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WAITING FOR CHEEKBONES

Kate Henderson

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master's of English - Creative Writing at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada**

August 1992

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ISBN 0-315-81007-6

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ABSTRACT

WAITING FOR CHEEKBONES

Kate Henderson

From amidst the haze of smoke that pervades her apartment-sized living room, Anne is nonetheless able to perceive an increasing need for clarity in her life. In love with Ben, she overlooks his reluctance, albeit anxiously, sensing that the key to his trust is her compassion. Smoking hash provides only temporary relief from the enormous effort to be understanding in the face of his indecision. The reader meets Anne as she begins to travel instinctively through her past to bring meaning to her present: the beginning of her marriage with Sandy, ten years earlier, as they set out across the country to make a home in the west; then further back, to the child remembering her experience within the family.

As the journey progresses, stories of Anne's present with Ben weave with recollections of her youthful relationship with Sandy, begun shortly after the disruption in her childhood that occurred when her parents separated. Unlike her sister, Laurie, who voices her outrage at events as they happen, Anne has learned to smoothe the ripples of conflict, postponing any feelings that might interfere with her quest for harmony. In marriage, the duplicity proves disastrous.

Older now, and vaguely aware of a pattern that has placed relationships on a course of certain destruction, Anne sets out to make amends by attempting to isolate what was missing from her earlier marriage. She commits herself to Ben,

a native of southern Ontario who represents a link to her roots, whole-heartedly, deciding that loyalty was also the missing element in her parents' marriage.

Despite clues that Ben does not feel the same devotion, Anne carries on in what becomes a one-sided affair. She is devastated when she meets his decided lack of interest head-on.

Throughout the book, Anne struggles to carve her identity. We meet the women who have influenced her life. Her grandmothers, thwarted in their attempts at happiness, each handling life differently: Dodie, lost in her selective memory; GrandEm, paralyzed with bitterness. Anne resists advice from friends to make Ben wait -- to make him work for her attention. She passively envisions the day her face will lose its baby fat and give way to the high cheekbones of her mother.

It is Laurie who suggests that Loretta may have waited too long for their father to make up his mind. Anne realizes then that she has believed all along that her mother didn't wait long enough, that given time her father would have ended the affair. Now, she is ready to reevaluate. She stops smoking hash long enough to allow herself to feel. By reliving the significant events that have shaped her life, Anne is able to forgive Ben, understanding that his reasons for leaving had little to do with her. This allows her to forgive herself for leaving Sandy, and opens the gate to forgiving her father for leaving the family.

The reader leaves Anne, balanced for a perfect moment, on the fine line between commitment and waiting. Her cheekbones have surfaced.

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ONE

Lying down, fully clothed, beside a man she longed to be closer to, Anne hesitated before answering his questions. Had she really loved Sandy? Had she married him thinking it would last? Ben's genuine curiosity about this part of her life took her by surprise. It was so long ago, and there were other men she'd loved since, maybe even more. She sensed this was not what he wanted to hear. He waited, head propped up on an elbow, looking at her as if he might learn something watching her face.

"No," she said finally. "We wanted different things." She wondered how she could explain Sandy, how he wouldn't come west unless she married him. "For me, the west was where adventure waited. I wanted him to come too." Anne stopped short. Her mind had suddenly filled with a distant vision of herself, settled comfortably beside Sandy on the bench seat of the old Plymouth, listening to the steady hum of the car's engine as they drove across the prairies. In every direction, acres and acres of golden corn shivered in the late summer breeze, the sky a huge blue bowl turned upside-down, its rim the far-away horizon.

Ben rolled onto his back, head cushioned between the folds of the pillow, eyes gravely studying the ceiling. He had not received her meaning. Unlike Sandy, Anne thought she and Ben would be good together. They'd both grown up in Ontario; they understood the same language. She had learned that these were important aspects of a relationship. They were not things she and Sandy had

shared.

"I wonder if it's possible to find love that will last, no matter what." Ben turned towards her, but his eyes lingered on the cold gray sky outside the window. "Sometimes I feel like I'm in a cave, chipping away at the stone, trying to find something. You know, with one of those lights on my forehead." He laughed.

Anne laughed too. She moved through the underground seam with him. He was wearing jeans and a black t-shirt. Sweat had collected in his dark blonde hair along the ridge of the hardhat, and he was wielding a pick-ax, the firm line of his jaw clenching each time he struck at the stone.

"Real love maybe?"

"Yeah," he said. "Totally unconditional, no matter what."

Anne groaned and sat up. "That's for parents and children." She swung her legs off the bed and walked over to the stove on the other side of the room. "There comes a time when you have to put in your share."

Along one wall of the room, a counter was his kitchen. She rinsed old grounds from the espresso pot and began to measure spoonfuls of fresh coffee into its small basket. Ben was silent. Anne suspected he wanted her to give him a sign. Coffee was the best that she could manage.

She left his apartment early that afternoon, armed with books he'd said would be helpful to study King Lear. Her paper was not due until the end of term, almost two months away, and Anne worked best under pressure, leaving assignments until the last minute. But she took the books, relieved to have a way

for a while from the careful measuring of words, the effort it took to say what she meant without letting on that she was in love with him.

Outside, she hoisted the strap of her purse, heavy with books, across her chest to keep her jacket from flying open. It had not snowed, but it was cold enough.

Anne knew she wouldn't read the books. Waiting to write until the day before deadline had become a ritual, fed by the excitement of finishing, incredibly, on time. When she returned to school five years earlier, she would reproach herself for leaving things so late. Now she called it letting the text settle, pleased with the simple wisdom of knowing how she worked best.

Ben's style was different; he collected so much information he didn't know where to start. Back in the spring, Anne had helped him wade through reams of notes to get a paper in on time. It was the first time they'd been together outside of class.

They had ordered pizza, and as they waited he'd looked up, about to say something else, when their eyes met. "It's amazing, isn't it?" he said. "We've lived all our lives in the same cities at the same time, without ever meeting, and now here we are." Anne felt an irresistible connection, as if he'd just reached across the table and touched her cheek.

As she walked down the street, she wondered if it was possible that Ben did not feel the same attraction. After all, she was the one who had knocked at his door at the end of the summer, when she got back from Europe.

The thought persisted as she passed store fronts; it was what distracted her from noticing her reflection in the plate glass windows of restaurants, or the movie titles playing at the theatre, or the crisp yellow leaves collected in the gutter. Her mind flipped through scenes like album covers, each moment captured with photographic detail. Only then did she see Ben, not in a cave striking hard at the rockface, but lying on the bed in his apartment, grey eyes distant, fingers clasped across his chest.

Anne looked forward to getting home, where she would turn on music, crumble a small piece of hash into tobacco, and run a bath. She would transcribe thoughts into her journal. Sometimes she turned them into stories.

One of the things Anne liked best about Ben was that he wrote too. He understood her obsession with the inner workings of character. At least, he was obsessed too. Submerged in bath bubbles, she relived clips of the morning's conversation, piecing together the words, looking for unexpected meanings, allowing her thoughts to follow the curl of smoke that rose from her cigarette. Was that really her own voice telling Ben that her marriage was over before it began?

TWO

Anne was only twenty when she and Sandy loaded up the Satellite and headed west. The pale green metal of the car glanced at the curb that day. In the blinding sun, rust spots disappeared; only the oversized body of the car gave away its age.

As she approached the car, Anne could see the unmistakable bumps of the dishrack and the foot pedal of a garbage can wedged between cardboard boxes full of books. Two wooden trunks sat on the roofrack, entirely visible beneath a thin sheet of white plastic that until that morning had been their shower curtain.

"That's it, we've got everything," she said to her mother, Loretta, who stood at the curb watching Sandy tighten the ropes.

Loretta turned to face Anne. She said nothing, but lifted her shoulders, her hands still deep in the folds of her jean skirt pockets. She nodded. Anne liked it that her mother was pretty. She'd overheard a neighbour once, telling Loretta that her high cheekbones and Roman nose were features age would never take away.

Anne put her large straw bag, brimming with maps and cigarette packages, on the sidewalk. She hugged her mother a last time and breathed deep familiar perfume as advice drifted over her shoulder into the warm dusty traffic.

"Don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it." Loretta stepped back to examine Anne's face, resting her hands on her daughter's shoulders. She

clenched her jaw to keep her chin from crumbling, and spoke between closed teeth.

"You're loved."

Anne smiled, her smooth face undisturbed. She had heard these words every time she'd left the house as a teenager. They'd become as common as good-bye, or see you soon.

"I know."

She picked up her purse, got into the car beside Sandy and rolled down the window.

"We'll phone. I'll write."

As Sandy pulled the car slowly away from the curb, Anne looked back and watched her mother's wave diminish to fingers moving in the air, the way they might if she were playing a scale, memorized long ago, on the piano.

By the time her vision cleared, there wasn't much left of Montreal. She slid her hand under Sandy's leg and looked out the window silently as they drove by a winding string of low-lying motels that led out to the highway. Signs rolled close to the road displayed large block letters: *COLOUR TV, AIR COND, VACANCY, DANSEUSES EXOTIQUES.*

The car picked up speed and they listened as the shower curtain ripped through the air above the noise of the engine.

"Do you think the tarp will hold up if it rains?" Anne was proud of her

idea to use the shower curtain. She had no doubt that it would protect the trunks.

"I don't know." Sandy leaned forward, squinting up at the sky directly above the car. "Looks like we'll find out pretty soon though." He glanced at her. "I think it'll be okay."

She settled into the seat, bringing her feet up onto the dashboard. The car sped by suburban malls that had sprung up since her mother moved them into the city. Only one was familiar, dwarfed by the immense parking lot of a brand-new complex that reflected clouds in its salmon-coloured glass.

Anne turned to watch Sandy, looking at the smooth, defined lines of his nose and chin. "What are you thinking?"

"Not much." He kept his eyes on the road. "What are you thinking?"

"That I feel like a turtle."

"What, that we're moving so slow?"

"No. With our house on our back. Everything we need is right here."

As they rolled west through the afternoon daylight, Anne tried to imagine the trip ahead. Her Grandmother Dodie, plucking dead leaves, as she always did, from the ivy trellis that stood at the door of her house; GrandEm, who always shook her head, telling Anne she was too young to understand, when they talked about things like marriage. But there came a point beyond which vivid, moving pictures became lifeless postcards. The unseen west. Beyond imagination.

Grey clouds were beginning to gather around the sun. To Anne, the sky looked like a painting Sandy had made at a carnival once, when they first started

going out. He'd chosen colours and spattered the paint onto a small canvas, lowering it carefully into a plexiglass cylinder where it spun round and round, faster and faster. The darkening afternoon sky was like that starburst: an edge of dark purple, the pale grey of wall-to-wall carpet, hints of charcoal, all infused with a blazing white.

Trees, hills, and fences turned into dusky shapes as the sun's brightness faded. Anne reached into the large purse nestled at her feet and brought out a book, one of many she'd studied in school without actually reading. GrandEm had given her this copy the year before. The inscription read: *It is about a young boy growing up on the prairies.*

"You bored already?"

"I'm not bored," she said, "I just thought it would be nice to read a book about the prairies when that's where we're going. You know, literature coming to life?"

Sandy smiled at the windshield, and his attention returned to the road signs.

Anne read laboriously in the receding light until she fell asleep.

When she awoke, the highway had widened from two lanes to four, indicating their arrival in Toronto. She stretched, the book closing in her lap.

Sandy's eyes scanned the traffic. "I was hoping we'd miss rush hour."

She watched red tail lights sleepily as he moved the car in and out of lanes, trying to find a clear straightaway. They had taken driving lessons together but he

drove with more confidence; he never stayed in the slow lane the way she did.

Without meaning to, Anne found her hands reaching out to clutch the dashboard.

A wave of panic rose in her throat.

"Jesus, Sandy, slow down."

He checked over his shoulder for cars as he changed lanes. "Why? What's the problem?"

"The problem is you're driving too fast."

"Relax, Annie. Look around. I'm going with the traffic." As he said it cars overtook them on both sides. Anne tried to reason with her fear that they would crash into a cement piling, not even four hundred miles from home, but it was no use. She sat, frozen, until he made his way over to an exit ramp.

"Time to get gas "

When they were off the expressway, Anne let out her breath. "Don't you ever do that again."

"Do what?" He looked at her. "What's the matter?"

"Neither of us has been driving long enough to pull those moves." She rolled down her window and breathed deeply, her body slowly relaxing. "I'd like to get where I'm going in one piece."

Silent, Sandy stared at the windshield. They passed through two traffic lights. "Tomorrow, you drive."

They stopped at a motel an hour or so west of the city limits. In the

parking lot, Sandy pulled what was left of the shower curtain off the roofrack while Anne booked a room. It felt like it was going to rain. When she came out, Sandy was brushing off the bugs that had stuck to the trunks.

"Good idea, the shower curtain." He said it as a joke, and Anne knew it meant he wasn't mad anymore. It was the first thing he'd said since they'd stopped for gas.

In bed that night, she watched reflections of headlights move slowly up the wall, expanding in quick bursts across the ceiling before they disappeared. An oil-painted forest hung directly above the dresser, lime green trees shining oddly in the dark. Shadow settled on the low, empty chest of drawers. She recalled a tall mahogany bureau that stood in the guest room at her grandmother's house. It had stared out of the darkness with white porcelain eyes for what seemed like whole summers when she was little.

The motel room brightened again. This dresser had no knobs; wooden ridges ran the length of each drawer. The faint smell of mothballs and sawdust, and the thin sheets against her legs made Anne feel like they were already in a place she'd never been before.

They had been married a week.

THREE

As Anne was growing up, she adopted Loretta's method of cataloguing events by referring to places they'd lived in. Loretta prefaced her memories with addresses.

"Do you remember when we'd go to the Honeydew? That would have been when we lived at 455 Cambridge. I'd put you and Laurie in the buggy -- you got to sit up and watch -- and we'd walk all the way down to Dundas. Do you remember that?"

Anne didn't remember, but there were things her mother had recounted with such detail that somehow a clear image had formed in her head. She could see the orange vinyl booths at the Honeydew, thick milkshake glasses filled to the brim. She couldn't see outside the picture window though, or people sitting at other tables.

She did remember 455 Cambridge. They had lived in the upstairs part of the house and from the back porch, perched at the top of a long flight of wooden stairs, you could see to the very end of the long backyard, where peonies bounced, their pink and white heads, heavy with dew, brushing the grass. Anne also remembered Mrs. Mackie from downstairs. Mrs. Mackie with the hard plastic leg that didn't bend at the knee.

On Saturday mornings, if she and Laurie were playing too loudly, her father would get up and whisper, "Mrs. Mackie isn't awake yet. Keep your voices

down until she's had a chance to drink her coffee." With that he would stumble barefoot back down the hall, and soon they would hear the sound of the bedroom door closing and the bedsprings groaning as the mattress took him back.

Sometimes he would get up early, make fried eggs and toast and put the plate, with a small glass of orange juice, on a tray. He'd take Annie and Laurie down to the garden to pick out a flower -- a peony, or a small branch from the lilac bush -- and put it in a slender white vase. Then he would carry the tray into the bedroom to Loretta. Annie liked sitting on the edge of the bed, watching her mother chew mouthfuls of toast and marmelade, her eyes closing to show how good it tasted.

One Saturday when she was about four, Annie decided she would make breakfast in bed for her parents. She slid out the tray from between the stove and the end of the counter, laid it on the floor, and took a small frying pan out of the drawer beneath the oven. Climbing up on a stool so she could walk on the counter, she squatted by the stove and broke four eggs into the pan. Then she put bread in the toaster, watching the red grill light until finally the toast popped up. She climbed back down and went to the fridge. The butter was too cold to spread, so she made little squares with her fingers. She took out two plates, and carefully spooned out the slippery eggs. Then she edged the plates off the counter, one at a time, and placed them on the tray, arranging the toast and butter around the eggs.

Excited and ready, she ran to get Laurie. When they came into the

kitchen, Laurie wrinkled her nose when she saw the tray, and looked up at Annie.

"The eggs are supposed to be white."

It was true. Something was wrong. Annie squatted beside the tray, peering down into the eggs. Then she remembered the orange juice and went to the fridge.

"There," she said, juice dripping from the bottoms of the glasses as she added them to the tray. "You take the other side."

Slowly, they shuffled small steps into their parents' bedroom. It was probably the sound of forks sliding on the metal tray that woke Loretta. She looked at them, then turned to the mountain of covers beside her.

"Gil, wake up." She shook him.

"Breakfast in bed!" announced Annie. They eased the tray onto Loretta's lap.

Loretta looked down, surveying the eggs, the toast, the lumps of butter. She picked up a glass carefully, trying not to spill the juice. "This is really something. Where did you learn to do this?"

"I watched Daddy," said Annie.

"The eggs are supposed to be white," said Laurie.

"They're lovely," said Loretta.

Gil rolled over, being careful not to disturb the tray.

"Jesus," he said, trying to contain his laughter, short bursts of air escaping from between his teeth. The tray jiggled on its perch. His hand shot out just in

time to catch the second glass of orange juice.

Loretta picked up a piece of toast and began nibbling at an edge. "It's very good," she said, nodding her head.

"There's butter on the side. Like in the restaurant." Annie beamed. Then she looked at her father, waiting for him to take a bite.

Gil reached over, picked up a plate and a fork, and scooped an egg onto a piece of toast.

"Mmmmmmm," he said as he chewed.

Loretta wasn't very hungry after all and Annie's father ate both plates of eggs. When Laurie asked again, he said she was right -- the eggs weren't cooked.

"That doesn't mean they weren't good though. That was the best breakfast I've ever eaten."

Do you remember the time you brought us breakfast in bed?" Loretta said. "And your father ate two plates of raw eggs." She sighed. "That would have been at 455 Cambridge. Were you old enough to remember?"

FOUR

Ben had not called for a week. Anne sat at the table in front of her living room window, watching as the first snow settled into a thin layer, outlining the parked cars across the street. It was no big deal, she thought, there could be any number of good reasons. But when the phone rang, her voice sank with disappointment.

It was Karla, who lived upstairs on the top floor of the three-storey building. They'd been friends since she first showed Anne the apartment two years ago, explaining as they went from room to room, some of them the size of large closets, that all of her tenants were students. Karla said she'd rented the apartment to Anne, who worked at a full-time job then, because Anne had mentioned she was enrolled in a night course.

The week before, they had christened their new business Karlanne's. Their plan, conceived over late-night glasses of wine, was to make original gift baskets using themes, like Heavenly Bath, or Kitchen Korner, arranging powder and bath oil or spices and cooking utensils on puffs of coloured tissue paper, wrapping the baskets with crackling cellophane tied with matching ribbons. They had actually put together two baskets the night before, and enthusiasm was high, dampened only temporarily by a disagreement over the company's logo.

That was why Karla was calling.

"I really think there should be a basket in there," she said. "Even if it's not

obvious."

"Basket or no basket, we have to have simple lines," said Anne.

"Something that will print clearly and look good. We could change the name if you're worried about the basket part. How about *Basket Case*? That's how I'm starting to feel."

"Annie, this is serious. It's our image."

Anne frowned into the receiver. Karla had hinted lately that she wasn't taking the basket business seriously. "I have three term papers due in the next three weeks, I have no idea what I'm going to write about, and I don't know where next month's rent is going to come from. Couldn't we just wait and see what the printers come up with? I'm sure they'll think of a way to get a basket in there."

"Okay." Karla's voice sounded uncertain. She paused. "Did Ben call?"

"No. But that's the least of my problems. I'll call you later, okay? Let me know if anything comes up."

Anne knew as she put down the receiver that something probably would come up and that Karla would come bounding down the stairs and knock on her door. The building was old, and noise from the hallway seeped through the apartment door that opened directly into her living room. She returned to the flowchart she had drawn, boxes on a page connected to each other with quick strokes of felt pen, labelled *King Lear*, *Goneril*, *Cordelia*. After staring at the paper for a while, Anne found her concentration wandering. Her gaze settled on

the large green leaves of a philodendron that spilled out of a mixing bowl onto the table. She put down the pen, opened a small round tin that sat near the phone, and heated a piece of hash until it broke into a pile of tiny pieces. She sprinkled crumbs of tobacco with the hash, back and forth along a rolling paper. Then she rolled the cigarette thin, leaving space for a narrow strip of cardboard, rolled tight, that would serve as a filter. As she smoked, she returned the lump of hash and the cigarette papers to the brass tin, its smooth lid a colour display of candy-coated licorice. She wondered when she'd find the time to meet David this week, to buy another piece. He always managed to cheer her up.

"Don't let this guy get under your skin," he'd say. "He's not worth the aggravation, no one is." David was married.

Anne was lying down on the two-seater couch when the phone rang, her legs dangling over the worn corduroy of one arm, her hands clasped behind her head on the other. Her eyes had followed most of the cracks in the ceiling, as she calculated the number of hours she would have to temp as a secretary to cover the rent.

"Hi. I've tried calling you a couple of times." Since he didn't have a phone in his apartment, Anne imagined Ben standing in the restaurant that was downstairs from his place.

"I have a machine now," Anne said. "For the business."

"I know. I hate talking to those things. How's your paper coming along?"

"It's coming." Anne lit a cigarette. "The real push won't happen for a

couple of weeks though. It's how I work."

"You're amazing. I'd be a raving lunatic if I didn't have a few pages by now."

"I have a flowchart."

"A flowchart?"

"Yeah. I draw ideas to see if they'll naturally lead anywhere."

He paused. "Think you'll have time for a break on Friday night?"

"Sure. It would give me something to look forward to, make me work harder."

"I'm cooking lasagna." He laughed. "Don't get your hopes up too high."

When Anne put down the phone, she smiled. Maybe he just needed time to think. She looked again at the paper on the table, brief sentences in bubbles, arrows leading back to the boxed-in characters. Lear remembered Cordelia as his favourite daughter because she wasn't there to do anything wrong.

She heard Karla's footsteps in the hallway; it sounded as if she were skipping down the stairs. Anne opened the door before she knocked.

"I think I've got an idea for my paper." She described the play to Karla in a couple of sentences, skipping to the end so she could deliver her brainstorm: "He overlooks his other daughters, what they've done for him, because he's obsessed with the idea that Cordelia loves him more. And hers is the only love that can't really be measured, because she's gone." Anne smiled. "A classic case of absence making the heart grow fonder."

"That's it?" said Karla, eyebrows knit together.

"This is just the beginning of his delusion." Anne's eyes flashed. She pieced together new ideas as she spoke. "All of his decisions were coloured by this obsession. He lost his perspective. His kingdom fell apart." She paused to let Karla absorb her words. Karla nodded slowly.

"Ben called."

"He did! What did he say?"

"He asked me over for dinner on Friday."

Her smile faded. "I thought we were going shopping for basket stuff after you finished work."

"We can do that in the afternoon. I'll leave work early."

"Okay." Her eyes brightened. "So what's he been doing all week?"

"Could be anything. He's probably just as scared as I am about getting into something too fast. I'm going to take this one real slow." She offered Karla a token from a newly rolled hash cigarette. "The last time I got swept off my feet, I ended up in a dustpan. I'm getting too old for dustpans."

Karla smiled, leaning back in her chair. She passed the joint back to Anne. "That's funny. You should write that down."

FIVE

Anne woke to the sound of the car's transmission gearing down. Still groggy, she pointed directions for Sandy that came to her from faraway memories of going to Grandma Dodie's house from the two-lane highway that turned into Main Street. The town had changed, but important landmarks, like the watertower that announced *The Town Worth Caring About*, and the sawmill standing guard by the river, were still there. The car glided along pavement she remembered as bumpy gravel. It turned a corner, groaned up the steep hill past the nursing home, then caught its breath on the curve. At the top of the hill, stood Dodie's house, skirted by the slope of an immense rock garden and surrounded by acres of velvet grass.

"This is it," Anne told Sandy. They were silent as the car climbed the driveway.

Dodie had stepped her way down the flagstone path, and stood on the expansive grass, her hands resting comfortably on her hips, her lips pressed together as if she had just applied lipstick. As they walked toward her from the car, she squinted into the sun. Anne leaned forward to hug her.

"Well now, how are you, Annie? And this must be Sandy." She held out her hand. "It's a real treat to finally meet you. You can call me Dolores -- or Dodie if you want. The kids gave me that name when they were little."

Her grandmother's hand continued to hold Sandy's, her head slightly tilted

as she looked up at him, her voice bubbling quickly to a comfortable laughter that soon had him grinning. Half-listening, Anne turned to look at the house. Ivy vines clung to the trellis and the shiny surfaces of the original windows reflected the three of them standing there, transforming their figures into strange, distorted shapes. Four low chairs on the lawn, their thick-planked, fan-shaped backs arranged around a white iron table, reminded her of sipping lemon sodas with the grown-ups before dinner, a floating cloud of cherry syrup at the bottom of her glass.

"Let's get something to drink and sit under the tree," Dodie said. She led the way to the house and opened the door for them, pausing to pick three or four dry yellow leaves off the wall of ivy.

Inside, Anne pointed at objects she remembered, naming them as she went: the cranberry pitcher in the window sill, the china dogs looking down from the top of the buffet, the long dining-room table in the centre of the room and high ladder-backed chairs pushed back against the walls.

"And the pantry," she said when they got to the kitchen. This was where Dodie used to store the stubby bottles of lemon Wink brought back from visits to New York.

Dodie, stooped over in the pantry getting bottles of ginger ale and tonic water, looked up. "Yup," she said wryly, "this sure is the pantry. It hasn't changed much."

Anne's smile faded. "What I meant was, it's all just the way I remember

it." She looked over at Sandy. He was smiling with her grandmother.

"I made reservations at Sir George's for eight o'clock as soon as you called," said Dodie. "If you want anything to tide you over, just help yourself." She gestured at the refrigerator behind her.

Anne opened the fridge. Shelves were stuffed with ready-made food, the kind she always thought of as snack food, like cheese slices, packages of sandwich meat, and a carton of eggnog. She checked for the bottle of maraschino cherries in the door, the bread and butter pickles. She wondered if Dodie bought these items because they were Anne's favourites, or if Anne had simply learned to love what was always there.

"Now, what will you have for a cocktail, Sandy," said Dodie. "You have the grand choice of rye or gin."

"I'll have what you're having," said Sandy as he watched her pour gin into a glass. Anne looked at him -- his favourite was rye -- but his eyes were fixed on the gold bubble-glass tumblers lined up on the counter.

Dodie asked him to carry the silver tray outside. Walking behind them on the way back through the dining room, Anne watched her grandmother stoop, and in a practiced motion pick a white thread off the dark carpet, slipping it into a pocket hidden in the folds of her turquoise housedress.

They sat down in the white wooden chairs, shaded by the giant branches of an elm tree.

"Main street's changed a lot," said Anne, thinking of the broad burgundy

awnings they'd passed on their way in, how they jarred with memories of faded stripes and swinging Coca-Cola signs. Driving by, she'd felt an undeniable sense of disappointment at what were clearly considered improvements.

Dodie nodded slowly, her eyes closing, lips pressing together. "Yup. The town has sure gone to town sprucing up the place." She turned to Sandy, her eyes closing demurely. "To coin a phrase." Then she shook her head, her brow crinkling, her voice deepening with annoyance. "They sure moved fast. Why, I don't even *recognize* some of the stores. When I was in office it took the better part of three years to decide on a bridge. And that was something we needed, mind you. 'Imagine!'"

Dodie's knees were crossed neatly beneath the gold piping of her hem, her slender feet slipped comfortably into turquoise slippers, the kind that fold into a clear plastic package. The only sign of age that Anne could see was in her neck, freckled now, the skin at her throat beginning to pucker. Her nails, polished a pale pink, ran their long tips against the inside of her thumb, one at a time, around the filter of a cigarette. Her hair was pinned tightly away from her face in the style she'd always worn, a fine silk hairnet, barely visible, keeping it in place. Everything about her was just as Anne remembered. Except for her eyes. Something in her eyes looked distant, as if she were always thinking of something else.

Dodie was telling Sandy about an expensive operation the eye specialist had suggested.

"It's the same one your Aunt Maude had, Annie. And hers wasn't very successful. I don't know. Some days I wake up and it's like someone's pulled a thin piece of gauze down over my eyes and everything is blurry. Other days I see as clear as a bell." She took a long drag from her cigarette and shrugged her shoulders. "Now Annie, how's your mother? She always says she's too busy to write, but I don't see how it would take so long to send a card once in a while. Is she still working the night shift? You'd think that with a new boyfriend she'd tell them she's done that long enough." Dodie paused to take a sip of gin and tonic.

"They're doing okay," said Anne, acutely aware that anything she told Dodie would get back to Loretta. "Wayne doesn't seem to mind."

"Pardon?" Dodie tilted her head and peered towards Anne as she said it, her features revealing an unexpected frailty.

Anne raised her voice and pushed it toward her grandmother. "He works at the station too -- he knows how demanding they can be. I think he understands how much she likes her job."

Dodie's nod was perfunctory, her businesslike tone returned. "Well, it seems to me that Loretta would be *extra* careful with him. She's not getting any younger, y'know."

Anne glanced at Sandy uncomfortably.

"When was this house built?" he asked, looking up at the roof.

"In 1915. Jesse bought it and added the kitchen and dining room. That would have been in 1927 -- just before we were married. Gad, it was a mess. All

the construction. I thought they'd never finish."

"You can't even tell where the addition starts," he said.

"That could be the ivy," said Anne. Dodie didn't hear.

"Jesse had them bring the stone up from the quarry. The same stone they used to build all the houses up here back before the war. He wanted a perfect match, and he got it, too." She smiled. "Had to pay for it though." She lit another cigarette with the flick of a slim gold lighter and blew the smoke from the side of her mouth in a single puff, leaning back, caught in the memory. "He always said: 'You get what you pay for'. Of course nothing was as expensive as it is now."

Anne liked to hear her grandmother talk about Jesse. Dodie used to reminisce on hot summer mornings when Anne and Laurie, happy to be smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee, would listen, enchanted, to stories told over and over. Her favourite was one that always began, "That was the time I had to choose between Jack Prism and your grandfather." Dodie's parents had sent her to visit an aunt in the country, away from her suitors, so she could make up her mind which one she would marry.

"Sir George's has a lovely buffet on Sundays," said Dodie, slipping a cigarette butt under her slipper and grinding it into the grass. "You can take what you want and leave the rest. I've taken to eating like a bird, now that I'm older."

While they ate roast beef, warmed all afternoon under the heat of an

orange lamp, Dodie began telling Sandy the story of two men courting her at the same time.

"It was almost unheard of in those days," she informed him, "to accept two different pins. But I did. I liked them both and I just *couldn't* decide."

Dodie had chosen Jesse because he came to get her. Somehow he'd persuaded her father to tell him where she'd gone. "To this day, I don't know what he said, but it must have really been something. Your great-granddad was awfully fond of Jack Prism. He was a history professor at the university." She beamed with delight when she got to the part where Jesse arrived at her aunt's house. "I was just sitting down to a breakfast of strawberries -- picked that very morning by my Aunt Shirley -- when she came to tell me Jesse was at the door." Dodie sighed. "That was the beginning of the glamorous part of my life -- years before your mother was born, Annie -- of following the racetrack circuit when Jesse was still a jockey. We met so many famous people during those years; I should have kept a diary." Dodie ended the story the way she always did, an edge of irony in her voice. "I never did finish those strawberries."

That night, Anne and Sandy had the upstairs to themselves.

"She's not your average grandmother," said Sandy, pulling his t-shirt over his head.

Anne smiled as she took off her clothes.

In bed, the down comforter pulled up around their shoulders was

simultaneously heavy and light. One arm folded under his head, Sandy looked up at the sloping ceiling, perhaps noticing the way Anne had as a young girl how the tiny flowers in the wallpaper made the shapes of faces in the moonlight.

"I don't think she can tell the difference between a ten and a twenty dollar bill anymore," said Anne. "Did you see how closely she was looking at them?" As she spoke, her gaze took in the ridge of his eyebrows, following the outline of his nose, then his lips.

"It sounds like she's had a good life."

Anne rolled away from him onto her back. She wanted Sandy to get the full picture of her grandmother, but something prevented her from telling him the rest of the story.

Two children had meant that Dodie couldn't follow Jesse on the circuit anymore. She'd stayed in the house on the hill and tried to make a life for herself and the children until the racing season was over. Sometimes she would get on a plane and join him for a weekend wherever the horses were racing. Saturday nights in posh hotel restaurants; Sunday afternoons at the track, smiling at his side into the camera as he held up prize ribbons for best trainer. Red, blue, sometimes gold. Until the day he had his first heart attack, she would explain to the children that his work meant he had to travel: "It doesn't mean he loves you any less."

As soon as she heard the news, Dodie had flown down to Baltimore.

Standing scared and out of breath at the nurses' station that night, the tops of the children's heads hardly reaching the counter, she listened, speechless, as the nurse looked at her suspiciously. "His wife arrived early this morning," she said. "She's been at his bedside all day."

This was not one of the stories Dodie told on lazy summer mornings; it was one Loretta had told when she thought Anne was old enough.

She turned to Sandy. "I think she likes to savour the best parts." She closed her eyes, unwilling to alter his impression of the proud woman downstairs, who had intrigued him with her charming recollections.

She could not allow her own voice to repeat the history that had somehow come to bear the same light weightiness as the featherdown quilt puffing up around their necks.

SIX

Shortly after Annie turned five, the family moved to a bigger house that had a front verandah, and sturdy white pillars that looked out onto McKenzie Boulevard. Everyone was still sleeping when she took the Sugar Crisp out into the backyard one morning. Everything was very quiet, except for the gently rustling leaves, the distant sound of the odd car going by out front. She had to be very careful opening and closing the screen door because sometimes it slipped out of her hands and slammed, jarring the sleeping house. It took two trips: one for the cereal and a bowl, one for the milk bottle and her favourite spoon. Settled cross-legged in the grass, she ate two bowlfuls in succession, adding cereal to the leftover milk, milk to the extra cereal. As she chewed, she read about the iron-on decal of Sugarbear's head that was supposed to be inside the box. His eyes were supposed to open and shut. Annie wondered how.

She put the bowl down and shoved an arm deep into the sticky bits of puffed wheat, her fingers feeling for foreign objects. She was not sure how big the prize was. She looked at the back of the box again as she searched, making sure that she had read correctly, that it really was inside. She reached the bottom, her fingertips blindly inspecting the corners of the wax paper pouch, sure that any moment they would touch something hard and thin and square. The edge of the sleeve of her nightie, pushed up over her elbow, was submerged in the sugary cereal. The prize wasn't there.

Slowly, she brought her arm out, avoiding any quick motion that might bring all the Sugar Crisp onto the lawn. She plucked at the puffs that had stuck to the flanelette, popping them into her mouth, disappointed that Laurie would probably find the Sugarbear face, if there was one. Tucking one flap of the cereal box into the other, she planted the box in the grass beside the milk. Her arms circled her knees, tented inside the ankle-length nightie. She gazed up at the treehouse, a row of planks set six feet off the ground in an old, sturdy apple tree that also supported a swing.

She and Laurie hadn't played in the treehouse since their Variety Packs had run out. The school had taken a field trip to Kellogg's factory one day and, at the end of the tour, each pupil was given a cellophane package that contained ten small boxes of cereal. It was the highlight of the trip. She and Laurie had taken theirs to the treehouse and eaten them with milk, right from the cartons, the way the lady had shown them: push down on the dotted lines and open the swinging doors. For a week, sometimes twice a day, they ate cereal up in the branches, even the Corn Flakes and Pep, which neither of them liked, feeling very grown-up in their own house with their own groceries.

Annie's eyes suddenly opened wide. The lady at the factory had told them how prizes were often slipped between the wax paper bag and the box. She opened the box again and slid her arm down the side, its cardboard bulging. Down to the corners again, then back up and down the other side. She found it! She brought out the Sugarbear and examined it closely. He closed his eyes if you

held him one way and opened when you moved him the other. She moved the Sugarbear back and forth again and again in the sunlight before she heard the sound of dishes from the kitchen window.

When the screen door slammed, Loretta turned from the sink and watched Annie come into the kitchen, her long nightie splashed with wet, her sleeves dotted with Sugarcrisps. She placed the milk carefully on the countertop, using both hands to open the fridge.

"Have you eaten?" said Loretta when she turned off the water.

"Yup," said Annie, balancing the milk bottle on the shelf of the fridge. She closed the door and waited for Loretta to finish spooning coffee into the metal basket.

"Was it good?"

"Uh-huh. And look!" She held up the small cardboard head for her mother's inspection.

"Oh, isn't that fun? Was he inside the box?"

"Yup."

Annie looked at her mother's stomach. It was hard and round because she was going to have a baby.

"How old will I be when the baby gets here?"

Loretta laughed. "It takes a long time, doesn't it?" She put the coffee pot on the stove and turned on the burner. Then she drew Annie's head gently towards her hip. "You'll be six, the same as you are now."

"Will I be able to hold her?"

"I think so. You know Annie, it might be a little boy."

"When will we know?"

"When the baby's born."

"Is he kicking?"

Loretta hesitated, looking up at the ceiling. "No, not right now."

Annie ran from the kitchen.

"It's a sleep-in day. Don't wake up your father," called Loretta behind her.

She took the stairs as fast as she dared in the long nightgown and opened the door to her parents' bedroom quietly, kneeling beside her father, holding the Sugarbear above his face until he opened his eyes.

In the cool half-light of the bedroom, she spoke in a solemn whisper. "I nearly didn't find it. They hid it in between the bag and the box."

SEVEN

As she picked out what to wear to Ben's for dinner, Anne decided she would put on her lucky earrings -- needles of brass that dangled the length of her hair. She'd bought them one afternoon in Portugal and dressed up that night to treat herself to a quiet, expensive dinner away from the central square. She hardly noticed a young, attractive waiter watching her from the doorway, until the terrace began to empty. Certain that he wanted her to pay so he could leave, she took out the clear plastic billfold she kept at the bottom of her purse. But when he came to the table, he did not mention the bill; instead he asked if she would join him for a drink.

Anne liked to think that the earrings helped define her cheekbones, making her look prettier. Walking down the street or riding the bus, she would notice women who had high cheekbones, thinking how lucky they were to possess such natural beauty. As she walked towards Ben's she imagined him kissing her hello. Maybe he would fold his arms around her as she washed dishes after dinner. She would turn towards him, unsuspecting, and tell him what a wonderful lasagna he had made. Her lips would be hesitant at first, as if she too were just deciding that their friendship should bloom.

As she climbed the steps in his building, she was bewildered by the sound of voices as she approached his door. She composed herself quickly so that when it swung open to her knock she was smiling.

"Hi," he said enthusiastically. "Here, let me take your coat." He turned back to the room. "Everyone, I'd like you to meet my friend Anne."

Anne looked into a sea of faces, realizing after a moment there were only four. She smiled at each of them, her head nodding as he rhymed off names. She remembered only Keifer. Taking a seat at the kitchen table, she dug in her purse for a package of cigarettes as the others resumed their conversation. It seemed they were all camp counselors. Ben had once told her how much he liked teaching kids how to tread water and build fires in northern summers.

"What about Nancy? Remember her?" said a girl with blonde hair who sat on a stool, knees touching the edge of the table, across from Anne. "Did he ever tell you about Nancy?"

Anne shook her head and glanced at Ben as she lit a cigarette.

Carolyn gave Ben a knowing look, nodding her head in Anne's direction. "Should we tell her the story?"

Ben spoke to Anne. "You have to take all of this with a grain of salt. Camp stories. You know -- shop talk."

"Well," started the girl, "Ben was Nancy's group leader, and from the very beginning of the season she would go to his tent every night to find out if she was doing everything all right with the kids." The girl suddenly burst into laughter; she clapped a hand over her mouth, shoulders shaking, her voice coming in breathless shrieks from beneath her hand.

Keifer picked up the story line. He was smiling too, but it was a different

smile, full of wonder, as if he had just noticed that something very small had moving parts. "She wore very tight t-shirts whenever she went to see him," he explained. "And she didn't wear a bra. Pretty soon, of course, everyone began to notice her when she walked across the camp and disappeared into his tent for what seemed like hours."

"It's amazing how these stories get blown up, Carolyn," said Ben. "She never stayed for longer than a few minutes. She wanted to make sure she was doing a good job, that's all."

Carolyn looked at him, her face unmoving. "She didn't get any better at making the kids do what they were supposed to do, if that's what you mean," she said wryly. Then she turned to Anne, her smile returning. "Anyway. Nancy must have decided it was time to get this guy into bed." She gestured a thumb in Ben's direction. "One night, I'm walking back to my tent. It's late and dark and I hear something behind the tents, see it moving from tree to tree in the shadows. At first I thought it was a deer, so I walked really quietly to take a look without scaring it away. I got there just in time to see Nancy darting into the space beside Ben's tent. You just wouldn't have believed what she was wearing!"

"Come on, Carolyn," Ben interrupted, "have a little compassion." He poured Anne a glass of beer and refilled the glasses already on the table with the rest of the quart.

Carolyn did not look at him. "She's in one of those lacy black nylon things. You know." Carolyn cut a line across the top of her legs with a finger. "She

looks around the campsite but she doesn't see me; all the kids are sleeping and most of the counselors are sitting around a campfire down at the lake. So when she thinks the coast is clear, she unzips the flap of his tent and disappears inside."

"This is the funny part," said Keifer, vying for Anne's attention. "I was sitting watching the fire we had going down at the beach. I was getting a little drunk, so I asked Ben if I could sleep in his tent for awhile. Only group leaders have their own tents, and I knew there was a card game going on in mine. So he says okay and I walk the forty feet or so up to camp, realizing that I'm even drunker than I thought. I'm almost stumbling."

"You don't have to make excuses," said Carolyn, glaring at him.

"It's dark too, and when I get inside the tent, pitch black. I don't know where Ben's flashlight is, so I just undress, leaving all my clothes in a heap, and jump into his sleeping bag." Keifer threw his head back and said something that to Anne sounded like "Whoa!"

Everyone listened spellbound. Anne and the couple at the other end of the table had said nothing.

"The lasagna should be just about finished," said Ben, opening the oven door.

"All of a sudden I realize there's another body in there with me and before I have time to wonder who it is or be scared or anything, she's kissing my mouth - deep -- putting her tongue all around my teeth, her leg in between my legs." He turned to Carolyn. "Honestly, I couldn't even talk."

Ben was cutting the lasagna into squares, his back to the table.

"That girl was so hot!" exclaimed Keifer. "She was all over me so fast my head was just spinning." He looked around at the faces watching as his skin flushed a deep pink.

"Slut," said Carolyn, leaning forward on the stool to pick up her glass from the table.

"I don't think so," said Keifer. "She was so embarrassed when she realized it was me. She sure got out of that tent pretty quick. I didn't have time to say anything."

"What could you possibly say," asked the man at the other end of the table, who had been silent.

"More. Faster," shouted Carolyn. The table broke into laughter.

"Voilà," said Ben, as he placed heaping plates in front of them. "Dan, do you want to grab the chili peppers from that shelf behind you."

"This looks great, Ben," said the girl beside Dan.

They all began to pick up forks, and Anne was putting a paper serviette across her lap when Keifer spoke again, almost as if they weren't there.

"I should have said something to her but it all happened so fast. Incredible." His eyes returned to the table. "I passed out right away, and when Ben came in and woke me up it was like I'd had a dream."

"It wasn't until I told him what I saw that we put two and two together," said Carolyn. She looked over at Ben who had just unfolded a wooden chair and

positioned it beside Anne. "Imagine if it had been you! No telling what would have stopped her."

"Just my luck," said Ben. He looked at Anne. "I don't often find surprises like that in my bed." He raised his glass and glanced around the table. "Let's eat. Cheers."

Anne chewed lasagna noodles, hardly noticing the taste. She was overwhelmed by Carolyn, who appeared to be with Keifer, but who gave the distinct impression that she was competing for Ben's attention. Why had she chosen to tell this story? It hung in the air above them all. As they ate, Anne had trouble dissolving the image of the black lace bodice, long white legs clasped around Keifer's slender torso. Suddenly she felt extraordinarily tired. She did not see how she would stay awake long into the night, listening to stories, drinking beer. This was not the evening she had expected.

"It's wild in those camps," said Carolyn, shaking her head, and laying down her fork to take a drink of beer. She looked at Anne. "You must think we're all nuts."

"No," she said quickly. "It sounds exciting."

The table burst into new laughter. Ben smiled approval and poured more beer into her glass. Anne had no difficulty containing her laughter.

"So, how did you two meet?" asked Carolyn, without looking up.

Anne waited, hoping Ben would answer, until she'd chewed enough to speak. "School," she said finally.

"Oh," said Carolyn. "I thought you lived in Ben's new neighbourhood." She turned to Ben. "This area's just a little run down, don't you think?"

"The price is right." He smiled, picking up his beer glass.

"You're not worried, walking around at night? We saw hookers on our way here." Carolyn checked for Anne's reaction. "At least they were dressed like hookers."

The table fell silent. Anne looked over at Dan and his girlfriend and smiled shyly, unable to add anything to Carolyn's conversation. She tried to think of interesting questions. "Do you live in Montreal?" Her eyes began with Dan, moving up the table to rest on Carolyn.

"Are you kidding?' she said as Dan answered yes. "This place is too big for us. Even Ben wouldn't live here if he weren't going to school, would you Ben? I mean, if you didn't have to."

"I don't know," he answered, "I'm getting kind of used to the place." He looked over at Dan. "I'm almost liking it."

"Oh, I don't know if I'd go that far," said Dan. "If it weren't for Charlotte, I think I would have packed it in last winter."

The girl beside him smiled.

"I can't say I'm looking forward to another winter."

"Where are you from?" asked Anne.

"Victoria. We don't get snow. Well, none that stays on the ground anyway."

Dan glanced at Charlotte. "We met at camp two summers ago." He grimaced. "I've been here ever since."

Carolyn laughed. To Anne, it hadn't sounded as if he were joking.

"Ben," said Keifer, looking up amazed, "this lasagna's great. When did you learn to cook?"

"It must have been while he was living with Mira. Cooking wasn't her strong suit."

Ben had finished eating. He did not look at Carolyn. Anne watched him put down his fork and stand to get more beer from the fridge. Without warning, she sneezed.

"Bless you," said Ben.

"Thank you." She picked up the napkin from her lap and brought it to her face before she sneezed again. Carolyn stared at her.

"Bless you again," she said.

Anne nodded her head and another sneeze rocked her body. In a moment her head was filled with all the sensations of a cold: runny nose, teary eyes, even a scratchy throat.

"Are you okay?" Ben asked.

"I'll be fine," said Anne, sneezing before the last word was out. She stood up, left the table and went into the bathroom. In the mirror her face was red, her eyes watery, and the sneezes were still coming. She rinsed her face with cold water, and told herself to relax as she patted it dry with a towel. She unrolled a

ream of toilet paper before going back into the room, and was about to sit down when she sneezed again.

"I think I'd better go," she said to Ben, smiling apology. "I don't know what's wrong."

"It'll go away," said Carolyn. "Stay awhile. Have another beer."

"No, really, I can't," said Anne. "I can hardly swallow." She began putting on her coat.

"I'll walk you home," said Ben.

"No, really, stay. I'll be okay. It was very nice meeting you all," she said, holding the toilet paper up to her nose as she bent to collect her purse from under the table.

The room watched as Ben put on his coat. Anne had already opened the door.

"I'll be back. Make yourselves at home."

He followed her down the stairs without saying anything.

"I'm sorry," she said when they got outside. "I don't know what's come over me."

"Don't worry about it," said Ben, putting his arm around her shoulder.

Before they reached the end of the block, the sneezes, still coming, were less frequent. Anne breathed deeply between each one. They walked like this, his arm around her, squeezing with each spasm of her shoulders, until they reached her apartment building. A good night kiss was out of the question.

"It could be stress," he said. "You've been under a lot of pressure."

Anne nodded, the tissue paper wet against her face.

"I'll call you tomorrow." He hesitated, as if he was trying to think of something else to say. "Well, sleep tight."

Unlocking her apartment door, Anne realized the sneezing had stopped. She went into the bathroom and checked her face in the mirror. It looked as though she had been crying for a week. The earrings dangled in her hair, harsh light reflecting from the bulb over the mirror. With disgust, she threw the damp paper into the toilet and went to sit down at the table, in front of the licorice tin.

Anne took off the earrings, the brass needles immobilized on the glossy wood and sprinkled tobacco into the rolling paper, thinking of Portugal, and Joachim the waiter, who, it had turned out, spoke little English beyond restaurant necessities.

They had smiled at each other over drinks, eyes glistening, when the broken French Joachim had learned from the tourists relayed a meaning. Anne knew then that they would go down to the beach; she could already sense the rhythm of the waves lapping on the shore, the sand pressing into her skin.

Early the next morning she'd returned to the beach. No one was there. She was looking for the clear plastic billfold that held her last three hundred dollars. There were any number of places she wouldn't have noticed it fall to the ground, but it was only back home in her living room smoking a joint that Anne was able to imagine Joachim taking the billfold. She pictured it: an arm stretched out in the dark sand beside them, a hand rummaging in her purse.

EIGHT

In the morning, after breakfast, Anne and Sandy said their goodbyes to Grandma Dodie, Sandy thanking her for the brass ashtray that she had removed from its place in the den to give to him. Dodie had started giving heirlooms away years ago. Anne had learned not to admire anything that she could carry.

The car wound its way through a network of tidy farms on the deserted two-lane highway that cut a path across the countryside and led from Dodie's house to GrandEm's. Her father had always called it a short trip when the family had driven from one world to another at Christmas. Probably the two hours seemed short to him after driving all night to get to Grandma Dodie's. But Anne and Laurie, growing impatient in the back seat, would ask what time it was, what time would they get there, and clock the distance on plastic watches from Santa.

Victorian houses stood close to the road, crops arranged in orderly rows behind them, scattered sheep grazing on miniature front lawns. Anne inhaled the smell of fresh manure that hung in the humid air.

"We usually drove this road in the winter," she told Sandy as he rolled up his window.

His eyes were squinted almost shut. "Powerful stuff."

"It's funny, I almost like it."

"You're probably from around here." He altered his voice for her amusement. "Yep, we like the smell of sheep shit."

She laughed. They drove in silence, Anne soaking up the countryside, her body appreciating the hot sun through the windshield, the familiar feel of the gentle slopes in the road. The long, red-shingled cheese factory that was the half-way marker her father had always pointed out came into view. They had stopped once and taken a tour through the factory, stepping their way along the wide gangplanks that overlooked vats of melted cheese.

"If you think it smells bad out here, you should smell it inside the factory," she said, pointing at the low building. "Ripened cheese." Sitting forward, she looked carefully at the building as they passed. "The factory means we're half-way there."

Then it came to her. The one time their father had pulled the car into the cheese factory's empty parking lot, Anne and Laurie had raced across the lot and read the sign out loud when they reached the unimpressive entrance. *CLOSED WEEKENDS AND HOLIDAYS.*

They had never taken the tour.

Her breathing quickened. "Do you know what?"

"What?"

"I never was inside that factory."

"So?" Sandy was smiling.

"So, how did I remember the smell?"

"Annie, you can smell it from here." He paused. "You can't really tell it's cheese, but..."

"But I can describe what it's like inside."

"Then maybe you were there and you don't remember."

"No. No. We were going to go on a tour. But it was always closed!" She shook her head incredulously. "I think I made it up."

Sandy patted her knee. "It's all right. I'd love you even if you'd never been to a cheese factory."

Anne stared at the sky. "I can't believe I made it up. Why? Maybe we passed so often, I started to imagine what it looked like inside...." She knew Sandy wasn't listening anymore, that it wasn't important. But how could she have carried with her all these years such a clear picture of the wooden walkways overlooking the vats.

Sandy broke into her reverie and Anne's attention shifted back to the car. "How long until we get to your GrandEm's?"

"Less than an hour."

"I can't say I'm looking forward to meeting her." He bit his lip nervously.

Anne leaned back against her door, watching his profile, inching her bare toes under his leg. Before the wedding, Loretta had said that Sandy lacked confidence.

"That's what worries me," she said. "You kids aren't old enough to be sure of anything."

Anne knew it was true. What her mother didn't know was how much they loved each other. When they made love, Sandy made her feel like she was the

most desirable woman alive. She helped him through uncertain moments like these. She sat forward and hugged her knees.

"GrandEm's not as bad as I make her out to be. We just don't see eye to eye on much anymore. She's pretty bitter about her life -- probably something to do with spending twenty years in a wheelchair. When she was young, she used to be a dancer."

When she and Sandy had decided to get married, Anne had called GrandEm, thinking she would be happy. Instead had said that living together and marriage were two different ballgames. "Sex is not as important as you think. You have to stand behind your man, no matter what. You don't even know what that means." Anne had tried to explain how things were different now, how women were more than emotional supports for men, but GrandEm would have none of it. "And from what I hear, he's not ready to support a family." Anne hung up the receiver with exasperation. "If I listened to my grandmother," she told Sandy, "we like sex too much to be getting married!" He put down his guitar. His hand slid up under her blouse, his lips grazing her ear. "If the two don't go together, let's skip the wedding."

In the car, she touched his arm. "You'll like my grandfather. He's a regular kinda guy." She settled back on her side of the bench seat.

When she and Laurie were younger, GrandEm had taken them on trips to the ice cream parlour. She would tell them stories about her college days, making faces as she described outlandish incidents involving other students that she

referred to as her crowd. She would do crazy things to entertain them, like seeing how long she could balance a cherry on the tip of her tongue and talk at the same time. She was in a wheelchair then too, but she could still drive, and she would send Anne to single out strong-looking men in the parking lot, asking them to hoist the wheelchair in or out of the back seat. Anne felt uncomfortable making requests of strangers, but nobody ever turned her down. She was glad when she and Laurie were older, and under GrandEm's exacting directions, learned to manage the chair by themselves.

"She gave up everything and put all her energy into marriage and kids," Anne told Sandy. "I guess for her to tell me to do anything different would be like calling her life a big mistake." Anne watched the dotted lines painted on the highway as they slipped, one at a time, under the rolling car.

NINE

"You might want to congratulate her on having a healthy baby," Patricia suggested, leaning over Annie's shoulder. Loretta was Patricia's best friend. She had known her since just before Jeffrey was born; this was the second time she'd helped out while Loretta was in the hospital. This time the girls were staying at her house because Gil was away on a business trip. Jeffrey had gone to his grandparents'. "Maybe you could tell her how it makes you feel to have another brother."

Annie moved the carriage down to the next line. *C-O-N-G-R-A-D-U-L-A-T-I-O-N-S*. The letters appeared one by one, each after a painstaking search. Patricia did not mention the spelling error, but it surprised her. Sometimes she forgot that Annie was only eight.

Annie had said she'd never typed before, but she sat down at the machine and rolled in the paper without thinking. She must have watched her mother do it. "*Dear Mummy,*" Patricia read, "*I hope you are well.*"

"Is she sort of sick?" asked Annie.

"No, honey, she's just tired." Patricia went into the kitchen and began filling the sink with water. She spoke to Annie over the counter that divided the two rooms. "As soon as she's slept for a couple of days, you and Laurie and Jeffrey will be able to go home and meet your new brother."

"Will Daddy be there?"

"I think he'll be back before then."

"If he was here now we could live at home." Annie said it matter-of-factly. Her attention returned to the keyboard, fingers poking at the letters.

"These things don't always happen when you expect them to Annie. He would have been here if he'd known."

Annie did not seem to hear. She looked up at the paper and realized she'd run off the page. She rolled the carriage up to type the next line.

Patricia was glad she had thought to bring out the typewriter. Her children were both boys, and they were older; there were not many playthings in the house that would occupy little girls. She didn't envy Loretta in the hospital, her fourth child in the nursery down the hall, her husband boarding a plane three thousand miles away. Last night, head sinking back into the pillow, Loretta had told her she was not sure yet how she would manage when she got home. But then she'd looked down at the baby, a smile suddenly returning to her face.

"Isn't it amazing how little they are? They were all this little once. It's really something, isn't it!"

Patricia finished the dishes and took the plug out of the drain, remembering fondly the small sturdy limbs of her own newborn boys.

"I'm going to see what Laurie's up to," she said to Annie.

"What do I do if I make a mistake?"

Patricia stopped to bend over the typewriter and show her how to use the

backspace key. She read silently: *It is good it is a boy because that means Jeff has someone to play with.*

Outside in the backyard, Laurie sat alone on the grass. "This is boring." She squinted up at Patricia. "When can we go home?"

"In a day or two. Annie's writing a letter to your mother. Why don't you write one too?"

"I don't want to," said Laurie. "I want to go home."

"Well, you can go home in a couple of days. But for now, we have to think of something you can do while you're here." Patricia wished she had insisted that her sons stay around the house today, or that they take Annie and Laurie with them around the neighbourhood.

"I'm finished," said Annie, sliding open the screen door. "Now I need a pen to sign it, and an envelope."

"Good girl," said Patricia. "Are you sure you don't want to write one too, Laurie? I'm going to see your mother tonight."

"I said, I don't want to write a letter." Laurie stared at Patricia.

"That's okay," said Annie quickly. "You can sign this one with me."

Patricia went back into the house to find a pen and an envelope. As she turned to slide the door closed, she saw that Annie was kneeling beside her younger sister, and putting an arm around her shoulder. She looked as if she were a little adult, explaining something to a child, nodding as she listened to Laurie's questions.

That night when her husband got home from work, Patricia told him dinner would be late.

"It's been a long time since a whole day just disappeared," she said. "Annie would be happy anywhere. But Laurie just wants to go home. I spent most of the day trying to find her something to do."

"She just needs more time to adjust," said Joseph. "All kids are different."

Dinner was quiet. The girls were shy to talk around the older boys. Patricia tried to draw them into conversation by asking them about school. Annie answered in single sentences; Laurie brooded. It was the telephone that finally broke the awkward silence.

"Yes, everything is just fine, Gil." Patricia smiled into the receiver. "Tomorrow? Okay. Do you want to talk to the girls?" She motioned for Annie to come to the phone.

"Hi Daddy," said Annie softly. Her eyes looked up at the ceiling as she listened. "We're fine. We have a new brother." As her father continued, Annie covered the mouthpiece and whispered to Laurie to come and take the phone.

"I don't want to talk to him," Laurie announced clearly to the table.

"When are you coming home, Daddy?" Annie's tone was polite. She nodded, then added, "she can't come to the phone right now, she's in the bathroom. Okay. I love you, too." She placed the receiver in the cradle with both hands. "He's coming tomorrow," she told the room. "He has a big surprise."

Patricia and her husband exchanged smiles. Laurie put her napkin on the

table, slid out of her chair and left the room. Annie looked at Patricia.

"Do you want me to bring her back?"

"No, that's okay." Patricia began to clear plates. "Maybe she needs some time alone."

"I'll go see."

"Honey," said Patricia, "we're going to go see your mother for a little while. If you need anything, just ask Peter or Kevin." The boys groaned in unison. "Be nice," she told them sternly when Annie had left the room. She turned to her husband. "Joseph, tell them to be nice."

"You heard your mother," said Joseph. "Why don't one of you go see if the girls would like to play a game. The other can clean up these dishes." Both boys scrambled up from the table and raced down the hall.

Patricia scraped and stacked the plates. "Gil should be at the hospital by the time we get there; his plane got in an hour ago."

"Poor guy. He's probably feeling pretty guilty he wasn't there last night."

"She was a week early, Joseph."

Joseph stood with his back to the counter. He smiled at her. "That doesn't mean he doesn't feel guilty."

At the hospital, Gil's face broke into a proud smile as he displayed the baby to them, his large frame hunkered over the tiny parcel. Loretta sat up in bed watching them.

"And that's not all." Gil seemed ready to burst. "I was just telling Loretta -- I got a big promotion."

"That's great news," said Joseph, reaching out to shake his hand underneath the baby blanket.

"Congratulations," said Patricia. She crossed the room to kiss Loretta. Although she smiled, Loretta's eyes looked worried.

"It means a move to Quebec," continued Gil. He looked down at the baby and bounced him gently. "But, luckily, moving expenses are part of the package."

Patricia squeezed Loretta's hand. The room was silent when Loretta began to sob. She brought her hands up to wipe at tears that were beginning to slide down her face.

"Jesus," said Gil. "I thought you'd be happy."

"I am," Loretta sniffed. "I really am."

Patricia sat down on the bed and put an arm around Loretta. Gil turned to Joseph.

"Come on. Let's put this little one to bed."

The two men left the room.

"I don't know what's the matter with me," said Loretta, still wiping at her face. "I should be happy. Why do I feel so sad?"

Patricia hugged her for a long moment. Then she leaned back and moved the damp hair away from Loretta's face. "It's an awful lot to be happening all at once." Her voice was calm, but her stomach a knot was beginning to tighten.

"What will I do without you?" Loretta forced a smile through her tears. Her dark eyes searched Patricia's.

When Gil and Joseph came back into the room, Patricia was telling Loretta about the girls.

"Annie sure is a big help. Oh, and I almost forgot, she wrote you a letter."

Loretta ripped open the flap of the envelope. "Both the girls really pitch in," she said. "Sometimes Laurie has to be prodded a bit -- she got used to being the baby. Annie's always seemed older than she is." She smiled when she read the note. It was the first time since they had arrived that her eyes smiled too.

No one had mentioned the move until Joseph stood up to leave.

"Congratulations again, old man. I know you've worked hard for this one."

Patricia kissed Loretta's cheek and said she'd call the next day. "I'll put the girls on the phone."

Wrapped in Joseph's arms in bed that night, Patricia stared out the window. She listened as branches scraped against the glass.

"Are you awake?" She turned her head toward him. "I can't help thinking this is not the time for Gil and Loretta to move. It's too much all at once." She waited for a response, heard only his steady breathing.

It's probably hormones, Patricia thought suddenly, she'll feel better when her body's back to normal. She closed her eyes and tried to picture Loretta,

sitting in a faraway room she'd never seen, the children gathered around her, her face animated as she told them a story. A welcome sleepiness was about to wash over her when she heard a noise downstairs. She waited to hear it again, her body fully alert, ready to wake Joseph. Listening closely, her muscles relaxed when she realized it was the typewriter. Then came a whisper of voices.

She folded back the covers and quietly put on her robe. At the top of the stairs, she saw there was a light on in the dining room, but she could not see the girls.

"You can't write that," said Annie's voice.

"I can so," hissed Laurie. "It's true."

"No it's not. You don't understand." As she said it, the paper was yanked from the machine. Patricia heard the garbage can lid opening, the paper crunching into a ball.

She descended the carpeted steps, clearing her throat so they'd know she was there.

"How would you girls like some orange juice?"

"I don't want any juice!" said Laurie, stomping to the bedroom at the end of the hall.

"No thank you," said Annie, standing in her nightie beside the garbage can. Patricia took a pitcher from the fridge and poured herself a glass.

"Well, okay," Annie said. "I guess I'll have some too."

"Couldn't sleep?" Patricia placed two glasses on the small kitchen table

and sat down.

Annie sat in the chair beside her. "Laurie wanted to write a letter. I guess she changed her mind."

"Oh." Patricia leaned towards Annie and whispered. "I don't think Laurie likes it here very much."

"She misses her friends." Annie took a long sip of juice. "And her bicycle. She just doesn't understand why we're here."

Patricia nodded. "She's lucky to have you."

Annie smiled. "Thanks for the juice," she said, standing up. "Good night."

Patricia sat at the table, sipping orange juice and listening for the sound of the rustling bedsheets to die down. She flicked off the light switch on the wall above her head and sat in the moonlit darkness, wondering what it was that made Annie seem so grown up. Maybe it was the curious stillness in her brown eyes. She stood up, took the glasses to the sink, then quietly lifted the lid of the garbage can. She smoothed the paper against the countertop and took it over to the window. One long sentence, words running together, spelled *deerdaddyihateyouforleavingusalone.*

Something in the pit of Patricia's stomach turned over when she read Laurie's message. It struck her that Annie had shown no emotion during the turmoil of the past two days. She seemed to slip effortlessly from one event to the next without anger, or sadness, or joy.

TEN

Anne was meeting her mother for dinner before she and Karla went to pick out wholesale baskets. It was a cute restaurant, one of Loretta's favourites, filled with pots of healthy-looking plants that Anne had just noticed were made of cloth. Loretta was not usually late; Anne was so sure she'd find her mother waiting at a table that she'd nearly walked into a mirrored wall, thinking it was another section. She sat with her back against the mirror, glancing up at the door every few minutes. If Loretta took much longer, she would have time to order a second drink. Loretta believed that more than one drink before dinner was cause for alarm.

The waitress arrived at the table with what looked like water on the rocks. She had trouble with English and after she'd taken the order, Anne had realized that her martini would probably come with ice.

She looked up in time to catch her mother's reflection in the mirrored entrance way, checking her hair, blown from the wind, and noticed, not for the first time, how good she looked. When Loretta saw Anne, she smiled, and Anne imagined it was the same smile she must have used on the runways when she was a model. Before she reached the table, Loretta poked at her bangs in the mirror above Anne's head.

"I'm frozen," she said, stretching out the vowel, her face stiff with cold.

Anne laughed as her mother took off her hat, gloves and coat before she

sat down. The waitress came to ask her what she'd like to drink.

"What's that?" asked Loretta. Anne told her and she turned to the waitress. "I'll have the same, only no ice". It would not have occurred to Loretta to say straight up.

"How are you?" her mother asked, setting her cigarette package on the table, her final motion to settling into the chair.

"Fine," said Anne, "I've had time to thaw."

"I can see that." Her glance darted, almost imperceptibly, to the glass.

"So, what's happening?" Loretta had told Anne once that this was a good way to find out what was going on without ruffling anyone's feathers. Anne was pretty sure that she had nothing to do with whatever was bugging Loretta when she'd called, but she didn't want to change that. Loretta looked up as if she were hearing an echo. Then her face relaxed and she groaned deeply.

"Oh, nothing really. Mummy called today. All these years, and she's still able to make me so mad. I don't know why she just doesn't accept me the way I am."

Anne smiled. She knew what to do. She listened. The waitress returned, placed a sleek martini glass before her mother, and handed them menus.

"She makes it so hard for me," Loretta continued. "Treating me as if I were still a little girl. And expecting me not to react. I have to react. Anybody would." She paused, took a sip of her martini, and looked up at Anne. "Don't you ever let me do that to you, okay? Promise?"

"Okay. What did she say?"

"Do you remember when she was here? When she made that comment at dinner, in front of my friends, that I don't have a sense of humour?" Anne nodded. "Well, when I told her it just wasn't the thing to say to my friends, whether she thinks it or not, she said that was proof -- no sense of humour. Do you think that's funny?"

"No." For as long as Anne could remember, Dodie's visits had dominated her mother's thoughts for weeks. She told Loretta this.

"You haven't lived with this all your life," her mother interrupted. "You were a much-loved child. You just don't know what the constant put-downs, the criticism can do. And you never will. Do you know what she told me once, after Daddy and I split? That is was no wonder, that I was hard to live with. No mention of him going off with Donna-Mae. Do you know how that made me feel?"

Loretta continued, and as she recounted each statement Dodie had made, the waitress came to ask about Anne's empty glass. She hesitated, then decided against hearing how liquor is bad for the skin.

"You have a sense of humour," she told her mother, hoping to change the subject, "it's a sense of self you have to work on."

Her mother laughed with her, then a pained expression crossed her face.

Anne glanced behind Loretta to the bar, where bottles were lined up in a mirrored cupboard. Their reflections looked as though the bottles went back to

the end of a long, long shelf. She'd heard about her mother's childhood, and she'd tried to imagine the make-believe friends living in Dodie's large house on the hill. Second-hand memories came like exotic dreams. When Loretta would announce her idea to become a pilot one day, in an airplane powered by piano keys, Dodie would say that her imagination was too lively. That the sensible thing would be to become a teacher or a nurse. Anne was studying to be a teacher.

"Are you listening to me?" Anne's thoughts snapped back to the table, but not soon enough. "I'm boring you, aren't I?" Loretta screwed up her mouth to expose her teeth and hissed. "My very worst fear." The face made Anne laugh. They opened their menus and read quietly, Anne deciding quickly on the fish. She was always dieting around her mother, who weighed less even though she was taller. Loretta always said they had the same build, that their legs were exactly the same shape. To Anne, they were the same except she was four inches shorter, which made them very different. Her mother said that meant she didn't have to worry about finding tall men.

Loretta had grander aspirations for Anne than looking for men. She wanted her to go to college, to have a career, to be a modern independent woman. Looking back, Anne remembered how surprised her mother was when Anne told her she'd said yes to Sandy.

Their food arrived. Her fish was deep fried, hardly visible beneath a rich, creamy layer of hollandaise.

"That must be a thousand calories, right there," her mother commented.

Annoyed, Anne scraped what she could off what turned out to be a tiny piece of sole, and picked at the scoop of lettuce beside it.

Her mother was chewing her first forkful of the garden-fresh salad Anne had avoided on the menu, thinking of brown-edged lettuce waiting in the fridge under a layer of saran wrap. Loretta crunched quietly, her eyes on the mirror behind Anne.

"Do you remember?" she asked. "Was I hard to live with?"

"Not that I recall." As soon as Anne heard the words, she remembered the year of arguments that preceded her moving out to live with Sandy.

"Do you remember when I told you I was going to get married?" Anne asked suddenly.

"I sure do. Did I miss something? What brought that up?"

"I don't know. Thinking about living with you, I guess. I still wonder sometimes if you knew we wouldn't work out together, or if you just thought I was too young." Loretta looked puzzled. "I mean, did you think Sandy and I were wrong together? Or did you think anybody would have been wrong for me then?"

"You were too young to know what you wanted." Loretta's voice was weak, she sounded tired.

"But did you see what I saw in Sandy?" Anne was not sure what she wanted to hear. It shouldn't matter now, whether her mother liked Sandy or not.

Loretta looked up from her plate. "I'm not sure I saw anything. But it wasn't me that was marrying him. I just hoped, somehow, that you were doing the

right thing."

"But you knew it was only a matter of time, didn't you?"

"Annie, what are you getting at? There was nothing I could do to stop you. You've told me that."

"I know. I'm just trying to think of how it must have felt for you. To know that I was going into something that you knew wasn't going to work."

Her mother put down her fork. "I wish I could say that I knew then that everything would turn out all right. I didn't." She took a sip of water. "All I could do was trust that you'd do the right thing for you." She smiled at Anne. "And you did."

"Did I? I really did love him. Sometimes I still do. I guess I want you to know I don't regret getting married."

The waitress came to clear away their plates, and rhymed off the available desserts from memory. Even creme caramel sounded unappetizing. Loretta passed up her usual scoop of vanilla ice cream. Anne wondered about the turn in the conversation. It was not something she had intended to talk about. She had to meet Karla in less than half-an-hour and she didn't feel like leaving.

"You know," said her mother, "it's hard not to feel responsible when you watch your kids make mistakes. All those books that tell you how much happens in the first five years." She shook her head. "You don't even remember the first five years!"

Anne folded a corner of her placemat, running a fingernail along the

crease. She smiled at Loretta, whose eyes had sharpened with concern. "I've got to go."

"I know."

When they emerged from the restaurant, they said good-bye quickly. It was too cold to stand around. Anne hugged Loretta and thanked her for dinner. Her mother was squinting, looking directly at her.

"You are loved," she said.

When Anne got home that night after unloading the taxi full of baskets, she was tired. She hadn't been able to shake the mood that had settled during the conversation over dinner. She opened the door to her apartment and saw its reflection in the window, the furniture, the pictures, the plants. Everything arranged in clean lines to give her an uncluttered feeling, the same feeling she got in her mother's apartment. Instead of staying up and smoking a last cigarette in the dark, Anne went to bed and fell into a deep sleep.

Her head is under water that is cold and clear. She can hear her breathing. It is regular and unnaturally loud, the way it is in movies when you know something is going to happen. Her hands hit the water beside her head. She must be about nine; her arms do not extend in front of her the way they do now when she swims. As she turns her head for air, sunlight bombards her eyes that are used to the cool darkness below. On one breath, she swallows a bit of water and it scares her, but she

can sense her mother watching. Loretta swims well. Anne wants to make her proud. She keeps going. Before she has recovered, she misses a breath altogether; her timing thrown off, she is turning to the wrong side, her mouth pressing into her arm, which is still in the water. Her breathing has stopped being regular, it is more of a heartbeat that she hears now, and it is pounding. Her head cannot find its way to the air.

In bed, Anne was not afraid of drowning, only of watching what would happen next.

Before her in the water she can see her mother's red and white striped bathing suit. She is there to save Anne, but Anne can't breathe and her arms flail in the water, scratching for air. She is hitting Loretta. She can see her face as she struggles to help. She pulls at Loretta, can feel her fingernails in her mother's shoulders as she brings her closer. The water is clouded with the bubbles they make from thrashing.

Then, they are walking along a sidewalk. Anne recognizes houses on the block. It is the same neighbourhood where they had a treehouse in the backyard. Loretta has her arm around Anne, and when Anne turns to her, she sees that she is looking directly into Loretta's eyes. She is grown up. Loretta's face is moist with tears and she sobs quietly. Anne cannot ask why she is sad, can only say,

"Why didn't you save me?"

A wail comes from deep inside Loretta.

"When they found us I was covered with scratches. My skin was raw and

bleeding. My legs were weak."

Their legs, the same shape. Awake in bed, Anne circled her knees with her arms. The room was still dark. She realized that she was now the age her mother was when she was nine. She hugged her legs tighter. What could she possibly offer a nine-year-old?

ELEVEN

When Sandy met GrandEm, he tried hard not to stare at the thick motionless legs, crossed at the ankles, that rested on steel flaps at the foot of her wheelchair. Instead, he concentrated on the puff of white hair, the thin line of red lipstick that moved as she spoke, the watery blue of her eyes. Since their arrival, he and Anne had sat at the kitchen table, juice glasses filled with ginger ale, listening to GrandEm tell them what the younger grandchildren were doing in school.

"I don't know about you, Sandy, but I think it's a crime the way kids are finishing school in this day and age without knowing how to spell." Her deep voice made Sandy sit up slightly in his chair. He nodded agreement, unsure of what he could add.

"It kills me," she continued. "The only reason Birdie's kids know how to add is because she sits down with them every night. These days most mothers are too busy working, and the teachers are so concerned with what the kids are thinking, they forget to make sure they have some basic skills to work with." She shook her head, looking down into her lap. Anne stood up to refill her glass.

"Where would I find an ashtray?" she asked.

GrandEm looked up quickly. "You don't still smoke, do you?"

"I know, I know," said Anne.

"In the cupboard, above the breadbox." GrandEm turned towards Sandy.

"You smoke too, I suppose."

Sandy nodded, shrugging his shoulders. He watched Anne as she crossed the kitchen, bringing an ashtray to the table. While she dug in her purse for cigarettes, he fished out a package of matches from his shirt pocket and prepared to light one so that it would arrive at the end of her cigarette just as she was putting it to her mouth. He caught her eyes and smiled.

"Thanks," she said.

"Maybe I'll have one, too," said GrandEm. "Just one."

Surprised, Sandy lit another match.

"Birdie would call us all nuts," she said, leaning forward to accept the light.

"My daughter's a nurse."

"How's Gampa?" asked Anne. "Where is he?"

"Oh, he's on all the boards now. There's the Safety Board, the Board of Directors, he's on another one at the college now. I lose track. You'd never know he was retired." She took a short puff of the cigarette to get it going, then sat back in the chair. "I always thought we might travel when he finished." She paused, eyes returning to Anne. "But he's too old now to be lifting the wheelchair in and out of the car."

Sandy watched GrandEm's mouth set resolutely, thin red lips a straight line as she looked out the window. She licked her lips, making a small noise with her tongue as cigarette smoke poured from her nostrils.

"Besides, he likes to keep busy."

"And Marie, how's Marie?"

"Oh, Annie, Marie left almost two years ago. We have a new girl now, her name is Constance. She's a young thing, not much experience. She's only been with us for about a month." GrandEm licked her lips again.

Sandy followed her gaze outside the window into the back yard. He surveyed the garden, empty seed envelopes shining in the bright sun, identifying mounds of earth as rows of celery, carrots, tomatoes.

"Looks like you have a pretty good garden," he said.

GrandEm's smile was short. "Yes, Gampa's proud of his vegetables." She paused and leaned forward to flick the ash from her cigarette. "And of course he has his roses too."

Sandy nodded. "Annie showed me. They're beautiful."

"I don't know," said Anne suddenly, "I think it's essential for teachers to let kids know they have good ideas. It's holds their interest, for one." She looked at GrandEm as if there had been no pause in the discussion about school.

"Annie, I'm the first to say how much I love kids. I love to hear their ideas. But we have to start giving them some information so that their ideas make good sense. Maybe they don't have to memorize poems the way we used to, but does that mean they shouldn't be able to spell?"

Sandy watched Anne stiffen as her grandmother continued to talk. GrandEm's voice had adopted a tone of authority; she had already told them she volunteered twice a week at the local elementary school. But GrandEm's firm

tone evaporated when the front door opened, spilling sunlight into the darkness beyond the kitchen.

"Annie, is that you?"

Sandy made out a tall slight frame, and the outline of eye glasses before the door clicked shut and the hallway became dark again.

"Gampa!" said Anne loudly, getting up to hug him.

He laughed as he came into the room, his wide smile revealing large square teeth. "Introduce me to your husband, Annie," he said, his eyes settling on Sandy over her shoulder.

Sandy didn't wait for Anne. He found himself on his feet, arm extended for a handshake, mouth forming words before he had a chance to think about them.

"Hello, sir."

"Call me George." He continued to smile as his eyes explored Sandy's face.

"Don't be ridiculous," said GrandEm, who did not turn around, "nobody's called you George for years."

The grip of the handshake loosened and Sandy stood, hesitating in the middle of the kitchen floor. He saw a hearing aid, flesh-coloured plastic, shaped around the contour of George's ear. He put his hands in his pockets, then sat back down at the table and smiled uncomfortably at GrandEm.

"So -- you're driving across the country," George said loudly. "Which route

will you be taking? Through the States? Or up north along the lakes?"

Sandy was about to say that he and Anne had not discussed the trip beyond Huronville, when he heard her voice.

"We thought we'd stay in Canada," she said.

"There's not much up there, Annie," said George. "You have to be real careful that you don't run out of gas or you'll be stuck. Let me get a map. I'll show you."

Anne sat down as her grandfather left the room and GrandEm reached for another cigarette with an audible sigh. Sandy took out his matches, watching Anne, hoping to get some indication that she had chosen the route they would take just to sound like they knew what they were doing. She did that sometimes. But, she did not look up until George came back into the room, carefully unfolding a well-worn map of Ontario and spreading it onto the counter. Anne stood up to look at the map.

"I worked up in this part of the country just after the war," he said, circling an area with a long finger. He looked over at Sandy. "It won't be so bad in the summer, but in the winter, it's a place you don't want to be without a reliable car. Does the Plymouth give you any trouble?"

"We just bought it," said Anne. "So far, it seems to run pretty well."

George turned to her. "You got a tune-up and an oil change before you headed out?"

She looked at him and then at Sandy.

"We check the oil whenever we get gas. What do you mean, change it?"

Sandy shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He knew more than Anne when it came to cars, but he was beginning to think he didn't know enough.

"I think they probably did that as part of the tune-up," he said. GrandEm glanced at him, taking a long, silent drag from her cigarette.

"Well, never mind," said George. "Before you leave we'll take it in to the garage and have them check it. You'll also need to take a container of water with you -- in case the radiator overheats when you're miles from anywhere."

Anne laughed. "I guess it's pretty obvious we don't know much about cars. But we'll learn as we go."

Sandy felt a wave of uneasiness. He wanted to tell Anne she didn't have to worry about the car, that they would find their way out west, that she would make a good teacher. Instead, he reached for a cigarette and lit the end carefully as George told Anne what else they should have in case of emergency.

She returned to the table. She placed the map, folded back into its well-worn creases, before her.

"This is going to be exciting."

He offered her a half-hearted smile.

"You kids must be hungry," said GrandEm. "Gampa, are you ready for lunch? Annie, maybe you could help your grandfather make some sandwiches."

"Sit down, Annie," said George. "I'm fine on my own, Em. Let the kids relax." He smiled at them. "Pretty soon you'll be on your own and there

won't be much time for relaxing." He opened a loaf of bread and began laying thick white pieces on the counter. "How does tuna sound?"

"Fine, dear," said Emma loudly. For Anne she lowered her voice. "Have you decided where you're going to live when you get to Edmonton? Are you registered for courses? Does the university have special apartments for married couples?"

"I looked into that, but I think we can find a cheaper place off-campus. Besides, they have a waiting list." Anne stood up and joined her grandfather at the counter. "What if I make some soup?"

"Good idea," said George. "There are cans of tomato in the pantry."

"And what will you do, Sandy?" GrandEm leaned toward him, poised and listening.

"Work!" He laughed.

She waited for him to continue.

"I never liked school very much and somebody has to make some money."

GrandEm did not conceal her dissatisfaction. "What kind of work?"

"Well, I hear they need people in the oil industry. Maybe I can get something there. I don't know, I'll see when we get there." He shifted in his chair and looked at her, feeling as though he were already in an interview.

"What kind of work have you done in Montreal?"

"Odd jobs, mostly." He thought for a moment, then added, "I worked for a year in freight. My father's a manager for one of the container outfits. He got

me that job."

"GrandEm, he's really a painter," interrupted Anne from the counter.

"He's done some really nice stuff."

GrandEm sighed. "I painted for awhile after Gil and Birdie grew up and got married." She leaned back in the chair.

Sandy wondered if this unsmiling woman had ever felt the flutter in the pit of her stomach that used to rise up unexpectedly in him when he faced a white canvas. It had been years since he'd painted anything. He didn't feel right calling himself a painter. But he liked it when Anne brought it up. She made it sound like whatever he was doing now was just temporary. GrandEm rolled the wheel of her chair to turn around.

"Gampa," said Emma, raising her voice. "Sandy paints, too."

George didn't hear. He was spreading the tuna mixture onto soft white slices of bread with a fork. Anne stirred soup at the stove.

"Painting is a very good hobby," she said. "But it doesn't pay the bills. You have responsibilities now."

For the first time since he was a boy, Sandy longed for a simple title, like fireman, so he could answer her questions with a word, assuring them he would take care of their granddaughter. He looked out the window, wishing he were standing in the yard with Anne, warmed by the hot sun and surrounded by the earthy smell of the garden.

TWELVE

Outside Anne's apartment doorway, Ben squinted as his eyes adjusted to the morning light; his head pounded as he turned to walk down the street. He was grateful Anne had not wakened to the sound of the bedroom door clicking behind him or the bathroom tap running; his head was muddled with the after-effects of Jack Daniels, and he didn't believe speech would have been possible. He was glad they'd slept in their clothes because the latter parts of the evening were hazy. The last thing he remembered clearly was Anne placing her hands together under her cheek before she put her head on his chest.

He held the curved wooden handle of a dark green umbrella as he walked; the forecast the night before had called for rain. In the cold morning brightness, the umbrella looked absurd. He used it like a cane, partly because he needed the support, partly because it was too heavy to life off the ground. A gnawing sensation in his stomach grew hard to ignore as he was passing the bistro where he and Anne had stopped for a drink one night after class. He and Mira had gone there often. They would order french fries dipped in a mixture of mustard and mayonnaise, and call it dinner.

Ben still missed Mira. After they'd split, she had visited once in a while just to talk. Sometimes they had ended up making love, almost out of habit. Mira had been seventeen when she'd left her husband; the baby would be six years old now. There was a time when Ben had hoped that she would come and

live with him, that they would send for her daughter together.

"She's nothing but a golddigger," his father had said.

"Not much gold here, Dad." Ben said it out loud on the street. The tone was angrier than it had been in his father's living room. It irritated him that Mira's new boyfriend drove a sporty Mazda and took her up north to his ski chalet on weekends.

Ben's head pounded harder as he climbed the stairs to his apartment. He closed the door behind him, and sank down onto the mattress, exhausted. As he fell asleep, the image of Anne putting her hands together, as if she were going to recite a prayer, then placing them purposefully under her cheek, floated in his head.

He woke with a start to the sound of a knock at the door. Sun beat down on the bed, and he was uncomfortably warm in his jacket. Shoes still planted on the carpet, he rolled his body forward and stood uncertainly.

"Hiya Ben, how are ya doing?" Dan smiled. He was wearing a thick grey sweater, one arm propped up against the wall.

Ben cleared his throat. "Hi, Dan."

"Rough night last night?"

"Yeah." He walked back into the room and sat heavily at the kitchen table, fingers pressed against his temples.

"I was in your neighbourhood to buy some stuff for dinner tonight." Dan

closed the door then turned around. "I would have called, but I don't know the number at the restaurant downstairs." He sat across the table from Ben. "You didn't forget about tonight, did you?"

"Of course not," Ben lied. "What time is it?"

"Around eight. Charlotte's making salmon steaks."

"No, I mean now." Ben leaned back in his chair, wishing his headache would go away.

"Almost noon. Is Anne coming?"

As Dan said it, Ben realized he'd forgotten to ask her. "We drank a bottle of Jack Daniels last night."

Dan raised his eyebrows and smiled. "So...you spent the night?"

"Yeah." When he saw Dan's face light up, he added, "We slept in our clothes."

"Oh, man." Dan unzipped his sweater, drew a package of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, and lit one. He blew out the match, placed it in the ashtray, then looked up at Ben. "What are you waiting for?"

Ben paused. "I don't want to end up with another fucked-up chick," he said quietly.

Dan leaned his head to one side, half of his mouth curling into a smile. "No one's suggesting that you to go to bed with the first female you see walking down the street. You like Anne. Anne likes you. You've known each other awhile and she seems like a nice girl. What's the problem?"

"I thought Mira was a nice girl." Ben took a cigarette from Dan's package on the table.

"Mira. Now, there's your problem. Anyone who couldn't see her coming..."

Ben rolled the end of his cigarette slowly against the lip of the ashtray. He wished he hadn't said anything about Mira. "I don't want to talk about it. I just think I should get to know her better before we start complicating things." He stood up from the table.

"Doesn't matter how long you wait, sex always complicates things."

Ben's smile was weak. "Look, I'm going to take a quick bath. Then I'll help you buy the food for tonight. Help yourself to coffee."

"You've got to take the plunge, sometime. No pain, no gain."

Ben closed the bathroom door on Dan's words. He peeled off clothes that were moist with sweat. As the tub filled, he shook three 222's from the bottle and turned on the water at the sink, putting his lips on the tap, and gulping down large mouthfuls of cold water.

Anne couldn't help feeling disoriented as she climbed the long flight of steps up to Dan and Charlotte's. She'd gotten up early to put baskets together with Karla and then had slipped back into bed. Awakened by Ben's call, she'd

fallen asleep again until he came to pick her up. It seemed like a new day, only it was dark. She liked it that he had not asked her to turn on the lights in her apartment. He'd talked quietly while she'd ironed a blouse, the streetlamp outside the window providing just enough light to see the wrinkles.

"Not much further, now." At the top of the stairs the bare lightbulb illuminated Dan's bald head poking out from around the corner.

"You guys should put an elevator in here," said Ben, coming up the stairs behind Anne.

When they reached the landing, Anne could see Charlotte standing behind Dan. She smiled at her, unable to move closer or speak over Dan, who blocked the narrow corridor, explaining why dinner would be late.

"Charlotte made a wonderful casserole. She made a cheese sauce and poured it over layers of sliced potatoes, following the recipe to the letter. It went into the oven over an hour ago," he paused to nod in her direction, "but she forgot to turn it on."

Charlotte blushed, her eyelashes lowered for a moment. Anne edged past Dan.

"I've done that," she laughed. "You're concentrating so hard on all the details, you miss the main event."

"Here, let me take your coat." Charlotte's voice was barely audible. She turned and hung Anne's jacket on one of the hooks in the hallway.

Anne followed her. "This apartment is wonderful," she said, stopping to

survey the large living room, where two single beds, one draped with a burgundy cotton print, the other with a blue plaid blanket, were pushed against opposite walls. A long coffee table separated the room, the shelf beneath it strewn with books and newspapers that were visible through the smoked glass top. Except for a poster, the walls were bare. "The ceilings are so high." Anne turned to look at the kitchen through an adjoining doorway. "And the kitchen's so big!" She turned to Charlotte. "Mine is the size of a broom closet."

Charlotte laughed nervously.

Anne dug her hands in her pockets. She continued looking around the room. "And a balcony too. That's great. Oh, I almost forgot," she said, reaching into the large purse that hung from her shoulder. "We brought some wine."

"Thank you," said Charlotte. She slid the bottle out of the paper bag and placed it in the fridge beside another bottle. "Would you like a beer? Or a glass of wine?"

"I'd love a beer." Anne listened as Ben's and Dan's low voices approached them from the hallway, their footsteps hesitating on the hardwood floor.

"So what are you going to do?" asked Ben.

"Well, first I have to call my brother and find out what's really going on. My mother doesn't know anything about money. Sometimes I wish I were closer - it's hard to tell her what to do when I don't have the whole story."

Ben smiled at Anne as he entered the kitchen. "I see you're all set," he said, glancing at her beer bottle. "Might be just the thing to clear the head." He

opened the fridge and pulled out two more, passing one to Dan.

"I hear you had a late night last night," said Dan, unscrewing the cap from his bottle.

Anne rolled her eyes. "And a late morning. I feel as if it's Sunday."

"Why don't we sit down," he said, motioning to the round table in the centre of the room.

Dan and Ben continued to talk, and Anne watched as Charlotte opened the oven door, lifted the lid of the casserole dish, and delicately prodded the potatoes with a fork. She put the lid back and closed the oven. Then she got herself a beer from the fridge. "Would anyone like a glass?"

"No thanks, this is fine," said Anne. Dan and Ben, immersed in conversation, did not look up.

Charlotte took a sip from her bottle and lifted the lid of a pot on top of the stove.

"Is there anything I can do?" asked Anne from the table.

"No, everything is almost ready. We're just waiting for the casserole." Her tone was apologetic.

Dan interrupted his conversation with Ben. "Yes, we're a very efficient team. Most of the time." He turned to Charlotte. "How about some cheese and crackers while we wait? So, Anne, I hear you've started your own company. How's business?"

"Pretty good. The Christmas orders are pouring in." Anne was beginning

to tire of talking about baskets. Her initial zeal had faded. She hoped Dan would not ask more questions.

"What do you put in these baskets?"

"Anything. Depends. It's like a personalized shopping service, only we put it all in a basket for presentation." This was how Anne had envisioned the baskets before orders started coming in. Actually, most people asked to have a basket made just like one they'd already seen.

"Do women ever order baskets for men?"

"Not so far," Anne admitted, "but I think men would like them if they were done right." She looked at Ben. "You've seen a couple. Would you?"

He laughed. "I sure wouldn't know what to do with flower-shaped soaps, if that's what you mean."

Dan was intent. "What would you put inside if Charlotte called you up, say, looking for a birthday basket for me?"

Anne smiled at Charlotte. "It would be easier if he shaved," she said, gesturing towards Dan's beard, "because then we could fill it with nice shaving stuff." She paused. "Let's see. First I'd ask Charlotte what you like to read. A couple of magazines, maybe, some stuff for the bath, some chocolate, a small bottle of your favourite liqueur?"

Charlotte nodded. Dan looked skeptical. "I don't know. I'd never take a bath. But it's funny, I kind of like the *idea* of reading in a tub with a glass of brandy." He looked at Ben, his eyes brightening. "For a guy who doesn't have a

shower though, it would be perfect." He laughed and Ben and Anne laughed with him. Charlotte smiled too as she sliced cheese at the counter that divided the room.

"Charlotte," said Ben, "do you recognize Anne? Are you in any of the same classes?"

"No, I don't think so." She placed the plate of cheese and crackers on the table.

There was something about Charlotte that Anne liked. Ben had mentioned that it took a while to get to know her.

"Charlotte's in Women's Studies," said Dan, "studying to be a feminist."

Anne smiled at Charlotte. "I suppose we all are. I'm studying English literature "

"Don't get me wrong. I think women's lib is a good thing. I work with a woman who's a real go-getter. When we go for lunch, it's like being with one of the guys, only nicer to look at. She knows exactly what she wants. There's something very attractive about that." He nodded. "I'm all for it. Aren't you, Ben? I'm just waiting for the day when women pull their own weight financially." He glanced up at Charlotte as she sat down. "No dig intended," he said, giving her arm a gentle squeeze.

Anne watched as Dan's and Charlotte's eyes settled at different places on the wooden surface of the table.

"I'm still waiting to be asked on a date!" Ben's laughter cut through the thick silence.

Charlotte stood up to check on the casserole. Anne took her empty beer bottle to the sink, asking which drawer the knives and forks were in so she could set the table.

"Sit down, sit down," said Dan. "You're a guest. Ben will set the table."

"Feel free to volunteer my services," said Ben, getting up.

"So, what do you think, Anne? We're already cooking and cleaning. When are women going to start taking on some of the tough stuff -- like paying for groceries, or asking someone on a date, or -- how about this -- initiating sex?"

Anne turned to Charlotte. "Have you ever noticed how men talk about women? They go on and on with admiration if a woman knows what she wants. But if you listen very carefully, you'll hear how they want her home cooking when they get in from work. And we've all heard the stories about aggressive women in bed." Anne looked over at Dan who was still sitting at the table. "What about that girl up at camp, what was her name? The stories are not always complimentary."

Charlotte's soft giggles filled the room.

"It's true."

Anne looked at Ben. He had stopped counting forks and was watching them. He looked as though he was wondering if the joke was somehow on him. She smiled, wanting him to know it was not. "Where are the glasses?"

"You're right," said Dan, as he moved cigarette packages and ashtrays off the table. "We probably don't have any idea how to be with a woman who knows

what she wants." He crossed the room to stand beside Anne, opening the cupboard of wine glasses. "We just *think* it would be refreshing."

Anne tried to interpret the peculiar expression that had settled on his face, but he turned away quickly.

It was late when Charlotte asked if they would like to stay the night. Ben accepted because it was cold outside and he did not want to stand on the street deliberating over whose apartment they would walk to.

"I hope you don't mind," he said to Anne. "I'm just dead. I can't face the thought of going out in the cold.

The three of them moved the mattresses from the makeshift couches into the centre of the living room floor. Charlotte brought sheets and they made up a large bed, pushing the mattresses together. Ben wondered if Dan had told Charlotte that he and Anne were not really sleeping together. Dan had excused himself early and was already in bed.

"Good night," said Charlotte quietly. "Sleep well."

"Good night," they whispered back together.

Ben undid the fly of his jeans and pulled them off. Anne did the same. They both took off sweaters and Anne sat down on the mattress, and slid under the sheets, still wearing her t-shirt and panties. Ben got into the bed beside her

and laid on his back, arms folded under his head. He wondered what would happen if he were to put his arm around her.

"Good night," she said.

He turned to look at her, wisps of hair had swept across her cheek.

"Good night, Anne."

He wished that somehow they could get past this awkwardness and let their bodies touch without changing anything. He felt like he'd waited so long he couldn't just reach over and put his arm around her. She would expect more. And whenever he thought about making love, even for a moment, he could feel the texture of Mira's long, thick hair on his shoulders, as if she were right there in his arms.

THIRTEEN

Almost two years had gone by since Gil and Loretta moved to Montreal, years that had passed quickly for Patricia, filled at first with getting used to them being gone, and then with other friends who naturally filled the empty space. Loretta's voice surprised her when she picked up the phone. It wasn't a special occasion.

"Everything is fine," said Loretta. "Except sometimes I feel so lonely."

She didn't know anyone. The women in the neighbourhood spoke French. She hardly had time to get out of the house. Loretta had explained these things in her letters, but there was something in her voice that alarmed Patricia.

"What if I came for a visit?"

"Oh could you? Would you?"

"I'll talk to Joseph and let you know."

Joseph wasn't crazy about agreeing to make dinners for the five days she would be gone. But he knew she was worried and she suspected he was worried too. The next week she flew to Montreal.

All the way there, Patricia tried to think of things she could say to Loretta that would make her feel better. While the stewardess instructed passengers what to do in case of emergency, and the engines screamed her excitement at going somewhere she had never been, when she stood in Montreal's giant airport trying to appear nonchalant as she waited for her baggage to come tumbling into the

quickly moving carousel, dozens of platitudes rang in her head. *This too shall pass. Where there's a will there's a way.*

The taxi dropped her off in front of a little stone house with navy trim. Snow piled high made the driveway appear too narrow for a car. All the houses on the street stood close to the road, close to each other, reminding Patricia of villages she'd visited in Europe, where people lived clustered together, clinging to the sides of mountains or huddled around small inlets of water.

Loretta's hands were wet when she opened the door. She hugged Patricia with her wrists, apologizing that she was not organized, and led the way down the hall to the back of the house. The sound of running water was a comfort to Patricia. It filled the room with the ordinary sound of any other day. She glanced around the kitchen. It was large enough for a washer and dryer, and a large white formica table that stood in the centre of the tiled floor, surrounded by a tight circle of chairs. A wall of windows gave out onto a glassed-in porch and beyond was the backyard, under a deep layer of snow.

"I have some coffee on," Loretta shouted above the water. "For heaven's sake, take off your coat." Loretta was wearing a pair of paint-smeared jeans. Her hair, straight and limp, had been stroked away from her face with her fingers, and drew attention to the fine bones of her nose and cheeks. A loose sweatshirt hung down to the middle of her thigh, and the jeans were rolled up to reveal the high arches of her feet. She turned to face Patricia as she lowered plates into the sink.

"So what do you think?"

"It's a pretty house." Patricia took off her coat, draped it over the back of a chair, and sat down at the table.

"Yeah," said Loretta. She turned off the water. "Some days I think so too. Some days I think I'll even plant a garden. But I just never seem to have any time."

"I remember what that's about."

"I'm just so glad to see you. I hardly ever get to talk to a grown-up. Gil tries, but he really doesn't want to hear what goes on all day." She paused. "He works hard too."

On glossy white walls hung the children's art work. For as long as Patricia had known her, wherever they lived, Loretta painted rooms white. What she'd thought looked small and dingy, Loretta would transform into a bright space, filled with interesting things to look at, things no one else thought to show off. She recalled the time Loretta had framed magazine covers she liked and hung them in the bathroom. Patricia's favourite was one with a row of soldiers in uniform that read "*Protest Against the Rising Tide of Conformity*" from its perch just above the toilet paper. In this kitchen, child-drawn stick men smiled at her from important black borders.

Loretta pulled the plug and water gurgled down the drain. "Okay," she said, wiping her wet hands on her jeans. "Before the boys wake up." She poured them both coffee and sat down beside Patricia. "You must be tired. How was the

flight?"

"I'm just fine," Patricia told her. "I miss you. We all miss you. I'm glad I could come for awhile...see how you're doing."

Loretta took a long drag from her cigarette. "Most days we do fine. The girls like school. Annie's in grade six now. Can you believe it? She'll be ten next week. It won't be long before Jeff and Calvin will be off to school themselves..." She hesitated. "Gil doesn't want me to, but I think it's time I went back to work."

"What will you do?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe try one of the modelling agencies -- I have to get down there and put my name in -- and find a housekeeper..." She looked up, her eyes deepening with uncertainty. Then she smiled. "What about you? What happened with the university?"

"I got a letter of acceptance last week. I start in September."

"My God, Pat, that's wonderful! I always knew! What about Joseph? Was he surprised? Did he think you'd get in?"

"I think so." Patricia looked up. "I never thought he might have doubts. I guess I had enough of my own."

"I don't think Gil thinks I'll be able to find a job that pays enough to make it worthwhile. He doesn't want me to work but he's not worried because he doesn't think it will happen. Do you know what I mean?"

"Why wouldn't he want you to work, Lor? You did when the girls were small. You've said you could use the money."

"I don't know. He says it's a reflection on him. That I shouldn't have to work."

"But it's different. You want to."

"I know, I know, but he doesn't understand why I'd want to. Sometimes I don't think he wants to." She laughed. "Maybe he should stay home for a couple of years."

Patricia stopped talking and looked at Loretta. Loretta was ten years younger; tiny lines were only beginning to stay at the corners of her eyes when she stopped smiling. Right then she looked like a little girl, waiting expectedly to be told what to do.

A small voice in the hallway interrupted any advice Patricia might have offered.

"I can't sleep." said Jeffrey, rubbing his eyes at the kitchen doorway.

"Then just lie down on the bed for some quiet time," said Loretta.

"Patricia will still be here when you get up."

His small bare feet thudded across the tiles until he arrived at his mother's side. "I'm not sleepy."

Loretta put out her cigarette and lifted him into her lap. "Patricia's going to go to school in September, just like you."

Jeff leaned back against Loretta's chest and looked at Patricia, squinting his eyes against the bright light. He began to cry. He turned to face Loretta and she wrapped her arms around him and swayed gently, side to side, in her straight-

backed chair.

"It's okay, sweetie," she said, her voice soothing. "The girls will be home from school soon," she said to Patricia.

Patricia watched as Jeffrey's head settled against Loretta's blue-gray sweatshirt. His sweat-damp hair stuck to his temples and his arms clung unapologetically to his mother's neck. Calvin was sleeping, but would probably wake up when he heard Anne and Laurie come in. From somewhere far away, a distant memory wrapped Patricia in a blanket of fatigue. Her own boys were fourteen and fifteen now -- the constant need of her had faded. She wondered how she had passed into this state, this state of taking a trip alone, of starting a new life in the fall, hardly noticing how that never-ending sleepiness had gone away.

Patricia watched as Loretta held Jeffrey's head against her, the bones of her fingers visible in the stretched out slenderness of her hand. His breathing was becoming regular and Loretta looked down at him, listening. The kitchen was warm. Moisture had settled into tiny beads of water on the windows and it was getting dark. Patricia tried to look outside, but she saw only their reflections in the glass.

When the girls came in, she was standing at the stove, stirring spaghetti sauce.

"Patricia!" Annie threw off her coat and skipped across the kitchen.

"Hi, hun." Patricia put her arm around Annie's shoulders. "You've sure grown tall since I last saw you." She turned to look at Laurie, who was taking her time undoing the zipper on her ski jacket. "My goodness, Laurie, so have you."

"Where's Mummy?" asked Laurie.

"Your mother's upstairs changing Calvin. Jeff is watching TV if he hasn't fallen back to sleep. And I could use some help with dinner."

"I'll set the table," said Annie, taking glasses down from the cupboard.

Laurie stood in the middle of the kitchen for a moment, then turned to go upstairs.

Patricia lifted the lid of a pot and stood stiff spaghetti noodles in the boiling water, waiting for them to soften before she pushed them down further. "So tell me, which pictures are yours, Annie?" She pointed to the wall of frames.

Annie giggled. "All of mine are from when I was really little," she explained. "Laurie can draw, but my people all look the same."

Patricia laughed. "I think your people look just fine," she said.

"But look at Laurie's picture of Howie. He really looks like a dog."

Patricia examined the portrait. She remembered Howie. The picture not only resembled a dog, it looked like that dog. "Yup," she said, "it is good. But I like the one you did of your mother, too."

"The one with her arms coming out of her head! It's horrible! I was in kindergarten!"

"Still. You captured something. Maybe the smile? I don't know."

Annie left the pictures and stood at Patricia's side, watching the sauce rise into thick, giant bubbles.

"Did you come for a vacation?" she asked.

"Sort of. It's been a long time since I've seen all of you. And pretty soon I'll be busy at school."

"You will?"

"Yes. I'm going to be a lawyer."

"That'll take years!" said Annie. "Lawyers and doctors take the longest."

Patricia laughed. "Do you like school?"

"It's okay I guess. I like seeing my friends."

Patricia nodded, then she turned the knob on the stove to simmer. "Sauce is almost done. Should we make a salad?"

"I know how," said Annie. "I'll make it."

The telephone rang once and Loretta answered it upstairs.

"That's probably Daddy," said Annie as she collected vegetables from the refrigerator and placed them in the lap of her tunic. "He's probably going to be late."

"Oh?"

"He works a lot. First at his job, then at his hobby."

"What's his hobby?"

"Well, he always played the trumpet. Now he's in an amateur orchestra. They have concerts in the high school auditorium."

"That must be fun."

One by one, Annie dropped leaves of lettuce into the sink. "Mummy doesn't think they have to rehearse every single night."

"Maybe she needs a hobby, too."

"No," said Annie slowly. "I think she needs a job."

"What makes you think that?"

"Nothing. Except she was happier when she was working. Now she gets sad a lot."

Patricia didn't know what to say.

"Don't say anything to Daddy. I told him once, just as an idea, you know, and it started a big fight."

Patricia looked over at Annie. She had turned on the water and was rinsing the lettuce, carefully spreading the leaves on a piece of paper towel beside the sink.

"Let's see if the spaghetti's done. Do you know how to test it?"

Annie turned around. "I take a little piece out and chew it."

"That's boring," said Patricia. "Sophia Loren -- you know, the movie star -- she throws it at the wall. If it sticks it's done, if it doesn't, it's not."

Annie smiled as Patricia removed a string of spaghetti from the pot. She looked around the kitchen for an empty space on the wall and pointed. Patricia swung the noodle from her hand. It stuck.

"Done," she announced, turning back to the stove.

"Does that really work?"

"Sophia's Italian. She should know."

They heard Loretta coming down the stairs.

"Gil won't be home for dinner," she said as she came into the kitchen. She sat Calvin in his highchair. "They're having an early rehearsal tonight. Maybe that means it won't go late."

"We'll save some for him," said Patricia. She looked around the kitchen.

"I think everything's ready. Are we ready?"

Loretta smiled. "Oh, Pat, it's good to have you here."

"Wait, wait," said Annie, "I'm not finished the salad yet. I still have to cut the tomatoes."

"Don't worry, by the time I get everyone sitting you'll be done." Loretta went into the hall and called up the stairs. "Laurie, it's time for dinner, come on downstairs." Then she came back through the kitchen on her way to the den.

"Mummy's smiling," said Annie quietly to Patricia. "You should come more often."

Patricia moved Annie's bangs off her forehead with her fingers. "She'll smile more as the boys get older. You'll see."

Patricia gave Annie's shoulders a gentle squeeze. She watched her scoop tomato wedges into the bowl and toss the salad with her fingers in one deft motion. She wanted to explain to Annie that this was a grown-up problem and she wasn't a grown-up, but the noise from the television had just switched off, and

she could hear Loretta's voice telling Jeffrey that Daddy wasn't coming home for dinner.

FOURTEEN

Anne had just come down the stairs from Karla's when the buzzer sounded loudly. She pressed the button that released the lock on the door at street level when she saw it was Ben.

"Hi," she said as he came up the stairs. Anne was getting used to his dropping by unexpectedly. He still didn't have a phone, and she liked not knowing when he would come over; it meant she didn't have to wait nervously for his arrival. She turned to open her apartment door as he got closer. When she asked how school had gone he made a face.

"I've just spent the last two hours listening to a bunch of people go boink-boink."

Anne laughed. "What's that?"

Ben stepped out of his boots at the door, put his books on a chair, and fell comfortably onto the loveseat, his feet over one end, his arms drawn up behind his head.

"I don't know. Boink-boink. A room full of boink-boink." He let out a deep breath. "Before school, I spent most of the afternoon down at the phone company, trying to get my phone back. I had to use their phone to call the camp office because I'm still trying to find out what they did with my last paycheque. And then I got into a class where no one had anything to say, but they said it anyway. Boink-boink."

Anne sat at the table rolling a hash cigarette. She chuckled as he spoke. Ben swung his legs to the floor and sat up.

"Sorry I didn't call before I came over. I thought I'd take my chances, see if you were home."

"Actually, I'm meeting David downtown in half an hour. Would you like to come for a drink?"

"No. I have too much work to do. Besides, I don't want to cut in on your stomping ground."

"I don't have a stomping ground. I just stop in for a drink to see David and buy some hash. Would you like some?" She extended a joint in his direction without standing up.

"I'd better not. Well okay, maybe just a small puff."

"So what happened with the phone?"

He rolled his eyes as he passed the joint back. "I'll be lucky if they give me a phone without a deposit once this bill is paid. I sure won't have one before it's paid."

Anne knew that Mira had sublet his apartment while he was at camp for the summer. She had placed a couple of hundred dollars worth of long-distance calls while she was there.

"Couldn't you call up Mira and ask her to pay the bill?"

"Mira doesn't have any money."

Anne continued, as if she hadn't noticed a change in the tone of his voice.

"How about your cheque? Is it on its way?"

Ben took two short puffs and passed the joint back to Anne. "They said they mailed it." He forced a smile. "But that's what they said last week."

Anne tried to reassure him. "I know it seems impossible now. But you'll see. Things turn out in the end." She went into the bedroom to look at the clock. "My God! I'm supposed to meet David right now." She sat down and pulled on a pair of socks, putting the package of cigarettes from the table into her purse. "I'm sorry," she said as she stood, wrapping a wide scarf over her head and around her neck. "Do you want to stay and eat something? I shouldn't be very long."

"No." Ben stood up but didn't move to put on his coat. "Do you think I could have a hug?"

Anne put down her gloves and unwrapped the scarf so that it hung loosely around her neck. "Of course." She put her arms around him, and squeezed him gently, resting her head on his chest. She looked up to ask if he felt better, when he kissed her, his lips brushing the words away. Minutes passed. Anne was not sure what she wanted to happen.

"Mmmmmmm," she said finally, opening her eyes to look at him. He was smiling.

"I've wanted to do that for a long time."

"Me too."

"Come on, you have to get going."

Anne picked up her coat and swung it around her shoulders. Dizzy for a moment, she stood still in the middle of the room, stretching the leather of her gloves over her fingers. Ben stood at the door, his hand on the doorknob.

"You ready?"

"You took me by surprise," she said as she passed him and stepped into the hallway, a smile lingering on her mouth.

They went down the stairs without talking. On the street, big flakes of snow were beginning to fall.

"I'll call you later," said Ben as he bent to kiss her cheek.

As she turned to walk away, Anne wanted to shout with delight, or dance, clacking her boots loudly on the wet pavement. She put her hands in her coat pockets, letting her legs carry her effortlessly down the hill.

David looked up as she opened the door into the warm room. He was standing alone at the bar; around him small groups of people stood gathered in circles. They looked up as he spoke.

"It's about time."

"I know, I know. I'm late. I'm sorry."

"You don't look sorry."

"I'll tell you all about it. Let me get my coat off."

"It better be good."

"Well, Ben dropped by just as I was leaving."

"Not good enough."

Anne nodded, motioning with her hands. "Let me finish." She turned to the bartender, who waited for her order. "It's still happy hour?"

The girl nodded.

"I'll have a scotch. With ice."

David laughed. "What? No beer? This must be big."

Anne lit a cigarette before she leaned toward David. "He kissed me," she announced.

He burst into laughter. "Drinks all around," he said loudly. "This girl has just been kissed."

Laughter rose from the clusters of people that stood nearby.

"Dav-id." Anne kept her eyes in his direction, not wanting to face the room.

"No, really," he lowered his voice, "are we talking a little peck? Or something more substantial?"

Anne shrugged her shoulders. "It was a nice kiss," she said quietly.

"Tongue?"

"Stop it!" She squirmed in her seat. Then she nodded.

"Ooooooh. You should celebrate. You've waited long enough."

"It was worth every moment." She took a long drag of her cigarette and

gazed distantly towards the window.

"I'm serious," David said. "Maybe the wait was worth it."

"You are not serious. You think I'm nuts."

"Okay, okay, I think you're nuts. But maybe you're not."

"Anyways, that's why I was late."

David picked up his small leather purse. "C'mon, let's go smoke a joint. Becky," he called to the bartender, "will you watch our drinks for a minute? We're coming back."

They edged their way sideways through the crowd that was beginning to thicken, until they were out in the cold. David brought out a joint he had already rolled and lit it.

"So this is it, then. True love."

Anne shrugged. She did not want to appear fickle, especially to David, if things did not work out. "I don't know what it is. I just know there's something about Ben that I really like. Who knows? Maybe he's my soul mate."

David took small puffs and held his breath. "Maybe there's no such thing." He passed the joint to her. "So when do I get to meet him?"

"Soon. He couldn't come tonight. What about you? How are things going?"

"Work, work, work. You know, the mortgage, the wife, and the kid. Tina finishes her course next month. Right now I'm stuck at home two nights a week."

"That's not so bad. She's there the rest of the time." Anne looked at him.

"And she's not going out for drinks."

"Good ol' Annie. My moral conscience."

"That's not what I mean. It's just that it's hard not to identify with her. I can imagine what it must be like in her shoes."

"It's easy to be in her shoes. She doesn't have to work all day."

"You stay home for a week. See if you'd call it a vacation."

"At least she doesn't have to deal with the pressure." David threw the filter of the joint on the sidewalk and ground it out with the toe of his boot.

"Boy. You men. You think you're the only ones that have to handle pressure. Day in, day out with a kid who's depending on you for everything? You don't think there's pressure in there somewhere?"

David rolled his eyes. "Let's go. It's cold out here."

Before they went inside, he put a small piece of hash, wrapped in tin foil, into the palm of Anne's hand. She led the way back into the bar. The sudden noise, warmth and cigarette smoke closed in around her unpleasantly. As soon as she got back to their stools, she dug in her purse for her wallet, and passed him twelve dollars.

"Hang on, hang on," he said, "What's the rush?"

"I have a class at eight-thirty," said Anne. "What time is it now?"

"Quarter after seven," said David. "Plenty of time."

"Not really. I'll be back in a second."

Anne slid off the stool and made her way to the washroom. She pushed

opened the door, grateful there was no one inside, went into one of two cubicles and sat, her forehead resting in her hands.

"You're getting too high, Anne," she said out loud. "Get it under control."

A few minutes later, when the shakiness had passed, she washed her hands and examined her face in the mirror. Since she was little, the consensus of grandmothers, aunts and uncles had been that her hair was her best feature. It was her father's hair. Laurie had Loretta's hair, which was thinner, but she'd also inherited the cheekbones. Anne bent over and swung her head up and down twice, something she'd done back in high school when her hair was long to make it look even fuller. Now that it was short, the gesture hardly made a difference. She rearranged her bangs with her fingers, pinched her cheeks to give them colour, and put Vaseline on her lips. She decided she would go eat a hamburger before class started.

"I've got to get going," she said to David when she got back.

"Why? You have a good hour."

"I have to get something to eat." She smiled. "Otherwise I'll fall asleep."

"Shoulda stuck to the beer." David picked up his cigarettes and prepared to move closer to a group of people whose faces Anne recognized although she'd never spoken to them.

"You're right." She started towards the door.

"Take it easy on this Ben guy. He could be interested but he might not be ready for all that soul mate stuff."

Anne turned and smiled at David before she pulled open the heavy wooden door and stepped into the dark night. Snow was collecting in the sidewalk cracks. As she headed down the street, she felt warm, even though it was cold outside. Warm that Ben had kissed her, that even David thought it was a good sign.

Flakes of snow swirled about her in the wind. When she looked up, Anne could hardly make out the Harvey's sign, though it was less than a block away.

FIFTEEN

Anne followed the curve of the road carefully, while Sandy napped, her foot hovering over the brake on downhill stretches. It wasn't long before a line of traffic had filled the rearview. On hills, where the road split into two lanes to allow cars to pass, occupants turned to stare at her. Anne didn't see them.

She was remembering that once, on a road just like this one, her parents had a fight while they were drive somewhere. She couldn't remember what it was about, but she could see her father pulling onto the shoulder, getting out and lying down on the hood of the car. He was on his back with his arms stretched wide across the windshield. Her mother slid over to the driver's seat, started up the engine and pulled slowly back onto the road. Anne remembered her father shouting. "Stop the car, stop the car," his short orange hair flapping against the windshield. Soon she and Laurie were shouting too, and her mother finally steered back onto the shoulder.

"I'm sure we couldn't have been going very fast," her mother would say when, laughing, Anne and Laurie would recount the story. "I never drive very fast."

Sandy opened his eyes. "What's so funny?"

"I was just remembering. When Laurie and I were little, before the boys were born, my parents had an argument in the car. All of a sudden my father slammed on the brakes and jumped out. Then he laid down on the hood." She

burst out laughing. "I guess he thought it was a good way to end the fight."

"That's it?"

"No. Then my mother got behind the wheel and turned the ignition back on. Pretty soon the car was moving, not really fast or anything, but fast enough, I guess, when you're face-up on a windshield."

Sandy stared at her. He was not laughing.

"I always thought my mother did the right thing," she said. "When he got back in the car, it was like his anger had disappeared in the wind."

"I'll bet."

"Maybe you had to be there", said Anne.

Sandy craned his neck to see out the back window. "You've got a pile of cars behind you. Speed up."

"I'm going the limit."

He groaned. "The brake pads will be worn down before we're out of Ontario."

Anne glanced at him and lifted her foot off the brake. Her leg muscles were tight. "Next stop we switch."

Along the treed roadside, gas stations popped suddenly into view as they came around a curve. There weren't many, and Anne didn't see them in time to slow down for a safe turn off the highway. It was late afternoon before she pulled into a small diner. A giant billboard, propped up in an empty field, had

announced: *TRUCK STOP, 2 MILES, HOME COOKED MEALS.*

Sandy surveyed the parking lot as he stretched. "Not many trucks."

The restaurant was empty except for a waitress sitting at the counter, drinking coffee and smoking a cigarette. She rested the cigarette in an ashtray without looking up when she heard the door open.

"Customers, Sam," she called out as she approached them. She extended an arm towards the empty tables. "Take your pick. You here to eat or drink?"

"Eat," said Anne quickly.

When they were seated, holding photocopied menus, she whispered to Sandy. "This might be a good place for grilled cheese sandwiches."

"I'm starving. I think I'm going to have the special."

"Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you. There isn't much you can do to a grilled cheese sandwich."

While they waited for their food, a group of men appeared at the doorway. They sat down, away from the window, before the waitress came back from the kitchen. Sandy nodded in the direction of trucks that had appeared in the parking lot.

"Ah, there are the trucks. Come for a home-made grilled cheese sandwich."

Before Anne could change her order, plates arrived at the table. Her sandwich looked lonely and flat compared to the swirls of mashed potatoes,

marbled with dark gravy, that rose up from Sandy's plate.

"Yous two travelling somewheres?" said the waitress, nodding toward their car in the parking lot.

"Edmonton, I hope." Sandy peeled paper napkins from the dispenser.

"Could we have two beers?"

"Never been that far," she said, "but I was in Winnipeg two years ago August. Nice place. Sure I'll getcha some beers. Anything else?" She glanced at Anne. "Ketchup?" Anne shook her head and the waitress disappeared.

"Looks good," she said, examining Sandy's plate.

"Wanna bite?" He cut into the hamburger steak with the edge of his fork, twirled it in the potatoes, and held the fork for Anne across the table. She chewed quickly when she noticed two beer bottles had arrived.

"Could I have a glass?"

Already across the room, the waitress turned back. She paused. "Sure you can have a glass." She hesitated and turned around again. "Do you want a fork for that sandwich?"

Anne glared at her, then noticed Sandy was shaking with laughter.

"It would be nice if you could look as though you're on my side," she said, picking up half of the sandwich.

In a moment a glass was placed gently beside the beer bottle. "I'm sorry," said the waitress. "I couldn't resist."

"It was funny," Anne said flatly.

"You know, when you're through eating you should take a walk around back. We're right on a lake and it's a pretty place to sit and watch the water. I could even slip you a couple of beers." She looked at Anne. "But no glass." She sighed. "The scenery's kinda romantic."

It occurred to Anne as they walked down the path to the lake, a beer bottle cold in her hand, that this trip was their honeymoon. Out loud, she wondered what it would be like to sleep in a tent.

"It'll be great," said Sandy. "Especially if this weather holds up." He positioned himself on a flat rock close to the water's edge.

"The canvas is so thin," grinned Anne. "Won't the neighbours be able to hear us?"

He reached for her hand. "I'll make sure we don't have any neighbours." He guided her to lean her back against his chest, drawing up his knees around her.

They sat like that, listening to the trees whisper back and forth across the lake, taking swigs of cold beer.

"This is it, you know. Beyond imagination." Anne turned her head and found his neck warm with sun against her nose. She paused there, smelling his skin, enjoying the knowledge that above her, his eyes were still watching the water. She kissed him, sliding her tongue over the roughness of new bristles. It wasn't long before his mouth covered hers, and his hand reached up to hold the back of her head.

The restaurant was empty again. "It's nice down there, ain't it?" said the waitress.

"Very nice." Anne felt drowsy with sun.

They got back in the car, Sandy in the driver's seat, and pulled out onto the two-lane highway. There was not a car in sight.

FOURTEEN

Anne lifted her head and rolled it back slowly, stretching the muscles in her neck.

"I have no patience for stuff like this," she said to Karla, who sat cross-legged on the floor across from her. Karla looked up as Anne stood to light a cigarette.

"It's these little touches that will make our baskets stand out." A small jar on the floor in front of her, Karla balanced a tiny square of checkered gingham over the lid and slipped an elastic around the cap. "It gets easier the more you do it."

Anne looked out the window at the falling snow. "I just can't seem to concentrate on tying ribbons around jar-lids."

Karla returned to her work. She measured out a length of narrow ribbon and wrapped it around the elastic, tied it, and then with one finger holding the ribbon tight, made a small bow. She put the jar on the finished side of the room.

Anne looked over at the bottled assortment of jams, mustards, capers and artichokes that remained to be done. She breathed heavily. "We could be here until midnight. And this order doesn't even have to be ready for two weeks." She took a long drag from her cigarette. "I told Ben I'd go for pizza later."

Karla put down the jar she was working on. "Aw, come on, Annie. You've been busy all week. I can't do this alone, you know."

"It's not as if this kind of thing is my strong suit, anyway. You do five covers to my one. I feel like I'm wasting my time."

"I'd just feel better if we didn't leave everything until the last minute."

Anne sat back down on the floor. She picked up a short fat jar of artichokes and laid a square of cloth on its lid. When she snapped the elastic around it, the edges of gingham sprang loose. She put the jar down and leaned back on her hands. "This is ridiculous."

"When is Ben coming?" asked Karla.

"In an hour." Anne watched as Karla snapped another elastic into place.

"Are you going to Achilles?"

"Yeah. It's cheap. The pizza's good."

"Their vegetarian is the best." Karla smiled. "Remember when we'd go and share a small pizza and order an extra salad? Dinner for two on less than five dollars?"

For a moment, Anne thought of asking Karla to join them, then decided against it, not wanting to share her time with Ben. She nodded, "Yeah, I remember."

Karla put down the jar she was working on. "You're letting Ben take over your life, you know. He gets priority over everything. School, the business, even work."

Anne stretched her legs in front of her. "You know me, Karla -- usually I fall into bed and I'm all involved before I've even found out what a guy is really

like. This time is different." Anne took a puff from her cigarette. "What happens here might change a whole pattern."

"I know," Karla said, picking up another jar, "but if he were really interested he would have made a move by now. You should make him work a little bit to get your attention. My God, all he has to do is pick up the phone and you drop everything."

"I tell him when I'm busy."

Karla frowned. "You're busy now."

Anne stood up. "Look," she said, "I know this is hard on you. This business means more to you than it does to me -- it was your idea from the beginning. You can give baskets all your attention. I've got piles of other stuff to think about."

"This business does mean a lot to me." Karla's voice was quiet.

"I have to get ready," said Anne, turning to leave. "I'll call you tomorrow."

The phone was ringing in her apartment and Anne took the stairs two at a time as soon as she heard it. She opened the door and slid with her socks across the wooden floor.

"Hi!" said Ben.

"Hi."

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I guess. It's this basket stuff. It's driving me around the bend."

"Listen, a good friend of mine is in town. I think I've mentioned him to you. Ross, remember?

"Yeah," said Anne, "I remember."

"It just so happens there's a great band playing down the street and we thought we'd go check it out. Do you want to come?"

"Actually, I'm kind of hungry."

"Oh, yeah, we were going to go out for pizza. I forgot. When Ross came, I guess we kinda got carried away. Anyway, I'd really like for you two to meet. This is the guy I grew up with." He paused. "We could eat first. The show doesn't start until nine."

"I'm not in the mood to rush. I'll eat something here and meet you."

"Okay. How about eight-thirty. Outside the Café Noir?"

"I can't stay late. I have to temp tomorrow."

"Don't worry, you'll be home early."

Anne put down the phone. She didn't feel like eating after all. Instead, she rolled a joint.

Outside the Café Noir, a line-up was just beginning to gather in front of the door. When she didn't see Ben, Anne walked back and forth on the sidewalk, listening to her boots squeak on the hard layer of snow. A few minutes later,

when she looked up again, they were coming towards her. Ben waved and she waved back, moving into the line.

"Jeez, it's freezing tonight," said Ben as he got close enough to hear.

Anne smiled and looked at Ross. He was shorter than Ben, with long hair tied into a pony tail that was the same colour as his light brown jacket. He had freckles.

"So, I finally get to meet you," he said. "Ben's told me a lot about you."

Anne nodded and stamped her feet. "It would be nice if they'd open the doors -- we could all go inside and talk."

"I know, I know, it's cold as hell. But I heard this band is really good. You'll both thank me tomorrow."

Anne was wondering what Ben would choose to tell Ross about her when the large metal doors pushed open and Ben, putting his hand on her back, guided Anne towards them. They climbed a long flight of dark stairs. The band had not begun, but the music was loud. She wished they'd turn it down; she couldn't keep track of what Ross and Ben were saying. Her attention began to wander toward the stage, where figures dressed entirely in black were setting up instruments.

"Testing, testing," one of them whispered into a mike.

Ross noticed her watching the stage. "I think that's the lead guitarist," he said, his mouth close to her ear.

She nodded and leaned toward Ben. "Is it just me or is this music awfully loud?"

"Wait until the band goes on!" He shouted, so close to her ear it hurt.

The dark room filled up quickly with young students. Anne watched mutely as girls with yellow hair filed past the table.

"I'm getting old," she shouted to Ben, nodding at the procession.

He laughed. "I'm glad we got a table. It's getting crowded in here."

For a couple of minutes, the music stopped. Anne listened to the faint buzzing in her ears. She turned to Ross. "Finally, we can hear," she said. "So, how long have you guys known each other?"

Before Ross could answer, a colossal roar of guitar chords filled the room. Spotlights snapped on. The bodies in black clothes turned out to be very young men. One of them was shouting at the audience. Something about war. Anne sat back in her chair. She looked at Ben. He had burst into laughter. Ross was saying something that sounded like 'give them a chance', but she couldn't be sure.

When the song was over, Ben leaned across the table to Ross. "I don't know who you get your information from, but I don't think I can take too much of this."

"Just stay for the first set." Ross looked at Anne. "You can't judge a band by one song."

The next song did not seem as loud as the first. Anne's ears had become accustomed to the volume. She decided to observe the room more as a social study of how things had changed since she was twenty, rather than think about whether it was somewhere she would choose to go. People were dancing now, the

floor jammed tightly with black-clothed bodies jerking violently to the beat of the music. She wondered if all the songs would sound the same. She couldn't hear the words. She wondered if anyone could.

"Can you hear what they're saying?" she asked Ben.

He put his mouth to her ear. "No." Before he moved away, he kissed her, his lips warm against her neck.

Anne smiled, pretending she was not surprised. It was the first time he'd kissed her since the afternoon in her apartment. She wondered if Ross would leave with them. Ben was talking to him now, cupping a hand around his ear. He leaned towards Anne and Ross turned back to the stage.

"Ross is going to take my keys, and I'll sleep over at your place, so we can leave anytime. Just say the word." He drew back and looked at her face.

"Anytime soon would be fine with me," said Anne.

"Now?"

Anne touched Ross's arm to get his attention. "It was nice meeting you. Maybe next time we'll get to talk more."

"You guys don't like them at all, do you?"

Anne smiled.

"I'm going to stay a little longer. They're a little rough, but I think they've got something here."

Ben and Anne collected their coats and started towards the door. They stopped at the top of the stairs to put them on.

"Leaving already?" said the doorman. "The evening's just getting started."

They looked at each other and broke into laughter that carried them down the stairs.

They talked about Ross as they got ready for bed. Anne slipped a nightie over her head, standing uncomfortably with her back to Ben as she undressed.

"He sure has unusual taste in music," she said.

"He always has," said Ben. "In retrospect, I should have known better."

Anne set the alarm clock. She had to be up at seven. She began to think of what she could wear. She knew the office because she'd worked there a couple of times before. Her outfit didn't have to be anything special. Still, she needed something presentable.

"Good night," said Ben, turning to kiss her.

Anne had gotten used to sleeping with Ben, to friendly good night kisses. It took her a moment to realize that this kiss was different. She'd always thought they would talk about making love first, or that she'd just know when something special was going to happen. Instinctively, she put her hand up to the side of his face. His legs were warm against hers. Before long, the nightie had twisted up around her neck. She rolled and Ben rolled with her, and she sat up to lift it over her head. His face shone in the moonlight that streamed through the window.

"You feel so good," he was saying.

Anne looked down at her white skin, her breasts exposed in the light. She'd always enjoyed sex, but this was different. She wanted to return to the darkness of the covers.

"I'm so scared," she said.

"Of what?"

He drew her to him and covered her lips with his mouth.

"Why did you say you were scared?" said Ben later, his head beside hers on the pillow.

"I don't know," said Anne. "For a moment it felt like I didn't know you at all."

He looked away from her. Then he nodded understanding. "You don't have to worry about AIDS, I've been tested."

Anne threw back the covers. "That's not exactly what I meant." Once out of bed, she reached up to the hook on the back of the bedroom door, fumbling as she tried to disentangle her robe from the assortment of clothes that hung there. Finally, she got it down and wrapped it around her body gratefully. "Do you want some orange juice?"

"Sure."

Anne went to the kitchen and opened the fridge door, squinting into the brightness. There was no orange juice. In fact, there was hardly anything on the

shelves. A can of tomato soup with a tin foil cover, a slice of butter, two heels of bread in a plastic bag. She closed the fridge.

"I'm out of juice. How about some water?"

"Sounds good."

Ben sat up in bed when she came back into the room. She passed him the cold glass, took off her robe, and slid under the sheets beside him as he drank. He leaned over her to put the glass on the table beside the bed.

"So, what do you want to know about me?"

"I don't have specific questions," said Anne. "It'll take a little bit of time, that's all. This is all kind of new." She wished she could explain, even to herself, how this night would change everything.

Ben kissed her good night and settled into the covers. Anne fell asleep a long while later, on her back.

When the alarm went off, she reached over and pressed the snooze button. She had curled up on her side during the night, away from Ben. He was nestled against her back, an arm around her waist. She thought sleepily that she could stay there a long time. But she knew she had to get up at the next sound of the alarm or she'd be late. She drifted back to sleep.

The radio blared again. This time Ben patted her gently.

"Time to get up." He climbed over her under the covers and sat on the edge of the bed before she had pushed the button. "I've got to get going, too."

Ross will wake up and go out and I won't have any keys." As he spoke, Ben stood and started pulling on his pants. He turned towards her as he was buckling his belt.

"He's probably sleeping," said Anne, still under the covers.

"No, he's probably starving and there's nothing to eat. He'll go out as soon as he wakes up." Ben smiled at her before going to the bathroom. He closed the door.

Anne got up and put on her robe, pulling the sash tightly around her waist. It irritated her that he had closed the bathroom door. At least she knew she had coffee. In the kitchen, she filled the kettle, setting two cups on the counter. Ben came out of the bathroom as she was spooning coffee into the filter.

"Don't make any for me," said Ben. "I've gotta go." He kissed her cheek. "I'll call you tonight."

Before she had time to speak, he was putting on his coat. Anne put down the coffee scoop, and watched from the kitchen doorway. He turned around before leaving the apartment.

"Have a good day at work."

She arrived at the door as it was closing behind him and pulled it open.

"I'll make you a bet he's still asleep."

"I'll tell you tonight," said Ben as he disappeared down the stairs.

Anne slammed the door shut. She went over to the table and opened her journal. *I have to be at work in an hour, she wrote. And I am so fucking mad I can hardly breathe.*

SEVENTEEN

After they'd been in Edmonton for a couple of weeks, Anne and Sandy rented a small house. At first, Anne spent her days going to school and her evenings puttering around the house making curtains. She covered only the bottom halves of the windows because she loved looking at the western sky that filled the top. Later she worked as a receptionist at a bank downtown, where she spent long afternoons gazing at the sky through the plate glass window across from her desk, waiting impatiently for the day to be over so she could go home and cut the grass, pot plants, or weed the garden.

Anne had started her job before Sandy found his. She'd decided to quit school after his first interview. He'd been gone over three hours that day for a job he really wanted and she met him at the door as soon as she heard the car pull in.

"So? How did it go?"

"I couldn't find the place. I drove around and around. The streets are sure screwed up down there."

The expectations filling Anne's chest dissolved into queasy disappointment.

"Did you find it eventually?"

"After a while it was too late anyway, so I just came home."

Anne couldn't pinpoint what had disturbed her most; that he hadn't phoned and asked for directions, or that he hadn't kept on looking until he found

it, for his own satisfaction. She didn't say anything. She knew he was already discouraged and she didn't want to make him feel worse. She also knew that she could find a job as a secretary quickly. If she worked, they'd have enough money to pay the rent. Anne continued going to classes, but her heart wasn't in it. By the time she told Sandy she was thinking of quitting, she'd already decided.

"I'm too distracted right now to concentrate," she told him. "Maybe next year, when we're a little more settled."

"Why not finish this term?" he suggested.

Anne knew that if she stayed she'd have to pay tuition fees. She accepted the offer from the bank because they said there was room for advancement. Soon after, Sandy found work at the refinery. By then she had settled comfortably into her paycheck.

Sandy was on the afternoon shift. As fall settled, there was less to do around the house. The garden was finished for the year. Anne turned her attention inside. She accepted all invitations from the people at work and, when it was her turn to entertain, she enjoyed it when they noticed what she'd done to a room. Sometimes, before going to bed, she would spend a good hour, moving from room to room in the house, smoking, admiring what looked just right, examining what should be rearranged.

They'd lived in the house for almost a year when Anne began a new project. She recorded calories at the end of the day, adding up the total of everything she ate. She wanted to lose the fifteen pounds she'd put on since the

wedding. Two weeks before, on her way to the store, the welcome sight of dry pavement after a long Edmonton winter had overwhelmed her with a sudden energy. And so, feet light in a pair of rubber-soled ballet slippers, she'd broken into a run. She ran past the store, past anywhere she'd ever walked before. She ran until she couldn't, until she was panting, until a light layer of sweat had formed under her bangs in the noon-day sun. Now she ran every day.

It was April. Spring came early to Edmonton, and this was going to be their second summer in the house. Anne's father was flying down on business for a week. Anne looked forward to his visit. She wanted him to see that everything was fine, even though things weren't the way she'd planned.

As she smoothed out the bedspread in the guest room, getting it ready, she remembered a sunny day before Sandy started working. They had spent the whole day in bed, legs intertwined, slipping in and out of sleep, the afternoon sun hot on damp sheets. Anne sat down on the corner of the made bed, and leaned back, staring out at the blue sky above the demi curtains. She felt like a different person now -- maybe more grown up. Her attention shifted to the curtains. They were so pleasing and they had cost nothing. A heavy orange and brown material, found in one of the closets, stretched into smart, tight pleats between the two curtain rods. Anne liked being able to transform a room, especially with something she had made.

That evening she put finishing touches on the house, which was already immaculate, while she watered the plants. Streaks of orange and purple sky

above the curtains were beginning to darken; it was almost nine. Sandy would get home around midnight. Anne lit a cigarette, poured herself a glass of wine, and opened the front door to let in a breeze. She took a pen and a notepad of paper down from the top of the fridge and totalled up the calories she'd eaten that day. She'd already lost five pounds.

By the time Sandy got home, she was asleep. She wakened only slightly when she heard him climb the old wooden stairs to the attic. The familiar smell of oil filled the bedroom as he peeled off layers of denim work clothes. Anne rolled against him when he got into bed, his cool skin still part of the night outside.

"It's not even dark yet," he said, lying on his back, legs crossed. "The stars are only starting to come out."

Anne smiled without opening her eyes. She knew that Sandy liked watching the sky out at refinery row on the edge of the city. Before she bought her own car, when they still shared the Plymouth, she would get scared sometimes waiting for him at the plant, listening to the gas flames roar out of the stacks into the pitch-black sky. She'd feel relieved when she could see him coming towards the car, headlights illuminating his body as it emerged from the endless darkness of the refinery grounds.

After work the next day, Anne changed into a pair of shorts. The weather was mild, Sandy had the day off, and they were going to have a barbeque. Everything was perfect for her father's visit. While the charcoal flames died down, she and Sandy sat at the kitchen table, beside the open back door, each with a glass of beer and a section of the newspaper. Anne was about to suggest they go ahead and eat when they heard a car in the driveway. She ran outside with bare feet, slowing down to step carefully on the gravel.

"Hey! How's my girl?" Gil hugged her, lifting her feet off the cold ground. When he put her down, he stood back to look at her. "You're looking good, kid, have you lost a little weight?"

"I guess so," said Anne. "I've been dieting anyway. You're looking pretty good yourself." She patted his large belly gently as his arm went around her shoulders. Sandy was on the patio when they got to the back of the house, scraping the barbeque grill with a wire brush. He'd brought the plate of hamburger patties outside.

"Hiya, Sandy." Gil reached out his free arm to shake Sandy's hand. "Sure is early for a barbeque. Back east we're still waiting for the snow to melt."

"Yeah, I know," Sandy said. He turned to place the patties on the grill. "It's great, eh?"

Anne took her father's hand. "Come on, I'll show you the house. Would you like a beer?"

"I'd love a beer!"

Gil walked through to the living room as Anne opened the fridge. "It's a cute place," he said.

"Doesn't it make you think of a gingerbread house?" said Anne, pleased. "I think it's the shape that does that -- the peaked roof." She brought him a bottle of beer and a glass.

"I don't need a glass, sweetheart."

Anne laughed. "I know, I know, we drink out of the bottle too, but I still offer. Actually, with the diet, I find a glass slows me down a bit."

Gil put his arm around her neck. "You're looking healthy, Annie. Are you happy?"

"Yeah. We're starting to really get settled."

"And how about the job. How's it going?"

"Oh, it's okay. You know. It's a job. But it's okay for now. Come on, I'll show you where you're sleeping." Anne led him into the guest room off the living room. "The king-size bed is even in here. We couldn't fit it up the stairs." She laughed.

"It looks lovely, darling. But I have to be close to everything at the hotel downtown. Maybe I'll spend a night on the week-end before heading back. C'mon, show me the rest." He turned to leave the room.

"Do you like the curtains?" asked Anne. "I made them."

"The place looks great," Gil said from the living room.

Anne turned to look at them herself, then left the guest room, where the

last of the day's sun streamed onto the bed. They went back through the kitchen and she showed her father the tiny bathroom and the hallway that led to the attic stairs. He looked around the bedroom from the steps, unable to stand under the sharply sloped ceiling. Anne led the way back downstairs, and Gil rested a hand on the step behind him, as he ducked under the storage space that jutted out above the staircase.

"We're both so much shorter," Anne said. "I never noticed how small it is up there."

"It's a great little house," said Gil. "You'd never find something like this downtown back east."

"I know. There's so much land here. Sometimes I feel like a pioneer."

In the kitchen, Anne opened a drawer and took out cutlery to set the table. "I think the hamburgers are almost ready. Are you hungry?"

"I could eat a burger."

"I made a nice salad, too. It's what I eat mostly these days. Anne took a wooden salad bowl from the fridge and placed it on the table. Gil sat down.

"How about school, Annie? Are you taking night courses?"

"Not for now. I decided to take a break and just live for awhile. It's so nice to get up on a Saturday morning and read the newspaper." Anne poured oil and vinegar into a glass jar, then opened a cupboard to get dry mustard and three small salad bowls, bringing them back to the table. "I'm even starting to cook!" she announced, scooping mustard into a small measuring spoon and tapping the

powder into the jar. "I put mac-tac on all the shelves in the cupboards...I made these curtains, too." She pointed in the direction of the yellow and white checkered cotton that framed the kitchen window. "I'm becoming quite domestic," she whispered. "But don't tell Sandy."

"Don't tell me what?" Sandy appeared at the doorway, the plate of cooked patties in one hand, a spatula in the other.

"That I've become a bit of a Suzy Homemaker," laughed Anne. She turned to her father. "I'm kind of liking it. It's a change."

Sandy put the plate on the table. "The buns are toasting. They'll be ready in a minute." He went back outside.

Gil lit a cigarette. "So what do you kids want for yourselves down the road?"

"We make that up day by day. I'm looking for a better job. They promised they'd promote me when I started at the bank, but it's not happening. The stuff I do now is pretty dull. Sandy's trying to get on the regular daytime shift." She lowered her voice. "Then we might get to see each other once in a while." She shook the salad dressing, pausing to open the jar and taste the liquid with her finger. "We have some good friends. Some old friends who've moved here from Montreal, some new ones from work. Things are starting to fall into place."

"Will you go back to school one day? You're too smart not to, you know."

"Maybe. I suppose it depends how far I can get without it." Sandy had

come in with the buns.

"How's the job going, Sandy?" asked Gil as he sat down at the table.

"So-so. I get to work on my own a lot because I'm on afternoons -- four to eleven. That part is good. It means I can draw when the work's done."

"Anne tells me you'll be working days soon. I guess shiftwork is hard for a body to get used to."

"I'm used to it. There are too many bosses around on the day shift, anyway. It would drive me nuts to be there nine to five." He looked at Anne. "Not only that -- you have to be there ten years before before they even think about putting you on days."

Anne put down her fork. "I thought the shift work was only temporary. Just to get some experience."

"That's what I thought too, at the beginning. Now I'm starting to like it. There's only two of us on at a time, and it's usually a buddy. None of the bosses stay after five."

Anne glanced at her father. She and Sandy had not discussed this before.

"How about holidays? Are you taking a vacation this summer?"

Anne was relieved to change the subject. "Not this year," she said, taking a mouthful of salad. "Not until we have some money saved, anyway. Paris in the springtime is still the dream." She touched Sandy's elbow. "Imagine the art galleries. You could spend a whole month just looking at famous paintings."

Sandy laughed. "The only time I've been to a gallery in my life was in

high school -- on a field trip. I hate them. Everybody in a line-up, stopping to look at paintings for just the right amount of time. Pretending they know what's good when a lot of it is just garbage." His tone softened when he looked at Anne. "Don't worry, you can still go. That way we won't need as much money."

"What do you want more than anything, Sandy?" asked Gil. "To make a living with your art?"

Anne already knew his answer to the art question. She was still absorbing the fact that he had no intention of getting on the day shift or going to Europe.

"No decent artist ever sold his stuff in his own lifetime. They all die destitute and then their work sells for thousands of dollars two hundred years after they're dead." He took a long drink of beer. "I'll consider myself lucky if I can finish something I really like."

"What about the daffodils in water colours?" asked Anne. "How can you not like them." She turned to her father. "The colours are perfect. So fragile, yet so alive!"

"Yeah, they were okay. But that was almost five years ago, Annie." Sandy turned to her father. "I've moved away from pastels. I'm into darker lines now. More definition."

"It's depressing," she said quietly.

"That's it, part of life is depressing," he explained. "There's a lot out there that has to be expressed. And no one's doing it anymore." He stood and took his empty plate to the sink. "Someone has to pick up where Van Gogh left off."

Forcing a laugh, Anne responded with what had become a stock answer to this observation.

"Just don't send me your ear in a package."

Sandy excused himself shortly after dinner to go to bed. He said it was always hard getting back into the swing of things when he had time off. Anne and Gil sat across from each other in the living room as dusk darkened the window. They were silent a long time, Anne watching her father as he inhaled cigarette smoke, then blew it out in long, drawn-out breaths.

"You may prove me wrong, sweetheart, but I don't think you can build a life around playing house. Your mother and I tried. Sooner or later you need something more."

Anne stood to turn on a lamp. She sat back down, folding one leg underneath her and taking a sip of brandy. "There were other factors involved with you and Mummy." She put her glass back on the coffee table.

"Like what?"

"Like Donna-Mae. Or don't you think that had anything to do with it?"

"C'mon, honey. Things had started to go wrong long before Donna-Mae came into the picture. Besides. We were just friends."

Anne had discussed this before with her father. He always said the same thing. Bottom line was that Donna-Mae wasn't an issue. Only Loretta thought so. Anne decided to drop the subject. "Anyways, we're young, we've got lots of

time to figure out what we want to do."

Gil stretched in his chair and yawned. "It's getting late and I've got an early morning tomorrow." He looked outside. "It doesn't look as late as it is. That long sun can be deceiving."

Anne stood with him and he put his arm around her, pulling her towards his chest. "I love you, kid. It's great to be able to spend some time with you."

"I love you, too."

Together they walked to the back door. On the gravel, Anne stood on one foot and then the other as he started the car. She waved at the headlights until they backed onto the street, then went inside.

She took down the pad of paper from the top of the fridge. Even with the beer and the brandy, her total for the day was only 1100 calories. Tomorrow she would run again. Anne put down the pen and watched the sun slip behind rooftops on the other side of the street. Maybe Donna-Mae and her father had just been friends after all and her mother had it wrong. Anne experienced the same sensation she'd felt the day that she and Sandy drove by the cheese factory. What if she'd imagined the whole thing, had only felt as though she'd been there?

EIGHTEEN

Annie walked quickly by the high school. It was the last period of the day and she hoped that no one from her Grade 10 history class would happen to look out the window and see her on the street. When she had passed the building, she slowed her pace. She joined Sandy in the middle of the football field.

"I'll die if someone saw me," she said, letting her books drop to the ground.

"Nah," said Sandy. "Besides, they expect it this time of year. No one wants to be inside."

"I've never skipped a class like this. Once I took the day off, but we had somewhere to go."

"I do it all the time."

"Do you really hate school that much?"

"Nah. Just Mosley's class. I don't care how much he knows about history, the guy's a bore."

Annie looked towards the windows. "Are you sure no one can see from this angle?"

He leaned back on his elbows. "To begin with, Mosley would never look out a window. It wouldn't occur to him. Anyone else looks out, they'll think we have a spare."

The air was sweet with the smell of warm grass. Sandy had closed his eyes to the sunlight. He was wearing light blue pants, a light blue shirt and a yellow

windbreaker. He was the only boy Annie knew who wore anything but blue jeans when the school relaxed uniform rules at the beginning of June. He was in two of her classes and she always sat beside him, but this was the first time she'd been with him outside of school. He lived far away. He took the school bus every morning.

"You wouldn't have a cigarette, would you?" he said, opening his eyes.

Anne had let her gaze settle on his face. She looked away quickly, unzipping her purse and passing him a package of Belvedere.

"Great. You want one too?"

Annie nodded. Sandy lit two cigarettes at once. He sat up and passed her one. "Is it okay if I put my head in your lap. Kinda like a pillow."

"I don't think so." Suddenly she had second thoughts.

"Suit yourself. The only way to enjoy this weather though is to lie back and watch the clouds drift by."

Annie looked up, remembering when she and Laurie, in the backyard at GrandEm's, would peek between their fingers at the bright sky and name the shapes of clouds.

"Do you see the duck?"

He squinted at the sun. "Where?"

She pointed, lining her arm up with his view, to a cloud with a beak, webbed feet already disintegrating, changing form.

"Yeah. Neat." He scanned the sky. "How 'bout that guy's face?"

Annie followed his gaze. "Is it a side view?"

"No, he's looking at us dead on. See? He's got a beard. And hardly any teeth."

"Yeah, I see it." Annie turned back to him, smiling. "I haven't done this since I was little."

Sandy shrugged. "I've never done it. I just like watching them move."

Annie sat, leaning on one arm. When she put out her cigarette, she stretched her legs in front of her, and leaned back on both arms. He rested his head in her lap. She looked down at him. His face was so close.

"This is comfortable," he said. He rolled his head to look at her. "Are you comfortable?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Annie found herself watching his face more than the sky. When he said something, she noticed how his nose moved as he spoke, how his lips were quick to curve into a smile. She began to relax. She lowered her back to the ground. He shifted his head onto her stomach and she bent her knees.

"Much better," he said. "Man, I can't wait until school's over and I can spend all day looking at the sky."

Annie placed her hands under the back of her head. She gazed at the sky. She had kissed boys before, but she'd never felt as comfortable with a boy as she did right then, with the weight of Sandy's head pressing into her stomach.

When the bell rang, Annie realized she had fallen asleep. Sandy was

sitting up, his arm resting on his knee, holding a cigarette. She stretched her arms above her head.

"I feel so lazy," she said.

"My mother calls it spring fever." He stood and offered her his hand.

"C'mon, the buses are lining up."

Annie got up and brushed the back of her pants.

"Are there grass stains?" she asked, twisting around to try and see for herself.

"No -- you're clean."

They walked towards the buses. Students were beginning to spill out of the doors. By the time they arrived in the parking lot, she and Sandy were surrounded. No one would look out a window and think they didn't blend in. Annie decided not to go back to her locker.

"This is my bus," said Sandy, stopping. He had one arm around his books, the other inside the pocket of his windbreaker. "We'll do that again sometime, Annie. See you tomorrow."

Her family had moved into the big old house on the corner lot across the street from the school. When she opened the front door, the buses were beginning to pull onto the street. Inside, the house was cool and when she closed

the door the sound of bus engines was replaced by voices on the TV. She took her books upstairs to her bedroom and looked out the window. There was still a line of buses moving out of the parking lot. Sandy's bus hadn't left. She looked at herself in the large mirror over the dresser that she and Laurie shared, pleased that her hair looked just right, that she had ironed her blouse that morning. She was having a pretty day. Secretly Annie believed that given time the roundness of her face would disappear, leaving behind the fine lines of her mother's cheekbones. She pulled her hair behind her neck, trying to imagine the grown-up face, then looked out the window again. This time she saw her father. He was coming up the walk, still wearing his jacket. Usually he carried it, and loosened his tie as soon as he left the office. Annie froze when she turned back to the mirror. Today was his appointment at the school to talk with her teachers. What if he had seen her lying out on the football field?

"Anne!"

She ran to the top of the stairs. "I'm upstairs, Daddy."

"Get down here!"

Annie straightened her posture as she entered the living room. He was pacing back and forth, his heavy shoes landing loudly on the hardwood floor.

"Yes?"

"I just met your math teacher," he seethed. "What's this I hear about you handing in tests with a look on your face that says 'Correct it, honey'?"

Annie looked at him, stunned.

"I don't know."

"Miss Matthews said your homework assignments are never finished, that you talk to friends in class, and then you have the cheek to toss a paper on her desk as if you couldn't give a damn."

"No I don't."

"The hell you don't! I've seen that look." He turned to pace another stretch.

"Anne doesn't pay attention, she talks to her friends, she doesn't do her homework...."

"That's not true! She spends all her time with the group that knows the answers. Sure I talk to my friends -- we don't know what's going on."

Gil stopped in his tracks. He turned to Annie and pointed his finger at her. "Look, young lady, you keep your mouth shut until I've finished. Do you understand?"

Annie nodded.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Yes."

Laurie appeared at the doorway and stared into the living room.

"This is none of your business," said Gil. "Start setting the table for dinner." He turned back to Annie. "I also spoke to your economics teacher. He did you the service of saying you were a very polite young lady. What makes him pick you out as such a favourite?"

Annie's eyes widened. "I like his class."

Gil's voice started out low. "You don't listen whenever you choose to. You are there to learn something. You listen to all of it. Do I make myself clear?"

Usually when her father got this mad, Annie had done something wrong -- like stay out too late, or go somewhere he told her not to. It would have made more sense if he'd seen her in the football field. She sat down on the sofa to explain.

"I listen to Miss Matthews when she's talking. I'm polite. If she sees a look on my face when I hand in tests, it's because I know I'm not going to get a good mark. But I'm passing. A lot of the kids in that class are failing."

"Don't talk back to me!" Laurie appeared again at the doorway. Anne signalled to her silently that everything was okay. Her father pointed his finger at her as he spoke. "I know what Miss Matthews is talking about. It's an attitude. You and your friends walk around this town like you own the place."

Annie leaned away from the accusing finger. She looked into his eyes and said nothing. He resumed his pacing.

"Miss Matthews is going to register you in summer school. You'll spend evenings studying. Is that clear?"

Annie couldn't believe it. She hated Miss Matthews. "But I've passed the course!"

They heard the front door push open and Loretta came in. She stood

behind Laurie, looking into the living room, Calvin and Jeff leaning on the doorframe.

"What's going on here?"

"I just spent half an hour listening to the cheeky behaviour your daughter displays in math class. Give me a cigarette."

Loretta slid a cigarette from her package and passed it to him.

"Just stop shouting. I can't stand it."

"She has to smarten up, Loretta. She's only got one year left." He turned to Annie. "You sure as hell won't saunter into university with that smirk on your face."

"I don't have a smirk on my face!"

"Gil, you're angry," said Loretta. "Sit down."

"You're fucking right! Listening to that bitch go on and on. And I know what she's talking about. I have to look at it every day."

Loretta sighed and began to leave the room. "C'mon Annie, let's get some dinner on the table."

"You stay right where you are, young lady. I'm not finished."

"Annie, you go start dinner," said Loretta firmly. "Take the boys with you."

Anne shepherded her brothers through the hallway. In the kitchen she and Laurie listened to their parents arguing.

"Here we go again," said Laurie. "Why don't you just do some homework once and awhile?"

"Yeah, and stay up all night until I get it right when I don't understand something."

Laurie shot her a glance. "At least I get good marks."

"It doesn't matter what I do. He'll always find something to be mad about."

They stopped talking when they heard their father's footsteps coming towards the kitchen. Annie's mouth opened before she knew what she was going to say.

"Why don't you just grow up?"

Gil stopped in his tracks. He grabbed the front of her shirt in his fist and lifted her up against the wall. The look on his face had changed. It was like watching a blue flame turn white.

"I gotta get out of here." He put her down and left the room. Loretta came into the kitchen and started taking plates down from the cupboard as the front door slammed shut.

The next day at school Annie noticed Sandy standing alone across from her locker. He approached her as the hall began to empty. The bell for first class sounded.

"Hi!"

"Hi. I've got to hurry or I'm going to be late."

"What do you have now?"

"Math with Matthews. My favourite." Annie grimaced. She snapped the lock shut then pulled on it to make sure it had held.

"I've got a spare. I'll walk you down."

"Well you'll have to run 'cuz I've got about a minute to get there." Annie started quickly down the hall, Sandy at her side. "Do you know what she told my father yesterday?"

"It wouldn't surprise me. I had her for two years in a row."

"She said I handed in a test with a 'correct it, honey' look on my face."

Annie flicked her wrist in Sandy's direction, the imaginary paper fluttering out of her hand. "The woman's a lunatic."

"It's a beautiful day outside. Why don't you skip class?"

Annie paused when the second bell sounded. She would need a pink slip from the office to get into class. She turned to Sandy. "Which door is best?"

He took her by the hand and led her down the main staircase.

"We can't go out that way," she whispered. "We'll end up right beside the office."

"They won't see us. They're too busy writing out late slips."

At the door, Sandy pushed down quietly on the metal bar that released the latch. He let go of her hand as they stepped into the sunlight.

"C'mon," he said, leading the way to the football field.

She held her books close to her chest as they walked through the parking

lot, past the windows of the school. When they'd made it to the goal post, out of view, she opened her purse, and offered him a cigarette.

"How often do you do this?"

"Not often." He smiled. "Until it gets nice outside."

Annie tilted her face towards the sun and closed her eyes. "It is nice." She opened her eyes and looked around quickly. "My father would kill me."

"Yeah, my mother would too. But they'll never know."

"What about your father? Isn't he worse?"

"Aw, he comes around. But he doesn't live with us anymore."

"They're divorced?"

"Soon to be, I suppose." Sandy didn't look at her. He was looking for something at the other end of the field.

"Sometimes I think my parents would be better off divorced. The fight so much."

"I hear your father spends a lot of time over at Dana Dorendale's house."

"He knows his mother." Annie looked at him. "They're both in the Amateur Orchestra Society. She plays the oboe."

"I have it on good authority that she plays a lot more than that."

"What are you trying to say, Sandy?"

"Stop sounding so innocent, Annie. Sometimes people have affairs."

"Well, they're not having an affair. I see them when I go over to Dana's for parties. They're friends, that's all."

"Maybe."

Anne laid back on the grass, shading her eyes with her hands, looking up at the sky. "People talk. Even if they don't know what they're talking about."

He stretched out his legs and leaned back. "I didn't believe my father was having an affair. Neither did my mother for a while." Sandy continued, his head resting on Anne's stomach, his voice echoing through her body. "It's not that Mrs. Dorendale is evil or anything. She probably just gets tired of being alone."

Anne said nothing. The sky had filled with a picture of Dana Dorendale's living room. Any parties Dana had were in the basement, but she could see into the living room when she came upstairs to the bathroom. It was true, her father was there a lot. But he wasn't doing anything. There were always other people around. Anne closed her eyes. The sun was so warm.

"I don't feel like going back inside. Let's skip the day."

Sandy laughed. "Your call. I'm easy."

"You know I think you're wrong," said Annie after a long silence. "My father would never do anything like that."

NINETEEN

Anne swung open the door to her apartment. Her hair was dripping. The snow had turned to rain, and outside the sidewalks were deep in gritty brown slush. Her leather boots were soaked through and they clung to her wet socks as she tried to take them off. She had spent the last two hours going from cheese shops to delicatessans, looking for special items she and Karla could use to fill two high-priced Christmas orders that had come in at the last minute. Finally, the sock let go of her foot, unable to leave the wet hug of the boot and Anne nearly lost her balance. The phone rang. She clumped across the hardwood floor, one foot bare, one squishing water into beads the size of the tread marks on her boot.

"Did you think of something?"

"Karla, I haven't even got my boots off." As she sat, Anne tugged on the other boot. "I found tins of escargots that will look very nice with all the other stuff."

"Oh, that's a good idea. How big are they?"

"They're little. They look very special. And their price was right on budget." With a grunt Anne released her other foot.

Karla's tone changed. "They're not really finger food though, are they? Everything else is."

Anne said nothing.

"Anne, are you still there?"

"The stores are closed. I couldn't exchange this stuff even if I wanted to."

Karla sighed. "Oh. Ben's here. He rang upstairs when you weren't home."

"Why didn't you say so? Tell him to come down. I'm just going to dry off and then I'll bring all this stuff up."

"Do you think escargots are okay?"

"Karla, it's Saturday. These baskets are for Monday. Christmas is on Thursday and we still have smaller orders to put together. You decide." Anne hung up the phone before Karla could say anything. She went to the bathroom and wrapped her hair in a towel, then took out the tins of escargots and lined them up on the table, trying to imagine them settled in against the dark greens and reds of the Christmas tissue paper. The phone rang again.

"I'm sorry. I had to hang up. I was dripping on the floor."

"Hiya, kid. Did I get you out of the shower?"

"Daddy. Hi. No. I mean, I thought you were Karla."

"Who's Karla?"

"She's the one I'm doing the baskets with."

"So how's it going, kid. Is the business booming? Is school all over?"

"Classes are over but I still have a term paper left to finish."

"Are you happy?"

"Yeah, I guess. It's just that there's so much to do with the baskets. Plus I'm working at an office for Christmas break. It will all be over soon."

"How's your love life?"

Anne's voice softened. "Actually, he should be coming over any minute."

"Is he the same one you told me about in the fall?"

"Yeah. His name's Ben."

"What does Ben do for a living?"

"He's a student like me."

"Do you love him?"

"I think so. But we're taking things really slow. I guess I'm finally growing up. I want to know more before I'm in over my head."

"What are you doing for Christmas?"

"He's going home to see his parents. What about you? How's Rita?"

As her father launched into stories about getting the house ready for the holidays, Anne watched her apartment door open. Ben was holding a brown paper bag, twisted around the neck of a familiar-shaped bottle. She motioned him to sit down.

He exhaled heavily and took off his boots. He crossed the room and sat down without looking up at her, resting the bag in his lap.

"No chance of you making it here this year, eh kid?"

"No," said Anne. "I have to work. I don't have any money anyways."

"Will you be at your mother's on Christmas day?"

"Yup. Jeffrey and Calvin will be there, too. A reunion of sorts. Laurie has papers to mark. She can't get away from the university until the end of January."

"I'll call you then. Take it easy, kid. I love you."

"I love you, too." Anne put down the phone. "That was my father," she explained.

Ben said nothing. His eyes were dark, his face unmoving, when he looked at her.

Anne removed the towel from her head. "I have to get this stuff up to Karla."

"What was the idea of letting me sit up there for so long?"

Anne looked up from placing the escargot tins into a bag. "I told Karla to tell you to come down."

"Well she said you'd be right up."

"When my father called I lost track of time. I'm sorry. But I really thought you were on your way down."

"I'd already been waiting for over an hour."

"That must have been while I was trudging around in the slush trying to find something special to put into two new orders we got today."

"Believe me, I heard all about it."

"Look, I got in two hours ago, found out we had a crisis, spent an hour wet and miserable, only to be told that escargots are not finger food. You said you would phone -- I had no idea you were coming over -- and so you got caught in the crossfire. I'm sorry."

"I think you need some time to yourself."

"No. You're here. And I'm glad to see you. Just give me a couple of minutes to get my head on."

"Anne, I'm tired too. I thought we might spend a quiet evening, maybe have a drink or two, and watch some T.V. But I'm just not in the mood for all this basket bullshit." Ben stood up. He had not taken off his jacket.

Anne put down the bag of escargots.

"Do you think I could have a hug?"

He put his arms around her and she smelled his shaving lotion, the fresh detergent smell of his shirt.

"I gotta go," he whispered.

She held him tight. "No, don't." It wasn't her voice that she heard. It was a whining plea. Tears filled her eyes, her throat was tight. Ben was wriggling out of her grasp.

"I'll call you tomorrow," he said, letting himself out of the apartment. Anne went to the phone.

"Why didn't you tell him to come down?"

"I thought you said you were coming up. Besides, it's good for him to wait for you for once."

"Damn you, Karla. That's not for you to decide."

Karla paused. "I took crackers and caviar out of another basket. You don't have to worry about taking the escargots back. I'll do it on Monday."

"To be honest with you, I don't care what you do with the baskets. Ben

just left and I'm getting into a bath." This time Anne said good-bye before she hung up the phone.

While water filled the tub, she rolled a joint. Soon, she was back in control. She could hardly remember the sound of the voice that had begged Ben to stay. Or the sensation of her face slipping into an unfamiliar expression as he backed away from her. Anne stayed in the tub a long while. Then she enveloped herself in the bathrobe Laurie had sent her for Christmas. She was faint from the hot water, drained. She laid down on the bed without turning down the blankets, and fell into a numb sleep, any excess moisture absorbed by the warm thick terry towel of the robe.

TWENTY

The owner sold the gingerbread house in June. Anne and Sandy decided to move in with Luke and Lucy, friends of Sandy's from back east. They were older; they'd lived in Edmonton for nearly four years. Anne liked Lucy's style of decorating and, pooling their resources, they could afford to rent a large farmhouse outside Edmonton's city limits. It meant that Anne had a long drive to get to her new job at the chemical company, but this disadvantage was easily offset by the view from the kitchen. Outside the window was a verandah that ran the length of the house, where she could sit and watch the sun go down. Nothing obstructed the sky; a farmer's field stretched from the yard out to the horizon.

Sandy was working a regular day shift. He filled orders and counted inventory at a furniture warehouse. The money wasn't great, and Anne knew he wasn't crazy about his boss, but she tried to make up for it by planning things together in the evening.

One night, when they were sitting at the kitchen table after dinner, Lucy suggested they have a party to mark the end of summer.

"I have a friend who knows how to roast a pig in the ground. Apparently it's really easy. You just wrap it up in wet newspaper, throw it on the coals, and bury it for twelve hours."

"Sounds simple," said Sandy. "Whatever happened to potato chips and beer." He took his plate to the sink and turned on the water.

Lucy rolled her eyes. "You're always so positive." She turned to Anne and Luke. "What do you think?"

"Sounds fun," said Anne. "But we'd have to do a lot of work. "The grass out there is up to my knees. And it would probably be a good idea to finish painting the kitchen before the cold weather sets in."

Luke nodded and took a swig of beer from his bottle. He was an attractive man. Anne liked the firmness in his jaw. "We could do it," he said.

"How many people?" asked Anne.

Lucy stood up to get a piece of paper.

"Why not everyone we know?" said Sandy, sitting back down at the table.

Lucy's back was to him. "Well, that's what I was thinking. After all, there'll be enough food."

Anne watched as Sandy closed his cigarette package and stood up again. He went to the fridge and took a beer bottle from the shelf. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"To watch TV." He left the room without looking back.

Anne had lost interest in the party by the time Lucy began to write down names. "I think this will be a lot of fun," Lucy said. "Luke, you and I can finish painting the kitchen this week -- only the cupboards are left. Anne, maybe you could see about renting a lawnmower. I have no idea what it would cost, but you could check around."

As Lucy spoke Anne could hear Sandy telling her that Lucy had roped her

into another crazy idea. Still, she wanted to contribute.

"I think that's everyone," said Lucy. "Is there anybody from work you want to add to the list?"

"I don't know anybody from this job yet. I'll let you know." Anne brought her plate to the counter.

Luke took another swig of beer and lit a cigarette. He turned around in his chair to face Anne. "Sandy doesn't seem very enthusiastic about this."

She had been about to excuse herself and go upstairs to bed. Instead, she leaned against the counter and folded her arms across her chest. "I'm sure he will be when the day comes, don't worry."

Lucy looked up from her list. "Luke and I were discussing this the other night. He hasn't seemed very happy since he started the job at Cleo's."

"It's a big change," said Anne. She looked at both of them. "It's hard adjusting to the day shift."

Lucy had a way of glancing, almost imperceptibly, at Luke. It made it appear as if they'd discussed whatever she was saying and come to a consensus. "Annie, it's been three months," she said. "And he's picked up his drinking a lot lately. Frankly, we're worried." Her gaze bounced off Luke. "He doesn't always make a lot of sense once he's had a couple of beers."

A familiar, forgotten chill returned to Anne. Years before, when Sandy had taken the job at his father's shipping company, there were six or seven months when he couldn't seem to sleep. He would sit for hours in the living

room, talking to himself, in the middle of the night. Every one in awhile, Anne would wake to the sound of his voice and get up. His sentences were clear, but together they didn't make sense. And they rhymed. When she spoke he kept on talking, like he hadn't heard. Anne never did find out what was going on at work. He left the job, and the solo conversations in the dark stopped as suddenly as they'd begun.

"You've seen this before," said Lucy calmly.

"It was nothing. It went away." Anne looked at Luke. "I think he was under a lot of pressure then, too."

"We just want you to know we're on your side. Let us know if you need anything."

Anne climbed the stairs, wondering who was on the other side. She went into the dark bedroom and took off her clothes, leaving them in a heap on the floor. The drive to work was taking a lot out of her. She was thinking she should get another job, closer to the house, when Sandy opened the door.

"So, all plans set for the party?"

Anne didn't answer.

"Come on. Even you can't fall asleep that fast. When's it going to be?"

"Two weeks. Let's talk about it tomorrow. I'm exhausted."

The day before the party, Anne got up early. She had called a couple of rental places during the week, but the grass outside was still waving in the wind. Work had been hectic and the grass had been left for so long she wasn't even sure a lawnmower would do it. In a dream the night before, she had seen herself swinging a scythe, back and forth, in an endless motion that made her arms feel as though they would come out of their sockets. She was cutting a path through the grass that had somehow grown over her head. As she dressed, Anne glanced out the window, relieved to see it was still the same length as it had been the day before. She would go for a run to get herself going, and then see about what farm equipment was available for rent.

She stepped down the stairs carefully so the hardwood wouldn't creak and wake anyone up. She tiptoed to the kitchen. Luke was sitting at the table drinking coffee.

"Oh! Good morning. I'm going for a quick run before I figure out what to do about that grass." She began putting on her running shoes. "Don't worry. By the time people get here, it'll be gone. Even if I have to rip it out with my hands." She laughed.

Luke flashed a quick smile, but she could see the muscles along the side of his face were rigid.

"You don't have to worry about it. I talked to a guy down the road who has a tractor lawnmower. He should be here soon."

"That's wonderful!" said Anne. "But I was going to do it, really."

"No problem."

She left the house. Before she'd made it out of the long driveway, a tractor pulled in. She waved, intending to keep on going, but the driver stopped.

"Hey! Hear you're having a party!"

Anne stopped to look up at him. He was younger, wisps of blonde hair showing from beneath a baseball cap that made it difficult to see his eyes.

"Yeah, and you're a godsend. Drop by tomorrow if you have nothing else to do. There'll be plenty of food."

"Sure will," he said. "Nothing better than a pig roast."

Anne waved again and skipped into a run. She wondered why she still felt tense; her worst nightmare had just vanished with a miracle.

On Sunday, friends began to arrive in the afternoon. Lucy had asked everyone to bring something and the kitchen counters were stacked with foil-covered casseroles and plates when Anne came in from the verandah.

She smiled at Lucy's friends who were standing in the kitchen. "My God, we're going to eat for weeks."

"Isn't it great?" said Lucy. "I figure there'll be over fifty of us. I don't think there'll be much left over."

"Well, you're brave. I wouldn't know what to do with all these hungry

people if you weren't here. What do you want me to do?"

"I think everything's under control. Just go outside and play hostess. Oh Annie," she said, "before you go, would you open a bottle of wine and pour me a glass?"

"No problem. I'll have one too. Less calories than beer." Anne poured the wine, gave a glass to Lucy, and went outside to the verandah. She looked for Sandy. He was standing by himself, one leg propped up on the railing at the far end of the porch.

"There sure is a lot of food in there."

"Annie, do you know any of these people?"

"Not yet. But they seem nice." She leaned on the railing looking down over the lawn. Luke was explaining to a little girl how the pig was buried under the pile of freshly turned earth. Anne looked up as another car made its way down the driveway. "There's Jim," she said. "Remember, I told you about him. He's one of the salesmen at work. He's a nice guy, you'll like him. C'mon."

Anne started toward the driveway. On her way, she realized Sandy had not moved. "Hi!"

"Wow, quite a party here! Anne, this is Lizzie, my wife, and Casey, my daughter."

She shook their hands. "That's Sandy over there," she said, pointing. "I'll introduce you later. What would you like to drink?"

"We brought some beer."

"Put it on the pile inside the door. There isn't any room in the fridge. I'll get you a couple of cold ones." Inside, she got two beers from the fridge and refilled her wine glass. "Would you like some more?" she asked Lucy.

"No, I'm still working on this one!"

Anne took the bottles outside. The sun beat hot on the balcony. She couldn't seem to concentrate. She nodded her head in a listening motion, realizing she had no idea what Jim was saying, then caught Sandy's eye, signalling for him to come over and join them. He looked away. "Excuse me," said Anne when Jim paused, not even sure if he had finished his sentence. "I'll be back in a minute."

More people had arrived. She made her way to the small bathroom upstairs where there wasn't a line-up. She put her wine glass on the back of the toilet and looked at her face in the mirror, holding both sides of the sink. She spoke out loud. "You are going to have a good time at this party. You are not going to let Sandy bring you down." Then she bent over, flipping her hair back and forth. She picked up the glass and went into the bedroom where she took off jeans and put on an Indian print skirt, standing sideways in the full-length mirror. "You did it, Anne. You lost twenty pounds and you look great!"

The northern lights played in the sky that night. Like giant piano keys,

they moved up and down across the black sky over the field. Anne hadn't eaten anything. She'd been hungry earlier, but now the smell of pork, and the sight of paper plates piled high with leftover salad, turned her stomach. She poured another glass of wine and turned to offer some to the man who stood beside her. She couldn't remember his name.

"No, no more wine," he said, placing his glass on the counter. Then he leaned over and kissed her mouth.

Anne didn't know if she should kiss him back just for fun or look angry and tell him she was married. Instead, she left the room and went out to the verandah. People had lined up along the bannister to watch the lights. She looked up at the sky.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?"

Anne turned towards the voice at her ear and saw up close the face she'd seen perched high on the tractor the morning before, a millenium ago.

"Hi, did you just get here?"

"Yeah. I got held up. But nothing keeps me from a pig roast for long."

Anne waved towards the door. "There's lots of food inside. But I don't know if there are any plates left."

"Come show me." He took her hand and Anne followed him into the house. "I've always wanted to see this place inside. We've lived down the street since I was little."

"Would you like a tour?"

"Sure."

Anne led the way up the stairs. "What's your name?"

"Bob. Bob Morrow. And yours?"

"I'm Anne." She turned to him on the landing. Four of us live here. Luke and Lucy have these two rooms and we have those two. One for a bedroom, one for a den, you know."

"It's a big place." Bob looked around. "Show me yours."

She opened the door to the bedroom and crossed the room to turn on the light. On her way, a movement outside the window caught her eye and she went over to see what it was.

"My God, I didn't realize how many people were here. Look at all those cars."

When Anne turned around, Bob stood close behind her. She kissed him. He kissed her back.

"What about your boyfriend. Isn't he downstairs?"

"No," said Anne, eyes closed, her face tilted to him. "He's out of town this week."

He kissed her again, this time for longer.

Downstairs, from his vantage point on the edge of the room, Sandy

watched Lucy as she moved from one group to another on her way to the kitchen.

"Would anyone like anything else? Beer? Wine? More food?"

It had been Anne's idea to live with her and Luke. He had told her it wouldn't work from the start, he'd even had a nightmare before they moved, but Anne wouldn't listen; she hadn't stopped making plans since Lucy suggested the idea. Sandy shook his head when Lucy glanced towards him, eyes asking if he wanted something, an empty beer bottle held up in the air. He called to her as she turned away.

"I changed my mind, Lucy. I'll have another one."

Sandy was startled by the sound of his own voice. No one noticed he had spoken. He wanted to go to upstairs to bed, but sleep would be impossible with all the noise. He wished that he and Anne were still in the little house, by themselves, living the quiet, organized life they used to. Lucy had delivered all her orders. She brought him a beer and sat down.

"You don't look like you're having much fun."

"It's okay."

"Where's Annie?"

"Outside, probably. I don't know."

"I know things aren't going so well for you at work."

Sandy turned to face her. What did she know about his job? She'd never asked.

"Luke and I thought it might be a good idea for the four of us to sit down

and decide how things are going to go this winter. Kind of like a meeting of the minds. I know sometimes that we don't do things the way you'd like, but you have to tell us. No one else is going to do it for you. I don't think even Annie knows what you want."

"What is this? You're not at work, you know. I'm not the latest addition to your case load."

"Sandy, I'm serious. You look pretty unhappy these days. I've never seen you like this."

"Yeah, well, I've never lived in a place like this."

"It's your home, too. Tell us how you want it to be." Lucy patted his leg before she stood to say good-bye to people who were leaving. Sandy watched her smile and ask them if they'd eaten enough. He wished he could make small talk so easily, slipping in and out of conversations without a hitch. Anne did it too, and Luke could always find something he was good at that needed doing. He didn't have to talk. These days, Sandy found he couldn't pretend to smile, even when he wanted to. He guessed Lucy was right, he couldn't expect them to know what he wanted. He wasn't sure what he wanted. He just knew it wasn't this.

He stood up, feeling as though everyone in the room was watching. He'd make it look as though he were going outside, then duck upstairs and catch the late movie. No one would miss him.

As he walked by their bedroom, he thought he heard voices. He opened the door, fully expecting to find the room empty, that voices had carried up the

stairs. The dim light from the hallway made it difficult to see, but there were two people lying on their bed. Suddenly it felt as though someone wearing a very heavy boot had kicked his stomach, hard.

"Annie? Annie?"

She didn't answer.

"Annie, is that you?"

He didn't know what else to do. He closed the door.

In the morning, Anne got up feeling hung over. She was glad she'd gone to bed early. She had to work but she'd get overtime for Labour Day, and it would go quickly. Sandy said he would drive her there, since he had the day off.

They didn't talk very much along the way. She tried to concentrate on the project that waited on her desk as they drove through the city. They were at the last traffic light before turning north onto the highway when Sandy spoke.

"Are you going to tell me what the hell went on last night?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you...in bed...with that....grasscutter!"

Anne stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about? I'm talking about opening the door to the bedroom last night. Annie, you were making love with that guy. I called your

name...." He hit the palm of his hand against the steering wheel.

The grasscutter. Yes, she remembered him. On the verandah. She had taken him on a tour of the house. Anne winced inside. And she'd kissed him. The next thing she remembered was waking up. She could not recall taking off her clothes or getting into bed.

"I kissed him," she said weakly. "That's all."

"You don't remember!"

Anne stared ahead. She could see the building where she worked coming into view. "I can't go into work. Let's go somewhere for coffee."

"I don't want to talk right now."

When he stopped the car, she leaned over to kiss him. He stared out the windshield.

"I'm sorry," she said, getting out of the car.

All day long, Anne tried to piece together the night before. Something that would make it seem real. She knew she should feel guilty, but she didn't. Only the tiny spark that had ignited in the car when Sandy told her reminded her periodically throughout the day. She'd made love to a total stranger. Only the fact was exciting. She did not remember a single sensation.

TWENTY-ONE

On Christmas Eve the basket rush was finally over. Anne wrapped presents that she would give to friends that night at Karla's. Ben had left to visit his parents. She had finished three term papers, shopped for over fifty baskets, and worked enough hours to cover her expenses. But she was broke. The presents she wrapped were pictures and books of her own. She worked with the ribbon, curling it with the edge of a scissor blade the way she'd watched Karla.

The night he'd left, she had given Ben a paperback edition of *The Diviners*, one of her favourite books. Inside, placed flat like a bookmark, was the ostrich skin wallet she'd bought in Portugal. On the card, she'd written that things would be different when he got back. Anne had decided she would give up the basket business and get a job that paid the bills.

Everything was wrapped. She sat cross-legged on the floor, leaning back on her hands. She was going to make big changes in the new year. She wouldn't buy any more hash, she would pay more attention to school, and she would start running when the warm weather came. She didn't know yet what she would do about money. January was around the corner, and she'd just finished paying December's rent.

She picked up the phone when it rang.

"Are you sure you won't come up for dinner?"

"No thanks, Karla. I'm having a glass of wine and just relaxing. I'll be up

later."

"If you don't want to eat, that's okay, just come up and sit with us."

"I'll be up soon. You guys go ahead." Anne put the phone down and took the lid off the licorice tin. As she rolled a joint, she thought about how tranquil things were. Thick snow fell silently by the window. Only the week before she and Ben had been delivering baskets by city bus.

They'd sat at the back of the bus. She'd been thinking about her paper, due the following day. Why was Lear so obsessed? What event had tripped the switch? Ben examined the label on a bottle of wine that Karla had positioned carefully in one of the baskets.

"I guess it's hard to buy the best when you have to consider making a profit."

Anne turned to him. "We could if someone wanted to pay for it."

"What's your favourite?"

She thought for a moment. "I don't know. I guess I like white in the summer, red in the winter."

"That's not what I meant. What kind?"

"It doesn't really matter."

"Of course it matters." He looked away. "Naturally, it would depend on what you were eating."

Anne laughed. "Do you mean the rules about white with fish and red with beef." She pulled on the cord above her head. "We get off at the next stop."

They got up and shuffled the baskets carefully to the back door of the bus while it moved. When it sighed to a stop they stepped down into the cold dark.

"You make it sound as if someone sets up these rules for no reason. People spend their lives developing taste, finding out what combinations the palate likes best. It's an art that's gone on for centuries."

"That's okay. But I like white wine on a hot summer day -- so cold that droplets of water form on the outside of the glass." Anne smiled down the street. "And in the winter, red wine makes you feel warm inside." She checked a slip of paper in her pocket. "This is the first address."

She went up and rang the doorbell. Ben stayed at the sidewalk. "Hi," she said to the aproned woman who answered the door. "Merry Christmas. The card is inside." She could hear the woman calling to her family as she went back to the sidewalk. "I think I'm getting into the spirit of things," she said to Ben.

He was silent as they delivered the last two baskets. It wasn't until they were standing back at the bus stop that he spoke.

"How can you just ignore a tradition that has gone on for hundreds of years?"

"Are we still talking about wine?"

"It's not just wine. It's the way you do everything. As if you were the first person on the planet, ignoring everything that has come before."

"Why? Because I drink red wine with chicken?"

"No. Because you dismiss tradition. You don't take history into account."

Sometimes things are the way they are because that's the way they're supposed to be."

"I don't believe we're wasting a perfectly beautiful evening arguing about what wine one is supposed to drink." She removed her arm from inside his. "I think it's important to step outside the realm of what we're supposed to do. If someone tells me I should drink red wine with beef, it's only natural for me to try it with chicken. Who knows, maybe I'll find out they're right, like you say. On the other hand, maybe I'll like it."

"Sounds a little like putting your finger in a socket to see if there's really electricity."

"Well, you can't just go around doing what everyone else says is best and call it living." Anne was surprised at how angry she was. The same defiance she'd felt when the high school principal told her she was wearing too much make-up or her skirt was shorter than regulation length, pushing into her throat like fire. They got on the bus and rode back to her neighbourhood in silence.

In the living room, surveying the mound of gifts, Anne shook her head. She must have been under a lot a pressure to react to such a simple thing so strongly. Something that only days later was small and unimportant, replaced easily by the memory of his voice, telling her he wished she was coming too, the night before he left.

She collected the gifts, carefully piling them onto a large flat package, the

framed poster that Karla had often said was her favourite. As she stood, she heard a knock. Anne went to open the door, lifting her leg up and balancing the gifts on her knee.

"Annie, you didn't have to buy presents!" said Karla. "I told you, it's just a get-together."

"Well, I didn't exactly buy them. You'll see."

"Just come up." Karla took parcels from the top of Anne's pile and started up the stairs. "Everyone wants to see you."

On New Year's Eve, Ben called. Anne wasn't in, but he'd left a message on her machine. His voice sounded different. She played the message again.

"Hi, it's me. I'm back. I'll call you back in about an hour."

Anne lit a cigarette and sat down. Throughout the holidays she'd been excited, looking forward to the day when she could talk to him and explain how she hadn't been herself before Christmas. There was a tone in his voice she did not want to hear. The phone rang and Anne let it ring a second time as she collected her thoughts.

"Hi, it's good to hear your voice. I thought maybe you'd already left for the night."

Anne relaxed. "How did the trip go? How are your parents?"

"They're fine. Christmas was good. My sister gave me a bottle of scotch. Ross and Kiefer are upstairs. We're starting in on it right now. Do you want to come over."

"I said I'd go out with Karla tonight. I've got to get ready. Maybe we could meet somewhere later?"

"I don't know if I'm in the mood to hit the town tonight."

"But it's New Year's Eve. The night you set the tone for the whole year! Come down to Dylan's Bar at midnight -- just for one."

"Okay, okay. But I don't know what kind of shape we'll be in by then."

Anne rolled a joint when she got off the phone. She had saved a last piece of hash for the evening. Karla had lent her a shiny silver blouse and a pair of black wide-legged pants that looked like a long skirt. Anne didn't wear much make-up anymore, but tonight she would put on mascara. She lit the joint and leaned her chair back against the wall, thinking how it was always when she made a special effort to look good that something went wrong.

"Don't be paranoid," she said out loud. "You'll look just fine."

It was Karla's idea to meet up with friends at a party down the street. Then they would walk over to Dylan's together. When she and Anne got to the

apartment, it was eleven o'clock. Anne looked around while Karla said hello to Jennifer, the host. Apart from a man who was flipping through magazines in the dimly-lit living room, the place was empty. Anne looked at Karla when Jennifer turned to put the wine they'd brought in the fridge.

"See," said Jennifer. "We have lots of champagne for midnight."

"Great," said Karla, looking back at Anne and shrugging her shoulders.

The doorbell rang. It was Matilda and her brother. They'd brought Stephen with them. Anne and Karla listened from the kitchen.

"Hi. You must be friends of Karla's."

"I have to be at Dylan's for midnight," Anne whispered to Karla. "How are we ever going to get out of here?"

"I don't know. I can't believe there's no one here."

They smiled quickly when Jennifer brought Matilda into the room. Matilda poked her head into the living room. Then she looked at Anne and Karla.

The six of them stood in an uncomfortable circle in the kitchen, sipping wine.

"I really have to meet Ben," said Anne quietly to Matilda when a conversation finally started."

"I sure don't want to stay here," said Matilda. "I'll come with you."

"How are we ever going to get out of here?"

"Just announce you're leaving. I'll join in."

She didn't know Matilda very well, but Anne admired the way she didn't worry about people she didn't even know. If it had been up to her she probably would have stayed until midnight, just to be polite.

"I have to be at Dylan's for midnight." She said it loudly, almost expecting someone to interrupt her and tell her she was being rude. "Jennifer it was nice meeting you. I'm sorry we didn't get here earlier."

"I'll come with you," said Matilda. She put down her wine glass and picked up her coat.

Before they made it to the front door, Stephen had joined them. It was so easy. Anne opened the door.

No one said anything until they were away from the house.

"Boy, what a party," said Stephen.

"I can't believe Karla suggested meeting here." Matilda's lips curled into a smile as she spoke. "I thought there'd be all kinds of people -- that we wouldn't be noticed coming in or going out."

"I know," said Anne. "Poor Jennifer."

Matilda looked at her. "This is New Year's Eve. Never mind poor Jennifer!"

"Looks like the guy in the living room could be part of Jennifer's problem," said Stephen.

Anne nodded her head emphatically.

"Whatever, it's not up to us to make sure Jennifer has a pleasant evening.

No one can live her life for her."

The silver material of her blouse clung coldly to Anne's skin. She wished she'd thought to wear a sweater. "Do you believe that New Year's Eve sets the tone for the year?"

"Well if that's the case, I don't think I'm nuts about this year's tone so far." Stephen turned up the collar on his jacket. "I guess a cab would be too much to hope for."

"Why don't we run," said Anne. "C'mon, it'll make us warm."

When they got to Dylan's it was just past midnight. Plastic champagne glasses stood empty, lining tabletops and ledges. Anne glanced around the room.

"Ben's not here, is he?" said Matilda, undoing her coat. "From what I've heard, somehow that doesn't surprise me."

"He'll be here," said Anne. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she wished she hadn't spoken so quickly. "They're probably running late."

"Who's Ben?" asked Stephen.

"A friend," said Anne.

"Let's find a table. We can always squeeze in more when he gets here."

"He'll probably be with a couple of friends, so we should take a bigger table." Anne led the way across the bar to a large booth close to the dance floor.

"I haven't danced in a long time," she said, folding her coat onto a chair.

"This is a good song." Matilda put her coat on top of Anne's.

"I'll watch the coats," said Stephen.

"The coats will be fine, said Anne.

She took one of his hands, Matilda took the other and together they led him to the small wooden dance floor. They danced through two songs that seemed to run together, before Stephen began shuffling away from them.

"I'll order drinks!" he shouted, making his way towards the table to the beat of the music.

Anne leaned towards Matilda's ear to talk. "Stephen's a nice guy." Matilda nodded. When the next song started, she motioned to Anne. Too slow. Anne glanced at her watch as they made their way back to the table.

"Except he's got the same problem you do."

"What's that?"

"A girlfriend who's never around. I haven't even met her, and this has been going on for months." She patted Anne's back as they sat down. "Does it ever occur to you that maybe Ben's not worth it. From what Karla tells me, this is not the first time he's let you down."

Stephen looked up. "Is this Ben guy your boyfriend?" he asked Anne. "I've got a girlfriend like that. Kind of a drag on New Year's Eve."

"It takes time to make a long-term commitment," said Anne.

He shrugged. "Gail has trouble making a short-term commitment." He turned to Matilda. "Seriously, one day she acts like I'm the best thing that's come along. Then, just when I'm starting to get comfortable, she tells me I'm not her

type."

"It's human to get bored with what is easily yours, to want something you can't have," said Matilda. "I'll bet she calls when she hasn't seen you for a while."

"Yeah, sure. Listen, I understand the dynamics here. I was in love with the prom queen. But doesn't that start to wear a little thin? I mean, if you play hard to get all the time, you're not going to be any closer to a relationship."

"I'm not talking about playing hard to get. I'm talking about holding someone's interest. It sounds like you come when she calls. Where's the fun?"

Anne heard only bits of the conversation. She stirred her drink with a straw, pretending to listen. Maybe Ben had fallen asleep. Or more friends had come over and he couldn't leave. Maybe there was a message on her machine. She watched people dancing. A man looked right at her, motioning for her to come and join him. She looked away quickly.

"It's such a losing battle," Matilda was saying to Stephen. "I don't know why you'd give something so much effort when you're not getting any return. Certainly when the writing's on the wall, you have to read it."

"I can't explain. How about you Anne, what keeps you hanging in there?"

Anne shrugged and looked at her watch. It was one-fifteen. "Listen, you guys, I'm going home. I'm tired."

"More like depressed," said Matilda.

"Okay, I'm depressed." Anne swung her coat over her shoulders, covering up the silver blouse. She was not looking forward to the cold walk home.

TWENTY-TWO

Everyone in high school knew about Dana Dorendale's house because Dana had the basement to himself and he was allowed to have friends over whenever he wanted. There were no grown-ups hovering about, bringing bowls of chips and asking what your name was, and no curfews. Dana even smoked downstairs, and rumour had it that his mother passed around joints to her guests in the living room. The two groups never got together -- upstairs was considered out of bounds -- but Dana and his friends had to use the bathroom at the top of the stairs. The toilet downstairs had overflowed years ago and it hadn't been fixed. There was a sign on the door that said *Out of Order*.

Downstairs, it was always dark. Dana liked it that way: he had suspended black tie-dyed sheets from the low ceiling, covering the brightness of fluorescent lights. It was difficult to see the old couches that lined the walls, or the tables, invariably littered with week-old beer bottles and full ashtrays. Anne was always surprised when she went to use the bathroom that the neglect extended upstairs. It was beyond rundown; huge spaces gaped where tiles had fallen off the wall. But she would also notice other details, like the gold rose-petal faucets, envisioning the house before no one cared. Back when the rosebuds were first installed, and everything was suburban new. When the carpets stretched quietly from one spacious room to another, like in other houses she had visited in the neighbourhood. Maybe Dana was a baby then, and his older brothers and sisters,

old enough now to be allowed in the living room, were in school. Maybe Mrs. Dorendale was still married then, although it was hard to imagine.

Donna-Mae Dorendale had thick black hair that fell in gentle waves around her shoulders. She always wore black and she was very, very slim. Whenever Anne saw her, her head would be thrown back, and she'd be laughing, large white teeth exposed. Her skin was tanned, even in the winter. Dana said she had a sunlamp.

When she emerged from the bathroom, Anne glanced down the hall to the living room. She had heard her father's laugh downstairs; from the hallway she could see his legs, crossed at the knee, one large shoe bouncing lazily in the air. A couple of years earlier, when Anne and her friends would sit under the trees of the college campus, smoking cigarettes long into the summer, he would come careening across the grass, the small headlight of his bicycle barely visible in the black, and tell her it was time to come home. Most of her friends were afraid of him.

Diane and Lisa appeared on the landing below Anne. They were looking for their boots in the mound of black leather and yellowed newspapers.

"It's boring tonight," said Lisa. "C'mon, Anne, let's go."

"I have to go back down and get my purse."

Anne made her way through the dark corridor that led to Dana's den. She picked up her coat and purse.

"See you tomorrow, everybody."

She left behind a muted chorus of goodbyes. Diane and Lisa were standing ready to go, both of them tilting their heads towards upstairs. She could hear her father's voice.

"It's a long way. How are you going home?"

"We'll walk, or take the bus if it goes by." Diane knew better than to tell him they would hitchhike.

"Hiya, kid," he said when he saw Anne.

"Hi, Daddy." Anne bent to look for her boots.

"Listen, it's damn cold out there tonight. I don't want you to walk all that way. And the buses aren't very reliable. Why don't I give you money for a taxi. Wait here, and I'll go call."

Diane and Lisa smiled at Anne. A taxi was a luxury they couldn't often afford. Anne had her boots on when her father reappeared. Diane and Lisa told him thank you before opening the door, the pile of boots crushing against the wall. Anne stretched her palm towards her father to accept the money.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention to your mother I was here. Okay kid? That'll be our secret."

"Okay. Good night." Anne stepped outside. She wondered why he'd said that. She never told her mother anything that happened at the Dorendales. Diane and Lisa waited for her in front of the house.

Anne stood in the driveway looking at them. She had wanted to laugh, but

she felt sick. She sat down hard in a snowbank.

"C'mon," said Diane, holding out her hand. "Maybe you need some food to take away the buzz. We'll hitchhike and use the money to go for fries when we get back to town."

They walked the eight long blocks to the lakeshore in silence, boot heels squeaking on the hard-packed snow. The tree branches above them were frozen, clicking conspiracy when gusts of wind blew across the fields, uninterrupted by the low roof-tops of the bungalows that neatly lined the other side of the street.

Loretta had given Gil twelve weeks when she found out about Donna-Mae. She'd marked her count every Saturday, standing in the downstairs hallway, and calling up the stairwell so the house could hear. "Four weeks." Then, "Ten weeks." Finally, she had rented an apartment downtown. Anne went to visit Sandy almost a year later. He was one of her only friends she'd kept in touch with. They talked mostly on the phone, but she'd gone with him once to an outdoor concert. The last time they'd spoken, he'd invited her to come for a visit because his mother was going to be away for the weekend. Anne had told her mother she was going over to Diane's, in case she was late.

Sandy opened the door just as she was checking for the number of the house.

"This is it," he called.

"Hi." Anne was relieved that he looked the same as he always did.

"It's a long way on the bus, eh?"

"It wasn't so bad. It's a beautiful day."

Sandy turned to go inside. "We're almost at that time of year again. Too bad you're not around. We could cut classes together."

"I go to all my classes now. I don't know a soul."

"Here, let me take your coat." Sandy laid it neatly on one of the living room armchairs.

Anne took off her shoes. "The carpet's so thick."

"What would you like to drink? The sky's the limit."

"I don't know. Whatever you're having."

"How about a Tom Collins?"

"Okay."

Sandy went to the wall unit and opened a cabinet door beside the stereo. Rows of bottles reflected against the mirror inside. "So how do you like it downtown? It must be more lively than it is out here."

"It's okay. I have a job lined up for the summer." Anne flopped down on the sofa. "I went to an agency. They gave me a typing test and asked me when I could start."

"Good," said Sandy. He passed her a tall, slim glass. "My father said he'd get me a summer job next year. They say I have to be eighteen."

Anne nodded then pointed at her drink. "It's good."

He sat down beside her on the couch. "My specialty. Music, we need music. What would you like to hear?"

"Anything," said Anne. "Something pretty." She looked around the room while he selected a record. All the furniture was brand-new. The drapes were closed. It seemed dark in the room after the bright sun outside. She was happy to be with him. He was one of the only people she knew who didn't ask for explanations. He hadn't pressed her for details when he found out they'd moved. He accepted whatever happened. Other friends wanted to know exactly what happened. Their parents were worse.

He moved the needle carefully onto the turntable. "There."

It was classical music. Anne was surprised. She didn't know any classical music, but the sound was soothing.

"Mozart," said Sandy. "It's my mother's."

Anne smiled. "Where is your mother?"

"She went with her boyfriend -- somewhere in the country." He shook his head. "I think the guy's a jerk, but I guess it's not up to me."

"Things are so much calmer at home without my father. I guess it will be different when my mother starts dating."

"Do you ever wish they'd get back together?"

"I used to. Now I see how it's better this way."

"What if they were happy?"

"Well, if they were happy, I guess things would be different. I just can't imagine it now, that's all." Anne was beginning to feel very cozy.

"I'll make us another one."

She slid off the couch down onto the carpet while he made drinks, leaning her back against the sofa, stretching her legs in front of her.

Sandy passed her the refilled glass and sat down on the floor beside her, reaching out with his foot to touch her toe. He smiled at her. She pushed up against the ball of his foot. When she looked back at him he had put down his drink and was leaning towards her, his lips pausing against hers. Anne kissed him. It wasn't like the kisses she was used to, nervous and probing, or determined and monotonous. His lips were exploring her. She put her glass on the table without opening her eyes and he pulled her towards him, down to the plush carpet. Each kiss was different; each made her want more. Soon she could feel his hands moving underneath her clothes.

Anne had no idea how much time had passed when Sandy stopped kissing her and got to his feet, pulling her weightless body towards him, and leading her up the stairs. She would have followed him anywhere.

"Are you going to come to my bed?"

The spoken words penetrated her brain. So this was how it happened. She'd always wondered about the girls at school that everyone talked about. She'd listened, incredulous, to the stories of what they did, with whom, unable to fathom words like *desire*, *lust*, *yearn*. In a split second she shifted from wanting it

all to wanting only not to be like them -- left to their stories, smoking cigarettes together in the washroom at school.

Instead, Sandy guided her into the guest room. He tucked her into bed and kissed her good night. A short, friendly kiss, not like before. Anne slept fitfully, dreaming over and over her defense to girlfriends she hardly ever saw anymore. It didn't happen. It didn't happen. But deep inside, Anne knew. Something had happened.

TWENTY-THREE

Sandy pulled into the parking lot of the Dairy Queen. He was meeting Anne so they could talk without Luke and Lucy being there. Her car had not arrived. He got out and leaned against the fender, lighting a cigarette, watching a group of teenagers who had gathered at the far end of the lot. The girls sat balanced on the fence, the boys forming a protective line in front of them, all licking cones of soft ice cream. Sandy remembered when he and Anne had frequented places like this before they had the money to go out for dinner. She liked the french fries at Kentucky Fried Chicken, the hamburgers at Harvey's.

She pulled up beside him. She rolled up her windows, locked the doors and got out of the car.

"It's ridiculous that we have to come here to talk," he said to her.

"I know. It's not for much longer."

They had rented an apartment in the city. There were only three weeks left before they moved. Sandy opened the door for her. The air conditioned chill made him shiver.

"What do you want?"

"Just a sundae. Small. Strawberry."

He nodded. "Why don't you get a table." He was hungry. He didn't know what Anne wanted to talk about. He only wanted them to make it out of the farmhouse and into a place of their own. He decided to order a burger. He

watched her smoke a cigarette as he stood at the counter, holding a slip of paper, the empty orange tray before him. Finally, the cashier placed a hamburger and two sundaes on the tray.

"Have a nice day!"

Sandy hated the way everyone in fast-food restaurants said that. He knew Anne would have smiled and said, "You too".

"One strawberry sundae." He placed the plastic dish in front of Anne and sat down.

She put out her cigarette. "Thanks."

He unwrapped the hamburger.

"You know," she said, "things have been going downhill for a long time." She looked out the plate glass window behind him.

He chewed a mouthful of dry hamburger meat. Since the pig roast, Anne had acted as if nothing unusual had happened. As if they were still grappling with ordinary problems, like how he didn't always tell her how he felt about things. He swallowed. "Lately, they've picked up speed."

"Sandy, I'm not going to go through life apologizing for something I don't even remember. I think we should concentrate on what put me in that position."

He put down the hamburger. It was beginning to taste like cardboard. "I don't believe you. Just because you don't remember doesn't mean it didn't happen. And it's going to take me awhile to forget."

"Don't you see? We have to move along or this will bury us. We can start

fresh, move into the new place, begin all over again. The longer we keep dwelling on this, the longer things will keep going downhill."

"You're always telling me you want to hear how I feel. Well now I'm telling you. I feel lousy."

"Yeah, well, I'm just realizing I've felt lousy for a long time." Anne scooped ice cream from the dish, closing her mouth around each spoonful. Sandy had always liked watching her eat. Something about the way her lips moved, glistening with strawberry sauce, made him want to kiss her. He looked down at his hamburger. How could he want to slap her face and make love to her, all at once.

"Do you think we could call it even and start all over again?" She was looking at him as if she'd just asked him to forget about a parking ticket.

"I don't know what you expect from me. Maybe this'll go away, but it's not going to happen overnight."

When they got home, Luke and Lucy were out. Anne and Sandy got into bed, undressing silently as a blanket of dusk descended over the fields outside the window. When Sandy kissed her, Anne responded with the same passion he remembered from his mother's living room, or under the sky, late at night in a park. His stomach turned. This was not for him. It was for the grasscutter.

They made love. He wasn't sure if he was hurting her, or if the sharp pain he felt inside was because he really did love her. He wasn't sure of anything

anymore.

Anne got out of bed and threw a robe around her shoulders when she woke up and realized Sandy was not beside her. She went downstairs, her feet bare. She stopped when she stepped on the kitchen tile. From there, she could hear his voice.

"Going down. Change the pace. Join the race. Never mind the face."

TWENTY-FOUR

There wasn't a message on her machine when she got home, and Ben did not call the next day. Anne froze when she actually heard his voice.

"I'm sorry about the other night," he said. "Other stuff just started happening. You know how it is."

"Let's just say I don't feel like one of your priorities."

"I know. I'd like to get together and talk about that." He paused. "How about tomorrow. I'll make you dinner."

"I don't know."

"I'm sorry. I really am. Come for dinner. We'll talk then."

The next night when she knocked at his door, she could smell roast beef from the hallway. He opened the door and hugged her hello.

"It's good to see you." He let go when he realized she was not hugging back.

"I made soup, and salad, and there's a roast in the oven."

"I brought wine." Anne's voice was flat. She took off her coat as he opened the oven. "So, what's going on?"

"I'll be with you in a minute." He spooned juices from the meat over four

small potatoes that surrounded the roast. Then he got two wine glasses from the cupboard.

"Let me start by telling you this has nothing to do with you," he said, twisting the corkscrew into the wine bottle.

"Then why am I here?"

He pulled the cork out gently and poured two glasses, motioning to her for a toast. "Red. For winter?"

She smiled. "And beef."

"Anne, I'm at an important juncture in my life." Ben sat down. "Every time I've fallen in love, somehow I'm the one that ends up getting hurt. It feels like I've been hurting a long time. I guess somewhere along the line I just stopped trying." He picked up his glass and took a sip of wine. Anne watched his face carefully as he spoke. A faint smile had appeared on his lips.

"Anyways, I've had to do some serious thinking lately." He looked her straight in the eye. "Mira and I are going to give it another shot. I don't know if things will work out, but I'm going to give it my very best."

Anne did not move. She stared at him.

"I didn't want to tell you over the phone. You're a very special person to me. I hope we can still be friends."

She stood up, putting her hands in her pockets. "A friend would have filled me in a long time ago."

"I didn't know I'd get another chance with Mira. And I didn't want you to

stop caring."

There was a knock at the door.

"Oh, no," said Ben, standing up. "I told her not to come tonight."

Anne sat back down. She hoped he would tell her to go away. She did not turn towards the door.

He came back and stood in the middle of the room, looking uncomfortable, yet strangely pleased with himself. "Anne, this is Mira," he said. "Mira, Anne."

Anne knew she had to leave. She had to get out of there before she exploded, or cried, or worse. She put on her coat, glancing at the girl who was staring in her direction. Mira chewed gum with exaggerated boredom.

Ben arrived at the door as Anne opened it. "I want you to have this," he said. "It's my favourite."

Anne took the book and put it in her purse. She did not look at the title.

Outside, her feet deep in cold slush, Anne felt a chill move up her body. The writing on the wall. How could she have been so stupid? She walked home, shivering uncontrollably all the way.

TWENTY-FIVE

Anne decided she would sublet her apartment and move into a smaller place, using the difference in rent to pay off bills. She compiled a long list of things that would have to be done and spent January showing her apartment to strangers and packing boxes. For half the price, she rented a one-room basement apartment that came with a desk. She left all her furniture at the old place, taking only the bed, kitchen utensils, and the typewriter. She called it her austerity program.

Laurie was home by then and she helped Anne move.

"You can't live here," she said when Anne unlocked the door to the apartment. She did not put down the box she was carrying.

Anne looked around the room. It was smaller than she remembered. Nicotine stains and moisture dripped long yellow streaks down the walls around them.

"A coat of paint and it will be fine," she told Laurie. "You'll see."

The taxi driver had followed them in. "Sure," he said, placing boxes on the desk and looking around. He went back for another load.

Laurie placed her box reluctantly on the counter. "We'll bring this stuff in and then I'll help you clean." She poked her head into the bathroom. "You're absolutely sure about this?"

"Positive. It's just for a little while."

Anne hoped she sounded surer than she felt. The uncovered lightbulb on the ceiling revealed a griminess she had not noticed when she'd come to sign the lease. Laurie went back to the taxi and Anne stood for a moment by herself, absorbing the feel of the room. It would be all right when it was painted. The closeness would become cozy. She would hang pictures, maybe bring over a couple of plants.

"I think I'm doing the right thing," she said when Laurie returned. "In a couple of months, my bills will be paid. It won't be so bad."

"That's it," said the cab driver. The surface of the desk was covered. He put the boxes he was carrying on the floor.

"Thanks," said Anne. "I know this was kind of unusual. I really appreciate your help." She passed him forty dollars. It had taken only one trip, but he'd helped them with the bed, and she hoped it was enough.

"Thanks. Good luck with the painting."

Laurie took off her coat and pushed up the sleeves of her sweater. "Okay, where's the cleaning stuff?"

As Anne cut swaths of white through the yellow grime, she thought about the move. It was a consolidation, a place where she could concentrate on getting her life into some kind of order. Laurie, rubber gloves up to her elbows, scrubbed the bathtub, the toilet, then the sink. The sound of running water

marked their progress.

An hour or so later, Laurie emptied another pail of dirty water into the kitchen sink. She peeled off the gloves. Anne dropped her sponge into the water and lit a cigarette.

"It's incredible to think that someone lived in this."

"He's in a rock band. It's part of the lifestyle. Thanks for helping, eh."

"No big deal."

Anne took a long drag of her cigarette. "You know, it's funny, I'm not mad at Ben anymore."

"Well, I hope you won't forget this day soon. If he cared, he'd be here."

"He can't be right now. Somehow I understand." She smiled apologetically. "I know it sounds bizarre."

Laurie patted Anne's back. "You come by it honestly. Have you ever noticed how the women in our family wait for their men to come home?" She paused, then looked at Anne. "Remember when Bill had the affair?"

Anne nodded.

"That was when I realized that I had the choice of waiting it out or getting on with my life. It wasn't that I didn't still love him. I just knew that I didn't want to spend any more time waiting for him to appreciate me. Hell, he had five years. He should have known."

"I think Daddy would have come back if Mummy had really been able to wait."

"That's not the point, Annie. Something happens when you hang around like that. It's like saying it's okay. Take your time. I'm nothing without you, so I'll wait." She stood and looked out the small window that was close to the ceiling.

"I'm not talking about pining or getting bitter. It's a different kind of wait. An active wait. I don't know, maybe I'm wrong. I just know I have to try."

Anne went over to the window and hugged her sister.

"C'mon," said Laurie. "Let's go to Mummy's. She says she hardly sees you anymore. It'll give you a break from this place."

Anne shook her head. "I want to clear these boxes off the bed. But thanks for everything. I couldn't have done it alone."

When Laurie had left, Anne found a space on the bed to sit down. She looked around the room, squinting her eyes, trying to picture everything as it would look when she had finished. She no longer saw the yellowed walls. In her mind, a bright white space, filled with colour, had taken its place.

During the next few weeks there were times Anne wanted only to smoke a joint, lie down and forget all about the world. But she didn't. She read -- books that she'd always been meaning to read. Books with titles like *Man and His Symbols*. *The White Goddess* was the book Ben had given her. Maybe was

what he'd hoped she would be. Anne didn't read beyond the first page. For weeks, she didn't do anything she didn't absolutely want or have to do. She played music in the dark every night as she fell asleep, listening over and over to the lyrics of favourite songs. The journal she'd bought before Christmas was blank. Each time she sat down to write, she could not think of where to begin, how to explain. She'd taken things so far all by herself.

By the middle of March, the weather had started to ease up; mounds of cold slush were giving way to the pavement. Anne woke up one morning before the alarm went off. She could not see the sky from her apartment, the building next door was too close, but if she stood near her window, and looked into the windows of the building across the alley, she could see a reflection of sky. That morning it was deep blue.

She walked uphill to the running track, the wind and sun making her eyes water. Her keys had turned metal cold in her hand. It was a relief to reach the soccer field, cocooned by a steep embankment on one side, and mirrored glass skyscrapers rising up on the other. The sun beat hot on the track. She stretched the tightness from her legs, rolling the balls of her feet back and forth on the pavement. She would run four laps. She placed one of her keys between her thumb and forefinger, and set out on her first lap.

Anne found herself smiling as she ran. Her feet felt as light as air. She drank in the view of the mountain that towered above one side of the track, and

then, rounding the curve, the sun-dazzled buildings against the crisp blue sky. As she began her second lap, she moved the key over a notch, to rest between her second and third fingers.

It was a funny thing, she thought, how her feelings for Ben had settled into a flat line lately. From this distance she wasn't implicated in the day-to-day puzzle of wondering of how he felt about her. She could see he was hurting, just as he had told her. How things he'd done really did have nothing to do with her; they were choices he had made just to make his own pain go away. Just like she had done with Sandy.

It was as if a mirror she'd looked at all her life had suddenly turned to glass and she could see through. When she'd left Sandy, there was only relief. She'd had to leave. She'd been so scared of getting stuck in a place where she didn't know how to breathe. What he'd gone through had hardly occurred to her.

Anne moved the key to between her third and fourth fingers. Her muscles were warm and a light dampness had formed at the back of her neck. Nothing to do with her. How many times had it happened before Ben? This time though had been different: she'd been deluded, but with an inexplicable conviction, a scenario that reminded her of Lear. Anne laughed out loud. Every step she took along the track made her lighter, as if she were a part of the wind that made the pine trees dance gently on the slope above her, of the sun beating rays on the mirrored glass, reflecting, reflecting.

A long-forgotten memory spread a picture across her mind. It would have

been in the house on Cambridge. Her father, bending over her, a cool washcloth on her forehead. Somehow Anne knew she was very sick. She would have been three, maybe four. His voice was close to her ear, a whisper. Her eyes were closed.

"How do you feel, sweetheart?"

Her voice was small. She wanted to hear that music again.

She could hear him chuckle, a low comfortable sound, could feel the light touch of his hand against her cheek.

"She's going to be all right, Loretta. She's going to be all right."

Anne moved the key to between her ring and baby fingers. She would give the final lap every ounce of strength she had. Her feet pounded the pavement. She heard the sound of her breathing, felt each muscle in her legs. Arms clutching at the air to propel her body, moving swiftly, surely, around one curve, then another. It was the first time she'd felt her body, so powerful.

END