NOTICE

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

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

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

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

AVIS

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

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

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

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

Country Life

Emil Sher

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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

September 1991

ISBN 0-315-73674-7

Canada

ABSTRACT

Country Life

Emil Sher

This collection of seven short stories charts the emotional territory of men's behaviour with respect to personal relationships. Most of the stories explore internal landscapes, reflected in first-person accounts by protagonists who grapple with incidents and events beyond their control.

Various techniques of fiction are used as a means of linking a story's structure to character development. In the title story, a mourning father tries to reconcile the urban and rural sensibilities and settings that inform his life. Language and generations collide in Sea of Tranquility as a young, inarticulate carpenter comes face-to-face with his girlfriend's self-assured, white-collar father. Generational differences are also explored in Sweet Chariot, where character development is rooted in imagery and gestures that take the place of words neither grandfather or grandson can express. The pace and sequential structure of Talia mirror the anxious protagonist's need to order and control his tentative efforts to win the affection of his girlfriend's young daughter. A sense of loss shapes both Mourning and Blumenthal's Ark. The one story told from a woman's perspective, How to Build a Porch, amounts to a portrait of her husband and father, and the differences between them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

COUNTRY LIFE

Mr. Wiley waddled up our stone path, walking to the fractured beat of his walking stick. He is a man who can be heard long before he is ever seen.

"Weeds," he gasped when I opened the door. He has the corrugated voice of a lifelong smoker. Laura's biggest fear is that he'll collapse in her arms. Smothered by an old man in overalls, she predicts.

"Weeds?"

"Weeds," Mr. Wiley repeated, clutching a large, brown envelope. "Watch yourself. They're sprouting between your cracks." He gestured with his walking stick, blissfully unaware of any double entendre.

It was true. Green tufts scattered over the walk, like patches of unsightly, unshaven hair. When we first moved in we were anxious to keep the house clean and bright, postcard neat. We planted flowers, painted the eaves, built a two-storey birdhouse. Now the fence is peeling in a bad way and the mailbox

leans to one side.

I looked at Mr. Wiley and nodded the way everyone around here nods: you let your head drop and slowly chew the inside of one cheek.

"We'll be sure to look after it as soon as we get back."

Now it was Mr. Wiley's turn to nod the local nod. Only he'd barely let his slack jaw down before another cough lay seige. Laura swears it's enough to rouse birds from their nests. He spit into a creased handkerchief, wiped his mouth.

"Of course, I didn't travel all the way over here just to talk about weeds."

Mr. Wiley is our closest neighbour. If you stand on the sagging crate by the tool shed, lean towards the road and peer through the scaffold of trees, you can see Mr. Wiley's earth-red roof. Shingled and scrubbed, his house is as old as ours but in far better shape. Every week the stout, broad-shouldered wife of the only lawyer in town cleans the house from top to bottom. Every other Tuesday a young boy with bad skin mows the lawn and clips the pampered garden. Weeds perish long before they sprout in Mr. Wiley's front yard.

"You don't need an excuse to visit," I told him.

Which was true. Despite the coughing, the hacking, the annoying habit of plucking loose threads from worn sleeves with yellow fingers, Mr. Wiley is a good neighour.

I invited him in for a cup of coffee. He declined.

"I know you're leaving tomorrow," he said.

"We'll be back in a week."

His lips folded into a crease. He has a brown, baked-apple face, topped with sprigs of white hair.

"I thought you'd want this." He gave me the envelope. "Mrs. Osler found it."

Mrs. Osler is the lawyer's wife.

"Must have fallen down and got lost in the shuffle. Your daughter gave it to me for Thanksgiving." He leaned forward. "To thank me for all the sweets we'd shared."

I nodded without chewing my cheek. I thanked him and offered to drive him home. He shook his head, said he'd rather walk. Before I could convince him otherwise he was waddling down our stone path, a caricature of himself, poking at the weeds with his walking stick.

Laura was upstairs, packing. I couldn't hear her open and close drawers, lift wire hangers out of closets. She is a woman who is seen long before she is ever heard. Soundless as a falling leaf. She pads into a room like a cat, curls up on the couch and snuggles up with newspapers her mother sends from back home. The pages barely rustle.

On the fridge, beneath a chipped Oreo magnet, was a list of things to do before we left. Order paint. Unplug computer. Call courier. Scott Henley: Sam, Adam and Eve.

Sam is a golden retriever who thinks he's a chicken. Adam and Eve are chickens who think they are dogs. Scott Henley is

the pock-skinned boy who mows Mr. Wiley's lawn every other week. He agreed to keep an eye on Sam and the chickens. The computer, the courier, the paint are all part of our business. We make and design greeting cards, out here in our home in the country.

Adam and Eve were pecking and scratching by the woodpile. I sat down at the kitchen table, carefully opened the envelope and pulled out the single sheet inside: a portrait of Mr. Wiley that Casey had drawn. All the details that you'd expect are there, only they have the boundless, untethered quality that children bring to drawings. So Mr. Wiley's large eyes look like spokeless wheels, and his eyebrows soar as high as birds in flight. Casey dressed him in crisp blue jeans hitched to a pair of red suspenders. A pen or a cigar grows out of a shirt pocket; I have seen Mr. Wiley chew on both. The laces on his brown shoes are neatly tied, the loops impossibly large. He is holding flowers in an outstretched hand. Dandelions, a clump of daffodils, some green ferns. Even at close range there's no telling where the roots end and Mr. Wiley's fingers begin.

Corn. Corn, he told us the morning we walked over to introduce ourselves. We stood by a slack clothesline, facing a bare field. Corn as far as you could see, Mr. Wiley declared, scraping the overcast sky with his walking stick, carving a soundless arc. Corn like you've never tasted. Corn like you've never seen. He leaned into his walking stick. Know why I had such beautiful corn, young lady?

Casey shook her head.

I told 'em. Whispered the words right into the ears of my corn. Looking good. You're looking good. You're looking very good.

Casey smiled. Children don't often stop to gauge their reactions. Adults tend to weigh consequences before they speak. I didn't know how to respond to Mr. Wiley's confession that he whispered sweet nothings into the ears of his corn; Laura's uncertain eyes mirrored mine. Was he pulling our urban legs? A polite challenge ran the risk of an insult. Overreaction could sound patronizing. So when Casey smiled I was relieved, greatly relieved, for no one would fault a five-year old for smiling, least of all an eighty-three year old man. Her smile was the green light we needed. That night, after I'd read her three pages from Stuart Little, she asked if she could be a cornstalk. And you pretend you're Mr. Wiley, my daughter insisted. Brushing her fleecy hair behind an ear, I bent over and whispered, "Looking good. You're looking good. You're looking very good."

Casey and Mr. Wiley picked flowers in the field where Mr. Wiley's beautiful corn once swayed. After an hour, two hours, sometimes an entire morning, Casey would run out from the narrow path in the woods that divide Mr. Wiley's home from ours, breathless and red-cheeked, the flowers a fragrant torch in her raised hand. Moments later she was at my door, anxious to show me the day's catch, pleased and proud as only a five year old can be. A white milk pitcher we discovered when we first moved in made a perfect vase on the kitchen table.

They picked weeds in Mr. Wiley's garden, and berries Casey stirred into thick jam. They collected the litter banking the sides of the road between our houses, compared cans and wrappers like amateur archaeologists.

At first we were worried, for all the predictable reasons. Yes, Mr. Wiley is a kind and generous eighty-three year old man. But he is a man, and we knew that some men take advantage of some girls in ways that are neither kind or generous. But we also knew that we had to trust Mr. Wiley, trust him as we trusted ourselves. Otherwise, we might as well have stayed in the city and lived our fortressed lives, behind reinforced doors bolted with locks and chains.

We didn't want to do that. We came to the country to raise our daughter in a place where she could run without fear and have a dog who thinks he's a chicken and pick flowers with an old man who lovingly whispers into the ears of his corn. I am a city person at heart, and can't pretend otherwise. The firm reassurance of concrete beneath my feet, the neon hearth of an all-night restaurant, the protective shadows of skyscrapers: these are my comforts. But a city is no place for a child, not any more. Every time Laura reads the newspapers her mother sends from back home she shares another story that convinces us we made the right move. Oh, God, she'll sigh, and I'll brace myself. Seven-year olds are extorting money in schoolyards. They found a baby in a trash can. A teenager was killed for wearing the wrong-coloured shoes on the wrong block. I'll look at her and

it doesn't seem right, my wife of seven years wrapped in a knitted cocoon, safe in one corner of the couch, talking about infants with severed limbs and young children killing each other over the colour of laces.

Children have a relationship with the elderly that adults can only envy. Not yet a threat, they're too young to have learned to patronize the old. Maybe that's what bonds the old with the young: neither are taken very seriously, both are powerless. He has four kids, Casey told us. A boy and three girls. Kids was a new addition to her vocabulary. Why tell her that Mr. Wiley's "kids" were probably in their fifties, grey-haired, slow-footed, older than Laura and me? And does he have grandchildren? Oh, yes, Casey said. Lots of grandchildren. She was sitting at the kitchen table, colouring. But, she added, they live far away.

One daughter had moved to Europe; two worked as engineers. Casey marvelled at the idea of women driving trains, guiding steam engines over treacherous tracks. The son lived in California. Computers, Mr. Wiley explained. Software.

Mrs. Wiley had died of an aneurism, a word as foreign to Mr. Wiley as "software". The flowers he picked with Casey made their way to his wife's grave, in a manicured cemetery overlooking a chain of small lakes linked by dense bush. Fridays, Mr. Wiley waddled past our wounded mailbox and up the road to the graveyard, one hand clutching his walking stick, the

other sprouting flowers.

"Cute picture," a young man in a ponytail declared. He wore a blue apron over a T-shirt. "Your kid's?"

I nodded, unwilling to give the details. He seemed satisfied and set to work, preserving Mr. Wiley under glass. We had decided to frame Casey's artwork while we were in town. The store specialized in framing pictures while you waited.

Laura was at her mother's place, a condominium with a magnificent view of the city. Her father passed away before we had met and married. His picture sits on the mantle of an artificial fireplace. He was a handsome man in a subtle way. His eyes are trusting and calm, his mouth forever on the verge of a grin. Next to the photograph of Laura's father is a vase; in the vase are Casey's ashes. After careful thought and many late-night cups of coffee, we'd decided to scatter her ashes near our home in the country.

She was killed a year ago, on a cool, cloudy day in October when birds chose the leafy warmth of a tree over the chill of an open sky. I wonder now if it wasn't somehow foretold. Sam was not himself that morning, barking in loud, choppy spasms. I have read that animals have premonitions of impending catastrophes, that dogs will yelp just hours before the ground convulses and an earthquake swallows homes and lives. Perhaps it wasn't the open sky that kept the birds in their trees but something else, a

scent only certain creatures smell.

I was in mid-sentence. The greeting cards that Laura and I make are a marriage of pictures and words. I was writing a card for someone who'd just been dumped by a lover. We aim for baby boomers with a sense of humour. "Remember: There are other fish in the sea." That would go on the cover. Inside, I had written: "But..."

But what? I wasn't sure. I was waiting, thinking about what to write, scribbling on a yellow legal pad filled with suspended phrases, possibilities, isolated words.

Backfire is common out here in the country; Sam's barks did more to annoy than alert me. I figured he was chasing the guilty culprit, nipping at the tires of one of the many rusting pickups that swerve and totter down these country roads.

I paused, then returned to my fish in the sea, searching for the right words, playing with phrases.

"But..."

A pounding knock. I recognized the sound of wood against wood. Mr. Wiley battered the door with such force he was still swinging when I finally opened it, breathing in a fierce way, almost ramming my knees with his walking stick. I feared he would die right then and there, gasping for air. His face was deflated and colourless, his rubbery lips a violent blue.

"Your daughter," he whispered in a shredded voice. He pointed his walking stick towards the swath of trees that separates our homes.

A nameless fear bore through me. I ran towards the path between the trees, unaware of my own feet or the ground beneath me.

Two hunters stood in the middle of the path, luminous in their orange vests. One grabbed clumps of his hair, walked in semicircles, cried, "Oh, my God!" over and over again. The other crouched by Casey and stroked her head awkwardly, as if she were a strange pet.

She was still breathing when I reached her, a quiet rasp that reminded me of Mr. Wiley. The calm hunter explained that a third friend had gone to get an ambulance. I said nothing, and simply rocked Casey's limp body in my arms. I whispered, "Everything's going to be all right, pumpkin. Everything's going to be all right."

I touched her cheek, still warm from her run. I wanted to shake her, urge her to continue running until she reached our house, where we'd plant her flowers in the milk pitcher. There were no flowers in her hands, covered with white mitts. Later, in court, the hysterical hunter claimed he'd mistaken the white mitts for a deer's tail.

I couldn't cry, I couldn't stop rocking, I couldn't stop whispering, "Everything's going to be all right." I didn't hear Laura run down the path, or Sam running behind her. Soon we were both caressing Casey. The hysterical hunter continued to walk in staggered circles. By then Mr. Wiley had arrived, wheezing, watching.

I leaned into Casey, brushed my lips against her neck, as if all she needed was a bit of air to get back on her feet again. The damp stain in her coat where the bullet had entered looked harmless, the kind that children acquire in the course of growing up.

Someone had mistaken my daughter for a deer. Seven hours later she died.

"Done," the pony-tailed clerk announced. I looked up. Casey's drawing of Mr. Wiley had taken on a different dimension. Glass and a gold frame made it seem timeless, ageless.

Walking back to the condominium, I thought of Laura and her mother sitting at the kitchen table, talking. They both cup their chins in the palm of one hand, doodling with the fingers of the other. The image of the two of them talking like that, pausing to sip coffee, was one of a thousand images that settled over me in the days after Casey's death. I imagined her at fourteen, at twenty, at thirty-five, the grown daughter who sits with her mother, my wife, at the kitchen table, her chin cupped in her hand, sipping coffee. Her face was not a face I knew, not one I could draw, not so much a face as a feeling, a possibility.

Some days, I picked up the phone and began to dial. I wanted desperately to phone the hunter. But what would I say? I drove by his house, only thirty miles away. I'd tell Laura I was going out for a drive, and park by his clapboard house, a bland affair with a gaggle of plastic geese planted in the front

yard. He sells insurance, and has two children of his own. I would see their bicycles on the lawn, a grass-stained soccer ball, some toys. Through the curtained windows I learned to recognize his stooped posture. It cannot be an easy thing to live with, knowing you have taken the life of another, no matter how unintentional. Still, I can't understand how a five-year old girl wearing white mittens can be mistaken for a deer. I have spent more than one evening looking at pictures of deer, at the shape and structure of their bodies. I have studied their delicate faces, looked into their fragile eyes. How is it possible? The question would linger, steady as rain, as I sat and watched the hunter set plates and glasses on his dining room table.

I had asked Mr. Wiley that very question. He has hunted himself; a large set of antlers crowned his front door.

"Anticipation," he said. "Anticipation."

We sat on his front porch, a plate of biscuits between us.

"What do you mean?"

He coughed and cleared his throat, plucked a thread from his sweater.

"When you're hunting deer, all you're thinking of is deer. Nothing else is on your mind. Nothing else should be. Deer, deer, deer. Anything else clutters up the brain."

He paused to tap his flossy head.

"Soon you start to anticipate. Trouble with anticipation is it can turn on you."

"Turn?"

"Turn into expectation. I suspect that's what happened to that fellow. Probably started seeing deer everywhere he looked. He never saw your daughter. He saw a deer because he wanted to see a deer. My understanding is that they'd gone into the woods early that morning and were heading home empty-handed. So you're talking pride, too. Pride and anticipation. That's no excuse, mind. And they had no business being where they were, so close to the road and all."

Anticipation. The word meshed perfectly with my images of Casey in the weeks after she died. Casey at fourteen, Casey at thirty-five. I had anticipated a life for my daughter where she would grow, change, flourish in ways we come to expect as parents. Perhaps that's what I should have told the man who killed my daughter, expecting a deer. I could call him up, whisper "Anticipation," and hang up.

Laura and I walked up to Mr. Wiley's house, the vase with Casey's ashes cradled in her arms. He'd agreed to let us scatter her ashes in the field where his corn once grew.

As we approached his front door I remembered. I remembered I had not told Laura, for reasons I still don't fully understand. About a month after Casey died I was walking along the road. Through the trees I glimpsed Mr. Wiley, perched on a step ladder in front of his door. I walked closer, planting my steps so as not to be heard. He had just removed the antlers above his front

door. A large, discoloured patch remained. By the stepladder, next to his walking stick, was a can of paint. I am not a sentimental man, but the sight of Mr. Wiley painting that patch left me on my knees, crouched by the side of the road, weeping.

SEA OF TRANQUILITY

You don't have to know how to fish, Deenie tells me, her voice cotton-soft. Just sit there with my father for a few hours and pretend you're having a good time, okay?

I'm sitting, I'm pretending. I know fuck all about fishing. I know worms, I know bait, I know hooks. That's it. The boat's glued to the lake, the lake's been ironed smooth. Nothing moves. Mr. Duschaney is a corpse with a rod. Tells me that's what he likes most about fishing: the stillness, the quiet. Out here, he says, I get the chance to unwind and collect my thoughts.

Out here I'm thinking of back there. Deenie and Mrs. Duschaney, sitting on the dock, talking mother-daughter talk. From here it looks very nice, thank you. They get the deck chairs and a nice slice of shade. We get splinters and sunstroke. Don't ask what I look like in this hat. He tells me it's important to protect yourself, smearing lotion over his chubby arms, around his thick wrists, between his chubby fingers. Hands me the tube. Make sure you get all of your neck...

I'm not good with empty time, dead space, holes waiting to be plugged with words. Talk never came easy. Teachers thought I was slow, kept me in the front of the class, asked me if everything was all right at home. I can't complain. The folks are decent and law-abiding. They pay their taxes, recycle their cans. They're not talkers, either. We all clammed up for a long while after my older brother died. Eleven years old. Eyes like marbles you keep stashed in a drawer, too pretty to trade. Killed by a nineteen-year old armed with his mother's Chevy. Barely spilled a drop of his own blood. The trickle he did spill smelled of liquor. So I've been told. Something snapped in his girlfriend's spine. She was sitting pretty in the passenger's seat. Now she talks with her lashes. Her boyfriend's out, good behaviour, walking the streets, driving.

Marry a lawyer, I told Deenie. Lawyers know smooth talk. Lawyer talk is so smooth you can't taste it going down. I'm no lawyer. I choke on big words. She tells me she doesn't want to marry a lawyer. Says a carpenter is just what she wanted, custom-made with a smooth finish.

They're laughing now, Deenie and her mother, talking wedding talk. Flowers, invites, R.S.V.P's. Last night Deenie told me we should take our vows beneath the open sky. She wants to do it here, the ceremony, right by the lake. This way, she says, God will hear us, the whole world will hear us pledge our love.

How do you know there's a God? Her head was on my chest, solid as an anchor. Up goes her head, out comes a smile. Bright

as the moon tacked to the sky. Tells me we better hope there's a God. Otherwise we have a lot of explaining to do. Starts to play with the three hairs on my chest. Like I said, I'm smooth as a plank. Her fingers are dancing on the spot. If there's a God, I ask, why did he give us nipples? I'm talking about men. I tell her those things are useless as buttons on a T-shirt. Why'd he bother? She tells me there's a reason for everything, everything has a purpose. Next thing I know, she's sucking like a newborn on one of my own. I'm thinking, what's wrong with this picture? Truth is, it isn't half bad. No fireworks but a couple of sparks, for sure. Next door Mr. Duschaney was snoring up a storm, giving his nostrils a real workout. I didn't want to take a chance. Last thing I needed was Deenie's father lunging through the door, chubby fingers wrapped around a rod, hungry for a hit.

Mrs. Duschaney gets out of her chair, walks around the dock, gives us a friendly wave. The old man raises his arm. A nest of scrawny hair grows in the pit. Pity the animal life that ever lived there. He grunts, drops his arm, grabs the rod. Soon he's breathing normal again. I figure the slits in his nose are long enough for quarters and other loose change. God help us if our kids get his nose. Deenie has her mother's nose, owl eyes and thick brows she plucks like a chicken. She tells me she's planning ahead, plucking today, thinking of tomorrow

Tomorrow can't come soon enough. We're leaving right after breakfast. Some hugs and handshakes and then we're off.

Tonight it's a meal at a fancy restaurant. Cloth napkins, candles, skinny waiters who talk real soft. And fresh fish...if they wait for our catch we'll be eating bread all night. Two hours and nothing has happened. About every fifteen minutes Mr. Duschaney gives me this smile. Three layers of chin spread out and his ears wiggle. I smile back, for Deenie's sake. Once in a while he asks a question. Do you enjoy working with your hands? Are tools expensive? I give short answers, make like I don't want to scare the fish.

He's a paper man, Mr. Duschaney. Works for a big company in one of those high buildings that pilots are warned about. Lots of shiny glass and polished stone. Sits in an office and barks on the phone all day. That's why he's so goddamn fat. Never moves from his desk. Signs contracts, writes memos. A paper man. Makes more in an hour than I make in a month.

Only now he doesn't look so important. Take the suits and ties off these clowns and they look like everyone else. Or worse. He's wearing a T-shirt with a lighthouse beaming from one side, shorts the colour of dead salmon. Salmon-pink, he tells me, like maybe the fish will notice.

They don't care. I don't care. Ten minutes into this expedition I figured I'd rather build a boat than sit in one. Not that I've ever built one. But I could. Even if Mr. Duschaney was there, sitting by the sidelines, tongue flapping, watching me work. He wouldn't be the first. They're all the same. Housewives, husbands, the tall and the short. They all

love to watch, eyes copper-bright. No one admits it. There's always an excuse. Can I get you anything? Would you like a cup of coffee? But they always hang around. They linger. We're not talking heart transplants, here. We're talking shelves, cupboards, small-time renovation. Still, they watch. Don't ask me why. One guy, real stiff around the edges but soft in the middle, told me he loved the smell of sawdust. Asked if he could saw a two-by-four. Just one, he said, like a kid eyeing a cookie.

Humpty Dumpty snorts, gives me another smile. Tells me this lake is his Sea of Tranquility. Points a chubby finger up to the sky, says there's a place on the moon with the same name. Leans towards me. I get a good whiff of lotion and sweat and something brewing on his brow. Says, I don't imagine the fish bite in the Sea of Tranquility. I say I don't imagine they do.

All this tranquility talk sticks to my skin. My feet itch. The wind is off duty today. A couple of bored clouds hang from the sky. Birds don't bother flying. The lake's still a polished floor. I could run across, no scuff marks, back to Deenie, away from the salmon-pink shorts and the bucket of worms. Let him sit here alone in his Sea of Tranquility.

Hard to believe he was ever young. After dinner last night Mrs. Duschaney dragged out the family pictures, said she was sure I'd like to see Deenie as a baby. Deenie made eyes at me, whispered Be Nice. I was nice. I smiled, nodded a lot, wondered when it was going to end. Some weren't half bad. Deenie in a

snowsuit, Deenie on a swing. I kept smiling and smiling. By the time Deenie was thirteen my mouth ached. Mr. Duschaney pointed to a picture of Deenie's mother, said she and Deenie could have been twins. Walked out of the other room, returned with the black-and-white proof. Pictures of Mrs. Duschaney before she was Mrs. Duschaney. Pictures of Mr. Duscheney before he was fat. Lots of black hair everywhere I looked. Real lean. One picture was pure Hollywood, both of them flashing smiles on a beach, feet buried in a mountain of sand.

Deenie brought out her camera, the one with the fancy lenses, showed it to her father. You know how to work this thing? he asks. His eyebrows graze his widow's peak, wants us to know he's surprised. Oh, Frank, Mrs. Duschaney says, swatting air. Really! Deenie doesn't get angry, doesn't sigh. She barely stirs. Gives her father a toothy lure and says, Daddy, you have a lot to learn...

Deenie's hanging over the edge of the dock, legs swinging, camera aimed at me and Mr. Duschaney. I make like I don't see her. She doesn't like those kinds of pictures, the ones where everyone's stiff as wood, smiles nailed to their faces. Spontaneous, she tells me. I don't want people to know I'm there.

That new camera's a real treat. A bird a mile away might as well be perched on your nose. You can lick the sap off distant trees. God knows what me and the old man look like, two stiffs in a boat, waiting.

This morning was real nice. Deenie pokes me in the ribs, says, Look. She's standing by the bedroom window, her nose touching glass. I know it's early, I can feel it in my arms and legs, can taste it in my mouth. I ask her if the geese are up yet. She swats air, pretends she's annoyed. There isn't much to see, no beaver slicing through the water or low flying ducks. It's more what you feel. Like the lid's been lifted off the world. The lake is simmering, in no rush to make waves. Hard to think of roads and sirens when you see a lake wake up. Take a picture, I say. Deenie shakes her head, nose rubbing glass. Tells me a picture wouldn't be fair. I hold her waist, still warm from sleep. She says a picture wouldn't be the same, no one would ever know what it was really like. She squeezes my hand. For a minute I forget that we're naked, that her folks are next door, that there's anyone else but us...

Out of my eye I catch some shadows, see Mr. Duschaney's rod bounce up and down. Hallelujah. Praise the Lord. Whatever. Big, small, I don't care. A fish is a fish. Anything's better than coming back empty-handed. Last thing I need is him thinking I'm some sort of curse, an evil eye you can never shake. He's a trophy man, Mr. Duschaney. Likes to see his name engraved or framed. Plaques and pictures cover the living room wall. In Honour of This, In Recognition of That. Shaking hands with important people, smiling with slick politicians. The type of pictures Deenie hates. Unspontaneous.

Something's wrong. He drops the rod, starts making funny

noises. His eyes roll. His left arm stiffens. A strange colour leaks across his face, a pasty colour, more stucco-white than salmon-pink. His right hand crawls over his T-shirt, makes me think of a crab. Chubby fingers squeeze the lighthouse. That's when I figure it's his heart.

I stand, the boat tips. I sit, the boat tips. Mr. Duschaney is rocking and shaking, gasping for air. Screams skate across the lake, slap me in the face. Mrs. Duschaney is grinding into the dock, all knotted arms and twisted legs. Deenie stands still as stone. Her camera takes it all in, brings us close. God knows what she sees.

I crouch and lay low, toss the bucket of worms into the lake. Let the fish feast. I grab a life jacket that smells of boat house. My head pops through, my hat is history. Life, I say, real low. Don't ask me why. It sounds right. I keep saying it, making my way to Mr. Duschaney. Life.

And it comes back to me, like it was yesterday, like I'm twelve again, a Boy Scout with scrubbed ears. A B C. Airway, Breathing, Circulation. I only lasted a year. Couldn't stand all the rules, the knots, that damn uniform. The folks thought I'd miss my brother, thought it would help being around other boys. Somewhere in my head I'd buried it. Now it's back, fresh and warm. A B C.

Life, I whisper, grabbing ankles thick as poles, dragging Mr. Duschaney's carcass over the seat. I open his mouth, let my fingers roam around. Nothing there but stone-hard teeth. I bend

down, plant an ear against his nostrils, make like I'm listening to a seashell. No summer breeze, no rolling waves. Not a sound.

I grab his wrist. Fingers hunt for signs of life, maybe a dull pulse. Too much fat. The neck's the same story. I dig around his throat, like checking a pipe for leaks. I find his ribs, pump his chest. Flesh jiggles, then fades.

Life.

Mr. Duschaney's a tree slashed clean at the stump, all wet and no roots. The horse-sized nostrils look too big to pinch. I manage. I tilt his head back, my fingers clamped to his nose. His cheeks are loose bags, his mouth's a rubber pouch. I squeeze his jaws, make a hole in his face. Next thing I know my lips are over his.

I blow. His chest rises and falls, rises and falls. I keep waiting for him to kick in, wonder how you jump-start so much flesh and bone.

Mrs. Duschaney's still screaming from the dock. Yells my name, yells his name, yells at Deenie. I blow and watch, blow and watch, throw in a "Life" now and then.

A small cough, real small, but a cough. I stop blowing, watch, and listen. More coughs and gurgles and baby grunts. I stand, peacock-proud. Before I can take a bow I'm down, in the water, treading. The boat's flipped over, belly up, oars floating like broken arms. I see him, bobbing, taking the sun.

I make like a motor, feet churning water. He's in my arms, a limp sack. The life jacket keeps things easy. Still, he's a

helluva load. An arm around his neck and we're off.

Every yard's about a mile long. Thank God he's a floater. I roll on my back, use two arms to pull. He's out like a light, doesn't resist.

Deenie's probably clicking away, taking pictures to show our kids. This is your father, that's my father.

I paddle, I kick. My arms are water-logged. Twenty, maybe thirty yards from the dock Deenie starts lobbing words.

Keep going. Keep going. You're almost there.

Crazy what goes through the mind. Mrs. Duschaney's weeping like a widow, Deenie's reeling us in. All I see is sky, blue sky, a couple of clouds. And I start thinking about what she said last night, how we should take our vows on the deck, beneath the open sky. Only it's not vows I'm hearing. Not a promise but a prayer.

Keep going. Keep going. You're almost there.

Deenie's words skim by, clip my ears, sail past Mr. Duschaney. I see them rise into the clouds. They travel forever and never stop, past stars and planets, a message for whoever's out there.

SWEET CHARIOT

A young boy, his face masked by a muddy scarf, carved the stone-grey ice with sleek, black skates. My grandfather wiped his glasses with a stiff thumb, leaned forward in the penalty box. It wasn't much of a box: one warped plank and a door that dangled on a hinge. But there was nowhere else to sit, and he was too weak to stand. On Sundays the rink was a loose knot of skaters. Young children bundled in thick layers, hatless youths shaving corners, couples in heavy wool sweaters.

"It's colder than a witch's tit."

My grandfather always enjoyed a salty phrase, a bawdy joke. I asked him about about a book of limericks I'd noticed on his night table.

"Mr. Hume," he said matter-of-factly. "Gregory Hume. Said I could borrow it until Monday. Moved in last week. And not a day too soon. Too many women in there," he said, pointing to a house across the street.

Saint Francis was rare: a home for the elderly that actually

looked like a home. Planted in a neat row of brass doorknockers, false shutters and stained glass, it looked like every other house on the block. Only a wheelchair ramp set it apart. In summer my grandfather used it as a putting green, defying gravity and the head nurse. All the rooms inside Saint Francis had been converted into bedrooms. Mrs. Burke, who spent her days in the hallway with the same copy of Women's Wear Daily glued to her lap, slept in what had once been a walk-in closet. Every inch was plastered with last-minute postcards from towns people drive through on the way to somewhere else, charming villages with perfect, white steeples and covered bridges sleeved in fresh snow. Captain, as my grandfather liked to be called, insisted most were blank.

No one could ever accurately pinpoint the source of my grandfather's nickname. He tailored explanations to suit his audience. Once, he wove an intricate tale of his exploits as a commander of a battleship. He kept a yellow news clipping, creased beyond legibility, that he claimed was a detailed account of how he led a local football squad to its most glorious victory. One rumour at Saint Francis had him at the helm of a luxurious cruise liner that had plied all the great rivers of the world.

Captain was the only man at Saint Francis his first year there. He was given his own room, a tiny den that looked out into the park where we sat on Sundays. The room barely held an old chair and a simple dresser, where he kept his prized

possession: a Mickey Mantle baseball card, in mint condition, displayed in a gold frame studded with pearls, next to a black and white picture of his wife of fifty-seven years.

At first he savoured the attention of being the only man in the house. The staff teased him about it, and he took it well. But soon he ached for some male company. "It's difficult to only talk to women," he once complained. My father told me there was little that could be done. Women usually live longer than men. Your grandmother, he said, was more the exception than the rule. Two months after she died Captain moved into Saint Francis, unable to cope on his own.

"What does Mr. Hume think of your baseball cards?"

Captain didn't hear. He stared out at the rink through his thick glasses, hypnotized by the motion of the skaters.

I nudged him with a sodden glove. He turned and raised an earmuff. Tiny hairs cushioned his long, heavy lobe.

"What does Mr. Hume think of your collection?"

"He loved the one of the Mick," he said. "Says he was in the stands the day Jackie Robinson played in Montreal for the first time. 'First coloured boy to play the big time', he told me, 'and I was there.'"

Expressions like "coloured boy" came easily to my grandfather. He held on to the language of his youth, and used old age not so much as an excuse as an explanation. Most of the nurses at Saint Francis were from the Caribbean and brushed off his remarks as the residue of an earlier generation. One, a

heavy-set woman named Sylvia, stood her ground. Whenever my grandfather barked at her through his stained teeth (two packs a day for forty-six years), she was firm and swift. "Animals aren't allowed at Saint Francis," she'd remind him, "so don't treat me like one." Then she'd disarm him with a half-moon smile he couldn't resist.

"Mr. Hume claims he has Robinson's autograph on the back of a matchbook," my grandfather continued. "He promised to show it to me when he gets back."

Some of the residents at Saint Francis stayed with family on weekends.

"Sharp as nails," he added.

"I would have liked to have seen him play."

"I don't mean Robinson," Captain snapped. "I'm talking about Mr. Hume." He leaned against the rotting boards. "The other day, we were eating breakfast. Me, Mr. Hume, and Mrs. Burke. And that fat Lenihan woman from upstairs. Out of nowhere he picks up his head, looks at me straight in the eye and says, 'They never play baseball.' Just like that. I didn't know what he was talking about, so I asked him. And he says, 'People in wheelchairs. They never play baseball. They compete in marathons. They play basketball. But I've never seen them play baseball.' I laughed. Who wouldn't? Laughed so hard I almost split my gut."

Or worse, I thought. According to Sylvia, Captain and Mrs. Lenihan were sitting in the TV lounge at the time. Just after

four in the afternoon, when Lucy was on. I love Lucy, too, Sylvia said, and she tried to squeeze in a few minutes when she could. As she described it, Lucy was working on an assembly line, filling pies with cream. Things sped up. Soon pies and cream were landing everywhere. It was very funny, Sylvia said. Mrs. Lenihan and my grandfather were practically in tears. After a minute or so Mrs. Lenihan turned to my grandfather and said, with the faintest trace of an Irish accent, "Why, Captain, it looks like your tugboat has sprung a leak." After that incident he never failed to spit her name out through pinched lips.

"Pretty soon Mr. Hume was laughing real hard, too," my grandfather continued. "Maybe because I was. You know how it can spread. It can be --" He stopped in mid-sentence, searched frantically for the word, his brow creased by the fear of memory loss.

"Contagious."

"Contagious," he repeated, as though he was learning a new language. "But it only spread between Mr. Hume and me. Mrs. Burke and that cow Lenihan looked at us like we were crazy. They didn't understand what we were laughing about. I mean, can you imagine playing baseball in a wheelchair?" He wiped his mouth with his overcoat. "Don't forget," he added, "that Mr. Hume is in a chair himself."

I couldn't forget because I'd never been told. Why bring it up? Besides, my grandfather hated to talk about wheelchairs. He only needed a cane to walk around Saint Francis. With an

extra arm for support, he could make it to the park across the street. Any further and he needed a wheelchair. One was parked in a corner of his room. His pride shrivelled as the chair was wheeled out and unfolded. He'd clench Sylvia's arms with desperate fingers, his thumb a wandering hook, the leather seat flypaper to his sagging, grey pants.

I looked up past the rink, towards the baseball diamond covered by a thick crust of snow. The fence was caked in ice. From the penalty box the frosted backdrop was a glass trellis that winked in the February sun. Icicles as sharp as spikes hung from the bleachers Captain and I sat on in the summer, watching little league players fan across the field, their parents squinting and cheering from the stands. Could they have played in wheelchairs? It was hard to imagine someone chasing a ground ball, or sliding into third. But then I thought of the one-armed pitcher in the States, and the woman I'd seen on TV who drove a car with her feet. If artists could paint with their mouths, why not baseball in wheelchairs? It was simply a matter of changing the rules. Scrap the outfield. Slice off the pitcher's mound. Change the shape and size of the bat (I imagined something like a canoe paddle). No fast pitches. Only gentle lobs that arced across the sky. I pictured beach balls that gyrated in a colourful spin, floating towards mitts made of aluminum circles webbed with fishing nets. My head swelled with possibilities, none of which I bothered sharing with my grandfather.

"I think it's time we headed back," I said.

Captain didn't move. He was lost in his own thoughts. He sometimes stared like that, his dull eyes fixed on a blank wall. I looked across the rink, but nothing had changed. Skaters continued to glide in their familiar patterns.

"Time to go home," I said.

I shook Captain's shoulder. This time he offered no resistance. He placed his cane on the ice and stepped through the penalty box door. We hugged the boards as we shuffled towards the narrow gap at the end of the rink. By the time we reached the front steps of Saint Francis he was short of breath. Soft, grey clouds streamed out of his mouth. I took a hold of his arm to help him up the stairs. He shook his head.

"Not yet," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "I want to go to the mall."

At first I thought I hadn't heard him correctly. The mall was ten blocks away, just on the border of the residential area he lived in. He couldn't get there without his wheelchair. And he knew it was closed on Sundays.

"The mall?" My voice betrayed skepticism. "It's too far to walk. And it's not open, anyway. Besides, you look tired."

"I am tired," he said, handing me his cane. "Get my chair and blanket."

I didn't want to argue. He sounded determined. When I came back with his chair he took to it without a struggle. I wrapped the blanket around his legs, careful to tuck in the sides. I pinched the tiny balls of lint between my gloved fingers and

flicked them to the ground. We started to roll, the wheels slowly crushing the sidewalk salt and grit.

After a few blocks Captain waved his hand in a voiceless command to stop. He pointed to a clothesline suspended over a jagged hedge of leafless shrubs. There was nothing on it except a single clothespin.

"Go get it," my grandfather cried, as though I had four legs and a wagging tail. I decided to appease him. I scurried into the strange backyard and returned with the pin in my hands. I dropped it into his mitts, stumps he kept crossed on his lap. He wiped his frosted glasses, inspected the clothespin, then buried it deep in his coat pocket. We continued.

By the time we reached the mall it had begun to snow. My grandfather thrust his hand silently towards the parking lot, a multilevel structure tacked onto one end of the sprawling mall. We parked by a bank of fresh snow by an entry ramp leading to the first floor of the empty lot.

"Take some snow and put it over here," Captain ordered, pointing to a bare spot of asphalt.

I complied; I was curious. After I had built a small pile, he told me to stop.

"Flatten it out," he said, "until it's about three inches high and square all around."

I took off my gloves and felt the snow mould to my fingers. A piece of cardboard, covered with crisp tire treads, made a perfect trowel. I smoothed the surface until it was flat and

level, the corners clean and sharp.

My grandfather's face was stamped with approval. He turned his wheelchair and faced the ramp. "This way," he said, his voice steady and sure.

The top of the ramp was flat and wide, so that cars from the upper levels could negotiate the turn. It was there that Captain told me to stop and turn him around. We now faced the snow bank we had left minutes before. He took out a pack of cigarettes and handed them to me. He knew I didn't smoke.

"My hands are too cold," he said. "Tear off the front part of the pack."

My raw fingers grabbed one corner of the pack and tore it along the edge. Captain stuffed the cigarettes back into his pocket. A path of tobacco trailed down his coat. I held the flap in my hand, not knowing what to do.

"Use this to attach it to the spokes," he said. He dug into his pocket and retrieved the clothespin.

Childhood memories resurfaced as I clamped the flap to the spokes. I had done the same thing as a child. One clothespin and an empty cigarette pack changed the voice of a bicycle from a rasp to a roar. I pedalled furiously around city blocks with friends, convinced I was on the saddle of a motorcycle.

"If only Mr. Hume could be with us now," Captain said ruefully. He looked up towards the sky, as though his new-found friend had died. "This," he announced, eyeing a lump of sooty ice, "is third base." Then he pointed to the bright patch of

snow I had sculpted into a perfect square. "That is home plate."

And then he was off. I stood in horror as he sailed down the ramp, his raised arms clasped in victory. The wheel with the clothespin purred quietly in the still air. He cheered gleefully as his blanket furled in the wind like a flag. For a moment I felt I was in the stands and he was in a chariot, pulled by the taut, glistening muscles of a weightless horse. He made no effort to slow down. The even tracks in the snow began to waver. I knew he was out of control but I couldn't move. A strange blend of fear and exhilaration churned in the pit of my stomach. My grandfather's laughter flooded the gulf between us. He glided over home plate and was thrown into the snowbank. From my vantage point he was a grey lump, an abandoned seal on an ice cap. I stood frozen to the ground, hypnotized by the motion of the spinning wheels as I wondered how you begin to measure the length of one man's pride.

BLUMENTHAL'S ARK

Only the children of Woodrow Avenue believed in Simon Blumenthal's ark. Parents gathered at dusk in his muddy backyard to survey the pine hulk basking in the watery sun. They smiled benignly when they greeted Blumenthal, who always wore maroon suspenders and a longshoreman's cap. When he sat in the cradle of unvarnished wood to catch his breath or drink lukewarm tea, he seemed even smaller than he was, a crumb lodged in the dry ribs of some ancient, nameless beast.

Near-sighted, bald and barrel-wide, Blumenthal didn't have a day's shipbuilding experience the morning a heavy truck loaded with lumber groaned into his driveway. By nightfall he'd stacked every plank and board into neat piles, poured assorted nails into plastic buckets, tacked his simple pencil drawings to the heavy oak tree in his backyard. After ten hours of work he settled between the oak's roots, thick as armrests, and closed his eyes. Straddling the border between sleep and consciousness, he assembled all the lumber in the yard into a fearless, magnificent

ark. When the floods came the ark would rise with the waves and bob like a child's paper boat in a stream. Sadly, needlessly, others would perish. He would warn them, urge them to build their own arks before it was too late. He hoped his humble vessel would be only one in an armada of arks, white sails puffed by God's urgent breath. But he feared his ark would be alone at sea, a lonely wooden island floating high above a coral reef of crusted skyscrapers and an ocean bed of city streets. Despite his warnings and pleas, neighbours would shake their heads and whisper about crazy, half-blind Blumenthal, a pathetic man ever since he lost his wife.

Lilly Blumenthal died on a warm, silky night in May. Dusk had carpeted Woodrow Avenue. Lilly and Simon were taking their daily walk. At the corner of Pine on this May evening, three young boys approached. Your bag, a tall one said, fifteen at most, his skin barely grazed by facial hair. Lilly resisted, clutched her purse to her chest. Simon stepped forward, hoping to reason, and tumbled to the ground when a fist to his stomach left him fearing he'd cough up his lungs. He tasted the sidewalk as his wife fell to the ground, heard her glasses strike the pavement and shatter. Heavy breathing, some kicks, the scent of adolescent rage. Someone -- a stranger, a neighbour? -- called an ambulance. Lilly lay in a coma for six days and died on the seventh. The boys were never found.

During his first night as a widower Blumenthal stared

blankly at the ceiling, his hands searching for the empty space where Lilly usually slept. Sleep was elusive. He needed a drink, a tonic, a cup of warm milk.

In the kitchen he noticed a warm glow from the Chasens' backyard. In fourteen years he had said very little to the Chasens. The truth of the matter was he had nothing to say. He and Lilly kept an eye out when the Chasens went on their annual trip to the Rockies, borrowed the occasional lawn tool. Now the Chasens were moving to another neighbourhood. They wanted something quieter, more serene. Woodrow Avenue was changing faster than they could keep up with. So many new faces, Joyce Chasen sighed. Their names are hard to pronounce.

Now, at three o'clock in the morning, the moon an unblinking, lashless eye, thirteen-year old Rodney Chasen was digging a hole. Blumenthal wandered towards the Chasens' yard to inspect Rodney's excavation. The brown-haired boy, eyes set deep in a long face, explained he was burying a time capsule. In a glass mayonnaise jar he had collected personal artifacts that people a hundred years from now would uncover and examine.

"And what will they find?" Blumenthal asked.

Rodney planted his shovel into the ground and showed Blumenthal the jar. Trapped inside like specimens were a baseball card, two marbles, a penknife, a comb, a protractor, a stick of gum. Blumenthal nodded, hooking his thumbs behind his suspenders. The boy is nothing like his arid parents, he thought. At least he has an imagination. New people were moving

in, two men. Architects, according to Dave Chasen. Blumenthal hoped they were quiet and kept to themselves.

At six the next morning, after helping Rodney Chasen bury his time capsule, Blumenthal crawled out of bed. He needed to walk. Doctors insisted that a return to routine was essential for his mental and physical health. He stepped into the untainted dawn, past the houses wrapped in sleep. Weekday mornings, at a time when the sun had barely seeped into the milky grey horizon of early morning, he and Lilly would walk through the neighbourhood, a colourless grid of duplexes and trimmed hedges stitched by train tracks. At that early hour, a peaceful calm blanketed the driveways. Drawn curtains, dew-drenched grass, an occasional kitchen light flickering, street lights fading.

Simon walked past Henry Gambol's renovated house, past an orchard of For Sale signs. At the corner of Woodrow and Pine stood a small child, gangly and thin, dressed in grey pants and a white shirt, clothes too neat for the occasion. Simon had seen him before, the son of an East Indian couple who had recently bought a corner store. One of the unpronounceables, Blumenthal had told Lilly one night. The boy stood next to a wagon stacked with newspapers. When Simon approached him he smiled nervously, as though he was lost. A front-page photograph showed a local house of worship in flames, a sect Blumenthal knew little about. Authorities suspected arson.

"Have you done this before?" Simon asked. "Delivered

newspapers?"

The boy shook his head.

Blumenthal leaned over and grabbed the red wagon handle. For the next forty-five minutes he pulled the wagon along Woodrow Avenue, as the shopkeeper's son gently laid newspapers on doorsteps and frayed welcome mats as if they were gifts or offerings.

Sleep eluded Blumenthal his second night alone. Sounds scraped and singed his ears: Lilly's glasses exploding on the sidewalk, an arsonist's flames.

Was God deaf?

A mayonnaise jar tumbled through the sky, slammed into the ground, broke into a thousand pieces.

A storm of glass showered Blumenthal as he lay in bed, damp with sweat and fear. Falling glass turned to rain, heavy rain, rain that swept away those who would kill an old woman for her purse or burn down a nondescript temple.

Blumenthal knew what had to be done.

When the skies opened and God wept for all that had happened on earth, flooding every neighbourhood, every street, every lane and path, Simon Blumenthal would be ready, feet planted on the varnished deck of an ark.

In the midst of mourning for his wife and ordering lumber, Blumenthal barely noticed the new neighbours who had moved in next door. A tall, long-legged man knocked on his door and

introduced himself as Norman. Chasen was right, for a change. Norman and his associate were architects and would work out of their new home. Could they borrow a hammer?

Blumenthal shuffled to the small basement workshop and returned with a hammer.

"Tell me," he said, raising a thick finger. "You and your associate, what do you design?"

"Homes," Norman said. "Low-income housing projects, mainly."

Blumenthal nodded. Why mention the ark to this new neighbour? He seemed pleasant, but he would laugh too. They would all laugh at an old man building an ark in his backyard. Who could blame them?

"And you're...?" Norman asked, eyes cocked.

"I'm retired."

"No," Norman smiled. "I meant your name."

"Blumenthal. I'm Simon Blumenthal."

"Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Blumenthal."

They shook hands formally, stiffly, two men on the cusp of a negotiation.

"Thank you for the hammer," Norman said. "I'll have it back to you this afternoon."

Blumenthal stood in a shaft of morning light and watched Norman from behind a curtained window.

By six a.m. every weekday morning, Blumenthal was walking

along Woodrow Avenue. He stopped to chat with the newspaper boy, who now had the route down by heart. Home by seven, Blumenthal ate half a grapefruit and drank his tea from a glass. By eight o'clock he was in his backyard, ready to begin his day's work. Maroon suspenders kept his jeans in place; an apron filled with nails sagged beneath his belt.

Work went slowly. Blumenthal worked alone, often stopping to circle the base of the ark in a type of ballet. By the time he managed to nail one board to a beam he was usually ready for his mid-morning break at ten o'clock (tea and a slice of black bread). He would sit on a deck chair and look at the ark, which resembled a shipwrecked hulk, stripped of its former glory, flung onto shore by an angry sea. When it was finished, word would spread to the like-minded about Blumenthal's ark. Most would only come to stare and shake their heads in disbelief. But some would come to stay, those who believed that there was another way, that God's patience was not endless and infinite. Blumenthal would post no rules about who would qualify for a place on his ark. Animals, atheists, animists -- all were welcome.

He always ate lunch at noon, napped until two. Then Blumenthal returned for another four hours work. By three-thirty school children would arrive to watch and assist, tying their family dogs to the oak tree. They held boards and ropes in place, sanded planks, straightened bent nails.

Parents, when they came, arrived just before dinner to

collect their children. A few exchanged pleasantries with Blumenthal, asked for details about the ark. Some stood at the edge of his yard and stared at the old man as if he was smack in the centre of a circus ring. Henry Gambol, from two doors down, prodded Blumenthal about his new neighbours. What were they like, these two architects? Were they friendly? He'd heard rumours, village gossip. Maybe Blumenthal could check them out, in a neighbourly type of way. Simon nodded silently, knowing Henry Gambol would never want to set foot on his ark.

Evenings, Blumenthal took a basin of hot water to the backyard, where he washed and scrubbed his blistered hands. Simon soon noticed his new neighbours engage in a ritual of their own. Norman, the one who had borrowed the hammer he had not yet returned, sat on a wooden stool, and read to Karl, stretched out on a lawn chair. Karl was bone-thin, reedy, his cheeks sharp edges on a hollowed face, his eyes bulging. What exactly Norman read, Simon couldn't say. He spoke too softly for Simon's waxy ears to catch. But his posture, the way he leaned forward to pass on each word, made Blumenthal think it was a novel of great importance. He tried not to stare, but couldn't resist looking at the two associates in the backyard, one reading to the other.

One night Blumenthal thought it had begun. Heavy rain beat down, a grey veil that fluttered like a curtain across Woodrow Avenue and lashed against the window pane. Simon got up and stumbled in his bathrobe to the back balcony. Overcome with

fear, he stepped outside and stood by his ark in the pouring rain. Had he misjudged God's timing? The rain was relentless. Puddles around his feet grew into muddy pools. Shoeless, Blumenthal searched the night sky for clues confirming God's wrath. He didn't know what to expect. A gash in the sky, perhaps, or a moon turning red as God seethed. Falling rain blanketed his vision. All Blumenthal could see was a grey tarp.

He shivered in the rain and decided it would be best to lie in a half-finished ark than risk drowning in his bed. He found some plastic sheeting which he used as a blanket.

By morning he woke up to a cloudless sky almost defiant in its blueness. Obviously, God had other plans.

Construction was delayed as Blumenthal recuperated from his night in the rain. He stayed inside and read, anxious to get back to his ark. He drank tea, watched television. In a moment of boredom he decided to sort through Lilly's jewellery. Their two daughters had already taken what they had wanted, and suggested that Simon have the rest appraised.

In his bedroom, Blumenthal laid out his wife's necklaces and brooches and clip-on earrings. He rolled her pearl necklace between his blistered fingers. Checking to see that he was alone, he clasped the necklace around his sagging neck. It was his gift to her for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. No one was around, no one would see him smile at the feel of her pearls around his neck. He ran his fingers over the pearls, felt their smooth roundness. There was a time he'd taken it off and

kissed her neck. No one would believe it, no one think that Blumenthal had it in him. Old people didn't do those things.

In the forest of jewellery he found her locket. He opened it and saw a small photograph in each side: Lilly and Simon, black-haired and young, in their twenties. The photographs were barely larger than his thumb, yet he could make out her sharp eyes, hair swept back, her mouth small as a pin hole. He had been handsome then, his skin tightly wrapped around an imposing face. When he closed the locket he realized they faced each other, his face almost touching hers.

Blumenthal lay on his bed and placed the locket on his bony chest. Lilly had worn it as she lay in a coma in the hospital. It seemed out of a place then, a patch of a gold on a white, sunken chest. Blumenthal had sat in a plastic chair and watched his wife breathe. What was this thing they called a coma? Was she dreaming, walking through familiar doors, talking to familiar faces? Or was she lost in a suspended world, a vast empty space, cold and frosted, blank, without reference points? Worse still, were her thoughts somehow being carried away through all the tubes attached to her thin body, her dreams captured in a plastic bag, then disposed by a round-shouldered orderly?

A knock on the door roused him from the edge of sleep.

A well-dressed woman smiled when Simon opened the front door. She wore a blue blazer and skirt, stood like a flight attendant. Her plastic mouth cracked into a grin, her eyes grew wide. Blumenthal realized why: he was still wearing Lilly's

pearl necklace. She smiled again.

"My name is Deborah Langley." She extended a hand capped with polished nails. "I'm the agent for the Rivers' house next door."

Simon nodded.

"As you probably know, their home is now up for sale. Every Sunday we have an open house, to give prospective buyers the chance to see the house."

What does she want, Simon thought.

"Many of our clients have commented about the project you're building in your backyard."

"An ark," Blumenthal said flatly. "I'm building an ark."

Deborah Langley's plucked brows rose. "An ark? How interesting. I suppose what I'm really asking, Mr. Blumenthal, is how long do you think this project will last. You see, some buyers are concerned about the hammering and the sawing. Is this a long-term project?"

"It will be finished soon."

"And then what?"

"What do you mean?"

"Where will it go? Will you have it shipped somewhere? A marina, perhaps?"

She is young, Blumenthal told himself. She doesn't know. She has so much to learn.

"I will wait, Mrs. Langley."

"Wait? May I ask you what you'll be waiting for, Mr.

Blumenthal?"

"I will wait for the flood. I hope you'll be ready too, when the day comes."

Simon smiled, turned around, and closed the door behind him.

Before she had died, Lilly spoke of a trip she and Simon would take together. Travel agency cruise brochures still lay piled on the hallway desk. Magnificent ships would have taken them through the Caribbean. They would stop at exotic ports, haggle at markets, eat tropical fruits. We'll dance on the deck as the sun sets, Lilly had promised. Simon liked the idea: dancing like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers on a deck, watching the sea swallow the red eye of the sun.

Now every brochure was a confirmation. Those cruise travellers would be saved, for God would not distinguish between arks and other floating vessels. Those on water when the floods began would survive the initial downpour. Supplies would last for as long as they could; then they would have to resort to fishing and the will of God.

Simon studied the glossy travel brochures, the regal ships presented like a delicacy on a blue plate garnished with white waves. They had never gone on a cruise, he and Lilly. This would have been their first.

A letter dropped through the mail slot. Blumenthal walked over and picked it up. There was no envelope; it was simply folded in three. He returned to his chair and read:

"Is our neighbourhood safe? Can we let our children play on the street when we don't know who are neighbours are any more? A plague has arrived. What has happened to traditional families? Our children's lives are at risk. When two men engage in unnatural acts, they commit a sin. A deadly plague is polluting our neighbourhood. We can not stand by silently and watch our children be corrupted by terminal, contagious diseases."

The note was neatly typed, double-spaced, unsigned. Who would have sent it? Blumenthal considered a list of possibilities. Henry Gambol, of course. Frank Shore, father of two dim-witted boys. Linda Seaton, a wiry woman who had petitioned the city for more stop signs. Darlene and Bill Myers, who dressed their twins in identical clothing. All were capable of the intolerance Blumenthal read between the lines.

How different things would be if Lilly were still alive. She would bang on front doors in search of the author. Her scalding eyes would peer through peepholes and windows. She would weed out the culprit, sit him down, and talk of the need for dialogue (one of her favourite words). She'd taught grade three for forty-three years and fervently believed that no conflict, no resistance could not be resolved by talking things out. Dialogue.

Blumenthal would not tread a similar path. Let Lilly believe in the power of dialogue. He would let things be. He folded the paper and placed it next to the cruise brochure. He stepped out of his house and walked next door.

The tall one answered. He looked pale, as though sleep itself had been sucked out of him, colours peeled off him in layers.

"Mr. Blumenthal."

"Good day, Mr. Norman. I was wondering if you by chance have finished with my hammer."

Norman grimaced, as if jolted by pain.

"I'm so sorry. With all the commotion of moving in and all, it just slipped my mind. Would you like to come in?"

Blumenthal nodded.

Norman led him to a comfortably furnished living room. Was this where the two associates engaged in unnatural acts? A colourful canvas covered one wall, slashes of paint that made no sense but appealed to Simon. Lamps the shapes of cymbals hung from the ceiling.

"I hope you like tea," Norman said, placing a tray down on a glass coffee table resting on chrome legs.

"Tea is fine. Thank you."

A muffled cough down the hallway punctured the silence they shared.

"Your associate, he is well?"

"Fine," Norman said flatly.

"We haven't been introduced."

"He doesn't like to be disturbed during the day. I'm the opposite. I look for an excuse not to work. He needs quiet."

"The noise I make must disturb him," Simon said. "The

hammering, the sawing. How does he get any work done?"

"Not to worry. He can block all that out. It's the unexpected visits, the unsolicited calls that break his pattern." He paused. "Your boat has gathered a lot of attention."

"Too much attention. Too little faith. I know they laugh behind my back. Let them laugh."

"How many people do you think it will hold?"

"As many as want to join me."

"How will you decide who joins you?"

"That's not for me to decide."

Norman smiled. Simon admired the strong, chalk-white teeth.

"How are you enjoying the neighbourhood?" Simon asked.

"It's fine. We don't get out all that much. We work at home, prefer spending time here."

"It's changing."

"How?"

"New faces. A different feel. It's difficult to explain. Frankly, I think it's time for a change. Why did you move here?"

"The price was right. The neighbourhood seems quiet. We need quiet."

"Me, too."

Standing at Blumenthal's doorstep was a man in a sports jacket and a woman with two cameras around her neck. The man introduced himself as a reporter for a local paper. He and the

photographer had been assigned to do a small profile about Simon and his ark.

"Propaganda," Simon said.

The reporter's eyes narrowed. "Propaganda?"

Simon walked past him and searched for his house key. "You'll distort my mission, put words into my mouth, twist facts to suit some editor's idea of a story. I have no time for your games. Good day."

He closed the door behind him.

In the Lifestyles section of the afternoon paper was a large photograph of Blumenthal's unfinished ark. He glanced at the caption before tossing the paper into the bin.

Sitting in the kitchen, he peeled potatoes. He wore an apron over one of Lilly's dresses. He had taken to wearing one of her dresses every day, usually late at night, when it was unlikely he would ever be disturbed. He could smell her on the fabric, as if it was a layer of her skin. Why not, he thought. If it brings her closer. If it makes me feel better. I'm a crazy old man. That's what they all believe.

Work on the ark continued at a slow pace. Blumenthal was content to nail a few boards, stop for a break, navigate an approving tour around his ark. The children of Woodrow Avenue continued to straighten nails, sand planks, collect wood scraps into piles. Dogs snoozed. At four o'clock each afternoon they gathered at the base of the oak tree, where Simon sat on a deck

chair.

"My wife was a teacher," he once told his flock. "For forty-two years she taught children like you how to spell and read and write. She told them stories. Perhaps you would like to hear a story?"

Nods all around.

"One day, a young boy ran away from home. He had only the clothes on his back and a small bag with a sandwich inside.

"The boy walked for many hours. Then the sky grew darker. He started to get cold. He passed by a field and saw a house with a light on. He knocked on the door. A woman came to the door.

"'Excuse me,' said the boy, 'but I'm looking for a place to stay for the night. Would you have an extra room?'

"The woman shook her head. 'There's no room here', she said, 'but you can sleep in the barn if you like.'

"Inside the barn the boy made himself a bed out of hay. Just as he was about to fall asleep he felt something wet against his back. He turned around and saw a cow poking him with her nose.

"'You have to help me,' cried the cow.

"'What's wrong?' asked the boy.

"'Wrong?' said the cow. 'What's wrong? I'll tell you what's wrong. I'm tired of being a cow. I've been a cow all my life, ever since I was a calf. It's time for a change.'

"'What type of change?' asked the boy.

"'I'd like to be a horse,' said the cow. 'Horses are very lucky. They're heroes. They're handsome. Everyone wants to ride them. They get to wear shoes. Cows are a different story altogether. Did you ever see a cow run? It's embarrassing.'

"That night, the boy and the cow left the barn together. 'From now on,' the boy said, 'you'll be a horse.' The cow smiled.

"Everywhere they went the boy introduced the cow as a horse. At first everyone laughed. But soon word began to spread, and when they reached a town there was a crowd waiting to see this very special horse.

"The boy was pleased. He charged twenty-five cents for people to touch the special horse. So you can imagine his surprise, his dismay, the day the cow said he was tired of being a horse.

"'I think I'm ready to be a duck', the cow declared.

"'A duck? I thought you wanted to be a horse.'

"'I did,' said the cow. 'Now I'm ready for a change.'"

Before Blumenthal could continue some parents had arrived to gather their children who pleaded that they be allowed to stay. They were instructed to thank Mr. Blumenthal before being whisked away.

By dusk Blumenthal had put away his tools. He would look at the ark and wonder when the rains would come, when the sky would open and God would weep for all that had happened on earth.

One evening he heard a woman's voice in the next yard. He

padded to the shrubs and peered through. Deborah Langley was talking to a young couple, speaking of the Rivers' vacant house, pointing to features in the backyard, her smile blinding. They walked around the house toward the front.

Simon edged his way through the bushes. The yard, similar in dimensions to his, felt empty without an ark in the middle, too open, too bare. He walked up to the back balcony and peered inside. The house was identical to his, built by the same developer years before, when quality still mattered. The door was unlocked. Blumenthal walked inside.

The last time he had seen his house like this was when he and Lilly had bought their own. They walked through each room as if it was a palace, stopping to imagine what would go where. Like children playing house, they played interior designer, deciding where each stick of furniture would go.

Deborah Langley was bidding the young couple a good night. Simon heard her steps echo through the empty house. Soon she would be in the kitchen, would find him there, alone, foolish. He stepped into a closet door and waited for her to pass.

Standing in a bare pantry, he heard her lock the back door, heard her heels click against the linoleum floor. When he heard the front door lock behind her he stepped out and continued his tour. In the empty bedroom he stood motionless, his feet rooted to the floor. This is what it will be like, he whispered. This is what it will be like. If the floods don't come soon and I die in my sleep and they come to take me away, this is what my house

will look like after they drag me out in a bag: bare walls, bare floor, a bare house. No signs of life.

Back in his own house, Simon carefully wrapped Lilly's locket in the sheet that spoke of unnatural acts. They must be told, he muttered. They must be told. He walked into the Chasens' yard. On his hands and knees he searched for the ground until he found the spot he was looking for. He started to dig, first with a trowel, then with his fingers, clawing at the earth until he touched glass. He unscrewed the lid and dropped the locket into the mayonnaise jar.

The back door opened. Simon stood up and hid behind a tree. He watched as Norman and Karl took their usual positions. Norman opened his book and began to read.

Simon watched and listened, hugging the jar to his chest. If these are unnatural acts, he thought, then he would stay on the ground when it rained, and drown standing up.

MOURNING

A long file of family and friends walked up to pay their respects. Matthew's grandfather stood draped in an ill-fitting suit and received everyone with the same wooden stare, the same mechanical hug. Women in dark lipstick kissed his cheeks; men squeezed his curved shoulders. Matthew's mother wept and nodded as a woman he recognized but couldn't name leaned forward and spoke in hushed tones.

At the center of the chapel lay his grandmother's coffin. He stared at the polished wood, the elegant handles, and remembered the last time he had seen her alive. He had planned to stop by his grandparent's apartment for a cool drink. It was a hot day, he was in their neighbourhood, he knew they'd be happy to see him. But he never made it passed the lobby door. He stood in front of their apartment, shuffling on the spot, kicking sidewalk grit. Baba was there, framed by the living room window, her mouth open wide, as if she knew the words perched on her dry lips would never take flight. Matthew wanted to wave, call out

her name, but knew there was no point. Since her stroke there was no telling how much she understood. And despite his thirst, he couldn't face her just then. He could see the domestic scene without stepping through the apartment. Jacob running around in her apron, flustered and pale; Baba marooned in her chair. Matthew looked up at the face in the window, then walked away. Now she lay alone in a wooden box. Regret sat in his stomach like a thick, undigested lump.

A balding rabbi with small eyes began to speak about his grandmother as if she had been a lifelong friend. A polished showman with all the right moves -- a studied pause, a rueful nod -- he described Baba's life as only someone who didn't know her would, with all the packaged emotion of a movie poster. A victim of pogroms. A woman of rare courage and uncommon endurance. A provider. She struggled. She inspired. She endured.

Matthew resented the rabbi's patter, his fill-in-the-blank routine. Tomorrow he would be back, mourning another heartfelt loss, another provider. If only his grandfather were up there instead, sharing a perspective no one else could provide, offering a few phrases, a few moments culled from sixty-three years of marriage. But Jacob could barely stand, let alone talk. We should all come back, Matthew thought. We should all gather in a few months' time and let Jacob speak from his heart, and not a script. But that wasn't how things were done. The rabbi ended with a Hebrew prayer, and asked the pallbearers to step forward.

Another grieving family had already gathered by the front steps of the funeral home. Matthew looked at the drawn faces as they stood in line to hear about the untarnished life of their beloved. In and out they streamed, twenty minutes at a time, coffin after coffin, loaded like moving-day furniture into the waiting hearse.

The cortege flowed in a regal procession from the funeral home to the cemetery. Rigid rows of tombstones baked in the sun. A young, wiry man stood and stared at an epitaph, as still as the stone itself. An older woman wept on her knees, pounding the earth, fresh flowers sprouting from her fists.

Matthew's feet sank into the soft earth leading to his grandmother's grave. He helped carry the coffin but felt detached from the procession, as if he had been asked to fill in at the last minute at a funeral for a stranger. Dappled shadows rippled over names etched in marble and granite, some shrouded in moss. He scanned the tombstones and searched for familiar names and felt a small triumph when he reached one marked SAMUELS. He had gone to university with someone named Stephanie Samuels. And it was Stephanie's face Matthew thought of as gravediggers eased the coffin into the ground with thick ropes. Jacob mumbled in a hopeless Yiddish. His mother cried inhuman sounds. Matthew tuned in to a distant siren.

Plans were made to converge at his uncle's house, where a week of mourning would take place in rooms where every mirror was to be covered. Baba's sons would not shave. Fruit baskets

and flowers would arrive from the companies where his uncles and aunts worked, from friends whose names Matthew would recognize but not be able to place. His father waited for him by the car.

"I think I'll walk," Matthew said.

"Walk?" His father's arched his eyebrows and threw his head back with just enough force to register disapproval. "I have a car, Matthew. We'll drive."

"I want to walk," Matthew insisted. "It won't take me more than an hour."

"Why are you being difficult?"

Matthew loosened the knot in his tie. "I'm not trying to be difficult. I just want to walk."

"Suit yourself," his father said. "I don't have time to argue." He headed towards Matthew's mother, surrounded by well-dressed women in a circle of grief.

After ten minutes Matthew reached the expressway. Red lights flashed from ambulances gathered below. There had been an accident, a terrible collision. At least four cars, maybe five. He couldn't tell. One had overturned, belly up in a web of black skid marks. Two were crushed, mangled like beer cans. He took a quick inventory: dislocated wheels, twisted axles, white glass, a running shoe, a single hubcap, a stuffed animal. One car, dark green with a shattered windshied, burned like a smoking, hissing log.

"Ashes."

A woman in white cat's-eye glasses and cherry-red lipstick stood beside Matthew, puffing hungrily on a plastic straw.

"Sorry?"

"Ashes," the woman declared. "Who's ever in that car is now ashes. The others may have survived, but not them." She sucked air. "Ashes."

"I suppose."

"I don't suppose. I know." She thumped her chest. "Look at it." She pointed with chipped nails, the straw pinched between nervous fingers. "It's a fireplace log. A fucking fireplace log. They don't have a chance." Another hungry puff. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. What's a sweater without a bust?"

Matthew turned to face the flashing sirens, the stretchers, a body bag, a cop who waved curious drivers on with slow, sweeping hands.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," she sang with a schoolyard lilt. "What's a sweater without a bust?"

She wants an answer, Matthew thought. She actually wants an answer. He looked at her and figured she was forty. Sunlight nicked the tip of her glasses. "I don't know."

"Oh, come on." She poked him playfully with one of her chipped nails.

"I don't know. Really, I just don't know."

A photographer sprinted from car to car, slowed by a harness of cameras.

"You're not much fun today," she said. "Don't tell me

you're on the rag!" She laughed, pleased with her joke, cherry-red lips spanning baby-sized teeth.

Still smoking the straw, she sidled next to him. Heavy perfume clung to her. "I bet you don't know my name." She didn't wait for a reply.

"Sheila," she announced, chewing on the straw, rolling the party mint pearls between her studded fingers. "Sheila," she repeated, as if the name was an unusual delicacy, something to savour. "What's yours?"

"Edgar," Matthew said, pleased with the sudden choice.

Tow trucks had arrived, impressive and stern, bulging with efficient levers and hooks.

"Are you religious?" Sheila asked.

Matthew stared at the woman. Her black, shellacked hair looked impossibly stiff. Pearls the size of party mints circled her neck. She wore a wispy blouse and a blue skirt. A litter of polished toes wriggled at the open tip of her scuffed shoes.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"You're wearing one of those things on your head. A skullcap."

He had forgotten to take it off when he had left the cemetery. Now he slipped it into the inside pocket of his jacket, avoiding eye contact and an explanation.

"I'm not religious," Sheila said. "How can you be religious when things like that happen? How do you explain something like that?" She pointed to the accident scene. The car that had been

in flames, the one Sheila had called the fireplace log, was now a steaming shell. Ashes.

"I don't know," Matthew said.

"I bet you're married, aren't you?"

"Yes," he said. And the lie left him with a pleasant aftertaste.

"Any kids?"

"One."

"A girl, right?"

Matthew nodded.

"I knew it. What's her name?"

"Stephanie."

"Stephanie. That's a nice name." Sheila threw her straw down to the expressway below. "Are you thirsty?"

"Thirsty?"

"Yeah, thirsty. You know, drink." She made a slurping sound with the straw, smacked her lips. "I'll treat you to a cold drink. You look like you could use one."

"No, I have to go."

"You don't have five minutes for a drink with a friend?"

"Not just now," Matthew said. "I have to go."

Sheila buried a finger in her hair. "I don't bite, you know." She gnashed her teeth.

"I'm sure," Matthew said drily. He began to walk away.

"Edgar."

Matthew continued to walk.

"Hey, Edgar!"

Matthew turned around. Sheila looked happy, comfortable with herself, the first and only guest at a party and still having a good time.

"Cheer up. Unwind. Let yourself go." The slogans tumbled forth.

Matthew smiled weakly and gave her a limp wave.

A few blocks later he stopped at a park, unlaced his shoes and leaned back on a bench, cushioned by his jacket. Tucked in a small corner of the park was a narrow lane of flat, packed earth bordered by long planks and stout Italian men coaxing and cursing lead balls, playing bocce. One by one they tossed, blessing their shots with a sly rub or a subtle kiss. Yelling, laughing, red-faced and hot, they slapped backs and stomped feet, a storm of voices in a language Matthew didn't understand.

"Avanti!" an Italian man urged a lead ball.

In the shade of an overhanging tree, an older, grey-haired couple were having a picnic. They sat on a blanket covered with assorted cheeses, tomatoes, a loaf of black bread, an enormous thermos. He was slicing a sausage, a small knife in his stubby hand. She was spooning yogourt into wooden bowls.

Matthew ambled to a nearby water fountain. He doused his neck, rinsed his mouth, walked to the swings. There were nine of them, some high, some low, all hanging from heavy chains. Two girls swung together, pigtails bouncing in the breeze. A young

father in new jeans swayed on the spot, a baby boy in denim overalls straddling one leg. Matthew smiled politely. His swing felt solid and reassuring.

Back and forth he swung, swallowing mouthfuls of an August breeze. Head back, everything was upside down, at frightfully wrong angles. Buildings, then sky. Sky, then buildings. He righted himself and continued to swing, higher and higher. His unlaced shoes seemed to scrape the park trees; his eyes watered. The park was a green blur. He closed his eyes.

There was something exhilarating about swinging with his eyes closed. He felt he was defying gravity, that there was no ground beneath him, that he was suspended from a bar hooked to the sky. He tightened his grip around the chains and squeezed his eyelids together. She appeared, slowly, the way a picture develops in a bath of chemicals. Baba's face was the colour of grey clay, an ash-toned, deflated mask. From her dry, parted lips Matthew heard songs, Yiddish folk songs she sang in the kitchen, his young legs dangling from a chair, her loose arms sleeved in flour. He couldn't understand the words but could sense their meaning by the way his grandmother modulated her voice.

Her voice began to fade, the sound swirling down the drain-shaped mouth. Now her mouth was a puncture, her thoughts an odourless, colourless leak. Her clay face hardened and turned to stone. A grainy sigh rattled at the back of her throat.

Matthew opened his eyes and saw clouds, gauzy clouds

stretched across a pale blue sky. As he swung back he saw the father caressing his baby son, smoothing the denim overalls, smoothing the buttery wisps of hair. He had lost momentum and swung back in forth in low arcs. All eyes were on him, he was sure of it: the father and son, the old couple picnicking under the tree, the men playing bocce. He dug his unlaced shoes into the dirt and jumped off the swing. He stumbled out of the park and onto the street. He prayed she would still be there, in her party mint pearls and heavy perfume. Yes, he wanted a drink. He was thirsty, very thirsty. He would tell Sheila all about Stephanie, how she had walked that morning for the very first time.

HOW TO BUILD A PORCH

David steps into the kitchen, sweat beading his arms, lifts his new workboots and gives them a good shake. Sawdust powders the tiles. I rarely see him dressed this way, straight out of a hardware catalogue. Throw in a yellow hardhat and sturdy lunchpail and the costume's complete. The truth of the matter is, I'm better with a hammer and nails than he is. But I'm due in three weeks and he isn't, so I decide to sit this one out. My mother sits across the table, knitting pink booties. My father -- who taught me how to handle a plane -- is outside, measuring and sawing, happy as a child in a sandbox. He and David are building an extension to the back porch, where we plan to spend a lot of time with the baby.

David asks for two beers; I nod towards the fridge and tell him to help himself. He looks at me, grins, then warns me not to sneak a drink. Alcohol, he frowns, is a no-no. Before he leaves he bends down and plants a wet one on my stomach. My mother beams; knitting needles click like dancing insects.

Everyone says I have her looks: the same round eyes, the same flat, wide smile. She likes to remind me that we can pass for sisters, and I wince when I think of the times we have. Thirty years separate us but she's aged well. We're more similar than I care to admit. I wonder if my daughter will come from the same mould. She may end up with David's grin, which is what caught my eye standing in line at the passport office two years ago. It was a hot enough day, the fans weren't working, no one was in the mood for small talk. No one wanted to be there. Except David, leaning over the counter, telling some grey-haired civil servant about his trip to Spain, describing a bullfight in great detail. Next thing I know, he's a matador, holding up his sports jacket like a cape. All eyes are on David; he's on a roll. He's good in large groups.

"Still haven't decided on a name?" my mother asks. She named me before she was married, before she even met my father. She named all five of us when she was still in high school, slouched over a desk beneath a beehive hairdo, dreaming of a house, a husband and a brood of kids. I'm the youngest of five girls, the only one they're close enough to visit without packing their bags. I thought I'd be the first to leave town, but I waited and waffled. Now I live twenty minutes away from the house I grew up in. I'd have never believed it.

"David likes Hannah." I feel like I'm eleven years old, in a school yard, talking about classmates and their crushes. David likes Hannah. David likes Ruth.

"Hannah?" My mother stops knitting, wrinkles her nose, bunny-fashion. "What type of name is Hannah?"

"A palindrome."

She sighs. She thinks I'm being difficult.

"What in God's name is a palindrome?"

I didn't know myself until David explained. "A word that's spelled the same backwards and forwards. Like Bob, or Anna."

"That's crazy," she says. "Choosing a name that works both ways. What's wrong with a one-way name?"

Maybe the heat's getting to her. You don't need a hammer and saw to work up a sweat today. She's usually not like this. Most of the time she sings about David, offers sugar-dipped descriptions to friends. Today's heat and humidity have sealed her praise.

"I'm partial to Miranda myself," I say. "We're still negotiating."

"Miranda? What type of name is Miranda?"

Shakespeare's, but I don't bother mentioning it. My mother's only seen one play in her life, a musical that my sister Glenda thought was her ticket to stardom. Today she's an accountant.

"Miranda sounds like the name of a car," my mother declares. She's always favoured sensible names, sensible clothes, a sensible lifestyle. "Why not Martha?" she offers.

The phone rings. I'm saved from commenting on Martha, Mary, or any other names she has up her sensible sleeve. Before

I can move from my chair she's at the phone, the booties speared to her chair.

"Albert!" she hollers. She was destined to marry a man named Albert. Rake-thin with teeth like a hoe, my father was barely nineteen when he loped up my grandmother's front walk to fix her pipes. He eventually took over the family business, nurturing a plumbing service into a well-drilling operation and two other stores. Dad sold the whole package last year for a pretty sum, and agreed to stay on as a consultant for another tidy amount. He's semi-retired, though I dread the day he punches in for the last time. He's not a reader, doesn't have any real hobbies. He's got my mother, but that's not enough.

"Albert!" My mother reddens. She dislikes the new owners, thinks they take advantage of my father, a good-hearted man who rarely says no.

Dad walks in, stopping at the sink to wash his hands. Sawdust clings to him like a second skin. A suit and tie, that would be a costume. He's happiest in his green work pants and plaid shirt. He must have two dozen plaid shirts and half a dozen pairs of green pants. He says it's easier that way. Mother says its sensible. Gone are the days when he loped like a nineteen year old, but he still has a lot of spring in him. Mom holds the phone like it's something she's picked up off the floor, then drops it in my father's scrubbed hand.

I recognize it right away, what my sisters and I have always called his work voice. My father has two voices, which he slips

on as easily as his plaid shirts. A work voice and a home voice. The work voice is like a bowling ball heading down an alley, a steady roll, striking the pins cleanly, without fanfare. The home voice is more passive, more like a sponge sheet that flutters in the wind, soaking up everything that comes its way. I can't say I prefer one over the other. Both are as much a part of him as his overbite.

"Do you know what our granddaughter may be called?" my mother says when my father hangs up.

He shakes his head, combs his thinning hair back with the wide, self-assured hands I've always envied. I hope my daughter has his hands.

"Miranda," Mom says. "Have you ever heard of someone naming their daughter Miranda?"

She doesn't wait for a reply.

"That's her first choice. David is thinking of...what's it called again, dear?"

"Palindrome."

"That's right. He wants to give her a palindrome. You know what a palindrome is?"

My father shakes his head again. I can see him eyeing David outside, who's milling about waiting for my father. Dad is itching to get back to work, but patiently waits it out.

"That's a name that's the same backwards and forwards. Like Bob or Anna."

My father looks at me and smiles. "You going to name your

daughter Bob?"

I grin. My mother shoos my father out of the kitchen. He taps on David's shoulder, points at something -- I can't tell what -- and the two of them laugh. When the saw isn't whining or they pause between all their hammering I can hear them talk. They talk about porches, they talk about politics, sometimes they hit rock bottom and talk about the weather, though today it's hot enough to be on a lot of people's minds. I can hear David, he's talking about computer software, about how these days a computer can tell you what you need to build a house, right down to the number of nails.

My father's impressed, I can tell. He thinks David is solid and durable, talks about him like the pipes he used to sell. David knows all about bytes and RAM and hard disks, it's what he does for a living. Mention computers to my father and his colour drains away, washes out. But a hammer or saw are useless in David's hands, so that kind of evens things up. Their conversations are always balanced that way. First they'll talk about a topic weighted in my father's favour, then switch so David has a chance to keep everything level and fair.

Whenever my father's around David slips on a mask and plays the role of the son he insists my father always wanted. Growing up in a house with six women, David says, must have only reminded my father of what he was missing. His theory is simple: all fathers want to have sons because of this connection between a father and son that a daughter just can't provide. Mothers are

happy one way or another, according to David. But fathers, they want another man in the house. So when we learned we were having a girl, I asked him how he felt, given his theory and all. He gave me that matador grin of his and claimed he was an exception.

If my father was unhappy with only girls, he kept the feeling so hidden he must've forgotten it was ever there. Which is why it burns me up to see David wearing that ridiculous mask. Like the sawdust and apron full of nails, it's part of a costume. He becomes someone else I barely recognize, someone I wouldn't want around, let alone marry. He treats me like a kid sister instead of his wife, talks to me like I've got gyprock for brains.

"Is David going to be there?" My mother's back at her seat, knitting fast and furious, the pink booties spawning out of her hands as if she were God himself.

"Where?"

"At the hospital. When you give birth."

We've had this discussion before. She charts my decisions like the weather, hoping for a change.

"I told you he'd be there. That's the way it's done these days."

Mom drops her head and sniffs, loud enough to make sure I know she disapproves. "Your father would have fainted watching you come into the world. Besides, I don't think a man has to be there. What's the point?"

Before I can stop myself I've stepped into the thicket of

her hard-held beliefs.

"The point is, he's the father. He's not going to sit in some waiting room until a nurse trots out to announce that mother and daughter are well. I want him there, and he wants to be there."

At prenatal classes he's the Boy Scout with the polished smile, the teacher's pet, the one the other mothers-to-be point to as an example for their hubbies to follow. David laps it up. He can be a gem when he wants to be, which is often enough to keep me sane.

"Douglas wasn't there when Alice had the twins," my mother pronounces. Alice is my oldest sister. The queen bee. She takes after my mother, except for the double chin that sits like a collar around her neck.

"Douglas wasn't there when Alice pulled a ligament shovelling snow," I counter. "Douglas wasn't there when Stewart was choking on a chicken bone. Douglas wasn't there the day you and Dad stepped on a plane for the first time in your lives. Seems to me that Douglas hasn't been there for a lot of occasions."

I get up and waddle to the fridge.

"You want a cold drink?" I ask.

"I'm fine, thank you." Knitting needles gnash.

Outside, my father and David are making good progress. They're too preoccupied to notice me behind the screen door, my daughter rounding my silhouette. Sweat snakes down my back. My

breasts feel heavy. I'm counting the days till we can sit out on the new porch. In spite of the heat, or maybe because of it, I wish I was out there now, prying old planks off with a crowbar, pinching nails between my lips, slipping a pencil behind my ear.

David clips a measuring tape to his belt and tells my father he wants to take a picture. My husband loves to chronicle change, loves to keep a record of events. He'll have a "before" and "after" picture of the porch to show to his friends, who'll compare the difference and agree that he's done a fine job. He'll never show the pictures he's been taking of me every week, like clockwork, my stomach rising like dough. He's pasted them to a piece of cardboard he keeps rolled like a treasured scroll in the closet. If my mother only knew.

"Look at that," Mom says. She points with the knitting needle towards the screen door. I'm back in my seat, fingers braided over my daughter. My father is standing in a hole next to the half-finished porch, like he's sinking into the ground. David is clicking away, a tourist snapping a native for the folks back home. My mother beams again.

"He's sweet," she says, sponging her brow with a folded napkin.

"When he wants to be," I add.

She gives me a look that hasn't changed since I was three. Her eyes, brows and nose join together in a disapproving knot. "You should be more generous," she says, shifting tones. She leans over and gently touches my arm, a simple gesture that

always thaws my insides, no matter how old I get. I resent her tactics because I know they always work. I use them myself.

"He's a good enough man," I continue.

Mom nods, savouring her strategy.

"I just wish he'd be more consistent," I add, tossing one last log into the fire smouldering between us.

"Consistent?" she says. Her needles are silent and still. "What do you mean?"

I realize I can't explain. I realize that if I tried to explain what it is I want from David, it would sound exactly like my mother's recipe for the perfect marriage: stability, no surprises, dependability. Half a dozen synonyms for consistent. I'd be just like her, minus the crow's feet.

I take a sip of my drink and avoid answering. I lean forward, anxious to hear what the men are talking about. Now they're on to the price of houses. My father mentions something about quality these days. David snorts.

"Susan phoned yesterday," my mother says. "Astrid got the lead part in her school play."

Susan is the middle child, the sister I'm closest to, divorced a year after she married. Double heartache for my mother: a daughter who has a child but no husband, a child who has a name an ocean away from sensible.

"She's coming up when the baby is born."

My mother squints, and I know she's hurt, feels dethroned.

"Coming here?" she asks, as if to confirm her worst fears.

I nod. "She's offered to give me a hand. And she thinks it would be good for Astrid."

"Babies are not like plastic dolls," she declares.

The wound is deep, and I feel for her. "I was thinking of shifts," I say.

Grey lies, we called them in high school. A lie you tell when a white lie is too obvious.

"You could come in the afternoons and give Susan some time off. I'm sure Astrid would love to spend some time with you and Dad."

"Your father is getting too old for that type of thing," Mom says.

That's her grey lie. Now we're even. I've seen my father with Astrid, and my other nieces and nephews. He's as comfortable with a grandchild as he is a hand tool. He handles both with healthy portions of love and care. I used to think it was somehow wrong to devote such care to something inanimate, but I've come to see that my father can't seem to distinguish among animal, vegetable and mineral. He's gentle with everything he handles, whether it's a granddaughter or a ladder. Mother's right: he's consistent.

"He loves spending time with the kids," I say. "You know that. Besides, you haven't seen Astrid in ages."

"That's no fault of ours," she says, drawing her lips together to make her point. It's an on-going complaint of hers that my sisters don't visit often enough with their kids. My

fear is she'll just about move in with us once mine arrives.

It's too hot to argue. My back is plastered to the vinyl seat, my legs rest on a hassock that's splitting at the seams. The heat doesn't seem to bother my mother; she continues to knit, her hands a blur of fingers and wool. Then she stops, booties dangling from her the needles. "Time to eat," she announces. A moustache of sweat hangs over her lips, everything on her sags: her hair, her skin, the breasts I once sought. She puts her knitting away and makes for the fridge.

"David made some pasta salad."

Her slippers stall on the linoleum. She makes a half-hearted pivot, forces a smile.

"Pasta salad? You mean macaroni?"

"I don't know what he throws in. Fusili, tortellini, spirals and shells. I don't ask. It's one of his creations. It's really good."

"I'm sure."

She fidgets with her dress, doesn't know what to do. I can see she's torn in half. Part of her loves the fact that David cooks. It fits in nicely with her image of my husband, the demi-god. But a prepared meal leaves her stranded on a kitchen tile. She's been making lunches for us all her life. Six paper bags stood side by side on the kitchen counter when we grew up: one each for the girls, one for my father. It didn't matter which one you took, they were all the same. A sandwich, some peeled carrots, a fruit. She'd be up at six, a dozen slices of white

bread laid out on the kitchen table, a blank grid she filled with squares of yellow cheese or balls of tuna. When we all moved out she volunteered to prepare meals for shut-ins, seniors who couldn't get out. Now she stands before me, defenceless and disarmed.

"Some sliced tomatoes might be nice," I suggest, and she agrees. How things have changed: now I'm the one putting band-aids over her wounds.

"Your father wouldn't know how to make a pasta salad," she says, admiring David's work as she places it on the table.

"That's because you've never let him."

A high-pitched laugh streams out of her like steam. "Let him? Why wouldn't I let him?"

Despite the heat, I plough into another dispute.

"Because the kitchen is your territory. Your lair. The last person in the world you want poking through your pantry and using your knives is Daddy."

"That's ridiculous," she says, waving me off with the flash of a blade. One hand holds a tomato to a cutting board. "He can come into the kitchen any time he likes."

"As long as you're there to supervise."

"He doesn't know where anything goes. I can't have a whisk sitting in a drawer where it doesn't belong."

"Dad's a quick learner," I say.

"That's really not the point, is it?" Mom turns and heads for the cupboard. "Besides," she continues, holding a plate.

"Your father and I both have our place in the home. How often do you see me wandering into his workshop and playing with his tools?"

"He never stopped me from hanging around."

She's covered half the plate with tomato slices. "That's different. You're his daughter, not his wife."

Lines are clearly drawn in my mother's world, as clean and sharp as her front lawn hedges. A daughter can sit by her father's side and watch him sand a block of wood until it's a velvet patch, she can take her turn tapping a chisel. A wife can only poke her head through the door and tell him dinner is ready, or there's a call for him. She'd edge her head through a crack in my father's workshop door and speak as if on the verge of some sacred territory. Then she'd always throw me a glance that told me I shouldn't overstay my welcome.

"Jesus H. Christ!" David yells from the yard. My mother winces; she hates to hear people swear, particularly those she admires.

My father walks in, grabs a dishtowel by the sink. "David's cut himself," he says, his calmness edged with concern.

"How'd he manage that?" I ask, but my father's already out the door, my mother trailing behind him.

By the time I reach the accident scene, things are pretty much under control. The cut is deep, everyone agrees he'll need stitches. My mother insists she drive him to the hospital, and that my father stay behind with me. She's happiest when she's

nursing the wounded. David makes a willing victim: pale, distraught, already thinking of a story to go with the scar. The two of them make a great pair as she leads him out of the backyard. For some reason I feel I'm the one to blame, that if I'd been out here sawing with my father and David was safe inside yakking with my mother, this wouldn't have happened.

"How'd he do it?" I ask, retreating to a lawn chair planted in a splattering of shade.

My father joins me by the weeping willow. "He was cutting some tape with a knife. I suppose it must have slipped somehow. It's a pretty nasty cut."

"He'll be all right."

"For sure," my father says. "He's in good hands." His love for my mother is genuine, solid. "How're you feeling?"

"Just fine," I say. "A little hot today, with this load and all." I wrap my arms around my stomach, embrace my daughter.

"She'll be here soon," my father says.

"Not soon enough."

He laughs, but keeps his lips close to his teeth, a habit from the days when he tried to hide his overbite.

I feel my daughter move, picture her swimming on the spot, eyes closed, hands clenched, struggling in the lightless pool of my body. I take my father's hand and place it over my stomach. "Do you feel her?"

He nods, letting his fingers rise with the ebb and flow of my daughter's movements. "Nice," he says, in a voice I don't

recognize. It's neither his work voice, nor his home voice, but something else all together, something fresh and peeled that he's plucked right off the branch above us. Then he lifts his hand and places it over mine. "Why don't we show her a few things?" he says, in that same voice.

"What do you mean?"

"Let's show her how to build a porch. It's not too early, is it?" He doesn't even bother to wink.

I watch him walk out of our circle of shade and onto the sun-bleached grass. Before I'm out of my chair he's sizing up another plank. When I reach the half-finished porch he hands me the saw.

I don't say a thing, not so much as a thank you. I just set to work, drawing the blade back and forth in a steady rhythm. When I finish I hand my father the plank.

"What time do you suppose they'll be back?" I ask.

He looks at his watch. "Hard to say. Around one, I suppose."

I figure that gives us at least an hour before I have to head back to the kitchen and pretend I never left. The last thing I need is a lecture on how to behave when you're nine months pregnant and ready to burst. I'll do my duty and keep the peace. I'll help set the table, where we'll all take our usual seats.

TALIA

1. Large lumps cover the batter, thick lumps that won't move. I prod them with a fork but they just sit there, indifferent. I want to call Judith and ask her what to do, but I can't. Not yet. I phoned an hour ago, too anxious for my own good. The recipe called for an eight by ten inch pan; all I have is a nine by thirteen. Relax, Jeremy. That's what Judith always says. Relax. When anyone else tells me to relax my fingers cramp and my mouth sours. But somehow my sister's words leave me calm. Still, those lumps in the batter are worrisome. Not to mention the trip to the zoo.

2. I'm going to the zoo with Talia. Talia is six years old. Tomorrow, she turns seven. I promised Angie I'd take Talia to the zoo for her birthday. If the cake is not a complete disaster the three of us will eat it off paper plates covered with penguins and wash it down with milk out of penguin cups. Talia loves penguins. She has surrounded herself with penguins: a

penguin lamp, a penguin pencil case, penguin bedsheets, penguin pillows, penguin wallpaper.

Last week, I flirted with the idea of a penguin cake. I imagined the look on Talia's face and saw one of her rare smiles. I began to doodle on a napkin, wondering if it could be done and how it could be done and what cake moulds I would need if it was going to be done. But then I rolled up the napkin and flung the pencilled penguin into the bin. I have always recognized my limitations. I may be capable of many things, but a penguin cake is not one of them.

So instead of a penguin dressed in a frosted tuxedo I will bring a basic, boring nine by thirteen chocolate cake. Angie told me not to worry, that Talia likes me, that these things take time and not to expect miracles in seven months. Seven months, I said. I gave her my best mock surprised look, which is almost as bad as my horrified stare. Is that how long we've known each other? Seven months?

Angie just smiled.

3. We met at the pet store where Angie is now the assistant manager. She started out working the cash and cleaning cages. The pay was lousy, she explained, but the hours were flexible and that was important because she wanted to be there when Talia got home from school. After Angie and Desmond split up she had to move out of the roomy house they'd lived in for five years, into a small three-and-a-half. That's when Talia started collecting

penguins. Desmond moved into a bachelor apartment downtown, in a monstrous highrise with an indoor pool that Talia loves. The doorman wears white gloves and calls her Miss Carew.

I stopped by the pet store to pick up dog biscuits. I needed a particular brand because Judith's dog, a shaggy mutt named Max, is a very particular eater. Angie must have seen me tug at my ear. I tug at my ear whenever I feel a little anxious, like when I can't find a particular brand of dog biscuits for a very particular dog. Angie strolled up and asked if she could help. Between ear tugs I told her what I needed. She looked me over and said biscuits weren't enough for someone my size. Maybe what I really needed was some doggie burgers, to fill me out and help tone my arms. Just kidding, she said a moment later. Just kidding.

A few months ago I asked her if she uses that line with every guy that walks into the store. We had just made love in the kitchen. Sort of. She laughed and said no, only the saucer-eyed ones that look like they need to be scratched behind the ears.

4. The lumps have disappeared. Now there are bubbles. Very stubborn bubbles. I mix and mix and mix. They persist. They cling to the bowl. My earlobes are dripping with batter. I have to call Judith.

5. When I was nine and Judith was thirteen, we baked a cake for

my father. My mother had died the year before; my father had not yet remarried. He wouldn't meet Diane for another seven years. By the time he met Diane I was old enough to drive. So I drove. Every Friday night I drove him to Diane's house. She lived in a small apartment above a hardware store. One Friday night, as the car idled and coughed, my father turned and looked at me. He has a large, sharp forehead that juts out like a cliff, so his eyes are always hidden and his eyebrows hang like empty nests.

He leaned over and asked me how old I was. Something lingered on his breath, something that smelled more like defeat than liquor. He wasn't drunk; he only really drank the year after my mother died. But I don't think he ever completely recovered. Sixteen, I said. Sixteen, he repeated. Sixteen is a good age. He pointed to the store window, to a pyramid of paint cans stacked to the ceiling. If you're going to screw someone, my father said, a room above a hardware store is as good a place as any. He waited for me to laugh. And as he waited he seemed to slowly break apart in little chunks; by the time I remembered to smile he had this awful look about him that turned his whole face into loose gravel. He never talked about Diane that way again, but it was all I could think of at their wedding.

The cake Judith and I made for him was nothing like his wedding cake, an elaborate affair mounted on Greek columns and ribboned with blue icing. This pre-Diane cake came out of a package. I asked Judith if there really was somebody named Betty Crocker. She looked at me, grinned and simply said, Oh, Jeremy.

She handed me a list of the items we needed. At thirteen she was terribly well organized. I got the eggs and milk out of the fridge, a fridge stocked by my Aunt Tillie, who dropped by at least twice a week to make sure we weren't starving. She and my mother could not have looked more different. Her beaky nose soared as my mother's sank. And my aunt's hair curled in places where my mother's just sort of hung there. Plus my mother was about forty pounds heavier and half a foot shorter, and every year, sure as Christmas, Aunt Tillie talked of the days when they used to share the same clothes. They both had the same laugh, a horsey laugh, the kind that people notice in restaurants. Judith has the same one.

Our oven door had a large glass window, and a light to reveal the treasures within. No need to open the oven to know how the meat loaf was doing; all you had to do was turn the light on, bend over and see if the pie crust had browned or the chicken was ready.

Judith let me pour and mix as she read out the directions. Lumps were never a problem back then. We had a three-speed electric mixer, straightforward and simple to use. The gadgets I see today scare the hell out of me. They look like they belong in a sterilized lab, not some cluttered kitchen. After we poured the batter into a pan and slipped it into the oven, I pulled a chair over from the kitchen table and sat facing the oven door. What are you doing, Judith asked. I told her I had to stand guard and make sure the cake didn't burn. She smiled. Relax,

Jeremy. She tapped a lime green watch strapped to her wrist. The cake will be ready in thirty-five minutes. I promise to let you know when it's time to take it out. I wouldn't budge. Judith sighed and walked out of the kitchen.

I never told her why I stayed. Just like I never told her what my father had said that night about Diane living above a hardware store; I didn't think she'd want to know. I stayed because of what I'd seen about two months before my mother died. I had just come home from school. I dropped my schoolbag and called out my mother's name. No answer. Sometimes she sat in the backyard and played word games, the kind you buy at airports for long flights. Crossword puzzles and logic problems and anagrams. She wasn't in the backyard. I found her in the kitchen, sitting in front of the oven, the very same way I sat the day Judith and I made a cake for my father. I called out her name but she didn't move. I said it again, louder. She didn't hear a thing. Her hands were folded in her apron. She looked happy. The oven light was on. Inside, a tray of chocolate chip cookies had burned into charcoal discs. After about five minutes she got up, took out the cookies, and threw them out. Some had to be scraped off. She carefully laid out a new batch, put them in the oven, sat down and watched them burn. She did the same thing until there wasn't a cookie left. I stood by the door, too frightened to say a thing.

Two months later she paid for a hotel room in quarters and dimes and swallowed two bottles of sleeping pills. On the day

she died she left a pot roast in the oven, with the light on, and detailed instructions for dinner that night.

6. I am at the zoo; the cake is cooling in the kitchen. I want everything to be perfect when I bring Talia here tomorrow; I've come to plan a route.

I thought we'd begin with the monkeys. Monkeys are safe and professional. They know how to work a crowd. One is playing with a plastic doll now, rocking it in its hairy arms. A young girl next to me -- about Talia's age, if I had to guess -- is entranced. She picks at her lips with nervous excitement. Her mother slaps her hand and says she'll have no lips left by the time she's ten, and what would that look like? The girl stops picking. The monkey has dropped the doll and is swinging from a bar. I want to crouch down and tell the girl that it's all right to pick her lip, that I understand, that after tugging at my earlobes for nineteen years I still have both ears. But I don't say anything. I can't. It's not my place to interfere. So I walk away, towards the bears.

A crowd has gathered, families out for the day. I stand between a young couple with twin daughters dressed in identical polka dot dresses, and a man lecturing his son about bears. The boy has little colour, and is fighting a losing battle with pimples. His father explains that animals were never meant to be caged. He speaks as though his son were to blame, as if this gawky kid in baggy shorts and a Miami Dolphins T-shirt had caged

them all himself and swallowed the keys. An unsettled anger churns in my stomach. One of the polka-dotted twins starts to cry. The boy's father continues. By now he's pointing a stiff finger at the bears, as if he knows each one personally. His son is shifting in his shorts, listening to his father speak of a conspiracy between all nations, rich and poor, to eventually put every single animal on the planet behind bars. And what a zoo it will be, he bellows. The twins are whisked away in a flurry of black dots. I linger. I'm curious to know where this is all leading to. I want to know what this man expects his son to do, how he expects his son to stop the conspiracy. But he disappoints me. Just as he's about to explain his theory he looks at his watch and says it's time to leave and pick up Mom.

After brief visits with the seals, the lions and the elephants, I reach the penguins.

Some are perched on a plastic iceberg. Others dive into a pond of clear water. They swim with a grace I envy. Two waddle together like old friends. They all look happy. That's the thing about penguins: they always look happy. Something about the way their beaks curve makes them look like they want nothing more than to be penguins. Something about their eyes says they can't understand how anyone would want to be anything else. I can see why Talia likes them.

The pellets in my pocket roll between my fingers. I feel adventurous. Me, the big risk taker. Red-lettered signs everywhere warn me not to feed the animals, but I don't care. I

want to feed the penguins. I want to toss them pellets and ask for a favour. I will be here tomorrow with Talia. You won't find a more loyal fan than Talia. I will pay dearly for a glimpse of her seven-year old smile. All I ask is that you do something, anything to make her laugh. In return, I'll throw you pellets every day for a week, a month, a year if I have to. All I ask is that you make Talia smile, so that by the time I take her home she'll tell Angie what a wonderful day she had as she devours my chocolate cake off penguin plates.

Sir, someone says.

A hand touches my elbow.

Excuse me, Sir.

A young boy is by my side, dressed in the unmistakeable green overalls that all zoo employees wear. He tells me it's against zoo policy to let the public feed the animals.

Half the pellets in my hand are gone. I wonder how long I've been feeding the penguins, if I've been talking out loud. This was supposed to be a rehearsal, a dry run. But I don't tell the young boy that. I nod and apologize. As I tug on my ear I hear the pellets fall to the ground.

7. <u>You aren't Desmond. You can't be Desmond. I don't want you to be Desmond.</u>

We were sitting in one of Angie's favourite restaurants, a small, East Indian hole-in-the-wall where you can eat with your fingers. Angie loves to roll clumps of sticky rice into balls

and dip them in sauces I can't pronounce. She was drinking a cup of milky tea, reminding me that I wasn't Talia's father. Desmond is Talia's father, she said. He'll always be her father. And for the time being, he's still my husband. She likes you, Jeremy. It just takes time. Angie rubbed her fingers over my hand. I kissed them, savouring the curried tips.

8. Tomorrow's visit to the zoo is only the second time Talia and I will be on our own. The first time, we went skating, on a crisp Saturday in early March. Angie had to fill in at the pet store for a part-timer, a young college kid who had called in sick the night before.

Talia wore a penguin snowsuit that Angie had made for her. I watched her move through the crowd, adorable in her penguin outfit, so graceful in her white skates.

I skated too, anxious to be next to Talia but careful to keep my distance. When at last she glided towards me I felt unreasonably hopeful. She wiped her runny nose with one of her fins and said she was cold.

We agreed on hot chocolate at a small bakery a few blocks from the rink. After three sips Talia said she was feeling much better, thank you, and asked for a brownie. Did she want to eat it right away, I asked, or save it for later? It's not for me, she murmured. It's for my father.

My heart sank. I told her it was a lovely thought. When she asked if we could give it to him right away I didn't know

what to say. I had a sudden flash of meeting Desmond, standing in the doorway of his luxurious downtown apartment, looking like a fool as Talia hugged him and gave him the brownie.

Why do you always do that, Talia asked.

I looked at Talia, her eyes shadowed by the penguin beak stretched over her head. I'd been tugging at my ear. I quickly explained that it was an old habit and asked if she was ready to go home. She said no and pointed to the brownie. I suggested we visit Angie at the pet store, and told her how happy her mother would be to see her. Talia just shook her head.

We took a cab to Desmond's apartment, our skates wedged between us. Talia knew the address by heart. When we arrived the doorman smiled and called her Miss Carew. Her lids fell when he told her that Desmond was away for the weekend. Aspen, I suddenly remembered. A three-day binge in Colorado. That's how Angie described it. A three-day binge. With a woman he had known for three weeks. The doorman promised Talia that her father's gift would be waiting for him when he got home. Talia nodded and carefully placed the brownie on the doorman's white glove. She didn't say a word during the cab ride home. She just tugged at her beak.

I held on to our skates, tying our laces into knots, wondering why silence couldn't be shaped and moulded as easily as fresh snow.

9. The cake has cooled. There is icing on my fingers, not to

mention patches of icing on the fridge and phone. I called Judith, deciding at the last minute to try a chocolate layer cake, wondering how I could do it with a nine by thirteen slab. Leave it be, Judith told me. Add sparkles if you want to. I bought little silver beads instead. Talia's name glitters across the cake. I was not much older than her when Judith and I baked that cake for my father. We didn't spell out his name with candy beads. After trying a sugary paste squeezed through a plastic bag, we gave up and etched his name with a toothpick. It looked rushed, as if someone had scratched it on at the last minute. Still, I remember my father's smile when we brought the cake into his bedroom. It was the first time he'd smiled since my mother died. It's a smile I would recognize anywhere.