your children."

"For now. I did say 'for now'."

"Sure you did. You were hedging your bets," said Crosby. He actually laughed and crossed his ankles the other way.

"Do you think I'm crazy, Doctor?"

"It's a crazy story, isn't it?"

She made an affirming nod.

"Why do you see it as a crazy story?"

"People just don't change into animals."

"Why not?"

"It defies the laws of nature."

"Be specific."

"Well, my brain, for example! My human brain has a certain structure. My memories have physiological correlates - engrams, memory traces. Change that structure and the memories must be different. A hyena brain couldn't have contained my human memories; yet I knew who I was all that time. Then there's the genes. The chromosome numbers are different for humans and hyenas. Finally, I seem to remember a pretty sudden transformation. Nature works gradually. Change takes time." She ran her tongue across her upper lip to keep from smiling her satisfaction at

having learned her lesson so very well. Crosby demanded flatly:

"You believe all that?"

"Well, I certainly used to."

"Some people believe in sudden change. Mystics; some religious people. What about the ritual of the mass? Bread and wine becoming the body and blood of Christ?"

"I don't believe in that anymore. I'm not even a Christian, let alone a Catholic."

"Were you ever?"

"For a while, as a child. But it was almost an accident, my being a Catholic, and I gave it up when I was twelve. My mother was a Catholic but my father wasn't," Joan went on. "I was sent to the regular public school. I was very eager to start, I wanted to learn to read. Across the road from us lived a girl named Kelly. She must have been seven or eight. I told her I was to start school, and she told me it was a terrible place. If you did anything wrong there, she said, the principal would cut you into pieces and throw you into the furnace. I believed her. By the time school started, I was very scared. I saw no sign of anything Kelly had described, but I was suspicious and terrified of doing anything wrong."

"One day we were all herded along the hall to the auditorium. The whole school was assembling there; we were supposed to see cartoons or something, as a treat. I asked a teacher if the principal knew, and she said 'I don't

know, dear.' The auditorium was already full of children and teachers and the lights had been lowered when our class started to file through the doors. I thought the whole thing was a monstrous plot. I was certain something dreadful would happen to everyone. If the principal hadn't given his permission, he would punish us all, teachers included. So I screamed. I screamed as loud as I could. I wanted to warn everybody, to save them from the furnace. A teacher hurried me away and made me lie down until my mother came to fetch me home. After that I was sent to school at the convent, where I did all the usual things Catholic girls do."

"Tell me about this principal."

"I never saw him, actually, but in my mind he had total power over the school, and liked nothing better than to get his hands on some bad child and chop him up. School was a place where you were supposed to work and be good, not have fun. Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse were fun; so they went against the rule."

"Why did the principal chop people up?"

"He liked to. He was always glad when someone was bad so he could do it."

"So you screamed."

"Yes."

"Did you ever scream at the Convent?"

"I don't think so. I wasn't afraid there."

"No principal?"

"She was called a 'mother superior'. I didn't think of her in the same way. In fact I got quite bold at the Convent and did quite a few bad things."

"For instance?"

"Chewed holes in my gloves. Talked in class. Quite often I was late. Other girls got to wear pink ribbons for being good, I sometimes had to wear a black veil tied around my arm for being bad."

"How would you describe your present beliefs about people?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"Do people like that principal really exist?"

"There are people who get a kick out of hurting others. It's a fact, isn't it? I used to feel smug when my sister Phyllis got into trouble. When we were very little." She paused, remembering. Crosby was silent. He went on being silent. It was embarrassing, as if she'd missed a cue. She blurted out: "Sometimes when Vern does something clumsy or wrong, I feel glad too. You see, he always pretends he's so perfect. But it's not very nice," she added, her voice falling. "Not very nice of me to feel that way."

"It makes you feel ashamed?"

"Sort of cheap, if you know what I mean."

"That principal - do you think he ever felt 'cheap' like that?"

"Oh good heavens, no. That was the whole point,

wasn't it?" She supposed he'd felt perfectly justified, cutting children up, throwing them in the furnace.

"I wonder what made him different from you and from the mother superior."

"I wish I knew," she said, shrugging her shoulders and beginning to glance around the room. After a time Crosby asked: "Who do you think changed you into a hyena?"

"Who?" She sucked thoughtfully at her lower lip. It was not a question that made much sense to her. Crosby was silent and his expression vaguely expectant.

"I don't think anyone in particular," she said finally. "It just happened. It was just one of those things: at a certain moment it had to happen. If anyone's to blame, it's probably me, you see; I probably took some kind of wrong turn, not meaning to, and brought it on."

"But you didn't mind being a hyena."

"I did to begin with. Then I got used to it. I used to wish we weren't stuck in the zoo, though. We were well treated there but it would have been nice to be free."

"Now you're free."

"Yes, that's true," she said with just a hint of mockery.

"Our time's up for today, but if you want to try to work on some of your problems with me, I think I can fit you in." Crosby waited for her to put her answer into words. "Four times a week, then," he said. "For now."

Chapter 28

"How was the doctor, darling?"

"Oh, he was really very nice. What about your day?"

"Much the same as usual." Fischer smiled wistfully. Every morning he wakened with the hope that something would have occurred in the night to make Joan remember. Every day it got harder and harder to believe that she wasn't hiding the truth deliberately. She was still sleeping in the spare room. This was both a relief and a source of pain. It made her seem very remote and virginal. Whenever he caught sight of her sweeping a floor, washing dishes or bouncing Nicky up and down on her knee he was always amazed, as if a china doll had suddenly come to life. As a boy he'd had a paralytic great-aunt who lay all day upon a chaise longue with a shawl across her shoulders. She could only move her left arm. She used to nibble Leibniz Keks and sip tisanes and stroke his hair with her good hand while he sat on a footstool beside the chaise longue. She hated Hitler with a passion, but this sentiment was always expressed in so thin and whispery a voice and to so limited a circle that it was inconceivable that it should ever put the family in any danger. Before every visit to Tante Minne's his mother admonished him anxiously to be quiet and good. 'Remember,' she said, 'Tante Minne is fragile as eggs'. Now he felt something of

the same fragility in Joan. He heard himself urging her to sit still, to relax, not to trouble herself. "It's okay," he called out when the phone rang. "Let me get it."

"It'll be my sister for sure." Joan cradled the receiver and leaned back against the doorframe. Fischer hastened to pull over a chair. "Sit, sit," he pleaded.

Joan didn't tell anyone else that she'd been a hyena. Vern was adamant that she mustn't and it seemed the least she could do. She just explained to everyone that she couldn't remember. They didn't all believe her. Many people seemed to suspect she'd run off with another man and was lying now to protect him. Louise Huddersfield accused her outright of going to California with Archie Conners; but that was because Louise had such a crush on Archie herself. Joan knew Louise loved creating an opportunity for saying Archie's name out loud and remarking casually: What a gorgeous bod. The one person Joan did feel badly about was Phyllis. Phyllis, purely from loyalty, believed absolutely in her amnesia. She believed in it so thoroughly that she seemed to think Joan had simply not existed for those nineteen months. "Don't pressure her," Phyllis cautioned Fischer when she thought Joan was out of earshot. "The main thing is she's alive and well."

"I don't pressure her," Fischer protested. "I'm very careful."

"Exactly, Vern. Too careful by far! It makes her nervous. It'd make anybody nervous."

"Well, it makes me nervous - those nineteen months like a gaping hole! I frankly don't care anymore what she did, I just need to know."

Fischer didn't mean to let on to anyone about Joan's hyena delusion. He only told Louise because he wanted her opinion; after all, she was a clinician with a job at the local mental hospital. Louise listened with a severely professional expression on her face. She remarked that Alec Crosby had the reputation of being 'very sound'. Joan was 'in good hands'. Still, it could take years and years to get to the bottom of it: they would all have to be very patient. A delusion was a bit like a tangled string. Trying to sort it out might make it worse for a while. Fischer must be brave and have faith. Fischer could not imagine being brave and having faith for years and years, so he told Raji. He hoped that he might be more sympathetic and understanding. Raji suggested the whole thing might be a sort of reincarnation, only in the middle of a life.

"But it's a delusion. It can't have happened! Don't you see?"

"Delusion, illusion! What's the big difference? Do we absolutely know what's possible and what's not?"

"Now Raji, you can't for one minute think it really happened!"

"Well, no," conceded the Indian, pursing his

plum-coloured lips. "But it is in the past, yes? What really matters, my dear friend, is NOW. And eternity, of course, but that is beyond our puny grasp."

"The past matters to me, I can't help it. In fact, I'm working on a theory . . ."

"Theories! Oh, Werner Fischer! That is okay in academia - but in marriage? Listen, instead of dreaming up theories about the poor girl you should be making mad love to her!" Fischer flushed deeply. How did Raji know he wasn't sleeping with Joan? He hadn't told anyone that. "Take some advice from me," Raji went on. "Knock her up. It does a woman good, and Joan looks magnificent when she's pregnant."

The only reaction that was in any way gratifying was Caroline's. She was impressed by Fischer's courage in welcoming home a wife who claimed to have been a nasty carnivore. "If you could only get to know her, I'm sure you'd like her," Fischer declared. "She's actually very charming."

"I'm sure you're right, but I think it would be better if we didn't meet. If I were your wife, I wouldn't want to know about me." They were in Caroline's bed. The afternoon sun trickled through the cracks in the window blind, dappling their bodies. "She could hardly blame us," Fischer began. Caroline touched the damp patch of curly hair on his breast and squirmed up against him. "Perhaps what she told you is true. I mean, there really are

werewolves, aren't there? And there's lots of stories about people turning into animals, so it must happen sometimes. I remember one about a swan."

"That was the god, Zeus. He turned into a swan and seduced a woman named Leda. It's only a myth, sweetheart. And werewolves exist only in fairytales."

"How can you be so sure, Vern? That's what amazes me about you." She raised her leg and stroked it. "I haven't shaved for a week," she remarked. "Feel how bristly it is." He felt. He kissed her calf.

"What amazes you?" he prompted.

"That you're always so bloody sure."

"If you'd bother to take a psych course, or even a biology course, you'd be just as sure as I am."

"Balls," said Caroline. "I'd never be so sure as you. I'm not that sort."

One day he and Caroline went out to the zoo. They found the hyena enclosure and stared for a time at its four scruffy occupants. It was all as Joan had described it, even down to the old woman sitting on the bench eating her lunch. Fischer reasoned that Joan must have been somewhere where she was at least able to observe the zoo hyenas. He approached the old lady. "Didn't there used to be another one?" he said conversationally.

"Aye," the woman replied.

"I wonder what happened to it."

"I don't know, but I kin guess." She gave Fischer a dark look. "T'others et it."

"The other hyenas? Ate it?"

"Bones 'n' all. What else?" She shrieked with laughter. Fischer backed away, clutching Caroline's hand.

The zoo was bounded on three sides by acres of parkland and bush and on the fourth by the Assiniboine River. The only human habitation within the park was the head gardener's cottage. It was situated in a wooded dell near the English Garden and offered no view of the zoo area. But from the vicinity of the hyena enclosure the sketchy outlines of an apartment house could be glimpsed through a screen of trees. Fischer pointed excitedly. "I wonder if any of the keepers live over there?" he said. "Let's go and see."

What they found when they crossed the river was an undistinguished red brick building, four storeys high and called, absurdly, the Côte d'Azur. A notice taped above the doorbells warned that the buzzer was out of order. The inner door was held open by a rubber doorstep.

The building's layout seemed perfectly symmetrical. A wide staircase bisected it. Between floors a landing with a big window looked across the lawn towards the river and the zoo beyond. Fischer studied the view from each landing, making notes and drawing rough sketches as he went along. "Why don't you just ring doorbells and

ask people if they recognize Joan's picture?"

"I don't want to give the game away." When they reached the fourth floor Fischer looked about for a way up to the roof. There was a door, but it was locked. He sat down on the top step and sketched the far bank of the river. "There has to be a gap in those trees," he explained. "That's the only way anyone could actually see the zoo from this building. If the building were higher, of course, you could see right over the trees."

"Suppose there isn't any gap?"

"There has to be. And in a way, that makes it easier to zero in on the culprit. You see, we first eliminate anyone whose apartment faces Portage Avenue. then we eliminate anyone who has no view of the zoo through a gap in the trees. Chances are not more than two or three apartments will have such a view: thus, you have only two or three suspects."

Caroline followed him outside. They walked along the foot of the rear wall. Fischer made a detailed drawing of the facade. He paced out the length of the external wall and carefully estimated the height of each window. "Don't you think it would make sense to let the police do this kind of thing?" Caroline said gently.

"Not yet. They won't be needed until Joan's got her memory back and it's time to arrest her abductors. My job is to give her enough details to jog her memory." He made a few more notes and finally put the notebook away.

"My eyesight's not so good," he said. "But I don't think a face near the hyena enclosure could be recognized by the naked eye from this distance, do you?" He was thinking of Hilary and her carnation. Hilary, when asked, had confirmed her visit to the zoo and even volunteered the story of the carnation. "I think," he went on, "that Joan must have had access to field glasses, or even a telescope."

"You know," Caroline objected, "I just can't see why anyone would keep a girl locked up and make her believe she was a hyena. It's too much. It just doesn't make any sense!"

"Well, thinking she was a hyena might be something Joan did to herself. Imagine how it must have been for her, locked up a prisoner, tormented, perhaps required to commit various perverse acts. She thinks - looking through a telescope at the hyenas - 'If only I were strong and powerful like them! Then I could kill this person who's tormenting me and escape!' So hyenas kind of get to be special for her. She's bored, she's lonely, maybe she's been forced to take LSD or something. Stuck in a little room with a telescope and nothing else to look at but the zoo! She spends hours each day watching the hyenas and suddenly she becomes convinced that she's really one of them."

"Oh my, oh my! You make it sound almost certain, Vern! But what about that hyena who disappeared? How do

you explain that?"

"Why, I don't have to. It's not my problem, you see. It was probably stolen by someone who fiddled the lock. Joan may have watched it happen and somehow escaped herself. And look!" Fischer pointed towards the river. "See how shallow it is here? See all those marshy little islands? You could easily walk across! That's what Joan must have done, then taken all her wet clothes off when she got to the other side. That would explain why she was naked when they found her."

"I guess you have it all figured out."

"I only have to convince Joan," said Fischer. "If I can do that, then the mystery's virtually solved."

Chapter 29

"You see," Joan told Crosby, "Vern really expects some 'truth' to emerge. I'm tempted sometimes to make something up just to keep him happy. He finds it unthinkable that I might go on forever claiming to have been a hyena. Unthinkable and undesirable."

Crosby pulled hard at his earlobe. "Don't you think most husbands would have pretty negative feelings about the possibility of their wives turning into hyenas? Or into any kind of non-human animal for that matter?"

"But Vern's field of study is animal behaviour!" Joan declared heatedly. "Now imagine that it is possible for a human being to actually become an animal for a time. Just think of the scientific possibilities! No more guessing whether animals feel love for each other! See colours! Dream! Make plans! Communicate! Don't you see? A whole new mode of studying animal behaviour! A whole new way, too, of relating to animals! Hundreds of mysteries solved! And he thinks that's undesirable!"

"I'm still not convinced," said Crosby. "I think what Vern doesn't like is his own wife disappearing for nineteen months. Think of his worry . . . his sorrow. The pain of loss. He suffered a lot because he didn't know where you were. Now he still doesn't know. So he's upset. It's natural enough."

"He didn't suffer that much. He had a girl

friend. He's still seeing her, too. He hasn't told me about her, but I found out. She lives right in our building." Joan paused to give Crosby a chance to comment, and forced herself to look him straight in the eye. His expression was neutral; his eyes gave nothing away. She wondered if he'd ever cheated on his wife. There was a picture of him and a blonde girl in a red sweater walking arm in arm. She'd often wondered if the girl were Crosby's wife. "I don't feel any jealousy," she said. "I mean, I'm not jealous of the girl. It just seems unfair. He's managed to be the injured party and also to have quite a lot of fun."

"You're angry at him, but you're not sure why," Crosby suggested. "Were you mad at him on the night you changed into a hyena?"

She thought back. It had annoyed her that Vern wanted her to buy beer, and that he didn't seem to care about her hair or her needs. There'd been some remark about his sister making her own shampoo, with its clear implication that Joan should emulate the sister if possible. However, her annoyance had been short-lived: she'd soon risen above it. She'd been sweet. It had been just one more little thing that rankled, and she knew that she had to learn to see things in a way that didn't rankle. So she'd written a cheque and set off for the beer outlet. In memory she saw herself leave the drugstore and turn up Osborne. Resolved to get beer and carry it home, thinking

how her arms would ache and that maybe, just maybe, Vern would be genuinely pleased with her instead of taking her effort for granted. It was at that point that she got the urge to run . . . and slipped. Mad? Oh, yes, for sure she'd been mad. She'd tried to talk herself out of it as she'd done hundreds of times by thinking of her own mother and what she'd had to put up with. She'd reminded herself to be grateful that Vern wasn't a gambler like her Dad. As if he refrained from being a gambler purely out of consideration for her! There was a flaw in the logic somewhere!

"I nearly went home and gave Vern the money, so he could go and line up for the beer himself," she confessed. "But the thought made me feel petty. So I just ran down the street. Maybe the wind was at my back, pushing. I seemed to fly. Then I slipped. I was falling forward when something in me cried out: NO! Instead of a painful fall I went on running - but on four feet."

Crosby was silent; he looked almost like he hadn't been listening. She didn't say anything. She was learning to let the silence be; to use it. To look at pictures of her past selves, caught in memory like flies in amber.

"If you'd let yourself fall instead," said Crosby.

"I'd have been winded. I'd have gotten muck all over my coat. It had been Vern's mother's coat. He would have been cross."

"Why?"

"It would've had to be drycleaned. Apart from the expense it still smelled of his Mum's perfume. Drycleaning would've spoiled the smell."

"He cared a lot about the smell?"

"His mother's very beautiful. He thinks very highly of her."

"Does he think very highly of you?"

Joan shrugged in exasperation. Crosby pressed his fingertips together and swivelled his chair until he was facing the drawn curtains. Then he swivelled back. "The coat's lost, of course," he said. Joan nodded.

The sessions always ended the same way. Just when she was on the brink of a discovery, Crosby announced in his flattest tone: "Very well. We'll go on next time." At first four hours a week had seemed so much; now it seemed so little! Even so there were the silences. Times when she became tongue-tied. When she stared at the couch and wondered how it would feel to be lying there instead of sitting in the bucket chair. In her imagination she would lie down facing the bookcase on which the picture stood, of Crosby and his wife; she would clasp her hands across her stomach; she would press her feet together. When she got caught up in what she was saying she imagined how she'd forget about her feet, so that her knees parted, ever so little, and her toes. She couldn't do it. If she did it she'd never be able to get up again. Besides, she needed to be able to look at Crosby. It was soothing to see a man

who was neither pleased nor displeased.

The walk home gave her a little respite, a breather, time to reflect on the session. Now it crossed her mind that Vern might be relieved if she left him. It was true that he thought very highly of his mother. He used to bury his nose in the folds of that coat and sigh. He should find a wife he thought just as highly of, a wife who liked to wear perfume and dress stylishly. Things weren't right between them: they hadn't been right before her hyena days and they weren't right now. He'd never forgive her for being how she was. But if she left him she wouldn't have to worry about that. She could stay in Winnipeg instead of moving to Calgary. She could go on seeing Crosby. There was only one problem. She could hardly bear to think about it, it was too terrible.

Nicky.

Vern would never let her have Nicky. She could understand that. No man would give custody of his only son to a woman he believed to be crazy.

Chapter 30

Raji's dig about love-making was as effective as Cupid's arrow. Fischer became obsessed by the idea of making love to Joan. He replayed all their old scenes in his mind: their first time, awkward and impassioned; the time they did it in a farmer's field and were spotted from an airplane which flew back and forth, giving them no peace. And the time he'd made her pregnant - early one Sunday morning while waiting for Norm to pick him up to go fishing.

Now she was back and it wasn't a bit like he'd ever imagined it would be. It was almost as if a miracle had taken place which everyone could see - but him. He bit his lip hard until the skin broke. Wasn't Raji right? Wasn't he going about everything the wrong way? Oh, he must make love to her! How absurd to have been put off by a crazy story! He must make love to her without further delay; then they would be truly reunited, one flesh, falling in love all over again. Her memory might even be kindled by ecstasy, the dark abyss of her forgetfulness might flood with light. She would be his wife again.

He took her out to dinner, to the Acropolis at the corner. He liked the steak, generously seasoned with oregano. He found the moustachioed owner who bartended and manned the register a sympathetic character. He made small talk with him about the pace of business in the summer.

"Is okay," the fellow conceded warily, tearing his attention away from his ragged fingernails. "Is not very busy. Not many tourist coming here, not much to see, not like Paris, New York, or Greece my country." He shrugged. "But I getting old, I retire soon, go home maybe." He gave Joan an old man's smile of appreciation. "You want dinner? And something to drink first? Whisky sour, okay, I fix, I bring you. Sit anywhere, anywhere there." He motioned carefully to the booths along the wall. There was an area furnished with tables covered with blue cloths, but it was roped off.

"What's he saving the tables for, do you know?" Joan whispered.

"Weddings probably." Fischer pulled the menu out from behind the record selector and perused it from force of habit. "Steak for you, too?"

"I think I'll try the salad."

"Don't, sweetheart. That doesn't sound like a dinner - salad! Pah!" He covered her hand with his.

"You're not wearing the ring," he said with tender reproach. On his way home he'd bought her a new wedding ring. Her old one, like the clothes she'd been wearing that fateful night, had disappeared.

"It's too big, I was afraid it would fall off."

"Get it adjusted. The jeweller will do it free. I'd take it in myself, but he needs to measure your finger."

The waitress who came to take their order had a face the colour of curds and a moustache on her upper lip. Beneath the bib of the apron her vast bosom drooped nearly to her waist. She was bowed down and slightly humpbacked, as though the weight of her huge breasts had been too much for her all her life. When she waddled off to see if there were any lamb chops left, Fischer said: "She must be his sister."

"Maybe."

"She looks just like him."

"She could be his wife."

"Or both," said Fischer, tittering.

Three teenagers came in and ordered Cokes and fries and played Beatles hits on the juke box. The heads of passersby were just visible above the blue and white cafe curtain. Occasionally someone paused to read the fly-specked signs. They sipped their drinks to make them last and Fischer smoked. He'd bought himself a pack of tailor-mades to mark the occasion. After an awkward silence Joan asked him about the job which awaited him in Calgary. Once she got him going he talked at length.

"And Picasso?" she said.

"Picasso? Oh, that rat, you mean. Well, you can guess. He was an experimental, not a control, so we needed his brain. Poor devil. He was a smart rat, all right. Lots of them are smarter than you'd think."

When their orders came the old man wandered over and took their empty glasses. "You like some wine?" he asked, staring down at their plates. "Is everything okay? Steak very good, I think."

"Delicious."

"And you, pretty missus?"

"The lamb's a bit tough, but tasty."

"Ah, tasty, tasty! Good, good!"

Once the old fellow had shuffled back to his place Fischer asked Joan how tough the lamb was. "Like shoe leather." Biting his tongue not to say 'I told you so' he cut off a big chunk of steak and placed it on her plate. "If you give me some of yours, that'll make it fair," he said. It was a shoulder chop, raddled with grey fat that puckered up around the edge. "We should refuse to pay for that," he said. His father had often made a fuss when food and service were not of an acceptable standard. But one look at Joan's horrified expression convinced him that this was not the time for copying his father's example.

Joan forced herself to eat two more bites of the awful chop, then the bit of steak Vern had given her. The steak wasn't really much better than the chop. Perhaps she was losing her taste for meat. Dead animals! She could live quite happily on fruit and vegetables, eggs and cheese. Dead animals - creatures just like herself.

Slaughtered, just to feed her and her kind! It seemed a

"pointless cruelty if you had the choice."

It was a relief to be outside again.

"We could walk to the theatre," Fischer said. "There's plenty of time before the show starts." They passed their apartment building on the way and Joan remarked on how happy Nicky had been to see Caroline, for it was she Fischer had asked to babysit. "He's crazy about her," explained Fischer. "She's good at playing with little kids. She makes this funny face with her fist, tying a hanky around it and wiggling her thumb as if the face is talking." An enthusiastic tremor in his voice warned him to change the subject. They stopped on the bridge to watch the sun-streaked flow of the river. Bats were already circling in the shadows under the trees. "We should think of having another kid soon," he ventured.

"I'm not sure I want another baby."

"Why not?"

"I'm not sure. They're a lot of work. They tie you down."

"They're fun too!"

"I know. I'm just not ready."

"Don't you like Nicky?"

"Of course. I love Nicky. It's nothing to do with that."

All through the movie he ached to make love to

her. He nibbled her ear and whispered love messages into it. He placed her hand in his lap. She patted him soothingly and took her hand back. Again and again he captured it, squeezed it meaningfully, drenched it with kisses and pressed it to himself. On the way home he was dizzy with apprehension. It might have been his first time. Joan might have been Royalty or Wealth or Fame or Another Man's Wife. He couldn't speak. She made comments about the movie, but he didn't answer, he had nothing to say. As soon as they were home he put on a record of Flamenco music. He knew she liked the way the mournful voice of the singer challenged the doleful strains of the guitar. The feet of the dancers stamped out a song of their own which was at once heroic and mocking. Clumsily he removed Joan's clothes and, as her flesh was bared, he rained frantic kisses on it. Then she fell silent, and he could no longer guess what she was thinking. She became closed and mysterious, like the temple of an alien tribe. Her soft tummy was streaked silver with stretch marks. He thought they must feel cool to the touch, like the metal itself. But when he laid his cheek on her belly it was neither cool nor warm. Her navel was a dark deep whorl. Quickly he covered her and sought her eyes, saying her name over and over. She stared up with a tiny, vacant, nearly sad smile. He was gripped by the fever for connection; his flesh interrogated hers; he married his rhythm to the beat of the music. Her face told him nothing, and he shifted his gaze

to her breasts. It was as if the thing which was Joan had drained away. It inflamed him, her coolness. He arched above her. He spoke words that sounded like stones falling down a mountainside. He bit her and she emitted a thin, breathless cry. He kissed her nipple and she held her breath, waiting for him to bite again. Again and again his mouth found her out, biting and carressing by turns. In this way he made her think of nothing but him and his body for the space of one Spanish song. But he could see how it annoyed her. It shouldn't, since she was his wife; yet it did and he couldn't help knowing it. When they finally lay side by side in the companionable dark listening to the last of the music her resistance was palpable, like a third person between them in the bed. He told himself it must be part of her madness, and would pass.

Chapter 31

It was an hour's journey to get to the zoo from the Roslyn Apartments. The bus, smelling of plastics, perfume and chewing gum, was crowded with shoppers: young women in crisp-looking outfits, older ones with blued hair and light summer coats. Joan had forgotten about that lovely sense of anonymity you could have on public transport. Here she was just one more woman in the crowd. No one gave her a second look, no one thought she was a lunatic, no one required that she give an account of herself or her plans for the day. She'd thought of bringing Nicky with her, but she was glad she'd sent him off to Mrs. Woods' as usual. This was a journey she had to make alone. She didn't know what to expect anymore. Perhaps the zoo would seem quite strange, not at all like the place she thought she'd lived in. Perhaps Vern was right, and she was the victim of a powerful delusion.

The sky was a clear washed blue, pale and endless. The clean shapes of gulls dipped and soared over the river. The chalky yellow path that marked the beginning of Assiniboine Park was pitted with anthills; she stepped over them regardless of the teeming life within.

Everywhere were eager darting swallows. A family of mallards drifted on the glassy water, making perfectly symmetrical wakes that knit like feathers behind them. An enormous dragonfly hovered beside her head, throwing

rainbows of colour and sound, then glinting out of sight. The humming of insects was the very sound of the heat. There was no breeze. She heard the whirr of swallows in flight and the varied notes of the gulls high overhead, the brassy insistent cry of the herring gulls and the squeaky timorous mew of the smaller Franklin's.

In the woods it was cooler. She fondled the trunk of a big oak, her fingertips exploring the fissures and crests of the bark. She was less than half a mile from the zoo. Pushing away from the tree she began to run, feeling moons of sweat form as she skimmed along the path. The river was screened by old willows that leaned out, trailing their branches in the sluggish waters near the bank. Her handbag slapped against her side. Her nostrils flared; she became conscious of her ears and the back of her neck. It was only the displaced air on her skin. The woods ended abruptly. She had reached the English garden.

She imagined that she had never seen flowers before; but of course she had. She had seen them in borders, even that morning while waiting for the bus, marigolds and salvia against the cream-coloured base of a building. Those had been mere decoration. The ones she saw now were lush and final. They swayed and beckoned in the windless air; tall lupins, blue bells, phlox, and the snapdragons that had fascinated her in childhood. There were banks of pansies, buttercups and daisies in vivid abundance. There were bushes with gleaming oily leaves and

tiny star-like flowers. There were roses of every hue. A white rose seemed to beckon, and Joan bent towards it and breathed in its perfume. It brushed her cheek, its texture both dry and fluid, like fine powder; it whispered secrets of birth, sex, death, and the mad pulsing of protoplasm. The earth was aglow with petals that had fallen; curled at the edges they floated on the black soil like spawn.

She looked around quickly as though her greedy joy was somehow indecent in such a public place. There was no one in sight, only a hummingbird, flower-like, his ruby throat and satiny-green body poised like a Christmas bauble, his diaphanous wings barely visible. She strolled along the neat cinder path. She rubbed a spearmint leaf between thumb and forefinger as her mother had taught her and released its enticing scent.

By and by, she left the garden behind and followed the road that joined the main zoo road between the moose enclosure and the pheasantry. In a corner paddock three zebras were pulling hay from a hayrack. Their paddock was all brown bare earth, beaten hard by their tidy hooved feet. The brown road made a U past the mouflon sheep, the one-humped camels, the two-humped camels, the lion house and the path to the adjoining enclosures where the lynx and hyenas lived. In the middle of the U were the few benches and picnic tables she had seen a thousand times. There was the phone booth that old fellow had used, and the little refreshment stand with its shutter propped up. Everything

was painted a dark forest-green, like the zoo trucks and the keepers' togs. She bought a Coke and some french fries in a cardboard cup and sat at one of the tables and watched the mouflon sheep. The fries were very hot. She nibbled at them gingerly while the mouflon lambs capered on their rock pile and tried to reach the leaves of an overhanging bough. The ewe lay serenely in the shade. A lion roared half-heartedly from the bottom of the U. A zoo truck cruising up the service lane stopped by the dromedaries to deliver clean straw. She thought how Crosby might have said she was putting off the moment of truth, lingering there, nursing her Coke. It didn't matter. There was no urgency now. She wiped her mouth and fingers carefully on a paper napkin and disposed of her rubbish in the bin, an oil drum painted green and white with the word 'zoo' stencilled on it. Then she strolled past the camels, the sheep, the lions, and came to the hyena enclosure the long way around. Windy's hindquarters protruded from the house. Henrietta lay asleep around the side in a strip of shade. A pair of dragon flies flitted above the big rubber water dish. The cubs were nowhere to be seen. They must be indoors, out of the sun. It was mid-day; it was hot.

She walked around the three sides of the enclosure that were accessible to the public. The hole the cubs had been digging was wider but, of course, no deeper. She smelt the soapy aroma of marking paste and the prickly stench of urine.

She watched, she waited. Nothing happened. Nobody stirred. Then she licked her finger, held it up to test the slight wind, and adjusted her position accordingly. From Windy and the cubs she expected little in the way of recognition. She had already thought it through, determined not to feel too disappointed.

Windy's tail twitched, the way it did when he had his dream.

Suddenly she felt a stabbing pain, like a menstrual cramp. Two or three times this happened. She rubbed the small of her back. Henry sighed, shook her head, opened her eyes. Got awkwardly to her feet. Stretched. Drank from the rubber dish, slopping the water.

Joan walked along the fence, to be nearer. Henry's belly sagged as much as ever, but she was thinner, and still dreaming of the grey beast and her prodding horn. She raised her head abruptly from the water and stared at Joan. Joan ducked under the barrier rail. She squatted down close to the fence. Henrietta advanced, tail high, sniffing inquiringly. Then whooped! a greeting. Joan, who had been tense with hope, relaxed and squealed softly.

The others came, curious and amazed, but not quite recognizing. The cubs looked magnificent. Joan scratched at the weeds on her side of the wire. The four hyenas scratched back, sniffing and chuckling.

When they tired of the old game, Joan spoke to them. At least she spoke to Henry, and seemed to hear

again in her head that old female voice. A quizzical tone: a 'how did you do it?' tone. An 'are you happy?' tone.

"I'll bring you a red flower too," Joan offered.

— For she could think of nothing else.

Henrietta dropped her tail, twitched her ears. She was afraid of red flowers. She was too old to change that way. Better to give in to the grey beast, her own familiar. It wouldn't be long now. Maybe before the flea season.

"Perhaps I'll come again with my mate," Joan told her. "You're my only witness. The only one, Henrietta!" Her legs were full of pins and needles, from squatting. Still when Henry pressed against the fence, Joan thrust her fingers through the wire and scratched the dear scruffy neck where it itched.

Chapter 32

Reading aloud to Nicky that night, Joan paused to savour the quiet. Nicky squirmed closer. "'S not finished yet," he complained, but kindly. She read on. It was their best time together. Occasionally, because it was summer and the window open, they could hear voices down in the street, rubbing together like coins in a pocket. At storytime Nicky forgot that he wasn't too sure of this mother who had appeared so suddenly in his life. He rested his head against her and allowed her to stroke his fine slightly damp hair. His pudgy hand crept up to his face almost furtively like a wild shy creature with its own skittish life and his thumb slipped into its hiding place between his lips. He was tremendously grateful that his mother never scolded him for sucking his thumb. The comfort of it was terribly necessary. And wasn't it his thumb, and his tongue? And his nose nuzzling his curled-up hand, smelling the well-loved smell of his skin?

"Then the Bear gazed up at the trees," read the mother. The doorbell shrilled. The boy slid off the bed and ran for it, skating his socks over the lino. His mother followed, dismayed to have been interrupted, her finger between the pages to mark their place.

It was Phyllis, which made it all right. The two sisters embraced while Nicky danced on tiptoe between them, arms reaching up. They lifted him together and hugged him

by turns. Then Joan read the rest of the story and Phyllis and Nicky listened. It was rather a long story about a bear who is thought to be not a bear, but just a silly man who needs a shave and wears a fur coat. Since it was a special occasion, there was no urgency about putting Nicky to bed. When the time came he was to let himself be carried down the hall to his little room off the kitchen.

"How peaceful it is with Werner away," Phyllis said. "I tried to call you today, and when there was no answer I was afraid you'd decided to go with him."

"He didn't really want me to. I'm glad. I don't really like fishing, and it gives me a chance to be alone with Nicky. A chance to think." They were silent for a time, curled up on the old couch. They relished the quiet, they delighted in the absence of the man. It was his absence that gave the evening its special value, as the oasis takes its meaning from the desert. They were sisters together; they were alone; they could say what they liked. They could talk about him, for example, but they need not. They could talk about their childhood, about Jack and Barbara, about friends left behind in Montreal; but they need not. At last Joan said: "If Nicky's asleep, we could make some lemonade." They walked stealthily down the long hall to the kitchen. Joan took three firm bright lemons from the fridge and got out the old glass juicer. Nicky was wuffling contentedly in his sleep. "So where were you

today?" Phyllis asked.

Giving a final twist to the lemon, Joan drew the feeling of the day around her like a cloak. She hadn't realized, until she arrived at the zoo, just how close she'd come to doubting herself. When she went afterwards to her appointment with Crosby she was in a state bordering on euphoria. She talked easily for the whole of the session. Not since telling Vern about those nineteen months had she spoken to anyone with such clarity and candour. Now the knowledge that she'd lied to Phyllis and that Phyllis had believed her lie was nearly unbearable. She began spooning seeds out of the lemon juice. "See?" she said. "They're like little fish. And the juicer's a castle with a lemonade moat." She laughed sadly. Phyllis laughed too, easy and unsuspecting. "You still haven't told me where you went today."

"The zoo," Joan confessed.

"It was nice weather for it. How'd Nicky like it?"

"I didn't take him." Joan lowered her eyes and ran the tip of her finger quickly over the chip in the table top that looked like the map of Australia. "I did think of it," she clarified, "but in the end I decided to go by myself."

"Why?"

"I haven't been completely honest with you," Joan said carefully. "It's not true, you see, that I have

amnesia. I remember everything. I'm really sorry about the lie, Phyl. It seemed like the best thing at the time, at least the easiest thing. Please forgive me?" Phyllis nodded, half-fearful of the revelation she knew must follow. But when Joan told her story, Phyllis didn't think it was so terrible. It could so easily have been worse! Why, Joan might have been raped or murdered, or kidnapped and forced to participate in dastardly acts! Instead she'd been a queer kind of dog-like creature, safe in the zoo. Phyllis tried to picture it. She had to laugh at the idea of a four-legged creature with Joan's face. "Oh, poor Vern," she said. "Did you really tell him everything? I can see how upset he'd be, he's so proud and possessive, but, oh dear! It does seem so appropriate, somehow!"

"Why?" Joan snapped. "Why appropriate?"

"Oh, Joan, nothing. I wasn't thinking."

"You must have meant something, Phyllis."

"It's just - oh, damn, you know better than I do how Vern is. Always going on about the way things are done in Europe, and about what barbarians we North Americans are. Except for you, of course. Since you're his wife, you're an exception. You're the cultured one. That's all. I didn't mean anything nasty."

"I suppose it must seem kind of funny," Joan conceded. "Looked at as something that happened to Vern. But it didn't really happen to him, you know. It happened to me. I was transformed, not Vern." She steepled her

fingers together. Her cheeks were fever-bright, her eyes shone. Suddenly Phyllis wasn't sure she didn't prefer to believe in Joan's amnesia, in a Joan vulnerable to trauma. She was certain that that's what Vern preferred. Instinctively she recognized that if Fischer hadn't believed that her sister's transformation was against nature, he would have had to find some other reason for rejecting it. The very knowledge of it seemed to bestow on Joan a kind of fierce potency.

"Things can't just go on as they are," Joan declared. "Vern's been waiting for the 'truth', but the truth he wants doesn't exist. Of course, I knew that all along, but I wasn't clear about it before today."

"What will you do?"

"I don't know yet. I'm not the person Vern thinks I am. I'm not even the person I thought I was. I'll have to wait and see."

Chapter 33

While cleaning his catch at the kitchen table, Fischer told Joan all about his fishing trip. He and Norm had seen lots of moose tracks: mornings they were wakened early by the tremulous calls of loons on the lake. The clatter of pelican wings overhead was a sure sign that fish were plentiful. Norm hooked the first one: a big pike. Trying to land it they nearly upset the canoe. As Fischer talked, his filleting knife flashed and fish scales flew like pale sparks. Joan rinsed the fillets. Fossil and Schiller twined around her feet, mewing urgently. Fischer gave them all the fish heads.

"It's really just as well that you didn't come with us, you know, Joan. It was a strenuous trip. And, as you can see, the mosquitoes were especially cruel." His brow and arms, badly sunburnt, were also lumpy with insect bites.

Nicky leaned against his father's knee, fascinated by the deft strokes of the knife until Fischer slit open a plump bass whose guts writhed with scores of living worms. Then the child recoiled. "Only a few little worms," said Fischer, scraping them out with his knife. "Nothing to worry about." But Nicky had already taken refuge in his mother's arms. He clung to her, his face pressed into her neck, while she patted and soothed him. It was so rare for him to pay her any attention when his father was there. It

made her heart melt. Fischer, looking with interest at mother and son, found his breath catch in his throat and felt his face, so pink, swollen and ridiculous with its three-day beard, assume a rapturous expression. "My two angels!" he burst out, and began at once to cough uncontrollably from the force of his own emotion.

Much later, after a good soak in the tub and a delicious fish supper, Fischer broached the subject of Joan's disappearance. He'd taken the liberty, he said, of discussing it with Norm. He hoped Joan didn't mind. She gave him a bright smile. It was a relief to her that Vern was bringing up the subject himself; she'd worried about how to open discussion. Now it would happen quite naturally. "Well!" Fischer exclaimed, surprised by her equanimity. "Norm told me about a drug which can be used in amnesia cases. It's called sodium pentothal, and sometimes the 'truth serum'. It stirs up the memories. Naturally, it can only be given under medical supervision, but you could ask Crosby for that." Joan opened her mouth to speak, but Vern wasn't finished. "I've been doing some scouting around on my own, too," he said.

"What sort of scouting?"

"I went to the zoo. Just to have a look about. Obviously you know a lot about hyenas, so it seemed reasonable to suppose that wherever you were, you were at least in a position to observe them. So where could you

have been?" He shrugged dramatically. "I'm convinced you were kept a prisoner," he went on. "In some narrow, bare room where you had nothing to do all day except stare through a window. How lonely you must have felt! How you must have suffered! Frightened of your captors! Perhaps he or they tortured you at night. Maybe you were forced to do things so unnatural you've blocked out fully all memory of them. Whoever this evildoer was, whatever he did, even a beast's life came to seem preferable to you. Through a telescope or maybe field glasses, you could see that one enclosure through the trees, and you identified yourself with the inmates. Oh, darling! Oh! Here's a hanky, there, have a good cry, now. Go on, cry, you'll feel better soon. There, there, there there."

She blew her nose and wiped repeatedly at her eyes. "How silly of me," she blubbered.

"No, not at all silly, my poor goose." Fischer held her; he rocked her like a baby; he crooned. Then he gave her a long gentlemanly kiss and drew away from her - for the contact had made his sunburn smart. Still he was much gratified by her tears, and felt certain that they signified that there was really something like truth in his theory about the Côte d'Azur. "Do you remember now? Is it all beginning to come back to you?" he asked in a small and infinitely hopeful voice. She shook her head vehemently. "It'll come," he soothed. "You'll see. The sodium pentothal will help. It makes sense, doesn't it? You, all

alone in that room, probably hungry, maybe cold. And those animals! Looking so warm in their thick coats, eating with gusto the meat their keeper brought for them! How you must have longed to feel strong and powerful, like them. How you must have longed to live your life without feeling lonely and afraid. I have the names, you know, of the major suspects." He drew out his little notebook and flipped through it. "By 'suspects' I mean, of course, those people who have apartments from which the zoo might be seen. There's an R. Lifschitz. A Dr. and Mrs. Santana. A William H. Pearl. Do any of those names sound familiar at all? Evoke any memories, however unclear? No? Are you quite sure?"

Joan shook her head. On her face was a little half-smile Fischer found maddening: to him it looked pitying and superior and scornful. At home where he'd been the youngest child his brother and sister had often looked at him like that. But suddenly Joan spoke. She told him she'd gone scouting at the zoo herself. She even insisted that the old hyena had recognized her. So then it was his turn to feel pity. He took her two hands in his and stroked her knuckles thoughtfully with his thumbs as if memorizing their shape. How desperate and unhappy she must have been! Because she'd just been weeping the jagged line of her harelip scar was flushed a livid pink. "My poor poor girl," he said. "My poor little goose. Nu, whatever you do, don't worry. We'll get all of it straightened out

very soon. Do you go tomorrow to see Crosby? Yes, of course, it's Monday."

Joan pulled her hands away and sighed her frustration. "Why don't you ever listen?" she complained.

"But I do listen!"

"No, that's not true. You never listen. You just dismiss everything I say as nonsense. Just because you took a genetics course and I didn't, you're somehow allowed to conclude that everything I say is wrong. It wouldn't matter what I'd done - you'd find some flaw. If I found gold, you'd be the one to be sure it was only fool's gold."

"Silly Joan! Gold indeed! All I'm asking you to do is speak to Dr. Crosby about a drug. Such a simple thing! It shouldn't be too much to ask of you! Crosby must know all about this drug; he'll probably wonder why he didn't think of trying it himself."

"I doubt it very much."

"Joanie dear, it's the sort of thing any doctor, and a psychiatrist in particular, is bound to know about. Here - I've written down the name so you won't forget tomorrow." Gritting her teeth Joan took the scrap of paper. "Suppose I take it and just tell the same story about being a hyena in the zoo?"

"Well, that's a chance. No drug works on everyone."

"So for this drug to work on me, I have to remember some new and different 'truth'?"

"Of course."

"I can't see why I should take it, then."

"What do you mean?"

"I lose either way, that's all. Can't you think of a test which at least gives me a chance? Like checking with the zoo to see if their hyena records correspond to what I've told you? That sort of thing?"

"Damn it, Joan, don't, please, don't be mulish.

"It's very unbecoming. It makes you look ugly." Fischer felt his heart hardening towards her. He wished he could feel as loving as he had a few moments before when she was weeping and he took hold of her hands. He made a great effort to at least look loving, but he could tell that she wasn't taken in, or perhaps she was just too annoyed. Why, oh why didn't she have more faith in him? "Whatever you decide to do about Crosby, which is of course your private concern and your right," he said bitterly, "don't ever tell my son you were a hyena. I would really prefer him to grow up to be normal, if possible, with normal expectations of females." A wave of righteous anger constricted his throat. In his mind he saw Nicholas John as he might be in twelve or fourteen years, steeling himself for that inevitable initiation into the sexual life: saw him with some fair and gentle creature, a younger version of Caroline. Fischer had been twenty-one himself, but nowadays kids grew up faster, and Nick was precocious as it was. How marred his future life might be if he had to.

worry about hyenas hiding in every bush and behind every pretty face! Joan suddenly appeared as a potentially serious liability, a person who might do awful damage to his son's psyche. He saw that he might eventually have to give up on her, for Nicky's sake. He might have to choose between his wife and his son. He sighed deeply, so heavy was the responsibility, and appealed to Joan once again. "Think of the boy," he pleaded. "He's your son, too, and he needs a normal, loving mother."

"And me?" said Joan.

"You?"

"Don't I need a husband who listens?"

Chapter 34

"So then you started to cry. Why?"

"Well, it was the idea, you know. That picture Vern had of me alone, in a narrow bare room, able only to stare through a telescope at life. It was a dreadfully sad picture."

"Just sad? Not, maybe, true?"

"True? How could it be true? I've never even been in the Côte d'Azur, or whatever it's called."

"You have been in bare and narrow rooms, however. Both real and symbolic."

She was silent. She looked down at her fingers. She'd been biting her nails a lot lately, something she hadn't done since childhood. They were sore and ugly. The sight of them filled her with shame. Why shame? Quickly, she looked up at Crosby.

"You've told me you often felt lonely," he said.

"Yes."

"At home, for instance, with your parents and sister."

"Yes." She glanced hurriedly at the framed photo of Crosby and his wife. "I did feel lonely then. Everything revolved around the horse races, you see, but no one admitted it. We thought we had no right to criticize. Why, I recall one year . . ." Why am I doing this? she wondered. Weeping again! Angrily she pulled a bunch of

Kleenex from the box Crosby kept in easy reach, and forced herself to continue her story. "My friend was going to take ballet lessons. I said I wanted to, too. The lessons weren't very expensive - only a few dollars." Her sobs made this sound an utterly tragic statement. How she'd loved her ballet teacher! She'd looked such a sight herself, her bony knees in pink tights, her shoulder blades sticking out like stunted wings. "What on earth do you want to take ballet for?" her mother asked, truly puzzled. "It doesn't seem like your kind of thing, dear. You know, you're really not the ballet dancer type." Oh, but Mum! Oh! Her tears streamed unrestrainedly. Furiqusly she applied wads of Kleenex to her stinging cheeks, but the flow would not be staunched. "You see," she blubbered wretchedly, "I wanted to be. The ballet dancer type. I might have been, you know." She paused for a vast and sloppy blow of the old nose. "I really was a skinny kid. But clumsy, and way too short. And most of all, of course, my scar, my uneven nostrils. That ruined me. I mean, Mum thought so. Then the money issue. Money was always a big issue. If I took ballet it meant less for Dad for the horses. Better he should go off and lose it on the horses than that I should have lessons to make me less clumsy."

They said nothing to each other for a long time. Crosby passed the waste basket and Joan dropped mountains of soggy Kleenexes into it. Her eyes continued to ooze, even though she'd suddenly lost interest in all those old

childhood woes. It occurred to her for the first time that it was not the beauty of the horses that had held her father in thrall. You didn't have to put money on beauty to appreciate it. "Imagine," she mused, "wanting to be a ballet dancer and ending up a spotted hyena. It really is a bit of a joke, that, you have to admit! At least I've been something, though. Not just a wife and mother." She grinned at Crosby. He was just an ordinary man. He wasn't especially great or wise and he certainly wasn't perfect. "Just last Wednesday," she said mischievously, "you wore unmatched socks. One navy, one black." He heard her without flinching. "Is your wife colour blind? Or do you just lose your socks?" she demanded. She began to tap her foot, aware that she was being obnoxious but unable to stop. Crosby didn't answer the sock question. He lapsed into one of his telling silences, so once again Joan took up the burden of herself. It sometimes angered her that Crosby wouldn't take that burden from her, but usually she saw quite clearly that it was not unwillingness or stubbornness that made him seem so unhelpful, but only her own childish expectations. "I'm going to leave Vern," she announced. "I haven't told him yet. He'll keep Nicky, of course." She started to cry again, very quietly. "I'm sorry," she said. "Everything seems sad today. How I wish Vern just knew, it'll be so very hard to tell him! He won't understand. He probably won't even listen. He'll think it's this hyena business, but I never should have

married him, I'm probably not meant for marriage. My mother thought I should have been a nun, you know. Imagine how much more shocking it would have been for a nun to turn into a hyena."

"You must try to get an agreement on visiting rights. A written, signed agreement."

It was her turn to be silent. She gazed through her tears in wonder. She conjured up the image of her son. Her Nicky: the only child who still called her 'Mummy'.

"Do you think I could?" she whispered. "Do you think I could get Vern to agree to that? Given . . . everything?"

"Nicky's your son, too. You need him."

"Yes. Oh, yes, I do," she wailed. "But does he need me? Does he need a crazy mother who turned into a hyena and has to see a shrink?"

"You don't do yourself justice."

"I don't know," she blubbered. "Hyenas are pretty terrific. My friend died the other day. Henrietta. They gave her a shot to put her out of her misery, it was in the paper."

"Yes, I read it," said Crosby. "I'm sorry."

At this expression of sympathy Joan was once more convulsed with sobs. She wept for Henrietta; she wept for Vern and Nicky; she wept for herself, for her loneliness.

"If only I could have Nicky sometimes!" she said. "Oh, it would make all the difference, somehow!" She

looked gratefully at Crosby. "How kind you are," she told him. "Always letting me be who I am. As if that's good enough."

"It is good enough," Crosby said with quiet finality.

Chapter 35

Friends volunteered to help Fischer pack. He'd rented a U-haul which Raji was going to drive all the way to Calgary. Joan had taken all the things she wanted for herself: her books, desk and bed, and the kitchen table with the chip in the enamel that looked like the map of Australia. Mrs. Theresa on the first floor took the mustard coloured carpet and an old dresser of pressed wood from Nicky's room. Then there were a few other things no one wanted or needed; these had been put aside for the Salvation Army, which would come in the morning. Most of the rooms were already alive with echoes. Fat worms of dust conferred in corners. All at once laughter rang out in the bathroom. "Vern! Oh, Vern, come and see!" Wearily Fischer lowered a dinner plate into a box and went to investigate. "Look," Louise and Caroline exclaimed. They both pointed above the sink at the top shelf of the medicine cupboard. Fischer looked, but couldn't imagine what was so funny. Of course, he was not disposed to find anything funny anymore. "Well?" he demanded. The two women looked at each other and shrugged maddeningly. "He doesn't see," Caroline remarked. "He's looked at them so long, he no longer sees."

Women, thought Fischer crossly. So unreliable, so frivolous, so hard! "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "We're behind as it is. I, for one,

haven't time to stand about here giggling."

"It's the pomade tubes, Vern. Yoshi's pomade. A whole shelf of empty tubes, neatly rolled up, and look! toothpaste tubes, too, there must be nearly a dozen of each. And he's been gone for over a year, now, hasn't he?"

"I don't see what's so funny about that," Fischer said, annoyed. He stomped back to the kitchen wondering why Yoshi'd saved all those tubes; the lead content, perhaps, if they contained lead. Some kind of war effort, for sure. It would be just like Yoshi to be doggedly making war efforts when the war had been over for more than twenty years. Fischer packed the last few dinner plates and taped the carton shut. Nearly a month had gone by since Joan moved out. She'd taken a suite with Phyllis in some building up on Corydon Avenue, he'd only been there once, to drop Nicky off for a visit. It was a dark little apartment ("cosy," Joan claimed). It's true it had a real fireplace and a big balcony, but still he couldn't fathom why she would choose it over the lovely house he'd rented in Calgary. The house was bright and clean; it had a garden and a built-in dishwasher. It must be true, what his father'd always maintained: women weren't sensible. You just couldn't count on a woman the way you could count on a man.

Anyway, Joan seemed determined to stay in Winnipeg. She even wanted a divorce; she even knew all about Caroline, heaven knows how she found that out. She

had both cats, it had seemed the least he could give her. Fortunately she'd realized it would be useless to put up a fight for Nicky; she had generous visiting rights, though. Well, she wasn't stupid. That's what made it all so sad. There had been a person he'd loved once, a clever, affectionate, lively girl, attractive despite a harelip scar. There really had been such a person, there had, oh, yes, there had. So he kept telling himself. Again and again he recalled episodes when she'd demonstrated her devotedness and her admiration. He wished he had it all on film, the way it was in his mind. He wished he could make this new crazy Joan sit down in front of the movie of their married life, so she could see how things ought to be. See all their plans for the future, all their children not yet conceived, all their holidays together. Just in case she needed reminding. He'd tried to point all that out, he'd tried to show her the cost of her foolishness. It hadn't worked. She was too far gone. So she'd up and left him after all, and made him wonder if he'd really been wrong about her from the start. Maybe she'd always been crazy and wilful, only he'd never noticed before. If that were the case, he had to admit, he was pretty stupid. He heard Louise and Caroline stifling more laughter. Well, maybe there was a special virus that attacked women and made them crazy. Maybe the giddy laughter of Caroline and Louise was really the first stage of some new female illness. He thought with pity of his small son, growing up in a world

of liberated harpies and furies. Poor Nicky, mocked and humiliated and unmanned! Just thinking of it made Fischer's eyes burn with unshed tears.

"Vern."

He jumped. "Sorry," he said to Caroline. "You startled me."

"Vern, the truck's all loaded now. Raji wondered - well - shouldn't you get a move on?"

Fischer walked through all the empty rooms for the last time. The first time he'd seen it the apartment had been empty, too, but oh! how different everything had been then! Then, he had been filled with joy and hope. Now the woman who had shared his joy and hope had jilted him. Once his sister had kicked down a lovely sandcastle on which he'd worked an entire afternoon. Well, he thought impatiently, slamming the apartment door for the last time. He'd do just what his father'd advised him to do then.

He'd build himself another.

The End