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Connexions: A Fictive Collection

Yvonne Callaway

A Thesis

in

The Department of English

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

September 1990

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ABSTRACT

Connexions: A Fictive Collection

Yvonne Callaway

Concordia University 1990

The use of the British variant of the title is intentional: it is hoped that the foreignness of the spelling will enhance--or foster--the sense of otherness in the stories, and assist in visually suggesting the intercrossing of ideas that are explored in these fictional pieces. The six narratives in the collection investigate the grey area where history and memory, truth and lies, reality and fantasy overlap and intermingle. As well, the connexions between the sexes come under scrutiny in a number of the works. The world as we accept it is juxtaposed with the world as it might be, or ought to be: an imaginative creation.

The introductory piece initiates the reader to the realm of well-reasoned, articulate madness. The protagonist examines her life, finds it wanting, and makes the appropriate changes, despite physical and moral laws against such self-directed living.

An absurdist story, "Playhouse", treads the fine line between fantasy and reality, sanity and madness. By placing the protagonist in an irrational and meaningless world, the

reader experiences, vicariously, the alienation of a woman not quite sure if she, or the rest of the world, is mad.

"Gemini Ascendent" examines the complications that occur when people take on more roles than they can handle. There are intimations of madness, here, as well.

This segues into "A Very Tale", an escape from a mad world, into one of fantasy. A strangely familiar literary realm is uncovered through a veritable *tour de force* of clichés, wordplay, puns and visual jokes--albeit the prince has splotchy skin and a repressed libido, and a princess pops her gum.

"Fog" also works in that grey area where fantasy becomes, through wish-fulfillment, a fashioned reality.

The title story pulls together the disparate elements of the previous works and forms a few connexions of its own; the final fiction becoming a realistic fallacy for what has gone before, and a culmination for this foray into meta-fiction.

For the most part, the pieces in this collection work with humour (occasionally black). A difficult discipline at the best of times, in the context of death, madness and marriage-breakup, comedy becomes a real challenge. The attempt is made, through careful phrasing and vocabulary, to enlighten, enrich, and entertain. And, through images, to reveal quirks in the creative mind.

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HELPFUL HOUSEHOLD HINT #43

Out of a sordid past he had arrived and was presently sitting, cross-legged, in the middle of the day and the middle of my bed, eating tuna-fish-salad sandwiches with the crusts carefully cut away. He was a petty official at the Rent Control Board, and I had gone in, five months before, to complain about my landlord. That was about the time I had sworn off men forever; again. This little tin-soldier of a man had listened, sympathetically I thought, to my list of complaints about the building and against the landlord. He then suggested going for lunch, as it was that time. I hesitated--he was man, after all--but he didn't appear particularly threatening. We went to a local diner. He had seemed so caring, so genuinely concerned and protective; ordering additional condiments for my rare roast-beef sandwich, and insisting that the waitress replace the glass of milk because something was swimming in it. Merely a blackened seed from the Kaiser roll, I thought, but I

appreciated his solicitude.

He had talked a lot about himself at lunch, but I put that down to nervousness. He didn't seem to have too much experience with women, apologizing every time his arm brushed against mine as he reached for the ketchup.

We exchanged phone numbers, he called the next day, and we went out a few times to classical concerts in the park. And he was always a perfect gentleman, kept his hands to himself. I met his mother; a tiny, quiet woman given to redecorating their small home, each year, in a different monochromatic scheme; yellow, at the time. His father had run off years before, a green year, unable to shoulder the expense of this decorating mania, and unwilling to accept the annual supply of dyed-to-match underwear. Claude had readily taken on his absent father's supply of new, celadon briefs.

Within a month and a half of meeting, Claude had moved his stereo and his stamp collection into my apartment--we would both save rent. Solicitude got lost in the move.

And now that the delirium of not being alone any more had passed, all that I could clearly appreciate were the thin puddles of mayonnaise-fishwater, tinged a delicate pink from the diced tomatoes, that plunged about the bread and butter plate as he waved it about to stress a point. The point was lost on me, but those puddles . . . it seemed they held an import greater than any mere man could. The plate tilted again and one long shivering puddle slopped towards the edge

of the plate, hung suspended momentarily above the expanse of rumpled sheets, then veered suddenly into the bread and became one with it, absorbed. Had mine been the same headlong frenzy into an accommodating mass? was I being absorbed? Shaken, I set about completing the chores of the house. He did nothing around the apartment, though he had suggested we change the colour scheme to mauve, and had even offered to paint. Mundane tasks kept me at a safe distance from the gesturing gourmand in the bedroom, and the hum of the vacuum drowned out his vocalizing.

Alone, at last.

Not that he was so noticeable; just that he was there. Always. In the haphazard folding of the towels, in apple cores browning wherever they had been abandoned, in pastel underwear drying on every flat surface (he insisted on hand-washing this inheritance from his Father), in the toilet seat always left at attention. At first these things hadn't seemed to matter, and it had been a joke to pee standing-up as the seat dictated; laughing, splashing. But a grinding annoyance had gradually crept in, and chilly observation had replaced the joking commentaries. . . .

The vacuum choked on something it found under the couch; a brownish sock, crumpled and somewhat stiff. His. The idea of extricating this soiled and sweat-stiffened item from the maw of the machine with my bare hand was exceedingly distasteful. I harboured the thought, momentarily, that love

shouldn't balk at these less pleasant details of cohabitant life. But then again, love should be buoyed by the cumulative times of joy; shared moments, private jokes, sex with abandon. Yes, well, sex had been abandoned fairly early in this ménage with an ex-priest (third year seminary dropout, but he would give himself airs) as old habits die hard. He preferred lying on his belly--hands plainly visible above his head in the event the night warden should happen by--surreptitiously rubbing himself against a hop-sacking cushion. Always a perfect gentleman. Though most nights lately, he thumbed through the *Guidelines for Rental Board Professionals: Part Six; Arbitration*, in pursuit of the elusive Level IV of the Civil Service.

Now if this sock, at least, had been the object of his passion, I could rush into the bedroom in tears, brandishing the proof of his infidelity. A scene would ensue in which, at last, he would enfold me in his arms; penitent, passionate, penetrating.

A noise behind me, audible because the machine had whined down to silence. The sock dropped away and lay like something long dead upon the carpet. Claude was there, his podgy big toe lolling above the on/off switch, the rest of his little piggies hid from view by the folds of his pyjamas. Not subtly striped, debonair silk pyjamas, but pilled and rumpled cowboy-patterned flannel PJs, without even the saving grace of a flyfront. He stood there with an empty mayonnaise jar in one

hand, the dogeared *Guidelines for Rental Board Professionals: Part Six; Arbitration* crammed under the same arm, and I realized I hated him.

Something in my eyes must have un-nerved him, for his podgy white toe jerked down onto the switch and his beginning lament was lost in the roar of the machine. He continued to stand, storklike, with one moist foot above the body of the vacuum cleaner. As I hoisted the barrel to wave him away several corrals of cowboys and steers were sucked into the mouth of the machine. And he just stood there, grinning flabbily under his pale Gauloise, jabbering and gesturing with the mayonnaise jar while making ineffectual pulling motions at the left leg of his jim-jams and hitching the manual more securely into his armpit. Blasted civil servant.

Such a small man.

And that decided me. I set the suction at MAX. and let the Deluxe Handy Helper do the rest. He made a remarkably tidy bundle moving through the flexible hose, although two buttons, one brown and one yellow, did pop off and wobble into the hallway. But I gave chase with the aspirator, and the renegade buttons joined the round-up with a satisfying clatter up the sleek metal tube, and a cacophonous rattling through the flex hose. No fuss, no muss.

On removing the pink filter bag from the belly of the machine, I realized that I was much better off living alone. The savings in shared rent couldn't compensate for the

emotional cost of living with a pastel marshmallow in colour co-ordinated BVDs. With no sex, and minimal conversation, I would be better off with a parakeet. I jettisoned the bag into the garbage, along with the sock. The only evidence of the contents was the occasional eruption of fine fine dust from the opening and, though I couldn't be quite sure, a faint cry of "Mama". I collected all the stamp albums, loose pages and packages of stamps, and dumped those in the bin in the basement too. Then I put away the machine, being careful not to let the selfwinding cord coil too quickly.

I tidied the rumpled bed and my hair, and set off to do the shopping, making a mental note to stop by the Rent Control Board and lodge another complaint against the landlord. And I was darn well going to get satisfaction, this time. They weren't going to get rid of me by foisting off some namby-pamby petty functionary. Maybe I'd better leaf through *Guidelines for Rental Board Professionals: Part Three; Tenant's Rights*, first. I made a tuna-fish-salad sandwich and turned to page one; couldn't be that difficult if he had handled it.

THE PLAYHOUSE . . .

The house is quite small, and angled across the stage. All three windows are wide and shuttered in white, in contrast with the pinkish hue of the clapboard. The roof is steeply pitched and a homely plume of smoke curls up from the tidy brick chimney. In another time that roof would have been thatch, and wisteria would have clambered up the trellis by the solid oak door, but this being a contemporary not a period-piece, the roofing is tarpaper shingle--in a suitably muted red--and an ornamental weeping birch slumps near the new concrete of the front stoop.

The interior of the set, visible through a half-wall, has very few furnishings, and only a small bookshelf built-in above the door. A double mattress covered in blue chenille and piled with far too many pillows rests on the floor in one corner. A bridge table, also draped in blue, stands in the centre of the one-room set. A bright orange blown-glass bowl,

with an arrangement of ceramic fruit, is in the centre of the table. Stage right, diagonally opposed to the bed and under one of the windows, stands an exaggeratedly ugly reproduction of a Louis XV tufted upholstered chair. It is in robin's-egg blue leather, a few shades lighter than the covers of the bed and table. It is ostensibly a new piece and the oversized price tag still hangs from the left arm. . .

I walked across the interior set, over to that chair, and examined the price tag. I tried to let my body express the roiling emotions of the character, to give the lead-in, the motivation, for the scene to follow. The stiffness of my gait had to indicate suppressed anger; the rigidity of neck and shoulders, and a slight tic, represent mounting frustration, even incipient hysteria. I had practised the manner and force with which I tore off, crumpled and cast aside the price tag, time and time again; the action had to be believable and act as a catalyst for the fight scene. *Feel the part, I coached myself, believe who you are; let your actions summarize the frustration.* The amount indicated on the tag would take almost all the money set aside for furnishing our little nest, and I turned to the man playing my husband and gave him an earful, referring to the mother-in-law--introduced in an earlier scene--as the instigator of such a tasteless purchase. He responded coolly

and masterfully, protecting the name and good taste of his mother while making me, the new wife, feel like an interloper. I rather warmed to the part, though I couldn't quite find the tonal balance between righteous indignation and whining justification that the character called for. After several takes of unresolved wrangling I was ready for a break, I felt as if we'd been rehearsing forever.

I broke character, smiled at Jim and indicated I needed a rest. But he kept on, the ham. I moved between the table and the chair, stage left, towards the door.

"Taking five. I need a cigarette."

He reached out and grabbed my arm while I fumbled with the door, which seemed to be jammed. The stage manager would have to be informed; everything was supposed to operate smoothly for the dress rehearsal. I pulled away from Jim in order to jiggle the door; the set was becoming claustrophobic to me. The door wouldn't open.

"Where are you going? A woman's place is with her husband." Jim was gripping my arm almost painfully now. A method actor. The door wouldn't budge.

"Enough of the Stanislavsky method, Jim. Help me with this damned door and let's take a break."

"I said a woman must stay with her husband. You are not going anywhere."

With these words he tugged me into the centre of the set, my hip bruising against the corner of the table. The glass

bowl hadn't even budged when my weight swung into it: the set decorator must have substituted a more solid wood prop for the shaky bridge table, I realized. Why hadn't she fixed the damned door at the same time?

"Jim, you're hurting me--now stop horsing around."

"'Man to command and woman to obey.' If you defy me I must take steps to discipline you."

He had managed a genuinely righteous look and was really feeling the part; but I was getting off the set. Let him practise at home in front of a mirror, as I did. I moved between the furniture, over to one of the windows to step out, but stopped short. Where I had expected to see the stage boards with one or two squashed butts, a few cut-out trees and the painted flats of stage right, I saw close-cropped grass growing from the walls of the house and extending to an eight-foot-high picket fence about twenty feet away. I could see the tops of flowering fruit trees beyond the fence, and feel the breeze that wafted their tangerine fragrance to me. Stage left, the view was almost the same, an unbroken eight-foot-high picket fence, the same blushing shade of pink as the clapboard. A rusted wheelbarrow, full of grass clippings, stood in a corner of the fence next to a manual lawnmower, its oiled blades glinting in the sunshine. No, must be the reflection from the arc lights. But, looking up, I saw no arc lights, no scaffolding. The booms and the catwalks were gone and a lone seagull was wheeling and crying far far above in

the blue sky. I turned to tell Jim. He was watching me with that stern and righteous look; he didn't need any practise in front of a mirror.

"All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of woman," he muttered. Narrowing his eyes he unbuckled and removed the heavy leather belt I hadn't noticed before.

"Great! You've really got a handle on the character," I told him. "Let's pick it up at this point after the break, 'okay?"

He just looked at me like I was some kind of bug, and raised the arm with the belt coiled around his hand. I wasn't waiting around to see where his character motivation was taking him, I made a leap for the window. But in that small room he was too close, and grabbing me by the hair he yanked me back into the room.

* * *

I spent the next few days in the bed, recuperating.

His mother came by every evening, bringing food and advice and tasteless bibelots to brighten our home. She was a character actress who had done some work with *Names* years before, and gave herself airs because of it. She not only had created the role, she was his mother. She'd sit in that Louis quinze repro chair and Jim would sit cross-legged at her feet, listening and nodding and murmuring "Yes, Mother" on occasion.

Despite the size of the room I could never make out just what they discussed at such length each evening, though she often brought tracts that seemed to spur the discussion. He was devoted to her, and her word ruled our roost. Promptly at eight she would leave and Jim would put out the lights, climb in to the low bed and on to me to quickly perform his husbandly duty. I wasn't called upon to act, as he didn't care what I thought or felt. Then he would roll over on his back and be snoring within a few minutes. I rapidly learned, from his fists, that discussions of a possible previous stage life were not to be countenanced. Jim referred to such talk as blasphemy, and the mindless prattling of a silly woman. I adopted a quiet and docile manner, based on the goody-two-shoes character, Melanie Hamilton-Wilkes in *Gone With the Wind*, in order to fend off his disciplining, and to give me time to try to understand just what was going on. But I couldn't. Our playing house was very real to Jim, and the woman I was forced to refer to as Mother.

I never spoke to her directly, nor she to me, except to ask that the sugar be passed, or to decline an additional helping of mashed turnip. Though we were only a few paces apart, all conversation flowed through the medium of her darling boy. Obviously the wickedness of woman did not extend to his sainted mother. I don't know where she went at eight each evening, nor what she did until she reappeared early the next evening, because I never went beyond the eight-foot

picket fence. The odd thing is that when I was allowed out into the yard I could never find the gate. Under the guise of weeding I was able to slowly circumnavigate the little house, but the pink barricade went on and on without a break. Yet Jim and his mother seemed able to come and go, from and to somewhere, at will.

The house had no kitchen that I could get to, nevertheless every evening Mother would produce full-course meals. Plain, tasteless stodge, but complete meals. She'd bustle through a door upstage left and come back with china platters heaped with overdone roast or chicken, bowls of steaming potatoes, or peas and carrots in gluey cream sauce. But that door was set into what was the outside wall of the house, and in my weeding capacity I knew the little house did not extend beyond the four walls that formed the original set. Mother took care of the cooking and the dishes, not trusting me with the Doulton that had been her mother's second best, though I was permitted to set the table provided I was careful. Jim always said grace.

On one occasion about twenty people were to come to the house for a Meeting. I was put in charge of arranging the folding chairs and given the honour of serving tea. I was very excited at the prospect of the Meeting, as I hadn't had contact with anyone but Jim and Mother for weeks. I had heard dogs barking beyond the fence, but I had never heard children playing or people passing. It was not until I had set up the

last range of chairs that I realized the small room couldn't possibly accommodate that many people, nor all the additional furniture. Yet the four rows of five seats didn't even crowd the room. The table had been put to one side and bore a silver and copper samovar and twenty of the good porcelain cups and saucers. The orange glass bowl with its dusty petrified fruit was on the bookshelf above the door, beside *Cuthbertson's Guide to WWI Fighting Aces*. Mother's ugly throne was at the front of the room and the bed had been banished to one of the offstage rooms that I never managed to enter. Even when the guests began to arrive the room didn't seem to fill up.

I was introduced as Jim's little bride and allowed to smile and blush becomingly--it had been made clear to me earlier that I was to be seen and not heard. But there would have been no hope of salvation from this group. They were as stiff and upright and proper as Jim and Mother, and I found myself nodding off beside the samovar while the meeting droned on. I was awakened by Mother's bony grip on my shoulder. She and another pinchfaced woman exchanged meaningful looks as I stifled a yawn and clambered to my feet. That evening, after the tea, Mother wouldn't let me stack the dishes or put away the chairs.

"We're going to have to take it a little easier from now on," was the way she put it. And she was right. I was pregnant.

I was also scared. It was one thing to be the casually abused wife of a dogmatic bible thumper, and quite another to be set up as the female lead in an unfriendly melodrama. I had visions of dying on the delivery table so that Jim's son could live--he would only have a son in this arranged world --and decided I did not want this starring role.

I had nothing to lose, and no other way out, so I started willing freedom. I used the power of concentration--mind over matter--summoning images of salvation. I called on all the gods I had ever heard of, and maybe even created a few. I promised all sorts of penances to whatever deity would deign to listen. Call it desperation, but I tried everything. If the house could grow to accommodate gatherings of people, if gateways could appear and disappear--damn it, if I could be rehearsing for a summer run of a second-rate bedroom farce one afternoon, and suddenly find myself living in a nightmare world, surely I could effect some change in this bizarre scenario?

I conjured up visions of knights on white chargers, miraculous openings in the barricade, fairy godmothers, spaceships landing and whisking me away to other planets. My inner life was rich with rescue plots, but little changed in the exterior world. The variety of overcooked vegetables increased, Mother believing in the value of broccoli and brussels sprouts to the coming generation. And Jim, at his mother's behest, was less abusive. That is, discipline was

reduced to the occasional sharp faceslap, but my body left alone, because of the baby. He spent more and more time gardening energetically.

* * *

One afternoon I was sipping tea, with my feet up, tatters of wool and the crochet-hook on the table beside me--Mother and I were supposed to be working on a layette set in blue. I was just looking out the window. Jim was outside raking the leaves that had drifted over from the neighbour's fruit trees. The sky was overcast and promised heavy rain. I heard a humming, like a swarm of locusts. From behind a bank of clouds something appeared. I squinted in the effort to see, and slowly the image resolved: a formation of thirty or more dun-coloured bi-planes. They were flying fairly low and in V's like migrating geese, seven or eight to a group. I couldn't make out the markings on the wings and bodies, but they didn't look like anything I had seen in *Cuthbertson's*. They flew closer and small specks appeared below them, then the specks swelled and billowed and multi-coloured parachutes popped open, tiny shapes dangling from the shroudlines. I was on my feet and by the window, as quick as my girth would let me, pushing the blue sheers away with my forearm. This must be it, my deliverance!

I wanted to be outside, waiting for them, but my shoes

had disappeared long ago. Besides, Jim was working in the front yard and I wouldn't be able to sneak out the door past him. All the windows had been fitted with fine wrought-iron grills; there would be no escaping that way. I'd be better off waiting here, and watching for my opportunity.

The parachutes were coming down too far away. I couldn't see where they landed because of the fence, but the bright silks and their pendulating cargo were much too far from the boundaries of my prison.

Another formation of bi-planes appeared out of the clouds. They wheeled and veered, then they were flying lower and closer overhead. Again dark specks appeared below the bodies of the planes, and I waited for the sudden jerk and Pop! of the chute. But nothing. The specks descended, growing larger; no chutes appeared. Now, I thought, now! But not one of the specks skipped in the air and blossomed. They just fell, and fell.

One hit the fence hard, jounced off and rolled to a stop just under the window. Two more thudded into the ground, rolled a few inches and stopped. Not bodies. Apples. Shiny, giant, obsidian apples.

The two in the yard appeared intact, but the one under the window had split open from the impact with the fence. From my position at the window I could look down directly on the broken apple. Nestled inside was a six-inch parachutist, dressed in desert fatigues and puttees, his arms crossed over

his breast. He wore a tiny WWI pie-plate of a helmet and the edge of his pack was just visible behind his little squared shoulders. He looked peaceful in death, with the gentle littleboy face of an accidental hero.

Jim came around the corner of the house then, pushing the rusty barrow. He saw the lumps on his immaculate lawn, and walked over. Stooping, he hefted the two glassrock apples in the middle of the yard, one in each hand, but not really looking at them. Noticing me in the window he rose and came closer, carrying the black fruit in the crook of his arm. He bent to pick up the broken halves of the third apple, staring through the glass at my swollen belly as he straightened up, not seeming to notice the stillborn parachutist cradled in the glassy fruit. I stepped back and the sheer blue curtain slowly dropped back into place. And, while I watched, he turned his back to me, and hurled my hope over the fence in four strong easy pitches.

GEMINI ASCENDENT

The salt water was rising, rising, almost lapping at her crocodile heels, as she struggled with all her parcels, stair by stair. Maybe a barracuda would happen by and end her misery. Or a shark, or a school of voracious piranha. But that was ridiculous; she was giving in to old-maid fancies. She fumbled for her keys, and stood a moment, snuffling away the tears, her bowed head resting against a dog-eared SAVE THE WHALES decal on the door. Struggling with the lock, juggling attaché case, mail, purse and sports bag, umbrella, and a sodden paper bag, a resoled shoe fell through a wet rent in the bag, and she cursed. A final yank and the keys were out of the open door. But she stayed in the common hallway a few extra moments, disentangling her curls from the decal's sticky corner, hitching the parcels from one arm to another, and hoping someone would happen by and ask what was the matter. A knight on a charger, perhaps, solemnly climbing to her

second storey flat. That was almost as ridiculous as imagining the sea rising to her home, or believing in a handsome and kind prince climbing twin plaits of auburn hair to rescue Rapunzel in her tower. There were no saviours.

She pirouetted into her entrance hall, kicking the loose shoe before her, and nearly toppling the coat-rack as she flung the umbrella towards it, and missed. The rest of the parcels she dumped on the floor.

"God, there has to be an easier way, than having it all," she murmured to herself, easing out of her soggy shoes, and subsiding damply onto the carved wooden hand that held the telephone answering machine. The machine was flashing furiously, and she sighed, looking at it. Another deep breath, and she punched the PLAY button and listened, sitting pigeon-toed, mimicking the voices, occasionally taking notes or wiping away a stray tear. Overwork, she thought. Stress. Her shoulders had slumped but, aware, she straightened.

The machine droned on, message after message, mostly business-related. Even an electronic advertisement, Super Carpet Warehouse's machine soliciting hers. Insidious, she thought. Economics ruled the world.

She unbuckled her crocodile belt, and worked out the snag in her skirt's zipper. It had caught that morning as she hurriedly dressed, and there hadn't been time to fix it. Stepping out of the skirt, she tugged at her stockings and suspender belt. The elasticized black lace and fasteners had

left ruffled welts along the flesh of her hips, and imprinted two sets of circles on her thighs. Rubbing the marks, she penned a change of date in her agenda with her other hand, and used her feet to corral the lingerie into a little pile, one charcoal stocking snagging briefly on a chipped toenail.

"Before all else, a quick bubble bath and a pedicure, m'girl. And a sit-down supper. The accounts can wait--a little. The weekend stretches ahead, plenty of time to get everything done."

Scooping up the piled clothing, she reset the answering machine, and quick-stepped to the bathroom. She dropped the stockings into the sink and started the bath, dumping in a grainy handful of tangerine salts. She wafted through the communicating door to the bedroom in a tangerine eddy, and burst into song,

I wanna be loved . . .
With inspiration . . .
I wanna be loved. . .
Starting tonight . . .

and waltzed out of her remaining clothes,

Instead of merely holding conversation
Hold me tight

partnering the hangered blouse and jacket separately into the closet with a big finish. Making a mental note of what to wear for Monday's meeting with the big boys from Toronto, she padded naked to the entrance hall to collect her briefcase and all the shoes, stopping off in the kitchen to dispose of the soggy paper bag, and pop something previously created and

frozen into the microwave. Once the shoes were treed and in the closet, Jan checked the bathwater, then hopscotched up the hall toward the living room, her briefcase bumping against her knees. She switched on the stereo, cutting off the eight o'clock newscaster in mid-disaster with the gentle strains of Dvorak's *Cello Concerto*. A pair of grand jetés propelled her to the bathroom door again, where the tub was almost full, the room fragrant and gently steamy.

Wrapping her hair in a towel, she removed contact lenses and makeup, her foot angling against the marble counter. Applying moisturizer she addressed herself in the mirror,

"Still preparing for a lover who never arrives, eh, Jan?"

She scanned her face for new lines, sighed, and stepped into the bubbles, a small moan accompanying immersion.

"But I can't lollygag about, I have work to do."

She made no move to hurry, merely rolled her head back and stretched across the large tub, luxuriating in its heat and motion. Squinting at her fragmented body through the foaming water, she was content to see that weight-training and tai'chi were paying off, balance to the long hours spent at her desk. Some bubbles stranded momentarily on the floating island of her belly and, as her stomach growled in anticipation of supper, she almost imagined she could see a hungry face contorting through the flesh and suds.

"Definitely working much too hard. Maybe I *should* take a few weeks at Christmas."

Musing on the possibilities of a vacation, she towelled herself dry. Her tummy growled again, and she looked down on herself smiling. But the smile jammed at grimace.

Under the skin of her abdomen she could see, roaming in clear relief, a small face framed by a pair of grasping hands. Her belly was almost flat, yet this small head, seen as through flesh-toned latex, seemed to play between the underlying firmness and her skin. She extended a fascinated hand in horror. But while she hesitated with one extended finger above a miniature clutching hand, the compact head and hands subsided into her flesh. Her stomach was smooth again, tinged pink by the heat of the bath, but otherwise unblemished. Running two fingers gingerly over the area where the apparition had been, she felt a slight tingling sensation, and her tummy rumbled again.

"Must be gas," she counselled herself, frightened. "Gas . . . hunger . . . overwork . . . and one too many Spritzers at lunch."

She hurried into a terry robe, leaving the ties dangling, and moved to the kitchen. Opening a package of Melba toast with quivering hands, she made an impromptu sandwich, thick with brie and topped with a fingerful of strawberry jam. Occasionally, as she nibbled on the sandwich, her hand brushed against her belly--soothing the tingly sensations, or trying to summon them, she couldn't be sure which.

Sipping on a too-full glass of Australian Chardonnay, and

mooning around the kitchen, she had to conclude that all of her life, now, was a pathetic attempt to avoid the obvious reality--she was working far too hard, and too long. She was starting to hallucinate! And for what? A multi-national corporation.

But she was not guilty alone. Others had swallowed the same expectations for life. There was an unspoken pact to carry on as if steady work, semi-annual vacations, a prestige car, and good quarter-end results were the only important aspects of life. What about love and companionship? She had all the running, but none of the humanity, of the human race. Money controlled the entire world, a great human exploitation.

Looking out her window across at the neighbouring windows, she realized that those people, behind their barriers of glass and privacy, were living the same consumer fairytale; an acquisitive existence, ignorant of anything meaningful. An addiction to things fostered by businesses like the one she worked for. A company that created desires, stoked them, then squeezed consumers dry. People were merely stepping stones to fortune for the controlling interests.

The micro-wave timer pinged, saving her from further nihilistic philosophy. She carried the casserole through to her place at the antique table. Another glass of white wine, and sliced tomatoes with fennel rounded off the meal. Once, she stood up to put on another CD. As her robe fell open she quickly scanned her belly. But aside from a small smear of

sticky strawberry jam, all was normal. Of course.

She slouched at the table, wearing her at-home glasses, reading her mail, and catching up on trade magazines, occasionally replenishing her glass with wine. Unwinding. Idly scratching with one finger a few inches below her collarbone, her nail snagged. Her eyes continued to follow the print in the magazine, but her head dipped and her hand performed a circular exploratory motion in the area where the nail had caught. The flat of her finger bumped onto a ridge. Chilly, almost metallic.

Slowly, she lowered the magazine. Her eyes followed her finger as it twitched along the glittering open edge of a heavy-duty industrial zipper that curved across her upper torso, from her right shoulder across to the left.

She felt no pain, only surprise. And wondrous curiosity. The weight of her breasts pulled on the far side of the open zipper, causing her chest to gape open, revealing a grey-blue fleece lining. She sat up slowly, arching her neck to be able to look more clearly inside herself. As her head craned towards the aperture, her chest gaped further open. Out of the opening one small, waving fist appeared, the knuckles mildly hairy. Then another small hand rose from out of the dark, tugging at the inner edge of the zipper, pulling the skin on her throat taut. A tiny bloodstone signet ring flashed on the pinky, within a nest of red-gold hair. The little nails were perfect and even, almost manicured.

Immaculate Egyptian cotton cuffs, in burgundy stripe on a white field, protruded from navy cashmere sleeves, eight brass anchor-buttons gleaming. The miniature fingers worked their way between the metal teeth of the zipper, the hands side by side now, and tugged again, gaining leverage and heaving the head and shoulders of a little man, or boy, into view. He was struggling to clamber out of the opening; she could feel his feet scrabbling for purchase in the area of her solar plexus. Without thinking, she placed her thumbs under his cashmere armpits, and extracted the eighteen inches of him out of the dark cave of her chest. She placed him gingerly on the table, noticing the sharp crease in his grey flannel trousers, the perfect cuffs, the even bows of the leather laces in his miniature brogues. And then her amazed eyes were looking deeply into the incredible blue eyes of the face that had appeared in her belly in the bath.

The little man stood in a relaxed attitude, his right arm angled by his side, his left rucking the edge of the blazer as his hand lolled in a trouser pocket. His ascot matched his pocket puff. And his smirk mirrored her incredulity.

But she could not focus on him. There was agitation in the area of her belly, and looking down into the dark sack of her body, she detected movement. A tangle of flesh and a flash of black sequins. Using both hands she reached in and lifted out an almost naked female. At least, what the tiny woman was wearing did little to hide her body. Rather, the

long lines of leg and torso were outlined by gleaming spandex, and the strategically placed sequins suggestively kept her modest. On being set on the table beside the nattily attired little male, the female curled into a sparkling spiral and hummed, unembarrassed by her nakedness, next to her twin. He, in the meantime, merely smirked the harder, and pulled a huge pipe and fixings from an inner pocket.

Tamping the strands of tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, he cleared his throat gently, and announced:

"I am Elmo, and this is Helena."

The glimmering spring beside him uncoiled somewhat, and nodded, a small black ostrich plume nestled in her red curls undulating with the motion. Helena chortled, and her blue/green eyes looked knowingly into Jan's. Then her green glance descended appreciatively in a slow sweep, over Jan's breasts and belly, and, even slower, back up to her face. Jan became aware of her own semi-nakedness, and fumbled with the ties of her robe, pulling the shawl collar together, too embarrassed and surprised to check on the zipper across her chest.

"I don't think we need worry about false modesty, Jan," Elmo remarked, "as we are all one."

And he smiled down on Helena, pulling thoughtfully on his blackbriar. She, for her part, adjusted her position so that her small coiffed and feathered head leaned between the crisp creases of his grey-flannels, her moist magenta lips opening,

but no words issuing--just a flick of pink tongue.

Jan accepted the comfort of his voice, the hoped-for truth of his words. The two had, after all, sprung from her.

"I . . . yes . . . But I don't quite, that is, I don't think I quite understand," she murmured lamely, amazed at herself for giving in to conversation with an hallucination. Helena answered.

"Honey, I am as real as you are. I dance down halls with you, and leap and pirouette at odd moments. I feed your sense of joy. I am the quickened beating of your heart, and the rapid breathing of your desire. Spring fever is what you feel, through me. Erotic fancies are yours, through me. I am the occasional *joie de vivre* that gives you sore cheek muscles from smiling at strangers on the street: the need to share, and tell. And more, so very much more."

Elmo removed the blackbriar from his teeth and looked seriously into the bowl at the small, glowing coals.

"Helena is correct, as far as she goes. But there is more to you than mere froth and fantasy, Jan. I think we all know that you are a competent person on a solid career path. You handle your responsibilities in a professional manner and you've got your priorities straight."

Jan noticed Elmo wore a company pin in his left lapel.

"Remember that young hotshot in the advertising department who was making a play for you?" he continued. "You deflated his advances, knowing it would be dangerous, a

conflict of interest."

"Not dangerous; or even threatening," Jan interrupted. "I know that romantic fantasy eventually becomes dull--and limited--reality. I just didn't give him much credit for longevity, is all."

Elmo smiled, his penetrating blue gaze glancing off her cheekbones, then out the window.

"Yes, and I gave you that rationale. I am the systematic and logical aspect of you. I keep you out of trouble."

"And out of life," she complained. "Don't get me wrong," she apologized quickly, seeing the ripples of a frown developing on Elmo's face. "I know that I am important--that my work is important--to the Corporation. But what about fun, a little pleasure in life?"

She had leaned forward in her agitation, and toyed with the stem of her wine glass. Glancing at the tiny couple on the table beside her glass, she abruptly came back to the fact that there were, indeed, two small people there.

"I'm sorry. I guess I'm long Jan, and short manners."

Meeting Helena's quizzical look she explained,

"Trading jargon for I'm spending too much time thinking of myself, and forgetting about my manners. Can I offer you two folks anything?"

Elmo opted for white wine, and Helena for Scotch, no ice, which Jan served them in stemmed sherry glasses, hesitating briefly in the kitchen as she realized that she was about to

serve drinks to a pair of apparitions.

"I can manage people, I can manage corporate finance, but I cannot manage my own thoughts," Jan thought, miserably, carrying the two small glasses in on a mahogany coaster. She went back to the kitchen to get beer nuts.

They moved from the dining area into the living room, Jan helping the pair onto the floor. Jan got the fireplace going, then scrunched down on the floor, leaning up against the couch. Helena lolled behind her on the couch, occasionally curled into a corner, or sprawled across one cushion on her stomach, her knees bent and ankles delicately crossed. Elmo stood near the fireplace, watching the flames, occasionally contributing to the conversation. He poked the fire and stirred up sparks, added smaller logs. Or puffed on his blackbriar.

The three moved on to cognac with the conversation, their balloon glasses catching the firelight, the liquor becoming molten gold in their mouths and throats. Jan gave way to tears a number of times, discussing the dearth of emotion in her corporate-controlled life, but Helena's small hands comforted her. When the music changed to torch songs, Helena sang along in a beautifully rich contralto. Jan listened, thrilled, and hummed quietly.

"Sing with me, honey," Helena laughed. "You've got a beautiful voice too!"

Jan hesitated briefly, then realized that she was Helena,

and Helena was her, so there really was no reason for shyness. Soon Lena Horne was artfully accompanied by Helena and Jan, in occasional three-part harmony, Elmo listening appreciatively. When the strains of her earlier theme song came on, Jan rolled her head back onto the couch and sang from her soul,

I wanna be loved
Startin' tonight . . .
I wanna be kissed
Until I tingle,
I wanna be kissed
Startin' tonight

Jan's robe had come undone and was slipping down over one blue-green shoulder, her auburn hair cascading over the cushions. Helena combed her fingers through the hair, stroking up and away from Jan's small face,

Embrace me till our heartbeats intermingle
Wrong or right. . .
I feel like acting my age
I'm past the stage of merely turtle-doving

Jan felt warm and comfortable, more comfortable than since she'd been a little girl. She even felt small, and looked after. The liquor was good, she was with caring people, her people,

I'm in no mood to resist and I insist
The world owes me a loving.
I wanna be thrilled to desperation
I wanna be thrilled starting tonight
With every kind of wonderful sensation
. . . .

The last stanza was a solo by Lena, because Helena was bent over Jan, humming in her hair, lips brushing over Jan's fluttering eyelids.

"This can't be happening," Jan thought.

Helena stroked Jan's head, combing the hair back from the forehead with her fingers. Occasionally a tangle snagged on one of her rings, but otherwise it was so soothing.

"You're getting close to burn-out, hon," Helena said. "You need a rest, get away from it all."

"But how can I?" Jan whined. "My accounts . . ."

Elmo interrupted, "We can take care of the accounts, Jan. Helena and I. We know the details as well as you do. You could rest."

Jan didn't look convinced. He topped up her glass.

The trio talked and drank until the dawn was glimmering against the empty bottles on the table.

"I can't go on playing their game," Jan slurred. "Industry is dangerous, it has to be stopped. And I'm going to stop 'em. I've infiltrated this far, and I'll keep on rising. Before they've realized it there will be a decent, ethical person on the board of directors!"

She stood on the carpet, her head barely coming up to the top of the coffee table. The morning sun glinted on the undulating teeth of the zipper across her chest.

"And once I'm in a position of power I can work to change things for the common good. Help people. . ."

Elmo topped up her glass.

"But how am I going to do it," she queried fretfully.

"Try looking deeper into yourself, Jan," Elmo suggested.

He towered over her.

Jan craned her already bent head and looked beyond the zipper, into her own deep murkiness.

"How'm I goin't do it?" she repeated, the words echoing oddly in her own ears. Her head lolled forward and a clump of hair caught on the zipper.

"How?", she repeated, "how?" She caught the echo and returned it, hallooing. Her voice reverberated in her own chest as she fell deeper and deeper into herself, giggling, disappearing in the grey-blue fleece as she fell and fell and fell.

Elmo reached over and closed the zipper on the little flesh-toned pouch lying on the floor, then tossed it into his briefcase. He took the statuesque Helena in his arms, and the pair danced in the dawnlight, overlooking their city.

A VERY TALE

This time there could be no mistaking it. There had been a sodden thump, like a dropped weight, on the balcony. Agnes had lived on the top storey of the old building for many years, and had been anticipating just such a crisis for most of them, given the times, and the crime rate. It just stood to reason that one day an enterprising thief--or rapist, one had to consider all the probabilities--would manage to get into the building, make his way to the roof and, from there, descend to the top floor balconies and into peoples' homes to carry out his nefarious schemes.

Well she wasn't going to succumb without a fight. Agnes Daye put down her book, pulled out her Great-uncle Rodney's cricket bat from its hiding place under the velvet love seat, and crept to the balcony door. Her hand reached toward the heavy folds of the curtains, then paused. Turning to survey, perhaps for the last time, the warm cosiness of the booklined room, she noted the afghans she'd crocheted and thrown across the overstuffed settees; the plants and bric-a-brac crowding

in warm pools of light cast by the fringed lamps; Mother's set of crystal decanters that stood, regularly refilled, on the mahogany breakfront, next to the radio from whence the gentle strains of the Mantovani String Orchestra, playing *Some Day My Prince Will Come*, emanated.

There came an ominous creaking, as of shifting weight, from the old wooden balcony. Agnes turned again to the task of repelling the enemy, inching back a section of the heavy drapery, carefully. The blackness of the night made a mirror of the window; all she could see was a reflection of her home, glowingly reversed. In leaning forward to blot out the light she saw that it had been raining, that the window was beaded with shimmering drops.

At first she didn't spy anyone on the balcony, then, gradually, she made out a figure, hovering near the flower boxes: probably preparing his lock-picking tools. Or worse.

There was no sense in waiting.

With synchronized movements she flung open the door, flipped on the balcony light with her elbow, and in stentorian tones--in as deep a baritone as she could muster--proclaimed,

"Get away from those nasturtiums and step into the light where I can keep an eye on you. No funny moves, I've got you covered," adjusting her cricket bat accordingly.

The dark shadow crouching by the flower boxes started, separated from the surrounding shadows, then straightened up and moved awkwardly into the light and, despite the

admonishment, the motion was funny. Or, at any rate, peculiar. In part, no doubt, because the intruder was so very very tall. Once he was completely unfurled he was well on the way to seven foot tall, and lanky as well. And dressed in evening clothes. He doffed his opera hat and said, in a mellifluous voice,

"Good evening. I . . . I am Anthony Rowley, and I seem to have lost my bearings. Sorry to inconvenience you, but . . . could you tell me where I am?"

He loomed over Agnes, his extended left arm and the lifted opera hat rising even higher, mirroring her pose with Great-uncle Rodney's cricket bat. Several raindrops had gathered on the hat brim, and the mannerly salute of the hat's owner precipitated them through the rarefied atmosphere to land, with a fat Plop!, on the nose-side of one large, round, unblinking black eye. A linen hanky, embroidered and monogrammed, was produced and the offending drop removed. But another took its place, and another, and another. Indeed, the heavens had opened, and Anthony Rowley's deep grey tail-coat was blotting up much of the sky's bounty. The ineffectual hanky was thrust into an inner breast pocket by a big gloved hand, and Agnes tensed, adjusting her grip on the cricket bat and wavering forth and back in preparation for the sudden production of a firearm. But none materialized. The great yellow-kid hand reappeared and fluttered, adjusting cravat, wing-collar and weskit, before subsiding limply at Anthony

Rowley's side. Catching the intrepid cricketer's gaze upon him, he hastily raised his hat again, and bowed. Agnes, recovering only slightly from her surprise at the extraordinary stranger, found herself bobbling in a makeshift curtsey. The two teetered on the balcony exchanging bows and nods until Agnes received a chilly raindrop down the neck, and suggested that they both go in out of the rain. Bat and hat lowered in unison, and Agnes and Anthony jockeyed for position in allowing the other through the door first. Finally the extent of Mr Rowley and the brevity of Miss Daye passed through the portal and coincided before a rosewood and damask settee, she serving sherry and biscuits, and casting curious glances at her more curious guest, and he attempting to find a point of balance on his left knee for the, now-collapsed, opera hat.

He complimented her on the quality of her sherry, and the comfort of her home. His shy gaze roamed, taking in everything, and Agnes found herself grateful that she was wearing Grandmama's cameo, and that her hair had been freshly blued and set. There was something about the intruder that was so very distinguished, so well-bred, despite his somewhat odd appearance. His face was extremely broad, of an indeterminate age, with a wide mouth and a greenish pallor to the skin. The body, under the brocade vest and boiled shirt, appeared compact and strong, almost barrel-chested, and not quite in proportion with his extremely long legs. These were

sheathed in fawn-coloured trousers that stretched taut against the powerful muscles of his thighs, and concluded in soft leather spats. He had immense, triangular feet.

"Mr Rowley," she began.

"Anthony," he interjected.

"Anthony," she acquiesced. "You will, I trust, understand my confusion. I hear a noise, at night, on my balcony. Upon investigation I discover not a common criminal cowering, but a gentleman of princely bearing."

He started.

She finished. "But what, Anthony, were you doing there? You make a very ineffectual cat-burglar."

"Miss Daye."

"Agnes, please."

"Agnes." He cleared his throat. "You are quite correct, I am not a thief." He smiled woefully to himself, shook his head slowly, then looked directly at her. "Unless, possibly, I could steal a heart. I am looking for a wife."

"On my balcony, Anthony, as a peeping Tom? A woman of my years?" She took a short breath. "Wouldn't a dating service have been more effective?"

Anthony blushed, his countenance mottling unattractively to a mud-brown. He hesitated, then spoke.

"May I be absolutely frank with you, Agnes?"

"I think, Anthony, under the circumstances, that might be a good idea. You are, after all, a midnight intruder."

And, if you cannot clear up some of this mystery, the police might have to. I don't wish to threaten you, but one cannot allow men to appear on one's balcony with impunity, and without invitation."

"Quite." He paused, placed his hat on the floor beside him, took another fortifying sip of sherry.

"I am not from around here."

"I had suspected as much. Anthony, there is something in your bearing and dress that smacks of foreign locales. Different times."

"Ah, then you understand. I was led to believe you would . . . because of all this," with a sweeping gesture he indicated the room, nodded toward the myriad books arrayed on shelves, floor to ceiling, and wall to wall.

"You are a well-read woman, and are probably aware of the theories of infinite space?"

She nodded. He continued.

"While it is true that space is infinite, not all of it is usable. If, for the purpose of illustration, we equate the space of the universe to the area of a house, there are vast sections--like crawlspaces, attics, corners under stairs, and awkward places where doors open--that are not particularly functional. Despite the infinity of space, only a finite area is truly habitable. Granted, as with attics, these areas can be utilized; with a little know-how and imagination the attic becomes a playroom for the children, the area under the stairs

functions as a cedar-closet. But renovations have to be planned. There must be time to create living-space out of non-functional space."

He paused, she nodded.

"I won't get into other dimensions, just now, and how they interact. I'll just say, simply, that I come from a place that has taken millennia to create; that has been painstakingly crafted by generations of committed storytellers and writers. What your Robert Louis Stevenson once called *The Land of Storybooks*."

There was a sharp intake of breath. Agnes leaned forward toward him.

"Then you are a fictional character!?" Her eyes were round with wonder and her mouth gaped open in a not particularly attractive manner.

"I would prefer, Agnes, if you would say that I am from the realm of fiction."

She was nodding, her eyes squinting and hazy with recollection:

*"With a rowley, powley, gammon and spinach,
Heigh ho! says Anthony Rowley."*

"Exactly," he said.

Agnes shook her head slowly, in wonder.

"I read of you when I was just a child. And there was a song as well." She hummed a few bars: "Hmm, hmmm . . . he would a-woeing go. . . But what has this do with finite and

infinite space?"

"I am coming to that. As I mentioned, it has taken centuries of imagination and storytelling, myth and embellishment, oral traditions and publishing, to create the land I come from. But in the last half century there has been a sudden--and devastating--encroachment on our space; a population explosion. Once upon a time authors took years to write their books, and lovingly develop their characters. We had plenty of space, and time, during the developmental stages, to arrange for housing the newly arrived. But lately . . . " he shook his head and sighed. "Lately there is a whole new breed of fiction architects. They care nothing for the fine crafting of their forebears. They do not painstakingly create new entities, or improve upon old ones. Instead, characters are twisted or mutilated in the most horrible way, and then presented to an unsophisticated public for mindless consumption. Dreadful mutants appear; upstarts, who know and care nothing for tradition, move into the better areas and desecrate them with loud music, Coca-cola cans and skate-boards. We are running out of space, because we do not have time to renovate for this production-line of newcomers. The situation has particularly worsened in the past thirty years."

"Television!" Agnes exclaimed.

"Mind-rot, more like," he spat out bitterly. "Red, Snowy, Jack, Henny-Penny, and many of the others have moved

out. The Old Woman has turned her shoe into a condominium, the three bears are operating a co-op, and nothing is the way it used to be. Why, there is even a furry chap, in one of the newer developments, living in a garbage can! Don't get me wrong, I'm in favour of change; but slowly. I would like to see respect for the old ways, and the old folks." He sipped at his sherry, and munched a water biscuit.

"I come from a respected family, one with history: Toad of Toad Hall is a relation, by marriage. I was all set to marry and carry on the family traditions but, due to the overcrowded conditions, my intended, Miss Mousey, was set upon by a cat, and I was unable to save her." He smote his breast, and gave a sob and shake of his head.

"I'm so awfully sorry," said Agnes, placing her small wizened hand over his large, yellow-gloved one. "But perhaps you'll be able to find someone else, in time?"

"Someone has been found, and that's why I left. They wanted to pair me off with a parvenu! A mouse of no breeding, with a squeaky voice, a penchant for cheap costume-jewellery, and short skirts. And me with royalty in the blood!"

At this he broke down completely, sobbing and fumbling for his monogrammed hanky. Agnes murmured that she would make some tea, and left him to compose himself. When she returned with the tea tray, she regarded his heaving shoulders sympathetically for a few moments.

"Anthony, Anthony, this will not do. You've left all

that behind. You're in a new world; you can start a new life. I suggest that you get a good night's rest. I've a comfy guest room, and I am sure that one of Great-uncle Rodney's nightshirts will do for you, though you are a tad tall. Come along, now, do."

Anthony rose obediently, sniffing quietly and thanking Agnes for her goodness. He made a foray into the damp night to retrieve an ample carpetbag nestling near the nasturtiums, then padded along behind her to the guest suite at the end of the hall. He smiled wistfully at *The Green Book of Fairy Tales* on the bedside table.

"I am sure I shall be very comfortable here, Agnes. Thank you."

"Sweet dreams, Anthony. Breakfast is at eight," and she closed the door.

Back in her own flowered-chintz room she sat at the carved secretary and wrote in her diary:

May 26th; an uneventful day, but a very stimulating evening. It appears I may have the opportunity to redress some of the wrongs of technology, and work with real magic. A Frog Prince is sleeping in the guest room, and it is up to me to help make his wishes come true. But first I have to discover what they are. How I do love a challenge!

She prepared for bed, put out the lights, and stood a moment at the window. The clouds parted and the Man in the Moon smiled down on her. A star twinkled brightly behind a wisp of mist. Agnes lifted her chin proudly, and prayed

solemnly:

*Starlight,
Star bright,
First star that I see tonight . . .*

* * *

Agnes and Anthony breakfasted on gammon and spinach to make Anthony feel more at home. Over her fourth cup of tea Agnes broached the topic of Anthony's future.

"I stayed awake quite late, Anthony, considering your options. I know that where you come from your career had been decided upon; you were to be a wooer of princesses. But I am afraid that in this world you cannot make a living out of marrying, though some film stars seem to. And you'll be arrested if you go about kissing princesses indiscriminately, assuming you can find any. You will have to decide on some other career, one that can properly utilize your talents, whatever they may be."

He regarded her balefully, but said nothing.

"With your permission, Anthony, we will hold a *soire* and garner ideas from other folk, to see what can be done for you."

"Agnes, I am in your hands. The magic that brought me here knew that you would be a sympathetic supporter. I can only trust that your friends and acquaintances will be the same."

"That's settled then; I'll phone around this morning and

we'll have a get-together this very night."

She dimpled comfortingly at him, and patted his large clasped hands.

By eight o'clock that evening the gathering was in full swing. People stood in small groups, chatting and sipping sherry, nibbling on water-cress or fish-paste sandwiches. The doorbell chimed, and in a few moments Agnes was threading her way through the crowd toward Anthony, her beaded bosom heaving with general excitement, a small, balding man in a pince-nez, and with several decorations on his lapel, in tow.

"Anthony, I would like to introduce you to the eminent Italian musicologist, *Dottore Dotilaso Famire*. The *Dottore* has travelled a great deal in his time, and is renowned for his unusual approach to banjo music, and the musical stage. I'm sure you'll find a lot to discuss," she gushed, and rushed away to orchestrate *bonhomie* in another part of the room.

The *Dottore* and Anthony surveyed each other from their differing vantage points.

"*Signora Daye* tells me you are somewhat new to our part of the world," said the *Dottore*, launching the conversation skyward. He paused, "How is the fly-fishing where you come from?" and the two settled down to a warm and animated chat, Anthony bending toward his diminutive partner, the *Dottore* occasionally illustrating a particular wrist action in

casting.

Across the room, Ryan Coake noticed the pair and gestured towards them with his sherry glass, "Check out the giant galoot in the tweeds chatting with the Doctor," he said, interrupting the redhead by his side. Annoyed at the interruption, Mia tossed her flaming mane, and cast a cool green look of appraisal in the indicated direction.

"I think he looks sweet," she purred. "And Agnes as much as said that he's royalty; I think I'll just head over there and make his acquaintance while you freshen up my drink and remember your manners, Ryan." Her heart-shaped face tipped up at his for a moment, lashes fluttering, rosebud lips pursed in a little moue. Her tongue deftly flicked a dainty wad of green gum from her left to her right cheek.

"Anyone in line for an inheritance, eh, Mia?" Ryan laughed, then lurched towards the breakfront to freshen both their drinks. Mia eyed him with calculation for a moment, then turned and undulated through the crowd, finally subsiding at the anglers' elbows.

"*Dottore Famire, come sta?* I enjoyed your massed banjo version of Handel's Messiah, this past Easter, very much."

"*Bellissima signorina* Kulpah! *Va bene, va bene;* thank you for your kind words. Have you met our guest of honour, *Signore* Antony Rowley?"

"I haven't yet had that pleasure," she hummed, her broad Slavic face tilting up to look Anthony in the eye, her

curvaceous frame standing just a little too close to him.

"An honour, Miss Kulpah," Anthony intoned from a very great height.

"Please, call me Mia." Her pointed little chin swung around as Ryan approached with a pair of highball glasses, and she swayed gently against Anthony's legs, snapping her gum.

"This is my . . . neighbour, Ryan Coake. Ryan is a Professor of English at a liberal Arts College, and a restaurant critic. He feeds minds, and his belly. Souls are left to their own devices."

Her laughter tinkled and she eyed Anthony, then Ryan, from under russet lashes.

"Mia is deadly accurate, as always," Ryan fleered. He passed her a glass and a wink. She accepted the glass, passed on the pass.

Ryan turned towards Anthony with a shrug.

"But I am looking to change that. In fact, I'm going to be opening my own restaurant in the next few weeks. It is to be called:

The Writers' Wrestaurant
Specializing in home-cooking

&

Food for thought.

His fingers traced the black-bordered, gold-leaf curlicue of

hand-painted letters as he saw them on the restaurant window of his mind's eye. Ryan smiled in a proprietary manner, and turned again to Anthony.

"Agnes tells me you are looking for a position, Rowley; says you're familiar with fiction. I need a manager. Someone literate, and polished. The money won't be great, at first, but all the great food you can eat. Soul food, and the best darned barbecued frogs legs this side of New Orleans . . . Rowley? Rowley!"

But the party he halloood for was not accepting calls. Anthony had blanched, and crumpled, carrying Mia down with him. She was entangled in his endless, twitching legs and was wearing the drink Ryan Coake had recently brought her. She was not, however, wearing the red mane she had tossed so prettily a few moments before. It lay under Anthony's elbow, an ice cube and a slice of orange nestling among the curls. Mia struggled upright, spied her pride under the recumbent's elbow, clutched at her close-cropped pate, shrieked, and joined Anthony in never-never land.

There they came together in slowed-motion, Mia moving awkwardly because her glass slippers pinched. Anthony Rowley reached for her slowly. His sinewy arms held her, lifted her up, up, up. The music started, and they were waltzing; her glass-shod feet twitching high above the ground. Soft pink light enveloped them, a particularly accurate spot lighting on his coronet from time to time, refracting into her eyes,

blinding her. Or was it the penetrating gleam of his dark eyes? Her glance searched those eyes, moving from one large, black orb to the other, but all she saw was herself, doubly distorted in the opaque black spheres. She faltered, but his sure arms were around her, supporting her, the edge of his ermine-trimmed cloak drifting over her arm. Perfume filled the air, perfume that became more pungent, more penetrating: perfume that became spirit of ammonia and brought Mia back to the world of the living, spluttering.

Agnes was bent over her with a small cut-glass vial, circulating the salts under her nose. Mia sat up. Her wig had been placed back on her head, though it was a bit askew. Anthony Rowley sat across from her, pale, with his head between his knees. He looked up, and the penetrating gaze of her swoon was upon her again. She flushed to the very roots of her being, glanced away, glanced back directly. Her eyes searched his big homely face. He struggled to his knees and crawled closer to her. Their eyes were locked, her breath coming in ragged little gasps.

"Mia, Mia Kulpah! I . . . you . . . will you consent to be my wife?" Anthony asked earnestly, balancing on one knee.

Mia appeared flustered, "This is so sudden." She glanced up at Ryan smirking and swaying above her. "Yes Anthony, yes; I will!" she replied fervently, her breath redolent of chicle.

Anthony fumbled with the diamond stickpin in his cravat,

withdrew it, and poised his hand to pin it to her heaving bosom. The enormity of the task overcame him, and he blushed to the very roots of his pomaded hair. She took the pin from his shaking hands and pierced the clinging fabric above her heart, barely noting that the three-carat bauble must be worth a small fortune. Then she subsided into his arms, his lips in her hair.

"Anthony, this is hardly what I had in mind when I suggested a soire to decide your future," Agnes said reprovingly. "You've both had too much to drink, or too much excitement, to make such a decision. Why don't you get up off the floor and reconsider?"

But the two seemed oblivious to anything but each other. Anthony tenderly plucked an orange seed from his beloved's peruke with his lips, and munched it absent-mindedly. She shivered in his arms, wishing her own hair was luxuriant and waist length. As if to soothe her, Anthony ran his huge hands over her head, stroking and smoothing away regrets. Her scalp tingled, and she sighed in somewhat surprised contentment.

Ryan Coake swam into her vision. He crouched before them, three very full glasses precariously balanced against one another between his spread fingers.

"Don't know what came over you two, but figured you could both use a little something to get the blood flowing properly to the brain again."

He ignored Mia, looked curiously at Anthony and proffered a glass. Anthony uncoiled one arm from around his blissful companion, took a glass for Mia and one for himself, nodding his appreciation for the act of kindness. *Dottore Dotilaso Famire* plumped down on the floor beside them, his lapel of feathered fishing-flies fluttering.

"*Come e bello, l'amore. So beautiful!*" He reached into a voluminous front pocket of his jacket, produced a ukulele and proceeded to tune up, then play. Soon everyone in the room was sprawled over furniture, or stretched out on the floor, heads resting in acquiescent laps, singing along to old favourites like *Harvest Moon, Alexander's Ragtime Band* and *Surrey With a Fringe on Top*. Even Agnes hunkered down on a hassock and gave a rousing rendition of *Camptown Ladies*, though she faltered when she got to "Bet my money on a bob-tail nag", and stared mistily at Mia. Liquor and loquaciousness flowed. It was a great night.

By midnight every head felt like a pumpkin, and the party slowly broke up. But it had been some enchanted evening, and the consensus was that Agnes' latest *proteg* was a prince of a man.

After a prolonged farewell, the new lovers finally parted, promising to meet on the morrow. Mia drove Ryan home, burbling about love, fate and *real* gentlemen, and toying with the stickpin.

"But you only just met the guy," Ryan protested.

"Though that rock is pretty good for one night's work," he admitted grudgingly. "Maybe we can make a little something out of this deal."

Mia sniffed, reprovngly.

"Ryan, don't be ridiculous. This is L-O-V-E, LOVE. There is something so very special about," she sighed, "Anthony." They drew up outside Ryan's home.

"The something special is that he is foreign, rich and foolish enough to propose!" Ryan cried.

Another suspiration from Mia. "It's as if we knew each other from somewhere else, another life. Or were meant to be together."

She tried to tell Ryan of the magical dancing, the celestial music, the soft pink light. She didn't mention the crown, or the slippers. "We were waltzing round and round. There was no one else in the world," a deep breath, "in the universe." Her foot tapped on the gas pedal, and the motor raced in three-four time. "This is special; we weren't just hips passing in the night."

Ryan sniffed; "It's just old-world charm from an old charmer: hypnotism, nothing real. And I'll believe this marriage business, Mia, when you invite me to the wedding." He exited the car, but stood by the open door. Mia looked moonily at the stars.

"Mia, you can't be serious about this guy!"

"Why not, Ryan?" she asked simply.

"Because . . . he's too old for you, for one thing. And, for another, what about us?"

"Goodnight Ryan."

Mia slipped the car into gear and proceeded slowly down the block. In her own driveway she stood leaning against the car door a moment, breathing in the rich spring air. The stars twinkled like a myriad diamond stickpins. Ryan came panting up the driveway. He stood a moment looking at her, then dropped to the ground, burying his face in her knees:

"You don't have to make me jealous with that strange old guy, Mia, I know you're swell. I would have got around to asking you sooner or later, anyway. . . please, marry me! Besides, we've got history."

She allowed him to kiss her and, scratching her head, they went into the house. The moon was silent, smiling.

Meantime, Agnes and Anthony were gathering up glasses and broken bits of party sandwiches; the lampshades were all put back, and the furniture straightened. In the kitchen Agnes washed, and Anthony dried. She tried to pass him wisdom along with the dripping plates.

"I'm not saying that she isn't a very nice girl, Anthony."

"I'll hear nothing against her!" he declared.

"Quite. But things are done differently here. As Kipling said, it has taken a great deal to wipe out

uncivilized instincts, like falling in love at first sight. It is not right, nor proper. You're responding to a faint!

"You know nothing about that young girl. Or her ways.

"You haven't discovered a way to earn your own living; what if you have a wife and cannot keep her? I'm surprised at you."

Anthony looked a little sheepish, and concentrated on drying between the tines of an ornate silver serving-fork. He crooned:

*Love can come to anyone,
The best things in life are free.*

He focused on a pickle platter.

"I *do* love Mia, she's so . . . different. There's nothing mousey about her at all," he added, surprised.

"But you cannot live on love," Agnes insisted.

"Not here, no," Anthony admitted. "But I did see something in the paper, this morning. It would mean moving to the seaside, and solitude, but we would have a home, and each other."

He rummaged in the rubbish for the newspaper and found the page, flicking away a little fish-paste.

"See, here . . . "

Agnes read where his long finger indicated:

LIGHT HOUSE KEEPING: LIVE IN. ONLY MATURE AND
SERIOUS NEED APPLY. REFERENCES REQUIRED. CALL
555-1212

and stifled her laughter.

"*Anythin' for a quiet life, as the man said wen he took*

the situation at the lighthouse," she quoted and chortled.

"Oh, Anthony, you are precious! They're looking for someone to clean house and be a companion. They are not looking for a lovesick pair to moon about a sea-tossed rock quoting sonnets, and sounding the foghorn."

She collapsed with mirth into a chair, soapy hands occasionally wiping away a tear, repeating "light house-keeping" from time to time, and exploding into further storms of laughter.

Anthony became poker-faced and finished drying the dishes.

"At any rate, nothing can keep me from the woman I love." He removed his apron and folded the tea towel.

"But if she doesn't really love you, Anthony; doesn't know and understand you?" Agnes asked.

He bowed coldly to her, "I'll see you in the morning. Good night," and left the room.

"And if someone else does, Anthony?" Agnes said, quietly. She shook her head, sighed. An image of Mia far from shops and city life, living on a desolate sea coast, rose unbidden. Agnes attempted to contain her mirth, but a deep, foghorn-like noise rumbled from her depths, sounded through her sinus, and she gave in to further paroxysms, gasping for breath, clutching her sides.

"This will never do," she sighed, weeping and weak with laughter. "I'll have to help that poor man, somehow."

She finished tidying up the tiny kitchen, occasionally convulsed with giggles, struggling to keep the noise of her mirth muffled. Her shoulders were still shuddering with suppressed amusement as she prepared for bed, and her writing was shaky in the Diary.

May 27: the FP seems interested in courtship even in this world: such a innocent! He proposed to, and was accepted by, Mia K! He must be capable of some kind of magic, as she seems absolutely enchanted by him. Must be another ploy to get Ryan to pop the question as she cannot be serious about Anthony, she didn't even ask him what make of car he drives! If we could just find a way to ensure that everyone lives happily ever after . . .

She left the flowered curtains open, and lay in bed looking up at the crescent moon, remembering about love.

* * *

Breakfast the next morning was a little chilly. Anthony was polite, but peremptory. He passed the preserves, and poured the tea, but there was a paucity of table-talk.

"Another lovely spring day," Agnes said blithely, admiring the cut of his shirt.

"Mmmm," he replied.

"Might be a nice day to take a walk about the town, maybe stroll through the park?" she inquired brightly. "I could show you my favourite buildings." She imagined walking arm in arm with him, past the library to the Town Hall and

through the ornate iron gates into the rose gardens.

"Hmmm," he answered.

She eyed him for a while, stirring her tea. He was an attractive fellow. He had presence sitting there, masticating his crumpet and jam, staring fixedly out the window, occasionally lifting his tea cup to his lips. Her mouth softened, looking at his.

"Anthony!" She chided, "You are behaving like a sulky child!"

"Hmmp!" in answer.

"All right. I apologize for laughing." She started to smile, saw his face, stopped. She added softly, "You are an *emigre*; your ways are not quite our ways, and there are bound to be areas where our differing cultures are . . . different," she ended lamely.

The doorbell chimed. Agnes cast a sorrowful look at Anthony who buttered another crumpet, and went to the door. Hand in hand Mia Kulpah and Ryan burst in, she more so than he.

"Where is he?" she asked breathlessly, then rushed down the hall and into the breakfast nook, dragging Ryan behind.

"Who, or what, are you?" she asked Anthony, eyes bright. "Where do you come from? Thank you," accepting a cup of tea from Agnes.

Mia stood by the table, her eyes on a level with Anthony's. She was dressed in a rippling green jumpsuit, the

diamond stickpin in her lapel, red hair curling down to her waist. She glanced at Agnes, twinkled briefly at Ryan, then looked back to Anthony, popping a fresh piece of gum into her mouth.

"Yesterday I was wearing a wig because my own hair was so short. But look at me this morning, this is my hair!" She grabbed a handful near her neck and tossed it back; it fluttered over her shoulder and cascaded two feet to her callipygous bottom.

"You don't like it?" Anthony asked, perplexed.

"I love it! But how did you do it? I went to bed with a tingling scalp, a brushcut, and . . ."

Ryan coughed, embarrassed.

"And woke up as Lady Godiva," she finished, smiling quickly at Ryan.

They all ruminated on that image for a moment.

"Anthony, I think you do owe Mia an explanation."

"And my fiancé," said Mia, indicating Ryan.

She removed the diamond stickpin and put it on the table before Anthony.

"Maybe we should leave you folks alone," said Agnes, moving towards the kitchen and pulling on Ryan's sleeve.

"No, Agnes, you have every right to be here," said Mia throatily, and cleared her throat. "I suppose, I owe you both an apology."

Anthony interrupted, "I think I understand." And to

Agnes, "There may be some cultural differences to iron out, after all."

The two exchanged a look, Agnes smiling comfortingly, Anthony looking a little embarrassed. Then turning to Mia, his broad face indicated consternation.

"I think I'll go make another pot of tea," Agnes said. "This is going to take a while," and she pattered off to the kitchen, making a lot of noise opening biscuit tins and tea caddies, toasting more crumpets, and scalding the pot. When she returned several minutes later, Mia was sitting primly at one end of the banquette beside Ryan, and Anthony sat glumly facing them on a chair. Agnes glanced at the threesome, and poured tea. And they talked, and they talked; Mia occasionally incredulous; Anthony emotional; Ryan helping out with literary explanations; Agnes pouring tea. By mid-afternoon, as the sun slanted through the curtains, they were pretty well talked out. Anthony rose to unload some of the tea. Agnes watched him walk away; an athletic walk, with splayed knees, controlled feet, and firm buns moving under tight denim. She sighed, and played with her cameo.

"I never thought fiction was true," Mia said to Agnes. "I mean, made-up stories and all. I thought they were just that, made-up."

"'Tis strange--but true; for truth is always strange; Stranger than fiction,'" quoted Ryan.

"What?"

"It's a quote from a poet, in a poem about a great lover," Agnes said, and smiled.

"Here's an interesting thought," Ryan interjected. "According to Anthony, the people from his land come into existence with imagination and storytelling. A *Frog He Would A-Wooing Go* was first published in 1765, but was part of oral tradition long before that. Therefore he is more than three hundred years old!"

Anthony had re-entered the breakfast nook and was leaning up against the wall.

"To be more accurate," he said, "I am as young as my tongue, and just a bit older than my teeth ." He smiled slowly, displaying a dazzling array of enamel.

Mia did not look comfortable.

"Where I come from I was becoming an endangered species. Badly drawn cartoon characters and undeveloped folks from romance novels and soap operas were taking over. I had to leave the land, and the people, I loved. I'll have to form new connections here. Adapt to this variety of normal."

He searched their faces. Agnes toyed with her teacup, looked up at him, smiled and blushed, looked away. Anthony looked at her, perplexed for a moment, then turned her face towards him and looked deeply into her eyes. He saw himself doubly distorted in her frank, friendly eyes. Then, slowly, he saw beyond his image, and into her; he sank deeper and deeper. Music started, and they were waltzing, her feet

barely skimming the ground, he bending slightly to accommodate her. Soft pink light enveloped them. He faltered, but her sure arms were around him, supporting him. Her perfume wafted over him, and he was back in the breakfast nook, looking on the comely face of the woman he could love. She tipped her head inquisitively.

"But you'll have to keep forming new connections because you'll outlive the rest of us, won't you?"

"You're forgetting your fairy tale lore," he chided softly. "Remember that whenever an enchanted being fell in love with a mortal, he or she had to give up something in order to be mortal too. In the land I come from I was an ageless frog, created centuries ago. Here, I am what I appear: a mortal man. The longer I am here, the more human I'll become."

Agnes realized that Anthony had lost some of his greenish cast, that his mouth didn't seem quite so broad.

"I cannot go back, and my magic will pretty much fade. But I think we could work together to be happy ever after. Or as long as we're allowed. Forgive me?"

Agnes smiled at him, leaned forward and kissed his big blunt nose.

"Ryan," she said, "don't you think the English Department could use a really devoted and knowledgeable genre professor?"

once upon a time

FOG

That there had to be more to life, Mr Tomshott had no doubt. He was bone- and road-weary, and had several more hours of highway before home. A few days of paper work --putting in the orders, catching up on trade mags--then back along this road, mile after endless mile. A stop of a few days in the other city; strip-bar lunches with the guys, lonely evenings in the motel grinding out more orders based on habit, or favours, then back again along this same stretch of highway, probably in exactly the same tracks, heading west. Back and forth like a shooting-gallery duck, with only his thoughts for company. Nothing ever changed.

He passed a No-U-Turn turning with a dun-coloured O.P.P. car squatting in the dusk, facing the other half of the highway. That was about right: he'd spotted the last cop about forty miles back. With an eye on the receding law in the mirror, his foot eased down on the accelerator and the little sedan purred with power; 120, 130, 140 klicks.

It was impossible to pull in a radio station clearly, so

he sang snatches of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pinafore*, tapping on the steering wheel, conducting the chorus with his cigar. The road became a rolling ocean, his car a sturdy little ship fearlessly negotiating the waves. In the light of the highbeams the staccato of the highway markings became tiny whitecaps beating against the prow.

Stick close to your desks and *never go to sea*
And you all may be rulers of the Queen's Navy

That Admiral knew nothing; being a free man on the bounding main, now there was a life! Make the office manager walk the plank. Keel-haul all those namby-pamby prissy types in the back office with their whining about quotas and chits and expense reports. Yes, and have an eager Nancy in every port; wearing those long flowing dresses with the tits almost popping out. Tomshott adjusted himself, cigar clenched in his teeth. Love 'em, leave 'em, and on to the next port. Hard work, but honest. Grog, travel, women, the company of other fearless men singing sea shanties under a Caribbean moon. Pick up his Havana cigars in Havana himself.

Ahead, his lights bounced off ground fog creeping across the road. Wraiths of mist drifted like smoke, merged into clumps, tore apart in swirling eddies. One particularly dense clump bunched together in the form of a running fox, and slowly shredded, until just the fox's brush was visible, running ahead of the car. Then he was thick in it, and the road disappeared in swirls of drifting mist. His foot eased

on the accelerator. The light from his highbeams was totally contained by the fog which obscured the road, but came no higher than the door handles.

The instrument panel seemed to dim in the gloom. He slowed right down, even pumping the brakes gently. As if through a submarine's periscope, he could see clear darkness all around him, but the road was submerged beneath billowing waves of grey, tinged yellow where the headlights tried to cut through.

The car was crawling now, barely 5 km.p.h. and Tomshott had no idea where the road was. He decided to pull over, if he could find the shoulder, and wait out the fog. He turned the wheel 45 degrees to the right and held his breath, waiting to feel the tires leave the tarmac and ease onto the edge. He could only see darkness, and indistinct wisps of vapour lifting and churning over the hood of the sedan. Slower now, slower; the lights seemed to fade as the fog thickened and still he hadn't felt the tires scrunch onto gravel. His foot twitched towards the gas pedal, just a little shot to get him off the road. He was inching along with one foot on the gas, the other on the brake. Finally the right front tire subsided onto the soft shoulder as he gave a short burst of gas. Realizing that a ditch lurked somewhere in that direction he corrected wildly with the steering wheel while pushing the brake to the floor. The car did a slow-mo fishtail, bouncing against the road edge, then stopped, rocking gently. The fog

obscured everything now.

Tomshott slumped back in his seat and exhaled wheezily. He'd never seen a fog come up so suddenly like that. Reaching for the knob on the steering wheel's stem, he set the four-way flashers, turned off the high beams and the engine. It was eerie sitting there in that cloud, pulsating with the jaundiced flash of the four-ways. His cigar had gone out, and while he waited for the lighter to pop he tried to get back to his thoughts of a seafaring life.

There would be fogs like this, peasoupers. But there'd be company as well. Those not on watch would be below decks, exchanging stories and jokes. He settled back in the seat, right arm stretched along to the next seat, his cigar a small red beacon in the gloom. Tall tales of travel and tall. And strong coffee to wash it all down. He smiled and felt thirsty. Tiny tendrils of smoke curled from his nostrils, mimicking the fog. He glanced at his watch; three bells. With this fog there was no way he'd be home before morning.

He could no longer detect the flashers, yet the fog was not perceptibly denser. He hunched forward over the wheel, but saw nothing save the ebb and flow of mist. He twisted the key in the ignition, to turn on the headlights, but nothing happened. Again. Not even a whine or a sputter. The engine was dead; probably dampness in the *whatsit*. Now he'd be stuck here until the fog lifted and he could flag down a passing car. Or try drying off the plugs, or something. He put the

keys in his pocket so as not to lock himself out by accident, and opened the door a crack to deposit his stogie on the gravel.

The air was warm, damp, and smelled vaguely of wintergreen. A whorl of fog snaked around his wrist and his fingers seemed to disappear. He pulled his hand hurriedly inside, and closed the door. His wrist prickled with pins and needles. Rubbing it with his right hand he noticed the digital display was out on his watch. For no particular reason he hit the switch that controlled the power locks but, of course, nothing happened. So he reached over and pushed all the lock buttons down manually, just battening down the hatches for the night. Didn't mean anything by it. His wrist was numb.

Tomshott hunkered down in his seat, staring at the moiling murk through the windscreen, rubbing his wrists together. This would make a great story for the lads between watches. Someone--the bosun's mate--would finish a tall tale; then he, the ship's carpenter, would top it with a recollection of the time, just off the Barbary Coast, when the ship was becalmed and surrounded by fog. With just a hint of wintergreen in the air, he'd say. The fellows would draw closer, because they knew he could tell a good story, and he'd launch into it full force. Even Cook would come in, with a fresh pot of coffee, to hear. Tomshott stared into the fog to find inspiration. It was such a fog, he'd say, that you

couldn't see your hand before your face. No, that wouldn't be any good, there'd be no story in that. Besides, he could see his hand and a bit beyond as well. No, better to capture the roiling mists, and the shapes that formed and faded as shreds of vapour merged, then melted. Like that clump on the hood, dissolving into the shape of a small animal, a dog. And behind it the twisting mists forming lumpy cylinders and pillars, a grey murk like a crowd circling the car.

The animal-form on the hood was changing again; the muzzle lengthening, the base becoming indistinct as the haze billowed. Then the mists compacted and the figure resolved into a silver fox, its brush coiled delicately around its front paws. Tomshott stared, wanting the image to change, for the eddying breeze to pick it apart and form something other. There, slowly, something was happening. The head seemed to twist, the muzzle split . . . in a lengthening yawn, then closed. The mirage sat grinning, blinking gently at Tomshott through the windscreen, who remembered seeing a running fox as he entered the fog.

The back of his neck felt naked. Tomshott glanced in the rear-view mirror. The movement and eddies in the fog bank surrounding the car had become the motions of a crowd. Wisps of mist wafted here and there, but the greater body of the fog had compacted into a luminescent throng: women in bonnets with shopping baskets; men in top hats craning forward to look in the car. Their ghostly mouths were moving, some seemed to be

laughing, but Tomshott heard nothing. He glanced to the right. The jumble of cloud-people continued, even children, about ten feet from the car. On the hood, the fox twitched its large erect ears and looked to Tomshott's left, its brush pumping up and down in silent emulation of a wag. Tomshott followed the fox's glance, then recoiled from the window. A figure was bent, just outside the window, pointing at him. A tall, homely, bearded spectre. A long, misty finger pointed down to the door lock, and seemed to beckon. Tomshott pressed back into his seat, shaking his head. The mist-man shook his head too, and seemed to laugh. The crowd pressed closer around the car. Suddenly the window between Tomshott and the bearded wraith whined down. A vaporous arm reached in through the open window and grabbed Tomshott's right arm at the shoulder. He felt an electrical tingle across his chest where the spectre touched him, then numbness. The wraith's arm withdrew, taking Tomshott's right arm with it. Tomshott sat a moment, watching the crowd circle the bearded wraith who carried his plaid-sleeved arm. He felt no pain, only numbness, and fear. Looking down, his right arm was gone, a vague chimera shimmering where it should have been. His left hand groped at the area where his right elbow used to be, and came away damp.

The crowd outside was tossing his arm, one to another. They seemed to laugh, but even through the open window he could hear nothing.

He fumbled with his left hand at the door lock, heaved on the door handle and pushed the door open with his shoulder. He stumbled to his feet, unbalanced by the weightlessness of his right side.

"Hey, that's mine!" he hollered, pushing through the crowd towards his arm. Or thought he hollered, the sound came back muffled as through damp cotton balls. The crowd laughed their soundless laugh, and hands reached out for him. Wherever he was touched he felt a tingling, an electrical buzz, then numbness. A lapel was ripped off, and wafted through the crowd like a banner. He lost a shoe. Still he struggled through the insubstantial crowd to where his arm was being tossed like a hot potato from one spectre to another. The crowd backed off a little, and he stood, dishevelled and panting, recognizing pieces of himself in many hands.

A woman in a low-cut, flowing gown leaned forward, fists on her hips. He stared at the milky roundness of her breasts, then, realizing what he was doing, glanced at her face. But she, aware, just laughed a soundless laugh, and the crowd roared silently with her. Her tongue, opalescent, flickered to the curve of her cupid's bow, then disappeared. With a sly look she glanced to her right, then left, then boldly wafted up to Tomshott. Her diaphanous arms reached up, she took him by the ears and, pulling his head down, gave him a resounding buss. His lips tingled, his tongue went numb. He heard a muffled roar like the pressure of water at the bottom of a

swimming pool. He licked his lips and tasted wintergreen.

Opening his eyes, he realized he'd closed them to be kissed by her. She was standing before him, arms crossed just under those delightful breasts, leaning back from the hips and looking at him appraisingly. Almost saucily. He grinned back. Then lunged for her suddenly and grabbed her, with two arms.

Tomshott was complete, but he was not quite himself. He was composed of the same pearlized grey mist as the crowd. He was no longer in a plaid suit, but wore the striped-jersey and tight-fitting pants of a British tar of the last century. He could feel his ribboned hat bobbling against his shoulders. For a moment he was frightened, then he felt the female in his arms squirm. He looked down on her, and thought she would be really delightful if she were a few inches taller, and had her hair in a pompadour. She smiled, pushing herself away from him. With plucking motions she gathered clumps of mist from the air, as if manipulating bubbles in a bath, and moulded them into a pompadour. She wavered before him, closed her eyes in concentration, then sprouted up about three inches. He laughed with delight. The crowd laughed, too.

When she pressed up against him, their outlines seemed to merge, but she stepped back with suddenness. Again, she plucked at the wisps of mist that drifted about until she had a substantial handful. Then she quickly thrust it into the front of his breeches. This time he could hear the crowd

laugh, but as he looked around there was no meanness in any face. And he joined in, laughing loudly, happy to the very depths of his being for the first time in years. The crowd swirled and drifted; laughing, singing, telling stories. Tomshott glanced back over his shoulder once, cigar firmly in place, one arm around his Nancy, and saw the little sedan sitting skewed on the edge of the highway. He gave a little wave and merged with the crowd, heading west.

The sun rose and a dun-coloured O.P.P. car pulled up behind the sedan, seemingly abandoned on the edge of the highway. The officer stepped out and moved to the car. The driver's door was open, the keys gone. The entire vehicle was coated in a very heavy dew. There seemed to be pawprints on the front hood, and a few shreds of plaid material had bunched up in the gravel by the front tire. No footprints. Looking up, the constable saw the brush of a silver-fox disappearing in the mist under the trees on the other side of the ditch.

CONNEXIONS

AUG. 10: So the so-called artist finds herself at loose ends; Sunday night of a three-day weekend; the phone isn't ringing, none of the admirers dropping by for a snuggle and discussion of literature, or a Scotch. Even the neighbours are quiet. There is nothing to come between our scribe and her muse:

-- Put through the call, collect. Hell, I'll even pay the charges. But where is the wretch when you need her?

-- Hiding.

Or dealing with a more positively reinforcing creative power. I want *that* generative power. Not this heat-creating fear of failure.

Yet, I don't set myself up as a writer. Really. Other folk say to me, write. Or, more properly, WRITE!!! But there must be something in me that holds the image--or illusion--of a writer too dear. That is why I am afraid to risk. Yet, I

manipulate words well. Sculpt them. Well, some of the time. And I've got a fabulous imagination. So what's the problem?

Must stem from the (mistaken) assumption that the flow of words has to be perfect from the moment the pen touches the paper, or the cursor brightens the screen.

Despite this inner and profound performance fear, there is genuine love of word play; concern for the placing of punctuation (yes! believe it or not, scholars of the future, she thought about the placement of such details!); even the creation of new word forms: why should some terms be hyphenated when fishwater *does* serve the purpose better than fish-water? Damned editors! If we are to be creative, why can we not create words, images, styles?! Damn conformity, let me reveal *my* vision in *my* way.

But how? Aye, there's the rub.

Judy says hang letter writing; when you sit in front of the screen to write (create sounds better), then do just that. Create. Stream of consciousness. Right? Write! But I need to writerright. Er, that looks awkward. Rightwrite? Smacks of self-imposed censorship.

What do I want to accomplish in literature, in painting with

words? And why, even when writing that, did I have an urge to use dialect of a sort? I know that slipping into accents in conversation shields me from my own truth--the voice doesn't sound like me so it cannot be me; truths being revealed by some other. What does it mean in print?

-- Life's a bitch, sorr, beggin' yer pardon. And oft-times I wonder why she warent' drowned as a whelp.

I suppose we'll just have to impose some sort of discipline; behaviour modification, reward the good etc. But get it down. Any of it. All of it. Trash and all. Nothing has to be seen by any one but me (sometimes wish it would only be seen by any one *but me!*) Nothing will come from nothing, that is sure. And nothing may come from rambling, but there is a greater likelihood of something happening if I just do it. Right? Write!

Maybe I can work with a writer's journal, regular entries of (the) my world observed. I'll continue tomorrow. Promise.

AUG. 11: Okay, just jump in and tell us what was going on and how you come to be inside on a beautiful day like this:

I was outside, reading. Mr Nicholl-Carnes halloed out to Mrs McWhinnie passing with her creaking shopping cart. When the old lady answered it was with an eructation of the throat,

like long un-used pipes suddenly being required to deliver water, with too much air in the pipes. Her "Good morning" rumbled forth, and tumbled toward the cracks in the sidewalk, while her eyes darted to and fro in an attempt to find a perch which approximated politeness, but did not light on the eyes of Mr Nicholl-Carnes on the balcony above her, or me, in the grass at her feet.

I wished she would go on to the grocery store so I could continue reading, and Mr Nicholl-Carnes would go back to whittling the decoy ducks he does by the dozens for his niece in London, Ont. to paint, and sell at a huge profit. (I think he just gives them to her, so her only cost is paint and brushes, the rest is easy egg money!) I was thick in the middle of a murder mystery, [when you cannot write, read! Education by emulation.] trying to tan my legs evenly, and I certainly didn't need the distraction of superficial talk.

It is that kind of mindless conversation, or seeing people gawking at accidents, that makes me figure if I were God I would have turned my face away from this mistaken creation long ago. I mean, I'd accept a few oversights, innocent errors or what have you. But centuries of humans mistreating one another? Where is there concern of people, for people? I'm totally bewildered (naive, I know, I know!) that Dachau and Auschwitz could have existed. That since 1948 apartheid

has been an ugly fact of South African existence and world conscience. How can it go on? How can people do such stupid things to people? Why does money rule the world? Well, if I were God, I'd be sick to my stomach. And if I had the ability to be omnipresent, I'd get the hell out of here. End of tirade.

Meanwhile:

The old lady had taken her twitchy eyes and shopping-cart to the store. But now Mr Nicholl-Carnes was warmed up and garrulous, and telling me he was rolling a supply of cigarettes for when he went away. He showed me a plastic yoghurt container, almost full. And, because he wouldn't come right out and say where he was going, I, obtusely, wouldn't ask. Guess God has turned away from me in disgust or despair, too. But I didn't want to know! I wanted to know who killed Sir Catamarque, and if the false heir would get the fortune. And how the author was going to BS me into believing it really was Lady Smythe-Jones when we know she didn't have the balls for it. Funny, neither does Mr Nicholl-Carnes; some kind of cancer.

Mr Nicholl-Carnes insisted on interrupting my reading with tales of his cigarette rolling, and how the painter had done two coats in the apartment and only charged \$235.00 (the landlord, Hawthorne, should have paid and/or had it done) and

the quality of the shortwave reception from the Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh; blah, blah, blah. I wanted to scream; or process him through the cigarette roller and make podgy SILENT cylinders out of him. The other tenants already wonder about my odd hours, and lack of visible support, so, instead of abreaction, I closed the book and came inside, giving up on the tan, but finding peace. Writing this journal helps. Wish my cheque would come. What is the Council waiting for?

AUG. 12: So I'm to be rewarded for my diligence. Have spent the last little while [very little while!] reworking "MEDIAS" in order to submit it to the CBC contest. Finally renamed the blasted thing too, "THE PLAYHOUSE . . ." Joyce would have liked that. I think it sounds good. Let's hope the people who are shortlisting read out loud. (Be honest, let's hope they read!)

AUG. 12: Not too much new to report. I've just input "A VERY TALE" and while, for the most part, it is very very lumpy, Agnes and Anthony do come across as sad-sack comic figures, à la Leacock. At any rate, it all adds to the file and that can't be bad. I may even rework "FOG". Why not?

Am just reworking this file. Maybe the writing mavens are on to something, after all. A diary of observations can't hurt; train the eye, and all that. Learn a more casual approach to

narrative; quasi-epistolary. Maybe I am planting seeds for future work that I can reap when I reread. Sounds like a curse carved in hieroglyphs on the wall of an Egyptian tomb:

REREAD AND REAP.

Mrs McWhittie finally had a stroke. Figured she'd either give one, or get one. So #7 is vacant. Wonder if I could get that tightass Hawthorne to let me have the place for the same rent she paid. He'd be able to rent this one for higher; have to appeal to his greed.

AUG. 17: This morning, the little Portuguese man who does the landlord's dirty work is cutting down the trees in the backyard. I don't think that he himself dislikes the trees; Hawthorne probably doesn't want to pay to have the leaves raked up in the fall any more. Or maybe he needs a few cords of wood for his fireplace, or to sell. At any rate, classical music cannot compete with the consumptive choking of the chainsaw and I am drawn to the window, a hapless, and helpless, spectator.

Yet, I can't keep a smile from happening while I watch the antics of the little workman as he alternates from one ladder to another, enveloped in purple haze, attempting to carve the Vee that will send the branches crashing to the ground. A professional, an expert in tree demolition, would have had the

branches lopped off, the trunk down and butchered into neat segments by now. But Benito, though hardworking and well-meaning, is no professional. First he climbs the eight-foot painter's ladder, then switches to the twenty-foot extension ladder, the chainsaw chattering all the while.

Slowly, very slow but sure, the leafy divide between this building and the outside world is thinned: asphalt streets, that before I could only peek at, leaf-framed glimpses, become a constant view, with cars and accompanying traffic noises. Squat family houses and dense clumps of apartment complexes are visible now, so I retreat to the greenery-lined comfort of this room of my own. {Literary snobbishness and allusion; squash it! Kill it!} The final movement of *The Pastorale* is now audible as, his destruction complete, the [little?] workman puts the saw to rest.

The mailman has been, but still no cheque. This poverty is an unbearable reality. Everything is money, and there is no real happiness underneath the sun. Books that show characters happy, falling in love, riding off into the sunset . . . they don't show the whole picture. You don't see the happy couple a few sunrises later when her wry humour seems more like nagging, and his raw manly scent is just a stink.

Why isn't there fairness, a just god; something to make this

existence reasonable or, at least, bearable?

AUG. 18: I don't understand the landlord, Hawthorne. He doesn't have respect for living things. Last spring he had Benito level the flower borders along the front walk and replace them with gravel. What was the justification for that? The flowers grew and bloomed in wild profusion; no care necessary. He doesn't allow pets in the building either. I don't like that man.

Noticed today that Mr Nicholl-Carnes has left for wherever. His balcony is still covered in wood shavings. Now I'll be able to read in peace. Wish there was someone to talk to.

* * *

AUG. 25: A week later. Got a little wild when some of the money came in, and I seem to have lost a few days. Can an ellipsis indicate an absence from observation? In an old movie the pages would flutter off a calender, like leaves.

I've just been down in the yard touching the trees. Or what's left, stumps. I miss them. And I feel, somehow, that they miss me. All living creatures should be capable of relating. Seems one of my major concerns is with the workings, or non-workings, of relationships, pairing. At times I'm almost

obsessed with the notion of a perfect soul-mate existing for even a one such as I. Always, there is this interest in couples and the machinations of coupling. Could do a story of woman or a man having a relationship with a hamadryad. Bring in peculiar individual self-evaluation; the unexamined life not being worth living, and all that. Or as Polonius suggested, "Know thyself and to thine own self be true". That may be more paraphrase than quote, but allow us our laziness and be charitable in the reading.

Woman and a tree spirit could be interesting; semi-mythical; spice it up with a twisted sex scene. Maybe that's how the parachutist got into the apple? But why obsidian? Don't know.

AUG. 28: We're going to have a storm. Used to be, as the clouds surged and darkened, the trees would flounce about arranging their leaves before the deluge. They'd adjust their branches to protect the nests of squirrels and birds sheltering there. The nests are gone now. Where are all those lodgers? Have they adapted to another group of trees; do they mourn like me? Anthropomorphism?

Aesthetic philosophy. I want to burn with belief in what I'm doing. I want to create something of artistic merit. If I could only verbalize what I think, I'd be in better shape; I

could believe I was following a path--with a destination in mind--though the path might be a winding one. Maybe I should find a paying job, teach? How long is one supposed to suffer for art?

I have faith in my images, not necessarily in my form.

AUG. 31: Had to take the garbage down to the garage. Near the bins I saw the chainsaw that had cut up my trees, and I felt the sorrow rushing up again. Then I noticed Hawthorne was there, in the garage. He had a bent, rusted shovel in his hands and was standing over something in the corner. I couldn't hold back, and told Hawthorne exactly what I thought of him. Maybe I yelled. He laughed, and said those trees had been just so much dead wood.

Something was squirming by his foot and as I moved closer to see, Hawthorne leaned down hard on the shovel and decapitated a mouse. I must have screamed because Hawthorne looked up, surprised (annoyed?) and said, as he shovelled the mousebits into a garbage bin, "I had no idea you were so squeamish." And he smirked, I swear, he smirked as he said it. I was shivering/leaning against the wall, just beside the shovel. Couldn't see any blood because of the rust. I didn't want to be standing there, so close, but I could not move--really frozen to the spot. Hawthorne said it was necessary to do many unpleasant things in order to control pests. He said

that the trees had been rotting and dangerous, and had had to be destroyed. He said that all things that made life unpleasant had to be destroyed. I thought about that, said nothing.

Hawthorne bent over the mousetrap, resetting it. I stood staring at him and I could feel myself acting, ending up a character in my own fiction. I could feel the big shovel in my hands, coming down hard on his head. A little groan, and his eyes would go wonky. He'd reach for me and I'd hit him again, and again, till he'd fall over. Sideways. There would be a moral victory in holding the blade of the shovel against his neck and pushing real hard, until his Adams apple bulged. I'd be vindicating the trees, the flower border, the mouse.

My hands closed around the weathered wood of the shovel handle. I could do it! It would be like fiction, but I'd be living what I created. Glorious! I could use the chainsaw for the rest; cut his limbs from the trunk--sap everywhere. (Joyce would have liked that.) Soon he'd be neatly stacked in the bins; so much dead wood. I'd use the watering-hose hanging over the spigot to hose down the cement floor, and my hands. And the chainsaw too, though it would probably rust right out, but that wouldn't be my problem.

No, my problem is to translate this experience, this anger, into fiction. I'll have to change the landlord's name, I suppose, no one will believe Hawthorne, too pat, too cute.

Better update files and make copies to work on. Maybe work everything up into a collection of short pieces, *CONNEXIONS*.