



National Library
of Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Canadian Theses Service

Services des thèses canadiennes

Ottawa, Canada
K1A 0N4

CANADIAN THESES

THÈSES CANADIENNES

NOTICE

The quality of this microfiche is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original thesis submitted for microfilming. Every effort has been made to ensure the highest quality of reproduction possible.

If pages are missing, contact the university which granted the degree.

Some pages may have indistinct print especially if the original pages were typed with a poor typewriter ribbon or if the university sent us an inferior photocopy.

Previously copyrighted materials (journal articles, published tests, etc.) are not filmed.

Reproduction in full or in part of this film is governed by the Canadian Copyright Act, R.S.C. 1970, c. C-30.

**THIS DISSERTATION
HAS BEEN MICROFILMED
EXACTLY AS RECEIVED**

AVIS

La qualité de cette microfiche dépend grandement de la qualité de la thèse soumise au microfilmage. Nous avons tout fait pour assurer une qualité supérieure de reproduction.

S'il manque des pages, veuillez communiquer avec l'université qui a conféré le grade.

La qualité d'impression de certaines pages peut laisser à désirer, surtout si les pages originales ont été dactylographiées à l'aide d'un ruban usé ou si l'université nous a fait parvenir une photocopie de qualité inférieure.

Les documents qui font déjà l'objet d'un droit d'auteur (articles de revue, examens publiés, etc.) ne sont pas microfilmés.

La reproduction, même partielle, de ce microfilm est soumise à la Loi canadienne sur le droit d'auteur, SRC 1970, c. C-30.

**LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ
MICROFILMÉE TELLE QUE
NOUS L'AVONS REÇUE**

Leave Me Alone
A Collection of Short Stories

Sandra Robertson

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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

June 1987

© Sandra Robertson, 1987

Permission has been granted to the National Library of Canada to microfilm this thesis and to lend or sell copies of the film.

The author (copyright owner) has reserved other publication rights, and neither the thesis nor extensive extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without his/her written permission.

L'autorisation a été accordée à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de microfilmer cette thèse et de prêter ou de vendre des exemplaires du film.

L'auteur (titulaire du droit d'auteur) se réserve les autres droits de publication; ni la thèse ni de longs extraits de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation écrite.

ISBN 0-315-37061-0

ABSTRACT

Leave Me Alone - A Collection of Short Stories

Sandra Robertson

The collection consists of seven short stories whose central theme is the essential isolation of human experience; more specifically the isolation of women and their need for self reliance in a society which has wrenched them from dependence upon men. With the exception of the first piece, which is a man's story, all are stories of separate women and follow chronologically from childhood to old age: from a little girl in a Nova Scotia fishing village to an elderly eccentric living in poverty in Montreal. Although the theme connects the stories together, each piece, in depicting a particular set of events, illustrates the circumstances and character of its protagonist, and should therefore be complete as a single entity as well as part of the collection.

CONTENTS

page	1. Scarlet Mittens
	14. Russell's cove
	26. The Man on the Bus
	56. Choices
	66. Grace
	88. Short Trips
	118. Marjorie

Scarlet Mittens

Tom drove slowly over the bumpy gravel road, enjoying the sharp crunch of stones under the tires. This was the part of the journey he liked best: the last quarter-mile. The road turned a bend, narrow now, only a track in the high grass where stunted spruce leaned inland, away from the wind. He drove carefully but with confidence, knowing every pothole, every patch where a hidden rock in the grassy spine at the road's centre could wrench the exhaust manifold from his old car.

Suddenly there were no more trees. The track ended in an open space, giving way to patches of drifted sand. Tom jammed on his brakes, jolted into confusion by an unaccustomed sight. There was another car sitting at his road end. His feeling of joy vanished.

Someone else was on his beach.

He drove onto the sand and grass alongside the other car. The thought crossed his mind that if he parked directly behind it, then its driver could only get away by turning round, off the road into the soft sand. It was a little sports car, so low that it could easily become stuck. Then the interloper, whoever he was, might be so discouraged with his visit that he might never come back, and would leave the beach empty, the way it had always been. However, he dismissed the thought. It would be an act unworthy of him. He remembered once vainly trying to find a parking spot near Scotia Square. A car had pulled

out, leaving a space. Another driver, a woman, had been patiently waiting for the spot, but he was closer. He drove on, and the woman smiled in gratitude. His wife, Grace had shouted angrily.

"A total stranger. A total stranger. And she gets more consideration from you than I do."

Damn. He hadn't wanted to think about Grace. That's why he had come to his beach: to let the salt air clean the sound of her voice from every corner of his mind. Poor Grace, saving, amazing, Graceless Grace. Hail Mary full of... Grace Poole. Who the hell was Grace Poole anyway? Oh, yes, the guardian of Thornfield Hall. The keeper of the damned.

Tom climbed from his car and walked round the tiny intruding MG, stirred unwillingly by dark and bitter envy. He had always longed for an MG -- an impossible dream for a man with four children. Besides, the idea of cramming his six-foot-four body into its delicate confines was grotesque.

He touched the smooth cream paint, the soft black roof. Then he leaned down to look inside, to catch a glimpse into the life of someone lucky enough to be the owner. The black interior was neat, flawless. A tidy man himself, he was irked and embarrassed by the clutter that Grace allowed to accumulate in their station wagon -- crumpled tissue, cigarette ends smeared with the same

bright red lipstick she had been wearing when he had first met her in 1961. She always kept a roll of toilet paper, unravelling on the floor, for wiping the windshield. It was cheaper than kleenex. He looked at the small steering wheel, the arrangement of glass faces on the dash, the gear shift. He always had to avoid driving with a standard shift, especially in winter, when giant boots turned his size thirteen feet into objects too clumsy to negotiate more than two floor pedals. There were no clues to the owner's identity, other than a couple of music tapes lying on the passenger seat, but he couldn't read their titles. Probably rock. Noisy rock. The owner was undoubtedly some young guy who kept his car windows wide open and his stereo blaring. Crass, no taste, rich parents as well.

He straightened up, a little ashamed of his small-mindedness. As he moved away from the little car, he noticed that one of its front tires was flat. Ha! he thought, serves him right! His spirits rose as he quickly climbed the slope that hid the beach from the track, turning up the collar of his old duffel coat against the damp November wind.

He reached the top of the bank and breathed sharply in pleasure as he saw the ocean below him, rolling in a wide grey sweep, gun-metal cold, tendrils of white foam on the firm sand. He saw no one. Tourists and natives,

looking for a beach, went south of Halifax to the golden bays of Hubbards, or Queensland; to any number of sandy beaches strung along the coast. Rarely did anyone cross the harbour and venture up the eastern shore. Certainly they would not consider driving the twenty-odd miles up here. Even so, the turn-off, almost hidden by woods, looked as if it went nowhere.

Years ago he had brought Grace here. He had still loved her then. He had tried to please her, but she had complained the whole way. It was too far. For her there had been no enchantment, only wind and desolation. She never knew that he came here to be alone now and again. She would have grudged the cost of the gasoline. She had a point, he had to admit. Grace kept such a close watch on expenditures that he found it necessary to skip a few lunches and hoard away the money for these journeys, so essential to his sanity.

He had left this morning after the usual Saturday morning quarrel. Grace had a habit of ruining an entire weekend by throwing a tantrum while he and his daughters were enjoying breakfast. He liked to cook this meal. It gave Grace a rest. Somehow, today it had gone wrong again. Grace had started criticizing their third daughter, and he still felt shame at the accusation in the girl's eyes when he had failed to stand up for her. But he knew she would understand. It was always easier for

everyone if they agreed with Grace. It would probably take him the rest of the weekend to coax her back into a good humour.

He climbed down, and started walking to the water's edge. He stopped and sat on a rock, drinking in the smell, hearing the voice of the sea.

Sand suddenly sputtered around him and a large dog came from behind. It ran in wide circles, then stopped in front of him. It was a golden labrador, a creature beautiful both still and in motion. It wagged a dripping tail. Tom picked up a smooth pebble and threw it down to the water. The animal galloped after it, snuffled in the sand, then galloped back again, dropping the pebble at his feet, slimy now with sea water and saliva. He picked it up, and the dog moved closer, sitting only a few inches in front of him. It wore a collar with a metal disc. Tom picked up the disc and read:

H. Beecroft
4 Wesley Gdns.
Hfx. N.S.

The dog obviously belonged to the man from the sports car, who was fortunately not in sight. He knew Wesley Gardens. It was near Spring Garden road, a few minutes' walk from downtown Halifax. The dog leaned against his knee. He stroked a silken ear. He had an affinity for animals. This one was still not full-grown, the legs and body slim for the breed, the feet large and strong, able to support what would become quite a heavy animal.

The dog shifted and stared along the beach. A grey-clad figure materialized near the far end. Someone had come round from behind the point, or perhaps had been sitting there, his grey coat invisible among the rocks. The dog started to run away, then returned to its former position, unwilling to leave its new friend.

"Go away, dog," Tom whispered in the golden ear. The dog lapped his face earnestly in return. The figure moved slowly along the beach towards where he was sitting. The dog seemed determined to stay. Now Tom's peace would be interrupted.

He sat, stroking the dog's chin, looking down at the sand, strangely at a loss, unwilling to watch the figure approaching, encroaching. He was disturbed by his own hostility.

The crunch of steps came close, and he saw a pair of rubber boots in front of him.

"I apologize for my dog. He always seems at his friendliest when he's wet and sandy."

Tom looked up in amazement at the high clear voice. So vivid had been his image of the man with the sports car that he thought at first that there must be yet another intruder. He looked around. The beach was completely empty, except for himself, a woman and a dog.

He felt that he should get up. He was a polite man, but it seemed superfluous on a beach. Instead, in an

attempt to cover his embarrassment he said, "Please don't apologize. I love dogs. What's his name?"

"Claud."

"Claude?"

The woman laughed.

"Yes. It's short for Claud-hopper. He has such enormous feet."

Tom looked down at his own huge feet in some concern. The woman spoke again:

"Do you mind if I sit down? -- or would you prefer to be alone?"

"Of course, please." He patted the rock beside him, disturbed that she had guessed his thoughts so correctly. He looked at her with interest as she sat down. She was wearing jeans tucked into rubber boots, a grey wollen jacket and, somewhat incongruously, bright scarlet mittens, such as a child would wear.

"Would you like an apple?"

She fished in her pocket and brought out two green apples. Granny Smiths. Surprised, he thanked her. He had not realized how hungry he was. He had not finished breakfast.

He looked at the woman and she grinned at him. Her eyes behind her glasses were warm and brown, like freshly made coffee. She looked quite young, about thirty or so. He was aware of the grey streaks in his hair, of how he

must look to her, and wondered why this should trouble him. They sat, munching. She was staring at him. He looked straight ahead.

"You look like a sea captain."

He was amazed.

"You're not far out. I never made captain, but I was a seafaring man. Nowadays we just plan imaginary manoeuvres -- paper boats. The impressive fleet of the Great Canadian Armed Forces."

"Why don't you leave?"

"What?"

"I said, 'why don't you leave?' It sounds as if you don't like it."

"I don't."

He had not said that out loud before. It was not even something which he had admitted to himself. He was unable to answer her question. There was far too much to explain. Too much at stake. Instead he evaded it:

"What do you do?"

"I count herring."

"Herring. Herring?"

She grinned at him again. Her teeth were white and even. The wind had painted her cheeks and the tip of her nose.

"For the Department of Fisheries. I make up reports of migratory trends and feeding habits, after adding up numbers of herring -- paper herring." Her voice

echoed his disgust. "I wouldn't know a herring if I saw one. I come from Saskatchewan."

"So why don't you leave?"

"I can't. I just started."

They looked at each other for a second, then started to laugh. The woman pulled back the hood of her jacket. Her hair was bound in a long, thick braid. It was the colour of molasses. He found himself staring at the band of elastic wound round and round the end of it. He imagined unwinding it.

"Have you only just come to live here?"

"Yes. Three months ago."

"How on earth did you find this beach?"

"It was quite by accident. I saw a road that looked as if it went nowhere, and there it was. We come here quite often."

"We?"

She looked straight into his eyes.

"Claud and I."

He felt his face growing warm.

"Don't you know many people here?"

"I know the lady at the public library, the couple who own my apartment, the boy who delivers the papers, the fellow in the next office who counts mackerel, and a nice man with sad eyes that I met on a windy beach -- who seems to have taken a liking to my dog."

There was a tiny fleck of apple on her chin. He removed it carefully with his finger.

"You're very tidy," she remarked.

He decided to change the subject.

"I'm surprised that a girl from Saskatchewan likes the ocean."

"It reminds me of the prairies. Where else can you find miles of empty, clean space?"

"Do you come from a farm?"

"No, a hardware store."

"Where did you learn to count herring?"

"At college, out west. If you can count nuts and bolts, you can count herring. I taught school for about ten years, then I went back to college to study economics, then I pumped gas in Winnipeg, then I sold insurance in Toronto, then I acquired a dog and a car and came to Nova Scotia." She picked up his wrist and examined his watch. "It's getting cold."

She stood up. He wanted to find out more about her. He wanted her to stay. He would have liked to talk to her longer -- to get a chance to establish more common ground. He was about to ask her about her car when he remembered the flat tire.

"I'll walk up with you."

He stood. She barely came to his shoulder.

"My name's Helen."

He remembered -- H. Beecroft, Wesley Gdns.

"I'm Tom."

They walked slowly up the beach, without speaking, the dog at their heels. When they reached the cars, Helen swore.

"Shit. Will you look at that bloody tire?"

"I'll help you with it. I presume you have a spare?"

"I presume too. I haven't needed it before."

She unlocked the trunk and they both peered inside. Tom removed the spare.

"Now, why don't you just keep warm in my car and I'll have this done in a few minutes."

"I can change a tire, you know." She stared at him in defiance.

"I'm sure you can. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to patronize you. It's just that I may be able to get the bolts off faster."

She stood watching while he loosened the nuts and jacked up the car. Then she took off her mittens and they crouched together removing the nuts by hand. Her hair smelled of fresh air and seaweed.

When they had finished, she thanked him and held out her hand.

"You must have a big family, with that monster of a car."

"I have four daughters."

He gripped her warm little hand. Her gaze didn't falter.

"All pushing six feet, I bet."

"It's only a matter of time."

She took a newspaper from the trunk and spread it out on the passenger seat. Claud jumped in on top of it and sat quietly.

"You're very tidy."

She laughed and climbed into the car.

"Goodbye, Tom."

"Take care." It sounded inadequate. She started the engine and roared off, waving from the window.

The wind whistled round his ears. He was cold. He turned to his car, and saw that she had left her mittens lying on the roof.

Russel's Cove.

Aggie ran down towards the beach. Swirls of sea mist clung to the ocean and drifted in white folds among the rocks. Small droplets gathered on Aggie's braids as she clambered with knowing feet down to the sand. She could just make out the figure, standing at the water's edge.

"Hi, Cliff. Hi, it's me."

Cliff turned round to wave. Aggie stopped long enough to tear off her sneakers and roll her jeans above her knees. She ran down the sand to him.

"Hi, Ag."

Cliff rarely spoke more than two words at a time. Some people found him very hard to understand. He was holding a paper bag in one hand. He took a piece of bread from it and slowly tore off scraps, throwing them one by one to a group of seagulls clustered around him. He passed her a slice from the bag and they stood together feeding the gulls. Everyone knew that the seabirds around the cove got enough to eat from the wharf and the fishing boats, but Cliff and Aggie enjoyed feeding them anyway. Aggie liked to think that the birds knew them. She had seen a picture once, of St. Francis of somewhere or other, casting his bread upon the waters. Well, maybe that was Jesus. She liked the phrase anyway, 'casting his bread upon the waters'. She repeated it to herself. There was another one about casting the first stone. It looked as if they might read some nice stuff in school this year.

"Cliff, I grew half an inch during the summer. We were all measured today. The first day back we always get measured. Soon I'll be up to your shoulder."

He looked down at her. He was a big man, with a baby's face and a square, solid body. He smiled his wet smile, the narrow blue eyes calm and sweet. Aggie took his hand. She loved him.

"We read a poem today in school. It's by Robert Frost. I'll say some of it for you."

Whose woods these
are I think I know,
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow,

"Isn't that neat? I can just imagine woods all filling up till only the tips of the trees are sticking through. Then if you walked through the forest you'd think the trees had just been planted. I wonder what really happens to all the snow that falls on the ocean? I guess it just all gets melted in, and then the ocean gets higher. Don't you think?"

Cliff nodded. They stood together for a while, their feet hidden in foam, watching the waves flopping over. Aggie wondered as always where all the water came from. She knew England and Europe were on the other side.

"I'll be ten tomorrow, Cliff. That's halfway to twenty. How old are you?"

She had known Cliff all her life, yet she had never before wondered how old he was. He took off his cap and scratched his head. He always wore his cap backwards, with the visor down over his neck. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Dunno." He grinned suddenly and fished inside the paper bag. "Happy Birthday."

He was holding something out to her. She saw that it was a tiny cameo, from a pendant, with the chain missing. The edge was encrusted with sand. The head was in pure white, and the background was the same/soft blue of her mother's small treasured Wedgewood bowl. Cliff had found many presents for her hidden in the sand. He had an eye for pretty things. Especially blue. She would wear it on a string around her neck.

"Thank you, Cliff, I love it, truly I do. Look, the colour is the same like the ocean gets some days."

For some reason Aggie wanted to cry. She didn't know why. She was always getting laughed at in school for crying about nothing. That and daydreaming. Her feet were starting to turn numb.

Cliff jerked his head towards the cluster of houses huddled above the wharf at the end of the cove.

"'s late. Y'Mom."

"My Mom's taking me to the movies after school tomorrow, because it's my birthday. But I'll see you day after that. Okay?"

"'kay. Bye."

She walked back, stopping to turn round and wave as she collected her sneakers. The mist had thickened. She could barely see him. She turned away. She knew that if she kept walking with her back to the sea she could walk and walk for days and months, years maybe, before she reached the ocean again.

She turned along the path towards the village. As she reached the wharf she saw her mother's fishing boat alongside. She could see the name painted on the stern -- 'Sandpiper'. All the other boats in Russell's cove had dumb names like 'Marjorie B', or 'Rosie Mac'. Aggie and her mother had spent a lot of thought over the name when they first got the boat, three years before.

Aggie was proud of her mother. She was the only woman on this part of the coast who owned her own fishing boat. Everyone in the Cove agreed that Jess Ferguson was a smart woman. She had gone to college, then taught school in Montreal, and after Aggie had been born she had come home to Russell's Cove with her baby. Aggie found it hard to believe that she had been born in a place with no ocean, only a river.

She started to hurry now, up the winding, steep path from the wharf among the houses. Some were empty. One had the roof caved in. She hurried past, afraid of the darkness, staring from the broken window. She came to the grey-shingled house where Cliff lived with his mother. Aggie looked to see if the old woman was looking out. Sometimes she stopped to talk, just to be polite. She was a little afraid of Cliff's mother, who was very wrinkled and looked at least a hundred years old. Aggie felt relieved that the window was empty today.

She remembered asking her mother a long time ago why Cliff was different from other people. Jess had replied that his mind hadn't grown since he was little. His head wasn't small, so if his brain hadn't grown, there must be something else in there to fill up the space; just air maybe.

Further up the track she came to the old Russell's Cove schoolhouse. It was boarded up, the paint almost all gone. Weeds grew as high as the window sills. Years ago it had been closed because there weren't enough children for the government to allocate a teacher. When Aggie had started school she had to be taken nine miles inland in a yellow bus to the Consolidated School. She hated it. It had a flat roof and you couldn't even smell the ocean. Now that the Morrison family had moved to Truro, she waited alone for the bus. She was the only child left in Russell's Cove.

She walked further up the hill, past the lines where salt cod hung stiffly to dry like frozen clothes on January washdays. Aggie started to hurry as she reached the last house on the path. Her mother was carrying bags of groceries from an old van parked alongside. She had just returned from Halifax, where she had taken the catch up to the Fisherman's Market. Aggie ran to open the back door.

They went into the cottage together. Jess dumped the groceries down on the table and turned. They hugged each other, thin arms around thin bodies. Jess's overalls smelled slightly of fish. Aggie loved the smell.

They both talked about their day. Aggie told her mother about the Robert Frost poem, while Jess moved about the kitchen, putting food away, cursing in turn the fish marketers, the Halifax drivers, the supermarket cashiers, and the government. Aggie fingered the cameo in her pocket. She didn't tell her mother about it. She didn't want to share it with anyone.

"How's Cliff today?" Her mother seemed to read Aggie's mind.

"Okay."

"At least his clams brought in a good price. I'll go down after supper with the money. God, I wish you had more friends. Maybe I should sell the boat and get a job in Halifax. We could have an apartment and you wouldn't have so far to go to school."

Aggie didn't like the way this conversation was going. She picked up one of her braids and stuck the end of it in her mouth. It was smooth and salty.

"Don't suck your hair."

Jess's voice was irritated. Aggie felt like crying again. She went to her bedroom and sat on the bed. She wondered what it would feel like to live in an apartment. She got up and looked from the window, at the wharf, and at the mist hanging over the ocean. On a clear day she could see the beach. Cliff would have no one to talk to if she went to Halifax. It was getting dark. She shivered. She took the cameo from her pocket and looked in the mirror, one hand holding the blue and white image against the freckled skin of her neck. With the other hand she held the long straw-coloured braids on top of her head. She stood, dreaming for a while, her favourite pastime. Sometimes she was a princess with a long velvet train and a tiara, but mostly she was a mermaid with long black hair and proper breasts. She began to feel better, and was able to smile at Jess when they had supper. Neither of them mentioned moving to Halifax again. The flicker of fear inside her started to die down.

Later on, Jess put on her warm jacket.

"I'm going down to take Cliff's money to his mother. I want you to be in bed when I get back."

"Okay, Jess." She hugged her mother tight.

Later, she tried to sleep. The roof of the cottage squeaked. Jess never left her alone in the house for long. Perhaps she had stayed to talk to the old lady. Aggie thought again about living in Halifax. She quite liked the harbour there. There were lots of boats, and the water still smelled the same, but you couldn't touch it every day. There was no beach -- only wharfs and warehouses. She took the cameo from the chair beside the bed and slipped it under the pillow. She tried to think about good things, like going to the movies tomorrow. She would spend the whole day on Saturday digging for clams with Cliff. She fell asleep.

When Jess woke her in the morning, she sat down on Aggie's bed. This was unusual. Aggie saw that her mother's face had the same worried look as on the day the hurricane had pounded the cove and she'd lost a lot of her lobster traps. Aggie felt a rush of fear.

"Aggie, Cliff's mother died last night."

Aggie felt relief tingle through her body. So that's all it was! Her mother was still talking.

"You hurry up for school. I have a lot of arrangements to make."

"What kind of arrangements?"

"Well, I'll talk to my lawyer in Halifax, the one who helped me to get the loan when I bought the boat. He'll try to sell the old house, and he'll see that Cliff

gets what's coming to him. There won't be much. God knows, they've been on welfare for years."

"Sell the house? Where's Cliff going to stay."

"Aggie, you know that Cliff can't stay there alone."

"But he's strong, and he can dig clams. And why can't he stay with people, like when McKenzie's house burned down, and people stayed with people?" Aggie was starting to shout.

"But it's not the same. Cliff can't look after himself. He's still a child in most ways."

"Why can't we look after him?"

"Aggie, he needs special care. The Reverend James from Gray's harbour is going to take him up to the Presbyterian Home in Halifax, tomorrow after the funeral."

Jess turned away, as if the subject were finished.

Aggie felt a sickness like green slime creeping over her insides.

"They can't send him to that old place. It's on a street! And it's full of queer people that nobody wants!"

"Aggie, please. Now, don't dawdle, or you'll miss your bus. I'll pick you up after school and we'll go to the movies. It's your birthday, remember."

Jess's voice sounded strange. Aggie was terrified that her mother was going to cry.

She went to school feeling stunned and confused. She got a piece of string from her teacher and hung the

little cameo around her neck. She fingered it often, through her T-shirt. She tried not to think of Cliff, shut in, clumsy and shy, alone with no ocean. She didn't see him that night. Her mother took her to the movies as they had planned. Neither of them spoke of Cliff. Aggie felt afraid of the tight look around Jess's mouth.

The next day she was packed off to school again. She knew there was to be a funeral. She felt left out, and at the same time relieved not to see Cliff standing like a lost child, not knowing, perhaps, what was in store for him. She was scolded for not eating her lunch, for not paying attention. Her head ached with misery.

After school she climbed down from the yellow bus and walked slowly down through the village, dragging her canvas bag. The books bumped along the rough stones. She turned along the path to the beach. All the boats were tied up at the wharf. She knew that no one had gone out today.

She stopped on the rocks and sat down, carefully putting her shoes and socks in a small cleft. A strong wind was blowing and the air was clear. The seagulls were scattered on the empty beach. She rummaged in her bag and found the bread she had kept at lunchtime. She walked down to the water. The birds came to gather round. She fed them slowly. Then she stood for a long time watching the waves. She undid the string around her neck and held the cameo, rubbing the contours of the delicate face with

her finger. It looked like a princess -- a sea princess. She threw it as far as she could into the water beyond the breaking waves. The tears fell at last. She cried out, shrieking and sobbing into the wind. She sat down in the cold water, clutching the soft, wet sand, the waves hitting her face and stinging her eyes with salt. She was still sitting there, shivering, when Jess came looking for her, to tell her that supper was ready.

The Man on the Bus

The first time she saw him on the bus she felt a moment of unaccountable fear. One minute she'd been thinking about how she would tackle the morning's work, wondering how many clients would show up, planning the first few things she would do -- turn on the fan by her desk, make out tickets to be picked up, put on the kettle for coffee. She hadn't been feeling nervous, certainly not afraid. Nothing had been further from her mind than the notion that someone was watching her, or might be intending harm. The next moment she saw him staring, and felt the fear.

She immediately dropped her eyes, then looked again, only to find him still watching her. She began to feel now that she was showing her awareness of him, even her fear. She stared straight ahead at the advertisements, not really seeing them. From the corner of her eye, she could make out the shape of his face. He was still staring in her direction. The bus was filling up. There were quite a few people standing. Surely someone would get into his line of vision? No, she could still see the pale blur of his face, the thick thatch of fairish hair. She tried to concentrate on the passengers around her: a large woman opposite, pink in polyester, using up two full seats; three teenaged girls standing in front of her, strap-hanging, giggling. She looked anywhere but at the man sitting a few rows down, on the other side of the bus.

There were only a few more stops to go. Now she could get up and face the front of the bus and he'd be behind her, out of sight. She stood, hitching her handbag onto her shoulder; then peered out of the window, bending forward, pretending she wasn't sure where she was, no longer afraid. Edging towards the step at the front of the bus, she allowed people to get off. Hers was the next stop. The bus slowed down and hissed to a halt. She stepped down, relieved to have left the man behind. Then she heard him, just behind her ear.

"Bye, Jenny."

She jumped as if someone had struck her. She looked round before she could stop herself, realizing too late that this was the very thing she should not have done. He stood, smiling just a trace. She caught sight of slightly rumpled clothing. He was not tall, but was heavily built. He had freckles. She only took this in quickly as she turned and fled across the road towards the building where she worked. She looked back. He was standing in the same spot. He hadn't moved when she turned the corner, still running.

This was idiotic. Why let herself be scared stiff just because some stranger was staring in a bus? But he knew her name! How on earth did he know who she was? He must have been following her. No, of course he hadn't. She'd never seen him before. Not on the bus, not

anywhere. If she had seen him in the office she would have remembered. She always noticed the faces of clients.

In the rush of people to the elevator her fear subsided. What did it matter, after all? The day must be got through. She unlocked her office, put on her busy face.

But several times during the day she remembered. Each time she told herself that it was nothing. At least it kept her from thinking about Mark -- Mark who had broken off with her three months previously. More space, he'd said he wanted. He'd taken his space and gone, leaving Jenny rejected and baffled.

After work she did some shopping, and went home much later than usual.

The next morning Jenny felt much better. It was a bright, clear, sunny morning and she had slept well. She loved the summer weather.

She waited for her usual bus. Seven-forty, along it came. She showed her pass and sat down in her favourite seat, near the front, on one of the three seats facing the aisle. Although the bus was already crowded by the time it reached her part of the route, there was almost always a seat. People piled in at the next few

stops. She paid no attention, but opened her book, aware of the smells around her: aftershave, freshly-washed bodies -- so different from the smells of hot tired people on the bus home after a long sticky day.

"Excuse me."

Someone had stepped on her foot. She looked up to acknowledge the apology. A woman with a briefcase removed her offending foot from Jenny's toe, and then, over the woman's shoulder, she saw him.

He was sitting about the same place as he had been yesterday, a few seats down, on the other side. This time Jenny did what she should have done the day before. She stared back at him. There, she thought, let him see that I'm not afraid. The very thought gave her confidence. He stared back, without change of expression. Jenny felt her confidence wilt, and she dropped her eyes. With some surprise she realized that she had taken this bus deliberately, when she could easily have left ten minutes earlier. She had needed to test the situation. It had been important to find out if he really would be there.

Strangely, the confirmation of her fears afforded her a degree of satisfaction. Still, almost everyone on the bus would be a regular traveller. She recognized a few. This could just be this guy's bus. There was no reason to believe that he meant her any harm.

When she stepped down from the bus, she looked straight ahead, keeping to the centre of a group of people, thankful for their presence. He must have remained in his seat. She didn't look back. She kept among the others as she crossed the street.

When the phone on her desk rang later that morning, she picked it up with anticipation. Phone calls usually meant more business.

"Hello, Montreal Travel."

"Hello, Jenny. How are you?"

Jenny's mind was on what she had been doing. She wondered vaguely who was calling. She knew that it was not Mark. She continued working on the file in front of her, the phone held securely against her ear with her shoulder.

"I'm fine. Who's calling?"

"It's me."

"I'm sorry, but I believe you must have the wrong number."

"Not a chance, Jenny darling."

"Who is this?"

"Let's say I'm Harry. Or would you prefer Lionel? I've always liked the name Lionel."

"I'm afraid I don't know anyone called Harry, or Lionel."

"But I know you. I've always known you. But I've only just found you."

"You really have the wrong number. Now, if you'll excuse me..." Jenny hung up in the middle of her own sentence, then brushed the tips of her fingers together as if to wipe away all contact with the telephone. It rang again. She allowed it to ring three times, then she picked up the receiver and dropped it quickly into its place. She got up from her desk swiftly and went to the washroom. The phone was ringing again as she closed the door.

She took her time, combing and doing her makeup. She walked to the full-length mirror, then backed away from it, scrutinizing the image of herself -- not bad, she thought. Then she replaced her things in her bag and left.

When she returned, she saw that the door of her office was open. Denise, the secretary for the suite of offices, was inside, talking on Jenny's phone, sifting through some papers on the desk. She looked up with relief at Jenny, and covered the mouthpiece with her hand.

"He said you asked him to call you. It's about a trip to London."

Jenny took the phone. Denise left, closing the door behind her.

"Yes? Can I help you?" There was no answer. "Hello... can I help you?" Stupid jerk must have hung up, she thought. Can't even go to the john without some impatient client making me feel guilty."

"You two-faced little cunt. "Can I help you?" The words fell on Jenny's senses like acid, his question a twisted parody of her own last words. She took the receiver away from her ear, and held it in front of her, looking at it. It was shiny and cream-coloured; clean and civilized, like her office. It had no business saying such grotesque things to her. She replaced it gently. Then she picked up her handbag and left the office, locking the door. She had never gone off and left her office unattended since she had opened up her own business, eight months before.

She ran down two flights of stairs to an advertising agency where her closest friend, Sasha, worked as a graphic artist.

"Come and have coffee with me."

"Something's up? Have you heard from Mark?"

"No, I've written him off."

"That seems drastic." Sasha never wrote a man off until he was dead. "Just a sec, let me get out of this overall." Sasha got up from her drawing board and threw her smock over a chair.

They took the elevator down and found a booth in a cafe in the ground floor of their building.

"Okay. Now tell me what's wrong," Sasha said, after they had each ordered a coffee.

"It's probably nothing."

"You look odd. What's happened?"

"I saw a man on the bus yesterday. He was staring. You know how guys do sometimes."

"Sure. It's known as ogling. Quite common in North America. Now in Italy..."

"No, I didn't mean that cheerful kind of attention-getting. This man looked sad, kind of. I felt uncomfortable right away, for him, as well as for myself, as if I could see into his life. And I felt afraid, too. I can't explain why. Oh, and he knew my name."

"He did? How do you know?"

"Because he got off the bus with me, and he said 'Goodbye, Jenny' when I left."

"That's a bit different. Maybe it was someone you met at a bar, and just chatted with. Maybe it was a client?"

"No, I'd have known. I'm sure I never saw him before in my life. Then he was on the bus again this morning."

"So? Maybe it's his bus."

"I know. I thought of that too. And he didn't speak, not today, not until he phoned just now. He called me a cunt."

"What, just like that?"

"Yes."

"You mean, he just phoned you up, and said 'Jenny you're a cunt'?"

"No. He called me a two-faced cunt."

"So. You didn't like 'cunt' more than you didn't like 'two-faced'?"

"I guess so. It sounded so vindictive. I wasn't expecting it. That was the worst part -- that I was so surprised. I was expecting it to be a client. I should have known."

"Don't be silly. How could you possibly have known?"

"Because he called earlier, and I hung up on him. I might have realized he'd call back. He sounded so angry."

"Because you hung up on him?" Jenny tried to think back to the incident, but something eluded her. "Well, what else? Couldn't he just be someone you'd met before and rejected, or something equally trivial?"

"How could you trivialize the destruction of a man's ego?"

"Maybe that's what's the matter with him. Did he sound destroyed?"

"Well, yes. Now that you mention it. There was something I'd been trying to put into place. It was the kind of anger he seemed to express. There was something very personal about it. I mean, if someone hung up on me, I'd just think that he or she was a very rude person. I wouldn't take it as a direct insult to myself, or to my

pride. I might be frustrated, but I wouldn't feel vengeful enough to want to shock or punish that person."

"Maybe you should go to the police. It is an offence, isn't it, to speak like that, on the phone, anonymously too."

"Perhaps I should, after work."

"Why not go now. It's almost lunch time. I'd come with you, but I'm in the middle of that layout. I hadn't planned on lunch."

"I'm sorry. I've kept you."

"Don't worry, kiddo. I needed a break. Now, just go to the police. Stop worrying and let them take care of it."

Sasha bent over and kissed her friend's cheek, then left. Jenny got to her feet slowly and walked from the building.

The downtown police station on deMaisonneuve was just a few short blocks away. She stood at the counter, waiting while a young officer dealt with an elderly lady who had lost her keys. Finally it was her turn.

She explained what happened, trying to be concise and to the point.

"Did the man accost you in any way, either on the bus, or on the street?"

"No."

"He only said 'Bye' and spoke your first name?"

"That's correct."

"He didn't use obscene language at that time?"

Only later on the phone?"

"Yes."

"How did he introduce himself when he called?"

"He didn't really. He just said 'It's me'. Then, when I pressed him, he said I could call him Harry or Lionel, but I'm sure that neither of those was his name."

"Then how did you know who it was?"

Jenny stared at the officer.

"I've no idea how I knew. I just knew."

"Surely you recognized his voice? He spoke to you before, didn't he? When he got off the bus?"

"Yes."

"Well then, if it was the same voice..."

"I only meant, yes, he had spoken to me. I didn't mean that I recognized his voice. I didn't. Maybe some people can recognize a voice that they've heard only once, but I'm not able to, particularly over the phone. It was just any normal, non-accented, medium, Anglophone voice."

"It could have been anyone?"

"Yes," Jenny admitted. "But I'm sure it was him."

"You may be right, but you have no complaint against the man on the bus, and since you can't say for

certain that he made the phone call, we have nothing to go on. However, we can certainly investigate the phone calls. There's a \$500 fine, you know, for making obscene calls. Next time, try to find out something about him, some identifying characteristic, or information. If it continues we can easily attach a device to your telephone. Let us know if you wish us to do this. Otherwise, if you do not want any further investigation, hang up the minute he starts talking. He'll probably stop. Your office number is listed, I presume?"

"Certainly, I run my own business."

"And he'd never called you at home?"

"No. Do you think it's just a coincidence -- someone stared at me the same day as another guy made a phone call?"

The officer shrugged his shoulders. "There's not very much to go on, is there? But don't worry. It's fairly common in a city this size, but most of these people are harmless. They just get their kicks from shocking people. They're real cowards. They'd never dare to say anything to anyone face-to-face."

* * *

That evening, Jenny decided she would walk the couple of miles to work the next day. She would wear her running shoes, the way New York women do, carrying shoes

for work in a bag. She decided to take sandwiches and eat her lunch at her desk too. She went to bed resolute, having set the alarm early to give herself an extra hour in the morning. Then, unaccountably, she thought of Mark.

They'd only been seeing each other for seven months. But it had felt right. Mark had been the first man in a long time that she'd been comfortable with, so his desertion had been more than a blow to her pride. There had been bitter disappointment -- in him, and in the situation, but mostly at herself for failing to recognize the signs of decay, or for ignoring them. In the darkness, demons plucked at her, relentless in their accusations. Why? Why? -- they said -- why do you always let this happen? Tears of loneliness and self-pity shook her.

She sat up in bed, spent and weary, becoming angry when she saw how late it was. There was a bottle of sleeping pills in her bathroom cupboard. Nothing lethal. They could be bought at any drugstore without a prescription. Jenny kept them there for emergencies. One was guaranteed to send her to sleep in less than thirty minutes. She got up and swallowed three. She couldn't afford to waste even thirty more minutes in misery.

When her clock radio went off, Jenny didn't even hear it. She lay, a senseless log, until the sound

gradually penetrated her sleep. When she opened her eyes it was after seven o'clock. Her mouth was sandpaper, and her head a lead weight. Oh Christ, she thought, I'll have to rush even to catch the bus -- never mind walking. I'll walk tomorrow. She staggered into the kitchen to make some coffee, then blindly collected her clothes and took a shower. The hot water helped some, but not a lot. If she hurried, she might make the earlier bus, at seven-thirty. No time for coffee.

Feeling slightly more awake, Jenny dressed as quickly as she could. She wore her favourite blue dress, and a pair of sandals. Brushing out her hair and applying makeup only took a few more minutes. Grabbing her shoulder bag and briefcase, she closed her apartment door and caught the elevator on its way down.

A haze masked the sun. The air was heavy and humid. Jenny saw the bus coming. Good, she thought, feeling pleased that she could catch the early bus. It was worth missing the coffee. She could always buy some at the cafe on the corner. It was then that she remembered that she had left the kettle for her coffee heating on the stove. She had not returned to the kitchen. It would be boiling now -- steam filling the room, increasing the dampness, heat shimmering from the burner still turned to its highest point. Jenny knew that she would have to go back. Just as the bus came to a stop at her corner she turned away.

There was no need, now, to hurry. Jenny returned to her apartment, realizing that she might as well have the cup of coffee after all.

The lid of the kettle was rattling as water spluttered on to the hot stove. She turned the heat off and made herself a cup of instant coffee, lacing it well with cream and sugar. Opening the fridge door, she searched for something to eat. Nothing there appealed to her. She took a chocolate chip cookie from the cupboard, then stuffed it back into the packet. It would only clog up her mouth with sugar, and she didn't want to clean her teeth all over again. The sleeping pills, still not washed from her body, had killed her appetite. The coffee tasted thick and syrupy. Jenny poured it down the sink before she left her apartment for the second time. She noticed the clock in the vestibule of her building as she went out. It was exactly seven-forty.

Her bus was at the stop. Jenny had to cross the road to reach it. She began to run. The doors had closed, as the driver started to move away. Jenny waved frantically at him. He nodded, and the doors jerked open just as she reached them.

This time she looked round for him -- still afraid, at the same time needing to keep him somehow confined to this bus. As long as she knew where he was, she could avoid him.

He was closer to her than before. His hands, resting on the back seat in front of him, were large and pale, their skin freckled like his face. His eyes held hers for a few moments, then he slowly opened his mouth, pushing his lips out towards her. The tongue moved forward, filling the round 'o' of his open mouth. Jenny stared aghast as his jaw worked slowly and deliberately. The eyes were half closed, glazed slits of blue, still looking at her, as the man, moving his lips and tongue, kissed the air between them.

Scarlet and bewildered, Jenny looked around her. Thankfully, no one else had seen. Her eyes travelled out to the passing street. It would soon be time to get off. She decided to walk the remaining nine or ten blocks. Sick with shame, she turned round, just before she stepped down. From his seat the blue eyes mocked her.

* * *

For two days Jenny didn't see him. She was worried -- he was not on the bus, so where was he?

On the second day, Friday, while she was in the office, her mother called from Toronto.

"Jenny, how have you been? How's business? Isn't this heat impossible?"

"Fine, fine, no," Jenny answered. Her mother's onslaught always drove her to monosyllables.

"What do you mean 'no'?"

"I mean I love it -- the heat." Nonetheless, her mother's voice gave her a certain ease. The child that is in all of us told her that everything was all right. Mother -- talkative, irritating, predictable but infinitely caring -- breathed normalcy.

"Well, Gerald and I are off tonight, so I wanted to say goodbye, and ask if there's anything we could bring you?" For a second Jenny's spirits drooped, she had forgotten that her mother and stepfather were leaving for three weeks in Ireland. "Maybe one of those gorgeous white fisherman's sweaters, or a length of Irish tweed?"

"Only if you have time to shop, and space in your luggage." Jenny kept the conversation going, trying to hide the slight shock she felt at her mother's imminent departure.

"It shouldn't be any trouble. Shopping's what we're going for, silly girl. There's only one thing I wanted to ask you -- maybe you could go down and check the cottage. Take a few days off and stay there. Have a rest. After all, you have your own business, you can take off whenever you like."

Jenny knew that it was useless to argue that having her own business made it impossible just to 'take off'.

She ran it alone, and could not afford at this early stage to lose any potential business. After Jenny's father's death, her mother had remarried and moved to Toronto, where her new husband, Gerald, was well established in an antique business, started by his father. He had a bevy of assistants to run it for him in his absence -- besides, trips to Ireland could be considered tax write-offs.

Later, when she had a few moments, she thought about it again. It was over two hours' drive to the cottage, and Jenny felt resentful at being asked to go, even though she loved the place. She disliked driving, and kept a car only for occasional use. The cottage was on the shores of Lake Memphremagog, a mile or two from the U.S. border. It had been in Jenny's family since she was a child. She had been secretly glad when her mother, moving to Toronto, had been unable to get a good price for it, and had decided to hang on to it for a few more years. Now it lay, hidden among trees, silent and empty, crumbling gradually without the constant care that any dwelling needs.

She had gone down for a long weekend once, with Mark, when she was still trying to keep their affair alive. Instead of feeling the peace and magic of the

just doing nothing. The longer she considered it, the more compelling the idea became.

Thinking that Sasha might enjoy coming with her, Jenny called her friend's office, only to be told that Sasha had called in sick, and was not expected back until Monday. Jenny hung up and did a quick calculation. Sasha must have her period. She'd be a wreck for days, doped on codeine. No point in even calling her. Jenny decided not to go.

The supermarket was cool and Jenny was hungry -- two circumstances which made her linger, buying extra things. She'd always treated herself on a Friday night, especially when she and Mark would spend the evening watching TV and munching cold chicken, with glasses of wine. Damn Mark, she thought, maybe sometime I'll be able to spend a whole day without thinking of the man. She made her way to the cooked meats -- stubbornly deciding to have a cold barbecued chicken all to herself. She chose one, then some cole slaw, pâté and black olives. At the bakery counter she picked up an apple pie and some French bread.

It was only a few blocks to her apartment building, but her plastic bag of groceries weighed more with each step. She opened the door to the vestibule, and put her

grocery bag down on the floor. The lock on the inner door was tricky. She needed both hands: one to pull the door towards her by the handle, and the other to turn the key. The plastic bag collapsed like a jellyfish, spilling one or two things onto the mat. As she straightened up she saw him -- leaning against the wall near the panel which bore the push buttons and names of the building's tenants. One hand was outstretched by his side, the forefinger lightly placed over one of the buttons. She saw with horror that it was the buzzer for her apartment. His other hand was in his side pocket, pulling his pants inward to his body. His knuckles showed through the fabric as his curled fist moved in his crotch to a terrible rhythm. For a few seconds Jenny stood in terror, knowing only that she should not unlock the door. Instinctively she knew that her home must be protected. ~~He must not be~~ allowed to follow her in, to come up with her in the elevator. He moved away from the wall and quickly retrieved her spilled groceries, handing the bag to her in silence. Jenny grabbed it, and fled into the street, her sandals clacking on the cement steps. Blindly she ran around the side of the building, heading for the entrance to the tenant's underground parking area. Mercifully her key was still clutched in her hand. As she inserted it in the lock, she looked back towards the street. NO one had followed her. The man was nowhere in sight. The heavy door grumbled,

and slowly opened. Jenny darted inside, her heart hammering. The door seemed to remain open forever. "Oh shit, shit, hurry up!" She said out loud. Finally it started its creaking descent and clicked into position. She was safe. No one could enter the garage without a key.

Jenny knew that now she could take the elevator straight to her floor without stopping at street level. Suddenly it struck her that he could easily have followed one of the tenants into the building. He could be waiting in the corridor, outside her apartment door, even on his way down to the basement garage from the inside.

Her eyes fell on her ancient Ford, grey with dust, and she knew her escape. Trying to gather her scattered wits, she ran to the car and unlocked it. She threw her groceries onto the passenger seat, then got in quickly and locked the doors. Oh, God, I hope it will start, she thought. Only when the engine's roar filled the huge cement cavern did she feel relief. She would escape straight to the cottage. She drove to the door, pulled the cord to open it, then drove out into the sunlight. Everything was going to be all right. She was free. She even had food with her. Turning the corner, she passed in front of the building, into the heavy rush hour traffic.

He was standing on the sidewalk, at the foot of the steps. As she approached, he looked straight at her and

waved, the blue eyes cheerful. Then he turned and started to walk quickly away in the other direction, glancing over his shoulder. The traffic had stopped for the light. She watched him for a few seconds in the mirror, then a bus pulled in to the sidewalk behind her to let someone off -- obscuring her view. She waited to allow the bus to pass. The traffic moved on as the light changed. There was no sign of the man. He had completely disappeared.

* * *

The crawl across Champlain bridge was endless. Hot sun glittered off metal and chrome. Horns blared as a huge army of hot, restless Montrealers left the city for the weekend. Jenny opened her window and sat, sweating, with her arm resting on the sill. She'd been badly frightened, but now that the city was behind her she would be safe. She must tell the police about that creep as soon as she got back into town. She certainly couldn't go now, there was no turning back on the bridge. At this rate it would take over an hour to get back, and he'd be long gone.

At last she reached the end of the bridge, and the traffic fanned out. By the time she passed Granby, there was little else on the road. Only a few cars passed her

before her turn-off near Sherbrooke. The nearest car behind her on the straight road was a long way off.

Half an hour later, she passed through Stanstead on the U.S. border, and turned off into the dirt road. The sun was already low. It would only take her a few minutes to open the cottage and settle in, then change into her swimsuit. There would be at least half an hour's daylight; just enough time to run down through the woods and have a quick swim. The water would feel wonderful in the evening air. It was the best time to swim.

She drove the last few miles very slowly. About half a mile from her cottage she passed the nearest neighbour. A large family from across the border came every summer. Jenny knew them slightly. She noticed with surprise that their cottage was boarded up. The family had been there the time she'd come with Mark. She remembered seeing them playing tennis. Now, there was a 'For Sale' sign by the front door. Jenny drove on, through thickening woods, where trees on either side turned the road into a green tunnel.

The cottage was invisible when approached from this side. Anyone not knowing it was there could miss it altogether. She stopped at the driveway, and slowly manoeuvred her car onto the bumpy overgrown track, until it was well off the road. The cottage seemed just as she had left it.

The door to the screened porch squeaked and slammed as she entered. A dark stain in front on the inner door reminded her of Mark and the broken wine bottle. Familiar smells met her: dust and resin and the faintest tinge of stale cigarettes from a forgotten ashtray by the sink. Two mugs stood upside down on the draining board. The Scrabble box still lay on the kitchen table. Jenny quickly put these things away, and blew dust from the table. Then she busied herself for a few minutes, turning on the main water tap, starting the electric pump, checking the fridge and putting away her groceries. Satisfied, she went into the bathroom to collect her swimsuit. Both she and Mark had left their suits hanging to dry on the shower rail. Only hers remained. She realized that Mark must have packed his soaking wet; he must have already known that he would not be back.

She sat down on the edge of the tub, clutching her swimsuit, and forced herself to examine the notion. Did he actually make love to me here, knowing that he was going to dump me, she asked herself. She felt mocked in the knowledge of all the love she'd squandered on him, all the effort and energy. None of it had done any good.

Jenny quickly changed, knowing that activity would help dispel the mood. She found a terry cloth robe of her mother's hanging on the bathroom door, and put it on over her swimsuit. Some instinct made her shut all the heavy

drapes and put on the lights. It would make the place more private, and would seem more welcoming when she returned from the lake. She locked the door, and dropped her bunch of keys into the pocket of the robe.

About twenty yards back down the road she had come lay the entrance to the path through the woods to the lake. From here it was a pleasant ten-minute jog through soft pine needles to the shore.

The water felt beautiful, soothing her nerves and caressing her limbs. She dropped her head back, allowing the coolness to reach her scalp. As the sun touched the edge of the mountain opposite the lake, Jenny wrapped her robe around her wet body and started to walk the steep path back, hurrying now that the wood was becoming dark.

As she reached the dirt road she saw a glint of metal under the trees near the path. She stopped. It was a car -- a Honda. She couldn't see its exact colour in the half-dark. She hadn't seen it there when she passed earlier. Suddenly she felt the backs of her hands prickling with the familiar fear. Could he have followed her here? She fought the rising panic. In her mind's eye, she saw the man walking swiftly away from her apartment building. Could he have been hurrying to a waiting car? No, no, she thought. He doesn't have a car. He travels by bus, for Chrissake. But so do I, she thought. And I have a car! He hadn't been on the bus that morning, she

remembered, so maybe he'd brought his car, then parked outside the apartment building, waiting for her to come home. Oh, God. She should have gone straight to the police, instead of running like a scared rabbit. What had she been using for brains?

She decided to drive the four miles to Stanstead -- where there was a small police station. She wouldn't have to tell a long story, just ask an officer to come back with her, to check out an abandoned car which didn't belong there. Yes. That was definitely the thing to do. If he was hiding anywhere in the woods, he would see the police. That would scare him off. She could ask if they would patrol the wood a few times. Maybe the car would even be gone by the time she got there with the police. She knew she must hurry, it was almost dark. All she had to do was to run the short distance to her own car. She bent to fasten her sandals properly, not wanting to trip. Thank goodness she had her keys handy. She'd been lucky with these keys twice already. She took out the bunch from her pocket and found the right key in readiness. Then she sprinted to her car, without looking around or behind, intent only on speed. She reached it safely and threw herself in, winding up the window and pressing down all the locks. She looked behind to the back seat, just to be on the safe side -- no one. Quickly she turned the key. Nothing happened but a dull whine. The motor didn't even

turn over. She tried again, and again. Lights. Okay. Nothing wrong with the battery. Somehow she could tell from the sound that it was not going to start. Something must have broken, or come loose. There was no point in even looking under the hood. Jenny didn't know a carburetor from a crankshaft. The only thing to do was to phone from the house. Of course, she didn't know the number. She sat in the car, trying to remember where the phone directory was. There must be some easy-to-remember number for emergencies, but she didn't know what it was. Surely if she dialled '0' the operator would give her the number, even connect her. Yes. That was the best thing to do, then wait in the house until the police came. It was too far to walk to Stanstead and he might see her from the woods and catch up with her on the lonely road.

The lights of the cottage showed up the squares of window covered by the drapes. It was already dark in the car, but she could make out which key unlocked the cottage. She got it ready, opened the car door then hurried the few yards into the verandah. She let herself into the cottage by the inner door. Quickly she turned and locked it. Then she stood on tiptoe to pull across a heavy bolt. Rarely used, it was very stiff with rust, but stretching as high as she could, she worked the bolt handle up and down, up and down, to loosen it. Finally it squeaked shut. She turned and leaned back against the door in relief.

It was then that she felt the cool air against her cheek. She looked at the side window, over the sink. The heavy curtain billowed gently, then fell back again. There were some jagged pieces of glass on the draining board, where the two mugs had been. Another piece lay on the floor.

He was standing in the doorway, leading to the living room.

In her terror everything was startlingly clear. He moved towards her as casually as if he were moving to the cash in a supermarket. His smile stretched from ear to ear. The rope held taut between his hands was at least an inch in diameter. No, that was an exaggeration. It was probably more like half an inch. And it must have been about eighteen inches in length because he held it wound once or twice round his hands at both ends. He jerked it a couple of times. His smile jerked at the same time. The rope and his smile were both stretched as far as they would go.

She couldn't move. She knew that no one would hear her if she screamed -- no one at all.

CHOICES

"Are you sure?"

Della felt like laughing. It was such a classic situation that it probably warranted Theo's equally classic question. She wondered fleetingly how Mary must have felt in the year 1 AD (or was it 0 AD?) with the cells of the world's Messiah multiplying like crazy in there -- 'Joe dear, I have something to tell you'.. His eyes might have shown the same blank horror. Only poor old Joseph would have had a different reason. He'd probably thought that his lady had been screwing around. She stared at Theo.

"Of course I'm sure. What do you think?" She began to feel sorry for him. Not a lot, but some.

"Goddam it! How could you have let it happen? You're supposed to be so well organized."

"Don't shout at me. Nothing's foolproof." Her conscience wouldn't let her sound too aggrieved. She had no real right to be the injured party here. Theo didn't know about the secretly hugged plans, the careful arithmetic. She could even read her daily temperature in Celcius. Not that it mattered; a graph was a graph. She was, as he had observed, well organized. And she shouldn't be surprised if Theo was a bit upset. She had been expecting this, had known he would be angry. Theo had made his views plain, and Della had never tried to influence him. She had always told herself that he would come around when he had to. They had been together for

seven years, never sharing a home, just together; weekends, the odd vacation; often one night during the week. It suited them. At least it suited Theo, and whatever suited Theo suited Della. She had never risked losing him by making demands. Nothing was worth that. Not until now. Her desire for a child, never utterly suppressed, had tiptoed into her conscious thought, where it remained steadfast and unquenchable. She had made her plans, rationalizing, hoping. Yes. He would come around she told herself. After all, he loved her. "You know nothing's foolproof," she repeated stubbornly.

"I've told you that I don't want children," said Theo, "I'm too old."

"But you're not having it. I am. And I'm obviously not too old, or it wouldn't have happened."

"But, Della, I'd be almost seventy by the time it graduates from high school."

She saw it, him maybe, long before graduation, learning to walk, starting to play hockey; black curly hair like his father's, one front tooth crossed slightly over the other, eyes warm and brown. She realized that Theo was still talking. He looked at her, starting to smile, but with fear still in his eyes.

"Listen, you're obviously not too far along. Thank God it's not too hard to get an abortion these days, especially for an older woman."

The little face in Della's mind crumpled up in a mixture of tears and blood. She exploded.

"Sure, nobody minds getting sucked out by a vacuum cleaner!" - Oh God. She hadn't meant this scene to be so ugly. Why had she started to shout? She forced her fury somewhere to the back of her mind. She had to quell the anger in Theo's eyes. She was not disturbed on her own behalf. They had been lovers so long that she had felt his wrath many times. But this time she had something to protect. Theo must be made to feel some of her joy. He must come to realize that she was not trying to trap him. She poured two cups of coffee and handed one to him. He sat at the table without speaking, his head bent. There was more grey now than black in the springy curls. They used to be like shining lumps of coal. She loved his hair. She reached out to touch, gently, the top of his head, wanting the comfort of the remembered softness. He drew back. Della shrank with hurt.

"Well, it happens all the time, Della. It won't be all that bad. Then afterwards, maybe we could take a long vacation together."

"I've been trying to get you to take a trip with me for years, but you were always so busy making money. How come you've suddenly got time now?"

"Because the restaurant is doing so well. I can leave it with George for a couple of weeks. His voice

was becoming more confident. The horror had gone from the brown eyes. He was warming up. "I know it's shitty for you, sweets, but I would never want any harm to come to you. You'd get the best of care."

Oh no, no, no. (This couldn't be happening. She shut her ears to what he was saying. This was her body and its contents being bandied about like a piece of choice scallopino. She had to stop him.

"Theo. Theo, listen to me please. I'm going to keep it. I want to have this child. You have to understand that."

"Keep it! Why has it got to be your decision? Why do I have no Goddam rights!"

"How can you shout about your rights and at the same time deny mine? Deny a child's rights?"

"Because if I forced motherhood on you, society would scream 'rape, bully'. The women of the world would be up in arms -- but suddenly it's okay for you to force fatherhood on me."

"I'm not forcing anything on you, Theo."

"Yes, you are. You're forcing a situation. Just because you made a mistake -- it doesn't mean we have to change our whole lives."

"But I want mine changed. I've always wanted a baby. I know you never did. You've made that plain frequently."

"Not frequently enough, apparently."

"Look, Theo.. I need a child. It's different for you. You've got lots of family. You're mother's still alive. There's brother George and his tribe, and all those uncles, not to mention cousin whatsisname in the National Assembly. Why, the whole Goddam city of Montreal is populated with your sisters and your cousins and your aunts. I need a family. I have no one."

"You have me. Isn't that enough?"

He picked a leaf from a geranium growing in a pot on the table.

"No. It's not enough."

He started slowly shredding the leaf into pieces, gathering the particles into a little heap with his fore-finger. She picked up the plant and carried it over to the window sill where she stood with her back to him.

'Oh God,' she thought. 'Please don't let me lose him. Not now. Make him see the child. Make him want to love it.'

Della was playing on the one part of him that she knew to be vulnerable. Greater than his love for her was his inbred respect for The Family -- the tradition that made him remain in that barn of a house in Outrement -- the youngest son taking care of his ninety-year-old mother, unattached and comfortable. The old man would have welcomed this new grandchild. Della had met him, a thin old Greek, leathery and fierce, courteous and proud

of his business, one of Montreal's first Greek restaurants. But the old man was dead.

The sun felt warm on Della's cheek. It was now or never. Maybe there was still hope. She moved and stood close to Theo. His face looked lined and sad. She wanted to kiss him, but knew that she would be unable to stand the pain if he turned away from her.

"I want you to make a decision." Her voice was starting to shake. He stared silently at her. "You can stick around. I know you've never wanted marriage..."

"Don't push me, Della." He slammed his fist down on the table. His eyes had the hunted look again.

"Let me finish. You haven't drunk your coffee. I was not suggesting that we marry. I don't care if we don't live together. But if you want to keep the relationship that has suited us all these years, then you can accept the child, care for it, claim it as your own, help me in whatever way you can to bring it up. You might even get to like it. It may turn out to be a son, and he could learn to take over the restaurant when you get tired. You have no heir except George's boys and they have no interest in the business." She looked at him for some sigh, some response.

"What's my other alternative?"

"You can fuck off."

She had intended to dress it up a little, give him some leeway perhaps. Nonetheless, she realized that this was the way she meant it.

"Della you're being childish and stubborn. We've both been so contented. I can't believe you'd be willing to wreck it all. You can't see it from any point of view but your own. Look, you'll see that I'm right." His voice was pleading. He was fighting for his interests. "Everything can go on as before. You're just not seeing things in perspective."

"You have your choice."

"But I thought you loved me."

"I thought I did too."

They sat in rigid silence. Always before, Della had given in to him. She had been afraid of losing him. But now there was a tiny creature, soft as a flower, safe and warm. She looked at Theo. He was writing in a check book. He stood up.

"You'll need this." He laid a check on the table. She did not look at it. She picked up his jacket and handed it silently to him. Then she stared towards the window.

"Look, I'll call you. Okay?" He spoke just before he closed the door. She picked up his cup of coffee and heaved it after him. It shattered against the door, leaving a large brown splash, with rivulets running down towards the floor.

"You stupid, selfish, pig-headed BASTARD!" She yelled at the empty room. The sound seemed to echo. Theo had truly gone. Della had lost. She should have known -- she'd never been a gambler. She looked around at her home. It was all she had left, until the child came.

She would have to get a bigger apartment eventually. However this one would do for a year or two. She could clear out all the clutter from the little room beside the bathroom. Maybe get some wallpaper, bears and stuff. She'd be allowed a few months' leave from work.

Her eyes fell on a large pair of shoes near the door. She picked them up and stared at them. One lace was frayed. 'Oh God, don't let me cry now. There's too much to think about.'

She fetched a large carton and dropped the shoes in the bottom. Then she went over the apartment methodically, picking up things: a good suit, shaving gear, odds and ends here and there. She piled them into the carton and found some string to put around it. She would drop it off at the restaurant on the way to work tomorrow. She mustn't leave him any excuse to come back and try to change her mind. She couldn't risk it. She might not be strong enough.

She picked up the check from the table. It was for ten thousand dollars. She was about to tear it up. It seemed like a lot of money, but stretched over eighteen

years or so, it looked a lot less, particularly with inflation. She put it in her pocket. Then she picked up the pieces of broken cup and put them in the garbage can. With a cloth she carefully wiped the coffee from the door. A brown stain remained. She frowned at it, then she got some scouring powder and scrubbed and scrubbed until no trace remained on the white paint.

GRACE

It was Monday afternoon.

The chesterfield was close to the window. Grace could sit there looking out into the street without being seen from the outside. A bluish film on the glass made the November sky even duller. Windows always got like that from nicotine deposits, Grace knew, when someone in the house smoked. Just looking at it reminded her that she should clean the windows. Maybe next week. She should also stop smoking, but that would only make her get fatter. Grace sighed as she looked down at her thighs, straining the navy blue polyester of her slacks. The school bus was late again. She lit a cigarette. And she waited.

Waiting was a large part of Grace's life, at least it had been since she had married Tom. That and eating -- or, thinking about eating.

Tom had a desk job, a 'shore' job, but in the early years, when he had been at sea for months on end, she had waited for letters -- waited for him to come home. During that period, when they had first come to Nova Scotia, she had waited on the sidelines at gatherings of naval officers' wives, silently eating cookies and potato chips, hoping that someone would speak to her. She felt that if

her mouth were full, no one would notice that she contributed little to the conversation.

She had waited out four pregnancies. Tom was a very tall man, and she had presented him with four beautiful strong healthy girls, each of whom fought and kicked her way through nine months' growth, sapping Grace's strength so severely that she could do little but sit or lie down, eating chocolate bars, the only food that would stay in her stomach.

Then there had been years spent with one baby resting on her hip and another crawling at her feet. She stirred baby food, which had to be tested and tasted. To please Tom, she had baked pies and cookies: more testing and tasting. There were no meals for Grace in those days -- only food. She ate in moments snatched while spooning gloop into tiny mouths (one-for-you-one-for-Mommy style). She ate while standing up preparing school lunches. With characteristic logic she would eat the last slice of bread from a packet, freeing the empty plastic bag for lunch-wrapping. Plates had to be cleaned, so Grace became a human garbage disposal. Nothing was wasted -- and everyone knows that there are no calories in crumbs.

Constantly busy, perpetually harried, Grace rarely found the time to look into a mirror. The one day, when she was shopping in Halifax, when all her daughters were in school, she caught sight of a fat woman walking towards

her from a shop window as she crossed Barrington Street. This woman was sloppily dressed in too-tight slacks and a grubby sweater. She was wearing Grace's clothes. The wispy blonde hair had once been thick and bright, and the face which frowned at nothing had been Grace's. The lumbering body had once been angular. What had happened to her? Where had she disappeared to? Who was this monster wearing her clothes?

*

*

*

The world had first begun to crumble the year after she'd left her home in Southern Ontario. She and Tom had gone to live briefly in Victoria, then he had been transferred to the east. No one had thought to warn her what Nova Scotia was like. No one had told her about the rocks, the miles and miles of spruce trees. She had imagined that mountains would soar behind calm blue water, like the west coast. She thought it would be mild and balmy -- one coast had to be just like the other, surely. Poor Grace had been cruelly uprooted. She thought more and more about the fresh greenness of Ontario, and closed her mind to the wild beauty of the rocky shores.

Where Grace had come from, you didn't talk to strangers. It was never discussed, merely not done. After years in Nova Scotia she still shunned the warmth and friendliness of the people, who just shrugged and

repeated to themselves -- 'there's no snob like an Upper Canada snob,' looking at each other knowingly. Tom was a more adaptable person. He caught on faster to local ways and therefore made friends more readily, while Grace was left wondering if there was something wrong with her, that people should prefer her husband. So she took it out on him.

When the girls were small, Tom had been at sea for much of the time, so Grace was left to raise them almost single-handedly. She had sat up alone and worried over their occasional illnesses. She had been the one who suffered over their daily dramas at school, who cleaned them, and helped them, and nourished them. It was she who had disciplined them, so when Tom came from the sea, bearded and smiling, with gifts in his duffel bag, and kisses, he got to be the hero, she the tyrant. So she took it out on him.

Tom was kind and dreamy. He loved to read, and had a passion for poetry. Grace liked to lose herself in romantic fiction. Tom would have liked her to be more intellectual. So she took it out on him.

Tom was handsome and tall and gifted and good-natured. Grace was fat and plain, and preoccupied with those responsibilities from which there was no escape. So she took it out on him.

After years in an old house facing the winds of Eastern Passage on the Dartmouth side of the harbour, she wanted a modern house. It would be easier to look after, and she deserved it, even though two of the girls had left home to go to college, and the third would finish high school in two years. She wanted comfort and ease. Tom, grateful for her years of effort, proud of the daughters she had raised, had bought the house in a new development fourteen miles out of Halifax, thinking that she would be pleased, not knowing her well enough to see pain in her so profound that there was no pleasing. So she took it out on him.

She had nothing to see from her window except other box-like suburban houses. The street ended in a forest, where trees had been pulled out and left to dry up and die, their roots grotesque and helpless.

Grace looked out, frowning at the November day. She hated Nova Scotia, and she hated what she had become. It was all Tom's fault. Still, she couldn't bear the thought of losing him.

But she had the girls. The brightness of their physical presence represented to her the only real proof that she existed at all. That's why, on Saturday morning she had so wanted the weekend to go well. There must be none of the usual bitterness and tension that so often stained the hours the family spent together. Grace had

been making plans all week. She had wanted the company of all the girls. She needed their beauty and energy all around her. Their eldest daughter, Sonia, had been expected home for the weekend. Instead, she had phoned from Toronto, waking them up, her voice full of forced confidence, pretending that her words couldn't possibly hurt.

"No, Mom. I can't make it -- I have to stay and work on a project. I'm doing it with a bunch of other people. It's to be a joint effort. If any members of the team don't do their share then none of us will get a good grade. You can't expect me not to pull my weight -- can you?"

She was putting the blame for the hurt onto Grace, for being selfish, for not wanting her daughter to do the fair and just thing. Grace felt certain that Sonia had merely found something more interesting to do -- a date more fun than a weekend with the family.

"I see." Grace's tone was cold, deliberately accusing.

"I'm sorry, Mom." Pleading now for approval, Sonia had lost whatever advantage she had. This was exactly what Grace wanted. She needed to strike back in her disappointment. She would not soften.

"Are you?" Grace waited.

"Of course I'm sorry. You do understand, don't you? I truly would have come if it had been possible."

Grace said nothing. "Mom?" Sonia was sounding desperate. Grace hated punishing the girl, but the moments of happiness she had felt all during the past week, whenever she had thought of Sonia's coming visit, rose up to mock her; re-lived in self-pity, representing so much squandered energy.

"I suppose you want to speak to your father?" Grace handed the phone over to Tom, who had overheard. Then she got up and left the room. She could hear him, speaking loudly as he always did when it was long distance.

"Sorry you're not coming, love. Never mind, come as soon as you can." His voice was cheerful and forgiving. Grace fought back tears. How dare he be so invulnerable?

The weekend further deteriorated. Grace went downstairs in her old velvet robe. It was time to start breakfast. Marina, their second daughter, who lived in residence at Dalhousie, arrived -- only to leave again with her latest boyfriend.

Grace's dream of the Saturday evening dinner began to fall apart. In her imagination she had seen the entire family at the table -- herself the beloved matriarch, encircled by laughter and admiration, amid the clatter of knives and forks, just like a scene in a television ad. A beloved matriarch was allowed to be fat.

She sullenly banged the kettle into the sink and filled it with water. The sky was grey. Rain spattered on the kitchen window. She decided to make porridge.

Tom came downstairs, whistling. He kissed her on the cheek.

"How's breakfast, old thing?" Tom had picked up a number of British expressions in the navy. Grace could tell he was aware she was upset. She knew that he would be cheerful and solicitous, anxious not to exacerbate her mood -- sometimes it only made her worse. "Can I help?" He would know from her response whether or not she was prepared to be friendly. He was standing near her, and she could smell the freshness of the soap he always used for shaving. It made her instantly recall the feel of his newly shaven cheek.

"Okay," Grace said, "maybe you could do the tea." He started to whistle again, relieved.

Grace stirred the porridge, watching the bubbles rise and break with a soft plop. She swirled the wooden spoon and one of the bubbles broke and spattered onto the back of her hand. She wiped the hot stuff from her skin on to her robe.

"Oh, Ma." The voice was plaintive. "You've got porridge all over your robe." Grace felt a wave of annoyance shake through her. The voice belonged to her third daughter, Shirley, who had just wandered into the

kitchen, yawning. The girl sat down at the kitchen table and started to read the paper. Shirley was the only one of the girls to have inherited Grace's fair, curling hair. She also had Grace's tendency to put her finger on other people's foibles. Like Grace, she was often vocal in her criticism. Since they were so alike in temperament, Grace and Shirley were constantly at war. Shirley was sixteen.

"Could you put the paper away until we've had breakfast?" Grace felt irritated. Her hand was beginning to sting where the hot porridge had landed. She ran water from the cold tap. Shirley said nothing, but folded the paper with an air of boredom.

"And set the table," Grace added. "There are four of us."

"I can count." Shirley slapped the paper down and got up.

"Don't use that tone!" Grace spoke sharply and looked around for Tom to give her some support, but he did not seem to have heard. He had gone towards the back door. Shirley started dropping knives and forks onto the table with a clatter. Grace felt anger rising, sour as acid.

There was a rush of cold air, and Tom and Grace's youngest child, Joanna, came in from her morning paper round. She hugged her father, then took off her wet shoes. Grace's anger lessened as she looked with

affection at the child. Like Sonia and Marina, she had Tom's fine dark hair. It fell over her shoulders, straight and shining. Her small face was pink from the cold air. Joanna, at ten years of age, was as fragile and as pretty as a kitten. Her mother adored her.

"Take off your wet things. You'll catch cold." Grace was aware that she fussed over Joanna, and she knew that Shirley resented it. The clattering at the table continued.

"Where's 'Rina? I thought she came home." Joanna had been looking forward to having Marina help her with her homework.

"Well, she left again." Grace's opinion of Marina's desertion was apparent in her voice. "Go and change, Joanna, your porridge is ready."

"Oh terrific, I'm real hungry. Thanks, Mom." Joanna kissed her mother. Her cheek was cold from the rain. Joanna sensed the tension between her mother and Shirley and desperately wanted to turn their tempers around.

"If you mean 'very hungry' why don't you say so?" Grace was fussy about the girls' grammar. She hated them to pick up the habits of their friends. Too late, she saw the hurt in Joanna's eyes as the child moved away.

"Tea's ready." Tom came to the table with the steaming teapot. He patted Joanna's behind. "Hurry up, Jo. Get rid of these wet jeans. We'll wait for you."

As Joanna left the kitchen she stopped. Shirley was juggling with cups and plates.

"Do you need any help with these, Shirl?" It was yet another attempt to placate.

"No., Go and change, will you? Otherwise we'll never get any breakfast."

"You surely don't imagine you're going to waste away to nothing, while you wait a few minutes for your sister." Sarcasm was Grace's favourite weapon, sharpened from frequent use.

"Look who's talking," Shirley muttered. She was the only one of the four girls to share with Grace the tendency to gain weight -- a trait she despised and worked very hard to restrain. Grace felt it a criticism of herself that Shirley should so strive to avoid this similarity to her mother.

"We need milk for the tea, love." Tom spoke quietly to Shirley, meaning only to change the subject, but his tone only served to throw Grace's querulousness into sharp relief, until the words seemed to hang in the air, bitter and punishing. Grace felt this and resented Tom for his gentleness, the quality in him that she had once loved.

"And don't put the carton on the table -- we might maintain some standards." Grace spoke just as Shirley took a full carton of milk from the refrigerator.

"I wasn't going to, Mom. Why are you always criticizing me?"

"If I don't 'criticize' as you call it, you'd all grow into a bunch of savages." Grace was ladling porridge into four bowls with a wooden spoon, dropping each spoonful with an angry motion, splattering porridge onto the table surface. She was working up into one of her moods.

"Now, now. Let's enjoy our breakfast in peace." Tom made the unfortunate mistake of implying that Grace was the one who was wrecking the peace, since she was the last to have spoken.

"I'm not hungry." Shirley got up from the table. She flashed a look at her father, shaking her head and raising her eyes in exaggerated bewilderment. Grace intercepted the look, and sensed the superiority that lay behind it. Too hurt at first to speak, she dropped the pot into the sink, and started to wash it out. Shirley had left.

Tom came to where Grace was standing and touched her awkwardly on the shoulder. "Come on, dear. Let's eat, then we can to the the library. Okay?"

Grace shrugged her shoulders and Tom's hand fell away. Grace felt that, in witnessing Shirley's mockery, her husband had been party to it.

"I don't care," she said.

"Why don't you come and eat before it gets cold?"

Grace continued to scrape the bottom of the pot with a plastic brush. Tom hovered near her, his anxiety palpable. "Shall I pour you a cup of tea?" he said.

She made no reply. Tom went back to the table and sat down. The milk carton stood at his elbow, where Shirley had set it down before leaving the room. Remembering Grace's admonishment, Tom got up again to get a pitcher, anxious to do the right thing. He opened one cupboard at random, then another.

"Where can I find a pitcher?"

"What for?"

"The milk."

"It's in the fridge."

"I know that. ~~It's here.~~ Shirley took it out. I just want a pitcher for it." Tom's voice was beginning to show the signs of a strained condescension.

Silently Grace opened the door of the refrigerator and took out a blue and white pitcher. It was full of milk. She put it on the table, then went back to the sink.

"Oh." Tom stood, holding the unopened milk carton, feeling foolish.

Grace continued washing the pot. The hot water stung the skin of her hand where the boiling porridge had landed earlier. She examined it. There was not even a blister to show for it.

Tom poured out two cups of tea, then pulled one bowl towards him and began to eat silently. Grace wrung out her washcloth and started to wipe down the door of the refrigerator.

"I thought I'd drive down to coast a bit," Tom said. Grace went on with her cleaning. "Would you like to come?"

"What for?"

"Well -- maybe we could go out to the beach at Henley's cove, get some fresh air."

Grace shrugged her shoulders and started to wipe fingerprints from the white cupboard doors.

"Do what you like." She said.

"Would you like to come?" Tom kept trying.

"I hate that beach."

"Do you mind if I go?"

"Why should I mind?" Grace returned to the sink.

"Maybe you'd rather I did some shopping or something -- is there anything you need?"

"I don't care what you do."

Tom's bowl was empty. He got up from the table. Grace heard him take his coat from the hall cupboard. The front door opened, then slammed. She dried her hands and went towards the hall. She saw that Joanna had been standing just inside the kitchen door. Beyond her, Grace saw herself in the hall mirror -- a fat woman, her mouth a

thin line drooping at the corners, with blobs of porridge drying on the front of her flannel robe. Three bowls stood on the table, their greyish contents congealing. Her child's lovely elfin face was pinched and pale. They both heard the car start up.

Tom was gone the whole morning. Grace made lunch for Joanna, then the child went off to a movie with one of her friends. There was no movie theatre within miles. The two girls had to be driven into Halifax by the mother of Joanna's friend. Grace did not have her own car. Tom had offered to buy her one, but she had never learned to drive. It was a constant source of friction between them. Grace grumbled about the isolation of the place, the lack of amenities, even of stores. Without her own transport she was stranded. There was a bus service, which the girls managed to adapt to, but it meant more planning and organization than Grace was prepared to undertake. Tom would urge her to take driving lessons. Grace would agree, even sign up with a driving school, then find excuses for dropping the idea. Secretly she greatly feared making a fool of herself in front of a driving instructor who would, no doubt, be younger than herself; in front of Tom, who would encourage her as though she were a child; and most of all, in front of the girls.

Sonia and Marina already had driver's licenses and Shirley was learning. Tom, thinking Grace to be merely idle, grew impatient.

Now, Grace, was left alone. Shirley had gone off somewhere. Joanna had left with her friend. It might as well not be a weekend. It could be an ordinary day. She sat on the corner of the sofa, surrounded by her silent house, smoking, fighting against a rising panic. Tom had never stayed away so long before. She was filled with fear for which she could find no cause. It came from the depth of her consciousness, fastening on to her like a net. The terror was the more intense because of its unfamiliarity, its lack of apparent cause. Grace was accustomed to certain fears -- fears for her children, fears of illness or of violence. But there had always been some specifically recognizable, even justifiable reason. She felt sure that if she knew what frightened her, then she would be able to examine it. As it was, she was unable to do anything but sit immobile, shrunk into herself, as it began to grow dark.

*

*

*

The relief she felt when she heard Tom's car in the driveway was so great that she wondered if part of her terror had been of being alone, of Tom's leaving her. She

had never before consciously entertained the idea that he might leave her.

She got up and put on the lamp, when she heard him come into the house. She wanted to run to him, to seek reassurance. She went out to the hall to greet him. He was struggling to remove his coat. His back was turned to her.

"Where have you been?"

She hadn't meant to sound censorious, merely to say something to him -- to include another human being into her sphere, which had so recently been filled with nameless terror.

"Oh, I just went to the beach. I told you I was going there." He still did not look at her. There was only tension between them, the resonance of feelings still left raw from their last contact. Grace felt that he was slipping out of her control. It was a sensation new to her.

"Would you like anything? You can't have had any lunch." Tom rarely carried more than a few dollars in his pocket at any one time. It never occurred to either of them that he might want to go out for lunch, or for a drink after work. He was not that sort of man.

It must have dawned on him that Grace was no longer angry with him. He turned to her in surprise. She wondered fleetingly if there was a hint of guilt on his

face, then dismissed the notion. It had been she, not he who had behaved badly this morning.

"No thanks. I'm not hungry. Where are the girls?"

"Joanna went to the movies. Shirley went off somewhere. You know Shirley." Grace lifted her hands in a gesture of resignation. Then she smiled at Tom, and held out her hand to him. But Tom had already turned away.

"Have you seen my book, I left it in the living room." His voice drifted back to her, but Grace barely listened. She heard him climb the stairs, then she noticed that his old duffel coat was hanging half off, half on the hanger. It was a relic of his seagoing days. Grace straightened it carefully, turning the collar outside, noticing how worn it was. There was a bulge in the pocket, spoiling the shape. She put her hand in and pulled out the object. It was a pair of scarlet gloves, rolled together. She unrolled them in surprise. They were mittens, not gloves. They didn't belong to her, nor to any of her daughters. She tried them on. They were too small for her. She was standing there with the mittens on her hands when Tom came down the stairs. He stopped dead, but said nothing.

"Whose are these?" Grace demanded. "They were bulging out your pocket," she added, by way of an excuse for what might well have been considered prying.

"I found them."

"They're too small for me."

"Oh." He held out his hand for them. Grace kept them on. They were clean. Not the wet, muddy objects you'd expect to find on the roadside on this November day.

"Maybe they'll fit Joanna," she said.

"But she's already got some."

"Not red ones. These are nice and bright. Besides it's useful to have a spare pair. She can wear these for school." Grace still didn't take off the mittens.

"You'll stretch them."

"So what?" she flared. "They're just an old pair of forgotten things that you found on the street. I don't know what you're getting so upset about."

"They weren't on the street. They were on the beach."

"Well, what does it matter, Joanna will like them."

Grace removed the mittens and rolled them up again. Tom turned away. She heard him sigh. Something nagged at the back of Grace's mind. She went downstairs to the laundry room to put the mittens in the basket of things to wash. Then she realized what was wrong. There was no sand on the mittens. They were slightly glazed on the palms. They had probably been used for driving, but otherwise they were clean. She sniffed them. There was no smell of seaweed, or of the salt water. They couldn't have been lying on the beach for very long.

It was Monday before the thought came to her. Maybe Tom was having an affair. The idea didn't present itself as a sudden glimpse of knowledge, nor as the result of some process of deduction. It came first as a joke. If Tom were any other man, I might think he was having an affair, she said to herself. Although the notion was laughable, something of it remained buried in her mind. Certainly Tom was too nice, too loyal, too much of a family man to do such a thing. The idea was ridiculous. Besides, Tom was too much in her control to take such a risk.

She did her washing on Monday mornings. She took everything from the drier and started sorting. The mittens had stuck to her polyester slacks and hung, like ornaments on a Christmas tree, until she pulled them off, realizing that they were not, after all, pure wool. Pure wool would have shrunk. Grace would have been happier if they had shrunk, then she could have thrown them away. Now they were just like new.

It was then that terror struck her again. She sat down on the cellar steps. The walls around her were damp. She was all alone in the musty-smelling place. Tom couldn't leave her for some woman with tiny hands and a dainty, firm body. Oh, sweet Christ, Grace thought, the woman must have left them in his car. If Tom had found someone's belongings on the beach, he wouldn't pick them

up. He would put them in some obvious place where the owner would find them again. She had seen him do it often.

The notion, having become a concrete suspicion in her mind, drove her to her feet. She fled upstairs to her sewing room. In a box, she kept carefully-made name tapes, which she had sewn into all her children's clothes for school. She sewed a tape neatly into each of the two mittens, then looked at them with some pride. 'Joanna Hamilton' said each mitten smugly.

Joanna would wear them with her grey coat. She would wear them every day. Grace's heart contracted when she thought about her little love, her baby. Tom would certainly think twice. He would see how pleased Joanna was with the mittens, and how pretty she looked.

Grace sat down to wait for the school bus, smoking and looking out the window at the street she hated, the mittens in her lap.

Short Trips

It wasn't really fall, although the leaves were just starting to turn. There was a patch of red at the top of one of the trees near Allison's property.

She stood on the old wooden bridge, watching a child wandering upstream. A small boy of about eight or nine, he searched the rocky pools for the moving glint of fish, oblivious to his audience. He couldn't see that the summer was dying. Perhaps only those born in the autumn feel this, Allison thought, each summer ending as we notch off another year.

A fish jumped, the ripples disappearing immediately, the tiny plop gone without echo. Wind moved the leaves overhanging the stream, rearranging reflections, shifting the surface of the water. Nothing stays the same, she thought. The sun moves round, altering patterns of shadow and rock. The pebbles may seem to have been there since time began, but they change position, worn by time and flow. A cloud hid the sun. Allison turned to go, shivering slightly. It would be her birthday in a month.

As she walked back towards her house she heard a loud, rasping noise, growing closer. It sounded almost like a lawn mower. She stood at the edge of the rutted driveway leading to her cottage and looked down the road towards the approaching sound. A figure appeared on an old motorscooter, going at low speed. The rider passed her and turned into her driveway. She stared in dismay as

the machine came to a stop a few yards from the front door of the house and its rider climbed off. Goggled and booted in black, he was a huge alien insect. He kicked a stand into position and let the machine rest. He shook it several times to test it. After some serious wobbling it stayed at an awkward angle, its front wheel turned sideways, robbed suddenly of its menace.

"Hi." The rider took off his black helmet and stood, a very ordinary-looking, slightly-built young man of about twenty-five. "I'm looking for a place to sleep."

"There's a motel in town, about three miles further on." Allison pointed in the direction the young man had been headed.

"No, I meant outside. On the grass." He looked around.

"Here?" Allison noticed that he carried a large plastic-covered pack on the rear of his scooter. It must be camping equipment.

"Well sure. If it's okay." She continued walking up to the steps of her house, destined for privacy, but he walked beside her. "It's nice and quiet," he added.

"I know. I want to keep it that way."

"I won't make any noise. I'm a silent sleeper. You won't even know I'm there."

She wanted to say 'no'. She wanted him to go away, because his presence jarred her. She did not want this

waif with his mechanized packhorse and plastic-covered chattels trampling on her tomato plants or leaving garbage around.

"Well. I'd rather you didn't."

She knew she was being uncharitable, but felt herself justified.

"Okay."

Without another word, the young man replaced his helmet and walked back towards his scooter. She noticed that he was slightly lame. Pity stirred her, but she knew that she couldn't change her mind now without it being obvious that she was patronizing him. She closed the front door, then stood in the hallway as the motorscooter coughed and spluttered its dying gasp. Silence. She remained, listening, at the same time wondering why she was bothering to care whether or not the young man's machine would start. Convinced that she was acting unwisely, she opened the front door again. He was standing beside the scooter, looking at it.

"Is it sick?"

He stared at her without replying. Then he removed his crash helmet again.

"Sorry. Did you say something?"

"I asked if it were sick."

"Oh, no, no, it's okay. It's fine, really."

He stood without moving. She realized that he was

probably waiting for her to go indoors again. The scooter looked quite old. Very likely he didn't want an audience, particularly if this were a common occurrence.

"Perhaps you'd like some coffee. I was just going to make some."

"Yeah. That would be great. Shall I come in?"

It had not occurred to her to invite him inside. Still, it would be silly to take the cup out to him, while he stood in the driveway to drink. She motioned him to follow her into the kitchen. He put his goggles and helmet down on the kitchen table, and put on a pair of steel-rimmed glasses, the thick lenses making him look like an undernourished owl.

"This is a terrific house."

He was looking around, impressed. Allison warmed a little towards him. She was proud of her home, a shingled cottage built in the early part of the century and remodeled with care. She had worked hard to pay for it, and it was her abiding love and interest.

"Thank you. You can sit here".

She pulled out a chair from beside the kitchen table and turned on the radio. The sweet, soothing sound of Mozart filled the room as she plugged in the electric kettle and set up the filter of her yellow earthenware coffee pot.

"What's your name?" He asked.

"James" she replied.

"James? That's a boy's name."

"Mrs. James. It's my last name."

He took off his glasses and wiped them on the lining of his leather jacket.

"How do you do, Mrs. James. I'm Henry." He offered his hand. She had not expected his fingernails to be so clean.

"How do you do, Henry."

Grey eyes gleamed at her. He replaced his glasses.

"It's Mr. Henry." He waited for her to react.

Touché, she thought, embarrassed at having treated him like a child. This was the second time this strange young man had made her feel uncomfortable. He had no right to sit in judgement on her. It was her own house. He was drinking her coffee.

"Do you take milk in your coffee, Mr. Henry? I drink it black, so I never thought to offer it to you."

"Thank you. I like it black too. I also like your music, Mrs. James. Where's Mr. James?"

"Dead."

"Oh." Now it was his turn to look awkward. "When did he die?"

"Twelve years ago."

"What did he die of?"

"You really do ask a lot of questions."

"I know." He nodded in agreement, carefully putting his cup down on its saucer. "But how else am I going to find out stuff?"

"There's a lot of stuff that is clearly not your business -- unless, of course, you are merely trying to find out if I am alone here and unprotected, so that you can come back and rob me."

He nodded again, his glasses glinting in the afternoon sun.

"There's that, isn't there? Or, alternatively, I could just as well do it now, save me coming back."

She looked at him sharply. He was staring into the dregs of his cup. Then he looked up and grinned.

"I'd have to tie you up first. Then I'd take off with your valuables -- where do you keep them, by the way? -- and make a hasty getaway on my ten-year-old scooter, if it will start. I'm sure the police will have great difficulty finding one small young man, pleasant-spoken, walks with a limp."

"I don't have any valuables worth talking about."

"I'm sorry if I frightened you, Mrs. James. I wouldn't have stopped, truly, if I had known you were alone here. And as soon as I have finished this coffee, I will go and find a place to sleep."

"But it's still early. Surely you don't need to find a place just yet?"

"Well, if I were in a hurry, I wouldn't. But since I'm a slow traveller, it makes more sense to stop longer in each place. Then I can enjoy what there is to look at, or listen to." He nodded towards the radio.

"Where are you going?"

"Wherever." The thin face registered discomfort.

"Well, west, anyhow."

"You mean you don't know?"

"I don't know how far I'll get. I started in Charlottetown and I've got as far as Southern Ontario in seven weeks. That's not bad, considering the number of breakdowns I've had."

"You're going across Canada? How long do you have?"

"The rest of my life, or until my money runs out, depends which happens first. And at this rate, if I continue drinking your coffee and enjoying your company, it might take me that long to get as far as Winnipeg."

She rose from the table and brought the coffee pot. He pushed his cup towards her and smiled innocently. She poured a fresh cup for them both.

"You may sleep on my lawn if you wish."

"Thank you," he said. They drank in silence, then he picked up the cups and took them over to the sink.

"Thank you again for your coffee, Mrs. James."

He gave an odd little bow. She noticed now that

one of his shoes had a huge thick sole. While he had been sitting down, she had forgotten about his lameness.

"I wonder if I might --"

"Use the washroom?"

"Clever of you."

"It's down the hall, on the right."

She rinsed the cups and dried them. She was putting them away when he came back.

"I love your bathroom, Mrs. James. Lime green and turquoise. It's wild. And a black bathtub! Who would have thought that a woman who looks so.."

"Dull?"

"No, of course I didn't mean that. But although you are obviously a person of taste, there's a whole side of you that no one usually sees, right?" He hesitated. "I mean, you're probably full of surprises. You may look very conventional, but I bet you're the sort of woman who wears the most outrageously sexy black lace underwear." He grinned. "For example," he added inconclusively.

She felt her face growing warm, and glanced down at her well-tailored tan silk blouse and linen slacks for reassurance, involuntarily half-covering her breasts with both hands for a second.

"Don't let me keep you," she said primly, realizing too late that she had given herself away. Had it been entirely without intention? The thought appalled her.

He laughed.

"Have you any preference as to which of your trees I might sleep under?"

"Any one. Do you have a tent?"

"No. — I have a plastic bag, borrowed from a department store. It was covering a mattress. They'll never miss it. I put my sleeping bag in it. By the way, what was he like?"

"Who?"

"Mr. James." He was gazing at her blandly.

"I barely remember."

"You can't have been married very long."

"A few years."

"Well, I'll dump my stuff in the back, then go and explore the town."

"What there is of it."

He walked to the door and stopped, strangely diffident now.

"Will you have supper with me?" He asked. "I noticed a place along the way, a real diner, with hot dogs, french fries. Yes?"

"Thank you, but I think I'll just have a quiet supper with a book."

"Okay." He walked out. "Thanks for the coffee, Mrs. James."

"It's Allison."

"Oh." He stood on one foot, the other with its giant sole, sliding back and forth on the waxed floor. "I really am Henry. Henry Carpenter. I'll see you later. Enjoy your book."

He was gone. The front door closed, then after a few dry starts, and a splutter or two, a triumphant roar splintered the air. She listened as it grew fainter, until it died away down the road towards the town.

She went into the living room and stared out of the window. Heavy clouds now obscured the early evening sun. A wind rustled the maple tree, showing the undersides of the leaves. The pressure had dropped. A storm must be on its way. She sat down with her book. The radio in the kitchen was still on, but the music had stopped. There was only speaking, a dialogue of muted voices, suitably modulated for a discussion on the current Stratford Festival. She could barely hear it. The house around her breathed stillness. Its peace usually comforted her, but tonight she felt waves of loneliness. Perhaps she would make herself an omelet, with herbs, onions maybe. No, not onions. They made her breath smell. Even after years of living alone, she had never accepted the notion that it scarcely mattered whether or not her breath smelled.

It must have been the rain that wakened her. It fell in a solid hiss, soaking into the dry ground. Her bedroom clock told her three minutes after midnight. Obviously the young man had decided to spend the night indoors, somewhere in town, otherwise she would have heard the noise of his scooter returning. She turned over and tried to sleep. It was useless. Her skin itched. She had mosquito bites on the sides of her feet. She scratched irritably. It was no good. She would have to get up. Sighing, she put on the light and got out of bed. Sleeplessness always called for definite action, like fixing a cup of cocoa, or making up your mind. Damn. Putting on her deep red velvet robe, she wandered into the kitchen. Her hair was hanging loose to her waist. It felt messy. From habit she twisted it into a knot and held it to the back of her head, looking around for hairpins. They were in the bedroom of course. She passed through the hall to fetch them and saw something white beside the front door. Curious, she bent to pick it up. It was a note:

Saw your light on. Don't be afraid if you see a prowler. It's only me, sheltering under the eaves. What spectacular rain.

H.C.

She opened the front door. Henry fell in. He must have been leaning on it. He was drenched. A huge plastic-covered bundle was clutched in his arms. Water

streamed from its corners to form a puddle at his feet. He looked apologetic. Allison stood, still holding up her hair at the back of her head with one hand. He spoke first.

"Truly, the last thing I wanted was to cause you any trouble."

"Leaving a note? What could be more provocative? What did you think I would do -- just leave it there, or read it and go back to bed, leaving you to drip for hours under the eaves?"

His glasses were wet, the thick brown hair matted and curling at the edges. He looked like a damp spaniel.

"Can I come in?"

"You already are."

"Why are you holding on to the back of your head?"

"I can't find my hairpins."

"Well just let go."

"I can't."

"Why."

She felt a need to reassert her authority.

"Are you going to stop asking questions and ruining my hardwood floor? Leave that wet thing outside and I'll get you some blankets."

"It's not all wet. It's just the cover." Opening the door, he unpeeled his sleeping bag from its wet slippery plastic. "Look, this is quite dry. Don't bother

with the blankets." He dumped the wet cover outside, removed the sodden shoes, and left them beside it.

Allison went to get a blanket from the bedroom cupboard, picking up her hairpins and fastening her hair up as she went. She handed him the blanket, feeling more at ease now that she had both hands free.

"Go and leave your wet clothes in the bathtub. You can cover yourself with this."

"Thank you, Ma'am."

She noticed that, without his shoes he stood with one foot on tiptoe. She turned away, thinking he might not wish her to see him walking without his special shoe. She turned on the lamp beside the chesterfield in the living room.

"I think you'll be quite comfortable here." She patted the cushions. "It's very soft, and long enough for most people."

"I'm not very long, as you can see." He had come in and now stood beside her. He smelled of fresh air, and rain. A drop of moisture hung from the tip of his nose.

"You'll find fresh towels in the bathroom cupboard. Put out the lights after you." She spoke crisply. "I'm going to bed." They stood awkwardly for a second. "Good night."

"Good night, Allison. Thank you."

She turned and walked quickly away, shutting the bedroom door carefully behind her. She normally left it open.

Allison woke with the sun on her eyelids. The storm was over. She smelled coffee.

Just as her mind registered this, she heard the hiss of the shower next door, and the sound of water jets battering the plastic shower curtains.

I don't remember telling that boy he could use the shower, she thought irritably. She felt imposed upon, her privacy in danger. Suddenly, over the sound of the water she heard singing. This was not everyday singing in the shower. What flooded the morning with penetrating sweetness was the popular tenor aria from Act One of La Bohème: Rodolpho's tenderly expressive declaration, sung in a controlled and perfectly modulated tenor, in flawless Italian.

Allison jumped out of bed and listened at the bathroom door, entranced at the remarkable voice. The singing stopped suddenly and the shower was turned off.

When she went in to the kitchen, the coffee was already filtering into the yellow earthenware pot, the kettle simmering. She refilled the filter with boiling

water, watching the grounds rise in a thick brown layer, then start to subside.

"Oh, you're up." She heard him speak by the kitchen door. "I was going to bring you coffee in bed."

"Do you bring your mother coffee in bed?" She instantly regretted the coyness in the question.

"No," was all he said, leaving all the implications hanging there.

"Is she a singer?"

"Who?"

"Your mother."

"No, she was a ballet dancer."

"Was? Do you mean that your mother is no longer alive?"

"No, I mean that she is no longer a ballet dancer. She got creaky at the knees."

"When?"

"When she did pliés." Henry held his hands clasped before him, making a circle with his arms, and with his cheeks sucked in, in a hideous parody of a dancer's haughty, emaciated expression, he sank towards the floor, his back straight, bent knees wide apart. He was wrapped only in a blanket. Allison turned away. "That's a plié."

"I didn't mean when did she creak. I meant what made her give up dancing?"

"Well, there used to be a good company in Halifax." Henry had straightened up by this time, and

adjusted the blanket. "Oh, I know it wasn't Sadler's, Wells, but she became one of the principal dancers there. She was really quite good, I guess. Anyway, she stayed on for a while after she and my Dad got married, then they moved to P.E.I., where she gave lessons. By this time I was born. I think she had planned on devoting the rest of her life to teaching me -- I was to be her raison d'être, her last chance of fame. Poor Ma. Canada's answer to Nijinski, galumphing across the stage like a paraplegic turkey. I was going to say 'Baryshnikov', but he was still doing his jetés and his sautés in Russia."

"Sautés are cooking" she said irrelevently. She didn't want to hear more of his life story, even if she had asked him. She had been merely curious, not interested. There was no reason to become close to this young man, nor to feel pity for a woman whose hopes seemed so pathetically squandered.

"Speaking of which," he said, responding to her wish to change the subject, "I am going to cook you some breakfast. What would you like? Bran Flakes, Corn Flakes, Rice Crispies, Sugar Pops..."

"Sugar Pops is 'cook'? Don't worry. I'll make the breakfast. Why don't you get your wet clothes and put them in the drier. It's out on the back porch." She pointed towards the door at the back of the kitchen. "I suppose you have some other things you could wear meanwhile?"

"Yes, but I'd have to go outside to get them. My bare feet." He stuck out one foot. It was the good one, she noticed. The blanket was carefully wrapped round his body, the ends tucked in to keep it secure. It left his chest and shoulders bare. She saw that they were thickly covered with golden hair.

"Well, stay as you are." She was speaking brusquely, busying herself with the breakfast. She heard him going to collect his wet clothes, then the hum of the drier.

"Where's the best place to dry these?" He was holding out his shoes. They looked bizarre, the one normal shoe and its fellow with the heavy thick sole.

"I hope they're not ruined. They must be expensive." She needed to talk about it -- to dispel her awkwardness.

"They're not. And they are." He grinned. "Look, I'll put them outside in the sun. They'll be dry by the time we've had breakfast. Then I can be on my way. Don't you have to be at work or something?"

"No, I'm on vacation."

"Where do you work?" They were seated now, buttering toast and sipping coffee.

"In the library, it's in the middle of town. You probably saw it last night -- an old brick building."

"Yes." He sounded excited. "I wanted to go in, but it was closed. What are you doing with your time off?"

"Are you going away?"

"No. I may just take a few short trips. Also, I have a private celebration to observe."

"Well, since you put it that way. I can't possibly ask you about it, can I? But just tell me, is it happy or sad?"

"Neither -- or both. It's sad, but it shouldn't be, so I'm trying to laugh at it, then maybe I'll feel better. Now, I sound like a line out of Cosmopolitan. Anyway, it's not important." No, she thought, there is nothing as pathetically "common," as heartbreakingly unlovely as the passing of a woman's youth. A Natural Process, but a bad joke, nonetheless, played on every one of us.

"However, you're looking sad." Henry was walking towards the drier. She couldn't see his face. "So, come out for a ride with me -- cheer you up."

"What do you mean, a ride?" An uncomfortable suspicion dawned. He was piling clothes over his arm, dry now.

"On my scooter, of course. What else?"

"Certainly not."

"Why not?"

"I'm just not going to."

"You wouldn't feel safe?"

"I didn't mean that."

"What then, too undignified?"

"No." He stood, waiting. "I'm far too old."

"Whatever you say, lady." He grinned at her.

"Whatever you say."

She knew that there could be no argument. He would leave her alone. Good. She would spend the day sunbathing. She tackled the dishes, glad to be in control. Henry had disappeared, presumably to dress. She started to hum, then to sing, as the words and the melody came together in her mind. Suddenly, she stopped in embarrassment. The music had been in her head since she heard Henry singing it in the shower. He was standing near the kitchen door, still grinning, fully dressed.

"I'm off."

"Okay. Goodbye, Henry."

She turned away from the sink to dry her hands. As she came across to the door, her hand outstretched to shake his, she realized that he had gone. He clattered out the screen door onto the porch. Allison felt disappointed, not because he was leaving, but because he had seemed to make light of her hospitality. She had thought him better-mannered than that.

Allison changed into shorts and a bright green halter top in front of her mirror. Even approaching

middle-age, she still looked good without her clothes, better perhaps. She took pride in dressing well, but being a conservative person she wore clothes which, although pleasing to her in colour and design, allowed her to melt into the background. A big woman, her strong bones and full breasts would have been arresting had her nature been different. Since childhood, she had tried to disguise her height by wearing flat shoes and muted colours. She moved slowly in public, often looking at the ground, sometimes walking with her arms folded across her chest. Anyone looking at her closely might have thought her elegant, but few stopped to look.

In shorts, with her shoulders bare, she knew that she need feel no shame over her body. There were streaks of grey in her hair. Her ankles were somehow squarer, and thin broken veins were scattered in tiny threads across the insides of her thighs. Nevertheless, her weight and shape had changed little in the last twenty years. She sometimes thought it a waste that no one saw her thus anymore, except herself.

The grass was cool under her bare feet. She flopped down on her foam rubber cushions and started spreading sun tan lotion on her legs. Something caught her eye -- something out of place near the front door. Neatly stowed to one side of the porch was Henry's large, plastic-covered pack. She stared at it for a few moments,

confused, before its significance restored some of her faith in human nature. She was pleased that he hadn't disappointed her, after all.

She heard the spluttering of the scooter slowing down in the road. It stopped, and Henry wheeled his machine into her driveway. He propped it up against its stand and picked something from the carrier, then walked towards her. He wore his leather jacket and carried a black crash helmet almost identical to the one he was wearing. He dropped the second helmet beside her.

"Here, you'll need this."

"I'm not riding on that thing."

"Sure you are." He squatted down in front of her.

"You must have some jeans you wear for gardening, or something?"

"Of course I have. But I'm still not riding on that thing."

"Well, put them on. And you can wear my leather jacket."

He took it off and handed it to her.

"It'll be far too small," she said indignantly.

"Then just don't do it up." His eyes were on the level of her breasts. "It's only to protect you."

He stood up and held out his hand to help her up.

"Henry, I have told you." She was beginning to sound desperate. "I will not ride on that noisy and offensive contraption."

It was amazing how quickly she got the hang of it. All you had to do was lean slightly when you went round a bend. For the first few miles she sat rigid, glued to Henry's waist, eyes closed, mouth dry, her face jammed against his blue denim back. Then she began to notice the smell of resin from the pine trees, and to feel the sun's warmth on the backs of her hands. When they slowed down at an intersection she dared to open her eyes. The grey road shot by beneath their feet, but if she looked to the side they didn't seem to be going all that fast. The world didn't look the same as it did from a bus or a car. A truck pulled up beside them. Allison shrieked. She could look straight through underneath it. As they started up again, Henry turned into the road that led to the town. They clattered through the town's residential area to its one main street. As they came to the centre, a figure stepped off the sidewalk in front of them. It was Ann Weybourn, her assistant librarian. Allison ducked behind Henry, but it was too late -- Ann had looked

at her, their eyes meeting briefly before Ann looked slowly elsewhere, checking the traffic. Allison laughed out loud. She tapped Henry's shoulder. He held his head further back towards her, still looking ahead.

"Can we go faster?"

Henry's profile turned to her, his mouth widening in glee. He lifted his hand from the handlebars in a gesture of assent.

"Hang on," he yelled into the wind.

Allison clasped him tightly, peering over his shoulder at the road ahead, the scene behind them wobbling in the rearview mirror.

They stopped for lunch at a roadside restaurant with a gas pump. Climbing stiffly from the scooter, she stood while Henry padlocked it, then walked beside him into the restaurant. Two figures were reflected in the plate glass window. Goggled and anonymous, they were creatures from another planet. No wonder Ann hadn't recognized her --with a man's leather jacket hanging open over a low-cut, bright green halter top. Who was she?

They sat in a booth and ordered hamburgers and cokes. Allison probed.

"What do you do in Charlottetown?"

"Work in the Post Office."

"But why? You're obviously a trained singer."

"Yeah. I took a degree in music at Dalhousie."

"Well then. Surely you're not going to smother so much talent?"

"Let's not kid ourselves. After I graduated, I went to New York, hung around the Metropolitan, tried to do odd jobs, applied for chorus work. But I soon realized that I'm not all that good. Sure, I have some talent, but in all the performing arts only the truly great are successful. The rest barely scrape a living."

"So what now?"

"It depends. I applied for an assistant teaching post in a school outside Toronto."

"Will you take it?"

"I don't know. It's in a suburb. I may just knock around a bit longer. I may end up working back in the old Charlottetown P.O." He spoke with a certain finality. Plainly he didn't want to discuss it any further.

When they got back to her house it was late afternoon -- just twenty-four hours after she had returned from the bridge to find the scooter in her driveway.

"I got some steaks this morning," he said. "I put them in the fridge while you were changing."

"That was a bit presumptuous, don't you think? What made you so sure that I would invite you for supper?"

"I wasn't. But even if you turned me out, it wouldn't matter. Then you'd just have two steaks sitting

there in your fridge. Besides, you did say that I could sleep on your lawn, and I still haven't done it."

Allison marinated the steaks in lemon juice and garlic, and fried them. She made a green salad with just a touch of oil and vinegar, then cut thick pieces of French bread. They carried the meal to a table outside and Allison opened a bottle of Côtes du Rhône. She had been saving it for her birthday.

After they had eaten they sat in silence, finishing their wine, nibbling cheese with the last of the bread. When it became dusk, Allison stood up and started towards the house. She turned round and held out her hand to him. Together they went through the porch and walked into the hall. It was much darker inside but they could still see.

Allison let go of his hand and walked into the bedroom. She turned down the bedclothes at one side of the bed and straightened her back. She was still wearing jeans and her green top. She felt suddenly afraid. Henry stood in front of her. His eyes, just a shade lower than hers, were those of a child peering into a candy store window. Allison's fear vanished and she raised her arms and laid them across his shoulders. He undid her halter top, and her breasts, unsupported, were huge as they

overflowed his small, cool hands. He unzipped her jeans and his fingers moved gently between her legs. She finished undressing and stood before him, tall and bravely naked. He undressed with his back to her, folding his clothes neatly and leaving them on a chair. When he turned to face her, even in the half-dark room she noticed the right leg shorter, skinny, the muscles flat and wasted. But as he limped nearer, the right foot held on tiptoe, she mainly noticed the phallus, pointing at her, healthy and pink.

Making love had always been one of Allison's special talents. Henry was not disappointed. Neither was she.

'What a pity I don't get a chance to do this more often,' she thought. Finally they both fell asleep, sticky, breathing wine.

It was dark when Allison awoke, to find Henry leaning on one elbow, looking at her. She could just make out his eyes as they reflected the light from the window. The curtains were still open.

"Do you realize, my lady, that I have just fulfilled my oldest and dearest fantasy?"

She waited for him to go on. To say 'what do you mean?' would seem to be pressing the point. She wanted to

take a neutral stand, and allow her attitude to develop as her perception of the situation became clear.

"When I was a kid," he began, "all the other prepubescent little brats were fantasizing over Sears' catalogues."

"Sears' catalogues? You mean those photographs of bras and bikini briefs?"

"Yeah. All those pointy little breasts that looked like sideways pyramids. Well, not me. I spent my early youth rapturously poring over a book of reproductions of the early masters. My first-ever orgasm was achieved while feasting my eyes on Raphael and Rubens -- not soaking up the classical and mythological allegories -- oh no, just longing to get my own grubby little paws on those huge luminous chunks of female flesh. Oh, those great round bottoms like golden puddings. Venus undid me every time. You know, if I ever get to see the original of The Judgement of Paris, or the Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus, I swear I'll pass out in ecstasy. I kept roaming the library to find bigger and bigger books, in the hope of seeing larger-scale reproductions, so the other kids thought I was nuts about art, for Chrissake. Bad enough I was learning to sing, and couldn't play hockey, but to be an art lover. No wonder they called me 'Harry the Fairy'. How ironic. I didn't give a shit about art. All I wanted was heterosex." He played with her hair,

which had half-tumbled from its pins. "It's very long, isn't it? Now, if you had pearls threaded through it, and a few short tendrils curling... anyway, I grew up with this passion for big, healthy, buxom women. All around me were little skinny girls, and none of them interested me. I've never really been with a woman like you before."

So that's how it is, Allison thought. Oh, well. She started to turn away from him.

"Allison, you're not offended? You surely don't think I'm trying to score, do you. Like I'm adding one more to my list? You should see my list!" He laughed. "It's so short it just doesn't count."

In the face of such candour, Allison softened.

"If I'm to be a work of art," she said, "I should be appreciated, not listed. Anyway, whoever is on your brief list has taught you well. And while you're in a receptive mood," her hands cupped his face, "perhaps there are some other things you'd like to try?"

Afterwards, her vacation seemed difficult to recall. The incidents jumbled together, patterns of days repeating themselves. She remembered being happy, even if she could not relive the sensation.

On the last day of her vacation, after he had left, Allison painted her front door. Then she made some new curtains for her kitchen -- bright yellow to match her coffee pot.

Then, on the day after labour day, she returned to her work in the library. She hung up her jacket and passed the circulation desk. Ann was already there, stacking books onto a cart.

"Hi, Mrs. James. How was your vacation? Did you go away?"

"No," Allison replied, walking into her own little office. "I just took a few short trips. Apart from that, it was quiet." She sat down and arranged her pencils neatly in a jar. "Quiet," she said to herself. "But nice." It was her birthday.

A few weeks later she received a postcard. It was a print of an oil painting: Rubens, Jean Paul (1577-1640). Detail from The Judgement of Paris, oil on panel, 57 1/8 X 76 3/4". National Gallery, London. It was the head of Venus in profile, the hair thick and bright, threaded with pearls, and with some curls escaping from their knot. Even the cheap reproduction couldn't hide the warmth and richness of the face. No message was on the back, apart from his name, and she could not read the postmark. There was no return address.

Marjorie

Marjorie plodded across the street and stepped in a puddle of slush in the gutter. Her sneakers were soaked through, but her feet were still dry. This was because she wore plastic bags over them, tied around the ankles. Marjorie used up a great deal of mental energy over the problem of keeping her feet dry. February was Montreal's worst month. In England there would be crocuses, purple and yellow, brightening the grass under the trees of the village green.

Marjorie had gone home to England for a visit in 1955. She had gone alone because Sinclair, her husband, had been too busy. She had not been back there since.

Ten years after that she'd left Sinclair -- just walked out one afternoon with an overnight bag and never returned.

A truck lumbered past, splashing her from head to foot with muddy brown slush. Marjorie made a rude gesture.

"Stupid bastard!" she yelled after it. She shook the blanket she wore as a coat. It was mud-coloured anyway, World War II service issue. She had picked it up for a dollar at the Salvation Army. It had a large hole in the middle, which was just right. She put her head through the hole, and the blanket covered her body to below the knees. It was okay for February and March, but on January days she often needed to wear a large plastic garbage bag underneath the blanket to keep out the wind.

There was a hole at the bottom edge of the bag for her head and more holes in the sides for her arms. It pulled on like a huge plastic sweater. Amazing what could be done with plastic. All it needed was a little ingenuity and a disregard for appearances. Marjorie had both.

She turned up Boulevard St. Laurent, past shops smelling of cooked meat and garlic. Halfway up the block was a poissonerie. Monsieur Gagnon always gave her fish heads and scraps for Fritz. Marjorie chatted with him for a while. She was proud of her French. She had studied at the Paris Conservatoire when she was a girl. Monsieur Gagnon complimented her on her accent. He did this every time they talked. It was part of their ritual.

She left the poissonerie and plodded on up the hill. Glenn appeared beside her. She was pleased to see him. His beauty never failed to stir her. He took her arm.

"Hello, love."

They smiled at one another as she spoke, and walked together companionably. A sliver of sunshine pierced the clouds, warming the afternoon, glinting on puddles. It caught the strands of Glenn's soft brown hair. When she'd first created him, she'd named him after Glenn Gould, whose playing Marjorie had loved so much. Her Glenn had the same hair too. She had gone to hear Glenn Gould play

one day years and years ago when she was in Toronto with Sinclair. Sinclair had fallen asleep, silly chap. Marjorie had been too enthralled listening to the notes falling as soft as velvet drops, watching the pale young face bent over the keyboard. She had been too caught up in the music to bother feeling embarrassed by her snoring husband. She laughed to herself at the memory. She had been young then, and still capable of embarrassment. It was such a relief to be an old lady, not to care what anyone thought, no longer to polish her reflection in other people's eyes.

But she could scarcely believe that she would still be alive while Glenn Gould was not. She had wept on that dreadful day. Her Glenn's playing had become more and more like his, the style and interpretation so utterly unique -- Marjorie remembered it perfectly.

They turned a corner and came to a health food restaurant, tucked into an old building. Marjorie looked up at her companion.

"You go on home love. I'll see you later." Glenn smiled at her and walked on. Sometimes he talked, sometimes he was silent. It was an ideal arrangement. He was an ideal lover. The perfect product of her imagination. She looked affectionately after his disappearing figure, then turned into the restaurant.

A flood of warm air met her. It smelled like French onion soup today. That meant it was Tuesday.

Wednesdays were minestrone. Thursdays, French Canadian pea. Monday, lentil. What were Fridays again? Oh, yes, bean. Weekends could be anything.

The restaurant was run by Victor and Hugo. Hugo's name was really something else, Bill probably, or Chuck, but he'd changed it -- not because they had literary pretensions, but because the coupling of their names pleased them. They had won a lot of money on Loto Quebec about five years ago and had opened up the restaurant. Victor was a stockbroker. Hugo ran the restaurant and did most of the cooking. Victor liked to come in at weekends and cook. Neither of them needed to work. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, the restaurant was very successful.

"Hello, Marje, my English rose."

Hugo hurried up to her, took the blanket coat with as much care as if it were Russian sable, and kissed her on both cheeks. He had thick ginger hair and whiskers. He looked a lot like Fritz. Once, after Fritz had been clawed in one of his many fights, the vet had shaved a patch of his ginger-striped fur to clean an infected scratch. The skin underneath had been the same healthy pink as Hugo's. They walked with the same self-conscious elegance. They shared the same pride in their appearance. They both had the same soft, sensual warmth. Only Fritz was a tomcat.

Marjorie bent down and removed her sneakers, then unwound the strings which laced up her ankles, holding the plastic bags in place.

"Here I'll put them on the radiator to dry."

Hugo took the sneakers. He relieved her of the plastic bags and folded them up neatly. The strings he wound over his thumb and little finger, crossing with each turn, to make a figure eight. Then he placed them beside the sneakers on the radiator.

"Come and sit down, sweetheart. Have a cup of coffee and warm your hands before you play."

"Thanks, Hugo. I'm feeling weary. It's this bloody winter. Won't it ever end?"

"Sure it will." Hugo handed her a steaming cup. "Here's a bran muffin."

Marjorie was touched, as always, by his kindness. He and Victor paid her to play, every day, in their restaurant. It wasn't much, but it was tax-free. Though they were not obliged to feed her as well, they always did.

"How've you been, Hugo?"

"Oh, I'm fine, but Victor's at home today with a cold. All runny nose and bad temper. I left him with the financial section of the New York Times scattered all over the bed. He gets so untidy when he's ill, poor dear. Excuse me, Marjorie... "Bonjour"

He spoke to three young women who had just come in and sat down. The room was usually half-full of

customers during the afternoon. By supper time it was crammed. There were many regulars who came often to eat, and to hear her play. Warmed now, with coffee and companionship, Marjorie moved over to the piano.

It was an old upright made of polished rosewood with a pattern cut out in fretwork, backed with faded silk. There were two brass candlesticks, one on either side. The keys were stained, but it was in tune. Marjorie had perfect pitch. To play an ill-tuned instrument made her want to vomit. She'd made it clear to Victor and Hugo that they wouldn't want her to vomit all over their nice piano. The customers might think that the phenomenon was a reflection on their cooking, rather than on her hypersensitive ear. They had it tuned regularly.

She started to play. She chose Scarlatti today. She loved the Sonatas. There were three volumes. She kept most of her music here at the restaurant, but mostly she didn't need it. So much of the music was forever etched into her mind, trapped within the nerves of her fingers. Strange what happens to the memory as one grows old, she thought. She could hardly remember what Sinclair looked like, but she could recall every note of the Mozart Fantasia in C minor that she had been playing the day she met him.

He had come to the door to ask for directions, standing tall and straight in his Canadian Air Force uniform. His unit had been stationed at an airfield just outside the village in England. There had been swarms of Canadians all over the place, in the pub, on the streets. She'd found them strange, noisy; interlopers in a drowsy landscape. Months later, Mummy had been horrified.

"Marry a Canadian, darling. You must be out of your mind. What on earth do you want to go to Canada for? It's frightfully cold and they have bears." Mummy always spoke in italics.

"I don't imagine they have bears in Montreal" Marjorie had replied, determined. She had been almost thirty, and afraid. Perhaps that was why she had married Sinclair. She couldn't remember any other reason.

But she could remember her first sight of Halifax/ harbour, grey with sleet, old buildings and the smell of fish. And she could remember Sinclair meeting her in Montreal after an endless train journey. He looked smaller out of uniform. She thought he looked duller than she remembered him. She'd been right.

Marjorie's playing rippled on. The customers were quiet as always, munching contentedly, muting their talk, listening, some of them reading. Hugo placed another cup

of coffee beside her. Soon she would stop and have supper. Glenn never came here to hear her play. They played together at home. Sinclair had kept her piano, hoping that she'd come back. So she and Glenn had to play on the edge of the table. Sometimes they played a concerto. Glenn would play the orchestral score, adapted for a second piano, and she would play the piano solo part. After that they would make love, the music still in her head. Then Glenn would unwind the long braids which she wore round her head like a coronet, and she would sleep peacefully against his warm shoulder.

Sinclair had always tried to get her to cut her hair, and dye it, once it started to go grey. He had married again, she had heard, about nine years ago. Marjorie had seen them once, in Steinbergs. His wife was small, and exquisitely dressed. She looked the perfect executive's wife, so different from the shy, slightly eccentric English woman he had first married. She looked like someone whom he had not needed to change.

* * *

Later she sat at an empty table, and Hugo brought two plates of fèves au lard, and a green salad. He sat down with her.

"Marjorie, I want to ask you something." Hugo crunched his salad and wiped his chin, neatly removing a drop of blue cheese dressing which had strayed there. Marjorie took a forkful of beans, enjoying their rich sauce. Her mouth filled with saliva. Apart from a bran muffin, she'd had nothing to eat all day.

"Your fêves are delicious, dear."

"Marjorie, you're not listening to me."

"Yes, I am. What is it?"

"I'd like you to marry me."

Marjorie picked up another forkful of beans. Hugo was spreading butter thickly on a piece of brown bread. She looked at the red hairs on the back of his wrist, curling over his cuff. He always wore expensive shirts.

"Why?"

"What do you mean 'why'?"

"I mean just 'why'. You have to have a reason."

"Because I'd like you to, is why."

"But what about Victor?"

"Oh, I've discussed it with Victor. He thinks it's a marvelous idea. He wishes he had thought of it."

"What do you suggest, three in a bed? I'm too old for gymnastics."

"Here, have some more coffee." Hugo poured coffee into her cup expertly, then continued crunching his salad. "You could have your own room. We'd both love to have you. We'd look after you."

"But I don't need looking after. I can look after myself. Besides, I've been married already."

"But this would be different."

"Indeed it would." She chuckled at the thought. They both sat for a moment, silently eating their fêves au lard. A customer came in, letting a gust of cold air into the room. Hugo got up to greet him. Marjorie, finished her beans and had started her salad when he returned.

"Well?" he said.

"This salad is good. I like these pieces of stuff in it -- snafu or whatever."

"Tofu."

"Tofu. I like the texture."

"Well?" he repeated.

"Well what?"

"Marjorie, darling. You are being deliberately obtuse. What do you think of my idea?" He had put down two slices of carrot cake. They each took one.

"No, dear."

"Give me a reason."

"I'm used to being alone. Besides, I'll be collecting my old-age pension in June."

"You're still a lovely woman, Marjorie."

"You sound like an old western movie. Mm, good cake."

"Yes, isn't it? Victor found this recipe. It's much moister than the one we've been using. I wish you'd take me seriously."

"I am taking you seriously. But how can I possibly contribute anything to you and Victor? You have a perfect relationship as it is."

"We need more in our lives. Look, we've got lots of money, we're middle-aged. We can't have any children.."

"Shame! Have you seen a doctor? Maybe you're not doing it right." Marjorie giggled. Hugo looked hurt. "Sorry dear. I didn't mean to make fun of you. Go on."

"Well, we need someone to care for together, someone to look after. Since we both love you, and you need us, I thought you'd be the perfect person to enrich our relationship."

"You really mean it, then. But why marriage?"

"It would give us a committment -- both of us -- all of us."

"I know we all get along famously, but all under the same roof? It wouldn't work. I snore."

"I bet you don't. You're just crying to make up difficulties."

"I don't have to make up difficulties. There are enough already."

"We'd get you a piano."

"Now you're trying to bribe me. No, no more coffee, thank you."

Hugo poured himself another cup and sat back, giving a gentle burp.

"Promise me you'll think about it?"

"Well, I will think. And thank you for asking, but I don't believe it would work. I'm very set in my ways, you know."

"Now, who's talking in old clichés?"

"And what about Fritz? He'd eat that expensive, noisy parrot thing you have."

"It's not a parrot thing. It's a minah bird. We'd move him into the restaurant. He'd be a conversation piece for customers."

"Scare them away, is what he'd do, with that dreadful squawking. But you've really got this thing all thought out, haven't you? I can just see it. Victor and Hugo and the gargoyle."

Marjorie choked on her carrot cake, laughing. Hugo thumped her on the back, then shook her shoulder.

"Don't call yourself nasty names. You are a sweet, talented lady."

"But I am a bit, well, odd, aren't I?"

"And Victor and I aren't?"

They both laughed. Hugo picked up the plates and cleared the table. Marjorie got up to go. It was late. Hugo helped her on with her blanket coat. She sat on the floor near the radiator and wrapped the plastic bags round

her ankles, then put the dry sneakers over them. He helped her to her feet and came with her towards the door.

"Why don't you wait another half-hour till I can close up, then I'll walk you home."

"No thanks, Hugo." He often asked her this. But she always refused. He couldn't see Glenn waiting for her, just inside the door, ready to take her hand and walk home with her, through the dark.

"Remember," he said, Victor and I love you. We enjoy your company. We need another person besides each other. Then we'd be complete." Hugo bent to kiss her on both cheeks. "We'll talk about it some more. Don't say 'no' straight away. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Of course, Hugo. But I really don't..."

"Ssh." Hugo put his hand over her mouth. His pink face looked vulnerable. His whiskers seemed to droop. She remembered that Fritz was waiting for his supper. Glenn stood beside her, silently waiting. He'd never before come to her while she was speaking to another person. For an instant she had the opportunity to see Hugo and Glenn together. Why on earth did this make her want to laugh?

"Good night, Hugo."

They left.

"What was all that about?" Glenn asked.

"You may well ask. Wait till we get home, and I'll tell you."

It was starting to snow.

They climbed the stairs. Marjorie's apartment was at the top of an old building. It was really a single room. There was a sink, but she had to share a toilet. This irked her. She unlocked the door, and an orange furry face appeared, about eighteen inches off the ground.

"Hello, Fritz." They went in. Fritz had beads of melting snow on his back. She left a window open at the rear, so that he could use the fire escape for his evening prowls. She picked him up and held him against her face. There was a small tear at the tip of his ear.

"You silly twit. You've been fighting again."

Fritz grinned. Obviously he'd won. She put him down and went to the 'small hotplate' in front of the window. He trotted after, tail aloft. Glenn stood, leaning against the wall nearby. She took a small pot from a hook on the wall and started to cook the fish scraps. Fritz ran back and forth across her legs, arching his back and purring.

"Well, out with it."

Glenn took a packet of tobacco from his pocket, and began sifting and separating the brown shreds. He had

taken up pipe-smoking recently. It reminded her of the village pub in England.

"Victor and Hugo want me to marry them."

"Both of them?"

"Well, Hugo actually. He suggested it."

"I see. A ménage à trois."

She glanced at him sharply. He was patting tobacco down into his pipe with one forefinger. With his other hand he held a match carefully against the bowl. He seemed to be avoiding her eyes.

"Well, it wouldn't have to be trois, it could be quatre."

He shook his head. What was the matter with the man? The pipe made a small bubbling sound as he drew on it.

"I'd be uncomfortable, with those two around."

Marjorie stamped her foot childishly. Really, this was too absurd. Fritz stretched up, his forepaws almost to the countertop, sniffing eagerly. The fish was almost done. She took some milk from the refrigerator. It was bare otherwise. She never needed to buy food. She made herself a cup of tea now and again. Otherwise she survived on what she had at the restaurant. It was enough. And Glenn never ate anything. She was really quite well off. There had been leaner times than this.

"I won't let you leave me, Glenn." He was looking hurt. This was the first time he had stood up to her. They had never disagreed in over fifteen years. That was part of his charm.

She emptied the pan of fish into a bowl and placed it on the floor. Fritz sniffed it, and carefully took a piece from the edge, shaking his head. It was still too hot. She poured him a saucer of milk.

"You would have a toilet all to yourself, Marje."

"No I wouldn't. I'd have to share it with Victor and Hugo."

She stood before him near the wall and leaned her head against his chest, needing to draw comfort from him.

"Help me to decide."

He stroked the back of her neck. Some of the tension eased.

"We'll talk later, in bed. Let's play now."

Marjorie cleared some library books from the old table and sat down.

"What shall we play?"

"How about the Schumann A minor concerto?"

"Opus fifty-four."

Glenn sat down at the other side of the table, opposite her. This was how they liked to play, the two grand pianos facing one another. Marjorie looked at him enquiringly. He nodded. They were ready to start. She

played the opening arpeggios. Glenn came in with the orchestral part, introducing the theme. Marjorie repeated it so, so softly. Then they played together. The music rose around them filling the room, scattering the cobwebs.

Fritz finished his fish, and started lapping the saucer of milk.

Outside, the snow fell in a gentle whisper.