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Full House

Suzanne Jensen

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Master of Arts in Creative Writing at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

August 1991

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ABSTRACT

Full House

Suzanne Jensen
Concordia University, 1991

Full House is a novel whose form might best be described as a triptych. Its three sections tell three quite distinct stories; yet each story makes reference to, completes and is completed by, the other two. The principal characters of each story are connected by blood or marriage, and the three sections of the novel are linked by their themes: the attraction of the maternal for women, and the ambivalent nature of the parent-child relationship; the difficulty women experience in establishing a balance of power in their relationships with men; and the betrayal and mistrust between men and women that prevent any lasting reconciliation of the sexes.

In Part I Angela, who is recovering from a long, severe depression, discovers that her husband, Robert, has had an affair with a woman named Maggie while she was ill. Rather than setting her back, however, the discovery seems to have galvanized her, and brought life into clearer focus.

Robert, in Part II, is still smarting from Maggie's rejection, and feels he has been used by her. He is also suffering from anxiety and remorse because he fears that

Angela has somehow found out about the affair, at a time when he feels a renewal of interest in, and optimism about, his marriage.

April, Angela's twin, is a journalist whose emotional responses and professional life have both been adversely affected by a sexual assault in late adolescence. Still unmarried at 36, she longs for a stable, long-term relationship--mostly because she wants to have children--but finds herself unable to sustain one.

I

Five thirty-five. A woman stands, back pressed to the metro station wall. She clutches her three children as though she fears they might all be carried along on the wave of commuters which flows out over the platforms, up the stairs and through the doors. She has one arm around an infant who sleeps in a pouch strapped to her body; her left arm supports a toddler who rides on a jutting hip. Her third child, about four years old, stands beside her, legs twitching, one hand bunching the hem of his mother's skirt.

As they wait for their bus, the station gradually clears of the last stragglers from the departed train. The woman now turns her wary gaze towards the black-eyed girls who slouch around the newsstand. They have the look of furies, or angels of death: their heads, crowned with pointed and lacquered horns of black hair, swivel and bob above black woollen sweaters that also serve as skirts; their mouths and noses exude intermittent plumes of smoke as a communal cigarette passes from hand to hand. Short sharp

bursts of an incomprehensible *patois* tumble from behind large wads of phosphorescent chewing gum. They are noisy and insolent, staring down anyone who looks too long at them; yet their eyes flicker often in the direction of two police officers who stand at the head of the stairs coming up from the trains.

The four-year-old's eyes are riveted on an old woman who sits on a nearby bench making funny faces at him. He pulls his mother's skirt over his eyes, then steals sideways glances back at her. It is not so much her face as her hat that has bewitched him: a squashed and faded lavender felt that sports a fluttering red ostrich plume and a mound of shiny red, yellow and purple fruit.

As the boy's eyes follow the ostrich plume, the woman reaches into her bag, pulls out a cellophane-wrapped candy and holds it out to him. He looks up at mother but she is on the moon again. He lets go of her skirt and sidles over towards the old woman. As he reaches for the candy and greedily tears the cellophane off she wheedles: "Such a pretty boy, y'are, arntcha? Whatchyer name, sonny?" The child's eyes, travelling from the woman's scuffed ankle-high boots to stained and threadbare coat to feathered hat, stop at the dark, empty cavern in her face, which should have been filled with teeth. Shoving the sweet lump into his cheek, he blurts: "My baby sister's got no teeth neither." The woman's cackling, which only shows more of the depths of

the cavern, is fearful. She waves another piece of candy before him. "That's it boy, just call me Baby Face. Now tell me, what's yer name?"

"Jeremy!" Mother, returning to earth. Jeremy grabbed the candy and backed away from the old woman. Angela glared at the bright green lump in his hand; smiled thinly in the direction of the old woman. "Jeremy, say thank you to the nice lady for the candy," she said, in a voice loud enough for the woman to hear, adding, "And don't you dare take another piece," under her breath.

But Jeremy was absorbed in unwrapping his second piece of candy. In his haste, he fumbled; dropped it; was about to pick it up and put it in his mouth anyway when Angela quickly put her foot over it and crushed it. The child looked up in momentary disbelief, then let out a howl of rage. Angela glanced over at the old woman, *Now see what you've done*, but already she was shuffling off towards the newsstand, working her gums and muttering to herself. *Troublemaker*, she thought bitterly. Jeremy's howling grew louder as he tugged at Angela's leg, trying to lift her foot off his prize.

A bus lumbered past the doors of the station, its wheels scraping the curb and stirring up a whirlwind in the

gutter. Scraps of silver foil and cellophane swarmed, locusts carried on clouds of dust.

Angela waited for the air to clear before going out. "Settle down, Jeremy," she said. "Our bus is here. We mustn't miss it."

"You stepped on my candy," he screamed.

With her free hand, Angela pulled him along towards the bus. Outside, the long queue of commuters glared at her screaming child, then at her, then looked away, their faces set in disapproving masks. Boarding, Angela searched with a sinking heart for an empty seat. She caught a middle-aged man's eye and held it until he stood up and stalked to the back. Easing into the seat, gathering Jeremy in, she searched her shoulder bag for something that would buy the child's silence. She found a small bag of peanuts which, though half its contents had already spilled into the bottom of her purse, momentarily stilled the boy's rage. As he devoured the peanuts, she glanced at her watch. Five forty-five.

Robby, the toddler who had silently clung to her all through Jeremy's howling, now reached for the bag of peanuts. Jeremy swiftly turned his back, putting the bag out of his brother's reach.

"Jeremy, please share with your brother," Angela pleaded.

He ate even faster, refusing to look at her. Robby began to whine. Tara awoke and let out small, snuffling noises. She nuzzled about, searching for Angela's breast. Soon she too would be wailing. Angela put her head down near the child's ear and closed her eyes. The Witching Hour: great time of day to be out with the kids. And great foresight of hers, too, not checking her wallet before calling a cab to take them into town. She had nearly been caught, had scarcely enough to pay the driver, and nothing left for a tip. *I'm sorry, I'm a little short.* She could see he didn't believe, her from a nice house in the suburbs; she could almost hear him thinking, *Should have refused to cross the bridge.* But was it her fault so many streets had been blocked for repairs? It took forever to get up Peel, and the traffic on Dorchester crawled, while the meter ticked away. He'd managed the weaving and dodging dance through the lines of buses on Guy without mishap, through heat that rose in shimmering waves from streets and sidewalks. All in a sweat, he'd delivered her triumphant to the doctor's door, only to discover she had no money for a tip. Angela had opened out her wallet, *I'm so sorry, only enough to take the metro home.* He shrugged. "No matter, lady." But it did matter.

She was fretting a bit now, too, over the dinner party she had planned for that evening. It was only Stan and Olive coming, and they were partners in business and old

friends besides, so it was nothing to worry about, really. But it would be the first time in over a year they'd invited anyone to dinner and, anxious about forgetting something vital, she'd been almost obsessive about the preparations. The menu was planned and the shopping done on the weekend; the house was cleaned the day before; and a babysitter was arranged for the afternoon. But then around mid-morning her little planet had wobbled crazily on its axis, and for a few agonized moments had stopped dead. Its rotation had resumed, eventually, but vision and balance were still askew; and the little dinner party loomed in her bursting head now like a surreal *tableau vivant*.

And the children--leave it to them to throw the whole schedule into disarray. Tara had woken fussy and slightly feverish that morning. By early afternoon the fussiness had worked up to a determined and uninterrupted wailing that thwarted all efforts to impose order on the jumble of forks and spoons, the pieces of cut chicken and fruit custard, the bunches of dahlias and chrysanthemums brought in from the garden. She had welcomed the distraction, in a way; it reassured her that in one sphere, at least, things still revolved as they should. Children got cranky, became suddenly ill, sent your heart on a roller coaster ride of worry--and always when you didn't have time, didn't have the car. That was the way things were.

The way things were. . . like the seasons in this crazy part of the world. They, too, could change between morning and afternoon, send you scurrying to pull out all the summer clothes you had squirrelled away the previous fall; and there, in the pocket of a coat would be a reminder of the preoccupations of the previous season. . .

Just so this morning. . . absently checking things, collecting clothes for the dry cleaners from Robert's closet, emptying out the usual odd bits: pens, coins and clips, scraps of notepaper. . .

Looking up, she examined the ads above the windows. A dove-white brassiere transmuted by degrees into an airborne bird; and another, *Vous êtes enceinte?*, offered a telephone number and a promise of help. Angela stole a glance at the faces of the other passengers. A woman seated across the aisle was buried in the latest Club Passion release--Secrets Partagés--and a tear rolled down one of her cheeks as she read. But the rest were blank, tranced--how else to survive the ordeal of every day? She glanced at the headlines of a newspaper that lay folded on the lap of another passenger. Its headlines screamed: "L'ACADIE: UN MORT, UNE BLESSEE." *L'Acadie, home of the exiled, dead or blessed, the blessed being only injured, or was it the other way around, and which was she, one of the blessed dead or living injured?* An aeon since finding the letter, sharing the secret, with her heart pounding so painfully against her ribs that she

hoped something would give way; that the planet, already off-axis, would shatter to gutter-dust, and all memory fly.

The bus lumbered past the corner house where she had grown up. She glimpsed a small child playing alone between two maples--the same two trees she had played under as a child. Her own father had planted them the day she and her twin sister, April, were born. Her parents were long dead, but there stood the trees, huge now, their scarlet leaves starting to fall, their upper branches arching over the dark-haired child going about her innocent, solitary play.

It is early May, and sultry, pollen-laden winds are blowing from the south. Sunlight filters through a hot, white haze, warming the earth and the bare arms and shoulders of four-year-old Angela, who plays between the two trees in the back garden. She is alone, her twin having been confined to bed with measles. She hears a car door slam, and runs to the gate to see who is there. She opens her mouth to call out "Daddy!", but closes it when she sees the grim look on his face. He walks swiftly up the front path and goes into the house, slamming the door behind him. The windows of the station wagon are partially open, and from them comes a noise she has never heard before. Drawn by the sound, she creeps around to the back of the car and climbs onto the bumper. From here, she witnesses close-up

the pandemonium of four squawking burlap bags hopping around the tight space, lunging at one another, crashing into the windows. In her fright she half-falls, half-jumps off the bumper and runs back into the garden to hide.

A conversation floats out over the garden on the May breezes, a conversation that turns to a brief, loud argument. Father, a surgeon, has brought home a gift of live chickens from a patient who has no other means of paying. Their immaculate suburban garden is no place to keep live chickens; they must be killed, but he is squeamish about animal blood and is angry that he has to do the job. Again a door slams, and then Father appears, dragging the four bags. He seizes an axe from the garden shed and savage-brutal-clumsy chops off their heads. Angela, hiding in a corner behind evergreen shrubbery, hears the commotion of beaks and wings, the four dull thwacks of the axe, and--
Silence.

She emerges to stare at the frenzy of the voiceless dead, who now hop on reserves of post-mortem nerves around the yard. Blood spurts from their necks, streaking their snowy feathers, staining the front of her blue and white shorts, leaving trails all over the lawn. Finally they collapse, their crumpled corpses ranging in a ragged circle around her. Father, looking up from wiping his axe, rushes to clean the blood from innocent arms and legs, and pale

breathless Mother swoops down from nowhere, rushing her inside to bathe, dress in clean clothes.

That night Angela wakes, her body convulsed for the first time by an attack of asthma.

Thirty years, she thought. Thirty years since father severed the chickens heads from their bodies, and me from my innocent love of him. And now this: a letter, falling from the inner pocket of Robert's coat like the blade of an axe, severing body from head, severing Before the Letter segment of life from whatever is to come after. The body still operates on post-mortem frenzy-of-nerves--hop around the house, hop to the cooking, hop into town--while the brain busies itself, savage-brutal-clumsy, dismembering Life with Robert, B.L.

The bus rounded the corner and drew near to their stop. Angela pulled the bell cord and herded the children out the back door. They walked the two blocks to the house slowly, to accommodate Robby's short legs. As they neared the house, she saw the babysitter sitting on the front steps. "Look, Jeremy," she cried, waving to the girl. "There's Tracy. Here, run give her the key to the house, will you?" Angela fished the key from amid a welter of diaper pins,

pacifiers, children's books and puzzles, lint-ridden peanuts. She followed the two boys to the house, noting wearily that the path was littered with yellow-orange leaves fallen from the neighbour's tree. Summer gone already? Her eyes searched the sky, the flowerbeds, checked the tree at the centre of their lawn. A yellow-leaved maple, always the last on the street to change, it stood, still as thick and green as at midsummer. Or was it? She crossed the lawn, peered closely at the leaves. The slender gold fingers of autumn had already left their telltale prints. *Not yet*, a voice whispered inside her. *Not yet*.

She looked down into the wide blue eyes of the child strapped to her, the child who had been born just as this tree was bursting from its winter tomb. Surely that was only yesterday? A birth, a flowering, a promise given--life bestowed in such abundance, and suddenly all withdrawn, no warning. The whole tidy universe altered in a day--no, less, a moment or two, the time it takes to, for instance, read a letter. Attention taken away for that moment, from everything that goes on around, and when you look up again--

"Mummy!" Jeremy shouted from the top step of the porch. He had the look of a drill sergeant inspecting his troops. Robby was already sitting on Tracy's lap with his thumb in his mouth. Angela walked slowly up the path towards them.

"The boys are starving," she said to Tracy, "but dinner isn't finished cooking yet. Could you just make them some soup and a sandwich while I feed the baby?"

"Sure, Mrs. Fairbairn."

In the dim, quiet nursery, she sank into the rocking chair, exhausted by the expedition into town. Must change doctors, she thought, find one close to home. And why not? There was no need to put herself through such things, just to keep the same paediatrician she'd gone to as a child. Once it had felt right, comforting; but now it was more like a chain tying her to childhood, to father, and a hangover from Jeremy's infancy when they'd lived in a flat on Côte des Neiges. Crazy. She'd exhausted herself just to learn that the baby's fever and fussiness was only teething. The doctor, a former colleague of her father's, was condescending, as always. Why should she remain loyal to someone who treated her like a mental defective? "Never mind that neither of your other children had symptoms like this, Angela, no child is quite like another I always say, and surely after having three you should realize that." "Of course you're right, doctor, sorry to have wasted your time." "Oh, no bother, Angela dear, best to be on the safe side with children, I always say. Best for mother not to try to diagnose these little ailments herself, right? Now, you just dissolve half a baby aspirin in water like I told you, and give it to--Tara, is it?--every four hours or so.

And massage her gums after feeding, if you remember. And by the way, you really should be getting her on solid foods soon, you know. A child her age shouldn't be restricted to breast milk alone."

Angela absently unbuttoned her blouse, put the child to her breast. Solid food, yes, I suppose its about time. Jeremy and Robby started pablum at about this age. She looked down at Tara, plump and rosy, suckling noisily, vigorously. Suppose she wasn't getting enough to eat? How would she ever forgive herself? But how could she not believe the evidence of the child herself--the solid feel of her little body in her arms--that she was well-nourished? But she wondered too, since she'd started reading the newspapers again and had found out what a potentially lethal chemical soup she was storing in her breasts, whether she was poisoning the child, wondered if she hadn't already poisoned Jeremy and Robby. They could, all three, at this moment, be harbouring carcinogens in their blood that would one day spawn uncontrolled cell division. . . .

Angela's forefinger stroked the baby's cheek. Distracted for a moment, she stopped feeding and looked up at her mother's face. The child's eyes were bright pools, full of benign curiosity and innocent wisdom. Angela let out her breath and sank into them, while the boys' querulous voices, *When will dinner. . . , Where is Mother. . . , When is Daddy coming home*, faded to an indistinct murmur. Her gaze

wandered to her own reflection in the mirror hanging on the closet door. The portrait of the modern Madonna, she thought ruefully. With her face in tired repose and the baby at her breast, she was no less representative than her blissful counterparts done in stone, or oils or stained glass. But what about the undercurrents of fear and rage and bewilderment that seemed to be all part of the landscape of marriage and motherhood? Nowhere in Christian art were those kinds of emotions acknowledged. The Greeks were closer to it, depicting rape, incest, betrayal, and murder among their Olympians, as if to say, *The gods have these trials and so will you.*

One week before her marriage, she has a dream. She is free-falling through the air with Robert and April, her twin, knowing that there is only one parachute for the three of them. Robert clasps April to his breast; Angela has her arms around the two of them. Angela worries that when the parachute opens Robert and April will become tangled in the cords. They fall and fall, but it is a feeling like flying, so they are not afraid. The earth is suddenly very close; it is time to pull the cord. As Angela expected, the cords wrap around Robert and April. She works to free them, until finally the parachute opens. But it is only a small square of red silk, and they are falling too fast. Death rushes to

meet them, but Robert saves them, slows the fall by releasing April and switching on a backup engine attached to his chest. "It'll give us more time," he shouts over the roar of rushing air. Though they glide gently now, parallel with the earth's surface, she knows that soon they will touch down, hard. Will they live. . .?

She wakes up, sweating, trembling, the silence of the house thundering in her ears. Weeping softly, she calls to April, asleep in the next room. April stirs, mutters in her sleep, and then is beside her, wordlessly holding while Angela stutters out her fears.

The rhythmical push of Angela's foot kept the chair rocking steadily. In a watery, motion-induced trance, her mind darted like a hungry fish in an underground river, snapping at bits of memory that scudded by on the rushing current.

Her first pregnancy. . . belly just beginning to protrude, having difficulty buttoning her winter coat. She dug out an old coat, roomy but not the right length. Wanting to salvage it, she took it to the dry cleaner's around the corner to have it altered. She went into the shop wearing the coat. The tailor, his teeth flashing in an alarming grin, rose from his little chair in the back and approached the counter.

"Madame, what may I, a poor tailor, do for a woman such as you."

She laughed at the excessive formality, the suggestion of lechery behind it, and hurried to explain about the coat. He held up a finger to suggest that she had no more than a few seconds to wait for such a minor problem to be taken care of, and scurried to get his chalk and yardstick. Returning, he beckoned her around to his side of the counter, and knelt before her. He marked the line of the new hem, chattering all the while about the silliness of women's fashions that had the hems going up and down like, ah,--here a pause and a lascivious grin--a yo-yo. He finished at the front where he started and, still kneeling, let his playful brown eyes rove upwards over her body. Only then did he realize she was pregnant.

"Ah, Madame. . ." His eyes, no longer mischievous or suggestive, were riveted to her softly rounded belly; his face glowed with something akin to adoration. A distant part of her felt her amused smile fade; sensed in every pore the tininess of the dry-cleaning shop, its heat and noxious odours. That part of her longed to flee, longed for something to happen that would free her from him; but the moment stretched out almost endlessly, forming a grotto of silence around them.

The presser, coming back from lunch, jangled the bells hanging above the door and broke the pell. Angela shed the

coat quickly and fled the shop. Unable to face the ardour of the little man again, she'd sent Robert back to pick it up when it was ready.

She shook her head and, surfacing, took a deep breath. Memory, which in the depths of her illness had shut down entirely, was once more a buzzing hive. She tried to think what it was all about, whether it had flung itself up between her and the events of the morning merely to divert her attention--or to instruct. Why had it threaded its way back through the maze of an intervening lifetime to that insignificant moment in the dry cleaning shop? To bolster her courage by reminding her of a forgotten power? For it was *power* that the tailor's eyes had acknowledged, the power of life itself, the power that transcended the small rounds of the day-to-day and the veiled hostility of that parallel but alien other world. And it was against a sense of powerlessness she had battled that afternoon, pleading poverty with the taxi driver like a welfare case; taking seats on a bus packed with people who had spent the day doing *real jobs*; feeling herself a failure even at keeping the affections of her husband. . . .

She looked down at the child in her arms and smoothed the wisps of dark hair on her head. Those eyes, she thought, already so curious and so watchful, she seems

almost to guess what's behind my eyes, while I can't begin to imagine what is behind hers. I long to be able to get past the sheer hard work of this baby business, to put the diapers and pabulum in their rightful place, and reach in instead, to somehow grasp the enormity of this emergence from dark nothingness into being, to--

Here the child, with a fine disregard for a mother's metaphysical concerns, took possession of the finger that stroked her cheek and returned to her feeding. "So that's your answer, is it," she murmured. "Well, you may be right this time, but later, no, not later, soon, soon we'll get to the rest."

Angela leaned her head on the high back of the chair and closed her eyes. This was not the same world they had ventured out into this afternoon. How the face of downtown had changed: it seemed so much dirtier, harder-edged, more dangerous than when she had worked there--or was it just that, with three children to worry about, she now saw everything as a present or future threat?

The young girls from the shops and the offices, and those invincible women with their careers: they all paraded before her now, with their determined way of walking, their designer suits and blouses, or their *Femme de carrière* dresses plastered to their bodies by the winds gusting around the office towers. She'd had ample time to observe them along their tortuous route up to the Seaforth Medical

Building. How alien they all seemed, though only five years before she had walked beside them, indistinguishable except perhaps for the contents of her briefcase: layout sketches, type samples and Velox prints. Only five years ago she had "dropped out" to have a child: today, with the clarity of a trapeze artist operating without safety nets, she saw how profoundly that act, unwitting at the time, had changed her. She could no longer identify with that world of concrete surfaces, of hard edges and angles, of time parcelled out in digital chunks. Her life with the children had no such boundaries: it was fluid, almost formless; it flowed according to the unpredictable needs of their little bodies; and, like the universe, it spiralled outward from its centre--the shattering moment of birth--in ever-expanding circles.

The child slept softly in her arms. Stealthily she rose, deposited her in the crib and crept out. She went down to the kitchen to check on the boys, the chicken simmering in its sauce of wine, mushrooms and bacon, and the trifle chilling in the refrigerator. Quickly she prepared the green salad, while settling all the details about the boys' schedule with Tracy. "And just try and keep them out of my hair while we're eating," she sighed. A dignified

meal with only adults present--what unimaginable luxury. She set dahlias and chrysanthemums, white, gold, cranberry, and mauve, between candles on the table and ran upstairs to shower and dress.

She stood before the closet, despairing. After the bright greens and peacock blues, the dramatic stripes and diagonals of the clothes she'd seen downtown, her pale delicate floral prints and neutral beige plaids seemed dull and flat. *What on earth to wear. I've been neglecting myself, it shows in my wardrobe. Must do something about these clothes, surely that would give me a lift.* Her fingers wandered over the tops of hangers, rested on a garment bag inside of which, she knew, hung an emerald green silk dress. But she rejected it, regretfully, as too formal for an evening at home. She looked back at the flowered cottons. *Dull and flat, yes. Like me. What do I have to give any more? No wonder Robert--*

"No!" She spoke the word out loud, startling herself and the cat, who lay sleeping on her chair in the corner of the room. *Clothes don't make-- I wasn't always-- But what does make and, oh, what's been made of me?*

If, back on the other side of her illness, Angela thought about it at all, she must surely have considered lifelong fidelity an option available only to the few.

"Think about it," her sensible head would have instructed. "A possible 45, 50, even 60 years together, *if* you stay married till one of you dies, which all the odds are against. And in all that time not to stray even *once*, either of you? Better to accept the inevitable, to prepare for it even, than to have your technicolour dream of bliss-for-life shattered by the first slip-up."

That's what sensible Angela would have thought/said then. But since then Angela has taken leave of her senses, so to speak; and now she stands in front of her closet wondering if she is facing Slip-up No. 1, or one slip-up in a series, or a Major Slip-up amid a barrage of minor ones, or--

Or not a slip-up at all, but a step away.

Her eyes strayed towards Robert's closet. The folding doors hung slightly open, letting in a narrow shaft of light. The rest was a cavern of shadows. She strained to see beyond the light, into the dark corners along the floor. Inside, she knew, it bulged with an untidy jumble of ties, shirts and suits, some older than their marriage. This closet, their attic and their basement all attested to Robert's compulsion to fold up, tie up, pocket or store away everything, rather than make the awful decision to part with it. She, who was driven by a need to periodically sort and

clear out things that got in the way of seeing where you were, had once tidied up the closet, separated out what she considered the hopeless from the wearable, and had bundled them up to give to the Salvation Army. She had showed the stuff to Robert, counting on his gratitude, on his bowing to her good sense. At first he had nodded his agreement; then, on a second thought, began looking through the things. When she checked his closet later, everything was back. "The good stuff will come back in style, you'll see. And I can use the really awful stuff for gardening," he said, forgetting that he never gardened.

And so this morning, knowing he would soon be needing his spring-and-fall coat, and would be grumbling that it hadn't been cleaned, she had pulled it out, checking the pockets as was her habit. . . .

Dear Robert,

I shall be brief and not nearly as sweet as you were in your letter. There is something I dread telling you but that I feel you must know, now that the baby is born and we are securely rooted in Toronto.

While usually it is the woman who ends up feeling used in these affairs, this time it is you, Robert, who have been used. Everything I did was carefully calculated, carefully timed, right down to the actual hour of the seduction--yes, you were seduced, no matter what you thought your rôle in the whole affair was. I only wanted a child, and as far as I was concerned, we were finished as soon as I was sure I was pregnant.

For this reason I refuse outright your offer of "assistance," as you so euphemistically put it, not because I think you mean anything bad or demeaning, but because first and most obviously it

means we *will* still be linked to each other despite my intentions to the contrary. Secondly, any assistance given, however well-intentioned, has the potential for arousing feelings of proprietorship, for making interference seem warranted, etc. Protest, protest, I can hear it all, even as I write, but never mind, I could go on, and you could protest and swear and plead, and in the end we would only wear each other out, and for what?

I am sorry to have to be so brutal, but it is best you know the truth: that way I am sure you can, will, forget about me, forget about feeling responsible for the child. I suspect you're no prizewinner as a husband or a father, but if you have any responsibility at all, it is only to Angela and your children with her.

Maggie

P.S. I hear through the grapevine that Angela is greatly improved. I am happy for that--happy for you. Talk to her more--don't say it's impossible. If you could pour out your soul to me, you can to her, too. She's not as fragile as you think.
M.

She'd read the letter twice, then burned it.

Angela glanced at her watch, shook her head, and reached into her closet. She pulled out a light blue cotton print dress and drew it over her head. Sitting at her dressing table, she brushed her fine, dark hair--still limp and exhausted from two close pregnancies--and gathered it into a severe little psyche-knot at the back of her head. Now her brown eyes stood out, too large and stark for her pale skin. She rummaged in her drawer for a tube of blush

and then groaned, remembering that Jeremy had painted the bathroom wall with her last one and she'd forgotten to pick up a new one. Just then she heard a key in the downstairs door; joyous shrieks and the thud of the boys' feet on the stairs; and Robert's voice calling, "A-n-n-gela, we're home."

"Coming!" she called back. She gave a hasty rub to her cheeks with a cold cloth, put on lipstick and hurried down the stairs. "Olive, Stanley, how nice to see you again!" she cried, a little breathless.

"Hello, Angela dear," Olive said, her eyes flickering. She looked, as always, like someone who hadn't decided if her body was a playground or a battlefield. Her dress was a crisp, hard-edged composition in black and white, like the ones Angela had seen that afternoon. The wide V of the neckline exposed her lightly freckled shoulders, and the narrow black skirt, slit up both sides, showed more of her thighs than Angela really wanted to see. The stark contrasts of the ensemble set off her Tangerine Tease mouth, her eyes shaded in two tones of violet, and flame-coloured hair shaped like a helmet whose visor had slipped down over one eye. With a shaft of sunlight behind her, bouncing off the crystal earrings that dangled from the perfect shells of her ears, she scintillated like the evening star.

Angela shrank from her, feeling as faded and shabby as the old chair they kept around for the cat to sleep on. She

turned to Stan, whose rumpled appearance and flat-footed stance never changed, and offered her cheek for his adoring, doggish kiss. "Angie, you look great," he said. She smiled steadily into his eyes, fearing that if she looked down she would catch him wagging his tail. "It's been too long."

She looked finally at Robert, just straightening up from greeting the children. *Surely Olive and Stan know all about him and Maggie. . . oh God, what ever must they be thinking. . .* The thought that she might be an object of their pity wrenched at her innards with such violence that her knees started to buckle. She backed up, pretending awkwardness, and clutched at the doorframe. Robert, turning just in time to catch her look, slipped an arm around her and walked her into the sitting room. He whispered, "Everything okay, honey?" She nodded, unable to look at him. The foundation was rotting, the roof caving in, the ditches around the yard oozing with an inky acid; and there stood Robert, graduate of the "I'm Okay, You're Okay" school of psychology, with his *Everything okay, Honey?* bouquet in hand. *How can he look at me, how can I let him touch me--*

She fought for control, terrified that these thoughts, leaping with all the kinetic energy of evil sprites, would pronounce a death sentence on their marriage before it had ever gone to trial.

"Well, then," said Robert when the children had gone back upstairs with Tracy, "shall we have a drink before dinner?"

While Robert busied himself in the kitchen, they settled into the sofa and chairs.

"The children really are lovely," Olive said. "Do have the good sense to enjoy this stage of their lives. What follows will not be nearly as pleasant." Though Olive was only a year or two older than Angela, her two children, born while she was in her early twenties, were already well into their teens. They had grown from solemn round-faced moppets, the darlings of all their elementary school teachers, into high school-age side-show freaks. The last time Angela had seen Billy, the son, she had not recognized him until Jeremy did. She had been out walking the children around the twilight village streets one sultry evening just before their bedtime, when she had seen a group of teenagers loitering and smoking in the square. She steered the stroller in a wide arc around them, pulling along resisting Jeremy, whose eyes were riveted on them. A voice separated itself, elevated itself above the din of the music that blared out of a ghetto-blaster, "Yo, Mrs. Fairbairn! Mrs. Fairbairn, how's it goin'? Don't tell me you got *three* a them, now? And are they ever cute! Jeremy!" The apparition in sleeveless, chained and studded leather vest threw itself on its knees before her child. She stared down

at the bald stripe that split his head in two, at the multi-hued spikes of hair phosphorescing in the twilight, and instinctively tightened her grip on the child's hand. But Jeremy was crowing with delight, "Billy! Billy! What'd you do to your head!" This outburst of a child caused such amusement among the friends of Billy, that he looked up sheepishly at Angela and said, "Don't pay no attention to them, Mrs. Fairbairn. Just a private joke. It don't mean nothin' against you." He straightened up. "Nice to see ya. Say 'Hi' to Mr. Fairbairn."

"I will," said Angela, looking at him intently, wondering why in heaven he wanted to look like this. And that infernal music! It made CBC's "Brave New Waves" sound like a nursery school sing-a-long. Before his metamorphosis, this same creature had won first prize in a regional competition for young musicians, evoking the sorrow of an angel cast out of paradise with his rendering of the adagio of Mozart's clarinet concerto. The boy looked down, shuffling his feet, as though he had just become aware of how he appeared to her. "So long, then," he mumbled, turning away.

"Not all children go the way ours did," Stanley admonished Olive.

"Oh, by the time mine are teenagers they'll undoubtedly be finding even more hideous things to do." Angela's voice was a little too high, and the giggle that followed was not

hers. "Of course, this afternoon was not what anyone would call a picnic either," she added, plunging on in embarrassed animation. "But then, you probably don't want to hear about it." She looked over at Stan, who smiled encouragement. "What do you mean, of course we want to hear about it!" Wryly she recounted the afternoon's adventures, enlarging the details to make it sound more a comedy than it was.

Stan was appreciative. "That's like something straight out of Erma Bombeck." His laugh was a cross between a bark and a snuffle. "I love it, Angie, I love it." Angela, glancing at Olive, saw her cast a withering look at Stan. *Rarely have I seen a match of such excruciating balance, she thought. Olive, who needs someone able to glide through her treacherous waters like a dolphin, gets this limping, basset hound-saboteur; and Stan, who wants only the same kind of unswerving devotion he gives, gets annihilated by her every time he opens his mouth.*

Robert entered with a tray of drinks. "Here we are, everybody," he said, handing one to each. "And I want to propose a toast," said Stan quickly. "To the hostess with the mostest!"

Olive groaned. "Forgive him, please, Angela? Not for the grammar, which is dreadful enough, but for trotting that one out one more time."

"It's okay," Angela said. "I haven't heard it in a while. I'd almost forgotten--" She stopped, bit her

tongue. Stan, unheeding, lunged on. "I think motherhood suits you to a T, Angela" he said. "What do you think, Olive. Doesn't she look great?"

"Yes, she does. Great," sighed the Evening Star, reaching for a package of cigarettes on the table beside her. "'Suits you to a T.'" What an original cliché, Stan."

"In Angela's case it's anything but a cliché, my dear. Look at her. A little too thin, mind you, but never so beautiful." To her dismay all of them, including Robert (how could he sit there grinning at her like that), looked at her. She blushed, felt foolish, then grew annoyed. "It's getting dark in here. You wouldn't be saying such things if all the lamps were on." She touched the knot of hair at the back of her head and jumped up. "Must be time to put the food on," she said, and fled to the kitchen.

At the table, Angela was relieved to find that the conversation had drifted off to business matters. This made her invisible for a while, as she served the food, poured the wine, dished out second helpings of everything to Stan-- and listened with half an ear to the discussion of their latest advertising contract, in case anyone asked her what she thought. No one did.

Near the end of dinner, Stan rushed to rescue her from anonymity. "Honestly, Angela," he said as he lapped up the last pools of sauce from his plate with a chunk of dinner roll, "these *nouvelle cuisine* frozen dinners we're promoting

are so good you could've served one up to us tonight and, sure, maybe we'd have known the difference, but we wouldn't have been insulted in the least."

"Next time," laughed Angela. Venus's twinkling lights swung 180 degrees as she turned from conversation with Robert to flash a look of unalloyed disgust at her Vulcan. *You irredeemable slob, Stanley*, the look said, *you've succumbed*. It was an unwritten but rigid rule of their partnership that it was fine to make a living pushing all kinds of objectionable products, even ideas, but you must never, even for a single moment, believe in any of your own hype. Robert looked nonplussed at this unforgivable gaffe of Stan's, though he, too, in recent conversations with Angela, had come perilously close to the same thing. He broke in hurriedly, his resonant voice dispersing the treacherous echoes that still hovered in the air.

"Say, Angela, we could use a feature story on this when our celebrity promoter comes to town," he said. "Think April would be interested? This guy is one of Hollywood's newest and hottest."

Angela looked doubtful. In her fifteen-year career as a journalist April had gone from chasing ambulances and police cruisers to--her latest--a feature article on the bag-ladies of Montreal. And somewhere in between--a year ago, or was it two now?--there had been a series on single mothers. Ever since then, April had been, well, not exactly

herself. Haunted, she thought, like me, but for a different reason.

"Run around after a movie idol? I don't know. Once, a long time ago, maybe. But April's changed these last few years." She looked at them all and shrugged.

"Never mind," said Robert. "I'm sure she'll get a charge out of it. She never could resist The Big Scoop. I'll call her myself, first thing in the morning."

"Well, when you're talking to her, tell her to come for dinner tomorrow night, too," said Angela. "It's been months since--" A loud shriek, a thump from the floor above, and peals of childish laughter. "The children," she finished lamely. "The children are forgetting they have an aunt."

"Yes, that ought to get her here. She adores those kids."

The children. April. The longing in her eyes when she looks at them. Another thump. More laughter. The milk-glass tears of the chandelier rattled briefly.

Angela stood up hastily, clearing the plates and serving dishes. "I'll get the dessert and coffee," she said.

She poured coffee beans into the grinder and let it whir noisily for 30 seconds; measured the coffee into the filter; filled the kettle and put it on to boil. As she scraped the plates, Olive appeared in the doorway.

"Anything I can do?" she asked. Angela was about to say,

"Not a thing, I was about to go and sit down myself," but the look on Olive's face stopped her.

"Of course, " she said. "You can stack the dishes on the side while I prepare the coffee tray."

"Those kids of yours look really sweet," Olive said, a note of wistfulness in her voice. "They all look sweet at that age," she said gently, remembering Billy. She reached into the cupboard for the cups and saucers, making a project of inspecting them for spots or rings. The air between them had suddenly sprouted a forest of unspoken--unspeakable--thoughts.

"Will you be coming back to work one of these days?"

"Oh," she said, startled a little by the directness of the question. *Oh God, no, never. Impossible. But how to explain--I never was that keen, it was just to be doing something for--with--Robert, it seems even less important now than it did then, I've lost all heart for the games--without insulting Olive.* "I don't, ah, really know, Olive," she hedged.

"What will you do if you don't? Stay home forever?"

Angela moved the spoons and cups around on the coffee tray. "I don't know that yet, either, really." How could she answer a question about something in the future? She had trouble thinking about later that evening. Time had become so slippery lately: what one did with it, where it went, were so hard to control. Hadn't she just lost a whole

chunk of it? Where it should have been, just behind her, there was a gaping hole, a nothingness that she might drop back into at any moment. As for the future, she couldn't imagine it as anything defined by tidy rounds of hours or years--it loomed like an impenetrable swamp.

Somewhere along the way between her past life and this present one, she'd gotten lost. Birds had come and eaten the crumbs she'd dropped to mark her path through the wilderness. All the time-ruled habits of her former life--the rising at seven, coming home at six, the shoptalk, the deadlines, all the things that once gave life meaning and shape--had slipped away from her. What was left now? Her days with the children had none of these firm boundaries. She often felt soft, like a mollusc; soft in the head, soft in the spine. . . and scared. . . . Where had the sense of being in charge of her life gone? She had felt nearly indestructible once. But now, caught up in the messy business of reproducing herself and Robert--when she should be feeling that they really would live forever--now she was plagued with nameless fears for them all, could think of little but the fragility and tentativeness of their lives. That feeling of being in control of things, would it ever come back, or was it an illusion anyway, and better lost?

Olive was inspecting her tapering, Tangerine Tease nails. "I guess you were glad to have a daughter after the two boys."

Angela smiled. "Very. Especially since she'll be the last."

Olive smiled too. "You anticipated my next question." She hurried on, "Not that it's any of my business, of course. I was just a little worried about you, that's all. I know you weren't well after Robbie was born--"

The kettle whistled behind Angela. "But I feel fine now, everything worked out just fine," she said hastily as she turned to pour water over the freshly ground coffee. *Please, don't pity me for something I hardly remember. . . .* To her it was just a bad dream of darkened bedrooms, a bully of a nanny, Robby born, Tara born, just a blur between. She had no memory, and therefore no defense when anyone spoke of it. *Pity me for this other thing, if you must, finding out about my husband's betrayal, now, when I am fully awake. Surely you must know all the sordid details--*

But Olive was going on as if she hadn't heard and wasn't really thinking about Angela at all. "--and girls bring a real special pack of headaches, I guess you know. That one of mine--" Angela, hearing the distress in her voice, put the kettle down and turned around. Olive sat at the kitchen table, her hands now folded over her mouth and chin. "She's getting to be a terror--we can't control her any more. Last Saturday she went out, said she was going to a movie. What time does she get in? Three-thirty in the morning. I ask you, what movie goes till three in the

morning? As if that wasn't enough, she burst in like the devil was chasing her, and two minutes later, the doorbell went off like a fire alarm. Stan went down to see what in hell was going on, and there stood a taxi driver, foaming at the mouth and yelling that she and her two friends had tried to stiff him--jumped out at a stop sign about two blocks away and split in three directions, like it was all planned. He picked Caroline to follow home--and there he was, demanding to be paid! So guess what--she turned around and paid him, just like that, even gave the guy a tip. Can you believe what I'm telling you? What kind of a monster am I raising? What on earth was it all about, if she had the money on her all the time?"

"A little rite of initiation?" Angela knew nothing about these things and feared the time when her own children would be putting their upbringing on trial; still, she could suggest another perspective. But apparently the question was rhetorical, for Olive rushed on without considering what Angela had said.

"So she was grounded. So last night she went out anyway, to a football game supposedly. Just didn't come home after school. I was so furious, I wanted to kill her. I waited up, I met her at the front door when she came home, to give her the old what-for, and she was so insolent, so, so--" She buried her face in her hands, her voice grew ragged. "Just the look of her irritates me, with that green

stripe in her hair, and all that black leather and black goop around her eyes--" Angela shuddered, thinking of the angels at the metro station-- "so when she started talking back, I, well--

"She was hanging up her jacket, I grabbed the hanger out of her hands, meaning to give her a whack across the arm with it." Her voice sank to a whisper. "She threw up her hand to deflect the blow and the hanger hit her in the face." Olive looked up, her face ravaged. "This morning she came down to breakfast--she never comes to breakfast any more, but this morning she had to--just to show off her black eye!" She blinked, and tears spilled down her cheeks.

Angela put a box of Kleenex on the table in front of her and sat down. "And you know you're the world's worst mother, and a child abuser to boot, right?"

"How did you guess," said Olive bitterly. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose. "What on earth did I do to her that she has to punish me like this? Bloody kids, they treat you so abominably it's impossible for you to keep your cool, and then you're the one who gets buried by the truckload of guilt after every confrontation."

Angela sat, wordlessly shredding a Kleenex onto the table. This was ironic: she'd been worried Olive might try to pry something out of her, and instead she was filling her up with this tale of woe. Olive was not like her, had figured out right away the limits of her tolerance of baby-

talk, and had lost no time rounding up a good nanny for her children. She had gone back to work soon after the second one was born; no guilt, no apologies. Better for her, better for the kids, she'd always said.

Angela made a pile of the shredded pieces of Kleenex, and twisted them into short, ragged rope. "I'm sorry, Olive," she said. "I really don't know what to say, I--"

"Oh, don't, Angela, it's okay, I don't expect--just, thanks for listening. Stan refuses to talk about it, insists it's all just normal teenage stuff, shouldn't worry so much."

"Maybe Stan's right," Angela suggested, though she knew it would sound disloyal to Olive.

"But what if he's not!" Olive burst out. "How can anyone assume anything like that? Would you chance it with *your* kids?"

"I don't know how it'll be with mine when they are that age," Angela said slowly. "I guess all I can hope is that I'll have the patience and fortitude to see it through to the other side."

"That's what's so bad when you're caught up in it--you stop believing there is another side," said Olive. "Or you worry that if there is, it's worse."

As if the view from my window weren't already bleak enough.

Olive stopped, stricken; she put a hand over Angela's. "I should shut up. I must be scaring you."

Angela shrugged. "Not really," she said. "Or at least, no more than I already was."

From the doorway, the sound of a discreet clearing of the throat. Stan, hands in pockets, brow and jowls adrift on a face as rumpled as his clothes: "If you two ladies could desist from your gossiping long enough to get two fellows a cup of coffee, we'd be eternally grateful," he said with an exaggerated bow.

"What do you think, Olive, should we go back in there?" Angela winked conspiratorially. "I don't mind, as long as the TV dinner talk is over," Olive said, the cold fire glinting once again in her eyes.

When they were all seated around the coffee table again, Robert, trying to make peace, said: "Shall I put on some music?" Answered by a chorus of Yeses, he pressed further. "Special requests, anyone? Stan?" Angela looked at Robert in disbelief. How many times had they--? And Stan always said: "How about old Ludwig Van, Bobby. Haven't heard that Fifth Piano since the last time we were here. Have you got it handy there?"

And Robert always said: "Sure, Stan. That agreeable to everyone?"

And always, to show her displeasure, Olive folded her arms, twisted in her seat and said, "Sure, let the Emperor strut his stuff," or something like it.

Sometimes Stan would back down; but this time he wouldn't be denied. "It's like a new food," he lectured primly. "You have to try it five times before you can say for sure you don't like it."

"But in Beethoven's case, five hundred times," Olive retorted. "Ah, give me a break, Olive." Stan had the thing in his jaws and wasn't about to let it drop. "It's enough you don't want to hear Beethoven in our house. Humour me, just for this evening, okay?"

"I'll put the volume on low, okay Olive?" said Robert, looking from one to the other.

Angela busied herself with the pouring of the coffee as the first majestic bars of the concerto swept over them. All the years she had known them, Stan and Olive had been like this, no doubt out of some deep disappointment with each other. Robert found it disconcerting, even annoying, but Angela secretly admired it. No holds barred: dangerous, Robert said. Nothing hidden: healthy, she said. (If the disappointment was mutual, they were at least on equal footing.) But tonight she was not so sure. Hostility darted between them like a piranha looking for food; each fed it with strips off the other. She looked at Robert, who

sat, obviously ill at ease, feigning absorption in the music. Was this to be their destiny, too?

Robert looked up from the record jacket he still held in his hands. "Well," he said, "I guess you've all been following the news of the MSO's tour of Europe. Taking the place by storm, apparently."

"Ah, that Dutoit, seems he's quite the sensation," Stan grumbled. "Still can't figure it out. He's not all that good-looking. Or am I missing something?"

"Are you ever," purred Olive. "He's got great body language, and is particularly adept at the French repertoire."

"Christ! Leave it to you to reduce everything to sex," growled Stan.

"I don't reduce anything, Stanley dear. I simply recognize it where it is--and it's everywhere. Of course, you can't even read the signals your own daughter is sending out, so it's no wonder you miss Dutoit's."

But Stanley had closed his eyes, in a mockery of being swept away by the music. "Ahhh, dig that credenza," he breathed, with such fervour that they all laughed in spite of themselves, in spite of--or perhaps because of--Stan's predictable buffoonery.

Suddenly Stan opened his eyes. "Hey, what about getting some tickets to the Centaur this season, like we used to in

the good old days!" He looked around at all of them, begging for more attention, more approval.

Olive's response was quick and pointed. "Well, that's very nice of you, Stan, but wouldn't you be more comfortable at home, snoozing in your own bed!"

Robert rushed in again to smooth things over: "The brochure they sent out last spring listed The Duchess of Malfi as one of the possibilities," he said. "I was disappointed to see they decided not to do it."

"Probably afraid they'd blow it," sniffed Olive. "That type of play is not exactly their forte. They're better at the kitchen sink stuff."

"True," laughed Robert. "And better to keep the Duchess in the perfect form we've given her in our imaginations than see her desecrated by a bad performance."

"Interesting that you're so concerned about a stage desecration--" Words suddenly out, like concealed weapons. *How did they, never intended, what is this, a contagious--*

Now all three were looking at her, as a flush spread up her neck and face to the roots of her hair. "That is, I mean, we've seen some very fine things--what was that play? I only remember the line, 'I am an island of calm in the midst of a turbulent sea'?" She looked at the ceiling and made a gesture of holding her hat down with both hands, while the others hooted with laughter.

"Artichoke! That was the best ever," Stan barked.
"Fourteen years of sleeping in the smokehouse, just for bringing a bastard child home to his wife!"

Angela stared at Stan. "It's true," she said. "I'd forgotten all about that part. Isn't that, I mean, all I remembered was the young girl who wore the hat to keep a lid on herself and, oh yes, there was the old beau who came to visit--"

Chains of, guilt by, free association? No, memory like a lightning rod grounded in the heart. The play, a line remembered, oft repeated. . . island of calm Soon after, a holiday in Jamaica like a green oasis in the desert of winter. Time out--island of calm--in the turbulent sea of work. . . . Weather warm but capricious; a New Year's party, and dancing beneath a giant gold moon and the myriad stars in an emerald green oasis-in-the-desert dress. Later, a storm had blown in from sea and raged, hour after hour. . . . Their room, an island-of-calm facing the turbulent sea, power out, nothing to do but watch the storm--and make love. A sigh, a giving in, a yes-why-not to life, snow-bound psyche expanding, opening out like a flower in the tropical warmth and yes, everything had been right and she'd come home rosy and rested and carrying their first child. . . .

Now Stan brings up what he remembers--the business about the smokehouse. . . fourteen years of feuding. . . and a reconciliation that came only after she'd evened things

out a bit. . . . But this is no farm in Saskatchewan, we have no smokehouse, oh, whatever is to become of us, what on earth keeps me sitting here so quietly, I ought to just scream at him, Stan and Olive probably wouldn't bat an eye, they'd think he had it coming--

The bitter anger that surged upward, threatening to engulf her, was diverted by Tracy's appearance in the doorway.

"The baby's crying and won't stop and Jeremy and Robby say they won't go to sleep unless Mommy and Daddy come and kiss them goodnight," she announced sullen-faced.

"I'll go up," Angela said quickly. "If you'll all excuse me for a moment?" Olive shrugged. Stanley bared his teeth in a knowing grin. "Sure, Mom," he said. "Do your thing."

"I'll come up in a moment," Robert murmured, touching her hand as she passed between their chairs.

She went first to the boys' room. They were hiding in the closet and, when she walked past the door, leaped out with loud boos. She knew they were there, but jumped and screamed nevertheless, only half in jest. They laughed and ran gleefully around the room in front of her. When she caught Robby she threw him high in the air, caught him and bounced him down on the bed. He squealed with delight. For Jeremy, she reared up and fell on him like a disgruntled

mother bear, mauling and squeezing him until he promised, gasping, he would go straight to bed.

"And, you will listen quietly while Tracy reads you a story. Won't you." She covered them and kissed their damp, flushed foreheads, though she knew the ritual was not finished. "And there'll be no more getting up. Will there." They stared at her, not moving.

"I have to pee," piped one.

"I want water," piped the other.

She sank onto Robbie's bed, wrist to her forehead, in mock exasperation. "I'll count to ten, and if you're not back--!"

They bounded out of bed and ran for the bathroom. She lay there, listening to their bathroom noises, the jostling and pushing and jockeying for position in front of the toilet, instructions from Jeremy to Robby about getting it in the right place, the sound of water running into the cup and "Hold the glass with both hands, Robbie. Mummy says." She looked around the room, at the panda bear wallpaper Jeremy had chosen and which he had "helped" her put up; at the mountains of watchful stuffed animals on each bed; at the dump trucks and Lego monsters on the shelves. A vanishing world? *I am an island of calm. . . . Ha! Like Krakatoa. . . .*

A feeble cry from the next room caught her attention. She went to the door and peeked in. When the shaft of light

from the open door fell across her face, the baby raised her head and howled out loud. Angela went to her, a warm rush of milk in her breasts already answering to the child's call. She picked her up and hugged her, soothed her with a rocking motion of her body, a sing-song, "There, there, precious, there, there." When she was quiet, she sat again with her in the rocking chair. A fierce resolve was forming, which calmed her: You three little ones, she thought, you will have to be my tri-corner hat. I was ill-- because of you, perhaps, I don't really know. No matter, now I will be well for you. Her voice breaking in her throat, she began to hum softly, then to sing,

*Hush little baby, don't you say a word
Mama's goin' to buy you a mockin' bird.*

Rocking, rocking, small mouth tugging, swallowing,
breathing, tugging,

*And if that mockin' bird don't sing,
Mama's goin' to buy you a diamond ring.*

Pulling, breast and belly rising, contracting, body awash
with a melting warmth from breasts to groin and singing:

*And if that diamon' ring turns brass,
Mama's goin' to buy you a lookin' glass.*

A looking glass held up to the past: a woman nested
abed with her man, dozing while her infant son feeds, dozing
and rousing, aroused, contractions rising, breaking like
waves in her, painful, pleasant, resonating through womb and

neck-of-womb, swelling labia swelling out, flowering open like lilies; a cry escapes and the man, drawn to her exuded warmth, answering swells quickly and enters as, shuddering, they both come.

Her voice faint, she continues:

And if that looking glass gets broke,

Mama's goin' to buy you a billy goat.

The door opens. Robert stands, hesitating; then closes the door behind him and swiftly crosses the room. Kneels beside the rocking chair, opens her dress farther and puts his lips to her other breast. "Oh, God, " she whispers. His hand slides up under her skirt, caresses the insides of her parted thighs, strokes the damp silk of her panties.

And if that billy goat won't pull,

Mama's going to buy you a cart and bull.

Breathless now, no longer singing but sighing, adlibbing, soughing, her body open and undulant as the sea,

And if that cart and bull turn over,

I'll meet you tonight beneath a downy cover.

A sharp intake of breath and the song stops, drowned by the oceanic crashing of her heart, the cetacean babbling inside her ear.

After a moment, the song resumes, breathless, muddled, as though tangled in seaweed:

And if that downy cover be torn,

We'll both rue the day we ever were born.

She opened her eyes, gazed blankly at Robert.

"Angela," he whispered, bowing his head and laying it on her shoulder. What was that in his voice? She put her cheek to his forehead and waited, memory now like a clear tidal pool alive with darting fish. (Studying the calendar the next morning, as if she didn't already know its answer, a tremor of fear and nausea rose in her. She thought: "This will be our daughter;" and then: "And she will be the last.")

"Angela, you are so beautiful. Everything was so nice tonight. I hope it wasn't too much for you."

Dreamily: "I survived. I'm still here." On an impulse that was as clear as it was cruel, she put a hand under his chin and nudged his face up to look at her. "I'm not as fragile as you think, Robert."

He buried his face in her neck and squeezed her shoulder with one hand. Then he stood up, straightening his clothes.

She buttoned up her dress. "I guess you'd better attend to our guests before they start wondering what we're up to."

"I daresay Stan and Olive know exactly what we're up to and are about to leave in disgust." His face took on a look of puzzlement. "I don't know how this all came about, I only came up to say goodnight to the kids and kiss the

baby." He bent over them, tenderly kissed Angela, kissed the baby, and was gone.

Angela struggled to her feet and put the sleeping child back in her crib.

Stan and Olive were gathering their things to leave.

"Well, see you two at the office in the morning," said Robert, a little too heartily.

"Right." Olive kissed Angela, squeezed her arm.

"Wonderful to see you again, dear, and thanks for the meal. Everything was just divine."

Stan, eager to lap up the last crumbs of her affection, smothered her in one of his hugs. "Next time, our place. Right, Olive?"

"Sure. If you like Stauffer's." Her earrings flashed a farewell as she turned and walked out into the night.

Robert stood looking after the taillights of their departing car. "Things aren't going too well with them," he said. And that, she thought, must be the understatement of the year. He turned to Angela. "Stan's talked to me quite a lot about it. I listen as much as I can, because he seems to need to get it off his chest." *And have you talked a lot to him about us?* "I finally told him the other day I thought they should get some counselling." *And did he*

advise us to do the same? I-will-if-you-will sort of thing?
Angela nodded, silent, while her evil sprites banged furiously to be let out; but she would not unlock the door, not yet. *Not bad for a pop psychologist, she thought. Listen patiently, mutter the right phrases, and when in over your head, pack them off to the so-called experts--whose own lives rarely stand up to close scrutiny.*

"Well," he said, "guess I'll drive Tracy home."

Lying in bed, eyes wide open, her back to him. He sighs sleepily and rolls towards her. "Good supper, sweetheart," he mutters, throwing an arm over her. "And good dessert,too."

"Are you talking about the trifle?" His arm increases the pressure of its hold on her. "That was no ordinary trifle, if you'll pardon the pun," he says.

Drifting a little, he says, "'I am an island of calm.' What a great line. Must start going to the plays again."

"Fourteen years in the smokehouse," she says.

"Mmmnnnph."

Robert's arm around her has gone limp; his breath in her ear rises and falls like a freighter on heavy seas. She closes her eyes, but for her sleep is a flimsy raft, open to the wind and waves. The waves toss all about her, throwing aboard their harvest of the awesome and strange.

The wind shifts almost hourly, freezing to warm and back again, but she is not fooled: it has the unmistakeable smell of winter.

* * * * *

II

Friday morning. A radio-alarm pierced the pre-dawn silence with its cacophony of jingles and jokes and jockey-patter. Robert groaned, flung out one arm and fumbled over the dials until he found the Snooz button. He lay there, stalling, trying to think what day it was. Just five more minutes, he thought, opening one eye to check the clock. Beside a galaxy of radio lights an angular display of glowing red tubes gave the time: 5:29. With a wink the lighted tubes switched to 5:30.

Five thirty! He rose up on one elbow to make sure he was seeing it right, then dropped back to the pillow with a satisfied sigh. Jeremy must have been playing with the clock again. He closed his eyes, rolled back to the centre of the bed where Angela lay and pulled her close to him. Another delicious hour and a half. . .

Then it came to him: yesterday, glancing at his desk calendar as he left for home, he had found Friday's page filled with a list of appointments starting at 10:30; and a note across the bottom of the page in his own square digital-style printing: FINISH NORTON QUOTE.

The Norton Quote. Couldn't afford to blow that one, not after the kind of work he and Stan had put into it in the last six months. "Courtin' Norton" they called it, though neither of them had ever courted a woman with such care. Over the past six months they had waged a campaign of careful coaxing: a formal introductory letter, some carefully timed follow-up calls, a little catered reception at the studio with samples of their best work on display, and finally dinner at the Ritz for Norton Senior, whose "Yes" was the final word. At last they had been rewarded with a conditional kind of assent--a request for a quotation.

But it was warm, lying in bed next to Angela. Had they moved at all during the night? How could a bastard like Norton drag him out of her arms at this hour? With his knees pressed into the backs of hers, and his face buried in her hair, he abandoned thoughts of Norton and drifted for a few dangerous moments near the shoreline of dreams. . .

Once in the long ago of their life together, B.C. (before the children), 5:30 in the morning was a favourite hour for making love. He would always wake up first, before

the alarm, and would kiss Angela through all the slow stages of her wakening. And after, the ritual of a mutual scrub in the shower and, with time beginning to press, a standup breakfast in the kitchen before dashing off to the office. Angela would fix her hair and makeup in the car, moaning all the while about the high flush in her cheeks. At the red lights he would lean over to kiss her, knowing she was happy. *They* were happy. But all that was behind them now, lost like childhood in the never-never, supplanted by the newer rituals dictated by the needs of the children. The occasional memory of that earlier age that burned through the haze of the intervening years provoked such unreasonable longing in Robert that he almost preferred not to recall it.

He nuzzled the back of Angela's neck and inhaled the dark, buckwheat honey smell of her hair. How new all this was, and how intoxicating! All during her illness she had carried a peculiar odour, very faint on her skin, but more pronounced on her hair and scalp. Not sour, though it was bordering on that, so much as musty, stale, like the air in a room that has been closed up over the winter.

The radio blared again. His hand shot out to turn down the volume. Quoting Norton could wait another 5 minutes. Right now, the damp wisp of hair that fell across Angela's forehead, the heat that rose along the curve where their bodies touched, spoke with a more insistent voice. He slid one hand under her breast and pressed his lips to the nape

of her neck. With a little groan she rolled away onto her stomach. He was quiet for a moment, considering whether his need for her was more pressing than hers for sleep. Lately she was sleeping much better than she had, so perhaps. . . He stroked her hair, then slid his hand down the length of her back and over her hips. When she did not move, he rose up on one elbow to look at her face. What he saw was not reassuring. Sleep moulded her profile into a stone, from the carved angle of her forehead and nose to the long, uncompromising line of her jaw. What kind of dream could give her such a look? Or was it a dream? Was she even asleep? And what would she think if she opened her eyes and caught him probing her face like this?

Robert sat up and threw his legs over the side of the bed. He tucked the blankets around Angela and placed his pillow against her back. Ah well, the glow from moments like they'd had the night before couldn't be expected to last forever, especially after ten years of marriage. After ten years he should be happy they were still speaking to each other, let alone making love. Look at Stan and Olive. They still spoke, but it might be better if they didn't. He and Angela were drifting a bit, it was true, what with the children, her illness, but soon she would be completely well again, and then they'd get back on track. . . They still had a good thing going, that was clear. Or at least, all the business of Maggie aside (and it really was aside now),

he still had a good thing going for her. As for Angela, what did he know, really, after all this time? Save for a few rare moments, he had never really been able to read her. Even before her illness she had always seemed engrossed in something beyond them, and during the illness she had abandoned him completely for it, whatever it was.

Ten years. It was only last June they had celebrated the anniversary, the same day Tara was christened. After their guests left, they had gone out, just the two of them. It was his idea--he was determined to make an occasion of it, even though Angela said she didn't feel up to it. As if to mock his efforts, it was a disaster from beginning to end: he drank too much and she only picked at her food; she cried in the restaurant after dinner, and he drank more when they got home and then was sick all night. That was four months ago, when their life whirled in the vortex of a dark hole in space, when he was sure that Angela would never recover and, for that matter, neither would he.

He plodded off through the darkness to the bathroom. As he showered and shaved he whistled softly, tunelessly. Must be nuts to be whistling at this hour, he thought. But no, he had every reason. Olive and Stan and their bickering aside, last night had been quite a night. Angela really outdid herself with that dinner; and the trifle--what a *pièce de résistance*! Olive, who usually turned down desserts, had been unable to pass it up, had even taken a

second helping, and would be groaning for days about the damage to her waistline. Yes, Angela was really coming back to herself, the proof was right there. She had planned everything, and her timing was perfect. She had managed to stay with them the whole night, with none of the lapses which used to alarm him so. (Where did she go when her eyes went blank, when she sat so long without moving, while tears carved a path down her face?) She had missed nothing--and she was remembering things! A few months ago, that after-dinner conversation about the plays they had seen would have been impossible. Funny thing about that one, *Artichoke*. . . like Stan, he too remembered that the husband had been banished to the smokehouse, but had forgotten that the bastard child with the hat was the reason why.

And that trip to town with all the kids. A few months ago that too would have been inconceivable, beyond her. Thinking of how far she had come since last year at this time, he felt dangerously close to tears, for the worry and, truth-to-tell, impatience for her to get back to normal again, had nearly done him in. Those terrible days, when he would come home to find Jeremy wandering around downstairs by himself, Robby in his crib crying, his diaper all dirty, Angela just sitting in the rocking chair, staring out the window, singing to herself. . . He'd done everything a man should for his wife--hired a nanny for the boys, took her to doctor after doctor. . . But the doctors prescribed drugs

which she wouldn't take because she was lactating, then pregnant again--oh! the dismay over that! A terrible time . . . worse for him than for her, sometimes, he thought, because he felt so out of his depth, helpless, alone. . . doing his best to keep his own course steady, not to fly or sink with her moods, which shifted as quickly as the winds at sea. . . torn between his joy that they were to have another child and the wish that it hadn't happened so soon . . . worried that it would finish Angela off, that he would live out the rest of his marriage with an invalid wife. . . In the dark sky of their future, the "worse" in the "for better or worse" part of their marriage vows had been the one clear star, and the light it shed was bleak and cold.

But this morning, optimism was at its peak for, more remarkable than anything else about last night was the little interlude in the nursery. It was as though all the things that had gone missing came back all at once: along with the return of memory and presence had come a new response to love. The little remark at the end notwithstanding (*I'm not as fragile as you think*--whatever did she mean by it, anyway?), it brought the evening to a rather satisfying conclusion.

A small shuffling noise from the hallway outside the bathroom, and a determined push on the lower half of the door interrupted his whistling. He opened the door to find little Robby standing there rubbing his eyes.

"Pee-pee," he moaned.

Silently, not to disturb his half-sleep, Robert led him to the toilet, set the step-stool in place, and helped him climb up. He circled the child's body with one arm and waited, ready to prevent accidental falls or spills.

"That's my big boy," he said when Robby had finished without incident. He picked him up, kissing and hugging him. "Now, back to bed?"

"Time for bwekfass?"

"No, not yet. It's still very early."

"Where's Mummy?"

"Still sound asleep. That's how early it is."

"Why you up before Mummy?"

"Daddy's got a ton-and-a-half of work to get through today, and he has to finish on time, 'cause," he paused, lowered his voice to a stage whisper, "guess who's coming to dinner tonight." As soon as he said it he knew he shouldn't have, knew that it would excite the child, that he'd be wide awake and disturbing Angela, but it was too late--

"Who, who's coming to dinner?"

"I'll tell, but you have to promise to go back to bed and stay till Mummy gets up."

"Not sweepy no more."

"Oh, too bad, guess I can't tell you then."

"Who, who, Dadde-e-e-e!"

Robert made his eyes large and fierce and put a finger to his lips. "Promise to go back to bed?"

"Pwomise."

Finger still on his lips, Robert mouthed "Auntie April," without making a sound. Robby put a finger to his lips and threw back his head, his face full of glee. Again Robert had second thoughts about what he was telling the child. What if April couldn't come on such short notice? What a hell of a job explaining--

But the cat was already out of the bag, and Robby in his demented joy was bouncing on his arm as if it were a pogo stick. It would be a job to get the kid settled down again.

"So, what about it, is it back to bed, now?"

Robby continued to bounce. "Annie Aperl, Annie Aperl," he crowed.

"Shhh, you'll wake Mummy up." The child's high spirits were making Robert a little edgy. If he didn't go back to sleep, he'd have to wake Angela before he left. She'd get up, she wouldn't say much, but her constant reproach, "*Think before you speak*," would be thick in the air around her. He knew she was right, especially where the kids were concerned. Robby's delight would probably work itself into a frenzy of anticipation by the afternoon, rubbing off on Jeremy and putting a strain on Angela's patience. And what if, after all that, April couldn't come!

"Now, Robby, remember your promise. You said you'd go back to bed if I told you the secret."

"I want sweep wif Mummy."

"You'll wake Mummy up."

"I be ve-e-wy quiet."

"You little con artist. How do you expect me to believe that. Look at you, jumping all over the place--"

Robby stopped his frenetic jumping. He rolled his eyes towards the ceiling, then his head fell on Robert's shoulder and his body went limp. "See, I be vewy quiet." Robert stood for a moment, doubting, looking at their reflection in the mirror. The child was still except for his fluttering eyelids. Robert tiptoed into the still-dark bedroom and deposited him under the covers. He sat beside him, stroking his pale hair. "Try to sleep a little more, now, Robby," he whispered. "It's still night outside, and there's lots of time to sleep before breakfast." The child curled up under the covers and appeared to drift off.

He checked Angela's face, listening for the slight rasp of her sleep breathing--a last remnant of her asthmatic childhood. He could detect no sound; but then, his tinnitus was acting up again lately, and he missed hearing a lot more than her breathing.

He pulled on shorts and t-shirt, gathered up suit, tie, socks and shoes. Cold enough for a coat today? He searched the violet sky, the lawn, for signs. A few fading

stars, and the moist, shimmering mantle on the lawn did not reassure him. Always tricky, second-guessing the weather this time of year. . . could be snowing by this afternoon . . . better to take your spring-and-fall, just to be on the safe side. . .

A quick search of the back of the closet turned up nothing. He checked his watch, then did a hanger by hanger search, with no better luck. Surely Angela hadn't been rearranging. . . or maybe she had, and if so, good. . . another sign that she was coming back to herself. Probably took it to the cleaners. . . it's about that time of year again. . . hope she remembered to empty the pockets. . .

He tiptoed over to the bed and bent down to check Robby. By some miracle, he really was asleep. He wanted to kiss him, he was so grateful, but he dared not disturb him. He looked over at Angela. She lay on her side, one arm flung over her pillow and her face in repose: no sign of the grimaces, the teeth-grinding, the groans and mutterings that had startled him from sleep so often during the long year of her illness. But the composed look of her, far from reassuring him, made him uneasy: something about it made him think she was not asleep.

The sun rose, warming his left shoulder as he drove along the approach to the bridge. Clouds the colour of

abalone shells banked the horizon, and a cool, gauzy mist draped the borders of the river. The windows of the office towers on the island mirrored the sky's mauve and gold; here and there a building caught the sun directly and flashed back a blinding message.

It wasn't so bad, getting up this early. The house had been so quiet. . . Usually by the time he got down to the kitchen in the morning everyone was up, just finishing breakfast. The boys would be up to their elbows in porridge, Tara would be gurgling in her baby seat at the end of the table, and Angela would already be looking distracted and weary. He always felt vaguely guilty, grabbing a quick cup of coffee, kissing everyone goodbye in a great rush, but glad, too, that he was not the one who had to cope with all that. . . Not that he didn't love them; on the contrary, he was consumed, overwhelmed at times, with love for them, though admittedly in an abstract sort of way. No, it was really a question of who was more suited to the task of raising them, caring for them. He'd once thought it was a job anyone could do, not much to it--until he'd found himself alone with them twice, while Angela was in hospital giving birth. With what longing he had waited for her to come back home! No, having kids was great, but there was a good deal more to raising them than it he'd ever have thought. Angela seemed to manage much better than he did, at least when she wasn't ill.

Angela and Robby. . . how sweet and peaceful they looked, sleeping in his bed. But the suspicion that Angela had been feigning sleep nagged, like a slight toothache. Why would she pretend. . .? Why would she want to avoid seeing him, speaking to him. . .?

He stopped for a red light at the corner of Mill. As the car idled, he probed at the source of his uneasiness.

I'm not as fragile as you think.

It was there, in what she had said last night in the nursery, with her face very close to his. For reasons he had had no time to analyze then, the words had sent a little shock to his nerves. Where had he heard them before. . .? But perhaps it wasn't so much the words as the way she spoke, the way she looked at him when she said them.

The light changed, but traffic was held back by a cop while an eighteen-wheeler manoeuvred its way around the corner and into the yards of the abattoir. Robert glimpsed distended whiskered nostrils and baleful eyes through the slatted sides of the truck. The cattle in the holding pens beside the street bellowed, as if to warn the new arrivals of their fate. He rolled up the window against the stench of slaughtered carcasses on one side, the camouflaging odours of spices and artificial smoke from the packing plants on

the other. He turned up Mill, the little tooth of worry still gnawing at the back of his brain.

McGill Street was nearly deserted. Drafts funnelling upwards carried aloft whole pages of discarded newspapers. A pair of old derelicts, one a crumpled hulk propped against the bus shelter, the other, a woman sorting the contents of a garbage basket, hurled insults at one another. A page of the Daily News drifted down from the sky while he sat waiting for the light at Wellington, and came to rest on the windshield.

PENELOPE'S PERFECT SMILE MATCHES
TODAY'S PREDICTED WEATHER

A girl with a lion's mane of blonde hair, wearing tight, high-cut jean shorts and a red v-neck t-shirt, leaned towards him. Her glossy red mouth was slightly open and, even with the poor reproduction, showed her arched tongue and glistening teeth.

"What a thing to feed to people with their cornflakes!" Robert muttered, stepping out of the car on one leg and flinging it away from the windshield. The old woman, distracted from her examination of the entrails of the city, looked up. At first her face was blank as a wall; then a

light flickered in her eyes and her tongue, fed by god-only-knew-what poisoned wells of anguish and betrayal, poured its venom over him.

"What are ya doin' comin' home at this hour! Do ya think I don't know where ya been? Do ya think I don't know about your floozy? Yer nothin' but a liar and a cheat and a worthless bum. I shoulda throwed y'out years ago, ya good fer nothin'--"

The barnacled wreck leaning against the bus shelter, startled by the sudden escalation of violence in her voice, sat up straight and stared, first at the screaming woman, then at Robert. In a gesture of one whose patience has been tried to its limits, he raised his fist to the faultless sky and bellowed, "E-NUFF!" The word and the racking cough that followed it battered the stones of the Canada Customs House and echoed up the street. The old woman stopped in mid-sentence and ducked as if to deflect a physical blow. The man raged on: "Quitther bellyachin', woman, or I'll gi' ya somethin' to bawl about! I heard enough outta youse. Yer no prizewinner yerself--"

Robert slammed the car door, shutting out the alternating current of abuse that flowed between the two derelicts, and sped away with the green light. He turned at rue St. Jacques and headed into the underground garage.

As he wound his way down through the dark tunnel, it came to him. Maggie! Hadn't she said, "Try talking to her

sometime, she's not as fragile as you think"--or something like that? And Angela said, "I'm not as fragile as you think," too, just like that. How did she come up with that now, when the business with Maggie was long over? It was impossible she had been talking to Maggie, and certainly *he* had never used that phrase. Unless her "antennae" had just picked it out of the air once when it had been on his mind. She could be frightening that way. How often in the past had she brought up something at the very same moment he was thinking about it, or begun to hum a tune that just happened to be running through his head?

There was no waiting for the elevator at this hour. He pressed the button; the door slid open. In the darkness of the underground garage it waited, a humming, garish box of light, like one of those insect zappers all his neighbours had in their gardens.

The twentieth floor hallway was a tomb, his art studio and offices little vaults of darkness and silence. He hurried down the hall to his office door, anxious to get down to some real work, to rid himself of thoughts about Maggie and Angela for a while. There was the Norton quote to finish before the mob got in, before the telephone started. He peeled off his jacket, shook it and hung it on the coat rack. He stretched and yawned, and looked around at his office. He used it very little, preferred to be at

his table in the art room; but sometimes, like today, when he had an important quote to work on, he would retreat to the office, as a Do Not Disturb signal to his colleagues. It was large, but rather sparsely furnished: a two-drawer teak desk on which were arranged only a black blotter, a hi-tech halogen lamp and a pen standing in a slab of black onyx. A small lateral filing cabinet stood against the wall to his right and a bookshelf holding binders full of trade journals stood against the left wall. Angela had supplied him with a few personal touches: photographs of the children, and of themselves during their courtship and the early days of their marriage; a plant she called a flowering maple which, though it had grown to ungainly proportions, never flowered any more and was dropping its leaves everywhere; and the brass coat rack in the corner of his office where his jacket now hung.

It was very quiet. With no background noise to camouflage it, the shriek-and-chime of his tinnitus filled the silence. To ease it, he made the opening rounds, switching on the lights, the photocopier and the sound system, rinsing out the coffee pot and making a fresh batch.

With the shadows expelled from the rooms and the machines whirring and gurgling, Robert prepared himself for the Norton quote. He poured himself a coffee, settled his half-glasses on his nose, and sat down to write. He headed up the page with large square caps, then put his pen down.

He loosened his tie, undid the top button of his shirt. He scribbled and scratched. Stared at the wall. Bit the end of his pencil and filled in another column of figures. He stretched out his arms, rolled up his sleeves, stared into space for several minutes, then erased one whole column. He ran the fingers of his left hand through his hair; took off his glasses and rubbed the little crease between his eyebrows.

"Norton, you bastard, what do you want from me, anyway?" he muttered. He rewrote the figures for the column he had erased and added them up on his calculator. How was he to know what was good enough? Norton had played cagey, hadn't given a clue as to what they might expect, and without that Robert felt himself floundering. At times like this he wished Angela still worked with them. Whereas he tended to duel with people who wielded power--and Norton, he felt, wielded enormous power--she somehow drew them in, softened them up, so they let down their guard, grew almost confidential.

He stared at the figures. He would have liked to do it straight, making a very precise estimate and including only a modest profit margin. But if he came in too much lower than the competition he would end up looking like an ass, doing the job for far less than he had to. But which was worse, that or getting the downturned thumb after all these months? He threw down his pencil and got up to pace the

room. At moments like these he wondered what the hell he did it all for. All this chasing around after a buck, was that what life was for? Screw Norton and his game of hard-to-get, he thought savagely. If he doesn't like the quote he can kiss my ass and be done with it. If anyone wants to do it for less they can have it. He sat down and looked hard at the figures again. He erased and upped his profit margin by 3% and re-totalled the columns. He photocopied the handwritten sheet and put the original on his secretary's desk with a note: "Good Morning Lucie! Please have this typed for 3:00 p.m. Very important!" He noted with satisfaction the tidiness of her desk, the careful symmetry of its arrangement: telephone to the left, perpendicular to the desk edge; clean blotter with a neatly typed list of employee locals and important clients' numbers under the plastic; black paper clip holder, index file and note pad in a tight cluster centred above the blotter; two black stacking trays, one marked RUSH and the other PENDING. And not a speck of dust anywhere, he noted. What a wife she'll make.

He checked his watch: 8:45. Still time to mark up some type and get some of the dockets ready for invoicing before phoning April. It would be game over with Angela if he forgot, after leaking the news of her coming to dinner to Robby. He debated whether to call her now, at home, then thought better of it.

Too bad she had never married, but not that surprising. When he was younger, Robert had considered asking her, but things had just evolved in such a way that it had never come about. They had dated during high school and the summer after graduation and, though she always treated him more like an adoring pet than a possible lover, he was completely smitten. But then she chose to go to medical school and he and Angela went to art school and, as those things go, he and Angela gravitated towards each other and well, the rest was history.

Robert had by no means been the only man hanging around April in those days, but she just never seemed able to choose one and stick with him. She'd been athletic and very competitive in high school, winning medals for the girls' basketball and field hockey teams every year. In summer she was never still, always tearing along the heat-heavy streets on her bicycle, her father's over-large t-shirt billowing out like a sail behind her back. But the innocent and diffuse nature of her competitiveness changed after she dropped out of pre-med school (and that event was still shrouded in mystery). Suddenly it defined as its target the male half of the world, and took on a surprising ferocity. She took a job as a clerk at the local drugstore that summer, and Robert, stopping in to ask her out to a movie one evening, had come upon her as she was waiting on a

customer, a boy of about nineteen. The boy was standing by the rack of condoms, and she approached him from behind with a highly audible, "Is there any particular brand you are looking for?", causing the boy to blush and swallow hard. "N-n-oo, just, er, looking." Upon which April launched into a graphic description of the merits of each brand, as if she hadn't heard him at all. The boy looked helplessly over her shoulder at Robert, and fled. April tossed her head and, turning on her heel, walked straight into him.

"What did you do that for?" he demanded. "You were embarrassing the poor kid to death."

April stared up at him, her arms folded. "If he's not too embarrassed to do it to someone, he shouldn't feel too bare-assed to talk about it."

Robert, forgetting why he had even dropped in to see her, walked away shaking his head. That night, he confided what he had seen to Angela. She nodded gravely. "I think she's very disappointed about medical school," she said. "She'll be all right once she finds herself again, once she figures out where she's going."

But April languished all through that fall, secluding herself in her room at night "to write," she said, though it was never clear what was being written. When she had twice missed the deadlines for applications to universities, Robert and Angela could stay silent no longer. Because they were studying together and saw each other every day, they

seemed to speak as one person in those days; and it seemed natural for them to speak to April about her future, or the apparent lack of it.

"You can't" and "you must" prefaced most of their arguments. April listened and, to their surprise, gave in with no argument. She followed their advice, went to journalism school because it would be "useful," would give her an income. Their inheritance wouldn't last forever, after all, and there was nothing romantic about a starving poet-novelist. She had only to look at the two of them, they knew which side the artist's bread was buttered on. They had gone into the graphic arts, a gold mine there for the looting; and April, though she might not do quite as well as they, would at least be financially independent.

He put a call through to the newspaper and left a message for April. As he hung up the phone he heard a door close softly. He listened for a moment, then tiptoed into the conference room, which in turn led to the art room. He noted with distaste the stale cigarette smell--Olive never emptied her ashtrays--the chairs pushed against the walls, the table littered with docketts, glossy photos and long sheets of typeset copy. Some conference room, he thought, heading into the art studio.

Marya, their new assistant, sat at her table, head bent over her work. Beneath the lamp, her hair shone like a sheet of gold leaf. What had Stan said? "Have to hand it to you, Bobby, you sure know how to pick 'em." Didn't know how he meant it, really. She was more than a bit odd, but had come with a good portfolio and a glowing recommendation from the director of her art school. Could he help it how she looked? She was attractive, but he hadn't hired her for that. Given the choice, though, he'd hire a pretty girl over a plain one any day, what red-blooded guy wouldn't?

"Good morning, Marya," he said brightly.

But he'd startled her. To his chagrin she jumped and dropped her pen on the floor. It rolled, leaving a trail of ink blots. He bent quickly to pick it up; wiped it and handed it back to her.

"Sorry if I--" he began.

"Oh, you frightened me so!" she exclaimed, bending down to wipe the ink from the floor.

"I'm sorry," he said again, polite and careful. She'd only been with them two weeks and he wanted her to last longer than her predecessor. "How's the work going?"

"Well, sir, I finished the paste-ups you gave me to do yesterday afternoon."

"All finished? How on earth did you manage that? There was at least eight hours' work there."

"Well, I stayed a little late last night, sir. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind? Are you kidding? That's terrific. The customer will be very pleased to get the job back a day early. Thank you, but you really didn't have to--"

"Oh, it was no bother at all, sir, really it wasn't."

"Marya, for God's sake, would you call me Robert. You embarrass me with all the 'sirs'."

"Yes, sir--Robert." She looked down, a deep flush staining her cheeks.

Her eyes were an unusual colour. They reminded him of a little perennial Angela had planted in the back garden one spring--the name escaped him at the moment. She'd planted one seedling in a shady corner of the rock garden where nothing else would grow and it had spread like the plague, sprouting up everywhere and crowding out other plants.

He cleared his throat. "What's that you're working on now?"

"It's the artwork for the Willson ad," she said in a low voice. "That is what you wanted me to do next?"

Robert looked up at the production chart on the wall. "Yes, that's fine. Right on. How is it going?"

"Oh, I only just started on it, as you can see." The music of her voice was distracting. Not a lilt, exactly, but the peculiar Irish way of putting words together. She'd come with her mother from Ireland as a child and gone to a

convent school run by Irish nuns, that much he knew. No wonder she gave off the air of some delicate, hothouse flower. . . Forget-me-nots, that was it! Now how could he have forgotten that?

Robert put a hand to his shirt pocket, then dropped it with an impatient sigh. He drew back and squinted. "From what I can see without my glasses, it seems okay," he said. "Go ahead with it, and I'll come back later and have a look."

"Yes, sir."

Retrieving his glasses from his office, he sat down to work at the conference room table. "Christ, what a mess," he said, carrying the overflowing ashtrays to the kitchen and dumping them in the sink. He sat again at the table, glancing at his watch. Where were Stan and Olive? Most of the stuff on the table was theirs, and they should have been in by now working on it.

Picking up a stack of dockets, he began sorting, marking, pricing.

The door swung open and Stan limped in, tail dragging, alone. Robert looked up, looked at his watch and then again at Stan, eyebrows raised. "Sandman lay on an extra bag last night, old man?"

Stan shrugged and turned to the coffee machine. "Listen to him, will you, feeling smug 'cause he beat me in for a change." He turned around. "Mail come yet?"

Robert shook his head. "Christ, Stan, you look like you slept in those clothes." *And you missed a patch shaving your chin.*

"Well, maybe I did," he barked. "And if I did it's none of your goddam business."

Robert shifted his gaze from the distracting patch on Stan's chin to the docket in front of him. "My but we're jumpy this morning."

Stan flung out one hand. "Jumpy, yeah. Well, who wouldn't be after the night I've had."

"I take it you didn't sleep too well."

"No, I didn't sleep well; if you must know, I didn't sleep at all. I had a raging case of indigestion. Must have been something I ate last night!"

"Touché," said Robert. "And with that I'll leave it alone. Please take note, I now change the subject. Did Olive come in with you?"

"Jesus Christ!" Stan turned abruptly to the window and jammed his hands into his pockets. "Isn't it obvious she didn't come in with me? She's staying home today. I told her I'd look after her clients for her."

On the verge of saying "Another day off?", Robert checked himself. He felt oddly guilty about having left them alone for so long the night before while he was upstairs with Angela. How long had it been? No doubt they

had guessed what was up, and no doubt it had only made the tension between them worse.

"No problem, Stan," he said. "There was something I needed to ask her about this job I'm billing her customer for, but it's not urgent. I'll talk to her about it Monday."

The coins in Stan's pockets rattled furiously. "She won't be in Monday either," he growled. "She's, ah, going away for a few days, decided to go see her mother. She didn't say when she'd be back."

Robert took a fast eye-count of the dockets piled on the table. Most of them were Stan and Olive's, and had been lying there a week, two weeks, just waiting to be marked up for billing. Stan and Olive hadn't been pulling their weight for a long time. Lately it seemed he had been doing nothing but cleaning up the debris left in the wake of their chaotic efforts to work. Now they had reached the crisis. If the three of them worked all day they wouldn't finish pricing what was sitting on the table. They had a new artist whose work had to be closely supervised, there were clients that had to be seen. Though Robert cared about Stan and Olive, was dismayed by their obvious unhappiness, the alarm that rang in his head right now screamed: What's Going to Happen to Us (Us equalling The Business). Their tight little team was being wiped out by injury, sickness and maternity leave. Next it would be him--from burnout.

Angela had started it, dropping out to be with the kids full-time, something they'd never really talked about, something he hadn't really expected her to do; and it just sort of snow-balled after that. Without Angela around to keep things on an even keel, Olive got bitchy and her work got sloppy, and now she was in such a fragile state she wouldn't be much use for a while. And Stan was getting more morose by the day, no telling what he was going to do. Only a matter of time before he would be left alone, running around like a chicken with his head cut off. How had he ended up like this, so isolated, carrying the weight of everything on his shoulders. . .

But he couldn't allow himself to dwell on it: it was the kind of stuff that made people give up, let it all go, slip into madness.

"I see," he said at last. "Well, that does throw a wrench in the works, doesn't it? What can I say? I'm sorry, naturally."

"Look, Bobby, it's no big deal, okay? I'll cover for her here, so don't sweat about that. And she'll be back, don't worry. She's just tired, that's all, needs a break."

"Sure, Stan. It's okay. Really."

"Oh, but listen, before I forget, she wants to thank you and Angela for the dinner. Me, too, for that matter. I didn't mean what I said before, about having indigestion. It was great, just great. Angela's a dear. You're a lucky

man, Bobby, a lucky man. You two've got something really great going there, it's plain as the nose on your face."

"Yes, well, that's--"

The intercom blared. "Mr Fairbairn, line one."

"Just a minute, Lucie," Robert called out. "Will you excuse me for a minute, Stan? I'll be right back."

"It's okay, Bobby, I'm on my way anyway. I'm due downtown for an appointment." He ran a hand through his lank, thinning patch of hair. "How do I look? Awful, I guess." He buttoned his shirt collar, tightened and straightened his tie. He shoved his hands into his pockets again and, as if surprised by the discovery, pulled out a miniature plastic tiger. "Oh, " he said, "Here, give this to Jeremy. I found it in my Frosted Flakes this morning."

"Stan, you don't really eat those things."

"Yeah, but don't tell anybody. Lately I've had a yen for them, I don't know why."

Robert smiled. "Well, the ads do say they're not just for kids, don't they?" He shoved the plastic tiger into the pocket of his own trousers. "And, ah, Stan, if you're going out to see clients, you'd better finish shaving. There's a disposable blade in the washroom."

He took the telephone call in his office.

"Hello, Robert. What's up?" As he anticipated, it was April, returning his call. There was the usual "Don't waste my time, just give me the story" abruptness to her telephone

manner that he used to think was rude, until he realized that it was the natural offspring of a mercurial nature married to a demanding job.

"Yes, April, how are you," he said, knowing she was checking a page of copy while she talked.

"I'm fine," she said, coming down hard on the "fine."
"I repeat, what's up? Is anything wrong?"

"No, nothing wrong. Angela's fine, if that's what you're getting at." He suspected April disapproved of Angela's marriage to him, and thought he was to blame for her illness. Of course, nothing could be farther from the truth, he knew that and so did Angela, and anyway, who did April think she was, making judgments on something she knew nothing about? Quickly he briefed her on the details of their campaign, the probable dates of their celebrity promoter's stay in Montreal, and wound up with, "So, what do you think? Do you want to meet him, do the interview?"

April's enthusiasm fell a little short of what he had imagined. "Sure," she said, her voice polite, neutral.
"Just let me know when you've scheduled the appointment."

"Okay, April. I'll do that. Now, the other thing," he rushed on, "Angela and I want you to come for dinner tonight. What do you say, do you think you could make it?"

"Hold on a minute," she replied, "I'm just checking my book here." After a short pause she said, "Yes, okay, it

looks as though I'm clear, but are you sure Angela is up to it?"

Robert, who had been thinking of Robby's excitement and holding his breath a little, let out a sigh. "Good!" he said. "And yes, you can be sure Angela's up to it. You should have seen her last night. We had Stan and Olive over for dinner--first time in over a year she's tried to do anything like that--and she was wonderful. The dinner was great, and she was really with it the whole evening. So, you come tonight, I'm sure you'll be thrilled to see how much better she is."

"That is good news," April said, her voice warming a little. "And actually, I've missed seeing all of you--"

"And we missed you!" Robert said fervently. "We were talking about you last night, actually, and neither of us could remember when you were last over. That's a disgraceful state of affairs, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, " April replied. "And believe me, I'm feeling pretty guilty about it."

"Oh, don't waste time feeling guilty, April, we understand, honestly, we do. But the kids, well, that's another story. They're sure you've abandoned them, and their little hearts are broken all to pieces."

A little laugh, brief but genuine. "I'm sure," she said. "They probably have forgotten all about me by now."

"Don't you believe that for a minute. Robby was jumping all over the place this morning when I told him you might be coming."

"Wasn't that taking an awful chance? I mean, I don't even have kids of my own, and I know you don't tell them anything too far in advance, especially something that might not come true."

"Yeah, I suppose. Another attack of foot-in-mouth disease, I guess. Anyway, it all worked out. Just don't let me down, okay?"

"Okay. See you tonight."

Robert put the phone down slowly. It was like a contagious disease. . . no one happy with life, no one interested in their work any more. . . about the interview, a weary, "Let's finish this business" tone in her voice that he thought he would never hear. . . Time was, everything was an adventure for her, all of life was a big scoop, you could see it in the way she turned her whole mind and body to something. Where had all that gone? Would April, like Angela, metamorphose into some sad-eyed creature, abstracted and distant from what went on around her, yet hypersensitive to all kinds of invisible "disturbances in the field" (some phrase Angela had picked up from a book, and tried with only moderate success to explain to him).

But maybe he shouldn't be leaping to conclusions about that--or about what she thought of his and Angela's marriage

either, for that matter. Maybe it was simply one of those off-days for her, as temporary as a dark-of-the-moon.

Come to think of it, he, too might be changing, in ways he didn't realize, and in ways others might not like. He felt he was the same as always, but how could he tell? He wasn't much in the habit of watching himself. "Plain as the nose on your face," Stan always said. The joke was, and they both relished it, your nose is only plain to someone else. Looking down at one's own nose gives a double, out-of-focus view; and looking at it in a mirror doesn't tell the true story either.

"Disturbances in the field". . . Anything that got in the way of perceiving true-ly, was Angela's explanation. A pretty good description of what was bothering them all right now. He was seeing Angela in a way he never had before, but was it true? And if it was true, what did it mean--that all the mental and physical adjustments he had made in order to live peacefully with her were wrong, that he had to rethink them, remake them? A staggering thought. Such a revision seemed impossible, beyond him. . . but what was the alternative? Stan and Olive were living all the gruesome consequences of failing that one.

He did love Angela, that he knew. He'd loved her even when she was ill and he didn't know from one day--one moment--to the next what to expect from her. But it had been hard, feeling so often that he had somehow been let

down. Who would ever have thought she could fall apart so completely? The worst of it was the domino effect it had on all his expectations--the cornerblocks on which he had, up to that point, built his life. From the beginning, he had thought of Angela as more than just a wife. She was his equal, his life partner, sharing his work, his dreams.

But now look what was he confronted with--the possibility that he had never really loved Angela, only his idea of her. Maybe she was not at all what he thought, maybe there had been disturbances in the field all along (his confused feelings about April, for one thing) that had prevented him from seeing the real Angela. He had thought she would handle motherhood as she had everything else--effortlessly. She hadn't: having children had nearly destroyed her--and them. So maybe he had erred, too, in taking everything that was apparent about her for what was real.

Parenthood had come to them a little impulsively, during a vacation in the Caribbean. Not that they hadn't discussed having children before; they had, and often. It was Angela who had always hesitated, saying that the time wasn't right yet. But under the spell of a Jamaican winter, surrounded by all that fecund warmth, something had happened to Angela: her responses to him lost that considered, almost measured quality he found disconcerting, even disappointing. Like the hibiscus that flowered everywhere on the island,

she opened brilliantly, for only a single day. On that day she conceived their first child.

Their child. With what joy they had anticipated his arrival, for they had imagined that the child's new little soul would be a willing host to all the forgotten dreams and lost fragments of themselves; that he or she would flourish in all the ways they had wanted to but hadn't. They were sure a child could cause no more than pleasant ripples on the surface of their lives, that he or she would strengthen the bonds between them and redouble their happiness.

Robert shook his head ruefully. How far from the truth could anyone get! He adored the child--and the two who had followed--but they had driven a wedge between them that he despaired of ever dislodging. Angela was, even during the rare lucid moments of her illness, utterly absorbed in the affairs of the children; she seemed to have little or no interest in the business any more, and he suspected that she might never come back to work with him. Meanwhile he, short-staffed at work without her, was finding it necessary to stay late most nights; and at home he often felt like a visitor from an alien world.

He got up and pulled down a framed photograph his mother had taken of them before he and Angela were married, at a time when Angela and April were still an inseparable duo.

There was Angela: taller than April, dark and straight, facing squarely into the camera; and April: fair-haired and laughing, balancing on one foot, the other foot drawn up so that her legs made a figure 4 (was that her aspiring dancer stage?). She was pointing at something off to her right, and her body, bent slightly at the waist, seemed to be straining against Robert's encircling arm. Wedged between them was Robert: a serious young man even then; slim (he touched his stomach now, self-consciously. Not too soft, thanks to the swimming and squash), medium height and build, with thick, sand-coloured hair (still thick, but quite a bit of grey. Well, he was nearly forty, after all) a prominent brow and bushy eyebrows that he liked to think gave him a rugged look (April called them "Neanderthal"; Angela, a little kinder, described them as "craggy"). What struck him now was the bemused look on his face as he stood between the two women, hand in hand with Angela, but looking at and trying to hold onto April.

Looking at the photo brought back that time with a painful clarity--how he'd hung around the two of them, half in love with both, paralysed at the thought of choosing one and condemning himself to a life that excluded the other. It was not until his mother (shelling peas at the kitchen table one summer afternoon) slid into their conversation the remark that "It was time he got on with it and married Angela," that he knew which of them he should marry. And

that very evening (how did these things manage to coincide in this way?), as if she'd overheard the conversation and was trying to be helpful, Angela (one leg tucked under her, the other languidly pushing the garden swing they sat on), had turned to him, her head tilted a bit to one side and said: "Would you like to marry me?" He didn't stop to consider the form of the question--"*Would you like to*" might have denoted mere curiosity--and had replied, "Yes!" without hesitation, for of course he did want to marry her, though that did not preclude also wanting to marry April.

He supposed he could thank his mother for saving him from such folly. Marriage to April, he'd long since concluded, would have been like a ride on a roller coaster: breath-taking but brief.

Robert reached for his glasses and looked more closely at Angela. There was something there about her he had never considered before: how at odds her stance was with the expression on her face. She stood tall and straight, which distracted the casual observer's eye from the vague, uncertain expression in her eyes. Robert had noticed that look before, but had always attributed it to her slight myopia. Now he was not so sure. She was still myopic, and had the same inwardness she had then; but there was nothing vague about her expression any more. He flinched, remembering the directness of her look as she said, "I am not as fragile as you think," the night before. What had

happened yesterday to make her say such a thing? What was she trying to tell him?

He closed his eyes, trying to picture her as she came down the stairs to greet him and Stan and Olive, but it was no use. The clamour of the children, the confusion of jackets and doors at the entrance, his annoyance at seeing a puff of dust and a stray watermelon seed under the hall table (how often had he told Angela to get rid of that mongoloid boy who helped her with the cleaning?), all conspired to keep him from seeing her as she was at that moment.

He replaced the picture and turned to the window. The autumn sun, angled low and close in the south, glared in through a film of dirt and streaks left by the summer's rain. How could it be that after ten years of marriage he felt he no longer knew her? Could it be he would never really know her? He shivered. Would they automatically become like Stan and Olive? Were the rifts already there that would eventually yawn into unbridgeable chasms?

And if she ever found out about Maggie. . .

In retrospect, the affair seemed futile, and regrettable, but it hadn't seemed that way at the time. He was at his wits end, then. But maybe it wasn't so bad, if it had brought him to his senses, made him understand what it was he really wanted. Perhaps it had saved the marriage. Maggie probably didn't know that was what she was doing,

getting involved with him. . . or maybe she did. She certainly had made it look like she got what she wanted. Shocking, how brutally she ended it. He still couldn't believe she behaved the way she had. . . moving away, severing all connections, denying him all the rights of a father. . .

The child would be three months old now, a marvellous age, still an infant, but curious and alert, staring long and hard at everything, smiling at people--

Robert sighed. It had been a little over a year since she had ended it, and still he couldn't forget, couldn't stop the longing to see . . .

* * * * *

They were to have met in Dominion Square, as usual. Before he arrived she waited on a bench beneath an ash which showered yellow leaves on her with every gust of wind. As she waited, her eyes wandered over the park. On a nearby bench a solitary pensioner nodded over his cane, oblivious to the squirrels and pigeons that flocked around him, begging for crumbs. The grass, worn down and criss-crossed by narrow footpaths, showed the lateness of the season. She turned away from the park, studied the domes and columns of Mary Queen of the World Cathedral. It was a mistake to have

agreed to meet him here: it resurrected feelings she had thought were dead.

Symbolically, she supposed, for what she was about to do, what she had to do, the place was correct. Not so long ago it had been a cemetery for cholera victims; now it was decorated with the cannons and monuments of war. The other times she had idled on this spot, or on another under another tree, waiting, wondering how many more years she would wait before all the waiting would be ended, she had been gloomily aware of the paradox of meeting in a graveyard to try to breathe life into a love affair. Today there was no paradox: the affair was dead, at least for her.

A tiny flutter, low in her abdomen. Her heart contracted with joy and pain. She'd felt it first only the day before, and could scarcely believe it. It was too early, wasn't it? But no, it insisted, I am here! Perhaps this is the real paradox, she thought. Love, or the chance of it, may very well be dead; but I have wrangled out of it something for myself alone, and am more alive now than I have ever been.

She'd been on vacation in Vancouver and job-hunting in Toronto, and hadn't seen Robert for four weeks. In the time she'd been away, she'd gone from not-knowing to knowing-but-not-believing; from not-believing to believing; and from there to a startled wonder at their combined fertility--hers

as explosive as the wild touch-me-not, his as indiscriminate as the rain.

The five weeks prior to her departure had been played out in a holding pattern. She had kept things cool with Robert, hoping against hope that her "experiment" had not failed. He, she knew, was walking around in a daze of guilt, hoping that she wouldn't press him for a second rendez-vous at the Boucherville WelcomInn; and holding on to the hope that Angela, who was seeing a psychotherapist twice weekly, would begin to get better. During that five weeks of being near him, yet keeping her distance, it had begun to come home to her: Angela was at the centre of everything between them. She was all they ever talked about. Whether she recovered or not, and whether she, Maggie, had a child or not, Robert would always belong only to Angela. No matter how miserable he got he would never leave her while she was ill, because he would never be able to live with himself after; and he would never leave her when she was well, because he would be happy again, because he loved her--and their children--too much.

Her eyes turned once again towards the park. A young man, dark and smiling, waved from the centre of the square. He stood before a small table on which she could see bright bits of gold and coloured beads. Her lips conferred a slight smile before she looked away.

"You don't have to wait there alone." His voice, so close to her shoulder, startled her. She turned. His eyes, which she imagined had to be as deep and black as the night sky of his desert country, beamed their intense points of light on her. She sensed a vague sort of alarm, but sat still and smiled back. "Come and talk to me while you wait for your friend. You are waiting for a friend, a man, I suppose, more's the pity. Come over to my table. He'll see you better there than if you're hiding under a tree, anyway." She laughed and stood up. "All right," she said, "but only because your argument is so logical."

He threw out his arms and then clasped his hands to his chest. "You break my heart," he cried. "I love a woman who loves logic. Why do you wait for him--he couldn't possibly appreciate you as much as I do!"

A sudden sharp gust of wind tore at the edges of the black cloth covering the man's table, and whipped up a cloud of dirt and debris. He quickly tied down the corners of the cloth, while she covered her face against the stinging dust. He came back to her, pulling a handkerchief from his jacket pocket.

"Here," he said. "Take this, keep it if you want. Wipe your eyes. You're not crying, are you? All those tears, just from the dust?"

"Yes, yes, just from the dust, honestly," she sniffed, though she herself wasn't sure. She gave him a small, wobbly smile.

His eyes flickered, taking in something over her shoulder. He stared, life-and-death, into her eyes. "You have less than fifteen seconds to decide whether you're having lunch with him or me," he said. Suddenly his face broke into a wide, toothy grin, and his hand flew out, past her, to someone behind her.

"You must be the lucky man this lovely woman is waiting for," he said.

She whirled around. "Oh, Robert," she said. This was the moment she had feared. She wished she hadn't been distracted by the Arab and had been able to watch him as he approached. Now she had only this almost-too-close picture of him to contend with. At the moment, eyeing her nervous admirer, he looked suspicious, possessive, guilty--and ordinary. Perhaps not completely ordinary, but certainly not one with the kind of aplomb needed to manage a second family on the side.

"Hello, Maggie," he said. Though he smiled and took her arm, his voice was cool.

The Arab kept his courageous smile. "I managed somehow to entice your lady friend over to my table to look at my treasures. She was only just saying she had children--" he stopped when he saw the startled look on Maggie's face.

"Ah, she thought her little niece might-- No niece either? Younger sister? No. Well, ahem, she just thought it was nicer to pass the time looking at my little treasures than to stand alone under a tree, tapping her foot and watching the clouds, you know how it is."

Maggie, suppressing a smile, held out her hand. "It was delightful, passing these few moments with you, Mr.--?"

"Mustafa, just Mustafa, please," he said, bowing low over her hand. "Come back to the square another day. I'm always here, except when I get chased away. For now, have a pleasant lunch."

Walking away from him, Maggie glanced up at Robert's face. He looked down at her briefly, his lips tight, and then looked away. His hand on her elbow guided her across the intersection of Peel and Dorchester towards the Sheraton Centre, while the wind tore at them, first from the back, then from the front. Normally she'd have tried to cajole him out of his bad humour, but today there seemed to be little point. She was about to send him back to Angela, and one day he would be grateful to her for it.

"Well," he said when they were seated at their table, "it's good to see you again, Maggie. It's been a very long four weeks without you in the office."

"I'm not too sure how to interpret that," she said dryly.

"You know very well what I mean," he said. "I've been a bit, ah, worried. Ever since, er, that is, the last few weeks before you went away, you seemed a little distant, preoccupied. As if you felt sorry, or guilty, or--"

"Wrong," she interrupted. "That sounds to me more like how you might have felt." She put a hand on his arm to stop him from saying any more. "Never mind, it's not important, just--" She took a deep breath. "Anyway, I really don't want to get into an argument, not now. I have something very important to tell you."

She felt, rather than saw, the waiter standing just behind her left shoulder. She glanced up. "A Tanqueray and tonic for my friend, and a tomato juice for me," she said.

"No Bloody Mary?" Robert asked. "You on the wagon, or did you switch to other substances while you were out there in Lotusland?"

"I just don't feel like having a drink, that's all. Now, do you want to hear what I have to tell you or not?"

Robert took her hand. "Save it, just for a moment," he said. "I haven't seen you for a month, and for now I just want to look at you."

Maggie eyes dropped and her head turned in that quick motion to one side that he knew signalled the end of her patience.

"Okay," he sighed, dropping her hand. "I'm listening."

"I won't be returning to work on Monday. I've received an offer of a job in Toronto and I've accepted it. I'm scheduled to move there later this week."

She tossed the words out quickly, and then watched. He sat unmoving, staring at a spot in the centre of the table. He sat this way so long that finally she looked there, too, half-fearing she would find her words lying there, like birds that have flown into a pane of glass.

At last he looked up. "This is not fair, Maggie. Ever since we made love that night, you've been strange, acting as if it never happened. And now, just like that, you're leaving. I don't understand. Am I being punished for something? Why didn't you at least tell me you were thinking of this?"

"I have only one thing to say about our having made love," she said. "For you it was a mistake."

"Maybe it was, but it's no reason for you to leave. For pity's sake, Maggie, don't do this to me now. I mean, in one way, I guess I can't blame you for wanting to leave the company, I guess I can understand that, under the circumstances, but to leave Montreal. . . What will I do? I've been feeling so alone since--"

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "I can't help that. This is the way it has to be."

"Why? What happened out there in Vancouver, anyway? Did you meet someone else?"

"You're not making any sense, Robert. I'm moving to Toronto, remember? And anyway, what makes you think that only another man could make me come to such a decision?"

He reached out again to take her hand in his. "You have to tell me what happened, that all of a sudden it's over. You owe me at least that much."

"I owe you?" She laughed, then considered it. "That could be true," she said. "Well, it's very simple." She withdrew her hand. "I'm 36 years old. It's time I stopped hanging around married men."

"That's all?"

"That's enough, believe me," she said. "As for you, since you love Angela so much, you should be trying to make things work better between you."

"Maggie, you know it's not as simple as that. Angela's been severely depressed for a long time, and there's no sign of it getting any better. I'm at my wits' end over her. We've had to hire a nanny for the boys--"

"And in the meantime, rumour has it she's pregnant again."

She had expected a response of surprise, even rage, but he was silent, and on his face there was only naked, helpless pain. When at last he spoke, his voice was flat

and weary. "So, the word gets around even in Vancouver, does it?"

"I was in touch with Olive a couple of times while I was away."

"Yes. Dear, helpful Olive. Always there with a smile and a pertinent bit of gossip."

The waiter placed their drinks before them and hovered, waiting for their order. "Turkey sandwich, white meat only, lettuce tomato and mayonnaise," she said.

"A club, I guess," Robert said.

The waiter gathered up their menus with a little sniff and strode away.

"What you don't understand, Maggie, is that the pregnancy was not planned. I didn't tell you about it because, well, there was always the possibility of an abortion, because of her condition. And anyway, she's my, I mean-- Oh, Christ, why am I trying to explain! I'm sorry, Maggie." He raised his drink and took a large swallow.

"The fact is," he continued, "it's too soon. We, I, should have been more careful. But it's done, and the most we--I--can hope for is that Angela will soon get better. But in the meantime, I-- Christ, it's bloody hell," he finished explosively.

"So you don't need me to complicate things further," she said. "You should feel happy, relieved that I'm going."

"Maggie, how can you say that? I feel as if I'm losing my best--my only--friend! Who is going to be there now when I need to talk?"

"I'm sorry," she said. Though she knew she sounded unconvincing, she went on. "Sorry it's so sudden. I know I'm leaving you in the lurch, a bit. The company, too. I don't expect you'll forgive me for that."

"Forgive! How can you talk of forgiveness like that. I am devastated by all this. I'll never get over it!"

"You'll forgive, just like Angela's going to forgive you. Eventually."

The waiter, eyebrows raised, placed their sandwiches before them, and looked from one to the other.

"Angela doesn't know, and isn't going to know, so there'll be nothing to forgive."

"How can you be so sure she doesn't know, or won't ever find out?"

His face went white. "Do you know something I don't about that? *Does she know?*"

"No," she said, uncomfortable at seeing him so nervous and guilty. "Or at least, I don't think so. But I think Angela has her way of finding out things that isn't like anyone else's."

She looked up at the waiter. "Thank you," she said. "That will be all." With a faint tightening of the mouth, the waiter turned on his heel and left them. Maggie turned

back to Robert. "Angela's feelers are always out, even when she's not watching and doesn't seem to be listening. But I'm sure you know that, too. The way she looked at me when she used to come in to the office was scary--and that was before there was even anything going on between us."

Robert nodded. What Maggie didn't know was that Angela was struck more with how much Maggie looked like April than anything else. She had made light of it, quipped about doing a double-take more than once, but he wasn't fooled. He bit into his sandwich, then put it down.

"Eat your lunch," he said. "We'll talk more about this later."

She considered for a moment giving him at least that. But no, she was ready to go. Now.

She lifted her napkin from her lap and laid it on the table. "I think I should be going, Robert. I've scarcely begun to pack, and the movers are coming the day after tomorrow." She rose, gathered up her jacket and bag, touched his shoulder and walked out of the restaurant. Startled, he jumped up, dropped a card from his wallet on the table, and hurried out after her.

"Maggie," he called to her retreating back. "Wait a minute!" But she was already halfway down the escalator and his calls were attracting the stares of other people in the lobby, so he changed course abruptly and ducked into the men's washroom. Three men were already there, and they were

replaced by a half-dozen others in the time it took him to relieve himself, scrub his hands, splash cold water on his face, comb his hair and inspect the knot of his tie. Only when the last one had left and he was alone did he dare look at his own reflection. His lips were tight and there was a pained little crease between his eyebrows. He put the tips of his fingers to his forehead and tried to rub it smooth. When the washroom door opened once more, admitting two men who smelled of a double-martini warmup to lunch, he made a quick, purposeful exit.

* * * * *

(And the cheek of that waiter. Even now, more than a year later, his face burned to think of it. "What's Angela doin' with a clod like you?" he had muttered when Robert went back to retrieve his credit card.)

If everything about Maggie's behaviour was a mystery that day, it had all clicked into place later, on the day of Tara's christening, in fact. Olive, looking up at him over the rim of a glass of sparkling wine, had slyly let it slip that she would soon be going to Toronto for another christening. . . The news, like a dash of cold water in the face, made him choke on the finger sandwich he'd just put in his mouth. Feigning only polite interest, he had asked a

question or two and then let it drop. Later, he had written. . .

The waiter was right, in the end--he really had behaved like a clod. And of course Maggie had been right, too. For him it was a mistake, and a terrible one. Though the guilt should have abated by now, it had not, and there were days, like today, when both fear and remorse would ravage his soul. Then no mirror was needed to see the nose on his face: the inward look saw it all, with no disturbances in the field. He had jeopardized everything that was dear to him for one night with Maggie. Now she had his child and he was left with a load of guilt and a perverse longing to see the child. The guilt and longing dogged him even when he knew he should be happy that Angela was so much better, and Tara was thriving in spite of the traumatic beginning of her little life.

And he should be grateful, he knew, that Maggie had ended the affair. Left to him, it might have dragged on indefinitely, until they were discovered--and everything was destroyed.

Impossible to imagine losing the life they had built together, especially now that Angela was getting better. . . that tender moment they had shared the night before. . . it had all happened so quickly he'd had no time to savour anything. Coming upon her in the nursery. . . eyes closed, dress open, the baby at her breast. . . he'd hesitated when

he saw her, reluctant to be caught witnessing the emotions that transfigured her. But his longing to be part of that moment, to be penetrated in some way by what she was feeling, had finally overcome his shame, and drawn him to her side. He knew it was more than sexual arousal that gave her that look, though that was part of it. It was as though all that mysterious business of bearing and nurturing the children had taken her to the very heart of life, had allowed her to penetrate to the source of all love, sorrow and ecstasy.

He glanced at his watch. "Enough of this," he said aloud. "Time to get back to work." His own brisk voice, the sensible sound of his words, were a kind of antidote to what he considered too much brooding. He returned to the conference room, now in noticeably better order than it had been when he arrived that morning. He surveyed the table, the room. So much tied up in this, these odd scraps of paper, sketches and proofs, samples and swatches; so much money, so much of himself. Suddenly it seemed odd, surreal almost--endless energy, endless working lunches and after hours brainstorming sessions, expended--on what? He sometimes envied Angela, who had forsaken it all with no apparent regret. And she had been good at it too, adept at design, but even more remarkable than that, a diviner, one

who knew what the client wanted more than he did himself. Funny thing was, she didn't seem to care that much, didn't go about it as if her life depended on it, like he did.

It was no wonder, though, he had the impression they were losing touch with each other, they were. She was getting better, that was clear, but she was so wrapped up in the kids and in some mysterious inner struggle, while he was still buried in the business, fighting for his life--for all their lives, for that matter--and had been too busy to pay much attention what was happening to Angela along the way. He knew he should be making a greater effort to understand, to listen to her; but lately he found himself shamelessly choosing a safe, easy-exit course through their conversations, purposely avoiding the dangerous mazes of her mind. How had it happened that, immersed in that small world of diapers and Lego and animal crackers, she had developed this habit of *thinking about things*, as in, "Robert, I've been thinking. . ." (how he had learned to dread hearing those words!). Did she set aside a time for it? If so, when (unless it was in her sleep)? Or was it simply all one thing to her, one process, the endless river of reflection flowing into and around and through the diapers, the toys, the nurture-giving?

He glanced at his watch and jumped up, pulling on his jacket. Already late for that 10:30 appointment! But he

checked himself running out the door and turned back into the art studio.

"Is that artwork ready for me to look at, Marya?" She straightened up and nodded. Putting on his glasses, he came around the table and stood behind her. "Hmnn," he said, a forefinger to the side of his nose. "Let's see, now. The figure top left is great, but you'll have to move the desk up more into the foreground, to give it emphasis. It's a small thing, I know, but that's what's important in this business--precision, details. No need to do the whole thing over, though, since it's only pen and ink. Just patch that area and re-draw the desk, that's all."

The girl hung her head. "Yes, sir. I'm terribly sorry, I--"

"It's nothing serious, though. You see, it's easily remedied." But still she looked downcast. "Anyway," he said brightly, "it's great you got all those mechanicals done last night. I'll check them over when I get back."

"All right, sir."

"Robert."

"Robert."

He left her side, crossed the room slowly. About to step into the receptionist's office, he stopped, one hand on the doorknob. Wasn't there something Stan had told him? Yes. He turned, catching Marya with her head up and her round blue eyes fixed on him. She dropped her head, went

back to her work. He crossed the room and stood near her again. He waited, but she did not look up again.

"Ah, by the way, Marya. . ."

"Yes, sir," she said, head still down.

"How is your mother?" he asked.

Now she looked up, all trace of furtiveness gone.

"Oh," she said, "there's nothing to be done now, except to pray for her peaceful death."

Taken aback by her candour, Robert cast about for something appropriate to say. "Well, I'm sorry," was all he could manage.

"It's Alzheimer's she has, sir, but I guess you would be knowing that." He nodded (vaguely remembering Stan had told him something like that), disturbed now by a certain blankness in her face. It was opaque, like a mask--not the skin itself, that was a miracle of translucence--but the expression. "It's so much worse every time I see her, why, she hardly knows me any more, and me her only daughter." With her pale hair and skin and wide, unblinking eyes, she might have been a porcelain wind-up doll reciting her lines.

He realized that she had stopped speaking, was waiting for him to say something. He dropped his eyes, floundering: "That's too bad, really. . . She's not still at home with you, is she?"

"Oh, no, sir. She's in a convalescent home in

Ste-Agathe. The doctor said it was best. I don't get to see her nearly as much as I'd like, is all."

He grabbed onto the line she had thrown out, knowing at last what it was he wanted to say. "Look, I have an idea. I've noticed how hard you work, and I know very well you must have been here very late last night. Why don't you finish what you're doing there and then take the afternoon off. Go up and visit your mother. It's Friday, after all, and such a fine day, it'll do you both good."

A look of surprise, then a small, shy smile at the corners of her mouth. "Thank you, er, Robert. That's very kind of you, I'm sure. Thank you."

"Please, don't thank me. It's I who should be thanking you." On an impulse he reached out, patted her shoulder. She stiffened, drew back. He pulled his hand away and took off his glasses in one motion, to hide his confusion. Christ, what makes her jump like that, he thought. Now I've gone and scared her out of her wits. Didn't mean anything by it. . . Who on earth would be after anyone so skinny-- bones sticking out of her shoulder like knives!

He coughed, moved away towards the door. "Have a nice afternoon, then," he said. "See you Monday."

He waited for Lucie to finish answering a call into her headset, noting with satisfaction that his quotation was already in her typewriter. She scribbled down the agenda he

dictated: the printer's till noon, lunch with Dennis Taylor, then to Comp-U-Type and back at 2:30, and waved him off.

He made a dash down the hallway towards the waiting elevator, arriving just as the doors closed. He jabbed at the button and paced up and down the corridor. She must have worked till midnight last night, he thought. Well, she'd do just fine here, with that kind of attitude. Or was she just a little too. . . hadn't really been necessary, after all, we were right on schedule with that job. Well, time would tell. . . soon she'll learn to relax a little. . Couple of months and she'll be ducking out at noon on Friday, like everyone else--without permission. Too bad about her mother. . .pleased when I gave her the afternoon, almost a smile there . . .

Nice looking girl. . . the way she wears her hair reminds me a bit of Maggie unfortunately. . . not at all the same personality, of course, that's a blessing. Though, come to think of it, Maggie was shy, too, when she started, not too sure of herself, and that changed quickly enough. Well, better just watch it, wouldn't want to repeat. . .

He glanced at his watch and punched the elevator button again. Too bad the last girl they had didn't work out, she was good, but left because she didn't like the atmosphere, whatever the hell that meant. Nice girl, too, come to think of it, but plain as porridge. . . maybe that's the kind we should be looking for. . . less dangerous. Probably best if

Angela doesn't see Marya. . . can just imagine the remarks
. . . April-Maggie-Marya. . . that's a real three-legged
stool of jealousy for her to sit and brood on. Nothing to
be jealous about any more, though, Maggie took care of that
. . . lobotomized all the longing for what I don't have. . .

Where the hell is the elevator, he thought savagely.
Do I have to walk the twenty flights just to get out of
here? He pressed an ear to the doors. Far below he could
hear gruff voices; a knocking on the walls; a bang of doors
as they met; and a quiet, burdened rumbling. He stepped
back and waited.

* * * * *

Dear Maggie,

I will come straight to the point. I recently
heard the news of your having had a child--our
child--and must confess I am deeply shocked. Now,
of course, the reason for many things becomes
clear, most of all your manner of leaving. But
why couldn't you, didn't you, tell me? Do I have
no rights at all in this? Or do I presume too
much, thinking the child is mine?

Sorry. I didn't start this letter meaning to
harass you. No doubt you have enough trouble in
your life right now without me adding to it.
Since hearing the news, I have gone through many
emotional phases myself--dismay, anger, wonder,
and finally, concern--for you, for the child.

This brings me to the subject of the enclosed
cheques. I send them because I don't know any
other way, given the circumstances, to act
responsibly in this affair. I want to help you,
and this seems to be all that's left to me. These
cheques will be followed by another six for the

last half of this year. Please, Maggie, don't be needlessly proud, accept the money for the child's sake. Justify it in whatever way you have to for yourself, but please, do accept it.

I know you consider everything between us to be finished, and I know only too well how capable you are of wiping things from your emotional slate, just by setting your very strong mind to the task. But no matter how much you want to deny me, Maggie, we are irrevocably linked to each other, because of this life we created together. Nevertheless, I have also come to believe, as you do, that we must make new lives apart from each other. My marriage--my wife and children--mean everything to me. Angela, God love her, is showing signs of recovery, and with luck we shall both regain our former equilibrium. I believe she knows nothing, still, and I will do everything in my power to prevent her from ever knowing, simply because she does not deserve to suffer all the hurt and anxiety such knowledge would almost certainly cause her.

In closing, I can only say I promise to abide by whatever decision you make in regard to accepting or not accepting the money for the child. Naturally, I would be overjoyed if you did accept, quite despondent if you didn't; but that does not alter my resolve.

Always,

Robert

* * * * *

By now, five other people from the floor were waiting for the elevator with him. At last the bell of the elevator rang and the doors opened. Three men stood, backs to the door, dwarfed by a massive, crated machine. Straining, they tugged at the straps tied around it; slowly they moved it out of the elevator and into the corridor. Robert, holding

the doors with one foot while the others boarded, watched their groaning progress down the hall, watched which door they wheeled the machine through. Hmmn. Competition must be getting its own stat camera in. He pulled pen and notebook from his breast pocket and jotted down the name and model number that showed clearly on the undraped side of the of crate. Must look into that. But for now, the printer's, Dennis Taylor, Comp-U-Type. . . Shoving pen and notebook back into his pocket, his hand fell on something else there. He pulled it out to examine it. A scrap of pink paper that turned out to be a slip from the dry cleaners dated-- Christ!--six months ago. "Excuse me, everybody," he said, suddenly realizing they were holding the door for him. He stepped into the elevator with an apologetic smile, and checked the slip: three suits, winter ones, no doubt. Have to check whether they ever got picked up. How on earth did I miss that one . . .? Six months! A wonder the cleaners never phoned. Have to stop stuffing things in pockets, always leaving something, forgetting it's there, finding it months later. . .

He tucked the slip carefully into his notebook, where he was sure to find it later. A full day ahead, and Norton last thing this afternoon. . . I'll be beat by the end of it. . . but then it'll be the long weekend, and--

And April for supper--almost forgot that. Good. It would do all three of them good to be together again. . . a

good dinner, a nice bottle of wine, a little visit with the kids, and maybe she'd talk about what was bothering her. Maybe that baby business again. . . or maybe in love at last. That would be nice for her, maybe help her to settle down a bit. . .

Just a nice family evening, yes, that sounds good. . . could use a little horseplay with the kids myself. Always feel so out of it with them. . . too bad, gone the way of so many fathers, absentee landlord. . . how did it all get so separate, their world, my world. . . really must talk with Angela, see if we can arrange things a little better. . . can't be good for her to be so tied down with the kids. . .

Dear Angela, wonder if she has any idea how much I love her. Seems there's so much more than that to making a good marriage, though. . . so much that it takes almost your lifetime together to find it all out. Love needed, yes, lots of it, but could it always be counted on. . .? Seemed at times so solid, like blocks of granite, cornerstone of the marriage; then again, wispy, elusive, a dandelion puff in the wind. . . and as likely to be blown far afield. . .

* * * * *

III

"It's all set, then," April said to Robert. "See you tonight." She put down the telephone receiver and sat with one hand resting on it. So it had been 4 months since the last time she'd been over to see them. In June, for the baby's christening--that was the last time. She guessed she was supposed to feel guilty about it, but couldn't. Just irritated with Robert for pointing it out.

Irritated by the message scribbled across the top of the page of copy in front of her, too. *Trim 3 ins. off.* The usual slash and burn. She'd already trimmed off part of the text, weeks ago. Why was there never a request to trim it with three inches more? These editorial directives were rarely based on textual considerations, that she knew. When she was young she had bowed to the directives without arguing, assuming the editors knew best. She was no longer convinced of that, having overheard some of their conversations. *The page has been reformatted--this has to be cut. . . We could squeeze in this short if 3 ins. were*

cut here and another 2 there. . . She often felt that her column--perhaps even the whole section where it appeared--was peripheral. It was only about life as it is commonly lived, after all--newsworthy only if there was nothing more theatrical going on in the arenas of sport or war.

She turned to the display terminal and retrieved the article from her bin. *Four months*, Robert had said. *Not since the christening.* How could anyone forget. It had been on one of those wilting days in June. Tara was cranky with heat rash and would not be comforted. During the ceremony her fretting, amplified by the hollow interior of the church, overruled both the somnolent droning of the priest and the sticky fidgeting of the guests. Angela, sallow and vacant, had sat out the little gathering afterwards like someone under hypnosis; and Robert, over-compensating, had flapped about and fetched for everyone like a nesting bird. His face was flushed and trickled with sweat even before it was discovered he'd forgotten to sugar the lemonade. Sweating even more profusely, but laughing at his own forgetfulness, he'd circled the room with the sugar bowl, dispensing jokes along with the cubes to expunge the bitter surprise from the mouths of everyone. But the sugar would not dissolve in the icy drink: the stirred granules hung for a few seconds in cloudy swirls before gathering in stubborn solidarity at the bottom of the glass.

Then later, when they'd given up on the lemonade and switched to the sparkling wine, she had witnessed a quiet little exchange between Robert and Olive. What was said April could not hear, but the effect could not have been more dramatic if Olive had dropped poison into his glass: he went white, then red again, then excused himself and went to the kitchen. When he came back bearing a cheese tray he was quiet, almost as distracted as Angela; and the little gathering had broken up soon after.

April counted forward on her fingers. Four months: he wasn't exaggerating. True, she'd talked on the phone with Angela in that time, but conversations with her these days were so vague, and when not vague, guarded, uneasy. And it seemed that Robby was always whining in the background, or Jeremy was interrupting. . . conversations never got finished, nothing was ever concluded. . . Then there was Angela's breakdown--her "illness," as they all politely called it--that everyone tiptoed around as if it were a minefield. April consented to the conspiracy of tactful silence because it seemed that that was what Angela wanted; and, in truth, she had enough to cope with herself, having been dogged by periods of depression for the past year. She hadn't broken down completely, yet; was still fighting to hide her misery, though it cost all her strength and left her feeling at the end of a day as empty and fragile as the discarded skin of a snake.

She studied the pumpkin-coloured hieroglyph that glowed on the little square of night sky in front of her. It took a determined concentration to see in the scattered bits shapes that meant anything.

It was like that with everything these days.

When she first started using computers for her work and the terms *Catastrophic Error* and *General Failure in Drive n* first came into her vocabulary, along with the instructions *Press F2 and check your data integrity*, or the questions *Abort? Retry? Fail?*, she had thought that programmers were really moonlighting poets, to have come up with such human expressions for what went on inside their machines. She wondered what catastrophic error had corrupted the integrity of her original data, had caused this general failure in all drives. What was to be her answer to *Abort? Retry? Fail?* Sometimes, she knew, no matter which answer you gave, the questions kept popping up, over and over, until your whole screen was filled with them. Only if you inserted a new diskette, or rebooted altogether, could you break the insistent repetition of the questions. . .

Angela being ill was nothing new. She had been asthmatic as a child, and April had often woken to the sound of her coughing, crying, wheezing in the dark; and Mother rushing down the hall, dressing gown flapping like a

nightbird's wings, lights going on, taps running in the bath, a tired voice soothing, crooning. . . Poor Angela, so thin she was like a shadow, allergic to everything under the sun, always the focus of Mother's anxious watching. . .

April had been seriously ill only once in her life, during the summer just after she dropped out of medical school; but she had recovered from whatever it was--an undiagnosed malaise of fever and debilitating fatigue--without medical intervention. Now, unused to being unwell, she had neither the inclination to seek help nor the experience to know whether she really needed it.

The telephone buzzed under her hand, giving her a guilty start. No doubt someone waiting for the copy.

"April Johanssen," she said, in a tone that warned whomever was on the line to choose his or her words carefully.

"And good morning to you, too, little Junebug. What's eating your ass this morning." Owen Stead, her section editor. Some people could not be intimidated.

"Nothing that a permanent leave of absence from this place wouldn't cure," she replied.

"Well, I think that could be arranged."

"Just tell me when, Owen."

"When, oh-when, that's what I want to know, too."

"And what's on your mind, as if I couldn't guess."

Owen's wife had abandoned him for her hairdresser the year

before; for months afterward he had worn a look of stupefied pain and had communicated only in monosyllables. But once the shock wore off and he began to notice what went on around him again, everything changed. His eyes got the look of someone determined to connect, and his speech became as nuance-laden as twilight in November.

Because they worked together and had been friends for a long time, April had been glad to see him recovering from his wife's betrayal--until she realized with dismay that she was the focus of his new-found will to live again. This, to her, was a betrayal almost as serious as the one his wife had perpetrated. What happened to the friendship now--the trust and acceptance it implied, the truce of passions it allowed? *The plaintiff, April Johanssen, petitions the court for an annulment of the ten-year contract of friendship with the defendant, Owen Stead, on grounds of an unprovoked assault of love on the person of the plaintiff.* What did he expect her to do, surrender the safety of the trench for a foray onto the battlefield of history's longest war?

"Well, I was passing through the composing room and I heard this mutinous muttering, and one was trying to bribe the other to call somebody, and the other was screaming, 'Are you crazy, I don't want to die,' and so naturally, me being the nosy character I am, I had to know what was up,

and so the one who didn't want to die said they were waiting for a page of copy--"

"Bunch of cowards," April snapped. "I'm five minutes away from finishing, if you would just get off my phone and let me work."

"I'll pass on the message," Owen said with a sigh. "But someday you'll have to tell me what makes a woman like you turn into such a witch." He hung up before she could open her mouth to reply. She slammed the phone down and then sat in a paralysis of pain, smothering the urge to cry out. The small finger of her right hand had caught between the telephone receiver and the cradle, and had borne the full force of her act of rage. She watched the throbbing tip of the finger change from white to red to pale blue while hot skewers of pain pierced the nerves of hand and forearm. Instinctively she plunged it into the glass of ice water on her desk, and this time could not suppress the yelp of pain that followed. She yanked her hand out of the water and dried it quickly, while helpless tears sprang to her eyes. She sat, eyes closed, elbow on desk, hand in the air, forcing herself to take deep breaths until she felt in control again. When she opened her eyes she caught Dan, one of the young staff reporters, gazing curiously at her from across the newsroom. April glared a "What do you want?" at him; he dropped his eyes and went back to work, a slow flush spreading up his face. But the surge of renewed anger had

only made her finger throb more painfully. She took another deep breath and turned back to her terminal. She did the edit with her left hand and, frowning, rewrote the last paragraph of her article:

Sperm-banking, embryo-freezing, artificial insemination, *in vitro* fertilization, surrogate motherhood, even, heaven forbid, cloning: with so many possible alternatives to the usual simple, fun way of procreating, no woman, no couple should be denied the pleasure of having and rearing a child, should she or they so desire.

She proofread the printed copy from the beginning one last time, folded it, stuffed it into a plastic bullet and shoved the bullet into the tube that went down to the composing room. Passing Owen's door on the way back to her desk, she leaned in to say "Relax, it's done," and kept walking.

"April!" he called out. "Not so fast."

She stopped, retraced her steps. When she was inside the door, he got up, shut the door, and pulled the cord that closed his venetian blinds.

"Really, Owen, is that necessary? You know how they all gossip out there."

"So they'll all be saying I'm in love with you. That's not gossip, that's the truth. And you, though you pretend otherwise, have a terrible case of the hots for me. That's true, too, isn't it?"

"Your imagination is working overtime. What do you want?"

He cleared his throat. "I was just looking at that article one last time."

"Why? Checking to see if I've gone off the deep end on a subject again? Tell you what, why don't you just give me a paper route for a while. Let someone else write the column if you feel you can't trust me any more." April jumped up and headed for the door. Owen grabbed her hand; she pulled it away, wincing with pain.

"Hey, what's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing." She hid her hand from him. "What did you want to say about it?" she asked, pointing to the screen. She waited, her stomach going queasy from the pain, and from the fear of there being something terribly wrong, a tone that implied a too-personal opinion, a too-personal preoccupation. Why she took these assignments when they caused her so much anguish, why she didn't refuse, suggest something else--

But it had nothing to do with refusing or acquiescing to an editor. The series she had done two years earlier on single motherhood--inspired by her own secret leanings in that direction--had brought several dozen letters to her desk, very few of them negative. The correspondents had almost unanimously demanded more articles, more information on all aspects of human reproduction, but especially the

"non-traditional" alternatives. The series of follow-ups she had done since then had been in direct response to the demand, but had served to teach her everything she needed to know about the sperm-and-egg-matching game as well. However, though she had probably indirectly abetted countless other women in their desire to conceive independently, she herself was no closer to making a decision about having a child. For her, no amount of research, no amount of awareness of the possibilities could get her over the first stumbling block: despite a dismal history of failed relationships, each one shorter than the last, she was still holding out for love.

Owen knew all that: she'd shared everything with him, back in the days when he'd been a good friend who was still safely married.

"It's just the last paragraph," Owen said, pointing at the screen. "Nothing serious, probably just nit-picking, but I deleted a couple of words here and there. Words that betray a certain personal preoccupation of the writer," he added, looking up at her.

She tossed her head. "Don't be silly. I wasn't thinking of myself at all when I wrote that piece."

"Right. Well, let's just say I found the focus of the piece was a little diffused, that's all. Through the whole article you've talked about couples who haven't been able to conceive in the normal fashion. The mention of woman,

meaning single woman, at the very end is unnecessary. Single women who are interested will be able to draw their own conclusions."

"So, is that all?" He was right, of course. Words leaking through the gaps in her attention. Again. She watched as he did the transmission.

"I'll call downstairs, tell them to look for the edit." "Fine," said April, and stood up. "Now if you don't mind, I'll be out for the rest of the day. My brother-in-law phoned this morning, all wound up about some celebrity promotion or something. There may or may not be anything in it--celebrity egos bore me stiff, as you well know. But I haven't seen my sister in a month of Sundays, so even if it turns out there's nothing to write about, I'll get a decent meal and maybe a decent chat with my sister. That is," she said with an ironic pause, "if my chief gives his permission."

He shrugged, not looking up. "Why not." His fingers, surprisingly long and expressive for a man of his size, drummed the desk. "I honestly didn't ask you in here to critique your copy," he said. "I wanted to ask you out to dinner tonight."

"Too late," she said, and was instantly sorry. His already bowed head bent still farther into his chest, revealing a circle of thinning hair amid salt-and-pepper curls. "I know," he said in a low voice.

The brittle armour of her anger collapsed, pierced by the defeat in his voice, the glimpse of the vulnerable crown.

"Maybe some other time," she said, more softly. When he still would not look up, she opened the door and walked out. She took her handbag and jacket off the hook near the door and left without a backward glance.

She strode down the hall to the elevator, pushed the down arrow and waited. Why did men always have to push things, upset the balance, ruin things? Seemed it was always *they* who wanted to go that extra length. Surely, at least half the time it was just out of curiosity, there was no real serious intent in it. So why did they do it, when there was no need, when everything was clicking along the way it should?

She preferred to keep Owen as a friend. Surely an involvement with him would end in failure, just like all the other love affairs she'd had, and when it was over she would lose both a lover and a friend. She had struggled through this same sort of thing already, with Charles, who lived in the apartment next to hers, and was still thankful she had not given in. During the four years they had been neighbours friendship had grown slowly, in the come-by-chance way inbred in apartment living. Sometimes they

wouldn't see each other for a month; other times they would see each other daily, with no apparent design on the part of either. Charles was a little odd: shy, serious, and deliberately solitary, preferring the company of his plants and pets and music to anything human; but rather than making her cautious, this had drawn her towards him, allowed her to trust him perhaps more than she should have. During the past winter, suffocating from the depression that bloomed like algae in a stagnant pond, she had used him shamelessly, visiting him night after night, throwing herself down on the banked cushions that served him for a sofa, amid the orchids, flame violets and lipstick vines that flourished in every corner of the room. He would put on music and they would talk, or play with the cat and dog. Sometimes he would give her something to read, or, best of all, read aloud to her.

Then one night, reading, his voice faltered; the book fell. She, with everything but her hearing shut down behind her closed eyes, acknowledged only the soothing stillness, the soft humidity, the heady fragrance of the jungle, and not the danger in it.

The k was soft, but urgent: a declaration. She opened her eyes, recoiling, folding in on herself like the sensitive fern. She looked at him looking helplessly at her for a long moment before she sat up. Ignoring his apologies, she left.

Having fled from him, however, she found herself disoriented, at loose ends, for she had not seen anyone but him for most of the winter. At first, bent on avoiding him, she invented reasons to be out at night; but the energy needed for that soon flagged. She found herself clinging to the dull habits of work like the shipwrecked cling to bits of floating debris; and the rest of her time was spent prone on the floor of her apartment, staring at the ceiling as if the answer to her dilemma might be found there.

To her questions about what made men behave the way they did, the blank screen of her ceiling yielded up only the same error messages as the charcoal sky of her VDT: *Bad command or file name; Catastrophic error. Press F2 and check data integrity;* and a directory with only one file named *?????????.???.* When she stopped asking these questions, the rude beeping and the pumpkin splatters that jumped disturbingly up and down the screen would fade to a white silence; and soon after she would fall into fitful sleep. This went on for several months, until one night she woke up to the sound of a faint humming. She lay for a long while, listening; and slowly, out of the darkness, came the words of a new question: *What is it with me?* She waited for the beeping and the pumpkin splatters to *Abort? Retry? or Fail?* the question, but nothing happened. Then the humming faded and with a sigh she fell into a deep sleep.

Later came the auxiliary questions: Why was desire always unequal. Why were love and friendship incompatible. Where had the ability to trust gone. What prompted the assumption that the failure of love was inevitable.

She stepped into the elevator which, floor by floor, down the fourteen stories to the street, admitted and disgorged passengers with wearying speed and impartiality. She knew everyone who entered and left, at least by sight. Perhaps this confined and mechanical elevator life was a prototype. You live like a prisoner in a narrow little box, the doors of which open and close at random, letting in others who may or may not be to your liking. As they enter you make the quick decision whether or not to speak, most of the time choosing to stare impassively at the wall. If one or the other of you does speak, the conversation is of necessity the kind that can be terminated on a second's notice with "Have a nice day," or something equally cheerful and inane. Sometimes you find yourself alone with a man like Owen or Charles, who speaks to you a bit more urgently, but for some obscure reason you do not respond. On a rare occasion you see someone you wish would go all the way to your floor, get off with you, talk to you all the way down the hall, but he disappoints by exiting with a wave of the hand before you are even halfway there. You dream sometimes

of The One who will enter; look at you; smile; say things that will make you follow him off the elevator.

The door opened one last time, freeing her and the last passengers at the street-level lobby. She emerged from the building, sneezed in the bright autumn sunshine, and turned her mind with an effort to the trip to the South Shore that afternoon. Should pick up some little gifts for the kids, she thought. Not really in the mood, but how can I show up empty-handed after all this time. Not about to get stuck in one of the malls, though, never find anything there, and then can never find the way out. She looked down the street, squinting at the signs hanging out over the sidewalks. Should avoid the tourist traps on Notre Dame and St-Paul, but where else to go. . . I'll pay an arm and a leg for some tacky little nothing, but if it pleases the kids... She hurried down towards the harbour and, rounding the corner onto St-Paul, had to side-step quickly to avoid running head-on into a tall, bearded man loitering at the door of a shop and blocking the narrow sidewalk.

"Excuse me," she said, stopping short.

He didn't budge. "My pleasure," he said, with an insolent smile. April lowered her head, tried to skirt around him, but something in the window of the shop caught her eye, made her look up again.

HALLOWEEN
AUBAINE DE LA SEMAINE--1/2 PRIX
BATMAN & SUPERMAN
THIS WEEK ONLY--1/2 PRICE

She came to a swift decision. "Do you have any of your specials left?" she asked abruptly.

"Sure do."

"Sizes 4 and 6?"

"Oh, the special is only on sizes twelve and up."

"Why just twelve and up?"

"Because twelve and up wouldn't be caught dead in them this year, that's why. They all want to be Madonna, even the guys. If not that, a telephone booth, a pop bottle, a roach--and I don't mean the insect. The little kiddies, they still want to be Batman and Superman, so why should I put the small sizes on sale. What do you think I am, crazy? How's a guy to make a living?"

April sighed. "So how much?"

"For you? A bargain--\$25.00."

"Each?"

"Whaddya mean, EACH, in that tone. I'll have you know, I sell these things to the American tourists for \$29.95, and they think it's a bargain."

April turned towards the door. "Sorry, too much," she said firmly. "At that price I'd having nothing left for the baby."

"There's a baby, too?" His eyebrows formed an inverted V as he considered this. "Well, I suppose if you need something for the baby, we could make a little better deal."

"Actually, I was just beginning to think I didn't want any of this stuff," April said. She fingered the material of the costume in the window. "Cheap," she said. "Fifty cents in materials, two dollars worth of Chinese labour. What a ripoff. Thanks, but I think I'll be going."

"Hey, hey, lady! Just because you don't want to spend too much on the little darlings, it's no reason to get insulting, you know."

April folded her arms and shifted her weight back onto one foot.

He rubbed a hand on his bearded cheek. "You're one tough cookie, lady. I don't know how you can look so nice and be so mean. Tell you what, you look around, find something for the baby, too, I'll make you a price."

April scanned the over-stuffed shop and zeroed in on a bright-eyed squeeze-doll made from a rubbery material that smelled like vanilla pudding. Perfect for a drooling, teething child, whose sole recognizable talent, according to Angela, was grabbing things and putting them in her mouth.

She stood, fingering the material of the costumes with one hand and weighing the doll in the other.

"I'll give you \$20 for the lot--one doll, one Batman size 6, one Superman size 4."

"Lady, lady, LADY!" He spread his hands in supplication. "You tryin' to cut my throat? Do you know what my rent is in this district? You tryin' to make me go out of business? Fifty for the lot, and you'll never get a better price anywhere."

"Why should I pay a 1000% markup, just so you can pay the rent? If you're overhead is so high, move your shop over to St-Henri. Thirty."

"You'll be robbing me blind, but no matter. I'm supposed to do some charitable deed every day, so now I'm gonna give them away for forty, not a penny less."

April stared coolly at him. "Look, you know I could walk down to the next block and find something cheaper and probably better there. So you're going to be reasonable and let me have them for \$35, no tax."

The man groaned and struck palm to forehead in a display of agony. "You drive me to the wall, woman! Tonight in my prayers I will mention your husband, may God have mercy."

April counted out the \$35 and laid the bills on the counter. "Take it or leave it."

"Well," he sighed, "a man has to do what business he can. If I weren't having such a good day, you'd never get away with this." He pocketed the bills and put the items in a plain bag. "You're sure you don't need anything else for the darlings?"

"That's it for today, thanks."

"Always a pleasure to do business with the gentle sex."
He paused just before the word "gentle" and then dropped it
between them like a parting bow.

She left him with a brief, withering smile and headed
for the lot where her car was parked.

Once as a child she had heard Father chide Mother for
naming her April, saying she should have been a June, given
her sunny nature. Mother's response to Father's suggestion
was grounded in an earthy wisdom. *You weren't there when
they were born, dear. Angela had her eyes wide open but
didn't utter a peep; April arrived howling like a late-
winter storm, what was I to think? And besides, June and
Angela, what kind of names are those for twins. . .?*

Father had only said that, of course, because she
always was happy when he was around. She was madly attached
to him, never went to sleep at night until he came home,
always climbed onto his lap in the evenings to be cuddled.
When she and Angela were small and had to be carried, she
always reached up to Daddy. As plump as Angela was thin,
and as boisterous as Angela was pensive, she would memorize
songs just to be ready to perform whenever there was an
occasion for it. She heard "My Heart Belongs to Daddy" one
day on the radio, and would not rest until her music teacher

got the music and taught her both the voice and piano parts. She sang it on Father's Day, much to everyone's amusement, and from then on it was her signature.

But Father died before she and Angela finished high school; and several years later her foray into medicine in his honour ended in disaster. Almost overnight her sunny outlook dissolved, leaving behind a troubled aggressiveness that often surfaced at inappropriate times and targeted innocent victims, like the shopkeeper. He, with an unflagging courtesy that mocked her abruptness, only confirmed what she already knew about herself: she was not a nice little girl who wanted nothing more than to please and entertain the world. The haggling itself was not so bad, she knew he expected it, would have been disappointed if she hadn't put up a little argument. But she'd been rude, ill-tempered: like someone learning a new dance, she'd got the moves right but hadn't caught the spirit. Worse, she felt no remorse, only a tired fury that was more like the residue of some ancient grievance than anything belonging to the moment.

Altogether a disagreeable day so far, between Owen, the injured finger and the brush with the shopkeeper. But Owen, well, hadn't he set himself up to be hurt? How could he betray their friendship that way, metamorphose almost overnight into a wilful suitor? Things had been so easy, so

uncomplicated before. She was right to feel rage, to want him to be torn apart by the hounds of his own desires.

So why had his slumped figure and bowed head almost stopped her heart there for a moment?

She pulled out of the parking garage and headed for her apartment at the top of rue de la Montagne. She checked her watch: lunch hour. Up the hill she could see snarled traffic, a road crew, and flocks of pedestrians jaywalking like oblivious pigeons. She made a swift decision to loop out along Dorchester, up Atwater to Côte des Neiges and back over Dr. Penfield. She parked on the steep slope of de la Montagne, wheel to the curb and emergency brake pulled up tight.

Letting herself into the apartment, she opened the balcony door to the breezes blowing around the mountain and rewound the tape of her telephone answering machine.

There were the usual clicks of telephones being hung up by anonymous hands, then a sombre voice, without so much as a hello, began,

*April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with--*

She raced across the room to slam a hand on the stop button

--spring rain.

and got another painful reminder of the injured finger.

"Cheap shot, Stead," she shouted at the offending machine. She squeezed her right hand with the left and inspected the finger. Blood had pooled beneath the nail, the fingertip was red and swollen down to the first knuckle, and the joint was stiff--probably a slight sprain as well as a dead nail.

And she was angry. She telephoned Owen's home number and waited to leave her own message. But instead of his familiar parody of "We're not home", she heard the sonorous gonging of the hours at Notre Dame basilica, followed by:

Love is a shadow.

How you lie and cry after it.

Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse.

in a voice as deep and solemn as the bells. Son-of-a-bitch, she thought, what is he up to? How did he know . . .?

Silence. The long, high-pitched tone signalling her turn to speak. "Very clever, Owen--"

She stopped, unable to go on. A welter of feelings struggled to find the words that would untangle them. Anger and bitterness fought with confusion and longing, trust and love with suspicion and pride. Unable to speak of a single one, she broke off. Everything was falling to pieces. She dropped the telephone back into its cradle and flung face down on the sofa, weeping aloud.

She falls and falls, plummeting deeper and deeper into darkness. The air is a blanket of lead, pressing down. Behind the curtain of the eyelids a labyrinthine hallway leads down, ever down, and doors burst open, releasing a crowd, a babel of buried memories, dreams. . .

Ocean sounds: shallow, gentle waves lapping at the shore. Carrying over the sound of the water, a child's voice, singing a brave, breathy rendition of "My Heart Belongs to Daddy." Far away a wild storm builds. It sweeps down over sea and shore like a bird of death. The sea rises up, drowns the song, washes away the voice. . . When the storm subsides, a tiny rowboat appears, far out in the ocean. In it are Boatman and his two passengers, Sunlight and Shadow. Boatman's head is a magician's trunk stuffed with stories, funny faces, foreign accents, card tricks. As he rows the little boat called Time, a babble of silly jokes, laughter, and rhymes pour from his mouth. His two passengers, Sunlight and Shadow, are weeping uncontrollably, grieving over the loss of their parents. Daddy was lost to a disease that wormed its way through bone and vein for months before the deadly roses bloomed beneath his skin. He

wasted before their eyes, losing his sight, losing his hair. Slowly it fell at first, forming a round O at the crown; then in clumps that clung to the death bed linen. He breathed his last with naked head cradled in weeping Mother's arms. Mother, whose voice now made sounds like breaking glass, rode the wild horse of her grief for less than a year before it carried her into the funeral pyre.

Boatman rows and rows. He distracts his orphaned passengers by teaching them to play tennis on a court he has marked out on the water, and by making them learn to play poker. He rows a little distance every day, until at last they reach the shore of their new life.

On the shore is a wide, columned gate, where they part, Shadow and Boatman going one way and Sunlight going the other. Sunlight is off on a Quest: she dissects frogs and studies pickled chicken embryos to the tune of "My Heart Belongs to Daddy." But one day, working in the lab, she and the doctor fantasy are chloroformed, instead of a rabbit.

She remembers nothing after reaching into a cage to pull out the trembling white rabbit. She wakes up in the pitch dark of a supply closet; struggles to her feet, searches for the door, the light switch. When she finds the light, she cries out in horror: her blouse and stockings are torn, there are stains on her skirt.

She tells no one; creeps home and retreats into the shadows of her room, spends a month confined to bed with undiagnosed pains and fever.

Shadow and Boatman are gone, leaving Sunlight sitting alone, cross-legged on a fringed, lotus-coloured circle of carpet which floats on the air at shoulder height. Attached to the underside of the carpet, a long filament of copper, a ground wire. It drifts on currents of air, not touching the earth. Sunlight sits contemplating a poker hand that dances from symmetry to non-symmetry and back again. Two pairs, a heart and a club in each, and a wild card: a full house. The wild card lodged between the two pairs is the one-eyed Jack of Spades; he holds up his infinity symbol, and transforms the pairs by turning his eye first on one and then on the other. . .

The air waves grow turbulent under the lotus-coloured carpet. The peaceful meditation on the mutating pairs is shattered by an alarm of clanging church bells, the loud urgent thud of horses' hooves--

"April, are you in there." A voice, a thud of fists on the door, phone chimes ringing, ringing. She picked up the phone, "Just a minute, please," put it down and stumbled towards the door. "Who is it?" she asked. Though her heart

thumped louder than the fists on the door, her brain, her limbs still struggled against an undertow of sleep.

"April! It's me, Owen. Please open the door."

She unlatched the door and stood to one side of it. He burst into the room and, without a moment's hesitation, took her into his arms. His body folded around her, large and comforting. His tie was loose and the collar of his shirt was open; his skin smelled of Lifebuoy soap. She let her forehead drop into the triangular mat of greying curls at his throat.

"I think I upset you," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," she said, wanting to dismiss the possibility that her feelings mattered more to him than his own drives.

He pushed her away and held her at arms length. "Look," he said, "I know you've been walking a tightrope for a long time. Do you think I wanted to be the one to make you lose your balance?"

Walking a tightrope. She only wished she had the skill for such an act, the courage to accept that danger in exchange for clarity of vision.

She dropped her eyes. "Don't over-dramatize the situation," she said. Taking his hand from her shoulder, she led him to the sofa.

"Sit down for a minute, let me make some coffee. I was in a dead sleep." Then, "Oh, my God, the phone." She

picked it up, listened for a moment, and hung up. "Whoever it was gave up. Can't say I blame them," and laughed. She looked at her watch. "Look at the time! I must have really slept. Have you had lunch?" He shook his head, No. She ignored the questions in his eyes, the crease of puzzlement down the centre of his forehead.

"I'll make us a sandwich," she said matter-of-factly and, not waiting for his answer, stepped into the kitchenette. "You can put on some music, if you like," she called out from the depths of the refrigerator. She pulled out bread, cheeses, tomato, sliced cold cuts. When she had heard no sound from the living room for several minutes, she tiptoed to the door to have a look. Owen stood with his back to her, gazing out the screen door towards the river. His jacket and tie lay neatly folded on the back of the chair. A warm breeze filtered through the screen, ruffling the leaves of the weeping fig that stood beside the door. A hot white haze hung over the river and the south shore, obscuring the outcroppings of Mont-Saint-Bruno and Mont-St-Hilaire. Silhouetted in the bright light, Owen's shoulders seemed to fill the whole door frame. She thought of the open collar of his shirt, the triangle of exposed skin her forehead had touched, and realized that never before had she seen him in any kind of disarray, not even during the strike at the newspaper, when he'd sometimes worked 30-hour shifts.

"Owen," she said softly. He turned. His eyes were a

wash of grey-green uncertainty, like the sea when the weather is about to change. "What happened?"

He hesitated a moment, then spoke all in a rush, leaving no room for her to slip in another of her indifferent remarks. "I was about to break down the door," he said. "When I called my home phone and heard your voice break on the machine I got terribly worried. I called here but there was no answer, so I got Dan to call again, told him to let it ring forever if he had to, and came over. I saw your car on the street, so I knew you had to be here. I must have pounded on the door for a good 5 minutes. Then I went to see if the superintendent would open the door, but there was no one there. So I came back, fully intending to break the door down if you didn't answer--"

"How could I have slept through all that!" April cried. She crossed the room, put her hands on Owen's arms. "Why were you in such a panic? What did you think had happened?"

He looked at the floor.

"What did you think I'd done? You thought I'd done something, didn't you? Taken something." She flung it at him, challenging him to deny it. He would not look up.

"Is that what you thought? *Is it?*" So he knew about that, too, how the sirens' song beguiled, morning after morning, following her from bed to shower to closet, singing sweetly of gravity and inertia. Guessed that she no

longer saw much reason to resist. Saw that her life, for all its busyness, its surfeit of possibilities, was empty.

"I've seen a few journalists go off the deep end over the years. I've learned to recognize the symptoms. And of course," he smiled ironically, "I have my spies. Dan has a bird's-eye view of your desk. and keeps me informed--"

A voice inside began to shout, to tell him where to stuff it, all the prying, the snooping, the misplaced pity; but it was weak, unconvincing. Beneath the firm tone of his voice, understood in the firm grip of his hands on her arms, was a soft pleading that overruled all the bitter inner clamour. Her eyes were riveted on the inviting triangle of flesh at the opening of his shirt. A wish, fleet as a shooting star: to lean into him and press her forehead there again, and her nose, her lips. . . .

She looked up. The furrow between his brows was gone; his eyes had cleared. "You know," he said, "when I was standing outside that door, pounding on it as though my life and yours depended on me getting in, I promised myself that if you were all right I'd never pressure you for anything again. Whatever you want from us you can have. For my part, I just want you around. Anything more than that is gravy."

As if to confirm what he had just said, he let go of her arms and stood back. She turned to look out once more over the river, the three bridges that spanned it, the untidy

sprawl of the cities along the south shore. Over there was Angela, in her snug home on its tree-lined street, with Robert and her children and her cat. She was paying dearly for that snugness, but here on the mountain April was paying dearly, too, for her solitary freedom. She would go over there tonight and come back filled with the same contrary emotions she always had after visiting them. She both feared and longed for something that they had. Theirs was no paradise, and yet, which was more painful--the immolation of the self being in the family business required, or the periods of searing loneliness that went with belonging only to yourself?

To be grounded without being buried. To be connected without being contained. Were these too much to ask?

She looked at Owen, whose calm gaze still rested on her. So it was to be whatever she wanted. He had been a good friend. He had made the first move to cross the boundary of simple friendship and it had infuriated her. But if he hadn't done so, would she ever have begun to look at him as a possible lover? What was she waiting for--the mythical, fatal *coup de foudre*?

Now that he had promised to back off, perhaps things would go back to what they were. She had managed it with Charles; she could probably do it again--but was that what she wanted?

I want to choose, not just to allow. . .

Owen cleared his throat. "I think I'd better be getting back to the office," he said.

"Yes, I suppose you'd better," she said. But she knew she shouldn't let him go, not just yet. They had left the old world behind, but had not yet sighted the shores of the new. If she did nothing, let him leave now without a sign, they might drift forever on a sea of misapprehension.

She put a hand out, touched his chest. "Thank you for--" She stopped. Her eyes travelled from where her fingers rested up to meet his. "--everything. For caring," she finished, mortified at the inadequacy of the words. He nodded; moved as though to take a step backward. She put out both hands, catching at his arms. "Just a moment, please," she said, and took a step towards him. He hesitated, then pulled her into his arms and kissed her forehead. She felt her feet leave the floor, found herself sitting on his lap, her shoulder snug against his chest, her forehead against his neck. She let out a long breath, and closed her eyes; felt the tension slide from her body.

Quiet. It gathers like a blue translucent curtain around them. Sounds, muffled by distance, drift on the air currents that swirl around the mountain. Down below, traffic arteries fill up, heat up; horns bleat, tires squeal, there is the muted exchange of insults. A DC-10 drones by on its way to Mirabel; a freighter signals its

passing through the St-Lambert locks with a flatulent blast. All this filters into her left ear, as though through cotton wool; into the right, which rests on his shoulder, pours only the sound of his beating heart. Time flows by unheeded outside this circle of quiet. Here there is only the inviolable space of this moment: it is all that matters.

The door of a neighbouring balcony slid open. Music poured through the opening. A piano, then a clarinet; and lastly, a soprano voice, *Wenn auf denn hochsten Fels ich steh'*, sending its song skyward, echoing as though flung against the walls of a mountain gorge. April's sense of time and place returned, swift as a comet; and with it, the awareness of being cradled by Owen's folded legs and circling arms, of hearing the slow, even rhythm of his breathing, of breathing the warm fragrance of his skin through his shirt. She was loathe to move, to see him leave; yet it was all right for him to leave, now. Whatever was there now would still be there when she saw him again.

She kissed his cheek lightly and stood up. He pulled himself up, put on his jacket and tie; smoothed his hair at the mirror by the door. He touched the thinning spot at the top of his head with a grimace, and reached for the door knob. "See you tomorrow?"

"Yes," she said, closing the door behind him.

At last she thought to look at her watch. Four-thirty! Too late now to beat the rush hour traffic to the bridge. Should have left an hour ago. *So sehnend klang im Wald das Lied, so sehnend klang es durch die Nacht. . .* Charles was home next door. This was his signal: *I'm home, wouldn't mind company.* But no time, she thought, pulling a loose, comfortable shift from the closet. Well, maybe a quick hello later, on the way out. But she stood, waiting until she had heard *Der Fruhling will kommen, der Fruhling, meine Freud'*, begin before drowning out the music with the noise of the shower.

Carrying the children's gifts and a light jacket in a large tote bag, she let herself out of the apartment. She checked her watch. No hurry now, rush hour well under way. She knocked on the door of the apartment next to hers.

Charles opened the door, *Mein Liebchen wohnt so weit von mir*, and smiled.

"Playing it again?" she laughed.

"I was afraid you hadn't heard it the first time," he said. "I was getting myself together to go out," she said. In reply to his raised eyebrows, "Oh, nothing like that-- it's family circus night again, that's all."

"I see. And how are they all?"

"All right, I guess. I'm a little ashamed to admit I haven't seen them since the baby's christening."

Charles clucked disapprovingly. "Guess you'd better be off then. You'll need the first two hours just to get through the apologies and excuses." *Ich hier so einsam bin.*

"Before I go, could you just play that again from the beginning?"

He beamed at her. "Sure. Come in and sit down."

Seated cross-legged on a cushion on the floor, breathing in the familiar humid plant and animal odours of his apartment, she watched him brush the record, clean the needle and cue up the cartridge arm again. Slim and fair, his slight build emphasized by a short-sleeved cotton shirt and baggy Bermudas, he looked more like a teenaged boy than a man of thirty. He flopped down on the floor near her, as the clarinet's melancholy solo filled the room.

"You're looking very tan and healthy," she said. The hair on his arms glowed gold against the burnished copper of his skin.

"Oh," he laughed, looking down at his feet. "I was working the evening shift during August and most of September, so I had a chance to get some sun. Now I'm back on days."

"So that's why I hadn't seen you around." They fell silent as Elly Ameling responded to the clarinet's invitation to song, *Wenn auf dem höchsten Fels. . .* There

was something new in his eyes, she decided. It was as if he were guarding some precious secret. For all his delight at seeing her, he was somehow *not there*.

He was a geriatrician, so it wasn't likely he'd fallen in love with one of his patients; and a solitary being who shunned the usual clubs and bars, so it was hard to believe he'd met someone. And yet, there he sat, picking at the fringe of the cushion, looking serious, a little distracted --and happy.

Der Fruhling will kommen, der Fruhling, meine Freud

She looked up, caught Charles giving her a look of--fondness? Yes, she decided, smiling at him. Fondness. Nothing more than that.

"That dress you have on, I don't think I've ever seen you wear it before."

"Oh," she laughed, "this old thing. It's ancient as the hills. Good for rough-housing with the kids."

"The colour really suits you. What do you call it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Angela calls it persimmon. I guess that's pretty close."

"Saffron," he said.

"Saffron?"

"Yes, you remember, the colour of Diana's tunic. And I'm not talking about the Princess of Wales."

The music had stopped. He was putting the record back into its jacket. "April--"

"Yes?"

"I was wondering if you could do me a favour."

From de la Montagne, April took a winding course south towards the river, the bag full of gifts and her jacket on the seat beside her. The sun beat in through the side window, warming her arm and her lap. She rolled down the windows and switched on the circulating fan. As she approached the last curve of rue des Seigneurs before crossing the canal bridge, the traffic thickened and slowed. A warm breeze blew off the water, rustled the poplars and wafted in through the open windows of the car. Clouds of tiny, whiskered seed pods blew about in the air. April's nose twitched, her eyes watered; she sneezed violently. Damned pollens, they're enough to make you wish for snow year-round, she thought, blowing her nose. In the matter of allergies, at least, she was becoming more like Angela with each passing season.

I was wondering if you could make a phone call for me. If someone answers, just pretend you've got the wrong number. So she had telephoned; made the appropriate apologies to the soft young voice that answered, and hung up. He was pleased and grateful, but then began exhibiting all the signs of wanting to be off, quickly. She was

curious to know what it was all about, and a little hurt that he volunteered nothing; but decided it was the better part of friendship to allow him his privacy, if that was what he wanted. Taking her cue, she gathered up her things to leave. At the door, he took her hand and squeezed it; when she let out a yelp, he dropped it, a look of shock on his face. She laughed, despite the pain.

"It's not that I mind you touching me," she said. "It's just that--" She showed him the injured finger. He looked at it, clucking a bit under his breath, and led her into the kitchen to look at it under the light.

"Just let me get my bag," he said.

"No!" she protested. "There's nothing to do for it, anyway. The nail's lost, no matter what. It'll take time, but it'll fix itself."

"There's too much blood under the nail," Charles said. "It's dangerous to leave it like that."

He brought his bag and laid a few instruments on the table. As he prepared a syringe, he explained. "I'll give you a little shot of a local anaesthetic, and then I have to pierce the nail to drain the blood that's collected. I'll try not to hurt you. Don't look if you're squeamish. If you feel faint, tell me right away." He gave her the injection and, while it took, straightened one end of a paper clip and sterilized it. He laughed at the astonished

look she gave him. "It's utterly barbaric," he said, "but no one seems to have found a better instrument."

He tested her finger and, finding it numb, said, "I would prefer you didn't look." She watched his face as he worked. It was completely concentrated on what he was doing: detached but somehow still kind. A small twinge of pain shot up the nerves of her hand, despite the anaesthetic. He stopped and looked up when her hand twitched involuntarily.

"Sorry," he said.

"It's okay," she said.

"It's done, anyway. We just have to wait a minute while it drains. Don't look yet." He held her hand and looked back into her eyes, which were still riveted on his face. "I guess you're wondering what all the business with the telephone was all about."

As he applied an antibiotic cream, bandaged the finger and then put away his instruments, he told her. She was the daughter of one of his patients. The patient, a woman who had been hospitalized with Alzheimer's disease for many months, had just died that afternoon. For over a month she had been expected to die at any moment, and he had promised the daughter he would be the one to contact her when it happened. He didn't want to tell her over the phone, but wanted to make sure she was at home before going over to see her. . . .

April watched him carefully as he told her all this. Yes, she decided, it was serious; he was showing all the symptoms of love.

Idling at the red light at rue St-Patrick. . . on the billboard facing her, a young woman was poised, eyes narrowed, arrow nocked and aimed. *La tension. . . au Club Med.* The light changed. So what would this mean--another good-bye? She knew how these things went, she'd been through all of it before. No matter what the intentions, love altered everything, drew you away from some circles and into others. It had happened countless times with girlfriends when she was younger, even with her own twin to a certain extent. Perhaps it would have been different if she, too, had married, then all of them might have continued to be friends as couples, though that in itself was a big change--like switching from a two-step to a quadrille. Well, what did she want, anyway, how could she expect things to reach a certain point and stay that way forever? Here was the face-off: stasis, perfection, the paralysis-of-death vs change, evolution, the dance-of-life. Owen moves out from the shadows; Charles, who is still young enough to dream of having it all, dashes off into the woods after a butterfly.

Angela, standing absently at the kitchen table, a damp cloth in her hand, shakes herself out of a little daydream. Jeremy is in the playroom, a few steps down and off the kitchen, engrossed in his Lego; Robby and Tara are upstairs napping. Angela wipes the table and hangs the cloth over the tap. She listens for a moment and then steals over to the cupboard where she keeps her cookbooks. Reaching behind them, she pulls out a thick, spiral-bound notebook and the fountain pen she keeps just for writing in the book. On the cover of the book a dark-haired woman wearing a blue two-piece swimsuit and scuba diving equipment explores an undersea cave.

She opens the book and turns to the last written page. On it a brief entry:

May 22

A dream: A lone cabin in a tiny clearing deep in the woods. Babies everywhere, my own and others. Men working on the cabin, sawing and hammering. I go inside to tend to one of the babies; I turn to go back out of doors, but the workmen have sealed up the doorway.

Angela sits at the kitchen table, uncaps her pen and, after checking the date of the last entry, turns to a new page. After a false start--the fountain pen needs filling--she sits, staring at the book. She bites her pen and then begins.

October 7

Almost five months since the last time I wrote.
Not a word since I was in hospital having Tara.
Incredible. The last so-called leisure time I had
was those precious few days. Just me and one child
who slept eighteen hours a day. What bliss. When
again will there be such a time. Never any time
any more. Never a thought followed through, no
sentence--written or spoken--ever completed, not a
dream that isn't interrupted. Used up--no other
way to describe it. So how am I ever see the way
out of this mess we're all in.
Strange, but I feel no great urge to do or say
anything--yet. Too exhausted, too empty, perhaps.
Or perhaps something in me knows it's best to--

Jeremy climbs the six steps up to the kitchen, trailing
a noisy, wooden pull-toy (a grinning bloodhound that rolls
along, nose to the ground, on clack-clacking wheels).
Angela hears him coming but does not look up.

"I want to go outside, Mummy."

Turning onto Bridge Street at the end of St-Patrick,
April switched on the radio. A snatch of raucous Billy
Idol, click, --incredible value and an unbelievable price!
So hurry on down to-- She switched to FM, --certain
recordings with original instruments have a less authentic
sound than-- back to AM, --with what you save you could
buy-- FM, --if you can pronounce Loch Ness you can
pronounce Pachelbel (the *ch* delivered with a prolonged
hawking)--

Pompous ass! she raged, turning it off altogether. *So
sehrend klang im Wald das Lied*, rang in her head. Never

could hear the song without thinking that Schubert wrote it and then lay down and died. He was dying--and knew it--when he wrote it. Must be why it haunts so. He knew it would be the last, yet it ends with such a burst of joy, *Der Fruhling will kommen*. . .

The car inched forward and down into the tunnel under the train tracks. Once more her foot went to the brake as the car ahead of her stopped suddenly. The bag of gifts slid to the floor. She leaned down to pick it up. The car behind her honked. She straightened up to see that the car ahead had moved forward ten feet. She glared into her rear-view mirror and was answered by a rude gesture from the driver behind. What on earth was the matter with everybody today? Must be the weather, some kind of misalignment of the planets or the stars, everyone so out-of-sorts. For myself, I'm not fit company for a dog. . . maybe I should go back, phone Angela, make an excuse, an apology. But it was too late, she was on a one-way approach to the bridge and had to cross before she could turn back.

"Mummy, I said I want to go out."

Angela looks up. "I know, Jeremy. But it's not time."

"When, then."

"When Tracy gets here. Then you can all go to the park."

"When's Auntie April gonna get here."

"Soon, I think."

"How long do I have to wait for Tracy?"

"How long? Mmmnn. That's hard to say. Depends--"

"No depends!" the child bellowed. "You always say depends! No more depends!"

Angela looked back at the page in her notebook. "When the big hand of the clock gets to six, then," she says, praying that it will be true. "In the meantime, Jeremy, why don't you make a picture for Auntie April, you know how much she likes that." She gets crayons and paper from the cupboard and puts them on the table in front of the child.

He folds his arms. "Don't know what to draw."

"How about a picture of Hounddog. He was Auntie April's favourite toy when she was a child, maybe she'd like a picture to remember him by, now that she never sees him any more." She puts the toy on the table. Jeremy puts it back on the floor. "Well, how about a picture of Mum, then." Go ahead, she thinks as the child climbs into the chair, use those crayons like daggers.

She looks at the page in her diary. ". . . and nothing to do but--" Nothing to do but what? When she puts her pen to the page this time, the words come out at a furious pace.

--wait. Robert doesn't know I know. It will be business as usual until I make a move. The waters are muddy, now, there is too much agitation. Wait. One day the waters will be still and clear again. Then you will see what has to be done.

Very odd: no feeling that there might be a relapse. Hardly slept last night, little wonder, woke up even before R's alarm went off. He almost went back to sleep, felt like giving him an elbow somewhere, but didn't want him to know I was awake. He was checking to see if I was awake, I could feel it, maybe thinking about last night and wanting it for himself this time. Oddly enough I could have, yesterday's revelation notwithstanding, but suddenly he was out of bed like a shot. Must have had something important on the agenda. Business, always business. The main turn-on these days. How do men get like that? Not that I'm so surprised-- he had the early symptoms before we were even married.

April coming today, any minute now, in fact. Will have everything to talk about, as usual. Must talk about the baby business before R gets here. Last time, T's christening and all, so touchy, and R's insensitive jokes annoyed her, I could tell. No wonder she hasn't been back. Must tell R to lay off, not even to bring it up unless--

"I finished my picture. It looks like a Halloween witch."

The two lanes of Bridge Street having merged, traffic flowed across the bridge in an uninterrupted stream. A train full of commuters lumbered along the tracks between the opposing lanes of traffic. Across the river, the South Shore shimmered in the unseasonable heat. April brushed a hand across her damp forehead. Much too hot for this time of year. No wonder everyone's so irritable. Seasons all turned around, summer cool and damp, autumn all ablaze. Angela most likely making iced herbal tea right now. Which kind would it be today? Pantry smells like a country field,

lemon grass and blackberry leaves, rosehips and chicory root, jars of brown rice and barley, bucket of honey made from--what was that autumn flower? Good for your allergies, she says. Wonder if she's still on the vegetarian kick. Must be hard, with Robert such a committed carnivore, but isn't that always the way. . . Goldenrod, that was it.

"She's a witch, all right," Angela says, gazing at the picture Jeremy holds up. "And that's quite a hat. I never saw a red feather in a witch's hat before, but it's a nice touch."

"Can I sit on the front steps and wait for Tracy?"

She looks at him doubtfully. "Only if you promise--"

"Not to move off the porch, I know."

She watches his retreating back. Does it start this early, not being able to do anything right by them? She used to tell him she had eyes in the back of her head, invisible ones (he'd searched through her hair trying to find them), and could see him no matter where he was. She only said it to make him think twice about doing something dangerous and forbidden, but then, realizing how oppressive it sounded, she stopped.

She looks again at his picture, at the hollow, gaping mouth, the downturned eyes. The child knows already that women can turn into witches. . . but does he know why?

She looks back at the page in her notebook.

". . . unless--

"April does," she writes, ending with her characteristic period, a tiny "o". Jeremy's voice, crowing a greeting to an unseen visitor, floats in through the screen door. The doorbell rings. Angela, expecting it to be April, closes her book, drops it and the pen into the space behind the row of cookbooks, and goes to the door. She stares through the screen uncomprehending.

"Friday, Missus! Come to help clean!"

"Oh, dear. Gerard." She looks into the boy's face, whose usual vacant expression is suffused now with an eager smile. "We did the cleaning on Wednesday, this week, remember? That was instead of-- You didn't understand. Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't make myself--" The boy's eager look changing rapidly to one of confusion, doubt, she casts about for something. "--but never mind, I have a very important job for you. The leaves, look at them, there must have been a wind in the night, they're all over the lawn, the path. They should be raked up." The boy's face is bright once again. "Jeremy, why don't you help Gerard? He'll need the rake, you know where that is--"

"And bags, Missus."

"Oh, no, Gerard, not in bags. Put them in the compost box in the back, Jeremy will show you where that is, too. Later we'll spread them on the perennial beds for mulch."

"Much?"

"Mulch. I'll show you later on, when it's cold, how to do the mulching."

"Yes, Missus."

She closes the door and leans on it; turns to find Robby standing on the stairs, rubbing his eyes. She holds out her arms and he comes to her, wrapping arms and legs around her and nestling his flushed face into her neck. "You slept such a long time, today. Was it a good sleep?" she murmurs next to his ear.

"Good sleep," he replies. "Hoozat door?"

"Gerard. He forgot we cleaned on Wednesday."

"Gerrod?" The child is instantly alert. "Gerrod here?"

"Yes, he's outside."

The child squirms his way down. "Go out, see Gerrod."

"Sure, Robby, just go and get your shoes and I'll help you put them on." She sits on the bottom step and waits. A glint of something dark red under the hall table catches her eye. She squints; leans forward; goes down on all fours to examine it. Now how did that get all the way in here? And how did we miss it when we cleaned? Guess I should really wear my glasses. . . good thing Robert didn't see, he'd be annoyed, and then go on again about Gerard. . .

"Here my shoes, Mummy." Angela picks up the seed and puts it in her pocket. "What you smile at?"

She opens her pocket to show him the seed. "Remember the day we all ate the pomegranate?"

Robby looks at them and grins. "Me red, Mummy red, Jemmy red, kitchen all red," he says, throwing out his arms.

Angela laughs. "Slippery seeds everywhere. This one must have stuck to somebody--it ended up under the hall table." She bent down to put on Robby's shoes.

"Slippy seeds evvywhere," he chuckles, rubbing his hands.

"There you are, little one," she says, tying a double bow in his laces. "Out you go. I hear your sister crying already."

She opens the door to let Robby out and finds Tracy standing on the step. "Oh, Tracy, good. I'm just about to get Tara up, and then you can take them all to the park. There won't be many more days like this, so we'd best use them well."

When April arrived the house looked deserted. Why weren't the children out on such a warm day? She tapped the horn lightly and gathered up the bag and her jacket. Still no one appeared. As she walked up the front path, the door opened and Angela stood smiling on the porch.

"Hello, stranger."

April grimaced. "Is this the Oratory? Shall I crawl up the path on my knees?"

"That would be a reasonable penance."

Still too thin, April thought, hugging her. But she's better, I can tell. "Where are the kids?" she asked, handing the bag of parcels to her.

"Gone to the park for a while. Until it starts to get dark." Angela led the way into the house. "Still playing fairy godmother, I see." They walked straight through the house and out into the quiet cool of the back garden.

"Now," said Angela, "we have about 40 minutes before the kids come back and Robert gets home, so let's relish it. I've already put the kettle on. Do you insist on coffee, or will you try one of my teas? I've found a nice one-- rosehips, orange peel, hibiscus flowers and all sorts of spices--very refreshing--"

"Yes, tea," laughed April. "How could anyone refuse such a brew?"

Robert, making the closing-up rounds in the after hours quiet of his studio and offices, fingered the slip from the dry cleaners in the side pocket of his jacket. He toyed with the idea of going to see if the suits were still there. He made a mental note to start emptying his pockets

completely, every night, from then on. God only knew what he might already have lost through such carelessness.

No, he decided, the cleaners could wait, it was late enough already. It had been a day full of surprises. After his regular appointments he had walked over to the Norton plant only three blocks away, quotation in hand. Old Norton had surprised him by shedding the usual crustiness in favour of the cloak of the Grand Old Man. He took the envelope containing the quotation and, without so much as glancing at the contents, said he would go over it on the weekend and get back to Robert on Monday. That disposed of, he invited Robert into the lounge adjoining his office and offered him a drink. There they had passed the end of the afternoon, their bodies cradled in pliant leather, their feet resting on the outstretched hide of a polar bear. Robert sipped Norton's premium scotch (he thought it shrewd to drink whatever the client drank) and inhaled the heady fumes of his leather furnishings and wealth. Halfway through the second drink Norton's face took on a high flush, and words began to pour in unexpected abundance through the gap beneath his mustache.

Angela sat across from April and, having shared rooms and clothes and every secret and dream she'd ever had with her until her engagement to Robert, thought: How did we get

here? Four months since the last visit, and how long since the one before that? She used to drop in all the time, often with a man in tow, now never, can't remember the last time--

"Guess you've been pretty busy lately?"

"Yes, pretty busy."

"But not too busy."

"No, not too busy."

Angela sipped her tea. "I'm sorry to say, I seldom read the papers any more, mornings are too hectic, nights I'm too tired, so I can't even tell you what I think about-- How much I--"

April looked up from her cup. "It's not important."

"Well, of course it's important. It's your life, your career, your--"

April cut in swiftly. "No. It's my job. Something I could change if I needed to."

"Are you planning--?"

"No, not now. But some day, maybe."

From the depths of a maple in the neighbour's yard a robin warbled his twilight adieus. Angela listened, memorizing. Soon there would be only the squabbling of the sparrows, who hadn't the sense to fly from winter.

"I think I was avoiding coming over, actually." April's voice, though soft, startled her.

"You didn't like the food," she said.

"Right. By the way, what are we having for supper?"

They exchanged wry smiles. And sipped their tea.

Robert started the car and eased it out of the underground garage and onto the street. He was feeling a little hazy with the scotch, and decided he should compensate with more than the usual caution. He was also reeling a bit from the revelations of the afternoon. Norton, it seemed, was not nearly the forthright, upright citizen Robert had imagined. His wife--whom Robert had always assumed to be dead, since she was nowhere in sight and had never been mentioned--had left him twenty years earlier, after eighteen years of marriage, because his indiscretions with her own friends had reached such proportions that she was left with no choice. After a divorce that was both very quiet and very costly, she had dropped out of sight, much to Norton's chagrin, for she never completely dropped out of his mind. Had she still been within reach, he confessed, he would have done everything in his power to woo her back. His three sons were dutiful and hard-working, everything a father could want, but they, too, had been unable to keep their wives for very long. He didn't like to think he might be responsible in some way for their failed marriages, but when he brooded, which seemed to be fairly often now that he was at the point

of being shelved--"taking a less active role in the decision-making process," his sons called it--he sometimes couldn't keep himself from these morbid ideas.

Robert hoped the old man's melancholy insobriety, and the confidences he had shared this afternoon, would not affect his decision on the quote. He thought not. For whatever reasons, Norton seemed to have taken a liking to Robert, seemed not to care so much about getting the best quote as getting a man he liked for the job. So all that sweating this morning had probably been for nothing!

It's so quiet, April thought. No disturbances, nothing deflecting the waves. I almost hear what she's thinking, like when we were young.

"It's because I always left here feeling frustrated," she said. "We never had a moment--not that I blamed you, the juggling act you did--do--was astonishing, I mean, between the kids, the kitchen, the 'Angela, where's this,' or 'What do you think of that,' from Robert--who in their right mind could expect coherent conversation--" *Not to mention the way Robert hovered around, listening in on our conversations as if he were afraid there was a plot of some kind hatching.*

"Yes, it's strange," said Angela. "I don't think he realizes, I mean, he loves you, loves having you over, but I think he feels very insecure when you're around. He becomes like one of the children."

"He wasn't like that before, before you were married."

"No. Funny, isn't it."

"Maybe he thought we both belonged to him then."

Angela frowned. "Yes, I think so. I think now he might be afraid you and I belong to each other more than he and I do."

"That might be the truest insight he'll ever have."

Angela pushed her wedding band around and around her finger. In the stillness, memory swirled, like smoke curling from a smouldering hearth. Coming down the stairs one evening, hearing Robert and April discussing something in urgent tones. They stopped when they heard her coming back. April's face was pinched with worry. Angela wasn't so far gone she didn't know it was she they were talking about. She was dismayed, didn't want April to worry, but also knew that half the craziness she felt was from the strain of acting normal when everything was falling to pieces.

"And besides, I saw it coming, you know, your breakdown. Horrible, like knowing half of your self is about to break off and fall over a cliff. I was out of my mind, never felt so helpless, so impotent--"

"April--"

She plunged on. "I'm so glad you're better. When you're not well, I'm not well, either."

"Yes," said Angela. "I know." The robin stopped his song and flew off. Angela's eyes followed its flight until it disappeared. The light was changing: dusk had crept in, unnoticed, through the curtain of moist air. A mosquito whined; a hand of each flew up at the same instant to wave it off. They stood up in unison to move inside. Angela, having seen a flash of white, reached for April's hand.

"What is this?"

"Wounded in battle," April laughed, deciding in that instant not to explain too much. It would make too long a detour around what was happening right here. "It's nothing serious, really. The bandage was all Charles' idea. He likes playing doctor so much he even does it after hours."

Angela looked at April curiously. It had been a long time since she'd mentioned him. "How is Charles, anyway?" *Now there's a nice fellow. And crazy about her. Or at least he was three years ago, when I met him.*

"Still the same. No. Not the same. I think he's in love."

"The way you say that, it's not with you." April shook her head. "Well, I guess I'm happy for him."

"You should be," April said. "I am."

Angela sighed. "Let's go inside."

Angela turned on the lights, peeked into the oven. A cloud of fragrant steam poured out.

"Mmmm. The rotten sock smell of Parmesan cheese. That must be lasagna. Vegetarian, I suppose."

"Naturally. I know you like it, and it's the only vegetarian dish Robert will eat."

Angela suddenly noticed the time. She looked towards the front door, listening. *It's almost dark. Where are Tracy and the children? Should be back any second. And Robert. And then it'll all be over, this lovely-- Haven't really said that much, but somehow it's better, it's more like it was. . . Don't think I should tell her about the letter. . . yet.*

Robert, navigating his cautious way along Mill Street and through the left turn on to Bridge, looked forward to sitting at dinner that evening between his wife and her sister. April's presence in the house seemed to quicken everything. The kids adored her and put out their best selves for her. So did he, come to think of it, though he always suspected he didn't impress her much.

On the bridge now, he flicked on the radio, hoping to catch some news. But it was later than he thought and there was only music on the airwaves. He relaxed a little, tapped the steering wheel with his thumbs and hummed along. *Cute*

little Cyndi Lauper, what a sensation she was, and what a sensational song. Could hardly understand any of the words, except "Girls just wanna have fun," but it was great for beating out a rhythm and humming along.

"Do you realize this is Thanksgiving weekend?"

April turned from looking out the darkened window.

"No," she said, startled at the thought. "I'd forgotten all about it."

"We'll be having the turkey on Monday. You're very welcome to come."

Before April could answer, there was a clatter of feet on the front porch, and shrieks, "Mummy, come now, quick. MumMY!"

Angela dropped the dishcloth she was holding and ran, April at her heels. They opened the front door to find Tracy and the children standing in the middle of the lawn, pointing at the sky. Clouds rolled and tossed in the wind like crumpled handkerchiefs; their edges were embroidered with moonlight. A sound like the distant barking of dogs filled the night air. Then they saw what the children were pointing at. Geese were flying into the clouds overhead in wide wavering vees; and as they dove through the gilt-edged curtain, their wings caught the light and then threw it off in brief, brilliant showers.

The children were spell-bound, and did not hear the car come up the driveway until their father leaped out and shouted, "What's up?"

April and Angela, standing on the porch with their arms around each others' waists, point up at the sky. He turned just in time to see the last stragglers in the vee signal their farewells. Then Robby screeched and pelted across the lawn towards him. Tara gurgled and bounced and flung out her arms, begging to be rescued from her stroller. Jeremy stood at attention, waiting.

April watched the show curiously. *A hero's welcome every night, just for coming home. How can a man not love his children for that? Well, let it be, they'll find out soon enough that he's mostly ordinary and can disappoint them. We all learn that in time.*

Angela turned to April. "So what about Monday." *Never did get around to the baby business. Maybe on Monday . . .*

"Monday?"

"Thanksgiving. Dinner."

"Oh, yes." April, who was just thinking how far back from somewhere she'd come that day, and that she might yet have a little way to go, didn't have to consider long.

"Yes, I'll come."

"The weather is supposed to be nice. We'll have to squeeze a walk out of the afternoon, maybe after dinner. Just the two of us."

"That would be nice."

"Hello, you two." Robert had a child on each arm. "You look like two cats who just ate the canary."

Angela nodded, not speaking. *Not yet I haven't. For now I'm just waiting, sitting on my paws, pretending to be asleep . . .*

He leaned forward to kiss Angela, while Robby, reaching for April, screamed "Annie Aperl! Annie Aperl!" Robert let go of Robby and held out his free hand to Jeremy. Tracy waved from the sidewalk. "See you next week," she called.

As they turn to go inside, Angela added: "And if you'd like to bring a friend along, it goes without saying--"

"I'll come early," April replied. "Give you a hand with the cooking."

END