NOTICE

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

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

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

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

AVIS

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

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

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

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

Canada

Ethnic Television

Teresa Jurkowski

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

ISBN 0-315-90851-3

Canada

ABSTRACT

Ethnic Television

Teresa Jurkowski

In the novel Ethnic Television, the main character seeks refuge in various fantasy lives, the narratives of which are gradually impinged upon by and intertwined with visions of her past. In attempting to repress painful memories, she becomes an unwilling spectator of the playing out of family scripts she has struggled to free herself from, where the realities of mental illness, violence and addiction have disenfranchised her emotionally.

The experience of 'viewing from a distance' is the central metaphor informing Ethnic Television, in which issues of cultural, familial and individual identity are explored as the protagonist learns to decode and link the fragments of her personal history.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	Ethnic Television	1
2.	Siblings	13
3	The Last Good Time	20
4.	The Siege Mentality	34
5.	Ethnic Television: Historical	42
6.	The Spy's Apprentice	48
7.	Death of a Sailor	57
8.	Habit	62
9.	La Dolce Vita	85
10.	The Subsistence Level	98
11.	Bread	106
12.	Propaganda	119

Ethnic Television

It was 3.45 in the morning and Veronica woke up with a start, completely alert, with a cold and stony pain in her stomach. She lay very still in her bed and listened to the buzzing of stray electrical impulses through the intercom, the sound of a small fly caught in a big jar. Someone was leaning insistently on someone else's bell, and Veronica began to list the possibilities: a contrite lover, a bag person, an errant psychopath seeking a nameless revenge. Any one of them might have come to impose their anguish on her, a stranger. The ringing was meant for her; she knew this with a deadly certainty. Veronica held her breath and waited. The buzzing stopped, and a moment later, the elevator opened. Muffled footsteps and a thud against her door.

The paper boy tossed a few more bundles at the other sills before leaving the same way he'd come. It took a few moments before she could translate these sounds into an understanding that, at least for the time being, the crisis had been averted.

This is not the father Veronica thinks she remembers He used to be there. One time he lay on the couch and closed his eyes and let her and her twin brother Henry play barber. He let them comb his hair and give him a pretend shave; he was the perfect customer, pliable and mild He made them a little blue rocking chair shaped like a cat with an arched back, and they would spend hours rocking in it, Veronica singing the words and Henry humming the tune. The day he dug the first foundation for the country house, he dipped them together into the cool red hole, the clean sun beating on their little heads as they descended, first Henry, then Veronica Then like magic, he lifted them out, one on each arm, encircling them in a single clasp before letting them slide down the muddy length of his overalls.

That afternoon their father blacked out again. Their mother Adele had a theory about it. He would pass out in places that were maximally dangerous, where he could break open his skull, yet manage to avoid so much as a scratch. "Bon, there he goes again -- if you're feeling dizzy, Eugene, WHY NOT LIE DOWN WHERE YOU CAN'T HURT YOURSELF? It's like on purpose for God's sake." She strode to the bathroom, shutting the door behind her, and they could hear the awful monologue that followed: "Come on, Eugene, get up now, why can't you get up, I couldn't pick you up off the floor even if I wanted to --" her voice already breaking with exasperation and fatigue, and something else they couldn't understand at the time.

Henry is out back digging holes under the stairs. It is one of her brother's specialties There is no stopping him once he gets out his fleet of Tonkas. He sits on the ground, making an engine sound with his lips, engrossed in his labours. Lately, he has abandoned the toys for more manly implements. He has banged together a sign bearing the bold inscription MEN AT WRORK, with an angled-off bottom that he can stick into the ground anywhere he must. He uses a small red shovel, dredging the earth with Lilliputian diligence. When their mother has a minute she gets him to fill them back up again, which he does, packing the dirt down with the foreknowledge of later and greater excavations.

Veronica has gone out back because she is afraid. The worst would be to have to watch her mother escort her tottering, haggard father back to the bedroom to lie down. She runs down the wooden steps and sits on the swing that hangs from the outside stairs. Henry looks up and she tells him: Daddy's sick again. He stands up straight, rubbing his palms on his jeans, and with one hand clutched over his heart he goes through his performance of Man Having A Seizure And Fainting, and keels over in the dirt. They both move out onto the unmown lawn and practise fainting until they are weak from laughter, then together they lie in the long grass, plucking clover flowers and sucking the sweet nectar out of them.

Douglas is hanging around in the garage. He doesn't seem to actually do much there, just adds an occasional new scrawl to the graffitti on the concrete walls and wooden planks. In chalk and felt marker 'Jimi Hendrix', '13', and afflicted-looking spiders. Today he is sniffing glue out of a freezer bag, the heavy-duty kind with the zip-lock top. He never finishes those model sets his mom and dad buy him. If someone cared to ask him, he'd admit he is a little pissed off that because of Veronica he wasn't allowed to buy the Living

Ghoul model and had to settle for the crummy King Kong He thinks she is a chickenshit scaredy-cat. Just the picture on the box scared her so much that they wouldn't let him have it, and he thinks of her cringing there in the toy department at Miracle Mart, like a bug-eyed dummy She is just a kid, anyways, he tells himself. He holds the bag over his face and inhales

At night Veronica and Henry are put to bed together, in the double bed in the boys' room, and every night their father carries her back to her own room once it's time for Douglas to go to sleep. They have pulled the covers over the wooden headboard to form a tent, the place where they hold their nightly consultations. "Mommy's arguing again," Henry whispers emphatically "I hate it when she argues with herself!" They lie on their stomachs face to face, soundlessly paddling their legs, small fry, swimming away

Their mother stalks the hall in her nightgown and curlers, interrupting her diatribe only briefly to drag on a king-size cigarette. "I don't know where the next meal is coming from, God Almighty In Heaven! Where? And he just lies there and snores. He doesn't have to worry about it! He lets me do that! Yes, that's all that I'm good for, for Chrissakes!" The yelling continues as Veronica and Henry burrow under the feather pillows. They are visualizing the interior of the refrigerator, its cold yellow light shining on an empty expanse Veronica thinks, One Day it might be true, One Day there might not be a Next Meal And what would that mean?

Ethnic Television

At this time there are few challenges that I'm prepared to meet, Veronica told the interviewer The interviewer was sympathetic, a little awe-struck despite the fact that she was from a very wealthy family, which is how she got this job, awe-struck because she was younger, a member of the TV generation, and lived with a secret horror of and fascination with syntax and spelling. They were discussing Veronica's first and critically acclaimed book, *Onward, Hagiographer*, which dealt with the failure of the substitution of contemporary psychology for conventional religion in North American culture. The book was so cannily and freshly written, it possessed enormous pop appeal while still bearing the marks that would make it a classic in its own right. No, she had no mentor, Veronica confessed tersely, she had had no time for a mentor, just hours snatched in which she consumed Russian and English novels, and abnormal psychology case studies, and ...

Veronica was sprawled across the couch, watching ethnic television. Like a beached whale, her mother would say. It was unfortunately very true that there were few challenges she was prepared to meet. She was, however, ready to admire the high arch of her feet, and she twirled her left foot, regarding it with a critical eye. Her boyfriend Ferdy had told her that she had beautiful feet, but she was sure that that wasn't much to go on. Her mother could be watching the loveliest star, say Ingrid Bergman, wrapping her slender and bejewelled arms around someone's virile silk-suited back, and be able to remark, she has ugly hands And Veronica would find herself squinting at the actress's bony joints or blunt fingertips, forgetting the chiffon, the immaculate complexion, the shimmering waves of radiant hair.

Now that she was going through what she privately referred to as her recovery phase, watching ethnic television is what Veronica did. She

especially liked the Arabic programming. Mostly they reran the same shows over and over again, and Veronica had her own particular favourite footage of a popular singer: In the opening shot, the singer's shadowy form can barely be made out behind tall golden grasses as she begins to descend a hillside She warbles seductively, tracing a sinuous path into the foreground, where it becomes apparent that she weighs a good three hundred pounds, a fact which no amount of artful mascara and eyeliner can obscure She is dressed all wrong for a big woman, a white silk dress, prodigally polka-dotted in black, she is dressed all wrong for walking down a hillside, her ample neck festooned with garlands of bulbous pearls that are rocked helplessly to and fro on the crest of her formidable bosom. Her eyelashes flutter coquettishly and her scarlet-nailed hands rotate in enigmatic whorls. She sidles across the screen and out of sight, in a fading ululation.

A horror, her mother would call her, but Veronica found herself mesmerized by the singer again and again.

That afternoon on Bulgarian Hour they were showing a soap opera, the main character of which was an extremely old woman, decked out in an elaborate costume of teal blue and lemon yellow She was extremely old and extremely wise, as evidenced by the number of middle-aged men with ill-fitting toupees who flocked around her and listened to her advice She also had heart-to-hearts with the servants, who were perpetually jumpy and superstitious, pop-eyed and whiney, forever holding handkerchiefs to their chests. Veronica tried to warm up to the old woman, but could only think how much she reminded her of Norman Bates' mother, victim of amateur taxidermy The worst part of it was that she was becoming convinced that she understood these television shows. It was a bad sign, like when she cried over an NFB documentary she had once seen about an aging Canadian poet. Towards the

end of the film he recited a poem about his regret that he would be leaving his wife, who was about one-third of his age, behind, and Veronica dissolved into tears She knew that in robust mental health she would have thought him a posing old fart, and waited for a small appreciative audience for whom she could imitate the pensive bend of his head, his assumption of an elegiac tone of voice

The Polish programming always ran the same three commercials. Douglas' favourite was the one for the airline, which he had slightly amended: *LOT celebrates fifty years of service, and thirty-five years in the air.*

Here, there was no centre, only an audience forever impinging on and swallowing up the willing entertainers, carrying them away in a garish collective dance, the ideal state a perpetual wedding reception, with everyone both bride and groom.

Undercover Man

It was late spring, when the CBC's program directors reached far back in time to fill late evening slots. They started running the Undercover Man series, a British spy show from the sixties, and Veronica began watching it with a vague sense that she had seen it before. When she calculated back to how old she was when it originally aired, she realized she must only have seen bits of it here and there; it was one of the shows that her older brother Douglas was allowed to watch. Anything too creepy or sexy or violent was off-limits for her and her twin brother Henry; just the sight of Hitchcock's balding dome and they were shooed off to bed by their parents.

Now, at midnight on Sundays, Veronica prepared Earl Grey tea that she served herself in a cup of English bone china; the delicate chatter of porcelain created, she felt, the appropriate atmosphere for savouring the clandestine movements of her newfound hero.

One night her boyfriend shook her awake and asked her, "What plans? What plans are you talking about it?" He worked late shifts at a restaurant and didn't enjoy being disturbed by her sleeptalking.

"No plans," murmured Veronica, and flung her arm around him so he could go back to sleep. But that was a lie. She'd been talking about *the* plans, the ones concealed in the handle of the umbrella Undercover Man had entrusted to her. In her dream, she sported a sleek platinum pageboy and a Chanel suit under her belted trenchcoat. In her dream, she had finally arrived She was becoming a spy.

In real life, her man was Ferdy, a talented dreamer whose looks were a smoldering combination of Latin swarthiness and Nordic delicacy. His latest obsession was with his alleged royal roots, and he was busy deciphering the

heraldry of a small family seal that his father had mailed to him from his home in northern Italy. To please him, Veronica waterpainted one of the many blown-up photocopies of the seal in what she thought would be the appropriately Florentine hues. Veronica herself had no such mysteries to resolve. All her grandparents were Polish peasants, and she felt instinctively that the salient feature of her family coat-of-arms would be *serf dormant.* She just had to compare their bodies, his sloping shoulders and tapering fingers, and her large-boned rawness, to know. Ferdy was a natural-born aristocrat, capable of becoming engrossed in the tiniest flaw on his alligator shoes, while all around him bags full of laundry cried out to be washed.

One of her friends had actually met the actor who had once played Undercover Man, and reported with grim regret that he was not nearly so handsome in person, and not at all as debonair. The friend was working at a newsagent's at a time when Undercover Man was in town to do a film "Boorish. He'd come in every evening to pick up a *New York Times*, dressed in a huge black fur, his complexion all boozy, and no wonder, he was pissed to the gills. He always seemed to be in a fury, and he was rude as all hell to everyone. One evening I thought he was going to knock over some old lady who was on her way out when he was on his way in. 'MOVE!' he bellows at her, and I thought she was going to pass out. Geez, what an apoplectic bastard."

We all have our little weaknesses, Veronica comforted herself, scanning her friend's ordinary-looking face with a critical eye. Men are like that, she thought, they can't bear for someone to be more handsome or more gifted than they are. Most men would rather stab themselves to the heart than give another man a compliment.

Her friend told her that Undercover Man also wrote reams and reams of poetry which, since he was intensely private individual, he didn't publish Veronica was sure it was about about huge waves crashing, crashing, crashing, mightily against the precipice.

"Maybe he's got a really tortured soul," she offered.

"Maybe he's just an asshole," her friend replied.

Ferdy began lecturing Veronica. He wasn't pleased with her behaviour and was unable to fathom why Veronica had lost what minimal sense of ambition or direction in life she once had. Instead of looking for a job, she was living off what was left from her student loans and a little money lent her by her mother, and as her mother pointed out, that and a bus ticket would get her across town. Ferdy decided that they were travelling to Italy at summer's end, and was nonplussed by her weary reply that she'd believe it when he produced the airline tickets.

An enthusiastic person himself, he procured a handsome wall map of that country, which he posted in her living room and decorated with pins, delineating his carefully staked-out odyssey. He followed her around her apartment reading out passages from travel books and spent an inordinate amount of his spare time deciding which clothes he wanted to bring along. He'd also taken to manicuring his nails, one of the skills he'd learned during his brief stint at modelling school. It was *noblesse oblige* that spurred him on to such niceties; family legend had it that he was in line for a count's title.

When Ferdy decided to learn the saxophone he sold his beloved guitars and quit smoking cold turkey. When he decided he wanted to model, he lost fifteen pounds in three weeks. Once there was nothing in his apartment to eat but rice, two eggs and canned niblets, and he spent half an hour learning to concoct mayonnaise from scratch, never mind if a person was hungry. That was the kind of individual he was, a willful optimist, an experimenter, an artist. He shed lifestyles with a grace that Veronica secretly worshipped; to her horror she was beginning to discover that even the way she arranged dishcloths in a drawer was guided by her mother's phantom hands.

Ferdy's plans centred on a reunion with his father, whom he hadn't seen in ten years. It was a concept difficult for Veronica to grasp: the idea of a father who was not a rock-solid fact on the living-room couch nearly every evening of childhood life, the idea of a father who had discarded his family and gone on to live other lives in other places.

She tried to master the Italian phrasebook Ferdy thrust upon her with the same inspiration she'd invoked in learning to read Chaucer aloud so beautifully that once her professor dropped his Oxonian guard for a moment to look humanly pleased. It made no matter that the so-called correct pronounciation was only speculative; at the time love, not duty, had made the backward leap of language possible.

It hadn't been that long ago, but now her energies were scattered. Now, even the mere sight of the book cover featuring Signor Jones from Nuova York feeding pigeons on the Piazza San Marco filled her with inexplicable resentment. Something about his blank cartoon face suggested to her that Signor Jones could not be trusted; it was so obviously devoid of suffering Clearly, he had never sat in a therapist's office, snuffling into extra-strength kleenex like she had, displaying the frayed filaments of her psyche's most intimate webs. Signor Jones got to Venice all right, but not via purgatory.

At first, it was ostensibly to practise Italian that Veronica began tuning in to the ethnic TV station. But very shortly it became the only thing that she could concentrate on. It was the vanguard of her mental defense against other images forming in the distance, images that she had no means of regulating, censoring, or shutting off.

Siblings

Down in the garage Veronica searches idly among the tools and rubbish. When her father is well this is fun to do. He saws and hammers and makes things, whistling and calling out measurements in French. The wall where the gas tank sits is built of hollow cement blocks, with sand poured in them for ballast. Veronica has planted white beans she's taken from Douglas's peashooter equipment, and frail and lovely vines have taken hold in the concrete. Her father doesn't mind things like that. Her other girlfriends don't hang around their dads' workshops; they are usually at ballet or Brownies or piano lessons, pursuing interests meant to keep them from the dreadful fate of becoming unladylike. Their mothers drive them to these activities in stationwagons. Her mother works nights, and even if she didn't she is too nervous to learn how to drive.

So she learns different kinds of things from her girlfriends. Though half of her is jealous the other half of her thinks that arabesques and the Minute Waltz and saluting with two fingers is baloney. When her father is there, she selects mysterious objects from his toolchests and holds them up to him for explanation. He doesn't always say what the objects are for, but he always tells her what they are made of. Her father shows her what is brass and what is tin, and when he is unsure he draws the piece up to his water-blue eyes, then bites it with pipeworn teeth before pronouncing a verdict. Now he's there less and less and she has to figure out for herself what is brass and what is tin, what is real and what is not.

Today, her father is in the hospital. Her mother is upstairs, lost in a jungle of laundry. Veronica spots a small wooden case shoved under the sheds, which she hasn't noticed before. She pulls it out and undoes the clasps. It is crammed with newspapers. She picks out the top one. It is full of awful pictures, a two-headed baby, a boy and a girl joined together at the stomach. THESE SIBLINGS ARE REALLY STUCK ON EACH OTHER, the headline announces. Veronica folds the pages closed, feeling sick She thinks that she has never really seen an ugly thing before this moment Her only consolation is that she positive she's not a sibling. She runs upstairs and asks her mother what one is. Her mother says that it's a small tree.

Undercover Man was able to assume countless different personae. It all depended on the hat he was wearing. Panama for glad-hearted pleasure-seeker. Tweed cap for cynical, sharp-witted man-about-town. Seaman's toque for rough-and-readiness, or Eastern-European sartorial know-not-how, in both cases fringed by honey-coloured curls. Mercenary soldier's beret. Derbies signalled business acumen. In a battered Homburg he was suddenly a scientist. Fedoras were all-purpose, depending on the tilt.

When he played the artist, he wore no hat at all, just combed his hair daringly down in a Bohemian bang over the brow. He could even get away with a Stetson. He looked at home in all these hats. He looked handsome in all of them That is how he got the job. A man who could only wear one hat was bad for national security.

Veronica didn't look good in any hat, but a kerchief suited her, knotted under the chin.

It is Sunday. They are going to mass. Henry is standing on the toilet seat, getting his hair slicked down by his mother, and Douglas sits with his scuffed shoes up on the coffee table, reading a Sergeant Fury comic book, his lower lip protruding in its customary pout. Veronica has gotten herself all ready, down to her clean gloves and sailor hat. Her father asks her to put his cufflinks in for him, and on tiptoe she inserts the black, shiny disks into the smooth blue cloth of his shirtcuffs. "You're my princess," he says. He holds on to her hand as they walk outside to the car. Veronica sits in the front beside her father, inspecting her gloves in an imitation of the grown-up way, waiting for the rest of the family. Suddenly Douglas runs down the front stairs, stopping dead outside the car door, his head huge in the frame of the rolled-down window "You only do it for PRAISE, because you want PRAISE!" he snarls.

This upsets Veronica. She doesn't know what praise means but feels ashamed to be doing things just to get it.

Our Treasures, Our National and Personal Treasures

Within the castle, the conquerors run to and fro on the dining tables, crushing bread and flowers and brave dead hands beneath their feet, scarring the oak with their spurs. They fling the half-eaten food from the plates and throw them into their sacks and when every last goblet is claimed they pull rings from the fingers of the corpses and put them on their own.

In the village a soldier stands with one foot on the chest of a bleeding peasant and tears through the contents of a trunk of clothes, cursing the poverty of his booty. He flings the poor garments into the air in disgust, and when he reaches the bottom and sees there is nothing more he scurries to gather them up again. Once the enemy has broken defenses, there is nothing too sacred or too mean for them to take for themselves ...

The tears welled up in Veronica's eyes and threatened to spill over until she spotted the wristwatch beneath the folds of the peasant's blouse sleeve.

Ferdy walked into the living room and asked what she was doing.

"I'm studying Italian, for God's sakes," she answered, conscious of the whine that had crept into her voice.

"Well, while you're at it, you can teach it to the Portugese actors you're watching," he said huffily.

God, what a quibbler, she thought, Italian, Portugese, they're only a branch away from each other on the language tree. "I've studied Latin, for your information This whole thing is completely under control." She made a great show of fluffing up the sofa pillows. This was as far as her resolve extended, and she lay back down and looked up at the ceiling.

"You'll never be ready. You've completely lost your sense of time. I don't think you even know what day of the week it is."

"E mercoledì. Non disturbami, signor Fernando, per favore."

This was what she was beginning to hate about the eighties that morbid scramble at self-improvement that everyone seemed to be engaging in Veronica felt that, like most lifestyle trends, it had an elements of cruel rigidity in it; it left no room for those vital periods of personal regression Fanning her face with a magazine, Veronica thought of Victorian heroines, constantly retiring to their rooms with severe migraine, fainting at will. The things women had to do to get a little space, the lengths they had to go to.

In days gone by, people had had poetic sounding diseases *Melancholia. Nostalgia.* Against what she flattered herself was a tide of contemporary disapproval, Veronica began to devote herself to cultivating the idiosyncrasies of these ancient infirmities

In the blue armchair in his bedroom sits her father, his face in his hand. He can sit motionless for what seems like hours to Veronica, though it may be only moments. Legs crossed, he looks a giant in the delicate boudoir seat. No furniture in their house fits him; his long bony feet dangle over the bed edge; he must cross his legs and sit sideways at the kitchen table because it is too low for him. Mirrors hang at breathtaking heights in their house; it does not enter his mind that most of the world is shorter than he is.

In the blue armchair sits her father, lonely as a swab in a crow's nest, waiting for sight of land.

The Last Good Time

On Sundays in summer the family drives down to Broadway Chips, a hamburger house by the riverside. When they get as far east as the place with the big round tanks, the air becomes oily and rancid-smelling, and Veronica and Henry hold their noses and chant Peppy-le-Pee-yoo until Douglas gets annoyed. Without looking up from the comic book he's reading he tells them, "It's the refineries." Douglas has a tendency to answer questions before they are even asked.

Broadway Chips is a wonderful place, decorated with posters of fat comic-book characters popping out of hot dog buns or nestling in gingham boxes of french fries. Opening the door makes a friendly gush of greasy steam swirl round and round. Veronica and Henry each get a hamburger, french-fry and Coke in a green bottle, and Douglas gets an extra hamburger or hot dog because he's older. To Veronica and Henry there's nothing warmer than their parents humming a grown-up hum while they sit in the back of the car, squashing their hamburgers down good and licking the sour yellow and sweet green that seeps out the edges. Together they watch the ships go by, gigantic ships like their father used to be on in the Navy They know about the Navy, but not really about the War, until Douglas begins supplying lurid details out of his Sergeant Fury comic books. They know their father couldn't kill anyone, he did stuff like swab-the-decks, batten-the-hatches, down-the-periscope, man-the-engines. 'Oh, yeah?' Douglas would say and look at them sideways

Anyway, as Veronica and Henry well knew, Canadians didn't kill people, they let Americans do that.

They approach the gravelly riverside, holding fast to their mother's hands, while their father walks closer to the shore with Douglas, who skips rocks with the careless skill they so admire. One day their father lets them go right to the river's edge, where they see the sea is lime-green and thick as jello around the huge cement blocks that litter the bank. He gives Henry and Veronica a rock apiece and tells them to make a wish. They hurl them into the water at the same time and watch with a big feeling in their hearts as the stones are swallowed in the deep. Douglas is able to make as many wishes as he wants, but he throws the rocks so hard they are out of sight when they sink.

On the way back home Henry shares what is left of his drink with Veronica. It is important to do so if you are wishing the same wish: to always be together, to always come every Sunday to have hamburgers and Coke with the whole family, to always drive in the car with the red and silver fins like a beautiful fish forever heading out to sea.

Ferdy's apartment overlooked Atwater near the 20 Highway It was in a dubious-looking two-storey brick building with a panoramic advertisement for Coca-Cola plastered over its blind side for the drivers to glimpse as they travelled eastward. The ground floor was occupied by a plumbing supplies company, seemingly defunct behind its front door with scabrous windowpanes encased in wire mesh. Up the rattling metal stairs was a common landing with a view of the raised expressway that snaked along the city's southern edge

Ferdy had inherited his mother's discerning eye for interior decoration, and the tiny apartment was decorated with her excellent hand-me-downs and articles purchased at Westmount stores that Veronica didn't dare set foot in In the bathroom he got whimsical, putting up a blood-coloured poster of a shark with rapacious grin. In the foreground, scarlet shadows of voluptuous girls were caught in a frozen flail like so many minnows; the caption read: Just When You Thought It Was Safe To Go Back Into the Water. Ferdy's lapses of taste were purposeful; as Veronica liked to remind him, he could afford them

The neighbours were an old man who barely ever emerged from his room at the back of the building, and whose very existence Veronica doubted, and a friendly woman named Miss Cordelia, who had dark unruly hair and took care of her aged mother. Once Miss Cordelia showed them a black and white photograph of herself in her days as an exotic dancer, all feathers and legs and eyes. It was hard for Veronica to reconcile this picture with the image of the woman in frumpy stretch slacks with the elastic band unravelling at the back, the pendulous breasts knocking as she bent over to pet her cat Sheba, a formidable animal that stalked the hall at night, suspicious of its reflection in the wax that glazed over the ancient tiles like a cataract. Underneath her aging flesh were other bodies, other lives; encased in the accumulation of time, recalled only in archives.

At night the traffic never ended; it was a noise in Veronica's head that she never grew accustomed to on her overnight stays. It muffled up through the shag carpet, harrying her with its musty drone as the ceaseless stream of zombie cars was pulled up from the darkness of the underpass.

Persona non grata

Veronica lived in two rooms on the fourteenth floor of a downtown highrise, surrounded by three tall buildings that each blocked the light in turn throughout the day. Douglas lived with his wife Paula and their son Spencer in a flat in the far east end near the dark river. Henry lived at home, which was somewhere between them, to look after their mother, he maintained, but really because he was far from finished sparring with his father's quiet ghost.

Though she could barely afford it, she insisted on the safety of this concrete tower. She needed a place that was difficult for the unwanted guest to penetrate, a place where three burglar-proof locks and a nosy concierge stood between her and jeopardy. So she forsook the handsome eccentricities of the old-fashioned type of flat that she loved for blank white rooms and a balcony that overlooked a clean and empty alley. Initially, she intended to keep it minimally furnished, free of the type of junk that gradually overtakes a home like dandelions pushing through pavement cracks. But the bric-a-brac marshalled itself and appeared on counters and bureaus, objects that she finally could not part with though they were tiresome to maintain: family pictures, kitchen articles once belonging to her mother that over time had acquired the status of artifacts, brass woodworking tools and rusty planes that had been her father's, things unearthed from the forgotten corners of her old home that she preserved as jealously as any archaeologist

And on the windowsills were plants that cast shadows on the blinds at night, still and patient and black as fossils.

Veronica suggests to Douglas that it is high time her Barbie and his GI Joe get married. They have been crossing paths for years now on the playroom floor. Douglas has deposited GI Joe for good in the closet under the basement stairs. "Shell-shock," he explains grimly. When Veronica insists, Douglas narrows his eyes and whispers, "You know, with that yellow hair, those beady blue eyes, I've been thinking, my GI Joe may secretly be a Kraut informer." But this possibility doesn't daunt Veronica or her Barbie, whose excrescent chest encases a resolve that would impress even the most redoubtable of plastic soldiers. Seeing he has no option but to relent, Douglas digs the doll out from a pile of junk, commenting gravely, "I have to tell you, he's not the man he used to be." He rolls back the dusty trouser leg that suspiciously doesn't terminate in the requisite combat boot, to reveal a leg torn cleanly off at the knee. "Secret manoeuvres. It was a special mission." The pant leg is rearranged with a show of reverence. Veronica feels it best not to probe too deeply into the matter, even on her Barbie's behalf. She understands that it must have been something quite atrocious that transpired, the sort of thing that took place behind the bushes in the right hand of a panel in a Sgt. Fury comic book. A civilian, she takes him at his word; unaware that sometimes the Army experiments on its own men.

"No more a fighting man from head to toe," muses Douglas, and handing the doll to her he asks in a small voice, "Do you think she'll still want him?" Veronica peers into the doll's face. He has the look of a man who wants to be cured, and furthermore the scar that is stylishly carved into his left cheek makes him quite attractive. "Let's face it," continues Douglas, "it's a prosthesis or nothing." Veronica clasps the doll to her flat chest, wondering how her brother could be so immature as to mention GI Joe's religion at this decisive moment.

Later that day she assembles the necessaries: a doily for the wedding dress, a bit of shoelace for the groom's tie, a few inch-long stalks pinched from flowering weeds in the backyard for the bouquet. As GI Joe possesses no formal attire, he has to be wed just as he is, in camouflage gear. It makes no difference that Barbie stands as stiff as a toilet brush, and that even though GI Joe has fully articulated action joints, his hands are molded only to clutch grenades. Veronica manages to get them to hold hands as a solemn Henry officiates, marrying the dolls with invisible rings.

Working under the bridge is one of the jobs Eugene never discusses in detail. They need a man with experience and without fear to venture below the river's surface and bring back news of the foundations silently eroding beneath the waves. Who better than this giant, this old sailor who knows his way around the bottom of the sea?

They tie Eugene into a diving suit, with a lantern strapped to his helmet. Submerged in the dark green water, he watches the debris swirl past, illuminated in a shaft of white light. His fingertips slowly read the concrete walls for damage to mend. When he is finished, he stays down for a moment, overcome by the sight of his own legs growing out of the riverbed, feet invisible in clouds of silt. Then echoes surround him, long, mournful wails, and he is recalled to himself, to the knowledge that this is only a temporary home.

It takes a man with experience and without fear to build a house underwater.

It won't always be like this, her mother tells her. There is no fooling her about what is happening to her daughter; she recognizes all the signs

She has come by taxi to Veronica's apartment, bearing a plastic container of soup. Hand in hand they sit on the sagging mattress in the bedroom, Veronica hunched down to lay her head on to her mother's small shoulder. All Veronica is thinking is that she's twenty-two, that she wants to be a grown-up, wants not to need to press back into her mother's flesh for comfort.

By way of encouragement, her mother tells her a story. She says: When your father got home and we were married, he left the door wide open whenever he went to the bathroom. As you know, the taller a man is the louder he pees, so this used to drive me crazy. I used to run up and shut it behind him until finally one day it happened and I thought, this is the last straw, we're not going to live like pigs. I crept up on him, ready with my last-straw speech, and I saw he was standing there with his free hand holding the door ajar, looking out

And that night he said that once the submarine he was in got torpedoed and caught fire and one of the men was trapped in the washroom The lavatory, he called it. They tried, but they couldn't get to him. It was one of those rare times I kept my mouth shut, because you know your father never told me anything about the war. I recall that at the time wanting to remind him that he was living in a house and not a submarine. It took him about a year before he was able to tell the difference.

A year, her mother says, and at the time Veronica believes her, because she needs to.

When Veronica runs home after that first day of school, she can hardly wait to tell her mother what's happened. When they assembled the new classes out in the the schoolyard, she and a small group of her friends were elated to discover that they were going straight into seventh grade, without doing the sixth. She won't even have to wear an ugly tunic anymore. She can't believe how fantastic this is. She swings open the front door and sees Henry there, purple-faced and shaking, their mother with an arm around him, speaking low. His first-day-of-school shirt is wrinkled with tears, and his clip-on tie is hanging by one forlorn plastic hook. They are making me do fifth grade over again, mommy, why? It is more than Veronica can stand to hear Henry cry like that. It's like the punch she feels in her stomach whenever Douglas beats Henry up. She thinks she could almost kill someone to make that feeling stop.

Lemay Street, birthplace of civilization. That's what Douglas called the place where they all grew up. A straight row of duplexes, joined two and two together, with four or five more expensive homes at the end of the street. Something knocked up in the mid-fifties for working-class families of modest income, first-time buyers. Apparently, they had all originally been painted a pale peppermint green on the inside, each of the five rooms on the ground floor, the same in the flat on top. The basements were left concrete, the lawns naked.

Veronica can remember when around the block did not exist, when the backyard led out into a huge field that was soon to become a street of its own She can remember playing in the backyard in a white dress, being just old enough to figure how to open the gate latch that led out into the field. Then her mother calling from the kitchen window, "Don't, dear. No." That was enough for Veronica. She was obedient. But just for a moment there, she had felt the wonder of having fingers on the latch, the latch ready to give, the world ready to open up.

It was right to be told that at two. At two you might wander off, get bitten by a big rat, fall down, hurt yourself. At the very least, you would get back home with your white dress snagged with cockleburrs. The problem was, Veronica's mother never let that basic motto adapt to the changing of the ages. In one form or another, she told her daughter the same thing at twenty-two, when she was already living on her own. The world beyond Lemay Street was an ancient Polish forest that her own mother had never seen, filled with the kind of unpredictable horrors Kosinski, whom her mother had never read, had once so uncannily invented.

In a way that had serious consequences, her mother had never acknowledged that hers was a family of giants, big-limbed, loud-voiced giants,

who didn't fit, who could not be made to fit into the little house. So they all became grotesques and managed their own escapes, each in his own way, after his own idea.

Their father had seen the world, had been to places unmentioned in letters now long discarded. Like a wartime letter, the important parts of his life were blacked out, never to be elucidated. The thing he perhaps remembered the best from those days was that to suffer in silence was a man's duty. The thing that he never discovered was that it was a lie.

So he bore them alone, the memories that made his ears ring all day long with the sound of rushing water.

It was light but always frightening, loud but always lonely, it was terrible waiting to die, it was terrible to die.

Moleman and Ratboy

In the darkened basement Henry sat, spooning cold Scary-ohs into his mouth. This is where he liked to be, with the drapes drawn tight and the television on. For an avid sports fan, Henry was not especially active, but he was strong as a bull, and once awed Veronica's friends by carrying a fridge up the stairs singlehandedly. Though this type of stunt eventually landed Henry with a hernia that left a scar like a railroad track on his belly, it was enough to put the fear of Henry's god into people's hearts. Henry regularly offered to come to Veronica's aid when she was having difficulty dealing with aggressive people. "I'll come over and look mean at them, o.k.?" he would say. His mean looks only worked with strangers, and Douglas took them for what they were, a bluff.

For Henry was a peaceable person and liked mostly to be left alone. He slung sides of beef around a meat market for a living but loved animals and had a special language that he talked to cats. When he got home he was always tired and wanted to go down and listen to his stereo. He had a fine voice that could often be made out over the clamourous rock music. Then he'd sit amongst the boxes of hockey and baseball cards that he'd been collecting since 1965 and watch men built like him running across artificial grass and ice On Thursday nights he opened his bankbook and prayed to it.

In the last few years he was alive, their father spent the summers making a cellar under the country house. It was mostly a matter of shovelling dirt into a big wheelbarrow and dumping it elsewhere, and Henry used to help him. The pair of them worked as if their days were numbered, as if they were building a bomb shelter. Douglas spent his time doing as little as possible besides being a foreman in his own mind, and laughed at them for spending the sunny days under the house with spades and pickaxes. It was easy for Douglas to laugh;

he just had to look at something being done once and know how to do it himself. The sight of his skinny little brother, his look of utmost concentration as he struggled not to tip over the huge barrow, amused him. "There go Moleman and Ratboy," is what he used to comment, turning over the pages of a fungusy old copy of *Popular Mechanics*.

The Siege Mentality

"I've finally figured out what it is you've got," Ferdy said He was standing in the kitchen, holding open the cupboard door

"Look at this," he said, motioning Veronica over "You've got four tins of Harvard beets. Three boxes of chocolate pie filling, a ten-pound bag of flour A Buickful of rice. Five tins of asparagus. Eight boxes of Kraft dinner, Christ, I'm *Italian*, I don't even *eat* Kraft dinner. Cupcake holders, six, no, seven, cans of tuna, two jars of pickles..." he reached further into the recesses of the shelves.

"They were on special."

"Do you mean to tell me that all of this food- three jumbo cans of tomatoes- that's o.k. -- all of it was on special?"

"I suppose you think that's funny."

"Just who the hell is gonna eat all this food? We're leaving in a month Twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four jars of assorted spices is this beginning to spell anything out to you?"

Veronica crossed her arms and gave him a truculent look

"The siege mentality. That's what you've got. Holed up in this apartment with six months' supply of food. You've even got bottled water Three cans of Ajax, a reservoirful of bleach." He continued counting. "Just what is it that's supposed to happen? A great famine? Pestilence? The Seven Plagues of Egypt, right here in the convenience of your own home?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Why don't you check the freezer while you're at it?"

"I don't have to, I know what's in there. Two of everything, in labelled plastic bags. When was the last time you even invited anyone over for supper?"

It was true. In the past weeks, she had stopped socializing. There was no one she particularly wanted to talk to, except Undercover Man, and no one she wanted to listen to, beside the people on ethnic television.

She looked over at Ferdy, still rummaging through the food pantry. Suddenly his chiselled jaw and cupid's bow mouth, his perfect jeans and carefully pressed shirt, and especially his alligator shoes irritated her.

"It's all right for you, you always had money in your family," she blurted.

Ferdy looked at her coolly. "Let's not get started on that again." He walked towards her, holding out a flat package in his hand. "Do you really think you'll need paper doilies when the flood comes?" It was a serious question.

Salutary Discipline

Veronica is thinking about a new pair of shoes. Her report card is straight *A*s this time and she thinks she deserves something new. She works hard to be the best but it's not easy to prove when you don't bring home the gold medal. This time Olga Krushnyk gets straight *A*s too, and the teacher has to flip a coin to see who'll get to wear it because there's only one medal to go around. They both watch as the quarter glitters and flips down onto tails, which is what Olga picked. The teacher looks at Veronica kindly; she is trying to make this fair as possible. But it isn't fair, Veronica thinks, Olga doesn't need the gold medal with the little heart dangling under the angel wings, Olga gets as many new things as she likes. For example, she got her first bra before anybody else, though, as Douglas explains to her, for a kid that flat it was only a symbolic gesture. When he defines the expression for Veronica she is careful to use it in her book report on the first unabridged grown-up novel she ever reads, *Jane Eyre*. 'When Jane lets the now-blind Mr. Rochester put his arm around her so she can lead them to their new home, it is a symbolic gesture." She doesn't specify exactly what it symbolizes, but when she gets the report there is a big red word, Excellent, in the margin beside the phrase.

Olga Krushnyk's dad is a high school principal and at times Veronica just hates her and her neat Ukranian-style braids. She feels it is a sin to hate someone like that. But when she tells the priest, who once a month brings a portable prie-dieu and sets up his travelling confessional in the hall at school, he tells her it is all right to have bad thoughts as long as you don't act on them He is more interested in knowing if she has bad thoughts about boys and asks her this question gravely, as if he's just caught her on the brink of doing something dangerous and is set up to pull her back. He seems a little

disappointed that she has nothing special to report, and she says her usual three Hail Marys with the feeling that somehow she has let him down.

On the way home after school Veronica walks through the park with her best friend Sophie. They play their favourite game, Frederick and Broderick. Veronica is supposed to be Frederick and Sophie is Broderick, and together they go on many adventures. Such as: wading through the deepest snows and conquering the mountain in the park, and skating around the boys' hockey rink before the boys get there and throw them out. They have given up dolls but Frederick and Broderick are really hard to part with. This afternoon their mission is to save victims from the boys' locker room in the park cabin. One of the victims is Olga Krushnyk.

They sidle along the outside of the cabin and call through the mesh windows. "Oh dear, Frederick, I think I hear Olga calling from within," says Sophie.

"Broderick, it is our duty to rescue her, we must put personal feelings aside," replies Veronica with conviction.

Broderick nods his assent and they pull open the door and approach the locker room, crouching as they run between the rows of benches. "Oh good Lord!" screams Frederick as Broderick knocks over a bench, sending the other benches crashing over like huge dominoes. "We must retreat!" calls Broderick, and they scamper out before the caretaker catches them.

Hidden behind some bushes, they watch breathlessly as the caretaker lumbers into the cabin, muttering curses in French. Suddenly a car in the street backfires thunderously and Broderick hisses, "It's too late, Frederick, they've shot her, the bastards!"

"Damn it , Broderick, our best just wasn't good enough this time."

When Veronica gets home her parents are in the kitchen. Her father has got a broom slung against his shoulder like a rifle, and he is marching up and down the kitchen floor.

"Company HALT!" he shouts. "And then they switched sides -- like this," he explains to his wife, pivoting on his heel and snapping the broom to the opposite shoulder. The kitchen is small and he nearly knocks Veronica in the head during this manoeuvre. He doesn't see her. "HUP-TWO-THREE-FOUR!"

His eyes are glittering and frantic. "This is how they do it, Adele," his voice booming as she were far away. He salutes her crisply, then marches to the front of the sink and turns the water on full blast. His hands thrust into imaginary vest pockets, Eugene begins reciting a speech in a phlegmatic British accent:

"We shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence ..."

"Mommy, what is he doing?"

"... and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island ..."

"It'll pass, dear," whispers her mother, as his voice begins to resonate throughout the house.

"... we shall defend our island, WHATEVER the cost may be .. "

Despite her impulse to economize in all things, her mother lets the water stream on and on over the pile of dirty dishes.

Veronica hides in her room and pulls out her geography book. She traces her finger around the map of Canada, over and over again, so she can reproduce it for the test next week. Under the desk her old shoes rub against each other on her uncomplaining feet.

When they visit their father that day at the hospital, he has a gift for each of them. For his wife he has made a black wallet, with flat stitching up the side and a zippered inner compartment. For his children he has fashioned belts out of flesh-coloured leather. All the belts are the same size, as if he hasn't remembered that Douglas is bigger than Veronica who is bigger than Henry. He explains to them that he's pressed a different design into each; Veronica runs her fingers over the criss-cross pattern on hers, red like pinched skin. She thinks the belt is really cool. She's always known her father is artistic; once she'd found a picture he'd sketched on the back leaf of a carpentry handbook. It was so nice she couldn't believe at first her father had done it, but the shakey outlines done by his shakey hands were proof enough. The picture was of a cowboy sitting on a fence, staring out into the wild western expanse of the blank page. Though her father hadn't finished the picture, the small figure was a delight, complete with chaps and stirrups and fringed shirt with proper yoking.

Henry is the first to break the silence during the taxi drive home.

"He did this in ark --" he grips the belt and pauses, "arkupational therapy. He can't be that sick if he can do ark -- ark --" he corrected himself with visible effort, "ortupational therapy?"

"That's *occupational*, dummy," says Douglas, staring gloomily out the taxi window.

"What is it, really?" asks Henry, who was anxious to know more.

"Basketweaving," snaps Douglas, "and will you stop fooling with that goddamned belt, Henry?"

"Shuttup, you," his little brother retorts, suddenly angry. He gives Douglas a slap with the belt buckle and starts to cry.

"Never mind *him*, Henry," Veronica comforts, drawing him into a discussion of the copper etching their father was making of an old ship, the kind with sails.

Their mother doesn't say anything at all, not even to tell them to be quiet. She sits in front beside the taxi driver, clutching her purse, which Veronica knows is filled with crumpled kleenexes and smells of Evening in Paris. Their mother seems embarrassed by the wallet for some reason, even though surely it was a lot of work for their father, with his blunt hands and bad eyesight It will end up in her top drawer, jumbled in with coupons for margarine and stray earrings.

Veronica decides to wear her belt with her new Levis to school the next day. In high school they are allowed to wear jeans. So many things are changing for her now that she's almost thirteen.

Their mother declares: "You are what you eat."

Veronica intones: "You are what you read."

Douglas confesses: "You are what you need."

Henry believes you are what you keep, but that is a secret he does not wish to share.

Ethnic Television: Historical

The little girl wraps the flannel folds of her nightgown tight around her ankles. In her arms is a doll that she takes care to nestle in a narrow sleeve She sits all morning by the stove, warming her feet and dreaming.

The little boy's father has carried him across the street. In the evening he will carry him back home again. The boy will keep the little girl company all day. As the soup thickens on the back of the stove, the little girl speaks and the little boy listens, the little girl listens and the little boy speaks. The meanings of the things they tell each other are so beautiful they are beyond words.

These children have something in common: a need to share, the warmth of the stove, their stocking feet on the fender.

This picture of her parents Veronica recreates for herself, to carry her back safely into the land of sleep, back into the cool red hole where all her memories take root.

Henry sometimes asks his father about the war. His father never seems to want to talk about it. If Henry becomes insistent, his father launches into a monologue on the intricacies of morse code or semaphore. This is not the sort of thing Henry is interested in, and for that matter neither is his father, an old-fashioned person with set ideas about what children and women should be allowed to hear. One day his father looks over and sees a blond shadow above Henry's upper lip, and decides it's time to say something more, or maybe it's just one of those rare times when he needs someone to talk to. He tells Henry about the German survivors they brought aboard after bombing their ship. When they were hauled on deck one of the men went berserk, wrenching the gun from his hands and screaming, you killed two of us and I'm going to kill four of you. His mate got to three before they were able to subdue him. The one left alive his father picked up and threw down the stairs into the underdeck.

"I was in the navy and never saw anyone killed up close before. Under all that dirt and blood I could see his face and that he was even younger and scareder than me. He was the only one I ever got to save, and he wasn't even one of ours."

After that, Henry never asks him about the war again.

Keeping House

From the time they are twelve, Veronica and Henry help out on Saturdays. Their mother is guided by a warm vision of the family working together to get their house in order. "If everybody pitches in, it'll all be done by lunchtime," she is fond of saying. In a clean house, she believes, nothing can go seriously wrong.

The vision might or might not be borrowed from those old public service films where the healthy family is seen in action, tackling a variety of chores. The girls sport kerchiefs on their heads and loose denims with a plaid border. The girls are in the spacious kitchen, bopping to toned-down ersatz Buddy Holly and waving their cleaning rags about in time. The boys roll up their sleeves and undo their top buttons to reveal the immaculate V of their cotton undershirts. The boys are in the front yard, raking up the never-ending pile of leaves that fall from a huge elm, and they're whistling to something on their transistor radio. Mother and Dad are busy setting up a grand barbecue on the little patio out back. When they think no-one's looking, they join hands and decide to cut a little rug themselves, singing "The Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B" and twirling around, apron to apron. Unbeknownst to their parents, the children have gathered in the kitchen and are watching their display with a great deal of amusement. "You're really hep, Daddy-O and Mommy-O," they call. Everybody in those films is always having one heck of a good time.

By the time they are twelve, on cleaning day, if they're lucky, their parents have gone out grocery shopping and Veronica and Henry can haul the record player into the kitchen and listen to the Osmonds and the Jackson Five while tidying up. They have heated debates about who is the better group, until one Saturday Douglas shows up with a record called "Band of

Gypsys" by someone named Jimi Hendrix. Veronica points out that the word gypsies is misspelt but her brother just gives her a look and plunks it onto the record player. Veronica and Henry never look back. Mesmerized by Hendrix's talking guitar, the two of them stand over the record player, watching the album turn round and round, waiting for the sound of weeping and jubilation.

They forget about Douglas. He is down in the basement in his room, doing his own housekeeping. The clothes, books, the bed linens and dishes and ashtrays meld together, form stalagmites and dunes to keep intruders out.

Navy Blue

At sixteen, Veronica calls him 'Pop', liking the friendly, American sit-com sound of it. 'Pop' is the guy who works hard all day to earn a decent living for his family, and despite this hard work his shirt is never rumpled (except at certain comical moments), because 'Mom' is always there to press it for him When things on the home front have really gotten out of hand, and Mom's loving ways can't fix them, Pop sits down and has a manly chat with his son, at the moment of resolution perhaps punching him on the arm; and with a daughter, at the moment of resolution, simpering to her how beautiful she is, just like her mother, his voice breaking a little. There is no family problem that can't be cured by a well-timed punch or compliment.

She knows that it is a version of this life that her father thinks he fought for on the lonely Atlantic. On board, young and very shy, he used to do jigsaw puzzles in his spare time. Veronica can imagine them, pictures of mountain ranges, and sailing ships, covered wooden bridges and picturesque, British-style villages to come home to.

People tell her that the navy was the worst service to be in, because there was nowhere to escape to, no generous bush to expire quietly under, no sky to welcome the solitary ascender. That is what Veronica thinks about, years later, when in the moldy dark of the repertory cinema she sits, feet stuck to the candy-glazed floor, crying helplessly as Jurgen Prochnow and his men die an agonizing death in their submarine.

Pop is in a folding chair on the front balcony, tapping a big brogued foot to the twang of country music. The record he's playing has a picture of two big greasy eggs in an iron skillet on the cover. Veronica guesses that this is meant to represent good old, down-home living. He thoughtfully puffs his pipe to the tune 'Oh Dem Golden Slippers', and watches the dull after-dinner activity of people on their street, car-washing, lawn-mowing, trim-painting. He looks almost merry. He's having a good day. Veronica finds it hard to think of him as a man who, as her mother informs her, is lying to his psychiatrist. What could he have to lie about? Veronica wonders. He lies about how bad he feels, is what her mother says.

Then she figures that Douglas must have learned to lie somewhere. He is a master of lies. How else could he be doing all the things he's doing? How could nobody notice, unless he's lying? And the worst of it is that he gets other people involved in his lies. He lets Veronica smoke up and then gets her to stand outside, watching for when their parents come home, to warn him so he can hide everything, his pipe and his roach clip and his bit of hash rolled lovingly in silver cigarette paper. Douglas has stopped beating her up; he's friendly now and often asks her opinion about things. So, for years, she does this, and things like this, for Douglas.

Until one day.

The Spy's Apprentice

Undercover Man preferred to work alone, but in her case he made an exception. There was a point in every spy's life at which he felt it was time to pass down the the craft, and he considered her a worthy apprentice Undercover Man acknowledged the usefulness of lady spies. For example, there was a limit to how much radio equipment a man could carry in the breast pocket of his suit or how much climbing gear he could cram into the false back of an attache case, but in the mid-sixties nobody ever questioned a lady for carrying extra luggage Not to mention that there was no end to the uses of eyelash glue, garters, nylon stockings, and twelve-piece manicure sets when equipment had to be improvised. She also possessed special skills: she had a photographic memory and was able to reproduce documents and blueprints word for word, item for item, regardless of whether she understood them or not; she had a gift for languages nearly equal to that of Undercover Man himself (though it was difficult to fathom how a such a taciturn person had ever cultivated this talent); she was able to make herself liked and trusted and was a professional confidante.

As spies, their names changed every week. For convenience's sake, they often posed as husband and wife, but this sounded more fun than it actually was. At first, she didn't worry about consequences, about the future. It was crucial for spies to have hero complexes and not to be whiners The only future they could believe in was that of national security and world peace. That they had to live lives of byzantine duplicity to achieve this was really beside the

point; they also had to believe in paradoxes. At least they could be grateful that they were in the employ of the British government and, as such, never had to actually kill anyone, at least not with their own hands.

Douglas thought it was stupid to spend time picking flowers when they were surrounded by nature; he believed that flowers should be left just where they were, and told Veronica so. Well, then why bother having windows in the house, she countered, if outside we are surrounded by light? I need proper illumination to peruse my books by, he answered. It was typical of him to rely on his superior vocabulary, it meant he always won arguments; Veronica hadn't the words yet to make such elegant retorts. So she garnered the new ones he used on her, building up to the day when she could have the last word.

Henry had other tactics for dealing with his older brother when he was being bossed around in this manner. He might screw up his face and utter a string of noises, imitating foghorns, animals, heavy machinery. When he got a little older, he learned to assume an expression of bland madness, and, lifting one hand aloft in which was held an imaginary surgical instrument, he would approach Douglas, and suavely intone, "*I* am a doctor". Henry had a genius for inventing one-man scenarios that rendered Douglas speechless.

Veronica was scanning the lakeside for wild irises. These flowers were rare and choice, not like the daisies and devil's paintbrush that grew freely in the thin grass around the country house. She stood some yards back of the sandy lot at the water's edge, training her eyes on the spongy clearings between the tree trunks and bushes, reconnoitring. Then she felt the soft thudding steps of someone making his way down the hill that sloped down into the lake, felt the quiet tremors through her own feet. Her father walked to the cement wall at the water's edge, and stood there, arms akimbo He w dressed in the swimming trunks his wife had bought for him, long boxers of an exotic South Sea floral print, the sort of thing he normally wouldn't be caught dead in. When he worked he wore denim overalls; when he dressed up he wore blue shirts and navy suits and was always hard-pressed to tell which of

his three ties went with these garments. Her brothers thought their mother'd bought this bathing suit as a joke. Veronica suspected it had something to do with her mother's insistence that her husband looked like Charlton Heston; that he was still capable of glamour.

Her father stood there, hiking up the trunks. They were cut low and showed his navel. Unaware or perhaps abashed that this was the effect they were meant to produce, he brushed back his loose brown curls because he didn't know what to do with them when they weren't slicked back. Only his hands and head were weatherbeaten and wise-looking; coveralls shed, his skin was white and smooth as a child's; only the network of indigo veins printed on the backs of his calves like tributaries on a map suggested he'd been somewhere, seen something. Sea legs, varicose veins from negotiating the rolling decks year after year.

He poised himself for a dive, then straightened up again, looking not into the water but beyond, to the other side of the lake. The damp soaked up into Veronica's sneakers as she stood motionless, gripping flowers that wilted in her hands as she strained to decipher what her father was saying to himself. Encouraging sounds, the ones he'd made to her when she was a child and frightened.

Well, Lofty, he remarked in undecided tones. Well.

This, a man so strong that exhausted friends clung to his back when they'd swum across the St. Lawrence in days before the war. Veronica had taken this story as gospel until now, despite the fact that in all her fifteen years she'd never seen him swim.

If she felt betrayed, she did not know it; if then she longed to forgive him, she did not feel it, but something caused her to call out to him as he finally plunged in, his face open and slack with fear.

She could not have seen what he saw every time he looked into water. Human flotsam: exploded torsoes, legs and heads and hands that floated free of their bodies, the eyes still seeing, the mouths still speaking, blasted pieces of friend and enemy conjoining monstrously in the red waves.

What Ferdy and all of her friends failed to understand about Veronica was that she wanted the simple life. In that respect, she was just like her father. In the middle of the madding crowd she wanted to be able to seal herself up, a tiny grain in a huge viscous oyster, and hear nothing but the music of the swirling water. In time, great changes would occur without any effort on her part; in time, she would be disgorged, a flawless pearl, an exotic. What everyone failed to understand was that she wanted to account to no one, wanted to be left alone, wanted to rule her world from the comfort of her living room, where all flux and tranformation was at her own behest.

"No, I don't want to go to the party on Saturday night. No, I don't want to meet your cousin from out of town next week. Or your aunt. Or your uncle. Or anyone. No, I don't. I just don't." She lay on the couch and recited these rude declinings of real and imagined invitations to the ceiling. It was good practice.

Across the TV screen flickered the grainy image of a man wielding a threatening-looking object -- a bayonet, a truncheon, a dismembered arm. He was shouting, in Armenian, Veronica decided. It turned out that he was only telling his wife that he was back from the market, the thing in his hand was a long loaf of bread. But these things were impossible for Veronica to know. With her eyeglasses kicked under the couch and her ignorance of Armenian, purblind and functionally deaf, she was put in the position of filling in a lot of blanks.

"If I were you, lady, I'd whack him a good one, before it's too late," she advised the woman on the television screen. "Right across the head."

She shifted her body slightly until her vision was level with the coffee table. Without her glasses, objects took on a new suavity. Dust ceased to plague her, the spines and edges of her books renewed themselves, became smooth and glossy again. Offending fingerprints that marred the wood

disappeared. It was like the game she played when she was a child, lifting her glasses up and down when sitting in the back of the family car. Glasses down, everything seemed ordinary and sensible, traffic lights and dashes of yellow line followed one after the other in a predictable procession. Glasses up, the street became a galaxy of crystal stars through which she sped, unaided by terrestrial landmarks.

One of Henry's not-so-secret desires was to look very tough, to be able to fling a look at another person that would reduce him to a quivering mass. He went to some lengths to achieve this goal, collecting leather jackets, black t-shirts, ornate cowboy boots with bitching heels that made him tower over the potential recipients of his fatal glance. But Henry was the prisoner of his own sweet face, his blue eyes and dimples betraying him at every turn, so Veronica frequently caught him looking in whatever mirror was available, practising grimaces and brow-furrowing, which invariably gave way to eye-crossing and crazed laughter. "People who always look in mirrors are supposed to be very insecure," Veronica warned him.

"I'm working on it, I'm working on it," Henry would tell her, and resume his posturing.

Douglas, when confronted with a mirror, had the same conversation with it every time. "You talking to me? You talking to ME? Yea, that's right, you, you shit-heel, YOU TALKING TO ME?"

Ix-nay, Barney

One winter afternoon Veronica gets home from a morning class and drops her books onto her desk in the basement.

There is a racket coming from Douglas' room; inside, he and Henry are watching TV.

"I've got an exam to study for," she bellows, prodding the door open with her foot.

"We're watching the Flintstones," says Henry in hushed tones. Their sister is barging in on a sacred rite.

"Ix-nay, Barney, it's ilma-way," says Douglas in an exaggerated whisper, and the pair of them start to giggle. "What an ob-snay, just because she's going to ollege-cay."

"Uck-fay off-fay," she tells them.

On the screen, Fred and Barney are peddling their car at the bottom of the lake. When they speak, bubbles erupt from their mouths; otherwise, they don't even seem to notice their surroundings. Whatever they do, wherever they go, things that happen never change them. They emerge unscathed on the other shore, dripping slightly, and game for more.

Gingerly, Eugene places one foot in the sewage, testing the seal of his yellow hipwaders. With effort he pulls the other foot forward and begins his march through the sea of excrement. Bits of waste bob against his legs but he dares not look at them too closely; they remind him of something: blind eyes and torn, frozen fingers.

"See, son," he calls back to Douglas, "it's nothing. Follow me." And he smiles at the boy, who hangs back, ashamed of his own apprehension. One hand gripping his toolbox handle and the other held out with fingers splayed, he moves forward, unsteadily, to join his father. Eugene's dentures gleam handsomely in the near dark as he gives his son a deliberately reassuring wink.

Death of a Sailor

Veronica and Ferdy are at the country place, sitting at the round oak table, smoking a joint and discussing the steps a person has to take to become self-actualized. They are both concerned with being all that they can be, and spend as much time as possible talking about it.

The kitchen door rattles, and Henry walks in with a look on his face she has never seen before, though she, if anyone, knows Henry's different faces "Verry, you have to come home now, something's happened," he tells her. He pulls on her hand like he did when they were kids and he had a secret to tell her. Without a word they enter their parents' room, infant conspirators once more, standing in the shadow of their parents' bed, confessing to broken cups, stolen nickels, lipsticks pilfered for making clown faces. Henry tells her that their father has just died. He pulls on her hand and they are five years old again, one body, joined at the fingers.

Some time after her father dies, Veronica takes up gardening, starting first with a modest strip she digs up under her bedroom window, where she plants sprawling snapdragons, and heavy-headed coxcombs that grow crooked and parched in the sun. She pulls these out and replaces them with sober ageratum that grow straight and compact, a china blue that complements the carmine and yellow of the snapdragons. She is incapable of planting a straight row. Each line rises up at the right, retreating on itself like the backward angle of her handwriting. Ferdy tells her that she is really a southpaw like Henry, and that only a ferocious desire to conform could have made her sit day after day, in failed attempts to force recalcitrant letters into the desirable slant of the guidelines under her copybook page.

In springs that follow she takes up seed-gardening. With astonishment and pleasure she discovers that she can see the tenderest sprouts begin where others see only undifferentiated mounds of patiently combed earth. Hands to the ground, Veronica learns of minute buds that grow like braille under her fingertips.

Some time after his father dies, Douglas gives up carpentry and takes up masonry. He tells Veronica that in carpentry all the real work gets boarded over. All the labour and sweat and improvising hidden under a bland gyproc face. Masonry is a dying craft, he says, and a work in stone is a work forever. He shows her a book on rock construction; the author warns that a person who wants to build a house out of stone should be prepared to work on it for a lifetime. She feels the thing to do when someone confesses a desire for immortality is to react politely, and she does, disbelieving him all the while. She is certain it's just that every time Douglas picks up a hammer he feels

someone standing beside him, a tall man in overalls, holding out a handful of nails to his beloved son.

Some time after his father dies, Henry develops a disturbing habit During the night he gets up and begins clicking the light switch in his bedroom, on-off, on-off, on-off. Their mother expresses fears Henry is going out of his mind. Douglas, who is usually sitting at the kitchen table at these times, reading Chekhov or the ingredients from the back of a box of Cap'n Crunch, suggests Henry is communicating with Martians. Only Veronica knows what the clicking means, though she shares it with no-one: Henry is calling out to his father, telling him to return, demanding what he thinks his father owes him.

Not surprisingly, they are all correct. Soon after Henry abandons his nocturnal dispatches, he takes up residence at a downtown hospital. In the mornings, from his window, Henry watches the painful sun that lights up the river, where now, ships are just flecks in the blue of Henry's eyes.

Henry comes home in the spring. After her classes are finished Veronica takes him for his daily walk. He takes small steps, mindful of his balance, like someone wading through a rocky stream. They go round and round the block, Henry on the inside of the curb, holding tight to Veronica's arm. With his free hand he grazes the sprouting hedgetops, like a blind man needing orientation. Sometimes, when they go back into the house, Henry's fingers are wounded with green, and in his palm is gripped a small cluster of damp buds.

But not only Henry is changed. Her mother is suddenly a frail woman with the eyes of a child who cannot comprehend its abandonment. She stands, peeling too many potatotes over the sink, preparing food for silenced mouths, listening for the tread of emptied shoes.

First small amounts of money begin disappearing from their mother's house, amounts that might or might not have been there in the first place. In leftover immigrant tradition, both Henry and their mother keep large amounts of cash in their wallets and top drawers, thick handfuls to be pawed and petted before reluctant leavetakings at the local bank. The amounts get larger, too large to be attributed to forgetfulness or miscalculation Veronica receives telephone calls from her mother and Henry, listening sympathetically to their respective plans for dealing with the situation. For Henry's part, Douglas has been beaten the fuck up, run the fuck over, had his fucking face smashed, his fucking arms broken, theoretically, no segment of his anatomy has escaped Henry's awful wrath. Her mother confides that she is compiling a long list of every cent Douglas has ever taken or been lent, and that it will come off his inheritance, and then some. She gives the distinct impression that on the day of her death this list will be found in her bureau, hidden under her bras and her rosary beads with the Jesus flattened from repeated crushing under bedcasters, and Henry and Veronica will be there to exact justice from the other side of her grave. "I'll fix him," swears their mother. "I'll fix him," swears Henry.

But nobody fixes Douglas. Douglas has started to give every sign that he's beyond the repair of human hands.

Henry gets an idea. It's about money. It's about how it's the most important thing in the world. How if you work long enough and save hard enough, it will start to add up. And that no one can take it away from you, unless you let them. No matter what shit you take in life, if you have a big enough stash of dough somewhere, you're safe.

Douglas gets an idea. It's about drugs. It's about how they're the most important thing in the world. How if you think fast enough and lie hard enough, you can always get them. And no one can take being stoned away from you, unless you let them. No matter what shit you take in life, if you have a big enough stash of dope somewhere, you're safe.

Veronica gets an idea. It's about dreams. It's about how they're the most important thing in the world. How if you sleep long enough and dream hard enough, they will begin to make meaning. And no one can take dreams away from you, unless you let them. No matter what shit you take in life, if you have a big enough stash of dreams somewhere, you're safe.

Habit

Someone from the pool hall finds Douglas with blue arms wrapped around a toilet. It was one thing to sell drugs in your establishment but having people dying in your restrooms was bad publicity. So they stuff twenty dollars into the taxi driver's hands and direct him to the toxicology clinic. In a few days Douglas is free to start all over again, to resume his routine. And Veronica and Henry are able to resume theirs, which means to do their best to forget he exists until the next skirmish, never long enough in coming.

Only their mother continues her nightly audiences with God on her son's behalf. She thinks of God as she thinks of her own father, a stern, disciplined presence who had to have his comb and brush just so on the dressing table, and if it were moved out of place, there had to be a damned good reason. She thinks of God as someone with razor-sharp creases in his trousers and a terrible case of ulcers, who has to be appealed to in the most ingratiating way.

But it was not in her to cast him out. Whatever reason Veronica and Henry gave was not good enough to abandon little Douglas: a grave, round-faced three-year-old, beating his fat fists on an upturned trash can and singing Polish songs for her through the long afternoons before they were born. Only she could look that far back into his eyes.

At university, they sat around and took things apart, dividing things into the smallest units of meaning, parsing the world beyond all recognition as if it were the cleverest and most necessary thing possible to do. If one student finally cracked open a poem like an egg, another leapt to the fore and argued, "Well, yes, but ..." and called out the phrase, the word, the syllable, the phoneme that laid waste to the previous interpretation. Veronica fiercely admired these students, how confident they were that their words mattered, how at home they seemed challenging those men in frumpy suits who'd had the best educations available. She didn't dare call out words as if they were objects she could own, preferring to borrow them politely in constructing earnest essays that usually fell wide of the mark. Speaking was risky, writing was easier than looking someone in the eye; it was emotionally economical. She produced each paper as if it were a contract with their world, hoping in this way she could somehow gather up proof that she existed in a way recognizable to them.

Statistically speaking, they do eventually recognize her. The title *University Scholar* gets printed on her transcripts each term. One day she gets a letter telling her she's received awards that will cover her tuition and books in her final year. She graduates with great distinction. Veronica wonders what great distinction really means, considering that none of her professors remember her face, much less her name. When she finally gets up the courage to ask her favourite professor if she can use his name as a recommendation, he asks her if he has any special hobbies.

"Gardening," she says, and the professor looks dismayed.

"You see, it's important to know these things," he elaborates politely as if she hasn't quite understood him. "I once had a student who played the violin masterfully and could read Dostoevsky in the original."

Veronica wanted to know if he could do those things simultaneously, like rubbing his head and scratching his belly at the same time, but felt it was not her place to question what constituted true accomplishment

Once she'd tried to get a conversation about Dostoevsky started with Henry at the dinner table.

"Who's Dostoevsky, some dead Russian fag?" he asked conversationally, shovelling potatotes into his mouth. Henry had a dim idea that Veronica hung around with people he called 'artists' and 'fags', using derogatory terms that he liked to pretend were synonymous.

It was true that there were some things she might never be able to discuss with Henry. But at least Henry thought it was a good thing when his sister took a spade to the back garden and made something grow in the grey earth.

Henry is sitting in the back of station wagon, clutching a plastic bag used for hamburger meat with the company name emblazoned on both sides. It contains a chunk of ice hacked off a freezer wall and his coworker's hand. He's warned this boy to pay attention when using the slicer; he wishes people would listen to him because there are things that he knows. His coworker sits beside him, screaming and punching him with his gauzy stump, while the driver, tears streaming down his butcher's apron, swears furiously in every language that he speaks, cutting off other cars and running red lights in the race to the hospital. With his open palm Henry slaps the boy hard in the face to stop him punching, from damaging the nerve endings that he believes can be reattached, grafted back on like a branch end to a tree. Then he takes hold of the boy's good hand, locking fingers and gazing into his white face, and recites to him a song he learned as a child. Everything is red in the back of the car but the blue of Henry's eye as he sings. He gets through the whole song once before the boy starts punching again.

Phrasebook open on bare knees, Ferdy quizzed Veronica on Italian grammar.

"*Dov'è siamo?*"

"*Siamo al letto, signor Jones.*"

"*Dov'è tua madre*?"

"*Nella cucina.*"

"*Dov'è tuo padre?*"

'What an idiotic question."

"I'm just following the list here."

"*No so.*"

"That's not an answer."

Veronica leafed hastily through the dictionary to find the word she wanted.

"*In una scatola*," she hissed, jumping out of bed.

"Jesus, you don't have to take the questions so *literally*. Make the answers up."

The television's hum drowned out the sound of Ferdy's voice as he accompanied Signor Jones on further adventures, *nella cucina, nel salotto* The ethnic station had gone off air, so Veronica settled for what looked like a foreign film on one of the French channels.

In a high-ceilinged classroom, a teacher raps his pointer on a boy's desk, waiting for an answer. He doesn't really see the boy, doesn't see an underfed fourteen-year-old, struggling to catch up, struggling to decode the mathematical symbols that swirl across the pages of the book he grips in his large hands. He only sees a mass of dark blond curls that dangle in his blue

eyes, shade his high, raw cheekbones, long, delicate neck bent over in shame, collar not as clean as it should be. There is something about the boy that infuriates the teacher, something about the soft slur of his French that he cannot bear, some steady defiance in his voice as if he were not quite ready to accept his own ignorance, his own inability.

"Tu ne sais pas la réponse, hein, Eugène? Tu ne sais jamais la réponse! Grand imbecile! Polack!" The last word muttered in disgust, only loud enough for the boy to hear. The sound just leaves his mouth before he's dealt a crashing blow across his face. So stunned is he, he fails to notice the boy fleeing the classroom, the book still in his other hand.

The boy runs and runs till he feels safe, his long legs speeding him to freedom over the streetcar tracks. At the fence of the slaughterhouse he stops and weeps. "Bastard," he says, and a French sub-title appears on the bottom of the screen.

Over the high gate the book goes sailing, swoops down like a bird, out of his sight.

Veronica's mother reads and reads. The shelves of her house cascade paperbacks that have the overblown look of rising bread, misshapen and bulging as if they'd been dredged from the bottom of a murky pool. Almost without exception the covers feature a smug-looking pair, man and woman. Beneath a surface bewilderment they have the secretly satisfied look of people who are assured of how their lives will turn out. Otherwise they are clad in tastefully ruffled formal attire, locked in an embrace only contortionists could manage without sustaining spinal injury. The more adventurous couples share an expression of calculated abandon; they too, know how their lives will turn out, but fancy the love-and-guts option, and live out their scripts like bipolar manic-depressives, battered, abused, but with experiences of ecstasy that only the privileged have access to.

Veronica has never read one of these books, but occasionally piles them into some semblance of order for her mother. Mentally she has compared the covers of her mother's books and her own books: the Canadian novels that featured sketches of heroes and heroines who appear to be in the last stages of terminal embarrassment, as if they personally had to account for every four-letter word or homosexual act in their lives before the Ontario Censor Board; the more expensive editions feature abstracts that are symbols of symbols in the novels themselves; the European novels are decorated with details of famous works of art hanging in museums she has never been to, images that to her were representative of the story within by only the most vigorous stretching of the imagination.

One day she hands her mother a historical novel about the land of her ancestors, hoping this will entertain as well as edify her. Her mother is in a bad mood, perhaps suspecting her daughter's intention, her daughter's feeling that somehow she should improve her mind, that it will do her good to learn about

her cultural background. Perhaps she is just feeling the characteristic irritability that is a symptom of her heart condition. But she knows something about reading that Veronica doesn't, that reading is not about instruction, education, bettering oneself. It is about thrills.

"Take that book away from me, I know Polish history already. All the Polacks ever did was fight amongst themselves and then feel persecuted."

She waves her hand dismissively, a queen on her sumptuous peach acrylic sedan, the *National Enquirers* and phone bills littered like documents of state around her, a teacup with mismatched saucer that also functions as an ashtray, trembling delicately ... she is clad in a dressing gown of the royalest blue, polyester that catches the stray glimmers of light shed by a swag lamp suspended above her. On her noble head she wears a spiky crown of curlers. Close to hand is her sceptre, a sleek black remote control that allows her to view how the dismal world is doing.

She's never asked to rule this empire, to nurse a mad king now dead, to be left with his profligate first son, a second son not suited to authority. She is tired now, and has to delegate responsibility from her chambers. The daughter is able enough, but alas, she is a woman, and will have to learn to wield power through an endless series of compromises, wheedling, and carrying more than her share.

She sighted Undercover Man across the street walking hurriedly in a direction perpendicular to her own. He was supposed to have returned to the hotel lobby by now. She called out to him once and was tempted to run after him, but her arms were weighted down by ale bottles, and she decided it would look rather desperate to chase a man down the street while so obviously burdened. Even though they were supposedly out on a weekend jaunt they had to appear natural without being conspicuous, though, to her way of thinking, not running after her supposed husband seemed more suspect than doing so They had to expect to be under surveillance at any time, so undertaking the simplest action had to be judged instantaneously on the basis of this double criterion. Foolishly, she called his name one more time, in a voice meant to carry across the din of automobiles and heavy machinery. He continued to move along, but she caught the barely perceptible movement of his neck, the evidence of the tiny animal part of him that responded to his name, of the iota of spontaneity still left in him that could not be trained out of existence. For this nearly invisible gesture she was grateful. No matter what business he had to complete that did not include her, he remained accessible to her at some level that continued to operate beyond the concerns of the whole world, the world it was often his job to carry on his shoulders.

When the children feel it is the right moment after Sunday dinner, they sidle up to their father and asked him to make a muscle for them. After a shy demurral, their father rolls up his sleeve, displaying a navy tattoo on his left bicep. The tattoo is what they are really interested in seeing, a lovely young mariner with flowing locks and a neat ribboned cap, etched in blue-green, the initials HMCS on a banner beneath the face. Making the muscle is what brings the image to life, stretches the lines taut along the curve of their father's arm, throws the contour of the cheeks into pulsing relief. Veronica grows up thinking that because the face is so pretty and the hair so long it's the picture of a sailor girl, not understanding that it can't possibly be, that the abundant hair, the long lashes and shapely mouth must belong to a boy.

Oh, it's so beautiful, they cry, knowing in a moment that their father will pull down his sleeve, put his pipe back into his mouth, and go on listening to his wife talk until it's time to watch the Ed Sullivan show. But before he does that he winks at the pair of them. He's a great one for winking. If one of them only glances at him as he rocks back and forth on his heels during mass, the quick shutting of his eye means that it's all right, that he is there and watching over them.

Pawns

Veronica and Henry are conferring in the room that used to be her bedroom. Someone has robbed their mother's house in her absence Nothing has been unduly disturbed, only odd gaps left by televisions, the microwave, the stereo, and other small moveables make their empty presences felt. In their mother's bedroom, her jewelry box lies open, the better pieces gone Most of these things are gifts, small luxuries to this woman who has spent most of her life labouring to keep her family afloat.

Henry holds up a fistful of pawn tickets to her face.

"Courtesy of our brother Douglas," he says. "He left them on the kitchen table."

For once, Henry's habit of carrying around his pocket calculator at all times is not the butt of his sister's jokes. They do what they have to do, figure out what it will cost to get everything out of hock and back in place before their mother gets back from her weekend away.

They drive to the pawnshop in the old blue Comet, now referred to as The Comic, after Douglas' suggestion. On the roof over the driver's seat is a dark circle of the brilliantine her father used to smear on that refuses to wash out. It hovers like a halo over whoever drives the car, more comforting even than the St. Christopher medals he was forever sticking on his dashboards. The acrid odour of something like incense hangs in the air, it is Henry's personal after-shave which he mixed up himself with pharmacy samples, the scent he called Eau de No Return.

A girlfriend invited Veronica and Ferdy to see a performance art show she was involved in. Veronica had seen one of her friend's performance art shows already and that had been enough for her. They had been compelled to watch a man and a woman completely wrapped in bandages, their limbs strung up to the ceiling on long cords like marionettes, struggling to cross the room to meet each other, struggling to break free. Behind them several television monitors crackled, imageless. The neo-classical background music was punctuated by their groans and screams. This went on for a good forty-five minutes, until exhausted, the pair of mummies expired, strangled in their own puppet strings.

Veronica hadn't been so upset by art since on the recommendation of her college painting teacher she had rushed out to see a movie on the works of Mark Prent. For three nights she had left her light on, haunted by images of sliced body parts and mutilated heads. It was no use telling herself that the exhibits were only latex molds of himself and his friends, that the sculptures were harmless, lifeless. She could imagine people being shorn of their limbs and members, could imagine the people that were capable of doing it.

In any case, Veronica had better things to do. She had her apartment to clean. For some reason, she couldn't seem to get it clean enough. This evening she was planning to attack the subtle dirt, the tiny deposits of grime that formed on the ridges of her toaster and under the quarter round in the kitchen. Most people didn't give a thought to these germ-laden areas of their homes. Most people seldom, if ever, wiped their doorknobs clean or vacuumed the undersides of their upholstery, but Veronica did not want to be among their number. Somewhere on the eastern fringe of downtown, an artist in fur rags rolled across the wooden planks of some gallery floor, acting out the stages of human evolution backwards, unmindful of the hazardous

dustballs she was embracing as, rag by rag, she devolved into her algae-coloured bodysuit In the kitchen on the fourteenth floor, Veronica dipped an old toothbrush into a pail of bleach and Mr. Clean, restoring her toggle switches to their former pristine state, gently scrubbing the dirt out of the letters O-N- and O-F-F, alternating between light and dark in her quest for purity

I'm Not a Well Woman

When Veronica was feeling at her worst, she could always call up Henry. Occasionally he didn't speak at all at first, and instead sang out melodies at the top of his lungs for a few minutes. Veronica would sit with the receiver in her hand until he was finished a heartfelt rendition of 'Too Fat Polka' or 'Manic Depression'. Then they would speak of serious things, take inventory of their lives, discuss Douglas, or Henry's girlfriends, or the strange pains Veronica had in the back of her neck. They'd talk and talk and would not stop talking of sad, mysterious events until one of them thought of something that would make them laugh. The conversation had to come full circle or they could not get off the phone.

Sometimes, for comfort, they'd end their talk in a dialogue comprised of their mother's favourite phrases:

"You know, Veronica, I'm not a Well Woman."

"That must be, Henry, because You Were Born Under an Unlucky Star."

"If only you got a nice office job instead of tracking dirt in on your construction boots every night, Then I Would Be Happy. But the way things are going, I realize now that I Should Have Strangled You At Birth."

"Talk like that and God's Going to Punish You."

"He already has. With Ungrateful Children Like You."

"I know, I know. I'm a Tramp! A Streetwalker!"

"Go ahead, laugh! Tell me, what is this MANIA you have for making fun of your mother? I tell you it's a SICKNESS! Who Will You Make Fun Of When I'm Dead?'

Other times they conversed in a thick European accent that their parents never had Brother and sister had convoluted arguments in broken English about the best way to cook cabbage, swapped imaginary scandals about

imaginary Ukranian neighbours, whispered calumnious rumours about the members of an infinitely extended family they had fabricated. At those moments, they knew exactly who they were: their own grandparents, discovering the *telefon*.

"The sharks. The sharks are going to get her. You don't know these people. They'll do anything when you owe them."

Douglas is pleading with Henry, following him around the kitchen, standing behind him as he makes himself a sandwich. He needs a hundred dollars. Henry tries to concentrate on the sandwich, to focus on spreading the mayonnaise thin on the white bread, on the grip of his big raw knuckles on the knife. To meet his brother's eyes is a mistake, they are tearing around the rims, his long thin body casts entreating shadows wherever he moves in the little room. Henry understands that Douglas is almost always lying, but there is forever a small tug at the back of his mind, the notion that for once he might be telling the truth.

Henry doesn't see his sister ganged up on and beaten by professional thugs. She's too tough, he thinks, she'd aim a steely fist and break the nose of the first guy who thought he'd could do her in, like he taught her. She's too smart, he thinks, she'd talk them out of it.

Then another picture comes to him, of Veronica, not tall, wiry, like he's always known her, but as a child he does not remember, frail and floating, while around her circle ancient beasts who cannot reason. And he can't save her, he doesn't know how to swim, his body is too muscular, too heavy, bound to the earth

He lays down the knife and pulls the money out of his wallet. Douglas blubbers with gratitude, makes promises of repayment while Henry slaps a slice of bread down so hard there is a hand print left in it.

When Douglas leaves, Henry eats the sandwich, all of it. There is nothing else to do.

To look at him, one would think that Undercover Man had sprung from the government's head, perfect and fully formed, but this of course could not be true. Even he had a past, and a name, neither of which he was prepared to divulge; perhaps the spurious attachment to this sort of thing had been cleansed right out of him. She called him Lyle, and though he did not object to this moniker he did not always respond to it, which occasionally became problematic when they were communicating via radios that were concealed in bibles or done up as hairdryers.

One evening as they sat on opposite sides of the hotel bed, disassembling the gear that kept them in touch during crucial and necessary separations, he looked over to her and said, "It's best you never call me by name, even a false one, it's too incriminating." It was nearly unbearable for her to receive even the gentlest criticisms from him, she did so long to be worthy Putting things into healthy perspective would have been safest; after all, she was in apprenticeship, and could not possibly have been perfect in every word and deed. She tamed the urge to brush back her straight hair (this gesture might have seemed like a feminine ploy), opting instead to gaze openly into his turquoise eyes. But they were hooded by his heavy lids, darkened and inward-looking as he toyed distractedly with the transistor in his palm.

Douglas' wife Paula shows up at Veronica's apartment in tears. Her belly protrudes alarmingly; Veronica can't get over her teenage sister-in-law, can't get over how willingly she lets these things happen to her. Her own birth control pills were consumed with reverence, little hosts to ward off entrapment, responsibilities, decisions.

Paula sits on the long green couch and composes herself. She tells Veronica what she already knows: Douglas is impossible. Douglas is crazy. Douglas won't leave her alone until he gets her last cent to spend on dope.

Veronica makes her a soothing herbal tea. Her homework, an essay on the character of Britomart in *The Faerie Queene*, sits half-finished in the typewriter in the hall.

"He's threatening me," Paula says, wiping her nose in a kleenex, and Veronica's stomach tightens. She feels nearly as frightened as Paula, but tries not to show it. She realizes that Douglas will figure out where his wife is, so she telephones Henry. Douglas is someone she can't handle on her own, Douglas makes it clear that he is losing his sense of boundary, of perspective.

There is a calm knocking at the door. "Let me in," a voice says.

"No," answers Veronica, seeing Douglas' swollen face through the peephole. He is looking sideways. She motions to Paula to hide in her bedroom.

"Let me in," he repeats.

"Fuck you, Douglas."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, let me in." He is sobbing now. Veronica can see him sitting on the steps, weeping openly, like a three-year-old. He still has his work clothes on, he is covered in cement powder, a tall, dusty ghost, jangling in the entrance.

"It's all right, I'll talk to him now," says Paula.

Veronica opens the door and he pushes past her.

"Come home," he tells his wife in a dead tone.

"No."

"Come home," he says again, more urgently

She sits on the couch with her arms crossed over her stomach Veronica stands between them, like a watchdog. He circles the coffee table to get to Paula, who rises to meet him. "Get out of my way," he warns Veronica

He begins to push Paula's shoulders, and they go round the room, Douglas shoving and Paula walking backward.

"Stop it, stop it," Veronica hisses. Her brother ignores her

The sound of Henry's boots fills the entrance way, and he runs through the open door.

"Get out of here. Get out or I swear I'll break your fucking head." Henry is a huge red muscle, ready to strike. His eyes blaze like blue gas. "You piece of shit," he swears, grabbing his brother by the arms and shoving his flailing body out the door.

"Call the cops," Henry instructs, and Veronica obeys, aiming a shaking finger at the black dial.

"Let me in," shouts Douglas, throwing his full weight against the locked door. "Let me in. Let me in. Let me in."

Veronica is convinced that the whole of her has been worn down. She runs a sorrowing finger over a tiny balding patch on her second-hand corduroys, foreseeing the decaying seams, the knees pushed out in frowsy bags, the rivets popping out, unmendable, the khaki green grown too dismal even for rags. Her oval, manicured nails sprout hangnails from the cold, and tiny white patches underneath them signal illness and deficiency. Her hair is wispy and dry to the touch; pillow stuffing. Feeling gingerly for more signs that she is undoing, she presses her knuckles to see that her joints are still attached, because her fingertips have gone blind to everything but abrading threads and skin.

Henry once asked his mother, "What did he ever do for me? He never had a good word to say to me."

"Oh, it's not true," his mother pleaded, 'if you could have seen him the way he used to be, I've seen him take the bread out of his own mouth to give to you.'

So out of that same mouth had come bread soft with his own spittle for his children to eat, and words hardened with bile, also for his children to eat And when his last breath was blown out, a great silence resounded. Douglas heard his endless, unspoken reproach and Henry heard his unnamed fears. Veronica heard voices from years before she was born, in languages she did not know.

The little boy cannot go to school today. His shoes are broken and it's too cold outside. His father carries him across the street to sit with the little girl, who shares her breakfast, porridge and milk, with the boy. He would like to have something to give her back. Since he has nothing, he shows her his schoolbook and shares solemnly with her the first words he has learned to read. *Mother. Father. Bread. Flower.* The words enfold themselves in the children's stainless hearts.

The Twin

They find Douglas sprawled across the couch sleeping. Veronica stands in the doorway, relieved to see him emptied of energy and rage, thinking how people like him don't have nightmares, they can't tell the difference between good and bad dreams anymore, between eyes opened and eyes closed. Henry's not so quick to get over the humiliation of fear. He pushes past her back to the entranceway and picks up a snow shovel, which he brandishes over his sleeping brother's head, whispering, then screaming, *the bastard*. Veronica doesn't try to stop him with even a word, so certain is she that he he could never do it. Between them stretches the wish that just this once he'd retaliate, break open Douglas' head and let the devils flee. But Henry is not a lyncher at heart.

Instead, Henry puts the shovel down and leans on it. He starts to cry, mourning the part of Douglas that violence or love cannot recover. Veronica sees something else: the slack jaw, the arm flung across the breast, the dirty boot hanging over the sofa edge make him look like a dead soldier she saw in a documentary once, kicked out like garbage from under a bush by an angry villager. And she understands for the first time that this man she wishes dead, and not the merciful Henry, is her true twin. She is his perfect mirror, addicted to this malignant swell, this loathing, coursing through her veins.

Towards the end of his life, when he got to be foreman, her mother says, Veronica's father had a recurring dream. He would startle her awake with his agonized twisting, and cry out, "Watchez-vous, watchez-vous, les gars!" In his sleep he stalked the skeletons of buildings, panicking over the missteps of his men. It was a terrible thing to have so many lives in your care, to tread the air with such a yoke around your neck, to accept that for all your prayers a person walks of his own accord and may turn from you and fall from your grasp

Eugene lunges for the the last man and picks him up. The man is surprisingly light and flings his thin arms around Eugene's neck, holding fast. Eugene glides swiftly over the watery deck; when the others are far behind Eugene puts the man down, but he won't let go, he clings to Eugene's chest and sobs. When he's finished crying he looks up at Eugene. The tears on his cheek Eugene rubs away carefully, till from beneath the dirt and blood emerges a boy's delicate face, a spray of bronze freckles on the unscarred skin. Green cat's eyes fix on Eugene's face, then shut suddenly as his neck goes slack.

When they find them later, behind the gun station, the prisoner is still in his captor's arms, his sleeping golden skull warmed on Eugene's beating heart.

You'll Get What's Coming To You

You'll get what's coming to you: usually an idle promise, but that was their mother's edict to Douglas. Unlike most of her mother's edicts, it was, in the final analysis, an ambiguous one. It was only their mother who still cherished the illusion that one day Douglas would lay down his junkie's dagger and bring peace to a territory of his own invention. Veronica imagined that, on the other hand, she herself dealt, if not strictly with realities, then at least with probabilities.

She believed that somewhere out there had to be something to stop Douglas. Since he had the constitution of a caveman, something external had to get to him. Veronica cringed when she thought of him saying that some junkies lived out a nearly-normal life-span. Another five years, ten, twenty, even one more year had become unthinkable. Douglas was accustomed to rolling on, a fearsome juggernaut crushing the unwary faithful under him Some great unseen hand would have to intervene An accident God The legal system. In the end, any solution became acceptable, until finally even the death he courted daily numbered secretly among her hopes.

La Dolce Vita

Up there in her concrete tower, Veronica had transformed herself into the sort of princess that she'd found tiresome as a child: the languishing, vapid type, who because she could get away with it shunned conflict and risk. To her way of thinking, Ferdy, resplendent in his silk shirts and alligator shoes, was proof of this; he was the prince, carrying her off on adventures, bringing her along to conquer his world. And to her chagrin, she could think of nothing better to do than to go along with it all.

Even the strictest of her feminist girlfriends practically cooed their approval of his decision to take her to Italy. "So romantic," one of them even said, and Veronica balked. "But you don't understand, he's trying to assimilate me, forcing me to learn Italian and *everything*."

"So you can be a little self-reliant when you get there? What's wrong with that?"

"I don't even speak my own language."

"Your grandparents' language, you mean. Jesus, is your identity that fragile?"

That's a bloody good question, Veronica thought.

Meanwhile, back at his summer palace, Prince Ferdy was sitting at the kitchen table in his spattered busboy whites and greasy sneakers, smelling of french fries and onions. Though he could hardly bear to look at another hamburger, he'd brought one home anyway, to save money. He wolfed it down

and went over the list before him. Under the section titled 'Incidentals' was a sum of money he would give to Veronica to buy new shoes in Italy, shoes beautiful beyond all dreaming.

He envisioned them dancing in a dusky bar somewhere in Rome, himself looking even more like Marcello Mastroianni than he already did, and Veronica looking just like Veronica as he saw her, radiant, always

They sat in the grimy little espresso bar, warming their hands on the cups of caffe latte. This place was cleared; it was all right to talk here. The genial, heavyset Italian who posed as the proprietor was a semi-retired agent himself, just as any other agent, watching him polish glasses and singing opera tunes in a feeling baritone, might suspect. He was far too friendly and natural, pouring the coffee out in such an officious way, as if he really cared about maintaining good custom.

Undercover Man was almost disposed to be friendly and natural himself.

"There are some things you simply don't tolerate," he said expansively.

She looked at him inquiringly.

"Bad coffee, for instance, which this, most fortunately, is not." He smiled warmly at her, rolling his shoulders in a comfortable way.

She felt it best not to press for further details.

"And other things, of course. Injustice. Oppression of the innocent." He was assuming stagey tones now. When things were going smoothly he liked to entertain her in this way; it was a rare treat. He had a beautifully modulated voice and enjoyed playing the actor. She was, after all, such an excellent audience. He was too perspicacious not to sense the affection she harboured for him, though even he could not guess at its depths.

In any case, it didn't take a sixth sense to interpret her steady gazes, the way she hung on his every word as she did now, thinking that even the cut of his tweed coat was perfection itself.

"And even other things, of course," she whispered. She was thinking how intolerable it was to hold back love. Just once she would like to peel back the coverlets of his twin bed when they were on a long assignment and be made welcome, instead of turning modestly away to cast a sad and wakeful eye on

stray lights that played along impassive walls. It was intolerable to be always pretending.

"But let us cast away care and talk of other things. Let us be of good cheer." He leaned forward and she inhaled his clean scent as he smiled roguishly. It was his one small vanity that his slightly crooked front teeth were imperfect and should not be displayed too prodigally.

She had absorbed countless skills under his tutelage. But what good was being able to decipher code or to aim the grappling hook with steady hand and scale the backs of buildings, in sling-back evening sandals? What booted it a woman if she could shadow the most elusive enemy down the most dangerous boulevards and report his hiding-place? In the end, it was merely words on a report, sounds on a tape-recorder secreted in some plausible looking dry-cleaning and delivered back to headquarters.

For she had not courage. And without it, she would be doomed to a lifetime of following in the wake of Undercover Man's tweeds as they flapped nobly in the bold winds of his private resolution.

That'll Learn Ya

One of their topics of discussion was what Henry would be called if ever his life's dream came true and he became a wrestler. He and Veronica argued about appropriate names for him. Henry's choice was 'King Bastard', but Veronica felt certain they'd never let him get away with it. 'The Tutor' was the alias she favoured. The only drawback was that his promotors might mix him up with Henry the Eighth and think the name is 'The Tudor', and oblige him to show up in ermine robes, in a beard dyed red.

"Come on, Henry, the Tutor, you could get your opponents into a half-nelson and tell them, ' that'll learn ya, that'll learn ya'...." Henry looked doubtful. As long as he was pretending, he was more interested in playing a good bad guy. He saw himself in black tights and mask, tattooed with majestic-looking thunderbolts. "Something basic, but *meaningful*," he says. "Something that spells out, Nobody Better Fuck With Me. King Bastard says it all."

Being a twin, did that mean you would grow up and always have a loneliness with you? Veronica wanted to know. Infants locked together, bodies safe in sleep, was there ever to be any sweeter coincidence in life than that togetherness? Swimming together from even before conception, bodies revolving in the dark water, the budding fingers of one grazing those of the other. It is dark but never frightening, quiet but never lonely, it is good waiting to be born, it is good to be born.

The old woman pushes aside the bowl and wipes her fingers clean of flour when her young daughter enters the kitchen. It is time for lessons On a clean sheet the same letters are formed over and over again, take shape in the slant of dusty sun that edges slowly away from the writer. The wet side of a fist is painstakingly manoeuvered over the page to prevent blots; these letters must be beautiful, they mean her own name.

Her mother is not satisfied with the plainness of the writing her daughter first shows her. She demands the elaborate calligraphy of her own language, and it is only with a great effort of memory that her daughter can recall complex swirls of the writing the immigrant nuns taught her before English school. It is heartbreaking to watch her mother gripping the pen with arthritic fingers, to watch her doggedly make the same mistakes so many times in the learning. But when this aging countrywoman has finally mastered the intricacies of her own signature, she understands why. Her mother's name is now a picture she can draw, a small garland of harps and trailing ivy. Even at sixty, it hadn't been too late for her to want to be more than an X on the page.

Until one day

Veronica is taking a bath, getting ready to go out with Ferdy. She and Henry are preparing to leave the house. Henry has informed her that downstairs Douglas is acting in a homemade skin flick, for his old friend, Rabbo. Rabbo is a career pervert, a professional voyeur; he owned those magazines that Veronica found in the garage so many years ago.

"That girl he brought in down there is a prostitute," Henry tells her.

"Oh God, how do you know?" Veronica asks.

"I can tell. I know."

Veronica has to trust him on this one. If she's downtown she can't tell prostitutes from regular people, individuals hugging the corners of buildings, dressed skimpily; Veronica looks at them and imagines that they, like everybody else, are just waiting for Godot.

The two of them are getting used to that sinking feeling, not having any power to stop Douglas, whatever foulness he might dream up. If they confronted him, he would lie to their faces and accuse them of having overactive imaginations. Their mother is at work and their father's in the hospital; Douglas Is safe to indulge in any nightmare he pleases. Locked in his bedroom, Henry waits until his sister is ready to leave. Though he can't stop Douglas from doing whatever he thinks he wants to do, at least he isn't going to leave her alone.

Veronica steps into the bath. It's necessary to make a clean escape. She sits brooding and scraping the dead skin off with a cheap terrycloth rag, waiting anxiously for Ferdy. Ferdy is kind, he is handsome, he would never betray her.

Veronica tries not to imagine the girl downstairs acting out the mechanics of Rabbo's slavering fantasies and then collecting a sum of money

at the end of it all, an ordinary evening's work for her It is hard to go on and on as if these things were normal, to live around them, despite them It is hard to decide where the limit is, at what point things cease to be pardonable, at what point the face of a brother takes on the final disfigurement that makes him the enemy. She splashes loudly, afraid to hear anything but the innocent sound of moving water, then stops, feeling the skin crawl coldly up her back, the approaching chill of a malevolent intruder. It is so strong she wraps the shower curtain about her and stands, looking up at the frosted window over the sink. It Is unbelievable; she thinks she sees Douglas perched on the laundry box with a polaroid camera. ready to snap. In another moment the apparition is gone In another moment it almost becomes possible that it has never happened at all.

This is the picture that never gets taken· A blur of flesh, a seventeen-year-old girl bathing, an anxious girl, a frightened girl, who puts a cloth to her tired face and then studies it in open hands, waiting for a likeness to weave itself into the coarse fabric. Waiting for an image of herself to form, a proof of her integrity and strength, indissolvable, impervious to her unshed tears of rage.

Eugene carries the small coffin on his shoulder, walks out of the church and into the street. The mourners part to let him by; they watch amazed as he passes the hearse and keeps on moving, down the hill, to the river.

They cannot stop him. Hands are thrust out but cannot touch him. In the end, the young man is left to travel alone, it is his infant son he has to lay to rest.

There is no one on the streets this early spring morning, no one behind the drawn curtains of the squat row houses to call him back. The damp seeps into his heavy shoes and gloveless fingers as he pushes on to where the water is.

He would like to name him, but there is no name he can remember, just the face of another silent, slumbering child.

It is his punishment, he believes: to carry forever this invisible burden, this dead boy no else will ever believe in, not even the mother who has never seen its face. There is a fierce longing in him to tell someone of this child's perfection that never passes away in the life that follows. So calamitous is this secret that the most precious gifts can be taken, must be taken from the receiver, that he vows to guard it, to tell no one. This promise he makes himself as he places one foot, then another, into the water.

In the blue river floats Veronica's father, buoyed up by a small white box, waiting for sight of land.

The Subsistence Level

Though Henry is usually loath to part with his father's car, he gladly lends it to Veronica to bring Douglas on one of his periodic trips to the country place. No one asks what he does up there alone because no one believes anything he says. The thought of him sixty miles away, even for a few short days, is too attractive a prospect to jeopardize, so she drives him up and Henry brings him back; that is the deal. Douglas makes everything work in his favour, even people's desire to be rid of him.

Usually Douglas concentrates on shifts in the landscape, new or refurbished patates frites stands, a novel piece of junk in the flea market yards Veronica notes the growth and demise of flowers and corn, whizzing by and taking inventory like a time-and-motion expert with a frantic eye on the seasons

But today they discuss the sort of things brought up on long trips, when unlikely topics are needed to fill the air. Once again Veronica recommends Böll's *The Clown* to Douglas, forgetting he's read it several times. She brings up the part about Schnier asking Kinkel whether he had an old man running around Bonn finding out how long it took to wear out underpants. They like this passage for different reasons: Veronica, for its humanistic content, Douglas, for its intimation that at the root of all orderliness is something nasty and trite.

The mood turns momentarily dark when Douglas brings up the plight of Terry-Thomas, suffering from Parkinson's disease.

"Penniless. Penniless. Living off the charity of the Actor's Guild, in a - in a..."

"A cold water flat," Veronica volunteers.

"A third-storey walk-up," Douglas speculates.

Neither of them has the slightest notion of what his living arrangements might really be, but in their sympathy they are keen to imagine terrible indignities.

"I saw that interview, too. I notice he still managed to crack one or two good jokes," says Veronica.

"The worst thing, really, that can happen to a comedian, to lose muscular control."

"To think he's poor and ill. To think that that's how someone with such talent can end up. Does he have someone to take care of him?"

But Douglas has lost interest in Terry-Thomas. He hangs his head and complains of stomach-ache. Veronica reaches for the can of Coke under the driver's seat, her remedy for motion-sickness, and hands it over to him without another word.

It was hard to develop a relationship with a man who was always leaving This time it was Europe. Undercover Man betrayed a secret excitement, reminding his apprentice how limited her world was becoming, how all her life was forming around the time she spent in his presence. "It's the last time I'll be going alone," he says consolingly. "Once you've learned the language well enough you can come with me. Right now you're too suspicious, with that accent. You look right, you just don't sound right." He glanced at her and saw her smile drop. It was true, she could easily pass for a foreigner, once she'd mastered the idiom. But that was a far way off.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way," he apologized.

It had been so much fun, practising to be a European. It had mostly consisted of Undercover Man getting her to walk around the room with a book on her head to improve her posture. "Your slouch! Anyone would recognize you as a North American in the blink of an eye! Good God, woman, stand up, erect - and proud! Like this ..." and he paraded around the room unselfconciously, twisting his buttocks in an elegant imitation of a woman's walk. "And could you please try to look a little less vacuous, and a little more -- intense! Like this .. " and he took her hand and gazed steadily, deeply at her, like a person who has seen everything and is surprised at nothing. Even if it was just a pose he was striking, to look upon him as he was abashed her. It was difficult to stare at him for more than a few moments, at the manly grooves on either side of his sculpted lips, his sweet tangled lashes, to feel his warm fingers gripping hers, impossible to be unaffected, to stay the leaping of her heart. "Please," he had said. "It's important." But he had spent far more time on her deportment than on tutoring her in the language, teaching her to stop shifting her fork from the right to left, on those small but telltale differences. It had seemed he wanted her to go along

with him, but at the penultimate moment, mere words had become an insuperable barrier

"And you can stop shaving your underarms, please," he'd requested. The intimate nature of the request gave her small shock of delight. "And stop using that cologne," he added. "You smell Canadian. Where we're going, women wear perfume, or nothing at all."

She felt savaged. "I beg your pardon?"

"If it's not expensive, they don't wear it, is what I mean."

What did a Canadian smell like, she wondered huffily. Like a pine tree? Swampland? A field of wheat?

"A Canadian smells -- ingenuous," Undercover Man continued. He walked around the room, his hands clasped with the indexes pointing upwards, seriously absorbed in his lecture. "Your fragrance should be -- complicated. And if you're perhaps bemused at my extensive knowledge of these details, the answer is, yes, I have impersonated females in my time. Every good man has. It's part of the job. And should you be called upon one day to bind your breasts and don whiskers, don't hesitate. It's a learning experience, going to the other side."

The brocade valance of the hotel room swam before her eyes. What was he asking of her-- to be some kind of arch-woman who at the drop of a hatpin could transform herself into a man? It was clearly too much to even dream of demanding. Manning a bazooka she had learned from him, though it was against her principles, fatal karate chops she had learned from him, though she prayed she'd never have to use one. But this was the absolute limit! This was beyond the pale!

"Did you think I was being serious?" he asked.

She looked at him pleadingly.

"You should be complimented that I have such expectations of you It is a compliment." He poured out two scotches from the bottle on the bureau, and lit two cigarettes at once, handing her one that he took from between his lips

"Let's be friends," he said simply.

What You Learn at Father's Knee

At the country place one afternoon, Spencer wakes up from his nap sobbing. "My legs," he cries, "my legs." Veronica and her mother stand by as Douglas tries to soothe his little boy. Locked in the fetal position, Spencer wails and wails.

"My legs," he screams, "I can't handle it."

When his father picks his small body up he screams to him, "Daddy, oh Daddy, I can't handle it."

"It's all right," he tells his son over and over. "It's only night terrors," he whispers to his mother and sister, "that's what the doctor says, that's all they are. Please, now, please, just go away."

But Veronica sees one thing and one thing only: that Spencer is going cold turkey. And for the first time she knows she can believe Douglas that he has tried again and again to go straight: to give himself up, arms clasped round his burning legs, howling to be born anew, into the light again.

Ferdy moved in with Veronica, to save money for the trip to Italy. He brought with him a collection of cardboard boxes, filled with his clothes, that she shoved against the bedroom walls. At night the boxes gave off a faint aroma of formaldehyde that distressed her. While she was supposed to be studying Italian, she was actually spending time reading health manuals, trying to pinpoint the nature of her malaise. She had taken to leafing through "Our Bodies, Ourselves" in private, as if it were some forbidden volume. Some of the anatomical diagrams scared her, and she covered them with her hand while reading the text.

Her boyfriend spent a good deal of time pulling garments endlessly from the boxes like magic scarves and trying them on in innumerable combinations He possessed an extensive wardrobe, the care of which he did not do justice to. Since he was exceedingly handsome, most of the outfits produced outstanding effects, which he was scrupulously critical of, and in front of a mirror he would hunch over, twirl, stretching this way and that to test the limits of his disguises. Ferdy's mother had been very kind, donating some really lovely ensembles from her cavernous closets She had even brought her to a designer shop to select a very stylish dress in a flattering pink, the type of article one saw in magazines, with the captions reading A.M. and P.M., showing the outfit adapting to the rigours of the changing day by the judicious addition of appropriate accessories. The pièce de résistance was a horrifically expensive Italian handbag, lined in chocolate suede, that his mother advised her to take everywhere.

"Don't worry if you're just going to out to buy a package of kleenex," she confided in her luxuriously drawling accent, which she had taken care to preserve in her thirty years in Canada. "Bring this with you and they'll be impressed, anywhere in the country." Instructions like these Veronica

carefully committed to memory. It was obvious that Ferdy and she were going, not just as themselves, but as ambassadors of the domain of his mother's own irreproachable taste.

Veronica stored these items of apparel in her closet. Ferdy frequently urged her to try them on, but it scared her to feel so different, and she was not sure of the effect of putting a tall, broad-shouldered blond into the clothes of a slight dark cosmopolitan-looking creature like his mother. The only reason they fit at all was that Veronica was underweight, and the cut of the clothes was generous. But even Ferdy's approval did not reassure her. When she lay down now, she felt her joints and belly and skull ache as they had when she was ten and had shot up to her height of five foot eight. She thought at twenty-three it was quite impossible to grow any more, but at night some secret process was at work in her limbs and spine. Only a tape measure convinced her that growth, if it was indeed taking place, was at some painful level that she could only guess at.

Bread

An autumn day, her father on the back gallery, standing on a kitchen chair. He nails a board to the underside of the porch above, where the corners meet. When the sparrows come to build their nest, he is there every morning to greet them, with bits of toast or suet he tosses into the snow A mug of coffee in his hand, he watches them from inside the house, tiny birds leaving tracks smaller than his fingernails as they hop from scrap to scrap.

Veronica looks again at a picture of her father and a few mates on board. Everyone in duffle coats and toques and with cigarettes dangling from their hands, leaning on a gun that for security reasons is covered by a tarpaulin. Her father is so young that it appears he is affecting the toughness, the world-weariness that he does, that he is merely playing at grown-ups. But it is only the appearance of pretense, only the image; he has killed people, shattered bodies that flew up in pieces like a handful of bread cast over the waves

There Are Other Homes

A small ferryboat moves slowly though a mist so thick the navigator seems scarcely to know his bearings. His young face is unshaven and his hair shiny with damp, and in the manner of old films a narrow band of bright light is cast across his fearful eyes The camera cuts to a heavy crucifix on the cabin wall behind him, swinging heavily with the roll of ponderous waves, then cuts back to the man, whose lips are trembling a whispered prayer. His eyes are shut tight.

He falls to his knees when the vessel runs aground on a sandy shore, falls to his knees and weeps. He leaps over the side of the boat, foregoing the gangplank, and staggers through the icy water, the dissipating mists.

On the beach a group of children await him. They are dressed in red and yellow tams, heavy woolen coats, laced boots. In their hands are wicker baskets filled with flowers and bread. They sing to him a song of greeting. O, les enfants, is all he gasps before falling once more, to hold fast in his hand the tiny foot of a green-eyed boy who bends over him and strokes his weary head.

Veronica switched the television off and pulled the comforter over her face. She had to beware of programming that included subtitles in languages she could understand; it exhausted her. It looked like now even the Hungarian show had become fraught with danger. If only they could broadcast the Tasaday eating grubs and living in harmony, she thought, but even they'd been exposed as an anthropological hoax, villagers who shed their wristwatches and pretended to be a people untouched by civilization, for hard cash. If only they could broadcast from alien planets, she thought. But the Martians would probably speak better English than she did, and what was worse they'd probably be better dancers. There was no use for it; the universe

was small; inifinitely small, and its inhabitants shared shockingly similar problems. Even her living room was being overrun by Hungarian sailors and nimble-footed extraterrestrials, all of them with a bone to pick.

"It all catches up to you," Undercover Man sighed, "this line of work." He swayed slowly in the hammock and sipped a pinkish-looking beverage with obvious distaste. Overhead a tropical moon beamed down lustrously.

"It's not too late for you to get out, you know." He spoke to his charge without turning his face. "You're still young and haven't been involved in anything that critical yet. The missions we've been on so far -- well, they've been child's play."

So that's what it comes to, Veronica thought to herself. Fretfully she twisted at the knot in her scarlet sarong and straightened her perfectly tailored linen blouse. An angry flush spread up her neck and cheeks.

The words came slowly and painfully. "I'm not good enough, am I? That's what you're really saying." Her voice was controlled, grim.

There was no reply for a moment, just the hammock's gentle creak and the distant sound of waves.

With a masterful swing of his leg, Undercover Man sat up, his back to her.

Damn, she thought, he can even get out of a hammock gracefully. Fascination overtook anger as she admired the oval of damp on his shirt between his shoulder blades. Damn, she thought, even his sweat smells alluring. She breathed in its sea-blown tang and followed him with her gaze as he stood up and traversed the small patio. He drew up a white rattan chair, twin to hers, and regarded her seriously.

"You have no idea what you're letting yourself in for. No idea. You have to give up everything."

"What do you mean, everything? A happy family life? A home in the suburbs? Please, please don't make me laugh."

"That sneer is most unbecoming." He was in control once again.

"Who gives a damn," she spat.

Undercover Man leapt from the chair and began pacing the small square of earthen bricks, his jaw set and his eyes blazing icily.

"Don't you see that being a spy means you'll never be permitted to be a whole person? Yes, that's right, scoff. It'll be a lifetime of being stuck with your ear to the wall and your body in the shadows, watching, waiting, listening, forever listening. People get into this business because they believe it will give them power. Good God, woman, they don't know what power is. Heaven forfend you should ever form an attachment to anyone. Friends, family, lovers -- you'll never be able to fully confide in a single soul. Your distance has to be maintained at all times, at all costs. One imprudent word, one misspent phrase and you could jeopardize the Free World! For God's sakes, don't you realize what you'd be giving up? Do you know what I've given up?"

He flung open the slat doors and returned with his travel bag, retrieving from it a small cloth envelope. With care he pulled out a black and white photograph and handed it to her.

"There," he said, "look."

It was a blurry shot of a boy of perhaps seventeen years of age, standing in front of a stone wall and smiling shyly at the photographer. In one hand was a rough nosegay of daisies and in the other he held a small knife, used for cutting the rugged stems.

She strained to make out the boy's features. Yes, the resemblance was there, the fine bones, the broad forehead, the well-shaped mouth. But something about his expression was not Undercover Man's at all; there was a hesitant expectancy to it, a sweet openness that she had never seen on his face. It could have been his father. His brother. His son. And when she looked back up at him questioningly he whispered hoarsely, "Don't, please, don't ask. It's classified information."

We Love a Good Ghost Story

Douglas' behaviour has become so ugly that his wife leaves him and his mother banishes him to the country place. No one wants to see him, no one wants to hear of him anymore. Everyone has given up on saving him.

He heads up north with a backpack of food, a bottle of heavy tranquilizers, and the idea of going cold turkey. He has done it many times before, but has never managed to make the sainted state last. He is up there for a few days, until the tranquilizers and his resolve run out. When he isn't sleeping or throwing up, he spends his time carving the bark off an ash tree with Henry's butcher knife, crying and talking to himself. One evening when he can no longer bear it he hitchhikes to the nearest village and heads to the bar, where with his last few dollars he knocks back a few beers and heads out again. The next driver who stops to pick him up, Douglas persuades to give up his vehicle. He does this by brandishing his butcher knife. The driver, seeing a tall, gaunt creature with scabrous face and hands, throws the keys into Douglas' lap and jumps out of his Corvette, glad for his life.

Douglas is right to think his luck is quite unbelievable. As soon as he crosses the bridge to Montreal, he can sell the car to some unscrupulous mechanics he knows and buy some dope immediately. And he hasn't even hurt anyone to do it. He can get quite a lot of money for a Corvette. He can buy quite a lot of dope for that money. And he thinks that, for all he cares, everyone he knows can drop dead after that. His head is quite clear, he is making plans fast. The only catch is that he is driving the car into the oncoming lane.

Douglas sails through the air like Daedalus. When he comes to, he finds himself in a shallow pool, in black water. Behind him is the front end of the Corvette, with the windshield ripped open. The other half of the car is upside

down on the other side of the highway. Curious people have started to gather in the dusk at the roadside, but Douglas doesn't notice them. He is thinking that his right foot is on backwards and that if he wants to get into town he will have to fix it. All he has to do is to turn it around, like he used to do with his G.I. Joe. Douglas forgets that even G.I. Joe's leg finally snapped off, that after all, even G.I. Joe was only human. He leans forward and wrenches the foot into place, but in the wrong direction.

The last thing he sees is a circle of people revolving around him, young faces made wise and old ones radiant in the approaching glow of the ambulance headlights. He is unknown to them, neither an evil man or good, but they gaze upon him with eyes full of unearned love; they have hopes for this harrowed creature floundering in mud.

There is nothing left to break anymore and Douglas passes out, falling slowly back into the dark stream. Strangers' arms surround his body like spokes in a wheel, lifting him up and up and up.

The House Her Father Built

On a cool and sunless day Veronica borrows Ferdy's car and drives alone to the country place. On her way up the front stairs she realizes she's brought along the wrong key and will be obliged to climb through the bedroom window. At the side of the house she lifts a ladder her father made, so old now it sprouts moss in the fissures of the flaking spruce. When she was little her parents used to forget the key too, and her mother would start an argument, which her father would cut short by saying he would climb in through the window. From the back seat Douglas, Henry and Veronica would clap and laugh, convinced that their father put a great deal of showmanship into the way he wildly flailed his long legs around as he tried to gain entry. He looked like the tail end of a frog frozen live, mid-leap into an icy pond. The thrilling part was whether he would get in before the window arbitrarily slammed down, guillotine-fashion, on his innocent body. This was a man's job, because their mother was far too nervous to climb the ladder or hold the window securely for him, and they were too little to be entrusted with these tasks.

They were kids and it never occurred to them that there could be more to his kicking legs than a desire to make the silliest of a silly situation, that perhaps he was afraid to knock himself out cold on a bedpost or walk alone through the dark house to the door that would let them in.

She has elected herself to gauge the damage of Douglas' ill-fated stay in the country. Once in the house, she moves swiftly from room to room, professional as an insurance estimator. In the boys' bedroom, the bedclothes lie twisted on the floor. On the panelled walls is a large unidentified stain, that looks deliberately, spitefully splashed on. She decides that the grittiness of the

stain means it was made with orange juice. The other bedrooms are untouched.

In the bathroom, the taps drip slowly. She shuts them tight. A dirty bar of soap lies on the sandy floor. Without even looking, she empties bleach into the toilet and lets it stand.

The kitchen table has a box of Cap'n Crunch turned over on its side, surrounded by an array of half-empty bowls. Around the souring milk in the bowls are garlands of apple blossoms; it is old, pretty china that her mother's mother had once religiously collected from Steinberg's. The tablecloth is worn linen embroidered with coloured yarns; Veronica thinks of how difficult it will be to get the Kool-Aid stains out of it.

All of it can be cleaned up later, she decides, not wanting to look at it anymore. It is surprising to her how she has gotten out of the habit of doing anything that needs to be done, preferring to seek out hiding places, quiet rooms where no one and nothing can reach her, where she can dream in peace. The attic is a place like that; she climbs the stairs that creak with gathering damp.

It is warm here despite the autumn coolness, warm and empty On the dusty boards Veronica lays down, feeling strangely comfortable as she used to, a long time ago, before she knew better. Overhead are exposed beams, measured and cut and nailed together by her father, some of them bolstered against the weight of snow, and she lays there counting them as far as her eyes can reach.

In the cold and heat he had worked, balancing on narrow planks of wood high up in the sky, high up in the sky, it had seemed to his little children, building a home for his family. A magician he was then, in overalls as baggy as a clown's trousers, pockets full of wondrous objects, brass levels, plumb lines

coloured with blue, blue chalk, thick red crayons for marking wood, penknives with bone handles

From the top of the house, the top of the tallest pines in the world, he waves to them before resuming his work. Patiently he lifts his hammer, to bring it down on the perfumed wood again and again and again, until the skeleton of their home rises up from his warm and aching palms.

Handcuffed to the hospital bed, Douglas serenades the police guard.

"Chains, my baby's got me locked up in chains," he croaks, glancing slyly at the young man in the chair to see what effect he's having. But the young man doesn't find his performance the least bit entertaining Douglas' luck has finally changed. Of all the officers in the Sûreté du Québec, he gets the one whose hero is Mahatma Gandhi, and whose sense of humour doesn't extend to laughing at people in pain. The man regards him with a steady, compassionate eye, and before Douglas can think up the right routine to woo his audience, he shifts forward on the vinyl chair.

"You told me yesterday you have a little boy," he says.

"Did anybody call for me?" Douglas asks, fearful of the man's gentleness.

"No."

"Nobody?"

"No."

"Got a cigarette?"

"I don't smoke," the policeman tells him, then adds, "but in the meantime you can tell me how you got here."

Douglas' son Spencer crouches in the sand at the beach by the lake. In one hand he holds a bucket and, in the other, a spoon burnt black at the bottom, one of his father's old heroin spoons. Each time he digs the stain fades a shadow more. He is building a city which he will people with small pine cones he has gathered. Around the little sand houses he constructs fences with smooth stones he's chosen from the lake bottom, more for decoration than defence. At the outskirts he makes careful gardens with fresh trillium, where the visiting ants are friendly dogs and cats. Those who will live here by the sea will be busy and happy and have nothing to fear. It doesn't matter that this place may only last for a day, there will always be time to build another one, out of sand or out of snow.

Spencer is a very serious little boy. He enjoys reciting the messages in greeting cards for his family. Happy Birthday, Four-Year-Old. We're wishing you the very best. When he reads, he leaves out the exclamation points.

Spencer is a very serious little boy. He will work and work and work to be loved.

The House of Stone

The covers are ripped from her sleeping form and a voice penetrates her dream. An urgent whisper, a man's voice, in her ear: "It's time," he says, "wake up." Her protests are useless, she wants to go back, back into the dark, but the man stands over her, holding her clothes and telling her to make ready

"But what, Lyle, what is it?" she murmurs, and he answers, "You'll see."

"We can't go," she says, "there's a blizzard outside. We're grounded until further notice. This is Canada," she sobs, "we're at the mercy of Nature here If we go out there we may never be seen again."

"I've prepared for those eventualities," he answers, and gives to her heavy leggings, an alpaca sweater and woolen trousers. "Don't dress me, I'm not a child," she wails.

"Aren't you," he says, maddeningly calm.

"I want some coffee," she says, as he throws a fur coat around her shoulders and pulls a balaclava over her head. "Room service will only take a minute."

"Not at this hour," he says, and pulls her by the hand.

She is still complaining on the elevator down.

"This is crazy," she shouts. He corrects her briskly. "This is duty," he declares, thrusting her into the triangle of the revolving door. She circles back into the lobby but this time he squeezes in with her and carries her off into the storm.

Outside the streets are a desert of blinding white. The tracks they leave behind them are swiftly filled in with snow. Noiselessly they move into the heart of the city till at their feet is the bottom of a staircase, carved into the side of the mountain above them. "Climb,' he commands her.

"But I'm so thirsty," she cries.

He brings a handful of snow to his lips and kisses cold water into her mouth.

The wind whips down as they ascend. As soon as his foot empties its print she fills it with her own, following to the top. Dark trees surround them now, there is no path but the one he makes for her, gliding through snow.

The forest ends and turns into smooth hills where outcroppings of shaped and coloured stones dot the landscape, jewels in gossamer.

"Do I know this place?"

"Do you?"

"I don't want to go."

His icy fingers grasp her wrist and they run between row on row of polished rock till he finds the place he wants. A granite pillar, the names etched in on it rendered indecipherable by the powdery white.

Exhausted, she kneels on the mound before it, and reaches for the shrunken buds of a plant whose stems stand petrified in snow. One touch and she is assured; within the blasted pods, the seeds of new flowers cluster in frosty sleep.

Her guardian stands at her side and she looks up at him, scarcely recognizing the face beneath the schapska, ancient and foreign, grimacing with cold.

"Remember him," he says, pointing to the ground, where deep beneath them in a tiny box is a frail lacework of icicle bones.

"How can I? He only lived for three days."

"For some that is a lifetime. Now tell me, tell me who he was."

There is no escaping his question. The words of reply are expelled from her mouth in tender, ghostly clouds.

"My brother," she says. "Born and died, blameless and perfect, in the spring of 1946."

"His name?"

"They never told me."

He kneels with her, waiting, until she leans forward and reaches out her fingers to write something in the snow.

The phone call she's been dreading finally comes.

"Veronica." Douglas says. "I've been here for weeks and no one's even called me." His voice is small and contrite.

"You could have killed someone," is all she can think of saying. The words are like stones in her mouth.

"I can't speak anymore," she tells her brother, and places the receiver in its cradle before he has a chance to answer.

"It's over," Henry whispers. "No more lying."

Later that night, when she has just fallen into a fitful sleep, a noise awakens her: the sound of ringing in her ears.

Propaganda

When it came time to get their passports, Veronica asked her mother where her birth certificate was. 'In the leather box in Daddy's closet,' she said. It was still called Daddy's closet although he'd been dead five years. Some of his clothes continued to hang there, his union windbreaker, his navy jacket, his three ties.

The narrow closet had long since ceased to smell like its owner, an aromatic mixture of sweat, pipe tobacco, and Old Spice aftershave. It smelled instead of floorwax and her mother's dresses, ordinary and clean. On the top shelf was a tooled leather box with brass clasps, that Veronica put on the bed, to go through later. Beside it was her father's old typewriter.

She remembers him teaching himself to type at one point, to fulfill what private ambition, none of them ever discovered. Evenings at the kitchen table, tapping away with his pipe clenched in his teeth and eyes filled with a secret delight.

Veronica sat on the bed and unzipped the vinyl carrying case.

Around the carriage were wound two sheets of yellowing paper, one to prevent the bale from being worn down, the other for typing. Across the top of the sheet her father had dutifully, repeatedly typed: 'The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy brown dog', the phrase that revealed to the hands each letter of the alphabet. Underneath it was a transcription of one of Churchill's speeches, typed with great care, the margins inset to centre the words on the page.

He might have been on the brink of saying something to the world when he bent over this little machine, willing his thick, leathery fingers to memorize where all the letters belonged. In decoding the words Veronica elicited her father's signal of distress; at the core of it finally, lay an appeal made in trust to those following after.

She had waited mutely for a sign from the dead, for this stranger to reveal himself to her through some token, some sound of his own making. But her father had left a long time ago, even before his death. He had, he had defended his island, marooned by his silence, his pain in not knowing how to get back home. And now it was she who brought a message to comfort him: that the time of vigilance, the time for propaganda was past.

She sat at the controls of the small craft, propelling it relentlessly on through the choppy water, stifling her desire to turn the boat back to the coast. Undercover Man held a book of Yeats' poems in his lap, mouthing the words he read by pocket flashlight. He was dressed for the sea, in white duck trousers, a heavy woolen sweater and matching toque. He was a pale figure crouching at the helm of the dark boat.

"Must we?" she asked plaintively, for the last of many times on that short voyage.

"We must," he declared softly, closing the book.

She shut the engines as he stood up, ready to go on deck and let down the lifeboat.

"This may be the last-- we may never ..." In an instant she forgot all her training and embraced him tightly, gathering the yarn of his sweater into her right hand.

"I've been told that in the old days, every fisherman's wife knitted her man's sweaters in a family pattern, so that if he drowned and became unrecognizable, the sweater would speak his name."

"Then memorize mine," he whispered, and drew her fingertips over his heart. As she wept, her tears rolled off his oiled garment in quicksilver beads, soaking into her own chest. To the last, he was impervious to her He disengaged himself, and before parting, handed her the book, open at 'The Stolen Child'.

It was so like him to leave, without giving her a chance to say how much she loved him. But that was not strictly true. She could have said it at any time It was wrong of her to think she had required his permission.

Veronica picked up the telephone and dialed Henry at work.

"Henry," she said, 'I'll be leaving in a few days."

"I know," replied her brother.

"The big world is waiting for me."

"The big world."

"Henry," she said, "It's waiting for you, too."

"Is that a fact?" he said, and started to laugh.

And he thought of this when he hung up the phone and went back outside, to resume piling boxes of meat into a frozen pyramid. On an impulse, he climbed to the top of the pile and went through a series of he-man poses, the blood on his white apron drying in the morning sun. "I bring you the word," he sang to the passersby, who gathered to admire his Olympian form.

It was not too late to become King Bastard, to don the fearful leotard and be the victor, again and again and again and again.

Douglas now resides at the Lazarus Home, with a family of addicts who had come back from the dead and who in doing so, stretch the belief of all those who knew them.

He learns discipline, he learns to speak and listen, listen and speak.

He learns to run on his crutches, his body a pendulum swinging wide As he stoops over his little bed every morning at dawn, pulling the sheets taut and readying himself for kitchen duty, his gnarled heart begins to beat faster, like a child's. Another day without the needle in his arm

Afternoons, he bathes in the cold northern lake and feels his limbs soothed, his bad legs lifting weightlessly in the water. Around him swim his fellows in an ever-moving circle. Together they dream of ordinary things, of peaceful lives, their bodies slicing athwart the currents, their mouths calling out their new joy.

Douglas will still be there, months later, to receive his sister's postcards. The administrators will check them first, scrutinizing them for encrypted messages, for contraband glued behind the stamps.

Their half-packed suitcases lay open on the living room floor. Ferdy and Veronica argued all afternoon about what and what not to bring and by the time he left for work, clothing, books, and personal effects had been divided into little piles in the corners and on the coffeetables.

Unless Veronica made some leap of trust, they'd spend their holiday weighted down, sinking gondolas with their overstuffed valises. It was Ferdy's father they were going to see; she was finally prepared to make room for the living.

She crouched over each of her bundles and put aside, for the time being, what she did not need.

Evening slips into night, and plants on the sill assume their nocturnal shape of ancient webs pressed into luminous slate. Across the television floats the image of an old steamer; on deck a mass of people contemplatively regard the port they are approaching. *Anglia*, the subtitle reads. In the centre of the crowd, a young peasant woman sits on a small, intricately carved box. She is simply dressed and her hands, bare of jewelry, are folded in her lap

Anything considered valuable, gold rings, amber rosaries, seeds from healing plants folded into linen squares, is sewn up into the lining of her blouse, the hem of her skirts. Veronica remembers all this without being told, and now foretells the traveller's future: in the new country, the woman will part with these things one by one until nothing is left but her self, whole and perfect, inside the clothes.