

The Movement of Clouds

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ABSTRACT

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The sufferings of Christ on the cross are often referred to as his "Passion". Interestingly, the passions of ordinary people quite often also involve suffering. Unlike Christ, however, human beings rarely understand the root or the reason of their passion. Often it seems to spring from somewhere deep within us. To spring from something we can not explain - something we fail to understand. This novel deals with passion, or obsession, in the microcosm of a brother-sister relationship. It centers on a young woman's conscious and unconscious struggle as she attempts to come to terms with the origin of personal obsessions. Her obsession with her brother and his obsession with war.

Your way lies over the hillside,
Out in the rain and the sleet;
Out in the world's wide turmoil,
Where bustle and business meet.
But mine by the noiseless fireside,
Where the fanciful embers glow
With a changeful, life-like motion-
Kiss me before you go.

My quiet way will be haunted
With visions none others can see,
Glances more precious than diamonds,
Smiles full of meaning to me.
The sound of a welcome footstep.
A whisper thrillingly low.
Ah, thought will clasp memory closely!
Kiss me before you go.

For this world is full of mischances,
And one of these chances may fall
That we ne'er again in the firelight
Make one shadow against the wall.
Oh, thence once more in parting-
Alas! that it must be so-
Leave me a fond benediction-
Kiss me before you go. Anonymous

The above verses were found in the tunic pocket of a trooper in the Imperial Yeomanry, killed in a South African skirmish. They were in a girl's handwriting.

From Poems and Songs on the South African War
Collected by Rev. J. Douglas Borthwick
Montreal, 1901

ONE

Through the small kitchen window, Clara watches the sky. The dark clouds breeze by - shifting and growing - into new shapes, new animals, different people. Arms and legs form and then are gone - are changed - moulded at will by the wind. Nothing remains the same. The clouds become plastecine in the hands of a child, become putty in the palms of a sculptor, become clay in the grasp of God.

Clara sees the figure of a young man take shape. Tall and slender. Head held high. Arms outstretched. Just like Simon. Simon who wants to hold the sky, to touch - even for a moment - something that is eternal. Simon the cloudmaker. Simon the cloudmover. An Olympian whose cult of worship has already been firmly established in the heart of his nineteen year old sister, Clara.

He should be home from rugby practice soon. Dinner, as always, is at 6:00. He'll be starving, Clara knows and digs the peeler into another potato. The gritty wet shavings stick to the sides of her hands. She wonders whether cooking show hosts have this problem. She doubts it. One potato, two potato, three potato, four ... a hell of a lot of potatoes around here - a hell of a lot of people around here. Sometimes Clara thinks of how it would be if there were only she and Simon. If Trudi and Tommy and Marie and Craig and their parents lived somewhere else. If she didn't have to

work in her Dad's dinky little store on Saturdays. If she just had to take care of Simon. She'd cook and do laundry and paint - all day long if she felt like it. And she'd sit outside under the trees and watch Simon chasing the clouds.

"Hi, honey."

Clara feels the wet kiss and turns to face her mother. "Hi, mom. Good day at the store?" She watches her mother slip the knot out and lift the scarf off her head. Soft hair streaked with grey tumbles out and smoothes over tired shoulders. Jenny Dobrik is still a beautiful woman. Tiny lines frame her clear brown eyes and radiate from the corners of her mouth. She smiles a lot. It is difficult to find pain and suffering in her face although years ago there must have been so much. Clara often thinks about that - the war, the death and the running. It's a part of her mother she just can't understand. How could anyone have seen such things and continued? Clara knows that had it been her, she would have died. She would have simply curled up and let her heart stop beating. In all likelihood, it would already have stopped on its own. Tick. Tock. Stop.

"We children were somehow protected from within," Jenny had told Clara one day. "Running and running alongside the carriages, we'd tease the horses and play skipping games. The planes that flew overhead fascinated us. And the orange

sky at night seemed so beautiful. It just didn't register that such beauty could be so grotesque. A child doesn't understand the concept of burning children. And Dresden and Berlin were always over the horizon. Close but not close enough. It all seemed like a game. I can only remember crying once during our escape. Before that last day, that is. I remember crying when I saw my mother cry. That face that had brushed me with kisses and smiles collapsed in on itself. My Muttchen crying. I remember it all so clearly. The wet grass slapping against my legs and the sounds of the bullfrogs at nightfall. I could see Muttchen crouching beside a patch of seedy bullrushes. Her legs drawn up inside her dress. Her arms wrapped around her knees. Her head bowed down blocking out the distant glow and her shoulders shaking. I wanted to run to her and hug her - lay her head in my lap and stroke, stroke her hair from her forehead the way she used to comfort me when I was ill or upset. But that image of her, that huddled sorrow figure was something I couldn't approach. I remember standing just a few metres away and crying my heart out quietly. Silently separated from my mother's grief. Her loneliness at that moment prolonged because I just couldn't understand."

Jenny's tired shoulders lift and settle back - straight and secure. She turns to her daughter,

"We only sold a little over eighty dollars worth. Mrs. Harmon was in for a few things and the Rogers came in for their weekly order. Other than that just a few packs of cigarettes and some milk. Your father and I spent most of the day sorting shelves. Summer's really over I guess."

Clara strokes a wisp of grey from her mother's forehead and smiles. "Just remember, mom, we have the monopoly on food in this town. It ain't big enough for two stores, partner. Swagger, swagger and an artful spin of the pistols." She pockets the imaginary guns. "How were the twins today?" Clara turns on the tap and washes the dirt off the peeled potatoes and then off her hands. Her mother offers her the towel.

"Two little angels. They slept almost all day. In fact, I practically had to shake them to keep them awake for lunch. Their colds are finally getting better, I think. Look, honey, I'm just going to give them their 5:30 feeding and then put them down. I'll be back to set the table, okay? Dad should be home soon with Trudi and Tommy." Jenny smiles at her daughter and leaves the kitchen. Clara can hear the babies cooing softly as they are carried upstairs. Two little angels. Two little birds. They are lucky. Always safely tucked in mother's arms or soft and sleeping. Clara wonders if they will be upset when they realize they will never fly.

Wiping a bead of wet off her forehead, Clara opens the oven to check the meatloaf. Prods it with a fork - still

pink. She closes the door and turns on the potatoes. Soon Trudi will be old enough to get dinner and then they can take turns. Then Clara can read for awhile or just sit and think on her paintings. She can even go to the field and watch Simon's rugby practice - like she used to do when they lived in the city. Before he'd gone away for so long. It had left such an empty space - his leaving. Such a black hole inside. But he was back now and Clara could feel all the missing bits slipping back into her framework. But for how long? How long would it last? Mixed up in the now filled-up black hole was a certain panic. A drifting, jumbled feeling that time has limits. That she and Simon might be separated again. That he might go away.

It's getting dark out now and Clara reaches for the cord that holds the curtains. Behind the barn she can still make out the bowed dying grasses of the ravine. The clouds are together in the sky. The clouds are the sky. They move into one another - more. They bulge into one another - more. They glandurize and squirt life, drop by drop onto the slender swift moving form. Simon will be soaked by the time he reaches the house. Clara's fingers loose and the string falls away. Letting the curtains cover the window, the clouds and Simon.

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The back door opens and shuts. Simon hangs up his jacket. Kicks off his shoes and walks into the sweet beef smell of the kitchen. He stops. His mother, Trudi, Tommy and Clara are silent, their heads bowed. At the head of the table, his father's worn hands are folded and from his grey lips "Grant us thy blessings oh Lord to these thy benefits and help us to eat and drink to thy glory for Christ's sake amen." No punctuation. The inherited grace pours from Richard Dobrik's mouth in one unhesitating flow. The words are understood only because they are old and familiar. Five heads lift and look to Simon. The babies are in bed. Teething sounds caught in their room.

"Sorry, I'm late. We got a little carried away at practice and no one noticed the time." Simon sits down beside Clara. He rolls his eyes at her. She smiles and kicks him softly under the table. Watches her brother spoon two, three, four big roasted potatoes onto his plate. His father hands Simon the meat.

"You must freeze out there. How long does this season run anyways?" Richard Dobrik lays the fork and knife across his plate and looks at his son. Leaves no time for an answer. "It's obviously too late for you to apply to graduate school, at least until spring. And you've got car payments to make and all those chargex bills. If you're not going to

do anything else, you may as well come help out at the store for now. All this work is just "too much for your mother."

"Richard, can you two talk about this later, please." Jenny smooths her skirt and piles the empty plates. Carries them to the sink. "Apple pie for dessert, Simon. Clara made it. And ice-cream."

"Thanks, mom, I'll have my piece later if it's okay. I'll be in my room." Crossing the kitchen, Simon kisses his mother's cheek and is gone. Clara listens to him moving up the stairs.

The first forkful of pie burns the top of her mouth, but she keeps it inside. Cools it off with a quick flip of ice-cream and swallows. "Ooh, hot!" she warns. With the edges of her ears she hears the click of forks on plates and her family's compliments. She glimpses a slight smudge of dirt on her mother's cheek. Simon's mark. Always impossible for him to stay quite clean.

She remembered holding her mother's hand and toddling behind her brother who somersaulted through the sand on the beach. Galloped through mud puddles in the rain. The very touch of dry or wet earth on his face and hands seemed to brighten his eyes. It had seemed wonderful to Clara. Tante Trude had sent them cards from Frankfurt one year for Christmas. Playing cards. A game called "Black Peter". When

it had been too cold to play outside or when Clara had been sick and at home, Jenny would pull the cards from the basket on top of the fridge. And the three of them would play over and over again. Each card with an animal smiling on its surface. One card with the ebony cat, Black Peter. Master of transformation. The person who held that card at the end of the game became Black Peter - the chimney sweep. Squeals of delight when a tiny bit of ashes from the fireplace was smeared on the nose. Simon tried so hard to get that card. To hold it when each game ended. So he could be Black Peter. So he could have the ashes streaking the tip of his nose. His nose. Simon's mark. It had seemed wonderful to Clara.

"Clara. Clara." Clara feels Trudi breathe her name into her ear. "Clara, I said that Tommy and me will dry the dishes. Come on."

Clara watches her father lean over and with a bit of spit on his napkin, gently rub the dirt off her mother's face. "Okay, okay, I'm coming," she tells her sister. And to her parents, "I'll bring you coffee." She watches her father grasp her mother's hand and lead her into the family room. They seem to walk so slowly. Walk as if they have no place to go. It fits, thinks Clara. It's true. She pours two cups of simmering coffee and takes them into the family room. A year

ago, her parents would have relaxed with brandies. The rich smell of her father's pipe would have breathed into the air.

Clara remembered the sick smell of boiled-over cauliflower when she came home from school that day. Stench overwhelming - and her mother's note. It had made her throw up until her stomach was empty and her throat dry. "A heart attack." She remembered trying to smile when the neighbor dropped off Tommy and Trudi. The feel of sadness alone. She remembered making them hotdogs, after flushing away the stringy stinking cauliflower. She remembered filling the pot with soapy water and opening all the windows. And waiting for her mother to call. She had carried her sleeping brother and sister to bed and sat watching them. Wanting to wake them up to hear their prayers. To feel somehow comforted. And waiting for her mother to call. Sick-pit feeling till she heard Jenny's voice: "Mild. They're sure he'll be all right." Clara remembered calling Simon. The feel of his voice.

And then everything had changed so suddenly. Everything had happened so fast. The sale of her father's law practice and her father's return home - thin and grey. And scared. So horrible to have seen fear in her father's eyes.

And now they were here in this tiny town where a single car at night seemed louder than the endlessness of

downtown traffic. Now they owned the store that they had always bought their groceries from in the summer on the way to the cabin. Now they leht out their barn for the neighbor's cows and her parents drank coffee instead of brandy after dinner. And now Simon was home.

Clara sets the cream pitcher on the coffee table. Smiles and walks back into the kitchen. Leaving her mother and father and the drone of T.V. news. Announcer mumbling a tribute to brave rebels in Afghanistan. Trudi and Tommy are racing around the kitchen, winding up their towels and snapping each other. Bad aims, they hit the table and wall most of the time. They are laughing, laughing their heads off and calling out each other's names. Just the two of them. A pair, thinks Clara. A real pair. Like the babies. Like mom and dad. Like Simon and me. No, not like Simon and me. We're one of a kind.

* * * * *

"Isn't it terrific?" the town says. "Isn't it family? Simon Dobrik working down at the store with his dad. Tote that barge. Lift that bale." Simon smiles at all the ladies who come into the store. He tickles the babies under the chin and remembers to say thank you. The town people are getting used to these Dobriks but Simon is still a novelty - a discovery in a small place. Telling jokes. Winking at the mothers when he asks their tiny pink-dress daughters, "Want a piece of candy, little girl?" with a put-on licentious grin. Fresh blood. New air. The town is pleased.

Jenny works in the store only from 4:00 to 6:00 each day now, while Simon goes to rugby practice. Her eyes are clear, empty of raw red lines. Her steps are quicker. She helps Trudi and Tommy off with their jackets and giggles with them over lunch. In the afternoons, she sometimes watches Clara. Peeks over shoulder at the thick colours that spread from her daughter's brush onto canvas. After canvas. After canvas.

Everything had happened so fast. Everything had changed so suddenly. Clara had unpacked her mind-packed suitcase and asked that her acceptance at the Ontario College of Art be waived one year. Her words had hung in her throat. Stuck with trapped tears and mucus when she told Jenny what

she'd done. "You'll need help," she'd said. "With dad. The babies." And then, the flick of hiccups and the sore-throat sobs. A year seemed short, Jenny had thought, but remembered how long, - how endless such time had seemed when she was younger. A daughter's sacrifice. Jenny still held guilt inside. But it went away at times. So happy to have her daughter with her. And the wonder of witnessing the stretching of colour from hands that had grown within.

After dinner, in the night-quiet of her room, Clara watches Simon watching the forms that seem to move across her dry canvas. People. Always people in flowing brush strokes. Muted hands touching. Always touching. Clara watches Simon shiver, just standing there watching. Watching his little sister inside the colour.

She was always drawing. Clara. Simon's little sister. Clear dark eyes following the movement of the pencil - the crayon on paper. Clear dark eyes - Simon's eyes - following Clara's. But that had been later, after the illness.

Clara remembered most of it vaguely. She'd been very sick. She remembered that. And she also remembered that, strangely, she had not been afraid. Those feelings had stayed inside. Caught and mixed up inside with so many other things. Days, weeks of beds and doctors were all swirled-up

and could no longer be pulled out from inside. But Simon's visit was clear. She remembered it, as if she had been apart from it all. As if she had stood separate and watched.

Four years old she was, but in the big bed, she had seemed like a tiny baby. Curled up - white and shivering. Simon had to sneak in to see her while his parents talked to the doctor. They had told him he was too young. He wasn't supposed to go in the room. He wasn't allowed to see Clara. But he was learning to read. He wanted to show Clara, he'd told her. He sat beside her and opened his book. "The cat in the hat..." he began to read. Clara had watched herself open her eyes and begin to cough. Small shreds of blood - or slime - popping from her mouth. Simon had put out his hand for her to spit in but she had just held it hard and pulled him closer. She had seen her own thin arms wrap around him. She had watched herself pat his back. Ever so lightly. "Everything will be all right, Simon," she'd heard herself whisper. Watched herself fall back to sleep. Watched him let her arms fall away, as she'd slipped back - white face blending into hospital pillow. Hoarse sucking of air into crisp thin lungs. She could almost see her own breath pulled in, in short frantic puffs. So tiny and working so hard to draw it in. Drawn in. Clara. Simon's little sister. She was always drawing.

Simon turns from the canvas and hugs his sister.

"Absolutely superb, my dear. Perhaps we could rent out one of those garage lots and sell your work there. Forty-nine dollars a shot. Gold frame included." He sweeps his arm towards the ceiling. "But might I suggest that you start working on Black-Velvet. It's a big seller." Simon catches the playful kick of his sister and grins. "Ah hah, you think you can fell the mighty Simon?" He holds his sister's ankle tightly. Smile widening as she hops on her free leg.

"I am doomed." Clara flings her hand against her forehead and slumps to the floor, melodramatically fluttering her eyelashes. "You held my life and limb," she suppresses a giggle, "in the palm of your hand and now I feel them slipping away." Her ankle plunks down. "Oh mighty Simon, you and the dread Black Velvet have been my death." Her outstretched body curls into itself and shudders. Face to knees, she laughs and laughs. Laughs up at her brother.

"You, mighty Simon, are an idiot."

"And you, little sister, are a genius." He blows her a kiss and walks into his room. Drawing. Always drawing. Clara. Simon's little sister. Hungry for breath. And Simon, her big brother. Feeling stifled too.

* * * * *

In the attic it is black. The thickest kind of darkness that seems to create a wall. Not even a speck or glint of light. And dead silence. Within the still cloaked room, dust drifts and settles and frail corner webs are woven by tiny brown spiders. Balls of fluff curl up in corners, dampened by warm wet air.

Clara steps up on the chair, shoved inside her closet and hoists herself onto the wobbly shelf. Crouching, she reaches up and pushes against the inset ceiling square. It tumbles into the space above and she stands. A half girl. A split woman. Yellow-bedroom-lit up to the waist. Her top half shrouded in black. Placing her hands on gritty wood, she slithers up into the dark. Her stomach and legs inch clean tracks across the dusty floor. The light from below stays separate. It does not touch the attic black. Like being blind. Or inside a cave, deep in the earth. Shifting her body, she creates creaks in the quiet. She reaches down into light. Pulls the flashlight up off the shelf and flicks it on. A small black beetle flits under a box.

Clara crosses the room and pulls at the string she sees hanging down. Dusty grey light dulls the yellow circle of her flashlight. She switches it off and stands still. Eyes adjusting. Mostly cracked wooden crates lying on their backs and sides. A flat wood-dress-dummy and yellow flaking

newspapers. 'War declared,' 'D Day'. Words, age simply, alone.

A reflection gleams off something in the far corner. A small stained-glass window propped against the wall. Almost afraid to touch it, Clara bends down. So old. Who made it? Who bought it? Who put it up here? A thread-thin crack runs across the top corner. There is a chip on one side. Clara spits on her sleeve and softly rubs the dust from the glass. Her finger traces the lead lines. They have gone soft. The overhead light forces a feeble glow through the glass. Blue, yellow and red. Christ's face is a dusty white and his hair grey with attic age.

What would he have looked like later? Would he have gone senile? Become incontinent? Would he have slurred his words or repeated himself over and over again? Would he have become blind or deaf?

In Sunday school, she used to colour bright pictures of him. Lying little on straw. Or stiff and cold, his body anointed and touched by Mary. Tried to stay in the lines. To add, somehow, a pupil to the blank round eye. The last year she'd gone, Clara's teacher had been young and pretty. And their Sunday school class had slept over in the sanctuary one night. Shared communion at midnight. Clara had felt guilty and afraid. It had been her first time and she was not

supposed to take it until she'd been confirmed. Others did, but Jenny and Richard felt it was important to understand first. To know what it all really meant. But she would have seemed so silly if she'd refused. No one else did. She would have set herself even further apart. The silver goblet had been passed to her and she'd tilted her head. Let the tiniest trickle of wet touch her throat.

When the bread came, she'd held the square in her fist and waited for the others to take their piece. 'Take. Eat. In remembrance of me'. It had tasted of sweat when she'd popped it in. A dry lump that was hard to swallow. It had not been the right time. One was not supposed to feel guilty, at least not about the taking and the eating. But somehow afterwards, when the starchy square had had been softened and swallowed, Clara had still felt guilty. Her guilt should have passed. Wasn't that the point? But she had been thinking only of the other girls watching her. She had been terrified, not contrite. Self-conscious instead of penitent. She had been thinking only of Simon and how they were to be confirmed at the same time. The guilt did not pass.

Afterwards, she had begun to go to church. She liked the singing the best. It had a soothing effect. Like a warm bath. Simon had turned away from it all, though. Didn't

go for years. Although he had gone for the babies. He had made an exception a few months back.

"All right already, I said I'm going. Jesus Murphy, don't you get on my back too." Simon had leaned over and laced his boot.

"Sorry! I didn't realize you'd changed your mind." Clara's eyes had snapped back at her brother. "It's important to them that you go, that's all."

"Ya, ya. I know. But I haven't been to church for so long. It's like going backwards. Remember Sunday school? How to become a good Christian - memorize one psalm a week and keep your fingernails clean." He had circled the lace into a bow and pulled his pant cuff down. Smiling. "And you! Drawing pictures all over the collection envelopes in church."

"At least I didn't take money out of the plate."

Simon had laughed. "An honest mistake. Passing out money. Now that seemed Christian to me."

"Why don't you believe anymore?"

"Ah, but I do. . . Atheism has run its course. I just do it backwards." He had seen his sister's puzzled look. "It's the old opposite definition thing. Most people believe there's evil because they first believe in God."

"And you believe in God because you first believe in evil?"

"Makes more sense, don't you think?" Simon had whipped the tie from around his neck, laying it back in the drawer. "No sense overdoing it." He'd grinned and loosened the top button of his shirt. His face had softened. "I had a dream."

"About what. Ties?" Clara had brushed the wrinkles from Simon's cotton back and turning, saw the darkness inside his eyes.

Clara brushes the veil of dust off the glass face and hair and they shine through. White and black and Christ-young. Is it really a blessing to be chosen? To be taken away early? Only the good die young. Bullshit. And the bitter and the bad live on and on. A lie. Something somebody made up to make it all seem okay. To displace the anger and the hurt. The unfairness. And what about the nice old people who live on and on and fade so slowly, we hardly notice? Like Nana. The old condolence of a good long life. But still things not said or done.

"But she got her faith back before that last breath. She talked to the minister and was at peace," people had said.

But the call had come, and Nana up and left before Clara and her father could get there. Later, the two of them

had sat in the white-walled room. Clara watching her father watch his mother. Listening to the breathing from the other bed and watching his body-mother. Seeing the pink veins of her eyelids and wiping the wet from her open-hung mouth. Teeth in the bedside drawer. Smile gone slack and vacant. Clara watching her father remember how it had been. How his mother had been. Wishing there was still time for more. Simon was coming for Christmas and Nana had talked about it and talked about it. Wishing there had just been time. Clara and her father, Richard had sat in that dry humming room waiting for the doctor to come and declare her dead. So long. To declare her gone. Things never to be said or done. Waiting and waiting and waiting.

Clara stands and turns from the window. To her left, a dark cardboard box oozes books onto the wood and dust. Faded covered pictures - still - where they've slipped from the mildewed box. Clara folds her legs behind her and kneels beside the books. Dickens and Shakespeare. Moby Dick and Wuthering Heights. The Journal of Susannah Moodie. Ugh. Read in class. What year? Grade eleven or twelve. Huckleberry preserves and the joys of pickling beets. Tough times maybe. And physical. But empty for Clara. Kahlil Gibran. Didn't realize people were into him so long ago. The people of this house. Did they burn incense and

meditate? Maybe it was a gift, from a friend who travelled. The spine of the book is stiff in Clara's hands. Never even read it. Hmph. She lays it down. Poems and Songs of the South African War. Dull gold lettering on beige leather, it catches her eye. Inside, it mentions the 'Strathcona Horse', Simon's regiment in Calgary.

By the still-open trap door, Clara can see the garbage bags of clothes. Trudi's and Tommy's. Preserved for the babies. And the boxes her father slipped up here, when they moved in. Clear felt marker - not yet dulled or greyed - labels the contents. Mason jars. Clara remembers Jenny, down in the kitchen. Patiently waiting. Sweet smell of strawberries oozing through the house. Clara leans down with the box and places it on the closet shelf. "I've found them, mom. I'll be right down." She climbs down from the shelf to the chair and on to the floor. Her pupils slowly shrinking in the bright bedroom light. She lays the two books on her desk and hoists the box of jars on her shoulder. Switches off the light and heads downstairs. Wuthering Heights and Poems and Songs of the South African War fade into the now dark room.

* * * * *

Clara sits alone. Her back spread out catching the dying heat of the fire. The embers light only themselves now. They will soon be cold. She stares at the huge Christmas tree - at the flickering lights of the plastic candles and the sparkling tinsel. The star on top is worn and bent. It's been around for so many Christmases. Always been a part of the family. Underneath the tree, her father's violin lies on dead needles. Tomorrow, he'll put it away, until next year. He only plays it on Christmas Eve. Squeaky carols oozing from his bow. On Christmas Eve, Clara feels close to her father. Closer than any other time in the year. The way he holds the thin wood neck. The way his hands shake, hesitating. Hoping for the right note, the right sound, to come out. On Christmas Eve, Richard's hands are delicate, to Clara. Richard's feelings can be heard.

Her father and mother have just gone to bed. Trudi and Tommy are already asleep - exhausted and heavy - after two days of new toys, chocolate Santas and nuts. And the twins have been tucked in for hours. Yesterday, they clapped their tiny hands as their bright zoo mobile was hung above their play-pen. They stared at it, fascinated, like Clara and the Christmas tree.

The neighbors streamed through the Dobrik doors all day. Hot cider and fruit cake. Mince meat tarts with crumbly pale pastry. Simon and Clara had ground up all the fruit.

The grinder attached to the ping pong table on the back porch. Clara squashing and pressing the fruit down while Simon turned the cool metal handle.

Jenny and Richard had thought this would be a nice way to thank the town people, for the spicy warm pies and jars of relish, that had been brought over when they'd moved up here. And to thank them all for the warmth, the friendliness they'd feared would be withheld. Strangers. City folk. An intrusion. Worries unfounded. Clara had drawn up the invitation and then gone, through the snow, to the small brick postoffice in town, where she'd photocopied it over and over onto fuzzy shiny sheets. These had been folded and slipped into bags at the store. Like advertisements for special prices on film-developing, at the drugstore in the city. Everyone bought groceries at the store, and consequently, almost everyone had shown up at the Dobriks that day.

Trudi and Tommy had played with the other children in the deep new snow. Their sled making track over track through the white. Clara stayed inside, rinsing mugs and refilling plates. And watching the rest. Staying clear of discussions. The fear being laid out.

She sits alone. Simon is at a rugby party. Drinking beer and laughing. Clara's happy for him. She's happy he has friends. She loves it when he tells her about them. It's almost like having her own. But easier.

Clara hears the front door open and shut - quietly - and footsteps moving towards her. Turning from the lights and the star, she looks at her brother. His tustled hair is shiny with the wet of light snow. His mouth is spread and grinning.

"Well, hello there, cutie. Wanna dance?" he laughs.

"Thank you, kind sir, but I'll have to decline. You see, these gentlemen swarming around me haven't let me sit down all night. If you'd care to sit down though, I believe you'll find I have some interesting ideas, regarding the global situation." Clara smiles. "How was the party?"

"Great! I absolutely destroyed George in a game of Caps. Ten beers in twenty minutes. When I left, he was asleep in the front hall. One of his arms was stretched towards the door, like he'd been ready to open it and then, 'Goodnight'. Like they say, 'Boom boom boom, out go the lights'. Poor guy." Simon unzips his jacket and slips it off, tossing it on the chair. "Some asshole invited those three stuck up twits, the ones that waitress at the motel. They were bugging me all night. You know, blinking their eyes and rolling their tongues around."

"Oh, poor Simon. But I'm sure you were polite and offered your body to them."

"Ya, all three, on the pool table, at once." He winks at his sister. "They act like they're God's gift to mankind. Only thing is, their wrapping paper's so glossy"

it's probably a big disappointment to undo the ribbon. Nothing but shredded newsprint inside. You been sitting here long? I mean, when did everyone else go to bed?"

"Oh, just a little while ago. I thought I'd wait up for you. Breathalizer in hand, of course."

"I wish you'd come with me." Simon sits down beside her.

"Ya, well -- you know."

"Um hum. And I also know, there's about three guys on the team who are dying to go out with you."

"I just don't have time for that kind of thing, right now." Clara slides the easy words out but inside, inside, the truth sits quietly. Already too many people to protect. Too hard. Too many people to mourn for, when the time comes.

"Or maybe you're avoiding something." Simon's hand folds over his sister's. "You have so much love to give. You need an outlet. Don't you want your own family some day?"

And inside Clara, the swell beats soft-waves against her stomach and her heart. Having Simon is enough and there's Jenny and the rest of the family. Having Simon is enough. Too much.

"Some day." Clara smiles at her brother, trying to keep the fear-beats from trickling through her hand.

"Speaking of avoiding things, I want to talk to you about this crazy plan of yours." She turns and lifting the poker, prods

the last of the glowing logs. Her throat is dry. "Sorry, bud, but I just won't let you go."

"Oh, I see. You going to truss me up and hide me in that attic?" Simon squeezes her hand.

"I'm serious, Simon. It's crazy. You did your bit and now you can forget all that. Go back to school. Get a job at Club Med. God, you'd be great at that! Scuba diving and parachuting. Just think of the obstacle courses you could set up. You know - for those round-the-pool-kind-of-things they have. And Simon, think of all the girls!" She wriggles her eyebrows and grins. Short smile. Fade.

"But schweet-heart, you know, you're the only girl for me." Simon stretches his legs in front of him. His forehead in lines. "It's just that I've got something to prove."

"To whom? Yourself?"

"Ya, and to other people too. Like dad. Like my buddies. Like that prick, C.O."

"But Simon, you got a degree. You made Lieutenant and you served for three years. You resigned because they wouldn't transfer you and that bastard wouldn't get off your back. There's nothing to be ashamed of. You got an honourable discharge and a nice fat cheque. What's to prove?"

"That six years of my life weren't wasted. That I'm a good soldier."

"For God's sake, Simon, why?"

"'Cause it haunts me." Simon looks down. Picks
stray tree-needles out of the carpet.

"What?"

"'Cause it haunts me."

"No, I mean what haunts you?"

"Whether or not I could make it. Whether or not I'd
be able to react to some one else's pointed gun. Some one
else. A person. Can you understand?" He catches the shake
of Clara's hair. "I just have to get this out of my system,
before I can get on with my life. Then, maybe more school or
Club Med. Nudge nudge wink wink." Simon pulls a piece of ice
off the bottom of his jeans and tosses it into the fireplace.
It sizzles. Leaves a small, darker mark on the charred wood.

"But Simon, this isn't a game. Or some hero movie.
What if you can't pull the trigger or fire the tank? You
could die, Simon. My God, you could die. And you wouldn't
just kill yourself." Clara's voice slips away in a whisper.

"I know, Clara. Believe me, I know. And I'm scared
shitless. But it's just something I have to do, or it's going
to destroy me. It just won't leave me alone."

"Clara turns and looks at her brother - her eyes
cloudy. "It's just not fair. It's not fair that things have
to change."

Simon takes his sister into his arms and rocks her.

His hand absorbing the warmth of the dying fire and Clara's back.

"Everything and everybody have to change. We have to, or we'll never grow. I don't want to have this doubt nagging me forever. And even if I didn't leave, I'd change. Only in a way that I wouldn't like, even you wouldn't like. I want to be somebody and I can't, if I just fart around and ignore what's inside. And I have no intention of this being my highest life-achievement. I know it's not. It couldn't be. Besides, the part of me that you'll miss when I'm gone - that will always be the same." Gently, he pushes Clara away and holds her shoulders. "And I'll always have you inside."

Clara watches the star glint behind Simon's head.

"Yes, Simon, I know."

"Right now, I don't even know where I'm going to go. They could start a T.V. show, 'Simon Dobrik, this is your war'. So don't worry about it, okay. And when the time comes, I promise it'll be short. After all, how could I stay away from my little sister? A guy needs someone to talk to, right? Besides, if I didn't have one girl who'd turn me down for a dance, I'd get a swelled head, you know." He kisses his sister lightly on the cheek. "Want a glass of milk before bed?"

Clara hears the light flick on in the kitchen and the fridge door open. The click of two glasses being placed

on the counter and the swirl of milk being poured. She leans over and pulls the plug on the Christmas tree. "You're wrong, Simon," she thinks. "Not everybody has to change. I'm never going to be any different than I am now. I'm never going to change."

* * * * *

"Simon, did you see a book lying around here?"

Clara sticks her head into the T.V.-blare of the family room. Simon lies back on the couch - his knees drawn up. An open book propped. He holds it up.

"You mean this?" Poems and Songs of the South African War. A few pages loosen and drift down.

Clara picks them up. "Ya, are you looking at it?" She sits down on the couch-space beside his feet and lifts her eyebrows. "You mean, you like poetry? Roll the cameras in here. Get the reporters. The making of history. Da da da da! Simon Dobrik and poems of the South African War. Yes folks and YOU ARE THERE!" Pages held tight in her hand.

He brushes her hair with his foot. "Shud up, you goof ball. If I see a single reporter, I'll deny the whole thing." Simon laughs. "Actually, it's pretty fascinating. Even mentions the 'Strathcona Horse', in the intro."

"I know."

"Have you read this one?"

Clara leans back, her head on her hand. "I don't know. Let's hear it."

"It's by Reverend F.G. Scott of Quebec and called 'On the Return of Our Troops.' Here goes!"

The seal set on our nationhood are these
Strong men returning victors from the war;

Up to the battle's very front they bore.
Our country's honour, till with every breeze
Fame sang their valour round the seven seas.
For us, they braved death in the cannon's roar,
For us, their comrades died and nevermore
Will see thy loved homes 'neath our maple trees.
Throw wide thy gates, O Canada, throw wide
The portals of thy gratitude; these men
Have roused the God in us. Now cast aside
All littleness of aim. With courage high
And loftier purpose, to thy tasks again,
And carve thine own illustrious destiny.

"And carve thine own illustrious destiny," Simon repeats. "Now this guy understood." Simon closes the book. His finger still touching the poem.

"He understood the feelings about something that happened a long time ago, Simon. People believed in causes then. They felt that they had right on their side. And that what they did, needed doing. It's not the same anymore."

"Maybe not generally. But that's exactly the way it is, inside of me."

"With cannons and portals? Give me a break, Simon."

"You know what I mean. I'm talking about feelings. About destiny. Besides, things haven't changed everywhere. If anyone is stupid enough to drop the bomb, that'll be it. But nobody will."

"Do you mean to tell me that war would be war? Like in the book there? That soldiers would wait to shoot till they could see the white of the eye?"

"No. I mean, weapons have changed. But look at the wars now. The rebels in Afghanistan. El Salvador. The Middle East. Even the Falklands. More sophisticated maybe, but not that different. They've just made it easier to kill. And quicker. Wait, let me finish. In a lot of places, it's still like this." He taps the book against his leg. "Shit, do you think so much money would have been spent to train me - to train soldiers all over the place - if anyone thought we'd switch from tanks and stuff to one big mother-fucking bomb? Survival. Psychology 101." He winks. "The strongest instinct is self-preservation. Quote. Unquote."

"Exactly. So what the hell, are you trying to prove?" Clara's teeth pull a hardened piece of skin from her finger. She flicks it in an ashtray. A small bubble of blood forms in the new hole. "Isn't life important? Your life?"

"I hope so. But that's the point. I want to get this thing over with. Get this thing out. So I can go on and do other things. And maybe - just maybe - I'll actually do some good in the meantime. Aggression and war seem to be human nature too, Clara. Maybe I can make it a little better. That's just the way it is. That's life."

"And that's a funny way to put it. Excuse me. I have to go pick the nits out of my white feathers and hunt around for an olive branch." Clara swings her leg from under her and begins to stand.

Simon touches her hand. "Wait, Clara, please. It's important to me that you understand. You know, I'm not blood-thirsty. I don't even know if I could actually kill someone. Even if they had the gun right on me and cocked. That's a pretty strange feeling, not knowing. Here, I'm supposed to be a soldier, or was, and I just don't know. It's like I'm stuck in one spot, till I resolve that. How can I start something new when that's not finished? It's awful, I know. I lie awake and think about it. I dream about it. I can't turn those feelings off or cover them up. That's just the way it is. No matter how scared I am. So maybe I have to go away and see what happens. There's a lot of people who could use me, Clara. A lot of places. Maybe I just have to go away." He opens the book. "My destiny, I guess. Or at least my reality, for the time being." Simon dogears the open page, then straightens it out. Again and again. He takes his sister's hand. Trying to pass on his feelings. Trying to make her understand.

"Reality is obviously far too painful. I think I'll avoid it."

"And illusions can be just as dangerous," Simon says. He watches his sister pull a kleenex from her pocket and blow her nose.

"I think I'll go for a walk." She moves across the room and flicks the knob on the T.V. The picture shrinks from

all sides, until a tiny white dot is left alone at the centre of the screen. Light humming. It fades. "If you promise to keep your trap shut, you can come with me."

Simon puts his finger to his lips. "I throw away the key."

Clara shoves the separate pages of the book in her pocket. And brother and sister slip into their jackets. Open and shut the door. A slow wind nudges clouds across the sky. Moving ever so slow and solid. A mass of white. Hands in pockets, Simon and Clara move underneath it. Their feet crunching the still-hard ground. Silent.

* * * * *

The concrete foundation-blocks and the wood hold in the cold of the fading winter. Second after second, day after day, they breathe out faint air, fresh from the snow. Cool air, joined by the heavy smell of old hay. Musty spores drift invisible through the barn, settling on tools and burlap sacks. Settling on Clara's face and hair.

Above her, the sky sweeps by the hole in the roof. Bare tree branch bent and cracked through in last week's storm. Richard and Simon chopped up the broken branch and the rotten boards. Piled them up in the shed, for firewood. Nothing left of the strong night wind but the open space of the roof and the dark clouds that breeze by.

In the hay, looking up at the sky, Clara lies on her back. Her body pushing the dull gold shafts away. They spread out beside her, like feelers. Like antennae. As if she is a deformed - too-formed - creature, with dozens of thin waving arms. A throwback. Her senses raw and open to the air.

The mouldy air shakes her body with a sneeze. Her head jerks back into the dusty hay. Her eyes drawing the clouds by, quicker, above.

She remembered how she and Simon had sat up high on the cliff by the cabin. Letting the sun make sweat. He had told her about an article he'd read. And how people could

supposedly concentrate and move things. How anybody could achieve that control.

She remembered how they had sat, quiet, in the sun, listening to the lap of water on the rocks below. Concentrating on the clouds. Thin wisps hanging still in the summer heat.

The slips of white had begun to move towards them. And, ignoring the slight breeze that had brushed the leaves and their hair, Clara and Simon had watched - had directed the movement of clouds.

* * * * *

In the centre of the field, young men are spread out in two slightly-uneven lines. Lines of bare legs - bare arms - bright colour clothes. Lines of faces, facing other faces. Hands and knees on the ground. Heads, now bent down, towards the muddy grass. Two long lines of supplicants. Or victims. Posture ancient and primitive.

From the bleachers, Clara watches the stripe-shirt referee lift up and examine, foot after foot, down the lines. Closely looking at each shoe he holds up, then letting foot drop back - plop to the mud. One by one, the kneeling men stand and mull out of the line-ups. Their cleats pronounced legal, safe for the game.

Clara watches her brother rise. He swashes the mud-bits off his hands and, bending over, tightens his laces. He stands up - hands outstretched. "Over here, Dennis." Dennis tosses the ball back over his shoulder to Simon. Simon hooks it under his arm and runs it up the field. Runs it over the goal line. His friend jogs over. Flashing a smile, Dennis slaps Simon's shoulder.

"Hell of a Try there, Dobrik. I mean, utterly fantastic, the way you charged through their non-existent defense." Dennis lifts his arm and wipes the fresh sweat off his forehead. His dark skin, already coated with tiny beads, glistening like pavement in the rain. "Hotter than hell, eh?"

"Ya, but thank God it rained last night."

Clara watches the two of them stride back towards centre field. The kneeling-men-lines have completely dissolved now and other players mill in the mud. Crouching and stretching their legs. Clara smells the salt, of other people, in the bleachers around her. She can see Jenny and Richard pushing the babies, in their double-stroller, around the far corner of the ash-track, that circles the field. Talking and laughing together, in the cloudless heat. Clara can see Trudi and Tommy, in the sand with their pails and shovels. With other children. Probably a long-jump pit during the high school track season. The small-body sunsuits and shorts are covered with clingy wet sand.

Clara catches the shrill-whistle of the game's beginning. The flashes of white shorts - red sweaters - white shorts - blue sweaters. Flashes of thick legs running and flashes of Simon. She hears the old men shout from the sidelines. "Way to go, lads!" "Lovely run, Dobrik!"

She remembered seeing the picture of her grandfather's rugby team. Yorkshire. 1905. Richard had pulled it out to show, when Simon had come home in the summer. So full of rugby. Clara's eyes had pulled in the soft-brown colour of the photograph. The faded stripes of the jerseys. Her grandfather's young picture face. Real face

never seen or touched. He had died two months before she was born. Preserved one dimensional, for Clara to see. She had thought of him, on his knees, lined up for cleat inspection on a rugby field. On his knees, lined up in a trench on a battlefield. Her other grandfather, lined up in another trench. On the German side. Faces facing faces. The future never registering.

Clara remembered how Simon had talked about the old town men. Mostly British and Welsh. Their cheering at rugby games. He'd told her how they'd strike up a conversation with him, in the store. Or stop him on the sidewalk. They'd tell him how he reminded them of themselves. As they used to be fifty years ago - strong and fast. Simon had told her how he'd rather die than end up like them. Rocking away on their porches. Wrapped up in quilts and memories.

Clara remembered Simon talking about their parents. How it had scared him to see them after four years. Still in love. With a nice house and land and plenty to eat. Kind and loving. God fearing and grey. How well Clara had understood. She had seen the grey seep through her mother's hair and into her father's eyes. She had watched it move stealthily through their bones. Make them happy at a forty dollar sale. Bring tears to their eyes when they burnt the huge pile of leaves in the fall. It had moved in with the heart attack. With the fear in her father's eyes. A sense of

the future as a series of Christmases and of old age. Even the surprise of the babies couldn't change that. Wanted so much, but still a reminder. A new reminder that there would be no more. That they had passed through a huge chunk of their lives.

Clara understood how that had frightened Simon. How he wanted there to be more than that. To halt, somehow, the process. Clara understood because, she too, had felt the grey seep in for short periods of time. Needed to be able to get away from it, then. She had learned to block certain things out. To forget events that hurt but passed by. It was her way of protecting herself. She had learned to breathe. But certain things could never be passed over. She had learned that as well.

Clara understood that Simon was searching for a place where the grey would not be able to settle. He wanted to be "someone she could be proud of," he'd said. Could be? He wanted to be somebody they could all be proud of. But especially her. Clara. His little sister. Simon wanted to show himself to her - how he could be - in a blaze of glory. Her big brother. Him. Mighty Simon.

Offside whistle pulls Clara back to the game. Simon and the red shirts - and the blue shirts - are all now a

patchy brown. Grass stains green, on calves and elbows. The white mitre ball now beige.

Clara watches her brother's legs catch flying mud and grass. Tossed up by his quick running feet. He deeks through outstretched arms. Weaves between players, on the dash upfield. Barely ducking a blue-shirt grasp, he pitches, belly down into the mud. The ball clutched tight to his side. He rolls over. Teeth shiny smile from face dirt-brown. Brown as Dennis' arm - which reaches down, pulls Simon to his feet. Clara hears the claps from the stands and the old man cheers. Wonders what the score is, as she catches the sun bouncing away from her brother's deep hole eyes. So full and close. So black, they almost seem to sink inside.

She lifts her arms and feels the slight air breeze cool the wet of her T-shirt. Sees her mother and father stop to clap and cheer. Through the waving summer heat, they continue behind the stroller. Pushing it slowly around the oval of the field.

* * * * *

Sound of tip tap typing in the den. Clara can hear her mother at work. Struggling to be polite. To be direct with punched out words. Hammering upset into the typewriter. It gets wound up in the ribbon. Stays hidden. Neat, cordial lines pop onto the page.

Each month, letters written to Generals and Procurators and Presidents, on behalf of black and white names and photographs. Amnesty-International Bulletin. Volume IX. Number 9.

Guatemala. 'Thousands of Guatemalan villagers and peasant farmers are reported to have been massacred and mutilated.'

Viet Nam. 'Two Buddhist monks are reported to have been banished.'

Guatemala. 'This young Kekchi woman, now in hiding, says she was attacked with machetes and raped by soldiers during an army attack on her hamlet in April this year. Her family was almost wiped out.' 'Are reported to have been.' 'Says she was.' Tact and diplomacy.

Poland 1945. This young German girl reportedly watched her mother raped and her six year old brother beaten in front of her dying father. She witnessed the events from under a bed, where she had been hidden. 'Reportedly.' 'Reportedly.' Tact and diplomacy.

Her mother's war has filtered through to Clara, in bits and pieces. Curiosity. Questions. Pulling out slices of pain, as the years go by. As she gets older, she begins to understand. Begins to understand Jenny's horrible realization, that the war had become something she could no longer watch on the horizon. That it had not just affected other people. That horrible realization. And Jenny had only been ten years old.

Funny how it had all come out of one simple question. Clara had wanted to know where her grandfather was buried. And suddenly, she had been made aware of so much more. She had seen her father's father's headstone, wrapped in waves of prairie grass, when she was only five. She had seen her father's mother's plastic face, propped up in the case on the funeral home table, last year. A small service, before Richard rode with his mother on the train, to Redcliff. To lower Nana beside her husband. To leave his parents to quietly crumble away together. Clara had seen a photograph of her mother's mother's mound. The grey granite that gave her her name. Clara Dorothea. But in Germany, plots were only rented. Twenty-thousand Deutschmarks for twenty years. And now the headstone had been recycled for another name. Her grandmother's bones bulldozed up, to make room for more.

But there was nothing to look at, in her mother's father's case. No headstone. No mannequin made-up face. No photo or cheque-stub for twenty-thousand Deutschmarks. Just the struggle of Jenny at Nana's last-year service. Just knowing, that Jenny had kept away from funerals and that her body was marked - on her driver's license - for science. No graves. No urns. No stones. No belts, no pins, no strings attached. But the commercial people got it all wrong. Jenny just wanted to fly.

"Or like the Eskimoes do it," she'd said. "They climb on an iceberg and float into the cold, when they feel it's time. They just drift off. Knowing full well, that as the soul develops, the body becomes less and less important. My God, it's so perfect."

Clara had wanted to know where her grandfather was buried. And Jenny had told her. That day curled into words for Clara to hear.

"It all happened so fast. We had to get away, you see. The Germans had just surrendered and the Russians were everywhere. Old men helped, and we buried him under a tree, just as he was. He would have liked that. He was so in love with the life rooted around us. I've told you that he was an agricultural scientist, haven't I? That means he worked with plants and animals. He was in touch with the Cosmos, as he

called it. When I went back, a few years later, I found out that all unmarked graves had been dug up and transferred into 'appropriate' yards. I remember standing on a hill surrounded by white crosses. They were all around me. They seemed to go on forever. And the little Polish caretaker who had taken me there, just swept his arm as to say, 'your father could be anywhere'. My whole world fell in then. Everything seemed to lose its meaning. Everything. I had loved my father so much, and suddenly, it seemed, I'd lost him all over again. They tried to take away what we had given him and I hated them - the men who had dug him up, the men who had reburied him, the men who never even cared enough to remember where my father was placed. Funerals seemed senseless to me after that. A waste. I prefer to remember Cosmos. To believe that there's a bit of my father, of all the people I've loved, everywhere.

"But he wasn't very old. What happened?" Clara had felt the dull-ache swirl inside of Jenny, but she had had to ask. She had needed to know. "What happened?"

"The impossible." Jenny had pulled a thread from the hem of her skirt. Wrapped it around her finger and broken it off. "With death all around us, I imagined a little shield around my family. I thought nothing could hurt the people I loved. There was always a separation somehow. A protection. Do you understand what I mean?"

Clara had held Simon and her parents in her mind and nodded.

"We were travelling in a carriage. One of the two, left out of some seventy, that had started out from Bolchau."

"What happened to the other carriages?" Clara had asked.

"Oh, they dropped off along the way. People got sick. And they came to towns where they knew people and decided to stay. Anyway, we and one other family were all that was left. The German army was retreating and the Russians were behind them. We were somewhere between the two."

"Like a sandwich." Clara had kissed her mother's cheek.

"Right. And of course on such a long journey, we had to stop and eat and sleep. And on this particular night, we reached a farmhouse, where a lot of other refugees had stopped. My mother took my brother and sister and I inside to wash and eat and my father went to the barn, to take care of our horses. I had gone outside to pick some mint for the lady who was cooking and heard shouts from the barn that someone had been hurt. I had the most horrible feeling inside, of knowing. Knowing that it was my father." Jenny had stopped for a moment and it had seemed to Clara that she had looked right through her. Seen something on the other side.

"He had climbed up into the loft to get hay and had fallen through some rotten boards. He was lying on the cement floor when I saw him. I talked to him and wanted to soothe his forehead. To rub my fingers through his hair. But it was thick with blood and his eyes just stared - empty. Somebody had told me that dying people, who can no longer see or speak or move, can often still hear. I didn't believe that he was dying, of course. But I remember thinking my father could hear me. Funny, I have no idea what it was I said."

"But why didn't a doctor come?"

"The bridges had all been bombed and there was no way to get him to a hospital. So we tried to keep him warm and comfortable. We talked to him all the time. He lived for three more days. Meanwhile, the Russians came. And he died."

Clara listens to the clear beat of typewriter keys and watches her mother through the open den door. Carbon paper leaves purple marks on the desk. And a bottle of white-out peers from behind a stack of envelopes. To have that horrible feeling. To feel that horrible sick inside. Knowing you can't help someone you love. Can't black out the hurt. So hard. And now mother, now Jenny, with clear eyes and warm hugs. The refusal of bitterness inside. The wanting, wanting to keep others clear of all that. To keep on going and doing. Being. So hard. Clara thinks of how often

she hears "It's selfish to mourn," "You're crying for yourself," on empty blurb T.V. and from withered lips. The time her father was sick and the neighbors collected in their living room. Fools, she thinks. They just don't know. Don't want to face the truth. That it's the dead we cry for. The hurt is for them. For not doing everything they wanted to do. For being stopped. That is the tragedy. That is the hardest thing about love.

Jenny licks the envelope flap and straightens the pile. Turns to look at her daughter, standing quietly, by the door. Feeling that eyes are there. "Honey, what's the matter?" She walks over to Clara and hugs her. Lets her daughter's tears slip through her sweater and slide onto her skin.

* * * * *

"Clara. Clara honey, come on. Wake up. Breakfast is almost ready." Clara's mother draws the curtains aside and the sun enters the room. "Hardly a cloud in the sky. It looks like it's going to be a beautiful day. Rise and shine." Jenny smiles and leaves the room. Closing the door behind her. "Bacon and eggs in five minutes!" Her voice drifts down the stairs.

Pushing the blankets away, Clara gets out of bed and walks to the window. The cool wood of the floor unnoticed. The sun hurts her eyes and she pulls the curtains shut. It should not be sunny today. It should not be like this. Clara just can't understand them - mom and dad and the kids. They seem to have accepted his decision, so fast. Taken it as a matter of course. Clara keeps trying but she can't. I just need more time, she tells herself. A little more time. Feeling her own lie inside.

She lifts her nightgown over her head and pulls on a sweater and a pair of jeans. Zips them up. She runs the brush through her hair and looks up at her reflection in the mirror. Still looking, she sits down on her bed. Watching herself smaller now, in the mirror - further away. Watching herself. Her self. And feeling no connection. Small-shiver curls inside. Feeling apart from herself. As if looking at somebody else's picture. As if her body is extra - detached. And she has no need for it.

The mirror-face is framed by a pair of rising hands. Clear-lined palms hued in paint-splash colours. Hands that splash and make pictures with paint. As if she does have need for her body. Her hands. Her way of touching, of trying to understand others. All those others she can't afford to get close to. Caring about them in brush strokes - water soluble paint. It's easier. The faceless people she will never let inside.

Jenny is sitting at the table when Clara walks into the kitchen. "Your eggs should still be warm." She walks over to the stove and spoons fluffy pale scrambles from pan to plate. "I think the toast is cold, though."

"That's all right." Clara sits down and begins spreading butter on a piece of toast lifted from the basket. The butter moves across the cold brown surface in slabs. Not melting into toast-tiny-bumps and ridges. Her mother pours Clara a cupful of coffee and refills her own mug.

"I guess I should know by now, not to put in your toast before you're down." Jenny smiles over her shoulder as she leans over - picks up Craig from the playpen. She sits down beside her eating daughter. Opens the buttons of her mother-blouse and raises the baby to her breast. He sucks noisily. "You've always done things on your own time, I always say. Since you were born. Forty-eight hours of

labour. I remember thinking you must have made up your mind to stay inside."

Clara remembered that. Somewhere deep inside, she remembered the warmth and the soothing even beat that had surrounded her. Thumb in mouth - eyes seeing nothing. Feeling safe in the darkness. A part of something much larger.

And then her watery warmth had run away and she'd felt herself pushed. Shifted into cold. The comfortable flow had ended and she'd felt cut off. A huge weight about to explode in her head. And it had grown bigger and bigger with nowhere to grow. Then the slap and sharp pain of air in her lungs. The weight subsiding.

Somewhere deep inside, she remembered the warmth as she was lain on Jenny's rounded belly. But she also remembered the cold against her, flowing from the other side. It told her things would never be the same again. Told her she was cut off. Ultimately alone.

Jenny jiggles the baby to a more comfortable position. "Late night, last night. I guess we're all tired. Simon and your dad left for the store an hour ago. They're pretty beat. But I'm relieved Simon got all his plans out in the open." She rises. Lowers Craig back into the playpen.

Lifts out Marie. She notices the raw red sacks under Clara's eyes. "Honey, I know you're upset and worried about Simon. None of us like his plans or really understand why he's chosen to do this. But the best we can do is support him. Love him. After all, there's nothing else we can do."

Clara pokes the toast crust into her mouth and chews. Swallows. "That's just it," she says. "There's nothing I can do."

"Except let him go." Jenny is feeding Marie now. "And pray he'll change his mind once he gets to Africa. Or that if he does go through with his plans, he'll stay safe and well. Besides, the South African army may not even accept him. Although, knowing Simon.... Hey, get rid of that long face. Just think, you're going to take the train to Toronto with him. Lucky girl!"

Clara remembered how bad it had been when Simon left that first time. Quitting school and taking off out west. Only sixteen years old. Jenny and Richard had torn each other apart.

Clara remembered how Jenny had moved into Simon's room. At first, Clara had thought it was to be closer to Simon. To lie in her son's bed. To feel nearer to him. That had made sense to Clara.

But then the muffled fights late at night. Clara had listened to her parents, through the heat vent in her bedroom floor. Mention of divorce and for-sale signs. And always talk of Simon. Clara had realized that the night-sounds of her mother came from Simon's room because of fear of closeness. Her mother and father had not been able to bear looking at one another. They could not stand to be close to someone else who had made Simon. Maybe made him want to go away, in that very moment of his making.

Clara remembered how hard it had been, for so long. How much time it had taken for them to separate Simon from themselves. To accept his decisions as his own. The consequences as his own. He had come out of it all okay. With a degree and a commission. He had come out of it all okay and so had Richard and Jenny. They had made the break.

Clara touches her mother's hand. Feels the warmth. The life. She carries her plate to the garbage and scrapes what's left into the dark green plastic. Curds of yellow bounce into a juice can covered with coffee grounds. An unbitten bite of toast falls onto the floor.

Jenny jostles Marie to her shoulder and lightly pats her baby-back. "We'll all miss him, honey. But it'll pass. Really it will. You need to make some friends, start going out. You're a beautiful girl." Jenny laughs. "You take

after me. Hey, maybe you should enroll in another correspondence creative writing course."

Clara picks the crust up off the floor and tosses it into the bag. She loops the corners into a knot and lets go. Needing so much more time.

"I'll take the garbage out," she says to Jenny and watches her mother carry the burped baby back to the play pen. Clara puts on her jacket and lifts the bag. Glances at Marie, now curled up sucking her thumb. You never get enough, eh Marie, thinks Clara. Neither do I. She bends down and kisses her baby brother. Her sister. Kisses Jenny. Neither do I.

Clara closes the door behind her and walks slowly, across the still-frozen field, towards the shed. The sun above shines brightly. But from the east, the clouds are beginning to move in.

* * * * *

TWO

9

The tall ceilings arch above. Solid and old. Crumpled gum wrappers and shoe-trod cigarette butts huddle together on the sides of stairs. And bright white lights spread a cold glow throughout the building.

Lifting one foot after another, Clara climbs the steps and sludges through the hall towards the washroom. Barely looking in front of herself. Familiar with the floors and walls of Union Station - the washroom door held open by a wedge of wood. Clara leans against the white wall. Waits till the door of the no-charge cubicle opens, Closes the door behind her. Flushes.

In front of the finger-marked mirror, Clara runs a comb through her hair. Jerking through the rats and the tats and then pulling her wiggly wavy hair through the elastic. Thin strands float to the floor and stick to her jacket.

She buys a cellophane wrapped bagel from the Indian lady's stand. Moves down the steps and into the corridor. Shows the blue-cap man her ticket and moves out onto the platform. "Car seven, down at the end". She shrugs her packsack higher on her shoulder and steps up into the dim grey light of the train. No seats in the no-smoking section. Makes her wonder why they bother asking, in the first place. There is a free set of seats past the plexiglass partition. She plunks her bag above and sits down. Hopes there's no one

else to get on. Hopes she won't have to tongue wag with a businessman or an old grandchild-visiting lady. Wants to be alone. Silent.

Her seat shakes subtly and the climbing purr begins. Good. Slow chugging, the train starts to move. And a panting puffing acne-faced man lurches into the seat beside her. She turns to the window and watches the dirt-brown walls of the station move past. Move past. Getting left behind. The train moves into the drizzle - out of the city.

Sideways sight of disappearing buildings and lake. She wonders what it looks like from above. Never been in a plane before, or watched tiny speck houses and cars - people-bits - drift by below clouds. But Simon has. Is. She wonders what it looks like to him. Who he is sitting beside, as his flight flies over the ocean. Maybe watching a movie, plugged into one of those teeny head sets or - now 6:00 - maybe eating dinner. Food squared off into little plastic tray sections. Clara pulls the cheese-stuffed bagel from her purse and unwrapping it, begins to chew.

The airport had been full of people. Even the sidewalks outside had been packed. People swishing in and out. Pulling luggage out of cars and cabs. Simon and Clara had sat together in the taxi. Their driver stopped - waiting for a space by the curb. Their driver sitting, letting the

meter tick away - his tip generous and ready in Simon's hand - his tip slowly shrinking as the fare clicked higher. Instead of taking it and letting them out, the driver had sat stiff. "Have to park first." Just waiting and listening to the tick. In the ticking and the waiting, Clara had stitched away - hurriedly finishing the tuck in the side of the jacket. Simon had given his father his rugby jacket before leaving. A token. And Richard had given Simon his hockey jacket. A gesture. This jacket. Patches and emblems on old sleeves - the jacket made for broad shoulders and a full chest. This jacket. Clara hurriedly making it slimmer with quick thread stabs, in the back of the cab.

"Want a smoke?" A pat on Clara's shoulder, the pock-faced train intruder holds out a bent pack of Players. The little tam-head man in the midst of the blue and white box seems to leer at Clara.

"Uh, no. Thankyou." She watches him strike a match across the black strip of a match book back. Two naked ladies dance across the cover - invite Clara to a downtown bar.

"I'm Taylor. You got a name?" Smoke joins the words popping out of the man's mouth. "Hello!" He waves his hand up and down in front of Clara's face. Smiling.

"Clara. I'm Clara. Hi." A wafting puff clouds over the man's face. Dark eyes seep through the smoke and smile.

"You going to Montreal?"

"No. Kingston."

"Oh. Don't tell me. Queen's University. Right?"

And you study English. Am I right?"

Clara wishes he'd go away. That another puff of smoke would encircle him and he would disappear with it. The sour thickness of it tickles her throat.

"No. Sorry."

"Okay, let me guess again. Philosophy. You're studying the great questions of mankind. For sure. That's it. I should have known. Philosophy."

"No." She is sick of this stupid game. Wants it to end. For him to leave her alone. "Actually, I do not go to Queen's or any other university." She turns slowly towards the window.

Behind her. "Oh, you work. You a secretary?"

He holds the now-shut pack of matches in his hand. Inside, Clara smiles.

"Actually, I'm an exotic dancer. I strip in a club for dirty old men and make eight hundred dollars a week. My stage name is Antigone." She feels so good, smug and satisfied. She watches his mouth slacken and the cigarette jerk from between his yellow bent fingers. He leans over and grabs at it as it rolls under the seat.

"No kidding? Wow. Ya, I can see it now. Should have guessed right off. A little subdued but you're a looker alright. So what do I call you - Clara or Antigone?"

Sudden vision of herself gyrating on a round plush covered stage. Bottom lip dropped in a pout - her clothes slipping to the floor. Googoo-eyeing a bunch of five-o'clock-shadow faces. Beer dripping down lecherous mouths. A quick shake and her thin slip slips to the floor. Teeny bud boobs and white cotton underwear. She watches the leering men fall off their chairs.

Begins to laugh. Tears urge out of the sides of her eyes and she feels a pain in her side. Laughing hysterically, out loud. People in the rest of the car turn and glare. Acne-faced young man stares.

"What's so funny?"

Clara wipes her eyes across her sleeve and swallows a rising giggle. "You are. I am. Antigone. What a joke!" She smiles. "Sorry. Actually, I live on a farm with my parents. I paint. And I'm just going home after seeing my brother off at the airport." Face straightens, as Simon comes back.

They had gone straight to the flight counter and watched as his ticket was stamped and his luggage weighed. Slid along the metal rollers out of sight. No direct flight

to South Africa-- he had booked through Portugal. Put up in Lisbon for a few days, then on to Johannesburg. At the counter, olive-skin men and women had clutched child-hands and shown their tickets. "Please be in the waiting room one hour before take-off." The ticket clerk had looked at her watch. "Fifteen minutes."

They'd rushed down the hall to the bookstore - fluorescent-light lit. Clara had bought Simon two books. Fantasies. Cover-pictures of bronze-bodied men and swords and silver-scaled dragons on front. They'd rushed down the hall to the bar. But no time, no time. Crowded and too many people to be served. No time.

"You really had me going." The young man's holey grin settles from laughter and fixes on Clara. The other passengers have turned back in their seats now. Clara watches a bitty baby rocking back and forth - back and forth - in its mother's arms. "Quite the cut up, aren't you?" Taylor smiles. "Hey. You listening to me?"

Clara's eyes focus back on the new cigarette glowing between his lined lips.

"Un huh." She nods back. "So what is it you do? Don't tell me, you're the booking agent for a strip joint. Just kidding. Are you going to Montreal?"

"Yup. Live there. And I do go to school. Psychology at McGill. I want to work with screwed-up kids. Figure they can identify with me. Know what I mean?" His teeth shine a soft yellow.

Clara looks through the smoke haze at his flashing eyes. So dark - they're almost black. Almost seem to sink inside. Like Simon's.

"That's great. I mean really. So tell me Mr. Psychologist, do you think I need help?" Clara's back begins to relax. Her shoulders settling against the seat.

Taylor's mouth folds in as he sucks a ball of smoke. Let's it slowly ooze out. "Everyone does," he answers softly.

The conductor reaches down for their tickets, passes them through a hole punch and hands them back. "Merci."

Taylor shoves the ticket inside his bag. "Damn, I should have gone to the washroom."

Clara's eyes widen and she hedges a bit in her seat. Closer to the window. "Should've? What do you mean?" She refrains from looking down at his jeans.

Taylor catches her shuffle and grins. "No, silly. Now who's got who going? Actually I take this train a lot 'cause my parents live in Toronto and sometimes I can get two trips out of one ticket. If they don't punch a hole in it,

you can get a refund." So I try to be in the can when the conductor makes his rounds. Every once in a while they'll come back around again and then I rather gallantly concede defeat. But lots of times the scheme works. Poor starving student and all that stuff, you know."

"Oh." Small flecks of snow stick to the outside of the window. Slowly melting on the warm glass. Replaced by others.

"So where'd your brother go? Holiday?"

"Sort of. Flew Air Portugal." Clara, inside, needing to talk. To tell someone. But afraid to. Too hard to understand. If she can't - doesn't yet - how can a stranger? Doesn't even know Simon. No. Don't want to go through the explaining. No.

Simon had held her hand as they'd hurried towards the lounge. The red jacket - Richard's hockey jacket - open and almost fitting. They'd stopped in front of the white desk. Cool white arborite. End of the line. Lady in uniform smiling like a television advertisement. Ticket holders only past this point.

"I don't understand why you have to go in there so early. I thought we'd have more time," Clara remembered saying.

"Me too." Simon had leaned over and stuffed the paperbacks in his duffle pocket. "Thanks for the books, Clara." Eyes so dark, they had seemed to absorb all light from the buzzing hall. Had seemed to draw Clara inside. Leaving only a fuzzy-light glow around Simon's face. A circle of white. It had seemed to Clara a ring of protecting grace. She had hugged her brother. Wrapping the circle tighter against him. Her arms holding it against him. Shoulder smoothed against her face. "Write, okay? A lot. I will, too."

Clara's heart patter patter pat pattered strong - so loud she could hear it. Could hear it quickening. Loudening. Pushing to get outside of her - inside of Simon.

Taylor touches Clara's hand. "Hey, you, Miss Meditation, what say we go to the bar car?" She nods. Conceding seems appropriate, after letting Simon go.

They push through the heavy doors and sway with the rocking train. Push into the next car. They walk past the microwave ping ping of the canteen counter. Iced pastries and saran-wrapped sandwiches languish behind smudged glass. A short line of hungry people moves against the wall, to let Clara and Taylor through.

The bar section of the car is crammed with people. Several small circle-tables hold styrofoam soup bowls and plastic spoons. Hands crumble crackers into greasy noodle

soup. The wall booths are people-packed. A pin-striped business man sloshes back beer from a bottle. And two elderly women gently gurgle from plastic swizzle-stick glasses. Against the back wall, two young men huddle over a booth table. Eyes concentrating, on a flat board game. They roll red dice - white dice - and sip detachable-stem-glass wine. Half of the booth is empty.

Taylor lightly lays his hand on Clara's shoulder and steers her towards the booth. "Mind if we join you?" He pops words towards the concentrating youths.

Crinkle-foreheads raise and out of one mouth, "Uh, well, we're trying to play a game."

His partner smiles at Clara. "Sure, why not. Sit down." He extends his finger-chewed hand. "I'm Bob," he says. "And this is John."

Taylor returns the handshake. "What are you playing?"

"You never played Risk? Great game. Look, we just started and it's a lot of fun. Better with more people. Want to play?"

Taylor catches the soft shake of Clara's head. He touches her once again. This time, lightly laying his fingers on hers. "Come on, Antigone, it'll get your mind off whatever it is your mind is on."

Clara feels trapped - pinned to new people. Game playing. Be a good sport. "Maybe I'll just watch."

"Impossible, my dear. Come on now, pick a playing colour." Bob gestures to several small plastic cases of coloured pieces. In front of him, little pink plastic bits sit in their container. John's bits are yellow.

"Blue," Clara concedes, seeing the blue mass of Europe on the board. "I always wanted to be a blonde."

"Alright, Blondie. But I'll warn you now, blue never seems to win."

"That's okay." Clara reaches for the blue. Taylor chooses red.

"Okay now, the little markers represent armies. I deal these cards and whichever countries you draw, you put a marker there. That means you own the country. The object of the game is to attack other countries and take them over. That's done with the roll of the dice. Attacker rolls red and defender rolls white. But you have to defeat army by army. Oh, and you place twenty-one extra markers on any of your own countries."

John takes over. "It's best to build up strength in a small area. Try and concentrate your power. Okay, Clara, see you own four countries on the blue continent - Europe. One country in Africa and two in Asia. So you'd do best to set up most your armies in Europe. Then, you take over the

outsiders and gain control of the continent. If you dominate one continent completely, you get extra armies each turn. Get it?

"But what's the objective?"

"World domination, of course."

"Quite the power trip!" Taylor flicks a match to his cigarette. "You guys want anything? What about you, Clara?" He orders four glasses of wine from the red-suited waiter.

"Okay, let's just start. You'll pick it up as you go along." The game begins. Drinks steadily planted in front of the players. A new twist is introduced. Whole drinks must be downed, by each involved party, if a country falls. They begin ordering two and three rounds at a time. Clara is laughing now. Giddily giggling as her armies mount bigger and bigger across Europe. Her turn rolls around again.

"Ah, I guess I'll attack Greenland." She gestures to the mass of blue markers covering Iceland. "From Iceland." Taylor picks up the white die, frowning down at his lonely two armies that stand in the midst of Greenland.

"You always attack me," he winces.

"'Cause you're the only one close to me. Besides, I just thought I'd protect Europe. Look at your force on North America. Sooner or later, you're going to attack me. I keep telling you, all I want to do is protect Europe. I'm not

going to move into your territory. I just want Europe safe."
Clara sighs. "Besides, what else can I do?"

"Well, you've got South Africa. You could attack Bob down there."

"No, she can't," Bob gloats. "One army isn't allowed to attack."

Clara throws the three red dice. Taylor rolls his two. "Ah ha, we each lose one army. I won't go down without a fight." Taylor waits for Clara's dice to fall again. He rolls. "Shit! Alright, smart ass, now you own Greenland. Thanks a lot. Now I can't get extra armies for owning North America."

"Don't be silly. Greenland's separate from North America."

"No, it's not. Remember, this is artful geography. Well done, Clara. Your turn again, after you guys drink." Clara and Taylor reach for wine from the glass-crowded table. Light yellow liquid shining in glass after glass. As if an army in itself.

Clara wipes a drip from her mouth corner. "No, I'll just take my card. I told you all I want is Europe."

"And we keep telling you, you can't be a pacifist in this game. You've got to try for the whole world. That's the object. Blot out everyone else."

"I'll stop for this round." Clara fingers another glass of wine and sips. Pulls a card from the pile and hands the dice to John.

"Okay. South Africa from East Africa." He hands one white dice to Clara. "This should be a quick one." Clara's blue man army slides off the board after one roll. "South Africa has fallen." He grins.

Simon had gently pulled away from Clara. "Look, sweetie, stop crying or you're going to get me upset. I'll miss you." Lightly kissing her cheek, he had turned. Handed his ticket to the uniform lady and walked on. Clara had watched him pass through the metal detector and disappear into the room behind the opaque glass. As if he had suddenly fallen off the edge of the earth. Passed out of her reach.

The tiny-bit-armies bounce and shift across the board and wine sloshes from full glasses. The train seems to be moving slower now. Labouring. Lurching along. From the brightly lit car, Clara can see only black and emptiness beyond the frosted windows. "This is ridiculous. A blizzard at the end of April." She gulps from her glass, and with her finger smoothes table-spills through specks of ashes and food that jiggle across the table.

"Oh, come on, maybe it'll be fun." Bob catches his glass, as it slides towards the edge of the table. "We have plenty of cheap wine at our place and lots of room. Our housemates are both in Quebec City. If this storm is as widespread as the conductor said, they'll be able to ski home tomorrow. We're just lucky we made it this far."

Taylor nods. "Thanks, you guys. That's really a nice offer. Are you far from the train station? I mean, the conductor says I should catch the 9:30 a.m. to Montreal. He thinks the tracks will be clear by then."

"No problem. A five minute cab ride. And the bus depot is close too, Clara. You'll be able to leave for your parents' place in the morning. It'll be great. We can party all night and then see you guys off in the morning. Provided the snow's stopped."

The glasses are drained quickly. The loneliest drops dribbled into mouths. Their table is cleared by the tired-eye waiter. Looking as if he needs a drink. The game is packed away and the train plods into the station. Brake-sounds creak through the snow. People and luggage ooze out doors through the heavy white drifts and into the station. Into waiting cabs. VIA has called ahead and Kingston cabbies, eager for bad night fares, sneak off through snow, taking passengers to motels. Taking Bob, John, Taylor and Clara to a house near the University.

Clara rubs the towel over her hair, feeling the wet seep through to her hands. She tosses it over the back of the chair and runs her fingers through her damp snarl hair. She can still see her hand print, warm and wet, on the black phone beside her. Can still hear the click-clack static of her mother's voice. Can still hear her relief. Happy that Clara is all right and has a place to stay for the night.

Clara's ears still hear the assurance that ran through the wires. "Yes, Simon is fine." Jenny had called the airport. The storm would not reach the Atlantic till sometime tomorrow. "Simon is fine."

Clara can hear the stereo through the floor and walls. Drum-beat bumps of Peter Gabriel. She sips the amber from glass. Feels the hot brandy move through her mouth and throat. Smooths talcum over her shower scrubbed body. Smell of being a baby again.

Soft flannel against her feet, she pulls on the man-pajamas. Folds up the cuffs and draws the string, tight across her belly. Funny, wearing pants to bed. Her feet feel naked. Better than nothing. Didn't bring a nightgown on a one day trip. Figured she'd sleep on the train. She crawls between the crinkled white sheets and flicks off the light. Pulls her feet up close to her chest and rubs her toes with her reached-down hands. Always so cold. Wishes she had her nightgown to snuggle up in. Wine and brandy curl in her belly

- tingle in her head. Smooth over the shouts and laughing of the others, downstairs. Smooth over Peter Gabriel's drumming and humming. His clear-sung-sounds swirl with brandy in her brain. When I try and sleep at night I can only dream in red. Slow fluttering lashes let in flashes of shadow on the ceiling above her. The outside world is black and white with just one colour dead. Her lids droop heavy and close.

* * * * *

THREE

The lake surface is neither wavy nor still. No wind today, but the quick touch of air and water that creates soft rolls over the bodies of fish. Sun oozes orange into the early morning grey. A few fragile clouds bunch and disperse. The arc of a loon's sudden dip from the air to water. His feet fan him across the crystal surface.

Green canvas canoe leaves thread-thin lines behind it as it moves smoothly across the time warping water. Clara's paddle drips its arc on the water. Cutting a line and pulling broadface back towards the boat. So still. The air damp and still subtly grey. She watches the drifting loon flick its web-feet and disappear into dark. Imagining its breath bubbles, as it stays so long under water. Sliding a silver fish-baby into its mouth. So long under water.

When Simon was on Vancouver Island - Royal Roads Military Academy - he'd buddied up and dived. Tanks full of breath after breath on back, he'd piked and rolled under water. Watching salt-specks float past flashes of fish and rock. He'd scuba-ed under ice in the winter. Strange feeling, that must have been. Attached to ropes that drifted behind and curled up into air through holes in the ice.

He'd lost two buddies, one winter. Ropes somehow detached. Uncurled. They'd been caught and held between

layers of water. Hard and soft. Specimens under a microscope. Caught and held. Unable to find their way back. Breath after breath after breath. Until only emptiness was left in the packs on their backs. And the breathing had stopped. Swirling and curling between layers - hard and soft. Their bodies had never been found. Floating somewhere, stiff. Stiffs caught. Cells preserved, in the cold ice flow. They would not have started to swell for months. Till the water warmed and the ice went. Clara imagined them, untouched by teeth. Stiff - still - and floating. Floating alone.

From the canoe, Clara watches the loon pop up, yards from where it went down. Salty fish meat. They are supposed to make lousy eating. Clara is glad. She sees mommy and daddy loon glide by the base of the huge cliff. Behind them, fuzzy little loon balls weave up and down with the gentle swells.

Each summer, one family claims the small rock, sticking up through the water in front of the cabin, as home. They gather and sun there. Oozing sticky white-grey that dries in the heat. At night, their screams drift in the dark. Clear. Sounding more like a man making that noise - trying to imitate. Yet, hardly sounding human.

The canoe cuts towards the cliff base - leaving v-ripples behind it. They slowly sink. Clara brushes water

away from her paddle, then pulls towards the canoe. It turns and moves with her through the water, alongside the worn rock face. Stretching up, straight from the water. Stretching straight down, into the water. Over three-hundred feet both ways. A fault in the earth. Fault. Funny word. As if a mistake - a fault - created this. Massive. Beautiful. Muted-green lichens in lace patterns. Rust dribble-lines in crevices. Natural. And the drawings - their drawings. Pictures, Indian finger-steady hands drew here. Rabbitman. And a pair of deer. A few feet above the water line. They must have slipped along in their canoes and drawn from the water. Palm-size pictures. Slowly being sucked in by the rock - melted off by the rain. Softly fading. Still there to remind. A fault in the earth.

Clara guides her canoe in a half-circle, away from the cliff and lays her paddle across the gunnels. She slips her sweatshirt over her head and tosses it on the shiny wood ribs. The sun is now round in the sky. No longer cut in half, on the morning horizon. The clouds seem to have melted in its heat. A few white streaks line blue. Mostly blue. Clara tilts her head back and closes her eyes. Drifts warm, as the last ripples fade. Such a good feeling, so fast. Light soaks in face and arms. Legs absorbing quick colour. The sun breathes bright on her hair. Touches her lightly - brightly - like quick man fingers. She thinks about Simon.

Clara remembered buzzing in the boat with brother and father. Searching for the dock at first thaw. Bad winter, it got carried away by the ice. They scouted bays and beaches - finally gave up. New dock, sawed and nailed and cribbed in water, by Richard and Simon. That spring.

Even from the dock, the dark wood logs and shutters of the cabin seem hidden. Quiet and withdrawn. Away from the eyes of strangers. The place where Simon had almost felt at home. Where he had actually seemed to let thin-roots trail from the soles of his running shoes, down into the aging floor boards. He had felt good there. Here. And he and Clara had let the must and raw dust seep inside. Let it draw them into the mist of the past. Simon had promised to come back.

"Look, if anything happens to me, we'll meet here on my first birthday, after a year has passed. Okay? That way, we'll be sure we'll see each other - one way or another, okay?" Simon's eyes had slid into her very gut with his words and had left her with a sick-hole feeling inside, when this had made her feel better. Somehow relieved. Even if dead - Simon would come back. They'd get to be with each other. They'd get to talk. Clara sitting on the netted-in porch, listening to a voice from the air. That sick-hole feeling that this would be wonderful in its strangeness. That she would look forward to this. Nothing minor ever. Just major. Sick-hole feeling of wanting Simon back. Whole. Not just a

the air. Power of love, maybe. But no. Don't want it that way. Want him alive. Grinning. Real, not spirit-hand, touching her shoulder.

The sun touches her like quick man fingers - breathes bright on her hair. She picks up her paddle and still, with sun soaking, heads across the bay. Low growls inside her stomach. Pancakes? No, bacon and eggs. Yes, they all like bacon and eggs. She'll fix breakfast while everyone sleeps. Wake them up, when the coffee starts to drip. Drop. Except Jenny. She'll be up. The babies have to be fed. Suckled. Rained on. Little coo cooing, softly cuddled against Jenny. Later to be laid in their playpen on the shore, just off the dock. The bright sun filtering through tall pine branches. The babies close enough to watch. And Simon so far - so very far - away. Light spray from her paddle flicks up and brushes Clara's face.

* * * * *

Early morning habit now, Clara flips through McLean's - turns page after page in the newspaper. Looking for the name. The words. Usually short articles. S. Africa police arrest journalist. In South Africa, the hangman favours blacks. Discovering Apartheid. S. Africa rocked by spy scandal. And somehow to Clara, it is the seeing, the spotting of those words - the name that matters most. It is the pinpointing of place. The recognition of its existence - its reality - that matters to Clara. The knowledge that he is somewhere. That Simon is someplace.

Clara crosses her legs, on the den floor, and turns the newspaper page. An article on South Africa. Simon drifts in past the words.

She remembered how they had been left alone, in Richard's den that night, after their parents had discussed and argued and accepted Simon's plan. How the wind had quietly blown up curtain billows. Exposing the specks of dirt that clung on the window sill. Left by the rain.

They had sat so still and alone in the night-quiet. As if they had nothing to say to each other, right then. Like two strangers in an elevator, it had seemed to Clara. Strangers. Avoiding each other's glance, denying possible conversation. The possibility of communication. Neither

wanting to catch the other's eye. Simon and Clara had stared, straight ahead, at the pedestal-propped globe by their father's desk. Stared straight ahead at the arc of blue and the tips of colour that broke in on the sides. Land. No words had slipped out. No movement. Just the staring at painted masses. Too hard to imagine oneself mixed-up somewhere on there - feet planted speck tiny - imperceptibly tiny - on the man-metal globe.

From the corner of her eye, Clara had watched Simon stand and walk over to the motionless globe. Motionless, from her place of the couch, she had watched him touch the earth. Watched his fingers pad it into a slow spin. Spin it around. Middle East. Russia. Canada. And slowing down - stop - on Europe. His resting hand had cast a small cup-shadow on Africa. And it had struck her then. Smash. That he was going to go away. It had hit her like that. Bash. That he was going to Africa. That he was going to that miles and miles away place. But here only inches - only fingers - away. Another spin and back again. From that tiny painted country he could shade with his very hand. And somehow, it had seemed less serious - not quite real - then.

She had thought of how they'd run their fingers across the television screen when they were younger. How they'd touched the jungles of Africa. How they'd moved their fingers on elephants and alligators, and pulled at Tarzan's

loin cloth. Jane's dress. She had thought of how they'd giggled, pretending they were reaching right in. Really touching those animals. Those clothes. Thinking that maybe they did have the power. That an elephant's trunk was not out of their reach.

To Clara, watching Simon's hand dwarf the globe-country, the thoughts and pretending had seemed real again. Her laughter had moved from inside out and grown louder, as she'd watched Simon's grin break. Watched his fingers move the continent colours - the water - around and around. Faster and faster till they had all disappeared. Grown together. And she and Simon had laughed together. Their own sounds caught up in the whirl of the world.

Clara glances back down at the newspaper, spread out on the floor, in front of her. Fluffs of lint from the rug dot the open page. Fingers from hands dab at the corner column. Try to feel the roughness - the realness - of the name. Of the place. She reads the article's small square paragraphs quickly. Tomorrow, she will have forgotten what they said. She rarely remembers anymore. Probably couldn't answer questions later, if she were given a quiz. Couldn't recall facts or specifics. They are no longer filtered through inside. They have begun to take up too much room. The article leaves touches on her nerves as light as those left by a badly-written book.

It is the mere existence that is important now. The fact that she can touch - if not feel - the words on the open page. The fact that Simon still exists, in a real place. And that that place has a name. A reality.

Clara remembers the spinning of the globe in her father's den. Remembers that Simon's fingers were the ones that moved it. Remembers that Simon's fingers were the ones that touched it. Not hers. Remembers that Simon's fingers touched it - not hers - didn't touch hers. She closes her eyes and touches. Touches again the words, on the page spread in front of her. Feeling nothing but rug lint and inky smudging. She thinks about blindness and braille. Wanting to feel the words - the place - with her fingers. Wanting to trust another sense.

Eyes still shut, she stands, and hands stretched out in front, she feels her way across the room. Ignoring - turning away from the coffee table leg-bump and the kick-ripped newspaper. Eyes still shut, she moves to the side of her father's desk and reaches out towards the motionless globe. With her fingers, she feels the coastal outline and the bump of mountains. The curve of the horn. With her fingers, she feels closer to Simon.

* * * * *

In the corner of the room, the easel. And the leaning-over sitting form of the painter. The easel and the painter and the painting. The painting. A tall wizened man stands off to one side. Two small baggy-leotard girls in the centre. A young boy, head in hand, sits by a table near the front. And a tall once womanly woman, now thin, stands behind holding a baby. The woman touches the baby, touches the woman but that is all. All for the touching. And their faces, all their faces, are coloured in red. No eyes or noses or gaping-hole talky mouths. Just red ovals. Expressionless. In their limbs - tiredness and hunger. In their posture - weariness and thirst. All for the touching, but somehow there is more and the separate family figures seem to join together. Seem to touch, in the untouching of this picture.

Clara dips her brush in the murky grey water of the glass. She wipes the camel hair tip on the rag. A rag. A piece of one of her old nightgowns. Warm flannel worn. By the time she tore it up, there was a split seam under one arm and three buttons were missing off the front. The hem brushed against her calves, eight inches from the floor, and the sleeves gathered around her mid-arm. An old nightgown. How old? Old. Worn until worn.

At night, she would pull her knees up and wrap the edges of the nightgown around her feet. Till she was all

inside it. All but her head and arms inside it. Like a bag of potatoes. Then she'd lift the blankets over her head and lie inside the darkness. A warm cocoon. And listen to her heart beating over and over again. Would it stop? Sometimes, it seemed to go so fast. Patter patter pat patter. Make-believe palpitations. But they had seemed so real. That was when she'd been little. So afraid to die. So sick. Young. Smaller than now.

Days and nights were discarded since then, with old outgrown nightgowns. And at night, Clara still curled in her cocoon. In a few nightgowns, she'd slipped into sleep quickly. Patter patter patter patter. No pat palpitations. Just even breathing and beating.

Pat pat, they've come back now. At night, the sudden shallow breaths of being afraid. Pat pat, she places her fingers against the big neck-vein at night and touches her heart beat. Fast with out-of-control nerves. A vicious circle. Knowing that she makes this happen, doesn't make it stop. Pat pat makes it happen again and again. Afraid to go to sleep. Wanting to stay conscious of it. To keep it beating. Sometimes she starts to drift and drowse and feels the shudder. Fears the shudder. Thinks about going to sleep and never waking up. Must keep conscious of it. Breathing and beating. No longer natural reflexes. She has to think

about them - urge them on - or they'll stop. Then remembering won't matter. Not like riding a bicycle. Fall off for too long and you can't get back on. Not ever or ever again. At least not here. At least not as her. As she. She Clara. Patter patter pat patter. Lies there for hours at night, in the little black sack. Eyes flutter fluttering shut then wacking open again. Starting to get bags under her eyes. Bags under potato-eyes in the dark potato sack. She drifts off a little each night but the waking up doesn't reassure her. No guarantees. Just lucky, this time.

Clara finishes with the rag and leaves it on the desk. A rag. A piece of one of her old nightgowns.

Simon had sat on the edge of her bed. The white hospital bed and she was in her little pale-blue flowered nightgown. Cheeks sunk and grey. Eyes, half-open, smiled up at her brother.

God, she remembers it all so clearly. Frozen in memory, like a polaroid snapshot that just now, popped out of the camera.

In his lap, The Cat in the Hat.

God, how clear. She reaches into the memory and picks up the book. The spine of the book is stiff in Clara's

hands. Cracks when opened. Never even read it. It drops from her hands. Guilt. She has nothing major to be guilty about. Nothing massive or horrid. Never even crushed an ant. Could never do that. Nothing major. Just little things that eat away and seem to suck at her.

Nothing major. But the time Simon came to read to her and she just couldn't stay awake. Felt just too sick to catch his words in her ears. And he'd been learning to read. Come in to see her. Risked trouble with the big fat red-faced grump nurse. And she'd fallen asleep. Not even having the first sentence from his mouth, to remember.

God, nothing major. Just little things that eat away and seem to suck at her. And death, death always looming just across that line. Life to death with a patter patter pat patter. Or maybe a quick pop in her head. Aneurysm. Jenny's friend died from one. Husband said she yelped, did a frenzied little dance, and then just keeled over. Oh God, nothing minor. To never be able to do everything we want. To always go with something unfinished. Something we've tried to wish away. Can't. So many pictures in Clara's head. And the memory of that communion. Without Simon. Cheating on him.

Now erase the eating of bread and the drinking of wine. Now lie awake and, open-eyed-eared, listen to Simon's story. No. Not done. To never be able to do everything she wants.

Clara slips her soft nightgown over her head. Feels it slide down her body and swish the floor. She fingers the two collar-buttons up and flicks her light switch off. Goes down to the kitchen. The newly stained steps creak, at the touch of her cold feet.

At the table, Jenny sits. Her feet propped-up on a chair. A discarded typewriter ribbon curls beside a pile of envelopes. Its carbon lightly smudging itself onto the naked pine. Clara tosses it in the garbage and wipes the marks away, with a slash of the dishcloth. "You look beat, mom. Did you get finished?"

"Yup, just now, and I am. I thought I'd have a cup of tea before bed. Marie and Craig will probably be awake in a few hours. Now that they're teething, I seem to be up all the time." Yawn. Jenny warps her back into an arch and stretches her arms.

"I'm dying for tea too, I'll make it." Clara pads over to the counter and places the kettle on the stove. Checking to see that the fire underneath is still hot enough. "I finished my painting." She pulls two bags out of the tea jar and leans against the counter.

"Terrific, can I see it?" Jenny sees her daughter straighten up and begin across the room. "You can show me when we go upstairs. We'll have our tea first." She uncrosses her feet and stretches them forwards and

backwards. "Are you feeling okay? Tired? You look, as dead as I feel."

"No, I'm fine. Just a little shell-shocked from sitting so long. This tea is just what I need." Clara pours the steaming water out of the pot. Drops in the tea bags and pours in more freshly bubbled water. "Lemon?"

"Mmmm." Jenny smiles. "I could get used to this. What service!" She slides her feet from the chair onto the floor and gestures to Clara. "Relax."

Clara curls into the warm wood of the big chair. Blowing across the surface of the tea, she sips in warmth and fingers the pile of white envelopes. Shuffles them to the table. "Are you trying to save the world or what?"

"I wish. Actually with a secretary or two I might be able to give it a good shot."

"Gee, imagine what you could do, if you had a word processor!" Clara begins to laugh - a fresh gulp of tea gurgling in her throat. "Oh, ouch!" Her face turns red and a stream of tea pours out of her nose. "How rude!" She begins to laugh again. Jenny releases a held-back giggle.

"Lucky you weren't drinking pop. That really stings." Reaching over, she sticks a wisp of hair back into Clara's pigtail-elastic. Clara touches her mother's hand.

"Don't you ever feel like it's hopeless? Like there's just not enough time?" She looks at her mother and

wipes the wet sugary tea from under her nose. Jenny is quiet for a moment.

"All the time." Jenny's voice is soft.

Clara nods. "Sometimes it seems really strange, you know. I mean, you work your head off, writing letters, marching and phoning the government. While a bunch of people run around figuring out the price of gold or sticking price tags on toothpaste and tampax. Or watching T.V. And somewhere else, there's all these other people, who run around all day, blasting other people and locking each other up. And then there's the people, who just seem to sit. Do you ever wonder if there's really a choice? If there's a chance that they might be in each other's shoes. That they might even be painting or writing letters and we might be doing their thing. God, it's scary, don't you think? Either way." Clara squeezes another piece of lemon over her cup and watches the liquid lighten.

"It is." Jenny wipes a fleck from her saucer and rolls it on the table with her finger. Back and forth. "Not everyone has a choice at everything, all the time. Sometimes, it's somebody else who's pushing the buttons. But when we do have the opportunity, we have to make our decisions carefully. We have to try to do what's right. Not everyone gets handed the same world and not everyone who does, deals with it in the same way. But it only takes one person to

start something. I just always try to do what's best and to accept my own limitations. I think that's the best that anyone can do." She pours more tea into Clara's cup and then into her own.

Clara watches the spilled-over tea rise higher in her saucer. "Do you believe in destiny?"

"Who do you think I am, with all these questions? The great guru?" Smiling, Jenny sees the urgency in her daughter's face and continues. "I'm not really sure, I guess. But, honey, Simon does. Right or wrong, we have to respect that."

Nothing major. Just little things that seem to eat away and suck at Clara. Like the patter patter pat patter. Trying to put it out of her mind. Clara sips her tea. Trying to put out the minor things and trying not to feel guilty. Not to worry.

Jenny studies the wide clear eyes of her daughter. "Clara." She lays her hand over the smaller paint-flecked one. "Sometimes, recognizing our own limitations is the hardest thing. Come on now, I want to see this new work of art. Private midnight screening, I am indeed honoured." Jenny runs some water into the cups and leaves them to soak. She follows Clara up the stairs and into her room.

"Oh! It's striking."

Clara feels it begin inside. The patter patter pat patter.

"But why the red faces?"

Inside - all inside - the urgency is running, running away of time. The feeling tight in her belly and chest that things are speeding up that things are going faster now and she can't slow them down.

She returns her mother's hug and says goodnight. Light out. Room black now - she wraps her feet inside flannel and curls under covers. Eyes open worrying and waiting. Waiting. Waiting. She's just not sure what for.

* * * * *

One by one. Clara lifts the soaking diapers from the pail and rinses them under the tap. Baby poo melts and slides down the drain. When the water runs across the cloth nearly clear, Clara lowers the diaper into the washing machine. Watches it curl on the bottom - coil after coil. Diaper after diaper pile up in the machine. Clara sprinkles soap flakes in circles. Shuts the lid. Deep diaper smell hangs heavy. Thick as earth. Life drooled on diapers. The proof, they are alive. Marie and Craig colicky and sloshing in themselves. Or grunting and crying. Constipated. Bum heat felt - their heat felt on their skin. Knowing they're alive. Watching the brown wave into soap suds. Shit as proof. Living proof. Shit. Thick as earth.

Clara lets down the lid lightly and turns, hearing the door creak mother-open.

Jenny smiles at her daughter. "You're terrific. You know that?" She pulls her boots off, toe on heel and shuffles the slush out the door with a stocking foot. "What would I do without you?"

Clara watches the door pushed shut - watches her mother emerge, skinny from the thick winter coat. It gets hung on the hook at the beginning of the row. Simon's hook. The only hook not piled with jackets and caps. So many clothes around here. So many people. Clara follows her

mother's bone hands as they reach out and brush against her cheek.

"I tell you, Marie and Craig sure have it good. Two moms for the price of one. Sorry to leave you with all this shit." Jenny smiles. "Pun. intended."

Clara smiles back. "No problem." Clara feels. "Lay before me your dirty diapers and they shall be cleansed." The wursh wursh of the washing spins softly and Clara thinks of her baby brother and sister. Their clear tiny faces - clean diapers. Their shared blood. "You look so tired. Want a glass of sherry?"

"Love one, but with you doing this fun stuff all day, I guess I'll have to see about dinner." Jenny blinks. Eyes still adjusting from the outside snow glare.

"Pas de problem. Ham's in the oven and vegetables on the stove. The babies have really been fussing but I think they're asleep now. And Tommy and Trudi are glued to that puzzle Dad bought." Clara thinks of the puzzle shapes. The clear cut edges that all fit together. Just got to look hard enough. Just got to look. "Come on, we'll settle down for a quick snort."

Jenny pushes the diaper-bare pail against the wall. "How about a quick one? Then, I'm afraid I've got one more favour to ask. Last one today, scout's honour." She slaps her gloves against the dryer lid. Tiny ice beads pop over its top.

"Mail?"

"Ya. I forgot it again. I know Trudi and Tommy will go, but I hate having them out in this snow, when it's getting dark. Would you mind?"

"Course not." Clara reaches over for her coat and slips one arm in.

"No drink first?" Jenny's eyes pass through Clara. Trying to see inside.

"Pour me a nice one. I'll be back in a flash." She peck-kisses her mother's cheek and sticks one foot in her boot. Other foot. Pulls on her mitts. Sees her mother's face frost-cloudy through the window as she pulls the porch door shut.

Thick heavy snow - the temperature rising a little - Clara pulls her feet up through the weight. Moves down the driveway. Damn Mr. Elliott, thinks Clara. He's supposed to plow this thing twice a day. Keeps his cows in our barn for free and then doesn't come through. Piss off!

Wet white sticks to her scarf. Filters the air, cool into her mouth and nose. Clara snuffles and mitt-hand presses the scarf up higher on her face.

In the sinking light and snow mist, everything is muted. Dulled and softened. Even the wood and wire of the fence seem hazy. Not quite clear. No icy break through the

snow, her feet sink deep past its surface. Giant pressed-out footsteps. Freak footsteps in a one-two down the lane.

Damn it, thinks Clara. Mom always forgets the mail. No, not always. Just more lately. So tired though - she's so tired. Back at the store and with the babies and Trudi and Tommy and Dad. And thoughts of Simon. Too much. Clara worries about Jenny. Worries about the load. Too much. Just too much to do and to think about. Got to stop bothering her with my problems. Worries. Got to let her free of all that. Mom's just got too much to handle.

Foot heavy trudge and the soft glare off the mail box. Metal holding place, still shiny with snow. The front lid is fastened by dripping-ice-sticks. Clara tugs and lifts. Reaches into the black. Parcel. S. Parcels. And bills, of course. The thin plastic window envelopes felt through her mitts. But who cares about bills? The song and dance about death and taxes. She shoves them into her pack sack - now resting - raised open on her knee. Who cares? Parcels. And in the now shy moon, Clara pulls a brown bundle from the box. Red felt pen oozes through the light. Richard and Jenny Dobrik and family. She slides it through her wool-touch into the bag and reaches for the rest. The last. Another parcel wet-touched and pulled into muted light. She sees her marker marked name. Clara Dobrik. And a white customs sticker. Was there one on the other parcel? Funny.

Not noticed. But here smudged black pen printing - she catches the words. S.A. Flag at the top of the list. No, he couldn't have. But really no doubt. He got her a flag. Real words blend into night-black as quick clouds blow past the moon. Wanting to open it right then. There. Alone. But will wait. She slips the package into her pack and hoists it up on her shoulder. Turns towards the house. He got her a flag!

She remembered the package after package, he'd sent her before. When he was at Military College. Flag after flag that he'd rolled from posts. From his hands to hers. B.C. flag from Victoria parliament. "Almost got caught that time," he'd written. And then to Quebec, for language lessons. The blue and white flag. His posting in Gagetown, New Brunswick. No flag had been safe. Clara remembered other parcels he'd sent her. The "Kiss me I'm Greek" mug wrapped in his old socks. Unwashed. The toilet seat signed by all his friends, at an eviction party, in Calgary. Not wiped. She had imagined other people - her friends if she'd had any - shown many - what they would have said. Buzzed and brewed over Freud. Not possibly understanding her feeling a little uneasy - unfair - when she'd finally windexed off yellow, before hanging the toilet seat on her bedroom wall. A feat. Nails and string and tape. And it always seemed to be falling down. String getting longer - slipping through tape. And

nails seeping longer and longer out of plaster. But somehow Clara had always managed to prop it back up, before it could fall. A reminder of Simon.

Like all the flags. Quebec. Draped over her night table. And New Brunswick. Hung in front of her closet. "No door here, Dad. But don't worry," she'd said, when they moved into the farmhouse. Knowing where she'd hang the prettiest flag. Free water boat. A feeling of movement.

And now, South Africa. You'd think they wouldn't let it out of the country. The customs sheet. Shit, who would have noticed. Stamp - blind - stamp. Probably nobody noticed. Unimportant to outsiders. Strangers.

Through the thick drift of air, Clara can hear quiet moo-calls from the barn. Cows outside for most their short lives. Touched by the wind, even in winter. But now safe - snug in the cool, but windfree, barn. Clara imagines their snot dripping down in little pouches. Plopping cement on the barn floor. She snuffles. Urges her own back up, inside her nose. Muses. You'd think it would freeze inside when it's cold. Crystalize. What sense does this make? She wipes her ice-bubble mitten across her nose and catches the shine of wet glistening in grey. What sense does this make? She presses open the back porch door. Clutches her pack - his package. Feels it tight against her shoulder.

* * * * *

Bright light of the bathroom - the tap steam rises. Curling through the air. It breathes mist onto the mirrors. Plants a warm sweat on the floor and walls. It dulls the print on the yellowing newspapers glued to the back wall. 'D-Day'. 'Corsets on sale'. Jenny dragged the stacks of old newspapers down from the attic. Stuck them up as wallpaper. Clara can make out their headlines, from her seat in the old claw bathtub. 'War Declared'. Dad was there, she thinks. Riding past waves and metal bits and bodies in a tin-can ship. Tattooed, like all the others. "It made me a man," he always said. He was there. A part of his life pronounced, on the bathroom wall. And now paper yellowed - Richard greyed. The grotesque passage of time.

Clara turns the tap off. Listens to it dispel a drip drip. Listens to the water roll up, as she lies back down. It glugs through the overflow drain. She lets the heat move from inside out. Seep out her open pores. The warmth so circling. Soothing. Protective. Eyes closed, she lets the water wash over her pale thin skin. Thin strands of hair, half-dry, spread across the water behind her. Float separate and softly sink.

When they were younger, Simon had talked of his brother before her. How the boy baby had died before her, so

she could be born. He had scared her with that. Not meant to, of course. Just statement of fact. What he thought was fact. But so tiny he'd been when it happened. Clara wondered how he could have been aware. How he could have realized. - remembered. Asked Jenny for answers later, when he began to talk. To question. How - still sucking at Jenny's breast - he could possibly have known. Maybe his feet had curled against the soft swell of her belly. Maybe he had just felt the closeness of something else alive. Close. He'd only been four months old when it happened. But he'd remembered. Asked about it and then told Clara, one day. As they'd teeter-totter walked behind their mother through the park.

"My baby brother died," he'd said. "Before you were born. He didn't get as big as he was supposed to. Mommy didn't tell why. But he came out too early and didn't know how to breathe yet. Mommy said he was too little to bury. But he's an angel now, you know. Did you see him in there? Mommy said you weren't inside yet. But I've been wondering. I mean, did he want to leave early? Did you push him out?"

Clara leans over and turns the hot-water tap on again. Watches the new steam float. Feels heat pulse on her feet and swirl up around her body. She reaches over to the basket on the corner shelf. Reaches for the wet-metal cuticle scissors. Slightly slippery - the middle pin slips out and

the two halves fall apart. She quietly curses. Lets one half of the scissors fall back into the basket. She holds the other half. Her cuticles now softened in the damp heat. She makes cutting motions at the dead skin. Realizes she only holds half-scissors between her fingers. Ineffective. Must be whole to work properly. Needs both pieces. She clutches the metal circle and with the sharp edge begins to scrape at the veil growing over her nail.

She remembered him telling her about it. About this baby brother. But how did he know it was a boy? Couldn't have. Wishful thinking maybe. Wanted a brother. Kindred spirits. Clara had thought about it often, since then. It seeped through her. A constant reminder of chance. The chance that he - it - might have lived. But that it didn't. It died so she could have a chance. Could be born. A chance.

Clara had wondered why it had happened. And how. How Jenny had felt. On the toilet maybe. Blood and a tiny dead speck. The instinctive fear of something gone wrong and the pain. Dark cramps slicing. Maybe didn't even tell Richard when they'd first hit. Probably hoped they'd pass. Maybe lying in bed. Legs drawn up in the sleep-quiet. Red life dribbling. Lying on fresh-washed sheets.

It haunted Clara. Always somewhere in the back of her head. In the pit. Such a chance her being here. A

gift? Saved for conception. Saved from illness. Such a sign. That she should be something special. Do something important. Why else did it happen?

Clara watches the red drip slow, into the water. It sinks in tiny balls then slowly spreads under the surface. She holds her finger in her mouth, sucking at the fresh poked hole. So what is it? - what am I here for? she thinks. Is it my painting? A thought that's come inside, before. Is it the painting? Which painting? The steam feels good in her lungs. Freeing the clogs. Sometimes, so afraid to add that last stroke. To finish each painting. If this is what I'm here for, will it end? Be over? Will I die? Empty voice musings. So that sometimes she feels like an idiot. Sometimes feels she must be paranoid. Mad. So afraid with each painting.

That thought sinks away and Simon takes its place inside. Maybe he's why. Maybe he's the reason. And she's been sent to guard him. Take care of him. Inside the beating - the pulsing is all for Simon.

Clara slides her hand beneath the bath surface and watches the fresh cuts shimmer. Watches the red globs dissipate. Like grease in a dishsoap commercial. She spreads her fingers and watches the blood trail in wrangly threads.

It drifts and breaks away, in dying pink lines.

Tap off. The steam now drips down the mirror. Dull lines slip down the outside of the toilet bowl - the sink-sides. Clara breaks her fingers up through the water surface. Watches the blood drip drop and circle-fade on the warm water shield. And inside, inside - the beating - the pulsing is all for Simon.

* * * * *

FOUR

Have you ever missed someone so badly that it hurt to forget them even for a second? That you needed to have the pain of their absence? That you couldn't stand them slipping backwards in your head? A sort of protection from within that you just didn't want.

In the summer at the cabin I like to throw rocks in the water. And watch the ripples spread and flatten out till the surface is smooth again.

Once Simon told me about a dream he had. His dream-body was in a hospital place. The waiting room was empty but there was a beautiful nurse sitting behind a desk. Naked. He said he had walked towards her as if he were going to make an appointment. And she had stood up. Her stomach, guts, everything were hanging right out. No blood, just a big gaping hole. And she had turned and walked away.

There was another beautiful nurse and she wheeled a stretcher towards Simon. There was a body on it. No arms or legs or head. Just a rectangle of body. And it was breathing.

And sitting and thinking. Thinking about
all those people who are still to come.
Who will experience a world I will never
see. No one I love will ever see. I
wonder what those people will look like
and what they will do. Will feel. I
wonder what they will feel. And if they
will ever sit and think about the people
who have come before. If they will care
enough, to pass judgement.

Today I think about the sun and all those poems
I've read. Lover dreaming of the rays that touch
her - warm her beloved far away. Makes no sense
to me. That same sun reaching down to strangers.
Even murderers. Even the dead. Faceless corpses -
their skin crackling and swelling. Poetic sun
warming splitting maggot eggs. Sun touching me -
touching Simon. But touching us each alone.

Today I look up at the clouds sweeping quickly
across the sky. Huge bunches travelling with
the wind. I watch the sun disappear in batton.
Blue shrink from the sky. As if it were yanked
up in a flat watery sheet. The clouds assume
control. I feel a fat drop slug onto my face.
Rain. Tears. Sweat. I concentrate and send
that cloud on to Simon. Or maybe he has sent
it on to me.

Today I think about Simon. Walking through the
green leaves or spread out on a beach. Thin

skin of sweat. The sun steams the skin dripping
droplets up into a cloud. This cloud. That
drops rain hard hitting onto my face and hands.

Today I open my mouth and catch Simon inside.

One night Simon and I played with the globe
in our father's den. Spinning spins so quickly
that all the countries - continents ran together.
No black lines separating. No spaces between.
Just a mass of colour and clear shreds of white.
My hand and his hand brushing each other.
Whirling the earth around and around.

If you were to put a huge chocolate cake with
icing and whipped cream and cherries and nuts
in front of a fat person you didn't know -
and he ate it - would you feel responsible?

If you were to find a book that someone you
loved shouldn't read - but did - would you
feel guilty?

I remember him coming into the room that night.
Red army man. Taylor. My feet were cold and he
told me he'd warm them up. Said I needed to be
close to someone. As if he knew. He climbed in
bed with me and brushed against my cheek. His
cheek against my cheek. All cigarette smokey.
His teeth scraped over tongue draped. Curvy
curled inside my mouth. Face skin touched.
The bed covers were twisted bunches pressed up
into my back. And he'd unbuttoned my pajamas -
untied the belt. I'd lifted up while he pushed
them down. Rolled them over and off my feet.
Kicked into a huddle mound with the sheets at
the end of the bed. As if I'd shed my skin. New
untouched meat raw underneath. Exposed to air.
To fingers. "You okay?" he'd asked and I'd nodded.
A child talking on the telephone. Word box silent.
Saliva sliding and mixing. "You okay?" he'd said
and I'd felt no. Said yes. But it just didn't

seem like the right time. The guilt wasn't passing. "Take. Eat. In remembrance of me."

I remember it being so very dark. I couldn't see him. Like being blind. Dark like his eyes - so dark - it was them that touched me. Pulled me inside. Dark like Simon's eyes.

Every Christmas Eve, dad would play Christmas carols on his violin and we would all sing. Nana taught me and Simon the harmonies to 'O Come All Ye Faithful'. We'd all sing and then hang up our stockings and then mom would come upstairs to listen to our prayers. One year, a long time ago, I remember mom was still humming 'Silent Night' when she came into my room. And I asked her what a virgin was. She told me it was a woman who had not been touched by a man. I thought about dad swinging me around at the park and holding my hand. But somehow, I knew that wasn't what she meant. I thought about my blue flannel nightie and the time Simon came to visit me in the hospital. I thought about Simon. And then I understood.

What do you give to someone you love when they go away? Do you tie up things with bows? Or buy them books? Maybe something yummy to eat on their trip. Or a kiss before they go. Maybe it would be best if you just told them what you felt inside. If you told them that what they were doing was wrong.

All curled up like a ball am I. Like a tiny baby. Like a sick Clara. Like the time Simon came to read to me. "The cat in the hat...." You won't be able to see me. I'm all inside now. I'm speaking to you from inside. I took a course in Creative Writing once. "Write about what you know," they said. "Write about the familiar. Write about places you've been." That's what they told us. "You like to canoe? Wonderful! Tell us about it. You watch loons at your cabin? Great! Take us diving with them."

Starting with what I know. Where I've been. Fine. I'll start in the place I know best. I'll start where I've been the most. I'll start in my mind. "Funny," you say. "Ha ha," you say. "That's one place I've never been." You bet your life you've never been here. Hear. And it's not funny. It's not ha ha. It's broken. So say I, Clara Dobrik. Welcome to my mind. You know actually I started out quite small, brainwise I mean. But every

thought - every painting - I added a cloud. My
mind and I had this great thing going. But Simon
got in the way.

Simon shifted.

Simon became the faces - became the clouds - became
my brain.

Simon became me. Simon is me. A little broken but me.

Don't you understand?