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Blue Sky, Open Road

Stella Teti

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

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

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ABSTRACT

Blue Sky, Open Road

Stella Teti

"Blue Sky, Open Road" is a collection of five linked short stories about the family and the lover of a young woman who has committed suicide. Her family background--her parents' immigration to Canada from a poor community in Italy, their emergence from poverty, and most important, the differences that have developed between their old world values and those which their children have learned in the new world--is the background that helps form these stories. The children in this family have lived two separate lives: one at home, ruled by fear of their father and his repressive laws, and another outside of home in which they believed any dream could be realized. The young woman's death symbolizes the failure to reconcile these two worlds; it haunts the characters, forcing them to confront their own confused values and deeply embedded fears. In these stories, silence is a menacing force that spreads pain and guilt, betrayal and distrust. Human sexuality is scorned and associated with power, sin and death. The suicide of the young woman, her choice to find peace in self-destruction, echoes in the worlds of the characters as a caution, a reminder of the frailty of the human spirit.

For Mario

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THE MECHANICAL HEART

1.

The sound of the trains was ferocious. On both tracks, steel against steel shook the earth as the trains moving in opposite directions held Felicia between them. She stood motionless, feeling the ground tremble beneath her. For a few seconds, the roar of the trains echoed through her, overpowering even the pain that gnawed inside her. It was a silent pain, moving slowly and deliberately. It led her out into the streets, walking anywhere, away from the pain, silent and powerful.

Once the trains had passed, she stood on the gravel by the track, where she could see in the distance the tree-lined streets on the other side of her neighbourhood. She thought of walking there sometime but it seemed far and pointless. She was afraid that if she wandered too far, she would not feel well enough to get back. She was afraid to go too close to the school, the university where Angela had graduated that spring she died.

Although, in her heart, Felicia knew it wasn't so, she thought of that school as the root of the evil that drove her daughter to jump from the roof of a building. "It was

all those ideas she was pumped up with, she couldn't see straight any more," Simone had told Felicia. "I told you we should have sent her to work. That would have fixed her straight. Look at Amelia," he said, as though the credit for Amelia's marriage and her job at the bank was all his.

"I'd like to know what she was doing in that apartment building, anyway," Simone said. "What business did she have there?" He chanted this, each word stressed by a slap on the table with the back of his hand.

Felicia knew that Angela had used school to get away from Simone.

"La scuola," Simone mimicked Angela. His back went stiff and his head shot up when he said this.

Felicia had responded with a chuckle at his display, then slapped his arm lightly. "Leave her be."

After Angela died, Simone's jokes, even just his laughter, to Felicia, took on a mean and ugly callousness. Felicia became angry with everyone, and especially angry with God. An overpowering feeling of hatred spread in her. It turned bitter and grew inside her, painfully eating her up from the inside.

To get to the trains, Felicia would crouch down and push through the hole in the fence that enclosed the railway tracks. The fence divided the two parts of the neighbourhood so that if you wanted to get to the other side of the track you had to pass through an old, concrete underground

tunnel. It was dark, and damp, and dirty. It smelled of urine. There were little light bulbs suspended from the ceiling. Her children used to count the bulbs when she passed through to get to the hairdresser's shop on the other side. Felicia always kept the children away from the walls because she could not see what was lurking in the shadows. Sometimes it was a dead bird, or an old bicycle tire, pieces of clothing, running shoes, a heavy smell of mould everywhere.

The children were curious and inched toward the darkened corners.

"Eww, what's that?" Amelia had once screeched.

"Get away from there." Felicia rushed them through, relieved at the sight of daylight falling on the staircase ahead. The children scrambled up the stairs. They played a game that they were being chased and they had to get up into daylight quickly or they would be pulled back into the dungeon with the monsters. When one of them tripped on the stairs, Felicia slapped each child--Amelia first, because she was the oldest. "I told you not to run."

Felicia was sure it was the teenagers who had cut a hole in the fence by the tracks. She had seen them climb over it many times. The fence sagged at the top from the pressure. These teenagers were young, some of them not yet sixteen. They wore dirty, torn jeans and thin t-shirts that

sometimes hung down from beneath their jackets. She imagined that their hair, long and uncombed, carried the stale smell of cigarettes. "The bums," Simone called them. When he heard of a robbery or a mugging in the neighbourhood, Simone blamed the bums for it. Felicia used to think that their fathers were lazy alcoholics and their mothers were dirty women, their teeth blackened from too much smoking, dry bony women. She used to think these children, born into delinquency, lived in cold, dirty homes, with little food. When she gave old clothes to the church for the poor, Felicia thought that these were the children who wore them. She used to wonder how anyone could abandon their children, let them run wild in the streets like that. She used to look into people's faces for signs of evil.

Now, as Felicia walked through the neighbourhood, past the grocery store and the bakery that used to be a diner, she averted her eyes from those of strangers. She was afraid that others could see her own guilt, as though her silent judgments had come back to haunt her. When she looked up, all she saw before her was her own pain.

"Why don't you go see a doctor?" Simone would tell her.

"What doctor? What's a doctor going to do for me? We all have to go when God says it's time."

Simone didn't like to hear her talk this way. "Next year, we'll go to Italy," he said. "You'll see how much good it will do you. You need some fresh air and sea water.

You'll feel brand new."

"What am I supposed to do in Italy? There's nothing for me there."

A long time ago, before her mother died, Felicia had wanted to go back, but they could not take the trip with all five children. Simone didn't want to leave any of them behind. He didn't trust anyone to stay with them and he didn't trust them to be alone.

Felicia's parents had passed away years ago. Simone's parents were dead too. There was no reason to go back now. Her children had never seen their grandparents. Across the world there were aunts, uncles, and cousins they had never met; all of these relations and nothing to relate them to. In this way, Felicia felt she had failed her children.

When she walked along the track, Felicia noted the weeds and the different types of wild flowers that grew among them. She compared these flowers to those she remembered in Italy, in the country. They were not like the flowers Simone planted in their front yard, neatly arranged in sections, the ground around them always clean and moist; Simone's small paradise. Along the track, the dried bushes of wild flowers swayed in the autumn wind. That summer, Felicia had dared to pick some, dared to walk through the neighbourhood with a bunch of wild flowers in her hand; an old dying woman picking wild flowers.

Ahead of her, the track stretched out for miles, past the city, and the suburbs and through small towns. Felicia had never been on the train, not in this city. She could only imagine the route. Felicia's life had been spent mostly at home, except, of course, during the few years that she had worked at the factory. By that time, all the children were in school and old enough to look after themselves. In the morning, Simone would drive Felicia to work in his truck. At night, she took the bus home. It was a one-hour trip on three buses that travelled the factory-lined streets, and the crumbling apartment buildings, then the long stretch of heavy traffic on Decarie Boulevard. In the winter, it was already dark by the time Felicia stepped off the bus at the corner of their street.

Besides work, there had been few other reasons to venture beyond the neighbourhood. There used to be trips to Saint Joseph's Oratory on Sundays, and Saturday trips to the Atwater market, where Simone negotiated prices for crates of grapes and tomatoes. Simone drove Felicia wherever she needed to go in his truck. There had been no reason for her to wander anywhere alone.

She felt the gritty rust on her fingers as she put her hands against the fence and looked across to the north side of the tracks. She thought, "Twenty-five years in this city and I've barely seen anything." Twenty-five years in this country and she could barely understand the language.

Her children spoke to each other in codes, switching from Italian to English when they didn't want her to understand. Sometimes they spelled words out. They shut her out of their language.

Soon after they arrived in Canada, Simone learned to speak French. It seemed easier than learning English, but Simone was the type who wanted to understand everything, so he forced himself to speak English. He watched English television, he read English words on containers of food, in the children's books, the daily newspaper. Of course, he understood a lot more than he let on because half the advantage of knowing something is in being able to hide it and bring it out only when you need to, like a weapon. Although Simone knew the children's language, they were careful to speak to him in Italian because Simone understood it as a sign of respect. Sometimes, when Simone's back was turned, Felicia saw the children exchange wide-eyed knowing looks. There was a frightened stillness in their expressions and in their movements.

Felicia never told Simone about her walks to the railroad tracks. She told him she needed air, so she went out for walks. This made him suspicious, but he didn't say anything because he knew that now there was nothing he could do about it. Years ago, he could scold her like a child, order her not to do this or that and he would have it his way. She never fought him, never stopped him when he beat

Amelia for coming home late, or when he kept Angela home from school for not eating properly. What could he do to her now? She wasn't afraid of Simone anymore. Yet, Felicia felt beaten. She was just over fifty and she felt she had lived one hundred years. Her body was breaking down and, after so many years of living in faithful silence, it seemed she had lost her soul.

She had thought...even as a child...she had thought there was strength in silence.

2.

"Felicia, where was your sister yesterday afternoon?" Her father stood with his back to the fire, his belt coiled around his hand.

"I don't know, Papa."

"She came an hour late to bring lunch to the men. Where was she?" The belt shot out and she felt a stinging pain on the back of her leg. "Dove andato?" A second lash and the belt curled around her back. It burned like a poisonous snake bite.

"No lo so," she cried out. Her arms instinctively flew up to shield her face. Felicia could hear her mother in the background, as she sat in her chair knitting by the firelight. She was talking slowly and quietly.

"Leave her alone," she said in a nagging whine, as if she were too tired to hear Felicia's screams.

In Felicia's memory, those whining pleas of her mother lived long after she had forgotten the sting of her fathers's belt.

Felicia would console herself that she wasn't lying. She didn't know where her sister had been.

Every day, her sister, Gianna prepared and took lunch to the men working in the fields. She was the eldest, and so this was one of her daily chores. One day, as Gianna was walking up the road toward the olive fields, Felicia saw Lucianno jump out of the bushes. He ran up the road to meet up with Gianna. Felicia had wanted to play a trick on them and follow them to listen to what they were saying but, of course, she didn't because she still had to wash the clothes and bake the bread for tomorrow.

Felicia knew that all hell would break loose if Papa knew that her sister secretly met Lucianno to do God knows what.

One night, Felicia had seen Lucianno out by the barn. He was waiting for Gianna. Gianna was always prepared with an excuse to get out of the house. She was going to look in on the cow; she thought it was getting sick like the one they lost last year. When Gianna returned, her cheeks were rosy and she was humming and smiling like it was Easter Sunday.

"Gianna's our happy child," her parents would say.

"If Papa ever finds out, he'll kill you," Felicia

warned her sister.

"He won't find out. Don't worry so much," Gianna laughed.

Felicia couldn't make up lies to protect her sister. Instead, she kept silent, and that wasn't the same as lying, was it?

3.

Of course, Simone found out about Felicia's trips to the railroad tracks.

"What do you do there, anyway?" he asked her. "I hope you don't have it in your head to do something crazy." Simone gave her a warning look. He waited for her to answer. They were sitting at the table having supper. Paolo and Maria had already left the table. Paolo had gone out. Maria was in her bedroom, probably listening to their conversation. They were like strangers to each other. They ate meals together, slept under the same roof like boarders.

When Felicia didn't answer him, Simone softened. "Felicia, don't be crazy, what about the rest of us? The other children?"

Still Felicia didn't answer. What could she tell him that he would understand? That something drew her there, like an instinct? She couldn't explain to Simone the release from her pain that she felt when she was enclosed in the thunder and screeching of the passing trains.

"People are beginning to talk," Simone said.

There was an unbearable, burning pain in Felicia's stomach. "What people?" she snapped. "Who's talking? I can't even step outside for a walk?"

"People see you there by the tracks. They think you're going to do something crazy."

This made her angry. Since when did he care about what people thought? "You think I'm a lunatic? What do you care about what people think? I've suffered this long, why would I want to throw myself at a train now when it's almost over?"

"Don't talk that way, Felicia." Felicia knew that Simone believed she would die soon. Sadly, he said, "Tomorrow I'll take you to see a doctor."

Poor Simone, always the burly commander, with his good intentions. He truly believed in his goodness. All those years he had worked for them, it had given him pleasure to sit at the dinner table with his family moving around him. He felt secure knowing that their destinies were in his hands.

Now, in the face of Felicia's illness, he seemed helpless and, though Felicia tried, she could not reach out to him. He was like a stranger to her. She didn't trust him, the way you don't trust a wounded wild animal; you want to help, but you know you can't. Felicia felt exhausted. She set her mind on washing the dishes. She tried to block

the pain by keeping herself busy; one thing at a time. She pushed herself away from the table. When she was standing, she took a moment to swallow the pain from the effort of getting herself up. She looked down at Simone, his eyes saddened by her suffering.

"Simone, it's no use. I have nothing left now. There's nothing left. All I want is a little peace. That's all that matters now." She was not affected by the hurt in Simone's face. It seemed that the pain in her own body had drained all her emotions. She felt empty, light as a feather falling slowly through the sky. It was a feeling that passed through her quickly, perhaps as quickly as Angela's free fall.

4.

In the bathroom mirror, her face was fogged over by the steam rising from the hot water that filled the bath tub. Felicia sat stiffly on the edge of the tub. Painfully, she set herself down in the hot water. She sat quietly for a long while. She was almost asleep when Simone knocked on the door.

"Felicia, what are you doing in there?" He turned the door knob back and forth but of course, the door was locked. She always locked the door. If she was to die in the bath, she thought, let them break the door down. She wanted to die in peace. Simone owed it to her.

"Felicia."

"Che voi?" she answered, hoping he would go away.

"Sta bene?" She could hear that his face was up against the door. She thought of him there, with his ear pressed against the door, his hand on the knob, the way he would listen intently when one of the girls took too long in the washroom.

"Sto bene," she answered. For a while, this satisfied him. Felicia ran the hot water again. The sound of running water filled the bathroom, it isolated her from everything else. The wave of heat spread through the tub and Felicia remembered Angela leaning over the tub, soap suds streaming from her head down over her face and into her mouth. She was screaming. The water was running and splashed over her head as Simone banged her head from one side of the tub to the other. Angela's hair was wrapped around his hand. Felicia could hear her head hitting against the porcelain. There was a moment of madness and Felicia flung herself at Simone, her clenched fists pounding on his back. He swatted her away with his free hand. She grabbed a towel and wrapped it around his neck, pulled with all of her strength. Instinctively, Simone swung out, hitting Felicia in the jaw. She lost her balance and fell clumsily to the floor. She was a much larger woman then and she landed with a thud. She felt a sharp pain in her backside. A tremor fluttered through her body.

Alarmed at Felicia's fall, Simone let go of Angela. He crawled to Felicia, sitting next to her on the wet tiles. She slapped him away, crying, "You want to kill my daughter. You want to kill my daughter."

Simone stood up and tried to lift Felicia.

"Leave me be." She slapped his legs. Slowly, she raised herself from the floor.

"Are you hurt?" he asked her, leading her to the kitchen. He pushed a chair close to her. "Did you hurt yourself? Don't cry, Felicia. I'll make some tea for you."

She wanted to see Angela. Where was she? Felicia stood up, calling for Angela.

"Sit down," Simone urged her. "Angela's all right," he said, and he called out for her. She was in her room with the door closed. "Angela, come here," Simone called. "Your mother wants to see you."

Angela stepped into the doorway, her hair dripping down her bathrobe. Her face was red and puffed. There was a big bruise below her right temple. Felicia held her arms out to her. She wanted to see her head, if there was blood.

Angela did not move. She stood in the doorway, swallowed hard. "Sto bene, Ma," she said in a trembling voice. Her head hung low so she could avoid looking in their faces. She was the silent one, as Felicia had been when she was a child. Slowly, Angela became invisible, like a ghost who opened and closed doors, left wet towels in the

bathroom, coffee cups and books in her room.

"Advocatessa," Simone joked, with a cutting laugh. Even after she had been accepted at law school, the idea of Angela being a lawyer seemed ridiculous to him. "She'll make a lot of this," he said, rubbing his thumb and fingers together as if he was feeling money. "Then our lawyer daughter can take care of us," he laughed, putting an arm over Felicia's shoulder. Felicia kept silent.

5.

Immersed in the hot water, Felicia breathed in the steam-filled air, pain flowing through her body in ripples. She remembered her mother's feeble voice in the background, "Leave her alone." It was a tired voice, maybe passed on to her by her mother and her mother's mother. It echoed with the sounds of a hard day's labour and night-time whisperings in a three-room cabin, cold nights knitting by the fire, feeding the men and feeding the children. It was a tired voice, carried over many generations, passed on from mother to daughter; a heritage of resigned strength.

As she walked through the streets on her way to the tracks, Felicia's reflection appeared like a ghost in the windows of stores where she had chosen shoes for her children, fish for family dinners, Christmas candy imported from Italy, and freshly baked pastries for Sunday visitors. In her sickness, Felicia was ashamed to enter these stores.

Over two years her body had shrivelled so much that she could barely recognize herself. The delicate curves of bones that for years had been securely hidden beneath mounds of flesh suddenly appeared; moulded kneecaps, the collar bone that sharply protruded. To the neighbours, she might pretend that all was well, as Simone did, but her body betrayed her. Anyone who knew her could tell that she was not well. She felt exposed, as if her sickness was a punishment she carried for the whole world to see. The sweater she wore hung loosely over her body and even though she had gathered it up under a belt, she had to push up the sleeves every few seconds because they kept slipping down off her shoulders. It was a heavy wool sweater she had knit for herself years ago. It used to cling to her snugly, contouring her heavy breasts and hugging her stomach so that she didn't need a belt. Back then, she felt solid.

All her life, Felicia had been a large woman. With the birth of each child, she expanded more and more. Simone always said that was the way he liked her. "Nice and healthy," he said. When she was pregnant with Amelia, he'd tease her about how nicely she was rounding out. There was a gleam of pride in his eyes as he reached out for her, drawing her to him gently, smoothing his hand over her swollen belly. They were new to each other. It felt like the world belonged to them.

Felicia knew Simone wanted a son. When Amelia was

born, Simone was at work in the fields. Felicia's mother had stayed to make dinner while Felicia rested and looked after the baby. When Simone came home, Felicia was sitting in the rocking chair, feeding the baby.

"You got a girl," Felicia's mother told him as he came through the door.

Simone hung his hat up. He looked at Felicia in bewilderment.

"Don't worry, there's still time for a son." Felicia's mother patted his arm, then she turned back to the stove.

Simone knelt by the chair to look at the baby as it suckled Felicia's breast. He was afraid to touch her. When the baby had tired herself out, she stopped sucking and fell asleep with her little mouth open against Felicia's nipple. They listened to her breathing peacefully in her sleep.

"Do you want to hold her?" Felicia whispered.

Surprised, Simone hesitated. "What if she cries?"

"It's alright, she's sleeping," Felicia reassured him.

"Leave him alone," her mother called out from the stove. "There'll be lots of time for him to look after her. Let him come have his dinner now."

Simone pointed with his thumb at Felicia's mother. "Is she going to stay long?" he whispered.

When they arrived in Canada, one year after Amelia was born, Felicia was pregnant again. They had sold their house to one of Felicia's cousins. Felicia packed their clothes,

the linen, all of the wedding gifts they had received, their jewelry, stacks of cloth diapers, an old photograph of her family taken fifteen years ago when she was a little girl; her whole life packed into two steel-frame trunks.

It was the beginning of October when their ship arrived at Halifax. They were bundled in their warmest clothes because they knew it would be cold but, in Halifax, the sun was bright and warm, too warm for the wool coats they wore. When they finally disembarked, they waited in a room filled with chairs and tables. Simone settled Felicia down at a chair with their satchels gathered around her. He told her he would go get them something to drink and he wandered through the tables toward the back of the room, where there was a kitchen. The people they had met on the ship had gone their own way. Still, it seemed that many families on their ship were going to Montreal and this reassured Felicia that it must be a good place to live.

"We have to wait five hours before our train leaves," Simone told her.

Some townspeople wandered among the Italians who had disembarked from the ship. Felicia noticed how the women moved comfortably among the men, talking and joking with them. Felicia watched them going about their business as she rocked Amelia in her arms. Amelia was growing restless; soon it would be time to feed her. Felicia searched the room for a more private spot. A young woman who spoke

English smiled at her, then bent down to play with Amelia.

"Beautiful baby," the girl said.

Felicia recognized the tone and the pronunciation of "biutfol" because she had heard it many times on the ship.

Felicia looked at the girl's ring finger and saw that she was not married.

When Amelia started moaning, the girl reached into her bag and pulled out a toy that made a clicking sound when you rolled it back and forth. She held it in front of Amelia. Amelia watched the girl carefully. The girl smiled and put the toy in Amelia's hand. Then she asked Felicia a question, and Felicia understood that she wanted to hold the baby. The woman sat on the chair next to Felicia. She talked to the baby in a singsong voice that quieted her as she curiously looked up at the girl. Felicia listened intently for familiar words. Then the girl spoke to Felicia again, and she was able to understand that her name was Sandra.

Simone returned carrying two little paper bags. "Who's this?" he asked Felicia.

"She wanted to hold the baby," Felicia answered.

"Ah si?" Simone said. Then he sat next to the girl. Sandra smiled at him and said something in English. Simone watched her, and it seemed he wasn't sure what to do, so he opened the bags and took out two cups of tea, and two rolls with sliced meat inside. He handed one to Felicia. Felicia

saw that Sandra felt uncomfortable and she was about to hand Amelia back to her. To make her feel welcome, Felicia offered her roll to Sandra.

"No, no," she said, shaking her head. Then she nodded and said something else.

Simone sat back in his chair and bit into his bread roll. His temples moved with the motion of his jaws. "Tu no ciai bambine?" he asked her. Sandra blushed, maybe because she didn't understand him, or maybe it was the way Simone was looking at her. She said something in English and she shook her head to show that she didn't understand him. Simone smiled coolly, running his eyes over her as if he was judging her worth.

Sandra glanced helplessly at Felicia, then gave Amelia a little squeeze and placed her in Felicia's arms. She fumbled and said something shyly, then quickly moved away. Felicia watched as the girl manoeuvred around the tables and disappeared into the crowd by the door.

"What's the matter with you?" Simone was angry with her. "You let strangers take your child?"

"She was a nice girl," Felicia said. "She gave a toy to Amelia."

"Nice girl. You don't understand a damn thing she's saying."

"I understood her," Felicia said.

Simone took the toy from the baby, and she began to

cry. "You don't trust anybody. Understand?" he warned.

"Now look after your child."

"She's hungry," Felicia said.

"So feed her."

Felicia positioned herself on her chair so that Simone's body shielded her from view. She unfastened the buttons on the front of her dress to release a breast to feed Amelia.

On the train headed for Montreal, Amelia sleeping in her arms, Felicia looked out the window as the countryside rolled past them. She imagined what it would be like to live in the city. Felicia had lived in the country all her life. When they left, she swore she would never miss it. While the train cut through the towns and fields, Felicia fell asleep, the baby's warm breath against her breast. In a half dream, she saw Simone lay a coat down over her, and for the moment she felt secure.

6.

At times, while Simone was at work, Felicia picked up the photograph that lay among her prayer books in the top drawer of her night table. It used to be framed and displayed on the dresser until, one day, in a fit of rage, Felicia had snatched it up and flung it across the room. It chipped the wall and the glass in the frame cracked then fell to pieces onto the bed.

It was the photograph of Amelia's wedding, taken two years ago, weeks before Angela died. In the picture Felicia stands next to Simone. She is round and bright in her dress. Her hair is fixed up around her head where the hairdresser had neatly placed it with clips and hair spray. She is standing next to Simone who is grinning at the camera, showing off. Simone stands next to Amelia, wrapped in her wedding dress, her arm laced through Frankie's. Around them is the family, Amelia's younger brother, Paolo, and her sisters, Angela, Cecilia and Maria. Felicia remembered how the photographer had placed them so carefully, moving Paolo closer to his sisters, even adjusting the angle of Cecilia's head, as though, somehow, he knew this would be their last family photograph. They posed stiffly, and at the photographer's cue, they smiled and the flash blinded them for seconds.

Frankie and Amelia are at the centre of the photograph but it's Angela, sitting in the chair to the side, that holds Felicia's attention. She is not smiling. She is looking out. Her eyes are wide and the expression in them is soft, as though she is able to see through the camera, as though she is on the other side of the picture looking in. It occurred to Felicia that she had always been there, alone, on the outside.

7.

One warm autumn day, as Felicia stood suspended between the motion of the north-and southbound trains, she saw her true reflection. She had her eyes closed, feeling for a few moments the tremor of the earth rumbling through her. When the southbound train behind her had passed, Felicia opened her eyes and saw a man in an empty car on the northbound freight train. He was in a sitting position, propped up against the frame of the car. He was sleeping with his hands clasped on his stomach, his head bent into his chest. As the train rolled along slowly, she saw that his coat was dark and his pants were brown. His matted hair was the colour of earth. Though he was not an old man, he looked ancient. Homeless, Felicia thought. Then it occurred to her that maybe he was dead. At first, Felicia felt envious of his peace.

Later, as she walked through the familiar streets, it chilled her to think that she had recognized death, alone, riding slowly and purposefully, in a freight car, pulled to the end of the earth to the beat of a mechanical heart.

GOOD FRIDAY

1.

Amelia woke up before Frankie's alarm went off. Lately, Amelia had difficulty sleeping, drifting in and out of sleep throughout the night. Amelia watched Frankie even while he slept, wanting to know what was in his dreams.

While he was suspended in sleep, she dared to put her cheek against his back, careful not to wake him. She could hear Frankie's heart beat calmly and steadily, his back falling and rising against her face with the movement of his breathing. Frankie's body was warm. Winter nights, Amelia used to wrap herself around him, warming her feet against his calves. She longed for those winter nights when she would fall asleep feeling secure, at the centre of her family.

A few months ago, just before Christmas, Amelia decided that Frankie had taken a lover. Her name was Lea. She was an assistant at the consulting firm where Frankie worked. Lea had been hired over a year ago. Her name would come up every now and again, but Amelia had never paid attention to it, until Lea started calling Frankie at home. Frankie talked to her in numbers and abbreviations that did not make

sense to Amelia. He joked with her and teased her about problems she was working on at the office.

In her mind, Amelia saw Frankie in his suit, tie, the crisply pressed shirts she ironed for him, walking the gauntlet of cars and shoppers, street vendors and beggars, with Lea at his side, keeping up with Frankie's fast pace. Amelia had been out of that world for four years now; the do-or-die world of business, where you had to sheathe your emotions in a coat of armour to survive from day to day. Frankie thrived on it.

Frankie's alarm went off at six-thirty. Amelia moved away from him as he reached for the clock on his night table. He fumbled with it then turned off its shaky, high pitched beeping. On Amelia's side of the bed, the sheets were cool. Frankie groaned as he rubbed a hand over his eyes, then in one swift movement, he swung his legs out of the bed. He stood up and walked, naked, to the bathroom.

It was Good Friday. Their oldest son, Marco, didn't have school today, but Frankie had to work, at least half a day, he told her. He had promised Amelia he would take the Monday off. She had planned to spend the Easter weekend with her brother and her father at her brother's country house. Since her mother died, it had become a tradition for Amelia to have the family over for holidays like Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, and even birthdays. Amelia had assumed the role of keeping what was left of their family

together.

It was just the three of them now. After her sister, Angela, died, their family became smaller and smaller. First Cecilia left, then Ma died, then Maria went away to study in Ontario. So, her brother, Paolo, and Pa were left alone in the house, until Paolo bought his own house and moved away too.

When it came to family matters, Frankie never questioned her. He knew the history; he had been through it with her, through all the crises.

"I can read you like a book," Frankie often told her, and she knew it was true.

Throughout the winter months, Amelia's suspicion of Frankie's affair weighed on her. The winter passed slowly. At home, she cooked and baked, she cleaned everything in sight. She shovelled snow from the driveway, then from the neighbour's driveway, while her youngest son, Peter, made angels in the snow. She took Peter to the skating rink and watched him stumble over the ice, using his hockey stick for support; all the while she thought of Lea and Frankie working overtime, meeting at the gym where Frankie worked out twice a week, or in the night when, suddenly, he had to rush to the office. System failure, he said.

She watched him, to catch him making the wrong move. She searched his face for clues. She watched for pauses or hesitations; the times he went off to be alone, the way he

stood in the backyard gazing over the landscape of houses and lawns around them.

Maybe, Amelia thought, Frankie knew that she would have to forgive him because she couldn't let him go.

Lea was a student, Frankie told Amelia. Amelia pictured someone young and bouncy like the adolescent daughters of their neighbours, who at the first sign of spring rode to school on ten-speed bicycles, their books hitched up over their shoulders in vinyl backpacks. On the telephone, Lea had a clear but flat voice. There was authority in her tone. It was the voice of someone young, but someone who knew what she wanted. Lea was polite in a businesslike way when she said, "Frankie Ciarella please." There was never even a hint of apology in her voice when she called late at night, or on a week-end, just as they were putting supper on the table.

"What's wrong with that girl?" Amelia said, in exasperation, one night, after one of Lea's calls. "Doesn't she have any scruples? It's ten o'clock at night."

Frankie shrugged. "She works odd hours. Things come up."

"Can't you find someone who works regular hours?"

"You don't let go of a good thing, Ami," Frankie said. "Lea's good."

"I'll bet she is," Amelia said. Frankie didn't respond. "I think she does it on purpose," she added.

"Don't think about it," Frankie answered. He reached out for her hips. "You're not turning into one of those bitchy, jealous wives, are you?" He grinned at her.

In his hold, Amelia turned to look into his face. "How would you like it if I went back to work and some guy kept calling me at home?"

Frankie let Amelia go. "Ami, this is stupid. If you don't stop this I'll get mad."

"You wouldn't like it, would you?" she said.

"Would you please use your head," Frankie said, bringing his fingers up to his temple. "What're you telling me here? Uh?"

Frankie stood squarely in front of her. In the mirror behind him, Amelia saw the muscles in his shoulder shift as he raised a hand up to his hip. "So what're you telling me?"

Amelia's stomach fluttered for a moment. She lost her concentration and backed down. "Nothing," she said quietly. "She's just a pain," she said, waving him off. In her bare feet she went to see that Marco and Peter were asleep. When she came back, Frankie's light was on and he was sitting up on his side of the bed, leaning against the headboard. The bed covers were folded down below his waist. He looked relaxed and in control. He was waiting for her.

Amelia braced herself, thinking he wanted to talk about Lea, but as she got into bed Frankie reached to turn off the

light. He moved up against her, running his hand up her back, taking her night shirt up over her head. He gathered the shirt in his hand, brushing his face against it, smelling the material. Amelia raised her arms up around him, relieved, and put aside, for the moment, the resentment she had stored up inside herself.

2.

Usually, Amelia was up before Frankie. By the time Frankie was in the shower, she would have the coffee made and the children's breakfast on the table.

Today, Amelia lingered in bed, listening to the sounds in the bathroom as Frankie got ready for work. She heard him open the shower curtain, then the sound of the water running. The curtain closed, and she heard the shower spraying against the tub walls.

Amelia got out of bed, wrapped her robe around herself, and looked into her sons' rooms. Seeing they were asleep, she went downstairs to the basement where Frankie had his desk, in an alcove at the bottom of the stairs.

She picked his briefcase up from the floor where it leaned against the desk. She searched through papers and folders, not really knowing what she was looking for. Amelia hadn't thought about what she would do if she found evidence. She leafed through pages of Frankie's notebook, remembering exactly where everything had been placed.

Frankie was meticulously organized and he would notice if anything was out of order. When she heard his footsteps coming down the stairs, she quickly closed the briefcase and met him on the way upstairs.

"What're you doing down there, Ami?" he asked. "No coffee this morning? You think this is a holiday or something?" he joked.

"You take so long in the bathroom, I used the one downstairs," she said, in a scolding voice. "O.K.," Frankie responded in his casual tone.

As Frankie left for work, Amelia stood at the door, holding Peter back so he wouldn't run out in his bare feet.

"Remember, you said you'd be home early," Amelia called out to him. "On the road by three," she said.

Frankie waved and slid his briefcase onto the passenger seat, then got into the car, turned out of the driveway and onto the street, waving again as he drove off.

The moment Amelia closed the front door, Peter darted away from her and ran down into the basement, where Marco was playing. Suddenly it struck her that maybe Frankie wasn't going to work. After all, it was a holiday for most businesses. What if Frankie was going to meet Lea? They could forward their office telephones to wherever they had planned to be. They could do that, couldn't they?

At noon, Frankie called to tell Amelia he would be home an hour later than he had expected.

"It sounds quiet over there," Amelia noted.

"Yeah, there're only a couple of people here today."

"Is Lea there?"

"Actually, yeah, she is."

"Frankie, we can't leave any later than four o'clock," Amelia warned. "Paolo and my father have already left and I told them we'd have supper together."

"Don't worry." Frankie was getting impatient. "Just be ready by the time I get home. We'll pack the car and leave right away." Frankie didn't sound as rushed as he usually did when he was at work.

"So you'll be home by three?" Amelia listened for sounds in the background.

"Yeah. I gotta go," Frankie said.

"What's the rush. You said nobody's there today?"

"Ami, if I'm going to get out of here on time, I've got to go. O.K.?"

"You don't have to work Monday, then?"

"Not if the guy who's supposed to be here, is here. Gotta go now, Ami."

A week before Easter, Amelia had busied herself with the preparations for the weekend at her brother's house in the country. She bought purple-coloured, plastic hay to nest the chocolate eggs in so that the children could find them in the woods among the branches and wet leaves. She

had prepared a dish of rabbit, stewed with vegetables, the way her mother used to make it. She had baked a lasagna and she cooked a pork roast. She had baked cakes and cookies days in advance. Fresh vegetables and fruit were neatly wrapped in bags ready to be packed into the cooler. Frankie had promised to stop for fresh bread at a bakery in a nearby town on their way up.

She wondered what her father would bring for the children this year. Last Easter, her father gave Marco and Peter one of those huge chocolate rabbits from a candy shop on Saint Hubert Street. It stood four feet tall; bigger than Peter, who was only three years old at the time. Marco was so fascinated by its size that he didn't want to eat it. Pa would tease him. "O.K. let's get the knife and cut into this rabbit," he would say. And when Marco shrieked, "Nooo, Nono," Pa burst out laughing.

Marco brought his friends home to see his giant rabbit. He promised the ears to Jake, and a gloved paw to Sammy. Nancy wanted a foot, Peter wanted the carrot in the rabbit's hand, and Marco had claimed the head. The rabbit was transferred from Marco's room to Peter's room, then back to Marco's room like a coveted trophy. But after a few weeks Amelia told the children she couldn't let them keep it in their rooms any more.

"It'll go stale and you won't be able to eat it," she told them, but this argument didn't work. "It'll melt in

the sun. You don't want it to melt, do you?" she asked. After some time the rabbit had lost its novelty and the children let Amelia cut it up while they stood around the table watching, as though she was carving a Christmas turkey. They watched that she made clean and even cuts, not to spoil the parts that were promised to them. When it was portioned out, they sat around the table, eating happily. "Mmm," they said, nodding to each other with satisfaction.

It would be tough to top that rabbit, Amelia thought. He would have to get them a live one. Then she remembered that, up until a few years ago, it wasn't unusual for Pa to have a rabbit or a chicken caged up in the basement; fresh meat for supper. Amelia remembered how he hosed down the meat after the animal had been skinned and Ma would take it into the kitchen to boil it. Paolo marvelled at the process. He stood by, anxiously ready to receive orders from Pa, who ridiculed anyone who was too squeamish to participate.

Amelia remembered how her father would tease her friend, Sandra, when she came over for supper. Pa winked at Paolo, then he'd start with his jokes about how this chicken they were eating had run for its life around the yard. It took three of them to catch it, and they sure had to work for their supper, he said. Sandra glanced at Amelia for reassurance, then, at Amelia's cue, she laughed in disbelief.

"No, it's not true," Amelia said. "My father likes to make stories up just to get you nervous."

Sandra innocently looked from Pa to Amelia, then back to Pa. She glanced at Angela, but Angela's face was expressionless.

Pa winked. "True, isn't it?" he said, with a nod to Paolo.

"Stop it, then," Ma interrupted. "Let the girl eat. Don't pay any attention to them," she told Sandra. "The men like to tease."

Amelia was afraid that Sandra would think they didn't buy their meat at the supermarket, like everyone else did. Some people were touchy about where their meat came from and they would probably lose their appetite the minute you told them what they were eating had been hopping around in a cage a day ago. What's the difference? Amelia thought. Dead is dead, right?

"It's the way he does it," her sister, Angela, had once told Amelia. "He really enjoys it."

"Yeah, so?" Amelia said in Pa's defence. "It reminds him of the good old days in Italy. That's how they lived over there." Amelia used to think that Angela was too delicate for her own good. She was so wrapped up in her ideas about what was right and wrong that she couldn't do what needed to be done to get by Pa. For this reason, Amelia never really trusted her. She kept her friends away

from Angela.

Sandra was Amelia's best friend. Back then, before Amelia and Frankie were married, the three of them had formed a tight network. Sandra was Amelia's cover in case Pa checked up on her when she went out with Frankie. Amelia and Sandra worked together at the same bank, until Amelia was transferred to a better job at another branch.

Sandra still worked at the bank. Two years ago, she divorced her husband and now she lived with her young daughter in a house she bought soon after the divorce. Amelia sometimes took a trip into town to have lunch with Sandra; to keep in touch, they said. But Amelia felt they weren't close any more.

Sandra had been vital to Amelia's relationship with Frankie. The three of them had once been inseparable, Amelia's link to life outside the craziness of home. They would laugh at the way Amelia's father followed her in his truck, checking up on her. They outwitted him, turned it into a game, so that Pa didn't seem as dangerous as he was to Angela.

Sitting in the restaurant with Sandra, Amelia caught whiffs of her perfume as Sandra waved her arms over the table, gesturing while she talked. She laughed her clear, short laugh, then continued with a wave of words and gestures as though nothing had changed over the years. Amelia laughed with her, but it was forced. She was

concentrating on it and it drained her energy. Sandra pushed up the sleeves of her silky blouse, the kind Amelia used to wear when she was working. When Sandra moved her arms, the gold bangles slid down her wrist, making a clinking sound like rattling chains.

Outside the restaurant, they embraced each other the way they used to. Amelia saw herself in the reflection of Sandra's sunglasses. Her face was drawn. She was covered with make-up but the signs of fatigue were there. From behind the sunglasses, Sandra was grinning at her, the big, silk bow around her neck blowing in the wind. "Say hi to Frankie for me," Sandra said, brushing her hand over Amelia's arm before she turned to go. As Sandra walked down the street, her back straightened. She quickened her pace and disappeared into the traffic and movement around the glass and stone buildings.

3.

Paolo's country house was in the Laurentian mountains, in a wooded area not far from a stream where Pa took Marco fishing last summer. It had been Paolo's idea to go to the country for the Easter weekend; it would be a first. Amelia anticipated the children's excitement at having an Easter egg hunt in the woods. The snow had melted, the weather was mild, and Amelia was looking forward to peace and quiet. She needed the rest. There was no telephone there, and

spending some time with her family might help her stop thinking of Frankie and Lea.

When they arrived, it was close to six-thirty. Marco and Peter dashed from the car and swarmed around Paolo and their grandfather. Pa picked Peter up into his arms while Marco tapped his hand on Paolo's stomach to get his attention.

"Uncle Paolo, I brought my Nintendo game. I beat Dad's score. I did. You wanna play?" Marco's voice echoed through the woods.

The trees were bare from the winter months. The children's voices seemed alien in the vast silence of the forest. The slamming of the car door, their footsteps on the wood stairs, the creaking of the porch door, these sounds were magnified, out of place here. Amelia sensed that they were intruders, and the inhabitants of the woods were watching them.

In the summer, Amelia liked to sit on the veranda and watch the daylight fade with the chirping of birds as darkness covered the forest, its silence broken by the snapping of a twig, the rustling of leaves. If you listened carefully, a light breeze moving through the trees sounded like a faint whisper.

Nights were still cold but, inside, the house was cozy because Paolo had lit the wood stove when he and Pa arrived that afternoon. Amelia quickly unpacked the cooler and

turned on the stove to warm up their supper.

When the food was ready to be eaten, they gathered around the table, the children shuffled from chair to chair, bickering over who they would sit next to. Amelia placed the hot dishes on the table, the steam rising up to her face. She had cooked a fish stew. Ma had always served it on Good Friday. Amelia brought out a fritatta, potato patties, the bread they had bought on their way up, hot peppers Pa had grown in his garden last year, and large sliced tomatoes, seasoned with oil and lots of oregano, the way Pa liked them.

Everyone settled down and ate hungrily, helping themselves, filling their empty plates. It was a meal that her mother would have made. Amelia looked at her father and was glad to see that there was a subdued smile on his lips as Marco passed him the dish of stew.

When they finished eating, Amelia brewed a pot of coffee in an old metal percolator that Ma had used years ago. The machine hissed and gurgled rythmically. While they waited for the coffee, they ate fruit salad Amelia had prepared at home, and cookies she had baked, and packed into a tin box.

The children drifted away from the table while Amelia, Pa, Paolo and Franki. sat around drinking coffee until it was all finished.

When Amelia stood up to clean the dishes, she looked

over the remains with satisfaction. They had eaten everything but a few pieces of bread; they could toast them for breakfast. She put the two uneaten peppers back into the jar, and the cookies, she left on the table in case anyone got hungry later on.

Amelia peered through the kitchen window, into the night. The woods were in complete darkness.

Sometimes, when they were driving the country roads at night, Frankie turned off the car for a few seconds.

"Imagine getting stuck out here at night," he would say, as they sat in the car, suspended in the darkness.

In the woods behind the house, Amelia saw two small sparkles of light, the eyes of a wild animal. They moved easily through the dark, like spirits.

Amelia put another log in the stove, then went back to the sink. While she washed the dishes, she listened to the men, who were still sitting around the table. They were talking about the renovations Paolo wanted to make in the house he had just bought in the city.

Paolo was twenty-eight years old. Three years ago, he had opened a used car lot. Although he never talked about his business to Amelia, she got information from Frankie. Frankie told her that Paolo was doing well and he was thinking of opening up a second shop in the east end of the city. It did not offend Amelia that she was excluded from these conversations. The men had always divided themselves

from the women. At any gathering, it always happened that the men and women wound up in separate rooms; the women in the kitchen, the men in the den, the men on the front gallery, the women in the backyard. She had learned a long time ago that there was no point in trying to break into the conversation.

Frankie took a sheet of paper and a pen from his briefcase. They took turns drawing out plans, scribbling over the paper. Frankie leaned with his elbows at the edge of the table. He studied the paper intently, reaching his arm across to point at their plan. "What you need is the main support here," he said, absently scratching his shoulder. Frankie had a way of zeroing in on what was important to people. He knew when to get involved. He hung back a little until he was familiar with the personality patterns, then he made his assessments and he would find a way in.

Amelia remembered the day she brought Frankie home to meet her father. The plan was that Amelia would go to mass that Sunday with Sandra, as usual, then Frankie would pick her up at the church after the mass. Amelia had told her mother that Frankie was coming, and Ma told Pa.

Frankie parked across from the house. As they crossed the street, Amelia saw Maria and Cecilia peering out the window; then Maria, the youngest, ran off, probably to tell Ma that they had arrived.

Amelia took Frankie through the kitchen, where Ma was making dinner. She nervously wiped her hands on her apron. Frankie was going to shake her hand, but Ma just gave him an abrupt nod of the head and a forced smile, twisted with suspicion.

Pa was in the backyard, sitting in a lawn chair, by the picnic table. He shook Frankie's hand without getting up from his chair. Pa hadn't even put a shirt on. He was barefoot. He wore an undershirt and an old pair of shorts. It was a hot August morning. Pa had been working in the garden and he intended to show Frankie that he was interfering with his day of rest.

Amelia sat down next to Frankie at the picnic table. Pa looked at them, as though to register in his mind what they looked like together. Then he grinned up at the sun. He picked a ripe tomato from the basket on the table. He turned the tomato in his hand as if he were massaging it. Pa bit into it, catching its juices in his hand. He smiled at Frankie, then motioned to the basket. "Go ahead," he said. "They're delicious."

Frankie nodded and smiled. "No, thanks," he said.

Pa turned to Amelia. "Go in and get us some bread," he ordered.

Amelia knew that Pa wanted to have Frankie to himself. She glanced at Frankie, but he was concentrating on Pa. As Amelia walked toward the house, she heard Frankie's soft and

quiet voice, broken by bursts of her father's mocking laughter.

In the kitchen, Amelia helped her mother with dinner, sneaking glances out the back window to see how Frankie was doing. She knew her father was deliberately keeping him in the hot sun when the front room in the house was much cooler. She saw that Frankie had loosened his tie. His eyes squinted against the sun, and he smoothed a hand over his chest--an innocent-looking gesture he usually made when he was bored.

The front door opened, and Paolo came through, all greased up from working at the garage.

"Even on a Sunday you can't keep yourself clean," Amelia scolded him.

Paolo didn't answer.

"Amelia's boyfriend is in the backyard with Pa," Maria said to Paolo. Paolo looked out into the backyard through the kitchen window. He glanced at Amelia. "The little Ford Escort out front is his?"

"None of your business," Amelia said.

"Phhaa," Paolo remarked, turning from the window and waving Frankie off, as though to say, "Don't waste your time."

Paolo was four years younger than Amelia and Frankie. To Amelia, he was just a kid. But, after a while, Paolo learned to like Frankie, and Pa learned to respect him.

Amelia could see this even now as they sat at the table, sketching plans of Paolo's house. This was her family. She had kept what was left of it together and now, alone in her distrust of Frankie, Amelia felt like an outsider.

She folded the dish towel and turned off the light above the sink. The dishes were cleaned. The Good Friday meal was over. Amelia put the children to bed while in the background she heard the men move around the kitchen. They rummaged through drawers, looking for a pack of playing cards. They flicked through fuzzy channels, looking for the hockey game on the old television set in the living room. From the bedroom, Amelia heard the sports announcer's droning, nasal voice, interrupted by lively beer commercials, then by interviews with players who talked in one continuous flow of words that had no beginning or ending.

In her bed, Amelia felt the dampness of the mattress through the sheets and through her flannel night gown, but she was so tired that when she curled up on her side of the bed she fell asleep instantly.

When Frankie came to bed, she felt the mattress swaying as it creaked under his weight. He settled himself against her. She felt his hand move over her before she drifted into sleep again.

Late in the night, Amelia was awakened by a cry that at first sounded like a child, then turned into a wild howl.

Amelia had been in such a deep sleep that she had forgotten where she was. In a panic, she searched through the darkness for familiar signs. She spotted the veiled window, saw Frankie next to her, and remembered where she was. For a moment Amelia wasn't sure if the cry that woke her had been in a dream or if it was real.

"Frankie, did you hear that?" she whispered.

Frankie was still. "Yeah, shhh."

Whatever it was that had screamed in the night had not been far from the window. But it must have moved away quietly because as they lay motionless, listening, they heard nothing.

"It's O.K. Go back to sleep," Frankie said.

"What was it?" Amelia asked.

"I don't know. A wild cat, maybe."

"Do you think it was a wolf?" she asked.

"Maybe."

"Jesus."

"It's O.K., go back to sleep," Frankie said impatiently. He put his arm around her and squeezed her breast.

"Frankie."

"What? Sleep."

"I want to go check on the kids."

"They're alright. Now sleep."

How did he know they were alright? How could he know

that while they were in another room? Amelia didn't want to get up because she knew that if she did, she wouldn't be able to fall asleep again. She would pace the dark and cold house for the rest of the night. Probably, Frankie was right, the children were asleep. Probably, the children hadn't even heard the cry.

"Frankie, what time is it?" she whispered. But Frankie was already sleeping, drawing long, deep breaths through his nose.

Amelia tried to sleep, but she couldn't. She thought of the eyes she had seen blinking at her in the darkness. She kept thinking that the cry in the woods was a sign of something, like a warning. She was afraid because she was the only one who knew this. Everyone else was asleep, unsuspecting. Amelia knew that something was waiting to happen. She thought of Angela and the dark secrets that had found their way into her heart and devoured her while the rest of them--Ma, Pa, Amelia--stood by unsuspecting.

She watched Frankie's back moving steadily with the rhythm of his breathing. Amelia couldn't close her eyes to the darkness while everyone slept unguarded. Someone should stay awake. They had children with them. They were in the wilderness; anything could happen. Didn't Frankie realize how vulnerable they were?

IN THE DEEP END

Paolo leaned forward on the edge of his chair, his elbows pressed into his knees. He watched Tessa break through the water with a far-reaching splash, and she went under. Drops of water splattered at Paolo's feet. A muscle in his shoulder tensed as he waited for Tessa to surface. They had arrived after dark and Paolo had turned the pool lights on. Their reflection off the water shimmered on the walls in trembling patches. Through the window, the moon shone over the backyard, now covered in a sheet of glistening ice. He wondered what had brought Tessa to him this time.

Paolo met Tessa the winter after his sister, Angela, died. She had killed herself. They all had been enraged with her for it--Paolo, his mother, his father. Now, ten years later, when he thought of his sister, Paolo still couldn't separate her from the way she died. He had not forgiven her.

Tessa finally rose to the surface with a gasp that reverberated back and forth across the pool. She swam away from Paolo. He saw her reflection in the water and his own

leaning figure held in the window like a mirror. In his mind he replayed Tessa, a few moments ago, by the pool, draping her clothes over a lounging chair. She was nervous and it seemed she wasn't sure how far to go. She stopped at her underclothes, turned to look at him. Paolo watched, waiting to see what she would do next. She turned away from him and walked toward the edge of the pool. She was in the deep end now, treading water. Paolo remembered how Tessa always stopped moving when she was thinking.

A long time ago, on the ice in the park, late at night under the yellow glow of the lights, Tessa stared across the soccer field into the darkness. Paolo had just come out of the clubhouse, the blades of his skates strung on his hockey stick. Tessa was alone on the ice. He could see little puffs of her breath in the air. He strained to see what it was she was looking at. There was nothing, no one there. She looked down at her skate, thinking, scraping at the ice. Charlie, the groundskeeper, would be out in a minute to tell her it was time to close up. Tessa pushed herself off into the centre of the rink. She skated backwards, slowly, away from whatever it was she had been looking at.

It was a cold night but Paolo knew that it felt good to be alone out there on the ice. The rink was at the end of the park, lit up like another planet, and so quiet you could hear your skates grinding into the ice.

Then maybe Tessa had seen him and wanted to show off a little, because she started skating smoothly, making fancy moves as though she were figure skating. Paolo stepped back into the darkness and watched her from a distance. He thought that she shouldn't be out there alone. She glided like an unsuspecting, moving target. Paolo turned and went back toward the clubhouse.

Inside, Charlie was passing a wet mop over the floor. He looked back when he heard the door open.

"Hey Paul, come to help clean up?"

"Not tonight, Charlie." He spotted a pair of girl's boots under a bench. "You should get the hockey team to do that for you. They must be good for something." He sat down on a bench and in a minute he had his boots off and was lacing up his skates.

"What're you doing? I'm closing up here," Charlie shouted at him across the room.

"No problem. Put my stuff outside."

"I know what you're after, you horny bastard," he said, twisting his mouth.

The funny thing was that Paolo wasn't all that sure what he was after. He just knew that he couldn't leave that girl out there alone. He gave Charlie a wolfish smile as he stood up on his skates and, pushing his hands into his gloves, he made for the door.

"Hey, you can take these, too." Charlie pointed to the boots under the bench.

"Later, Charlie," Paolo said, as he stepped out into the night thinking, "Charlie's alright."

Usually, Paolo skated in the hockey rink just to knock a puck around. He'd come to the rink late, so just about everyone had gone home; none of those thirteen-year-old brats whirling around him. He'd slam the puck at the gate, at a spot he imagined. He'd go like this for a while, his breath coming out in warm puffs as he whirled around the rink. His heart pumped in his ears and he imagined the puck crashing through the gate like a fire ball, blasting across the field and through the school he and his sisters had gone to when they were kids. It left a blaze of fire as it ripped through the old school, and farther, past the street where they used to buy candy from a store owned by a skinny lady with a whining voice.

The lady would have a smoking cigarette between her fingers, holding it in front of her mouth and she'd stand back behind the counter, squinting against the smoke while she waited for you to make up your mind. Then she would reach into the glass case behind the counter, her bony fingers picking out the candy as she counted it out piece by piece. Black licorice, wax candy, sour tarts, rock candy, she had all kinds of junk. Paolo remembered how the old floorboards creaked as you walked in. He and his

friends would sit up on the stools at the counter where some men sat drinking cups of coffee. The skinny lady would call out to them. "All right you boys, get down from there." She walked them toward the candy counter. "You boys wanna buy something?"

The store was on the same street where, one day after school, Sabatino Fiori shot his daughter, Cathy. The way the story went, Sabatino Fiori was a useless drunk who brought home other women. In fact, one day his wife found him in their bed with another woman. The story was told that Sabatino really didn't mean to kill his daughter, it was his wife he wanted to murder, but she wasn't in the house, so he shot the daughter instead. It was said that he shot Cathy in the leg when she made a run for it. Then, because he was drunk and didn't know what he was doing, he shot again and killed her.

Paolo was too young to know Cathy Fiori, but he used to see her and her sister in the school yard and around the neighbourhood. Cathy Fiori and her sister Santina were the type who used to skip classes even in grade seven, when most everyone was too chicken to do it. Sometimes guys on motorcycles stopped in front of the schoolyard gate. They wore dark glasses and had stringy hair. "The bums" was what everyone called them. Before Paolo even knew what Santina and Cathy could be doing with those guys, the word was that the two sisters were hot to trot. In the winter they wore

little leather jackets, short and so tight they had to keep them open. Paolo was ten years old. He was awestruck by the sisters, the legendary status they had earned among the kids in the school. Even the teachers treated them differently, ignoring them for the most part, as though they were afraid of them.

Sometimes, Santina was sent to the principal's office for swearing in the school yard. Sometimes, the sisters were called to the principal's office together. Paolo saw how the boys would tease the sisters, especially Santina, because she was the older and the more aggressive one.

"Hey, suck this," Leonard James once called out to Santina, across the corridor. He grabbed his crotch and pushed it forward with a sudden, lifting motion. Leonard made everyone nervous because you never knew what to expect from him. On his way to his locker, Paolo would see gobs of Leonard's spit in different places along the halls. Once, Leonard ran from the boys' washroom, screaming and waving his underwear at the girls lined up for gym class.

"Hey, Santina," he called out, "here." And he threw them at her.

Santina just pushed them aside with her foot. "Fuck off," she said, casually, and turned away.

Leonard spat on the floor, an angry, animal look in his eyes. Paolo could tell by the way Santina ignored him that she was used to it, used to being laughed at and spat on.

The last time Paolo saw Santina was in the funeral home. She sat next to her mother, who was sobbing and shaking her head. Santina wore a black dress with half sleeves. Her arms were white and thin. She wasn't wearing make-up and for the first time Santina looked like all the other girls in grade seven. The word was that she was really fourteen years old and still she hadn't passed grade seven. Paolo watched her sitting there like a completely different girl from the one he saw at school. She had her arm around her mother. Their faces were touching, looking at no one, like there was no one else in the room, and Paolo saw that Santina knew about all kinds of things, things that no one else could ever know.

In Paolo's pool, Tessa disappeared below the surface again. The water stopped moving after a few seconds. Nothing to worry about but, still, Paolo stood up and walked around the pool, toward the spot where Tessa had gone under. It was too long. What was she doing down there? O.K. Ten more seconds and he'd go in after her. Still the same game, he thought. Bitch. Why wasn't she coming up? Five more seconds and he'd go in after her. Probably she was testing him. That was how they had started ten years ago.

On the ice, without his hockey stick, Paolo felt light and unsteady. While he skated, he watched Tessa glide by

him, her body curved into the turn, one leg passing over the other. Then, with a twist, she was going backward, past him. He caught a flash of her breath and red mittens, and the clicking of her skates on the ice. Jesus, she moved like she was born on those things. Paolo picked up speed, racing with her. He could tell she was getting nervous. He zig-zagged in and out in front of her, concentrating on not hitting her. She slowed down a little and kept him in check. Still, Paolo was glad she didn't chicken out. Then, as if dared, she picked up speed. Paolo was game, so he cut by her. She let him get ahead one full lap. As he came up around the last corner just behind her, she pushed ahead, glanced back, and timing it just right, she twisted around and came to a full stop in front of him. They crashed into each other and the impact of the collision threw her back. Paolo moved forward to catch her but, instead, he fell with her.

For a moment, he was too afraid to touch her. Then he saw her moving, slowly struggling up on her elbow. Her eyes watered. She looked scared. Paolo raised himself up on one knee. "Are you O.K.?"

She sat forward. "I think so." Her voice was shaky. From the cold? She was scared? She was hurting, so he waited for her to make the first move. Jesus, why did she do it?

"Can you get up?"

"I think so."

Paolo squatted down beside her. "Come on, you'll freeze sitting there." He moved with her to get her up on her feet. She was unsteady. Skating slowly, he brought her off the ice. She winced with pain, and she hung back a little, tugging at Paolo's jacket for support. Although he was mad as hell with her, Paolo walked her home, two blocks away, where she lived in a duplex with her mother and her mother's boyfriend.

At home, Paolo lay on his bed, his head propped up against the wall that separated his room from his sisters' room. He used to hear Angela crying on nights Pa waited for her with his belt coiled next to him on the couch.

As Angela walked in, Pa got up from the couch and everyone knew enough to get out of his way, including Ma, who usually hung back in the kitchen, busy at the sink or at the counter. Paolo saw her on his way through the house, one night as Pa had Angela cornered in the hallway. Angela was shielding herself from the belt that Pa whacked at her from every direction. Ma was at the counter, calmly wiping apples, her back to the hallway, as though she couldn't hear Angela screaming, Pa shouting above the sound of her voice, the lash of the belt, and the clapping sound it made as it slapped against Angela's skin. Paolo figured that Ma either blocked it out, or worked it in, like background music on the radio.

Paolo had broken it down to mechanics. He thought it would all stop if one of the sounds was taken away. If Angela stopped screaming everything would be quiet. Angela could stop it, she could stop the belt from hitting, if she would only stop her screaming.

When Paolo went home, the night he met Tessa at the skating rink, the house was quiet. Three of his sisters were gone; all three in less than a year. First, Amelia got married, then Angela died, then Cecilia left home after a big fight with Ma, who swore she'd never set eyes on her again, and Pa, who said she ought to be shot like a bitch gone wild. So that left just Paolo, and his youngest sister, Maria, at home with Ma and Pa.

Since Angela died, the house was like a mortuary. Every little word that was spoken sounded too loud, out of place, or insincere. They sat together at meal times as though they were forced to be there, then everyone went off in different directions, relieved that another meal was over.

Paolo worked down the street, at Tony's garage. Summer nights he rode through the city on his bicycle. If he wanted company he stopped in at the pool hall near the park. In the winter, Paolo went to the skating rink. He skated fast and hard to get the adrenaline pumping fast so that he wouldn't have to think about anything but breathing. He whizzed by other skaters so closely that he sometimes heard

the swishing sound of their vinyl jackets rubbing against his as he cut by them.

After that first time in the rink with Tessa, Paolo was careful. She had shaken him up. He considered it a warning. There was nothing more Paolo wanted to learn about pain.

Paolo stood at the edge of the pool. That's it, he thought. He pulled his shoes and socks off. Just as he lifted his sweater over his head, he heard the water breaking. Tessa coughed, and breathed in quick little gasps. She rubbed her hands over her face, smoothing her hair back over her forehead. Paolo stood behind her. In the window she saw his reflection, shirtless and barefoot.

"So. Are you coming in or are you just admiring yourself?" Tessa's voice echoed over the water.

Paolo didn't answer. He picked up the towel he had left on a chair that morning after doing his laps. A few feet from the edge of the pool, he held the towel open for Tessa. Let her walk to him. "Come on," he said. He knew her response before he spoke the words.

Tessa moved away to create distance between them. "Mmm." She glided farther. "It's nice in here."

Paolo dropped the towel back into the chair. "I've got some food in the kitchen. You'll be alright here?"

Tessa studied him the way she used to do when it seemed

her head was full of things she couldn't say to him. She was in the deep end, treading water.

Five minutes, tops, Paolo thought. She'd be inside in five minutes. He turned and walked into the house. Still the same game, he thought, careful not to let her see he was shaken again.

Two years ago, in the shop on Saint James Street, Paolo was in the office going over some paperwork. It was a hot, sticky summer day. There were a lot of loafers on the lot, mostly kids with nothing better to do. Usually, his men handled them O.K., but on days like this, the mechanics got impatient, the salesmen were restless, and the damned Coke machine always broke down just when you needed it most. Paolo's office was in the rear, closed off by glass, so he had a good view of the front desk and the front door. He could see the pool room across the road, the Voyages Motel next to it, and the landscaper's lot where his father used to sell Christmas trees.

Every year, in the second week of December, Pa had driven to a tree farm up north and hauled trees back by the truck load. He'd rent a lot on Saint James Street, and he would take a couple of weeks off from work to sell them. Paolo and his father took turns sleeping in the trailer at night. The winter that Paolo met Tessa was the last year Pa sold trees.

Tessa walked from the bus stop a block away. She didn't wear a coat. She always wore layers of sweaters beneath her thick red sweater. She carried a big black bag over her shoulder. Paolo hated that bag. It was ugly and it made her look as if she was on the run and travelling light.

Nights, Tessa brought him hot chocolate in a thermos. He sat by the window so he could watch the trees and be on the lookout for Pa, who sometimes dropped in to check up on him.

Tessa released a tingling and painful sensation in his feet as she pulled off his boots. She slipped his feet beneath her sweaters and pressed them against her stomach, rubbing out the numbness from the cold.

She told him her mother didn't care if she stayed out late. "It gives her a chance to screw her boyfriend," Tessa said. The way she had said it, so casually, a spark of vengeance in her eyes, and the thought of Tessa's mother at home screwing somebody sent a warm, exciting flutter through Paolo. He understood what Tessa was running from, why she played dangerous games, and that made him want her all the more.

Tessa didn't mind going home on the bus. After midnight, they waited by the street, in the smell of the trees that shielded them from the wind. When she saw the bus coming, Tessa held him to her for the last time, then

ran across the road to get there before the bus stopped. Tessa didn't complain about the dirty blankets they had to lay on, or about having to slip out behind the trailer when Pa unexpectedly stopped by. She didn't mind waiting until the coast was clear. Paolo would go out behind the lot to find her exercising her fingers and her legs in a kind of dance movement to keep them from going numb.

She told him she loved the smell of Christmas trees. She preferred winter to summer, she told him, her eyes tearing from the cold, her jaws numb.

She probed Paolo for pieces of his life, practically inviting herself home to meet his family. He told her it wasn't a good time to meet them. He told her his mother was sick, which was true, but he didn't tell her about Angela and about Cecilia. He preferred to let Tessa fantasize about his life at home. At times, her innocence irritated him, but sometimes he liked to bask in it, to taste his own dream of the home he wished he'd had.

Instead of telling Tessa stories about himself, Paolo satisfied her with stories about the neighbourhood. He told her the story of Sabatino Fiori. Actually, it was a relief to tell it to an outsider, to see the amazement in Tessa's eyes as he recounted it.

Over the years the story of Sabatino Fiori had lost its impact on Paolo. It was just another story of a screwed up family, broken by fear and violence and death, as his own

family had been.

Tessa wanted to know what happened to Santina and her mother.

"I don't know," he said. He ran his hand through a bunch of curls in Tessa's hair, thinking how soft it felt.

"Did Sabatino go to jail?"

"I guess so."

"For how long."

"I don't know." Paolo was getting impatient. "Nobody talked about it. It was just one of those things."

What did she want? Revenge? A happy ending? Was she looking for justice? What did it matter what happened to Cathy's sister and her mother? Whether or not Sabatino went to jail? The man shot his daughter. That was the whole point of the story, to tell her about their neighbourhood. Nobody cares what happened next, they just want to witness and leave, quietly, to stay out of it, innocent. They whispered about it on the church steps where they met each other on Sundays. They shook their heads and clicked their tongues. The women gave great big heaving sighs as though just talking about it was too much for them. They must have whispered about Angela too, the way she died, somehow connecting it all to sin and God's will.

Paolo held Tessa to him. He let her wrap him in her dreams. It took a few months for her to realize that Paolo had no intention of letting her into his world.

"I guess I'm not good enough for you," she said, her voice thick with the scorn of having been rejected. The saddest part was that she still let him hold her. Even so, he just shook his head, said nothing, took hold of her. He thought, how could he let her go? Yet he couldn't keep her, having nothing to offer but the sins of his family.

Tessa stopped calling him, stopped meeting him at the garage. The following winter he didn't see her at the skating rink. She disappeared.

For years, he hadn't seen her, until that hot summer day when Tessa, wearing jeans and a loose t-shirt, walked into his shop. She looked the same as the last time he'd seen her. It seemed time had stood still.

"Visiting the old neighbourhood," she said. She lounged back on the old couch in his office. Bernie, the salesman, passed by and kind of squatted down a little to get a better look at her.

"Your business is doing well?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Uh-huh." She took a moment. "Must be. I hear you've opened another shop."

"Yeah?" He meant, Is that what you heard? Tessa's face became flushed the way it did when she was nervous. He wanted so badly to touch her. She watched him silently and he knew she was angry. "Where did you hear that?" he asked her.

"What does it matter?"

Oh no. She was starting with the "it doesn't matter" routine. Things always went downhill from there. Paolo tried to cheer her. "Well if you heard about it from a happy customer, that makes me feel good," he said, moving his hands up to his chest to show he was relaxed. "But if you heard about it from an angry customer, that worries me."

Tessa didn't laugh. It's true, it wasn't funny, but Paolo remembered how she used to laugh at all his dumb jokes. Still, she must have understood that he didn't want her to go, because she settled herself into the couch.

"Just a minute," he said, then he went to tell Bernie he would be leaving early and asked him to close up the shop. Bernie kept glancing in the window while Paolo talked. "Sure, Paul. Have fun." He winked.

"Yeah, right," Paolo answered as he walked away. Then he turned. "I'll be checking in at the other barnyard tomorrow morning, so be here on time for a change, Beautiful."

When he came back, Tessa was at the door with her keys in her hand. "Come on, let's go for a drive."

On the highway, driving with the windows down, a warm breeze blew in their faces. Paolo watched the road carefully. Inbetween glances at the road signs and traffic behind them, Paolo watched Tessa. The look of concentration on her face told him that she was about to spring something

on him. He wondered what it was she was up to. Probably, she knew the whole thing made him nervous: the heat, someone else at the wheel taking him to who knows where. Tessa wouldn't tell him. Then, out of the blue, as they took an exit into another city, Tessa told him she was getting married. Just like that.

So, Paolo thought. That was why she came back. One more test. That was it. Paolo didn't say anything he had been set up to say. He took a moment to conceal his contempt, then, in his most honest voice, he congratulated her. Tessa laughed at him. It was a new laugh. One he had never heard from her before; the mocking laugh of experience.

As they drove through the city, neither of them spoke. It seemed that Tessa knew exactly where she was going. For now, that satisfied Paolo. He let her drive on. It looked like she was headed for another town on back roads but, instead, she pulled into a motel parking lot.

"I love this place," she said.

Paolo didn't ask her why. Inside the room, he examined the pastel comforter, the colour of the carpet, the counter where there was a long mirror against the wall above the sinks, the door to the bathroom, the clothes rack and dressers. So, Tessa had been here. With whom, the guy she was marrying? With someone else? He took it all in. He didn't want to think how it had been eight years since he

last saw her and suddenly she turned up, took him away to tell him she was getting married, rented a motel room, and after they had exhausted each other, she cried, her face cushioned against his stomach. He felt her warm tears on his skin. He ran his hand through her hair thinking how soft it was. He didn't ask any questions. Paolo just figured it was one of those things.

When Tessa had called him this time, almost two years later, Paolo wasn't in the office. Tessa left a message with Bernie. When Paolo got the message, he wondered if he should call her back or not. It was damned stupid, but his pulse was racing and he couldn't think straight, so he did something else to get his mind off it. It was no good, because when he came back to it, he felt jumpy all over again.

O.K., so he called her. This time they would go to his place. No surprises, no gloomy two-hour drives back from the country, neither of them talking. On the telephone, he was inside her and she knew that in his mind he was planning everything. No questions. No worries.

In the kitchen, Paolo poured some pasta into boiling water. "They're called penne," he would tell her later, while he fed her fantasies with bits and pieces of the old language, and of his connection to a world that was simple, good and pure, as she had imagined it to be.

Paolo stirred the pot, then went to the door. He looked out into the pool area. The windows around the pool were thick with ice. It was quiet. The water was not moving. He breathed in nervously, then he released his breath when he saw Tessa in the pool, on her back, her eyes closed, still floating in the deep end where he left her.

UNATTACHED

Steven leaned on his car, which was parked on the gravel by the roadside. He had a clear view of the house. It had taken him four hours to get there from Edmonton, where he was visiting his brother, Bill.

When Steven's girlfriend, Angela, died five years ago, he and Bill had moved out to Edmonton. Bill stayed, but Steven went home three months later. At least once a year, he came back to see his brother. "I'm checking up on you," he joked.

Steven had been scheduled to fly back to Montreal this morning, but had changed his mind at the last minute. Instead, he rented a car and headed northwest through barren prairie, populated only by small farming communities. He drove through long stretches of winding roads and thick brush, not a house in sight for miles. Steven wondered if Laura was still living out here after all.

"Back home," she used to call it, when she spoke of the farm that had belonged to her father--before he died and her brother took it over.

Laura had moved to Montreal to go to school. She joked

with Steven that it was a good thing she was raised in a close-knit community because the only way she could afford to pay her way through school was to share a five room flat with two other girls.

"In a situation like that," Laura said, "there is very little that's private."

Steven's gaze followed a path that cut through a pasture and led to the house, which stood out in the open, some distance from the edge of a dark forest. A car and a pickup truck were parked by the barn. Across from the barn was a tractor and another large piece of machinery that reminded him of an escalator. To the west, wheat fields stretched out endlessly. It pleased him to look at the horizon of wheat blending into the sky.

Steven imagined Laura in the house, under its dark green roof, as she moved from the kitchen to the bedroom. He pictured what the house might look like inside. He imagined a staircase overlooking the living room, its wood darkened with time, cracks in the floorboards, and dark corners where you would find an unexpected door to a closet, or a staircase to the basement or the attic.

From the road, Steven saw a light on downstairs; probably the kitchen. There was a light on upstairs too, and Steven thought it must be Laura's room. He thought of Laura up there alone, her baby sleeping in the next room, her mother and her brother in another part of the house.

For a moment, Steven was filled with shame for having abandoned her.

Night was falling. In the distance the last traces of the orange-pink sunset faded into the wheat fields. Maybe he was just tired, or maybe it was the hours of driving through flatlands with nothing in sight but oceans of golden wheat that gave Steven an incredible sensation of tranquility. He watched for signs of Laura, a curtain moving, a screen door slamming, someone in the yard, but nothing stirred.

Steven felt he had been waiting a long time. The forest across the road from where he had parked was already in darkness. The air was cooling and so, with a last look at the house, Steven decided it was time to take shelter.

He got into the car, followed the road up a hill and stopped at a clearing in the woods. He got out to take a look around. The air was misty. He felt a drop of rain on his eyelid. Steven leaned against the car, listening to the rain pattering on the leaves. He thought of how close he was to Laura, how close he was to the possibility of turning his whole life around in one moment. Steven had always felt that there was nothing, no person in the whole universe who could touch him, no one who could hold him down, try to shape him.

When Laura became pregnant, she told Steven that she wanted to keep the baby. Steven covered his anger with cold

cynicism.

"Are we supposed to get married and live happily ever after? Is that what you think?"

Laura didn't answer. She watched him sadly. It was a Friday night and, as on every Friday, Laura brought home some wine and she rented a movie on video. She ordered a pizza for supper, then filled the tub with water for a bath.

That night, Laura sat at the table wearing the Chinese kimono that she wore summer evenings when she and Steven sat out on the balcony until after midnight, watching the traffic and passers-by on the street down below.

Laura stood up and in her bare feet she went out to the balcony. Through the window, Steven watched her cautiously. A chill ran up his spine as Laura leaned forward over the railing, the night breeze ruffling her hair. Steven stood up and followed her. He didn't know what to tell her. It was all very clear. There was no way he could marry anyone. No way he could have a baby.

He stood next to her on the balcony, ready to move quickly if she decided to do anything crazy. Steven had trained himself to move quickly. At home, in his bed sleepless nights, he imagined himself involved in possible confrontations. Let's say he got into a fight with someone in a bar, or with someone at a traffic light. He thought of the moves, of ways to get out.

Laura leaned into the breeze, her hands gripping the railing. She looked out into the street, at the surrounding buildings, at the lights and the traffic below. Steven caught her mood, and for a moment he felt a rush of helplessness. A feeling of being trapped passed through him but he quickly shrugged it off before it settled into him.

"Laura, come inside. You'll catch cold out here."

She shook her head, no.

Steven saw that she was shivering. There was the smell of rain in the air. Some people were talking quietly, a few balconies above them. Then they heard the sound of chairs being shuffled as the people above went in for the night. It was quiet again, except for the traffic down below, the usual Friday night activity. Steven felt restless, trapped up there on that balcony with Laura trying to snare him.

Laura looked away from him. She was hurt and angry. She gazed out into the streets, her mind wandering somewhere else. What was she plotting?

"Laura, open your eyes. I don't even have a job." He waited for her to say, "Well, get one." He wanted her to say it. They would fight and he could leave.

She turned to face him and he was relieved to see that she had not been crying. Crying was always a sure sign of trouble. No, Laura wasn't crying, but her face was full of anger and Steven knew that he had shattered whatever illusions she might have built around him.

"You're so smart," Laura said, angrily. Steven could see the goose bumps on her chest. "You're such a smartass." She brought a hand up, pointing at herself. "You know what I want. Why don't you tell me, then, what it is that you want? Can you tell me that?"

Laura had a way of turning things around to make him feel like a louse. Well, O.K., Steven thought. Maybe he wasn't sure, yet, of what he wanted, but he sure as hell knew what he didn't want.

He took Laura inside and stayed the night, but the next day Steven packed the things he kept at her apartment into two gym bags. He gave back her key and he was gone. What else could he do?

Sitting in his car, in the woods, Steven put his hand out in front of him and he couldn't see it. He couldn't remember ever having been in such complete darkness. He had to go somewhere. He needed to see people, signs of life around him. Nervously, he took the keys from his pocket and started the car.

He drove out to the road, and down past the spot on the shoulder where he had stopped earlier, and he headed into town.

At the edge of town he found a bar in a place called the Honey Bee Motel. Steven pulled into the gravel lot, which was spotted with mud puddles from the rain. As he walked up the steps to the side door, he felt he had gone a

hundred years back in time. The building was an old shack, with broken windows at the back. On the thick wood door, a piece of rope that was looped through two hooks served as a handle. The wall at the entrance was covered with posters and hand-written announcements. "Square Dancing Lessons on Tuesday Nights," one of them read.

The bar was in an L-shaped room with a kitchen at the far end, behind the pool table and the video games. The counter at the bar and the wall behind it separated this area from the front, where a bandstand faced the bar, overlooking the dance floor and a section of tables.

In the far corner, some teenagers stood over the juke box. They leaned into it, studying the list of titles. A group of older men sat at a table near the bar, talking and glancing up at the television screen suspended above the counter at the far end.

The floorboards creaked as Steven walked toward the bar. The men at the table and two men standing by the counter turned to look at him as he entered. Steven nodded and sat at the counter. He ordered a beer from the girl working the bar.

"Quiet night," Steven said following her movements with his eyes.

"Yep," she answered, putting a bottle down by his arm. "Glass?" she asked, moving to get one from behind the counter.

"No, thanks." He took a long swig from the bottle, then glanced over his shoulder, taking in the room. He looked at the men standing at the bar, but they were busy talking about some land that had recently been sold.

"You're from around here?" asked the girl, as she wiped the counter.

"No." Steven watched her reach up to slip some glasses into the slots above the counter.

"Passing through," the girl said, nodding, waiting for an answer.

The girl was short, rather young looking. Her hair was a honey blonde colour, and she had blue eyes that sparkled under the light above the bar. Steven figured her to be about eighteen or nineteen years old. Just barely of drinking age, and she was already serving it out like an old pro, Steven thought.

"Might stay awhile." Steven shrugged. He noticed that the men at the counter glanced at him when he said this, and Steven understood that, even here, there was no room for strangers.

"This really a hotel?" Steven asked the girl.

She smiled. "About a hundred years ago it was."

"Cindy," one of the men called, leaning over the counter and giving Steven a warning look. The girl glanced at Steven apologetically, then went to tend to the men.

Steven looked up at the television monitor, where there

was an old war movie playing. The kids by the juke box were on the dance floor now, trying to impress each other with new dance steps.

Steven wondered if Laura ever came here. She must know every one of these people by name, know their histories, their families. Steven thought how a person could suffocate in a town like this. But then, a person could suffocate in the city too. For the past five years, Steven had wandered from one bad job to the next, nothing promising, earning just enough money to last him while he looked for something else. He had moved out west for a while, then went back home. He moved to Ontario and went home again, always next to broke. Maybe it was this that the men at the bar saw in him, Steven thought. Maybe they recognized someone on the run, always moving, but getting nowhere.

Steven stood up and from the way Cindy glanced at him anxiously, thinking he was leaving, Steven knew he had found someone who would see him through the night. He picked up his beer and headed toward the pool table at the back. The men at the table invited him to pool, but when he told them he wouldn't play for money, they shrugged and turned away from him. He put some coins into a video machine, played a game, then went to the counter again. He drank more beer, and watched the movie up on the screen, the sound turned down low.

At around midnight, the men at the table shuffled out

after exchanging good-nights with the two guys at the counter. The pool table had been abandoned and the teenagers had already gone.

The men sitting at the counter finished their drinks. "Yup. Up at dawn," one of them said, with a wink to Steven. "Night, Cindy," they called as they left.

It turned out that the girl's mother owned the bar, and when she came to close up for the night, Cindy and Steven went for a drive.

She directed Steven up a dirt road, where they stopped by a stream in the woods. It was dark and Steven had no idea where he was. Cindy took a lighter from her purse and, leaving her shoes on the ground by the car, she led Steven down by the water.

"Bring the blanket," she told him.

Steven walked a few feet behind her, nervous because he couldn't see in the darkness, and this girl who had taken him here seemed so young. "This isn't a good idea," he wanted to say. Instead, he said, "The ground is all wet."

She laughed. Then as if to apologize, she lightly tapped her bare foot on the earth. "It's O.K. It didn't rain much," she said.

Steven could hear the stream running quietly. Cindy clicked the lighter shut. "I'll run out of fluid," she said. "Too bad you don't have a flashlight." Steven remembered that he did have one in the trunk, but Cindy had

moved so fast, he hadn't thought about it.

She took the blanket from him and spread it out on the ground. Cindy had on one of those tight jean dresses with a zipper down the front. She threw her jacket down and unzipped the bottom of the dress a little to loosen it. Then she sat on the blanket, crossing her legs. She patted the ground beside her. "It's O.K., sit down," she said. She leaned back on her elbows. "It's not so warm out tonight. We used to come out here for a midnight swim," she said, with a hint of a dare in her voice. Suddenly, Steven felt spent. He wasn't up to performing any daring acts. He wanted to spend the night quietly, warm, and secure. What he was looking for was peace of mind. He shouldn't have come here. He should have just taken the girl home.

Cindy took her dress off and, wrapping herself in the blanket, she nestled up against him. Steven remembered Angela, a long time ago, toward the end, before she died, how she had taken him to dark, secluded corners, into deep stairwells, and back alleys, a deserted school yard, or a fenced-off field. It was crazy, and thrilling, and shameless. Steven rode so blindly on the tide of these emotions that he couldn't think straight.

He had tried to concentrate on his courses, but when he sat in the library, his books spread out before him, all he could think about was Angela. She took hold of him so tightly, he could hardly breath. It felt like she was

trying to draw him into her. Steven took comfort in her warmth, but cautiously, always holding back.

Against a brick wall, in the rain, the night train passing, Angela's hair blowing, her hand gripping the sleeve of his jacket, she was wild. When she finally released him, he let her put her face into his chest and he could tell by her breathing that she was crying. He let her cry as he warmed his hands in her hair. When it passed and he was able to make her laugh again, they picked up their bags and walked to the bus stop, separated because Angela was sure that her father spied on her. Steven sensed that she was dangerous, and so he kept his distance.

Often, Steven caught Angela giving him long looks, as though she was watching him through a window.

They were both in their final year at the university when they met. He had first noticed her in the library, then he later spotted her in different places on campus. Steven noticed that she was alone most of the time. In the student centre, he looked out the long wall of windows as he sat back on the couch in the upstairs lounge. He watched her walk from the buildings on the far side of the campus, up toward the library, the snowflakes melting in her hair.

It seemed that Angela was engulfed in a cloud of sadness, and so it amazed him to watch how she transformed herself for him, to watch how she turned her sadness into exhilarating and shameful desire.

One night Angela had called him from a street corner telephone. She was shaken, he could hear it in her voice.

"Steven?"

"Yeah?"

"Talk to me?" she said.

Steven felt a tingling sensation run up his spine. Stretching the telephone cord, he leaned against the door frame of his bedroom. Down the hall, Steven could hear voices in the den, where his parents were watching the late night news on television. His brother passed him in the hallway, giving Steven a playful jab in the side.

It seemed Angela's shaky voice was worlds away from him. He sighed heavily.

"What're you doing wondering the streets alone late at night?"

He knew Angela had caught the tone of irritation in his voice because she waited a moment before she answered. "I have nowhere to go," she said.

Instead of feeling sympathy, Steven felt disgust. So this was it. She was throwing herself on his mercy. Angela, studious and serious, controlled, then wild, was trying to take him over. He warded her off.

"Angie. It's late. Go home."

The next time he saw her, Angela was back to her usual, taunting self. She laughed at his sluggish study habits, teased him because he couldn't concentrate. When she took

him away again to one of her dark havens, Steven reassured himself that all was well.

That summer, after she had finished all her courses, written all the exams, Angela jumped from the top of a building and she died.

It was Steven's mother who had seen the picture in the newspaper first. There was no name, just a picture and a story. "A young woman," the newspaper had called her.

"Look at this," Steven's mother had remarked. "The car got all dented." She had never met Angela so she had no way of knowing who the girl in the picture was.

Angela had fallen onto the hood of a car below. Her face was turned to one side, one arm flung across her waist, the other, bent at the elbow, rested by her face. There was no trace of blood. It was crazy, but Angela looked like she was sleeping. The metal of the car was raised up around her in smooth curves like a huge plush pillow.

Steven had scornfully clipped the photograph from the newspaper because it didn't belong there with the stories of politicians' wranglings. He couldn't bear to see it among the newspapers in the pile on the kitchen table. Angela's death, on display, for the world to see. "So this is Angela," his father and his brother would say.

He had folded the picture and slipped it into his wallet, where he left it for years. The newsprint faded and the paper yellowed and became embrittled at the folds. He

had tried to throw it out whenever he cleaned out his wallet, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. So he left it there to crumble, bit by bit.

"I don't know why you always get attached to such crazy girls," Steven's mother had remarked, shaking her head in disapproval.

Steven had figured that it was after Angela died that things started going downhill for him. But now, looking down at this girl he had found in a bar a few hours ago, not far from Laura, he thought that maybe he had been running all along. He had run from Angela.

He thought of how he had passed through people's lives, unaffected by them. He passed through them quietly, trying not to upset them on his way.

In the early morning dusk, Steven looked at Cindy, and he saw that maybe she wasn't so young after all. There was a small scar across one leg. Could it be a knife scar? Her face, even in sleep, seemed hardened. Maybe it was from having spent too many nights sleeping by the river, Steven thought, with a faint sense of pity for her.

He got up, found his shirt and walked toward the water. He splashed some onto his face and tasted its coolness on his lips. He saw a fish moving swiftly just below the surface. He had an urge to touch it, just to feel its smooth, silvery body quivering in his hands, then to let it go, watch it swim away to safety.

As the fish disappeared downstream, Steven had an idea. He opened his wallet and carefully pulled out the crumbling photograph of Angela. He took out all the pieces that had fallen away. He held them in his hand, and closed his fingers around them. Then he held his hand out to the water and let the pieces fall into the river. He watched them spread apart as the water washed over them, and carried them off downstream.

Steven drove Cindy into town, where she lived with her mother and her sister. He hadn't told her why he had come here, or about Laura and their baby. He watched the girl walk unsteadily up the path and onto the little wood porch that encircled the house. It occurred to Steven that it probably would not have surprised her. That if Steven was to walk into the Honey Bee Motel one night with Laura, Cindy would greet him, serve their drinks, unflinching, as she would any other customer.

In the daylight, the house where Steven hoped to find Laura looked old, in need of repair. He drove down the path that cut through the pasture and stopped a few yards away from the house. A dog came bounding out from around back. It stood by the car, barking, until an elderly woman-- Laura's mother?--opened the front door and called the dog away. Partly from nerves, and partly from hunger, Steven felt a gnawing sensation in his stomach. He wasn't sure if Laura would turn him away. What would he say to her?

Leaving the front door open, the old woman stepped off the porch. As she moved away from the door, Steven saw that someone was standing in the doorway. It was Laura. She moved out onto the porch, the little girl at her side. Laura scooped up the little girl, holding her up on her hip.

Laura's mother approached the car. "What do you want, young man?"

Laura had recognized him. Steven saw that. She stood on the porch watching, waiting. He felt relieved that he had found her, but at the same time, afraid of what was to come.

"Are you lost?" Laura's mother tried again.

"No, I'm not lost," he answered impatiently.

Steven stepped out of his car, his head buzzing, his heart pumping fast, as after a long, hard run. He straightened himself up. Dizzy with hunger and fatigue, he walked past the old woman and up to Laura and his daughter, standing on the porch. He was thinking that even if they turned him away, he had to let them know, he had to show them that he had stopped running.

BLUE SKY, OPEN ROAD

Cecilia had been meaning to break up with David, but every time she tried, something got in the way. Actually, the problem was that Cecilia didn't know what to say to him. There was nothing she had to say that David didn't already know. So what was the point?

David was ten years older than Cecilia. He was also married and had two children, a boy and a girl. He never talked about his wife, although her name slipped out now and again, almost accidentally, when he told stories about his kids. Cecilia held back the questions that came up in her mind while David told his stories. They were the obvious questions, like: what was he doing hanging out in bars when he had a family at home? and how many others had there been before Cecilia? Cecilia never asked David these questions because she figured he either didn't know the answer or he would lie.

Every couple of weeks or so, David stopped in at Bar Six, where Cecilia worked the seven-to-two shift. Rudy, the manager of Bar Six, knew about David and Cecilia. He didn't like it, but he stayed out of it, except for that one time

when he took Cecilia aside, just before closing time.

"This isn't good, C.C.," he said. He waited for her to answer, but she didn't.

Cecilia knew that Rudy was just trying to be a nice guy, but he was the last person on earth you'd expect to find judging anyone.

"O.K." Rudy nodded. "I'm not telling you what to do, awright?" he said, raising his hands up to show that he was backing off. That was the first and last time Rudy mentioned anything about it, which was fine with Cecilia because she had her own built-in lectures and guilt trip every time David left her apartment. Jesus, what was she supposed to do? Ask him to make up his mind? She laughed at herself for being audacious enough to think that it was a matter of choice.

One night, David sat at the bar, watching Cecilia mix drinks. Usually, he walked around a bit, talking with people he knew, or he would go into the games room for a while, come back, finish a drink, and walk around some more. David didn't like to look worried, so he mingled a lot.

"Everything O.K.?" Cecilia asked.

"Peachy," he answered with half a smile.

Cecilia nodded and turned away, thinking that maybe David would spare her from having to break up with him and he would dump her instead. She saw him watching her as she moved around the counter, picking up glasses, checking for

empties, and wiping off spills. David's elbows rested on the counter, his shoulders hunched as he stared at the glass in front of him.

When he saw Cecilia coming toward him, he straightened himself up and waved his hand, motioning her to come closer. He extended his arm over the counter and leaned his face toward her ear. She smelled the shampoo in his hair, which was still damp from the shower he had taken before leaving the fire station.

"Let's go somewhere," he said, taking her hand, threading his fingers through hers.

"Where do you want to go?" she asked.

"The sky's the limit?" he asked.

So, he wasn't going to dump her after all, not yet. "That's up to you, Chief," she answered, brushing her finger over his lips. Then she moved away to reach for an empty glass across the counter.

David stood up and signalled like he was dialling a telephone to let her know that he would call her later.

There were times when Cecilia was taken by what she thought of as an intense state of inertia. Mostly it happened when she was alone. It wasn't boredom or laziness. It felt more like she was leaving her body, as though she was suspended in mid-air, watching from far up, out of reach and unable to change the things she looked down at. Nothing moved, everything was quiet, except for the sound of a clock

ticking somewhere.

Cecilia had first noticed these lapses about five years ago, when she moved away from home to live with her friend, Susan. Susan lived in an old, run-down triplex on a block lined with row houses that had spiralling metal staircases that shook whenever someone climbed up or down. At night, Cecilia heard the thumping of footsteps and the entire staircase vibrating as the girl who lived upstairs went off to work. Unable to sleep, Cecilia would lie in bed staring through the darkness, battling fear, waiting for something in the night to strike out at her.

Many times, Susan came home from a late-night class and found Cecilia on the living room couch half dazed with fatigue. There were sections of the newspaper, which she had read and re-read, scattered around her.

"Oh, oh. It's another lethargy attack," Susan joked. She would collect the newspaper and neatly pile it on the table. Then like an older sister, she would kiss Cecilia on the temple. "Come on, Ceil, off to bed."

When Susan graduated from university, she moved to Ontario, then moved again to Halifax, and now she was talking about going west. Between Ontario and Halifax, Susan had been married. She had a baby and got divorced a year later.

"Everyone knew he was screwing around," she told Cecilia on the telephone. Then, in her anger, Susan told

her things about Max that Cecilia didn't want to know.

"Cried like a baby when he finally realized that he'd really fucked up and I wasn't going to put up with it," she said, with a chuckle in her voice. She paused a moment. Cecilia heard Susan's baby in the background, banging a toy against a table or on the floor, making a quick and sharp sound. Clack, clack, clack.

"So, what's new with you?" Susan asked.

"Same old stuff." Cecilia didn't tell Susan about David.

David called Cecilia on a warm summer morning, a few days after he had stopped in at Bar Six. "Let's take off," he said. "We'll go for a drive in the country."

By now, Cecilia took for granted that, wife or no wife, part of David belonged to her. As long as Cecilia believed that she and David were happy together she felt less guilty about being with him. David never spoke about guilt but Cecilia felt it in his mood swings.

They brought along a thermos of coffee and ate doughnuts for breakfast as they headed south to the border, where they crossed into New York State.

The Customs officer was a man about David's age. He sat on a stool, one hand holding a clipboard, the other relaxed on his thigh. He seemed to have a good angle of view from where he was sitting and he didn't have to lean

forward to look into their car. He wore dark glasses, so Cecilia wasn't sure who he was looking at as he ran the routine questions by David. Then at the end of the questioning, as though trying to catch David in a lie, he nodded toward Cecilia. "That your wife or your girlfriend?"

David was caught off-guard. He faltered for a second and looked at Cecilia, but in a moment he recovered and turned to him with a wide grin.

"You're outta here," the officer said, coolly.

"Uppity little bastard," David said as he drove away, a smile still on his lips.

They drove on in silence. They were the only ones on the road, except for a truck or a car that would pass them now and again. The sky was like a clear and vast ocean. It was hypnotizing. They passed through hills and valleys where cows grazed in pastures, soundlessly, their movements so slow it was like driving through a post card.

"Yes, sir," David exclaimed. "Blue sky and lots of open road. That's all you need," he said.

Cecilia smiled at him, but David's words played themselves over and over in her mind like a nagging question, a difficult riddle. Just what was it that she needed? And so she was stuck again, suspended in her scattered thoughts.

Stories of the past surfaced in bits and pieces in Cecilia's dreams, or in flashes during the day. The details

were scattered, lost in her subconscious, partially forgotten. No one could verify the facts for her; everyone had been left behind.

David must have sensed that he was losing her again because he slid his hand across the seat and under her skirt. He tangled his fingers in her underwear, weaving them in and out of the material in soothing strokes, teasing her.

"Isn't this illegal?" she said, laughing.

David glanced at her, then up at the rear view mirror. "I'm watching," he said, keeping the car steady with his left hand while with his right hand he found his way inside her.

Cecilia gasped and she saw David glance up at the mirror again. She took hold of his arm. They were being reckless, but Cecilia didn't want to stop him. David turned to look at her, to see how she was doing, or rather, to see how he was doing. That was what he was really checking for. This was David's fantasy, she thought, and so she abandoned herself to it easily because there was nothing holding her back. So what? she thought. So why not?

Cecilia remembered stories her mother used to tell about Italy, where she grew up. As Cecilia and her sisters grew older, her mother's stories often were about young women in the old country. Ma meant the stories as warnings, as lessons to Cecilia and her sisters.

Sometimes there was an unmarried girl who got pregnant because she had been left alone somewhere--walking home from the olive fields, or in the barn tending to the animals. In Ma's stories a man would come along and, the way Ma told it, he forced himself on the girl. "He did what he wanted to her," Ma would say, with a firm nod of her head. The man was forced to marry the girl even though it was known that he was a squandering drunk. The whole town talked about how miserable the girl's life was, and all because she had been careless enough to be walking home alone.

Ma told of fathers who beat their daughters, in public, sometimes, to shame them. Women were locked into closets for days at a time, or tied up in cellars, their hair shaved off for punishment.

"My father just had to look at us, and we shook with fright," Ma said, making fists with her hands and shaking her head to show them fear. But Ma's stories were ancient. Back then, when she told them, Cecilia felt that her mother spoke of things that would never touch her. Yet, the stories stayed in her memory; her mother's fists, her head shaking, her eyes closed in fear. Could it be that her mother had made-up these stories?

In the car, David had pulled his hand away. It rested on his leg. Cecilia took it up and raised it to her face, smelling on his finger tips the scent of her own body. David gave her hand a little squeeze and he looked at her a

moment. He was comfortable now.

From the start, Cecilia had seen a cruel cynicism in David. He was hurt, she told herself. He felt cheated out of something and whatever it was, he was trying to get it back. "You've got to be happy," she once told him. David regarded her with cold and cutting eyes, then turned his gaze away from her. He had hurt her, but David had a point, Cecilia thought. What right did she have to console him with the possibility of happiness? To David she was just a girl, a twenty-three year old girl. How dare she pretend to know pain?

They had been driving for over an hour when David turned onto a gravel paved road that wound upward through a wooded area. He turned the engine off, looked at Cecilia and, without speaking, they both stepped out into the warmth of the morning sun. Cecilia walked with him up the path. On the right the forest stretched out and upward. On the left there was a steep decline into more forest below. The silence all around them was broken only by the chirping of birds, nearby, or deeper in the woods. David walked steadily, looking up ahead into the forest. It seemed he had been here before. She wanted to ask him, but Cecilia was spooked by the silence in the dense forest and she was afraid that David would tell her he had dreamed of this place, or that long ago he had lost someone here. This was a place where a person could easily get lost.

David extended his hand to her and led her down the side of the mountain. The dense forest surrounded them from above and below so that it seemed they were descending into the tree tops. Twigs and pebbles rolled into Cecilia's sandals, jabbing her feet. She got dizzy looking down and so she kept her eyes on David's feet as he carefully chose his step, testing his footing first. Cecilia followed him unquestioningly. Her only worry was that David had better not fall.

They finally stopped on a flat slab of rock that had not been visible from the top. David helped her down and they stood facing each other. He smiled proudly, as though he had just shown her into their home, and so Cecilia felt safe again.

She walked to the edge and looked out at the horizon of pointed tree tops that spread out before them and below them. It seemed they were suspended on a cushion of greenery and no harm could possibly come to them here. She thought of her sister, Angela, who, five years ago, had killed herself by jumping from the rooftop of a high rise apartment building. Cecilia hadn't told David this story. She remembered her mother and father talking between themselves, questioning what Angela was doing up there anyway. What had driven her there? They talked as though her death had been something less than suicide; an accident, or maybe a punishment. For what? Cecilia wondered.

David came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. He held her to him tightly.

"You wanna jump?" he said in a hushed tone, inviting, teasing death.

"Do you?" she countered, playing the game, David's game.

David didn't answer. He enclosed her in his body and walked her backwards, away from the edge. She felt the tip of his nose and lips just barely brush the skin of her neck. He pressed his hand over her heart, holding it so still against her racing pulse that it felt she would burst. She released a helpless cry and David moved his hands over and under her clothing as it fell from her piece by piece like shedding skin. They stood naked, exposed, carelessly perched on the mountain side, above shame and guilt and fear. No one would dare to touch them.

It was afterwards, when they were back in the car, moving through the stillness of the country, that Cecilia felt the familiar void inside her, as when David would leave her, alone in her apartment, tousled and guilt-ridden, craving him all the more. She turned the radio on loudly, singing out, foolishly, enjoying herself, faking it, grappling with the emptiness that threatened to overtake her, as it had taken her sister.

They drove into a town where they stopped for lunch in a small diner. It was well after one o'clock but some

townspeople lingered over cups of coffee. When David and Cecilia walked in, the other customers regarded them with suspicious, sidelong glances. They were large, rough-faced men and women. Their motions, as they drank from the stained coffee cups, suggested that they had nothing to hide. They were relaxed, honest, working people, taking time out, contemplating the work that lay ahead of them. Cecilia felt out of place here.

David slid into a booth. He sat back and lit a cigarette.

There was just one waitress in the restaurant. When she came to take their order she gave David knowing, scornful looks. "I know what you're up to," she seemed to be saying. But she was playful with him, rough and playful. She was a large woman, as Cecilia's mother had been. Cecilia saw that she was confident, comfortable with her size. When she had finished with David, she turned to Cecilia and took her order as though Cecilia was invisible. Then she smiled at David and waddled away toward the kitchen.

"Well, things could be worse, Dave. You could have been married to that," Cecilia said, spitefully.

David didn't laugh. He gave her a quick, calculating look, raised his eyebrows in disinterest and turned his face to the window.

It was on a warm summer day like today, five years ago, that Cecilia's sister died. Cecilia remembered how, that evening, she had arrived home from the Bagel Basket, where she worked with Susan. As she walked down her street that night, she noticed that her oldest sister's car was parked across from their house. She found this odd, as it was a Wednesday and Amelia rarely visited in the middle of the week. Their front door, which in the summer was usually left open and unlocked, was closed. The yellow lawn chair her father sat on after supper had been brought inside--a sign that her father was in for the night, although his truck wasn't in the driveway. Cecilia sensed that something was not right. Already, it was too quiet.

Inside, the kitchen light shone through the hallway. Ma, Amelia and her husband, Frankie, were in the den. It was dark. No one had bothered to turn the lamp on. In the shadows, Cecilia saw that her mother's face was puffy from crying. She sat on one end of the couch, her elbow propped up on the arm rest. Her hand was closed tightly around a rumpled Kleenex. Ma turned her face into that hand, hiding herself from Amelia and Frankie, who watched her helplessly, waiting.

Frankie sat forward in the armchair. His elbows rested on his knees, his hands folded one into the other, the way men pray in church. He hung his head and glanced up at Amelia from time to time, then stared down at his feet

again.

Amelia sat on the couch, her body turned to face Ma. She had a hand on Ma's shoulder as though to comfort her. Cecilia could see the tension in her sister's body. It was a forced gesture and Ma leaned away from it. Still, Amelia kept her hand on Ma's shoulder. It looked cold and heavy, unwanted.

They all had turned when Cecilia came into the house, but no one spoke. Frankie looked at Amelia as if to ask her a question. Amelia looked at Ma, and Ma turned her face into her clenched hand. She let out a heavy sigh. They turned away from Cecilia, as though to dismiss her. Then it struck her that something had happened with Angela. Her first thought was that maybe Angela had finally left. That after all those nights of Simone cornering her in the hallway as she came home from school, finally, Angela had saved herself.

Maria, the youngest, appeared in the hallway. She stood in the light of the kitchen. Maria's hair was up in a towel, her bathrobe wrapped around her. She had just come out of the shower. She was preparing herself for something, Cecilia thought. She was the practical one. It was Maria who told Cecilia about Angela.

In their bedroom, Maria spoke quietly, using few words and broken sentences. "Angela's dead," she said in a voice so raspy it was almost a whisper.

Cecilia felt a muscle in her leg move. Then a chill rose up through her. In her mind, she repeated Maria's words, measured them, testing the truth in them.

Cecilia used to fantasize that one day she and her sisters would band together and leave their father's house. It was a childish fantasy that she escaped to over the cries of her sister and the smacking sound of their father's belt. Cecilia would sit in her bed, her stomach nervously churning, while she made a list in her mind of all the things they would need and how much it would cost. It was organized in her mind. She had divided it into two parts, one for things that were essential and one for things they could do without.

Cecilia held on to this fantasy, running it over and over in her mind, waiting for the whipping to stop because no one had dared to stop Simone.

When Angela finally came into the room, Cecilia lay in her bed holding her breath, wishing she could disappear into the darkness because she was filled with shame and guilt for not having the courage to interfere. She could hear Angela's shaky breathing as she moved in the dark. Angela put her school bag down by the desk between their beds, then fumbled through a drawer, looking for a nightgown. Cecilia saw that even in the darkness, Angela's head hung low in shame.

One night, Cecilia got up and went to sit on the floor

by her sister's bed.

"Angela," she called.

Her sister breathed in. She was listening.

"Make him stop," Cecilia whispered.

"I can't," Angela answered after a moment. Her face was partially covered with the blankets. She had always, as long as Cecilia could remember, slept this way; with her back to the wall and securely bundled beneath the covers.

"I'm scared," Cecilia said into the darkness.

"I know," Angela answered. "Shh, go to sleep."

"Do you know what they say about you when you're not here?"

"Who says?"

"Him and Ma."

"No," Angela said. "And I don't want to hear. Go to bed now. It's O.K."

"They don't believe you, Angie," Cecilia said. "They think you're up to God knows what."

"Shh."

"He checks up on you, the way he used to check up on Amelia."

"Quiet," Angela said impatiently. Then she turned her back to the room.

From her bed, Cecilia heard Angela breathing back tears. She wanted to comfort her but she didn't know how. All she could think of to say was, "I hate him too." She

dared to say this out loud in their darkened room, the three of them silent and angry and scared, always scared.

Soon after her sister died, Cecilia left home. Her mother was in the hallway, flinging her bags at the door, crying obscenities at her. Her father would murder her, Ma threatened. How could she do this to them now, after what Angela had done. Ma said she never wanted to see Cecilia again. She was a whore. Her mother had said that.

Cecilia had expected it. She had expected all of it. She put her bags into the taxi, her face hardened by the determination to do what was necessary. Yet, as they drove out of the neighbourhood and across the city to Susan's place, Cecilia felt a sinking feeling as she understood that she could never go back. She owned two lives now; one had just ended because, to her parents, she was as good as dead.

There were things that Cecilia knew she might never understand; why did Angela die, and why were there so many secrets in their house, and why couldn't she live in the silence any more, and why was it necessary for her family to disown her?

Sleepless nights, Cecilia lay in her bed listening to Susan, in the other room, playing sex games with her boyfriends. Remembering her mother's accusations, Cecilia cried, quietly so as not to disturb her friend in the other room, realizing that although she would never know what it meant to be a whore, the name had already stamped itself in

her because her mother had spoken it.

Months later, Cecilia noticed that her brother, Paolo, was following her. She saw him on the street, near the store where she worked. She saw him in a car parked across the street from where she lived. He waited and watched her. This was her brother, and so she wasn't afraid.

One day, Cecilia looked out the window and saw Paolo again. He drove a different car each time she had seen him, and Cecilia guessed that he still worked at the garage. She took her house keys and went out to meet him. Paolo watched her coming toward him as she crossed the street, but before she could reach him, he started the engine and took off.

After this encounter, Paolo stopped following her. Weeks later, Susan gave Cecilia a note she had found in their mailbox. "This better not be someone's idea of a joke because it isn't funny," she said, nervously handing the note to Cecilia.

There was no envelope. The note was written on onion skin paper, folded several times. There were no names on it. It read: "If you give a damn, your mother's dying."

At her mother's funeral, Cecilia had seen, for the last time, what was left of her family together. She had been the outsider, sitting alone, across from them, the other mourners gossiping over the misfortunes of the Botte family. In the old neighbourhood, Cecilia would be a legend, the exception, as her sister had been before her.

Cecilia saw herself looking at her family as though watching herself in a dream, her heart aching to be visible. She saw that her father was not frightening. He was a sad, aging man. The others were lost, as she was, unsure of how to deal with the situation, unsure of how to deal with her.

Now, here she was, years later, sitting in a dingy restaurant in a tired old town, a hundred miles away from home with a lover she couldn't talk to because she felt he could see through her. Cecilia questioned if the things she remembered had actually happened, if they were dreams, stories she had heard somewhere, or if they were her own fabrications, imagined possibilities, fantasies constructed from fragments of her torn emotions.

"You're not eating?" David said, pointing at the bowl the waitress had put in front of her.

"What is it?"

"Looks like chicken noodle soup," David said.

With her spoon, Cecilia scooped up some noodles. Then with her fingers she picked up a noodle from the spoon, and dangled it in the air, catching drops of broth on her tongue as they slid off the noodle. David watched her, coolly. He saw that other customers and the waitress were staring. When Cecilia offered him the noodle he did not move forward to take it but she saw that he was suppressing a smile. Cecilia dropped the noodle in her mouth, licked her fingers

and, raising her eyebrows to David, she said, "Mmmm. Good."

Heading back home after lunch, they drove through the town, past the general store, past the post office and a few small shops. There were children playing by the road, their tiny feet in sandals, kicking pebbles as they ran. David slowed down, keeping an eye on the kids as he drove by.

On the outskirts of the town, they saw a cemetery behind a small church. David glanced at Cecilia once. He parked in a clearing at the edge of the forest beyond the cemetery. "Wanna go out for a walk?" he said, opening the door, stepping out into the sun.

They walked through the graveyard, stepping around headstones. Cecilia moved off in another direction while David hung back a little, watching her go from headstone to headstone, reading names and dates, the life spans of babies, and mothers and fathers and grandparents. She tried to make connections. "These two were brothers," she called out to David.

David stood yards away from her, behind her. He surveyed the area. Cecilia knew that he was looking for a good spot, a secluded corner.

"I want you," he had told her that first time and every time after that, when she showed remorse for taking him from his family, where she knew he belonged. She gave in but the guilt lingered.

Before Cecilia's mother passed away, Cecilia dreamed that she found Ma sitting in a corner, on the floor of what seemed to be the kitchen of the Bagel Basket. Ma was propped up against a large sack of flour. The floor was dirty. Ma was crying in heaving sobs, her hands resting limply in her lap. She looked like a lost child. Cecilia went to her. She sat down on the floor next to her. In her dream, Cecilia had an uneasy feeling that something was not right. She was scared, but she took her mother in her arms, feeling her weight, the rounded flesh on her shoulders. Cecilia rocked her mother in her arms, smelling the sweet scent in her hair as it had smelled when Cecilia was a child. Ma moved her head and Cecilia could see her face. It was distorted like something evil. Her eyes were wide and glazed with a mixture of fear and anger. Her mouth was slanted in a contemptuous smile. As she moved in Cecilia's arms, she pushed her face forward and spat out, "Putana." She said it in a whispered tone, like something to be known just between her and Cecilia.

Cecilia often thought of that dream. It seemed that centuries had passed since she had been cast out from her family. Her mother had shunned her when she tried to speak with her. She hung up the telephone, slammed the door in her face.

Perhaps her mother had always been a ghost, a ghost from another world that Cecilia had never known, yet she had

lived in its shadows until one summer afternoon, in the city, not far from the university, they had lost Angela somewhere between the old country and the new.

Cecilia sat among the graves. She watched David from a distance, his hands curled into a loose fist. She wondered why he was running from his family. She froze him there, like a picture, soundless. This was David, another life passing through her.

David took her behind the church.

"Out here, in the open?" she protested.

He rocked her in his arms. Cecilia took comfort. But in a moment she was filled with sadness, for herself and for David. Already, she felt the familiar emptiness setting in. Before it took her over, she laughed playfully, in defiance of the ghosts that were haunting her. Then she realized that it didn't matter why David was running, he just was. Cecilia ran with him. They had done well not to talk about the past. There were too many probabilities. The truth was as evasive as the ghosts who possessed it.