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Last Call

James Whittall

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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

July 1992

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## ABSTRACT

Last Call

James Whittall

*Last Call* is a collection of occasional short stories, all of which are set between the first year of Ronald Reagan's presidency and the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989. While the stories do not deal directly with the politics of this last and most unnerving decade of the Cold War, the events and, especially, the "mood" of the era serve as the environment in which ordinary people attempt to survive extraordinary and often bizarre social circumstances.

The stories in *Last Call* are written in a realistic and spare manner, to heighten the sense of anxiety which was a "natural" condition of life at that time. I selected this style precisely because minimalism in literature is an effective means of emotionally segregating the reader from the protagonist; indeed, it is my intention that the reader should act as an observer of, and not a participant in, the events to which my protagonists react. The purpose of *Last Call* is to illustrate the relative horror of living with the threat of nuclear extinction, environmental decay, and the collapse of social and behavioral norms. Thus, the reader's role should be that of a social scientist, since the objectivity required for the role serves only to intensify the feelings of displacement and anxiety. To that end, roughly half of the

stories are written as quasi-documentaries, where the narrator-observer reports the basic facts of bizarre social situations as they appear to him. Many of these pieces are extremely short—perhaps three or four paragraphs—and interspersed evenly throughout the manuscript, to build the level of anxiety. However, since it is not my intention to entirely alienate the reader, I have included a number of stories written as first-person narratives. These serve to counter the angularity of the quasi-documentaries, and also to add a human dimension to the book as a whole. I believe that these antinomies—objectivity and emotion—were integral components of the mood of the Eighties, since it was the almost crazed rationalism of the super powers which made nuclear war possible, and the intense emotional reaction against the idea of nuclear war which both accentuated and demoralised the lives of the people upon which my protagonists are based.

This notion of the tension between intellectualism and passion is further illustrated in my characters. I include up to three key individuals per story—one who is passive and rational, another who is aggressive and emotional, and a third individual whose personality is a successful amalgam of these conflicting tendencies. The passive and aggressive characters, around which the majority of the stories are written, are only tenuously connected in terms of their friendship or marriage; yet, they have a kind of symbiotic psychological relationship—each would like to shed the other's influence, but cannot. The third individual (usually Johnny, the middle-aged bartender, who appears regularly as either a key or background figure), is self-sufficient, since he is more or less well-rounded as a human being,

inasmuch as the times will allow.

Both Johnny and another recurring character, Fin, are used to bear witness to many of the events which transpire before them. They are essentially the same in that they embody opposing aggressive and passive tendencies; yet it is only Fin—a man in his twenties—who cannot reconcile these forces in his personality. He acts either as a passive or as an aggressive, depending on what his external circumstances demand of him. As a survivor of the times, he is a kind of psychological chameleon, easily changing his "colours" to adapt to his erratic, often confusing environment. Johnny, however, acts as a kind of passive misanthrope. he is a very hard individual, yet bears no outward malice towards any one individual. It is precisely because of his nature that he is able to look out for his own best interests, no matter what the situation, and survive.

As I mentioned earlier, all of the stories in *Last Call* take place against a backdrop of violence, pollution, economic collapse, and social decay. Unlike Hemingway, who writes of social institutions as they are only tenuously connected to his protagonists, and Carver, whose social institutions are non-existent, my stories involve an ever-present and malignant authority whose sole objective is to truncate the existences of my protagonists. The only institution which has a prominent symbolic position in *Last Call* is the neighbourhood pub, or, in some cases, the strip bar. In both instances, these places act—whether for good or bad—as locations where people can interact; and it is this interaction that denotes our last shreds of society. Also, many of the stories revolve around the act of

drinking, and it is this act which represents the temporary suspension of reason in favour of more Dionysian behaviour. Hence, the importance of the title to my manuscript. Like *Twelfth Night*, last call is a literal end to the party; but it is also used symbolically to signify the end of the decade, the end of the Cold War era, and the end to whatever it was about the Eighties that made my generation feel alive.

*Last call for alcohol.  
Last call for freedom of speech.  
Drink up. Happy hour's now enforced by law.*

The Dead Kennedys



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

AFTER THE WAR .....	1
THE ANARCHIST .....	5
LAWN PARTY .....	16
IN THE COUNTRY OF THE BLIND .....	18
PAIN KILLERS .....	27
POWER FAILURE .....	38
BEFORE DINNER .....	49
A FALLING OUT .....	50
THE DUMP .....	59
SOME ENCHANTED EVENING .....	65
DESIRE .....	67
MAN AND WIFE .....	79
THE NEOPRIMITIVIST .....	87
MY TRIP TO NEW YORK .....	91
SOONER OR LATER .....	92
IN THE MEANTIME .....	105

## AFTER THE WAR

What's funniest about this detente thing is that you get to missing the stuff you were most afraid of throughout your life. Like nuclear annihilation, for one. Some of my friends say they miss that feeling of hanging by a thread, that today could be the last you'll ever see. They say now that this detente thing is here, they find it hard to think in terms of what to do for tomorrow. Let me give you an example. One of my old girlfriends—I think her name was Beth or Betty or something—anyway, she tried to hang herself. But her mother came in and found her and took her down, and when she got out of the hospital she hanged herself again, but this time did it right. In the note she said something about not being able to live because she didn't know how. I was sad for her I guess, but I didn't attend the memorial service because it was in Vancouver and I never loved her. Still, Rick and I had a drink in her honour that night, and it was a very silent and respectful thing, because we knew she had more guts than the both of us put together.

One of the things I miss most is the propaganda. Reagan with his bear in the woods, and all that evil empire stuff. That was great. I remember watching the crazy old fart on television and thinking, George Orwell would have loved this. He really would. And the funniest thing of all was that it was 1984 when all this was happening. Stranger than fiction, they say. Stranger than fiction.

What I really miss are the bars. You remember the bars, with names like Ground Zero or The Bunker or Checkpoint Charlie, and the decor all barbed wire, and the bar itself like a gun turret, or maybe a fallout shelter. And every Friday and Saturday night, and sometimes on Wednesday, there would be three bands for five dollars. Civil Terror put on a pretty good show for a local group. But the best was The Exploited because Rick broke his arm on the dance floor and then used it later to beat the shit out of some skinhead from Montreal who had slammed him too hard or something. And I had a chain padlocked to my boot at the beginning of the show, and at the end it was gone and my ankle was bleeding inside my boot, but I don't remember feeling a thing.

Especially I miss the movies. I'd spend my afternoons in the theatre watching those wonderful Mad Max films, and plan how I would get by living in the rubble of the past. Back then I was going through my anti-social phase, and thought a limited nuclear exchange would be great if I could get through it alive. The megadeath thing didn't bother me as much as the idea that it would be hard to grow food in radioactive soil. But later I saw a news report about the yard-long

dandelion leaves that were shooting up around Chernobyl, and it occurred to me that I'd probably be able to grow twenty-pound potatoes and carrots the size of tree trunks, if only there were something left to plant. So, for a month, I bought as many seeds as I could lay my hands on—two packets each of broccoli seeds, corn seeds, sunflower seeds, you name it; hell, I even planned to raise beets, and I hate beets—and I stored them all under the floor boards of my apartment. This seemed like a pretty sane thing to do at the time. Now it just makes me wince when I think about it.

And then there were all the drugs, if things got too much for you, which they did, and often. Not like now, where the police are cracking down on dealers and you can't find any no matter how many times you walk past the Parliament buildings. But they were easy enough to find then. And if we had fifteen or twenty dollars, we would decide what was more important, buying food or getting high. It usually depended on how hungry we were, though when you got high the hunger would go away if you forgot to think about it.

That time we went to pick up the bag of acid, and the cops pulled us over because Rick was driving and he had been busted earlier for breaking and entering. Sarah slid the bag into her pants and up inside of her, but it broke, and when we got home we had to tie her to the couch so she wouldn't knock anything over, jerking around like she was. That was the worst, I think. But some of the acid was still good.

Or the time we got thoroughly wasted and took some beer and ice in a knapsack up to Parliament Hill to see the Prince and Princess of Wales, who were in town for a visit, and got stopped by the secret police because they thought we were carrying a bomb. Rick and I had a good laugh over that one, though Rick said he was sorry it wasn't a real bomb. Or the nights just getting blind drunk or stoned and then waiting to watch the sun come up with its many colours, like an explosion on the horizon.

What's funniest, I think, is that we all feel we have to talk about it. Even now. Especially now. My parents laugh and say I'm overreacting, that things were worse for them during their war, what with the food shortages and all, so I keep it between me and my friends. My parents say I should get on with my life and stop bumming around from one job to the next with no goal or purpose in sight, which I suppose is good advice, but I can't make them understand. When I tell Rick it's no use, that I can't seem to see past the idea that there's no future, he just nods very seriously and says "Yeah" because he knows what I mean and it isn't another lame excuse.

## THE ANARCHIST

*I am the Antichrist.  
I am an anarchist.  
I know what I want,  
and I know how to get it.  
I want to destroy  
the passersby.*

The Sex Pistols

When Johnny saw us come into the Royal Oak, he pulled two pilsner glasses down from the overhead glass rack and filled them with draft beer. I hung my coat on a nail by the door, but Goose had just finished a night shift at the Health and Welfare building and was still wearing his guard's uniform, so he kept his coat on. We went over to claim two empty stools at the bar.

"How's it doing guys?" Johnny asked, placing the beers on two felt pads on the bar in front of us.

"We're not dead yet, if that's what you mean," said Goose. He began to put

his earrings back in. He was not allowed to wear them at work.

I took a sip of beer and looked around the pub. There were the same faces at the usual tables, and some new ones. Two fashion jockeys were making a big show of playing darts in the corner by the pinball machine. I reached for some peanuts.

"How's things at Wealth and Hellfire?" Johnny asked Goose. He picked a steaming shot glass out of the washer and began to wipe it clean with a white rag. "Have they noticed your new *coiffure*?"

"Nah," said Goose. "They don't even suspect. It looks like a bean shave with this sucker on." He removed his loose fitting guard's cap to reveal the mohawk he had received at a party on his Monday night off.

Johnny raised his eyebrows and whistled. "Better watch yourself, chum. That's hardly regulation length, you know."

Goose snorted and took a sip of his beer.

"You can't talk to him," I said to Johnny. And then to Goose: "They're going to find out eventually. You can't keep that hat on forever. Then what are you going to do? We've got rent to pay."

"I'll just shave my head clean and start over," said Goose. "Don't worry. You worry too much."

"Someone has to," I said. "You don't."

"Worrying's for businessmen," said Goose. "Just ask Johnny here. I'll bet he

worries enough for ten ulcers. Don't you, John, old boy?"

Johnny smiled or grimaced, I could not tell which.

Some rich-looking civil servant type and his fat fur-coated woman came up from behind us to order drinks. The woman glared at Goose's new haircut as if it were some sort of cancerous lump growing on the back of his neck. Goose did not turn around to stare her down, but I could tell he knew she was there by the way his shoulders were set.

"What'll it be?" Johnny asked over our heads in his professional bartender's voice.

"Yeah, what'll it be?" Goose repeated. Johnny shot him a menacing look.

"Canadian Club," said the civil servant in a flat tone.

"Cointreau," said the woman nasally.

"Coming up," said Johnny. He reached beneath the bar for the bottles of booze.

"You know, Johnny, old boy," said Goose in a voice loud enough for the couple behind him to hear, "it troubles me, the kind of clientele you've been getting lately. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if you were planning to hang ferns in the window, or buy brass furniture, or some such thing."

I could see Johnny's lips pinching. He put the glasses of C.C. and Cointreau on the bar. The civil servant paid up and took the drinks and the woman away without saying a word. Johnny waited until they were out of earshot, and



then he leaned forward to within an inch of Goose's nose.

"I know the kind of shit you boys get into," he said in a low voice. "People tell me things. Now, if you want to keep on coming here, I suggest you keep your mouths shut. Otherwise, I might have to card you." He stood up. "I think we understand each other."

Goose looked at me with feigned surprise, and then he looked at Johnny.

"This new-found love of the law doesn't become you, buddy," he said.

"Don't mock me, punk," Johnny said angrily. "I run a stand-up operation. I answer to no one, and I serve whoever I please. And that's worth more than a hundred of you grunts doing time at four and a quarter an hour."

Goose's face was cement.

"You offend me, sir," he said, straightening up on his bar stool. "I'll have you know there isn't a higher duty to perform than that of security officer at a government installation."

Johnny's eyes narrowed. "You're a real son of a bitch, you know that? As far as I'm concerned, a monkey suit's a monkey suit, no matter if you work at McDonald's or the Taj Mahal."

Goose picked up his glass and drained it in three huge swallows.

"I don't have to take this abuse," he said, letting loose a long, guttural burp. "I get enough of it at work." He elbowed me in the ribs. "Drink up. I don't like the turn this conversation has taken."

"Aw, I just got comfortable," I said and gulped down my beer.

"We'll get comfortable some place else," said Goose, "where the smell isn't so bad. Come on."

He dug into his pocket for three dollar bills and threw them crumpled onto the bar in front of Johnny.

"We'll be back when you're in better spirits."

Johnny picked up the wadded bills and stuffed them into his apron. "Don't do me any favours."

I went over to the door to get my coat. Goose was behind me, putting on his guard's cap. In the corner, the two trend hounds were complaining about the shoddy workmanship of the darts they were being forced to play with. As we went out the door, Goose shouted "Assholes!" loud enough to make them turn around and glare. I could see Johnny over at the bar pinching and unpinching his lips.

It was cold outside and dark. I put on my woollen toque, and it was warm over my ears. Goose's plastic-brimmed cap barely covered the shaved sides of his head, so he turned up his collar and walked with his shoulders hunched against the frigid wind.

"You shouldn't have mouthed off like that to Johnny, you know," I said into a puff of steam as we hurried down Bank Street. "The Oak is one of the few places we're still allowed to drink in."

"He had it coming," said Goose, shivering. "Sometimes he gets a little too

big, know what I mean? Besides, I owe him money, and I didn't feel like paying up."

"Yeah," I said. "But still."

"But nothing," said Goose.

We walked together in silence past the burnt-out grocery and the old Bank Restaurant with its faded green and white awnings.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Who cares?" said Goose. "Let's just go."

"I have to work at six," I said. "It's already near one."

"Worry, worry, worry," said Goose.

"Look, would you please cool it with that worry stuff?" I said.

"Bellyache, bellyache, bellyache," said Goose with his chin to his chest.

"Hey," I said, stopping on the sidewalk, "if you don't knock it off, you can go wherever it is you're going by yourself. Okay?"

Goose turned and looked me straight in the eye.

"Fine," he said stonily. "See you around."

We stared at each other for several seconds. This was how things were with Goose and me. Sometimes he would forget that I was on his side. But then he would remember and apologize, and everything would be all right again. I waited.

Finally, Goose said "Come on," which was as good an apology as I was likely to get. I gave in

We walked shoulder to shoulder in the cold, past the all-night Lebanese pizza joint, toward the centre of town. Ahead of us, the Peace Tower did its shabby imitation of Big Ben, then announced the hour with a single flat bong like a death knell. All along the street the lights in the pubs started going out one by one.

"Drink up, gentlemen, it's time," said Goose into his collar.

"You know," I said, "when the revolution comes, we'll have to restore last call to the unwholesome hour of three."

"Why have any hour at all?" said Goose. "The whole point of anarchy is self-rule. Let the pubs close when they will, I say."

"There has to be some law."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Right. That kind of thinking made the Berlin Wall," said Goose. "No rules. No policy. No control."

"Yeah, but—"

"No buts either."

I did not pursue the issue further. Goose's bony shoulders were set solidly beneath the thick padding of his coat.

We stopped at the corner of Bank and Laurier to smoke cigarettes. Goose lit us both up, then undid his fly and pissed an encircled letter A into a snow bank by the window of a stereo shop.

"Hey, you got some on my foot," I said.

"Consider yourself baptized," said Goose, his cigarette clamped between his teeth. He shook himself off, then zipped up. "Jeez, that was cold."

We both stared at the anarchy symbol steaming in the strange yellow light of the street lamp arching over our heads. Then Goose did something I would not even have expected from him. He raised up his knee and straightened out his leg with enough violent force to send his booted foot through the stereo shop window. The glass shattered as easily as if it were thinly-sheeted ice over a black puddle. An alarm sounded, but Goose did not seem to notice. He carefully slapped the shards of glass from his pant leg with a gloved hand, then reached through the window and lifted out five medium-sized cardboard boxes, which he gave to me. He removed three more boxes for himself, and without a word he turned and ran down Laurier. Stunned, I stumbled after him. I heard a police siren somewhere behind me, but I was not thinking about what would happen if we were to get caught. Instead, I concentrated on keeping a fast but regular stride so that my lungs would not freeze. Goose's pace, however, became more frantic, and soon he had left me far behind. I saw him turn the corner onto Kent, but when I reached that corner myself he was gone.

When I finally got back home, panting and my heart ready to collapse against my ribs, I found Goose's coat and boots by the door and Goose sitting in our graffiti-scrawled kitchen making himself a cup of tea.

"There you are," he said, looking up from the table. "What kept you?"

"You son of a bitch," I said. "You dirty, lousy son of a bitch. That was the stupidest thing I think you've ever done."

"Tea?" Goose asked with mock sincerity. When I did not respond, he pulled out the tea bag that was in his cup and popped it into his mouth, leaving the string hanging from his thin lips. Then he started making little sucking noises. I ignored him.

"Did we at least get anything for our troubles?" I had dropped my boxes by Goose's coat and boots, and had not thought to check them for their contents.

"Mine had nothing in them," Goose said. He took the tea bag out of his mouth and threw it into the corner by the fridge. "Luck of the draw, I guess."

I swore and went to where the boxes were stacked in the hall by the door. I ripped each of the five cartons open, but they were all empty. I swore again, then went back to the kitchen.

"You mean we risked our necks for nothing?" I shouted. I could not believe this was happening.

"I suppose they were for display purposes only." Goose sipped at his tea. "Funny. I never stopped to wonder at how light they were when I was carrying them back here. Isn't that funny? I think it's funny."

"Hysterical."

"I ask you," said Goose, "what kind of a world is it when they keep empty

boxes in store windows? There's no trust anymore. It's lack of trust made the Berlin Wall, that's for sure."

I suddenly realized how tired I was. Excitement of the kind we had just experienced leaves you with nothing but a sleepy feeling. Also, it was very late.

"I'm going to bed."

"Bed? Bed?" said Goose, getting out of his chair. "Don't tell me you're tired. You can sleep tomorrow. I know where there's a shop with cameras in the window. No boxes. If the pigs didn't catch us the first time, they certainly won't get us now. Pigs are slow, stupid animals. So, are we on, O my brother?"

"Nope," I said. "You can have your revolution tonight without me." I turned and went down the hall to the bathroom.

"Aw, come on, old boy," I heard Goose call from the kitchen. "You know what they say about rolling stones."

"Yeah," I called back, "they play elevator music to sell-out audiences."

Goose was quiet.

I brushed my teeth, then took a whiz and went into my bedroom, closing the door. As I settled my head into my pillow, I heard the front door open and slam shut, and boots stomping down the creaky wooden stairs. Then I went to sleep.

In my sleep I dreamt I was running by myself through the snow, and the air was so cold my lungs burned, and then there was the sound of an alarm ringing, and I woke up and it was six o'clock and time for work.

I got slowly out of my bed and walked half asleep into the hall. I passed Goose's room on the way to the kitchen. The door was open and I looked in. Goose was snoring in bed in his guard's uniform. His arms stuck straight out and his hands dangled, limp, over the sides of the bed. Both of his hands had been cut badly and were now clotted with dark dried blood. His boots, which he was still wearing, were crusted with bits of glass. By the foot of his bed, in a jumble on the floor, lay three second-hand cameras.

I closed the door and went into the kitchen snapping on the light. Stupid, I thought, stupid. There was only one shop in all the city where we could pawn those cameras, and it had a hole in its window the size of Goose's boot.



## LAWN PARTY

They electrocuted Ed Bandy before dawn. Outside the prison there were more than a hundred people gathered in the dark. Their cars were parked on the neatly trimmed lawn of the prison. There were reporters and film crews standing on the lawn. Some of the people who had come to the execution carried placards that said *Feeling a little hot under the collar, Ed?* and *This jolt's for you, Ed.* Everyone was chanting "Burn, Bandy, Burn." They were all having a wonderful time.

A man being interviewed for the news said he was glad about the execution. "It's like farming," he said, trying to be profound. "You have to kill the bugs to keep 'em from eating your broccoli." One young man with spiked orange hair and an earring told a reporter that executions were murder, and murder was wrong. The other men in the crowd heard this and chased him away with the sticks from their placards.

The sun was showing red through the black clouds over the hills. When the

lights of the prison flickered and went out and then came back on, the men threw up their hats and the women lit a fire for the effigy they had made from clothes donated by the local Goodwill.

## **IN THE COUNTRY OF THE BLIND**

On his way to work, Finney was passed by someone in a car who leaned over in the driver's seat and shouted "Faggot!" through the open passenger window. Before he could respond, the car lurched forward and went squealing around the corner onto Queen Street.

Finney stood on the slushy sidewalk and watched it go. He did not have to look around to know that the other people on the sidewalk were staring at him. He clenched and unclenched his hands. His breathing was heavy and his face burned. When he resumed walking his mind raced over the many kinds of revenge he would exact if he ever saw that car again. The more satisfying mental scenarios he envisioned several times. The one he particularly liked involved a crowbar. But by the time he reached the smoke shop at the corner of Queen and Bank, he had decided to smash out the headlights of the car with the steel toes of his boots.

The bell above the smoke shop door jingled as he walked in. Roy looked up from behind the cash register.

"Hey, Finish," Roy called to him.

"Hey, Royal."

Finney went into the small storage room by the bookrack and hung his leather jacket on a peg over the stacked cigarette cartons. He reached up to put his lunch on the shelf where the boxes of candy bars were kept, and then he returned to the front.

Royal was looking at the shaved side of Finney's head. "You better take out your metal."

Finney's hand went up to his earlobe and felt the three gold hoops he had forgotten to remove before leaving for work.

"That explains it," he said.

"What?" Roy asked.

"Some fascist called me a fag this morning. From the safety of a moving vehicle, naturally. The coward. I'll get him."

"You do that," said Roy. "In the meantime, I'd take those earrings out. If the old man sees them, he'll have a fit."

"Is he here, yet?"

"No. He'll be in this afternoon."

Finney made a gesture with his fingers. "He can get stuffed. There are laws about that kind of thing. He can't fire me."

Roy raised his eyebrows. He sat down in a chair behind the cash register

and took out a cigarette and lit it. Then he picked up a folded copy of the *National Enquirer* and began to read. Finney went to rearrange the magazines on the stand across from the glass checkout counter.

"People think they know all about you from a few pieces of tin," said Finney as he worked. "Did you know Polish diplomats wear studs in their left ears as a sign of authority? No one calls them names about it, that's for sure."

"Where did you hear that?" said Roy into his paper.

"One of my professors told me. He said he'd get an earring himself, but it would be hard for him if he did. Departmental politics."

"Uh-huh."

"Yeah. Hey, have you seen the knife?"

"Here." Roy lifted a rusty paring knife from beside the cash register and held it out over the counter.

"Not so fast. Is it your turn to do the books, or mine?"

"Yours. I did them last week."

"I don't remember that."

"I tell you, I did."

"Okay, I'll do them. But I still don't remember."

Finney took the paring knife and went over to the book rack. He put the knife in his pocket and began to take down the paperback books that had not sold that week. He piled the books one on top of the other on the floor. When he was

finished, he took the knife out of his pocket and sliced off the front cover of each book. This was how the book returns were done. You only had to send back the cover for a refund. The rest of the book went into the trash. When Finney was first hired to work at the smoke shop, he thought this would be a good way to get books for free. But when he saw the novels that were sold there, the kind with embossed partially dressed lovers on the front, he decided that the garbage was really the best place for them.

"Here are the covers," Finney said to Roy. "I'll take the books out to the bin. Will you call the distributor to come?"

"Okay." Roy placed the thin stack of book covers on the counter and reached for the phone. "I'll ask him to bring more of those Harlequins. They sell quickly."

"Whatever," said Finney. He loaded the ruined paperbacks into his arms and went out the back door to the dumpster in the parking lot. When he returned, cold and rubbing his arms, Roy was leaning back in his chair with another tabloid.

"Why do you read that trash?" Finney asked, putting the knife back beside the cash register.

"It passes the time."

Finney walked over to the magazine stand and lifted out a copy of *Maclean's*. He tossed it fluttering onto the counter where Roy was sitting.

"There," he said. "Read that. Broaden your mind."

Roy did not look up. "My mind is as broad as I want it for now, thank you."

The bell above the door jingled, and a woman in a fur coat walked into the store. Finney looked at her. Roy put down his paper and got out of his chair. The woman went over to where Finney was standing and reached past him for a copy of *Vogue*. Then she took the magazine to the cash and dropped it bang on the glass counter in front of Roy.

"Will that be all?" Roy asked.

The woman opened her small black purse.

Roy rang in the sale. He took the money from the woman's gloved hand, counted out the change, and placed the coins in her narrow palm. The woman looked at him.

"Can I have a bag?" she said.

Roy blinked. "Yes, of course." He reached under the counter and brought out a brown paper bag. He slid the magazine into the bag, folded the top over, and handed it to the woman.

"Where's my receipt?" said the woman.

"This register doesn't provide receipts," Roy told her.

The woman gave him a fierce look, then clutched the bag to her chest and left the store. The door jingled shut behind her.

"Rich bitch," Finney called after her.

Roy said nothing. He sat down in his chair and picked up his paper.

"I'll bet she has razor blades up her slit. Boy, I hate people like that, don't you?"

Roy was reading.

"Do you know what your problem is?" said Finney. "You're too laid back. No one should have to take that stuff. At least, not for the lousy pay we're getting."

"What use is there in getting pissed off?" said Roy as he continued reading. "I have my dignity. And I can see by the way she treats people that she has none. So she makes herself feel big by trying to make me feel small. I pity her more than anything else."

"That's not the point," said Finney. "It's the principle of the thing. She treated you like that because she assumes that's what people in our position are for."

"Well, we can certainly see past that, can't we?" said Roy. He looked at his watch, then got out of his chair and went into the storage room. He returned with his lunch.

"You want to look after the cash while I eat this?"

"Sure."

Finney went around the side of the counter and sat down in Roy's chair. The seat was still warm. Roy placed two sandwiches wrapped in cellophane, a plastic container filled with stuffed olives in brine, and a stick of white cheese on the glass counter. He unwrapped one of the sandwiches and took a big bite.

"Wanna sanwish?" he asked with his mouth full.



"I got my own," said Finney.

Roy wedged the rest of the sandwich into his mouth and started chewing noisily. Finney could not stand watching Roy eat, so he turned away and stared out the wide plate-glass window at the busy street in front of the store. He could hear Roy making little grunting noises behind him.

Outside, many civil servants were pushing past each other on the slushy sidewalk. Finney checked his watch. Twelve on the nose, he thought. Right on time. The lunch rush would begin soon.

"Hurry up and eat," he said to Roy. "We're going to get busy any minute." He turned back to the window. "Look at those fools. They must wait by the door for the stroke of noon."

Roy said something Finney did not fully understand.

Through the window, Finney could see a well-dressed young man stepping carefully through the slush to the front door of the smoke shop. The man pushed the door open with a ring and came inside stamping his feet. He wore a portable cassette player with earphones strapped to the sides of his neatly combed head. He dug into the inside pocket of his trim blue coat and extracted a wallet, then walked up to the counter.

"White Owls please," he said much too loudly.

Annoyed, Finney reached for the cigars. He dropped the package on the counter.

"Anything else?"

"What?" the man half-yelled.

"Take your goddamned headphones off," Finney yelled back.

The man put his hand into his left front pocket and made something click.

"Sorry," he said. "I guess my music was too loud. What did you say?"

"Anything else?"

"No. That's it, thanks."

Finney rang in the sale.

"Say," said the man. "You'll probably get into this. Want to hear?" He peeled the earphones from his head and held them out to Finney. Finney backed away.

"Why would I want to listen to that?" he said.

The man seemed surprised. "Well, it's the Sex Pistols."

Finney raised his eyebrows. "Really?"

"Sure. You looked like a Pistols fan. Sorry."

"No. I love them," Finney said quickly.

"They're my favourites, too," said the man. "This is a bootleg tape I got from a friend in Montreal. Ripping stuff."

"Wow," said Finney.

"Look," said the man, "if you're interested, I could copy it for you. I have a dual tape drive at home."

"I'll bet you do," said Finney, then adding: "Sure. Why not?"

"Okay, I'll bring the tape in tomorrow."

"Okay."

The man put the package of cigars into his pocket. He replaced his earphones and turned for the door.

"See you tomorrow."

The man opened the door and went out onto the sloppy sidewalk. Finney watched him hop over a slush puddle, jog across the street and go into a government office building.

I'll be damned, Finney thought. I'll be damned straight to Hell. He turned around. Roy was giving him his patented You're-an-asshole look.

"Well, how about that?" he said.

Finney turned back to the cash.

"How about that, I said."

"Shut up."

"He has eyes, O Lord, but he does not see," Roy said to the ceiling.

"I said shut up."

"He has eyes," Roy kept on saying. "He has eyes, he has eyes, he has eyes."

## **PAIN KILLERS**

Outside the medical clinic it was dark, and a cold wind blew the dying leaves from the wildly bending trees. Two doctors sat across from each other in an office with a bottle of rye between them on the desk. The young doctor had his back to the wall and held his head with his hands. The old doctor sipped rye from a specimen jar. They spoke quietly because it was night and they were alone.

"Do you suppose she'll go to prison?" the young doctor asked. He was quite drunk.

"She's already in prison," came the answer.

The young doctor winced and rubbed his temples with the tips of his fingers.

"I know, but do you suppose she'll stay there?"

The old doctor said nothing.

"I tell you," said the young doctor, "I feel like hell about this whole thing."

"It's to be expected. Have some more rye."

"That won't help."

"It certainly won't hurt."

The young doctor shrugged. He clenched his fist around the neck of the bottle and tilted it up for a drink. When the old doctor saw this he said, "For God's sake, will you please take it in a glass like a civilized human being?"

"No glasses," said the young doctor between swallows.

"Use a specimen jar, like me."

"That's filthy."

"No, it isn't," said the old doctor. "The jars have been sterilized. Besides, that's good rye. You don't swig good rye from the bottle."

"Why not?"

"Because it isn't done." The old doctor stood up and went to the office's small dispensary for a specimen jar.

"Here," he said. "Use that."

The young doctor took hold of the jar and splashed rye into it. Then he and the old doctor drank together in silence for several minutes.

The wind rattled the window above the young doctor's head. The old doctor looked up. There were no curtains hanging over the black glass reflecting the lighted ceiling. He wondered about this. He had curtains for the window in his office. He liked curtains. They made things more comfortable, and they kept out the light. Sometimes in the morning the light was too painful on eyes that had

grown accustomed to the dark. He made a note to himself to ask his wife about curtains for his friend's window.

The young doctor put down his jar and held the bottle of rye up against the lamp light to consider it.

"My father gave me this bottle when I graduated," he said.

"It's good rye."

"He wanted me to toast him the day I quit my practice. He worked pretty damn hard so I could study medicine."

"It's really fine rye," the old doctor observed. "But I think you may be a bit premature about all this. There's no need to quit."

"There's a nurse in prison on my account," said the young doctor. "And what about my oath? I'd say there's reason enough to quit."

"Huh. You should hear yourself. You're talking complete rot."

"No I'm not."

"You're drunk and talking rot, I tell you."

"I'm not drunk enough," said the young doctor. "That's my problem."

"You haven't even thought this thing all the way through. You've got to at least think things through before you can make that kind of a decision. There's no easy road in this line of work."

"You sound like a commercial," said the young doctor.

"Maybe," said the old doctor. "But you have to make some damned lousy

decisions at times, and those are the ones that never work out right, no matter which way you go."

The young doctor laughed, then sipped some more of his rye.

"I don't think that applies to this particular situation."

"Well, maybe she'll be found innocent," said the old doctor. "What about that?"

"She is innocent," said the young doctor.

"Then there's nothing to worry about, is there? What did you use?"

The young doctor reached into the pocket of his lab coat and took out a small plastic bottle half filled with yellow pills. He held the bottle out over his desk. The old doctor looked down through his glasses to examine it.

"Phenobarbital," he noted. "Good choice."

The young doctor returned the bottle to his pocket and snorted, "Thanks."

"No, I mean it. They'll most likely conclude it was a suicide. You have nothing to worry about. She'll be set free for sure. They're probably only holding her as a formality, until they get things cleared up."

"You think so?"

"Absolutely."

The old doctor leaned back into his chair.

"At any rate," he said, "there's no need to quit. This whole thing will blow over eventually. In the meantime, you will just have to be hard about it."

"Hah."

"What's funny about that?"

"I'm not hard," said the young doctor.

"You'll have to make yourself hard."

"I can't. I'm not like you."

The old doctor took that as a compliment. To further illustrate his hardness, he pointed to the bottle on the desk and said, "The only difference between you and me is that, and a few more just like it."

The young doctor considered this for a moment.

"In Korea," the old doctor continued, "we had to do this sort of thing all the time. Did I tell you I was a medic? Yes? Well, anyway, there would be these chaps who would come in all blown to hell and screaming their bloody heads off. Now, most times we'd have supplies enough to save them. On the times when we didn't, all we could do was to make things comfortable for them as they died. That was when the bottles came in handy, let me tell you."

"Jesus," said the young doctor. "I don't want to hear your lousy war stories."

"It's the same thing for you now," said the old doctor.

"No, it isn't."

"I tell you, it is. There's nothing terrible done now that was never done worse in war."

"Look," the young doctor sighed, "could you please just stop talking about



your lousy war?"

"Well, there's no reason to be rude," said the old doctor, offended. "I was just trying to make you feel better. That sort of thing just isn't done."

"Christ," the young doctor said, exasperated. He took a sip from his drink and made a face. "Needs water."

He stood up to get some water but staggered sideways. His shoulder bumped the framed diploma that hung on the wall beside his desk, and it swung violently from its hook before settling at a tilt.

"Now look what you've done." The old doctor started to get up out of his chair to set the diploma straight.

"Leave it," said the young doctor as he went to the sink in his examination room. "I like it fine that way. Leave it the way it is."

While he was running water into his jar, the old doctor got up and fixed the diploma. When the young doctor came back into the room he did not notice. He sat down hard in his chair. He was very drunk.

"He begged me to give him the pills, you know," the young doctor said after a while. "What could I do?"

"Was he that hard up?"

"He was finished, absolutely finished. His leukaemia was pretty acute, but it was the bad blood from the transfusion that did him in. He said he couldn't go on living like a bloody leper because of it. He wanted to die with a bit of dignity."

The old doctor looked down into his drink and said nothing.

The young doctor reached into his pocket and touched the pill bottle. Then he took out his hand and lifted the jar of rye and water up for a sip.

"We have to do everything by the book," he said at last. "We have to fill out all the forms and follow all the routines and procedures. Just this once I wanted to really help someone. They tell us how to ease their suffering, but they never say anything about putting an end to it entirely. That's what we become doctors for, isn't it?"

The old doctor said nothing. He was looking into his drink.

"Anyway, he said he'd do it himself if I didn't help. I suggested he see a psychiatrist, but he refused. That's when I gave him the pills. I saw no other way."

The old doctor said nothing. He was looking into his drink.

"I saw no other way," the young doctor said again.

The old doctor looked at his friend and saw his suffering. The booze was not working, that much was obvious. Strange. It had always worked for him. There was the time in the war when that infantry chap had been brought in with most of his jaw and cheek gone. He was almost dead already, but not quite. The captain told them to lay the poor devil inside a bombed-out hut, and he had thought they were doing it to keep him protected from the debris that was being tossed up by the shells. But then the captain ordered them to get on with other business and went into the hut with his pistol drawn. The old doctor, who was then a young

medic, got drunk for three days after that on some rice wine he found in a crate on the back of an abandoned truck. When he was finished being drunk it was not so bad. Those bottles had certainly come in handy. He could not understand why the same thing was not happening here, with his friend. He had always suspected that young men were not as sturdy today as they had been during the war.

"Listen," he said impatiently, "you're just going to have to buck up about all this. It won't do for you to go around feeling miserable all the time. You have other people to tend to besides yourself."

The young doctor looked up angrily.

"Yes, well, it's easy enough to hand out advice along with the medicine, isn't it?" he said. "If you weren't so quick to anaesthetize yourself along with your patients, perhaps you'd feel a bit more compassion."

The old doctor knew what this meant. He stood up slowly and said, "I am going to drive you home now, Ben." He knew what it meant, all right.

"What's your hurry?" said the young doctor. "I was just about to toast my father. Be a good chap and stay to toast my father with me."

"No, Ben. I am going to take you home. You can sleep this whole thing out of your system."

"I don't want to sleep," the young doctor protested. "I want to toast my father. Be a good chap, old chap."

"No. Come on."

The old doctor helped his friend out of his chair and into his winter coat. Then he put on his own coat, and they left the clinic.

Outside in the parking lot it was cold and dark. The moon stared from the black sky like a blind eye. It lit the surrounding houses and the street, and cast long shadows. A street-cleaning vehicle was spraying water against the sidewalk as it slowly moved, but the wind was blowing too hard. Dead leaves and bits of paper swirled in the air, then settled back onto the pavement where the machine had just washed.

They drove without talking through town to the young doctor's apartment. The old doctor saw his friend inside and made sure he was comfortably in bed. Then he got back into his car and drove off to his own house.

On the way home he played the radio. The first station was news, some silly piece about a calf born with two heads. He turned to a station that had music. After a while he got tired, so he reached to turn the music off and drove the rest of the way in silence.

When the old doctor arrived home his wife was up waiting. She went to kiss him, then stopped and said, "You've been drinking."

"A bit, yes," he said. "I just had one glass of rye."

"With whom?" she said.

"No one," he said.

"Well, your dinner's in the oven," she said and went back into the kitchen.

"How was your day?"

"Long," he said. "It's good to be finally home." He hung his coat on a wire hanger in the hall closet.

"Poor dear," said his wife from the kitchen. "Would you like some tea with your meal? That will relax you."

"Not tonight," he said. "I'd much rather have a drink."

"Will a gin and tonic do?"

"No. I've been drinking rye. It isn't done to mix your drinks."

He heard his wife sigh from the kitchen.

The old doctor went into the kitchen and sat down at the dinner table. His wife placed a plate of hot pork chops, potatoes and peas in front of him, and he began to eat while she put some ice in a glass of rye. He ate the way the British eat. He took a little corner of meat on the end of his fork and then pasted some mashed potatoes and peas on top of it. When his wife was finished making his drink she brought it and the bottle of rye to the table. She sat down in the chair opposite his.

"It's a terrible thing what that nurse did at the hospital," she said. "I saw it on the news."

"It was a suicide," the doctor said between mouthfuls. "He took the pills himself. She had nothing to do with it."

"My, my."

"It happens," he said.

"Yes, I suppose. But it's really very sad."

"It happens," he said again.

The doctor took some more meat, potatoes and peas on the tip of his fork, and was about to put the fork in his mouth when he remembered to ask his wife about the curtains.

## POWER FAILURE

Finney was at the computer typing up his résumé for a job he saw in the paper, and Yvette was watching television in the living room, when the lights went out. You could hear everything shut down suddenly—the computer, the television, the fridge—and then it was very dark inside and quiet.

"Damn!" Finney thumped his fist down on the desk.

"*Ah, merde!*" said Yvette from the living room.

They waited silently in their dark apartment for several minutes. Most times it did not take long for the electricity to come back on. But nothing was happening now.

"I think it's going to be out for a while," Finney called to Yvette in the dark.

They waited some more.

"It's definitely out for a bit," Yvette called to him.

"Do we have candles?"

"I think so. I'll go see."

Finney heard Yvette get up off the couch and move slowly through the living room. Then he heard her flick the light switch in the kitchen. He shook his head.

"That won't do you much good," he yelled.

"Habit," Yvette yelled back.

Finney heard the kitchen cabinets being opened one by one, and Yvette rummaging around inside them. Then something heavy tumbled to the floor and smashed. Yvette let out a little scream.

"What was that?" Finney asked.

"A glass, I think."

"Be careful not to step in it."

"I can't see a damned thing," Yvette said angrily. "It's dark as a cave in here. Wait. I found a candle."

"Do you have a light?"

"No."

"My cigarettes are on the coffee table. Don't move. I'll get my matches."

"Okay."

Finney got up from the desk and used his hands to find his way out of the study and into the hall. He moved down the hall to the living room, groped in the dark for the coffee table, and knocked over a box of matches with the fingers of his right hand. He slid a match from the box and struck it. The living room lit up dimly with orange light. The furniture made huge moving shadows on the walls. He



could see Yvette standing in the kitchen with the candle in her hand. On the floor by her feet was their crystal vase, a wedding present, broken into thick pieces. Yvette looked down.

"Oh, perfect," she said. "My grandmother gave us that. It's an heirloom."

"It's garbage now," Finney said, moving towards the kitchen. "Stay where you are. Don't step in the glass."

Yvette held out the candle.

"Well, Diogenes," he joked, "You won't find too many honest men with this thing."

Yvette gave him a blank look. She had never taken classical literature, and Finney did not feel like explaining.

He touched the flame of his match to the candle's blackened wick and said, "Let there be light!"

The kitchen was weakly illuminated.

"Very funny," said Yvette. "Get the broom and the dustpan, and help me clean up this mess."

He waved the match out. Yvette placed the flickering candle on the kitchen table, then bent over and started to carefully pick up the larger pieces of the broken vase. Finney stepped over her and went to where the broom and dustpan were hanging on the wall by the fridge. He waited until she had cleared away the big chunks of crystal, then leaned over and brushed up the smaller shards. They

dropped their portions of the smashed vase into the trash.

"So much for that," Yvette said sadly.

"Nothing you can do about it now," Finney said.

"Maybe we can send the bill to the power company."

"I doubt it."

Yvette picked the candle up from the table, and Finney followed her into the living room. Giant furniture shapes fluttered against the walls. Yvette put the candle down on the coffee table. They sat together on the couch. The apartment was very quiet. Finney heard a car hiss by outside on the rainy street.

"Now what?" Yvette asked.

"I don't know," Finney replied.

They considered this for a moment.

The candle made a large patch of orange light around them in the living room. The hall was very dark, and so was the kitchen. There was the sound of a faucet dripping, but Finney could not tell if it was coming from the sink in the kitchen or from the sink in the bathroom down the hall.

"What were you watching on the television?" he asked Yvette after a while.

"A mystery," she said. "I wasn't really paying attention. I guess it wasn't very good."

"Why didn't you turn the TV off?"

"I don't know."

They were quiet again.

"I hope the electricity comes on soon," Finney said. "I have to send that résumé out tomorrow."

"Can't you write it by hand?" Yvette asked.

"Are you kidding?" he said. "They won't even look at it like that. It has to be done up nice."

"I see."

"I tell you, if this power failure ruins my chances at that job."

"It'll come on soon."

They sat on the couch, watching the candle sputter and the liquid wax roll down its opaque shaft to the wax-encrusted candle holder. Finney put his arm around Yvette's shoulders. He felt Yvette's hand on his thigh.

"People used to sit around fires and tell stories," Finney said. His eyes glazed over, and the flame at the tip of the candle went out of focus.

"I don't know anyone who has a fireplace," said Yvette quietly. She too was staring vacantly at the candlelight.

"I don't know anyone who can tell stories," Finney said. They both laughed at that.

"Well," said Yvette. "I don't even know anyone who reads stories. So there."

Finney laughed again. "Okay. You win."

"Do you know how to make hand shadows?" Yvette asked, looking at the

candle.

"No."

"Neither do I."

"Let's try."

"Okay."

Finney held both of his hands out in front of the candlelight and made a shape against the wall.

"What's that supposed to be?" said Yvette and laughed.

"A bird."

Finney arranged his fingers so that the shape on the wall sprouted wings and a sort of beak.

"Really? It doesn't look like any bird I've ever seen," she said.

"It's a Dodo."

"Dodos don't look like that."

"How do you know? Have you ever seen one?"

"I saw a drawing in a book once."

"All right, then. You do a shadow."

"Do I have to make a Dodo?"

"No. Make whatever you like."

Yvette put out her hands.

"That looks like a dog on its hind legs," Finney said.

"It's a man," said Yvette. She wiggled her middle finger. "See?"

"You're disgusting," he said.

They both laughed. Yvette returned her hand to his thigh.

"I guess what I need is a live model," she said. She looked directly into his eyes.

"Whatever could you mean?" Finney asked.

Yvette wiggled her eyebrows. Then she leaned over and kissed him full on the mouth. Her hand moved up his thigh. Finney put his left hand on her breast and squeezed it gently.

"Mmm," she said.

He squeezed her breast a little harder, but she took his hand away this time.

"You're not kneading bread, you know."

"Sorry," he said.

"That's okay. Come on. Let's go to bed."

"All right," Finney grinned.

They got up and went into their bedroom. Yvette set the candle on the night table by her side of the bed and started to undress. Finney took his clothes off too, and when they were naked they stepped up to each other and hugged. Yvette's flat belly was warm against his. They kissed again, and he passed his hand down her smooth back and over her bum. He started to squeeze the flesh of her buttock. Yvette pulled away from him and went to turn down the quilt. Then they

climbed into bed. Yvette lay her head back on the pillow and Finney kissed her. When he rolled over on top of her, the telephone in the living room rang.

"Jesus," said Yvette. "Every time. It never fails."

"At least we know the phones are still working," Finney laughed

The phone rang again.

"Don't answer it," said Yvette, tightening her bare arms around his neck.

"It's probably my mother, wondering if our power is out too." Finney slid free from her grasp. "This won't take long."

Yvette reached up and gave him a long tongue kiss as he got out of bed.

He said, "Hold that thought."

"Hurry back, big boy," Yvette said lasciviously.

The telephone rang once more, and Finney picked it up.

"Hello?"

There was no answer, but he could hear people yelling at the other end of the line.

"Hello?" Finney said again.

"Is this Saint Mary's emergency?" said an anxious-sounding woman's voice. By her accent Finney could tell she was an East Indian.

"No," he said. "I'm afraid you have the wrong—"

"This is a medical emergency," the woman said. "Please tell me what is the number I have called."

He told the woman their phone number. Then he added quickly, "If it's a medical emergency, call 911."

The commotion in the background grew louder.

"What? What?" said the woman.

"Call 911," Finney yelled.

"What's going on?" Yvette called from the bedroom.

There was more shouting in the phone. Then the woman said, "Oh, he is not breathing."

"Jesus," Finney said. "Lady, hang up and dial 911."

The woman began to make moaning sounds.

"What's wrong?" Yvette asked, her voice rising.

"Listen," Finney said firmly into the phone. "Calm down. Does anyone there know how to give mouth-to-mouth?"

"What?" said the woman's voice. "No. I—his face is turning blue."

"God," Finney said. "Give me your address. I'll call 911 for you. Do you hear me? Give me your address. Hello?"

The phone was dead.

He replaced the receiver very carefully. His whole body was trembling. He had to sit down. He sat down on the couch. He felt his heart slamming against his ribs. He took several deep breaths and his heart slowed a bit. He breathed deeply again. Soon his heart was beating almost normally, and his body trembled only a

little. He got up and went into the bedroom.

Yvette was sitting up in bed with her legs folded and the quilt spread across her lap. She looked afraid.

"Wrong number," Finney said.

He saw Yvette physically deflate.

"Jesus," she said, breathing hard, "I thought that was somebody we know. Who was it?"

"I don't know," Finney said. "A woman. An East Indian, I think. Someone was choking to death, or something. I don't know if she understood what I was telling her."

"Did she call 911?" Yvette lay back and sunk her head into her pillow.

"I don't know." Finney got into bed with his back to her. He pulled the quilt up over his shoulders and held it tight under his chin. "It's so damned frustrating, this not knowing."

"Maybe you should call 911 anyway."

"And tell them what?" Finney demanded. "They'll think I'm a crank."

"Maybe the phone company could trace the call," Yvette suggested. "They've got computers and stuff to do that."

"No," Finney said. "Impossible. They would have had to know before the call was made."

"Oh."



"It's useless." Finney's voice trembled.

He stared at the shadow he made against the wall. The candle flared up behind him, and his shadow grew smaller and smaller, then got bigger, and then very big, and then it became small again.

Yvette's hand touched his hip underneath the quilt.

"Don't," Finney said, irritated.

Yvette removed her hand and turned away from him in the bed.

"That's not what I meant," she said, offended. "I only wanted—"

But this, too, they did not finish.

## BEFORE DINNER

Kirsty worked in Radiology at St. Mary's. The walls of her small, dirty apartment were decorated with pictures of stillborn babies that she had snipped out of medical journals. There was one little boy who had no skull, so his head looked like butterscotch pudding in a plastic bag. Another had been born with his torso split open down the middle like a lobster cracked in half and waiting to be baked. A little girl with blond hair had her heart purple as a plum dangling on the outside of her chest. Kirsty called them her icons of the new age.

I felt vaguely nauseous looking at the pictures.

"It sort of makes you not want to have children," I said.

"Don't worry," said Kirsty. "These are the very, very rare ones. The ones who have been born ruined on the outside."

## **A FALLING OUT**

He fanned his face with the playing cards. It was too hot and humid in the kitchen. The girl would not let him open the windows because of the rain.

"I'm suffocating in here," he complained.

The girl said nothing. She stood at the kitchen window, watching the rain spot the glass and leave its milky stains. Through the window she could see rain clinging to the bare branches of the thin maple trees. It collected in black pools on the driveway where the paving had crumbled away. No children, home from school for the weekend, were outside playing in the puddles. No cats crouched under stairwells to keep from getting wet. At the corner, the traffic lights changed from green to yellow to red and then to green again, but the street was empty.

"How long will it last, do you think?" she asked.

"How should I know?" the man said irritably. The heat was affecting his temper.

"I wish it would stop."

"It'll stop when it stops."

*"Fatigant."*

"Anyway, it's your turn to play."

"I don't feel like it anymore."

"But the game isn't over."

The girl hesitated, but then she said "All right" and returned to the table.

"I can't stand this," the man breathed heavily. "I'm getting the fan. Finish your hand while I'm gone."

The girl picked up her cards and considered them silently. The man went into the bedroom and came back with the electric fan. He plugged it into the socket beneath the kitchen table and turned it on low.

"That should do the trick," he said, making adjustments so the draught would not blow the cards off the table.

The girl waited until the man was seated with his cards in his hand before she laid down three deuces and discarded a king. The man studied his cards quickly, then picked up the girl's discarded king and placed it on the table with two of his own kings.

"I win," he said. "Again."

The girl was silent.

"That was a careless move. You're really not paying attention."

He began to tally the scores with a pencil.

"I told you I didn't feel like playing," she said.

"That's no excuse for sloppiness," he said.

The girl threw down her cards and crossed her arms. "I don't care. I don't care about this stupid game. I don't want to play any more."

The man pretended to be calm. He slowly picked up the cards that she had thrown down, then leaned over in his chair to retrieve the ones that had fallen to the floor. He put them back into the deck and began to shuffle.

"One more game," he said.

"No," said the girl.

"It'll make you feel better."

"I said no."

"It'll help take your mind off things."

"If you ask me one more time, I'll hit you."

"Okay, okay," he said. "Jesus."

He shuffled the cards silently. The girl got up and went to the window. There were fresh stains on the glass where the rain had fallen. The sky was getting darker, and she could see some of her face reflected in the window. She looked at herself—the shaved head, the pale skin. She skimmed her palm over her stubbly scalp.

"I look like a concentration camp survivor," she said.

The man was not listening. He had started a game of solitaire, and was

tugging at one of his earrings as he considered his next move.

"I said I look like a concentration camp survivor." Louder this time.

The man's head came up.

"You look all right to me," he said.

"You think this face looks all right? I look terrible. Look at my face."

The man looked at the girl's face.

"You know," he said, "you're going to make yourself sick if you keep on like this."

She turned back to the window and looked at her reflection in the dark glass. "We're all sick," she said. "You're sick. I'm sick. The whole world is sick. Sick sick sick. It's like a disease no one can cure."

"My, we're cheerful today."

"Don't get snotty with me."

"I'm not getting snotty. All I'm saying is, you can't just stand there and worry all day long."

"I'll do what I want."

"Well, it's not good," said the man. "You should maybe play another game of cards. It'll make you stop worrying."

"Leave me alone," the girl said quietly.

"Fine. I'm leaving you alone."

The man went back to his game of solitaire. The girl went back to watching

the rain come down. The kitchen was very quiet, except for the rain patting against the glass, and the stiff, papery sound of the man flipping over his playing cards.

After a while the man cleared his throat and said, "What time is it?"

The girl checked her watch.

"Almost four."

The man laid down his cards and got up to fill the kettle for tea.

"You shouldn't do that," the girl warned.

"Do what?"

"You shouldn't make tea."

"I want tea. It's four o'clock."

"They said we shouldn't drink the water just yet. They said we should wait."

"Bullshit."

"They said it's bad."

"To hell with them," he said. "What do they know?"

"Well, I don't want tea," said the girl.

"I wasn't offering any. Besides, you're being ridiculous. You can't just cut out water because they said so."

"I will if I have to."

"Well, that's stupid. I'm having tea. You can have some or not, whatever you like."

He carried the kettle to the sink, ran tap water into it, and returned it to the

stove. He turned the element on and started to get things ready for the tea. As the element heated up, the kettle began to tick, and then it made a hissing sound like dead air on the radio.

"Are you sure you won't have any?"

The girl said nothing.

"I'll make a big pot, just in case."

He put two tea bags into the stained tea pot. Then he opened up the cupboard above the sink and brought out a bag of cinnamon-flavoured cookies. He put these, and two cups, on a plastic serving tray. The girl watched him do this. When she saw him take down the bag of cookies, she was reminded of something she wanted to say but forgot.

She said: "I wonder if the food will be safe to eat."

"Probably." He carefully picked up the tray and carried it to the table. "They said the food would be all right."

"Well, they don't know everything," said the girl. "Besides, maybe they're not telling the whole story. They never tell the whole story when things like this happen."

He stopped and looked at her severely.

"You're impossible," he said. "You're doing this deliberately."

"Doing what?"

"Jesus."



He set the tray down on the formica table top and sat down hard in his chair. Fishing a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, he slid a cigarette out of the pack, tapped it twice on the table, and put it in his mouth. He found his lighter in his other pocket and lit up.

The girl faked a cough and fanned the air in front of her face. The man ignored her. He smoked quietly as he waited for the water to come to a boil. When the girl saw that he was no longer paying attention to her, she turned back to the window.

"It's strange, isn't it?" she said, her head against the window frame, her breath steaming the glass. "It's strange how something like this can happen so far away, and now we can't go outside because it's raining."

She had wanted to say that for quite some time, and now there it was. She felt better, having said it, but she was afraid of what the man would say in return.

He blew smoke rings.

The girl turned, enraged.

"You're such a shit," she said. "You don't care about anything. You just sit there smoking your disgusting cigarettes and playing your stupid games, and you just don't care."

The man faked a surprised look.

"Will you listen to yourself?" he said in a calm voice. "You're talking complete nonsense. You should really hear yourself. It's nuts."

"You're the crazy one," said the girl.

"Really?" said the man. "Is that so? Listen. When it clears up we'll drive out to the country and see for ourselves just how much damage your radioactive rain has done. I can tell you right now, everything will be exactly the same as before, because we're not getting the worst of it. We're too far away. For God's sake, we're talking *Chernobyl* here, not Chalk River. They're just telling us to lay off the water to be on the safe side. Hell, I bet we could even get some fishing in. You always say fishing helps you to relax."

"Oh, come on," the girl gestured with her hands. "We haven't been able to eat those fish for years. We'd catch them and just throw them back."

"Huh," said the man, disgusted. "You're talking absolute nonsense. You should hear yourself. You and your doomsday gloom. Look, I'm dealing the cards. Let's play one more game and fuck all this crap."

The girl laughed. She looked at him and laughed again, shaking her head.

"You're incredible," she said. "Okay, let's play your stupid game. You win."

She went back to the table. As she sat down she said, "Maybe Nero had the right idea after all." He was the one who always said that. Now she was glad to be able to use it back at him.

He looked at her angrily. He was about to say something, but the kettle started to whistle sharply. He did not tell the girl what he was going to tell her, and he did not get up. He sat in his chair and considered the jet of near-transparent

steam as it rose up out of the kettle and into the humid air.

"Well?" she asked.

He stayed where he was.

"Shall we have some tea?" she prodded.

He stayed where he was.

"Let it boil," he said at last. "Let it boil longer."

## THE DUMP

A waitress with thick granny glasses and an orange nylon uniform sat smoking at a table by the door of the tavern. There were two old men in old brown clothes playing backgammon under a slate advertising Hot Chicken Sandwich \$3.75 in pink chalk. One man had rotten grey skin and the stump of a cigar hanging from his thin lips. The other was missing two fingers from his right hand; he used his thumb and ring-less ring finger to move the backgammon pieces around the board. The bartender leaned against the bar, watching a baseball game on the tube. I seated myself at a table in the far corner of the room. But the waitress stayed where she was, smoking. Either she didn't see me come in, or she figured it wasn't worth her while to serve me.

I was on my way to Montreal to see a man about hauling some barrels. There was an address written on a scrap of paper in my rig parked outside. I wasn't supposed to show until after midnight. It was now fifteen minutes to eight, which meant I had time for a few beers and a late supper. But the waitress wasn't

setting any speed records getting to me, and I had to hit the road before ten if I was going to make it in time to cut the deal.

Finally, I called out, "Hey, is this place open or what?"

The bartender glanced at me from across the room, then returned to his television. The waitress blew a lungful of smoke into the stale air, crushed out her cigarette, and came over with a note pad and pencil.

"Have you decided what you want, young fellow?" she asked.

"Service, for starters," I said, looking at a greasy menu. "I'll have a hot chicken sandwich for the main course."

The waitress snapped the gum she was chewing.

"That was Wednesday's special," she said flatly. "Today's is hamburger steak."

"You got hot chicken sandwich written on your board up there."

"No chalk to change it."

"Welcome to the Ritz," I mumbled loud enough for her to hear. "Okay, I'll take the hamburger steak."

"You want that with fries or mash?"

"Mash. What have you got on tap?"

"Blue "

"I'll have a Blue, then."

"Good choice."

I handed her back the menu. She turned towards the kitchen. I looked at her legs as she walked. They were white as the belly of a dead fish and striped with blue veins. What was it about dumps like this that attracted people like her? You could walk into any tavern in any small town in any corner of this lousy province, and you'd get the same stale smoke, the same varicose veins, and the same sour old men playing backgammon. That's one thing I learned about travelling. No matter where you go, it's always the same old shit.

The woman returned with my beer.

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

"Fine. What time does this place close?"

"Three-thirty."

"Good. I'll be pulling through here later tonight. I might want to stop in for a snack."

"Suit yourself."

She went over to the kitchen to see about my dinner. I checked my watch. Ten after eight. Not bad. I'd make it to Montreal with time to spare.

The hamburger steak, when it came, looked no worse than any other hamburger steak I had ever eaten—which is to say, it looked pretty awful. One fried-black patty floated in congealed axle grease, garnished with canned grey-green peas and an ice-cream scoop of starchy instant potatoes. I'd need another beer to choke this mess down.

"I'll have one more draft."

The waitress marked it up on my bill, then went to the bar. I started in on my hamburger steak. It tasted like dog food.

"How is it?" she asked when she returned.

"How do you think?" I said with a mouthful of mash. "Take my advice. Fire the chef."

"Funny," she said.

"Listen," I said between swallows, "I heard through a friend there's a ravine around here somewhere that's great for hiking. You know how I can get to it?"

"At this time of night?"

"The sun's not down yet. Besides, when you're on the road all day, you got to get your exercise when you can. My friend said there was quite a view."

The waitress looked at me through her granny glasses. I could see my face reflected in each of the thick lenses.

"Yeah, I been up there a couple of times myself," she said after a moment. "It's quite a view, all right."

"Good. Then you know how to get there."

"Yeah, what the hell. Okay, you take a left at the intersection and head out of town about three or four miles. When you come to a fork in the road, you go right and drive for a mile. The ravine's under an old covered bridge. You can't miss it." All this while indicating different spots on the food-flecked wall, as if they were

points on some yellowed map. Then she added, "All our water comes out of the river there."

"You don't say."

I'd stopped listening by that point. It was trouble enough just finishing my rotten meal.

"Bring me another beer, will you?" I said.

She left without saying a word.

I drank the last beer quickly to kill the taste the hamburger steak left in my mouth. The waitress gave me the bill and I paid up, leaving a fifty cent tip.

"Big-time spender," she said, pocketing the money. She went back to sit at her table by the door.

As I passed her to leave, she lit up a cigarette and said, "You'd be surprised how many truckers come through here looking for that ravine. The place is a real tourist attraction. A regular goddamned Niagara Falls."

I looked at her like a complete fool, not understanding a word she was saying, then pushed through the door into the cool of the evening.

It was spring, and there was that rotten smell you get when everything starts to thaw. Sort of like dog shit, only worse. An old pickup rattled past, its flatbed crammed with rusting machine parts. It grated to a stop at the intersection, turned left and rumbled away out of sight. I climbed into my rig, then backed it onto the road.



It wasn't until I'd got on the highway to Montreal that I figured out what she had meant about the ravine.

I shrugged my shoulders. What the hell, I thought. The job I was on was worth at least a couple of grand. It wouldn't hurt to stop by on my way back and leave her a better tip. Say, twenty or so. A little insurance in the form of filthy lucre.

## **SOME ENCHANTED EVENING**

We took the evening cruise down the St. Lawrence from the port in Old Montreal. Nat kept saying how romantic it was and how pretty the lights of the city were from out on the water with everything around us all black. It was cold, and she snuggled up close under my arm.

The cruise hostess began to speak into a microphone as we passed the old fort. She spoke in French, and I had to listen carefully to understand what she was saying. Finally, I stopped listening and leaned back to watch the spot light on the highest of the skyscrapers before us slice the darkly clouded sky like a huge sword.

That was when we felt the bump at the front of the boat and heard a bumping scraping sound go down along one side. Someone shouted from the pilot's cabin. Then a search light swung over our heads and stabbed at the black water, and we heard the hostess say a startled "O" into her microphone when everyone saw what it was.

It was floating belly up in the water. Its throat had been cut from ear to ear, and the face was white and surprised-looking, as if it had not expected to be found. Nat, being a nurse, didn't mind the look of it as the crew pulled it dripping on board, and I had seen enough mutilated bodies on the news not to be shocked.

I suppose this was true for the rest of the passengers as well, because by the time we docked there was a joke circulating about how we had gone out on a cruise and come back from a fishing trip.

## DESIRE

Neil stood at the top of the stairs, looking up. The neon sign sizzled in the cold night air. He checked the advertisement in the newspaper he was holding. He had the right address. The sign told him he was in the right place. But instead of a door there were stairs descending into darkness.

What the hell, he thought. He went down the stairs and found a metal door hidden in the shadows. With his hands he located a button to one side of the door frame. He pressed it and waited. Nothing happened. He pressed the button again. A panel in the door opened and a black man's face looked out.

"What?"

"Is this the Cabaret?"

"Who are you?"

Neil held up the newspaper.

"I'm looking for the Cabaret. This is your ad, isn't it?"

The black man glared at Neil, and the panel slid shut. Then there came the

sound of a heavy bolt shifting inside the door, and the door swung open.

Neil stepped inside, but the black man stopped him with a big pink palm.

Neil started.

"You have to tip me first," the man said.

"How much?" Neil asked, relieved. He reached for his wallet.

"Five bucks is good," said the man. "Ten is better."

Neil handed him a ten.

"Welcome." The black man grinned all white teeth.

Neil nodded, then stepped into the dark of the club. The black man closed the door behind him and heaved the bolt back into place.

The club was almost empty. Neil checked his watch. Ten after eight. He guessed it was still too early for a sizeable crowd. Music thudded loudly from the big stereo speakers that were bolted to the ceiling. Red, green and blue lights flashed over the stage where a tall, bored-looking woman in high heels strutted awkwardly in front of a small cluster of men seated in the dark. The bartender, who was dressed in a black tuxedo, talked into the ear of a blonde waitress. Several other waitresses smoked idly at a table by the bar, some adjusting the straps of their lingerie, some teasing their hair with small combs.

Neil selected a table at the far end of the club and sat down, draping his coat over the back of the chair opposite his. He spread his newspaper open on the table and looked at the ad for the Cabaret. There was a beautiful woman

dressed in a revealing swimsuit, and a thought bubble suspended above her darkly gleaming hair asked *Am I the girl of your dreams?*

Neil had noticed the ad one day among the other announcements in the Classified section. He had clipped it out and taped it to the wall over his bed, next to the magazine photo of the gleaming red sports car he wanted to buy. But when he realized that the woman in the ad was not making her way into his dreams, as had the car, he decided to visit the Cabaret and see her in person. He had never done anything like this before, and he did not know how to act. That was why he chose to sit away from the other men. He did not want to look as if he regularly associated with people of that sort. They were—what was the word?—unsophisticated. He wanted to look as if he were not with them. He wanted to look as if he had only stopped in for a drink and had become interested in the show.

He imagined himself in that role.

This seems like a nice enough place, he says, looking about him with approval. I suppose I could stay for just a little while. The waitresses smile as they walk past. They know he is different. They know he is not here to leer and make idiotic remarks. One even stops to talk. They become friends, exchange phone numbers, make promises to call each other soon.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Neil did not see the waitress come up to his table. "We're having a special now, until eight-thirty. Peach schnapps, three

bucks. Tequila Sunrises, four bucks." She snapped the gum she was chewing and waited for his answer.

"I'll have a beer," Neil said and smiled.

"We got Blue, Miller, Fifty, Black Label—"

"Blue," Neil cut her off. "Please."

The waitress snapped her gum a second time and turned for the bar. But Neil caught her by the arm before she could leave. She spun around, alarmed. Neil quickly removed his hand.

"Sorry," he said. Then, indicating the ad, "I just wanted to know if this girl actually works here."

The waitress glared at him, then turned and pointed. There was a black-haired woman performing a table dance for a bald-headed man in the corner. She was stunning in her tight-fitting red dress. Neil watched her as she snaked about the man, who sat transfixed in the dark.

"Is that the woman of your dreams?" the waitress asked nastily and laughed.

Neil grinned, and felt foolish for doing it.

"You and every other guy in this damned place," the waitress said and walked off.

Neil looked after her, then returned his attention to the beauty in the red dress.

The music stopped, and the tall, bored-looking woman collected her purse

and her clothing and stepped carefully from the stage. Scattered applause. The disk jockey invited the men in the audience to sample the club's wonderful peach schnapps, just three dollars, and the delicious Tequila Sunrises, only four dollars. Then he asked them to give a big hand for the very beautiful Tina, the beautiful Tina, gentlemen. Another woman clicked onto the stage in her heels, and a slow, seductive song swept from the sound system. The waitress returned with Neil's beer.

"You have a nice place here," Neil commended her, smiling, as he paid for the drink.

"It's okay," the waitress said between chews. She gave Neil his change. He handed her a good tip.

"Gee, thanks."

"Don't mention it."

"My name's Sheila. If you need anything else, just ask."

"Thanks, Sheila," Neil said. He returned his wallet to the pocket of his coat. The waitress went to serve another table. Neil smiled to himself. It always amazed him how a little money could melt the ice in any situation.

He sipped at his beer, watching the woman in the red dress dance for the bald-headed man. She had removed her top and was swinging her breasts close to the man's face. The man sat very still, as if afraid to move. Neil mocked him silently. He knew what to do with a woman like that.



He imagined himself as she presses closer. He looks deep into her eyes. He compliments her on her great beauty, her dazzling charm, her hypnotic grace. She blushes. He is the first man in some time to cause her to blush. She loses her cool professionalism and talks candidly with him. He is different, she says. Not like the other bums who come in here. What is he doing in this god-awful place? Just stopped in for a beer, he says, but I have to be going. I have a lot of work to do. He rises. Don't leave, she says, touching his hand. Stay for another dance. This one's on the house, but don't tell my manager. He'll kill me if he finds out.

More applause. The very beautiful Tina clicked off the stage in her heels, dragging a grey blanket behind her. The bald-headed man was counting out his money as the woman slipped back into her red dress. She pulled a strap over her shoulder and accepted the roll of bills, tossing her long brown hair from her face. She blew the man a kiss, turned, and glanced in Neil's direction.

Neil smiled. The woman smiled back. Neil waved her over. He saw her tuck her money into a small black purse and pick her way through the tables to where he was sitting. Neil straightened up in his chair.

"What are you doing all the way over here by yourself?" she asked as she sat down.

"Just stopped in for a beer," Neil said, grinning. "I don't like to sit with those other guys. They're too unsophisticated."

"Okay. You having fun tonight?"

"Sure."

"Got a smoke?"

"You bet."

Neil dug into his shirt pocket for a pack of cigarettes. He took one cigarette for the girl and one for himself, and lit them both up.

"Would you like me to dance for you?" she asked, blowing smoke up to the ceiling.

"How much?"

"Minimum five bucks."

"What do I get for five bucks?"

"One dance."

"What do I get for ten?"

"One very special dance."

"Here's twenty."

The woman looked at him. She took a drag from her cigarette, then crushed it out in Neil's ashtray. She stood. The disk jockey introduced the next act, a very lovely and talented Chantal who clambered drunkenly onto the stage with a beach ball and a bottle of tanning oil. Men with high voices began to sing about California girls. Neil's dancer started to sway slowly, ignoring the lively beat of the music. Then she leaned forward.

"What's your name, Honey?"

"Neil," he said, looking deep into her eyes.

"Hi, Neil I'm Desire."

"Is that your real name?"

"Tonight it is."

"It's pretty."

"Thank you, Neil. Do you think I have a beautiful body?"

"Sure."

"You have big shoulders. I love men with big shoulders."

Neil grinned.

"Would like to see my tits?"

Neil nodded.

Desire slowly peeled away the top of her dress. She licked her finger and traced a wet circle around one of her nipples. The saliva sparkled in the red light.

"What do you think?" she asked.

Neil looked at Desire's breasts.

"They're very nice."

The woman moved closer, swinging her hips seductively. She touched Neil's shoulder with her hand.

"Tell me about yourself, Neil."

Neil shrugged. He was trying to make up his mind what part of Desire he should look at.

"I work at the brewery," he said. "I hate my job."

"Who doesn't? Are you married?"

"No."

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"No. I used to, but it didn't work out."

"A handsome man like you without a girlfriend? I don't believe it."

Neil flushed. He was glad of the dark.

Desire moved closer and placed both hands on his shoulders. She lowered her head, and her thick hair tumbled into his face.

"Do I make you hot?" she whispered in his ear.

"Yes," Neil rasped. He breathed deeply. Her hair smelled like shampoo and cigarette smoke. He could feel her warm breath on his cheek.

"You have very sexy shoulders, Neil," she cooed. "I love men with sexy shoulders. Would you like to see more?"

"Yes."

Desire straightened herself and pushed her tight dress past her hips. It fell to the floor around her ankles. She kicked the material daintily away and turned to give Neil a good view of her bum.

"Do you think I have a nice ass?"

"Very."

"Or do you like my tits more?"

"I like your tits."

Desire turned around and swung her breasts close to Neil's face. Glancing over her bare shoulder, Neil could see the bald-headed man looking in his direction. Let him stare, he thought. I have her now, and there's more twenties where the first one came from. He returned his attention to Desire. She was now running her hands through her hair, and her eyes were closed.

"Jesus, you're beautiful," Neil said, watching her.

"Thank you, Neil," said the woman.

She leaned forward once again to whisper in his ear.

"I'll bet you'd really like to touch me. Would you like to touch my tits?"

"Yes."

"I'd love you to touch my tits. I'd love you to do it. Would you like that?"

This time, instead of answering, Neil cupped his hand around her firm, warm breast and turned his face up to kiss her.

Desire stumbled backwards.

"What the hell?" she said.

Neil pulled back, surprised.

"Jesus," she said angrily. "You guys are all the same. Twenty bucks ain't going to buy you that, you dirty fucker."

Before Neil could speak, the black man was standing before him.

"What's going on here?" he said threateningly.

"The guy thinks he's a fucking Romeo," Desire said quickly.

The black man turned his attention to Neil. "You know the rules, buddy," he said. "No touching."

"She asked me to," Neil said, scared.

"That's part of the routine, pal," the man said. "What'd you think?"

Desire was wriggling back into her dress. The black man motioned to another bouncer, a huge-shouldered man with short blond hair, who was standing in a dark corner. The bouncer stepped forward.

"Yes, sir?"

"Escort this bum to the front door," said the black man angrily. "See he doesn't get back in."

"Yes, sir. Come on, asshole." The bouncer seized Neil by the arm.

"My coat," Neil yelled, struggling.

"Fuck your coat, asshole. Out. Now."

The bouncer swept Neil to the door, swung the bolt open with one hand, and pushed him into the stairwell.

Neil picked himself up. The bouncer stood in the door with his arms folded.

"What am I supposed to do for a coat?" Neil pleaded. "It's freezing out here."

The bouncer shrugged his wide shoulders. "You're the big romantic," he said. "That hot blood of yours ought to keep you warm enough. Now fuck off, and

don't come back."

He slammed the door shut with a loud clank.

Neil stood staring at the closed door hidden in the shadows. He thought about calling the police so he could retrieve his coat, but decided against it. He did not want to make a scene. He turned and climbed the stairs to street level.

Standing under the club's electric sign as it popped and hummed in the cold night air, shivering and with his arms wrapped around himself for warmth, Neil spotted a cab and was about to flag it down when he realized his wallet was in his coat, and he had no money for the ride home.

## MAN AND WIFE

*There is nothing sure in this world.  
There is nothing pure in this world.*

Billy Idol

I was up waiting in the dark when Jenny got home.

"Hi," I said as she closed the front door. I must have frightened her, because she jumped when I spoke.

"What are you doing awake?" she demanded, then went quickly into the bathroom with her sports bag slung over her shoulder. The light in the bathroom went on.

"Can't sleep," I said. "Where the hell have you been? It's almost five."

"I got out late," she called. "I left my bike at the club and took a taxi home."

I heard water running in the sink.

"Did you fuck the cabbie again?" I asked her.



"What?"

"I said did you fuck the cabbie again."

Jenny came out into the hall with soap on her face.

"Please don't start, love. I've had a really long night, and I hate it when you start that."

"I'm not starting anything," I said sitting in the dark. "I just think that if you're going to act like a whore all the time, you should maybe charge like one. You're always giving your services away."

"You're really ugly when you're like this," was all she said. She went back to the sink to finish washing her face.

I turned on the light and looked through the television guide for something interesting to watch, though I was not really interested in television. The water stopped running and Jenny came out of the bathroom, her face scrubbed clean. She was a plain-looking woman without her makeup. Her skin was too pale, her eyebrows too thin, and her nose too big. But she had a good figure, and a remarkable aptitude for the bed.

She went into the kitchen and put the kettle on for tea.

"Want a cup?" she asked.

"No. The caffeine will keep me awake."

"Don't be silly. It'll relax you so you can sleep."

"I don't want one. Look, what took you so long to get home?"

"I told you. I got out late."

She reached for a coffee mug in the cupboard.

"I tried a new routine tonight," she said, changing the subject in her usual way. "Everyone said it was the best of all."

"Congratulations."

"My boss says I'm doing an excellent job. He's going to try and get me some contracts in Niagara Falls. There's lots of money to be made there."

"Wonderful."

"I also used that new outfit I bought yesterday. You know, the demi-cup with the lace. The guys were wild about it."

"Terrific."

"We'll be rich before you know it. Then we'll retire to the south of France."

"I thought we were going to retire to Italy," I said.

First it had been a log cabin in northern Quebec. Finally, I talked her into going to Spain. But she changed her mind and wanted to live in San Francisco. We had settled on Italy only last month.

"I've been thinking of France lately," Jenny answered. "It's so romantic there. And they have lots of nude beaches. You'll love it."

"I've had enough nudity for some time," I said sourly. "How much longer do you figure you'll need to do this?"

I don't know why I asked that question. I knew the answer. We had been

over this plenty of times before.

"Another couple of years," Jenny said, clinking a spoon against the sugar bowl. "We set a deadline. Remember?"

"And then we'll be finished with all this crap?"

"I suppose, yes."

"Good. Because I don't know how much more I can take."

Jenny came into the living room and leaned over to kiss me.

"You'll take all of it, love, because I'm going to make us rich, and you'll put up with anything for the money."

I watched her, hating her, as she carried her cup of tea to the sofa, sitting with her long legs folded beneath her. I hated that she thought she knew me well enough to say something like that. I hated that she knew she could get away with saying it. But most of all, I hated that she was right.

"I forgot to tell you," she said, sipping her tea, oblivious to my black stare, "there was the saddest man in the audience tonight."

"Why?"

"I'll get to that in a minute. I noticed him all alone in a corner while I was doing my first set. He was very old, probably fifty, and he was sitting by himself in the dark, drinking. Anyway, I went up to his table after I finished and asked if he was having a good time. He said yes, he was having a wonderful time, and he thought I was a terrific dancer. Isn't that nice? So I said why are you sitting here

by yourself. And he said his wife had just died, and that the funeral was yesterday, and he was trying to drink away the pain of losing her. Isn't that the saddest thing you've ever heard? I could have cried."

I rolled my eyes.

"What?" she asked. "Why are you pulling such a face?"

"For God's sake, are you that naive?" I said. "He was just throwing you a line to see what he could hook."

Jenny looked offended.

"No, he wasn't," she said defensively. "He was absolutely stricken with grief."

"How could you tell?"

"I could see it in his eyes. There was such pain in them."

"He's probably used that pitch in every strip club in the city," I said. "You were a fool to fall for it."

"Don't be mean. He said he'd been married for twenty-seven years. It was a heart attack. She died very suddenly."

"So why was he in a strip club, instead of in a bar?"

"I don't know. Maybe he just wanted to talk to someone who would listen. I hear men's problems all the time."

"I'll bet you do."

"Don't start."

"And I suppose you gave him a table dance at a reduced rate."

"No."

"No?"

"I gave it to him for free," she said quietly. Then she added, "He said I reminded him of his wife. He offered to pay, but I refused."

"You have a soft heart," I said. "And you're a bloody fool for believing that sappy story."

Jenny thought about this for a moment. Then a genuine sadness passed over her plain face.

"What's the matter?" I asked, not really concerned.

"I was just thinking what would you do if we were married twenty-seven years and I died suddenly."

I flipped a page in the television guide and pretended to be interested in one of its listings.

"First of all," I said, "no one stays married for twenty-seven years any more. And even if we did stick it out that long, the last thing I would do is head straight for the nearest strip club."

"Why?"

"Because it's perverse."

"It is not," Jenny said angrily. "I honestly think he didn't know where he was or what he was doing. He looked so helpless sitting there by himself. And you're mean to say such a thing. He was a very kind and gentle man."

I was watching Jenny's face closely as she spoke. I had learned to read her expressions over the years, because I knew I never got the whole story, even when she was telling me the truth. There was something about what she was not saying, and the way she was not looking at me, that made me suspicious. Then I realized what it was.

"You fucked him, didn't you?" I said.

Jenny got up off the couch and went quickly to the kitchen to toss her tea into the sink.

"I hate it when you use that word," she said. "It's filthy."

"Answer me. You fucked him, didn't you?"

"Does it really matter what I say?" she asked, trying to shift the blame to me, as she usually did when she was found out. "You've obviously made up your mind about the subject." She put her fists on her hips and glared at me indignantly.

"Jenny, I'm going to ask you once more."

"Yes, yes," she suddenly exploded. "I fucked him. Okay? I fucked him in the back seat of the cab. And do you know what? It was very a nice fuck. It was the nicest fuck I've had in a long time."

I sat in my chair and stared at her silently for several seconds. She had her fists on her hips, but she was looking at the floor.

"If it's any consolation," she said slowly and angrily, "I charged him. Here's the goddamned money."

She dug into the pocket of her jeans and took out a roll of bills. Then she threw the roll onto my lap and stormed into the bedroom slamming the door. I picked up the money and counted it. She couldn't have charged him much, I thought. There was no more than what she usually made dancing at tables at the club.

I put the money in my pocket. I would deposit it in the morning, in a special account I opened the day before while Jenny was busy shopping for that new outfit.

I reached to turn off the light. In the dark I sat thinking about the old man who said his wife had died, and how I'd probably be able to leave Jenny before our two-year deadline was up.

## THE NEOPRIMITIVIST

I had dinner with him the night he returned from Alberta. He went out West, he told me, on a thirteen-week government contract planting trees. But it wasn't the job made him go there: I knew that much about him. He loved to travel, and he only worked in one place long enough to buy his passage to some place else. He had already hiked throughout much of the world, and had thumbed his way across the country four times. In the ten years since we'd lived together, I had run into him on perhaps a dozen different occasions, and while I no longer missed his company I nevertheless seized the opportunity to visit with him that one evening.

He enjoyed the thirteen weeks he'd spent living in the bush. He said he had become interested in neoprimitivism there. He was a very charming and likeable person, and was always latching onto something to give his life meaning, having no other interests except travel and loud music, so I did not laugh when he explained this to me. I remembered when he became a hippie right at the end of the counter culture movement, and later a punk when it looked as if the anarchists



in Britain were going to set off the world revolution. So I did not think it strange that he would proclaim himself a neoprimitivist, since neoprimitivism as a philosophy was becoming quite popular among many people our age, and there was already a book out on it.

After our dinner he showed me his tattoos. He started by taking off his shirt. His arms and back were ringed with intricate, abstract designs drawn in black ink. He said he got them at a tattooist called the Flying Dutchman in Victoria. They cost most of what he had earned planting trees. Some of the rings were so fresh they still were sealed with hard black scabs. He pointed them out to me.

"This one is a Haida tribal pattern," he said. "It's composed of sun symbols, each representing a different phase of the sun."

"And that?" I asked, indicating a beautifully drawn whorl on his right shoulder.

"I don't know," he said. "It looked good, so I had the Dutchman throw it in cheap. He didn't mind. I was getting a lot of work done."

I asked him to explain neoprimitivist philosophy to me. I did not know much about it, though I was familiar with the customs of tattooing, scarification, and the piercing of nipples, labia and penises with sharp metal studs.

"It's not so much a philosophy as it is a way of life," he explained. "It's about getting back to simple things. We reject technology and the complicated way in which people must organize their lives to service it."

I did not say anything, though I was very conscious of my television set, which occupied a conspicuous space in my living room.

"What about the eating of meat?" I asked.

"We're very much for that," he said.

"That's a funny thing to say, coming from an ex-vegetarian."

He raised his eyebrows. "I saw the error of my ways. Humans are omnivores. There can be no denying that fact."

"I see. And the scars and the piercing? Is this necessary, or do you simply proclaim yourself a neoprimitivist, as you would to become a muslim?"

I was having him on, but he took my question seriously. He told me he didn't know, but he would check up on it. He had left his copy of the book at a friend's place in Montreal.

"You haven't pierced yourself, have you?"

"As a matter of fact," he said.

"No!" I said incredulously.

"It was an interesting experience," he said.

I asked him what he had pierced, and he showed me.

Later, when we were both dressed, I told him his stud was indeed an interesting experience, and he laughed.

When I saw him to the door and said good-bye, it was the same as it always was for us. He turned his back to me, our visit already relegated to the

memorable past, and walked down my street until the night sealed itself around him.

The last I heard of him was when he called from a hospital in Vancouver. He did not explain what was wrong, but it had something to do with a tattooist in Montreal who had not properly sterilized his needles.

## **MY TRIP TO NEW YORK**

The first bullet whistled up into the air. The second drilled into the side of a building, spraying chips of brick. The third struck a little girl in a stroller. People started to shout and run for cover.

The police fired back, killing two of the men. The last man stumbled out with his hands up high. He tossed a suitcase clattering into the street. One cop rushed over and threw him to the ground and pressed a shotgun barrel to his temple. Everyone was screaming.

I saw the mother kneel and gently wipe blood off her daughter's face.

By the time a doctor arrived to give her a shot, she had run out of Kleenex and was using the sleeves of her shirt.

## SOONER OR LATER

*It's just another movie, another song and dance,  
another poor sucker who never had a chance.  
It's just another captain going down with his ship,  
just another jerk taking pride in his work.*

Timbuk 3

At the employment office there was a man I had never seen before. His clothes were worn and faded, and his hair was white, though his face did not look old. He carried a small pad of paper and a pen for writing down the addresses and telephone numbers of jobs posted on the job board. Except there were no jobs. There had been none for almost a week.

The people I knew as regulars shuffled idly about the office. Many of them were on a first-name basis with each other and the counsellors. They were the ones who came in the morning, though it made no real difference if they reported at nine or at noon. There were no jobs at any time of the day. They just came in

to drink coffee and eat cookies because these things were free, and were the government's reward, I suppose, for getting up to look for work.

The man stepped behind me and stopped. I could hear him breathe. The rubber soles of his shoes squeaked on the scuffed linoleum.

"Pretty shabby pickings," I said over my shoulder, then turned. He glanced at me.

"It sure seems like it," he said. He was trying to be polite, but he looked at me the way older people do when they meet people my age who are without work.

"I've never been able to understand why they call this place Employment and Immigration," I said. "If you ask me, it's more like Unemployment and Homelessness."

"Is it always this bad?"

"Lately, yeah."

The man turned his attention to the board behind me.

"Nothing. I checked already."

He looked anyway. There were two slips of paper pinned up with thumbtacks. One was for a cocktail waitress, minimum wage plus tips. The other was for a receptionist at some health spa, five-fifty an hour, bilingualism required.

The man sighed and stared down at the floor where his feet were standing in their worn-out sneakers.

"Welcome to the wonderful world of unemployment," I said.

"Thanks." He smiled slightly and scratched the back of his head. His scalp was pink under his white hair. "I guess I'm pretty new to all this."

"You'll get used to it. Reporting here every morning becomes a ritual after a while. Still, it's more productive than standing in the soup lines."

"The soup lines have their own value," he said, scanning the other boards. "But I'm not that desperate. Yet."

"You'd be surprised what desperation can make you do."

He slipped the pad of paper and the pen into a pocket of his jacket and looked at me.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. It's just that sooner or later you get desperate enough to do almost anything."

"Oh. Yes, I suppose that's true."

"You just get laid off?" changing the subject.

"Three days ago," he said.

"I thought so. You look pretty green. Applied for pogeys yet?"

"That was the first thing they made me do."

"Good. Who's your counsellor?"

"Ingrid."

"Ah, the ice maiden. She's okay, but frigid as a witch's tit."

He laughed very shyly. "I know what you mean."

"Where did you work?"

"The Vilas plant."

They made hand-crafted colonial furniture there, and I could see he was proud to tell me this.

"Thirty-three years," he continued, "turning wood into beautiful things with these two hands. Look at these scars." He held out his palms. "They come from working hard all your life. My father used to say those were the marks of an honest man. Now they've decided it's cheaper to automate, and I'm out of a job. What do you suppose that makes me?"

I shrugged. I had heard this hard-luck song a thousand times before, and though the words were always different the tune stayed the same.

"Have you thought of retraining?"

"You mean, like one of those computer courses?"

"Yeah. The government has some pretty good programs, if you don't mind being a drudge for a living."

The man shifted on his feet. "I took computer basics at some high school last year. You know, for fun. When it came time to print what I had written, the machine just kept typing my name and then crossing it out. I figured it was a bad sign."

I laughed. "The gods of technology frown upon the computer-illiterate."

The man tried to smile, but I could see he did not fully understand me.



"Anyway," he went on, "what good is retraining to someone like me? I am fifty-two years old. No one needs a middle-aged man who makes furniture."

"No one needs a young man with an arts degree," I countered. "My mother always said I should have taken business."

"The world doesn't need any more businessmen."

"No. You're right. But does it need furniture makers and art history majors? There's the question."

"There it is, all right."

We stood silently for a while. It looked to me as if our conversation had run its course. But there was something about the man that made me not want to give up. Maybe it was his eyes. He had the nicest eyes, a deep baby blue.

"Listen," I suggested, "there's no point in standing around here all morning. My poguey cheque came in yesterday, so I've got money. Let's go get a drink. My treat."

"It's too early for liquor."

"Well, it's got to be last call somewhere. Come on. Let me buy you one for the road."

"I can't drink away your money, son."

"Nonsense." I clapped him on the shoulder. "I'd just spend it on food. Besides, misery loves company. Let's go."

"All right," he grinned. "But I'll pay for myself."

"We'll negotiate later. I know a great place near here. Two for one on beer, all day long. You couldn't beat that price with a stick."

"No, I guess you couldn't."

He followed me to the coatrack by the refreshments table. I reached for my leather jacket, then swiped a handful of oatmeal cookies from the box next to the coffee machine. I put one of the cookies in my mouth and slipped the jacket over my arms.

"Hey, Marc," I called, the cookie clamped between my teeth.

One of the counsellors looked up from behind his counter, where he was filling out a form.

"These oatmeal cookies suck. Tomorrow, how about some chocolate chip?"

Marc smiled and waved.

The man was waiting for me at the door to the lobby. I joined him, and we walked together through the lobby and out the revolving door into the cold. The sun was brilliant coming up over the tops of the ice-capped skyscrapers. I shaded my eyes against it.

"Which way?" asked the man, his breath steaming in the frigid air.

"Up the street," I pointed. "It's only a few blocks."

"Do you think they'll be serving food at this hour? I haven't had breakfast."

"I'll ask Johnny when we get there. The kitchen opens pretty early. They cater to people like us in the morning."

The man said "People like us" or something in a low voice. I didn't quite hear him.

We started down the wide sidewalk. People in identical trim suits and overcoats hurried past us. The traffic was heavy going into the centre of town.

"You seem to know your way around that office," said the man. He had to shout over the roar of a bus.

"I go in every morning around this time," I shouted back. "The best pickings are in the morning."

"It didn't seem that way to me."

"It depends on what you're looking for. Anyway, things are bad these days. It usually goes in cycles, though. Some months are good. Some aren't so good. After a while, it becomes a pretty familiar pattern. I've gotten so that I can almost pinpoint the periods when it's going to be bad. But don't ask me why I keep going in. I guess I've gotten into a kind of habit. It gives me a reason to get out of bed."

The man looked at me quickly, his shoulders hunched against the cold.

"I know what you mean. I did the six o'clock shift for twenty-seven years. I don't think I could ever get used to waking up past seven."

"How did you get into furniture making?" I asked.

"My father made furniture," he said. "At Vilas. His father taught him, and he taught me."

"Wow," I said. "That's pretty rare."

"He said there would always be a market for hand-made furniture. He said no two pieces ever came out exactly the same, and that's what made them special. Like paintings, or sculptures. In his time, furniture made on the assembly line was considered poor taste. These days, everyone thinks it's best to have the same make and model as everyone else. Even the rich. Especially the rich. And they're supposed to know better."

"Go figure," I said.

"You would have liked him, my father." Smiling as he remembered. "He was one in a million."

"My dad was a salesman or something," I said. "I think he sold car parts."

"You don't know?" The man seemed shocked.

"He was always away," I explained. "I left home pretty early. I haven't been back in a long time. I get letters from my mom every now and again. She doesn't mention him."

"I see," said the man.

The next block over we passed a kid leaning against a stone wall that used to be part of an old building, probably a church. The man looked at him carefully as we walked. The kid was maybe ten years old. Under his open jacket he was wearing a Sex Pistols T-shirt that had two buses with Nowhere and Boredom written on their destination plates. The man shook his head. He was obviously disgusted at the sight. But I had to smile. I had owned a shirt like that when I was

the kid's age, or perhaps a little older. When the shirt had become too worn to wear, I cut out the buses with a razor blade and used the swatch as a snot rag.

"Here we are," I indicated after we had walked a little further. We were standing outside a small, time-blackened brick building with flaking green trim and wide plate glass windows.

"After you," the man said quietly.

I pushed inside and he followed, holding the heavy wooden door open over my head with his big scarred hand.

It was dark inside the pub, and quiet. Johnny was in a chair tipped back against the wall behind the bar. He looked up from his newspaper as we came in. Several of the regulars seated at tables waved to me without energy. I nodded in their direction.

"What do you say, John?" I called. We hung up our coats and went over to sit at the bar.

Johnny folded the newspaper and smiled. When he noticed my companion his face changed.

"Another victim?" he asked tragically.

"Fresh from the trenches," I said. "I'm giving him survival lessons."

"Old Fin is always bringing 'em in," Johnny said to the man. He got up and extended his hand. "I didn't get your name."

"Bob Enright," said the man. They shook.

"Sorry about your recent misfortune, Bob. It's a troubled world we live in."

"Bob used to work at Vilas," I said.

"No kidding?" said Johnny. "Jeez, you probably made some of this stuff. It's all Vilas. Rickety as hell, but cheaper than a tart's underwear."

Bob's face was set funny.

"Let me get you a beer, Bob. On the house." Johnny reached under the bar.

"A fresh victim always gets his first round free. That's my policy. Just ask Fin."

I watched Bob watch Johnny as he poured the cold yellow beer foaming into a pilsner glass. Some of the white foam slopped over the top of the glass and spattered on the floor. Johnny put the glass on a pad and slid it to where my new friend was sitting.

"Down the hatch, Bob. A round a day keeps the depression away."

I laughed. Johnny had said that to me when I first came into the Oak. He said it to everyone. But it always made me laugh.

Bob looked at the glass of beer. His face was still set funny.

"One for you, Fin?" Johnny said cheerfully.

"Of course." I licked my finger and reached for one of the pads. They were stacked next to the bowl of cherries.

Johnny poured the beer and handed it to me. I was just going to ask him about some breakfast when Bob stood up suddenly and went for the door.

"What's wrong?" I asked, surprised.

"I'm sorry, son," Bob said as he put on his coat. "I just can't do this."

"Do what?" I said.

Johnny was standing quietly, looking back and forth between the two of us.

"This just isn't my way," Bob said. "When I had work, I was the first in on my shift and the last to leave."

"And look what it's gotten you," I said. "Come on. There's no shame in one little drink."

"No, there isn't, you're right. But my experience has been that one drink very easily becomes two drinks, which too easily becomes a pattern. Believe me, son, I'm tempted. But I just haven't got the time. I've got a wife, and kids. I'm sorry."

He nodded to Johnny and pushed through the door. I saw him, hands in his pockets, on the sidewalk through the plate glass window. He turned and headed in the direction of the employment office.

I shrugged my shoulders and went back to my beer. Johnny looked at me from across the bar.

"Almost had him," he said quietly as he wiped the wood surface of the bar with an old rag.

I said nothing.

"What's the matter? Losing your touch?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

"Nothing. He just didn't want a beer."

"Looked more like an attack of the guilts. You could have tried harder to get him to stay."

"So he left," I said. "Big deal. You don't have to be an asshole about it."

"Watch it," Johnny warned.

"Jesus," I mumbled, "sometimes I expect little horns to pop out of your head, you old fart."

Johnny looked up from his cleaning. "What can I tell you? A recession's always good for business. Besides, I haven't heard you complaining about the work."

"That doesn't mean I feel right about the way we do things."

"Look, you just keep your mind on the job. It's a bloody good thing for you they're not all like your friend, Mr. Upright."

"He'll come around," I said. I took a sip of my beer. "I've handled a thousand just like him. Sooner or later, they always come around."

"That's better," Johnny said. He folded the white rag and put it under the bar. "That's how I like my little missionary to talk."

"Don't call me that."

"My little missionary." Laughing.

"Shut up!"



He was about to say it again, but I shot him a look of such pure venom that he closed his ugly trap and went back to his cleaning.

## IN THE MEANTIME

"The weather report said it was going to be nice." Joe, worried, stood at the window. "You should see it out there."

Snow blew in huge gusts from the grey sky. It drifted solidly over the window ledges and clung in clumps to the windward halves of the bending trees. Someone in a long black coat leaned hard against the driving snow, breathing a trail of steam into the frigid wind.

Marie made a noise from the bedroom.

"What was that?" Joe called to her.

"Nothing. Just a twinge," Marie called back. "I'm through packing. My back hurt when I tried to lift the suitcase."

"Well, be careful."

Joe heard Marie sigh. Then she said, "Will you ring for a cab? It'll take twice as long to get here in this storm."

"Okay."

Joe found the yellow pages and sat down in the brocade chair by the telephone. He opened the directory to "T" and flipped through to the Taxi section.

"Rose Cab is good, isn't it?" he asked, locating the advertisement on the page with his finger.

"It's fast," Marie said tiredly from the bedroom. "But they keep their cars in horrible condition. The last one I was in smelled like a barn."

"I'll take speed over stench any day," said Joe. He dialed the number printed on the ad.

Marie carried the suitcase with both hands into the living room and dropped it heavily on the floor next to Joe's chair. She went over to sit on the couch. Joe looked at the bag, and then he looked at his wife.

"You should have said if you needed help, you know."

Marie said nothing.

Joe began to speak into the phone. Marie put her feet up on the couch and worried about the storm. It was a Saturday. The roads would not be ploughed until Monday morning. How could they expect to arrive anywhere on time with so much snow on the roads?

"And an extra ten if you can get a car here within fifteen minutes," Joe said. He returned the receiver to its cradle.

Marie looked at him.

"He said all the cabs are delayed by half an hour," Joe explained. "I offered

a little incentive."

"We can't afford ten dollars," said Marie. "We can't even afford the cab."

"Well, we certainly can't walk there. It's too far."

Joe leaned back in the brocade chair and massaged the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. He felt a dull ache behind his eyes.

"I'm getting one of those headaches", he said. "I can feel it coming. It would have to snow today, wouldn't it?"

Marie sighed. "We really didn't plan this very well."

Joe said nothing. He stared up at the paint flaking from the ceiling. There were old cobwebs thickened with dust in the corner where the ceiling met the wall. Funny how he'd never noticed these things before. He would have to clean and paint sometime in the spring.

Marie looked at her feet in their dirty white socks at the end of the couch.

"Do you think we're doing the right thing?" she asked.

"It's a little late to be asking that," Joe muttered, his head against the back of the chair.

"I mean, you don't even have a job," Marie continued. "You promised me you'd have one by now."

"I did not," Joe said sharply. "What I said was not to expect much. Teaching is hard to get into these days. You knew that from the beginning. And don't say you didn't."

"That's not true," Marie remembered. "You said if you did enough substitute teaching, something permanent would come up."

"I never said that."

"Yes, you did."

"Look, I should know what I said."

"You always do this," said Marie, "say something and then contradict it later. You have such a selective memory when it suits you."

"Bullshit." Joe's head was starting to throb. "I can remember things perfectly well. You're the one who revises everything I say."

"Oh, stop. I'm really not in the mood for one of your episodes."

"Like the time I told you there was no milk in the fridge," Joe said, ignoring her, "and when I got back from work you still hadn't bought any, and you told me that I said I was going to pick some up on the way home."

"Here we go with that again. You always have to bring that up."

"Just to illustrate a point."

"You're so childish sometimes."

Joe's face flushed. "I hate it when you call me that." His voice tight with rage.

"Then don't act like a child," Marie said evenly. "You're a very childish person. Especially when we argue. That's when you get your most childish."

Joe was furious. He wanted to yell and pick up the coffee table and smash

it on the floor. Instead, he leaned his head against the back of the brocade chair and resumed massaging the bridge of his nose.

Marie looked at him and began to feel badly. She knew he hated to be called names.

"I didn't mean for this to get out of hand," she said softly. "All I'm saying is, we didn't think things through carefully enough. That's all."

"Just leave me the *fuck* alone!" Joe yelled.

Marie began to cry silently. At first, Joe did not hear her. But when she sniffled he looked up and his anger drained from him instantly. He got out of his chair and went to the couch to sit with his wife.

"Don't cry," he said, touching her cheek. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been so stupid."

"Oh Joe," Marie said miserably.

She leaned to him and wept against his chest.

"What are we going to do? We've got this lousy little place, and there's not even a proper bed."

"Look," Joe said gently. He stroked her dark hair. "No one gave us any guarantees, you know. Things aren't like they used to be. You can't expect anything to come easily any more. But something will pop up. In the meantime, we'll just have to make do."

"I suppose," Marie said. She wiped her eyes with the palms of her hands.

"Are things really as bad as all that?" Joe asked. "I can think of worse ways to live."

"You're right," said Marie. "I'm just being silly."

"No, you're not," Joe said. "You're scared. So am I. I'm sorry I've put us in this spot. If anyone's to blame, it's me."

"That's not true. It isn't. We both did this."

"Let's not argue any more," Joe said. "We should get dressed. The cab will be here soon."

"Okay."

He got up and went to the closet for his coat. Marie followed, blowing her nose on a wadded-up tissue she kept in the sleeve of her sweater. As they dressed, a car horn sounded twice from outside. Joe looked out to the window.

"There's our cab," he said.

"That was quick," said Marie.

She finished wrapping her head in a purple paisley shawl. Joe walked in his boots to the living room for the suitcase. When he returned, the front door was open and Marie was being helped into the back seat of the taxi by the driver. Joe went outside carrying the suitcase over his shoulder, then turned to lock the door. The wind had calmed, and snow was dropping soundlessly around him. He scrunched through the fresh snow to the street and climbed into the cab next to Marie, slamming the door.

Marie's eyes were closed. She was breathing heavily through her mouth.

"Another?" Joe asked, alarmed.

Marie nodded, panting fiercely. "They're coming every six minutes now."

The driver was looking at her in his rearview mirror.

"The Jewish General," Joe said to him in the mirror. "And hurry."

"Sure thing," said the man. He put the car in gear. "But no promises on that hurry part. The snow's pretty bad."

"Do your best," Joe said. He was watching Marie.

"You bet," said the man.

He glanced in the mirror at Joe watching Marie. Then, deciding on something, he said, "I was a Saturday baby too, you know. Tell you what—this drive's on the house. If it's a boy, you can name him after me, okay?"

"That depends," said Joe. "What's your name?"

"Ernest."

"Christ," Joe said and laughed nervously.

Marie elbowed him hard in the ribs. "You're very kind," she said to the driver, smiling sweatily.

The driver grinned back, then pressed his booted foot on the gas pedal. The car laboured and slid quickly down the snow-swept street. Joe looked at Marie. Her eyes were open now, and her breathing was slower.

"Okay?" he asked.



"That was a big one," Marie said with relief.

Joe checked out the cab window to see if the sky was beginning to clear.

"Think we'll make it?" he said, concerned.

"I hope so," Marie said. She took hold of Joe's gloved hand and squeezed.

"Things'll get pretty messy here if we don't."