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ON PLEASANT AVENUE: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

Clive Moody

A Thesis
in the Department
of English

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

Sept. 1991

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ISBN 0-315-68741-X

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ABSTRACT

On Pleasant Avenue: A Collection of Short Stories

C. Moody

On Pleasant Avenue is a collection of short stories set on a nominally ordinary suburban street. The actual name of the street is Forty-Sixth Avenue, but in one of the stories it is referred to as Pleasant Avenue, after the street in the Dick and Jane children's stories. This irony reflects the separation between the idealized Dick and Jane world and the reality of the lives that are actually lived there. The occupants of the houses on Pleasant Avenue accept a middle-class code of conduct that at times distorts their sense of ethics. Their lives must be, or must seem to be, as neat and orderly as the properties they maintain. This illusion is maintained not only for their neighbour's benefit; they themselves have come to accept a distorted picture of their own lives. Self-conscious and conservative, the inhabitants of Pleasant Avenue are not given to introspection, ironically, they lose much of the enjoyment of living amidst comfortable surroundings by losing touch with their own emotions.

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To June, with apologies

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HOUSE FOR SALE

From her picture window, Sandra Bailey could see her husband Ron stride across the back yard to the utility shed. As he walked he kicked at the maple leaves lying ankle deep on the ground. Sandra wondered whether he was kicking at them playfully, or in anger. Surely he couldn't still be angry? It had been two hours since they'd talked. She certainly wasn't angry any more, if she ever really had been. It sometimes seemed to her that she'd learned to shout as loudly as Ron did just to keep from being overwhelmed by him. Or perhaps it was a way to stop the tears from coming.

It hadn't worked, of course, it had just postponed the inevitable. In the end Ron had stormed up to the study, slamming the door behind him. Then Sandra had sat down on the

couch and let the tears come.

Ron opened the utility shed door and fished out two rakes. Leaving one rake leaning against the shed, he walked over to one corner of the yard and began raking the dead leaves with short, quick strokes. Ron never once looked back towards the house, but Sandra knew he was sending her a message. The rake leaning against the shed, the turning away. He expected her to do her share of the work, but silently. That suited Sandra. She'd long since run out of fresh things to say, and all the old words had had their original meanings distorted by continual bickering. Sandra walked into the yard, picked up her rake, and chose an unoccupied corner to clear of leaves.

Out of the corner of her eye Sandra could see Mrs Hellstrom edging along her side of the cedar hedge towards them, pretending to be examining the new growth. Mrs Hellstrom, "eighty-three and fit as a fiddle", as she liked to say, seemed incapable of just stepping over to the hedge that separated their properties and announcing her presence. Her approach had to be circuitous, and when she did at last speak she'd start the conversation by expressing surprise that she'd found someone there. In the four years they'd lived on Forty-Sixth Avenue the pattern had never changed. Sandra could tell that Ron had seen her coming too, for he had quietly put down his rake and, with his head down, was walking towards the back

door. Sandra was annoyed at his desertion. Faced with the prospect of an hour-long conversation on earwigs and Anglican Women's Auxiliary meetings, she doggedly continued to rake up dead maple leaves and pray that Mrs Hellstrom really was only interested in the new cedar growth.

"Oh, hello Sandra. Hello Ron. I didn't know you were in the garden."

Sandra looked up and smiled her number one smile. Mrs Hellstrom really was so sweet, and Ron hadn't been able to make it to the house in time. He wheeled around and waved, showing the necessary amount of surprise and pleasure at hearing Mrs Hellstrom's voice, and joined Sandra at the hedge. They would have to put off raking until the next day. It was already past five o'clock, and the October sun would probably be set by the time Mrs Hellstrom had finished talking.

"Such a lovely hedge this year. Lord knows we had plenty of rain this summer." Mrs Hellstrom closely examined the new foliage. "I suppose I'd better get the boy to trim it soon. You did such a lovely job of trimming your side, Ron."

Ron combed his fingers through his lank, dirty-blond hair. "Well, of course, I'd be glad to do that for you, Edna. I mean, anytime..." Sandra knew her husband couldn't win, whether or not Mrs Hellstrom accepted his offer. It was the choice between doing an unwanted chore or living with a guilty conscience.

Mrs Hellstrom smiled radiantly at them. For an octogenarian, her face was remarkably unwrinkled. A pair of light blue eyes peered out of a face whose skin seemed to have sagged down with age rather than folded up, so that two small jowls hung down somewhat incongruously from her birdlike features. Her thin, cotton wool hair was bundled under a scarf. "Oh no, dear. I couldn't possibly impose on you. You have enough chores of your own to do." So, thought Sandra, he'll have to live with the guilt this time.

"How's your granddaughter doing these days, Edna?" Sandra tried to rescue Ron by changing the subject. The granddaughter in Calgary had been flavour of the month with Mrs Hellstrom recently. Sandra was sure it would get Ron off the hook.

She wasn't wrong. With a triumphant look that said "I've got a secret," Mrs Hellstrom reached inside her gardening apron and produced an envelope of photographs. She handed them over the hedge to Sandra, who suspected that they were the reason she'd wanted to talk in the first place. "I just got these at lunchtime. Isn't the baby lovely? She reminds me so much of Patty when she was a newborn."

Sandra sifted through the snapshots as quickly as was polite, with Ron looking over her shoulder. The newborn, pink and wrinkled, was wrapped in a crocheted yellow baby blanket, and was held in various poses by the smiling granddaughter or her smiling husband. Sandra was sure that Mrs Hellstrom had

crocheted the blanket. It had almost the same pattern as a shawl Mrs Hellstrom had given her that past Christmas. "Oh, it's lovely, Edna. Just lovely. That's a lovely blanket the baby's wrapped in." From the smile Mrs Hellstrom gave her, Sandra knew she'd guessed correctly.

"What are they calling her?" Ron asked, making sure he contributed to the conversation.

Mrs Hellstrom's smile faded just a little. "Vanessa. Vanessa Amanda. I have to say I wasn't too fussy on the names when I heard them. There are so many Vanessas around these days. Amandas too for that matter. Still, Vanessa Amanda Stewart doesn't sound all that bad, I suppose." Mrs Hellstrom sighed. "Of course, being their first they would have preferred a boy, but you can't choose these things. Perhaps the next one will be. As I always say, as long as it's healthy."

Sandra smiled. Yes, Mrs Hellstrom did always say that.

"And how about you two? When am I going to be making a baby blanket for you folks?" The question took Sandra and Ron completely by surprise. It wasn't as if Mrs Hellstrom hadn't hinted about children before, but this was the first time she'd come out and asked the question. The question had been asked many times by other people, however, especially by Ron's mother, and Sandra gave her stock answer without skipping a beat. "Oh there's plenty of time for that, Edna. You have to be ready for children you know."

Mrs Hellstrom frowned. "Oh, come on now Sandra. That house of yours is just made for children. And what about this wonderful back yard? How long have you two been married now? Six, seven years?"

Ron looked back at the house, as if examining it in a fresh perspective. "It would be seven years this November."

Sandra felt the smile frozen on her face begin to hurt. She giggled nervously. "Anyway, Edna, why would you want some little monster living next to you? Making all sorts of noise? Trampling your flowers?"

"Oh but I love children, dear. I'm sorry. I hope I wasn't being too forward. It's just that you two are such a nice young couple. You fit so well together. It just seems a shame for you not to have children. They'd kind of complete the picture."

Sandra was amused. "How do you know that a baby would 'Complete the picture', Edna?"

Mrs Hellstrom chuckled. "Oh, I just know. I've got a good nose for these things, you know. Always have had. My daughter's been married now for thirty-eight years. The very moment I set eyes on Frank, I just knew he was right for Muriel. They had so much in common, and he's got such strong character." Mrs Hellstrom became pensive for a moment. "On the other hand, I just knew the fellow Clara married was all wrong for her. And I was right. It didn't last long at all."

Sandra was puzzled. "Clara...?"

"My other daughter. She's two years older than Muriel. Lives down in the States somewhere now. I don't see her too often."

Sandra couldn't remember another daughter being mentioned, let alone seen, in the four years she'd known Mrs Hellstrom.

Mrs Hellstrom shook her head sadly. "Bill and I had such a time raising that girl. She had a mind of her own from the very start. Not like Muriel at all. Had her father's stubborn nature. Those two used to fight like cats and dogs, right up until the day he passed away. She was sixteen then, and his going kind of quietened her down for a while. For all their arguing, Clara and her dad had been very close. For a few years after his death I had very little trouble with her. People who knew us were amazed at the change."

Mrs Hellstrom continued to examine the hedge's new growth as she talked, rolling the dark green sprouts between her thumb and forefinger. "Of course there were always boys. Clara was a very pretty girl, a natural strawberry blonde. And she loved to go dancing. But the boys were always good boys, from good families. I knew their parents. I didn't mind her going out with them at all. But then she got a job as a secretary in town and started going around with him.

The anger with which she said "him" surprised Sandra. Mrs Hellstrom's face still showed some of that anger. "Him? You mean the man she married?"

"Yes, him. Spiro Arniopolis. A fat little Greek boy Clara met while out shopping one lunchtime. He told everyone to call him Arnie, but Clara never did. She liked the name Spiro and always called him that. I'm afraid I took a rather sharp dislike for him almost immediately, and through the entire time I knew him I called him Mr Arniopolis."

Mrs Hellstrom loved to boast about her family. This was the first time Sandra had heard harsh words about any of them. So, thought Sandra, not everything has always been sweetness and light with her either.

"Within a week of meeting him Clara was madly in love, and all the old arguments started all over again. Even before we were introduced I was sure that Mr Arniopolis was not a suitable prospect for my daughter. But no, no, she wouldn't hear a word said against him. All the old stubbornness came out again. If she'd been difficult at sixteen, she was impossible at twenty. Her father must have rolled over in his grave to hear how she carried on. I was almost glad that he was dead and didn't have to see what was happening."

"Sounds like your daughter had quite a temper", said Ron.

Sandra smiled. Ron really shouldn't talk about someone else's temper.

"But you hadn't met the man yet. How could you be so sure he was all wrong for Clara?" Sandra asked.

Mrs Hellstrom pondered the question for a moment. "Well,

I suppose it was more a question of knowing that Clara was all wrong for him. She was such a headstrong girl, she'd do anything that popped into her head. Just the sort of girl who'd fall madly in love and wind up in big trouble. And then there was her background. What on earth did she know about Greeks anyway? You have to remember that this was back in the late nineteen-forties. It wasn't the same city it is today."

"But I soon got to meet Mr Arniopolis for myself. I told Clara to invite him out for Sunday supper. And when he and Clara walked up the front path, honestly Sandra I almost died. Here was this squat, ugly fellow in an ice cream suit, his wavy hair all oiled down, walking arm in arm with my very own daughter. I mean she just towered over him. They looked ridiculous. Muriel and I just looked at each other and we both burst into laughter. I had a hard time composing myself before I answered the door, I can tell you."

Ron was slowly pacing back and forth behind Sandra. She hoped Mrs Hellstrom wouldn't notice his impatience. He wasn't as good as she was at hiding his emotions.

Mrs Hellstrom dropped the crushed shoots she'd been rolling in her fingers to the ground. "I will never know what Clara saw in that man. I won't say he was impolite or anything like that. And he did have a certain charm about him. Mr Arniopolis was around thirty years old at the time, and seemed to be quite worldly. I remember we talked a lot about plants

and flowers, and he took quite an interest in my African violets. He spoke English perfectly well, with just the touch of an accent. And it wasn't as if he was without prospects. He was a lawyer with some big firm on St. James street. But he wasn't the man for my daughter, and after he'd gone I told Clara that plainly."

The light was rapidly leaving the year . "What did Clara have to say about that?" asked Sandra.

Mrs Hellstrom laughed. "Well, I wouldn't repeat all that she said in polite company. What it boiled down to was that he'd asked her to marry him before they'd come to dinner, and she was bound and determined to become Mrs Spiro Arnio-polis. There were some fireworks at our house that night, I can tell you. I told Clara I'd never agree to the wedding, and she threatened to elope if I didn't." Mrs Hellstrom shook her head sadly. "And that's exactly what happened. Two weeks later she didn't come home from work. I received a telegram later that evening from Clara. 'Married today Niagara Falls Stop Back next Friday Stop.' And that was that."

Mrs Hellstrom lapsed into silence. Sandra could see that the incident still hurt after so many years. She felt sorry for the old woman. "When she came back, were you able to patch things up?"

No, not really. Oh we tried, but it was just no good. I could never completely forgive her for running away, and I

think she always knew how I felt about her husband. They settled into a small apartment on Decarie boulevard, and we saw very little of each other. Muriel saw her sister more than I did, but I tried to discourage that. I didn't want them introducing her to some of Mr Arniopolis' friends. One Greek in the family was enough. Too much, really."

There was an edge to Ron's voice when he spoke. He was taking the interruption of his chores less gracefully than his wife. "You said that their marriage didn't work out. So what happened there?"

"Four years after their marriage I could tell things were going downhill. Clara was often upset when I talked to her, and though she never said why, I was sure that a split was coming. Mr Arniopolis and I often went weeks without talking, and when I did see him his manner was fairly frosty. No, I knew the end was coming, and come it did."

"One evening Clara arrived on my doorstep, bags in hand, and asked if she could stay with me for a while. She and Spiro, as she called him, had had a big fight over something or other, and she'd ended up by walking out on him. Of course I took her in. I gave her her old room, made a pot of tea, and listened as she told me all the grim details of this last terrible fight. That night was enough to convince me that she was never going back to Mr Arniopolis."

Sandra was surprised. "Never? Didn't she and her husband

try to patch things up?"

Mrs Hellstrom shook her head. "They never had a chance to. Mr Arniopolis came over that night demanding to speak to Clara, but I refused to allow him to see her. I told him she was just too distraught. The last thing Clara needed was for husband to sweet talk her into coming back to him. I knew Clara would never see things straight. She was just too headstrong for her own good."

"I'd a sister living in Detroit at the time, and I arranged for Clara to take the train down and stay there for a few weeks. While she was away I told old Spiro that he might as well forget about Clara ever coming back to him. Then I wrote to Clara and told her that Spiro wanted a divorce, which was a little white lie at the time, and that it would be better for all concerned if she stayed down in the States for a while more. And that was that."

"But it didn't bother you that you'd broken up your daughter's marriage?"

"But I didn't break it up, dear. It would almost certainly have been on the rocks anyway. But that's the point, don't you see? They weren't right for each other in the first place. And no matter how much you tape together a relationship like theirs, it's bound to fall apart sooner or later." Mrs Hellstrom shook her head. "My Lord, I don't mind telling you, I prayed that those two wouldn't have a baby. That would have

been terrible. Not at all like people like you two having one. Now that would be completely different."

Mrs Hellstrom suddenly brightened. "But they didn't, did they? The Good Lord took care of that part. Clara stayed down in Detroit for a year or two, then moved west. Pity, she never married again. I suppose her marriage to Mr Arniopolis must have soured her on it. Now, as I was saying about you two...goodness, wasn't that a bat that just flew over?"

"Couldn't have been a bird. It's too dark." Sandra noticed the impatience showing in Ron's voice. The sun was completely down by then.

A ghostly hand waved from the other side of the hedge. "Well, well. How time flies. I mustn't keep you. It's so chilly after dark these days. Until next time then." Mrs Hellstrom walked back towards her house and was quickly sucked into the darkness.

Ron had difficulty in the dark finding the rake he'd dropped. When he did, they stashed their tools in the garden shed and went back inside the house. Ron slammed the door after him. "Well, there's an hour shot to hell. Why can't I be in my own back yard without always worrying that she'll want to talk?"

Sandra shrugged. "She means well. She's just lonely, that's all."

"Well I can see why, the way she treated her daughter.

Who'd want much to do with a woman like that?"

Sandra stared out the kitchen window. The back yard was completely hidden by darkness. "Some people fit, she said. Some people..."

"And I won't have time to clean up the yard tomorrow. The real estate guy's coming over right after breakfast. Damn, I wanted those leaves raked. It makes the place look so much better."

Sandra continued to stare into the darkness. "Ron, do you think there's anything in what she was saying? About people who fit together I mean."

Ron didn't answer. Sandra had the feeling that he was staring at her. "Ron...?"

"Don't, Sandra. It's too late to change things now. It's all over." He came up behind Sandra and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. Together they stood staring into the darkness. "You know, I'm going to miss this place."

Sandra heard a small voice which she barely recognized as her own answer him. "Me too," it said. "Me too."

THE CHAIN

You know, this street is such a bummer. I mean really, it brings me down. All the narrow-minded old farts who live on it. And all the shit they hand out. You know, the old "And when is Bobby going to finally cut his hair?" crap. I won't miss it at all. Not them, not my old lady, especially not my old man. I've been wanting to get out for so long, man. I've seen what these people can do. Oh yeah, and they look so nice too. Like, there were these neighbours of ours, the Norbergs. This was years ago, right? I remember how bad they got screwed by everyone. I guess they were the first people I saw get really dumped on.

The thing I remember about the Norbergs wasn't so much the Norbergs themselves, but their friend Lyle, which is funny because Lyle only lived with them for maybe two months,

tops. Maybe I remember Lyle because he looked a little like Tom Selleck, the actor, who had a big show on T.V. back then. My mom never missed it. Anyway, Lyle looked a lot like Tom Selleck, kind of tall and tanned and mustachioed. Only he wore his hair slicked back, and was a little skinnier. I guess he was in his mid-thirties, but it was hard to tell: Even my parents couldn't agree on how old Lyle was. He wore tight black pants and tight white shirts opened up and a thin gold chain around his neck that I thought was neat. I was eight years old then, and I thought Lyle's chain was really neat.

The Norbergs themselves aren't so easy to remember, maybe because they didn't look like anyone famous. Mrs Norberg I always thought of as old, though I suppose she wasn't really. She was a plump woman with grey hair tied back in a bun. She gardened a lot. Had a lovely garden. I remember she wore a big straw hat and had these funny knee-high nylons that she wore rolled down to her ankles. The image of her I remember most is her down on her hands and knees weeding her tomato patch. Then in the evenings she'd just sit alone on her back patio, drinking tea and staring off into the distance. "She's lonely, now that her husband's gone," my mother said, and it certainly looked like it. The only people who visited her regularly were three ladies from down the street, who'd come over once a week to play bridge. Those days you could see her going back and forth, all excited, getting things ready for

her guests. If only knew the way they'd end up repaying her for her kindness. As it was you'd think those old bats were some kind of royalty, the way she cleaned up for them.

She was a real friendly lady, in a shy sort of way. She liked me until I was seven, always sneaking me oreos and sometimes a Mae West over the hedge. I called her Auntie Rita. When I was seven I let my older cousin Ralph bring his new Daisy gun over and he potted a couple of her sparrows. I thought it was no big deal, but Mom really yelled at us, and after that there were no more Oreos from Mrs Norberg.

Funny, here it is only ten years later, and I can't conjure up her face. I think it was plump, but I can't remember what her eyes and nose and mouth looked like. All those years living beside her, and nobody thought to take even a snapshot of the woman.

All I really remember about her son Freddie are his glasses: large, square, wire-rimmed specs that seemed to cover half his face. Freddy was skinny and short and even quieter than his mother. The difference was that Freddie wasn't friendly. He wouldn't even say hello to you unless his mother told him to. I guess he was in his twenties somewhere, and an only child. That he was an only child seemed to be a big deal to my parents. They blamed that for much of his behavior. That, and Freddie's father dying when he was young, seemed to make it impossible for him to grow up normal. "That

Freddie's spoiled rotten. Rita should have had another," my mother would say. "He's got no man at home to set him straight," my father would say, shaking his head. "No wonder he's that way inclined."

I was saved from being spoiled by my baby brother James, who hadn't been caught killing sparrows and was still receiving Oreos and Mae Wests from Mrs Norberg. James is two years younger than me. If it would have helped Freddie as much as my parents thought it would, I would have been pleased to give Mrs Norberg my baby brother, and probably thrown in a few of my toys for good measure. As a matter of fact, I'd still like to deal the little jerk away. As it was, we weren't allowed to go into the Norbergs. "I don't want you boys ever to go visit Freddie's house. Not when his mother isn't there. You never go inside, you understand?" my mother told us. She called it Freddie's house only when she told us not to visit. Otherwise it was always called Mrs Norberg's.

When I was eight a lot of the older guys wanted to look like John Travolta. All the disco shit. You couldn't go anywhere and not hear the Bee Gees. Even Freddie got into the act. In the daytime he'd stay up in his room, watching T.V. or blaring his stereo. My mom thought he did that just to annoy her. I get the same reaction from her when I pump up the volume on Twisted Sister. Anyway, come Friday night Freddie would put on his flashy duds. White suit with razor-sharp pleats. Open

black shirt. Gold-plated razor blade on a thin gold chain around his neck. Disco Freddie, right?

After supper, Freddie would head downtown. Me and James, and sometimes Ralph, would follow him down to the bus stop, making fun of his walk and generally goofing around. Sometimes he'd tell us to get lost. On good nights he'd turn around and make like he was going to chase us. One time I called the small black bag he always carried a fagolabag, like my old man called it, and he actually did chase after us. He could only catch James though. James just stood there and wailed his snotty head off. All Freddie could do was swear at me a bit and walk back to the bus stop. You had to watch your step with Freddie though. He had a mean streak to him.

The first time I saw Lyle was on a Sunday afternoon in July. Just after lunch a taxi pulled up in front of the Norberg's. A tall guy with a mustache got out of the back and stood looking over the place while the taxi driver brought his bags up to the front porch. The way he was looking the place over, it was like he was thinking about buying the house. He wore designer jeans and a tight cotton shirt and was very, very tanned. He spotted me and James watching him from behind the hedge and waved at us. We ducked, but I knew he'd seen us. When we peeked over the hedge he was still standing there, grinning at us. "Peek-a-boo, I see you," he said, and I could hear him laughing as we ran in the back of our house.

A little while later we heard the same laughter coming from the Norberg's patio. Auntie Rita was putting a pitcher of iced tea on the table in front of Lyle and Freddie, who were lounging around in deckchairs. Lyle seemed to be telling a joke, because both Auntie Rita and Freddie had stopped to listen to him. After the punchline, Lyle laughed his contagious laugh and seemed quite pleased with himself. Freddie giggled in a funny, high-pitched way. Auntie Rita just smiled and went into the kitchen. I got the impression she didn't understand the joke.

"Who've the Norbergs got visiting?" my mother asked. She was squinting over at their patio. Mom's eyesight was never good.

My father put down his magazine and peered over. "I don't know. From the clothes I'd say it's one of Freddie's pals."

"He came in a big taxi. With suitcases and everything." I felt good knowing something about the Norberg's visitor that my parents didn't know.

"Oh really? That should be interesting." said my mother. She and my father had the same kind of funny smile after that.

After a while Auntie Rita showed Lyle around the garden, stopping every once in a while to point out some tree or flower. Lyle seemed interested in whatever it was

she was saying. Freddie trailed along behind them, giggling nervously every now and then. As they walked alongside the hedge between our place and theirs, Freddie drifted back to the patio, sitting in a deckchair with his back turned towards us. Auntie Rita and Lyle walked along the hedge until they were opposite our patio, then Auntie Rita smiled and waved at my parents.

"Hello Andy. Hello Barbara. I've got someone here I'd like to introduce you to." I tagged along as my parents walked over, keeping well hidden behind my father.

"Andy and Barbara Morehouse, this is Mr Saunders."

"Lyle. Just call me Lyle. Pleased to meet you." Lyle shook hands with both my parents rather solemnly. "And this is your son?"

My father looked around and seemed surprised to find me hiding behind him. "Bobby, come say hello to Mr Saunders."

I walked over to the hedge and received the same solemn handshake from Lyle. "Pleased to meet you, Bobby. You can call me Lyle too, okay? None of this Mr Saunders stuff."

"Lyle's a friend of Frederick's. He's going to be staying with us for a while," said Auntie Rita.

"Just for a week or two, while I do some apartment-hunting." Lyle added quickly. He looked around appreciatively, stretched and relaxed. "It's such a delightful neighbourhood. Rita was very nice to invite me."

"Are you from out of town, Lyle?" my mother asked.

Lyle shrugged , then smiled. "Sort of. I move around a bit. I'm from California originally."

My mother was impressed. "Really? Oh, I've always wanted to go there. It seems so nice."

"It is quite nice, really. You should take a trip sometime. I can tell you some interesting places you really should see."

"That would be so nice." my mother said.

"So what kind of work do you do, Lyle?" asked my father.

"Oh, I'm a writer," said Lyle, concentrating on a sparrow flying across our yard.

"Really? You mean for movies and things?" My mother was all ears.

Lyle shook his head and chuckled. "No, no. Mostly novels. Mystery novels. I did do some scriptwriting when I first started out though. Worked on "The Fugitive" for a while. Did you get that show up here?"

"With David Jansen? You knew David Jansen?"

Lyle smiled at my mother's enthusiasm. "Sure I knew Dave. He was a close friend. I wrote the last show of the series, the one where they finally caught the real killer. I'm still proud of that one." Lyle shrugged. "But that's all in the past now. T.V.'s such a jungle. I decided I preferred writing novels, and that's what I've concentrated

on the past few years."

"Any money in it?" asked my father.

Lyle Laughed. "Oh, a fair amount. You never know how much you'll get when you publish something. It's hit and miss. While I finish off my latest work I've taken a job as a waiter down at the Casa Verde, on Mountain. Just part time, of course."

"Oh of course," said my father.

Lyle looked back at the Norberg's patio. "Anyway, I guess we shouldn't let Frederick sit alone much longer. I'm sure we'll have plenty of opportunities to talk about all sorts of things over the next week or two."

"Oh yes," my mother answered, "you must tell me all about your time in Hollywood. That's something that's always fascinated me."

"Sure. Anytime. It's been nice meeting you folks. You too, Bobby." Lyle gave me a wink and walked back to the patio with Auntie Rita.

"Well, what did you think of our Mr Saunders?" asked my mother once we were settled down on our own patio. "He certainly seems to have lead quite a life."

My father let own a hard laugh. "you really believe all that Hollywood stuff, don't you, Barbara? You really believe this guy worked in television. What baloney!"

"Shh, Andy. Keep your voice down. They might hear you."

Mom glanced nervously towards the Norberg's. "I don't know. He seemed to know what he was talking about. Why wouldn't it be true?"

Father shook his head. "Yeah, right. And I'm Robert Redford. About the only thing I'm sure he's telling the truth about is his job as a waiter. This I believe."

Mom still didn't want to believe that Lyle wasn't telling the truth. "You're too much of a sceptic, Andy. You should have faith in people sometimes."

"Yeah, right."

See, my old man was always like that. Never had a good word for anybody. And it was real funny because, even though he never liked any of the neighbours, he was always real worried about what they thought of him. As if they were going to arrest Andy Morehouse for not cutting his lawn often enough, or for driving a dirty car. He really didn't like people, but he was determined they'd have nothing to hold over him either.

Lyle must have worked at his job as a waiter in the evenings, for most days he'd be on Auntie Rita's patio tanning from around eleven o'clock in the morning. He'd lie motionless on a deckchair, flipping over every thirty minutes like he was a T-bone on the barbie. He had it down to a science. His skin was the colour of caramel pudding.

Freddie joined him at first. He had quite a lot of

catching up to do. His habit of staying in his room all day hadn't done much for his colour. His body was so thin and white, he looked funny lying beside tall, tanned Lyle. Freddie never learned Lyle's knack of staying stock still. He looked uncomfortable, rolling this way and that, like someone having a bad dream. Still, he kept at it, and gradually his skin did start to go a pinky-brown colour.

When Lyle and Freddie came out, I used to sneak along the hedge until I was close to their patio. Then I'd watch them through a hole in the hedge. They made a ritual out of putting tanning oil on each other. Lyle would lie perfectly still as Freddie poured oil into his hand, then, beginning with Lyle's shoulders, he'd carefully rub the oil in. Sometimes you could smell the cocoanut. Freddie would keep rubbing the oil into Lyle's skin all the way down to his feet, even putting some on the soles.

Lyle's ritual seemed neater. Freddie used some kind of white lotion, and Lyle would squirt this down Freddie's spine and across his shoulders in the shape of a cross. Then, using just his fingertips, he'd slowly spread it around in a small circular motion. It must have felt good. Freddie moaned quite a bit. When Lyle did his legs, Freddie would get quite squirmy. I was too young back then to know what was going on. I just figured he must have been ticklish.

Of course I'd heard the word "fag" before. That was

the word my old man used all the time when he was talking about Freddie. I didn't know what he meant then, just that it wasn't nice to be a fag. But now Dad kept referring to Freddie and Lyle as "those fags." That got my curiosity going. Something was happening next door that I couldn't figure out, and I was determined to come up with some answers.

Freddie gave up tanning after a few weeks. He'd still go out on the patio when Lyle tanned, but would sit reading in the shade of the patio umbrella. Auntie Rita would bring out sandwiches for their lunch, but she didn't stay to eat with them. Only in the evenings when Lyle didn't work would they all sit out together, sipping iced tea and talking. My bedroom was in the back of the house, so I could hear them while I was lying in bed. Then there would be a lot of laughter coming from their patio, lasting well into the night. My mother said nothing about it, but my father got fed up.

"Jesus, don't they know what time it is? I know those two could care less about other people. But Rita? Rita should know better."

"Now, Andy..."

"Don't you now And me. Bad enough she lets that buggar mooch off of her without all this jazz at night. She should give him the boot, that's what. Him and his darling Freddie."

My mom said nothing. I knew she was prepared to put up with a lot more than she cared to admit to Dad from her new neighbour. One day I'd come home early from the park to find Mom serving tea to Lyle in our living room. Mom seemed flustered when I walked in, but Lyle was delighted to see me.

"Well hello, Bobby. How are you doing, little buddy?" He held out his hand and gave me his usual handshake.

"Mr Saunders...Lyle...was just telling me all about his time in Hollywood, Bobby. He knows a lot of big people there."

Lyle laughed. "Well, I guess that's true, Barbara. It's just that it seems odd to put it like that. You see, once you've got to know the people in the industry, you find out they're just folks, like everyone else." Lyle was dressed all in white. White T-shirt, white jeans, white buck shoes. His clothes really showed off his tan.

My mother couldn't believe that. "Oh, come on, Lyle. How can someone like Lee Majors be just ordinary?"

"You know the Six Million Dollar Man? Wow!" The thought that someone who was a friend of a big star was sitting in my living room really blew me away.

"Cross my heart. Ordinary guy. Used to go fishing with him. One of my best friends."

We sat there for a long time listening to Lyle tell

stories of his Hollywood experiences. The parties he'd gone to in so-and-so's mansion. The starlets he'd dated. Mom liked that stuff. I just wanted to know if people like Lee Majors really did all the dangerous stuff they seemed to do on T.V.

"Well. they do some of it, Bobby. But the real rough stuff is done by stuntmen. That's what they're paid for." I guess I must have looked disappointed, because Lyle laughed and said, "Of course, people like Lee Majors like to do their own stunts, and they do them as often as they're allowed. Lee's a real tough guy, you know."

That made things better. Lyle finished up his cup of tea, and despite fervent offers of more tea and cake from my mother, he said goodbye,

After he'd gone my mother brought me back in the living room and sat me in Dad's lazyboy. That was what she usually did when she wanted to yell at me, and I couldn't figure out what I'd done wrong. "Bobby, I'm going to ask you not to mention Lyle's visit today to your father. Your father doesn't like Lyle a whole lot, and I don't think he'd like to know that Lyle came over here. You know what I mean? He might get the wrong...well, let's just say he might not like it. Is it a promise then? Good boy."

That was the first time my mom had ever asked me to keep a secret. That in itself made me feel great. That I

was keeping it from my father made it even more exciting. Suddenly it was like an adult, like I was playing an adult kind of game. My old man made no secret of his dislike of Lyle. I knew just how he'd react if he found out Lyle was coming over to our house. And as I thought Lyle was neat, it was no problem getting me to keep my mouth shut.

One morning I was fooling around in the back yard with my brother's Nerf soccer ball when I kicked it harder and higher than I meant to. The ball cleared the hedge and wound up in Auntie Rita's tomato patch, on the other side of her patio. I made a quick dash through her back yard to retrieve it, and only when I was on the way back did I notice Lyle standing at the back door, watching me.

Or at least I thought he was watching me. I waved, but it was as if he was looking right through me, like I wasn't there. It gave me a funny feeling, so I quickly turned away and started back home. It was only then that he called out to me.

"Hey, Bobby. Don't run away so fast." When I turned to look at him he wore his usual smile. He waved me over. "Hey, come on in for a while. I'd like to talk to you a bit."

I hesitated. "Gee, I'd like to, Lyle. But I'm not supposed to. I mean, Mom would get mad if she found out."

Lyle laughed. "C'mon, just a few minutes. Rita and Frederick have gone shopping, so who's to know?"

He had a point. Freddie being away seemed to make it okay. Besides, it would give me a chance to look around inside their house. I went through the screen door, through the back porch, and into the kitchen.

The kitchen was pretty much the same as ours, only painted white instead of yellow. Their table was covered with a red and white checkered tablecloth. I took a quick peek down the hallway, but there was nothing unusual to see. Lyle sat me at the table. "Coke okay for you, Bobby? Or would you like some orange juice?"

"Coke please."

"Coke it is then." Lyle produced a can from the fridge, pulled the tab, and placed it on the table in front of me. He sat down across from me and lit up a cigarette. "You'll have to excuse my appearance, little buddy. I just got up a while ago. Worked late last night."

"It's alright," I said, and really I didn't know what he was talking about. His hair was slicked back as neat as it always was, and he didn't have that shadow of whiskers my dad always had when he woke up. I don't know, maybe he felt the white bathrobe he wore wasn't snazzy enough. Why the hell should an eight-year old care what he wore anyway?"

"Yeah, well, I won't be working as a waiter too much longer. My novel's almost done, so with a little luck I won't need that kind of job any more. You can take a job

like that for just so long, you know what I mean?" Lyle looked over at me very seriously, then smiled. He reached over and tousled my hair. "Well, maybe you don't know what I mean. You will in time, I guess. Anyway, if the book works out I'll have plenty of time to sleep in in the mornings. You want some chips?"

"No thanks. Lyle, does Burt Reynolds do his own stunts, like Lee Majors does?"

Lyle seemed puzzled by the question, then laughed. "Jesus, kid, you've got a one-track mind, don't you? You know, this might come as a surprise to you, but I don't know everyone in Hollywood, not by a long shot."

"But you knew Lee Majors, and all kinds of big stars..."

"Yes, but not everybody, kid. Nobody knows everybody down there." Lyle took a sip of coffee from his cup.

"Anyway, I prefer it here, right here with Rita and Frederick. I'd rather live here on Forty-Sixth Avenue than anywhere in Beverly Hills."

"Why?" I must have looked shocked at the idea that anyone would choose not to live with the stars, for Lyle seemed amused at my reaction.

"Because this is much nicer, kid. Living in a nice neighbourhood with people who care for you. Kind of like a family. I'd trade a little glitter for that." Lyle smiled and took another sip of his coffee. "Anyway, Freddie'd

never want to leave his mom. She's very special to him you know. He figured maybe if I moved in for a while we could work things out. Rita...Mrs Norberg...seemed a little uncomfortable at first, but everything's settled down nicely now."

Lyle stretched and slowly relaxed. "What all this means, Bobby, is that I'm here to stay, and I think that you and I should be buddies, right from the start. What do you say?"

Lyle held out his right hand across the table and I solemnly shook it. "Anyway, good buddy, how about another Coke?"

"No thanks, Lyle. I've got to be going. Mom will worry where I'm gone."

Lyle looked really disappointed. "Well, maybe next time you come over we can get to know each other better. I'd like that. Until next time then."

When I got back to my side of the hedge Mom was waiting for me. "Bobby, did I just see you come out of Freddie's house? Eh? And what have I always told you about that?"

There was no use lying to her. "Freddie wasn't there, Mom. Just Lyle. Honest."

If I thought that piece of honesty would save me, I was wrong. Mom's right hand landed squarely on my behind and kept on landing while her left hand hauled me into the house. This time she sat me in the lazyboy for the usual reason.

"I don't want to ever, ever catch you going into that house again. Do you understand me, young man?"

"But Mom, Freddie wasn't there. Freddie wasn't there."

"I don't care if it was Freddie or Lyle. Do you hear me? One's as bad as the other."

That really confused me, and I think comparing Lyle with Freddie with Freddie bothered my mom too, because she stopped being angry and sat down on the couch. It took a while for her to say anything, and when she did it still didn't make much sense to me.

"Bobby, I think I should explain that I think Lyle is really a nice man. I mean really. But I'd just as soon you'd stay out of Mrs Norbergs when he's there."

"But Mom, he comes in here, doesn't he?"

"That's a completely different thing." Mom struggled to find the right words. "Oh, Bobby. If you were only a few years older I could explain. It could be dangerous...He didn't touch you did he? I mean Lyle. Just now."

I thought for a moment. "Well, he did shake my hand."

"What for?"

"Well, he said we should be buddies."

"Oh no!" Mom sat up straight on the couch. "What else did he say?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Nothing. All he said was that, now that he was here to stay, we should be buddies. That's

all, Mom. Honest."

"Here to stay? Oh, he can't be serious." Mom slumped back on the couch. "It'll never work. That type of man doesn't belong here."

"What type of man, Mom?"

Mom didn't answer me. She just sat somberly staring down at the carpet. "I don't know what your father's going to say about this. I don't think he's going to be happy."

He wasn't, as a matter of fact, but he didn't hear about Lyle's staying from Mom. Mrs Carter, who was one of the ladies Auntie Rita played cards with, told her husband about it a few days later. Her husband worked with my dad. And no, he wasn't happy about Lyle's staying at all.

"As long as that character's living over there I don't want anything to do with any of them, Barbara. This whole thing stinks."

Mom didn't say anything, but I knew she didn't feel quite as strongly about Lyle as Dad did. Lyle was still coming over for tea once or twice a week, always around two o'clock in the afternoon. Mom would tell me and James to go play in the back yard, which disappointed me, because I liked to hear Lyle's stories as much as she did. Anyway, we did as we were told, and I put up with James as best I could, only once or twice making him cry.

Every Friday I had to go grocery shopping with Mom and

James over at the I.G.A. I hated it, but Mom said that I was too young to stay in the house on my own. Mom would give us each a Mr Freeze for keeping quiet, but that didn't make me like shopping any better.

Anyway, one Friday we bumped into Auntie Rita beside the frozen food section. She was stacking boxes of frozen pierogis into her cart.

"They're for Lyle," she explained. "His favourites. Too much trouble to make from scratch though."

"And how are things over at your place now, Rita," my mother asked.

Auntie Rita glanced over at me, then seemed to pick her words very carefully. "Fine. Very nice, actually. Lyle's such a sweet person, always so considerate. And Frederick! I don't think he's been as happy since before my George died. Lyle's really brought him out of his shell."

"And yourself? How are you keeping within yourself?"

Auntie Rita shrugged. "Freddie's happy now. I guess that's the most important thing, isn't it? That's the most I can hope for. But...oh, I don't know, Barbara. Somehow it still doesn't seem like it's right, them sharing that room together. I feel almost guilty when I think of his father. I don't know what he would have done in this situation. Maybe if he hadn't passed away when Freddie was so small...I just don't know. I can't expect to change him

now, can I?"

"No, I suppose not. It's just, well, an awkward situation. With the kids and all." Mom nodded towards us. "It makes me nervous sometimes."

"Nervous? About the children? Surely you don't think... Oh, Barbara, neither Lyle or my Frederick would ever, ever..."

"Well, things have been known to happen, Rita. I mean you read about it all the time with, well, people like that."

"No, no. Not my boys. Oh, how could you ever imagine... How?" Auntie Rita gripped the handle of the shopping cart very tightly. Without another word she pushed her cart past us and was gone.

I didn't see much of Auntie Rita after that. She didn't seem to do as much gardening as she used to, and never brought her tea out on the patio in the evenings. Sometimes when Lyle was home they'd all sit out there and drink iced tea, just like they used to, but there wasn't much laughter then.

I guess it was sometime around then that the ladies stopped coming over to play cards. They told Auntie Rita it was too hot to play in the summer months, but Mr Carter told my dad they had no plans to play at Auntie Rita's house again. At least not as long as Lyle lived there.

I really hadn't intended to visit Auntie Rita's again, but one morning our cat, Whisky, caught a robin under the

hedge and ran off with it across the Norberg's back yard. I ran after him, but trying to grab him was like catching a greased pig. He finally snuck under the far hedge and was gone.

When I looked over to their back door, there was Lyle again, staring out at the back yard. This time there was no doubt he was watching me. As I crossed over the yard he called out to me.

"Hey, Bobby. Come in for a few minutes. I need to talk to you."

"I can't, Lyle. Honest. I'll get in a lot of trouble."

Lyle scowled at me. "Get your ass in here, kid. I'm not fooling. We need to talk."

Once again I found myself drinking Coke at the Norberg's kitchen table. Lyle lit a cigarette and sat down across from me. He was angry about something. "Just what have your mom and dad been saying about us? Can you tell me that? I mean, why are they giving us the cold shoulder lately?"

I couldn't answer him. I hadn't realized my mom wasn't being friendly any more, and I didn't have the nerve to tell Lyle what my father'd been saying.

Lyle shook his head. "I just want to know what the hell's got into people around here. It seems like we've become the social pariahs of the neighbourhood, and I don't think that's very nice."

I didn't know how to answer him. For one thing I didn't know what a pariah was.

"Just look at the way people are treating Rita. Nobody talks to her any more. Nobody. I mean, she's one of the sweetest people that I've ever met, and they've just shot her down. How can people do that to her?"

Lyle took a drag from his cigarette. "Last week they had an anniversary party two houses over. Invited everyone on the street to come. Everyone but the Norbergs. That really hurt Rita. And why, for God's sake?"

I didn't know the answer. I don't think Lyle really expected me to know the answer.

"Anyway, all this garbage has made the past few weeks a living nightmare. And now even your mom's turned frosty on me. I'm thinking of moving on soon."

"Move on? You mean you're leaving?" It seemed that Lyle had just arrived.

"Sure. It's almost September. Time to head south, just like the birds. I'm not fussy on cold weather, kid. That I won't miss." Lyle seemed tired as he took another drag on his cigarette.

"are you going back to California?" Lyle seemed puzzled by my question. "You know. Back to Hollywood?"

Lyle smiled at the thought. "No, Key West this time.

Florida."

"Would Freddie go with you?"

Lyle shook his head. "Don't know. I doubt it. Not with his mom staying here." Lyle threw the cigarette butt into his coffee cup. It made a quick hissing sound as it went out. "You know, Bobby, I wouldn't leave either if I felt things would get back to normal around here, if I felt people would just be nice to us. I really wanted this to work out, kid. I really tried this time round. Its just... well, what was I expecting anyway? A kid from Verdun finds paradise and lives happily ever after? I should have known better."

"Verdun? You're not from California?"

Lyle laughed drily. "Sure, California. Yeah, I moved to Hollywood when I was very little. Very little."

Lyle seemed to snap out of his bad mood. "Anyway, Bobby, it doesn't matter where you're from or what you've done, it's who you are that counts, right? That's all that really matters."

I began to suspect that my father was right about Lyle. "Did you really know all those people out in Hollywood, Lyle? Honest? Like you said you did?"

Lyle looked at me for a long time before he said anything. Finally he stood up and grabbed me by the arm. "Come here, kid. I want to show you something."

Lyle led me down the hallway, up the stairs, and into

a large bedroom, slamming the door behind us. My arm hurt where he held me. He swung me around and sat me on the edge of the bed. I started thinking about what my mother had said, about it being dangerous to be with Lyle alone. I'd forgotten just how big he was. I was scared shitless. I just wanted to go home right away. I remember that I started to cry.

"Let me go, Lyle. Please. I didn't mean anything."

Lyle was looking down at me. "What the hell are you talking about, kid?"

Don't hurt me. Please. I won't tell anyone I was here, honest."

Lyle stared at me hard. "You really thought I was going to hurt you, didn't you, Bobby? You really thought that I would...Oh, Sweet Jesus! What have people been saying about me?"

Lyle paced around the room, slowly shaking his head. He stopped in front of a full-length mirror hung on the back of the door and stared at his reflection for a minute. "I generally like what I see in that mirror, kid. I mean I'm not bad looking. I take care of myself. And I've learned to live with who I am." Lyle turned and looked back in the mirror. "But I wouldn't like what I saw there if I ever hurt someone like you, Bobby. That's something I'd never do."

I realized he was telling me the truth. Somehow I knew

that being with Lyle was a very safe place to be. Lyle brought me a kleenex and I blew my nose and wiped my eyes. I felt badly that I hadn't trusted him.

Lyle snapped his fingers. "Hey, enough of all this heavy stuff. I didn't bring you up here for all that. Got something for you. Go over to the mirror, Bobby, and close your eyes."

I closed my eyes and felt something cool against my neck. When I opened my eyes again and looked in the mirror I was wearing Lyle's gold chain. I couldn't believe it.

"Really? It's mine? Wow!"

Lyle grinned. "Sure it's yours. I want you to have it. For friendship."

I looked at myself wearing the chain in the mirror. Somehow it didn't look as cool as when Lyle wore it, but it still looked real cool. "Oh wow! Really? Just for being a friend?"

"My friends mean a lot to me, Bobby. I like to show them I appreciate having them around."

I didn't know what to say. It was like Christmas had come early. I reached up and gave him a great big hug. It just seemed like the natural thing to do. I don't know, maybe if I knew what the word "fag" meant I wouldn't have done that. Maybe I would have been afraid. But I didn't, and Lyle just felt so big and warm holding me. I can still

remember the way he smelled, kind of like cigarettes and cocoanut.

When we finally stopped hugging Lyle winked and ruffled my hair. "Now I guess you'd better run along before your mom starts missing you. See you later, kid."

"See you, Lyle."

I ran out the back door and wriggled through the hedge into my back yard. This time Mom wasn't waiting for me. It was only at lunchtime that she saw me, when I came in to eat.

"What's that you've got around your neck, Bobby?"

"Lyle gave it to me, Mom. For being a friend. Isn't it neat?"

Mom had a funny look on her face. "You went in there again, didn't you, Bobby? You went into their house."

"No, Mom. Honest. I didn't go in." After what had happened the last time I wasn't about to tell her the truth.

Mom held out her hand. "Give me the chain, Bobby. Right now, please."

I pulled off the chain and gave it to her. "But Mom, he gave it to me."

"Come with me, Bobby. This is going back right now."

Auntie Rita answered the door when we rang. My mom handed her the chain. "That's from our friend Lyle, Rita. He gave it to Bobby this morning. My son is not going to

accept gifts like that. Not from a man like Lyle. I'd thank you to tell him that for me."

Auntie Rita looked at the chain in her hand as if it were a dead bird. "But I'm sure it was meant as just a gift, Barbara. Nothing more than that."

"Give it back to him, Rita. And for God's sake get rid of him so that everything can get back to normal around here." With that, Mom turned around and walked back home, firmly holding my hand.

The last time I saw Lyle was the next morning. He was standing in front of the Norberg's with his suitcases. Freddie was with him. I wanted to tell him how sorry I was for all the trouble I'd caused him, but I just didn't know what to say. He saw me standing on our front lawn and came over to shake my hand.

"Well, Bobby, it's been nice knowing you. Hope to meet you again some day. You were a good friend to have." Lyle laughed. "Hell, probably the only friend I had around here."

"You heading south, Lyle?"

"Of course. Florida. Just like I said. Going to teach Freddie how to get a real tropical.tan."

Freddie's going with you? But I thought you said..."

Yeah, well, I was wrong about that. He surprised me as much as his mom when he told her he was leaving. Hell, I think he even surprised himself a bit. I don't know,

maybe they can straighten things out in a little while. I sure hope so."

Freddie was sitting astride a large valise, his back turned towards the house. His hands were toying with one of the clasps, flicking it open and shut, open and shut.

"I didn't want it to go this way, kid. It'll be hard on his mom for the next while. That's the thing I feel bad about. But..." Lyle shrugged his shoulders. "Well, it really wasn't my choice to make, was it?"

A car honked and Lyle spun around. "Hey, there's my taxi now. Gotta go, Bobby. Here, let's shake hands again, partner, for friendship's sake."

When I shook Lyle's outstretched hand, I felt something cold and hard pressed into my palm. It was Lyle's chain. He laughed and gave me a wink, then turned and strode over to the cab. One final wave and he was gone. I stuffed the chain into my pants pocket. then later hid it under the socks in my dresser.

I still have that chain. My good luck piece. It's a little lightweight for my tastes now. Doesn't go real well with the heavy metal gear. But like I said, it's my good luck piece. Whenever I wear it I think of my friend Lyle. I remember the smell of cigarettes and warm cocoanut. I took it out and started wearing it when I was thirteen. Mom didn't say boo about it. I guess she'd forgotten wh-

Lyle's chain even looked like.

Knowing Lyle kind of changed the way I looked at things. It was a couple of years until I found out what "fag" meant. Then a lot of what was going on with Lyle and Freddie made sense. What never really made sense was the way people treated them. If you're different, then you're in for a rough ride. That seems to be some kind of rule. I've been there, man. And James is just starting to catch the same sort of shit. It's kind of sad really. I know it won't be long before he's out of here too.

I don't know what happened to Lyle and Freddie after that day. I never saw either of them again. Auntie Rita held on to the house for a year or two. She gave up gardening, gave up talking to people. In the warm evenings she still sat out on her patio, staring off into the distance. She sold the place to the Fergusons, who sold it to the Gagnons, who sold it to the Smiths. They're the owners now. The Gagnons made my father mad by tearing out the honeysuckle hedge and putting up a six foot privacy fence all around. Ugly-looking thing. I can't help but wonder though, if the Norbergs had done that, whether they and their friend Lyle wouldn't still be living there.

OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES

Finally with the night came the breeze, blowing softly from the west. But the days had been too hot for anything to cool much in the darkness. Despite her window being pulled completely up, Anna's room refused to dry, the summer dampness clinging tenaciously to drapes and sheer curtains, bedclothes and pajamas. She lay inert, the cotton sheet having been violently thrown back over the foot of the bed and onto the floor. There was the calm of defeat about her, the slow breathing and quietness that come from accepting the impossibility of sleep. Her eyes wide open, Anna placidly watched the silhouettes of curtains and trees play on the ceiling, the tricks of wind and streetlight. Choirs of frogs and crickets raised their harsh voices, joined in

their nighttime madness by the shrill singing of a robin somewhere down the street. Only the occasional gust of leaf-rustling wind or the infrequent passing of a car momentarily drowned out the oppressive symphony.

There was another sound borne on the wind that night. Through Anna's window came the sound of human voices. At first the words were muffled, only the tones could be heard clearly enough to understand. A man's voice was deep and threatening. A young girl's voice answered with soft but frantic denial. A woman's voice pleaded. It was what the woman was saying that could be made out first, for she seemed to be saying one word over and over again. The word she was saying was please. Anna sighed deeply and gestured in frustration at the shadows on the ceiling. "Oh God, they're starting again," she said.

The volume of the man's voice rose with his anger, the girl's fearful denials grew correspondingly louder. Anna began to understand some of the words. Much of what the man said finished with "you little bitch," or "you cheeky little whore." A high-pitched girl's voice answered him. "I didn't," "I'm sorry," "I won't, I swear." Anna could no longer hear the woman's voice. She wasn't sure whether she'd stopped talking or was still quietly saying "please" to someone who obviously wasn't paying attention.

Finally the words that Anna most dreaded hearing were

spoken. "I'll teach you!" said the man with bitter finality. The girl's voice became hysterical. "No, please. Please Daddy nooooo..." She screamed then. Again and again. In pain and outrage. To Anna it seemed the screaming went on for hours. Then finally screams changed to moans, moans to loud sobs, sobs quietened until hidden by the sounds of choirs of frogs and insects, and the shrill singing of a robin somewhere down the street. Anna found herself shivering despite the heat, her heart pumping hard and her breathing fast and ragged. She held herself tightly and closed her eyes and prayed she could reach the sanctuary of sleep, but it was a very long time before she did.

Anna woke to the smell of bacon frying and the sound of someone taking a shower. For a moment she was disoriented, confused by where she found herself. Daylight had transformed the damp, sinister room she'd lain tortuously awake in only hours before into somewhere safe and comfortably familiar. The morning air felt cool and stimulating. so cool that Anna reached down and pulled the sheet back over her. Outside her window nature was no less noisy, though the songs of the birds were far sweeter and more varied than the endless drone of the night insects. It was a morning of smells and sights and sounds to banish the hobgoblins of the night. But one goblin stubbornly remained to spoil her peace of mind. She had heard the screams in the dark again,

and they would not go away. They were as clear to Anna in the light of day as they had been when they were first beaten out of her young neighbour. It was not only the situation that was so disturbing, but her reaction to it. Lying there in the night, fascination had mingled with disgust and pity. The coming of the morning had seen this uneasiness turn to guilt. Anna pulled the sheet tightly over her head and waited for her courage to return. When it did she threw off the covers and swung out of bed in one quick motion.

Downstairs in the dining room Anna found her mother already feeding her baby brother in his high chair. Spoonfuls of apple sauce were shoved into Matthew's mouth, only to squirt out again as soon as the spoon was removed. Anna grimaced when she saw the baby. She was always disgusted by the way he ate. Globbs of apple sauce ran down his chin and covered his bib, despite her mother's attempts to spoon it all the way back into his mouth. Already at the age of eleven Anna had vowed to herself that she'd never have children. Not unless she could afford to hire somebody to feed them. She sat down at her place at the table. Her mother stopped feeding Matthew just long enough to put Anna's bacon and eggs out, then went back to her frustrating task.

11 Her father looked up from his Gazette and smiled

warmly at her. His smile changed to a quizzical look. He seemed worried about something he saw, and when he spoke his voice was tender and concerned. "You look tired, Anna. Dark circles under your eyes. Didn't you get to sleep last night?"

Annä sat playing with her food, her eyes focused on the plate. She shrugged in way of reply, and said, almost under her breath, "They were at it again last night."

Her father leaned closer to her. "Beg your pardon, honey. What did yoy say?"

Anna kept her eyes glued to the plate in front of her. She drew figure-eights in the bacon grease with her fork. Louder she said, "I said they were at it again last night."

Anna glanced up to catch her mother and father exchanging a secretive, meaningful look. Her father's face was sombre, his eyes searched his wife's , as if looking for a clue as to how he should react. He took a deep breath and his eyes looked up at the ceiling for an instant before he looked over at his daughter with a smile that Anna knew was false. He made a motion with his right hand as if to brush aside some gnat that was hovering in front of him. Well, Anna, what can I say? Sometimes people have..." His eyes searched the room for the proper word. "Well, disagreements. You know. It's only natural." He let out a laugh that made

Anna wince with its hollowness. "I mean, heck. Don't we have arguments sometimes? You and I? You have to allow for these things, you know."

Anna's anger and frustration rose in her. She knew it would be useless to go on. but she couldn't help herself. Tears welled up in her eyes.eyes that still focused on the plate in front of her. She shouted down at her bacon and eggs, "He beats her up, he beats her up. I told you he beats her up."

Her father's voice grew stern and commanding. "Now don't you start that again, young lady! Don't you start. You have no business saying things like that. You have no proof that that's what's going on, and I won't have you telling lies about Herb Anderson and his daughter that way. Do you hear me? I won't have it."

"But Daddy..."

"I said that's enough!"

Anna was bullied into silence. She sat motionless in her place, her face burning with humiliation, her body feeling cold and clammy. Her mother was trying to soothe the baby, who had been frightened by the shouting and was now wailing uncontrollably. Her father made a show of controlling his temper and went back to eating his breakfast, but Anna noticed that he cut his bacon with unusually violent movements, and that he threw his knife and fork

down noisily before he'd finished his meal.

Without a word, Anna's father reached over and squeezed her hand. Anna looked into his eyes and saw his strength there, his honesty. Her father's eyes said trust me, believe in me, I will protect you, and she had to believe them. Hadn't he always taken care of her in the past? If obedience was the price of protection, Anna was willing to pay that price. Her father smiled, then stood up and said to no one in particular, "Geez, it's late. I gotta run. Goodbye. Have a nice day," and was out of the front door before his wife could even kiss him goodbye.

A few minute's later Anna felt her mother's hand rest on her shoulder. Her mother leaned down and hugged her tightly. Anna felt the love and comfort her mother was offering in that hug, and her sullen anger gave way to a deep sadness. "Mommy, why doesn't Daddy listen to me? I'm not telling lies, honest I'm not."

Her mother dragged a chair over and sat down next to her. She played with Anna's long brown hair, twisting and braiding strands of it as she softly spoke. "Honey, I know you're not. And just between you and me, I think your father thinks that you're probably right too. It's just that... well, sometimes it only makes things worse if you tell the truth. I know that's kind of hard to understand but...Herb Anderson's a good man, Anna. He's got some

problems and, well, you know, he drinks a bit. But he's a good man all the same. Sometimes if you don't say anything, you know, kind of turn a blind eye so to speak, sometimes things get better on their own, you know?"

Anna looked at her mother questioningly. "You mean we can't say anything? Can't we do anything?"

Her mother's voice answered very quietly. Her eyes turned away from Anna and looked over at her husband's vacated chair. "Sometimes when we try and help someone we only wind up making things worse, Anna. What's going on is going on in somebody else's house, and we've got no right to stick our noses in it." Her mother smiled a sad smile at her and caressed her shoulder again. "Try not to think about it honey. It doesn't help. Besides, like I said, leaving it alone may be the best thing for everyone."

Anna spent the rest of the morning in the basement playroom, the coolest room in the house. She listened to her Michael Jackson records over and over again on her portable record player. while she played listlessly with her Barbie and Ken dolls. Her grandmother had made her a huge wardrobe of clothes for them, a wardrobe her grandmother enlarged every Christmas and birthday with more fancy clothes. Anna didn't have the heart to tell her that she wasn't really interested in Barbie and Ken any more. She wondered how she could do it without disappointing

the old woman too much. She couldn't just come out and tell her the truth, for she knew that the truth would hurt.

After lunch, Anna gathered up her towel and headed over to the public pool on 55th Avenue. Shimmering waves of hot air rose from the asphalt. It was mid-July, and she was already bored with summer vacation. Her flip-flops kept time as she walked down the driveway. As she passed the Andersons', Louise Anderson came out of her front door, carrying two large Coke bottles in her arms. She froze when she saw Anna, and blushed deeply. For a moment the girls eyed each other. Anna was first to speak.

"Hi, Louise. How's it going?"

Louise looked bashful and smiled an embarrassed smile. "Okay. You?"

Anna pointed at the Coke bottles and seized the opportunity. "You going to the store? Mind if I come along?"

Louise seemed startled. "Why sure. Yeah, okay. I mean if you really want to."

The two girls walked down to the corner store together. They had both been in Mrs Baldwin's grade five class the previous year. Anna had come second in the class. Louise had failed the year and would be taking the grade over in the fall. Anna talked about her friends and Mrs Baldwin and which boys were the best looking. At first Louise hadn't answered, or said yeah or I guess or okay to whatever Anna

was saying. But gradually she began to open up to Anna, and by the time they'd returned from the store it was Louise who was doing most of the talking about the past school year. It was then that Anna asked her to come to the pool with her. Louise seemed completely bewildered by being asked, and it was only after Anna had pressed her that she finally agreed to go. Anna waited outside Louise's front door for her to get a towel and bathing suit. When Louise finally returned they walked to the pool together, Louise talking constantly.

Anna had never really liked Louise. Louise was a gawky girl, with hunched shoulders and a long, narrow face. She wore spectacles with heavy brown frames, and her oily brown hair was cut in a pageboy that did nothing for her. There were some amongst her classmates who didn't remember that her proper name was Louise, for her poor marks at school had earned her the nickname Bobo, by which she was generally known. Louise seemed incapable of answering even the simplest question in class. When asked a question, she would blush beet-red and would finally stammer out an answer that was invariably wrong. Mrs Baldwin had given up on her. Louise also had the unfortunate inability to control her bladder. Every few days a puddle of urine would form under her chair, and Mr Kusyk the janitor would have to be called in to mop it up. Anna couldn't remember Louise having any

real friends in school. She was somebody that most people avoided, and Anna had done the same. In the two years since the Andersons had moved in next door, Anna had perhaps said hello to Louise a dozen times, only doing so when she felt she really had to. At other times they had waved to each other with a quick, tentative movement of the hand. Anna had been polite. She was not an unfriendly girl, but she did not want Louise to get the wrong idea. She knew that they could never be friends. Louise's unpopularity would have made her too much of a burden for Anna to cope with.

It was the beatings that had made the difference. Anna knew that. Something deep inside her had been touched by the shouts and screams that she heard from her neighbour's house. She had been horrified by the beatings. Anna couldn't imagine her father doing something like that to her. On the few nights that she didn't hear anything from next door, Anna had felt strangely disappointed. For all the obvious misery of Louise's situation, what was going on next door at the Anderson's house was fascinating, almost too real to be real. Anna's household was dull in comparison, so ordered and sane. It seemed to Anna that her neighbours came from another world, a world filled with unrestrained emotion. Despite her disgust with Mr Anderson's cruelty, she was drawn by his power, his physical strength. She had imagined the blows raining down on Louise, had tried to imagine

herself in Louise's place. She could not. The situation was too foreign to her, far too strange. It was precisely this strangeness that attracted her. She wanted to know what it was like to be his daughter. What it was like to be Louise.

Louise continued talking all the way to the pool. There they quickly changed, took a cold shower, and threaded their way through the large crowd and into the water. There were too many people in the pool to swim very far, but Anna felt refreshed just walking around in the water. She took a long look around at the bathers in the pool and those sunning themselves around it, and was relieved to see that none of her friends were there. It would have been uncomfortable for her if anyone she knew had seen her with Louise.

Anna looked over at Louise, who had strode through the water beside her and was still talking about this and that. Louise looked even less attractive than normal. Her hair was covered by an ugly white bathing cap, and her eyes appeared unusually small and close set without her glasses. The dark brown one piece bathing suit she wore only accentuated her body's awkwardness. Her untanned skin was crisscrossed by hundreds of little blue veins, but it was not the veins that caught Anna's attention. It was the bruises. All along Louise's arms and around her shoulders were bruises of all different shades of blue and brown and

yellow. A dark blue one, round and at least three inches wide, covered her right shoulder. Below it on her arm four smaller bruises, brown-yellow, striped her skin in the shape of fingers.

Anna was stunned. She had wondered whether or not she would be able to see evidence of the beatings, but she hadn't expected it to be so plain. She stared at Louise's arms and shoulders, unable to comprehend how someone could receive such punishment. She realized with a start that she had been staring at the bruises for a long time, and looked up at Louise's face to see if she had noticed. Louise, however, had been oblivious to Anna's stare, and was still talking excitedly about this and that. Anna's showing interest in her had sparked Louise's unabated, almost compulsive chatter, but she never looked Anna in the face. Louise kept her face averted, as if talking to someone invisible who was standing a few feet in front of her. For a moment Anna had the unsettling feeling that Louise wasn't really talking to her at all, but then she realized that wasn't the case. Louise's shyness would never allow her to make eye contact. Anna was safe to stare as long as she liked.

On the walk home Louise's talking gradually subsided. She became more the Louise Anna remembered from school, quiet and shy. By the time they reached Louise's house it was Anna who was doing all of the talking. Louise stood at the end

of her front path and nervously fidgeted with a corner of her towel. Anna didn't know what to say next. She thought about inviting Louise to her house, perhaps to play her records down in the playroom. Once she'd set a precedent, though, Anna knew that she'd have trouble stopping Louise from coming over at other times. She didn't want that. Besides, hers wasn't the house she wanted to go into.

"Louise, can we go inside your house for a while?" Anna said in a nonchalant way that she hoped would hide her interest.

"No! We can't!" The loudness of Louise's answer surprised Anna. Louise's eyes widened in alarm, eyes that for once focused on Anna's face. Louise's face flushed a deep pink. Then, perhaps realizing how loudly she'd answered Anna's question, the girl turned her gaze down to the pavement again, and resumed toying with her towel. "I mean, I can't. I'm sorry. I'm not allowed anyone in while my parents are at work, see?" Louise's eyes once again looked up at Anna, but this time there was pleading in them. "You understand, don't you, Anna? I mean, it's not cause I don't want to have you in or anything. Honest."

Anna knew there was no use pushing Louise. She hid her disappointment with as cheery a smile as she could muster. "Oh, don't worry about it, Louise. I understand, really. It's alright. Listen, you want to go swimming again tomorrow?"

Maybe same time, eh?" Louise seemed delighted with the invitation and nodded her agreement. "Okay then. It's a deal. So long, Louise." Anna waved goodbye as she strode back to her house.

That night Anna listened as Louise Anderson was beaten again. The beaten Louise screamed and moaned and sobbed, her voice husky with emotion. The beaten Louise, the tortured Louise, the nighttime Louise. Anna lay in the darkness and tried to reconcile the two Louise Andersons she knew: the girl in the night that she somehow both pitied and envied, and the girl she'd been with only that afternoon, a stupid, uninteresting girl, plain and sexless. A girl that managed to be both boring and embarrassing at the same time. Anna couldn't believe they were the same person. She remembered the bruises though. The bruises. Medals earned in a nightmare of war. Proof of...what? Valour? Experience? Anna wasn't sure. But somehow they connected the two Louises, and convinced her that there was more to the girl than she'd seen in the daylight. There had to be.

In the morning she once again appeared at the breakfast table tired and distraught. Her mother gave her a sympathetic nod. Her father ignored her, keeping his attention deliberately on the newspaper spread out in front of him. Anna silently ate her breakfast, and wondered at the way something that was going on next door could cause so much

tension around her own table.

When she came for her that afternoon, Anna found Louise already waiting on the sidewalk in front of her house. The two girls walked to the pool together, Louise once again talking incessantly. At the pool Anna noticed a bruise on Louise's arm that she was sure hadn't been there the day before, a large, dark blue mark just above the right elbow. Anna couldn't tell if any of the other marks were new or not.

Anna's heart sank as she recognized several people she knew from school. Mandy Bryant, the girl who'd come first in Mrs Baldwin's class, was sitting tanning with Mary Levy and Tanya Smith. Over at the diving boards Dennis Arniotis : and his hunky cousin Sandy were waiting their turn. Anna quickly jumped into the water and threaded her way to the center of the pool, with Louise following right behind her, chattering away as usual. She hoped that the large number of bathers would hide them from view, but it didn't work. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Mandy and her friends watching them, whispering and giggling amongst themselves. Anna tried to keep her back to them. As she and Louise stood there, two boys surfaced right in front of them. It was Dennis and Sandy, the hunk.

Dennis grinned. "Hey, Anna. How's it going?"

Anna thought she would die. To be seen with Louise

Anderson by Mandy Bryant was bad enough. To be seen with her by Dennis and Sandy was a nightmare. Anna tried to smile. "Okay I guess. It's just too hot. You guys know Louise?"

Anna was surprised when both boys smiled and said hello to Louise, who was trying her best to hide behind her. They stood and chatted a few minutes before going back to the diving board, and although Louise still cowered behind Anna and said nothing, Dennis and Sandy didn't seem to think it was unusual for them to be together.

The two girls cooled themselves for a time, then slowly walked home. Again Louise stopped talking by the time they reached her house. Anna knew that there was no point in asking to go into Louise's house. That had been made clear the first time. And so she talked for a while in front of the house, then said goodbye to Louise and arranged to meet her the next day to go swimming again.

Going swimming was something Anna and Louise did almost every day for the next few weeks. As Louise became more comfortable with Anna, her nervous chatter slowed down and her speech approached normal speed. She was even able to say a few words to Dennis and Sandy, who were also there regularly. Anna was surprised to find that Louise was a very good swimmer, her long, thin body cutting through the water almost effortlessly. Swimming seemed to rid Louise of her

gawkiness. It was no longer such an embarrassment to be seen with her. Only Mandy Bryant continued to smirk at them, and Anna knew she was a bitch anyway.

"I see that you've been hanging around with Louise Anderson lately," Anna's mother said one afternoon. It's funny, but I never thought that she and you were such good friends."

Anna shrugged. "She's alright. Why shouldn't I be seeing Louise?"

"Don't get me wrong, Anna. You can see whoever you want. It's just that, well, with what might be going on over at her house, I don't think getting close to Louise is too wise just now. You know what I mean?"

"But Mom, we just go swimming together. That's all."

Anna's mother eyed her daughter for a moment. "Anna, there are some things I wouldn't want you to get involved in, and I'd just as soon you weren't so friendly with Herb Anderson's daughter right now. If you insist on seeing Louise, I won't stop you, but be careful. And for God's sake don't mention it to your father. He'll go through the roof."

That last day's outing began in exactly the same way as the others had. It was only when they were at the pool that Anna noticed the wind picking up and dark thunderclouds rapidly moving to obliterate the sun. By the time they'd

reached Louise's house the two girls were being pelted with hard rain, and the daylight was so subdued it seemed like twilight. It was there on the sidewalk in front of Louise's house that Anna tried again.

"Hey, Louise, can I come inside? I mean, I'm getting kind of wet, eh."

Louise had that same startled look on her face she'd had when Anna had first asked to come in, but this time she said nothing. She looked towards the house, then back at Anna, as if trying to come to some decision. Anna pushed a little harder. "C'mon, Louise. It's pouring. Let me come in, eh."

Louise came to a decision. "Wait here a minute," she told Anna, then ran and unlocked the door. She disappeared inside for a minute, then came back and frantically waved Anna to come in, as one burglar would signal another that the coast was clear.

The girls stood in the downstairs hallway, drying themselves with their towels. Anna giggled nervously. Louise giggled in return and soon both of them were unable to control themselves. They giggled for a full two minutes before they were able to stop. When she'd dried herself off, as best she could, Anna took a look around. The Anderson's living room was almost identical to her house in its layout, but she was surprised by how different it seemed. All the

walls and carpeting were off-white. The modern furniture was made of chrome and white Naugahide. Somehow Anna had expected the Anderson's furniture to be heavy, old fashioned stuff, and the paint on the walls to be a more sombre colour. Louise tugged Anna by the arm. "Come on, Anna. I'll show you my room." The two girls raced upstairs.

Louise's room was nothing like Anna had expected. The walls were the same colour as those in the living room. Posters of Michael Jackson and George Michael had been neatly pinned up. The bedspread on the single bed, the curtains, and the drawers and nightstand were colour-coordinated, a cheerful green and white. Discarded clothing, dolls, and toys were strewn everywhere, giving the room a happy, cluttered air. Louise ran across the room and dove headfirst onto the bedspread, bursting into the strange cackling laughter that she always broke into when she was excited. She lay in mock exhaustion spreadeagled on the bed, looking very pleased with life.

Anna realized that it had been a mistake to come into the Anderson's house. Her imagination had formed an image of what the house would be like, especially Louise's room. Louise's room would have an oppressive feel to it. Old gray paint, cracked and peeling, would be covered here and there by black and white photographs of sour-faced relatives, paintings of bleak landscapes, perhaps a large crucifix.

The room would be sparcely furnished with dilapidated wooden drawers and a creaky bed with only dirty sheets covering it, the way Anna imagined a prison cell would look. Her imagination allowed for just one toy, a pathetic teddy bear, one-eyed and losing its stuffing after much abuse. No such battered creature was present. The true nature of Louise's room smashed what Anna had built up in her mind over weeks of speculation, and she was disappointed. It was the ordinary room of a young girl. It was a place where nothing serious could possibly happen.

Louise sat up and patted the side of the bed. "Come and sit down, Anna. Would you like a Coke? I'll get you a Coke, okay?" Louise ran off to get her a drink before Anna had a chance to reply.

While Louise was gone, Anna sat on the side of the bed, and tried to imagine what the Anderson's was like at night. Out the window she could see her own bedroom window, directly across from Louise's. Perhaps it happened in the hallway, or one of the other bedrooms. Anna had never asked Louise anything about the beatings, in case Louise realized why she'd become so friendly. She got up off the bed and went over to the doorway. She could hear Louise moving around in the kitchen. Anna was curious about the other bedrooms. Perhaps they wouldn't be as disappointing as Louise's room. Quietly she walked down the hallway to the back bedroom and

planced in. Cartons were neatly stacked against one wall, magazines and books against the other. She walked back down the hallway, opened a door, and peered into the front bedroom.

"Who the hell are you?"

The man lying on the double bed was looking at her with surprise and suspicion. He seemed groggy, as if he'd just woken up. On the night table beside him sat an empty bottle of Wood's Old Navy rum. The man lay flopped down on the top of the covers, the belt and top button of his grey slacks were undone, his tie loosened several inches so that the knot lay in the centre of his chest. Mr Anderson's long, sandy-coloured hair stuck out from his head at odd angles. He kept blinking his light-blue eyes as if he was having a hard time getting them to focus. Or perhaps he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Mr Anderson lifted himself up onto his elbows and gave Anna a hard, challenging stare. "Well, just who the hell are you then?"

Anna found herself struck dumb. She knew she had to answer, but was completely at a loss as to what to say. "A...A...Anna Lewis, sir. From next door. I just came in cause it was raining and..."

"Louise, come up here!" Mr Anderson bellowed. Anna heard the sharp sound of glass breaking downstairs in the

kitchen, then, after a long silence, hesitant footsteps coming up the stairs. Louise came and joined Anna in the doorway.

Mr Anderson's voice was soft, but there was a menace to it, like a man fighting a losing battle to control his temper. "Well, Louise. So this is what happens when your mother and me are at work, eh? You invite your friends in to have the run of the house when we're gone, eh? How many times have I told you nobody's allowed in here? How many goddamn times!"

Louise was staring down at the floor in front of her. Anna was shocked at how pale she'd turned. She was visibly shaking. Louise held her lower lip between her teeth and nervously shifted from one foot to the other. As if talking to someone invisible standing in front of her she said "I didn't mean to, Daddy. I mean-I...I...didn't mean to, Daddy."

"It's all my fault, Mr Anderson." Anna said in as apologetic a voice as she could muster. "I asked if I could come in..."

"What do you mean you didn't mean to?" Mr Anderson said sarcastically. He showed no sign of having even heard what Anna had said. "You lying little bitch. I bet you've been doing this all the time, eh? Just how long has this been going on, eh? Sneaking your friends in here."

Louise answered her invisible man. "I didn't. Honest, I haven't been, Daddy. Honest." She nervously tugged at the bottom of her T-shirt.

Anna tried again. "Please, Mr Anderson, this is really the first time I've been here..."

"Lying, lying, lying little bitch!" Louise's father spat the words out, his eyes glaring at his daughter. He pointed his finger at Louise menacingly. "You're a useless lying little whore, and I'm fed up with your lies."

Mr Anderson's voice had grown louder, Anna noticed that Louise's denials had grown louder also. It seemed to Anna that neither of them noticed she was there. Something was happening, something was building that Anna could not control, could not prevent. It was as if Louise and her father were performing a private ceremony in which Anna could take no part. Anna continued to try and calm the man, but it was she alone who was listening to her words, words of reason whose only effect was to remind her that what was going on had nothing to do with reason.

"Please" Anna began saying over and over again. It was said not as an appeal, , but as a prayer.

But the inevitable words were spoken. "I'll show you!" shouted Mr Anderson, jumping up from the bed. Louise screamed and ran into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. Her father brushed past Anna and ran after her. Louise was

able to hold the door closed for only a second or so before Mr Anderson forced his way in. There was the sound of skin slapping skin, and then a piercing scream. And then Anna was gone, racing pell mell down the stairs and out the front door, not even taking the time to close it after her.

Anna ran until she felt her mother's arms around her, until her tears soaked her mother's blouse and her mother's voice soothed the pain. She found her mother in the kitchen and ran and held her tight, so very tight. She heard her mother's voice asking what was wrong, what happened, what was it, and she could not answer her. Not until the shock was gone. Not until the tears had subsided.

Her mother held her tightly and gently rocked her back and forth. Anna heard her softly whisper her name over and over again. "Anna, Anna, Anna. Oh, my poor baby. It's alright." For a minute Anna was comforted, feeling the warmth and security of her mother's arms banish the world. But then she remembered Louise, and what had happened, might still be happening, just next door.

Anna pulled away from her mother and looked up at her "Mommy, you've got to do something. You've got to stop him from hurting Louise. Mommy, I saw, I saw!"

Anna's mother looked at her daughter for a long time. A couple of times she seemed about to say something, but stopped. Finally she turned and looked out the kitchen

window, and said very softly, "I'm sorry, Anna. There's nothing we can do. It's...It's none of our business, honey. I wish we could help, but we can't."

Anna couldn't believe what she had heard. "But I saw! I saw him hit her. Can't we call the police or something? You mean we can't do anything to help Louise?"

Her mother kept her back turned to her. "Anna, listen to me. I want you to stop seeing Louise. Do you understand? I don't want you ever to go over there again. I don't want you mixed up in all of this. Do you understand?" Her mother finally turned and faced her. There was a look of deep sorrow on her face and her cheeks were damp. "We can't do anything, Anna. And I won't have you hurt by what's going on. Now that's the end of it, do you hear? That's all."

The next few days were tortuous for Anna. Most nights she still heard the shouts and screams coming from next door. In the mornings there was stony silence at the breakfast table. During the day she withdrew to the basement, listlessly playing with toys that did nothing to dispel her gloom. She saw Louise passing her house a couple of times, her eyes down on the pavement in front of her. Each time she saw her a heavy weight of guilt settled in her stomach, and she'd move away from the window before Louise could see her.

Anna decided to phone Louise. She looked the number up in the book, picked up the phone, dialed the first two

numbers, hung up. Picked up the phone, dialed the first three numbers, hung up. Anna had hoped that the right words to say would come to her while she dialed. But they did not.

One evening the doorbell rang, just as Anna had sat down to supper. Her father left the table to answer it. Anna was shocked to hear the familiar, angry tone of Mr Anderson's voice in the foyer, and her father's angry voice answering him. She could not hear what was being said. The argument went on for several minutes before the front door closed and her father returned to the table. When he sat down Anna could see that he was still angry.

"That was Herb Anderson," he said. "They've taken his daughter away from him, at least until he dries out a bit i guess." Her father shook his head in disbelief. "And then here he comes to my door and accuses me of getting the authorities after him, of not minding my own business." He looked over at his wife. "The drunken sot! I never would do a thing like that, Jane. You know I wouldn't."

Anna's mother kept her eyes down at her plate. After a few seconds she quietly answered him. "No, Ian. I know you wouldn't." She looked over at him. "But someone must have felt they had to put a stop to it."

Her husband frowned. "It's someone else's problem, Jane. They had no right to."

Anna's father returned to eating his meal. Her mother

sat quietly for a few moments. Her eyes met Anna's. Just the hint of a smile played on her lips, and suddenly Anna knew. Knew just who had put a stop to what was going on next door. The smile faded from her mother's lips as she glanced nervously over at her father, but he was concentrating on eating his meal. Anna understood that he must never know what her mother had done. The only way that her mother could have acted was secretly. To act openly, to defy her husband, might have changed their relationship, and Anna's mother couldn't risk that. The illusion of order, the lie that must be maintained no matter what, was the glue that kept their family together. Anna wondered if everything worked that way, if truth was always buried deep below illusion. You tampered with illusion at your own risk.

In bed that night Anna lay awake watching the shadows move about her ceiling. No sounds of human conflict could be heard, just the ordinary sounds of an ordinary summer night in the suburbs. Sleep would not come though. The words and events of those few weeks kept passing through Anna's mind. One memory more than all the others kept coming back to her. She was standing in the doorway of the Anderson's bedroom, saying please to a man who didn't seem to realize she was there.

ON PLEASANT AVENUE

Charles Simpson's marriage to his wife Karen had lasted eleven years, three months, eight days, one hour, thirteen minutes, and ten seconds. Those last ten seconds had been eventful. It is never wise to argue with your spouse when he is drying the cutlery. Charles had used the Eversharp carving knife his mother had given them for Christmas to carve some ham for lunch. Now the knife was much dirtier. He stared down at his wife lying on the kitchen floor. So this was the end. Or almost the end. Charles took a few deep breathes and tried to calm his racing heart. He listened at the basement door. Little Jennifer was still playing Nintendo in the downstairs playroom. Upstairs the baby was sound asleep. It would be Jennifer next, he decided. It

had to be a clean sweep. There could be no other way. Holding the carving knife behind his back he quietly descended the stairs.

Afterwards Charles threw his clothes in the laundry hamper and took a long, hot shower. As he towelled himself off the sounds of a normal Sunday afternoon in the summer-time could be heard through the screen window, the sounds of birds and children and lawn mowers. Charlie tried to shave, but found that his hand shook too violently to hold the razor to his skin. After he'd nicked himself a couple of times he gave the job up. It was better for people to see him one last time with a little stubble than a network of cuts spread across his face.

He took some time in choosing what he should wear that day. His blue jeans seemed too informal, while a pair of his office pants were too dark and out of place for a Sunday afternoon. He finally decided on a pair of white golf slacks. He matched those with a white cotton golf shirt and his new tennis shoes. It seemed important somehow to be devoid of colour. Charles Simpson combed his dark, curly hair one last time and examined himself in the mirror. Yes, he was ready now. It was time to go to the lake.

"Charlie! It's about time you got out here." Charles almost jumped to hear his name called. He finished closing the front door and turned around. Pierre Sampson was crossing

the street from his house. Tall and trim, he wore an easy smile on his face. "Come on now, neighbour, this is too nice a day to spend indoors. You spend too much time cooped up, Charlie. You gotta stop and smell the roses sometimes, you know."

Charles waved and smiled. "W...Well, you know, I've been kind of busy lately, Pierre. But I'm out now, aren't I?"

Pierre playfully punched Charles on the shoulder. "You make too much money, you know that, Charlie? Just rolling in dough and still you work Sundays. That's a sin, you know. Working on the Lord's day. God's gonna get you for that, Charlie."

Charles tried to punch his neighbour on the arm, but his hand shook so much he missed by several inches. "H...Ha! You should talk. How many houses you sold this week, Pierre? Four? Five?"

Pierre smiled ruefully. "I wish. Wasn't a bad week though. Sold two. One down by the lakeshore and one just over on Forty-Fifth. You know that old stone place above Gagnon? The one with the red door? Well, that one."

Pierre laughed. "And yeah. I do work most Sundays too. That's the nature of the business. I'm taking today off though. It's just too nice. Good day to work on getting rid of all this Creeping Charlie I've got on my lawn. What do you use to keep your lawn looking so good?"

"Just Weed'n Feed. The liquid kind you spray on."

"Sure seems to do the trick. Say, where's the wife and kids today? Haven't seen them around."

"Oh, they're...lying down."

"Not feeling well, are they? Must have that bug that's been going around. Louise had it a few weeks ago. Makes you feel lousy. Anyway, while you're out, why don't you come over and have a cold one? I've got some O'Keefe on ice."

Charles shrugged. "Gee, I'd like to, Pierre, but I've got to go down to the lakeshore right now. Maybe some other time, eh?"

"Oh, c'mon, Charlie. What's the hurry? Come on over and sit a while."

"No, no. Thanks anyway, but I've got to go to the lake."

Pierre lowered his voice and leaned towards Charles. "You're not meeting someone, are you, Charlie? I mean, you don't have some little chickie waiting for you down there, all hot to trot, have you? Eh, Charlie?"

Charles smiled nervously. "Well if you must know, Pierre, I've decided to throw myself in the lake."

"I'll bet she's a blonde, eh Charlie? Some little blonde from the office, eh? You sly dog you. I always knew you were too quiet to be true. Ah, Charlie, guys like you are really something, you know that? Never what you seem."

"Well, I've got to be going..."

"No, guys like you are never what they seem, Charlie. The type you'd never suspect of a thing. Boy oh boy, what a guy!"

"But it's not like that, really. I'm going to..."

"Well, hello there, Charlie. I was beginning to wonder what had happened to you." Calling out from over the hedge was Charles' neighbour, Henry Stanshaw. Still spry at eighty six, Henry was even more talkative than Pierre. Charles' heart sank as Henry came around the hedge and shuffled towards them.

"I didn't see you in church today, Charlie. It's not like you to miss a service. Even Reverend Wilson mentioned it afterwards.. 'Not like Charlie to miss a service,' he said. We all wondered what had happened to you."

Charles Simpson shifted his weight from one leg to the other. "Well, as I was just telling Pierre, Henry, the family's a bit under the weather today."

"Under the weather, eh? That's too bad, that is. Thought it must be that. That's alright then. Where are they now, Charlie?"

"They're lying down."

Henry Stanshaw shook his head. "On a day like this? They shouldn't be cooped up inside on a beautiful day like this. You should get them out here in the sunshine, Charlie. Do them the world of good."

Charles smiled weakly. "Well, to tell you the truth, Henry, they're all dead."

"Doesn't matter how they're feeling, Charlie. Get them out in the sunshine. Fresh air and sunshine, that's the ticket! Got me where I am today. That and leading a good Christian life. Nothing like it, Charlie."

"Yes, well, you may be right, Henry. You may be right."

"Course I am. Now why don't you come over and join Martha and me on the patio for a glass of sherry. I can tell you about the sermon you missed today. It was a beaut. The subject was redemption."

"Well, I'd really like to, Henry, but I've really got to go down to the lakeshore. Now if you'll excuse me..."

"The lakeshore? Why on earth do you have to go down there?"

"I think he's going for the sunshine and the fresh air, Henry," said Pierre, giving Charles a wink.

"Well then, take the family. Just the thing they need. Why when I was your age it took us an hour and a half by streetcar to reach the water. Did it every Sunday though. Took a picnic lunch and made a day of it. As I was just saying to Mrs Higginbottom this morning..."

"Well, yes, Henry. I suppose we all should go. However that's not possible today. And now if you'll excuse me, I have to leave."

Charles had just taken a few steps away from his neighbours when he found his path blocked by the round shape of Janice Chesterton, yet another neighbour. "And how is Mr Simpson today? Is this a stag party, or can I get into the conversation?"

"H...Hello, Janice. By all means. I mean, it's lovely to see you."

"Well, I just had to get out on a lovely day like this. Actually, I was just coming over to visit with Karen. Is she home?"

"No, I mean, yes. I mean. She's lying down."

"Oh, that's too bad. I was hoping we could have a little chat over some iced tea. It's been a couple of days since we've talked. You alright, Charlie? You look a little pale."

"Oh, well, I..."

"Fresh air and sunshine, Charlie. That's what you need. Fresh air and sunshine. That's the ticket," said Henry.

"That and the right company," whispered Pierre.

"I'm fine, really, Janice. I just want to go down to the lake for a while."

"Oh, isn't it lovely down there at this time of the year, with the breeze off the water? One of my favourite spots. You know, Charlie, we're so lucky to live on this street. Pleasant Avenue, I call it. Like in the Dick and Jane stories I used to read to my kids. Pleasant Avenue.

Such a good place to bring up a family."

"My family's all gone now."

"Most of my people are out of town too. Isn't it a shame? Not like the old days at all, is it?"

"No, I suppose not. And now if you'll excuse me, I really must go down to the lake."

"Well, you know, all of this talk about going down to the lake has really got me interested," said Janice. "You wouldn't mind if I tagged along with you, would you, Charlie?"

"Well, it's not that I don't want you to come, Janice, but..."

"Say, that sounds like a nice idea. Mind if I come along too?" said Henry.

"Well..."

"I guess I might as well tag along too." Pierre leaned over to Charlie and whispered in his ear. "Maybe I'll see who it is that's got you so damned interested in going down to the lake anyway."

Charles could think of no polite way to say no, and so he and his three neighbours set off on the five minute walk to the lakeshore, only Charlie remaining silent as they walked along.

Fifteen minutes later Janice, Henry, and Pierre walked slowly and silently down Forty Sixth Avenue. Their silence was broken only as they reached Charles' house.

"I suppose I should tell Karen what happened," said Janice. "Oh God, what will I say to her?"

"I don't know," said Henry. "To think he'd do something like that. It's so...unchristian."

"At least the current's so strong there. It was all over so quickly," said Pierre. "I had no idea. Just none at all."

"If only he'd said something. If he'd given us some warning," said Janice. "But he said something at the end, just before he went under for the last time. What was that he shouted?"

"Something about depriving his death of dignity, or words to that effect," said Pierre.

Henry Stanshaw shook his head. "Now I wonder what the devil he meant by that?"

Janice shrugged. "Who knows? Obviously the man was crazy. You've got to be to do something like that. Anyway, one thing is sure. All this craziness has certainly ruined a perfect day."