



National Library
of Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Canadian Theses Service

Service des thèses canadiennes

Ottawa, Canada
K1A 0N4

NOTICE

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

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

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

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

AVIS

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

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

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

La reproduction, même partielle, de cette microforme est soumise à la Loi canadienne sur le droit d'auteur, SRC 1970, c. C-30, et ses amendements subséquents.

The Family Album

Ken Briscoe

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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

June 1991

© Ken Briscoe, 1991



National Library
of Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Canadian Theses Service Service des thèses canadiennes

Ottawa, Canada
K1A 0N4

The author has granted an irrevocable non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of his/her thesis by any means and in any form or format, making this thesis available to interested persons.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in his/her thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without his/her permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence irrévocable et non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de sa thèse de quelque manière et sous quelque forme que ce soit pour mettre des exemplaires de cette thèse à la disposition des personnes intéressées.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège sa thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

ISBN 0-315-68757-6

Canada

ABSTRACT

The Family Album

Ken Briscoe

This collection of stories explores the imprint of the family and its patterns on individuals.

The persistence of this imprint is examined from the viewpoint of individuals who have internalized these habitual forms.

As well, the textural and informative intrusions of media and technology on human relationships and perceptions are considered.

The incongruity of image and experience, the projected family image versus the individual's experience of the family, the isolation of the individual and the struggle for individuation, underlie many of the stories.

Table of Contents

Down Time	1
The Dark Forest	16
Last Stop	20
Requiem	29
Fine Lines	34
Lost & Found	39
Typecast	56
Breakfast	61
Wedding	67
The Widow's Tale	72
The Birds	81

DOWN TIME

My name is Greg Warren. I'm fourteen years old. My brother Bobby is nineteen. He's a really quiet guy, and kind of intense. I think he's a really great guy but he just got put into electro-sedation at the William T. Barnum Hospital out on the South Shore. That's sort of bad news.

My parents didn't really explain what happened. They always do that. It's as if they think I'm too young, whatever that's supposed to mean, like you'd think being young was some kind of infirmity to hear them tell it, either that or else maybe they just don't understand what happened and they're trying to pretend they do. Anyhow, it must be hot if they're making such a big deal out of it.

They tried to keep it hush-hush but I knew there was something brewing when dad suddenly got a big project at work. They never offer him a big project at work but whenever there's trouble at home, he finds something to keep him away.

They wouldn't tell me what the police said on the phone so I've been trying to piece it all together. I strongly suspect it's got something to do with this newspaper clipping I found in mom's room.

MONTREAL. A bizarre turn of events yesterday on the banks of the St. Lawrence river left five people dead and several

others in a state of shock.

Around 9:30 a.m., Len Potemkin, a local resident, heard the sound of someone hammering, followed by a scream. Potemkin went to his front window to investigate and found a crowd gathered around a large elm tree on the river bank adjacent to his property.

Potemkin, astonished when arriving at the tree, said he saw "a fireman, definitely not a local boy, up in the tree, nailing a skinny young girl to the large elm".

The girl, 18 year-old Maria Fatima, apparently offered no resistance whatsoever to what experts have dubbed "a sexuoreligious travesty-ritual".

The firefighter/crucifier, Bud "Sparks" Logan, reportedly did not know the girl. "I'm not sure what got into me," he said later in an exclusive interview with channel 12, "but whatever it was it was powerful. I felt like I was on remote

control or something."

Logan, a Montreal fireman had been encouraged by his supervisor, Ernest Lovewit, to consider voluntary burn-out therapy in a city psycho-reform centre.

Fatima was reportedly involved in a psychic love triangle with Montrealers, Robert Warren and Sue Reznicki. According to sources, the trio had attended seances with a channel named Tango, during which they contacted the spirit of Fatima's father, a former Montreal firefighter, and one-time boxer.

The incident was further complicated by the unexpected approach of an Alfa-Romeo, travelling at approximately 150 kilometres per hour which inexplicably turned off the small country road and headed straight for the crowded elm tree. Twenty people were hurt in the rush to clear the way for the oncoming car but most of the injuries were minor.

The occupants of the car, two middle-aged men and a young woman who has been identified as one man's daughter, were killed instantly when the speeding car hit its target.

Police are not ruling out the possibility of a group suicide or a murder/suicide or even a group murder.

"It's a tough one to call," said Constable Michael McGarr. "Given the data we have to work with, I guess anything is possible, but it is strangely reminiscent of the rash of 'performance art' deaths we saw last year."

CBS has bought exclusive rights to the story.

Now that I look at this clipping again, I'm even more convinced than ever that his 'psycho' relationship with this Fatima person has something to do with Bobby's getting sent in. Kids get put into electro-sedation so easily nowadays, for all kinds of stuff. Someone told me the other day in school that they can send you in for flunking your morality and

ethics course, just to sort of perk up your attitude a little.

Anyway, my mom decided to go visit Bobby and insisted that the whole family had to go along.

Wow, what a reaction.

Juliet, my sister, was horrified. She was so embarrassed about Bobby getting sent in because one of her snooty friends went and told everybody. Now, the whole snoot-set is avoiding her like the plague. What a joke! I actually thought it was kind of cool that he got sent in. Electro-sedation is big prestige in school. He'll be a hero when he gets out.

Juliet just can't think long-term.

Of course, when my mom mentioned us visiting Bobby, my dad said he was too busy at work to go, but my mom said it was the least he could do and that it was more important than his logical object extensions project at work. He got kind of steamed at that. Well, as steamed as he gets, which is about as hot as a 1289 motherboard about to reach nirvana. That reminds me, I was querying a really exclusive access object file about the origins of the word nirvana - I thought I'd look it up and impress the info-creeps at school; they use it all the time but haven't got the loosest notion of what it means. Then, whammo-bango, out of nowhere, my snoop detection software started flying all over the screen. The dogs were trying to tap my line. For a query like that? I couldn't believe it. So, I figure this word is really hot.

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get any information on it before I had to cut loose since the snoops were bearing down on me, hard and fast. I could practically smell their electric breath.

Anyway, there we were, my mom and dad, myself and Juliet, wandering through the Barnum trying to find the electro-sedation wing. My father finally gets a big brainstorm: maybe he'll access the main help screen in the lobby for a block diagram of the building. Someone once told me it actually feels good to get hit on the head with a baseball bat. Apparently, it releases some kind of chemicals in your system that really feel good. I guess the key is to not get hit too hard. Anyway, I guess I thought of that because I was looking at my dad and wondering if he's ever felt anything.

When we finally found the viewing room, I couldn't believe the crowds. There was one family -- they must have been disillusionists or something -- you could smell them half-way across the hall.

Lining up to wait for a screen to become available was really exponential. Now that I think about it, there wasn't even any music. What a bore!

They were using the latest Virtual Vector Displays with interlaced chroma extrapolation enhancers. I couldn't believe it. They're the greatest displays for kissing the rainbow, you know, when you get your head up really close to the display and it arcs. Wow! It's a really smooth charge with VVDs, the

load is awesome, if you can afford it. These hospitals obviously could afford them. And to think that the government kept saying there was no money for space exploration. What a joke! They could close down this wing and send the whole damn thing off into space if they wanted to. Governments! What a bore!

Anyway, it was really weird when Bob's face popped up on the nine-by-six VVD screen. It didn't look like Bobby knew we were there. His head was slumped to one side and he was picking his nose and yawning at the same time. So, there's this giant head picking its giant nose for this bunch of good citizens to see.

Nice one, Bob.

Juliet was dying.

"Hello, Robert!" mom said, trying to get his attention, but the giant head just kept picking. They had probably forgotten to patch in the audio or something. Bobby started coughing, a real bad fit. I wondered if they let him smoke. He was so wired. Suddenly the audio kicked in and the giant head exploded with sound. All the daytrippers in the viewing room looked to see what was happening on our screen.

Bobby looked pretty groggy.

"Robert," my mom called out, "can you hear me?"

Bobby squinted as he stared into the viewer.

"Mom?" he said, "is that you?"

"Yes dear," she replied.

"Oh, hey, how's it goin'" he said, his eyes drifting all over the place.

"I'm fine, son." she said. "Are they taking good care of you."

"Oh yeah," Bobby said, wrestling with a major cough. "Yeah, it's just great here. Everything's really great."

"Now, Robert, darling," she said, "remember they're just trying to help you to get better."

"Oh, yeah, mom. No sweat, I'm doing great."

"We just want you to come home as soon as possible," mom said. She didn't know what to say but you gotta give her points for trying. At least she gave it a shot.

My dad, on the other hand, piped in his usual non-sequiturs. I picked up 'non-sequiturs' on the classics computer and thought of dad as soon as I read the definition. I'll give it a shot at school on Monday.

After an eternity of awkwardness, the viewer finally began flashing the thirty-seconds warning and sure as silicon, thirty seconds later Bob's enormous head disappeared. I thought, maybe, they would have had him zoom off or rotate maybe, like a vortex effect or something really cool like that.

"Well," my dad said, making his way to the elevator, "I feel our interview with Robert was very successful."

What crap! An interview? Abstracting objects had finally fried his brain. Actually, I read an article on people who

spend too much time abstracting, and it seems it can definitely cause a certain amount of brain damage. There's some kind of chemical generated when you substitute an abstracted object in your mind for a tangible object. This chemical -- don't quote me on this -- literally rots your brain, it's some kind of amino acid or something.

Predictably, my mom said: "Robert looks like he lost weight!"

"It's the lighting, Mom," Juliet explained, "too much backlight, not enough key! We're doing lighting now in our media courses."

"It's true, Juliet, those deep shadows under his eyes must have been from the overhead light!" mom said, trying her best to believe it.

"That's it, Mom!" Juliet said in her usual obnoxious voice. Actually, she sounded like someone talking very loud inside a sealed can. Her voice would just kind of ring in your head without you ever being able to make out the words. Weird!

"But can't they do something about it?" mom said. She was trying to find an issue to gravitate towards.

"Be reasonable, Audrey," dad said, "they can't be running around fine-tuning the lighting on each of the sets. Look how many people there are in here. You'd need a huge crew to do that."

Globally pragmatic!

We were just about to get in the elevator when a doctor

walked up to dad and introduced himself:

"I'm Dr. Maurice Kronski," he said, "I believe you're Mr. Warren."

"Yes, I believe I am too," dad said. Cool, dad. Kronski was totally non-plussed -- that's from the nineteen-fifties, I think, the college students then came up with that one; they were into swallowing goldfish and, get this: stuffing themselves into telephone booths. Talk about radical.

Dr. Kronski continued on his mission:

"I'm taking care of young Robert," Dr. Kronski explained, "I just wanted to let you know that he's responding very well to the new treatment."

"What is the new treatment," dad asked.

"It's really such a simple process. I'm surprised nobody thought of it before," Dr. Kronski said, pretty thrilled with himself. "It works like this," he said, unfolding his arms for effect, "The candidate is isolated on his set and, most of the time, he is in the non-voluntary entertainment mode. During this time the videos are running. They are specially edited shows supplied by STV, you know, the Sitcom Network. STV supplies the shows to us with no commercials. That way, the client has to stay focused on the primary message, there are no commercial diversions. In this way, he or she, as the case may be, is exposed to acceptable social norms in a humorous setting. It's all quite gentle, and our success rate is very high."

"That really is quite simple, isn't it, Audrey?"

"Oh yes. But isn't the lighting a little cruel?" mom said.

"Well, I admit we haven't worked out all of the logistics on the lighting, but we have some consultants coming in from L.A. and if anyone can do something with the lighting it's them," Dr. Kronski replied, smiling tightly.

"That's excellent!" dad said.

"Dr. Kronski," mom asked, "what were those marks on young Robert's head?"

"What marks do you mean?" Dr. Kronski asked.

"You know," she said, "where the hair is shaved around his temples?"

"Oh those marks! Don't worry, Mrs. Warren," Doctor Kronski said, "That's just where we tie-in for direct transmissions."

"What's that?"

"It's a new technique we're testing, using the new C4488 technology. This amazing new chip provides us with a virtual interface to the peripheral device, in this case, your son Bobby. This, in effect, allows us to warm boot his I.S., you know, his Information Structure."

"That's amazing," father added, " I didn't realize what a versatile chip the C4488 was."

"Really, Mr. Warren, it has truly come into its own."

"And can it receive data as well?" dad asked.

"Absolutely. We monitor the data returned from the peripheral device," he turned to mom, "your son, Mrs. Warren," then he turned back to dad, "and we are then able to use this information to adjust such things as the duration of the data dialogue -- we like to call them interviews," he added with a smile then waited for a reaction.

Dad's face was a study in motionlessness and mom's too, so Dr. Kronski continued.

"Since we can synchronously monitor the output of the interface and the video/audio data, we can automatically detect a sympathetic event. We look for a 2000 millisecond or less reaction time. In other words, as Bobby is viewing one of the classic situation comedies we use in our database, our computer is waiting for a peak experience from Bobby. If the peak experience comes, the computer documents the time, intensity, and stress-quality of the experience. In the software we are able to set specific thresholds. If the threshold is met or surpassed the computer then counter checks the moral validity of the experience. To do this it compares the frame number of the video to a morality look-up table, which is a simple code for the appropriate response for that portion of video."

"That's really quite incredible." dad said.

Doctor Kronski continued, "what's more, it does all of this in one one-thousandth of a second."

"Well, my lord," said mom, "when I think of those old

C2288s we use to work with, the mind just boggles."

"But what do you do once you get the reaction you're looking for?" Juliet asked.

"Well, yes," said Dr. Kronski, "Let me continue," he said, swallowing so hard that I thought he was going to choke, "When an appropriate sympathetic response is detected, an external monitoring device begins beeping at 10-second intervals and the video playback initiates a loop of the sequence that triggered the response. This sequence will then keep repeating until an orderly or doctor has time to respond to the alarm. The orderly or doctor then observes the physical aspects of the reaction: is Bobby laughing or crying? We still have a bug in the program around that. The serial protocol isn't able to transmit that data for some reason but we're working on it now," he said with his head a little lower than before. "Nevertheless," he added, "we like the human touch of having someone actually there, monitoring."

Bullshit!

"But I don't understand what this does for Bobby?" Juliet said in her naturally obnoxious way.

"Well, young lady, what it does for your brother is precisely this: once we accumulate enough sympathetic events, we compile them, a greatest hits collection if you will, and then the computer is able to play back just those specific sequences for Bobby in rapid succession. In effect what we do is cultivate Bobby's good feelings, the things that make him

laugh and cry, and we simply ignore his bad feelings, the things that make him angry and violent."

"How long does this usually take?" mom asked.

"As long as it takes, Mrs. Warren," Dr. Kronski said, managing to create an extraordinary number of wrinkles on his forehead. "A case like Bobby may take two or three weeks from the time we identify and program a compilation of his sympathetic events, his greatest hits, if you will. Once we start playing the sequence to him, it will stay on twenty-four hours a day. That way, even in his sleep, he'll be benefitting from this gentle encouragement."

Doctor Kronski looked victorious.

Everybody except Dad seemed a little numb from his explanation. Mom looked like she was wondering what she should make for supper but I could tell by the look on dad's face that he was going to ask another question, so I jumped in with the first thing I thought of:

"Gee, this must keep you really busy, Dr. Kronski," I said.

Not too imaginative but apparently imaginative enough for this guy.

"Well, actually, I'm looking at my watch and I just remembered an appointment I have for eleven-thirty," he said.

"I'm really quite thrilled, knowing my son is getting this kind of technically superior care," dad said, sounding like a public service announcement.

"Thank you, Dr. Kronski!" mom said, balancing the relative merits of tofu loaf and veggie-pizza.

The crowds had thinned out a little. We walked slowly to the elevators. I kept thinking about Bobby's nine-by-six head picking its nose.

Nice one, Bob!

THE DARK FOREST

The Dark Forest is a hall of mirrors, a maze of soul-destroying questions, a trauma-drenched playground where egos wander like homeless waifs, waiting to be saved by thirsty vampires.

In the Dark Forest, Helga lives in the basement. Her son Peter lives upstairs with his pregnant girl-friend.

It's a well concealed fact that formality breeds contempt, but it's an important fact to keep in mind while negotiating the twists and turns of the Dark Forest.

Helga hates all human beings, herself included, and her daily struggle is to release enough anger to keep herself alive. There is a simple logic to her subconscious philosophy. It goes something like this: if I hate everyone in the world, I am free to engage anyone as the victim of my psychic violence. My children, my neighbours, the unsuspecting shop-owner, all must yield to my compulsion!

Abandon hope all ye who make eye contact with me!

Helga, the night stalker, reigns supreme in her domain. This dark forest is so dark that her son Peter often walks right into the trees, appearing very clumsy to Helga.

This darkness is so dark that even Peter's words are darkened, appearing meaningless and jumbled to all who are only visitors to this nocturnal land. Not even the deepest sadness can make sense of Peter's words. Only the blackest

magic may find their truth.

Beyond the glazed eyeballs, Peter is a flickering candle in a bell jar.

When I see him, I always try to be as friendly as possible: "How ya doin'?" and all that stuff.

Some may argue it's an empty gesture, like bowing to a blind king, but I can't help but feel that it makes both of us feel a little bit better about the inevitable.

There was a disturbance in the back yard the other day so I walked to the back of the house to see what was going on. When I looked out, I saw Helga and Peter throwing what appeared to be an old bronze-coloured radiator off their balcony.

From my perspective, on the top floor, Peter and Helga were squashed and round-looking like beavers on a construction site. This visual compression exaggerated their slow movement across the balcony. Finally, it was up, up, and away as the radiator made its solo flight through the air, a cloud of plaster dust billowing up behind it. The dull impact of the radiator on the damp lawn must have struck a primal chord in the womb; the sky darkened and Helga was suddenly trying to rip Peter's heart out. He crouched to defend himself but it was too late, her owl's claws were already in too deep.

There was no hope.

I tried to speak, hoping that something could restore the illusion of two round, squashed people throwing a radiator

from a balcony, but I too had been silenced by the Dark Forest. I saw the crushed flowers, geraniums, I supposed, under the gold-coloured radiator.

Finally, my voice was heard, and Peter and Helga, still hunched over their railing, looked up at me, as if each one's head had simply rotated on its axis.

"Are you renovating?", my voice asked.

Only the hum of the huge transformer at the end of the yard could be heard. Even the birds waited.

"Mr. Bentley,", Helga said, each syllable heavily stressed and lasting exactly the same duration, "we're changing the radiator."

Then they both turned their heads back, with the same rotating motion, to face the unfinished business on the lawn below.

Bruno, Helga's husband, stumbled into the yard too late to participate in this round of the game, but eager to contribute his usual expertise.

"What the fuck is this?", he said, the whole phrase sounding like one long vowel.

"Shut up, you stupid old man!", Helga replied effortlessly.

"Quit arguing", Peter yelled.

Helga shot Peter a look. Then in a threatening whisper she said, "Don't you ever talk to me like that again."

"Fucking moron", Bruno mumbled to Peter, "why don't you

be like your sister? She's got three jobs now. She practically runs the Burger King. What do you ever do except drink beer with your friends and stay out late?"

"You shut up you stupid old man," Helga said, "You're always drunk anyway you stupid man."

"Quit pickin' on him, Ma," Peter said, "You're always pickin on him."

"He's always drunk."

"Leave him alone."

Bruno wasn't feeling too good.

He dragged himself, damaged and dishevelled, from the now vivid green garden. As he looked back, he spotted the crushed flowers, now apparently tulips, under the brass-coloured radiator. "Bloody fucking shit," he mumbled as he sluggishly found his way to the gate.

The plaster dust had settled.

Helga wound her way down the circular staircase to the garden, adjusting the blue rag she had tied on her head.

Peter stood, staring at the mess below, his mouth hanging open and his baseball cap drenched with sweat.

The dampness of the day brought the sweet smell of rotten wood and spring grass up to my window. The birds slowly resumed their business and a soft spring rain anointed Helga with holy water.

LAST STOP

A bare 25-watt bulb shone in the corner of the room. David sat alone, staring at the intricate patterns on the worn-out persian rug. There was nothing else to look at but blank walls and endless ceiling. His gaze was pulled up to the empty wall. As he contemplated its emptiness, images began to form.

There was an image of his father. At first it was fuzzy and uncertain then it grew sharper and sharper. His father was driving; it was a sunny day; he seemed very happy.

This was the best memory David had, sitting in the front seat beside his dad; they were on their way to his dad's house in the country.

David was seven. His dad had an old yellow Chevy convertible. They had the top down and David felt like he was flying. The music was up full blast and his dad was singing along with it. He'd look over at David and take his hands off the wheel and pretend he was playing the guitar. David would laugh. The trees and the sky and their big yellow spaceship were one and David's heart and mind were part of that oneness.

As the day slipped into evening, his fantasy world gave way to hunger and they had to pull their spaceship into a roadside cafe.

The screen door creaked as they walked into the cafe. There was an old Seeburg juke box in the corner, coated in

grease and smoke. David's dad walked over to it and dropped some money in. The electronic arm reached down for the selection and when the needle hit the record, the clicking and popping burst out of the speaker. The music filled the cafe. David and his dad found an empty booth.

A waitress slowly walked over. She was very pretty but wore a lot of make-up. David had never seen so much make-up, except possibly on a clown.

"Would you like to see a menu?" she asked.

"How about a burger and fries, partner?" his dad asked.

"Sure!" David said enthusiastically.

"Ok. Two burgers, two fries, two cokes." his dad said to the waitress.

This was all really exciting. David's mom didn't like him eating burgers or fries and especially didn't want him to drink Coke. He devoured his supper and they had lemon meringue pie for desert.

As they walked back out to the car, David could hear the crickets and the sound of a nearby stream. He hadn't been to the country much. The sounds were a little scary but exciting. Once they got in the car and started the engine, the sound of the crickets and the stream dissolved into the hum of the big yellow spaceship.

The night air was cool but the sky was full of stars, so they drove with the top down and the heat on. The wind felt so good in his hair and the night was so clear David could see

the Big Dipper and constellations he had only ever read about.

The black pines skipped by set against the silver moonlight. David had never felt like this in his life. It was like something was complete. He felt cold and warm and scared and safe, and very alive.

David remembered that feeling as he stared at the blank wall. That was what it felt like not to be caught in a half-life. To be on the edge of disaster or triumph. To be on the edge of anything at all. To feel that nothing is nailed down but everything is immortal.

Somehow, it was all there on a blank wall.

He had fallen asleep in the car and his father had carried him into the house.

Although he couldn't remember any of his dreams, he had the vague sensation of having dreamed heavily. As he woke up, his dreams still seemed to surround him but he knew where he was. He got out of bed and went looking for his dad. He didn't know his way around the house but he could hear his dad talking in another room. He eventually found him in the kitchen. There was a woman in a white silk housecoat, sitting at the kitchen table. Her long auburn hair was wet and she was rubbing it with a big, blue towel. He hadn't anticipated this. He was frozen.

"David, this is Donna," his dad said.

The words echoed in his head and he didn't react.

"You awake there, buddy?" his dad asked.

But David couldn't think of anything to say. He just needed a bit of time to adjust. He hadn't imagined anyone else being with them. He thought it was gonna be just him and his dad. He stood there not knowing what to do or say.

"You look like you're still asleep there, buddy," his dad said.

Donna's eyes peered out through her wet hair. She pushed it aside and looked deeply into David's eyes. Her gaze was penetrating but warm.

"Why don't you just sit down over here," Donna said, getting up to pull a chair out for him.

Her voice was confident and reassuring. She welcomed him with her eyes. He was still tongue-tied as his dad rummaged through the cupboards.

"What would you like for breakfast, Davey?", he asked.

"Maybe David would like to just sit and get comfortable for a minute," Donna said.

David was grateful for her suggestion. His mom had always taught him that it's better to say nothing when you don't know what to say. That's what he did. But he felt like he was warming up a bit and it was really very nice of Donna to buy him some time, since he didn't want to appear foolish to his father.

"I usually have cereal," he said, at last.

"Coming right up," his dad said. "We've got all kinds of

cereal here. Would you like Cheerios or granola?"

"Sure," David said. "I mean, yes please."

"Well," his dad said, "which one will it be? Do you still like Cheerios?"

David hadn't eaten Cheerios in years.

"Oh," David said, "oh yeah, uh, I'll have Cheerios please."

His dad laughed.

"Your dad tells me you're quite a musician," Donna said.

"Oh," David said, "I'm just studying piano."

"I play the cello," Donna said, "maybe we could do a little duet later."

"I'm just learning," David said, "I don't really play anything too great, yet."

"That's ok," Donna said, "We could just have fun."

He didn't really want to like her but she seemed to be talking right to him. It made him feel important. The shock of finding her at his dad's house was slowly giving way to a feeling of excitement. Maybe this would be a really fun weekend after all. He felt open to all possibilities. It was a kind of hope he hadn't felt before.

His dad brought him a bowl of Cheerios and David dug in right away. He hadn't wanted to say anything to spoil their trip but one hamburger and some fries wasn't much of a supper and he was starving. Donna was sipping on her coffee and combing her hair out. David watched her closely as he ate his

breakfast.

"Have you ever been on horseback?" Donna asked him.

"No," David replied.

"Would you like to try it?" she asked.

"Yeah, I guess so," he answered.

"Great," she said. "After breakfast we'll saddle up Buttermilk for you. She's really friendly. She won't mind you being a beginner."

David hurried through his cereal, imagining himself on a horse. It was like a dream come true. He couldn't wait.

The smell of the stalls was strong, but coming from the city it was nice to be able to smell anything. Buttermilk looked huge to him. He was starting to wonder if he should have agreed to this. Climbing up on to something that big and that high suddenly wasn't very inviting.

"Come on, Davey," his dad said. "I'll give you a boost up. Hold on tight there, partner."

His dad helped him up and next thing he knew he was actually sitting on top of this monster ready to ride. It was a giddy feeling, riding this undulating mass, trying to find its rhythm.

They took a quiet path through the woods. David felt an exhilaration he had never experienced before. He felt like he was really in his body and that it was doing what he wanted it to.

As they rode along they reached a clearing. Donna had

gone ahead and was getting off her horse and unpacking her saddle bags. She laid out an old Hudson's Bay blanket on the ground and started laying out a spread of cold cuts and crusty bread.

"How's about a little snack there, guys," she called out.

"Great," David called back.

"Chow's on," she called and it echoed in his head.

The phone was ringing. The harshly lit room resumed its hold on him.

The silence was deafening then the phone rang again. The chiming engulfed the room.

David looked down at the old black phone ringing by his feet. It looked huge sitting there on the rug. His feet looked huge, too and his body felt unbearably heavy. Even moving his head was an effort. Once again, the phone rang.

He knew who it was. It was paralysing. It rang again.

He leaned over, trying to balance the weight of his head, and reached for the receiver.

"Hello," he said, finally, in a sullen voice.

"What the hell took you so long to answer?" the voice said. David held the receiver away from his ear.

"Here I am," the voice said, "trying to do this move single-handed while you and your useless friends sit around doing nothing, and you can't even pick up the bloody phone."

David's friends had left hours ago, after waiting three hours for his mother to show up. They had run out of patience.

This had just happened one too many times and as much as they liked David, they knew his mother might not show up at all. They had sat through the vigil with David too often to be patient or understanding. David was hurt and embarrassed. Bob, David's best friend, had been furious by the end and said David's mother was a lush and that she'd never change. David had hit him in a moment of rage. He had probably lost his best friend. Maybe his only friend. He wanted to cry but the tears never came.

"Don't freak out, mom," David said in a calm voice.

"We're coming to pick up the fridge and stove now," she said. "Did you bring them down yet?"

"No," David said. "Remember, you said to wait until you called."

"Couldn't you just figure out to bring it down on your own when you didn't hear from me?" his mother asked.

"But mom," David said, "you know you freak out if I don't do exactly what you say."

"Don't you talk to me that way, young man," his mother said, "If you weren't so bloody selfish we wouldn't be in this mess."

"Oh, great," David said, "Blame everything on me."

"Well who the hell else would I blame it on?" his mother asked.

"Well, maybe if you would have paid the rent on time, even once, this wouldn't have happened," David said.

There was a long silence, then she hung up.

David held the dead receiver in his hand, staring at it. He let the receiver fall on the persian rug. It lay there inanimate, buzzing like a wounded insect.

He stood up and walked over to the window. He hadn't even noticed the snow falling. A thick, wet coat covered the ground. Lights sparkled magically on the fresh surface.

He suddenly found himself in the stairwell, the lone light at the top of the stairs casting a giant shadow on the dingy wall.

He opened the door and took a deep breath of the cool spring air. The rhythmic splash of his steps was all he could hear.

REQUIEM

It was cold for May. As I looked around, I saw everyone shivering. Even the midday sun couldn't warm us up. Liam was dead and now his body lay surrounded by people whose shredded sense of family was only marginally stronger than their indifference.

In all fairness and honesty, nobody really liked him. He had wallowed most of his life in alcohol and self-pity. His life was terrifying to those who had wanted to be protected from his disease, fearing it might be genetic. His life was even more terrifying to those who had already been trapped by his disease but wanted to keep pretending that they were magically different. They assured themselves that, at least, their lives would amount to more than just an obsolete wardrobe and a handful of postcards.

The priest stood over the coffin making impersonal, droning noises. Fortunately, the wind and the trees lent some music to the occasion. The coffin that no one had wanted to pay for hovered in that transient place between notoriety and oblivion. Surely, if Liam had been there, he would have felt uncomfortable and offered everyone a drink. He was an alcoholic, but he wasn't cheap. He was almost always broke but never cheap.

The priest was visibly irritated that no one knew what to do. The only religious occasions left were baptisms and

funerals. In and out, that's all. As for what's in between, you just tried to muddle through as best you could without any rituals.

Some faces wore tears. A reddened cheek could be seen here and there. Someone behind me blew her nose. The cold weather had helped with all of these symptoms, making the mourning roles easier to play convincingly. Who was the audience, I wondered? Perhaps the priest was the audience. And the men who waited eagerly to finish a day's shovelling. Even in mourning, the family's unshaken faith in appearances shone through. Together they were the grieving family, imagining a great loss, perhaps to mankind. The scant dressings of this desolate affair did not cut deep enough to burst the bubble of this collective hallucination.

"Ashes to ashes," the priest droned on.

I thought of Liam's nicotine-stained fingers. Although his life had become such a colourless travesty, he had actually been the only one who had ever listened to me when I was little. He was very tender then. That was before he had embraced despair. There was always a hint of mischief in his eyes. I guess that's what made him seem different. Children were definitely to be seen and not heard when we were growing up. We were the voiceless masses. Not sentient beings with a full range of emotions, but rather short inadequate people whose tears brought runny noses and nothing else. Liam saw the layers of adult lies but was impotent against them. He was, of

course, a child himself. He was on our side but had let himself be trapped in a large awkward body that only let him out when it was too numb to stop him. That numbness he found in alcohol. We, the children, imitated him and found a similar numbness in success.

His yellowed face, as it had been in his last days, flashed through my mind, radiant in its discoloration. He was no hero. Not even to me, though it had been easy to love his childishness when I was young. But seeing his infantile rage eat him alive had opened a door I could never hope to close.

I felt sorry for him and angry at him. He had gone wandering off to another realm without ever knowing his way around this one. He had never freed himself. His mother had treated him like a child all his life and now he had rolled over and died and had never stood upright. He had only defied her, the act of a child. A hellish scream cut through me as I remembered the kindness in his eyes and the weakness in his heart. He had a good heart, my mother used to say. But children who haven't escaped their torturers haven't had their hearts opened to the wounding clarity of the sun. They're pawns who would be kings and have less chance than a camel of passing through the eye of the needle.

My anger was welling up so quickly, I hadn't noticed it was my turn to do the last reading. Everyone gently stared at me in that family way of saying "hurry up, you're embarrassing us!" The pictures on my family's faces all told elaborate but

pre-fabricated tales of impatience, worthlessness, and lack of self-respect, but most of all they told of secrecy: the labyrinth of silence, the breeding ground of this disease that had eaten Liam's soul.

What great secrets was Liam taking to his grave?

The impatient faces around me were given a voice that whispered something about getting on with my reading.

I had written some things down on an old sheet from a sketching pad. The discoloured edges had given it a dignity that seemed appropriate. Liam would have appreciated it. I couldn't remember where I had put the sheet, but I, finally, found it in my jacket pocket. As my fingers brushed across it, I knew by its texture that it was the right one. It had been folded in four and had taken on the shape of my wallet. This made it a unique document, not just another piece of printed paper but something personal. My handwriting was sketchy and blurred.

Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again:

But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life. (St.John 4:13)

I realized the spectre of death had always been among us. It had walked freely through our lives and had always lived in some part of our house. As a child, I had clearly seen this spectre in Liam's eyes but hadn't known what it was. This thought was chilling.

Looking into his eyes I also saw myself in the streams of destiny gushing through those two shiny mirrors.

Nothing could make him come back.

Not even the people who looked like him or the people who had said they loved him.

This was the great disappointment I felt as the wind tore my piece of sketching paper in half, taking the story of Jacob's well with it.

FINE LINES

Fine lines spread out across her face. Trenches of despair. Nothing touched her anymore. Nothing could touch her anymore.

A dream had filled her heart with steel and even the shadows of the moon couldn't move her.

The harsh fluorescent lights echoed in her empty eyes. The cold mechanical stare was only slightly betrayed by a subtle twitch.

Every morning the Metro slipped into the station leaving her on the platform. Shell-shocked, she struggled to the escalator and found her way up to the building that held her captive.

I watched this procession, day after day, becoming increasingly obsessed with her, drawing hundreds of sketches of her, riding the Metro every day, waiting for her.

Those finely etched lines on her face had delicately entangled me in her mystery.

It made no sense whatsoever, but I was beginning to feel like I could read those lines on her face. Slowly, I was finding my way around the long darkened hallways of her heart. I began keeping notes, hoping that the outer physical manifestations of my research, as I had now begun to think of it, would save me from being pulled into her obvious madness.

Clearly, a crime had been committed. My investigation -- things had escalated quickly as they do in nightmares -- must

be very discrete. Proximity to this crime of despair would surely contaminate me with its guilt. How could I keep my hands clean? How could I work scientifically and intuitively without being touched by the crime?

Determined to follow her home, I waited hour upon hour for her in the Metro. Guards harassed me, unaware of the gravity of my work, but I had managed to hold my own, explaining I was from out of town and waiting for a friend who would certainly come through this station. This unimaginative lie disturbed me in an odd way. It created a physical discomfort that was quite foreign to me: it was as if a group of tendons or muscles in my chest were badly twisted.

A memory I had presumed to be long gone from my collection of possible memories arose fully blown in my consciousness. In this memory, my mother had found some cigarettes in my dresser and I had told her I was keeping them for a friend. It had been an equally unimaginative lie but I remembered all of the tension it had exerted on me physically and the sense of shame that had felt so unfamiliar. What I felt now was so remarkably similar, it had brought all of the sensory recollection of its predecessor. I'm sorry to burden you with all this self-indulgent detail but I am haunted by the feeling that all the elements of this case are inexplicably intertwined.

I realized how precarious my position had become. I was getting closer and closer to the edge. A violent wind blew

through the station, as though a phantom train had just rushed through without stopping for human cargo.

A cold trembling gripped me as the coloured light from the stained glass windows crossed my face. A sickening sense of darkness came over me. I was aware of a metallic taste in my mouth. It's funny how your mind skims across the surface of meaning like a smooth stone across a quiet pond. I suddenly wondered what her name was. The suddenness of the thought made me question the meaning of naming. It seemed to me that names diminished things; they limited them. Was it the same for people? The pure sound of a name could close thousands of tiny doors of possibility. Pure imagination was harnessed by naming. I felt an emptiness in my stomach. I hadn't eaten since breakfast. I looked at my watch. It was ten past five. People crowded onto the platform.

My eyes had drifted to the stained glass window and my mind had locked on them. The windows were no doubt intended to depict nothing in particular, some general pattern, devoid of meaning, but I saw, distinctly depicted, the image of three women lifting Christ from the grave. The beams of light emitted from his eyes were focused on the platform and moved with the sun's progress through the sky. Suddenly, the light focused on someone's leg. I looked up. There she was with the two beams writing light across her face. The sheer synchronicity of this phenomenon was so rivetting, I could no longer feel my body. This moment was like a sacrament, free

from concept, the unattainable epiphany in all its pomp and fury.

She stood there bathed in light, looking statuesque, her long blond hair moving gently.

Exhausted and shaking, I refused to perish on these shores.

The Metro rushed into the station. I jumped in the car behind hers, hoping it wouldn't get too crowded. I couldn't let her see me. If, in any way, she felt she was being followed, her dull despair would change to fear and there would be nothing left for me to read. The transgression would never be named and limited.

She got off unexpectedly at the Villa-Maria station. I just barely managed to slip out onto the platform before the Metro doors slammed shut. The platform was crowded. A woman burdened with shopping bags was in my way. I couldn't seem to get past her. I felt like I was suffocating. The train pulled out, creating a welcome breeze and I managed to squeeze ahead of the woman in front of me. By now, I had completely lost sight of Our Lady of the Lights.

I continued to push forward, just slightly aware of my weightlessness. Finally reaching the escalators, I spotted her, a few people ahead of me.

Despite my dizziness, I was able to move up a few stairs until I was immediately behind her. At this proximity I could feel the aura of sadness which enveloped her. There was

violence mixed in with this sadness. Like a safecracker I tried to listen for the tumblers falling but there was only silence.

A crude looking man pushed past me and took her by the arm. She turned suddenly. A look of terror streaked across her face and stayed frozen there until she could force a smile. The man's face was like stone. He let go his grip as she whispered: "Father, I didn't know it was you!"

LOST & FOUND

The phone rang.

"Hello," Brendan said.

"Hi!" the voice on the other end of the line said. "Is this Brendan Cunningham?"

"Yes, it is," Brendan answered.

"Mr. Cunningham," the voice said, "are you, by any chance, related to Sean A. Cunningham?"

"Yes, I am," Brendan said, "he's my uncle, I mean, he was my uncle. He's been dead for years."

"I'm sorry to hear, Mr. Cunningham," the voice said. "I've been going through the phone book trying to find a relative or someone who knew him," the man said.

"Why?" Brendan asked.

"Well, actually," the man said, "I've found some things here that belong to him. Just some odds and ends, according to a description of the contents that was written up before it was crated. Nothing valuable, I guess, but I thought someone else might wanna decide what to do with them; says on the form, there are some photos. You know, I thought, maybe, they would have some sentimental value to someone."

"Where did you find them?" Brendan asked.

"Right here," the man said, "in the basement of the old train station."

"That seems pretty hard to believe," Brendan said. "That

stuff must have been there for an awfully long time. Are you sure they're my uncle's belongings?"

"According to the ticket stub," the man said, "one Sean A. Cunningham put this stuff in here thirty-three years ago almost to the day."

"That's really strange that it could sit there all this time," Brendan said.

"It sure is," the man said. "They crated it and put it in the basement when he didn't show up for it. I guess, no one ever got around to throwing it out."

Brendan was shocked and surprised. This was exciting, like finding a lost treasure.

"So," the man said.

"So, what?" Brendan asked.

"Well, are you going to come and pick this stuff up?" the man asked.

Brendan didn't know what to do. He knew next to nothing about Uncle Sean, other than that he had died when Brendan was eight and people studiously avoid talking about him. Brendan wasn't sure if he wanted to come face-to-face with his uncle's dark secrets, if there were any secrets. The whole thing seemed quite unreal. What would Sean have put into storage at a train station? And why?

"Well?" the man asked.

Brendan felt like he owed it to Sean to gather his things and put them in a proper resting place. He was also very curious.

"Ok," Brendan said. "What do I do?"

The old train station had been in mothballs for more years than anyone seemed able to remember. Even the old men who always sat around on the bench out in front of the beautiful stone building would get into arguments about when the station had been shut down and moved to the suburbs.

Developers had fought long and hard to gain control of the site and after a ten-year legal battle with a local historical group, who claimed Sir John A. MacDonald had frequented the station, they had finally won the right to do as they pleased with the property.

They were renovating the entire building, turning it into boutiques. The basement where the crate of Sean's belongings had been found was going to be a McDonald's, with historical pictures on the walls, including several of Sir John A. This was the developers' tribute to the building's history. There was an artist's impression of the franchise taped up in the huge front window.

The man who had called Brendan was standing by the main entrance with the crate, as he said he would.

"Hi, I'm Brendan Cunningham," Brendan said, holding out his hand to the man.

"Not too much trouble finding the place?" the man asked, shaking Brendan's hand.

"No," Brendan answered. "I remember coming to this

station when I was a kid."

The man lifted the small crate and handed it to Brendan.

"Well, this is it," the man said.

"Thanks," Brendan said, taking the crate as if its contents were sacred.

"You got a car?" the man asked.

"Yes," Brendan said.

"You could pull it up to the loading dock if you want," the man said.

"It's ok," Brendan said, "It's really not that heavy. Thanks anyway."

"No problem," the man said.

As Brendan struggled up the stairs with the crate he regretted not taking him up on his offer. The crate wasn't terribly heavy but it was large enough to be very awkward. Brendan felt too embarrassed to turn back so he continued up the stairs, trying his best to make it look effortless.

When Brendan got home, he carried the crate into the living room and put it down carefully in the middle of the rug. It was nailed shut and tied up with a piece of thick cord. The knot was old and tight and Brendan couldn't get it undone. He went to the kitchen to get a knife.

He came back and cut the cord, then sat on the floor, staring at the crate.

It took a tremendous amount of will to pry open the top of the crate. He really didn't know what to expect. As he

lifted the top off the crate, a deep musty smell came rushing out like escaping demons.

Brendan peered into it.

On top of the box, neatly folded, was an army sweater with suede epaulettes. Brendan lifted the sweater out. The moths had completely missed it. Brendan held it up against himself; it looked like a perfect fit. It felt odd to think of himself and Sean being the same size. An uncle who dies when you're still small takes on such a mythic scale, it's hard to imagine ever achieving that same scale yourself, no matter how old you are. Brendan placed the sweater carefully on the sofa and looked to see what other bittersweet treasures lay inside.

A worn-out old cigarette tin, Egyptian Ovals #7, sat on top of a faded blue shoe box. Brendan lifted the cigarette tin out gently and placed it on the floor. The bent lid opened easily. Inside were photographs of different sizes and quality. Brendan had been a photographer for twenty years and had always loved old family pictures. Even pictures of other people's families. He had once had a vernissage of a collection of other people's home photos. Despite his professional skills, he really believed that the best pictures were taken by amateurs who loved their subjects. No technique could make up for that factor.

Finding these pictures was like stumbling into a gold mine. There was a beautiful portrait of Uncle Sean, he must

have been in his late twenties. It looked like a professional portrait, the lighting was dark and moody, Sean was holding a cigarette and the smoke curled up through the shot.

Another was a snapshot of Sean with a stunning woman. They were walking arm-in-arm down the street, her long curly hair blowing in the wind. They seemed unaware of the photographer. Sean's look was intense. The woman looked at Sean and her smiling profile was radiant.

There were several other shots: Sean with some army buddies, my mother, my grandmother and grandfather, and an exquisite portrait of the woman with the curly hair. It looked like it might have been done by the same photographer who did the portrait of Sean. Just the right touch of backlight emphasized her radiance. A haunting charm had been captured in this photograph. Her curly hair fell in a tangle to one shoulder and her full sensuous mouth smiled mysteriously.

Brendan sat holding the photographs for a long time. They held a special magic for him, their touch and their smell brought a peacefulness. They were both remote and personal.

He sat, staring at the crate. His curiosity began to work on him so he put the photographs back into the cigarette tin, handling them with reverence and placed the tin on the sofa behind him.

The faded blue shoe box was next.

He lifted it out of the crate. It had been taped closed but the glue had long since lost its grip.

The doorbell rang.

Brendan was annoyed. He felt like he was partaking of a deep sacrament, reading this message from the past.

He didn't want to be disturbed. He didn't want to have to leave the quietness of this work he had found. The intensity of this experience was a welcome relief.

The doorbell rang again.

Brendan put the shoe box back in the crate and went to answer the door. The spell seemed to follow him.

When he opened the door, a tall woman, maybe in her sixties, with her long white hair tied tightly back, stood staring at him.

"Are you Brendan Cunningham?" the woman asked.

"Yes," Brendan said.

This was turning out to be quite a day.

There was a pause, the woman was a little out of breath, probably from walking up the three flights of stairs to Brendan's apartment. Finally, she caught her breath.

"May I come in for a minute," she asked.

Brendan hesitated momentarily, not sure what to make of this woman's appearance. He decided to take a chance and invited her in.

"It's very kind of you to invite me in," she said.

"It's no problem," Brendan said, "Do we know each other or something?"

"No," she said.

Brendan was disappointed. He had hoped her answer would have offered some explanation for her presence in his apartment.

"You must be wondering why I've come here," she said.

"Well," Brendan said, "to be perfectly honest, yes, I am wondering."

She smiled.

The smile was familiar.

"I didn't mean to be rude," Brendan said, apologetically.

She had clear blue eyes and full lips and a youthful body. Brendan was quite taken with her. Now that she had settled in his living room, he couldn't help but notice how attractive she was.

"Could I get you something?" Brendan asked.

"No thank you," she said, "I'm fine."

"So," Brendan said, "Is there something I can do for you?"

"Yes," she said, holding up a worn-out old claim check, "I've come to pick up the crate."

It suddenly hit Brendan, of course she looked familiar, she was the woman in the pictures with Uncle Sean. She had aged without losing any of her charm.

They both looked down at the open crate at the same time.

"I've come to pick everything up," she said.

There was something icy in her tone, now. It gave Brendan a bit of a chill.

"But if you had the claim check all along," Brendan said, "why didn't you go pick the stuff up sooner?"

"I couldn't," she said curtly, offering no explanation and adding, "I see you've opened the crate."

"Yes," Brendan said, "I didn't think there was any reason not to. I wanted to know what was in it."

"There's nothing in there but memories," she said.

"I'm sorry," Brendan said, "I didn't mean to intrude."

"Of course, you didn't," she said mechanically.

Brendan had to gather his thoughts. Everything was happening too quickly.

First, he had come into possession of a mysterious uncle's belongings from thirty or more years ago, and then this woman had shown up ready to take them away just as quickly. Surely, as a nephew, he must have some say in this.

"Why should I just turn these things over to you?" he said. "What gives you the right to come along and claim everything?"

"This!" she said, holding up the claim check.

"That's true," Brendan said, "you're right, but don't you understand that just a few hours ago this stuff didn't even exist for me and now it's sitting there like a big question mark. My uncle's life has always been a dark mystery in our family. This is my chance to see something or touch something from his world. I feel like I should, at least, get some explanation." he said, looking down at the crate.

"What if I told you that this was all none of your business. That it was strictly between me and your uncle," she said.

"I'd be very disappointed," Brendan said.

"Well," she said, "I'm sorry, but it really is strictly between me and your uncle. There's no use getting involved with someone else's past."

Brendan was at a loss for something to say.

"Now," she said, standing up, "I'd like to leave."

"Surely, you could tell me something about my uncle," Brendan pleaded.

"Why?" she asked, "What would it do for you?"

Brendan didn't know what it would do.

She was already putting the sweater back in the crate.

"What makes you think you can just pry open someone's life for your own amusement?" she asked.

She put the lid on the crate and lifted it.

"Do you want me to help you?" Brendan asked.

"I'm fine," she said, walking towards the door.

"Would you just explain one thing?" he said.

She stopped and looked at him.

"Why did you show up today?" Brendan asked.

"Fine," she said, putting down the crate, "I'll explain that. I always had this claim check but I've lived in Ireland since just before your uncle died. It was, obviously, not very practical for me to pick it up but I received a letter asking

if I knew Sean and explaining the crate would be thrown out if it wasn't picked up by a certain date. I knew no one from here would pick it up and I felt it was my responsibility. So, I made the trip from Ireland. When I went to the station, the man told me you had already been by. He gave me your name and I looked up your address and now, I'll take these things back with me. Believe me, Sean would've wanted it that way."

"But the letter," Brendan said, "how did they know to send it to you?"

"It was sent to all the Cunninghams," she said.

"Then you're a Cunningham?" Brendan asked.

She picked up the crate and walked towards the door. Brendan stood, holding the door for her, hoping she might volunteer something, some last clue.

She left without even saying goodbye.

He stood in the doorway listening to her steps echo through the building. He felt he had lost something he could never find again.

He closed the door and walked back to the living room, throwing himself on the sofa. As he sat there, numb and empty, he felt something under his hand. It was the Egyptian Ovals cigarette tin. She had missed it. Brendan slowly opened the tin but it was empty.

He stared into the empty tin, dejected. He had been so close to something. He didn't even know what it was he had been so close to, but it was something that had always been in

his world, yet invisible.

Uncle Sean was more of an enigma now than he had been only a few hours earlier.

Brendan was not particularly close to anyone. His family had pretty much disappeared to other parts of the world and he had gradually drifted away from his parents. He had often thought that if his brothers and sisters had been around he might have spent more time with his family.

When the man had phoned from the train station, the meaning of the crate's discovery hadn't struck Brendan, but, seeing his uncle's possessions, and touching them, had made Uncle Sean very real to him. Now, the loss of those objects was a very real loss.

The doorbell rang, startling Brendan. He was in no mood for unexpected guests. He was in no mood for anyone. He sat on the sofa, staring into the cigarette tin. The doorbell rang again. Brendan waited silently, hoping to hear the sound of footsteps walking away. Instead, the doorbell rang again. Brendan decided to answer it.

As he was opening the door, he tried to think of an excuse to get rid of this intruder. When the door opened, he was surprised to see the woman, who had claimed the crate. She stood there, a little flushed. She had put the crate down on the mat.

"Could you take this in, please?" she asked Brendan, pointing to the crate.

Brendan lifted the crate and carried it into his hallway.

"You should have let me help you with it," Brendan said.

"I could've managed fine," she said, "but I decided to come back. Unfortunately, I didn't decide to come back until I was all the way down your three flights of stairs. I almost didn't come back at the thought of climbing all the way up again, with that thing."

"You should have rung from downstairs," Brendan said, "I could have come down and helped you."

"I'm not one to make others suffer for my mistakes," she said. "I shouldn't have left without any explanation. I really must apologize."

"It's no big deal," Brendan said, "I just don't know anything about my Uncle Sean. I don't even know much about the rest of my family, and finding this crate was so unexpected. It's hard to explain, but it made me feel kind of hopeful."

"I understand," she said, "I didn't mean to be nasty, but I was angry with you for opening the crate. I was also angry just because you were a Cunningham."

"But I don't understand," Brendan said, "I thought you were a Cunningham too."

"If I'm welcome to come in, I'll try to explain," she said.

"Please," Brendan said, gesturing towards the living room, "make yourself at home."

She smiled briefly, then made her way to the living room.

Brendan closed the door.

"Would you like something to drink?" Brendan asked, "You must be thirsty!"

"A cup of tea would be nice," she said. "It has been an awfully long day."

"Great," Brendan said, "I'll join you."

Brendan went to the kitchen to prepare the tea. He was quite excited about her return and went about getting the tea ready as quickly as possible.

As he came into the living room, carrying the large tray of tea and biscuits, he stopped suddenly. She was gone. He panicked. As he glanced around the room, he noticed the crate was still sitting by the front door. He heaved a sigh of relief. He saw her in the hallway. She was looking at Brendan's photographs.

"Are these yours?" she called from the hallway.

"The photographs?" Brendan asked, walking down the hallway towards her.

"Yes," she answered.

"Yeah," he said, "they're mine."

"They're alive and passionate," she said, "I quite like them."

"Thank you," Brendan said, "I'm a professional, that is, I work as a photographer professionally, but these street shots were just done for my own pleasure. I make my living doing rather dull portraits. These," he said, "are what I

really like to do."

"There's a lot of feeling in them," she said, "I can see this is what you fancy." She looked into his eyes. "I'm sorry about before," she said, "There's a lot of anger between me and your family. I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

Brendan didn't know what to say. He just stared into her eyes. Her gaze was so sure, so unbroken.

"I came here," she said, "determined to make an end of your uncle's memory, perhaps, you will help me, once and for all, to put him to rest."

She put her arm around him, and they walked to the living room together.

"Your uncle was quite a brilliant man," she said, "not just in my humble opinion," she added. "Others recognized his talent. He was an exquisite painter. Unfortunately, his work was not widely recognized at the time, and he never managed to make much of a living at it." She paused as they approached the sofa.

She sat down and gestured for Brendan to sit beside her. Brendan noticed a silver cross, hanging tight to her neck. She noticed him staring at it.

"Sean gave this to me," she said, holding it up, "Even though I wanted so badly to forget him, I couldn't part with this cross."

"It's very beautiful," Brendan said.

"It was made in Dublin," she said, "when we were first

there." She paused. "Your Uncle Sean was a fiery, explosive man," she said, "He couldn't seem to settle anywhere. There was no place on earth exciting enough to hold him forever, but Dublin was a place he loved dearly." She let the cross fall from her grip. "We had both grown up in Montreal. I had always loved Sean. Always! But, it wasn't 'till he was older that he really fell in love with me. We had always been very special friends up until then, but that was the beginning of the end for us."

Brendan thought of the photograph of Uncle Sean and this mysterious woman, walking together.

"You see," she said, "Sean and I were cousins." She paused to break a deep breath. "The family wouldn't hear of our being in love. It was blasphemous nonsense, we were old enough to know better, they told us. But Sean was determined. In defiance and desperation, we ran away to Ireland. We foolishly thought we could run away from the problem, but it followed us everywhere." She was lost in thoughts too personal to share.

"Oh, some things were very convenient," she said, "My name was already Cunningham, so we could easily pass for husband and wife. But there was always a feeling of guilt and shame we couldn't shake off. Even when we thought we were carefree, the spectre was always nearby. We lived in constant dread of meeting people we had known in Montreal, so we moved from Ireland to Italy and from there to France. But, wherever

we went, the bad feeling always followed us. Sean had always liked to take a drink, but his drinking got out of hand, and we fell deep into the pit, together. I could never bring myself to hate him. Even in the end," she said, touching the silver cross, "Even in the end, I still loved him."

Brendan watched her as her eyes closed lightly. He sat silently, letting thoughts and emotions pass through him. Her face had grown serene. A deep peacefulness came over Brendan. He put his hand on her shoulder. She gently placed her hand over his.

TYPECAST

The ballerinas moved up and down as they circled the miniature fountain, the tinkling clockwork accompanying their mechanical dance.

She gazed intently at the porcelain figures, a static smile etched on her face.

"Ryan was always the weak one," she said. "He was a sickly child, very sensitive. Loud sounds or strong odours disturbed him. I remember, one time when we were on our way to Prince Edward Island, he cried about young Terry's body odour. It was a long drive and Ryan had to ride up front, all the way, squeezed in between dad and I. Imagine, making such a big deal about a bit of natural body odour, but that's the kind of child he was. Of course, young Terry would antagonize him something terrible. It really wasn't fair of Terry to tease Ryan that way but you know how cruel children can be, especially to each other. Ryan, the poor thing, was such a frail creature. He was always the weaker one. Even as a baby, you could tell by the way he cried. There was something about his cry that just wasn't normal, and he cried so easily. He always seemed so uncomfortable. Not a very loving child, not at all, but a good boy and bright. If you tried to hug him, though, his body would go completely rigid. You couldn't really hug him, not really, and he was almost always crying."

The ballerinas turned and turned, gracefully, tirelessly,

their porcelain cheeks flushed from their dance.

"Now, Terry," she said, "now, he was the strong one. Always so nimble and such a good physique. And such a good kid. Always ready to help. Always a smile and a twinkle in his eyes. A natural athlete. Young Terry was what used to be known as a man's man. He loved sports: hockey, football, you name it. He was good at everything he did. Made quarterback on the Loyola team. Good all-round athlete. And a real lady's man. I remember his high school sweetheart, what was her name? Oh yes, Connie? That's it, Connie..." She paused as her eyes glazed over and she put all of herself into finding the name, "Connie Dewhurst. That's it, Connie Dewhurst," she said, "Connie Dewhurst," she said again under her breath, gazing off into a distant past. "Oh, Connie was such a sensational girl. Really quite smashing. A real dresser and cute as can be. Oh, yes, that Connie was really special, and such a pretty figure. She was what you would call petite. Really tiny. Tiny wrists and a little waist. I can still see that Sherwood green satin dress she wore. Such fine lace work! She wore it to the graduation and Terry looked so handsome in his tux. They looked like little dolls, all dressed up," she said, shaking her head from side to side and smiling.

The tinkling of the ballerinas filled the gap as she exhaled heavily and looked upward to a vanishing point. Slowly she lowered her gaze to the tiny dancers.

"The boys fought so much," she said, "I suppose it was

natural for brothers to fight that way, but it always disturbed me. Dad always used to say: 'Leave them alone, they'll work it out,' but I could never get used to it. We would never have been allowed to fight like that at home. Father never would have stood for it. He would've given us a thrashing for fighting like that. Families had to be strong, he always said, there couldn't be any dissension in the ranks. Everything had to be on the up-and-up. He believed in discipline. Now, all that has gone by the boards, but I think there's still something to be said for a strict upbringing. Father didn't put up with any nonsense but he was a wonderful man, my father. That great shock of white hair and a laugh that filled the house. He loved the outdoors. I remember walks with him across the mountain. There was a path, back then, you could take that went right up past the lake and the graveyard. It was quite a hike but Father loved it and I loved to go with him. I remember those walks like it was yesterday. We'd stop, every time, mind you, every time without fail, we'd stop at the inn off the lake and father would get me a treat. I'd always ask for the hot cocoa during the cold weather. Father would always ask me what I wanted, then say: 'Let me see if I can guess,' with those sparkling mischievous eyes. I'd say 'cocoa' and he'd laugh and say 'I never would have guessed'. Just thinking about that hot cocoa, I can almost taste it. It was the real hot cocoa. Not like the instant stuff they make now! Father would sip on a soda while I would drink my cocoa

ever so slowly, savouring every drop, and then we'd be off to continue on our adventure."

Tears had formed in her eyes and the ballerinas looked very fuzzy now.

"My father," she said, "was a wonderful man. A real gentleman. At home, he would always smoke a pipe. My mother always said she liked the smell of the pipe about the house. He loved to sit in the parlour in his favourite chair with his pipe and his paper, poring over the sports statistics and the stock market. He had a passion for numbers. Young Ryan inherited that from him. He'd pretend to buy and sell stocks, then watch them move up and down. He had a little black leather notebook he kept his stocks in, I can see it so clearly in my mind's eye, it was black with gold worn-off writing on the front that just said: 'Notes'. He'd get so excited when one of his stocks would do well, even though it was all only imaginary. It was really just a game but he derived so much enjoyment from it. I guess that's when I developed my fascination for numbers." She paused. Her eyes were almost closed. "I was always pretty handy with sums," she said, suddenly animated. "Won a prize in the sixth grade! Father was so proud of me. He loved his sports, too. What was that team that he liked so much?" she said, pausing to remember, knowing it would never come. "He just thought the world of them and whenever they'd do something brilliant, he'd tell us all about it. Young Terry would remember their name."

The ballerinas danced faithfully, round after round,
their shining hair sparkling as they danced.

BREAKFAST

The walls were white.

The rugs were white.

The mugs were white.

The room was white.

White, white, white.

Can't get enough of that white!

The newspaper was a welcome sight, although it was somewhat white.

The radio blared its bland morning show sound.

Tick. Tock. The digital sound clock.

The coffee machine gushed and steamed.

Anna-Maria, her lipstick between her teeth, stood staring into the coffee pot while tying up her hair.

Carrying his shaves-as-close-as-a-blade-or-your-money-back electric razor, George found his way into the kitchen, humming and buzzing.

He strolled over to the coffee machine and poked around a little, lifting the lid.

"Don't do that," Anna-Maria said, slapping his hand.

"I just want to see if it's ready," George said.

"It'll be ready in a minute," she said.

George kept shaving as he walked over to the toaster oven and threw in some certified biologically-grown sprouted whole wheat bread.

"This bread really is excellent!" George said, rapturously.

Anna-Maria, who had sat herself down at the table, emitted an acknowledging grunt, as she pored over the classifieds.

"I can't concentrate with the radio on," Anna-Maria said, turning it off with a decided click.

George was watching his toast toast.

"Alright! Here's something interesting," Anna-Maria said in a slightly distracted voice. "They're looking for a Director-Visionary for a forward-looking company on the cutting edge of expert system technology. Only aggressive, self-assured, executive types need apply. That probably means they're looking for a man."

"Don't be ridiculous," George said, "You could pull it off, you're as pushy as any man I've ever known."

"Very funny, dad," Anna-Maria said. "You know, dad, this really does seem to be right up my alley. Listen, the ideal candidate will have a graduate degree in the computer sciences and or an MBA, and will have a proven track record in the field. This candidate will also have red hair."

"That's amazing!" George said, "It's you!"

The toaster buzzed.

The coffee sputtered.

The telephone rang.

"I'll get it," George said.

"It's ok, I'll get it," said Anna-Maria.

"It's my toast," George said.

"No, no, the telephone," Anna-Maria said.

"Oh," George said.

The phone stopped ringing.

They stared at each other for a few seconds then went back to their respective concerns.

"Here's a good one," Anna-Maria said, "Wanted: executive material with strong telemarketing skills to launch exciting new product. Get in on the ground floor of an exciting new company."

"Sounds... exciting!" George said, jumping up as he suddenly remembered his toast. He came back to the table holding the toast upside down between two fingers like a dead fish.

"You ready for coffee?" he said.

Anna-Maria nodded without lifting her head up from the paper. George got two cups of coffee and splashed them on the table. Anna-Maria sipped on hers, folding the paper carelessly and circling interesting prospects with bright red lipstick and less interesting ones with blue eye-liner.

"Insurance firm seeks sales representative. Some knowledge of financial planning preferred. MBA optional but

desirable."

"That might be interesting," George said.

"Maybe I could get us a good deal on some insurance, eh dad?" Anna-Maria said.

"That'd be great," George replied, fingering his ginger marmalade then licking it off the tips of his fingers.

"I'm really getting psyched up to go job hunting," Anna-Maria said. "There's something I really like about job hunting. It's so... well, it's so exciting."

"You sure do seem to enjoy it," George agreed, taking another sip of his coffee.

"Just imagining what some of these jobs might be like is a lot of fun," Anna-Maria said. "Maybe I'd even have my own office -- I'd want to have an all-white office -- and I love imagining what kind of people I'd be working with. Maybe the people I'd be working with would travel a lot. To the East: Singapore and Taiwan and Tokyo. Maybe I'd travel a lot, too. Who knows?"

"Who knows?" George said, putting a couple more slices of certified biologically-grown sprouted whole wheat bread in their brand new, all-white Sanyo Toasty Plus toaster oven.

Anna-Maria returned to her paper. George stood supervising his toast.

"This oven is quite amazing," George said, "not at all like the old one. The toast comes out like real old-fashioned toast. And it gets brown without getting all dry and hard."

"Here's a good one," Anna-Maria said, "Public Relations Officer for a leading edge aerospace firm. Background in media relations an asset. The ideal candidate will have training in communications, B.A. preferred, and an intuitive approach to problem-solving and factual reconstruction."

"Well," George said, "that's different from the usual stuff you look at. Could be interesting." He was trying to butter his toast with one hand and reach for the raspberry jam with the other. It wasn't working out so well.

"Factual reconstruction," Anna-Maria said softly, mostly to herself, trying to decide whether to circle the job in lipstick or eye-liner.

"Could you pass me the raspberry jam," George asked.

Without looking up from her paper, Anna-Maria slid the jam across the white melamine table. George had to drop his butter knife to make it stop.

"What time is it, dad?" Anna-Maria asked.

"Ten o'clock," George said.

"Maybe, I'll turn the radio on," Anna-Maria said, "You mind?"

"No," George said, "Go ahead!"

"I just want to hear the weather report," Anna-Maria said, "I hope it's gonna be nice today for my job hunting."

"Seems pretty nice out there right now," George said from behind the fridge door. He was rummaging.

"Where are the left-over potatoes from last night?"

George asked.

"In the fridge," Anna-Maria said, snapping on the radio.

"I can't see them," George said.

"Shhh! They're doing the weather," Anna-Maria said, leaning over the radio.

George kept looking and mumbling.

"Oh great! it's gonna rain," Anna-Maria said, "So much for my job hunting."

"I found them," George said. "Would you like an omelette and some home fries?"

"Sure," Anna-Maria said.

"How about another cup of coffee?" George asked.

"Sure!" she said, sitting down at the table and opening the paper. "Look at these water purifiers they have on sale. I wonder if they have them in white."

WEDDING

"So what's the video gonna cost you?" Annie's brother asked, leaning over so Annie could whisper in his ear.

"Two-five," Annie said.

"Two-five?", he echoed, "That's pretty good."

"Yeah," she said, "he told me it's gonna go up to two-six or two-seven next year."

"Wo! That's pretty steep," he said, "Does that include a love story?"

"Yeah, the works," Annie said, looking to see if the director had finished the close-ups of Father McGee.

"Ok," the director called, "everybody back to the altar for the wide shots."

Father McGee moved back to his position, facing the wedding party.

"Father, if you could just repeat the vows here, we'll just be doing your over-the-shoulder shots," the director said, "you don't really have to say them, you know, just mouth them so it looks good."

Father McGee repeated the vows for the camera, nodding and gesturing at the appropriate times.

The congregation was getting impatient.

It was stinking hot outside and the damp cool serenity of the church had been transformed into the muggy wasteland of video production. Between being under the heat of the lights

and constantly having to smile, everybody was getting close to the edge.

"They should have gone with the two-camera shoot, like I said," Annie's mother complained. "Then you can do the whole thing 'live'. There's none of this 'retake this' and 'cutaway' that. You really lose the feeling of the event with all this stopping and starting."

"With all the fancy technology that's around now," Annie's aunt said, "I don't know why they can't just shoot the bride and groom in studio. And do those special effects after."

"Actually, they can," Annie's mother said, "we got a quote on it, guess how much?"

"Oh, God, I don't know," her aunt said.

"No, really, guess," her mother said.

"I don't know... five thousand?" her aunt asked.

"You're not even warm," Annie's mother said.

"Ten?" her aunt asked.

"Forty thousand dollars!" Annie's mother said, nodding her head on each word.

"Forty K," her aunt echoed.

"The mind boggles," her mother said, nodding her head from side to side. "You actually perform the ceremony in an Ultimatte studio with the bride and groom, the priest, and the witnesses and that's it."

"Amazing," her aunt said, "a real live wedding!"

"And listen to this," Annie's mother said, "if you're from out of town or maybe your family doesn't approve of the wedding or something like that, they have stock footage of people sitting in the pews in your choice of churches. They can key them in to your show just like that."

"Stop!" her aunt said. "Your choice of church. How about that?"

"They had St. Joseph's Oratory, Notre-Dame, you name it. All the biggies," Annie's mother said.

"Ok! Quiet! People," the director called out, "We're in the home stretch here, the best part: the kiss!"

The director prepped Father McGee for the famous line.

Father McGee cleared his throat then took a deep breath and exhaled heavily.

"I now pronounce you man and wife!" Father McGee said, "You may kiss the bride."

"Wo! Cut, cut, cut!" the director called out. "Father McGee, you sound depressed. Let's play this a little more upbeat. This is a wedding, not a funeral. How about a bit more smile in that delivery. Remember: this is the happiest day of their lives, right kids?" the director said turning to Annie and the man who was probably now, technically speaking, her husband.

"Ok, The Kiss: Take two," the director said, "Action!"

"I now pronounce you man and wife!", Father McGee said, sounding like a late-night commercial for dog food. "You can

kiss the bride, now!"

Annie's husband leaned over to kiss her, but the camera man, who had been attempting a super low-angle shot of the official smooch, fell forward, knocking Annie's husband right into her. Her husband cracked his freshly made crown on Annie's braces.

"You broke my fucking tooth," Annie's husband said, getting ready to hit the camera man, who scrambled out of swinging range. "You big ape," he said, gesturing menacingly.

"Calm down," Annie said, "it was an accident."

The director walked over toward Annie, staying clear of her husband.

"People, people, people," the director said, "How am I supposed to make a nice video when nobody's smiling."

"I'll give you a nice smile," Annie's husband said, smiling and showing his chipped tooth.

"Ok," the director said to Annie's husband, "Here's the scoop: we'll shoot you in profile from the other side and nobody'll be any the wiser. Deal?"

"Look, bozo," Annie's husband said, "just wrap this up and fast or you and your whole crew are dead meat and you can forget about getting paid."

"No need to get nasty," the director said, "we'll skip the kiss. Let's just do the dolly shot down the aisle; then it's a wrap."

"Right!" Annie's husband barked.

The organist played the recessional as Annie and her husband walked solemnly down the aisle followed by a camera man, a sound man, a cable puller, a dolly pusher, a gaffer and a grip, and their train of cables.

The congregation smiled one last time and Annie's mother cried.

THE WIDOW'S TALE

"Hey, mister, you wanna fool around?" the speaker was a slender Oriental woman, rather tall, with shiny hair cut even at the shoulders.

Vince was caught off guard by this unexpected proposition. As he turned and looked at her he experienced one of those perfect moments, where everything synchronizes and even the quality of light is intensified. Her look was serene and thoughtful and he wondered if he hadn't imagined what he had heard.

"I'm sorry," he said, pointing to his ear, "I beg your pardon."

"I said do you wanna fool around?" she repeated in a voice that was neither seductive nor harsh but very engaging. The smooth surface of her face was perfectly bathed in the soft, diffused afternoon light.

Vince was having a hard time putting this whole thing together. Here he was, on a moderately posh downtown avenue, in the middle of the afternoon, minding his own business and out of nowhere the whole tone of the day was focused on this pregnant moment. Up to this point, he had just been on his usual treadmill, trying to get ahead.

"You hard of hearing, maybe? I can sign for you," she said and she started signing her proposition.

"As far as I know," he said, "My hearing is twenty-twenty

or whatever it is that hearing is."

She laughed.

"Look," Vince said, "let me get this straight: you're asking me if I'd like to pay you to have sex with me."

"You know, mister," she said, "you're one smart cookie!"

"Look," Vince said impatiently, "You don't have to be sarcastic, I'm just a little surprised."

"They say it's the world's oldest profession," she said, smiling gracefully and looking Vince right in the eye.

There was something aristocratic about her. She was dressed very conservatively; a beautifully detailed silk blouse hung from her narrow shoulders.

"You sure as hell don't look like a hooker," Vince said.

"Oh no?" she asked, "What does a hooker look like?"

"Oh, I don't know," Vince said, "but not like you. You look more like an advertising executive or a diplomat's wife or something."

"That's very charming of you," she said, "but I'm trying to run a business, so, how could I put this diplomatically... are you interested or not?"

Vince had been struck in this perfect moment with what seemed to be a perfect idea.

"Alright," Vince said, "I'm interested."

"Ok, let's go!" she said.

"No, wait a minute," Vince said. "Let's get something straight first. No offense intended to your profession but I'm

not in the habit of paying for sex."

"Lighten up," she said, "we all pay for sex, one way or the other."

"Look," Vince said, "you know what I mean."

"No, I don't," she said, "but I can pretend I do if that turns you on."

Vince was starting to get frustrated.

"Look," he said, "here's what we'll do: I'll pay you for your time, but I don't want to have sex with you."

"Oh no, are you one of these kinky guys or some shit?" she asked. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to tell me a story," he said.

"A story?" she asked, stepping back from him. "You got a thing about your mother or something? I don't wanna get messed up in that crap!"

"No, no," he said, reassuringly, "it's not like that. It's just that I'm a writer and I'm having a hard time coming up with stories. This just seems like a good idea. Totally spontaneous."

"Sounds like what you need right now is a therapist," she said.

"No, believe me," Vince said, "what I need right now is a story. You must have a good one you could tell me."

"What kind of story?" she asked, "Something kinky?"

"No, no, nothing kinky," he said, "just a regular story, but a real story, maybe something that happened to you, or,

you know, something like that." Vince said.

"Ok," she said, "I've got a story for you but you've gotta pay me."

"I told you," Vince said, slightly desperate, "I'll pay you."

"Let's go to my place," she said.

Her apartment was nearby.

They took the elevator to the seventh floor and got off. The building had probably been quite charming when it was first built but it hadn't been maintained. There were holes in the walls and graffiti scribbled all over. The carpeting was badly worn and full of cigarette burns.

Her apartment was just a few doors down from the elevator: number 726. It was surprisingly open and spacious. There was one large room with a walk-through kitchen and a washroom. The windows were open and a gentle breeze made the translucent curtains sway. There was a faint scent of lemon grass. She walked over to a small altar in the far corner of the room and lit some incense.

"So," she said, still fiddling with the incense, "should I take off my clothes?"

"Gimme a break," Vince said.

She walked right up to him, staring into his eyes.

"Put the money on the altar, beside the incense," she said.

They hadn't discussed a price and Vince wasn't up on the

going rates. He wasn't even sure if he had any money on him. He rifled through his pockets and put all the money he could find on the altar.

This was a strange experience. Vince felt his senses were all about to burst, as he walked towards her, loading a blank cassette into his Walkman.

She shot him a look.

"I always use this for recording ideas," he said.

"No recorder," she said.

"I'm terrible at taking notes," Vince said.

"Just listen," she said.

For the first time, Vince felt like he was no longer in control of the situation.

"Let's sit over here," she said, pushing a pillow up against the head of her huge brass bed.

The smoke from the incense curled up in spirals. Vince, very self-consciously, made his way to the bed and sat at the foot leaning against the bars. He dropped his Walkman on the bed between them and looked up into her deep black eyes.

"Once upon a time," she started, "there was a little girl named Po Yee. She lived with her younger brother, her mother, and her stepfather. They lived in a small fishing village. Life was slow and mostly predictable. When the fishing was good, they lived quite comfortably."

"Po Yee's mother was very beautiful. She became a widow during the war. It was hard finding food for her children. She

had to beg just to get some bread or fish. So, when an older man from a nearby village offered to marry her, she accepted."

"Her new husband had never been married. He was kind enough, but he was a crude and simple man. He was no match for Po Yee's mother, in his mind or in his body. She was a fiery woman of great imagination and strength. Po Yee had inherited these qualities."

"You don't look very comfortable," she said to Vince.

"I'm fine," he said.

"Why don't you lie down on the bed," she suggested, "I won't bite you, unless you want me to!"

"It's ok," he said, "Keep going."

She closed her finely charcoaled eyes and continued.

"One day, a strange, handsome man with a slight limp came to Po Yee's house. He smiled at Po Yee then asked where he could find her mother. She was down at the docks helping Po Yee's stepfather bring in the day's catch. 'Where are the docks?' he asked in a rich voice, brimming with emotion. Po Yee pointed to them. She watched from the window as the handsome man limped slowly down the hill. When he reached the docks, he stood, watching Po Yee's mother pull in the nets. She was still a beautiful woman with a clear, soft look and a slender able body. She was as strong as any man. The men always joked about getting Po Yee's mother to pull in the big catches. They seemed proud of her. The man still stood, staring as Po Yee's mother pulled in the last net, then wiped

the sweat from her forehead. As she turned toward the hill, she saw him watching her. They stared at each other for a long time then ran into each other's arms."

Vince was getting a cramp in his neck from sitting stiffly on the edge of the bed. He lay down with his arms behind his head.

"Better?" she asked.

"I was getting a bit of a cramp, sitting like that," Vince said.

"You want a little massage?" she asked.

"Umm, no, I'm ok," Vince said.

The incense had burned out. She walked over and lit another stick. Vince watched her closely. She had slender hips and moved gently and confidently. She sat on the bed beside Vince and continued her story.

"Po Yee was perplexed. Who was this man? Eventually, she found out he was her natural father. She had never known him. She thought he had died during the war but he had been a prisoner on a small island. He had been stranded there when the war ended. Now, nobody knew if, by law, he was still married to Po Yee's mother, and there was a lot of arguing and confusion. Po Yee's mother would have to go to the city to sign some papers. So, she left with Po Yee's natural father, promising to return within two days."

"After three days had passed, Po Yee's stepfather became very impatient and started drinking. He sat at the kitchen

table with a candle burning, drinking glass after glass, getting angrier by the minute. He wasn't a bad man but Po Yee had never liked him. He had tried to be nice to her and had even spoiled her, in some ways, but it was ordained in the stars they could never be friends."

"He wasn't used to drinking and he had drunk too much. Po Yee came into the kitchen to get some water. He watched her closely, reeling on his chair. His look was evil. Nothing good could come from his state of mind. Po Yee saw how drunk he was and tried to leave the kitchen quietly but as she passed him, he grabbed her arm. 'You're hurting me,' she said. But he just sat there, reeling, and holding on to her. 'Let go,' she said. But still, he just sat there. She tried to wrestle her arm free but he grabbed her other arm and shook her. 'You hate me, don't you?' he said, at last. She did hate him but she couldn't tell him. The old man knew, just the same. 'I don't hate you. Just let me go!' she said in a controlled voice. She tried to calm herself down; her heart was pounding. The old man was full of poison. 'You ungrateful brat,' he yelled, ripping open her nightdress. She pushed him away and he fell, knocking the table over. The alcohol splashed on the floor and ignited instantly as the candle fell on it."

"Po Yee ran to her brother's room and dragged him out of bed. As she carried him past the kitchen, she saw the old man sprawled out across the fiery floor."

"She never saw her mother and father again and eventually

found her way to America where she married an ambassador. Their marriage was short and unhappy."

A fly buzzed around Vince's head . He felt a numb warmth and exhaled deeply.

She sat, looking through him.

"Was it good for you?" she asked, standing up and walking over to the altar.

She picked up the money and counted it.

Vince was still sprawled out on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

"With a bit of work, this could be a made-for-TV movie," he mumbled to himself, "I've got to go," he added, walking towards the door.

"By the way," she said, fanning herself with the money, "you were great."

Vince was thinking about the casting for his new film. He smiled tightly as he walked through the door.

The incense wove its way through the silence.

THE BIRDS

The birds look as if they're in the water; the vines block the view. In the distance, an arched bridge, perfectly symmetrical. Above, the denim-blue water: the good earth, crowned by sprawling pines, ink blots.

Crossing the bridge, a woman, who moves like the trees, looks intently into her son. He has seen the birds. She sees his seeing. They are both flat surfaces, forfeiting their other directions to the composition of the fabric, moving in steps, not jarring but discrete, from moment to moment.

They cross the bridge. We see them coming. Their story unfolds.

Isaac's neighbours envy him. The farm is perfectly groomed. His mind organizes endless desire.

From the top of the arched bridge, neighbours see the perfection of his work: the neat rows of alternating crops, glistening in the sun.

He thinks only of his work; work frees the soul.

The farmhouse is modest, but starkly attractive. Amy understands the erratic movements of the eye and knows how to train its wild tendencies. Rooms flow colourfully into one another: harmony, space, objects. The kitchen, large and open, a crude pine table at one end, the old oven and sink at the other. Through the window over the sink, Amy sees her husband swaying in the fields like a piece of colourful cloth, flowing

to the rhythm of the wind.

The beige sky is cloudless and thick.

The front door slams. Amy hears her husband calling, he'll be hungry now. He'll wash up, then sit at the table, and clasp his hands to pray. He'll speak while he eats, but it'll be mostly to himself; Amy will be able to linger in her private world, occasionally nodding her head.

When they were married, this land was only a dream. It grew around them abruptly, wrapping them in its sounds.

Marcus slipped into their lives like the breeze through an open window. The magical child. Amy was transformed. He set her on fire; you could see the embers in her eyes. Her ecstasy was silently sustained through the years.

A sun that fills the sky leaks through the windows. Its heat is everywhere, especially in the fields.

Isaac's days are long, he loves Marcus, but time slips through his fingers, an inescapable rhythm of seasons and sunsets. His goals all lie in the future where he can never reach them. His dreams forge powerful contours in the landscape.

And always the sound of his chanting.

The nasal droning.

The moving landscape.

The whispering cornfields.

The day fades. The night is quiet. A chill sets in.

Marcus is eight.

Isaac sits by the lamp, watching his exhaled smoke expand. Drifting snow taps at the window. He stands up, rubbing his eyes, looking out at the night. The full moon illuminates spirals of powdered snow caught in a patternless race across empty fields. A shudder runs down his spine. His pipe has gone out. He leaves it on the table and blows out the lamp.

Cold feet on a creaking floor give way to bare feet on the parched soil.

Amy goes into the village with Marcus. Icy blue eyes.

It's raining. Amy and Marcus run into a store, out of breath, Amy shaking the rain out of her hair. Lightning explodes; Amy jumps. Marcus' mouth is dry. Rain-water trickles down the sides of his face. A deep relaxation comes over him, a silver thread, weaving around him. He feels safe in his cocoon. Lightning flashes in Amy's eyes. Thunder crashes.

Amy scoops flour from an open bag.

"The father and I are one," whispers Marcus.

"What did you say?" Amy asks, but Marcus has disappeared.

She continues scooping.

The rain stops. They leave.

Amy's grip is tight.

Marcus is twelve. It's the year of the famine. Disease has devoured most of the crops but Isaac has salvaged enough to feed his family.

The winter brings less fortunate neighbours begging. Amy gives some grain, or winter vegetables, but spring arrives, and supplies are low.

Some have migrated to the city, hoping for work or charity. Hunger consumes their serenity.

Summer comes.

Isaac works hard. Marcus takes over some of the heavy work. Amy sees them in the fields, a few careless strokes in a wash of golden grain. Sometimes she cries, it just happens spontaneously; she doesn't even know she's crying until she stops.

A diffuse, dull anger builds up. Nothing causes it but it mixes freely with bitterness. Amy feels it in her body. Some movements are difficult. Fear creeps in and Amy is sick for a long time.

Marcus takes care of his mother, bringing her tea and the biscuits she has grown so fond of.

There is a new bridge. One that arches up through the clouds where the graces live.

Anger seems difficult now. Perhaps the famine has made it obsolete. Amy's past is becoming a large bright room full of warm memories; her father's forgotten eyes visit her often.

As the pick-axe strikes the ground, a round of sweat sprinkles the parched soil near Marcus' feet. He feels a rough hand on his bare shoulder. A shudder ripples through his chest.

The sun is too strong now. He walks to the house with his father.

The famine fades from memory. Crops look good, there's no trace of disease. People celebrate quietly: little smiles and knowing looks. Superstition.

During the harvest Amy's dreams begin.

She's walking through a field of heather, when the sky suddenly darkens and huge rust-coloured clouds move rapidly across the horizon. There's no wind, and the warm air seems charged. Looking into her hand, she sees a spinning design, maybe a flower; as she tries to stop the spinning she feels herself being drawn in against her will. A terrible dizziness, like nausea, comes over her, she's spinning for an eternity, until suddenly she's awake. She breathes deeply, closing her eyes, but the spinning comes back.

Isaac is gone.

A terrible chill, a sickening anticipation, spreads through her, paralysing her. Where could Isaac be in the middle of the night? On a chair beside the bed, her housecoat seems to glow in the dark room. She handles it like a dangerous object, putting it on carefully as she leaves the room.

The kitchen is dark, the curtains are drawn. Amy calls softly for Isaac but there's no answer. She moves slowly towards the sound of a rusty hinge, fastening her housecoat as she goes. The front door is open, swinging carelessly in the

breeze. The night air seems menacing, and her dreams are still in her body. She isn't centred, it's hard to breathe. The air carries a sweet fragrance, unfamiliar, luring her on. It's a warm breeze. Amy's long hair moves gently as she walks.

A solitary voice is chanting. It's Isaac. She starts to run towards him, but suddenly recoils in fear. The moon is dizzying, she wants to faint. She sees him now, his long arms swinging a pick-axe.

He seems unaware of her presence, continuing to swing the pick. She touches his shoulder. He turns towards her. She faints. Marcus' new boots squeak with every step. Lost in thought, he walks down the dirt road leading to the village. His straw hat protects him from the blistering sun.

At noon, the town is quiet. People stay inside, cooling down.

Amy rarely sleeps. When she sleeps, it's fitful and nightmarish. She whispers his name but her eyes can't see him, they're caught in the other world; the veil is impenetrable. Sometimes she smiles.

Isaac has thrown himself into his work, but his soul remains entangled in the sun fading slowly across the endless horizon. He sits on the porch, watching it vanish.

His mind is almost still.

Birds bicker callously. The horizon dissolves into a thin trail of smoke. The breeze is icy. Stars appear.

The moon is full.