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Signs and Wonders

Stacey Larin

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

(Creative Writing)

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

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Abstract

Signs and Wonders

Stacey Larin

Signs and Wonders is a trio of short stories linked in theme and technique. Each story presents a central character whose struggle with emotional and spiritual concerns is manifested in his or her inability to communicate effectively with others, especially his or her spouse. In each story, however, the main character undergoes an experience associated with secondary characters which prompts movement away from negativism, solitude, and paralysis towards communication, healing, and emotional and spiritual renewal.

Technically, all three stories are based in traditional realism, but incorporate some non-traditional variations to greater and lesser degrees. The limited third-person narrative viewpoint of each story is offset by the use of chronological disruption, memory, and the interplay of dream/ vision and reality. Each story, however, is informed by a governing metaphor or imagery drawn from the sciences: "Tense" draws upon quantum mechanics, "The Code" upon biology, and "Noise" upon chaos and systems theory. As unifying formal devices, these metaphors help shape and integrate thematically both the individual stories and the group as a whole.

Acknowledgements

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That's why it's called the end.

So Janet thinks.

And has been thinking for some time: days, weeks, months? At least the last few minutes since she came home to kick off her shoes into the pile at the door, crumple her jacket onto a chair, poise her pen as that line about timeless love unraveled into the nothingness of the paper's blank labyrinth. Too many possibilities. Or is it probabilities? That her first class this summer, tonight, should have to be cancelled, leaving her displaced like her students, an illegal alien in her own home. Still, what choice did she have? Janet leans back from the study desk, pushes her notebook away, brings her hands up to her shoulders and neck to knead the muscles. Tense. Time. Where is Iain? Beyond the pooled light on the desk, the house is suddenly dark, very still. Even Schrödinger is nowhere in sight. Janet sits at the desk, listening. Unbreathing. Very still. Where is Iain?

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* * * * *

She'd turned a last corner in the corridor and there he was. He glanced up to see her and waved her in, his tie dipping into a half-unpacked box of books, his hair as usual beginning to stab the air in the stubborn black shocks which had captured Janet's attention the first time she ever saw him. He still plastered them down with water every morning, driving off to work sleek as a Fitzgerald hero and rattling home later as hopelessly rumpled as a youthful Einstein. She stopped in the doorway. Inside the room, naked metallic shelves striped the walls; an uncurtained window diffused light towards the broad-backed steel desk. Iain placed a few books on a shelf and turned: the books staggered like dominoes. His tie dipped into the box again as she watched his long fingers with their bitten-down nails pry up another text.

Janet touched her own fingertips to the fresh white paint of the walls: the air still wafted pungent. She felt a twitch of an itch high in her nose: allergy? She glanced about, then back at Iain.

"Looks just like my office."

"Really? Was it hard to find?"

"It's on the opposite side of the building. I'll never find my way around this maze."

"I meant mine," said Iain.

"It takes time," said a voice from the doorway.

Janet and Iain turned and Iain scraped his fingers through his hair. The doorway held a woman who held a ball of black and white fuzz.

"I don't suppose you'd like a kitten," said the woman.

Janet sneezed.

She'd turned: a young woman in the doorway held a small mottled kitten against the vivid chevron pattern of her knit dress. Her ash-blond hair was drawn back from her face into a severe spinsterly knot, but her pale eyes were framed by pointed black-rimmed glasses so unflattering that Janet saw instantly that she was beautiful and saw Iain turn and smooth his hair.

In the car on the way home, Janet held on her lap the kitten given to them by Iain's new colleague in the physics department, Vivian Wedgwood. She had found it by the road that morning on the way to the college and had been hoping to find it a home when she saw Janet and Iain.

"Poor little thing. It was pure chance," Vivian had said, stroking its white stomach as it purred on Iain's desk. "And what do you do, Janet?"

She opened her mouth to say <u>I write</u>, as she would, could have said even a year ago, and felt blood warm her cheeks as Vivian waited, as Iain waited too. What did she

do? "Actually, I'll be teaching here also." She heard her voice after all. "English. As a foreign language."

"Really?" said Vivian.

"Yes," said Janet.

"I see," smiled Vivian, and stroked the kitten's stomach with a clear-lacquered nail. "Poor little thing."

Schrödinger pads by the study doorway towards the kitchen and Janet pushes her chair away from the desk to rise. She breathes again. Silly: no one will break into the house. It's not even dark out yet; but leafy shadows, palmate and pinnate, have already inked the windows. Janet snaps on the kitchen light and, in the incandescent flood, sees her own taut-jawed face peering in the window over the sink, the twin panes casting a ghost to the original ghost. Her doubled hand pushes her colourless hair back from her blackened eyes. Schrodinger weaves around her legs, paradox of rough pattern and mink patina, and she stoops to stroke him. Her watchcat: he keeps time for Janet, requesting his meals on a finely-tuned schedule. Tonight, though, is the first night of the course Janet is teaching (supposed to be teaching) this summer, the same night she taught last term and the term before, Iain's night to feed the cat. Iain would always be home for dinner after she'd leave and, when she'd get back from class, he'd already be up in bed,

reading Omni. Tonight he should be feeding the cat. Where is he?

She'd turned a last corner in the corridor and there they were: her new summer students clustered outside the classroom, silently watching her approach, as, inside, another group parroted the unintelligible words of their instructor. Janet smiled at the students, cleared her throat, tapped lightly on the windowpane of the door; and the teacher, short and stocky with coarse grey hairs trained across his skull and a frothy ring around it like a laurel crown, edged the door open.

"I'm sorry," Janet said, "but there must be some mistake. I'm supposed to be teaching English here tonight."

The man glared up at her. "This," he hissed in heavily-accented English, "is Bothno-Ugaric," and closed the door in her face.

The students were still waiting quietly, clutching looseleaf notebooks and plastic pencilcases. Janet swallowed. This isn't really happening. The sharp dark eyes of the students pinned her against the door. Why do these things always happen to me? Still, she managed to squeeze through the knot of bodies. But although she checked the length of the corridor and the floor below, she could find no empty classrooms; each contained an instructor scrawling on the board, students hunched over their

notebooks, all pausing to stare at her as she glanced through the window, then scribbling again furiously, as if writing her into their accounts of Asian empires, differential equations, the schizophrenic psyche. Her own clicking footsteps echoing down the corridors made it sound as though she were being followed. She didn't check the other floors in the building. She returned to the students, who milled midgetlike about her for a moment before closing in like a puddle.

"I'm sorry." Janet spoke slowly, knowing most of them were recent arrivals from the Orient, the Middle East, come to study Western technology. "We cannot have class tonight. I will check on room arrangements. If there is a change in room number, I will post it on the door here. Otherwise we will meet here next time."

She looked around at them and they looked back wordlessly, miniature adults, young men and women, no bigger than she'd been as a child. What had happened? What in the world had arrested their growth so while she'd sprouted like Alice dizzy on mushrooms?

"No class tonight," she repeated, hearing her voice desperately simplify syntax, acquire an accent. "Next time. Next time."

"Nesstime," they echoed en masse, and beamed at her.

* * * * *

Janet opens the fridge to get the cat food and Schrödinger backs off sideways with his tail curled over his back like a question mark. Almost a year has passed since they brought him home, since they moved here from the last place, since they both began to teach at the local college, but Janet is no closer to writing her novel, Iain is no closer to completing his doctoral dissertation, which will allow him to seek what he calls a real position at a real university. To these ends he consumes Scientific American at the dinner table, plunges into Physics Today in the bath, attacks Nature passionately up in bed while Janet brushes her teeth and scrubs her face. When she comes out of the bathroom, he switches off the lamp that always flares into darkness and she stumbles forward in the shocking blackness, her hands outstretched, until she blunders into the bed and stretches out carefully along its edge. Before moving again, she waits for the pounding of her heart to lessen, for the visual purple to wash like a balm across her retinas and rescue her from blindness. Silly, silly...but she knows that this cold war will continue night after night, that she will keep lying there, knowing this, unable to stop the same thoughts from crystallizing, the possibilities, probabilities, petrifying. She can't sleep but she can't watch the late-night news, can't make sense of another

Harper's index. What in the world is happening? Then she feels a gentle vibration at the foot of the bed and Schrodinger settles for the night. After night. After night.

Janet closes the fridge and dumps congealed cat food into a dish. Schrodinger's spine undulates beneath her hand.

"Silly cat," she says. "You came out of it alive, didn't you?"

Iain told Vivian Wedgwood what had happened when she stopped by the next day to see if she could help them settle into their new home. Preparing tea, Janet left the kitchen door open to listen to their voices in the living room. Wasn't it nice to hear Iain sounding so animated again?

"...and then, after we'd checked all the kitchen cupboards, we looked at each other and realized there was only one more possibility."

"You don't mean--" Vivian breathed.

"Yes!" Iain exclaimed. "He bolted out of that fridge like a bat out of hell--frozen over, of course."

They both chuckled and then swivelled their heads towards Janet as she entered with the tray. Their eyes, similar shades of grey, were bright.

"So you found him there alive," said Vivian.

"The last possibility," Iain nodded.

"When all others collapsed?" Vivian murmured.

Iain grinned. "Schrödinger's cat lives."

"Whose cat?" Janet settled the tray on the coffee table and sat down on the side chair. "Did you find out who owns him?"

Iain said nothing for a moment, but when Vivian smiled and slid forward on the couch towards the tray, he said, "No, Janet, you remember--Schrödinger, the physicist who designed that famous thought experiment to illustrate the probability wave function. I'm sure I must have rambled on about it sometime." He coughed.

"Oh," said Janet, feeling her cheeks tingle as she bent to pour the tea. "Yes, of course." The name suddenly connected with memory, snapped into place in Iain's own voice reading aloud from the latest journals and magazines stuffed into his worn knapsack, strewn amid his kitchenette dishes, scattered over the dimpled hotel-room bedcover. He'd had them forwarded during their honeymoon.

"According to Schrödinger," said Vivian, plumping a sofa pillow and settling back, "the observer was necessary to collapse the probability wave function of any experiment. He suggested the example of a cat sealed in a box in which a lethal gas would either be released or not, according to a random event, such as the radioactive decay of an atom. When the experiment is activated, the gas either is or is not released, but without looking we can't know."

"Yes, I see," said Janet, setting the teapot down carefully. She had heard Iain say all this often enough and could probably recite it herself. She looked over at him but he was looking at the sugar bowl. It was the one shaped like a miniature globe which she'd bought him years ago but only she used. He still shovelled sugar out of the box.

"According to classical physics, of course, the cat is either dead or not dead and we simply have to look and see. But according to a certain interpretation of quantum mechanics, the Copenhagen Interpretation"--she stretched the short a--"the wave function of the experiment contains the possibility of the cat being alive or the cat being dead. Its fate is determined only when we look inside the box and the wave function then collapses as one of the possibilities, or probabilities, actualizes, while the other vanishes." Vivian paused. "Do you see, Janet?"

Janet smiled. "Cream, Vivian?"

Vivian smiled back. "Not a drop."

Iain scooped sugar into his mug, helped himself generously to the cream, and said, "But according to another interpretation, the Many Worlds Interpretation"--he paused to slurp as Janet stared at him--"the moment the atom does or doesn't decay, reality splits into two branches, each with its own version of our fatalistic feline, but the wave function doesn't collapse. The cat isn't in limbo, as in the other interpretation, but is both dead and alive, and

only when we look into the box does our wave function split again to coincide with two realities, one in which the cat dies and one in which it lives, mutually exclusive, mutually unknowable."

His voice had acquired what Janet recognized as its thoughtful, scholarly tone, usually reserved for the lectern and his practice runs in front of the mirror. She sat immobilized in the chair. Copenhaaagen?

"The observer becomes the creator, in effect. All he has to do is look, and possibilities become probabilities become realities." He took a gulp of tea and gazed off pensively.

"In this case, one or the other," said Vivian, lifting her mug and tapping it gently with a long fingernail. She looked at Janet through her cat's-eyes glasses. "Which will it be?"

Sitting at the kitchen table, Janet watches Schrödinger, finished with his meal, saunter over to the doorway and then suddenly sink to a crouch, tail tip flickering, rump quivering, whole body ready for the spring, tensed. She tries to see what has caught his attention: by radar or sixth sense? But even as she scans the hallway he rises again, turns, leaps fluidly onto a kitchen chair, flops to his side and begins washing a paw. Janet tries to relax, watching the cat at his ease, but she

finds her own body sitting stiffly, uneasily. Lately she feels besieged by signs and symbols, strange relations. Politics speaks religion on the east coast and fires flare insatiably out west; the cat rolls over to wash his ear and rain falls in unutterable salvation. Schrodinger looks at her with eyes half-lidded in bliss, faintly foreign, alien, ineffable--what was it? Bothno-Ugaric? Something Slavic; and while grown men budget for shuttles to and from the flag on the moon, children on peace missions crash into oblivion. What order of life is this? Men and women throughout the world at war with each other--what future can they promise? To themselves, to their children.... She can't say. She can't think. How long?

And Schrödinger blinks: he has become her constant companion, despite (because of?) her allergy; she can't fathom how she got through the first few years of her marriage without him. Sometimes she forgets he is (nominally) Iain's cat; sometimes, in fact, when she is home alone with him in the study, trying to write to the rhythm of his throaty rumbling, unable to write, language paralyzed at the pen-nib, she forgets she is even married to Iain. Sometimes, as if across a great divide, she sees herself pausing in mid-step in the doorway of her apartment bathroom the night of the day Iain began teaching, and Iain, sitting up in bed with a copy of Omni on his knees, saying that it looked like the time had come to tie the knot, and she then

finding herself completing the step into the bedroom without objection.

It seemed sensible, the thing to do, at the time. What else had she ever wanted? A home, a sense of belonging, of order. Better to be safe than sorry, her mother had always said. Her father, when home, never said anything, vanishing behind the noisy façade of the newspaper. And she'd always been very sensible, even Iain said so; why make waves? No moods, no scenes: an exceptional woman, the strong, silent type, he used to joke with his friends. That's what he loved about her, he'd growl softly in her ear. And then nip it.

And sometimes, lately, how long? days, weeks, months? she finds herself musing: and if I hadn't said yes? and if I hadn't agreed? and if I hadn't then walked through the bedroom door?

She looks at Schrödinger curled upon the seat cushion. And if I had tensed and then simply--turned away?

Iain placed the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the hotel room door after asking the hotel operator to hold all calls. Janet looked at the suitcases standing where the bellboy had dumped them, then at Iain.

"But I'm waiting to find out about that job. That English as a second language course. For foreigners. They said if there was any news, they'd phone."

Iain closed the door behind himself with a click and smiled. "We already have a second language," he said. "The language of love." He took off his blazer and draped it over a chair.

Janet stared at him and managed to stop the tremulous wave that rippled her throat. She didn't trust herself to say anything for a moment. Instead she sat down on the bed. After a minute she took off her jacket too.

Iain placed the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the hotel room door after the bellboy brought up the science journals clogging their mailbox downstairs.

"Must you do that?" Janet asked. Was that really her voice? She tried to smile. "The maids are starting to give me knowing little smirks," she said, and twisted her face in imitation.

Iain stood by the door, holding the books. He had grey smudges under his eyes. "I don't see why they would," he said. "I told you, Janet, a long time ago, I don't like to be interrupted when I'm reading. It's research, after all. This stuff's important. I've got to keep up with it." He sat down by the window, crossed one leg at the ankle over the opposite knee, opened one of the journals flat. The spine snapped. He bit at the nail of an index finger and looked at her. "Don't be so uptight. Why are you always so tense? For God's sake, aren't we married, after all?"

"Yes," said Janet. "We are." Married. The cottage in the country. The kids.

"I'm sorry," he said. He breathed out heavily and managed a thin smile. "I shouldn't have said anything. It's just writing this damned thesis--well, that's nothing to do with you. Forgive me?"

Janet looked at the neatly patterned pages of the book flattened against the table, wordless in violation. She closed her eyes. "Forget it."

When they got back from the honeymoon, they had the argument about doors.

"Obviously, doors are meant for closing," Iain said. "Otherwise we'd simply have doorways, archways, entranceways. But as soon as we hinge a door onto an opening, we indicate closure. People don't leave their doors open when they go out; doors become the locus, the sign, of 'locking up', of separation between point X and point Y. We always kept the doors shut in my house. A door's purpose is to be closed."

"But if people just wanted to be closed off from other people, or wanted to keep areas closed off from other areas, logically they wouldn't need any doors at all," said Janet. "They would just have separate, distinct rooms with unbroken walls. Which is absurd. How would they get around? Doors are connections, links; they're interfaces,

belonging to two places at once, relating them. They're meant for opening."

Iain stared at her, opened his mouth, then clamped it shut, strode to the front door, and slammed it shut behind himself. Of course, he opened it first.

She watches Schrödinger's eyes slant into the sleep of utter comfort. Could she try one more time? "Sequence of tenses. Remember that? Very simple. Putting things in order. Verb tenses working together to reflect meaning." To create meaning. Possibilities. Probabilities. Certainties. And Janet would see her chalk-covered hands gesturing, sending up small puffs of white; she would watch the faint clouds hover around her, unsettling. "Now, what do we need here? Simple present? Or past, or future? Or present perfect, past perfect, future perfect? Or present infinitive? Or perfect infinitive? Past participle? Present perfect participle?..." She would gaze out onto the rows of faces, indistinguishable, undecipherable, even after a whole term, dwarf adults, wizened children, offspring of modern warfare, her own. <u>I would like to have known</u> or <u>I would have liked to know</u>? Which will it be?

Standing at the lectern, her heart pounding: <u>I don't want to know</u>!

And the students staring at her, speechless.

* * * * *

"And she's quite a smart cookie, you know," Iain called from where he was lathering his face at the bathroom mirror. "Family's name is highly respected in these circles. Was already teaching while finishing her undergrad studies--got her doctorate last year. Already published quite a bit here and there. Wherever. Said maybe she could introduce me to a few people. Could be useful, what with all these contract negotiation problems. You know."

"Well--" Janet knotted her robe about herself slowly, then drew the drapes open at the window. The yard below was a fragile litter of still sepia leaves. Hadn't she just raked them all up yesterday? "I don't know-- Do you think she's for real? Her name-- With all that, what reason does she have for being here?"

"What's the matter with you?" Iain came out of the bathroom. He was wearing a towel with a faded "Holiday Inn" logo wrapped around his waist. "I don't understand you anymore, Janet, there's just no talking to you. What do you want? Can't you just take people as they are? Or things? Why must you always complicate things?"

Janet looked at the foamy white beard blurring his jawline and trembling like a swirl of soft ice cream at the tip of his chin. There were two long furrows bracketing his mouth that she didn't remember, that must have formed before her eyes. What was happening to them? She felt a draft

graze her cheek. "Of course, she is quite beautiful."

"Really? Is she? I hadn't noticed," Iain responded. "Well? Like you've always said, appearances aren't everything, are they?"

"No," said Janet, watching a large creamy dollop separate itself from his face and drop to the rug. "No, they're not."

At the science department's spring party, Janet realized too late that something had been added to her orange juice. By then, she found herself travelling around the room with Iain as he talked but never herself talking, moving in his orbit as he moved, drifting her gaze around the room as Vivian drifted in and out of her field of vision with her glinting smile out of Lewis Carroll, her name out of Harlequin Romance. Were those glasses for real? Was she for real? Of course; after all, she'd given Schrodinger to Janet. Iain, supposedly; but she'd handed the kitten to Janet as their fingers brushed: "Here, Janet...." Janet found herself thinking about herself, at the moment, in the third person: she found herself thinking about herself...as if from a distance in space and time, in spacetime, much in the way that she had recently begun to write in her journal, adrift from the words, their signs, their significance, unable to connect with this language she must use which spoke as if human while conceiving the inhuman. Below the

hubbub of the crowd, she seemed suddenly to hear Iain's murmur a few feet away, turned to see him leaning close to the head of the barmaid whose face was hidden behind a smooth sheet of hair. Wasn't that one of his students? Iain looked up with a taut smile to meet Janet's gaze, walked back with a fresh gin and tonic delicately beaded with moisture he rubbed away with his thumb. She heard him laugh warmly at her side, saw him turn an anticipatory smile to one colleague's joke, bend a serious expression to another's comments. She gazed down into her glass, still chill, watched light slow and still within the ice. Frozen. What does this mean? What does what does this mean mean?

"...first strike," someone was saying. "I tell you, it's up to us."

"Stick to our guns," another rumbled, " and we'd win it. Absolutely."

"Got to. Or all we've fought for till now would be meaningless," added a third, as the second echoed, "Meaningless, utterly meaningless," and Janet felt the ice trembling to life again in her glass as the murmurous voices meshed and enmeshed her like the newspapers, the television, people in the street with placards: the end of the world tomorrow! And tomorrow, and tomorrow, to the last syllable of recorded time. Who said that? The war to end all wars, communiques to end all communication, language pared down to the X and Y, the X and how, not why. She looked at Iain,

who swayed in her vision and he was introducing her to someone named Black or Blank involved in the contract negotiations, and she watched his untrimmed rusty mustache bristle itself around her name as she heard: contract: negotiation: strike:

She blinked: but instantly the vertigo passed to leave in its wake Blank's voice politely asking about work, home, family, children.

"Not yet," said Iain, flexing an arm around her shoulders so that she felt jarred from within her the only two words she believed could still mean something, anything.

"Not now," she said, staring at the red mustache. Meaning. Meaningless. What does this mean?

"But eventually," Iain smiled, gripping her shoulder with his fingers and squeezing lightly. "Plenty of time."

She felt herself slipping through his grasp, insubstantial, felt the words slipping from her control. No. Not now. Not like this.

But she hadn't opened her mouth; and around them, people were yawning and reaching for their coats.

"Why not simply make it a glass box?" Janet had asked. Vivian looked at her silently and then bowed her head to her raised cup, but Iain put his mug down on the table and a little tea sloshed over the rim to ring it.

"You don't understand, Janet," he said. "It's an

experiment in perception."

"Precisely," she replied.

Iain stared at her, speechless.

It was chance, pure chance, that had designed Janet's cancellation tonight, for her sake, for their sake, she is sure of it, a design, an order masquerading as randomness, as she rises from the kitchen table and walks towards the front hallway. Schrodinger follows soundlessly behind her. She doesn't know what it is she is looking for, but she knows she'll know when she sees it. As she approaches the front door, she sees her sudden ghost again, her face at the diamond pane of the door, as if she stands outside again, fumbling her key in the lock, entering to sidestep Schrödinger, to glance at Iain's windbreaker hanging from the closet knob, kick off her shoes by his below, head into the study where she writes. Supposedly. Where Iain writes. Supposedly. Where neither of them, she knows, has written anything worth writing, worth meaning, since they've moved from one place and another to their current stopover on this suburban cul-de-sac where their dead-end stares them full in the face, unflinching, arrogant, absolute. She knows this, just as she knows she has found what she was looking for as she looks at Iain's windbreaker, Iain's shoes. The same ones he wore going out today before she left. She stares at them. Or did he?

* * * * *

Janet stares at Iain's clothes and, beneath the drumming of her pulse, hears the words whirring and clicking into position, things falling into place. The clothes are macroscopic objects, like Schrodinger's hypothetical cat, and thereby subject to irreversible thermodynamic processes. Not to quantum mechanical wave functions, which apply to the level of subatomic particles which correlate not into independently existing structures but into a web of correlations whose meanings arise from their relationships to the whole where "correlation" is a concept dependent upon the conceiver so that finally Iain's windbreaker, Iain's shoes, stand not on their own but as tools for correlating experience.

Which is ultimately representable by an ur-wave function where all possibilities are mapped.

So that either Iain did not wear those clothes earlier and is still out, or he did wear them and has returned home. So that either he is home, upstairs, alone, or he is home, upstairs, not alone. With the door to the bedroom closed. Aren't we married, after all?

Janet stares at the clothes.

For God's sake. Yes.

Which will it be?

* * * * *

Schrodinger turns and pads noiselessly to the stairway, sits, curls his tail around his front toes. He looks at Janet with eyes that are wide black disks rimmed with green-gold, he, the survivor of the fridge, the ice-box. Janet remembers how, when they'd first noticed him missing, she'd been relieved, grateful, almost hopeful he'd run away. And if they hadn't found him? He shimmers suddenly in her gaze, solidifies. And if I hadn't taken what was offered? And if I hadn't opened the door? To know, to take the chance and speak, to set things in order. What other possible probable futures were collapsed, vanished, splintered away, unreachable, unknowable, at the turning point?

Janet takes a step towards the cat and he floats up the stairs to the dim second-storey hall where she knows the future waits, waits for her to see Schrödinger sitting at the bedroom door, his tail licking the broadloom in slow, steady waves, where she will stand listening, tense, a soundless noise coming from within as of the sudden tensing of readied muscle. All it will take is a twist of her wrist and she will have made the decision to discover, to perceive, to activate the reality that lies beyond the closed door, the future that both of them will have to live. It could be any, it could be all. But she will know only one, after she places her hand on the doorknob, opens the door, looks into the twilit room.

The Code

Through the space between the curtains, Evelyn can see the sky beginning to turn a faint putty-grey and she rolls over and presses her hands to her stomach. Next to her, Mark is a dark bulk against the paler darkness of the room and she watches the slow rise and fall of the blanket as he breathes in and out, sighing. When his lips begin to twitch, she hears the rumbling start low in his throat and then, just at the edge of clarity, the words, diminutive but perfectly formed. "What?" she whispers, leaning towards him. "What is it?" Mark swallows and turns his head from side to side. "Nummun," he says. "Wintago. Durm." When he stops, she lies back down and, after a while, she hears him exhale heavily and then throw the covers back. The bedsprings creak as he gets up and pads into the kitchen without turning on the light. She hears him cough softly, twice. When he returns, she waits motionless, her eyes closed, for the faint milky smell of his breath as he leans over to kiss her forehead. After a few minutes, she is listening to the steady rise and fall of his breath as she presses her hands to her stomach. Then, from the kitchen, she hears Romeo cough softly, twice. If I died now, she thinks, would there be anything left of me at all?

"You were talking again," she tells him.

Mark is standing in the kitchen looping his tie and she laces her fingers around her coffee mug and then unlaces them. He is wearing what she calls his authority suit: a thin maroon and grey pinstripe on charcoal with matching maroon tie and pale grey shirt. Mark works for a large accounting firm as a manager, having risen so swiftly through the ranks that some of his junior colleagues, his superiors in age, have fashioned for him the slogan, "The Buck does not stop here." At a party thrown by the firm, when they could see she was several months pregnant, Evelyn overheard two of Mark's co-workers smirking: better get as much of it as possible while you still can. Her cheeks had burned but she hadn't said anything. Mark pulls a smile at the ribbing but now every morning brushes his thick dark hair back from his temples to expose his receding hairline. Baldness, he had warned Evelyn on their first date, ran in his family; as soon as they graduated from university, they were married.

Evelyn is not sure why Mark remains with the firm. Every night she sees him hunched over binders at the kitchen table, punching and repunching the same equations into his lap-top computer. Numbers have never held her interest; the neat abstraction of percentages and statistics leaves her cold. Nevertheless, she floundered through the requisite math courses to complete her bachelor's degree in psychology; after graduation five years ago, she acquired

the part-time position of children's counsellor at the local clinic. She felt her own experience as a child from a divorced family would serve her well, help her to help them. And the children did respond to her; at night she would write down the things she had learned during the day, for future reference. With most of her income saved and Mark advancing successfully, she should have been able to quit by this time, as they had planned; they should have been expecting their own child, they should have been choosing names, decorating a nursery. They still had the rolls of wallpaper in the hall closet. For the past month, however, she has been waiting the day through at home, alone, until Mark returns with his briefcase bulging with files: if he makes partner within the next two years, he'll be the youngest in the firm's history. Later, she fixes him decaffeinated coffee, black, with two sugars--he thanks her with a smile--before undressing slowly in the bedroom and easing herself between the sheets. The kitchen light burns for hours. She does know what holds him to the firm, even now; the integrity, he says. Being entrusted with confidential information. The profession's code of honour. True to his word, he never speaks of his clients to her beyond mentioning their names.

At times, Evelyn feels impatience simmer into a strange, intense anger within her. "Your Sunday-school morals," she'd finally said, not stopped but spurred on by

the look in Mark's eyes, the sound of her own voice, "adhering to codes and rules for their own sake. What's the point?" After all, he isn't an altar-boy anymore, he hasn't even gone to church in years, he stopped long before they met. Who was he to talk about morals and values and beliefs in a world where every day she saw children abused and battered by their own parents and yet could have none of her own, could only feel them bleed away from her into nothingness.... Once, twice--how many times? Her voice had risen, shaking. "What's the point of all this? Can you tell me? Can you?" Mark had just looked at her. Then he turned and left the room heavily, saying nothing more. It was only after he was gone that she closed her eyes and felt how dry they were, the skin around her eyes, her mouth, taut as the wings of a dead moth.

That was the last time they had argued. Since then, both have been careful in conversation to stick to neutral subjects: the dinner menu, the weather. But lately, over the past month, he has begun to talk in his sleep; nothing precise, just mouthings and mumblings at first, but then trembling just on the verge of sense so that Evelyn finds herself thinking that if she just spoke the right word, if she knew the key, the message would unlock and unfold before her, all the things that remain unsaid, all the things he will not speak of by day. So that when she clasps her

coffee mug and says, "You were talking again," he stops in mid-loop, brow wrinkled.

"Did I say anything?"

"No," Evelyn says. "Not really. But you sound like you want to."

Mark smiles at her. "What's up today?" he says. "What about that friend of yours, what's her name, the one who phones...." He squints. "Madge, Marge?"

"Midge," Evelyn says.

"That's it," Mark says. "Why don't you have her over for supper sometime." He picks up his briefcase.

"Mark--" Evelyn feels a knot forming in her stomach, breathes in to ease it. "You're not getting enough rest, with this work. You need some rest. You're worn out."

She watches his finely molded lips move. "I'm fine," Mark says. "Everything's fine."

Evelyn looks down into the fresh beige swirl of coffee and back up. "You can talk to me, Mark," she says. "It's all right."

"Evie," he says. "You know it's confidential. I can't."

That's not what I meant, she wants to say, but her heart is beating quickly and he leans over to kiss her forehead. "I'll try to make it as early as possible," he says. "Maybe I'll have a surprise."

Evelyn watches the spiralled cream uncurl, slowly dissolve. "All right," she says.

"You have a good day," he calls from the door.

"All right," Evelyn says.

Midge was the first person Evelyn met who believed in reincarnation. In her child psychology seminar, Evelyn found herself seated next to a large-boned woman with a pleasant, deep-jawed face who, within five minutes, had informed her of her two grown children, her two divorces, and her faith in extraterrestrial visitations. By the end of the first class, Evelyn found herself adopted; by the time the course reached the topic of adolescent rebellion, which Evelyn found engrossing, Midge claimed she was learning nothing new and switched into film studies. Nonetheless, they remained in touch. Every few weeks, Evelyn receives updates on Midge's activities: the film industry is too plastic, she is now in the health-food business with two people she located through a newspaper ad; the health-food venture fell through and she is now apprenticed in the art of Swedish massage. Actually, Midge is the one to make the effort; curled up at home on the couch day after day, Evelyn finds it easier simply to let everyone else drift away, letting her thoughts fade out on waves like flotsam. Midge does not think highly of this attitude.

"You got to get back into the swing, honey," she says. "Your soul ain't ready to migrate yet."

Evelyn looks at the big gentle face and smiles but she's not sure what reincarnation has to do with her. She has been a student of psychology, not mysticism; what can spiritualism do for her? Her parents had never shown much more than a perfunctory interest in all that, unlike Mark's. Their divorce, and their bitterness towards each other, had only been prolonged because they had married in the Catholic church, to please her father's family. Evelyn can still hear them spitting at one another about the biggest mistake they had ever made in their lives. Evelyn knows that Midge, in her concern, means well. Still, she knows she cannot return to work, not now, cannot have those children look towards her into emptiness. Some days she does not bother to change out of her bathrobe and leaves the TV running continuously with the volume off, the stories as two-dimensional as the faces flattened on the screen. Then Mark comes home, kisses her, snaps his briefcase open on the table. She thinks of Mark pulling the brush away from his temples, sliding his hand back over his hair to speed his genetic legacy. Why is he in such a hurry to skip over from youth to middle age? She arranges and rearranges her bookshelves, flips through material Midge lends her on UFO sightings, New Age phenomena. Midge sends her salt-free recipes and inspirational fillers clipped from tabloids.

"Follow this," she scrawls in the margin in her round, florid hand. "You'll feel reborn in no time."

Reborn, Evelyn thinks. New birth. Baldness runs in the family. At her side, Mark jerks a leg, snorts, and she leans up on her elbow. He rattles off a string of words into his pillow as if citing in binomial nomenclature the names of extinct flora and fauna. "Mark?" she whispers, and then holds her breath, listening, her heart pounding, her mouth dry with fear.

That evening, Mark brings home Romeo.

"It's just for a week," he says. "While I'm away." He pauses. "Don't say no right away."

But she is not saying anything. She stands staring at the cage, evidently homemade, which fills the hallway, the steel-wire box squatting atop the ominously slender-looking pole, and inside, staring out at her, the garish feathered form clutching the perch with spread-toed ochre feet like overcooked strips of dough.

"It's just a trial," Mark says. "I told Howie it would just be a trial. Turns out his roommate's allergic. But probably his brother will take him." She sees him put his hands in his pants pockets, take them back out. "I thought he'd be good company."

"A parrot?" Evelyn says.

"That's right," Mark says, "you got it," as if taking her recognition for enthusiasm; grunting, he shifts the cage down the hallway into the kitchen as she watches. Howie was the president of Mark's fraternity for two years straight; he once nominated and acclaimed Mark and Evelyn as the couple most likely to remain naive. Since those days, Mark and Howie have tried to meet a few times a year to keep tabs on each other, reminisce. But Evelyn has heard nothing of Howie over the past year and thought Mark had left all that behind. Not that Mark was ever as wild as Howie: he was the only fraternity treasurer ever to balance the cash consistently after the innumerable beer bashes; the on-campus interviewers from the accounting firms were impressed with his work in official student capacities. While at university, Evelyn did not think much of fraternities: their raucous parties, extravagant behaviour. Still, she allowed, that was the way men learned to relate. She had the impression Mark had joined just to belong to something, somewhere. But when she met Mark in their final year, rumours were circulating of the near-death of one first-year pledge. She never found out if they were true: when she asked him, Mark's brown eyes grew opaque. He would only say that every year somebody could get hurt; it was expected, part of the experience. She knew he would never tell her about his own initiation; he had been pledged to silence.

Now he stands before her in the kitchen next to the cage with the parrot. He drums on the mesh with his fingernails and clicks his tongue and the bird pivots its head to look at him. It is a small parrot, not much more than a foot tall, and mostly a brilliant apple green except for swaths of crimson and blue spreading back from its crown to spill over its wings. Against the familiar backdrop of the house, the plumage is so vivid that Evelyn finds herself blinking. Mark tells her the bird's name is Romeo.

"Romeo?" Evelyn repeats. "Romeo?" For a moment, the lines from the play flit through her mind; a laugh curdles in her throat, subsides.

"Just while I'm out of town," Mark is saying. "I remember this guy from the frat house. God, he must be going on ten." Then he stops talking and looks at her, moves his hands before himself for a moment as if groping into a dark room. "Evie," he says. Then he puts one of the hands in his pocket, runs the other back through his hair. He gives the cage a rattle, clicks his tongue.

"Say something for Evelyn," he coaxes. "You can talk with him, you know. Come on, say something for Evelyn."

Evelyn stares at the bird inside the cage and slowly it lifts one foot off the perch, balancing as it stretches its leg straight out as if performing an exercise, and then, slowly, it returns the foot to the perch. One black eye peers down at her over the saffron hump of the beak and

suddenly she is sure that it is reading her mind, probing. She takes a step back toward the door.

"I can't talk to a bird," she says.

"Sure you can," Mark says. "Parrots love to talk."

No, she thinks, I can't talk to a bird! But Mark is already pulling his chair up to the table, his briefcase snicking open under his thumbs.

Between the curtains, the sky is matte black and starless and Evelyn rolls over and stretches her arm across the flat expanse of mattress beside her. She can't sleep. After a while, she gets up and puts on her robe and makes herself some herbal tea. Then, curling her legs up onto the cushions of the couch, she begins to flick through the programs on television with the remote. The kitchen light is still on but she has left the living room dark: the light from the TV blinks irregularly over the carpet. For a minute, she watches a scene from a black and white movie; then she switches the channel. The news is on. She catches the tail end of a report on the imminent postal strike and thinks of the letters she has left unanswered, the communication she has let lapse for--how long? Then the anchorman's face flashes back. He begins talking about the search that is continuing for two children missing almost a month, about the yearly statistical increase in missing children. She aims the remote, presses, is about to turn

the TV off when the voice on the public television station catches her ear: British, crisp, well-modulated. The narrator is discussing Mendel and modern theories of evolution. Evelyn recalls drawing genetic grids in biology class: BB, bb, Bb. She watches as computerized graphics illustrate the unique double helix structure of the DNA molecule, watches as egg cells cloned from salamanders divide and multiply in perfect genetic replication. Except for one egg that fails to develop, the narrator says, all the young salamanders are exact copies of their salamander parent. "Despite its extraordinary and amazing self-regulation," the cultured voice informs her, "the process of life remains subject to random fluctuations and internal error, that is, undesirable genetic mutation. The six-limbed calf, the Siamese twin, are rare phenomena indeed: when she errs, nature is swift and efficient, and will rarely fail to abort spontaneously that which endangers itself through failure to follow the master code." She presses the remote and the screen goes blank. Her hands are shaking. She crosses her arms and grips them tightly with her hands. Gradually, she becomes aware of a rattling sound coming from the kitchen and she gets up and walks to the door. She sees Romeo inside in his cage with one foot on the perch and the other gripping the steel-wire frame; the black curves of his talons throw sharp arcs of light. Bird, she thinks. Reptile, amphibian. Fish, fetus, egg. The

cage rattles and she jumps, sees Romeo's eye fixed upon her.

"What are you staring at?" she says, feeling the sweat runneling under her eyes. "What do you know? You can't even talk."

She sees the bird begin to move its beak, shifting the large upper part slightly back and forth over the lower. Then she sees the movement of its tongue, a wrinkled tar-black lozenge. "Hey baby," says Romeo. "Hey baby, come here often?"

Midge comes by in the afternoon and brings Evelyn a pink terry-cloth headband and wristband set. She tells Evelyn that her days as a masseuse are over: her mentor received a tearful letter from a former lover in Sweden and closed up shop to return home. Now, however, Midge has found what she ultimately wants to do: aerobic Tai Chi instruction. "Melt off that flab," she says, slapping a thigh that continues to wobble afterward for several seconds. "Let your true inner self emerge." Then they hear the rattling from the kitchen.

Midge stands in the kitchen staring silently at Romeo for a few moments. Then she goes up to the cage and walks around it, still looking in at him. He stares back at her and moves his beak. Evelyn tells Midge that Mark brought it over to keep her company while he is working on an out-of-town project.

"A parrot," Midge muses. She looks at Evelyn, pensive, her low-slung chin jutting forward. "I have a theory about this," she says. "In certain instances, I believe the more colourful the creature, the more extensive its array of previous lives."

Evelyn almost smiles at the solemnity of Midge's pronouncement. "You mean this bird"--she lowers her voice--"has...come back from the dead?"

"Don't laugh," Midge says. "After all, what's the ultimate symbol for immortality but the phoenix rising from its own ashes?" She nods at Evelyn sagely. Then she says, "Does it talk?"

"When it wants to," Evelyn says, "like Mark." She stands silenced by her own words, uncertain that she has heard correctly. Why did she say that? She feels her stomach squeeze inward and tries to say something else but cannot. Then she sees Midge's large motherly face turned towards her, the skin around her eyes crinkling as she gazes at Evelyn for a moment and then smiles.

"We're all of us souls on the road of life," she says. "What do you expect, honey? He's only a man."

Evelyn opens her eyes to the pale putty-coloured light and, when she rolls over, she feels the pain shoot across her abdomen and she presses with her hands, thinking: not again, God, not again. But now she can feel the dampness of

the pillow under her neck, the short wisps of hair clinging to the sweat on her forehead, and she tries to turn to Mark and feels a wrench of pain and now she can feel the bed drenched beneath her so that she whispers, Mark, her voice rising, shaking, Mark! And blurred with sleep his voice answers, What is it? and he snaps on the bedside light to look at her and says, my God. He gets her somehow into the car and she curls into a ball hugging her belly as the spasms approach, moaning: it's a dream, not again, not now, it must be a dream, and then she is lying on the hospital bed with her eyes closed against the light and rimmed with wetness and she can feel the contractions growing more and more feeble until finally they stop. Afterwards, she can feel Mark holding her hand tightly and she opens her eyes to another dimmer room and then closes them again. And then much later she hears the doctor talking to her, watches his lips move: there is always a risk, always some that can't survive, there is always that small percentage. And she murmurs dully, her tongue thick: percentage? And he tells her, yes, statistically, spontaneously, there is nothing to be done, it is better this way after all, better now rather than later, but she must rest, she mustn't talk, and she turns her head toward the wall as she hears Mark murmuring and thinks: no, not again, it's a dream, it must be a dream, and she rolls over hugging her belly to open her eyes to the patch of paling

sky between the drapes. She can feel her hands pressed flat to her stomach. She closes her eyes again for a moment as she breathes, tightly, but no moisture squeezes from their corners, and she reopens them. Then, next to her, she sees Mark turn his head, swallow, watches as his lips twitch and begin to speak.

Midge stands at the stove, stirring something in a saucepan from which emanate warm aromatic waves. In the cage, the parrot is cracking sunflower seeds in its beak. Midge is telling her about the superior health advantages of aerobic exercise combined with weight training. After all, she says, today women can do anything, can be anything they want. The flesh on the back of her upper arm vibrates as her arm circles, stirring. "You ought to get out and try it," she tells Evelyn. "You ain't doing much."

I don't know what to do, Evelyn thinks. She crosses her arms under her ribs, leans in towards the table. She opens her mouth. "I feel so empty," she says.

Midge glances towards her quickly. Then she says, "Here, honey, this'll fill you right up. Broccoli-carrot soup, no salt. Terrific for the digestion." She places a bowl of broth before Evelyn and sits down at the table. Evelyn can feel the steam rising and bathing her face. She sips the soup slowly while Midge watches, making encouraging noises, but she can only manage a few mouthfuls; the

scalding liquid seems to burn away any sense of taste. She leans back. "I can't," she says.

"Here." Midge rummages in her canvas shoulderbag, dumps out eyeliner pencils, loose change, a rainbow assortment of Kleenex. At last she waves several small squares of paper, triumphant. "Guest passes," she says. "Tai Chi is the way."

Evelyn shakes her head; her throat feels clogged. "I don't know what to do."

Midge tells her that's just what her sister said a few years ago after she found out her husband was having an affair. But then she went to a psychic who told her that she was going to come into a lot of money. "And what do you think?" Midge says. "She won a massive settlement and now lives half the year in Florida. On the gulf coast." She shuffles deeper into her purse for her wallet and emerges with a small white card with wrinkled corners. "Try it."

"No," Evelyn says. "Midge--" She laces her fingers together, unlaces them. "I just can't see--" She pulls in her breath and blurts, "If I could start over again, if I could just start over again as a child--"

Evelyn stops. She knows what Midge will say. She will give another earnest account of that woman who has never been to Egypt but can accurately describe the interior of the excavated palace or tomb of some pharaoh she claims was her lover 4000 years ago. She will refer to people who,

under hypnosis, speak in ancient languages they have never studied. She will tell her to read Shirley MacLaine. But that's not what Evelyn means. She can't quite put her finger on it. But she knows that's not what she means.

But Midge just looks at her for a moment. Then she says, "Honey, lord knows I ain't no miracle worker. Maybe--" She looks down at the card she is tapping against the table, puts it down, stands up and shrugs into her aquamarine suede jacket.

"Ever had your colours done?" she asks. "I bet you're a winter. Don't wear black."

After Midge leaves, Evelyn remains sitting in the kitchen. Mark will be back in a couple of days, she thinks. She ought to clean up the living room a bit. It looks like she's been lying on the couch all week. But she knows Mark won't say anything about it; he doesn't seem to see the disarray any more. The shadows of several birds passing the window flicker over the table and she hears Romeo emit a sudden squawk and she jumps. "Shut up," she says. "Idiotic bird." He begins cracking seeds again in his beak.

"Stop it," Evelyn says. "You don't even listen."

"Awk," Romeo says. "Come here often?"

Evelyn stares at him. She feels her breath begin to come more shortly. "Shut up," she says. "You stupid fraternity bird. Shut up."

"Hey baby," Romeo says and makes a smacking sound in his throat. "Hey baby baby baby."

"I'm not your baby!" Evelyn stands up and bangs the cage with the flat of her hand. "Stop it!"

"Baby baby," Romeo says, and then emits a whoop. "Come again?" He stretches his neck forward, gurgling. "Come again? Come again come again come again?"

Evelyn feels her half-curled fists bouncing off the mesh squares, hears the sound of the metal reverberating as she gasps. "Stop it!" she cries. "Is that all you can say? Is that all you can think of? Stop it, you bastard, shut up!" and she sees Romeo teeter sideways on his perch and then grip one wall of the cage with his foot, staring at her. She stops banging and sits down, hugging her stomach with her arms. After a minute, she hears the sound of sunflower seeds cracking; the shells drop like dried cocoons to the littered floor of the cage.

When Mark phones, she tells him that Romeo must go.

"What's the matter?" Mark's voice is thinned by distance. "What's wrong?"

"I don't want it here," Evelyn says. "Get it out."

"All right," Mark says. "We'll discuss it when I get back." He pauses. "I thought he would be nice company."

"He's not nice company," Evelyn says. "I don't want nice company."

"Well, what is it?" Mark asks. "Doesn't he talk?"

Her hands are trembling as she grips the receiver. What is it, she thinks. Talk. Talk. "Yes," she hears herself say. "He talks. He talks, but he doesn't listen."

She hears Mark breathe out heavily into her ear. "Evie," he says. "What do you expect?" he says. "He's only a bird."

After she has lain in bed long enough to know that she will not fall asleep, Evelyn gets up and goes into the living room and turns on the TV. She flicks past some commercials and hears the lottery numbers called. When the news comes on, she watches footage of a warehouse destroyed by fire and is about to flick to the next station when she hears the anchorman mention the children. After weeks of false leads, their bodies have been found in shallow graves near a vacation resort closed for renovations. The bodies were located with the aid of a psychic who helped solve a multiple murder case in the States last year. Evelyn stares at the image of a small dark-haired woman among the police detectives, the woman who found the dead children. Then she wonders if it is the same one who predicted Midge's sister's divorce. After a moment, she shuffles into the kitchen and picks up the dog-eared card Midge left on the table. The name is different: the woman on the news had a lengthy, foreign-sounding name; the card reads only "Mme.

Iris." Beneath the name is printed, "psychic readings consultations" and in the corner, in smaller print, "By appointment only" and a telephone number. Evelyn recognises the exchange. She puts the card back on the table and looks over at Romeo in his cage, but his head is hunched down into his wings and he appears to be asleep.

The house is on a quiet residential street lined with trees fringed with early translucent leaves. When she left this morning, Evelyn stood outside for a moment on her doorstep; as the breeze lifted her hair, she could feel herself teetering as if she had been dried and flattened like a pressed petal. She blinked into the daylight. It had been so long since she had really ventured outside that even the spring sun felt hot on her face. She wanted to go back inside. But instead she found herself getting into a taxi and giving the driver the address. Now she stands before the house and thinks that it is not what she expected. She does not know what she expected but it wasn't this, a simple red-brick duplex with a neatly blocked hedge and plot of lawn. She walks slowly up the concrete steps. On the porch sit two large pots of purple crocuses; to the right there is a short wooden ramp. She presses her forefinger to the doorbell and waits.

There is still time to leave. She could still turn, hurry down the street, not glance back over her shoulder.

But the door opens and she faces a tall woman in a knit dress.

"Mme. Iris?" Evelyn says.

"No," says the woman. She seems a little surprised at Evelyn's question. "Come in."

Evelyn hesitates, confused, and the woman says, "Iris is inside. Please come in."

As soon as she steps into the hallway, she notices the soothing coolness of the air on her face. The woman walks ahead and stops at the first entranceway off the hall.

"Someone for you," she says. "Will you be okay?"

Evelyn hears a murmur and then the woman says, "I'll drop by later. See you then."

"See you later," says the other voice. It is high and sweet, almost childlike, with a faint indeterminate accent. Evelyn recognises it now as the voice she spoke with briefly over the phone. "Mme. Iris?" Evelyn had asked, her heart pounding, and after a pause the voice had answered, "This is Iris." When she had asked to make an appointment, there had been another pause. "Please," Evelyn said. "I need to talk to someone. Please." "All right," the woman had said. "I'll see you." Now the other woman turns and walks back up the hall. For an instant, Evelyn glimpses the dazzle of sunshine on wavering leaves, rushing metal. Then the door closes off the outside noise and she stands inside, alone.

"Come in," says the voice, and Evelyn steps into what appears to be the living room. The drapes, pale and gauzy, are drawn, and Evelyn glances about blinking in the cool light.

"Mme. Iris?" she says, and then she sees her.

The woman sits at a small wooden table covered with papers. An electric typewriter case squats to one side. A few thick books lie open on the couch next to the table and Evelyn can see double columns of print, some in red. The woman's face is round and double-chinned beneath curly reddish-brown hair and, with a shock, Evelyn sees the faint fluttering of the half-closed eyes and thinks: she's blind. Only then does she see the thick-knuckled hands gripping the arms of the metal wheelchair, the polyester-slacked legs pressed together like pipecleaners and angled to the right upon the footrest. Sudden goosepimples prickle her skin and she averts her eyes quickly.

"You don't have to look away," says Iris, and Evelyn hears her heart pulsing in her ears as she looks back at her. "Come in," Iris says, and Evelyn walks over to the table and sits down in the chair at the side.

"What can I do for you?" says Iris.

Evelyn swallows and then opens her mouth. "I heard that you predict things," she says, and waits. Iris sits silently. She continues, "I thought--I was wondering--a friend of mine is going into a new career. In aerobics

instruction. I was wondering if you could tell me what happens."

"I see," says Iris. "Is that all?"

"No," Evelyn says. She crosses her legs and then uncrosses them. "My husband--is hoping for a promotion. Where he works. I was wondering if you could tell me about that. About what will happen."

Iris's eyes remain half-closed. She lets out a breath through her nose with her lips pressed shut. "I see," she says. "That's very interesting." Her fingers move on the padded armrests. "Now why don't you tell me why you're really here."

Evelyn leans over to smile at the bundle in the cradle and then touches the edge of the cradle with her fingertips, rocking it. "What a pretty baby," she coos. "Such a pretty baby," and from the doorway Mark says, "What baby?" She turns to see him with his briefcase and calculator. "Come in," she says, "come and see the baby," but Mark repeats, "What baby?" "Don't be silly," she says, "the baby. Our baby." And then she sees that his eyes have gone shiny and he closes his mouth and leaves the room, and she looks down into the cradle and the baby is gone. She begins to pull off the blankets, searching through the sheets, using both hands now, her fingers spread, dragging the tangled sheets

out onto the floor in layers like the skin of an onion, but there is nothing there and the baby is gone.

Evelyn stares at the lidded eyes. "I think I should go," she says.

"You don't have to go," says Iris.

For a moment, Evelyn sits paralysed in her chair. Then she sees Iris lean slightly forward, sees one of her hands slip from the armrest into her lap, and she jumps up.

"I think I should go," she says. "I have to go!"

"You don't have to go," says Iris, but Evelyn turns and stumbles into the hallway. Behind her, she hears a brief mechanical whirr.

"I'll be here," says Iris.

Evelyn lies curled sideways in the bed. Dimly, through the closed window, she can hear the hissing of cars in the rain. Where are all those people going at this time of night, what do they have to do? She tries to keep her eyes shut but they keep wanting to open. The cars pass in the rain and she doesn't know what to do. The sharp rattle of metal grates across her ears. She opens her eyes. The room is dim. Lifting the covers away to swing her legs to the floor, she gets out of bed slowly and walks down the hallway. When she gets to the kitchen, she stops.

Without snapping the light switch, she can see the cage silhouetted against the window. The wire door hangs open. Romeo is gone.

She walks over to the cage and looks inside. The floor is covered with small greyish objects she takes at first for the shells of sunflower seeds, but when she touches them with her fingertips, they uncurl into wrinkled ribbons of paper blackened with lines and columns of numbers, the same statistics calculated and rejected over and over again. She climbs into the cage and sees, far off in one corner, a single chair within a pool of lamplight. When she reaches it, she recognizes the worn velvet, the well-stuffed bookcase behind. A child with dark eyes looks up from the book it is reading and smiles and says something. "What?" Evelyn says. "What is it?" Sweet as music, the words pour over her, incomprehensible, and she shakes her head. Then the child turns the book around so that she can read, but the letters run and slide across the page like a slipstream of brilliance, blurring with the energy of their dance, and she covers her face with her hand and says, "Stop it, I can't, I can't." She can feel the breath sliding in and out of her lungs. The room is quiet. Then, faintly, Evelyn hears a low rumbling, a muttering. "Mark?" she murmurs, and then she feels her arm stretched out across the empty bed and blinks her eyes open into the darkness. For a

moment, she remains immobile, confused, but then the muttering begins again. She gets out of bed slowly, pulling on her robe, and goes to the kitchen. Against the moonlit wash of the rain-spattered window, Romeo sits hunched on his perch in his cage, his brilliant plumage paled and silvered. He seems asleep. She takes a step closer; and then she sees the faint working of the beak, the curl of the tongue, hears the tiny muttered words rising from within.

This time it is Iris who greets her at the door and leads her down the hallway to the living room. The wheelchair hums quietly over the carpeting. They sit at the table that is still strewn with papers. Evelyn stops herself from crossing her arms but she can feel her heart beating quickly. She looks about the room which she now sees is done in cool shades of blue and silver, lavender and rose, a rhythm of patterns and textures pleasing to the eye. There are no paintings on the walls but on the coffee table and end tables ranges an eclectic collection of what appear to be third-world carvings and sculptures--a squat terra cotta dog, an intricately patterned gourd, African heads with long cheeks and high foreheads of smooth ebony wood whose coolness Evelyn can imagine beneath her fingertips. The large books are gone from the couch, but she sees another on the coffee table opened to a colourful picture of a man

leading a woman seated on a donkey and suddenly the red print she glimpsed the other day clicks into place and she feels her stomach jump. What is she doing here? She looks quickly back at Iris who sits with her eyelids lowered, silent.

"Well," Evelyn says.

"Well what?" says Iris.

"Well, what do we do? I mean, for the reading. Don't we have to join hands or something?" Evelyn can feel her arms trembling; she presses them against the armrests.

"No," Iris says. She seems to smile. "We don't have to do anything like that. We can just sit and talk for a while. It's all right."

"Oh," says Evelyn. "All right." After a few moments, she says, "What should we talk about?"

"Anything," says Iris.

"All right." Evelyn swallows. What should she say? Why did she come here? She glances about the room again. "You have an unusual home," she says.

"Thank you," Iris says. "I always wanted to be an interior decorator."

Evelyn looks back at her quickly and sees the rounded cheeks lifted by a tiny smile and then they both laugh. Evelyn listens in amazement to the sound of her own voice. How long has it been since she really laughed? "I like blue," she says.

"So do I," says Iris.

Evelyn takes a breath. "You know--I wasn't expecting this."

"I know," Iris replies.

"No, I mean--my friend told me about you, how you helped her sister a few years ago, predicted things for her."

Iris presses her lips together. Then she says, "Some prophecy doesn't require much inspiration. But there's still room for the unpredictable, Evelyn."

Evelyn starts to hear her name in this woman's mouth, somehow sweetened by the bell-like voice. Unpredictability, Evelyn thinks. In things? Or people? She sees Mark hunching silently over the numbers, sees the pattern their life has fallen into as if they had no other choice, as if they had planned it this way. They didn't, she knows. But what can she do? The silence presses in on her ears. Then she hears Iris say, "Life has a way of making us face our worst fears."

What is she talking about? Evelyn, Mark, their marriage-- Then Evelyn thinks: her eyes, her legs. She feels her mouth go dry and is suddenly afraid. Whenever she saw disabled people as she was growing up, she used to look away, confused, unable to face them. Why were people born that way? Was it just a mistake? Count your blessings, the grown-ups always used to say, you'll understand when you

have children. But I don't, she finds herself thinking, I don't have children, I don't understand, I don't know what to do. Every day now all she does is lie on the couch, wait for Mark to come home and immerse himself in work, stare at the machine-gun fire of empty images on TV. He never says a word; and neither does she, letting the day wither into nothingness. She hasn't done anything; the clothes she is wearing have grown loose; they bag at the waistline now as she leans in toward the table. The papers covering it, she sees now, look curiously blank and yet shadowed as if with the reflection of a message. She stares without understanding: then, with a start, she realises she is looking at pages of braille. She opens her mouth and says, "You read this."

"Yes," says Iris. "There are different ways to see. I do transcriptions, for children. Help them learn how to read. How to see a new vision of the world."

Blind children, Evelyn thinks. Malfunctions, mistakes. She wraps her arms across each other and hears Iris asking in her munchkin voice, "Would you like to try?"

"No," Evelyn answers immediately. Iris remains silent. As the quiet of the room surrounds her like a tide pool, Evelyn finds herself struggling with the words. "Blue," she says finally. "How can you know colours? How can you even imagine them, without light?"

"Try me," Iris says.

"How?" Evelyn asks, but Iris doesn't answer. For a moment, Evelyn can't think of anything. Then she remembers Romeo.

"There's this parrot," she says, and stops. What is she doing? This isn't why she came here. But she goes on. "He's not too big. He has a--a green head. And his chest is mostly green, and then his beak is yellow, like--lemon-yellow." She tries to remember how he looks sitting hunched in the cage, cracking seeds endlessly. How many times has she glanced at him without seeing? "His head is green and then blue, bright blue, like the sky on a very clear hot dry day, no clouds, and his wings are mostly red, but almost orange, like ripe hothouse tomatoes." She can see him now, the demarcation of each neatly zippered feather, the roll of his round black-pupilled eyes like polished buttons. "My husband brought him home. To keep me company."

Iris is nodding. "Yes," she says. "I can see that."

And Evelyn thinks of Romeo in his cage outlined against the window, turning towards her, one foot on the perch and the other clinging to the cage wall as he squawks out strings of non-sequiturs, Mark standing with his briefcase by the cage in the kitchen, moving his hands, turning away. "Sometimes," she says, "sometimes, when he talks, I wonder if he realizes what he's saying. If he realizes what they taught him."

"I don't know," Iris says. "What do you think?"

"He doesn't know what to say," Evelyn says, looking at Iris. "If he knew how to talk to me, he would. I know. He doesn't know what to do. I think I stopped him when he needed to talk to me and now, now he can't."

"Yes," says Iris.

"And I wonder sometimes," Evelyn says, "what kind of language people have before they're born, before they're taught what to say and what to be. How they think and imagine. If there's a whole other type of language we forget later, a whole different way of communicating that we bury and can't remember how to reach. That should be the thing to find out, what we say and don't say, how we keep each other apart, how we deny and hide it, what's too hard to speak, wanting to speak but not knowing what to say, not knowing how to say it." She can hear her own voice flowing like a ribbon wound tightly around a spool and then suddenly released to unfurl and unfurl and then she feels her throat closing and she says, "I lost our baby." She can see Iris sitting motionless with her eyes almost completely shut as if she is asleep, but she sees her eyelashes quivering and she knows she is listening. "That's all we ever wanted, what we hoped for, a family, to have the kind of family we never had as children. We didn't expect anything else, we didn't care what other people said about careers or money or stereotypes. But now it's changed. It's like nothing ever

happened but it's all changed. What if we can't have that, now? What if our wanting so much to redo ourselves, our childhoods, is why we can't have it? Or what if we finally do have children and they aren't normal? What if I'm not ready for what happens, what if I don't know what to do, what if I don't know how to love them any better than I was loved?" She feels the tears running down her face now, melting everything sideways. "I don't understand, I don't know what to do, I don't know where to go. It's like I'm caught behind a mirror, in the dark, and I can't get back. There's nothing I can ever do to get back."

Soft shadows have draped the room into dimness. Iris's face has become a pale pink blur against the grey and Evelyn can taste the salt wetness sliding between her lips and into her mouth. The room is quiet. Evelyn reaches up to wipe her eyes and Iris stretches forward and finds her hand.

"Come," she says. "Let us try now."

"No," Evelyn says, alarmed, feeling her stomach squeezing in and fluttering, wondering what Iris is talking about, wondering if, after all she said, she's just looking for a pay-out after all. "Not now. I can't. I'm not ready. I can't."

"Yes, you can," Iris says, "you won't be alone," and she guides Evelyn's hand over the table. Her small thick-knuckled hand is warm and then, with a thrill, Evelyn feels the sheet of braille brush beneath her fingertips, the

tiny molded dots which texture the blankness into meaning. She touches the ridges, confused, unable to discern where their design begins or ends, and then out of the disorder she feels something emerge, feels the word beginning to form within her mind. "Listen," says Iris, "let me show you," and they begin with the first letter.

Noise

When he hears the baby crying, Elliott thinks: I know, it's my turn. Then he wakes up and opens his eyes to the narrow crack in the ceiling dimly illumined by the first morning light sliding in strata through the blinds. He still lies carefully on his side of the bed even though he knows the comforter slopes off his body to the blank plain of the mattress. The baby continues to wail. Will, he thinks. But he can tell, again, that the cry is quite different. He can hear the floorboards creak overhead as the mother approaches to comfort the child, other heavier footsteps recede as they reach the door and then, faintly, the sound of the door shutting behind them. He hears the woman's singing as a dim melodious hum. Doesn't she ever sleep? Why does the husband work so early? Who do these people think they are? With its annunciatory crackle, the clock-radio on his nightstand coughs into life and staticky strains of Vivaldi sweep in mid-phrase into the room, blurring the noise from above. He lies carefully on his side of the bed and listens as the strings vibrate and sing to their conclusion, waiting for both the last bar and his trembling to fade.

Elliott started working on his comparative review of recordings of Handel's Messiah long before the Christmas season, right after Claudia left. It was, after all, his

idea, not Ed's. Ed wanted him to do a piece on this year's impending crop of pop-rock Christmas benefit albums. "You know--whoever's still hot. Whatever's still hot. That's what sells, El." He had gone to see Ed at the newspaper office to try to sell him the idea. Ed leaned back in his swivel chair and propped his feet up on his desk scattered with the debris of scrawled telephone messages and half-eaten take-out meals from ethnic restaurants. Aside from the coffee-stained PC, appearances had changed little since their days of working together on the university paper. Elliott had done the occasional book or music review; Ed had produced editorials on such topics as the cultural significance of pub-crawling. Elliott still wore some of the wool crew-necks and plain button-down shirts he'd had then; Ed had expanded into larger and gaudier versions of the plaids and paisleys he preferred. That day he sported, pinned to his red-checked Levi's shirt, the button he had acquired back in university that proclaimed him, "The Ed." That combination, along with the incipient dewlaps undisguised by his soft beard, somehow reminded Elliott of a department-store Santa Claus he had once visited as a child. Elliott had desperately wanted a particular type of electric train set, but the Santa spoke with a heavy foreign accent and hadn't understood him. A week later he had seen him on his coffee break, lighting up a cigarette behind a bin of naked mannequins and taking a long, grateful drag.

Entertainment editor at the paper is only one of Ed's jobs. He also owns a controlling share in a new radio station on the mountain. Ed's real job, though, is business manager for the electronics company owned by his elderly father, whom Ed refers to as "Big Daddy." Ed is the only one of four siblings who did not move away after university graduation in search of greener pastures. "Big Daddy needs me," he once explained to Elliott. "Hell, he still wants someone in the family to inherit." Ed makes a point of taking his father out for Sunday brunch whenever the old man is up to it; frequently, following such occasions, he will ask how Elliott's parents are enjoying their retirement down south and will shake his head meaningfully at Elliott's shrug. There remains to Ed a certain crass guilelessness that made it impossible for Elliott to break off their friendship despite Claudia's long-term disapproval.

Visiting the office that day, Elliott sat gingerly atop an unstable mound of papers on Ed's desk. The faint intertwined odours of garlic and curry wafted upward. He made a mental note to take his jacket to the dry cleaners. Although Claudia had never liked Ed, she had nonetheless been far more tolerant than Elliott of the disorder Ed left in his wake, following a visit; he would find himself proferring ashtrays or coasters which Ed cheerfully placed next to the damp ring or cigarette stump on the coffee

table, then proceeded to ignore. Elliott would be unable to keep his eye from the burning ashen cylinder.

"I don't know, Ed." Elliott steadied himself on the desk, fingers spread. "I don't listen to that teenybopper junk. Don't you have space for something a little more traditional?"

"You mean like Springsteen doing 'Santa Claus is Coming to Town'?"

That was when he came up with the idea of reviewing The Messiah on compact disk. He hadn't been contemplating it at all; somehow the idea sprang whole into his mind. He would choose the three or four versions he considered best and give a comparative review of pros and cons--the big booming productions versus the smaller original-instrument sort--so that people could make their own choice. When the words finally stopped coming out of his mouth, he could hear his pulse sounding in his ears.

Ed put his thumbs and forefingertips together and squinted at the far office wall. "Okay," he said. "I like it," he said, as if surprised with himself. "It's got class, it's got culture, it's got seasonal nostalgia. It'll sell. You got me convinced." Then he looked at Elliott. "Beats me why you ever quit law school, El. You argue a case pretty well."

Elliott didn't answer. Instead he went straight back to the apartment, to begin working on the article immediately,

he told himself. He needed to plunge into some work again. He needed to pull in a few dollars. But even after he had closed the blinds and turned on all the lights and the stereo, as he always did now by late afternoon, the best he could do was to hold himself still in the living room armchair as the words flew away through the music's insulation and into the resonant silence.

This time it is the phone that wakes him up. He feels his head jerk up off the pillow, his heart thudding: Claudia. He snatches up the receiver, takes a breath, and says, very quietly, "Hello?"

"Hey, El, what's the good news?" It's Ed. Elliott sinks back into his pillow. His arms and legs, his torso, all feel unbearably heavy, as if overnight his bone marrow has petrified. He can barely budge his leaden eyelids. Has he slept at all? He squints towards the sullen glow of the clock-radio.

"Listen, El," says Ed, and then the dopplerized hum Elliott hears in the background becomes suddenly muffled, as if Ed has clamped a hand over the mouthpiece. Carphone. He thinks he hears a stifled giggle. Then Ed's breath fills his ear again. "Say, how's the article coming?"

"For God's sake." Elliott groans. "Give me a break. It's been like the night of the living dead here with my upstairs neighbours."

"Tempus fugit, El. I thought you needed the bucks."

He does. Elliott feels his fingers tighten around the receiver. Ed is just doing him a favour, he knows, letting him write an article; he has enough regular staff. And UIC is running out. His savings are nearly gone. And there's Christmas coming up, presents for Will, when he sees him again. He wonders for the hundredth time if he should ask Ed for a loan. He opens his mouth but Ed is already saying, "Come to dinner tomorrow."

"No," Elliott hears himself say. "I mean, thanks. But I can't. I mean, I'd like to, but--" Elliott feels his tongue stumbling over the words. Why did he take the answering machine off short ring?

"Great," says Ed. "Tanya's bringing a friend. Says she's got lots of charisma. You'll like her. Trust me. Seven o'clock, my place." Elliott can almost hear Ed wink over the phone. "And don't forget the vino."

Elliott sits holding the dial tone to his ear for several long droning seconds before hanging up. He won't go, he tells himself. It's that simple. He doesn't need to be set up. Even with a friend of Tanya's. Tanya is Ed's current girlfriend; they met while picketing the impending sale of the city's best repertory cinema to make way for another condominium highrise. Like Ed, Elliott also noticed her a number of times in the ticket booth, the lightbulb overhead casting a smooth sheen upon her blond hair, her

crimson fingernails, as she pushed the change forward. He never spoke to her, though. Now she works at the radio station while modelling part-time. Elliott didn't picket, but he is glad that the cinema was saved. He still slips in occasionally when it features old classics--Waterloo Bridge, Casablanca, or the flickering celluloid ghosts of the twenties. He could spend the evening there. The new cashier isn't much to look at. But he doesn't think he can take another evening of Ed showing him his latest electronic acquisition wedged amid the already overwhelming clutter of his apartment. He walks into the bathroom and turns on the shower. Then he wonders if Tanya's friend is also a model.

That afternoon Elliott spends a couple of hours trying to work. He cannot afford to miss any more deadlines. He sets the telephone bell to "high" in case Claudia calls. Then he drops the first disk into the CD player, watches the little drawer glide smoothly shut, turns up the volume to let the first grave cadences cascade upon his ears. He has to do this, he tells himself. As he leans back into the chair, he can feel the music slide into his ears and through his pulse to spread along his arteries and capilliaries, branching and bifurcating with every beat. He thinks of this music spanning in an instant the lacuna of two and a half centuries, as if sluicing its way through a black hole

to emerge in another, alien universe. He wonders what Handel would make of the twentieth century and "Jingle Bell Rock."

Then the chorus retreats and the bass, world-famous for his timbre and precision, surges forward. Instantly Elliott sees his grandfather, sheet music in hand, rehearsing for his church choir's annual performance. His brush-cut hair was already iron-grey then, but his face retained a youthful, even boyish resilience. Elliott can still match the words, the notes, to the continued controlled dance of his grandfather's Adam's apple above his bow-tie knot, can still see the family collie stretching himself upward, paws on the stooped shoulders, to howl along with his narrow snout full in his grandfather's face, himself sitting with ankles dangling at the edge of the couch, giggling. He must have been just about Will's age then. The bass's voice rolls with the richness of fresh-turned loam and Elliott finds his own throat tightening. He had just been old enough to stay up for Grandpa's performance that last year. At the end of it, as the rest of the choir filed out, Grandpa sat down in his seat instead, waving the choristers past. When the music minister finally went up to him and put his hand on his shoulder, Grandpa was still smiling. He was also dead. The buzzing crowd in the sanctuary and foyer was oblivious. But when his parents realized what had happened, his father ordered his mother to take him home. As she bustled Elliott away in horror, he craned his neck back over

his shoulder, wondering if he should wave good night. A few months later, when he finally understood what had happened, he threw out all the Bible story books his grandfather had given him. As his mother tucked him into bed, he waited, trembling with hatred and defiance, for her to question him about the empty bookshelf. But she never said a word. His uncertainty over whether or not she even detected the change served merely to fan his anger; he had never understood why she disliked his spending so much time with Grandpa. Certainly his father, who rarely bothered to enter his room, never noticed what he had done.

After that, he treated with calculated coldness and derision both the younger neighbourhood children who still believed in Santa Claus and the older ones who believed in a virgin birth at Bethlehem. In the sixth grade, he refused to take part in the school's annual Christmas pageant; on his high-school registration form, he wrote in the blank space for religious affiliation, "none." Once or twice, during his university years, classmates invited him to meetings of Christian fellowship groups; he made a point of informing them that he never set foot in a church except to cast his vote in a provincial or federal election.

And he meant it; whenever the final break actually occurred, he cannot recall experiencing church after his grandfather's death, except for Will's baptism, done at Claudia's insistence. Or, for the matter, a live

performance of The Messiah. The closest he came was listening to an abridged version of it on the radio with Claudia their first Christmas season together as newlyweds. She said it was a tradition in her family to listen to it in celebration of Christmas day. He could understand that, given her ethnic roots; Handel was big in the Reformed Church. So on the way home from the law library one evening, he stopped in at a record store, debated pros and cons, then finally splurged on the most expensive CD set. Christmas morning, before Claudia awoke, he slipped it, tied up with red curling ribbon, under their tabletop Christmas tree.

She left it behind, with him. Elliott clears his throat. He closes his eyes, concentrates on the voice, searches each note for a seed of what he knows has become, since this recording was made, cancer of the larynx. That voice, once so glorious, now rasps from a tube in the singer's throat. But Elliott detects no clues. The music washes over him. How long has it been since he has really listened to this? He will, this time, he will listen to it all the way through. He has to. For his assignment. But when the bass has declared the shining of the light, and the chorus announces the divine birth, the child that is born, the son that is given, Elliott jerks himself up from his seat to punch open the CD slot. Later, he tells himself,

later, as he drops the disk into its case, snapping the music shut.

And upstairs he hears the baby crying. Jesus, how long will this go on? Where does he have to go to find a little peace? He pulls on his jacket and heads for the elevator. With a lurch, it begins its descent three flights to the yellowed marble of the lobby floor. Outside, the pale beetle-back shell of snow from this morning has degenerated to mud-browned slush, but the stars are already pricking winter's early night with laser precision. People cloaked in the type of outerwear he recognizes from his former professional life--broad-shouldered wool coats and fur-rimmed hats for the women, trenchcoats with epaulettes and belts casually knotted, not buckled, for the men--brush past him with glossy department-store shopping bags clearing their paths. Elliott dreads the prospect of Christmas shopping, of the malls crowded with harried consumers, the canned Christmas carols: deck the halls and ho ho ho and all that jazz, he thinks. He pulls up his jacket collar. Perhaps he will shop next week. Store windows edged with sprayed-on snow sparkle with lights and decorations that have been up since Hallowe'en. Attached to brackets on the poles of the street lights are metre-high plastic candles complete with perpetual flames lit from within by tapered bulbs. On the bus-stop bench in front of the video arcade sits the local wino, shouting frosty puffs of air into the

dusk and pounding rhythmically on the bench with his gloveless fist like a bankrupt televangelist. The bag lady next to him rummages restlessly through sacks and parcels in her rusty bundle-buggy, ignoring him. The two or three other people standing at the bus stop do the same.

Elliott crosses the street and turns the corner. Maybe he shouldn't live downtown anymore, after all. Behind the counter inside the variety store, the Asian couple with crinkled skin like that of dehydrated apples is quarreling again incomprehensibly, vowels expanding and contracting, voices lacing and overlapping, pitch swelling and then ebbing as he walks back down the aisle to the counter. Their argument recedes behind the slits of their lowered eyelids. Elliott puts his intended purchases in front of the old woman: cold cuts encased in plastic, a few cans, a loaf of bread that continues to bear the indentation of his fingertips after he releases it. As she rings in his items, Elliott sees the bottles of wine ranged along the shelves next to the cash register. He grasps one by the neck. "This too." As the door jangles shut, he can hear behind him the bird-thin voices rising again like an inexorable tide.

Elliott turns the key in the mailbox. Around the corner from the alcove, he can hear the clank of the elevator beginning its descent. As he reaches in, he lets himself

think that maybe today Claudia has written, if not a letter, hell, at least a Christmas card. Aren't there any on the market yet for abandoned husbands? But all he finds are the hydro bill and a flyer advertising "Career opportunities at home! Bookkeeping, Computer Science, Para-legal!!" The paper flutters in his hand. He drops it, crumpled, into the wastebin and turns to the elevator.

That's when he sees the wino. He crouches over Elliott's grocery bag which sits before the elevator door, shuffling through its contents, his matted grey hair masking his face. Elliott feels words rise in his throat only to stick there like gnats to fly-paper. He remains by the bank of mailboxes, voiceless. He is close enough to see the dirt under the old man's fingernails as he lifts something to his nose, sniffs. The elevator door rolls open. The old man jumps and scrambles back to the glass doors of the apartment building, stuffing something under his jacket with one hand as he yanks at a door handle with another. A damp, chilly gust whips his jacket out behind him into a cape, swirls his hair like a tumbleweed around his face, and he is gone.

Upstairs, unpacking his groceries, Elliott identifies the stolen goods: the bottle of wine, the can of tuna. Elliott looks at the remaining items on the counter for a few moments before touching them again. Then he picks up the bread and puts it in the fridge, wondering if among her many treasures the bag lady boasts a can opener.

The menu is spinach lasagna with garlic baguettes and tossed salad.

"Real ricotta," declares Ed around a steaming mouthful of pasta. "None of this cottage cheese crap. Italian's my absolute fave."

"Unless you're eating moussaka," says Tanya.

"Right," says Ed. "That's the stuff that goes into the salads."

"No, Eddie, that's feta," corrects Tanya, as she dishes another spoonful onto Ed's plate.

"Right," Ed says. He forks the noodles into his mouth. "Well, it's all Greek to me," he says, and laughs. The corners of his mouth are already stained orange.

Elliott pulls his gaze away and finds himself looking at Tanya. She is looking at him also. He had never noticed how extremely blue her eyes were in that dingy ticket booth, slanting above her high cheekbones, her square jaw. He wonders again if her background is Dutch. Tanya raises her wineglass to her lips and swallows. He sees the tip of her tongue emerge and lick away a stray drop.

Elliott looks down at his plate. Why did he come here tonight? As soon as he walked in the door, he knew he'd made a mistake. Rock music blared from a pair of new stereo speakers the size of a washer-dryer set. Tanya turned it down at his arrival, but instantly he felt a headache

burgeoning at his temples. Then he met Myrtle. Myrtle is not a model. Myrtle is a nursing student, from Saskatchewan, he was told. Tanya's aunt's second cousin's niece-in-law, or something to that effect, so Tanya took her under her wing, as it were. Elliott nodded. "Wonderful," he said. Myrtle blushed and shook his hand. He could feel his headache creeping around his eyes. Myrtle is short and pear-shaped, with dark hair that fans out into frizz at the shoulders and fair freckled skin that makes her look younger than she must be. Elliott would not have mistaken her for one of Tanya's closest relatives. "Pleased to meet you," he said, shaking her small, slightly damp hand. Myrtle smiled, ducking her head. Then, as they sat down to eat, he saw her mouthing a few words silently to herself before picking up her fork. Elliott found his own fork freezing halfway to his mouth. How on earth did she end up here? With a vacuumous pop! Ed uncorked a bottle of Chianti from his own supply.

Now, as she sits across from him at the table, Elliott tries to think up an excuse for leaving early. Perhaps he can plead his deadline. But then Ed starts up again.

"So what do you think?" he says to Tanya. "Was I right?" he says. "Or what? Perry Comatose, or what?"

"Oh, right," says Tanya.

"What?" says Elliott.

"Oh, Elliott," says Myrtle, "you sing!"

Sing?" says Elliott. "Me?" He looks from one to the other. Tanya takes a dainty bite of tomato; Myrtle smiles at him with open delight. Ed leans back in his chair. Things seem a little fuzzy. Did he miss part of the conversation?

But then Ed says to Myrtle, "No, kiddo, we're talking speaking voice. I'll have you know," and he winks, "that the legal secretaries used to call up El here when they knew he wasn't home, just to get his answering machine. What did they say? 'A voice you want to jump into bed with.' That's it."

Myrtle turns beet red. Elliott feels his ears growing hot. What the hell is going on here?

"So what do you say?" says Ed. "The station's setting up a late-night, soft-rock/new-age mix program and we need a DJ. Hell, you don't even have to be there. You could record the stuff if you want. I don't care." He takes a sip of wine. "All we want's your voice."

Elliott sits silently for a moment. He tries to keep himself very still. Then he says, quietly, "Are you offering me a job?"

"No," says Ed. "I'm asking you to audition for the New York City Rockettes." He winks again at Myrtle. "What do you think? The guy's all choked up."

"I thought you meant he was a singer," Myrtle says.

"No," says Ed. "Never heard him sing. But he's got a great ear," says Ed, "fabulous. Working on a piece for me right now, as a matter of fact. A review of the something-or-other mass. Highbrow stuff. You might like it."

"The Messiah," Elliott hears himself correcting. "On CD." Is Ed putting on a show? Or is he always this obnoxious when he drinks? Elliott swallows a mouthful of wine and tries to remember.

"No!" says Myrtle. "Well, praise the Lord! We're going to be singing that at the Cathedral. Doesn't the Spirit move in wonderful ways?" And once again she begins to beam at him, then, as if remembering herself, she ducks her head, blushes.

"Wonderful," says Tanya, and smiles at him.

Elliott makes himself smile too. Lots of charisma, Ed said. Trust me. He wonders what Tanya had actually told Ed about Myrtle, wonders if she had phoned him up at work to tell him about this newly arrived friend, relative, this western waif, the two of them planning, playing at match-making, playing a party game of "Telephone" as the words slurred and blurred amid the ferment of the newspaper office, charisma begat by charismatic. Doesn't he know the difference? Trust Ed.

"Do you do live reviews too?" Myrtle is asking. She peeks up again. "Are you going to review us?"

Great idea!' says Ed. 'We could call it Son of 'Messiah'."

And then, as he instantly knew, foreknew, she would, Myrtle looks to him, but already Elliott is turning his gaze away, hoping that someone, anyone will rescue him from what he knows has already become in Myrtle's mind their pact of Christian kinship as the silence begins to lengthen and stretch in perfect time with the melted mozarella linking the lasagna pan and the laden spatula hovering over Ed's plate. Elliott sits frozen, staring. He stares at the ever-thinning strand of cheese stretching parabolically to infinity. He shouldn't have drunk all that wine. How much wine has he had? Then he sees his own hand reach out a light-year across the expanse of the table, sees it snap the string in two, feels himself open his mouth, deliberately, and begin to laugh. Tanya and Ed begin to laugh too. Myrtle looks down at her plate. Ed reaches for the wine bottle; Tanya deposits the lasagna on Ed's plate. Only then does Elliott realise that merely an instant has passed, he has only now completed the blink of his eyes that he began when he glanced away from Myrtle. Nobody was waiting for anything, he's sure. But when he leans back in his chair, he feels his heart pounding.

"Speaking of great ideas, that reminds me," Ed begins anew, and Elliott retreats to his dinner plate, pushing a forkful of leafy salad into his mouth. Ed will take over

again. He can't handle anything more. He feels he cannot lift his gaze to eye level again. And now the weariness creeping through his entire body makes it difficult even to keep chewing; he must have been awakened every other hour last night by that holy terror upstairs, scrunching his pillow up around his ears but still somehow hearing the voices of the mother and then even the father singing to comfort it. Voices. All we want's your voice. His own voice on the answering machine, seducing messages from women who are never his wife, his own voice rippling the radio waves, riding upward and outward through the thinning atmospheric reaches into deepening blue and indigo and finally the breathtaking black breathlessness of space to drift and bounce and dance amid all the other radio waves and television waves and short waves communicating in silent cacophony the grandeur of earthly civilization: declarations of war, parliamentary debates, Lucy and Ricky bawling at each other over the noise of canned laughter....

A roar of mirth yanks Elliott back down to earth. He blinks and sees Ed at the end of the table wiping the corners of his eyes with one hand while the other holds a freshly uncorked bottle of wine. Tanya is laughing too. Even Myrtle has a tentative smile on her face.

"'S'true, I tell you, word for word!' Ed is insisting. "Would I lie to you? Eh? Would I?"

The main course is over. Elliott looks down at his plate, still nearly full. He can feel his stomach constricting, as though its walls are almost touching. Then Tanya is standing at his side, collecting the dishes from the table. He feels her hair sweep across his shoulder as she leans forward, hears the words murmur past his ear: 'Aren't you hungry, Elliott?'

He waits until she moves away again, keeps his eyes on the blank tablecloth before him. He has to use all his concentration to keep from trembling. Hungry, Elliott thinks. No. I'm not hungry. I'm starving.

It happens again a week later. Elliott turns the key in the mailbox and feels the wind whirl and gust around him, turns to see the wino crouching over his grocery bag. Elliott stands clutching his mail in his hand, frozen. Then the wino looks at him and straightens up. His eyes are deep-set, red-rimmed, piercing blue. He starts walking over to Elliott. Elliott cannot move. He comes up so close that Elliott can count the dark hairs sprouting from his nostrils, can feel his short, heavy breaths in his face, scented with drink and gingivitis, can smell the ancestry of his coat and trousers, the soup kitchens and boiler rooms and park benches where he has slept. The wino begins to nod, slowly.

"I know you," he says. His voice is low, almost a whisper. Elliott can barely hear him. He listens, unable to move.

"I know you," says the old man. "I seen you. I remember. You think I don't remember but I do. I always do. Not just here, but there. Not just now, but then. I seen you with all them other kids but I remember you, I remember what you said, I remember what you did." The old man begins to back away, slowly, still nodding, still whispering. "I know you," he says. "I remember you....I ain't forgotten about you," and as his hand touches the glass pane, the front door of the building flies open and a great grey gust aswirl with flattened cigarette packages and torn bus transfers and crumpled chewing gum wrappers envelops him and sucks him back out into the wintry darkness and the door swings shut and he is gone.

Elliott sits in the living room chair with the headphones on and pen to paper, listening to the different voices of the chorus lacing and layering like rich veins of ore through the earth, silver soprano, golden bass. He sits with his pen-nib just touching the empty page, waiting, waiting for the words to flow like a melody, like a string of notes that will tie up in one package all he can possibly say in response to this music, and he waits. He waits and hears sung the notes chosen by Handel, waits to be stirred

by that same inspiration, thinks of the gift of musical genius come to some, not to others. He thinks of Handel inspired to write by writings that claimed inspiration, and wonders all over again if it is all just fluke, just chance amid randomness, meaningless; or if, somehow, it was coded into creation, if that music, if these words were designed to emerge from the unravelling of the deeper patterns of chaos, designed to enter this very day, this very hour, into his ears. And what of himself, what of how he grew up, what of the way his father told him, You'll never amount to anything before you're thirty anyhow, so you might as well stay in school, so he did, university, grad school, law school, as his father wished, past the point of no return. What if their fathers had said that to Mozart, to Vivaldi, infant prodigies, boy wonders? What would the world have been without their music, what will his son be, growing up, without him? The orchestra floods his ears. He doesn't know how to make sense of it, he doesn't know what any of it means. Then the aria washes him in glory like streams of light through stained glass and he thinks of the bass's throat bathed in radiation, looks down at his moving fingers to find that he has been writing, of Will, of his own child, of the day they bathed his forehead in the waters of life.

Tanya is just locking the front door when Elliott arrives at the radio station. He could see that all the

lights inside were already off as he drove up. At this hour the street is quiet.

Tanya stands looking at him with the key still in her hand. She tells him that Ed isn't here tonight, he works late at the paper on Saturdays.

'Right,' says Elliott. I came to talk about the job. But he's not here. I'll come back. He said something about having to fill out an application, you know, as a formality. I thought he said he'd be here late.

"Oh, I remember, says Tanya. No, he said he'd be here all week except Saturdays, but that I'd be here late if you wanted to pick up the application.

'Right, says Elliott. that was it. Got you mixed up, I guess. But as he stands looking at Tanya, he knows he didn't really get the days mixed up, he knows that he put off going, telling himself he was still thinking about it, until he had no choice but to come this night, at this hour. He looks at Tanya and knows that she knows that too.

But she doesn't say anything. She unlocks the door again and goes back inside to get him an application form. She doesn't invite him inside so he waits outside by the door, his breath rising in quiet, regular puffs into the cold, still air.

Tanya hands him the application form and Elliott stuffs it into his jacket pocket. Then he hears himself say, "Do you need a lift?"

Tanya looks at him. No,' she says. 'Don't bother,' she says. "I can just catch the bus."

"It's no bother,' Elliott says. "Really.'

So Tanya gets into his car and he heads east. He sees Tanya adjusting her seat belt and wonders if she is comparing his car to Ed's. Within the close confines of the car, he detects the faint odour of cigarette smoke hovering around her like a cloud from a censer.

When they get to Tanya's apartment building, an old brownstone walk-up, she thanks Elliott for the ride and says good night.

'I'll walk you to your door,' says Elliott. 'Really, it's no bother.'

Their footsteps echo loudly along the uncarpeted corridor and up the stairs. Tanya stops at a door marked with the number eight.

'Here we are," she says. She bends slightly to unlock the door, flips her hair back over her shoulder. The door opens with a lurch and swings inward.

"Well," says Tanya. She stands in the doorway, half her face cast in shadow, the other lit from the side by the dim overhead light in the corridor. Elliott can see the knife-edge angle of the corner of her mouth, can see the tiny fine blond hairs along her right cheek. He steps into the apartment and in the darkness feels her pressed between himself and the wall, feels her mouth against his, her lips

dry, slightly apart, can feel her body through the layers of clothing they both wear like a nude awaiting release from marble at the sculptor's hand. As he holds her, Elliott finds himself waiting, waiting for the desire to rise within him, waiting for her response, anything, waits like a clinician watching his subjects interact from behind a two-way mirror as it comes to him that he is angry. For a moment, Tanya still doesn't move; then Elliott feels her twist slightly, grips her arms with his hands, presses his mouth against hers, harder, back and down. Tanya begins to struggle and with a surge pushes him away slightly, turns her head aside, gasps. He loses hold of one arm and she staggers, knocking into a chair or table that scrapes against the floor and spills something, books, magazines, papers, with a rush onto the linoleum.

"Get away from me! Tanya hisses.

Elliott finds himself standing in the doorway again, trembling, his heart pounding. In the light from the corridor, he can see her eyes glittering as she stands with her mouth open, panting. "Who the hell do you think you are?" Tanya says, and then the apartment is flooded with light. Elliott blinks and in the sudden illumination sees Tanya still clutching with one hand the edge of a small semi-circular table, sees a stream of magazines and mail spreading along the floor to the end of the hallway and the bare feet of Myrtle, standing there in a chenille bathrobe,

her finger still on the lightswitch. As if from an aeon ago, he hears her voice saying, "What's going on? I heard noises..." but already she is silent, standing motionless as she stares at them with her finger on the lightswitch, her mouth frozen open in a soundless O.

When the telephone rings, Elliott does not move. He opens his eyes to the darkness of the bedroom and then shuts them again, counting off the four rings until the answering machine on his desk picks up. He hears the click signalling that his outgoing message is unwinding into the caller's ear and he has almost dozed off again in the silence within the apartment when he hears her voice.

"Elliott?"

For a moment, he still doesn't move. For a moment, as he lies there in bed, he sees her in his mind's eye, standing outside the bedroom door, calling to him, a presence so real, so palpable that he throws the comforter back and gets out of bed, goes down the hall to the living room entrance and looks down at the answering machine with its green light aglow, whirring quietly, hears her disembodied voice. "Elliott?" she says again. "Are you there? It's Claudia."

Elliott breathes in once, deeply. Then he picks up the phone and turns off the machine.

"Hi, Claudia," says Elliott. "It's me."

"Oh, Elliott," she says. The connection is weak, staticky. She sounds a little flustered, her voice a little high-pitched, as if she's nervous to be speaking to him after so long. Or maybe she has always sounded that way, and he just never noticed. "I thought I might have missed you. Did I wake you up or something?"

"No, that's okay," says Elliott. Actually, yeah, you did, it's the middle of the night. Where are you?"

"Oh, I forgot, I'm sorry," says Claudia. I guess I got the time difference mixed up."

"Where are you?" Elliott asks again, but he knows now that she has gone back to Holland, to be with her parents, with Will.

"Listen, Elliott," says Claudia, and now he can see her gripping the telephone receiver tightly with the long fingers of one hand, with the other brushing her dark blond bangs out of her eyes, can hear that she has something important to say. "I'm sorry I haven't been in touch for so long, but I had a lot to think about. I needed to think things out before talking with you."

"Sure," says Elliott. "That's okay. How are you both?"

"We're fine," says Claudia. "God looks after us." Beyond the static, he can hear some background noise coming from Claudia's end of the line. He thinks he can detect

Will there, saying something to her, Claudia murmuring a response.

"Is he there?" Elliott asks. "I'd like to talk to him."

"Elliott, we're very busy," says Claudia. "We're getting ready to go out somewhere."

"Look, I'd just like to have a word with my son," says Elliott. He feels his jaw beginning to tighten.

"He has a name, you know," Claudia says.

"I know," Elliott says. "I'd like to talk to my son, William."

He hears her voice more faintly, as if she has turned aside from the phone, calling him: "Willi!" and then something more, indistinguishable, in Dutch. Elliott hates the way she always pronounces his name as if it begins with a V, how she insists on speaking only Dutch with him, never English, even though the child is already fluently bilingual, hates the way she always refers to God as if he were a doting uncle when she has chosen to break up their family.

Suddenly she is back on the line. "He doesn't want to come to the phone," Claudia says.

"What?" Elliott says. "Put him on the phone!"

"You can't force him to speak to you," Claudia says. "He doesn't want to speak to you."

"Why the hell not?" says Elliott. "I'm his dad. What have you been saying to him?"

"That's exactly what I mean," Claudia says. "You fly into a rage over nothing!"

"I am not in a rage!" Elliott can feel himself beginning to shake, makes himself breathe deeply again, slowly.

"You're just the way your father was--you keep everything bottled up and looking good and under control on the outside and then in private, at home, with us, you take out everything on us."

Her voice has risen and in the background now there's silence. Elliott can envision Will standing there, his small body tense, listening. He tries to speak calmly but already he knows it's too late. Across the miles, through the static, through the twists and turns of cables and wires, her voice pours into his ear, the anger and hurt and accusations to which he cannot respond beyond murmuring her name two or three times: "Claudia. Claudia." She will not listen. She tells him again that she cannot live this way, she cannot live with a man without vision, without direction, a man who will not take any chances in life. She cannot live with a man who drifts and slides and ends up quitting when something is finally almost within reach. She reminds him again of all the terrible things he has said and done to her, how he ignored her, ridiculed her, tormented

her, her words burgeoning into plots and scenarios he can no longer even begin to recognise. Elliott sits holding the telephone receiver to his ear, wordless. He does not know what to say anymore. He does not know what to believe anymore. He thinks of trying to explain, one last time, why he went all the way only to quit at the bar. He thinks of the clothes he once wore, the lunches he did, the rhetoric he spoke. But mostly he thinks of the power he tasted, the power to deal in lives like a drug. He knew he had to escape that. There was no other hope for saving them, their marriage, their family. He believed that. He knows that. But she will not understand it, ever. Instead, she has simply dismissed him as hopeless, a failure. Elliott sits and lets her talk, he does not even try to stop her, not even when she finally comes to the point of the phone call, the point he realises he has been waiting for, quietly, and says she wants a divorce. She and Will are doing fine, she has met somebody nice who is good to them, even if Elliott just wants to keep drifting she still has to get on with her life, she can't wait forever for him to find some direction, she only has one life to live and she has to get on with it.

When Claudia finally stops talking, Elliott sits without saying anything for a few moments. Then he asks, "When can I see Will?"

"Elliott," Claudia says. "We're very busy. It's almost Christmas and we're busy with lots of things over here."

"I know it's almost Christmas," Elliott says. "What do you think I mean?" he says. "When can I see my son?"

"I think it would be better if he spent Christmas here with family," says Claudia. "It would be better for him."

"I'm his father, for God's sake!" says Elliott. "Doesn't that count as family anymore?"

"Look, Elliott," says Claudia. She sounds on the verge of tears. "I can't talk to you anymore if you're like this. I'll be in touch. You'll hear from my lawyer." There is a pause, as if she is already hanging up the phone. Elliott opens his mouth again, and hears her say, "Merry Christmas." Then she hangs up.

Elliott puts the receiver back onto the cradle of the phone. Then he turns the answering machine back on. He knows he will probably not see Will again for a long time, if ever. He knows now that he has known that all along. He thinks about the time ahead of them in family court and knows that it will have nothing really to do with family, it will have everything to do with lawyers, knows that as a father under the law he has only responsibilities, no rights. He thinks about what Claudia said tonight, about all the other times he has heard it all, how he will not face his fears, stand up for himself, take chances. He

thinks about what happened with Tanya tonight and wonders what Claudia would have said to that, he wonders what she'd say about the article he's writing, about dinner at Ed's, about Myrtle, about the tickets she has sent him to her performance Sunday night of The Messiah, there in the envelope, a white blur, tucked into the corner of his desk blotter. With an intensity that makes him shake, he wishes he had never met Claudia; and then, his eyes still on the envelope, Elliott realises that it is no longer dark in the apartment, that day is breaking, it's morning.

And he hears the baby upstairs, crying. Through the floor he hears the mother's murmurous voice and then the father's, lower, reverberating. And then he hears the ball beginning to bounce.

Elliott looks at the clock on the desk. Then he gets up and goes into the bedroom and gets dressed, doing up the buttons to his shirt slowly and deliberately to make sure he doesn't skip a button hole. At the door he puts on his shoes. Then he heads down the corridor to the stairwell and climbs one flight to the next floor. He stands behind the stairwell door, looking through the small rectangular pane of glass, and waits until he sees the apartment door open. A dark-haired man in a ski jacket emerges, then leans inward for a moment. Elliott hears the man murmur something unintelligible; then, with startling clarity, the woman's

voice: "We'll see you there in a little while! Say bye-bye to Daddy, sweetie." Then the door closes.

As he watches the man walk down the corridor, Elliott feels his breath coming quickly. He waits until the man turns the corner, until he hears the sound of the elevator door rumbling open and then shut again. Then he pushes open the stairwell door. He walks down to the spot where the man emerged. He can hear the woman inside laughing, the ball bouncing against the old hardwood floor. Elliott raises his fist to the door and knocks.

The ball dribbles to silence. A moment later, the door opens, and for the first time Elliott sees her. She stands in the doorway, slim to thinness, her long mouse-brown hair parted in the middle and pushed behind her ears, her face devoid of make-up, plain, the eyes shadowed by faint dark rings, a face plain to the point of homeliness but for those eyes, the lashes short, pale, but her eyes large and luminously green and gazing at him with such a look of joyous expectation, her mouth already curling up into a welcoming smile, that Elliott knows she thought he was her husband returning, having forgotten something, a scarf, a kiss, the bride still thrilling to the bridegroom; and there on her hip he sees the child, the baby, not more than half a year old, boy or girl he can't be sure, with a head of soft dark curls, long dark eyelashes that must have come from its father, but with eyes so like the mother's, huge and

brilliant, staring at him now with the same absolute unrecognition, with the utter guileless beauty of childhood, that he feels the words rise and burst from his throat.

"Has it ever occurred to you," Elliott says, "that other people live in this building too?" Mother and child stare at him, silent, and he continues, "Has it ever occurred to you that some of us have different schedules? That some of us like to sleep in in the morning past five or six a.m.? Has it ever occurred to you," Elliott says, feeling himself beginning to tremble, "that some of us don't have jobs to get to at the crack of dawn, that we don't all have little children with us?" He sees the woman begin to back away from the door, clutching the baby against her, sees the baby's chin beginning to pucker. "Can't you think of anyone else?" Elliott says, his voice rising. "Can't you even let someone sleep in on a Sunday morning, for Christ's sake?"

The baby has begun to cry. The woman stands inside the apartment holding the child's head against her chest with her hand, her own eyes now filled with tears, and he sees her swallowing quickly, two or three times, just standing there staring at him, the tiny gold cross at her throat quivering as she swallows and at the beat of her pulse. Elliott stares at it, stares at the cheap lacy collar of her dress, realises that they must have been preparing to join the father at church. He feels his own heart pounding

against his rib cage. Then he turns and walks back down the corridor, his knees weak and rubbery beneath him. When he reaches his apartment, he locks the door behind himself, leans against it. And then the telephone begins to ring.

Elliott lets the phone ring three times before picking it up. He clears his throat. "Yes."

"Listen, El," says Ed. "I was just talking to Tanya." Elliott sits down. "She said you showed up last night," says Ed. "Listen, El, we have to straighten some things out."

"What did she tell you?" Elliott asks. "I don't have anything to say. She'd tell you anything to get in your good books."

"What are you talking about?" says Ed. "She said you came by about the DJ job. We have to straighten out the hours you'll work. And about the article, El, you're way behind schedule." Ed pauses. Then he says, "What good books?"

For a moment, Elliott just sits holding the phone to his ear. Maybe if he doesn't say anything, Ed will drop the subject, maybe if he just stops talking it will all go away. But Ed is saying, "Hey, is something going on here? Elliott? Elliott! What the hell is going on here?"

"Listen, Ed," says Elliott. He shifts to the edge of the seat, hunches forward. "I didn't want to have to tell you this. But you know how it is with women like that."

"Like what?" says Ed. "What are you talking about?"

"She's only using you," says Elliott. Stop it, he tells himself. "All she sees in you are money and career opportunities. She's just a shallow little gold-digger. Can't you see that?"

"That's not true," Ed says. "What are you talking about? She cares about me. She cares about Myrtle. She goes to the hospital when Myrtle's working there and reads to the sick kids. She's real good with them. She's a decent person. And she cares about me."

"Right," says Elliott. "I suppose that's why she's been coming on to me."

"What do you mean?" says Ed. His voice is starting to shake. "She wouldn't do that. Tanya's not that way, she loves me, she told me so."

"Don't be ridiculous," says Elliott. Stop it. Stop it. But he goes on. "What would she see in a boorish slob like you?"

For several moments, Elliott hears only the hum of the telephone line, the ghosts of other voices and conversations passing through the same cable. Then Ed comes back on the line. At first, he can hardly understand what Ed is saying. Then, with a shock, Elliott realises he is crying.

"Who do you think you are, Elliott? God's gift to women? You're no prize package, you know. Where the hell do you come off with all this garbage about other people

when you can't even clean up your own life?" Ed gives a loud hiccup. "I know I'm no Mr. Universe, I know I'm no saint, but I'm a human being, you know, I've got feelings too, you know, I've been your friend." With that word, Ed begins to shout. "I stuck by you because I was your friend when nobody else wanted anything to do with you. What kind of a friend are you, Elliott? Who are you to pass judgment on anyone? It's no wonder your wife left you. You don't know the first thing about love!"

Ed slams down the phone. The noise crashes against Elliott's ear. Elliott sits motionless in his desk chair. The telephone jangles and he picks it up in mid-ring, holds the receiver out a foot from his ear.

"And you're fired!" screams Ed.

Elliott replaces the telephone receiver carefully. Then he leans out across the desk, rests his head on his crossed arms. He stays that way, without moving, for a long time. Then, stiffly, he rises and walks into the bedroom, lies down on the bed, closes his eyes, and sleeps.

When Elliott opens his eyes again, the room is dark. He looks at the clock-radio. It is late afternoon, almost evening. He has slept the entire day. He gets up and turns on all the lights one by one. Then he cooks himself an omelette with toast for supper, chewing everything slowly and thoroughly. After washing the dishes, he spends a

little while looking at the weekend paper. The apartment building is quiet. He gets up, puts on his jacket, and heads outside.

When he gets into his car, he's not sure where he's going. For a while, he just drives, surging and slowing along with other cars on the roads. Then he heads west. A few minutes later, he turns onto a street lined with cars. He has to drive two or three blocks before he can find a parking space. He gets out of the car and follows the people he sees ahead. When he gets to the wide double doors at the top of the steps, he hands over his ticket and steps inside.

The glow of innumerable candles poised in sconces on the walls and at the ends of the pews suffuses the cathedral. Very little space is left; people shuffle and settle in their seats like a sea of wind-blown wheat. Elliott accepts a program from an usher and slips into a pew at the very back as the music begins.

He could almost sing along with it, he knows the music so well. For a long while he just watches the orchestra playing, violin, violoncello, oboe, bass, bassoon; picks out the delicate trills of the harpsichord. Only then, only after the chill of the winter's night has seeped out of his bones, does he finally raise his eyes to the choir. He lets his eyes move over the faces slowly, studying the different facial mannerisms apparent even from a distance. Some seem

barely to move their lips, as if crooning as much inwardly as outwardly; others stretch their mouths wide, nod their heads forward in emphatic accompaniment. And then he finds Myrtle. She stands to one side amidst the sopranos, her face tilted slightly upward, her mouth open now in a round joyous O. Elliott drops his gaze to the back of the pew ahead of him. Then he closes his eyes and simply listens. The audience has stopped its rustling and sits stilled. The music swells beneath him like a wave and lifts Elliott from his seat into the central aisle. Near the rear on one side, he sees Ed and Tanya, listening intently. He lifts his hand to wave but they don't see him. A few pews further on sits his upstairs neighbour, gazing with brilliant wide eyes at the choir. That must be her husband with his arm around her. Now, as he looks around, Elliott realises he recognises more and more people: a couple of the legal secretaries he used to flirt with, even some of the lawyers he knew, kids he knew in high school, his elementary school principal. As he goes up the steps to where the altar would normally be standing, Elliott thinks he sees, far back to the side near one of the transept columns, the bag lady sitting unencumbered for once. Elliott weaves his way among the musicians, being careful not to jostle an arm, disrupt the slide of a bow. The chorus surrounds him like a great pealing carillon. They sing of the shaking of the nations, of fearfulness and relief, they sing of wounds and

iniquities and good tidings of great joy. Surrounding him, they sing of the breaking of bonds, of healing, of victory, of mystery; they sing of a father everlasting, of the dead made alive, of law fulfilled and transfigured by grace; they sing of power and riches and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and blessing. But Elliott goes on, making his way towards the tenors, and finally stops in front of his grandfather.

"Grandpa," says Elliott.

Even as his Adam's apple bounces to song, his grandfather smiles and nods at him.

"Grandpa," says Elliott. "I have to know. Can you tell me? Can anyone here be singing this without meaning it? Can you sing, can you hear and know these words, this music, without meaning it, without believing it, without its making a difference?" And his grandfather smiles and sings on and Elliott says, "I need to know, Grandpa, I need to know if it makes a difference, getting out of this limbo, or just going on like this, day after day, not dead, not alive, not giving a damn. Do you know, Grandpa, can you tell me, does it make any difference at all?" And together with his grandfather, all the members of the chorus lift their voices with a power that shakes Elliott awake, and sing, with gorgeous glorious finality, Amen.

Thunderous applause fills the cathedral as Elliott straightens up in his seat. He waits until people begin to

rise and don their coats again. Then he makes his way among the crowd, steps back through the doors into the night, and begins to walk.

He walks down the street, passing men and women in leather and furs getting into Lincolns and Cadillacs, passing elderly people leaning on one another's arms, passing young students who gather together at the bus stop, humming and stamping their feet against the cold. He walks, passing his own car parked at the end of the street, as a few snowflakes begin to drift down from the shrouded heavens like tiny stars. He walks all the way home, warmed by the exertion, wondering what to do with his love for his own son, whom he had for only a season, wondering how to make sense of it, what to do with this season of love.

Elliott walks until he reaches his apartment building. When he gets upstairs, he turns off the lights he had left burning and stands at the window, watching the snow glide earthward like constellations shaken backward through the sieve of time. Then he turns around and sits down in front of the television. He runs through the channels until he finds one that is already off the air. Then he leans forward and adjusts the brightness control until most of the snow is invisible and what remains dances over the screen, electrical interference, electromagnetic exchanges, the hustle and bustle spewed from earth, but beyond that, he knows, faint but detectable amid the static, the radiation

that floods inward like a primeval newscast from the farthest reaches of space, and he listens, through the noise of creation, to the voice of God.