

THE GREEN ASH AND OTHER STORIES

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ABSTRACT

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The eight stories in this collection, though diverse in theme, setting, and cast of principal and secondary characters, have as a common dramatic conflict, a personal conflict, the resolution of which requires an irrevocable decision. On a literal level, the decision is as apparently insignificant as: planting a tree (The Green Ash); buying a pleasure boat (Personal Flotation Device); playing a game (Learning to Play Ball); beginning a family (The Turning Point Restaurant); ending an affair (P-O-P); or avenging a humiliation (Strings). On a symbolic level, however, the decision is predicated on the alternatives: to preserve the safe but stultifying status quo, or to step into an uncertain future that holds the potential for self-fulfillment.

The reader enters the minds of the protagonists as they weigh the alternatives, then steps out and back to observe the actions which reveal the protagonists' decision.

Decision-making is less evident in Crossings and Mating due to the narrative structure of the stories. The crisis, precipitated in the distant past, still awaits a resolution. The alternatives facing the protagonists are: to resolve it with self-acceptance or continue to repress its disquieting reverberations.

With the exception of Mating which takes place over a twelve month period, all the other stories have a time-frame of less than twelve hours. The author makes use of the central protagonist's memory to recreate past events preceding the moment of decision.

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With Gratitude

The author wishes to express his deepest thanks to
three people who gave him invaluable support:

Elizabeth Spencer, writer extraordinaire, for her
"green thumb" nurturing;

Madeleine Bertrand, friend and helpmate, who steered
me out of a cul-de-sac and onto the road again;

Ron Harvie, writer, who critiqued my writings with
an eye to bringing out the best in them -- and me.

The Green Ash

It hadn't been her suggestion that caused the tiff. It was the CKOY weatherman's. All she had done was to pass it along.

Curious how Phil always took his suggestions to heart, like taking an umbrella to work, wearing galoshes instead of slip-on rubbers, or putting on the winter tires.

But today, when that same respectable authority said that their Indian summer would end tomorrow, or Sunday at the latest, and suggested "planting those bulbs before the soil turns to concrete," Phil turned a deaf ear.

He'd been as good as deaf when the weather report came crackling through the portable radio on top of the fridge. And even though she had turned up the volume so that the forecast might carry down the hall to the bathroom, she knew that Phil would likely not have heard it over the hum of his electric razor.

That's why she passed along the suggestion. No; they didn't have bulbs to plant, thank heavens. Just a tree, a green ash that had been sitting -- no, dying -- in the corner of the yard for the past six -- or was it closer to eight? -- months.

"Well, what do you say?" she asked with controlled

casualness. "I'll stand by and give you and the tree moral support."

Phil continued to munch absent-mindedly on his Kellogg's Special K while he gazed out the dinette window into the brightness of the October morning.

"Hunh," he grunted, shielding his eyes with his hand and squinting toward the far corner of the back yard. Standing there in the shadow of the dying elm, with its roots bound in burlap, the sapling looked absurdly like a toothpick imbedded in an olive.

"Does that mean yes, you will do it, or no, you won't?" she asked. Lately she was finding his grunts difficult to interpret. They all seemed like "no."

"Why must it be yes or no?" he countered. "Will maybe do?"

"You've been 'maybeing' for ages. If tomorrow's to be the last decent day of fall, I think it's time you did something about it. I can tell you one thing, it won't make it through the winter in its bag. That is, if it's still alive."

"Is that a warning from Mother Nature?" he asked archly.

Mother Nature! Well at least that was a step up from what he had been calling her for the last four years. "Stop pecking at Marilyn like a Mother Hen," he had said time after time. But wasn't "pecking" more a sign of caring than planting your head in the sand like an ostrich?

All she ever asked of Marilyn was that she 'play the

field'. Clinging to one boyfriend throughout your college years when you could date dozens of attractive fellows seemed like stunting one's social growth. God knows there's plenty of time for exclusivity during marriage; why nurture it before you tie the knot?

She might have pecked less if her boyfriend, Harold, had been special, a rose among thorns. But he wasn't. In fact, a thorn among roses was more like it. You felt psychologically pricked every time you came in touch with him. He would frown when you smiled, put down something just after you had praised it, and chuckle when he had upset your apple cart. And grooming to him was something you did to horses. He let his fine, blond hair grow long and stringy, his beard tangle, and his fingernails look like they'd been cleaned with an eyebrow pencil.

Did Phil really think "Harry the Hippie" would make an ideal son-in-law? Of course not! But he'd never admit to it. "Leave things be," he'd say, "and stop pecking at Marilyn for going out with him. He's her choice; not yours."

But of course, when Marilyn left them to join Harold in Vancouver where he managed to do what he didn't even try to do in Ottawa -- land a job -- guess who Phil blamed for Marilyn's sudden departure? It had nothing to do with Harold. "You pecked at her so much she grabbed at the first chance and flew the coop," he said.

Well maybe if she had been free to peck a little more

instead of being ordered head-down into the sand with him, Marilyn would be dating a man with roots in Ottawa instead of a will-o'-the-wisp.

Strange though, how at Uplands airport he had pecked at her like a Mother Hen trying to prod her chick back into the coop. "Lay low on the junk food, now. And if you're too busy to make your own meals, then come back and we'll restore you to health with home cooking"... "Remember, the first beer is a stimulant. The ones after that are depressants. Don't match Harold's intake or I'll have to come and pick you up"... and "Don't let the dampness get to you. We'll keep the home fires burning just in case."

Then something strange happened. When he and Marilyn hugged for the last time, and she stepped through the metal detector and out onto the tarmac, it was as if his spirit took off with her. He walked like a zombie back to the parked car. And when she turned on the radio to fill the vacuum they felt within and without, he snapped it off. They drove home in aching silence. It was the beginning of the deep freeze.

That evening, instead of joining her in front of the TV to watch "All in the Family" -- his favorite show -- he disappeared down the hall. When she went to their bedroom, she got a jolt. He wasn't there. Nor was he in the bathroom. He was snoring on Marilyn's bed with one of her psychology textbooks lying open on his chest. She put the book back on the shelf, and threw a comforter over him, then went to bed. The room seemed eerily quiet without him snoring. He used that

habit as an excuse to make Marilyn's bed his own from that evening on.

" 'Tis the season to be jolly" became a mocking cliché during their first Christmas without their daughter in twenty-one years. And the long-distance call they put through after they had nibbled on their chicken-sized turkey didn't brighten the gloom. Marilyn sounded giddy and detached, like she was laughing at them. She said they had skied at Whistler the day before and had "got home" so pooped they couldn't finish decorating the tree. "Home"? In Vancouver? What did she call the place where she had been raised for the better part of her life?

The green ash had not been bought as a substitute for Marilyn. She knew it, and so did Phil. They could never fuss over a tree the way they had over their daughter. But she found it uncanny when Phil mentioned "Sprucing up the yard once and for all" at the same time the same idea crossed her mind. Is the adult instinct to nurture mysteriously re-channelled when the offspring leave the nest?

Suddenly they were excited for the first time in ages. They both seemed to want to tend growing things. A tree to replace the dying elm -- that was an obvious priority.

So was the lawn. It was pockmarked with clumps of spikey dandelion greens and crabgrass. The first owner of the house had landscaped the front and back yards with the clay that had been dug up to lay the basement foundation. Every

spring they had sprinkled the bare spots with grass seed. But the rains always washed the kernels away before they had a chance to root.

She and Phil would have done more, but on those long-ago sunny days when they could have attacked the foot-long dandelion roots with a kitchen knife, Phil and Marilyn fled the yard for Britannia where they sailed around the bay in a rented Y Flyer. Sometimes she'd tag along, but only to bask in the sun on the deck of the clubhouse along with other land-bound mothers.

That sunny Saturday morning in April, when she and Phil headed out to Godbout's Garden Centre, she felt that a new bond was forming between them, the first in over twenty years that did not include Marilyn. They had become both linked and separated by Marilyn, like parents are when they flank their toddling charge, each grasping a hand. This new bond wasn't as strong as a handgrasp. Not yet. It was more like the first thread that a spider strings between the two furthest points of contact.

The Centre was jammed with browsers, buyers and wailing toddlers. Bags of reeking fertilizer were stacked up like flood dikes in the huge aluminum shed behind the main showroom and greenhouse. What to choose? There were mixtures not only to supply nutrients in a range of ratios, but to combat weeds, insects, and diseases. Some for grass seed. Some mixtures included cyover; others were called "pasture mixtures", best for fast growth. "Shadynook" mixtures were for dark patches.

The brand names -- Weed'n Seed, Vigoro, and Guard'n Grow -- and the pushy browsers rattled her and Phil. By the time they got the attention of a boy who seemed almost too young to know the difference between horse and rabbit manure, Phil was testy. When he mentioned that their yard had a clay base, the boy said: "You got real problems there, sir." He recommended spreading a thick layer of topsoil over the entire area, or laying down sod. "We could send around a nurseryman to look at it and give you an estimate," he said.

"Nurseryman!" That of course, was the word. But nursery still brought an image of a pink bedroom to mind. A man in grubby overalls just didn't jibe with it.

The boy gave them a mud-stained business card. "Call my uncle soon. He's real busy these days. Already got a bunch of appointments."

"What about a tree to replace a dying elm?" she asked as he was about to dart away. "Something that won't die just as soon as it reaches maturity."

"A green ash," he declared. "it's the most common replacement for an elm because it's more hardy. Doesn't get the diseases and insects that elms do."

She didn't like the sound of its name. Ash -- what's left after something has had the life burned out of it. She pictured a forest after a fire has raged through it. "Green" saved it. She would concentrate on that.

Would it grow in clay?

"Lady," he replied. "Don't plant a ten dollar tree in a ten cent hole." She was surprised at the wisdom of the kid. Probably heard his father say that a dozen times a day. "My uncle can tell you where it'll grow best," he said.

Phil called the next Monday to make an appointment. As the boy warned them, his uncle was booked solid. For weeks. Sorry, but call again. Maybe someone will cancel their appointment and they could be fitted in.

Phil didn't bother. "If he's that much in demand, he's probably charging an arm and a leg," he said.

She knew that the financial commitment was only half of it. The other half was time. Once beautified, he'd have to spend hours keeping it up. Planting, fertilizing, spraying, weeding, trimming -- no, that just wasn't for Phil. He wanted his Garden of Eden to be like God's: finished in six days! "I'll loosen up the clay with a hoe," he compromised. "Maybe grass seed will take root in the little furrows."

Some did. But the dandelion seeds took greater advantage of the favor. By midsummer the war between the grass and the dandelions ended. The spikey green shoots had stolen the meagre rations of nutrients from the blades of grass.

"Why is it, the weeds always seem to win over the grass?" Phil fumed, hacking a huge clump of dandelion tufts with his hoe.

"Because they have energy," she said. "That makes for growth wouldn't you say? And you take away that energy by going for their roots, not their leaves," she reminded him.

"Hunh," he grunted, and gave another blow to a stubborn clump. She felt his eyes on her as she knelt to wrench loose a white, carrot-shaped dandelion root.

"You remember when Marilyn would bring us bouquets of dandelions, half for you and half for me?" he recalled.

"She didn't know what a favor she was doing for the grass, did she?"

"And for me," he said. "Less to contend with the following spring. We had their seeds contained in a flower bowl on the dinette table," he chuckled.

The image of Marilyn with fistfuls of dandelions persisted. Suddenly it struck her: he adored Marilyn for her energy, her root growth; she adored her, for her flower, her womanly promise. He wanted to keep her so he could draw on that energy of hers, like water from a spring. She wanted her to be plucked while in full flower so that her seeds could multiply.

Phil's love for her was wrong. Hers was right. And she had been right to worry about the kind of man she would eventually settle down with. You must worry about the quality of soils and fertilizers. Otherwise there's no growth, no promise, no hope.

By mid-August their lawn reflected that barrenness. The hot sun had scorched the few blades of healthy grass. As the lawn became scrubbier, Phil spent less and less time on it. He would take naps in Marilyn's room.

The green ash they had brought home from Godbout's

remained in the corner where it had been set aside until the expected coming of the nurseryman.

So here he was, still squinting at it, now mocking her with that "Mother Nature" tag. How utterly typical! Knowing that he had failed to revive the yard, he must now project his feelings of impotence onto her.

Yes, Phil, it's sure obvious that you aren't Father Nature, she fumed. But don't say it. He's angling for a battle. He wants to vent his frustration -- with himself.

"No," she said calmly, "it's not the word of Mother Nature. It's the word of someone who is tired of seeing signs of death and dying all around."

"It's fall, for Christ's sake," he said. "Things die in the fall that have nothing to do with me. That little tree wouldn't grow an inch for you if I were to plant it this goddam minute."

"At least it might not die," she murmured. "That is, if it's still alive."

"One thing that still is alive around here is that non-stop pecking habit of yours." He banged his coffee mug down on the table, rose to his feet and wrenched the car keys off the hook near the side door. He swore when the keys fell from his fingers to the floor, and groaned when he bent over to pick them up. He slammed the door behind him so hard that it bounced open. He left it that way.

She heard something rattle in the garage after he

entered through the roll-up door. Probably kicking something he hadn't bothered to put in its proper place. Look out, fella; things you kick around have a way of getting back at you.

He pounded the accelerator to warm up the car. It whined as he backed it out.

She waited for the pause when he shifted from reverse to first. It was then that he used to toot the horn, his goodbye signal to her and Marilyn. He had stopped when Marilyn left. In January, he gave her a toot on her birthday. It was the best present of the day. From then on he sounded the horn only when he felt pucky. She knew he was anything but that at this moment, but a toot -- a simple toot -- would banish the storm cloud hovering over them.

Don't set yourself up for a letdown, she told herself. Remember what you got the last time you did. It was at the Valentine dance for yacht club members. During a slow waltz she whispered in his ear: "I love you," and waited for the echo.

"Ditto," he whispered back.

"Ditto!" The word brought back memories of a thing she had cursed when she taught at Kent Street Public: the duplicating machine called "the ditto." To use it you had to fill its drum with gooey ink. It always blackened your fingers, and often your clothes if you didn't bother to put on the apron that hung next to it.

Instead of launching her into a stratosphere of sunset-pink clouds, his response hurled her into a huge drum of black goo. For days she felt like a bird trapped in an oil slick.

She heard the growl of the car moving forward in first gear, second, then a fading hum.

She was to be punished once again with silence -- for not being silent.

Is it so wrong to peck if the cause is good? What about all those television commercials urging you to "give generously" to the Canadian Cancer Society, CARE, and Foster Parents Plan? Aren't they pecking at you to do what you know you should do?

So what's wrong with pecking to save the life of a tree?

Something fell to the floor, like an autumn leaf.

My God, is that letter to Marilyn still here? The draft from the door being slammed must have blown it off the calendar where she had paper-clipped it to the November page for Phil. He said he would stick it in the envelope with his next letter to Marilyn, which he hadn't gotten around to writing.

It came from Glamour magazine. She had picked it up and opened it, only because she thought that if it were a bill, she would pay it as yet another mother-daughter 'forget me not' gesture. But it was a solicitation letter. How old was the thing anyway? It seemed ages ago when it came. The postmark was smudged. She took the letter out of the envelope. Sure enough -- September 10 -- six weeks ago.

It was from the editor, Patricia Patten. What a name! So phoney, just too perfect for someone in a glamour game. What if she'd been baptized Grindle Humplemeyer? Would she have

written letters from Glamour under that name? Something beginning with, say, "Greetings from Grindle" or "Hello from the Hump" instead of "From the desk of Patricia Patten."

What could Pat, from her desk in glamorous New York, possibly have to offer a young woman who had given up a conventional middle-class lifestyle in unglamorous Ottawa for a hippie lifestyle in scenically glamorous Vancouver?

"Some women sparkle, and some don't," Pat observed. "The ones who do are the ones who said yes to themselves. There is no substitute for it. In fact, all the money in the world can't get that sparkle for a woman who hasn't said yes to herself."

Pat but pertinent, she thought. Who sparkles when they're negative? Had she ever consciously, or even unconsciously, said yes to herself? If she had, she couldn't pinpoint the precise time.

And Phil? Well that was no mystery. She couldn't recall him saying yes to anything in years. Or no. He was an uncommitted, a 'hunh' man, a maybe'er. The dandelion shoots, the crabgrass and that green ash were proof of that.

She looked out again at the tree. So like Phil, she thought -- uncommitted to change, to growth. But then, how could it be otherwise when it couldn't put down roots? No wonder Phil didn't want to plant it. He liked the fact that it couldn't grow; after all, growth is change, and change means letting go of long-held habits, views and yes -- offspring.

There was also the outside possibility that the ash

was already dead. How embarrassing to plant something that can't possibly grow. You'd feel foolish -- or impotent.

Pat didn't want to feel impotent either. But she was committed to growth -- in circulation. Just checking off the Yes box on the enclosed reply form would ensure it.

"Delaying is saying no to now," she warned. "Say yes. Now!"

She slid the letter back into the envelope. Now -- now -- now flashed into her thoughts like a green traffic signal.

Now was the time to do something with that tree. Where would the axe be? Logically in the garage where he dumped most of his things. But of course, if you expected it to be there, it never was. Phil did have a way of defying your expectations. Better check, anyway.

She rose from the table, and stepped into the breezeway linking the kitchen to the garage. Giving the knob of the door opening into the garage a firm twist, she pushed. The door didn't budge. Still jammed. Phil said maybe he'd plane it. That's why he used the roll-up door to get into the garage. It still worked.

A door doesn't defy me, she muttered to herself. I'll take no from a person, but not a thing.

She hammered it with her fists. Then she threw her weight against it. The door flew open with a bang. What was that!? She peered into the dimness and saw the stepladder with a broken middle rung lying on the floor. Phil must have leaned it against the door.

She stepped onto the concrete floor, scooped up the fallen object, and banged it back against the wall. She slapped the dust off her hands. God it was dark, dusty, greasy, and smelly! A hermit's heaven.

Now where is it? Tossed on the floor, perhaps. Ah, there was the thing that Phil tripped over: an almost empty plastic bottle of window wiper liquid. He'll probably squish it when he drives the car back in tonight. Then blame it for being in his way.

Could it be behind those winter tires in the corner? Please, no. Tires are so hard to shift. Phew! -- no sign of it there.

Had he hung it up on those two nails in its original place? That would be a surprise. And a bother. She'd have to grope for it behind the pup tent which was hanging on the wall like a bulging tapestry. She and Phil had bought the tent for Marilyn when she was dying to have a little house of her own in the back yard. Phil had planned to build her a little cabin, but hadn't got around to it. It had been her idea to buy a tent. If Marilyn lost interest in the novelty of having her own little refuge, at least someone else could make use of it. Like mummy and daddy! Taking a cue from Marilyn and Harold who often took it upriver on overnight cruises in the Y Flyer, she and Phil spent the July 1st weekend huddling in the thing. The idea seemed great at the time. If Marilyn had used it for a love nest, why couldn't she? Phil must have been in league with the weatherman. The gamble was a washout in every way. When

they got home, she and Phil hung it up to dry. It had dangled there ever since. Talk about a reminder of dampened hopes!

She bent over and raised herself under it. It was pitch black, and suffocating. She kept her eyes closed to block out the dust, and ran both hands against the wall, groping for either the head or the handle. If she dislodged it, it would fall on top of her foot. Ah ... the handle! It was in its place after all. Phil could be so unpredictable.

She nudged it loose from the nail supports, lowered herself, and came up gasping as the tent fell down. Sprawled there, it looked like a chrysalis, the shell of a spirit that had flown, never to return. She'd leave it there, company for the bottle of wiper liquid.

Grasping the axe by its neck, she stepped up to the breezeway and out of the rear door leading onto the patio and the scorched lawn. She strode to the ash. It looked anything but green. One tiny brown leaf still clung to its twig-sized trunk.

"Are you dead or alive?" She wasn't embarrassed to ask. Phyllis Linley of the yacht club coterie always claimed to talk with her plants. "They have spirits, you know," she'd insist. Maybe she was right. Her plants burst with health, according to all accounts.

She didn't expect an answer, just a sign -- a tiny little bud that had sprouted during the warm spell, perhaps.

Perish the thought, she ordered herself. But she couldn't. Up close, the tree looked like that thing that Phil

dragged home before Christmas. Marilyn would never have given it the nod. When she was with them, they let her choose the Christmas tree. Before she could toddle, they would pull her on a toboggan into the woods of the Gatineau Hills. The tree she waved her mitt at was the one that Phil would chop down. She'd pull Marilyn back to the car while Phil wrestled the tree through the brush. Later, when the 'no trespassing' signs went up, they went to the tree farm beyond Stittsville. There they were met at the parking lot by a horse-drawn sleigh which would take them along a trail through woods. When Marilyn hollered "There -- that's the one!" they would leap off the sleigh and wait until a man in a snowmobile came along and toppled it with a buzz saw.

They rolled the tree onto a sledge attached to the sleigh which backtracked to carry them and their felled treasure to the parking lot. Marilyn got a kick out of waiting for the horse to "manure" the trail.

But last Christmas, before they'd even talked of a tree-hunting outing, Phil thumped on the front door and handed her what appeared to be a broomstick stuck in a heavy circular base.

"What's this?" she asked as she took it, and stepped back to make room for the boxes that he was dumping into the vestibule.

"A Christmas tree," he said. "The old office model."

"Phil," she said firmly. "This is not a tree. It's a broomstick."

"The branches are inside these boxes. You stick

them in those," he said, pointing to what looked like bullet holes.

"It still isn't a tree. It's a thing."

Phil assembled it despite her objections. It looked like a scarecrow draped with tinsel. How could anyone call a thing a tree? Trees have life, or did before they were chopped down. Manufactured things never did.

Does this tree have life? Or is it like a broomstick?

She tested her grip on the axe. Yes, she could wield it; she would wield it. She placed her feet wide apart to steady herself, gripped the handle tightly with both hands, and raised the axe high in the air. Down you come

Yikes!

The impact of the blade striking the clay in the centre of the yard sent a shockwave up her arms. If the weatherman thinks the soil will turn to concrete, what does he call this?

The second blow sent a small lump of clay into a somersault. The next made two lumps scatter. Whump! More lumps. Whump, whump, whump. The more she chopped the more she wanted to chop. More, more, more.

She tossed the axe, and fell gasping to her knees. She wondered who was more shook up from the blows -- the clay or her.

Cupping her hands, she pulled the lumps toward her. Yes, she had struck deeply enough. She crawled around to the opposite side and scooped up the last of the lumps to form

another pile. A perfect little crater.

Problem: how was she to get the tree from the corner to the crater? It was too heavy to carry. Phil practically hemorrhaged bringing it from the car to the corner.

Yes -- Marilyn's toboggan back there in the garage. Perfect!

She raced to the breezeway and into the garage. Thank God it wasn't behind anything. That one plunge into the dust and grime would do her for the day. /

Thank God Phil was too indecisive to throw the warped thing out or give it away. Imagine it still being useful twenty years later. And before the first snowfall.

She set it down next to the ash and rotated the burlap base onto the end panel of the toboggan. Would it topple when she pulled it along? She'd go slowly. After all, it's probably as scared as Marilyn was when she was lowered onto it for the first time. She pulled it gently, keeping her eye on the tree's teetering trunk.

At the edge of the crater, she nudged it off with the same rotating motion and guided it into the hole. It fell like a wounded sentry.

"Forgive me," she said. "I often hurt when I mean to help."

She jostled the base until it stood upright. It was now at least a foot shorter than it had been in the corner.

How to turn a ten cent hole into a ten dollar hole; that was the question. Why hadn't they picked up some peat moss

or something when they bought the tree?

It needs something organic; leaves perhaps. Yes that's it. She leapt up and grabbed a clump of leaves that had been piled up by the wind against the chicken wire fence their next door neighbour had erected to stop the fluffy dandelion seeds from drifting onto his property.

She coated the sides of the crater with the leaves. They'd help, but solider stuff was needed.

Those three garbage pails near the garage -- they'd either be full or empty. Dragging them on garbage day to the driveway in front was Phil's job. Often he'd forget, or wait until the next pick-up.

Were they full or empty? She wrenched off the lid of the one on the left.

She didn't have to look down for her answer. It came up -- as a stench.

Ugh, but eureka! Hold your nose and dig in! Go for the organic waste. No, not a soggy paper towel. Organic -- that which once had life. Those dried sachets of tea leaves are perfect. So are the black banana peels, the ribbons of potato peelings, coffee grounds (from grounds to ground -- how apt!), carrot greens that are still green, wilted lettuce leaves, grapefruit rinds ... What about egg shells? Why not! They're calcium aren't they?

She grabbed the useable matter by fistfuls, and dumped it into the trough circling the burlap sack, patting the reeking mixture to make it even all 'round.

She undid the knot on the burlap bag and loosened the swathe. The roots must stretch. It's cruel to keep them bound so tightly, like stunting the feet of Chinese girls.

There was fresher organic waste in the second pail. Lots of potato peelings from her servings of scalloped potatoes that she heaped on Phil's plate.

Now water. All this must be moistened and firmed up. Luckily Phil hadn't hid the pail in the garage. It was still there, under the tap, half-full of rainwater. She twisted the top handle. Out gushed rust-coloured water. Fine -- iron. Surely trees need it too.

She knelt and kneaded the doused mixture like dough. The stench didn't nauseate her; it reassured her -- the odor of fertility.

What about my feet? Didn't women in Spain, or was it Mexico, stomp barefoot on grapes to make a richer wine?

She kicked off her sandals and stepped into the slush. Chilly but invigorating.

She stomped around the tree three times. "Woo-woo -- woo!" she hooted. Make like an Indian encircling the fire in a rain dance. We must appease all the spirits. "Woo -- woo -- woo." Shreiks of laughter shook her. She teetered, and fell to the ground.

Isn't this just a little too primeval? Rest a minute, Mother Nature, before going back in to load the dishwasher and vacuum the rugs.

* * *

Suddenly the sun seemed higher. It was almost hot.

Surely she hadn't slept. Still it seemed like mid-day, and the sludge on her feet had dried.

She got up, picked up her sandals, and went to the tap to wash the residue off her feet and hands.

She slid into the sandals and walked hesitantly back to the tree.

It looked different. It hadn't sprouted a bud; but something had changed.

She ran her fingers up and down its slender trunk. Smooth as a newborn baby's skin. And warm.

"Hang in there," she whispered. "We'll pull through this winter together. Yes ... yes, we will."

She backed slowly to the breezeway door, keeping her eyes fixed on the tree.

Had the water from her caressing hand left tiny droplets on the trunk? The tree sparkled in the brightness.

She turned around and went into the house to shed her soiled shift and take a shower.

Learning to Play Ball

He realized when his father parked the car in front of the Dominion store, and his mother said, "Chris, why don't you wander around the mall with daddy," that his father's 'game-plan' was about to begin.

It had to be that, because his mother usually invited him to join her. She called him "captain" as he pushed the cart up and down the aisles for her. And to thank him she always let him pick a pack of chiclets off the snack rack at the check-out counter. But when he went into stores with his father, which wasn't very often, all he did was wait. And when he would tell his father he wanted to go, his father would just glower at him, or say "Hold your horses."

Yes, it had to be the start of the gameplan, but he couldn't let on that he knew or his father would paddle him for eavesdropping as soon as they got home. He always got madder than a grasshopper trapped in an empty pickle jar when he caught him listening to his parent's whispery conversations. "How do you like the sound of this?" he'd say as he swung the ping pong bat against his backside.

But they weren't whispering that night almost a week ago when they talked about the gameplan. They were speaking so loud that they woke him up.

"But every day, he gets more like you," his father roared.

"And what's wrong with that?" she shouted back.

"What's wrong is that you're a woman!"

Then it got quiet. That's when he got up and crept to the stair landing in time to catch his father use that word, game plan. What did it mean? Not something fun, or his mother wouldn't have said, "I don't like it, but I'll go along with it on one condition: that you don't let it get out of hand." And she added, "Rome wasn't built in a day, and it is building we're talking about. Don't forget that"

He certainly hadn't been able to forget it. How was he to be built into something like Rome? Wasn't that where they once threw Christians to the lions?

The next day, Chris had waited for something unusual to happen, a break from the routine, a suggestion that he do something he wasn't used to doing, like the time his mother insisted that he go for a walk with his father. It was the day before his birthday, and he found out later that she wanted him out of the way while a neighbour, who had stored the bike she had bought for him, brought it around to the house for her to decorate with balloons and coloured streamers before hiding it in the basement until his party the next afternoon....

"Hey, how about we drop in and see Fred Mann," said his father as he swung the back of his seat ahead so Chris could get out on the driver's side instead of his mother's.

This had to be the gameplan. It just had to be.

Chris followed, stamping on his father's shadow.

It wasn't Fred Mann himself; it was his store, The Sports Mann, that he didn't like. It was so junky, and if you didn't accidentally knock over a bunch of hockey sticks leaning against an empty carton, you got dirty trying to get past the tires and pedals of bicycles that blocked your way into the place. But no matter what free spot you stood in, you couldn't escape the angry gaze of that moose.

It glowered down from the top of the partition that separated the repair shop from the main area where all the new bikes, toboggans, paddles, fishing rods, and skis were piled up.

At first Chris thought the moose was just sticking its head out like all those animals in Noah's Ark on the cover of his "Great Stories from the Bible." An elephant looked out of one porthole, and a tiger, the other. Two giraffes poked their heads through holes in the cabin roof, like periscopes. But when his father told him the moose was dead, he wondered why its eyes weren't closed. When things die, don't they close their eyes like they're asleep forever and ever? But his father told him the eyes were made of glass. "The real ones would rot," he had said. Still, they looked awfully real. Maybe the moose was only pretending to be dead, and when he couldn't stand being somebody else's trophy any longer, he'd make a break for it.

The shrill ring of the doorbell that went off like a burglar alarm when they stepped into the shop brought Fred Mann out from behind the partition, wiping his dirty hands with

a dirty rag. Chris wondered how Fred expected to get his hands clean if he rubbed them with a rag with dirt already on it.

"Afternoon," he said. "Can I help you?"

"Maybe," said Chris' father. "I realize it's slightly out of season what with fall coming on, but do you have any baseball bats and balls still in stock?"

"You taking up baseball?" said Fred Mann genially.

"Great way to fight the battle of the bulge. Except you look in pretty good shape."

"Not bad for an old man, I guess."

Chris never knew why his father called himself that. He didn't have grey hair. Maybe it was because of that book about the old man, and the sea that he would never stop blabbing about when Chris begged his mother to tell him about her favorite books.

"Actually, it's the shape of this young man here that's the concern," said his father, pointing in Chris' direction with a hitchhiker's thumb.

Chris saw the smile in Mr. Mann's eyes suddenly fade. The eyes were more truthful than the mouth. The mouth could lie with a forced smile or with words, but the eyes never could.

"So it would be a bantam size you're looking for. Think I can help you there. Saw one down here the other day, and meant to put it out on display, except I'm short enough on space as it is and I got a crate of hockey sticks out in the back to put out."

From behind a pile of cartons, he pulled out a shiny

bat.

It looked so smooth. Chris could see that already Mr. Mann's greasy fingers had left their mark on the skinny end. He didn't want grease fingerprints on anything of his. That's why he didn't like anyone to touch his things, except his mother. Her hands were always clean. Always.

"There you go, Casey," said Mr. Mann, shoving the bat into Chris' hands. That made his father chuckle, and both men looked at each other and smiled.

Chris handled it delicately. He didn't want any of the grease spots to rub off onto his hands. "My name is Chris," he corrected. The two men laughed. Were they making fun of him?

"He's talking about a famous batter," his father said. "A real power hitter." Chris didn't really care to know about Casey if all he had was a bat. Now, Robin Hood ... he lived in the woods, hiding from evil knights. And Tarzan. His jungle hide-out was full of animals which were like housepets, and he swung through the air on vines. That was more exciting than trying to hit a ball.

"Don't you want to take a few practice swings with it?" his father asked.

No, he didn't. But he couldn't say no or his father would glower at him. All he wanted to do with the bat was clean it. But not with Mr. Mann's rag.

"Guess he needs a little coaching," said his father to Mr. Mann. "We'll have a few practice sessions in the yard so he can get the hang of it."

While the two men poked behind some cartons for a ball, Chris wet his finger with his tongue and rubbed it on a black fingerprint. Good, it could be cleaned off. It wouldn't be so bad to have a bat after all, but only a shiny one.

The ring of the cash register told Chris the bat was now his. He would first clean it with one of his mother's rags, then find a nice place for it on the shelf in his bedroom. But only if it would stay shiny. Otherwise it would go to the back of his closet with the fishing rod and that useless set of carpenter's tools made of plastic his father gave him last Christmas.

"Hey Chris, catch!"

A ball struck him on the shoulder as he looked up. That was mean. It could have hit him in the face.

"Foul ball," his father said. "Sorry. Pick it up and hold onto it while I root in this bargain barrel for a sec." His father bent over a steel barrel painted bright red that Chris had peered into on previous visits. His arms were too short to reach into it, but some of the things down there looked nice to hold, like that shiny, long flashlight he once saw.

"Anything here I can't afford to pass up, Fred?" his father asked.

"There's some tackle still there, I think, but not for your kind of fishing. Hip boots too, at the bottom, size large. You'd swim in them."

His father's hand stopped stirring, and plucked out a pair of sunglasses. He ran his finger along the upper rim which had little porch-like roofs above each glass window.

His father put them on, grinned at him, and asked: "Well, what do you think? Notice the visors? Kinda jazzy, eh?"

"They make your eyes look pink," said Chris. He was about to add, "Like a pig's," but held back. That would make his father mad.

"That's because the lens are tinted," he said. "What are you asking for these?" his father asked Mr. Mann who had almost disappeared with his rag into the repair shop.

"Hmmm ... A dollar. Most customers prefer the green ones, but they're sold out."

"For a buck, you gotta deal," his father said, and slapped some change on the counter.

"Okay sport, let's try them out in the sun," he said, nudging Chris to the door.

It was the first time his father had called him sport. Chris didn't like it. His mother called him "honey." He liked that better than sport. It meant smooth and sweet. Sport meant rough and tough.

His father was holding the door open for him to pass through when Chris snapped around. The eyes were still staring. He had to blink, sometime!

"Mr. Mann," Chris called. The retreating figure turned around, and raised his eyebrows.

"Did you shoot that moose?" Chris asked.

"Yep, long time ago. Quite a bull, eh?"

"A bull? Did you shoot him in the eye?" So that's where the expression 'bull's eye' comes from, Chris thought.

"No. Got him in the shoulder ... near the heart."

"You don't shoot moose in the eye," his father chided.

"But you told me his eyes are made of glass. I thought maybe it was because his real eyes were shot out by the bullet."

"They're glass so that they won't rot. Why do you never believe me when I tell you something?"

The pat his father applied to the back of his head felt more like a slap.

On the way home, his mother kept looking back at him, winking and smiling. "What a perfect day to play outdoors," she must have said about a million times. Did she expect him to play outdoors with his new bat? Couldn't she see it was too shiny and smooth to dent? Not all things have to be used. They can be stroked or looked at too. Like the old brass razor his father gave him last Christmas when he got a new Shick electric. When he shined it up with his mother's Brasso, they didn't expect him to use it. Just keep it shiny.

When the car came to a halt in the garage, Chris tried to head for his room with the bat, but his mother got to the back door and blocked him from going in.

"No, Chris," she said. "It's just too nice a day to spend indoors. Why don't you give your bat and ball a try-out?"

"Hey Chris! You left your ball on the back seat!" said his father. "Here you go, sport." He saw the ball this time, and dodged it. It bounced on the side of the porch and landed on the grass.

His mother was the first to speak. "What you need is a catcher," she said. "Would you like me to be your catcher while you bat and daddy pitches?"

"I don't want to play," he said.

"That's because you don't know how much fun it is," she said. "Daddy wants to show you, so that you can learn to enjoy playing. ... Aw, honey, it's fun, you know. All the other boys your age seem to enjoy it. You will too if you give it a chance."

Alright, if that was what she wanted he would mess up his nice bat for her. He didn't care about wiping off the fingerprints on it anymore. It would get dirtier anyway. But if it got dented, he wouldn't want it for his shelf.

"It's not going to be real baseball," his father assured him. "We're just going to toss a few balls to you. So you can practice hitting. Real baseball is a team game. But that'll come later, sport."

"How many do I have to hit?" asked Chris.

"As many as you want. The more the 'batter'," he chuckled standing in the middle of the back yard, and looking around.

"With my new glasses, I can face into the sun. You two shouldn't cause you gotta see the ball. So I'll pitch from here, and you two stand there on the driveway."

Chris looked to see where his mother was standing. She looked at him. Were they in the right place?

"Gimme this for a sec," his father said, grabbing

the bat from Chris' hands. Holding the fat end in his fist, his father scratched two lines on the gravel with the handle end of the bat. "This is home plate," he said. "Chris, stand on this side of it." It didn't look like a plate. It looked like the outline of a fish. "Now Mrs. Catcher, this is where you stand," he said to Chris' mother and drew an X. "Got it?"

He gave the bat back to Chris. Sure enough, the handle was scraped and dirty. Why did he have to ruin it?

He heard his father whisper to his mother: "Don't worry. I'll toss the ball lightly. You won't get hurt." Chris saw her force a smile, and when his father turned back to him, he saw her glance at her fingernails. She hated breaking one.

"You don't just stand here," his father barked. "You cock yourself so that when you swing the bat, you do it not just with your hands, but with your body. Like this." His father put his arms around Chris, and held the bat. "Now we tilt back this way, so that when we see the ball coming, we go this way." His father rocked him from one unsteady position to another. Chris felt as if his own body was going to fall over, like a baby tree in a strong wind.

"You got it? Chris -- Hold the bat with me! Okay, now lean back, then when the ball comes, swing forward." He was rocked in the bear hug again. "Hey, how about your mum tossing the ball to us. I'll give you a demonstration. Get the ball, dear, and give us a little toss."

His mother picked up the ball where his father had dropped it, and wandered to the middle of the yard. "Here? Is

this where I'm to be?" Chris could see she was a little scared.

"You won't hit me, will you?"

"No, we'll swing downwards so the ball runs along the grass. Don't worry. Just give us an under-arm toss."

His mother forced another half-smile. "Alright. Here goes." She tossed the ball in their direction. It was rolling on the ground by the time it approached them. Chris could feel his father's body tighten. He leaned over and scooped the ball with his left hand, still holding onto the bat with his right. He tossed it back to her. "Oops," she said when she ran to it with cupped hands, and missed it.

She picked it up, moved closer to the pair, and gave another little toss.

"Swing," shouted his father, bringing the bat down against the ball which rolled like a croquet ball across the lawn. "A hit! That was a hit. Now we should be running to first base. But we'll do that another time. Got the feel of it? You swing with your whole body, not just your arms. You go forward so that by the time you whack the ball into the field, you're on your way to first base."

"That was quite a hit, honey," his mother said. "It went right by me. You would have made it to the base if you'd tried, I'll bet."

"Daddy was holding me," said Chris. "I couldn't get out."

His father opened his arms, and Chris sprung forward.

"Do you think you can do that on your own?" he asked.

Chris nodded.

"Alright then, catcher, take your place, and I'll take over the mound." His father ambled to the other side of the yard to pick up the ball. It had rolled into the damp earth of a bed of dried-up petunias. Chris pictured the ball splattering mud on his bat. Why must clean things become dirty? Why not the other way around?

"Okay, dear. Just relax. It's only a game," whispered his mother to him as she took her place on the scrawled X. "I've never played it before either. Fun isn't it?" He didn't answer. He didn't like being humoured. It made him feel like a baby.

"Ready?" asked his father.

Chris shrugged. He watched his father making overdone pitching warm-ups.

"Chris. You're not standing like I showed you. Cock yourself. So you can swing forward."

There was that word again. Did his father want him to bend downwards like his little pee-wee?

"You know when you pull the hammer back on your cap gun to make it bang the cap, well that is called cocking your gun." explained his father. "The hammer comes forward to strike the cap, and you gotta come forward to strike the ball ... I mean hit it ... you don't want to strike out"

So that's what he meant by cock. It wasn't a dirty word after all.

"Okay. Take the bat off your shoulder and hold it

out the way I showed you. And lean back to get ready to come forward, cause here comes the first ball."

Chris could see it coming. He was surprised when he swung the bat, and didn't hit it. The ball seemed to shoot past. Could it be that the ball didn't like being hit too?

His mother was on the other side of the driveway, in their neighbour's back yard, picking up the ball. She quickly sneaked back and rolled it to his father like a bowling ball.

"Chris, when you swing the bat, swing it upwards. You aren't driving a stake into the ground. Make the ball fly!"

First he asks me to hit the ball. Now he wants me to make it fly. Why doesn't he make it fly by pitching it in the opposite direction!

The next ball also shot by. It was definitely trying to avoid being hit.

"There! You did it again. The bat is not a sledge hammer," his father shouted. "You swing with it. You want to send the ball flying away from you."

When his mother scampered back with the ball, she whispered to Chris, "Try. Try and do what daddy says."

He was trying. Couldn't they see that? It was the ball. It was teasing him.

"Here, let me show you again," said his father coming up to him and grabbing the bat. "First of all, just to make sure the bat doesn't stick to your hands, you do this." Chris watched him hold the bat between his legs as he crouched to rub his hands on the gravel of the driveway.

He remembered seeing the big guys doing the very same thing in the school playground. They would place the bat between their legs, and after rubbing their hands in the dust, would run them up and down the handle of the bat sticking up between their legs. It always made the other guys laugh. What did it mean when they did that? Were they pretending to play with their pee-wees? Surely not! Pee-wees weren't that big, and they didn't stick up like that.

"It prevents the bat from sticking to your sweaty hands," his father explained. Okay now, stand back and watch. Here's the kind of swing that will send the ball from here to kingdom come."

His father swung so hard Chris could hear the whooshing sound of the bat slicing the air. It looked more fun when you didn't have to worry about hitting the ball. Just swing and pretend you hit it. That was the kind of game he liked.

He brushed his hands in the gravel. It felt cold. He picked up the bat which was still warm from his father's hands and got ready for the next pitch. It didn't matter if he hit the ball or not. He was going to swing the way his father did, and pretend, like him, that he hit it.

"Bet you do it this time," his mother said.

"Alright. Gimme a kingdom-comer," his father said, kicking up his leg and letting go of the ball.

Chris didn't try to hit the ball. It was the bat he wanted to master.

He swung -- in anger: at being coaxed by his mother

into his father's game; at being humiliated by a bat he didn't want anymore; at being egged on by those piggy eyes.

The bat must have been angry too. It swung him around and onto the gravel before flying from his hands ... to his father's face.

There were shrieks. His father's first, his mother's, then his.

Mummy, mummy. Look at my elbow and my knee! I've skinned them.

But she wouldn't look. She was patting her hands on top of his father's which were covering his eyes where the glasses had splintered.

He had to get away from the shrieks, far away, where they couldn't be heard.

Yes, the little woods at the end of Sherwood Road. There it was quiet. There you could play your own games, games that didn't hurt any part of your body -- or your feelings.

P-O-P

The impulse to turn around, claim her coat and boots from the checkroom in the lobby, and go back home got stronger as she approached the double doors at the end of the hotel corridor, and confirmed by the name in brass relief letters above the frame -- Salon Verchères -- that it was the room in which the party was to be held.

She could hear familiar voices inside, loud but not raucous. The raucousness would come later, after a few more drinks, when the layers of cultivated bonhomie, like clown masks, would slip to reveal bruised egos.

Standing there reminded her of how she had felt ten years before when she stood before another set of doors. GYM, was stencilled on each door, in large black letters. Above the marking on the left door were coloured socks, tacked up to form the letters, S O C K. On the right door, the socks formed an H O P and an exclamation point. None of the words encouraged her to step through to the testing ground beyond, where she would either retain what little sense of worth she had left, or lose it completely.

At that time she had just been dropped by her Grade Eleven steady of eight months, and wanted to go to the hop just to show Jim Olynek that she wasn't pining. She was also hoping

she might be able to rekindle an old flame under his very nose. Jim was going dateless too, and it was only a matter of when, not if, he would pluck another "dish" off the shelf. She wanted to beat him at his own game.

Before leaving for the hop that evening, her father patted her arm and said: "Before you enter, take a deep breath, throw your shoulders back, and sail in with a smile on your face. You'll have the fellows in the palm of your hand." He made it seem foolproof.

Rather than spin around and flee in that moment of panic in front of those doors, she took his advice and strode in. It worked. The stares that would normally have unnerved her, flattered her. They were looking to see how she was taking the tumble. And when she looked totally intact, like a Humpty Dumpty that hadn't broken, they continued to stare -- in amazement, not pity.

Not only did she retain her sense of worth, she doubled it. Jim's arch rival, Terry Harnley swept her onto the dance floor and into his muscular embrace. At midnight, he took her home via the Swan Pond in his modified Love Bug.

There wouldn't be that kind of triumph in store for her this evening, even though a similar test awaited her beyond these panelled doors. Press on, oh ye of little self-faith, she ordered herself.

She took a deep breath, threw her shoulders back, set a smile, and pulled open the right hand door. Cigarette smoke and darkness enveloped her as she stepped in. She stood

there with the smile still intact, waiting until her eyes began to see light.

"Ah, mademoiselle Kelly, welcome ... If you wish to leave your gift with me, I shall be glad to put it under the tree for you," came a familiar voice.

She turned to see the delicately-featured face of André Bernard. He was the prettiest of the bevy of pretty men in Merchandise Display. Unfortunately, he was gay, or so everyone claimed. So were most of the others. But they were all rather flirtatious with the girls which made her wonder how true the claims were.

"Thanks, André. I was embarrassed to be seen carrying it. As you can see, it's the old Laura Secord standby. I didn't have the chance to cover the store wrapping with anything jazzier. Hide it if you can," she said slipping the package to him.

"I'd like to keep it. Who cares about the wrapping when you know what's inside? I have a terrible weakness for chocolate." He held the package at arm's length and covered his eyes with his other arm in a mock "If I look at it any longer, I'll succumb" pose.

"Carol!... Carol!... Over here!"

She winked at André and headed in the direction of the voices. Adjusting now to the dimness, she could actually distinguish the males and females in the room. That was a relief. It would be embarrassing to say "Hi Neil" to the back of Sandra.

"Here ... here," a voice echoed as she found herself in a clearing and was able to get a sense of the room's size. Sure enough there they were: Yvonne, Jennifer, and Mado sitting against the wall, awaiting additional reinforcements. Why didn't they stand? When you advertise yourself as remaindered stock, you remain that way -- on the shelf. First impressions last.

"Green!" exclaimed Jennifer, noting her dress. "How Christmassy!"

"Beautiful," purred Yvonne. "So many people wear black in the evening at Christmas. Yes, it can be very beautiful. But why not be a little ... how shall I say it ... more like the season?"

Yvonne was the head translator in the advertising department. But her "métier", as she always reminded everyone, was from English to French. She always found herself fumbling for the "mot juste" when speaking English. But that gave her a certain charm, Carol thought. Especially the way she purred. If only she were about twenty years younger, and not quite so dumpy, she would be sensational with that purry voice and French accent. As it was, she was a divorcée whose husband had traded in for a younger model, and she seemed to relish licking her wounds. Carol knew that by her third drink, she would be weeping quietly about how lonely she feels at Christmas without her husband. For eighteen years, she said, they had spent heart-warming reveillons with relatives on both sides. Last year, when she went to the reveillons of her two sisters, she was treated like damaged goods.

"Well, if you can afford it, why not? Except I can't afford to buy a green dress just for Christmas," said Jennifer glancing quickly down at her brown and beige ensemble that she wore regularly to the office. Obviously she hadn't brought an evening dress to step into before coming to the party, as others had done.

"Carol can get double mileage out of her dress. She can wear it on St. Patrick's Day. I can't."

"Why not, for heaven's sake?" asked Carol.

"Cause I'm not about to betray my British ancestry... My God, every St. Patrick's Day I make a point of not wearing anything green, even eye make-up, just so that no one will think I'm Irish."

"Is that such a no-no?" asked Carol.

"Not if you are Irish," she said. "But I'm not. Haven't a trace of Irish blood in my veins. I've mainly Scottish."

Scottish thistle, thought Carol. She didn't really like Jennifer. But since she did most of the fashion illustrating for the copy that Carol wrote, they often had to work together as a team, and it was better to keep things on an even keel than allow her occasional bitchy remarks to tip the boat.

"I wear green on St. Patrick's Day, and I'm not Irish," said Yvonne. "I just like being part of the fun of the occasion ... you know ... just for the fun," she said sadly. Poor Yvonne, she had the will but not the way to become a party girl.

"Where's Hans?" asked the baby-faced Mado, peering over Carol's shoulder.

Carol froze. She had expected to be hounded, but she figured that Jennifer rather than Mado would lead the pack. No matter; the test had begun. It was time to toss the first red herring.

"A last minute hitch ... he won't be able to make it," she said casually.

It was as if a shadow had passed over Mado's face. She went from bright to gloomy in a flash. Yvonne sighed and slumped back in her chair.

"Not a lover's quarrel, I hope," piped Jennifer.

Liar, thought Carol. You know you hope that we have a lover's quarrel every instant we're together.

"No, he had something else to do this evening," Carol said. She wondered if that lie was more detectable than Jennifer's. But she couldn't think of anything more original to get the sniffing bitches off the scent.

"I was really hoping to see him again," said Mado sadly.

Carol believed her. When she brought Hans to last year's Christmas party, he really jollied her up. He said later that he had only done so because he got a kick seeing her gurgle and jiggle like a chubby baby.

"I really didn't know if I was going to come myself," said Carol. "He was pretty insistent that I join him." There, that should stop them in their tracks. They'll realize what a

sacrifice I made in coming to socialize with them rather than be with him. Mado will probably die of envy, poor thing.

But damn Jennifer for being dead on. Yes, they had had a lover's quarrel. Hans had begged her to bring him, and she had said no, at least a dozen times.

"Give me one good reason," he had insisted. But she couldn't. He'd never understand that she had to go alone in order to be able to put the previous year's experience with him in perspective.

How well she remembered the beating her pride took.

He was to have been her trophy for the evening. She had always assumed that the person with the trophy got the compliments.

But on that occasion the trophy got them! All she got were questions, like "Where did you find him?" and "How did you land him?" Did they really think she had safaried into a jungle with a net?

He'd made the first move. How could she ever forget it? She was sitting at the bar in the après-ski lounge at Mont-Gabriel, watching the skiers criss-cross the slopes. She felt snug sitting less than ten feet from the crackling fire on her left, knowing that ten feet ahead of her, on the other side of the windowpane, it was bone-chilling.

"Are you an indoor skier?" asked a voice from behind.

She spun around to stare speechlessly into a pair of animated sapphires. "Uhhh... no. Frostbite ... Terrible for my schoolgirl complexion. What's your excuse?"

"A twisted ankle," he said, raising his leg to show her the bulge of swaddling band.

"Is that your achilles' heel?" she asked.

"No. It's a woman who's strong -- inside and out. What's yours?"

"A boy with Paul Newman eyes," she confessed.

A few drinks and many giggles later, she let him use her shoulder as a crutch as they lurched to his room and tumbled onto his bed. She was thrilled to discover that, with the exception of his bound ankle, all his other moving parts worked. The sapphires sparkled even brighter in the morning light.

Back in Montreal he hopped through her thoughts all week long. Should she call him to ask about his ankle? Then when she learned that department employees could bring guests to the Christmas party, she had her reason to call. She couldn't get over his response. It wasn't simply gracious; it was positively enthusiastic! Days later, over drinks at the Churchill Pub, she found out why he had leapt at the invitation. Back in Austria, he disclosed, he had done some modelling, mainly of ski wear. Lately he had been looking for the chance to meet some "biggies" in advertising in Montreal who might toss a few assignments his way. He had been to a few agencies to inquire about work, but he felt that they were "playing" with him. They had their favorites that they pushed, and didn't seem too interested in adding to their stable, unless he would be willing to take their in-house modelling course. They said he had to learn to "create" a variety of looks rather than rely on the one obvious

Nordic image he projected so naturally.

So that was why, instead of clinging to her all evening, he had orbited around the managers of the department. He was courting them for favours! For the underlings, he struck a variety of poses: the alpine athlete, the Strauss waltz wunder-kind, the laid back boulevardier, the beerhaus bon vivant, the Student Prince Where the pose lacked a detail, they filled it in with their imaginations.

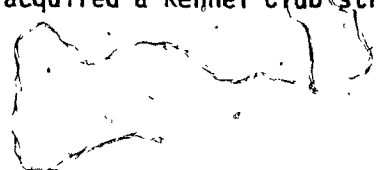
Carol felt like a jewel thief when she took him away from the party. Outside, the fresh air seem to cool her indignation. So did his gratitude. "The best Christmas party I've been to in Canada," he gushed.

She offered him her hand at the entrance to her apartment building. When his eyes turned as murky as the Blue Danube she recalled staring into, she softened. "How about a nightcap?" she asked. And the eyes suddenly sparkled.

It was the first of the many nights that not only he stayed over, so did pieces of his wardrobe. Three stayovers later, a pair of corduroy trousers, two casual shirts, one pale blue cardigan, and a striped dressing gown occupied her bedroom closet. Five weeks later, he brought the last of his belongings from his room in the apartment he shared with two McGill engineering students, and stayed -- put.

Carol figured that he had claimed squatter's rights. She couldn't recall having asked him to move in. Nor could she recall him having asked her. But there he was, right "at home."

It was as if she had acquired a Kennel Club stray



who, having sniffed comfort and security in her presence, chose to stay. She had mixed feelings about his take-over. On the one hand she revelled in his perfect beauty and his bursts of lunging playfulness. But like huge pets in small confines, he often got under foot. She soon ordered him out of the kitchen. There would be more water on the floor than in the sink whenever he did the dishes. And as for his attempts at cooking, she wondered how blobs of grease from the stove ended up inside the fridge.

But when he wanted to give affection and receive it, she forgot what a nuisance he could be.

He never forgot what a convenience she could be. He nagged her to help him get modelling jobs in the advertising department. "You must use your influence," he would remind her. She mentioned his availability to Neil Parker, the art director, only once. "I'll keep him in mind," Neil said. "But you realize we get our models through Constance Brown ... Still, if she can't provide us with his kind of type, I'll let you know." Hans kept nipping at her heels, especially as he moved from one unchallenging job to another: telephone solicitation for home delivery of The Montreal Star; a server behind the counter of an Austrian take-out deli on Bleury Street; a ski instructor with elementary school children on the languid incline of Fletcher's Field.

"Well hello Colleen, and a top of the evening to you."
She didn't have to turn around to know who the wit was. Jerry.

Bates had called her "Colleen" from the very first day she began her copywriting job with Eaton's. She had worn a green summer dress that was closer to mist green than emerald, but he instantly dubbed her Colleen after she said she was Carol Kelly. That was to be his pet name for her whether she liked it or not. He always made a point of calling people in the department by a name approximating their given name. Thus Fred was Ferdy, and Marlene was Merlin. Those with French names got off lightly; he would simply anglicize their name. Pierre Giroux was always Peter. Jeanne was pronounced Jean. He was known as Unna, because his attempt at humour never abated.

"So where's Heinz and his 57 varieties of seduction?" he asked, coiling his arm around her waist. Ah ... even Unna was sensitive to Hans' presence, or rather absence.

"Couldn't make it Sorry?" she asked coyly.

"Heartbroken. Now I'll have to carry the ball in keeping the ladies titillated for the night. Was hoping for some back-up."

Thank God, he's joking, thought Carol. She knew that he thought he was the 'life of the party', but she also knew that he knew when he was beat. And she knew he had felt beat at last year's party. In fact he had made an ass of himself trying to outshine Hans with his wit, which became more and more strained as the evening had wore on.

"His name is Hans. Not Heinz," Mado pointed out in annoyance. "Why do you always get people's names mixed up?" It was plain that Mado was in the dumps.

"Ahh ..." murmured Jerry, faking a look of sheepishness for Mado. "As in 'Keep your Hans off' my gorgeous body?"

"No!" she shouted.

"Enough, children! 'Tis the season to be jolly. Let's fake it even if we don't feel it," said Carol.

"Hey, hey, hey ... Right on. Say, it must be a miracle of sorts when a colleen busts up a good fight instead of starting one. You can't be all that Irish even if you do wear green most of the time," he said.

"I'd like a drink," she said squinting to locate the bar in the oversized dark room. It had to be where the bodies were huddled. "See you later alligators," she trilled.

"Let's belly up to the bar," said Jerry as he rested his arm to her waist and led her away. "And maybe later, my bar and your belly can play rubsy on the dance floor."

No way, you crude bastard, thought Carol. As soon as the dancing starts, I'm off.

"You have such a way with words," she said.

"Yeah. And you should see the other things my tongue is capable of," he leered.

I'll bet, thought Carol. Why is it that the obviously impotent jocks insist on boasting about their sexual prowess? Don't they see that no one is fooled by false advertising?

As they reached the cluster of people clamoring for the attention of the grim-faced attendant bobbing behind the bar, Jerry insisted she stand in front of him. He put his hands

on her waist, and then pushed her forward. So that was his game: to use her as his own private battering ram. Unna that's unacceptable!

She was balancing on her left foot while trying to aim her other heel for a jab to his right shoe when, damn him, he gave her another push. She fell against the back of Yves Lafontaine, the head of French-language advertising. It would have to be him. Of all the people she didn't like to look like a klutz in front of, it was Yves. He was reputed to be a French-Canadian blueblood. She noticed he had that special predisposition of the aristocrat: to show courtly deference to those worthy of his respect, and barely-concealed impatience with those he thought were fools. Bumping him like that made her feel like a fool, and she wasn't surprised when he spun around with the withering glance that was his trademark.

"Sorry, Yves. I was pushed off balance," she smiled embarrassedly.

She saw him give Jerry the arched eyebrow treatment. "Jump in," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder and guiding her in front of him.

"Fountain. Your back won't ever make a great window, but it's sure a real pane," she heard Jerry protest.

"I'm getting a pain from you a little lower down," Yves retorted.

Carol giggled. Trust Yves to rescue her. He was always so gallant. She often wondered if he acted that way towards his wife who was also reputed to be a blueblood. She

imagined them bowing and curtsying to one another in the elegant manner of those porcelain courtiers poised on the base of her mother's nighttable lamp.

"Are you alone tonight?" he asked.

Oh no; not Yves too! Did everyone measure her worth relative to that of the other person she was attached to? Was she nothing more than an adjunct, a pedestal for a work of art?

She shook her head.

"You've caught the eye of Mr. Kornbluth. May I introduce you to him?" Yves asked politely.

That's better. Ever gallant Yves was just trying to substitute Jerry with more distinguished company. That she could take. She had been wanting to meet the famous Mr. Kornbluth, but had only glimpsed his back as he darted down the corridor to the conference room at the far end of the department. He had been brought up from New York to counsel the division heads on the latest in point-of-purchase advertising techniques, and from all reports, seemed to have made quite a stir.

The man on Yves' left squeezed Carol's hand.

"Let's not stand on formality," he said. "Call me Howie."

"Don't be deceived by the color of her dress," said Yves. "She's not green in our business. She's the best English-language copywriter in the department."

"Shhhhh ..." said Carol in embarrassment. "I don't want to have a fight on my hands with all the others. But, thanks for the compliment."

"Well, it's the truth. You're bright as well as attractive. A rare combination in the department," said Yves.

Separate the truth from the gallantry, Carol ordered herself. In Yves' company it was easy to lose your objectivity about yourself.

"Thanks for the pointer about the brains," said Howie. "I'd already perceived the external attributes."

Howie looked up at her with a cheshire cat grin on his round, flushed face. Don't expect a return compliment about your external attributes, she thought. The white lying I do is restricted only to the advertising copy I write.

"I hear that you've been impressing the store VP's with some revolutionary theories of P-O-P advertising," said Carol, hoping to wipe the grin off his face with an appeal to the highly-touted vigour of his intellect.

"Really?" The grin vanished. Now the eyes bulged.

"According to my unimpeachable sources," she replied.

"Well, I hope that it's true. I didn't think Eaton's was ready for us. And by the non-committal reception of the people we've been talking to, I thought we'd struck out. The New York retail scene is not exactly the same as the Montreal scene. And Eaton's prides itself on being a store of tradition rather than trend ... But maybe we have struck a responsive chord after all"

"I think so," added Yves. "I know you've given me something to think about. We go day to day here, and never ask if we're going ahead or standing still. For all I know, maybe

we are going backwards."

"Now I'm really intrigued," said Carol. "What are your theories? In a nutshell, of course. I don't want you to ... I mean, the gist of them."

"Well, how about letting me buy you a drink, and then find a cosy place where we can talk about them. What'll you have?"

They were suddenly pressed against the bar. She hurriedly gave her order, watching the harried barman pour with one hand while lining up glasses with the other.

When Howie had grabbed his drink, he winked at Yves, then invited Carol to follow him as he wedged a path for her through the pressing bodies.

The only two empty seats he could find were near the entrance. Fine, thought Carol. If he becomes a bore, I've got an escape hatch.

"Harmonic -- that's the name we've given our theory of advertising that we've been talking about all week up here," he began. "Heard about it?"

She took a sip of her gin Collins and shook her head.

"Well, essentially, harmonic advertising is the kind of advertising that harmoniously blends messages received by different areas of the brain," he explained. "Scientists believe that the left side of the brain is verbal, rational and logical in processing information. The right side handles the perception of images and feelings ... Are you still with me?" he asked.

"So far," she said, offering him a reassuring smile.

"Due to the avalanche of messages, on radio, television, billboards, newspapers et cetera, et cetera, et cetera," he sermonized, "the consumer tends to use the right brain when he reacts to all the products presented before him ... or her, as the case may be," he quickly added. "Let's not forget that the consumer is often more accurately represented by a she than a he."

"You mean that the consumer doesn't use logic when buying a product?" she countered.

"In the main, no. She is so bombarded by all sorts of names and claims that she can't possibly remember, so she falls back on her impression of a product. She might not like a dishwasher because it's better than all the others, but because it has a handy cutting board on its top. So she wants the washer with a cutting board, but she doesn't know if its a GE, a Maytag, or a Westinghouse. Got it?"

"Uh - huh." She took another sip and waved cheerily to Jennifer whose glance, more sullen than ever, had just locked with hers.

"Well, to get back to my point, harmonic advertising aims to impact on both sides of the brain, to create a kind of cumulative selling effect that will virtually guarantee the purchase of the article in question."

He took another sip of his drink, burped, then continued. "The challenge of this kind of advertising is to make

sure that the logical data ... like the manufacturer's claims et cetera, et cetera, et cetera ... harmonize with the impressions that the consumer has already registered."

He burped again. "Pardonnez-moi, as you say up here. Though P-O-P to you probably means the physical point-of-purchase -- where the purchase takes place -- we think of P-O-P as the psychological point-of-purchase, the point when the message in the left brain harmonizes with the message in the right. Then pop! The sale is literally 'in the bag'. Conversely, if the messages from each side don't harmonize, the customer will reject the merchandise, and like the li'l ole weasel, pop goes the sale."

He paused as if he'd just completed a dramatic soliloquy.

Suddenly she sensed something pop within her brain, as if two bubbles, each representing an idea, had just collided to form a greater one.

"I suppose that theory applies to all our decisions to accept or reject, whether it's store merchandise or ..."

"Or what?" he asked, his eyes bulging and the cheshire grin returning.

"Or people," she blurted. "The principle is the same, wouldn't you say?"

He stared at her closely.

"You do have brains as well as beauty. Two messages about you just went pop in my mind," he said, patting her leg.

She was tempted to say, "In mine too," but checked

herself. He'd never believe the pop in her brain had triggered an impulse to reject. Pop you go, she thought.

She felt the palm of his hand press, then grip, her leg. When she glanced quickly down, she noticed how large his gold wedding band was. Did its size reflect the love his wife felt for him or the love he felt for himself, she wondered.

"Poops ... party poops ... why!ya being so stand-offish? You can play coochy-coo later"

There was Jerry standing in front of them with an arm hooked around Yvonne's waist. Carol was surprised to see Yvonne looking almost flattered by Jerry's fumbling claim on her.

"Carol, come and look at the gifts before they are opened. They are so beautiful," Yvonne purred.

"Thanks for reminding me," she said rising quickly and grabbing Yvonne's elbow, wrenching her loose from Jerry's clutches. "I promised Mado I would admire her handiwork. She spent the whole afternoon in her cubicle concocting it."

They crossed the room to the far corner where the gifts had been arranged under a white polystyrene Christmas tree, dotted with large coloured sequins.

Carol was glad she couldn't spot her gift. Even though it was worth more than the three dollars set as a price limit by the organizing committee, it just couldn't compare with the fanciful creations strewn at her feet, each competing for the eye of the claimants.

Carol spotted Mado's creation: a bottle of Quebec Liquor Board-labelled French wine disguised as a Christmas tree

with a little angel perched on its peak.

"That's the trouble with prettily wrapped gifts," said a voice from behind. "What's inside never measures up." Carol didn't have to turn around to identify the voice. It could only be Jennifer's. The season's spirit was still eluding her.

* * *

It was minutes before midnight when she entered the apartment. She closed the door behind her quietly. Hans was probably sleeping; she didn't want to rouse him. She wasn't ready to apply fresh bandages to his wounded pride.

All the lights were on in the living room. Too lazy to turn all but one out. They seemed to spotlight the heaps of clutter. An empty bottle of wine towered above the tangerine peels and nutshells on the coffee table. So he had drunk wine instead of going out for the beer he preferred. That figured. Why bother to pamper yourself when you are determined to be a martyr?

He would probably be out cold, flopped on the bed with his clothes still on. Wine brought out the sluggard in him, or did it simply expose, like glass, the rhinestone passing as a diamond?

She turned out the lights and entered the bedroom. The light from the glaring street lamps below cast a bluish glow over the white-walled room. Sure enough, he hadn't drawn the drapes. But he had found the strength to undress himself. His outstretched limbs claimed the entire bed.

She watched his eyelids closely while she removed

and hung up her clothes. Was he feigning sleep so he wouldn't have to acknowledge that she had kept her promise to leave the party early in order to be with him? Not so much as a flicker.

His nude body looked like marble on the dark bedspread. She paused to admire it. Not even in the museums of New York, Berlin, and Italy had she seen a work of art as beautiful. She had liked the body of David in Florence, but had been repelled by the face. Michelangelo had captured the warrior in his subject, but not the lover. There was no trace of cruelty in the sensuality of Hans' face; nor strength.

She followed the line of his body from his shoulders, down the spine to his tightly rounded buttocks and down his muscular thighs and legs. The proportions seemed even more beautiful as he lay there in repose.

She leaned over him and stroked his thighs and buttocks with the palm of her hand. She felt his muscles tighten.

"What time is it?" he slurred.

"Around midnight," she answered.

"You're kidding."

"Look for yourself," she said. The alarm clock with the illuminated dial and hands was inches away from his face on the bedside table. He didn't bother to peer at it.

He lay there, eyes shut. Oblivious to time, place and

There was that popping sensation again.

She withdrew her hand and stood back to scrutinize once more the form on the bed. Then she spun around, strode to

the vestibule, parted the closet's accordion-fold doors and extracted from the upper shelf the patched comforter her mother had passed along to her when her maternal grandmother had died. She would have tossed it out had it not been the only heirloom she had to remind her of the sole morale booster of her early childhood.

After dumping newspapers and magazines from the couch, she spread the comforter on the cushions, then arranged herself on top of it. She wrapped the flaps tightly around her, and within seconds, felt a warmth envelope her.

The day after Christmas she would tell him. Yes, on Boxing Day. He would have no trouble finding someone else who would snatch him off his perch in a warm bar. He was a gift -- but the kind that, when you give it to yourself, has no sentimental value.

The Turning Point Restaurant

"It's not too late to turn back," she said. "We could probably beat the storm home."

"Please, Jan," he said, wiping away the condensation on the windshield with the tips of his fingers.

"Please, what?"

"Please stop scrounging for every excuse you can think of for not going through with this visit."

She glanced at him, but he kept his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

"Dammit Vic, what visit is worth risking our lives for? If we get hit with freezing rain, we'll be in the ditch in no time. I'm not ready to tempt death just yet, thank you very much."

"I've got things under control" he said. "But trust you to associate a little social visit with tempting death."

"I'm referring to getting there for the visit. That's all. I just don't think it's worth the risk."

"For family, you make sacrifices. If we were going to see acquaintances, I'd turn back. But for Jack, I think we should make the effort. After all, he's done it for us in the past," he said.

"For which we'll be eternally grateful," she said bitterly.

He knew she'd never forget last year's visit when Jack and Vi brought their 'brood' to their apartment in Ottawa

for Christmas dinner. The welcome mat had been laid out for them, mainly by Jan. She had bought half-a-dozen Christmas crackers, two for each of the kids, had baked shortbread cookies in the shape of snowmen, and had wrapped their gifts with huge ribbons and bows. But when the kids tore open their crackers, they found a tin whistle inside which they blew into each other's ears. They surprised Jan by consuming the two dozen shortbread snowmen, or at least apparently consuming them. For days afterward, she and Vic found headless snowmen tucked under the cushions on the chesterfield, and dumped behind the books on the teak shelves. And it had been a complete waste of time and money wrapping their gifts with satin bows. They yanked at the ribbon like it was an obstinate shoelace they couldn't unknot. And they barely touched the turkey she stuffed and baked for over six hours. Jack revealed later they had insisted on stopping for hamburgers in Smiths Falls, and didn't have the appetite for anything other than the plum pudding dessert and the shortbread snowmen.

When they had retreated home to Kingston, Jan burst into tears. Later she had said, "One afternoon with them, and I felt drained. How must Jack and Vi feel having them 'round twenty-four hours a day?"

"Maybe when they're your own, you develop shock absorbers in order to cope," he had said.

* * *

"Hey gorgeous, how about we stop for a stretch and coffee? I think our neck muscles and nerves are getting a little taut." You choose the place, and I'll treatcha... Game?" He

glanced anxiously at her.

"Game," she said. "But don't think we'll have much of a choice. The restaurants we've passed look closed. We might have to settle for a coke in a grocery store, but even they don't look open."

"I guess even storekeepers, desperate to rake in a buck in the off season, still respect the sanctity of Christmas Day," he said.

"Sanctity! Haven't heard that word in a dog's age ... Now there's just got to be a restaurant open on this God-forsaken highway. You don't just close down all the facilities just because it's a sanctified day. After all they're human needs that just can't be put on hold indefinitely."

"Those extra cups of coffee getting to you too?" He saw her flash a smile.

"Wouldn't it be great if just around the bend ahead was one of those restaurants with checkered table cloths, the aroma of coffee and pine decorations, and a little group of road-weary travellers like ourselves who'd unwittingly change the course of our lives?"

She frowned again.

"Was just thinking about that King of Kensington show on CTV...."

"CBC," she corrected.

"You remember it then," he said.

"I don't know what particular episode you're referring to. All I know is that it's a CBC, not a CTV, show."

"You win," he said. "I really never paid much attention to the network which carries it." Lately he had to bow to her superior knowledge of Canadiana. When she catapulted herself from the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women to S-X level in the Cultural Affairs Division of the Secretary of State, not only did she rivet her eyes into anthologies of Canadian poetry, prose, fiction, and art history, but insisted they watch all documentaries described in the TV schedule as "offering a rare glimpse into a hitherto unexplored aspect of Canadian life."

"Go on," she prompted. "You were saying something about one of the episodes"

"It was the Christmas one, last year's I think. It took place in a highway restaurant on Christmas eve. There was a fierce storm outside, and people had come in to sit it out. There was an Italian couple; she was pregnant, and he couldn't speak ze English viry goude. And there was a hoighty-toighty dame in her flashy mink coat ... and of course, the King and his mother, Gladys, and her boyfriend"

"So what happened?" she asked.

"Well, predictably, the pregnant Italian girl goes into labour, and of course, it's impossible to get her to a hospital or for a doctor to get through to the restaurant. So they all pitch in and help, except the husband of the girl keeps fainting, and the king has to keep reviving him. The ladies take over and deliver the child. The snooty lady drapes her coat over the new mother, and the men take turns holding the

baby in their arms...."

"Stop!" she insisted. "I get the picture already. They all came to realize the true meaning of Christmas, that it was about the humble birth of a little child ... and from that moment on, they knew their lives would never be the same, they had all gained a new insight into..."

"So you do remember it," he said.

"Not at all. Not a single detail. I'm just building on a cliché, don't you see? Doesn't every Christmas program inevitably focus on a child, or children? It's all tied in with the pronatalism conspiracy. And of course, at Christmas, people get too bogged down in sentiment to see the thing for what it is: a conspiracy. How come they never show Mary changing Jesus' diapers, and wearing herself out pounding the crap out of them on the rocks near a filthy stream? All we ever see is this Madonna like creature smiling like she's had the greatest experience of her life giving birth to this child"

"Well, it was the greatest experience, historically speaking."

"I know, I know. But it still perpetuates the myth of the ecstasy of childbirth, and God knows that not every woman gets to rear a savior. Devils yes. Saviours, only once in a millenium."

"Do you think that place is open?" he asked, squinting at a restaurant that didn't have a single car parked in front of it, and giving the windshield another quick wipe with his fingers.

"Doesn't look like it ... Nope. I see a sign on the

door. Can't read it but it's probably a closed notice."

"Maybe over the next hill," he said.

"Hope springs eternal," she said.

* * *

"I'm glad we're out of that desolate stretch," she said after they had just emerged from the hilly terrain, and were on the flat plains flanking the St. Lawrence River. The rain was pelting their car. "Maybe it's the weather that's getting to me, but everything back there looked so desolate. You saw all those abandoned farmhouses?"

"It's become a tourist area now. I don't think the farming was ever too profitable."

"Sad, isn't it to think of the first settlers who broke their backs clearing the land, only to have their great-grandchildren take the profits from subdividing the land for cottages, and move to Florida."

"The whole area looks different in the summer. Teeming with families. The lakes are great for kids because they can fish in them as well as swim."

"Remind me not to book a cottage for one of those 'get away from it all' vacations."

* * *

"Jan ..."

"Hmmm?"

"You're not going to bring up the subject of your promotion, are you?" he asked.

"I hadn't really thought about it. I suppose I

might allude to it somewhere in the conversation. It's hard to keep quiet about one of the luckiest breaks in your life, you know."

"I'm thinking of Vi," he explained.

"Well, what about her? If she has no compunction about parading her three tarnished trophies under my nose, why can't I parade my shiny one under her's?"

"C'mon, Jan. She doesn't parade them. We know they're albatrosses around her neck, and so does she. Remember when she became pregnant with Jill, and how worried she was that she'd never be able to get back into teaching again because of the teacher surplus. And sure enough, it happened, but there's a pupil shortage to boot. Her days as a professional, at least in the education business, are over."

"I'd feel more sorry for her if she hadn't been in teaching. It's a mothering profession ... A dead end ... Hey, isn't that a restaurant over there beyond the interchange? She rubbed the condensation off the side window with a tattered kleenex. "Yes. It's one of those Gulf restaurants. Don't think you'll get your turning point experience in there."

"I'll forgo the turning point, and settle for emptying my bladder while they fill the tank."

* * *

"It's as if the furies are trying to thwart us from going through with this visit," she said grimly. "Honk the horn again, so they know we're here."

He sounded the horn again. Jason's face appeared in

the centre of the ornamental wreath that hung suspended in the centre of the large living room picture window.

"Do you think it would occur to them to come out with an umbrella? Can't they see it's pouring? The wind is bad enough, but I refuse to get my hair soaked."

"Stay here," he said, "and I'll go ahead and come back with one. They probably are wondering why we're sitting here."

"Well it doesn't take a genius to figure that we might not want to get soaked to the skin," she said. "Do we look like ducks? Sitting ducks, maybe," she spat.

"Be back in a minute," he said, as he left out of the car and bounded up the sidewalk.

* * *

"We wondered if you were having second thoughts about coming in," said Vi.

"I didn't think of bringing an umbrella. My God, when was the last time you had to bring an umbrella with you when you went out on Christmas Day? I can remember a snowless Christmas, back in the fifties. But it was still freezing. But rain!" said Jan, handing her coat to Vic who was standing there with a wooden clothes hanger.

"Yes, it's tough on the poor kids. Not just ours. But all kids. It's like a Christmas without Santa. No chance of giving the new toboggan or ski-doo a try-out. Jill, not so loud. It's lovely, dear, but not so loud."

The piano strains of "Hail, hail, the gang's all

here," coming from the dining room softened, but only slightly.

"Where's Jack," asked Vic after running a comb through his damp hair.

"Your money or your life," a voice growled.

They glanced around to see Jack standing at the head of the basement stairs pointing a power drill at them and making a tough-guy face.

"Hey ... we're poor, plain folk. Give us a break, mister," said Vic plaintively, half-smiling.

"He's only joking," said Jason, sticking his head around the corner of the door frame behind his father.

"Save us, Jason," said Vic. "Save us from that mean old daddy of yours." Jason looked confused. His head disappeared behind the door frame.

"It's alright, Jase," his father said. "They know it's only a joke." He smiled at his brother and sister-in-law. "I feel like a kid with a new toy. You remember, Vic, how dad would never let us play with his power tools? I can see why now. Wouldn't want Jase to play around with this. But let's see. Almost twenty-five years later, I get to fulfil a childhood wish. But darn it, I'm no longer a kid. Too bad we have to grow up, eh?"

"Hell, at Christmas, everyone should be able to be a child again," said Vic.

"That's fine for you men to say," piped Vi from the kitchen. "But you boys still need a mother to put the turkey on the table. Mothers don't have the right to become little girls

at Christmas. They've got too much work to do. Right Jan?"

"Right on," agreed Jan.

"... So what the heck do we care now," the two female voices warbled to the pounding strains coming from the dining room.

* * *

"Well, was Santa good to you kids?" asked Vic as he took his and Jan's gifts from the two large shopping bags and placed them on the coffee table.

"Yeah," said Jill. Jason and Sally nodded in agreement. "Was he good to you?" she asked.

"I'd say so. Gave me a beautiful book on Norman Rockwell paintings. You know who he is?"

"No," said Jill with embarrassment.

"He used to paint pictures for a magazine called The Saturday Evening Post," Vic explained. "But I got to know him when his paintings appeared on Kellogg's Corn Flakes boxes. They were of young kids like yourself. I put all the boxes with different faces on the table when I ate my breakfast because I usually ate alone. I had an early morning paper route."

"How did Santa visit you if you have no chimney for him to come down?" asked Sally.

"We left the door on the balcony open for him," said Vic as he passed the kids their gifts.

"Be careful with the wrapping," ordered Jill. "We're supposed to bring different kinds to our next art class, and I don't want scraps."

* * *

"I can't take my eyes off your hair," said Vi as she passed Jan the cranberry sauce. "What made you decide to streak it. It's gorgeous."

"The sun and salt water in the Bahamas," she said. "I got natural streaks there, then Renaldo took over when I got back. Needless to say his touch is a little more thorough than Mother Nature's."

"I have to find a hairdresser to hide my streaks. Not blond ones -- grey. Courtesy not of Mother Nature but my brood," she said. "Oh, have you heard the latest about my career?" she asked.

"You're going back into teaching?" asked Jan incredulously.

"Nursing. It's impossible to get a school board to hire you when they can't fire the redundant teachers they already have. No, I'm going to start nursing courses next fall. At least that's the plan for now. It's not that far removed from teaching. Both require a strong maternal instinct. Patients are like children. They need a lot of reassurance and attention."

* * *

"Hey you kids are awfully quiet," said Jack. "Jason, tell Auntie Jan and Uncle Vic about the pageant at the cathedral."

Jill covered her mouth as if to control an outburst of giggles.

Jason looked down at his empty dinner plate and whispered, "What do you want me to tell them?"

"About the baby," Jill shrieked.

"Jill, let Jason tell the story," her father said.

"Yes, tell us about the baby, Jase."

"Instead of a doll in the manger, there was a real live baby," Jason blurted.

"Oh no," said Jan. "Say no more. I can imagine the pandemonium."

"Yeah, he cried," said Jason.

"And they had to put a pacifier in his mouth," Jill added, covering her mouth once again to stifle her exaggerated mirth.

"The baby Jesus with a pacifier in his mouth. I've never seen a nativity scene depicted quite like that," said Jan. "He's always shown as blissfully content, the perfect little angel."

"That was not the lingering impression I had of the pageant," said Jack with annoyance. "Jase, may I add a few details to your story?" his father asked. Jason nodded, and stared down at his plate once again.

"Well, the minister, who sort of emcee'd the pageant, must have got a little confused, because at the point the three Kings of Orient-are were supposed to glide up the aisle, he skipped ahead to another carol and left them hanging back there."

"Yeah, they looked stupid just standing there," chortled Jill.

"In any case, without their presence in ermine, velvet and gold, and their gifts propped up in front of the manger, you found your attention focused on the child. Not the

glitter, but the child. Now that's what Christmas is all about," declared Jack.

"I dare say a crying child does sort of grab your attention," said Jan.

"Oh, the crying was only momentary. The fellow playing Joseph was really the baby's father. He picked him up, patted his bum a few times, gave him the pacifier, and put him back in the manger."

"Must have been sort of touching," said Jack.

"Was Mary the baby's mother?" asked Jan.

"No that was Heather Robinson. She lives over on College Street," said Jill.

"She's pretty but she never says hello to anybody," said Jason.

"She's shy. Don't forget she's only fifteen," Vi pointed out.

"How appropriate to call upon a young virgin to play the role of a mother. Where was the real mother?" asked Jan.

* * *

"She's coming on in about one minute," hollered Jill.

"Thanks, dear. We'll be right in," said Vi. "Bring your coffees with you," she suggested.

"And now for a brief message from the great white mother," said Jan.

"Will she have her crown on this time?" asked Sally.

"No, dear, she only wears that for special occasions," said her mother as she sat down on the sofa and patted the place

next to her as a signal to Jan to join her.

"But isn't Christmas a special occasion?" persisted Sally.

"For adorable little children like you dear, it is. But not for queens."

"Wonder if she'll make mention of the assassination of her uncle," said Jack.

"Looks like she's still grieving. My God, she looks wan and pale," said Jan as the camera moved in for a close-up.

"What a funny voice," said Jason.

"Would hardly rouse the troops, would it Jason," Jan said. "Now Queen Elizabeth the first. That was a woman who knew how to wield the sceptre." Jan saw Sally ask Jill what a sceptre was. "Like a stick," Jill whispered back and made a hand motion pretending she was hitting her sister with one.

"Spare me another plug for The Year of the Child, even a royal one," muttered Jan. "One more week and we're out of it, thank God. What about The Year of the Aged? They're the ones in our society who need love and care, and they're not getting much of it from the children they raised."

"There's Princess Anné," pointed Jill. "We saw her when she came to Kingston."

"I didn't know that she was Honorary Chairman of the 'Save the Children Fund'," said Vi. "I thought she was concerned only with horses. Perhaps that son of hers has finally brought out the maternal instinct in her."

"She even looks like a mother instead of a horse,"

said Jack, and then feigned a look of shame for his disrespect.

* * *

"Look. It's snowing!" Jason shouted.

"Oh no," muttered Jan.

"I guess we're going to get a white Christmas after all. Now the kids can celebrate."

"Vic, I think we should be on our way. It's coming down pretty heavily. There could be problems." Jan said.

"You don't have to run so soon. We could give you one of the kid's beds for the night if you wanted to stay over. There's lots of room in this inn," said Jack.

"I think if we left now, we'd be able to make it without much trouble. And there's still two hours more of daylight. I say we skidaddle pronto." Jan gulped the last of her sherry, put the glass down on the coffee table, and stood up. "Let's go, lazy bones," she ordered Vic.

"Jan, how do you keep that marvellous figure of yours?" asked Vi.

"At the Y. Three evenings a week. It's just a few blocks away, and very equipped. Much better than the old one on Metcalfe."

"Three evenings a week! I don't have one free evening a week!" said Vi. "And even if I did, I'd be too exhausted to raise a finger."

"That's the great thing about regular exercise. It perks you up. You should give it a try."

"Maybe when the kids are a little older. Someone

still has to make the meals, clean up, and get them into bed. Jack can't. His classes this year at Queen's are draining him... Maybe in a year or two."

"Vic, you're squeezing Sally to death. Let go of her for heaven's sake," said Jan sharply.

"I think Sally enjoys getting a bear hug from her uncle, don't you dear?" said her mother. Sally smiled shyly.

"I want a hug too," said Jason.

"Okay. Hugs for all," said Vic.

* * *

"You seem upset about something," said Vic as he merged with the traffic onto the 401.

"I've got a headache, that's all," she said.

"From what?"

"The ..., oh forget it."

"Say it."

"What did you think of the decanter and glasses they gave us?"

"I'm rather impressed with it. Very simple. Hate that cut glass stuff."

"But the implication behind it, like our lives are so empty that we drink all the time. And Vi's comment: "I'm sure you'll put it to good use." What did she mean by that, may I ask?"

"I think she meant that since we entertain quite a bit, we'll be able to use the set a lot. I don't think there was any hidden message ... And by the way, I think you did a

good job of choosing those gifts for the kids. Especially the Miss Piggy puppet for Jill. They all said "thank you," you noticed: In fact, they seemed remarkably well behaved."

"I couldn't believe it. But then I saw that baseball bat in the hall closet behind the coats. Bet Jack keeps them in line with it," she said.

"You mean hits them with it?"

"Threatens to hit them with it. How else could he get them to behave? Didn't your father keep a rod or a belt hanging around as a reminder to toe the line?"

"No. He didn't bother with discipline. In fact, he didn't seem to really care what we did, bad or good."

* * *

"Can't you pass that snowplough?" she asked.

"This morning, you complained about tempting death. Well I'd certainly be doing that if I tried to pass. I can't see a thing. I think we should just stay behind the plough. Besides it's like it's doing us a personal favour, clearing the road for just us."

"He's not doing us a personal favour by crawling at twenty-five miles an hour. It'll take us six hours to hit Ottawa at this rate."

"Maybe he'll turn off at Smiths Falls. It's only a dozen or so miles ahead."

"More like three dozen. We haven't come all that far you know. Tell you what. As much as I'd like to press on, I'd be willing to pay for a motel room and continue first thing

tomorrow. We'd have daylight, and the roads would probably be cleaned. I'm exhausted, and you must be worse."

"Think we can find a place? We didn't have much luck with our turning point restaurant this morning," he said.

"But we're not looking for a restaurant. Or a turning point. Just a room. And given this storm, there must be a motel or two open to cater to people going nowhere fast, like us."

* * *

The motel section was officially closed for the winter season, but the proprietor, Beth Lehman, said she'd let them have a room if they would be willing to "make do" with an electric heater. "You'd never think that what went on in the Middle East would have an effect here. But it has. Heating oil costs," she chattily explained. "It would be prohibitive to heat the entire wing for the sake of the one unit."

It would be her very own private heater, the one she used in the bedroom on sub-zero nights. "I won't need it tonight. Besides, like that song goes, 'I've got my love to keep me warm'," she smiled to Jan, nodding in the direction of the man outside who was shaking clumps of snow off the brightly-lit Christmas tree with a huge white star on its peak.

"I see you have that, too," she added.

* * *

"Feel better?" he asked.

"Hmmm."

"Not the most superbly appointed room, is it?" he

observed.

"Definitely a family motel," she decreed.

"What makes you say that?"

"The extra space for cots, and these narrow twin beds. Certainly not amenable for lovers, licit or otherwise."

"Bet we can do something about that."

"What are you doing?"

"Taking out the night table so we can bring the beds together."

"For God's sake Vic...."

"Aren't you cold?"

"A little."

"Alright then. Let's get these beds together."

"No, Vic."

"You definitely are a little cold."

"I'm tired Vic. Just tired. It's been a tiring day."

"C'mon. I thought it was quite refreshing. The kids I mean. Sure, they did their kiddie sort of things, but they weren't the devils they were last year. Maybe it was because they were on home ground."

"Vic! Move that bed back, and if you're still feeling chilly, take that extra blanket on the closet shelf," she pointed.

"What about you? What'll you use to keep warm?"

"Since I didn't bring a nightgown, I intend to sleep in my clothes. They're wool. And if that's not enough, I'll drape my coat over me. It's wool, too. So don't worry about me

being cold."

* * *

Leave her alone, you fool. Can't you see she's exhausted? Look at her ... dead to the world

You're being unreasonable to expect her to have strong feelings for the kids like you do. After all, they're your kin, not her's.

Lying there so still, she looks like the original sleeping beauty.

There -- it happened again. When a car passes, and its lights shine through the window blind, Jan, in profile with her coat draped across her midriff, looks pregnant ... swelled with life. Will you tell her about that tomorrow, about her maternal silhouette? Better not. She'll roll her eyes heavenward and remind you of the legal agreement you made her sign -- to have no children until both parties "agree in writing to beget."

It was different then. There were debts from college to pay off. And things to buy, things you both ~~never~~ had as kids because her parents had too many kids to provide for; and yours because of all those bills for treatments of dad's never-ending respiratory ailments, thanks to the trench war in France. Kids would have gotten in the way of your plans to do graduate work in Europe after a five-year stint with the government.

If you once believed that a career was the only route to self-fulfillment, you can hardly blame her for believing it too. Besides, she's closer to reaching that goal than you are, and maybe ever will be.

Admit it, though. You loved her so much you didn't want to share her with anybody else. But now you know that a child needn't take anything away from love that's already there. It might even add to it

That man who was Joseph -- surely his love for his son, when he picked him up from the manger and patted him gently, must have warmed the heart of the woman to whom they were bonded in flesh and spirit. And like a morning glory blossom warmed by the sun, her heart must have opened to the glory of life.

Crossings

He and Di got to the Dorval air terminal early, not because of any sense of urgency he felt, but because it was the beginning of the three-day St. Jean Baptiste holiday weekend. "There might be a slowdown getting through customs and immigration with the rush we're expecting," the Delta ticket agent had cautioned.

But the rush had obviously not begun, and the female customs officer barely glanced at their luggage when she asked them the standard question about bringing gifts, citrus fruit, cigarettes and alcohol. "Have a nice trip," she said as she lifted Di's grey-pink weekender and his grey-blue pullman from the counter and dumped them on a moving conveyor belt behind her.

"Why is it when you have time to spare for them to plough through all your personal belongings, they don't bother? And when you're in a rush, they go through everything, piece by piece?" he wondered aloud as he double-checked their departure time on a television monitor.

"I guess it's because we look so normal. When you're travelling alone, and in a hurry, they probably think you're a courier crossing with dope or stolen gems or whatever," she said.

Dave looked at her then down at himself.

"Are we that normal looking? I don't take that as a compliment. What about my boots? Don't you think they're a little different from the normal?"

She didn't bother to look down. She wasn't as taken as he was with those cowboy boots with their pointed toes and high heels. Thank God they were conservative; no embossed swirls or twirls. She knew why he wore them. It wasn't to be different; it was to look tall. It bothered him that he seemed to have shrunk from his adolescent height of five ten. It was because of his posture. He was beginning to slouch. The boots not only took him past his former height, but made him look slimmer. He was still vain about his good looks, maybe even more so now than when she married him twelve years ago.

"I dare say she's seen men wearing cowboy boots before. Now if you had long hair, sloppy clothes, and a banged up guitar to match, she might have inspected your bag more closely. Let's face it. You look too square."

"Let's get a drink," he said. "We have over half an hour to kill before boarding."

"Don't you think you've had enough? I know that you're upset. I didn't mind you having those scotches this morning, but there's a limit, honey. I don't want to have to carry you off the plane."

"I'll not be needing your help in getting off the plane," he protested. "But you can help by stopping being so damned over-protective. I am alright. And I'll be alright."

"Fine! Then what do you need another drink for?"

she countered.

"Go sit there over by the window over there, and watch the planes land and take off. I'll meet you here in half an hour. I think we're getting on each other's nerves."

Heading in the direction of the bar, he turned around to see if she had taken a seat. She hadn't. She was standing there, following him with hurt-filled eyes. She wanted to be a leaning post for him at this time; but she was more like a dragging anchor.

The bar off the main corridor about forty yards from where he left her was almost empty. Then he remembered the time. Just before lunch. It would be hours until the afternoon crowd would fill the place. If then. Being Saturday, few businessmen were en route that day. Probably tomorrow they'd begin to pack the place before catching planes for points west and south. It felt strange flying on what was obviously a non-business day. The entire airport seemed strangely quiet, like the day didn't really count, a lull between spurts of life.

He hadn't eased into a padded armchair when a waiter stood over him.

"Monsieur?" he asked.

"Scotch and water," he commanded. He would have preferred that the waiter address him in English. He looked like an Anglophone, didn't he? Don't people, especially those dealing with the public, have an instinct for recognizing a type? Surely the waiter didn't think he was a Pepsi cowboy from the "Festival Western" in St. Tite. After all his boots were dark brown, not

maroon with silver trim.

Why was he overreacting to everyone's treatment of him? Was it because of Dave's over-attentiveness? She'd been fussing over him ever since the news came a day-and-a-half ago. Maybe it was her way of trying to forget Jon. He'd been her first 'steady', and they say you never forget the first one.

It was as if his reaction to Jon's death was more important than the death itself. But how could it be? She knew that his and Jon's friendship was of the past, that they hadn't seen each other in over fifteen years.

If their friendship had endured, and Dave liked to think it had, it was because, by mutual desire and tacit consent, they had kept it in the past. Getting together again was possible, but only in each other's memories.

Since the news, Jon had come back, again and again, in scenes that flashed through his mind like snippets of old home movies.

There they were: on the beach at North Hatley building a sand castle; Jon was trying to pat a tower into shape while he was pawing at the sand like a cocker spaniel, trying to dig a moat ... on a raft at Camp Kanawana, he diving neatly into the lake, and Jon, holding his nose and jumping feet first ... at Belmont Park, he gripping the chariot's handrail and bobbing up and down to get it moving and Jon huddling low in the seat, covering his eyes with his small hands ... in their secret cave under the porch at Jon's house devising a secret code for the day they would team up as spies, Jon warning "Never reveal it,

even under torture. It's ours till death do us part." ... in the school gym, he receiving a silver cup for setting a new broad-jump record at the interclass trackmeet and Jon receiving a Webster's Student Dictionary for his essay on "Communism -- the Panacea that became a Peril" ... in the middle of the woods, Jon trying to cut through a board with a dull box saw, and he pounding nails into the boards, tightly dovetailed to make a leakproof roof on their den.

It was Jon who first suggested they build a "den" in the woods behind the cemetery on the far side of the new housing development. They would pilfer boards and planks in the night, hide them in a safe place, then haul them through the woods to their secret site. They scavenged for nails carelessly dropped by the carpenters, and pieces of shingles that had been tossed aside as scrap.

It took them a full summer to build, and almost another full summer to rebuild after a fierce winter during which the weight of snow on the lean-to roof crumbled the flimsy supports. They made it sturdy enough to withstand the onslaught of a military attack.

Then they added a low-ceilinged extension just for sleeping. The first room was for recreation and eating. The second was the exact size of two sleeping bags laid side-by-side.

Building the hut was more fun than spending time inside it. In fact, as soon as they finished one project, Jon would suggest another, like rebuilding one of the walls with a window for light. And then building a fireplace and chimney.

They never really used it as a fireplace. They put the Coleman stove inside it so that the gassy fumes would rise instead of filling the little living space.

They would visit their den on weekends while school was in session. During the summer recess, they would go almost daily. Several times when he suggested to Jon that they invite some of the other guys to accompany them, Jon would get annoyed. "If you do, then count me out," he said, "for good." It was a private place, Jon insisted. Once you reveal the location to others, they would make it their place. Or try to destroy it.

On the day he suggested bringing another friend along for the third time, Jon blew his top. "Go with him. See if I care," he dared. But when he phoned Jon to say that he had changed his mind about inviting Donnie, Jon still refused to have anything to do with him that day. It was as if he had actually violated their pact. The next day they trekked to their den together, and he could recall feeling joyous relief. He had been afraid that Jon would never join him again. Jon's anger, it seemed to him, was like a volcano -- quick to erupt and slow to cool.

Then one day, Jon made him erupt and never totally cool. They had slept overnight in the hut. When he rose in the morning to dress, he couldn't find his underwear which he had placed on a branch of a tree to dry overnight. It had gotten wet when he sat too long on some damp moss on a rock. He had placed both his jeans and the underwear on separate branches of the same tree to dry. In the morning, the jeans were still

there, but the underwear was gone. It hadn't fallen on the ground. He looked for it while he wandered away from the cabin to find a spot to relieve himself.

Back at the hut, he demanded that Jon hand it over.

"What over?" Jon mumbled, still only half-awake.

"My underwear, klepto," he said.

"What underwear?"

"The shorts I put on the tree last night. Hand them over."

"Fuck off."

"I said hand them over before I take your shorts and hide them."

"I don't have them," he said, turning over in his sleeping bag as if to go back to sleep.

"The joke's over. Give me back my underwear." He knew why he was so insistent. The blue Jockey shorts were old and tattered. His mother had just patched the seat. But what really bothered him was that his name was on the shorts, on a label that his mother had sewn in before he attended the Scout jamboree in Winnipeg the summer before. He didn't want anyone else to know who the shorts belonged to, at least not those shorts. Not the patched ones. He felt sure that Jon had taken them in order to play a joke on him later. Like when school resumed. He would be walking down the corridor one day, past the bulletin board where lost and found articles like gloves and kerchieves were pinned up, and there it would be: his soiled, patched underwear with his name in full view. He'd never live it down.

He asked Jon about the underwear at least ten times that day, but Jon continued to deny having it.

He had almost forgotten about the shorts until one day on the bulletin board, he saw a used condom pinned up. So the jokes had started again. It would be only a matter of time when his underwear would be there. At the first sign of the article, he'd hit Jon where it hurts.

But he never saw it again. Maybe a bird flew off with it after all, a crow perhaps. They collected things like that, didn't they?

"May I join you? I could use a drink myself." said Di, standing before him with that same look of anxious concern.

"Be my guest," he said. It was rather selfish of him to restrict her to the lobby. Her nerves needed calming too. Besides, she'd be more relaxed in the air with a drink under her belt. The last thing he wanted was to have her squeeze his hand nervously throughout the flight. It would make him tense too.

She ordered a rum and coke in French. "Yes, madame," the waiter acknowledged.

"Did that lawyer mention anything about the funeral arrangements?" she asked.

"I suppose that if he was dishonorably discharged from the army, as you once told me he was, it won't be a military funeral," he replied testily.

"No, I know that. But I thought that for suicides,

you didn't get the regular kind of service. Did he say if there was to be a religious service?"

"No. He just said that it was to take place at the funeral home, not a church."

"Oh. Do you think a clergyman will officiate, or do they have someone from the home conduct the ..."

"How the hell should I know?" he said. He wondered why all these piddling details really mattered. A human being had died an unnatural death. That's the issue, not who would spout some meaningless words about his life.

Di was annoying him as much as that lawyer who had called to inform him of Jon's death. He had a most annoying accent. It sounded English to Dave, and yet it could have been what they call "proper Bostonian". In any case, it was the kind he found pompous and patronizing.

The voice explained in cultured tones the details of Jon's death. He had been hit by a commuter train at a level crossing. Originally it was thought that it was an accident. Witnesses said he was running across the tracks as if trying to get across before the train approached. Then they found the note in his apartment. It wasn't exactly a suicide note. It was a rambling account of the man's state of depression. It might have been written days before his death. But it alluded to the possibility of an act of self-destruction. The lawyer didn't read the letter to him over the phone. He said that in it there was the specific request that Dave attend his funeral. Then the lawyer added something about the subject of an unmen-

tionable, or was it an unmentionable subject? Dave couldn't remember exactly, but he hadn't liked the sound of it. He asked the lawyer what he meant, and the lawyer said that he would discuss it after the funeral. "It's a terribly personal matter," he said.

That hurt look in her eyes, how could he make it clear that it wasn't her behavior that was upsetting him, though in an indirect way it was. She was being too concerned about things that weren't at the heart of the issue.

They drank in silence, she eyeing every apparent mood swing in him, waiting for a sign of change.

"Guess we'd better be getting on," he said, swallowing a little piece of ice as he sucked the last drop of his scotch from the glass. She offered him the remains of her drink, but he declined. She left her half-full glass on the tiny table.

Dave led the way to the wing of the terminal where the American-bound planes berthed. He marched into the step-through metal detector first, but when they made a detour to the left into a room where the immigration officials lay in wait, Dave insisted that Di get in front of him. "No, you go first," she whispered. "I get so nervous I never know what to say."

"Say the truth," he ordered. "What have you got to be nervous about, for Christ sake?"

He felt his heart pounding, and his palms soaking the handles on the two overnight bags he was carrying.

She nervous? What reason did she have to be nervous about crossing a border? If anyone in the world had reason to

be nervous, it was him. Thanks to Jon. For years he had tried to blank his memory of that experience, but every time he faced an immigration official at a crossing, it all came painfully back. The harder he tried to erase it, the more he seemed to imprint it.

It was a hot Saturday in July, and Jon suggested to him that he "bug" his father to lend him the car for the day so they could laze on the beach at Lake Champlain, and maybe go to the Plattsburg drive-in where "Bonnie and Clyde" was playing on a double bill.

They figured they'd be on the beach by eleven, but at 10:45 they were stuck in a tie-up on the Mercier Bridge. It was eleven when the stalled van was towed away and the cars ahead began to edge forward. By the time they reached the divided highway leading south, they were set to fly. The faster they flew, the cooler they felt. Within a mile of the border, Dave dropped back to the speed limit. They didn't expect any delay at the border. They'd been waved through on previous crossings. But they were slightly nervous when they eased into a lane and saw a face with a grim expression and cold blue eyes peering suspiciously at them. They both felt a little sheepish, knowing they'd been doing over eighty in a sixty-five mile-an-hour zone. They expected the officer to mention it. He would likely have been tipped off; the highway was radar patrolled. But after asking the standard questions about names, place of residence, and citizenship, he ordered them to pull up to a parking space which he indicated with a wave of his hand.

"Oh, oh," said Jon. "Guess we're in for it. Do you think we'll have to pay a fine for going over the limit?"

"Why did you egg me on?" he returned.

"I didn't egg you on. I didn't even say a word about it," said Jon, his voice becoming slightly hysterical.

"No, but you seemed to be getting your jollies from it."

"You too," said Jon.

They stayed silent waiting for the officer to join them. When he arrived, he ordered them to get out of the car, and to follow him into the building. He remembered how nervous Jon looked. Something seemed ominous, and Jon, as usual, was the first to sense it.

Inside the lobby of the building they were escorted to a counter and told to put their identification on it. The man behind it held up their identification cards with his left hand while his right hand seemed to perform some typing motion under the counter. He nodded at the escorting officer who then ordered them to follow him into a little office. He told them to sit down while he slipped a form into a typewriter and then asked them to spell out their names in full while he pecked at the keyboard with two fingers. He asked them to give him their addresses and their ages:

Then he looked directly at Jon and asked: "Are you a homosexual?" Dave saw Jon turn scarlet, and shake his head.

The man then turned to him and asked him the very same question. Even though he had already heard it just before,

the question hit him like a baseball on the forehead.

"No," he croaked. He had meant to say it more firmly, but couldn't seem to get it out.

"Whether you admit you are or not, I have invested in me, as an official of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the power to refuse you admittance to the United States of America on grounds laid down in the McCarran-Walter Act pertaining to the exclusion of homosexual aliens," he said matter-of-factly.

"But we just told you we're not homosexuals," Dave spluttered.

"You didn't hear what I just said," said the man. "I have invested in me as an official ..." and he repeated to the word what he had just said.

"Does this mean you're not letting us in?" asked Jon weakly.

The grim face nodded.

"Does this mean forever," he asked, still reeling from the implication of the charge.

"Like I told you. I have the power invested in me ..."

"No, no. Don't repeat it," Dave protested. He couldn't bear to hear it again for the third time. It was like a final verdict with no chance of appeal.

The man turned away to tap out something on the form, pulled it from the typewriter, signed it, and handed them a copy. "Give this to your immigration officials on your way

back," he said. And then he added: "Though I am refusing you admittance, you might find another official who'll let you through. Refusal as I have just told you is discretionary."

He got up and opened the door for them to leave.

It was then that Dave asked how they could prove to him they were not homosexuals. "The burden of the proof is on you," he said. "But whatever you were to come up with, it wouldn't change my mind. I just have an instinct about you two."

They walked out of the building like zombies and got into the car. They sat in silence for what seemed like an hour. Then Jon began to laugh hysterically. Even when Dave hit him and told him to cut it out, he continued that loon-like laugh.

He dropped Jon off at his house without saying a word. He wanted to tell him to get a haircut. That long blond hair made him look sort of like a fifi. Maybe that was what did it. But he didn't say it. He was afraid that Jon would break into that high pitched laugh again.

Two days later, he called Jon's house. He was still in a state of shock about the incident, but he wanted to warn Jon not to mention a thing about it to anyone. Not even his parents. To ensure Jon's commitment, he had planned to say: "You do, and I'll kill you." That kind of a threat would surely silence him. But when he called, Jon's mother answered the phone. When he asked for Jon, she dropped the receiver on something without saying a word. Jon's father came on the line. "I wanted to speak to Jon," he explained.

"Jon's gone," said his father.

"When's he coming back?" he asked, though the way his father spoke it sounded like it was forever.

"We don't know. He phoned us last night to say that he took a bus to Plattsburg and enlisted in the American army to fight in Viet Nam. That's all we know at this point. I'll let him know that you called," he said, then hung up.

That was the last time he spoke to Jon's parents. He saw them occasionally, but either they didn't see him or pretended not to see him. He felt they were holding him responsible for Jon's impulsive self-sacrifice.

Within days of Jon's departure, Di had become Dave's best friend as well as his girlfriend. They had restrained themselves from being too intimate in front of Jon out of respect for his feelings of rejection, by both of them. Jon had unwittingly brought them together. He had insisted that Dave double-date with him and Di, and it was during those occasions that Dave, who had been dating younger girls in the junior high school grades, had begun to see Di in a new light. He'd always been turned on by her cheerleader looks. But what fascinated him more was that special healing touch of hers. If you complained of a backache, she'd insist on rubbing it for you. And if you were down in the dumps, she'd search for a way to pull you out, like bringing you a handful of her homebaked brownies. Dave soon dubbed her Mary Poppins and would chant the line from the song in the movies: "With a spoonful of sugar, the medicine goes down, medicine goes down ..."

"I'd rather be her than Typhoid Mary," she'd respond. "Would you prefer a spoonful of spirilla?" Then she'd tweak his ear and chuckle.

In the five years of their courtship during which he took Science at Sir George and she Nursing at McGill, they talked only fleetingly of Jon. They listened to, but never sought news about him. None ever came directly from Jon, but within days of the announcement of their engagement and impending marriage in The Montreal Star, he (not Di) received a gift certificate from Birks for one hundred dollars. A tiny card accompanied it signed only Jon. He wasn't even sure it was Jon's signature. It might have been Jon's mother who could possibly have been instructed by Jon to get the certificate for him.

He didn't know what to buy with the certificate, so gave it to Di who bought a simple white bone china dinner set for four with it. But they rarely used it. It was a back-up set for those special occasions when their regular eight-piece set couldn't meet their dining requirements.

Neither he nor Di ever ate off the dishes. They were always assigned to guests.

"Is this gentleman your husband?" asked the black official.

"Yes," said Di.

"Fine, you may proceed. May I see your identification, sir?" he asked disinterestedly. Glancing at his driver's licence and his Bell Canada employee identification card, he

slid them back, and said, "Fine."

Amazing, he thought, how on one occasion they pin you down, probe the very fibre of your being, and stick a label on you, and on another they barely check to note if you're animal, vegetable or mineral.

"I can't understand why I get so nervous going through immigration like this," said Di. "Nothing's ever happened to me or anyone I know. I guess we are just too normal to bother with."

They had ten minutes to wait in the Delta boarding lounge. It was a large square room with vinyl-covered, chrome tubing seats lining all four walls. Just about every seat was occupied with people waiting for the signal to line up with their boarding passes.

He noticed that those who were not glancing down at their tickets or some kind of reading material stared straight ahead, their faces expressionless. In one corner a mother was trying to pacify her young son who was sobbing one moment and shrieking the next. He was the only one who seemed to be upset, and totally uninhibited about showing it.

Dave wondered if he appeared to the others like they to him. He felt like that distraught kid, but he didn't have the guts to scream out in frustration. The price of being a man. But what kind of a man? Who said a man can't have feelings, or if he does, that he can't express them?

They hadn't been airborne for more than five minutes when a stewardess asked them if they would care for a drink or

light refreshment. He ordered a scotch, and she a coke. They drank in silence. She put her hand in his.

"He loved me, you know," he blurted out.

"Yes, I know," she said.

"How do you know?" he asked, surprised at the calmness of her reply.

"He told me. Not directly, but indirectly ... That's when I began to take an interest in you. He spoke of you the way someone speaks of a lover. He couldn't help it, because he couldn't help feeling that way about you. At first I was jealous, but then I encouraged him to talk about you. When he did, it was like poetry, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning's, 'How do I love thee?'"

"Did you ever love him?" he asked.

"I thought I did at the time, but no, I don't think so now. I cared for him, though. He always seemed like a lost pup. I wanted to hold him in my arms and comfort him."

He looked out of the window and marvelled at the clearness of the cloudless sky. The wing of the plane beneath the window looked like a metallic springboard from which you could leap into the blue infinity. Or a perch upon which floating spirits could alight like a bird on a finger.

Was Jon out there? Looking down on them?

He thought of the Noel Coward play that had come on tour to Place des Arts the winter before in which a man was visited by his two deceased wives -- in ghost-like form. For days afterward, he had fantasized about who among the 'dear

departed' he would want to swoop into his presence.

At this moment, family members faded on his imaginary guest list, leaving only one person: Jon. He wanted him to appear on the wing of the plane, right in front of his window so they could face one another. Then cupping his hands around his mouth so that none of the passengers could see his lips, he would silently mouth the words he wanted desperately to say.

Strings

He stood there before us, dangling the thing like it was a prize trout he'd just reeled in.

What were we supposed to do now? Bow down? Applaud? Salivate like Pavlov's dog?

There was an air of expectancy filling the gym, the kind that a magician creates when he removes a magic wand from his shirtsleeve and holds his audience in suspense until his next move.

I looked at Eric. He was staring at Nutter, as seemingly captivated as all the others. I didn't know whether I felt relieved or chagrined. A bit of both perhaps.

The chagrin stemmed from seeing Nutter's prediction -- that the kids of this Grade Two class would be enthralled with his marionette -- come true. How could an ordinary doll, made only slightly extraordinary by strings, hold Eric, the original "I seen it all before" kid, and his classmates so spellbound?

It had to be Nutter's advance billing.

"Get ready to meet a boy older than a grandfather, an imp with magical powers," he had said before lifting the marionette out of the carton marked RAID in bold black print.

"Boys and girls, meet Peter Pan," oozed Nutter, his

right hand jiggling the crossbar of the cruciform device that raised and lowered the marionette's hands. Peter wasn't chopping the air. He was waving at us! That was just the beginning of the performance. The worst was yet to come. I'd seen the preview.

Would these seven-year old guinea pigs from Elgin Public School react to Peter the way I had when Nutter honoured me with a personal introduction? Or would they confirm Nutter's belief that it is only as children that we can enter the world of the imagination?

It was that conviction which inspired Nutter to treat us, the young adults of Ottawa Teachers College, like six-year olds.

Had I not completed one year of a general arts program at a Montreal university before switching to the Ottawa college, I might have gone along with Nutter's fanciful brand of condescension. But I had been spoiled by the lecturers at Sir George. They had treated me like an adult. When I answered a question correctly, they would say: "Right you are, sir." Nutter would say: "Atta boy." They didn't seem to care if you skipped their classes. Nutter took a roll call, always asking if anyone knew the reason why a student was absent. If it was due to illness, he made us all pen a short get-well message which he collected, stuffed in a large business envelope and mailed to the student.

Nutter's aim, as he explained at the outset of his

course in Elementary English, was to simulate in our classes the kind of mentality we would face later as teachers. We were to frolic in a Never Never Land of childish innocence.

Our first entry into that playground of make-believe naivete was like a crash landing. It happened just after Nutter took his first roll call, during which he insisted that everyone respond with "present" rather than "here." "You can be present, but not necessarily here -- in spirit, that is," he coyly explained.

Nutter then held up a battered maroon book and pranced up and down the aisles asking each of us what he was holding. "A book." "A book." "A volume of poetry." "An heirloom." "A book." The replies made him grin.

It was as if he were the privileged observer of the spectacle of the six blind men touching different parts of an elephant and then making six different pronouncements about what the creature was.

Returning to the front of the class, he held up the book, opened the front cover, and said: "Now, what does it look like?"

No one replied. The object remained resolutely a book.

He made a crestfallen face. "How sad that none of you see it as a door," he said flapping the front cover with his long fingers, "a door to the world of the imagination."

"It's a world that you all must enter if you want to reach children," he continued. "I want to help you reach

children, and to do that, I will have to challenge you to see the world through your imagination instead of your intellect."

I shouldn't have been surprised to be re-introduced to Peter Pan by Nutter. After all, Nutter prided himself on being a child at heart, and hadn't Peter Pan been the last hold-out in the resistance to growing up?

Still, I hadn't expected to meet him face-to-face that morning a month ago when Nutter hushed us to silence, and with a "Have I got a surprise for you" gleam in his eye, announced: "Boys and girls, it's time you met one of my best friends. I know you're going to love him as much as I do."

From my seat at the back, I could see all heads align themselves in the direction of the door. But there didn't seem to be anyone standing on the other side of the frosted glass pane. Maybe the friend didn't love Nutter as much as he loved him.

But instead of going to the door to welcome the mystery guest, he went to his desk and opened the bottom drawer. He seemed to be fiddling with something. It rattled.

That sound provoked a ripple of relief among the girls sitting at the head of the class. I guess they thought he was going to pull out a snake to charm before their horror-struck eyes. Or maybe a frightened mouse to pass from hand to hand.

His hand jerked upward to reveal a rotating figure, about eighteen inches high clad in a green felt tunic and tights.

It faced us, then Nutter. Us again. Nutter again. The girls in the front tittered. Nutter seized its buttocks to steady it, then lowered it onto the desktop.

"Recognize him?" Nutter asked.

"It's Peter Pan," the girls in the front chorused. They might have added "of Walt Disney fame." It was more impishly cute than the Peter Pan shown in the illustrations of the original Barrie version that had been read to me at bedtime.

Nutter beamed.

"Peter. It looks like you have a lot of new friends here. How about a big hello?"

The greeting that came out of Nutter's mouth, which sounded like the yowl of a cat, made me wonder who the real dummy was. Did Nutter really think he was imitating the voice of a young kid? And moving his lips like that... We're the dummies, I thought. We're going along with him. We should ball for the 'hook' and have him whisked away.

The tittering girls vied with one another to reach out and touch the figure.

Nutter guided the marionette to the desktop of his favorite student. "Okay, Peter, how about a kiss on the cheek for Brenda?" he gushed. Brenda leaned forward to offer her cheek as Nutter awkwardly bumped the marionette's face against hers. A chorus of "awh's" broke out among the surrounding spectators. I saw Brenda touch her eye with her index finger as she turned scarlet. That kiss, which Nutter got such a joy from administering, might have hurt. But Nutter hadn't noticed.

He was looking towards the back of the class.

"Now, how about a handshake with one of the boys," he said. I looked down, but knew I'd been marked for the encounter.

Nutter was carrying a gauntlet. He wanted to see if I'd rise to his challenge. I knew he was bothered by my sardonic smile and skeptical stare. All would be forgiven if I submitted to the spell he was trying to weave with his latest prop.

I jumped when the marionette crashed on my desk like a shot duck. It looked worse for wear up close. There were smudge marks blotting out the three freckles on each cheek. And the green felt costume was tattered and dirty from use, or possibly abuse. So this was Peter Pan, the boy who refused to be manipulated by adults.

"Peter, meet Paul," said Nutter. "How about shaking Peter's hand, Paul. He'd like that."

So you want to manipulate me too, I thought. Don't you have enough marionettes in this classroom as it is? Must you go for broke? You want us to act like children. Okay. How about I act like a spoiled four-year-old and refuse to do your bidding?

I reached out and jiggled the dirty little rubber hand hanging in front of me.

I could sense the class' relief. They knew that eventually Nutter and I would have our showdown, but they weren't ready for it that day. Moreover, they were always nervous about the possibility of Nutter blowing his stack.

The day he turned purple because some members of the class didn't put their hearts into the pantomiming of "Under the Toadstool Crept an Elf," he made us print the entire poem a dozen times before leaving the class.

Peter still hovered before me.

"Tell me, Paul. What do you think of my friend Peter?" he asked.

"Who am I to knock someone's friend?" I quipped. I expected a titter from the class, but all I glimpsed were embarrassed smiles.

Nutter lowered his hands so that the marionette drooped in front of me.

"Peter is very sad to think that you would want to knock him. He wants to know why, don't you, my friend?"

Nutter raised and lowered the head of the marionette.

The truth of the matter was that I have never cared for marionettes. It's the strings. Unless you are very far away from them, and they are manipulated against a darkly-coloured backdrop, you can't help but be aware of them. I've seen marionette shows, during which I almost came to believe that the performers were live beings. Suddenly a wire thread would catch the light, and a linear flash, like streamlined lightning, would shatter once and for all the illusion of self-animation.

Puppets are another story, glove puppets, that is. They derive their illusion of animation from below rather than above. That's the secret of their effectiveness. A cousin of the glove puppet, the ventriloquist's dummy, is to my mind the

most impressive of the species. Not only does it seem to have a life of its own, but it seems to wield a power over its controller. Charlie always sassed Edgar. You never get that impression with a marionette. You know who is firmly in control even if you never see the controller. It's the strings. They expose the mysterious complicity between the master and the mastered.

"Those strings," I mumbled. "They're too distracting"

Suddenly Peter was gone. Not back to Never Never Land, but to the top of Nutter's desk where he lay sprawled like a skydiver whose chute hadn't opened.

"Young man," spluttered Nutter. "You will be the death of me yet. Have I not made it perfectly clear that you are to look upon things through the eyes of a child, and not an unimaginative adult? A child wouldn't even see the strings. He'd see a friend-to-be, someone he'd like to know. That's why I introduced him to you."

I thought of another famous marionette whose nose grew long whenever he lied. Would that such a curse applied to marionette handlers. Nutter's nose would have looked like an elephant's trunk.

"Children are reluctant to speak openly to adults," Nutter continued. "But they'll speak their minds with other children. By allowing them to befriend a creature such as Peter, they will open up and express themselves. So forget about such things as strings and see the wonderful possibilities for com-

unication he can bring to them ... and you."

Kids aren't that dumb, I thought. In fact, they're the first to spot something that isn't quite what it's made out to be. I remembered the time I played Santa at the Sunday school Christmas party. I'd been made up to look ruddy and windburnt, and a squinting young girl asked me if I used Mrs. Santa's blush and lipstick. And a smart-alec said he wanted to pull my beard because it looked like there was an "elastic holding it on." So much for kids not seeing a marionette's strings.

I've always been impressed by that capacity for wonder that goes hand in hand with a sharply critical eye. Kids believe in Superman, but if they were to suspect that he soars through the air on wires, they'd shout "phoney!"

My mind raced through examples of this paradox: that what is illusory should look real. I got only snatches of Nutter's spiel about "getting through" to children by "seizing the minds of the young" and over forty years of experience having proved him right. Suddenly there was silence. He was waiting for my answer.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" I said sheepishly.

"I said, do you trust my judgment gained from that experience?"

I felt like I was being pinned down by a bully who'd only let go if I shouted "uncle." I wasn't ready to concede, but I wanted to end the bout.

I nodded.

Trust his judgement? No way. My experience showed

me that kids don't like adults acting like kids in front of them. What they really like is when an adult treats them like adults.

"I sense you're not entirely convinced. But wait until the classroom demonstrations begin, and you'll see. My little friend Peter has never failed me yet," said Nutter.

Well, here was the test. Somehow, seeing Nutter in the middle of the college gym, surrounded on three sides by banks of student teachers, and facing a class of kids who didn't have to kow-tow to him to get a passing mark, he looked a little less formidable, even vulnerable, like a foolhardy general facing a force greater than his own.

Still,⁴ Nutter wasn't my chief concern at that moment. It was Eric. When the doors of the gym had been opened to let his class in to take their places, he led the scramble for the choicest seat -- the one in the furthest corner of the matrix of desks which faced a table that served as a desk for the teacher.

As he raced across the floor, I looked for a telltale bulge in the pockets of his corduroy trousers. I couldn't see a thing. Phew, phew! I couldn't believe he would have brought that knife into the classroom. On the other hand, you could count on Eric doing what he shouldn't do. That was half his charm. The other half was his shrewdness. It might have been fanned into flame by the irregular shifts of his mother who waited on tables in the Alexandra Hotel. He was left to live by his own wits most of the time. I got a sample of his street-smart cockiness when I moved into the same Victorian rooming

house on Somerset Street in early September.

I was lugging a heavy carton of books and trying to wrestle open the screen door. The glare of the afternoon sun on the screen panels prevented me from seeing Eric who was holding the door shut.

"Say knock, knock," said the shadowy figure.

"Knock, knock."

"Who's there?"

"Paul," I said.

"Paul who? Make it good or I won't let you in," he challenged.

"Paul-ese open the door before I break my arms," I begged.

The door was kicked open.

"What's in that box?" the kid asked.

"Books."

"Bor-ring," he pronounced while rushing past me down the porch steps.

Soon after, his mother asked if she could leave him with me for a few hours while she went to the dentist. Actually, it was more a case of a dentist coming to her, and of her wanting Eric out of the way while he kept his appointment with her. In any case, I didn't mind spending a little time in Eric's company. It gave me a chance to sound him out on a few course assignments. It was Eric who called my attention to the visit of his class to the college that Tuesday afternoon. I hadn't made the connection between Eric's and the "inner-city school class"

that had been noted in the schedule. He wanted to know if I would be teaching him. I explained that we -- the students -- were going to sit on the sidelines while our teachers strutted their stuff. "Can I wink at you, then?" he asked. "Discreetly," I said. "Your eyes are supposed to be on the teacher, not me."

Then two nights before the event Eric appeared at my door to show me the gift his mother had bought him if he promised to join the local Cub pack and not to misbehave at meetings. I knew why she had bribed him. Eric ran ahead of a pack, not in it.

There must have been a dozen things the knife could do in addition to cutting. Out came a corkscrew, a screwdriver, a can opener, something that looked like an ice pick, a bottle opener, scissors, and blades of varying shapes and capacities. By the time he had finished pulling them out of the handle one by one, the knife looked like a pocket-sized armoury.

"I'm going to bring it to your college," he said. "Bet most of your teacher friends haven't seen anything like it. Will there be a 'Show and Tell'?"

"Not a formal one like you have in your regular classes," I said.

"But I want to show it to them," he whined. "Hey, maybe before the class begins, you can hold up a piece of rope and I'll cut it in three seconds flat. Zap, zap, zap. Think you can find one?"

"How about strings?" I countered. "I can think of some you could cut."

"Yeah? Which ones?"

I caught the gleam in his eye.

"Forget it, Eric. And forget about bringing it to the college. It's neither the time nor the place to have a knife-wielding demonstration," I said with all the unthreatening authority I could muster. Imagine re-creating "Blackboard Jungle" under the eyes of my professors and colleagues! They'd string me up for sure.

Knowing Eric's perversity, I had half expected to see him leap into the gym like an Indian marauder with the thing gripped in his teeth. At least it could have been confiscated by his regular teacher or by Nutter himself. My relief at not spotting it was less than one hundred percent. He could have slipped it for safe-keeping to a cohort. My last hope was that Eric would be 'charmed' into submission by the marionette. Would Nutter's instrument and tune do that?

"Who knows where Peter comes from?" asked Nutter, making the marionette bob like a Jack-in-the-box.

A half dozen arms were raised. Nutter nodded to the only boy at the back who had raised his hand.

"From that box on the table," he said.

The student teachers giggled. Nutter forced a grin.

"Yes, that's where he came from just a minute ago. But I'm thinking of the land he comes from. Do you know the name of it?"

The boy shook his head. Nutter nodded to a girl at the front of a row who held up her arm as if saluting.

"Disneyland," she declared.

There was another ripple of giggles from the sidelines. This time Nutter didn't smile.

"Yes, like most lucky young people, he's been to Disneyland, but that's really not where he comes from. The name of his home is ..." Nutter lowered his voice as if to reveal an important secret. "...Never Never Land. Doesn't that sound like an exciting place to come from?"

There was silence in the large hall. "Does anyone know where Never Never Land is?" The silence persisted. "I can travel to it any time I want to. Does anyone know how I can get there?"

One arm was hesitantly raised. Nutter leaned toward her, smiling.

"By balloon?" she said.

The smile vanished.

"No, little girl. I don't need a balloon to go there. I have an even better way. Do you want to know what it is?"

The blushing girl nodded.

Nutter tapped his large index finger against his head. "My imagination," he said. "With it I can go to Never Never Land and anywhere else I want to. Isn't that exciting?"

I saw that the smile on Eric's face had turned to a frown.

"I'll tell you what," said Nutter to the squirming pupil, "For those of you who aren't used to travelling in their

imaginations, I've brought you Peter to act as your guide."

"Tell us all about the owl and the pussycat," squeaked Nutter as he shook the hand control to make Peter jump up and down, presumably with enthusiasm for a recitation.

Nutter obliged. And continued with a half dozen other poems that Peter leapt up and down for.

The kids had ants in their pants. I could sense they wanted Peter to do something more spectacular than begging for more of the same. He didn't seem to be guiding them at all. More like following along with what was being doled out.

Nutter began to saunter up and down the aisles, dragging Peter with him, while reciting a bizarre Mother Goose rhyme about a little old lady who fell asleep on her way to market, and had her petticoat cut up by a pedlar named Stout.

Eric's excitement as Nutter sidled up to him made me jittery. He was like a boxer warming up for a bout. I guess Nutter must have mistaken his bouncing for unrestrained enthusiasm.

"I caught your mischievous smile," he said to Eric. "I'll bet you and Peter could be fast friends. He's a mischievous little fellow, too. Do you know who he's most mischievous with?"

Eric stared at Nutter without answering.

"Peter, tell your friend here, who you like to play tricks on," ordered Nutter.

"That mean old Captain Hook," came the usual.

Eric continued to stare -- coldly.

"Do you know who Captain Hook is?" Nutter asked.

Eric shook his head.

"Captain Hook is a pirate who has a horrible hook where his hand used to be. He's Peter's sworn enemy. That's why Peter plays tricks on him. To make him angry enough so that he will sail away from Never Never Land and never, never come back. Do you have a trick for Peter? Maybe he'll show you one if you show him one first."

Eric looked thoughtful. "Yeah, I got a trick for Peter," he said.

"Oh goody," came a squeal.

"It's in my secret cave," he said raising the cover of his desk. "Through this trap door."

"Do you want him to slide in?"

Eric nodded, opening the cover wider to let Nutter lower the marionette into the desk's shallow compartment.

"You gotta let go of him," said Eric.

"But I'm not holding on to him," Nutter replied.

"You can see for yourself. My hands aren't touching him."

"You're holding onto the strings. You gotta let go of the strings."

"Strings? ... I don't see any strings," protested Nutter. "All I see is a little boy with a spirit of adventure."

The hall was quiet.

I knew Eric didn't like to have his leg pulled. And I knew he was torn between going along with Nutter's dupery like a good sport, and calling his bluff.

"Close your eyes, then," Eric ordered.

Nutter closed his eyes as Eric lowered the cover, but not all the way. He left room for his hands to probe inside the compartment. His arms jerked. Bang went the cover as he pulled his hands free and folded them on his chest.

"He's ready to come out now."

"How about opening your trap door so he can leap out," said Nutter.

"If he's so magic he can do it himself," Eric countered.

Nutter raised the desktop about three or four inches and tugged.

From the upraised hand control hung five shrivelled strings.

Nutter looked horrified. "You've cut them!" he exclaimed.

"Cut what?"

"The strings. You've cut the strings!"

"You said you couldn't see any strings. You can't cut something that's invisible!" retorted Eric.

Giggles broke out among the student teachers.

Nutter stared in disbelief at the dangling strings.

Eric gave me a conspiratorial wink. He couldn't repress his glee.

I shook my head and scowled to indicate my disapproval.

Nutter's eyes travelled from the strings to the averted face of Eric. He stiffened like a retriever, picking

up a fresh scent. He cocked his head directly above Eric's. His eyes, like two dark gun barrels, wavered, then locked with mine.

I saw the flash -- the flash of illumination.

Down went my head.

I heard some shuffling, the bang of a desktop, and footsteps. When I looked up, Nutter was arranging the marionette on the table like a body in a casket.

The atmosphere grew more tense as he turned toward us. He stood, his face grave as if preparing to pronounce a sentence.

Then he began to speak.

"Boys and girls," he said slowly as if still searching for words. "What you have witnessed just now should be an important object lesson to you. You have seen a pupil perform an act of vandalism." He paused.

"Now most of you would assume the pupil is guilty, but I know better. The child is an innocent dupe of a young adult who masterminded the nasty stunt and set him up to take the rap. Thank God, I'm not easily hoodwinked ...

"It's not anger I feel toward the young lad, but pity. Pity, because he's been doubly victimized. He is a victim of someone else's sick pursuit of vengeance, a pursuit not unlike that of Captain Hook. But what's more tragic is that he has been robbed of his childish imagination. He was unable to see Peter as a friend who could lead him to Never Never Land. He saw him the way an adult sees a marionette: as an extension

of the person pulling the strings.

"I thank God I have enough of the child in me to see Peter as a playmate quite separate from me. It's imagination, you see. It's something that you as teachers must always keep alive in your pupils ... and of course, yourselves. With it you will hold the secret of eternal youth ..." He paused. "...And the power to sway young minds."

Behind me I heard the sound of tentative applause. It swelled. I slumped in my seat as it grew louder. I looked up to see Nutter smiling. It wasn't the impish smile of the marionette. It was like Eric's when he winked at me just after he'd cut the strings. It was the smile of someone whose imaginative powers could never, never again hold a claim to innocence.

Personal Flotation Device

He felt inclined to cover his ears when his son hollered at the kids in the back to "Simmer down, or else."

"Now I asked your grandpa to bring you to the show," Garth added "So if he gives me any negative report about your behavior, I'll personally whack each and every one of you. Is that clear?"

There were murmurs of assent from the trio, then silence.

But only for a moment, he calculated. As soon as their father would drop them off at the entrance to the exhibition hall and speed off to his squash game, they'd act like grasshoppers again, jumping up and down and shrieking shrill insults at one another: "Steeeyoupid!" "Meeeanie!" "Dummeeee!"

He wished he'd never mentioned to Garth that he was planning to take in this year's boat show. He wanted to go on his own so he could linger over whatever caught his eye, without having to catch up to or lag behind someone whose pace didn't match his own. There had to be some benefits to being a widower and alone.

Yet when he told his son that he was going to go on a weekday to avoid the crowds, Garth asked him to postpone his

outing till Saturday and take the kids. "I'll pay their admissions and a buck apiece for a coke and pizza or whatever they might want to munch on," he offered.

Would Garth ever stop jumping to the conclusion that he, the ever-doting grandfather, was searching for yet another amusement for the kids? He made that very same leap when he told his son he had agreed to be custodian of the pool at Golden Glen Manor.

"Terrific." said Garth. "Maybe you can let the kids use it during afternoon nap-time or whenever it's not being used by the goldie-oldies."

He had been taken aback by Garth's suggestion, because when he told Carol Stevens, the social animator at the retirement home, that he would take on the duties for the two hours a day it was in use, in exchange for a bigger apartment with a western exposure and balcony at no increase in rent, he hadn't the kids in mind.

But then Garth and his echo, Joanne, had very fixed notions about the role of children as grandchildren. "They drain the life from their parents, but add life to their grandparents," Garth once told him. "It's true," added Joanne.

Maybe ...

But the kids hadn't given him the kind of life Garth had in mind. To be perfectly fair, though, they had for Pat. When he and Pat moved from Toronto to Victoria when he retired over five years ago, she really seemed to gain a second wind. At first he thought it was due to the fresh air, the sunshine,

the slower pace of Victoria, and the little condominium row house which required so little upkeep. All those played their part. But the moment she put down the phone to say the kids were coming over for supper, or for hot dogs or 'munchies', she was whipping icing, stirring fudge, pouring jello into animal-shaped molds, of kneading dough for her lemon pies -- the flour flew. Between visits, she stitched brightly-colored bed quilts from patterns in Family magazine, rattled off cotton pyjamas and sports shirts on her old Singer, and clicked out dozens of pairs of brightly-coloured socks from the machinations of her grey knitting needles and freckled hands.

But he discovered, after her sudden heart attack and death, that the bounce in his step had sprung more from her bustling activity around the kids than from the kids themselves. The first outdoor barbecue he hosted after Pat's passing was a leaden affair. When she had been present, the steaks seemed tastier. Maybe it was the way she had served them after he flipped them onto the steakboards. She sprinkled them with parsley as if it was magic fairy dust.

It was after yet another barbecue that had been hit by a surprise shower, and further dampened by an outpouring of pouty complaints, that he decided to sell the condominium and take a small apartment in Golden Glen Manor. He wouldn't be needing a patio anymore. And in a smaller place, Garth and Joanne wouldn't expect him to entertain as much. There simply wasn't enough room for the six of them around the little dinette table.

That hadn't stopped the kids from dropping in on Saturdays. His apartment was big enough to change in. After their dips, he served them soft drinks and Dad's oatmeal cookies. When they left, he savoured the glorious silence as he picked up the damp towels off his bedspread to launder them up for the next noisy invasion.

Actually, he was pleased that the pool could keep them amused while he puttered about with a mop and checked the gauges on the heating and filtration systems.

Luckily, because Saturday afternoon was a popular time for residents to go shopping or visit friends and family, few were disturbed by the kids' high-decibel or tidal wave antics.

When they were there, he was very much the lifeguard. But normally he was expected only to keep an eye on the chlorine level, the acid-alkaline balance and temperature of the water. Manor users preferred the low eighties. For the kids, he set the gauge for seventy-five. Though he was expected to mop up puddles around the pool's edge to prevent slipping, he was not expected to clean the pool. The in-wall skimmer slurped up oily scum from the water surface, and a young man came every week to vacuum the bottom.

Occasionally, he would put on goggles and flippers and swim along the bottom of the pool looking for bobby pins, coins, and sometimes keys that a bather would lose. He enjoyed that; he felt at peace probing those silent depths.

At other times, when the pool was empty, he would float on his back in his PFD.

"What in the hell is a PFD?" he had asked Carol when she told him he must wear it when on duty.

"A potential life saver. It stands for personal flotation device," she said, and produced the padded vest for him to put on. "I can't take chances on having you slip and maybe bump your head, fall into the pool and drown," she said. "Or maybe have a dizzy spell while you're standing next to it. It's not uncomfortable, and quite snazzy, don't you think? The ladies won't be able to take their eyes off you."

He wasn't that convinced of its snazziness, but it was attention getting -- shiny yellow, with two parallel shiny black belts that had red buckles. Stuffed with a material called Ensolite, it was surprisingly lightweight and slim fitting, unlike the bulky, kapok-filled jackets he had worn years before during lifeboat drill on that Caribbean cruise with Pat.

Though the PFD could be hot at times, he always buckled the belts when ladies were present -- the best battler of the bulge since the corset.

Without the PFD he couldn't have floated for minutes at a time. He had been shocked to discover that he couldn't float unaided anymore. That had been one of his specialities. He taught Garth to trust water -- not to thrash it -- by floating alongside his wiggling little body. In those days, he could float on his back for hours. Garth never could. But when Tim, his youngest grandchild, challenged him to a floating match and insisted that he remove his PFD, he just couldn't float without treading, which Tim called "sneaky swimming."

He couldn't understand why he had lost his buoyancy. But at his next physical check-up he asked the doctor if it indicated something was wrong. He was afraid it might have something to do with his lungs.

But the doctor, a self-confessed 'fitness freak', told him that most males start life as "floaters" and turn into "sinkers" as they age.

"Unless they have a high degree of body fat and very little muscle and bone density, men, young at heart but senior in years like yourself, generally sink," he said comfortingly.

"Some will float somewhere in the middle between the surface and the bottom, and others will sit right on the bottom."

"Where do you settle?" he asked while tapping on his shoulder blades.

"Near the bottom, but not on it," he replied. He thought how convenient it always was for him to probe the pool's bottom for lost articles without actually crawling along it.

The wind-burnt doctor, who told him he had once worked with Olympic swimming contenders, said that women generally are better floaters because they have more body fat and a different centre of gravity. But most men lose the natural ability to float as they grow older. Most ... that was a relief! From that point on, he didn't mind putting on the PFD when he puttered about the pool.

But out of the water, his body seemed heavy, like it was too weighty for his frame. His spirits sagged too.

He wondered if he might have acted too quickly in selling the condominium. It was located in an open space, on the edge of the University of Victoria, and in the early evenings, he and Pat would wander across the field and around the campus. They enjoyed rubbing shoulders with the students and poking around building sites. There, there was confidence in the future, a sense of commitment to an even better life ahead.

'Golden Glum,' as it was dubbed by some of its residents, wasn't near a place worth visiting, other than the shopping plaza three blocks away where you could get a Baskin and Robbins ice cream cone and eat it on the way back to the home. He often invited one of the many widows in the Manor to join him. It was a way of repaying the kindnesses they showered on him when he moved in. Ingrid Uhlen raised the hem of his curtains when she spotted them dragging on the floor. Ellen Barstow made a matching set of table cloth, placemats, and napkins for his little dinette table. Mamie Horvath was always bringing stew and casserole leftovers in used margarine containers.

The persistent attention depressed, rather than raised, his spirits. Perhaps it was Pat. He missed her.

He once asked Ellen what made her so bright and bouncy. She always seemed to be game for a pool party or a square dance in the rec room using Ken and Lois Farthing's scratchy barn burner LP. "Because I believe in a better future, so I look forward to every day that carries me into it," she said.

That gave him pause. True, Ellen was only sixty-one, and had outlived two husbands. She looked good for another

quarter century, and probably another husband. It couldn't be that way for him. Not after Pat. It wasn't that she was so perfect, though being in the company of other women lately made her seem so. It was the fit between them that was perfect. Even Garth had remarked on it. 'On their thirtieth wedding anniversary, he had sent them a card embossed with a divided circle. Inside was an explanation of the yin and yang monad that the design symbolized. It was the perfect harmony of male and female. "That's how your marriage appears to me," Garth had penned on the card. They framed the card and hung it in their bedroom as a talisman.

They could never get over how, when they visited an art gallery or a museum while holidaying, they always met at the same painting or sculpture. It would be a rallying point. And it wasn't just the colour or the form they'd find compelling; it was the spirit of the work. They both felt it.

Even where their tastes were opposite, they had that same Mr. and Mrs. Jack Spratt compatibility. Finishing off a chicken, he'd gnaw on the wings while she'd sponge up the gravy with whole wheat bread. Each thought the other's preference undignified. And when she served him their favorite -- Neapolitan ice cream, she kept the strawberry and half the vanilla portion, and heaped his dish with the other half of the vanilla and all the chocolate.

He wished he could have developed that same kind of fit with Garth when Pat died. He was so much like her -- in looks with his fine, honey-coloured hair and blue eyes -- and

in personality. It was in the latter aspect that the fit was so wrong. Her willowy ability to bend in a wind rather than snap, her busybee buzzing from chore to chore, her readiness for a chic dinner party or a weiner roast -- he loved them in her; he hated them in Garth. He was such a diddler. Even in his career. As soon as he had started to make something of his parliamentary press job for the Vancouver Sun, he quit it to take on a safe, unchallenging press relations position with the environment department of the provincial government. Now, instead of reporting solid news, he was churning out flattering press releases about the minister's dull speeches to B.C. Rotary Club members. Yes, he'd become an ego inflater, a lightweight -- professionally, and lately, personally.

And so had the kids. Pat had been able to have spirited chats with them. But when he tried to get something going while they were sucking on the straws of their Cokes and Sprites, he got these kind of dead-enders:

"Terry, what is your favorite subject at school?"

"Don't have any. The teacher makes them all boring."

"Tina. You're getting so tall. Soon you'll be able to wear pretty dresses."

"Yuk. I never want to give up my jeans."

"Tim. Want a game of checkers?"

"That's an old fogeys' game."

"Don't forget what I said, now. Behave or else."

And be waiting here at four on the nose so I don't have to park."

And Garth headed off to his game with his former colleagues in the parliamentary press gallery.

He looked at them -- Tim, Terry and Tina -- the terrible trio. Already they looked sullen. After all, they'd been dumped on Grandpa for the afternoon, and he was so dull and pokey. "Let's sail in, mates," he said with false heartiness.

AHOY! WELCOME TO THE 1979 BOAT SHOW flashed the illuminated sign above the entrance to the exhibition hall. He hoped the show would have some live demonstrations, or films. Not for his sake, but the kids'. Otherwise they would get fidgety and start their hit-and-run routine. Tina always started it. She picked on Tim. Terry would try to protect him by going after Tina. The two younger boys would then pursue their sister who, when cornered, would holler: "No fair. Two against one!"

"Can we have the money daddy gave you to buy our own stuff?" asked Tina.

Typically Tina, he thought. He knew that she hated it when he suggested she eat something more wholesome than Cokes and Mae Wests. She still was slim, almost skinny in her tomboyish way. But he imagined her getting fat as she filled out as a woman. Yes; she would float all her life.

"We'll see...."

He followed them to the row of box office stalls and paid for one adult and three children's admissions. Tina was just twelve, but could pass for younger, so he took advantage of her appearance to get her an under-twelve rate. If they behaved, he'd buy a bag of Planters peanuts for each of them with the

dollar he'd saved.

For less than a minute, the kids were quiet when they entered the hall and let their eyes run wild. He'd forgotten how colorful sails had become. They weren't basic white any more. They flashed combinations of all the primary colours. Above them, suspended from the ceiling, were strings of bright pennants.

"Wow. Look at them!" shrieked Tina.

He noticed that her eyes were focussed on a fleet of shiny runabouts with bows tapered to the shape of arrowheads. Before he could give them instructions about staying together, they were out of earshot.

He followed them to the exhibit to warn them not to touch the display boats. He was too late. A man with a badge and a battered sailor cap had already warned them.

"This is my favorite," declared Terry. It was the biggest, the shiniest, and the blackest. It looked like a torpedo.

"Bet it'd go like a bat outa hell," he added, wanting to touch its hull, but afraid of being caught again.

"Shh ... Don't swear in front of Grandpa," Tina ordered. Then in a hushed voice which he just barely heard, she added: "Or he might not buy a boat for us."

So that was it; He wasn't surprised. When he had mentioned to Garth that he was going to the show, Garth had said: "Terrific! The kids will love you to death if you buy a boat for them. They're at that age when you can't keep them away from water, and they'll soon be ready to water ski."

Was he being selfish to think of a boat for himself? True, the kids had proven themselves to be real water babies, but was he obliged to make water skiers of them too? Why did he have the impression that the kids were draining him too?

"Hey, I like the name, Thundercraft," said Terry, spying the chrome insignia on its bow.

"How'd yuh do," said the man with the badge and cap. "I see you gotta crew busting to cast off. Don't blame 'em. This one's like a rocket on water."

"How fast does it go?" asked Tim.

"Well, young fellow, it depends whether you fit it with single or twin, gas or diesel power. But let's put it this way. Whatever you choose, you could run circles round the ferries."

"Hey, that'd be fun. All those people looking at us while we roared round and round them," said Terry.

"It's got a lot of special features," said the salesman, "the deep-V hull, double deadrise for lateral stability, and propeller pockets to optimize weight distribution for maximum propulsion efficiency. Care to see the cockpit?"

He wondered if he was talking about the boat or a fighter plane.

"It's a little racy for my blood," he said.

"But think of the kids!"

Sounds like Garth, he thought. Why is everyone trying to turn me into a year 'round Santa?

"Thanks anyway," he said, and flicked his head to

indicate to the kids that it was time to cast off for another display.

The salesman shoved a brochure in his hand. "Just in case you have second thoughts," he said.

"I don't care what else we're going to see. That's going to be my favorite," said Terry.

"Mine too," echoed Tim.

"What do you think of that one there?" he asked, trying to distract them. It was what he considered an ideal family boat; a sort of canopied patio sitting on two pontoons. A propped-up poster called it a "Flote Bote." He could imagine pleasant outings with Garth, Joanne, the kids and himself cruising the shoreline and bays in the vessel. There were cushioned seats that looked as if they could seat twelve people comfortably, and a table around which the family could eat and play scrabble or Clue.

"It looks like a playpen for babies," said Tina.

"Bet that couldn't pass a rowboat," added Terry.

"Hey look at that one," shrieked Tim. "It looks like a millionaire's boat." Sure enough, it did. They all stared at a huge cabin cruiser that looked like it could accommodate the Queen and her court. There was a line-up of people waiting to mount the steps leading to its deck.

"Hey, let's go," yelled Tina, and off they ran.

When he caught up with them, it was to tell them that he would meet them under that huge red sail in an hour. They were on their own. He told Tina to keep an eye on her watch to

ensure they weren't late. "Be on time or there'll be no treats," he warned, then ambled off.

He heard Tina say "Is he ever crabby!"

Was he? Probably. He felt that way when they treated him like Mamie Horvath's inflatable mattress that he let them use when they came to swim -- something to cling to, mount, and possess until they got bored with it.

He stood at the intersection of the two main aisles that divided the exhibition into quarters. In one area were the huge cruisers; in another, the powerboats; in the third appeared to be the "toys" like kayaks, surfboards, inflatable rowboats, canoes, scuba diving gear, and a range of other water sports equipment. In the fourth were the sailboats. He sauntered toward them.

Why did he feel drawn to them and away from the powerboats? He studied their profiles. Then it struck him. The sailboats with their brightly coloured sails, rounded hulls, tapering keels and rudders resembled tropical fish with their undulating fins and tails. They were made for water. The powerboats were like racing cars minus their wheels. They didn't hug the water; they skimmed across its surface. The fastest of the lot rode above it, like skipping stones. At rest, they seemed mired in, rather than at one with, the water.

And then his eye fell on a boat that seemed to beckon him. Its dimensions looked right: compact rather than sleek. Probably about twenty feet long, with a sail that looked manageable without a crew. He didn't care for its name: Independent.

A brand name, after all. He didn't have to call it that. He'd call it Pat. No. Patricia. Yes, it did look patrician like Pat: simple rather than elegant. But dignified.

"Nice, isn't she?" said a voice.

He turned to see a round-faced, salt-and-pepper haired woman of about forty-five smiling at him.

"An independent lady, is she?" he said.

"Uh-huh. She takes care of herself," she said.

"May I introduce you to her?"

She helped him into the cockpit. "Seats six cosily," she observed and pointed to the large, lined lockers under each of the parallel benches. "For most of your worldly goods," she said. "There's more storage space inside."

She led him into the interior to point out the dinette and moulded galley, the ventilated compartment for a gas tank, and the V-shaped berth forward for two.

"You'll have noticed the boat is constructed and finished in fibreglass, but note the teak trim inside. It's also in the hull and deck liners," she explained.

"One reason why the name Independent is so appropriate is that she doesn't knuckle under to threats from the elements. She's got a keel locking bolt to ensure self-righting, and her interior foam flotation makes her unsinkable. The lady's no pushover."

"We're not late, you are!" said Tim when he met them at the red sail.

"Sorry," he said. "I met a very winning lady, and could hardly tear myself away from her."

Tina looked at him suspiciously.

"Where is she?"

"Over there. Want to see her?"

"You promised us treats if we got here on time," said Terry. "I want a hot dog, a Coke, not a Pepsi, I hate Pepsies, and french fries. With lots of ketchup."

"Me too," said Tim.

"Same here, except I want vinegar on my French fries," said Tina. "Ketchup looks like blood. Yuk!"

They sauntered to a snack counter behind the sail where he placed the orders as directed.

"Can we go back to the Thundercraft again?" asked Terry. "I knew it was going to be the best one in the show. I could tell right off."

"Sure, if you want to take a last look at it," he said.

The three glanced at one another. They'd caught the significance of 'last'.

They ate their snacks in silence, and pelted the trash bin with their empty dixie cups.

As they passed the Thundercraft on the way out, he heard Terry mutter to Tina: "Old crab."

When the car rolled up to the appointed spot, Tina wrenched the back door open, clambered in, and threw herself against the seat. Terry and Tim imitated her.

"So, how did it go? See anything you like?" Garth asked them.

"Yeah, but Grandpa wouldn't buy it," pouted Terry.

"He liked that stupid Flote-Bote" said Tina.

"Now, now," said Garth, keeping his eye on the merging traffic ahead. "I'm sure if Grandpa liked it, it's because he thinks it would be the best for you."

"It's a slowpoke," said Tina. "I'd rather have one of those wet bikes that you can ride like a motorcycle on water than sit around on a dumb slowpoke like that," she said.

"Me too," said Tim.

"How about it, Dad? Did you settle on one?" Garth asked, betraying a hint of apprehension.

"Uh-huh," he said.

"You did! Well you never told us that," shrieked Tina.

"Which one?" asked Terry, leaning forward so that he could feel his grandson's hot breath on the side of his face.

"It's a beaut of a sailboat."

"A sailboat!" chorused Terry and Tina.

Garth looked at his father. "Don't you think it's a little risky for the kids to be sailing ... I mean, sailing requires discipline, doesn't it? Everyone has to heave and duck together, and that sort of thing, don't they?"

"The boat's for me, Garth. Naturally you're all invited to join me when I'm berthed here. But I got the boat to sail up and down the coast, into all those coves and channels

where the salmon wander. I'm giving up my apartment at Golden Glen. Pat and I are going to spend our last few years together."

He could feel Garth's eyes on him. The kids were quiet, and still.

"Dad, have you had a check-up recently?"

"Uh-huh."

"And what did the doctor say?" Garth asked softly.

The car turned to face the sun as it was about to set in a cloud-dappled February sky. Garth pulled down the overhead visor just as his father raised his to witness the spectacle of the huge glowing disc steadily descending.

And then it happened, something he had noticed ever since moving to his apartment facing westward. Just as the perimeter of the sun met the perimeter of the earth, the red orb arrested its descent. It bobbed above the horizon. Was the effect due to shimmering heat waves on the horizon? He didn't know, but he liked to think that the sun wanted to have one last defiant gesture before the world turned its back on it.

"The deadman's float."

"What?" asked Garth in alarm.

"He said I'll never be able to do it again. But I'm not hitting bottom yet."

Garth lowered the visor further. Shielded from the descending sun's glow, he looked pale and shadow-blotched.

"Damn sun," muttered Garth.

"Red sky at night, a sailor's delight. It's a good sign, you know," his father countered. He wanted to repeat the adage, to sing it, but he held back. He didn't want Garth to think he was sinking into senility when, in fact, his spirits seemed buoyant for the first time in months.

Mating

The instant I laid my eyes on him, I thought of dear, helpful Mum back home in Kenogami, in upper Quebec.

What would her reaction be to this Don Knotts look-alike shaking my hand like he was priming a pump? Was this what she had in mind for me?

"Halooow," he drawled. "I'm Ern. Ern Rawlings."

"Hi Ernie, I'm Paul."

"Pleased to meetchaw Paulie," he said, pumping steadily as if water was now flowing.

"Paul," I corrected.

"Ern," he repeated.

"Got you. Ern it is."

And got you as a roommate it would seem, I fumed. Ern; earn. What had I done to earn this dubious honour? How could she have done this to me?

When she told me, just ten days before leaving home to start university studies at Mount Allison in lower New Brunswick, that she had written to the Dean of Studies asking him to play matchmaker, I nearly raised the roof.

"What did you do a thing like that for?" I exploded.

"For you. I did it for you," she shot back.

I didn't believe her. She had done it for herself.

I knew she wasn't too keen on the books I had been reading lately, nor the turtlenecks and black jeans I'd been wearing. And writing to the Dean was just another one of her subtle ploys to keep me on the straight and narrow. In fact, sending me to Mount A had been part of it. I had wanted to go to Sir George Williams in Montreal, but she knew from the reports of other students who had gone before me, that it was dangerously close to the "beatnik" coffee shops she knew I'd likely frequent. No, Mount Allison was a church-subsidized university, the training ground of United Church theologians. And Sackville seemed as far from temptation's reach as Kenogami, about two hundred and fifty miles northeast of Montreal as the snow goose flies. "You'll feel more at home there," she had said. But I didn't want to feel at home. I wanted to feel cut loose. I wanted candlelit coffee houses and a crumbling room above an allnight delicatessen where 'subterraneans' gathered because refills were free after the first cup. Still, she was financing most of my college expenses from the estate dad left her, and she clung to that other golden rule that you just can't buck: those who have the gold, rule. But going along with her choice of university didn't mean I had to go along with her choice of roommate.

After our tempers cooled, she had said quietly so as to avoid another blow-up, "I wrote to the Dean not requesting any particular type of student, but describing you. All I did was ask him to choose someone to complement you. That's all."

"Did you mention my utter loathing of team sports?" I asked. I knew she was bothered by that, and felt responsible.

Not having a sports-minded father was beginning to affect my manly development, she feared. I hoped she hadn't asked for a jock with muscles like Steeve Reeves who would wreak the revenge of Goliath on me even if I were to assure him I'd left my sling-shot at home. Or a theologian who would shepherd me back to the Christian flock, which I had abandoned to sample the high-altitude pastures of Eastern mysticism.

"I told you I didn't ask for a particular type. I just described your pluses and minuses, and asked him as I told you, to find someone who might complement them."

I wondered how she had described my looks if Ern was to be a complement to me. We were both on the skinny side, but I'd passed the acne stage. Ern was still trapped in it.

I wasn't blind to my facial flaws. I'd seen them often enough in the bathroom mirror while I squeezed pimples. No, you don't have a receding hairline, I constantly reassured myself -- just a high forehead. But I couldn't pretend my hair was thick. That's why I shampooed it every morning -- to create the illusion of thickness. Had Mum mentioned my thinning hair to the Dean? If so, he'd really found a roommate with plus's to spare to complement my minus's. Ern's was thick, but wavy. In profile it looked like the comb of a rooster, except it wasn't as red. Closer to auburn. That naturally marcelled effect, combined with his receding chin, his pale skin, and his round, horn-rimmed glasses, added up to an image of a prissy librarian, or a violin teacher. He didn't speak in that high pitched, overly-precise manner like they often do. He drawled: in a

baritone when calm; in a bass when aroused, like a bawling cow with a swollen udder.

If this strange looking creature was a complement to me, how must Mum have described me to the Dean?

"Rather narrow, eh?" I observed.

"What?"

"Everything. The room, the beds, and the floor space," I said. We both looked down and noticed that when I had dropped my luggage to greet him, I hadn't an inch to spare on either side of my desert shoes. The two suitcases were wedged between my legs and the built-in beds. It was as if the two slender beds had originally been one until someone noticed that it was an impediment to intercourse of another order, and sliced away the middle third. Despite the passageway, the beds seemed awfully close. I figured that if Ern snored, the wheezing would seem more like three inches from my ear than thirty.

"I hope they provide locker space for our bags," I said, "or we're going to have to learn to walk like Indians ... you know, one foot before the other. The space between the beds would make a great throughway for termites, but it's a little tight for human traffic."

"Yaw. I was thinking sort of the same thing," he drawled. "But there is locker space down in the basement. I already taken my bags down there."

I already taken! The meaning of complementing -- to mutually make up for what is lacking -- was really hitting home, like a right to the jaw. I would complement his lack of

grammar. But what lack in me would he complement?

I soon found out. Shoshiology for one. That's how he pronounced it. He was majoring in it. I was aiming toward an English major. What's sociology about, I wanted to know.

"Well, it's the study of groups," Ern explained. Psychology is the study of individuals. I asked him how many individuals constituted a group. For example, did he and I form a group? No, we didn't. We were two individuals. Were we to have a mutual friend, and hang around as a trio, we'd be a group. That never happened.

Ern soon became the bosom buddy of Phil McIntyre, a gangly fellow one year younger than himself from his home town of Antigonish, Nova Scotia, whom he had known only casually before coming to Mount A.

I fell in with the kind of individual (we later attracted others to form a group) Mum was probably hoping my roommate would divert me from. Peter burst into my life after I wrote a letter to the editor of the campus paper protesting the inclusion of a short story which I thought was a poor imitation of Salinger's style and subject matter. A direct steal from "Catcher," it was about a young kid's visit from the boonies in Nova Scotia to the wicked city of Halifax. I said that if this story was a sample of the quality of writing we were to expect from the Argosy in future issues, we were in for a rough voyage of undiscovery. "Shape up or ship out," I challenged.

The day the issue with my letter appeared, Peter James, the author, charged into the room with blood in his eye.

He told me his article was a spoof, and that he didn't really want to have it published, but the editor needed material for the first issue, and he reluctantly gave him some of his "little sketches." By the time he left with my apology, we had exchanged views on the merits of Norman Mailer, Jack Kerouac, and Henry Miller. Having read only one of their works didn't keep me from speaking with an air of authority and erudition. Peter and I became friends, and it was through him I met others like us. We thought of ourselves as the "literati." I always met Peter in his room, because his roommate, though not as well read as Peter, could pass as literate. Ern had shocked Peter on his first visit when he said that the last novel he had read was "Nathial" Hawthorne's, The Scarlet Letter. He had hated it because he had to write an essay on it for his Grade Eleven English teacher whom he "had no use for" because he was always quoting poetry that never rhymed.

"He gave me a scarlet U on it because I guess he knew I didn't bother finishing the book," said Ern.

I giggled. It was the wittiest thing I'd heard Ern say.

"What did the U stand for?" asked Peter.

"Unsatisfactory," drawled Ern, stretching the word so that it seemed like a complete sentence.

Peter looked relieved. At that time, the popular term denoting social acceptance was U. It meant University-trained, the uncommon. Non-U's were the intellectually dormant. I could see why Peter might be shaken to learn that for botching

his assignment, Ern might have earned a U-rating. Unthinkable! After that encounter, Peter never visited our room when he knew Ern might be present. Nor did others in our group. Ern was strictly non-U.

After Peter had left, Ern asked me if I had read "that Hawthorne nawvlē." I said yes. "What did the scarlet A mean in the end," he asked. "Angel," I said. "She was elevated from a sexual, to a spiritual, being."

"Wall, what'dyaw know," he mumbled.

While Ern might have been relieved that my friends never dropped in, I wasn't given that same break. Phil was in our room often and for long visits. Still, even though he sat on Ern's bed on the other side of the narrow Gaza strip, I felt that he was on top of me. And where Ern mooed like a cow, but laughed like a librarian anxious not to disturb the hushed, bookish tranquility, Phil neighed like a horse, and talked with the precision of a librarian. He was studying to be a chartered accountant and had a grating tendency to interrupt a colourful anecdote with: "Where'd you hear that?" or "You actually read that?" as if everything spoken had to be accounted for as well. I could see why he and Ern got along. Ern was just too lacking in imagination to make the ordinary extraordinary in his mind or in his conversation, which meant that Phil never subjected him to his demands for proof.

Though Phil got on my nerves, it wasn't until one evening in late October that I ordered him to stay out of our room for something I couldn't forgive. The heat in our rooms

had been jacked up to the eighties due to the colder than normal weather, making sleeping in pyjamas almost unbearable. Until they lowered the heat, which they did after others also complained, I slept on top of the bed in my briefs. Ern seemed flustered by my near nudity but didn't say anything.

I was frightened out of my wits one suffocatingly hot night with a bright flash that was so close to my face I could feel its radiant heat.

I bolted upright and heard the whinney of Phil, and the door slam.

"What the hell was that?" I yelled.

"Nawthing," Ern drawled.

"Nawthing!" I retorted. "Was it a cigarette lighter? Were you two trying to burn me alive?"

"Don't be so stee-u-pid," said Ern. "Why would anyone want to do that?"

I was about to say "because you want to martyrize me for not stooping to your non-U depths of ignorance." But I bit my tongue.

"If you're so worried about being burned, cover yourself up," he said.

Though I gave the order to Phil the next day to keep out of the room, by the end of the week he had apologized for frightening me -- "We just wanted to catch you without a frown," he explained -- and was back on Ern's bed, staring at me as if to determine whether I was an asset or a liability.

Peter urged me to ask the director of the residence

to request a room change, which I did. All he would agree to do was let Phil switch rooms with me. Unfortunately, Phil was matched with another Commerce student who played on the football team and was given to friendly tackling when you least expected it. I decided that I could stand assaults on the English language better than those to my slender body. I stayed put.

Ern never hit the books "with vigah" as the current U.S. president was given to say. I was secretly hoping that he might flunk out as a "Christmas graduate." But when we shook hands and bid each other a merry Christmas before heading in opposite directions for home, I almost felt sad. I was sure he wouldn't return for the second term, and I guess I felt guilty for being so distant with him. He really didn't have a mean bone in his thin body, and the more I thought about it, the more I realized that he had tried to please me in little ways.

For example, if he didn't care for a particular pastry that came with the meals in the cafeteria in Truman House, he'd wrap it in a serviette, bring it to the room, and drop it in my lap saying "Sweets for the sweet." And when he got baked goods sent to him from home, he insisted that we "share and share alike," except I had nothing to share in return. Ern must also have been as generous behind my back because when his brother, who lived in Pugwash, about fifty miles away, came one Sunday for a visit, you'd have thought that I was Northrop Frye. "So this is the litterture expert from Upper Canada you'n been telling us all about," he said. He looked almost like Ern's twin brother except that his glasses were gold-framed, like an

old man's. And there was grey in his sideburns. It was his brother who came back in December to drive Ern and Phil home to Antigonish. And when he met me then he said "How's Mr. Long-fellow?"

I thought of Ern's secret admiration for me on the way home. Why, if he really liked me, did he persist in making all those grammatical errors even after I corrected him? Was it to annoy me or to show he had no regard for my ever-modest expertise? If he really liked me, wouldn't he try to make me like him? His grammar was always a barrier to closeness. I just couldn't call anyone a friend who spoke like an illiterate.

When I gave examples of his grammatical massacres to Mum, she was horrified. "But if he's a nice person, I suppose it really doesn't matter, does it?" she said.

"Well, you'll be happy to know that we do complement one another," I reminded her. "He can't speak properly, and I can. He can't read a decent book, and I can. A plus and a minus. But if opposites attract, there's something between us that's foiling the effect."

"I'd say it's your attitude," she said. "I'll bet he doesn't focus on your shortcomings the way you do on his," she observed. "That's another complementary habit that isn't likely to attract him to you."

When I kissed Mum goodbye to head back to Mount A, she urged me to think of Ern "as a tennis partner not on the other side of the net, but on your side, as if you're playing doubles." Mum was still so determined to make a sport of me.

"He's more of a complement to you than you think" she added. I'm still not sorry I wrote that letter to the Dean."

I rapped on our room door, and listened for a rustle. On the one hand, I had been hoping that he'd "graduated." But on the other, I wanted him to give me a warm drawled "Hal-ow." Coming to a room that could seem familiar only with him in it and finding him not there was unsettling, like entering your bedroom and seeing no bed.

That evening, I slept in the room alone. I was about to go to the director to ask if Ern would be returning, when my missing mate popped into the room and began pumping my hand like we were bosom buddies who'd been separated for years.

"Frank's car broke down yesterday and it took over six hours to fix it. We could've drove here all night, but we stayed three in a motel, and took it slow getting here today," he explained.

Suddenly I wished that he had been stranded indefinitely. My ears had resumed their slow burn.

He told me that he had failed two out of his five exams, one shy of the number guaranteeing the student a hasty boot from the halls of academe. One of the failures was English.

"I'm alright in my two shosh's though," he said proudly.

"Sho glad to hear it," I muttered as I headed over to Bennett House to welcome Peter back from Woodstock.

The next morning Phil burst into our room and began

to whinney in triumph. He had just discovered that his roommate, having outlived his usefulness to the university on the gridiron, had been given his walking papers. I was surprised when neither Ern nor Phil suggested the possibility of moving into common quarters. After Phil left, I asked Ern if he was interested in making such a move, that I would be sorry but not insulted.

"Naw," he lowed. "We'd never get work done. We'd just khabutz the whole time. It's better that we be kept apart. And you know, you being here helps. Phil doesn't stay as long."

If, as a kid, I had come between two playmates, I'd have gotten my nose flattened. It felt odd to be appreciated for that now. Still, I wanted them together -- in another room. But before I could get to the director to propose a switch, Phil was reassigned to a room with a theologian whose roommate had failed to return due to homesickness. A graduate student, formerly of Truman house, brought his belongings to Phil's old room and remained alone and aloof in it for the rest of the term. Graduate students, it seems, could forego the privilege of being mated.

Phil dropped in less frequently, but when he did, he would lie on Ern's bed, like Wordsworth waiting for a revelation. That bothered me. I wasn't convinced that beds were not the best settings for revelations. A waterfall, yes. Or a sunset on the Aegean. But not a narrow bed in a room in Sackville. He didn't mock wrestle Ern onto the bed with him anymore. Nor did he whinney as much.

In early February, when the days were short and the

cold winds from the Tantramar marshes made hibernation seem the only sensible way of coping, Ern and I reclined on our beds with our noses in books. I was doing research for a term paper on Keats and Shelley, and Ern was doing background reading for a paper in his Sex and Society sociology course. He hadn't yet settled on a topic, but the assignment, as I gathered from his rambling explanation, was to focus on an aspect of sexual behaviour that is conditioned by the prevailing social values of the ambient society. I suggested that he write about Detroit's impact on mating patterns with the subtitle of: The Car as a Mobile Bedroom. He blushed, nawww'd, and stuck his nose back between the covers of the huge book propped on his chest.

It suddenly occurred to me, that Ern's librarian-like prudery in sexual matters was giving him problems not only in his social, but his academic, development. Neither of us had girlfriends at the university mainly because the ratio of males to females was three to one. The beauties of that minority had about a dozen guys apiece in their orbits and their less luminous sisters had absolutely no gravitational pull. At dances in the nearby gym, I managed to entice an attractive co-ed from Pictou, to rock-and-roll with me, but couldn't get her into my arms for the slow waltzes. Ern fared worse. He thought rock-and-roll was "just pushin' and pullin'," and waltzed like a robot with a blown fuse. After the first "Autumn Leaves" dance at which he jerked back and forth with an uncomfortable Freshette only once, he never went to another. Had he been humiliated by girls often, I wondered. He seemed to freeze in their presence. Was he a virgin?

I was, but by default rather than desire. Back in Kenogami, I had been referred to as a "brain," and I guess that's how I was perceived by girls, something like Humpty Dumpty -- all head and no groin. At Mount A, I might have been more concerned about my lack of conquests in the mating game had I not been so concerned about my lack of academic conquests. My marks on my Christmas exams were twenty percent lower than my high school marks, and I was worried that the bursary I had won on combined compassionate and academic grounds might be withdrawn. I had received half of the three hundred dollars six weeks after fall registration, and was awaiting the second half with mounting unease.

"Wall ... isn't that a corker," drawled Ern, his face still buried in the covers of the book. "You ever hear tell of a bolster board?"

"A bolster board? Aren't bolsters cushions?" I countered. I thought of the expression, "to bolster a person's ego." To me it meant to plump up, like a cushion or pillow. What did a board have to do with it?

"Maybe you're right," he said, burying his face even deeper between the book's covers. "Guess you are," he concluded, and invited me to take a look at the large illustration he was examining.

It was an artist's rendering of the custom called "bundling." Shown was a couple in a large bed separated by a mound which ran the length of the bed between them. The caption referred to the bolster as shown, and noted that some beds were

constructed with a board running down the middle. Bundling was practised by anxious parents who wanted to encourage their offspring to court, and at the same time, discourage copulation. The term was derived from the custom of bundling whole families into one bed during overnight stays at crowded hostelrys.

"Why don't you do your paper on bundling?" I proposed.

"Can't think of too much to say about it," he drawled lazily. "It's got to be twenty-five hundred words long. I could say all I know about it in one paragraph, maybe even one sentence."

"Let your imagination inspire you," I urged. "Write about the implications of it, how on the one hand the bolster could inhibit physical intimacy, but on the other, could facilitate psychic intimacy."

"You got enough ten dollar words there to choke a horse," he said. "Can't understand a thing you said." His face disappeared once again.

What a complement we are, I reminded myself. He has no ideas, I have lots of them. But does he open himself up to any of them? Of course not! He'd rather read the book with his nose instead of his imagination.

Three days before his paper was due, he still was searching for a topic. At first I thought that his research efforts had exhausted him, then I realized he had come down with the flu that was sweeping over the campus like the chilling winds off the marshes.

"Awwwwww," he lowed. "I'll never be able to write my paper in time." He lay on his bed looking grey instead of

his usual white. I knew he was really suffering. He needed to get good marks in his two sociology courses to bring up his borderline average. The paper was to count for twenty-five per cent of the final mark.

I felt sorry for him. Had he begun it a week earlier, it would have been behind him. But here he was, bedbound with an unstarted paper hanging over his head.

I had finished mine on the Romantic duo the night before, and was feeling cocky from the accomplishment. I had typed the entire twelve pages in one sitting; I had flown on the wings of poesy. Had I the energy for another flight?

I got out my battered portable typewriter, reeled in a blank sheet, and in caps wrote: THE BOLSTER AS INHIBITOR AND FACILITATOR.

Like Coleridge who claimed to be able to write only in the white heat of inspiration, I put on my wings like Icarus and soared to the sun.

I wrote about how on one hand the bolster inhibited copulation, but heightened the urge at the same time, so that when a couple who had 'bundled' their way through courtship actually wed, the outpouring of sexual expression was like a torrent after the floodgates had been lifted. What had been 'Bolstered' were the joys of the marriage bed. And then how the bolster also impelled couples to get to know each other's souls before getting to know each other's bodies. It inspired Romance! I described present day bolsters such as the stick-shift in cars, and the armrest in movie theatres. I concluded

with a plea for the preservation of bolsters so that couples could approach the marriage bed "shorn of their blindfolds as well as their bodices and breeches." Byron would have been proud. All the paper lacked was a bibliography to give it the touch of the pedant as well as the poet.

It was too late to race to the library to get a few tomes with pretentious titles and paragraph-long subtitles. I'd go to the library and back next morning before my French class at eleven. I fell asleep with visions of gratitude swimming in my head. Ern would throw himself at my feet, beholden to me for his very survival.

He was still sleeping fitfully when I got back to the room after breakfast. I brought him an orange.

I realized that I wouldn't be able to get the books out on my card since I had already borrowed to my limit. I'd have to use Ern's card. I found his wallet in the pocket of his pants that were draped over his desk chair. I flipped through the paddle-wheel of plastic envelopes stuffed with identification cards, ticket stubs, stamps and photos ... I flipped back in disbelief. There staring at me was a photo of me! I appeared to be asleep, but I wasn't wearing my pyjama top. Then it hit me. It wasn't a cigarette lighter that Phil or Ern had flicked in my face; it was a camera. The light and heat had been sparked by the flash. I was fascinated by the photo. I looked younger than my mirror image. There were no tension lines. And my hair looked tousled, and thick from being matted. I was angelic.

I slid out his card, and dashed to the library on

the other side of the campus. I took out six books, quick-glanced each one of them in the reading area, jotted down the author's and publisher's names, and relevant details, then dumped them on the return desk.

Ern was awake but still death-like when I got back to the room and typed the information onto a sheet which I clipped to the others.

"Didn't you finish your paper?" he asked.

"All except for the bibliography. Now it's done."

That afternoon I slid it under the Sociology professor's door.

I didn't tell Ern what I had done until the next day, when he managed to rouse himself.

"You did whaaawt?" he bawled, sounding like a cow in labour.

"I whipped it up that evening when you were too gone to open your eyes," I said. "If you get a bad mark, I'll go to your prof and confess that it was all a mistake. If you get a good mark, well you can ... say thank you." I couldn't think of anything tangible to ask for.

I was tempted to ask him about that photo, but I didn't, mainly because I had no business prying in his wallet; also because Peter had urged me to ignore it. "Lookit," he said. "It's weird alright, but he hasn't laid a hand on you, has he?"

I shook my head.

"Then don't do anything ... except sleep with one

eye open from now on," he teased. "Or failing that, steal all the pillows from the rooms in your residence and build a bolster, like a sandbag dike."

Ern wasn't at all grateful. I guess he thought I had sabotaged his year. He was even less so when he brought the paper back to the room two weeks later to show me the mark and the professor's comments.

"A 90!" I yelped, grabbing it out of his hand.

The professor had written: "Witty and imaginative, but superficial in the research. Would you read it to the class?"

"Are you going to?" I asked.

"Suppose I have to," he said. "Otherwise, the professor might be suspicious of me if I refuse."

I knew Ern wouldn't enjoy reading it aloud. While he was always relaxed with me and a few people on our floor whom he spoke to in the hallway, he was very self-conscious in groups.

Standing before a bank of students, mooring words he scarcely knew, would surely provoke a few snickers. But he went through with it, and predictably, fared as badly as he suffered. The class giggled, but his professor, as I learned from a member of the class, seemed impressed with his courage. It had been both a public defeat and a private victory.

I found the paper on my desk when I got back after supper.

"What's this?" I asked Ern who was lying listlessly on his bed.

"Can't you see?" he retorted.

"Yes, but why?"

"Because it's yours. I'd give you the mark too if I could."

When Ern left the room to visit Phil, which he did often and for hours at a time after that exchange, I stuck the paper among his notes in his desk drawer. I never saw it again.

I might have been more upset about Ern's broody withdrawal had it taken place the fall before, but as it was now weeks away from our finals, I was glad to have our room to myself. I could cram undisturbed. When he was in our room, he remained as silently preoccupied with his textbooks and notes as I was. He was worried about failing. I was worried about passing badly. I had spent too much time with Peter and our group, and there was a backlog of reading and reviewing to be done.

Peter asked me if Ern had finally succeeded in "ravishing" me with "something more -- how shall I put it? -- yes, intrusive than a brownie camera?"

"No," I told him flatly. "But it's almost as if he's holding back from doing something. I feel he wants to ... well, sort of connect with me, but not necessarily in a sexual way," I spluttered.

"Better build that bolster," he said.

The day after that exchange, Peter handed me a folded piece of paper. "Keep it out of Ern's sight," he said.

It was a poem entitled "Ode on a Scotian Ern," and took great liberties with the ode upon which it was modeled. I was depicted as the "unravished bride," and Ern, the "Bold

Lover." But unlike Keats' frolicking lovers, arrested in their state of bliss by the timelessness of art, we were doomed to eternal misery by virtue of our natal origins. I was a "Blueberry" (as people from the Lake St. John region are dubbed. Ern, naturally, was a "Bluenose." We were thus condemned to be blue for the rest of our mortal lives. What separated us was not time, but space -- an entire province. The poem ended with the phrase:

"Blue is true, and the truth is truly blue.

So do not rue it

Because ~~is~~ you 'bluet'!"

I would have liked to show it to Ern, but not being able to was a sign of the invisible barrier that still lay between us.

Ern and I parted as roommates in April with a handshake and a promise to write and tell each other how we fared. Neither of us talked of rooming together the following fall.

I sent Ern a postcard from Kenogami after I got my marks and told him that I had been pleasantly surprised. I'd regained my former average. He sent me a postcard saying he'd passed three out of his five courses, and was equally relieved.

I didn't return to Mount A. When Peter wrote to say he was planning to take the one-year program at the teacher's college in Fredericton, I lost my enthusiasm for returning. I didn't think I'd find another soul-mate to replace him. Moreover, I wanted to be where I could meet girls without having to shave, press my pants and shine my shoes. I finally convinced Mum that Sir George and Montreal would better stimulate my intel-

lectual development; and she gave in. Besides, Montreal was an overnight train ride away from Kenogami. She had missed seeing me during my semesters at Mount A.

That fall, when I rented a room near the Main and began my second year studies, I was too swept up in the diversions of big-city, and big-university, life to think of Ern.

Until one day in October.

Coming back to my room on a sunny afternoon, I found a battered package lying on my bed. The landlord had obviously tossed it there. It was originally addressed to me in Kenogami, but Mum had boldly printed NOW AT, and my new address.

I tore off the string and brown paper to discover a burgundy-coloured velvet cushion emblazoned with the letters: M O U N T arching over a huge A, sprouting wings. The gold-coloured letters and insignia, purchaseable in the Mount A bookstore, were usually sewn onto the backs of burgundy-coloured jackets by the "non-U" freshman.

I spied a little note crumpled in the brown paper.

It said: Sorry you didn't make it back.

Had this made for you. Hope

it brings back some pleasant

memories.

Good luck,

Ern

Ern had yet to scale the heights of Parnassus, but his gift did bring back memories: of his confession to not knowing what the scarlet A came to stand for, and of his getting

a scarlet U for his ignorance ... of the illustration of the
bolster that caught his eye but not his imagination ... of the
paper written from a wellspring of fantasy rather than of
facts ... of the parody that Peter wrote about Ern and me, and
the original Keatsian ode which had nudged us from romanticism
into cynicism, (of the photograph of me looking like an angel),
an idealization made real by a photographer's eye and lens ...

I wanted to write Ern to urge him to read Keats' Ode,
but I knew he would miss the significance just as surely as he
missed the significance of the scarlet letter. I wanted him to
know what Keats came to know: that only in our romantic imagin-
ations, where ideas conceive and are conceived, is truth beauty,
and beauty truth; that the Bold Lover and the still unravished
bride, separated by the bolster of the artist's brushstroke,
will always have a "happy, more happy love" because it is "still
to be enjoyed." But in the world of the senses, consummation --
leaping over the bolster -- "leaves a heart high-sorrowful and
cloyed." We need bolsters. They shield us from mortal beauty,
a beauty that because of its mortality, is without truth. That
simple fact, my Scotian Ern, is a truth without beauty. And
like Peter implied, it can make you truly blue. It's something
I learned while you were my roommate.

Instead I wrote him a short note thanking him for
the cushion. I still have it. It's propped on top of the
pillows on my bed. The last time Mum visited me, she asked me
why I still kept it. I didn't bother to answer her. Sometimes
I wonder if Ern has kept that photo of me.