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Canada

THE BLACK LINE

Barbara Kaczor

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**

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ABSTRACT

The Black Line

Barbara Kaczor

The Black Line is a collection of three short stories and a novella, that explores the darker side of its characters. The image of the black line is introduced in the novella, "Harlequin," and, in essence, all of the characters in the collection possess a certain blackness, a sense of displacement while they struggle with societal values and expectations. "Harlequin" examines human relationships, romance, and betrayal; "Daddy's Girl" demonstrates the ripples that affect the daughter of a murderer; "Provigo Biography" looks at the distance between strangers; and "Ladies' Night" takes a look at a few days in the life of a stripper.

In order to provide the necessary intimacy to the narratives, the stories and the novella are told in the first-person point of view. The collection focuses on female characters, and employs a realistic style. Attention is also paid to detail and dialogue as a method of revealing character.

For Deidre and Doris

Acknowledgements

Much thanks to my advisor, Carol Bolt, whose guidance and encouragement helped me to complete this work.

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Harlequin

Our trip began with rain.

"Carly, did you bring an umbrella?" Helena asked me absently as a sprinkle of rain began to fall. She rubbed the sole of her shoe over a cobblestone. The gravel between the stone and her shoe made a rasping sound, like someone trying to catch their breath. "I left mine at home."

I shook my head, speechless. The water drops shone like chandelier lights in the green countryside. Pure romance, I know that now, but even then, I shook my head to get rid of the enchantment.

We walked towards the bus depot. I brought my camera up to my eye and shielded the lens from the rain with my hand. Between the hedgerows, a tan-coloured dog ran seeking shelter.

Helena laughed, her voice pirouetting up into the sky. "Did you bring an umbrella, or just a camera store?" She wiped a raindrop away from my cheek. Touch. Don't touch.

"Quick--take a picture of me in front of this thing. Whatever it is." She laughed again, looking at a toothy, grinning gargoyle hanging over a store front.

I complied, watching the shutter click over Helena's perfect face.

We saw the bus creep up to the depot and made a run for it. Helena

stumbled on the cobblestones and clutched at my jacket.

"Christ, it's not even real cobblestone," she said as she steadied herself. "It's just something that was built to please the tourists. Look--the stones are all new and only in front of the older-looking buildings. It looks like the owners of those buildings are trying to keep up an image."

Last night a woman had been disgusted with us in a London bar.

"You don't think Shakespeare's house is real, do you?" she said. "You don't believe they preserved the thatched cottage just in case he became famous later on?" She sat on a bar-stool, smoked a cigarette and was busy getting drunk. We decided not to pay any more attention to her and turned away. The last thing I heard her say was "Fucking American tourists!" Soon we could no longer hear her shouts over the music.

"Shows what she knows," said Helena. "She can't even tell we're Canadian."

"What's the difference?" I said.

"We show more nudity than violence on tv. That's got to count for something. More swearing too."

Later I asked Helena: "Maybe we shouldn't bother going all the way out to Warwick. Everybody does it. It's all a part of the tour."

"Exactly," she answered. "It's a part of what we have to see. What if someone asks us about it. I don't think they'll be too impressed to hear that we

gave up seeing all the great sites of Europe for a chance to sleep in."

I remember how I met Helena. It was while we were eating in our dorm's cafeteria. We both carried over-flowing trays. One idiot made the comment: "Whoa! I didn't think *girls* could eat like that." We started off healthy with a plate from the salad bar, but ended the meal with a couple of bags of M&Ms or a box of Smarties.

We were the only two people we knew who could stuff our faces without worrying about getting fat. We were especially famous for our Midnight Chocolate and Chip Raids down to the nearest variety store after the caf closed down and the vending machines had nothing but shit left in them. I think it's catching up on me now, but never Helena. Always reed-thin, she'll be. Helena was a dancer. At least she took her degree in dance. At school, she worried about things like the curvature of the arch of her foot, bleeding toes from point shoes (although she claimed that dancers get used to it), making too much noise from banging her new shoes on the floor when trying to break them in, and the right haircut. I worried about getting my assignments in on time (envious of Helena's ability to get straight A's on done-the-night-before papers), having enough sleep, the paradox of peeling nail polish and not having any nail polish when I have a run in my hose, keeping enough pens with me in case one after another runs out of ink, and getting the right haircut. Believe it or not, we had plenty in common.

Helena and I climbed onto the bus, showed the driver our passes and tried to find two adjoining seats so we could sit together. We had to go all the way to the back row, where we took our place beside an elderly man and his wife. They smiled at us and we returned the polite expression.

I sat by the window on the far right, I could see the countryside and the cars whipping by in the opposite direction. On my left was Helena, the old man, then his wife. Pleasant smiles were exchanged a few times between Helena and the man whenever the bus rode over a bump.

"Where are you going?" asked the man. His wife leaned forward to listen.

"Warwick Castle," answered Helena.

"Oh yes, we're going to see that too today. We visit it once in a while to see if anything's changed."

"Has anything ever changed?" she asked.

"Not usually," he laughed. "But it's become our ritual. I don't know what would happen to us if the routine was broken." So much for our big escapade, I thought. Our adventure is another person's routine.

"Wow," said Helena. "I wish we had more castles in our country. I'd love to do this every day." I was worried that the couple would think of us as fucking tourists like the woman in the bar, but the gentleman seemed to enjoy our attentions. His smile just grew wider with each comment Helena made. His wife was polite and quiet; she asked where we were from and if we were enjoying ourselves.

"If you like," said the old man as we arrived at the castle's parking lot, "you can come with us to see the castle. There are no guides inside, and the brochure doesn't tell all the stories."

"Yes, I'd like that," said Helena and immediately turned to walk up the path to the gates. When we got to the gate, we showed the cashier at the entrance booth our prepaid package-tour passes, and the elderly couple showed her a card.

The cashier looked at their card and smiled: "How are you doing today, Mr. and Mrs. Ashford? Have a good visit."

"All right," Mr. Ashford said to us, "let's go this way. We'll start in the main hall and end our tour in the dungeon--don't be afraid--and afterwards, if you like, you can climb the walls surrounding the castle. But only if you still have the energy."

We followed him to the Great Hall and were greeted with the cold gleam of a silver suit of armour. Most impressive on the checkerboard floor was the complete set of armour for both man and horse.

"Look," said Helena as she hopped from square to square. "I'll be the Queen, you be the Jack."

"You mean chess, not poker," Mr. Ashford corrected her. He chuckled as he watched Helena's playfulness. I saw his wife look around for a chair.

Mr. Ashford began his impromptu tour, punctuated by waving arms and pointing fingers: "Warwick castle, I believe--if I remember my facts correctly--is

about one thousand years old, and the most visited stately home on view in England. There's a fine collection of art, I suppose, if you're interested in that sort of thing. Also popular with the tourists are the wax figures of royalty who used to live here. That's all on the second floor, especially in the bedrooms. I think it's especially good for the visitors who've never seen royalty before."

We followed Helena as she went from one suit of armour to another. Mr. Ashford didn't seem to mind giving up his guiding role to her for the moment. She tried to peek inside the mask of each to see if there was anybody inside. I suppose she figured that this place was set up like a haunted house and there were people hired to sit in those suits and when an unsuspecting visitor walked by, they made their move.

"What's this?" she said, picking up a piece of brightly coloured material.

"Maybe you shouldn't touch it," I told her.

"Oh, come on. Who's it going to hurt?"

We all came a little bit closer to where she stood. She held over her hand a hat, a cap really, all in points, with a couple of bells attached to its ends.

"Oh, this must belong to one of those fellows who comes in to amuse the school children. Do you remember that Dorothy?" he turned to his wife, who looked up and weakly smiled from the bench. "When there was that clown here tying up balloons for all the youngsters. This hat, it's a fool's coxcomb, like in *King Lear*."

"Better talk to Carly. She's the Shakespeare freak," said Helena and she

tossed the hat back on the window seat. Mrs. Ashford walked over and joined us. She peered at the hat.

"Oh, good. Have you seen much Shakespeare performed? You must see something in England before you go," said Mr. Ashford. "There's nothing like it anywhere else. The American actors can never get the accent right. Then, what do I know? I don't understand it. But it must be wonderful because it's Shakespeare. Oh, there's so much that you girls must see while you're in England. How long are you planning to stay?"

I shrugged my shoulders, but Helena said: "Oh, a couple of weeks at least."

He turned to his wife. "Didn't you want to take a look at the gardens today, dear? I don't want to bore you with all this. Why would you want to hear it again? I'll join you in a few minutes." I saw him give her a little shove.

Mrs. Ashford didn't lose her balance, but she hesitated for a moment. I stared at her, unsure if I should say anything. She clutched her purse with both hands, then adjusted her hat. "All right. Don't be too long." She nodded at us. "Good day ladies."

"Wait," said Helena. "I'll go with you."

Mrs. Ashford said: "You don't have to do that."

"But I insist." The two walked out together, their images blackened in the doorway from the incoming sunlight.

"Where is your friend going?" asked Mr. Ashford.

"It's all right. I'm still here," I replied.

"Oh, yes. Yes." But he seemed a little surprised.

I listened patiently to Mr. Ashford's lecture about the castle, wearing the pretend-to-be-conscious face I used to wear in church so long ago. He pointed out what he wanted me to see and rushed on to the next site. I couldn't linger over anything I found interesting.

In about half an hour, Mrs. Ashford and Helena returned from the garden.

"I think we've kept the girls long enough, dear," she said. "Besides, you did promise me a walk in the garden."

By this time Mr. Ashford was very excited in his role as guide. He motioned Helena over to the Great Hall to show her how the horse's armour was put together.

Mrs. Ashford walked over to me. "I hope he didn't bore you, dear."

"No, of course not," I responded politely.

"Do you really like to read Shakespeare?" she asked me. "It's rare to find students who like it nowadays."

"I prefer watching it," I replied.

"I find his plays very sad. Such rules and restrictions," she said picking up the jester's hat. "The heroes treat people with such cruelty; they get away with anything. The mean-spirited jokes they played on the scapegoats. Who would have ever thought it? I always found it impossible to believe that Prince Hal turned his back on John Falstaff. 'I do not know thee, old man,' Hal said. After

all they had been through and shared together, just like that." She dropped the hat. "Gone. Duty before friendship."

I thought perhaps she was upset about the attention that her husband was giving us and I tried to pay more notice to her. I asked her if she wanted to go upstairs to see the wax figures. She smiled weakly and said no, she had already seen them many times before. She finally stood patiently in the doorway until Mr. Ashford noticed that she was waiting.

"If you have any other questions, please come on out to the gardens and ask us. We'd be happy to help you," he said.

"Yes, please do," emphasized his wife, before taking his arm and leading him outside.

"Thank you," said Helena.

Mrs. Ashford stumbled on the stairs. Her husband put a strong arm around her and led her outside.

I began to wonder: Whatever happened to Juliet's nurse? After Juliet became a wife, the nurse disappeared.

"Do you think they'll notice if the hat's gone? It would make a good souvenir," asked Helena. We were walking about the Great Hall of the castle. She was about to try the cap on.

"I dare you," I said. But the hat didn't fit.

"I guess this means it wasn't meant for me," she said.

"No, the colours don't suit you anyway."

"But they'll look great on you." She shoved the cap on my head. Whoever owned this hat must have had an extremely small skull. It fit tightly.

"I don't want hat head, Helena."

"Christ," she said and picked the cap off my head, rolled it into a ball, checked to see if anybody was looking, then pitched it back over to where she found it.

"Are Mr. and Mrs. A gone?" Helena asked.

"I don't know."

"Well, I grabbed a brochure from the desk in case he left any important details out, but I doubt it. Let's go check out the dungeon and see if it would've been a better place to exile poor Mrs. Ashford."

"It was nice of you to go with her."

"I learned lots of new names for flowers. I had always just made up my own names for them, but if I want to speak properly about these plants, I guess I should know the proper terminology." She took me by the arm, linking hers through mine; we touched each other's inside elbow.

"We walked like this," motioned Helena. "She needed someone to help keep her balance when going over the bumpy ground. But she wore long sleeves, so she was less sticky," said Helena as she pushed me away. It was only a tiny action, so brief and so quick that most people would have barely noticed it.

"Gee, thanks," I said, trying to keep my feelings from being hurt.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. Here. Here's my arm," she said. Don't touch. Touch. "Let's walk this way. Nobody will take any notice of it in Europe. It's acceptable here. Like two little old ladies helping each other walk down the street."

She swung her hair back behind her shoulders. "Did you know that the Ashfords have been married for almost 47 years?"

"Really?" Somehow that fact surprised me. I imagined being in exile for almost fifty years.

"Isn't it nice that they still have something in common, that they're able to spend so much time together doing things?"

As nice as being chained to your prison guard.

"I think he's just afraid to go anywhere alone."

"Just like you, Carly. That's why we're here together. Afraid to be alone," said Helena. "Just like me."

We walked out slowly, towards the garden. In the distance, I saw a young woman travelling back and forth on a unicycle. She was tall and lanky, with short, dark blonde hair. At first, I mistook her for a man.

"I haven't seen one of these since I was a kid at the circus," I said. "I think I'd like to try it. How about it Hel?"

"No thanks. But go ahead." She folded her arms across her chest and started to roam and wander. "You're always good for a laugh," she called back

over her shoulder as she headed back for the gate. I looked at the rider one more time before I picked up my pace to catch up with Helena.

We got back into London as it began to get dark.

"I'm bored and it's nowhere near bedtime. Do you want to do something?" asked Helena.

"Like what?"

"Is the hotel bar still open?"

"Probably. But I don't think I would like the clientele."

"Why not?"

"They're people with no other place to go."

"Just like us, snob," said Helena.

As we talked, I saw her practice ballet positions, for the first time in a long time, using the back of a hotel chair for balance. She began her dance career after seeing *The Red Shoes*. Her first performance happened in her daydreams and led to a university degree in dance. But her last performance was during her final exams. I don't know if she ever took it really seriously though, even in the beginning. I once saw her laugh at the comment said by a guy from her Math class. He asked her: "If I can get a degree for theatre or dance, can I get a degree for what I do when I'm drunk?"

"Maybe I should audition for some European company," she mused.

"Do you want to go dancing then?" I asked hopefully.

"Naw. I don't have that much energy." She let her hand drop off the chair.

So we settled on the bar downstairs, since it was close by. I thought Helena still would be bored at the bar. But we had a few drinks bought for us by some lone gentlemen hidden in the shadows of the whisky bottles. Only one came out from his lair and turned out to be a small-time businessman from America, over here for a quick kill. We ignored him the best we could. By the end of the night we got up on stage with the hired lounge singer and belted out a few well-known numbers and duets, as well as taking a couple of requests. Before we left, Helena made sure she shook hands and thanked every member of "our" band.

"We want to go there anyway, so what's a few days early?" asked Helena when she found the article in *Vogue* magazine. The new collections were about to be shown in Paris. She came out from the shower dripping wet because in her rush, she had forgotten her towel. She started pitching things into her suitcase, and snapping things shut.

"Come on, hurry up!" she said. I blushed and turned away.

She said: "Jesus, don't ever do anything in dance. You couldn't handle the dressing room."

"That's different," I said and threw her my robe. "It's OK there to be undressed in front of other people." Change rooms are North America's version of a nude beach: a safe and socially sanctioned area.

She rolled her suitcase to the door and flopped down in a chair to wait for me. She hadn't bothered to get dressed yet. Instead, she chattered and absently played with the belt on the bathrobe.

"God, I wonder who we'll see in the shows at Paris? Maybe we'll get to sit beside somebody famous, hmm?"

"Maybe we'll actually get to see some clothes," I replied.

Helena continued without missing a beat: "Of course. And Paris is so romantic. Think of all the cute French guys we'll get to meet. Here's your chance to drink with the locals!" She gave me a triumphant glance. She thought she was doing me a big favour--giving me a chance to "drink with the locals."

We were in England. We were supposed to be doing something different--I didn't know what--but something other than what we would do at home. Maybe I really just expected us to be magically changed by a new atmosphere.

I watched Helena as she fingered through the glossy pictures of the mag.

"Do you think hair's going to be short again soon? I've just grown mine out to the length I like it," she said piling her wet hair atop of her head. "But maybe there's some chic stylist we can go and see in Paris." She finally stood up, tightened the bathrobe and went to look in the mirror in the washroom. She wiped the steam away from the mirror with the palm of her hand.

"God, you sound brainless--like a walking, talking Barbie-doll," I sighed.

She turned her head and looked at me.

"You can't make up your own mind," I said. "I'm just being honest."

Helena was quiet for a moment, then added sadly, "So lie to me."

I said nothing instead; sometimes silence was preferable to the truth. And I didn't have the voice for lies. They were much too tiring to say. There seemed a kind of energy needed in order to lie well. You had to build it up inside you, let yourself glow, as if you really meant what you were saying and were happy about it. To gush or be silent. I wondered which way gets you in less trouble.

I watched Helena run her fingers through her dark hair. With a slight tilt of the chin, she slicked her hair off her face, leaving every expression exposed. I knew exactly what she was thinking. She was very pleased with herself, that she had had her way again, believing, after all, that what she wanted was what was right.

I had a sudden urge to brush her hair, but it was still wet. I wanted to mother Helena, to tell her that her life would be happy and everything would be better than we ever expected. That's what I thought friends were supposed to do.

Instead I opened her suitcase and folded up her balled-up clothes and tucked in a few loose ends.

* * *

We spent the first few days of our trip taking pictures. She handed me her camera and asked me to snap some pictures of her standing in front of important sites and palaces. I asked her why she just didn't take the pictures herself.

"To prove I was actually here," she said, "I need to be in the picture."

"Does it matter to anyone else? You know that you were here."

"Fine," she replied, taking back her camera and looping it around her wrist. She walked over to a vendor's cart and purchased a few postcards and a souvenir photo album.

"Since you won't take the pictures, I have to buy these," she said.

"That doesn't make sense. You're not in those either."

"They're evidence."

"Of what?"

"Oh, Carly, you take much better pictures than I do. You should just do this for me. It's important that I do all the right things. These pictures are all I'll have to remember this trip."

* * *

We took the ferry from Dover to Calais, then a train down to Paris. On the ferry, we sat in the outdoor lounge to get some sun, and ordered Tanqueray Gin and tonics from the bar. I took a picture: bare, bronzed legs resting on top of wooden planks; sun-lit hair licked in the wind.

We arrived at the hotel and fell into our pillows. After a good night's rest, we made our way over to the runways. We ran from our breakfast to the Metro; we tore out of the Metro and into a taxi when we realized that we didn't know where we were going. It was all very exciting, until we found out we just couldn't buy a ticket and go in. We were forced to stand in an impromptu corral with hundreds of other people who also hoped to get in without an invitation. We soon got tired of waiting in line for the Chanel show with the rest of the fashion

groupies. "FGs" as the American magazines called them. At least we met some Parisians while waiting in line. Several people had brought various bottles of wine and invited Helena and I to share with them. One man was particularly generous.

"To keep you from getting cold," he said in fairly decent English. It was a bit chilly for late summer. But as the man said, Paris weather is so unpredictable.

"Thanks," Helena grinned.

"Merci," I reminded her. I thought: You can at least speak that much French.

"I know."

"Why don't you say it?"

"But he knows English," she said as she dug into her purse to look for a snack to eat.

Helena had told me that there were hundreds of ways to get in to such events: Getting to know the security guards, flashing a bit of money, wearing sexy clothing etc.--all were possibilities when trying to get into a fashion show.

I imagined myself as a photographer-model, who had a view of both sides of the fashion show: as the observer and the observed. I'm a model who takes pictures of the audience's reactions. The film would be developed for the designer later, in case he couldn't get a good view of the audience.

"O.K.," Helena said very loudly. "This is getting ridiculous. I'm getting sick of standing around and waiting for something to happen." Then she shouted: "Has anybody got a bomb? Nothing nuclear. I just want to free all women from

these fashion dictators!" She giggled as I tried to shush her. From the corner of my eye, I saw some people take more than a passing interest.

"Got your passport?" I asked and hooked her around the elbow. "We may have to get out of here quick."

"Awww, I don't want to go. I'm just beginning to have fun."

Our provider of spirits smiled as he held Helena up on her other side. "She's OK," he said to me. He called Helena "cherie" and she giggled. He bent over to kiss her on the mouth. She didn't resist him, except to laugh harder.

"Don't you think it's fascist that a man has appropriated the line of Coco Chanel?" Helena asked him. There was some applause. A few of the surrounding women, with bright fire-orange hair began to clap and stamp their feet in agreement.

"You speak English?" I asked one of them.

"Of course." She spoke without an accent. "I'm American."

Great, I thought. Another bloody tourist who doesn't know what's going on.

"Clap, clap, clap for me as I strut my stuff down the catwalk! I'm Karl Lagerfeld! Anybody got a fan I can borrow? Geez, I need a ponytail," shouted Helena. "They're just a bunch of drag queens, really, who want to dress themselves."

"Bravo!" shouted another woman and I tried to speak to her, but she replied only in French. She was also either very drunk or stoned, and our small noise had simply amused her.

"Can anyone see what's going on?" I asked the American girl.

She stood up on tip toe and scanned the horizon across the sea of funny haircuts. "Nope," she said and flopped back down onto her flats and popped her bubble gum. "But it looks like some cops are coming. Though I could be wrong, looks like they're coming in this direction. Maybe you should keep her quiet." Her eyes slid back and forth.

"Come on Hel, let's get out of here."

"Spoil sport." The man beside her helped her resist.

"Fuck off. She's going to be sick," I shouted at him and he suddenly stopped understanding English. He shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"Need help?" a voice asked beside my ear. I turned to a handsome face. I swore that the sun shone a little more brightly at that moment, and perhaps some bells even rang.

"Yes, thanks."

He helped me unlatch Helena from the grasp of our former friend and wine steward with an "Excuse me" and a slight push with his elbow, and led her underneath the bleachers set up for the paparazzi. We sat her down on the curb, by a fountain. I crouched down beside her and held her upright. I kept my arm around her and felt the sweat on her back. She panted and looked like she was going to cry.

"It's alright, Hel. Good thing there's always one of us who can look after the other."

Helena leaned back and sighed. "I don't know." She shrugged her shoulders. "I'm just jealous. I'd love to be womanly...a muse for those fascists. Or rich enough. Oh, I don't know. Christ, I'm tired of waiting. Let me go!" She shrugged off my grip on her arm. Some of her hair had fallen out of its clip, and a few locks had begun to curl and stick to her face. She wiped back her bangs with a coat sleeve, then ran the cuff under her nose.

"That's very attractive," I whispered to her. I noticed that the man who helped us was still hanging around. Cute strawberry blonde guy.

"Thanks," I said.

"No problem. Are you two going to be OK?"

"Oh, I think so."

Helena sniffed.

"Do you want a kleenex?" I asked her.

"No...no." She was impatient and edgy. "I think I forgot my purse back there."

"No, I grabbed it as we were leaving," said Mr. Wonderful as he handed it to her. I was careful to listen if the angels were singing.

"Oh shit, thanks," said Hel. "Don't worry," she whispered to me. "I've got my passport in my pocket. We can still get into the show."

"No, let's get you home."

"Do you live in Paris?" the stranger asked.

"Oh no. I just call the hotel we stay at 'home'. Gives us a sense of place.

We don't feel like such tourists."

He squinted his eyes, surveyed the court like a king and said: "Look--I'm waiting for a couple of friends and we'll be going out for dinner later. Would you two like to join us?" He touched the back of my arm, in both an inviting and protective gesture. "It's just a bunch of fellow travellers," he continued, "people whom I've met at various hostels."

"I can't promise anything until after Helena's had a nap."

"Helena." He paused. "And your name is?"

"Carly."

"I'm Kyle."

I wasn't sure if we should shake hands, since I had to hold up Helena. He paused to look at his watch and then motioned the direction with his hands. "We'll be meeting at the Closerie des Lilas at eight o'clock. It's in Montparnasse."

"You've read Hemingway."

"Hasn't everyone? I'll reserve his stool for you."

"Deal."

"We'll see you there then?"

"I hope so. I'm sure I can talk her into it."

"All right." He leaned over and kissed me on both cheeks. "As they do in France," he explained. He squeezed my arm. "Until then."

Helena looked up at me, after Kyle had walked away. She winked and said, "Oh Carly, he's definitely a mission."

"Yes," I said. "Mine."

Helena dressed up in a long, sleeveless cotton shirt and navy pants despite the earlier chill. I brought an extra sweater in case she got cold, but, of course, I just ended up carrying two sweaters with me all night long. There were certain times when she looked so beautiful that I wanted to slap her. It was just my luck that it was one of those nights. I was willing to wear simply a good shirt and jeans, but changed my outfit after seeing what she was wearing. So I put on a black mini-dress that buttoned up in the back.

I remember how polite everyone was trying to be: ordering a bottle of wine to share, listening carefully to everything everyone had to say without interruption. Helena smiled over a cup of cappuccino held up close to her mouth. She wiped off her lipstick from the lip of the cup with her thumb. She did this each time she took a sip, as if to remove any mar, any imperfection. Everyone was on display, everyone put on a show.

"Where are you from?" a deeply tanned man asked.

"We're both from Canada," replied Helena.

"Toronto?" he asked. "Same as your friend Kyle?"

"Yes, Toronto," I replied, recognizing in the man's voice that this was the only Canadian city he had heard of. Tonight was not the night to cause provocation, so I put off giving a geography lesson.

"I bet he's never even heard of Edmonton," said a scruffy, dark man who

passed beside me.

"Or Guelph," I replied. He nodded with a brief grin and continued walking towards the bar.

Kyle had held out chairs for both Helena and I when we first entered the restaurant. Originally, he sat us together at the table, at the corner of the rectangle, and gave us equal attention in conversation and glances. But the players shifted around, like a deck of cards being shuffled for play, as people wandered in to join the party or to leave for awhile to meet some other friends with promises to return later that night. I got up to get a drink. When I returned from the bar, Kyle and Helena were in deep discussion. I tried to squeeze back into the conversation.

I pulled up a chair close to Kyle. Helena sat on his other side.

"Hello, hero."

He smiled at me in return. I dared not touch him. Not yet. Maybe later.

"Helena's looking a lot better than she did this afternoon, isn't she?" I reminded Kyle, my voice tight and high.

"Are you two having a good time?" he asked.

"Great," said Helena, nodding her head, answering for both of us.

"So what are you two doing? Are you in school? Working?"

"We've just graduated from university," said Helena.

A woman behind us yelled "Yay!" and clapped her tiny hands. I thought I saw her roll her eyes at us, but I wasn't really sure. She could have been talking

to anybody. I sat up straighter and posed.

"Oh, really?" said Kyle. "I was almost finished, but I've taken a year or two off before I do my final year."

"What were you studying?" Helena asked. She tilted her head to one side and brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. I discreetly tried to wipe the corners of my lipstick. Kyle put a hand on the back of my chair, but leaned towards Helena.

"Mostly economics. Believe it or not, I even took a couple Women's Studies courses, the ones they would let me take, and even considered getting a minor in it, but the other courses are only open to women."

"That's stupid," said Helena. "It's not fair if you want to take the course. How else are men expected to learn?"

"Why did you want to minor in Women's Studies?" I asked Kyle. He craned his neck to look back at me. He looked awkward, because his body didn't follow.

"Well, I plan one day to go to Law School. I thought it'd be good to get a background in women's issues, because it's an area in law that's really opening up these days," he replied.

"We could have used a few men in our class," offered Helena. "It'd offer a more realistic point of view. Sometime the class I took got too..."

"Feminist?" I offered.

"Extreme," she said. "Come on, both sexes live in the real world." I lost points in that conversation. As usual, Helena won. But then I always let her win.

Back home, I was known as Helena's friend. All the boys knew that and made sure they brought a friend along if they were interested in Helena. At that time I didn't care much about it, I wasn't interested in any of those boys. It was all very temporary. Helena knew that none of those guys were serious about her. It was as much of a game to them as it was to her: a chase, a hunt. Once caught, all there was to do was to try to get away.

Kyle got up and introduced us to Adam, the same dark Edmonton man. "A fellow compatriot and resident scoundrel." He shook Adam's hand and the two men shared a private laugh.

Kyle relayed to us the story of how he and Adam had met two French girls this afternoon and how they had convinced them that they, being from Canada, were igloo architects.

"But Adam--Adam's the real rogue," said Kyle.

"I don't know how it happened," Adam said. "I told my wife I was going out for a drink and I ended up in Paris."

"Doesn't she know where you are?" Helena asked incredulously.

"I call her up every once in a while. I send postcards. Maybe you can write one to her for me. Let her know I'm all right."

Adam offered to buy us a round of drinks. Helena smiled. I shrugged. Rising from his chair, Kyle said he was going to help Adam carry the drinks back. Helena excused herself to go to the washroom.

"Save me my seat, OK?"

I nodded. Adam returned balancing three drinks in his two hands. Twisting around in my chair, I tried to find out where Kyle could have gone. I saw Helena smile at him, forming a pocket of warmth around them, sending an icicle right into my lungs. He followed her outside.

"Are you staying in Paris long?" Adam asked.

"I don't know," I replied truthfully, not really sure if I wanted to stay in this seat for long.

"Any specific plans?" he asked. Conversation swirled around us.

"Excuse me, but I think I should return some of these empty glasses to the bar. It's an old bartending reflex," I said to cover my poor excuse.

I went looking for Kyle and Helena, the icicle melting into ash as I peered into every corner. I found them out on the terrace. Seeing them so close together, I realized that Kyle had been just playing us off each other until he decided which one of us he wanted. I shook my head to get rid of the jealousy. It was obvious he wanted all of us to be pleasant to each other. Perhaps he hoped if things didn't work out with one, there would still be the other. An heir and a spare kind of idea.

He kissed her and I turned around to go back into the restaurant. Secretly, under the table, I ripped up a menu while I tried to control myself. I put on my sweater and headed for the Metro. I left Helena's sweater hanging off the back of a chair. She lost it. I would say later that it was only because I was concerned that she might catch cold that I left the sweater behind. At the time, I couldn't

bear to touch it.

It was that kind of an evening, a blue evening, when the descending dusk filtered out all the colours, except indigo, from the sky. I walked around the city and saw all the sites by night. An underworld effect, like the reversal of dark and light on a film negative.

The next morning she asked me, "What do you think of him?" She didn't have to say who.

"He's nice. Well dressed," was all I could muster. I didn't want to say what I thought. I just wanted to forget about him for the time being. I merely reminded myself that I did get to sit in Sartre's seat for awhile, before a couple with a camera asked me to move.

"Adam's a nice guy," Helena said to me while she helped me fix my hair.

"But not nice-looking," I replied, hating myself for it.

"This'll be good," said Helena. "There are some places where it's still safer for us to be with a guy. Even look around here. We get hassled less with Kyle and his friends around."

Her comments reminded me of the times we used to go bar-hopping together back home. It was a delicate balancing act of trying to get the attention of certain men and avoiding others. Here, in Paris--like in Toronto, Guelph and Edmonton, the desirable man would protect us from the undesirables.

"Sure, safety in numbers," I replied, trying to sound enthusiastic. I could feel my energy drain. We were getting ready for a day trip to Versailles and the French countryside.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Whenever you are."

We had pitched in with Kyle and some of his friends and rented two cars for the day. All of us piled into the cars, three in the front and three in the back of each vehicle, and we prepared for the splendour of another royal palace. They were more interesting than cathedrals; castles had more luxury, but fewer stained glass windows.

Versailles was crowded, full of tour groups and guides all speaking different languages. Inside, it was very hot, sweltering; outside, it had begun to rain. I took shelter under a staircase. This is where Kyle found me. My heart jumped.

Maybe, I thought.

"Here you are. I was wondering what kind of trouble you had got yourself into. Had enough?" he asked.

"Just about."

"Don't worry, we'll be leaving soon. I just hope the weather clears up. I wanted to go on a picnic. There's a place on the way home that sells sandwiches, and decent wine and let's us eat in their field."

"How do you know about it?"

He smiled and put his arm around me. "I know everything. I'm the hero,

remember?"

And sure enough, when we all finally assembled by the entrance, the sun had come out again.

"Don't worry," said Kyle when he saw Helena test the ground with her hand and wipe the dirt off with a kleenex from her purse, "they also provide blankets for us to sit on."

We clambered into the cars and drove the quick ten minutes to the farm. Kyle led the way and knocked on the door of the farmhouse. A woman with a faded red handkerchief covering her head, answered the door. She smiled as if she recognized Kyle, but I suspected this was how she greeted everyone she met.

"Bonjour," said Kyle. "Dejeuner pour ...". He held up his fingers to try to show our numbers. The woman looked at us and counted heads anyway before calling into the house. Kyle took out his wallet and offered to pay for Helena and me. After a polite refusal, we accepted his generous offer. Before she shut the door, she handed Kyle several checkered blankets and pointed towards the field, nodding and smiling.

"Merci," said Kyle. He handed out the blankets and headed for the field. We all followed him, not knowing what else to do, or wondering if we had a choice. One of the girls from our group, Marjorie, walked beside Kyle. Marjorie wasn't her real name. She said that since no English-speaking person could properly pronounce her name to just call her Marjorie, since we all seemed able to manage that. I asked her what her real name was and she replied, "Margarite".

She spelled it for me to make sure I could at least correctly see the name in my head.

"It's close to Margaret," I said to her.

She wrinkled her nose and said, "I don't like 'Margaret'. Some people started to call me 'Margie' and I didn't like that either. I heard the name 'Marjorie' and it suited me. And I think it's close enough."

"Margarite," I said, trying my hand at saying her real name. "It's not that difficult," I told her.

"Well, you can't hear yourself saying it. You say it with an English accent and it hurts my ears."

I say Marjorie with an English accent and I haven't deafened you yet, I thought.

Kyle called her "Margarita" to get under her skin. Between them, it was a joke, but no one else dared to call her Margarita to her face. Helena called her "Tequila" secretly between us. Sour like lemons, bitter as salt.

Looking at her, I could have sworn that Marjorie was Kyle's sister, despite being a good foot shorter than him. She had the same light reddish-blond hair colour and similar features. But she wasn't his sister.

She frequently stroked his shoulder to get his attention, touched his arm to emphasize a point in their tête-à-tête and held his hand as they shared a laugh. I wondered what they had to laugh about and why I was so paranoid. She didn't even know me, I'm sure. She was a Parisian woman, who despite studying

English at university, spoke with a heavy accent. Often Marjorie referred to Kyle as her tutor. Helena kept close to my side and I could tell she wasn't too impressed. But she didn't do anything except make a terse comment about Marjorie's looks. I was intrigued by Marjorie: Helena would have more competition.

Soon we were helping each other spread out the blankets; Helena doubled up the layers of a blanket by folding over a corner before she sat down on it.

A man, the woman and two young men came out of the house carrying wicker baskets, painted a deep brown, and eight bottles of wine. There were the customary red and white checkered cloths tucked in as lining for each of the baskets; inside each of the baskets themselves were loaves of warm bread, sliced into thick portions, breast of chicken, rolls of ham and cheese, salad and a small tub of butter. Madam passed us all a glass, as the Messieurs walked around and poured red wine for everyone. They opened the rest of the bottles for us and distributed them equally to each blanket. Our hosts' good humour was infectious and soon all of us were laughing. A happy epidemic.

But as soon as our hosts left, everyone's attention was turned to Marjorie. She shared a blanket and a basket with Kyle, and she began to speak very loudly. She spoke with more gusto after a few gulps of wine.

"Since she speaks French, you would've thought she would have ordered the lunch for us, instead of having Kyle try to give hand signals," Helena buzzed in my ear.

"Don't worry, Kyle did just fine. This is a great lunch. He was right. A pleasant surprise."

"When did you talk to him?"

Before I could answer her, Marjorie began her speech:

"Poor Marie Antoinette! She came all that way just to be killed off in the revolution. Left all her family behind. I often wondered if she was very happy here, although I imagine it isn't all that different from Austria. After all, a princess is always a princess.

"There are so many stories about her. Some are very romantic, saying she had many lovers and admirers; others telling about the corruption of her wealth, quoting that she said 'Let the poor eat cake'." I watched Marjorie's rouged mouth. The immaculate lipstick was smudged. "I think most people like to portray her as a very lonely queen, without a friend in the world. But I'm sure that was her own fault. One of my best girlfriends, one whom I can trust completely on this, who worked at Versailles last summer told me all these ghost stories about the palace. You'd expect they'd be about a headless Marie looking for her wig or something. But it's nothing like that. Supposedly, Marie had a little friend whom her parents adopted for her as a playmate. She was probably a poor Austrian child whose parents couldn't afford to keep her so she was sold to work in the kitchen of the palace or in the stables if you're a romantic who believes that all little girls love horses. She then caught the eye of the young princess, who felt sorry for her. Having no playmates of her own age, besides her brothers and sisters who were

no fun, the princess begged her mummy and daddy to get her this little girl.

"Now I've heard that this little girl grew up with Marie and they became as close as sisters, so she knew many secrets. It's been told that this girl became one of Marie's ladies-in-waiting and accompanied her here to France. But once Marie and Louis were married, Marie became obsessed with being French. She felt that her friend only reminded everyone of her past, so she sent her away, exiled her. My friend said they found letters in Versailles, written by Marie, showing a correspondence with a woman in Warsaw. Perhaps this was her little friend, and Marie was asking her to come back because she was so lonely being in France, and her husband only could be concerned with the revolution that was about to happen here."

"Did the playmate come back?" asked Kyle.

"Well," said Marjorie, "it depends who you ask. There are different endings. There are some who say that she never came back and lived her own life. But my friend thinks that the playmate came back and for some reason Marie had her beheaded--maybe she knew too much--which is why Marie suffered the same fate. Still, there's some ghost in Versailles." Marjorie paused to take a bite of an apple she had found in her lunch basket. The skin of the apple crunched as her teeth bit into it. "I've always wanted to see the ghost."

"I don't believe in ghosts," said Helena. "But you're very entertaining." She put on a forced grin for the benefit of those watching. Marjorie returned it with a smile as thin as an ice-pick.

Adam came over to where Helena and I sat and offered us some of his wine.

"I'm driving," he explained away his generosity and topped up both our glasses. Helena moved over and offered him a place on the blanket between us. He accepted.

He sat facing me more than Helena, which seemed to suit her fine. She didn't want his attention. He was a very plain-looking man. He had dark, curly hair that needed to be trimmed and a stubble on his rectangular jaw. I didn't want his attention either. I pretended to study the flight of birds while he stared at me.

Helena asked him, "How's it going?"

Adam looked around him and held out his arms. "Who can beat this? What more can a man ask for?" He was only slightly drunk and I'm sure he was serious in his delight.

Marjorie let out a loud laugh. Heads turned. Accidentally, she snorted and I heard Helena mutter "Ha!" under her breath. Adam heard it too and gave me a knowing look. I suspected that Kyle had sent him over to keep the peace.

"Marjorie tries too hard," Adam said. "I don't think Kyle takes her seriously. She can be lots of fun, but she's too different for him. I'm a great believer in marrying the girl-next-door."

Adam poured me another glass of wine.

"Careful," Helena warned. "She's a wild woman when she's drunk."

Adam looked down and smiled, open-mouthed. "Good. I like wild women."

"But you married the girl-next-door, right?" I blurted out.

"Drink your wine," said Adam. I suddenly wanted to say that I was sorry, but I was afraid to open my mouth. So I did as I was told. After awhile, and more wine, everything seemed to blend together. Helena excused herself with an "I'll be right back" and pinched my arm gently. I acknowledged her departure with a nod and reached in the basket to see if there was anything else to eat. I couldn't believe that I was hungry again.

"Here." He plucked a green grape off its stem and put it in my mouth. I tasted his thumb.

"Maybe I should lie back on a couch like an Emperor," I said.

"I wouldn't object."

I raised my eyebrows and threw a grape at him.

"Am I still amusing you?" I asked him.

"What?"

"Well, you must have come over here for a reason. Why didn't you go and sit with Kyle?"

"Kyle's not amusing."

"See, I was right. You did come over to be amused by me."

"Don't worry. You're doing a good job."

"Ah-ha. Have some more wine," and I poured myself another glass. I dug my fingers into the grass and inhaled the scent of the soil I had just unearthed. I could hear Marjorie's laugh in the distance. I forgot to wonder where Helena

was. The more I drank, the better Adam looked.

"Why did you come to Europe, Adam?"

"Isn't it the thing to do?"

"But we aren't doing anything."

"Sure we are. We're running away."

"Speak for yourself."

"I am," he said.

"If your wife's that bad, why don't you just divorce her?"

"Because I love her." He paused, serious. "I just wish she'd be different.

Or should I say, I wish she were the same as my expectations."

"I wonder if she'll be there when you get back."

"Of course. Where else would she go?"

"Oh, Adam," I said, beginning to feel charmed. We were all here in Europe trying to play grown-up; away from our other friends and family, nobody would know how adolescent we really were. Our actions matched those in the cafe. We put on our best behaviour, wore it like a fine cloak. The exception was Adam. He was a grown-up and had come to Europe to escape being one.

"What are you running away from?" he asked me.

"Nothing." I stretched my legs. "I'm on vacation. It's that simple. Just a good time."

"Good. I hope so." He lay down on his side and rested his head on one hand, while grabbing more grapes with the other.

I extended my arms up towards the sky and leaned back as far as I could without falling. I felt raindrops fall on my face.

"It's raining again," I said quietly as everyone hurriedly began packing up the baskets and rolling the blankets. I looked around to see where Helena had gone. All I could see was her back as she ran up the small hill to the cars. I tried to pick up as much as I could, Helena's purse, my bag, as well as some grapes and the remaining bottle of wine. The guys ran up to the house to return the goods, while Helena and Marjorie dashed into the car that Kyle was driving. They joined two other waiting women and one man. Since that car was already full, I was forced to take shelter in the other car, Adam's.

Adam was the first to return to the second car. He looked at the passengers in the car ahead of us and said, "It would be interesting to hear what's not said in that car."

"Christ, you're perceptive," I said from the back, leaning forward and resting my arms on the front seat.

"It's an acquired talent," he replied and started the engine. I finished off the bottle of wine. I pondered silently my reasons for drinking. I drank to make men more interesting.

Helena told me that the ride back mostly consisted of a "discussion" on the existence of ghosts.

"I bet she'd like to kill me to prove her point," said Helena. I know she was

exaggerating. She was just mad. Kyle had driven Marjorie home, alone, before he came back to meet the cafe group for dinner. The competition was becoming fierce. And, in reality, there was no competition. Kyle had made his choice. After all, it is a man's privilege to choose as much as it is a woman's prerogative to change her mind.

During dessert, when Kyle said that he knew a place where we could hunt for some ghosts, Helena was all for it. Earlier we had made plans to check out a cabaret.

"Helena?" I asked.

"It's what we wanted to do, something wild," she said to me.

"It sounds like it could be something illegal."

"Come on, what are they going to do to us if they catch us? It's not like we're breaking into Versailles or something. It's just an abandoned old building."

"It still must belong to somebody. They'll think we're trying to rob the place."

"What's wrong Carly?" asked Kyle. "It'll be a piece of cake finding Marie-Antoinette's ghost."

Helena laughed at his attempted joke and then said, "You don't have to come Carly, if you don't want to. I just thought you wanted some adventure. Don't let me spoil your fun."

Wonderful, I thought. She'll blame everything on me.

"Is Marjorie going?" I couldn't resist asking.

"No," replied Kyle. "She has things to do with some of her girlfriends from school tonight." Helena wore an air of triumph.

We prepared ourselves by raiding the bed covers from our hotel room because we anticipated a haunted place would be cold, and we headed over to the flea market to buy a couple of cheap flashlights. I brought a wind-breaker and a new umbrella, just in case.

Kyle picked us up in front of our hotel in one of the rented cars. Adam sat in the back and smiled when I joined him. He had cut his hair and showered.

"No tie?" I teased, pleased with the improvements. Nobody else from the dinner wanted to come.

I wondered if K and H were holding hands by now, secretly, out of my sight. Their hands sticky on the vinyl seat cover, fingers entwined, Kyle with one hand on the wheel. Adam attempted to make some conversation, asking some of those negligible details--such as how old I was and where I was from--that we had neglected to ask each other on the picnic. I gave my answers in curt bites and quickly became angry at myself. I realized I was only angry with Adam because I was angry with Helena. I didn't want to come here tonight. Why was she playing these girlish games here in Europe, wasting our time? I wanted to go out and do things with her, instead of following a couple of guys around. She could do all this back at home at her leisure. We didn't come to Europe just to

pick up guys.

We parked nearby the remains of what might once have been a castle. It was made of stone towers, decorated here and there with a sprinkle of rubble, and pebbles as small as pearls that had delicately come tumbling down from the broken walls. I couldn't believe that I was happy that I came. Not a tourist in sight. I felt original.

Helena said, "Oh." Obviously this wasn't the romantic outing she had envisioned.

"I think we can get some cover over on the other side of the building where it's fairly intact," said Kyle.

"Is it safe to go in?" surveyed Adam, running a silvery beam from his flashlight over the damp landscape. He kept a solid position by the car. He had on his checkered jacket, green pants tucked into a pair of black rubber boots.

"You brought those boots all the way from Canada?" I asked him.

And with a twinkle in his eye, "Oh, well, *these* I save for special occasions and dangerous adventures." Adam seemed strangely settled at that moment, as if he were ready to sink roots into the life he was living now. As if he were prepared to wade in the muck around here, or planned to do some construction. There is a sense of commitment when you want to get your hands dirty.

"Do you want to walk around and see more of this place?" I asked Adam, when Kyle and Helena started to make their way to the other side of the ruin.

"We should've come in the daytime if you really want to see the castle."

"Don't be silly. We'll have a sober talk at least."

We walked around for a long time in silence before either of us spoke.

"I'm not very good at this," I sputtered out. "I'm not like Helena."

"Good, I'm glad you're not like Helena."

"There's always something I'm supposed to say and some way I'm supposed to act. And sometimes I do. I can giggle with the best of them, I'll never be as good as Helena when it comes to hair-flipping, but I'll pass. And I never say what shows who I really am. With these games, people are so superficial, so polite."

Adam leaned up against one of the half-fallen walls. "Don't you think it's safer that way? Think of all the passions you want to let loose."

"What's wrong with passion?"

"Exactly." Adam walked closer to me, so that our thighs rubbed together.

"You know," Adam began. "I think Kyle first had his eye on you, not Helena. Your name came up a lot when he told us a couple of new girls were going to join us for dinner. But I think that you're just too serious for him."

"Excuse me?"

"I mean, you're smart," he offered as a compliment.

"Helena's smart too," I said in defense.

"Yeah, but she's not interested in using it."

But I'm not pretty. He didn't say I'm pretty, I thought.

"What's wrong?" Adam asked.

I shrugged him off. "Nothing."

"I thought you said you didn't like to play games," he said to me.

We walked around the corner of the castle and I playfully took the flashlight from Adam's hand. I shone the beam in his face and made him blink. "I don't see a thick black line running through you, like I do with most people.

"A what?"

"A black line. With you, it's a thin black line, splitting your core."

He smiled in disbelief. "Do you see this line in Kyle? Helena?" he asked.

"I see it in everybody," I replied, "but especially in Kyle and Helena."

"In everybody, heh?" I imagined Adam reaching deep into his coat pocket (I could see his fingers moving inside it) and drawing out a huge, full-length mirror so I could see myself. I would blink at my unfaltering image. The eyes in the reflection would be inwardly closed; that is, there would only be a surface, no depth, no core.

But Adam didn't. Instead he asked: "What does this line mean?"

"Your true soul."

He said that he had to laugh. He didn't know that he had a spiritualist in his midst. I didn't want to talk to him about it any further.

So, instead, we continued our walk. He took my hand and I resisted looking at him. But I kept thinking about his black line. I could feel him tracing the creases of my palm with his fingertips.

Adam moved forward and kissed me. I stood still, not exactly sure how I

felt about this. Adam bit my upper, then lower lip. I started to giggle, because I suddenly had a vision of two bulldogs fighting. I collapsed against his arm, which he had placed between me and the castle wall.

"Hey," he said and pulled me closer. I looked into his eyes and suppressed a laugh. It was enough for me to know that I could have slept with him if I wanted.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I just can't." I giggled again, this time at the image of Adam and I making love in the car with Adam only wearing his rubber boots.

Adam muttered, "Fuck." He slightly turned away from me. "Look, I'll take you home if you want. I'll go tell Kyle and Helena we're going, so they don't think the car is being stolen. Wait here."

My impulse was to salute his order, but I didn't think he'd find it very funny under the circumstances. I watched him walk away. He didn't even look back once. I'd laughed at him and I wanted to tell him I was sorry over and over again, but he walked back with Kyle and an angry Helena.

We dropped off Adam at the cafe before Kyle turned the car around to drive to our hotel.

"Wait, I've got to get something upstairs," said Helena. "I'll just be a minute." I resisted making a comment about forgetting condoms or her diaphragm at home.

As soon as we entered our room, Helena turned to face me.

"What's your problem?"

"What?"

"Why did you send Adam to come and get us? He told us to come back because you wanted to come home."

"I didn't say that. He was just going over to tell you that we were leaving and he'd be back with the car as soon as he could."

"Yeah, sure."

"Maybe he just changed his mind by the time he found you. Maybe he realized it wouldn't be practical to leave you stranded out there for that long time."

"Long time? I don't think so. I was having a good time. Next time, if you don't want to go out with us, don't bother." Helena turned away from me as quickly as she had pounced. I heard her slam the door.

One spring break, instead of going to Florida, visiting with parents, or staying in residence to do homework (which was the most boring option of all, since all the campus pubs were closed for the break), Helena and I sublet an apartment for a week. It belonged to a friend of a friend who chose the Florida elective and needed the extra cash, so she charged her house-sitters.

We spent the mornings, I mostly remember the mornings, drinking coffee, sometimes with sopping wet hair tucked away under plush coloured bath-towels, silent, flipping through old magazines that we found underneath the table, searching through bookshelves for something interesting and deep to read,

unplugging the tv and turning on the radio.

The radio was only turned on softly, so we couldn't hear any words being spoken by a singer or a DJ; We could only hear the brief buzz of music to cover up the sound of the traffic outside.

The kitchen was painted creamy white, probably done by its resident when she first moved in. Helena vaguely remembered being invited to a painting party. It was the "in" thing to do among the fine arts students. I can't remember if I had been invited.

I said to her later, after this week was long over, that we would make up what we missed in Florida on our European trip.

"Make up for what?" she replied. "It was the best break I ever had. You and I, just the two of us, being ourselves."

We sat in the kitchen on high stools, looking at each other, trying not to laugh. Helena lit a cigarette. She had started smoking because it was somehow fashionable for dancers to smoke. But Helena didn't need some oral fixation to control her weight. She rarely smoked around our other friends. They would only think her silly and pretentious.

She got up to make another pot of coffee. We were already addicted to caffeine and the swirl of cream poured into stirred coffee. She carried the ashtray over the kitchen counter with her right hand, while taking a drag of the cigarette with the other. She chattered. I barely heard her over the voice of the water being poured into the electric kettle. I closed my eyes because everything was

warmly domestic and all the sounds lulled me. So much for the caffeine. I slid a cigarette out of the package on the counter beside me.

"You don't smoke!" she cried happily because I was joining in. I wanted to put on a thick French accent and ask her if she wanted to make love right now. But I knew that that would shock her and I didn't want to risk that since I didn't even know why I wanted to say that. The words formed in my mouth, but I knew they wouldn't be understood. So I remained silent once again. Except this time, silence took more energy than lying.

The top of the barstool was painted bright blue and Helena covered its sky blue eye when she returned and sat down with two cups of coffee.

She gave me a high five and said: "I think I could live like this. I think I'm finally, somewhat, grown up." I had to smile at her qualifier.

I woke up feeling homesick. Waves of it kept hitting me in the stomach. It left me feeling empty as if everything familiar had been sucked out of me in a moment.

I lay awake in bed. The room was dark because the curtains were still drawn. But I could see from behind them, the brightness that was trying to get inside.

Helena was asleep in the bed next to mine. She had come back sometime during the night. I hadn't woken up. I suddenly felt worried that Kyle had the opportunity to watch me sleep like I was watching her now. He would have stood

by the edge of my bed: staring down at my body, waiting to see if I revealed anything, carefully monitoring my intakes of breath.

I sat up before I got right out of bed. The room was cold. It felt like I was at a relative's house for Christmas and my family and I had stayed too long. The novelty had worn off. There was a dizzying knot in my stomach that was hard to keep down and not cry. But there were no snowstorms to hold me here. Really, there was nothing to keep me from going home. Except that I'd be giving up.

Adam and I waited for Kyle and Helena to show up. I had already waited for Helena three times this week. I didn't yet want to admit that this was becoming a habit. Helena had called and asked me to meet her and I assumed Kyle had asked the same of Adam. Our conversation was sparse and uncomfortable. We hadn't seen each other since that night of ghost-hunting.

Adam asked: "Done anything exciting lately?"

"When Helena and I have been together alone," I sighed, Adam nodded in understanding, "we had coffee on the Champs-Elysees, went window shopping, and we saw the Mona Lisa--but couldn't get close enough to the picture to see why she's smiling. On one of the days when Helena wasn't around, I packed a lunch and climbed the Eiffel Tower stairs. But mostly, I've been waiting around for Helena to show up, like tonight."

Adam grinned. "Yeah, it sounds a lot like old times. When I first met Kyle here, I'd never know when he'd show up or who he would bring. Forgive me for

saying so, but I'd thought I'd get lucky when Kyle said he found a girl with a friend to bring to dinner."

"No offense taken," I replied remembering Kyle had repeatedly mentioned my name to Adam.

Adam began to give me advice about doing my own thing. Very soon all I could see was his mouth moving. I blocked out everything he was saying.

"Thanks," I smiled. "I'll take it into consideration." I could feel the black line rising up within me and I swallowed hard to fight it back down. I didn't need a mirror to see it, but I could tell my own black line was thickening.

I insisted that we wait, despite the waiter's obvious attempts to free the table for another customer. He had already removed the coffee cups and kept glancing down at the check lying on our table. Adam suggested that we go on to a nearby bar, saying that they would catch up to us. At ten o'clock, Kyle and Helena finally made their appearance.

"You're still here?" Kyle commented as he pulled up a chair from another table.

"Were you hoping that we'd be gone by now?" I replied.

"No, no. Of course not." Kyle turned on his charming smile. He put his arm around Helena and ordered a round of espresso for the four of us. We only spoke in bits and bites about what we had done during the day. But Adam and Kyle had already been to all the museums I had gone to see, and Helena hadn't seen any of them. I knocked over a glass of water into my lap. Kyle raised his

hand to ask for the check.

Adam and Kyle walked Helena and I back to our hotel and said good-night.

"They're going home early, and I'm surprised you came back tonight. I thought that I wouldn't see you again until morning."

"That's because I had to talk to you," said Helena. "You're having a good time with Kyle and Adam, right? Just try to keep an open mind, OK?"

"OK," I said cautiously.

"Kyle is going to Greece in a couple of days. He asked me to go with him." She quickly corrected herself: "Of course, he wants you to come too. Do you want to go? We planned on going there anyway, Carly. Why not a couple of weeks earlier?"

"Well," I drawled, "we'll miss seeing Barcelona, Florence, Venice, Vienna..."

"We can always backtrack. We're not on a set schedule. But Kyle has to get back home in a couple of weeks. He hasn't seen Greece yet. Adam can come if he wants. Kyle said he was going to ask him on the way home."

"I don't know. And I don't know if Adam will want to go. He's into doing his own thing."

"Oh," said Helena. She pushed her hair behind her ears and twisted a long piece between her fingers. "This is OK with you Carly, isn't it?" she asked in a mewling voice. It wasn't OK with me, but I feared my resentment wasn't genuine, but still jealousy from Kyle choosing Helena. I wondered why I couldn't control my anger, since I could rationalize why I was feeling it. Also, it was true what

Helena said. We had all year to go back to the rest of Europe. Who knows, maybe I'd really like Greece and want to stay there anyway.

"Sure, why not?" I gave in.

"Thank you," she said and hugged me. She rocked me back and forth in her hold. I was only glad that I could make her so happy, but then I realized, I had nothing to do with it.

"It's been a long time since I've had a beautiful woman in my room," joked Adam when I went to see him. I had paced the lobby for several minutes, when he caught me in my hesitation to ring him and invited me upstairs. I wasn't sure if I'd be welcome. I hadn't been the ideal companion on our last couple of outings. To be considerate, I was careful not to laugh too loudly.

"How many hotels have you been slagging around in for that to happen?"

"All my life, baby. Want something to drink?" he offered.

"Maybe. Got any warm beer?"

He dug into a bag he had stashed under his bed.

"Did they ask you?" I said.

"Yes," he answered.

"Are you going?"

"Of course not." He passed me a flat beer in a toothbrush glass. I took a sip.

"But you are, aren't you?" Adam asked. I nodded. He shrugged in

disappointment. I don't think it was so much that I'd be going (I kept my ego in check), but the fact that I didn't have the guts to stay.

"What are you afraid of? Being on you own or leaving Helena with Kyle?"

"Are those the things I should be afraid of? I don't think so, Adam." I gave off an attitude that I hoped would pass as bravery.

"Why don't you stay here? I'm here--and if that isn't reason enough, once Kyle is gone, I'm sure Marjorie will be glad to show you the real France."

I felt restraint hold me by the throat. It seemed a wonderful idea for the moment. I didn't want to pack up and leave Paris quite yet.

"I know where you can do your laundry for free," said Adam.

I smiled. I sat on the edge of his unmade bed, since there weren't any chairs, and I watched the traffic flowing by his window.

"Don't worry," said Adam. "You'll have a great time. Greece is beautiful. Just take the time to enjoy it, Carly."

It was my turn to be disappointed. He was letting me make my own mistakes. I'd have nobody else to blame. Yet I was glad he mentioned my name. To him, I still existed. I wrote down his address in case I changed my mind and said good-bye.

I slept the whole time during the ferry crossing. We had travelled quickly through Italy by train, as Kyle had promised, while he pointed out all the important sites and monuments. It was a seven hour sail to Greece. Rather than share a

cabin with Kyle and Helena, I decided to camp out on the deck with the backpackers and other travellers. They were having a small party among the lifeboats. Some sat on the deck chairs, others shared their sleeping bags. One woman made an imitation bonfire out of flashlights. A man began singing fire-side songs. Someone called out, asking if anyone had a guitar.

Finally, I had a chance to sleep in comfort and security. I asked one of the pursers to take a picture of us so I could have something with which to remember all our faces.

After only one night in Athens, Kyle announced that we were going to visit his friend Kristos. Kristos had gone to Kyle's high school as a foreign exchange student. He always promised Kyle a free place to stay when Kyle came to Greece. Especially on cold winter nights, Kristos would tell all his roommates about his villa on Mykonos. If possible, we would sail there the next morning. Again, I was silently outvoted. Helena was enthusiastic about staying in a real home and not a hotel. After dinner, Kyle went to make a few phone calls, leaving Helena and I on the terrace with a bottle of wine.

"This is turning out well," said Helena.

"If you say so."

"What's your problem?" she asked.

"Nothing, Helena," I sighed. "I'm just a bit tired from running around. This is not how I planned our vacation."

"No, it's much better. Christ, what else did you expect?"

Lots, I thought. I want to be elevated to such ecstatic heights that I would be afraid of falling if I dared to wish to go home.

"Look at what Kyle is doing for us: He's getting us out of a hotel for a couple of weeks. His friend might have a boat we can use, maybe, if it's big enough, we can do some island-hopping. And it's all free! This leaves us with more money for the rest of our vacation." I reflected on Helena's planned adventures with Kyle and wondered where it left me. Her plans were also too perfect, too glossy, almost slippery. I felt like I was becoming a travel brochure.

"Get some sun on your face," said my mother's voice. Yes, then I'd be all the more colourful for the cover of Bon Voyage magazine.

"I wanted to rough it," I told Helena. "I didn't expect to be pampered. It wasn't what I was looking for."

"What are you looking for then? Adam could have come along, you know. Kyle said that he probably would've joined us with a little more coaxing. You could have been nicer to him."

That's not what I'm looking for, I thought angrily.

"What do I want?" I said out loud. "I don't know Helena. I thought I could learn something here, by experiencing something different. I wanted a change. So far we've only hung out with Kyle and his friends. We haven't met any Europeans. We could've stayed home and met the same people."

"Kristos, the guy who has the villa, is Greek. See, Kyle comes through for

you, even before you ask him for it," said Helena proudly and she sat up straighter in her seat like a bird in full plumage.

Kyle returned and motioned for another bottle of wine.

"Good news," he said. "My friend says we can come down anytime we like. It's ideal. It's not the villa I was talking about, his family's staying there right now, but he and his friends run a hotel, so we can stay and eat there for free.

"Carly's not too crazy about going," said Helena.

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to," replied Helena.

Kyle leaned back in his chair and hooked his thumbs into the belt loops of his shorts. "I wish you'd just relax, Carly. Then we'd all have a better time."

"I am having a good time."

"When you get home you only want to say 'I had a good time' to your mother. But to your friends you want to use 'great' as your least descriptive adjective. Face the facts, a lot of your friends can't afford trips like this and they're looking forward to hearing about the wild times you had in Europe so they can at least vicariously live the experience, 'cause they'll probably never get here."

We never did anything that wild, I thought, except maybe the idea to go ghost-hunting. We're not having wild times, only extravagant ones.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked him.

"Whatever comes naturally," said Kyle, lounging back, putting his hands behind his head, like he was satisfied just having won a bet. Maybe he had. I

didn't know what he and Helena talked about any more.

Helena and I had a brief conversation soon after we arrived in Mykonos. Everything that Kyle had promised turned into fact. We were staying in a wonderful Greek hotel with a salt-water pool and a view of the ocean so close that it was a toss up between the sun-deck and the beach. Everything we needed was at our front door.

While Kyle went out in the mornings with Kristos to help him with some business (Kyle claimed it had to do with the hotel), Helena and I sat in the sun-splashed restaurant, dozing over the remains of our breakfast. A waiter walked by with a fresh jug of orange juice. Helena flagged him down. I went up to the buffet for a refill of coffee and some wedges of watermelon.

"Want some?" I offered Helena the plate of fruit.

"No thanks." She was preoccupied with curiosity about what Kyle and Kristos were doing.

"Who cares," I said. But before she could say 'I do', I changed the subject: "Is there anything you want to do today? There's a tennis court behind the pool. Do you want to see if we can borrow a couple of rackets?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm feeling lazy again. After all, I'm on vacation. Christ, I haven't worked out for ages and it feels great!"

"That's a dangerous thought. What about dancing?"

She shrugged. "What about it?"

"It's what you wanted to do last year."

"Carly, do you know how hard it is to make a living as a dancer? Do you know how hard it is to even make it into a company?"

"Hard--but not impossible," I replied, having the funny feeling that somehow Kyle was looking over my shoulder.

"Carly!" Helena cried, her voice biting like a slap.

"What?"

"You're not paying attention. You almost knocked over your coffee."

"Shit." I padded the small stain with a napkin, but the spot just spread.

"Forget it. Somebody else will clean it up. Let's go and sit outside. The morning sun is nice. Not too hot." Helena stood up and walked out. I hid the stain under my napkin. My urge was to change the tablecloth, and I laughed at the thought of customer anarchy--everyone getting up and helping themselves to fixing their own messes. All the waiters would be at a loss for something to do, someone to serve.

We moved out to the patio and Helena closed the umbrella over our table. She took off her shoes and put her feet up on a chair.

"He makes me happy, you know that," Helena said to me.

"I know." There was nothing else I could say.

"Carly, do you think it's better to get married in the summer or in the winter? The summer's more traditional, but practical if you consider the weather. But I'd like to get married at Christmas or on Valentine's and have a procession of horse-

drawn sleighs take me to my wedding. What do you think?"

I said: "Whatever season is closer to when you decide to get married. Then you can begin your life of wedded bliss as soon as possible." She seemed pleased with my answer.

Helena and I had leaned back in our chairs during the whole conversation, trying to catch some sun. We didn't look at each other in the eye even once.

During exams in our second year, Helena came up to my room as I was trying to study. She had called me before she showed up at my door and sounded really happy. I thought she had just aced an exam. I had to study, but her mania continued. She began to read her History exam out loud to me, pointing to the words as if what they said was very important, speaking faster and happier until she began telling me about this guy in her class whom she'd liked all semester, who offered her a ride back to the residence and ended up inviting her over to his house while they were in the car, how she thought it odd but he was from such a nice family that she ignored her instincts, believing his social status prevented anything from happening, and how he had pushed her to the ground, held her down and pulled off her pants. He said afterwards how much she had liked it but there was blood. She told him "How can you think that I enjoyed that?" I didn't know what to do, except hold her tightly, to squeeze it all out of her.

A few weeks later she began her new semester like any student would.

Her happiness had subsided, stopped being forced, and she was back to normal.

We spent the next two weeks on the isle of Mykonos. At night, it was windy and I had to wrap myself in a blanket while I sat on the patio outside of our hotel room. It seemed strange that it could be so cold when only half a mile away, in the centre of town it was still very warm. The narrow streets must trap the warmth of the sun and the whitewashed walls keep in the light. People spilled out into the streets since there wasn't room to dance inside the nightclubs. Even The Scandi, with its split levels, didn't have the capacity to contain its crowds. I wondered how the islanders managed to keep their sanity when it was full-blown tourist season. I couldn't take the swarm of people so I told Helena and Kyle that I would meet them back at the hotel. I walked up the hill back to the hotel passing a few people on the way, but nobody bothered me. I blended in.

It was early September and I thought about how at the same time last year I was still in school, bright with anticipation of the future. Still eager. But being here, in the real world, it was difficult to keep a happy face. I was supposed to be having a good time. What was wrong with me if I wasn't finding all this fun?

I thought about Adam and wondered what he was doing. I thought about going home. Why do we travel? If it's not to pick up guys, what is it? It isn't to see the Eiffel Tower. I've already seen it in too many pictures and travel shows. What am I getting away from? What am I trying to find?

Some people say that they travel to "find" themselves. I think it's a stupid

term. I wonder how I could ever be lost from myself. If I don't already have it in me, whatever it is I'm looking for, how will I find it somewhere else? Maybe that's why I needed to spend so much time alone on this vacation. I had to be by myself in order to find myself. I may as well have locked myself in a room at home to do that.

But being in Europe, I had a nicer view.

My mother's voice rang loud and clear: "It's time to grow up." Yes, and become frantically boring. That was my worst fear.

I could hear the music from the bars all the way up the hill and I wondered if Kyle and Helena were dancing. They were playing a lot of familiar songs, mostly by American bands. Lucky for Helena; I don't think she could dance to a foreign beat.

I picked up a booklet from the hotel lobby. It described various things to see and do throughout the Greek islands. There is one island, Karpathos, where the village of Olymbos is almost entirely populated with women. It is a matriarchy, all the businesses are owned by women, and they make all the decisions. Most of the men from the village have gone abroad to find work and send half their wages back home. They only visit their wives and families once a year. The traditional dress that the women wear is famous for its medallion necklaces.

"Hey, let's go see this place," I said, showing Helena and Kyle the booklet.

"Are you sure you don't want to go see Lesbos first?" smirked Kyle. "Naw,

it sounds boring." Helena agreed.

"I wouldn't get off on it," explained Kyle.

I went to the market to buy some souvenirs for my parents. Helena already had a suitcase bursting with knick-knacks. I felt negligent in my duty to get things for my family. I had already bought handmade sandals for my mother (we have the same sized feet) and a belt with a silver buckle for my father. My parents told me not to buy anything too expensive, since I (translation: they) would only have to pay duty on it when I came back to Canada. Helena said a rule of thumb when buying gifts was to buy things that I myself liked, in case the receiver didn't like them. Then I would get to keep them.

For myself, I had already bought a wallet, and a couple of picture books. Kyle and Helena walked around with matching t-shirts emblazoned with sayings like: SCORE: Ouzo 12 Me 0. She'd bought a few bits of jewellery from the local merchants, but doubted their value.

"Oh well, they're just for fun," she said and smiled.

I walked into town past the stall of Greek men calling out to me: "Hey Miss! You come from America?" At first I thought this was a pick-up line, but they were only trying to sell me something. In a strange way, I felt disappointed. They sounded so friendly. I found that the merchants could tell where the English-speaking tourists were from by their footwear. The British wore almost formal, leather or canvas shoes; the Americans (North Americans) wore sneakers; and the

Skipppies (Aussies and Kiwis) wore jandles or what the Americans called flip flops. At least people didn't hop down the street like kangaroos behind me in order to get me to come into their store.

I walked by a stall full of glinty, gaudy beads; a display which I had walked past many times before. This time I stopped. Worry beads. I had only seen men using them in the street, sitting at tables in restaurants, pausing slowly in a shaded doorway; moving the tiny beads back and forth along a chain with a thumb and forefinger, while the rest of the hand held the remainder of the beads. They'd be a unique gift even if my parents wouldn't use them. They were pretty too.

I chose a glassy green pair for my mother, peacock blue for my father. I paused deciding on one for myself. Finally, I chose a chain of deep red beads that sank into the colour of the new blouse I had just bought.

Wandering through the streets, taking pictures, not of people, but landscapes: Houses, ships, birds, water, fish dead in the market, floral bouquets decorating a doorway, a black dog running from a restaurant, stone streets, a pail of whitewash.

One morning, the three of us got up early to catch a boat for a day-trip to Delos. Kyle said that he had heard there were wonderful ruins there.

"Wonderful ruins," smirked Helena. She put on a very large hat to block out

the sun, but also wore her bathing suit. I wondered how she was going to wrestle such an enormous hat back home. She twirled her sunglasses while we motored over to the next island.

There were several other people coming over with us, mostly in couples, but no one was really mingling since it was only a day trip and we'd probably never see each other again. The boat crew had organized our day: First, to visit an archaeological dig site before it got too hot; then a picnic barbecue back on the boat. The rest of the afternoon there were games planned or we could explore the island at our leisure.

Helena didn't last long at the site. She kept complaining that she was getting pebbles in her sandals. Kyle made a joke saying that she'd be in trouble if Bam-Bam showed up. Only he laughed.

"I guess she's upset that nobody here takes Mastercard," said Kyle. He explained to me about the myth of Narcissus and how he was to have been reincarnated on Mykonos and that's why Helena liked it so much better there.

"Narcissus and Helen of Troy," I said. "Who can beat that?"

"Not even Paris and all his designer shops," replied Kyle. "But this isle of Delos is the legendary birthplace of Apollo and his twin sister Artemis, and one of the great spiritual centres of the ancient world." He stopped and laughed. "I got that one out of the *Let's Go* guidebook."

"Really? You sounded impressive!"

He smiled and put his arm around my shoulders and gave me a mock tour

of Delos' ancient ruins.

"You're much more fun than Helena," he said.

Helena didn't eat much lunch. She didn't like the food we were served. The captain tripped as he came over to offer her a capful of ouzo.

"It's just water," he said. But she wasn't so stupid to believe it was water and refused it.

"You can get arrested for drunk boat-driving in my country," she told him.

"Shit--squid!" She pinched each piece by the tentacle and threw it away into the ocean. "Can't we get something to eat that's not fattening?" Kyle offered her the fruit from his dessert, since that was all she was willing to eat. "It's the only thing I can sort of recognize," she said.

Kyle said to her: "Why'd you do that? Carly and I would've eaten it. Don't eat if you want to lose weight. Christ, what a waste." I almost expected him to call her a silly girl and tell her she deserved a spanking.

After we finished eating, Kyle turned to me and said, "Ready to go?"

"Where?"

"The rest of the island. We have until three o'clock. May as well see what we can see."

Most of the others in our group decided to play volleyball by the boat. A few went back to study the ruins. Kyle and I decided to go for a swim. There was no one else around. I felt free to be myself and didn't care what Kyle

thought. And he enjoyed my new attitude. We laughed all afternoon.

Three weeks ago when we missed a train in Italy, we took the opportunity to take a road trip along the coast. It was a beautiful dry and sunny day. We pulled up in our rented car to a restaurant with a view of the deep blue sea. We had been driving along the coastline, but hadn't been able to get close to the water. We'd been warned that the sea was too polluted to even stick our feet in. But after driving all those miles, the sea seemed harmless and beckoning. The restaurant was the colour of a sandy-peach and the grass was dry. The beach was covered with jagged stones, too rough for us to walk on. Like the wolf who couldn't get the sour grapes, the three of us agreed that none of us really wanted to walk out to the water anyway. Instead, I said I was happy just to stop for a few moments. I went inside the restaurant to use the washroom and to buy a bottle of pop. I chatted with the cashier for awhile and helped him practise his English. When I came back outside, the car was shaking. I had to wait until it stopped before I let my presence be known. Kyle got out of the car and smoothed down his hair. Then he slid into the driver's seat and turned on the engine. Helena crawled over the seat to sit up front with Kyle and didn't look back at me once. I know that she knew I saw, but wasn't going to acknowledge it.

The sea was kissing the sky. 'It's time to shed the old to make room for the new, to be clean enough, light enough to be able to take on what's coming. I've had enough of the shit I've been letting myself feel. It's about time I moved on,' I thought. It didn't seem out of the ordinary. Kyle barely blinked as I threw my

bathing suit back on the beach.

"I couldn't do this back home!" I screamed and laughed at the same time.

"Of course not, you'd get arrested," Kyle teased as he snapped his towel in my direction. He peeled off his t-shirt and shorts and dug into his knapsack. I was too busy spinning on the beach to care about what he was doing. I opened my eyes when I heard a clicking sound.

Kyle took the camera away from his eye. "Don't worry," he said. "There isn't any film in it."

"No?"

"No. I wouldn't do anything without your permission."

"Then what are you doing?"

"Pretending. Come on. Pose for me."

I put one hand on my hip and piled my hair on top of my head with the other. I pouted like Brigitte Bardot.

"Meow," said Kyle. I laughed at him and walked towards the sea, not giving a shit about what he thought.

I could hear Kyle call out to me as I sank deeper into the water. He was laughing and I didn't really care. I ignored him. Maybe I was a little bit annoyed, but that was overruled by the feeling of gratification that Kyle was with me while he and Helena were having problems. There was a certain power in winning a prize that you didn't want to keep. You know, I really did want Kyle to like me, but he wouldn't be able to do that ever, and I'm not good at pretending. Too tired to

try to impress. I've got other things to do. But Helena doesn't. And Helena-- Helena is very good at pretending.

And the sea was warm. I wanted to walk to the water. I lay on my back and floated on top of the ocean. It was worth a walk over the jagged stones.

"I'll have a hard time returning home," I sighed as I returned to the beach and lay face-down on my towel. "I'll have to be normal."

"Just think of all the adventures you have left to live," said Kyle. "You're still young. You'll probably come back to Greece one day. Maybe for your honeymoon."

I looked at Kyle vacantly as he cooed all these promises. I watched him look at my body. Devourer. So what. His stare didn't bother me any more.

Kyle touched my leg. "It's the first time we've had the chance to be alone," he said.

I froze for a moment, but I couldn't let him ruin my confidence. I pushed away his hand. Fuck you, Kyle. But I had to smile. Not to please him, but to laugh at him. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep.

All of a sudden, he was on top of me.

"Get off!" I shouted.

"Shut up," he said. I imagined his breath as a cool wind on the back of my neck. I did not want to be here.

"You're not a very nice girl," he told me. "You fucking tease."

"So? Don't you have any self-control?"

He pulled my hair and head back, then pushed my face down, into the sand. He rubbed against the small of my back. I felt so cold.

He grabbed my fists and held them to the ground with one hand. He bit into my shoulder and growled, "How do you like it?" My mouth was full of sand; I could only spit.

"You never really know, do you Carly?"

I tried to roll my body to prevent myself from suffocating. "Let go! Turn me over!" I demanded. "Can't you even look me in the face, Kyle?"

He stopped and stood up, pulling his shorts over his erection. He walked into the ocean. After a few moments, he came back to the beach, put on his t-shirt and gathered his things. He threw my bathing suit at me. It hit the back of my thighs, sandy, cold and wet. I climbed into it, shivering, silent.

Nothing happened, I told myself, shaking. Nothing happened.

"Would you like some more wine, Carly?" Kyle offered to pour me another glass.

"Yes, please," and I held up my glass.

Helena lay back in her chair and laughed. "Look at that sunburn. Gotta make sure I put some cream on your back, baby," she remarked to Kyle.

"Excuse me," I said. "I'll be right back."

"Oh, I'll go with you," offered Helena. We walked together to the washrooms at the back of the restaurant.

"Too bad Kristos couldn't join us, after buying us this dinner, after letting us stay here, in fact," I said.

"I know, he's too busy. It's a good thing Kyle has friends."

I brushed my hair. Helena offered me her lipstick.

"It'll look really good on you. Your face is so tanned."

I smoothed the crayon across my lips, then rubbed my lips together to get even colour. Helena beamed. I smiled till my cheeks hurt.

At night I sat out on the patio with a blanket wrapped around me. I watched the lights of a boat flicker on and off as it glided into the harbour. Faintly, I could hear music coming from the boat. It was probably a party cruise and everyone was having a grand time.

It was morning.

Kyle was out with Kristos.

Helena sat on her bed, brushing her hair.

"Hel."

Her stone blue eyes scanned my face and turned into a wall.

"I'm not in the mood, Carly," she said.

"Hel-- It's--"

"Don't Carly." More brush-strokes.

I opened my mouth to say something, anything. I wanted to stop the

silence, but I saw a dark shadow pass over Helena's face.

"I don't know you any more Carly." She hid her face.

I couldn't move.

"I don't want to know," she shouted. "I don't want to know." Lie to me. Lie to me. That's all I could hear.

It was a hot night. No wind at all. As I was getting ready for bed, I got up to open my window so I wouldn't feel locked in. I only opened it a crack.

"What happened?" I heard Helena ask Kyle.

"Nothing. I just scared her a bit. She took off all her clothes, can you believe it? The little bitch."

"What? What do you mean?"

"I'd watch your back if I were you." He paused. "I took some pictures if you need proof."

"Why do you want pictures of her? All you had to do was rough her up a bit. Just scare her a little. I didn't want any proof. Christ, I'm tired of her giving me grief."

"With friends like you..."

"Cut it. How else were we to make the point? She's not the type you can tell straight to her face. She'd make me feel guilty. Why couldn't she just take the hint?"

"Hey, it was your idea to get rid of her. I didn't have to do it."

"You just scared her, right? That's all you did."

"I had to get a little rough because she liked it."

"That's just great. I hope she didn't like it too much."

"Don't worry. She was scared."

I shut the window, but couldn't keep the voices out of my head.

We left the island the next day.

You drift for as long as you can. Now I'm just drifting in another direction. It was still quite warm as we returned to Athens. Surprising, I thought, since it's common to have chilly nights in most European cities, even during the hottest months. I had been looking forward to a break in the day's heat.

To make matters worse the ferry was overbooked, despite the safety laws. I was surprised that we could get three tickets on short notice, but I don't think anybody was counting the number they were selling. I couldn't believe how loudly they screamed at each other, fighting over seats. A mother wanted to let her feverish little boy sleep across a row of seats. Another family wanted to sit on him.

I rubbed my eyes as I listened to them yell and glanced up to see them throw their angry arms towards each other. The ferry was still far from docking and I was reluctant to get up to try to escape up on deck. I had perspired so much that the bottom of my suit was wet. I was afraid that someone might think that I had peed my pants. Suddenly, Kyle and Helena had announced that they

were making their way back home. They said I could stay, of course, with Kristos. I was more than welcome. I remember seeing the cruel line of hope in their eyes. But I was determined not to do what they wanted and I couldn't really stay with a friend of Kyle's.

Helena and Kyle finished playing a game of cards. They hadn't asked me to join them. Helena shuffled the deck before she put them in the box. I thought that she might one day turn out to be an excellent solitaire player. There was not much else for me to do. I wished that I could fall asleep. Instead, all I could do was lay my head back and try to listen for waves.

She didn't know me. She didn't know Kyle. I didn't know her.

After the card game was over, Kyle and Helena milled around without having much to say. Bored, Kyle dug through his bag and found his sunglasses. He put them on and sat on the floor of the ferry. He asked Helena for a paper cup. After she passed one to him, he threw a few silver coins into it and began rolling his head back and forth, mouth slightly open and rattled the coins in the cup.

Helena laughed, her voice like a bell. "Don't be an ass," she said, but it was hard for her to conceal her amusement.

Kyle shook the cup a few more times for effect, then got up and snuggled close to Helena. "I'm glad I could make you smile."

I dreamed about a princess and her best friend, who used the royal pass

to get into and bomb the fashion runways of Paris. They were bound to make the headlines this time, and the princess would again be in trouble with her family, the best friend would be exiled from the kingdom, but it wouldn't matter, because they didn't want to live there. The princess had just dumped her fiancé, a suitable marriage, simply because it was required of her and she found that to be very boring.

After the bomb and rescue, the princess and her best friend took the models out for drinks (they made sure they were unharmed in the bombing) at Les Deux Magots. With the models, they posed for famous photographers and were told that they were all beautiful.

The nurse and the fool were both present at the ceremonies in which the princess placed her crown upon her friend's head. Romeo was lost and that was a good thing, because then Juliet had the time to come to the coronation too.

At the port, a driver from the hotel was waiting for us with a smile and an open trunk. But he was no porter and we had to heave our heavy bags into the car ourselves.

"Without your love and support we wouldn't've been able to make this trip," Kyle sarcastically toasted the driver, Mike. Kyle slammed the trunk closed. We had met Mike when we had first arrived in Athens a couple of weeks ago, and he had recommended his employer's hotel to us. The hotel he worked for catered to English-speaking tourists, so they need not ever do without the comforts of

home. Strangely enough, it was like seeing an old friend again when he met us at the port. A familiar face in the crowd.

The drive to our hotel would have been fairly short if it were not for the always incredible Athens traffic. So we sat in the parking lot for the next half hour, just waiting to move. It was a very quiet wait. We were all tired and I think we were afraid that if anyone spoke it would only turn into an argument. Not only did we not have the energy, but we also had an unwilling audience. Only the music from the car radio spoke with its scratchy voice in the darkness.

Across the street from our hotel was one of those mini-shrines that forest many of the roadsides in Greece. When someone dies in a car accident in Greece, the family erects a small shrine to commemorate the place and to warn other travellers of the danger. It is also traditional to have a portrait of the person who died, as well as a saint, a lit candle, some food and a jar of wine encased in the shrine. Mike said he heard two versions for the reason to enclose food and wine: 1) for religious purposes--to feed the saint; and 2) to sustain fellow travellers if they are in need of sustenance. Either way, it's meant only as a token.

As I was photographing some of these objects, Mike told me about an American tourist who tried to get drunk by drinking the wine from a bunch of roadside shrines. Except that someone had decided to play a joke and pissed in some of the bottles. The tourist didn't know the difference. Or so I was told.

Mike offered to take a picture of me in front of one of those shrines. I

declined politely. I didn't want to be an object in the picture.

Mike suggested we stay at the hotel for dinner, since we were tired from the six hour ferry ride together. The food wasn't too bad, he said, and you don't have to walk to get it.

When each of us had a drink in hand, we went to an empty table on the patio. It was easy to find one, since we were only the second party out there. The other occupied table contained two very drunk men.

One of the men was tall, a bit thin, and dressed in blue. The other looked older than the first, shorter and had a small mustache. They both laughed, holding onto each other, as we made our entrance. Kyle gave them a look that let everyone know that he was not at all impressed. He chose a table a good distance away from them and began to look at the menu.

"Hey, where are you chaps from?" a loud voice queried.

"Excuse me?" I answered.

"Where are you from?" the mustached man asked again.

"Canada."

"Ooooo, Canada!" he squealed using what sounded like a bad imitation of a snooty English accent. The other man was bent over in laughter.

"Where are you from?" the man called again. But Kyle and Helena ignored him and I picked up my menu. I noticed that the waitress was already walking to our table.

"Go ahead and order first. I haven't decided yet," I said.

"If only you'd look at the menu, you might have some idea," commented Kyle.

"Hey! Hey, dearie! That bird is from Australia!" the man with the mustache shouted.

"No, Canada," I tried to correct him. I heard Kyle sigh impatiently.

"Australia, Australia! A fine, fine country!" he sang.

"Are you ready to order?" asked the waitress.

"A couple of souvlaki pitas for me," said Kyle. "And one more for the lady," he said as he passed up their menus.

"I'll have a serving of tzaziki, please," I said. "With bread," I added. The waitress wandered off with our orders written neatly on some paper. She too had been imported for the English-speaking tourists. Or had had some very good English lessons.

I saw Mike at the bar after the waitress left. Waving, Kyle called for him to join us. Mike slid off his stool, took a sip of his drink and walked over.

"Cheers, mates." Mike lifted his glass.

Before he could sit down, Mike was greeted with the cheery, "Where are you from? She's from Australia!" Mike simply looked at the men and shook his head. He sat down and loosened his collar on his black uniform.

"Hey, Australia! Australia!"

"Just ignore them, Carly," Helena stared hard in my direction. Nothing was

said. The two men laughed and the sounds of the traffic hummed behind the hotel. We all sipped our drinks until Mike began a new conversation: "So how were the Isles?"

"Great!" Kyle said almost too excitedly. "I really enjoyed seeing the digs, especially at Delos." He still couldn't look at me, but wouldn't give me a chance to speak either. He gave Mike a detailed account of the site.

Helena shifted in her chair. "Well, it was fine for a couple of hours. What else can you do after that? You kick around a few stones and wonder if any ancient, mythological person, maybe gods, have also touched them. Then the mystery wears off and you begin to long for a seat and a drink at The Scandi bar back on Mykonos."

Helena paused for a moment and took a sip of her drink. As she placed the glass back down, a voice called from behind her, "You're right! You're absolutely right!"

Helena smiled and slightly turned her head to look at the two men. As she looked back to us, the condescending smile remained. Helena let the silence sink for a minute, then abruptly resumed her speech: "I prefer Athens. There's nothing like the sight of the Parthenon when you first drive into the city. You can't take your eyes off it," Helena said sucking in her breath. "The best thing about Athens is that you can spend a day getting your archaeological urges out of your system with the Acropolis and then return to modern civilization and still have other things to do " Helena picked up her drink and brought the glass up to her lips.

"Hey you! Do you want to dance?" the mustached man yelled. I turned my head to look at him.

"Don't give them an audience. Ignore them," insisted Kyle. Before I could turn my attention back to the group, I saw the thin man with his head down on the table. He appeared to be sleeping, except that his back was shaking. What was their joke now?

"Ha! Big, big plans! Why do you bother?" the mustached man shouted at us. "You could be dead tomorrow." There was a pause before his thin friend seemed to giggle. I tried to laugh, like I had so many times on this trip, but it stopped short of a smile. The thin man raised his head and looked at me, his eyes red, tears glistening on his face.

"I mean," said the mustached man, slightly rising out of his seat, "that everything must stop. Say no. Face up to Fortune's Mess."

"What bull-shit. Isn't there a law against this?" Helena said and quickly took a sip.

"Christ," breathed Kyle and shook his head. I looked at my hands.

"There, there," I heard the mustached man say to his friend and pat him on the back.

Mike rose out of his seat and strolled over to their table. "C'mon guys, closing time." Mike helped the younger man up, leaning him against his shoulder, and assisted them out.

Helena picked up Kyle's hand, leaned over and gave him a kiss. I kept as

still as possible to avoid being noticed. I even stopped breathing. The only action I made was watching.

When Mike returned to our table he offered to buy us a round of ouzos. Kyle and Helena refused, saying that they'd already had enough to drink. He signalled to the waitress to bring two glasses.

"They flew in a couple of days ago from England to join their friend who was serving his army duty here in Greece," Mike began. "They came to celebrate his 21st birthday. Well, they spent the birthday just looking for the guy. He didn't show up to meet them. They finally got his address after calling home to his parents. When they got to his apartment, they found him hanging from the ceiling."

The drinks were brought to the table and the waitress added, "Your dinner will be here soon."

Mike raised his glass and toasted, "Yassou." He downed his drink in one shot. I took a slow sip of the licorice-tasting drink and thought about possibly staying up and getting drunk myself.

"Christ, I'm not that hungry any more. Kind of spoils your appetite," said Kyle. "Mike, do you want to have our order? On us."

"Sure. Thanks."

Kyle and Helena got up and he put his arm around her shoulders. "What a bloody, awful, evening," I could hear Kyle say as they made their way into the hotel. "This almost spoils the whole trip."

Helena fumbled near the stairs and stooped down to pick up the pack of cards she had just dropped. I suddenly saw Helena and Kyle grow old before my eyes as he put a protective arm around her before he took her out to see the gardens at Warwick.

I simply glanced at their retreating figures and then looked up to see if there was a moon. Yes, but barely. Perspiration ran down my forehead and onto my cheek. I wiped it away with the coolness of my glass. Strange, it wasn't even that hot any more. I sat there, looking up at the sky and listened to the odd song the two men were singing on their way home. At this point I could barely make out the lyrics even though they shouted the words. Perhaps it was the shouting itself that obscured them. You can only make so much noise before you deafen those around you. You could hear in their voices, though, the swaying way they must have been walking, and in the echoes of the dark night, against the bleached walls of the bar, the syncopated rhythm of their shoes on the cracked and ancient pavement.

The next morning Kyle and Helena were gone. I awoke that morning, slightly hung over, after sharing a bottle with Mike. I didn't know how far Kyle and Helena had gone. But I climbed up the small, small hill down the street. I screamed after a departing taxi, not sure if the couple in the backseat was really Kyle and Helena. I didn't scream because I wanted them to come back. In fact, I wanted to throw stones. I screamed because I suddenly had something to say.

It came out black and sticky. Words formed on the stones around me. I outlined them with chalk. They were new words to me, but all of them, I could understand.

I told Helena everything despite the fact she would never hear me.

I've forgiven myself for everything.

I stayed at the hotel for another week. I had to move on, yet there was no place to go. There was a festival near the harbour, brightly lit, with a carousel weaving up and down and around. I walked out to the beach, barefoot in the sand, the diamonds of coloured lights flowed on the azure sea, like a patchwork quilt cresting on the waves. I watched the acrobats and jugglers practice their craft. An old clown looked at me and smiled, showing his teeth.

I finally found a place to live in a suburb of Athens. Not exactly in the centre of the action, but a corner of a room that was mine. In the apartment there were three rooms: one for living, the other two for sleeping. I lived with four other people. The single apartment contained three women and two men. Only one of us, George, was actually Greek. The rest were from all over the world. Silke, from Germany, Stephan was South African, Isabella was from Mexico, and Gillian, Australian. For such a disparate group of people, we got along most of the time. But then, we didn't spend too much time together. Everyone had a life outside the apartment. Except me, at first.

In the living room, there was a large window that looked down on the street. I moved a desk under the window so I could look out onto the street,

which I did for hours, and had something on which to rest my elbows. At first, I took photos of the people walking by, without them seeing me. But soon I stopped taking pictures altogether. If I forget the people and places, so be it. I'm not sure if I am remembering all this correctly. It's all in black and white and I don't want to romanticize it at all. I don't want to record the moment, reconstruct a memory of something destroyed.

In exchange for Greek lessons, I taught a few students English every other morning at a school nearby the apartment. The school was a large room on the third floor of a building in the business district. It was highly disorganized, but nobody seemed to care. Blue paint peeled off the walls. I also worked in the market, hired in case the occasional tourist might need an English-speaking salesperson. The owners of the shop told me that I could expect full-time work in the summer. My Greek was getting pretty good. I made an effort to practise. My eyes began to see in a new alphabet, the symbols turning into sound. First of all, I learned to swear after dealing with the men at the market. They were impressed with my vocabulary, but disappointed that I couldn't hold a conversation.

People kept coming in and out of the apartment. I didn't know anyone very well. Sometimes George had some friends stay over. The only person I saw every day was Gillian. She was a comfort. One day I couldn't find my passport

and some of my belongings were missing.

"Don't worry," said Gillian. "You can get to an embassy easily. If you've got family back in Canada, I'm sure they can verify your identity. So don't worry that you didn't bring your birth certificate. It probably would've been taken too, anyway." She had such a carefree manner that worked for me at the time. After I had calmed down, she went out to work. I decided to wait until the next day before going to the embassy. It was already late in the day and I didn't want to get lost in the dark. I began to wish I'd never left home.

I didn't go outside for several days. Gillian wondered if the phone books were all in Greek, so I wouldn't be able find out where the embassy was. George hadn't been here for a couple of days, so I couldn't ask him if he knew. Nobody else could offer any help. I thought that I must've lost my jobs for sure, or else I would've have gone to one of my employers for help. But I was afraid that they would just trick me if they discovered that I was in trouble.

Being in limbo was not a fun place to be. Some people like it, that is why they become expatriates--they want to put things on hold. But they always have a choice. I felt as if I was running out of choices and I was afraid that I could never go home. Fear grabbed me by the back of the throat and made me choke and cry. What was I doing? I had no idea. The prospect of not being able to control my own actions paralysed me for several days. I was afraid to think of the future. I was afraid to move, to do something wrong. All I could think of was that

I didn't even have an extra passport photo. I think if I had had that, that might have saved me.

I found my passport wedged in a desk drawer. Relief sprinkled over me like rain. I didn't know how it got there. I was so mindless during that time that I could have easily lost it there myself. Finally, I called home. My mother said that everyone was doing fine, that she saw Helena and she said hi. My mother asked how I was enjoying my trip. I wanted to tell her that I was doing great, having the time of my life, but all I could do was blubber and cry. I was almost too busy wiping my nose and trying to hide my emotions from the people swarming around me to hear her tell me to calm down.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked.

"If I knew who I was, I might be able to answer that," I replied. I desperately wanted to go home, but knew people would wonder why I didn't want to stay. Lots of people lived abroad for years and all of them said they loved it. They would wonder why I couldn't manage.

"Don't do anything stupid," was my mother's sound advice before she hung up the phone. I stood in the post office for awhile with the receiver still up against my ear. Then I slowly hung up the phone and put away my address book. I saw the next person in line wipe off the phone receiver before she used it. She was a young woman, all alone, obviously not from around here. She could survive. Maybe she knew her homelessness was only temporary.

Eventually I was asked to leave the apartment. I had very little money left and I wasn't working, so I couldn't cover the rent. Gillian told me about a family who was willing to give free room and board in exchange for a live-in nanny who could give English lessons. She said she considered taking the job, but the father said that he wanted someone with an American accent. So I swallowed my pride, lied about my nationality, and went. I knew there wasn't really any difference and they would never know.

I stayed with the family for almost a year. There were five kids, almost grown, but they still kept me busy. I saved up a bit of money and also was re-hired at the market. I sort of freelance now, both in teaching and through the various shops--whoever offers and can pay me the highest price. Gillian and I share a flat above the restaurant where she works. Things are pretty good. I still haven't discovered why I came here or why I stay here. Sometimes I think I still am afraid to admit defeat and go home. What would I say? I could easily spread out all my developed photographs and point to all the places I had been. How would I live? I don't have a life back there any more.

I didn't expect it would happen. But I received an invitation to Helena's wedding. She must have got my address through Adam. I wasn't asked to be in the wedding party or anything--that didn't surprise me. She had included a

short note saying that she knew it was far for me to come, but if I could, it would mean so much to the both of them, since I was there when they met. I looked between the lines to search for any trace of guilt on their part.

I examined the envelope. I looked at my name largely scrawled in Helena's handwriting, underneath a huge blue stamp. My name was still my name. I still existed outside of Greece, even though it was in the memory of those who hadn't seen me in over a year. I could have died and many of them would probably not even know.

I could imagine myself getting up and walking past the head table, grabbing the microphone and telling everyone about our trip to Europe, how Helena and Kyle had met, and about what had happened.

I wondered if Adam would be there. He might, with his wife. I get the occasional card from him since he returned home. He talks about coming back, but can't seem to get around to doing it.

Helena added in her note: "We used to be so close. I'd hate to lose touch. Please write to me some time."

So I took out a pen and paper from my desk and wrote out my apologies, saying that I was sorry, I would not be able to attend the wedding.

"I know women like Helena," said Gillian as I cut her hair, razor-short.

"We're all like that," I replied, black line rising.

Daddy's Girl

'The bastard's going away today! Hurray! Hurray!' I sing very loudly inside my head. Furiously, I pace up and down the grey corridors while my mother sits in the waiting room, dolled up in a colourful flowered dress. We were driven in today with my father. He is now exchanging his clothes and personal belongings for an institutional uniform.

The guards kept him hand-cuffed during the entire ride, even though the car doors automatically locked and despite his insistence that he'd never hurt his family. "What's the point of the cuffs?" he had asked. The guards said nothing as they shoved him into the car. I remarked that the cuffs were probably prison procedure.

"Don't you ever say that goddamned word to me," he shouted. "You're not even supposed to know what it means."

'Yeah, but I do know what it means, you bastard,' I think as I continue up the hall, back towards the waiting room. 'I know what it means and I'm in one right now because of you.'

I hear a chair scrape the floor of the waiting room and assume that mother has gotten up because something is going on. Instead of picking up the pace of my walk, I slow down. I don't give a damn what is going on in this place.

Inside the room I see my mother embracing my father, kissing him hard on the mouth. I wonder how people can do that without cutting their lips on each others' teeth. My father's hands are chained in front of him, so he can't hug her back. Two guards flank this flock of geeks.

"Well, there she is," my father slowly drawls when he opens his eyes and sees me. "Where the hell did you go? This is no place for an upstanding young lady like yourself to be wandering about." I say nothing--only stare at his old and tired face. Mother starts to cry.

"Aw, shuddup. Who're you crying for? Me or you?" he grumbles. "C'mon--Let's sit down. I'm tired." My mother and father sit across from each other at a table in the centre of the room. The guards move back to lean against a wall. One guard takes out a package of cigarettes and passes one of them to the other guard. I remain standing in the doorway.

"I don't suppose they'll be offering us any," says my father. "Did you bring some smokes?" he asks mother.

She shakes her head. "They made me leave them at the front desk."

Father leans close to mother and whispers, "Did they check her out? Eh?" He points his eyes in my direction. "Did you think of passing them on to her?"

I am sure the guards can hear him, because I certainly could. Maybe that's because I've got good ears and I'm used to listening for every little sound. But I get bored with their arguments and start to check for cracks in the doorframe.

I turn my eyes to look at my father's face. As soon as I see it, I look away.

He didn't bother shaving today, and his small, black eyes glitter back at me from inside his sunken face. I imagine that he is grinning now, at me, at my cowardice. But when I look back up his head is bent low, as if he were concentrating intently on folding his hands and learning how to pray. Mother rubs the new green material on his uniformed back.

"What the hell," he says. "Goddamn injustice system."

"Sssshhh, honey," my mother draws circles on his back. He mumbles something and mother bends down to whisper in his ear.

He pinches the bit of bone, the part in between his eyes. "You still believe that I was set-up by some bastard, don't you?" he sighs. "You still believe me."

"The lawyer said he'll try to appeal again," Mother smiles.

"You just don't get it do you?" he grunts and then looks up towards me.

"At least she's smart enough to know that I did it."

Mother sits back quickly and takes her arm away from around him. "Don't you ever say that again."

He laughs: "Hey, I'm joking. I'm only joking." He leans against the back of his chair. "Only having fun with you. I've gotta make some fun for myself in this place." He looks up again to see if I'm looking at him.

"Why don't you come in here and get away from the door. You're making me nervous. I don't like talking to you from across the room."

"I don't want to."

"Why?"

"Are you going to kill me if I don't?"

"I might," he says and quickly turns in his seat. "And I might do it too if you *do* come into the room. I haven't decided yet what I'm going to do with you." Mother slaps him on the arm and tells him to shut his mouth. He just looks at her with a grin.

"I told you that I was only having fun. What are you two getting all serious about for Chrissakes? What the hell do you two've got to worry about? Not me, that's for sure." Then he turns to one of the guards and asks him for a glass of water. The guard refuses. He says he can't leave the other guard alone in the room.

"Alone!" father shouts. "Why we'll keep him company, won't we girls? Look what a nice daughter I have for him. Just the right age too."

I shift my weight so that I lean on the other side of the doorframe and continue to check for cracks.

"Now don't get scary," he says and lounges back in his seat. "The only sensible piece of advice I can give you is to keep your legs crossed and your mouth shut. Don't you be going out and telling boys, 'Oh, I want you. I need you,' and then be bringing them home and expecting them to do nothing. Besides, it'll be an awful mess in the morning for your mother to clean up." He tries as best as he can with cuffs on to pick his teeth with a long fingernail. Then he sucks the remnant back and it whistles through his teeth.

I can only think how much I hate myself for looking like him. "Daddy's girl"

is what all the lady-relatives used to call me. "You take after your father," they used to say. I bet nowadays they're hoping that it's only in looks.

Quickly, I turn out of the room and continue my walk up and down the hall. I keep passing the open door but I never look in. Great God, I realize, we have to go to the church again tonight.

Daddy's little girl, I sing softly to myself. Do all girls want to marry their Daddies when they're little?

They always say that he was a normal man, a family man, a generous man.

Mother starts to cry again when we're told to leave the penitentiary. Even one of the guards tells her to shut up.

"C'mon," I say from the hall. "We've got to go home so you can change out of that dress. You don't want them to think that we had a party today, do you?" I look in to see if she's coming.

"That's my girl," father grins. He sits very still with his braceleted hands folded in his lap. He looks at the guards. "Five more minutes guys? Five less that you'll have to put up with me." The older one nods his OK.

He and mother sit with her arms wrapped around him for a long time. I've returned to my spot at the door. What else can I do but watch?

Mother sniffs and runs her hands through Father's hair. "I thought you didn't want to talk about it Joe."

Father unrolls his body from its balled-up position. His face is all red. He

rubs his hands over mother's flowered thighs. He whispers, "Open."

Mother shoves his hands away and says, "Forget it, Joe. They're not going to treat you like a teenage boy."

"There are guys in here that are worse than me," he says softly. "They won't be afraid of me."

"Make them afraid," says mother. She squints her eyes at him. "It's always worked with me."

Mother wears white pearls with her black dress to go to the memorial mass at the Catholic church. The family asked for a mass to be held in Bill's name to commemorate Bill's death. As far as I know, she's never been to church, but about a month before The Day, she sneaked into the church after a Sunday service and grabbed on of their weekly bulletins. That's how she found out the time of the mass. She claims to have been a Catholic once, but I'm never really sure about what my mother tells me.

We shouldn't show defeat, she says. Always put on a good front and the rest will follow. Looking into the mirror, she smears on her lipstick. I watch her prepare, since I've been ready for an hour. I've put on a flowered dress, similar to the one that Mom wore to the visit today, but darker, gloomier. God, maybe someone'll mistake us for twins.

As if she can read my mind, mother laughs. "Do you want to know what's really funny?" she giggles. "I had those damn cigarettes with me the whole time.

I finally lied to him and got away with it. It's a new start for me, kiddo."

She turns away from the mirror to look at me, "Do you think I should cut my hair short?" and turns back to finish her make-up -- a quick stroke of powder under the eyes.

"If you want," I answer.

"Maybe you should cut yours too."

"Mine's already short."

"Shorter."

"No. I don't think so."

"Why not? It's time for a change!"

"I don't want to look like a guy. I look like one enough already."

"Then grow it long for all I care!" she snaps at me. She fiddles through her make-up bag and sighs, "Oh dear," and laughs. I wonder if she's drunk, because she only laughs when she's drunk.

"O.K. let's go," she says as she makes some final primps on her hair.

"Don't forget the cigarettes."

It's very quiet at the service, and I still think that we really shouldn't be here. Mother said it was nonsense when I first told her that we should just stay home. She said that he was our friend too, and that Dad got all the blame. It wasn't really his fault, she said. "Remember that. They were friends. They used to go out together all the time. I was a bridesmaid at his wedding."

Still, people look at me; I look at them; they quickly look away. I wonder what they see. I sit alone in the whole row of chairs, while everyone else crowds to the front. I don't sit at the back because I'm ashamed. I sit in the back in case someone brings out pictures of the funeral. I've heard of that happening. Some people even take pictures of the corpse during visitation. I've never seen a dead body and I don't want to start now.

"Just awhile longer," mother whispers in my ear when she comes back from the washroom. She goes back to her seat, third row from the front. She sits up very straight and peers over the hat of the lady sitting in front of her.

"Asinine," she says.

A few people at the front of the room are getting up and making speeches. I don't know what they're saying, because I don't really care to listen. I just sit and swing my legs back and forth, trying not to kick the seat in front of me.

Suddenly my mother gets up, runs to the front, and starts to shake hands with all the people sitting in the front row. She extends her white gloved hands, grabs theirs and says, "Sorry, sorry" to each one of them. Then she jogs down the aisle and hisses to me, "Let's go."

I tell her, "But your mascara's running. Don't you want to go to the washroom first to fix it?" She quickly takes out a tube of lipstick and applies it to her cheeks. She takes off one glove and rubs the lipstick around and around. Then she takes the tube and smears the make-up in one big line, across her lips.

"No. Let's go. I look okay."

"He did it. You know he did it, don't you?" I ask her while driving home. She doesn't answer me right away. She keeps her eyes on the road, her hands on the wheel, and only blinks a couple of times while she thinks.

"It doesn't really matter any more," she finally replies. She drops me off at home, tells me to be a good girl and that she'll be back later tonight. I know not to even bother to ask her where she's going.

I unlock the front door and go straight to my mom's bedroom to get a cigarette. I open up a new pack, taken from the carton stuffed in the back of her closet. The plastic wrap gets thrown in the bathroom garbage and I look for some matches in the kitchen. I find some, behind the knives and forks in the cutlery drawer, among old, half-burned birthday candles. I light the cigarette and watch the flame burn itself out. It doesn't hurt my fingers much any more. Then I throw the rest of the pack of cigs on the kitchen counter. It doesn't matter where I leave them. Mother always leaves half-finished packs all over the house. She won't notice this new one.

The news says my father used a gun. Where would he have gotten a gun? I keep imagining a knife. That's probably because I would use a knife. I've had a blade of my own since I was six years old. Once, when I was in Grade 4, I got mad at another girl in my class. I put my jackknife in the pocket of my dress and showed it around, saying I could kill her if I wanted to. I had the power. Nobody

was afraid. I wasn't mad at them. It wasn't a big deal.

Even though I was angry enough to bring the knife, I didn't want to kill her. So I folded up the blade and put it back in my pocket, hoping that my teachers and my parents wouldn't find out what I had thought.

They say that my father took a gun and shot his best friend from across the room. Some people said it was an accident; some people said he had been drinking; others say he committed cold-blooded murder. There wasn't a motive, or at least an obvious one. There were suggestions about my mother; some people want to find some blame in her, as if my father couldn't kill somebody all by himself.

I imagine a blood red knife dripping. My father holding it high over his head; his victim dying at his feet. I imagine murder as something intimate, secret, the reason only known between the two.

My father says he found his friend dead in the basement, that he died alone.

I don't believe him.

I search through the bottom of my closet for my blade. It's got to be here somewhere. This is where everything of mine that is lost, is found. There's a collection of rubbery bouncing balls: some brightly coloured like pink bubblegum lipstick; others clear with a rainbow swirl trapped inside; all with chunks bitten out of them by the sidewalk.

I pinch a small pink ball between my fingers and remember when I was young enough to play with these things. I'd slap the ball down as hard as I could on the sidewalk and watch it fly high into the air, hitting the clear blue sky, while I shaded my eyes so I wouldn't look directly into the sun. They say you can safely watch an eclipse through a pair of smoked coke bottles. I wonder if you can do the same to look at the sun on an ordinary day.

The ball always came falling back down.

I remember the smell of spring so sweet, just after the snow had melted, and the smokiness in the air. Maybe someone was fixing up some coke bottles. Probably they were cleaning a chimney.

When spring came, I could go outside and play again, until the rain washed away our chalk hopscotch. Then out came big black umbrellas with huge hooked handles on which I could hang my book bag, and red rubber boots which I'd wear barefoot in order to keep my socks dry. The boots were pretty but not very effective. By the time I got home, my feet would smell like tires and I'd run sockless on the newly cleaned carpet in the living room.

When it rained in the summer, we opened the windows of our house to let the fresh air in. I'd sit on the sill, feeling the cool breeze blow past me, picking away at the old white paint, my knees wet and pressed against the wire screen.

Once my father threw me through the screen and into the rain. The rain came down like shards of glass. I had been bouncing my ball in the house. I know he told me not to once before. He first smacked my head with the flat of

his hand and then gave me a push so hard that I didn't feel myself falling. He threw the ball out after me. It flew and bounced down the street and into the sewer grate. I looked down into the grate, wishing I had a flashlight, thinking about how Danny Tucker had told me that tiny people lived in the bottom of our sewers. Danny threw straws and pennies into the grate as he told me this. I wondered if they had my ball. I hoped that it hadn't smashed any of their houses or destroyed any of their villages.

I believed anything I was told or anything I read back then. All that worrying for nothing.

Danny Tucker, I wonder whatever happened to him. I think his family moved away. Lucky Tucky.

I find the jackknife inside the boot of an old roller skate and open it up. The spring causes the knife to snap open and it scares me. It's like it controls me, forces me to follow its actions. The handle is made of imitation wood; the blade is silver steel. I swish it through the air, cutting out imaginary cob webs then quickly fold it up and put it back in the skate before I cut myself. I tidy up the closet, throw the bag of balls underneath everything else and close the doors. I forget why I wanted to find the knife anyway.

I take a bath before I go to bed. I find one of my mother's razors and shave off all my private hair. I don't want to grow up.

My father.

In my dream, he had his thumb firmly pressed up against the boy's asshole.

"Don't move," he said.

I can see and hear all of this from another room. From behind the wall, I shout "Punch him! Punch him! Punch him!"

I want to go into the kitchen and smash all the dishes, one plate at a time. Or to set the house on fire while the people are still in it -- not to kill them, but just to get rid of them for awhile. Why are all these people in my house? It would all be magic. Nothing would be hurt after it was all over. In fact, it'd be better.

I sleep in class, my head buried in my arms on my desk, wondering if my mother came home last night. I didn't see her this morning. Perhaps she was still sleeping. Doesn't she deserve to sleep in? The teacher calls my name. She's picking on me. I ignore her and turn over to get more comfortable.

When she grabs my arm, I yank it back and thrash in my seat. She leaves me alone. I must've hollered too; some of the kids are wincing at the words I'm thinking.

I want to change my name.

Tomorrow more kids will be pulled out of my class. This seems to coincide with the headlines. I might even be assigned to a different teacher. The social

workers like to fuck up the normal families by putting me in the normal kids' classrooms, saying that I'm harmless. I should help the teachers out, give them a reason to kick me out of school. Expel me.

But no one yells at me any more. They don't push. They would rather just leave me alone. They don't want me to exist. I'm cursed. Don't touch me.

I want to become invisible. But they are the ones making me invisible. I want it to be my decision, under my control.

I go to visit every Saturday afternoon. I used to play in the park on Saturday afternoons. He smiles at me the whole time. A tooth is broken. I can see it even though I don't look at him. If Mother comes, he and she talk, but I can't hear what they say. The only sounds are murmurs and a lightbulb buzzing. Mother drives me there, but doesn't always come in. Sometimes I just go in with the lawyer. The lawyer says it looks better for the appeal if I go to see my Dad. When I hear the chairs scrape against the floor, I know it's time to leave. Mother drops me off at home afterwards and asks me to make supper. The phone is ringing. Tiny bells running far away. I'm too afraid to answer it. I don't want to talk to my father. In case he asks me to do something I don't want to do. The house behind us has put up a Christmas tree early. I fall asleep while I watch the flashing lights turn on and off to the rhythm of a Christmas carol.

My mother buys a calendar and hangs it up with a magnet on the fridge. She numbers the dates in descending order, counting down the days until my father's sentence will be over. She greets me every day with a new number. "Seven thousand, two hundred and fifty-five days until your 'ather gets out of jail," she says today. Every day her pile of travel brochures grows. I know she dreams of escape. She looks at pictures of Cadillac convertibles and palm trees. I just want to get out of this town.

I get out my knife. I nick my nose with the knife, the little bit between the nostrils. I think it's an accident. It happened when I opened it up. I wonder if I can now wear a ring there, like some women do. I will find a loop of silver and pierce it through the flesh. The pain will eventually go away.

Provigo Biography

The old lady stopped me in the aisle of the Provigo to say:

"Could you help me? I've been waiting for the guy to come back." She stretched an arm towards the yellow boxes with the smiling Lassies. I reached up and pulled down a box of dog biscuits, making sure the bottom wasn't crushed.

"How much are they?" she asked.

"Three-forty-five."

"They're not on sale? Look at the price on top of the box. I hope I have enough money. I just came from the barber's to get my hair cut, and I only had toast to give my dog this morning. Thank you very much. I only hope that one day I can help you out, even though I'm 86. I was born in 1908, you know."

We looked at each other for a minute, in a silence that was too tight to breathe in. The old woman stood directly in the middle of the aisle with her cane blocking off one side, a display of cans on the other. She wore a pink and grey hand-knit hat (so I couldn't see her haircut) and coral-coloured plastic glasses. I kept staring at the wart on her nose; although she certainly was not a wicked witch. She was a sweet old lady. The wart looked like she was putting something on it to remove it: It was dry and scaly and brown in colour, like a lump of old chocolate.

"Have you lived in Montreal your whole life?" I asked politely, wondering if I should slowly back away and try to resume my shopping.

"First I lived in St. Henri, then my mother moved to Verdun where I had a ten to ten curfew: If I wasn't home by then I was locked out for the night. Once I came home at five after ten and I asked my mother, Whatsa matter? Don't I live here any more? She told me to go back and sleep where I had come from. My boyfriend lived next door and when I was leaving his house I told him to wait up because I'd soon be coming back to sleep on his sofa. And sure enough, that's where I slept. The next morning, I told my mother I'd had enough. I was 21 years of age and could come home any time I wanted; especially if two of the kids could and the other two couldn't. It wasn't right."

I shifted my weight to my left foot.

"So I left and moved into an apartment on Fort St. below St. Catherine, but I didn't like it there because the landlady kept peering in my window. At the time I was drinking port for my health. Doctor's orders. I wasn't really very ill, but that's what the doctor told me to do. I kept a bottle on the window sill to keep it cold because this place didn't have a refrigerator. So she accused me and asked me why I'd be bringing beer home. I told her it was for my health, that the doctor had told me to drink it and that it was stout for Chrissakes! Did she think that I liked to drink it?"

I wondered why she was telling me all this and if I should really care, but I couldn't come up with an exact answer because she interrupted my thoughts:

"So I told her to consider this my notice, that I didn't like her snooping around my window and I'd go find a place elsewhere. She told me I owed her a week's rent and I told her, What for? A friend offered me a place to stay on De Maisonneuve, near Fort. Then I moved onto Chomedey, then St. Marc and finally back to Fort St."

"All in the same little neighbourhood," I said for it was my neighbourhood too. Somebody passing by might have wondered why I bothered to listen. I sort of felt like a boy scout. Either way, the woman seemed to need to talk to someone and I was in no real hurry.

"Yes. I've stayed in the same place since my husband died five years ago. It was about this time of year when he died, around the Christmas holidays." I felt a tug under my tongue to ask if she had married the guy whose couch she once slept on, but I resisted. I didn't want to interrupt. I felt that I better let her say what she had to say and get on with it. I wasn't in a rush but I didn't want to be stuck here all day either. I felt sorry for her but there was nothing I could do.

"I can't leave the place where my husband died," she continued. "Lee had said to me, Grandnana, Great Grandnana, you almost outlived us all, after their car accident -- broken glass, cut up everywhere. Thank God Lee had his head on his mother's lap, so his face wasn't cut. Can you imagine? Claire said to him, Don't talk to Grandnana like that. But I know that Lee didn't mean it. He's just a little boy. He simply had it on his mind and had to say it." She touched her lower lip with the tips of her fingers and began to turn away from me, but I could still

see her face; I could see her begin to smile.

"My husband was an army man so he'd probably wink at you like that (she winked at me) and call you sweetheart and I wouldn't mind because he was an army man. And when a man friend of mine gave me a kiss on the cheek, he'd nudge me and say, 'See, he gave you a kiss' and then laugh. Oh, he was never jealous." She paused for a moment and adjusted the cane on her arm. I took a step back.

"I'd better get this home to my dog. He's probably getting hungry. Toast doesn't quite fill you up. I just hope some day I can help you out like you've helped me."

"If I need a hand, I'll let you know." I smiled and backed away.

"Goodbye."

"Bye," and I gave her a little wave. She wandered off with the box crooked under one arm and her cane hanging over the other. I turned around to head back down the aisle. The old woman was very small and could no longer stand upright. It crossed my mind briefly that maybe I should make sure she got home OK. But she did say she had a family, didn't she? She might be proud. It was not my place to interfere. I went back to my basket, which I had left on the floor, and to my deciding which size of dish soap I should buy. It was a consideration since I was only going to be in Montreal for a few more months and didn't want to move any unnecessary things. Anything extra would have to be used up or thrown away.

Ladies' Night

He looks like a boy I used to go to school with, I thought as I spun around on the box. Now he's asking me how many fingers I can stick up my snatch.

The D.J. speaks into the mike: "Only five dollars a dance, gentlemen..." The gentlemen root themselves beside small round tables and inside brown vinyl seats. The place looks like an old disco --- sparkling ball overhanging a multi-coloured floor. The Preppy Boys with their clean blond haircuts vocalize their lust.

"Hey baby! Oooooe! I want you to bear my children!" they clap and shout. They think they're being impressive. The others, mostly workers, hide in the shadows, sit still, and drink quietly. Most men come and sit alone.

I slide up to the next table. A guy sits there, all alone, except for his drink. He looks kind of sweaty. Probably dropped in after work. He's still wearing his dirty blue overalls. I say hi. He just stares. I think he's looking at my tits. He didn't say no, so I sit down. I talk for awhile about the music and what he's drinking. He pulls out a bill.

"Only five dollars for your private dancer..." hums the D.J. I pull over my dancing box and climb aboard. He looks at me. Why do they bother coming in here to see a bunch of naked girls dance? They get pissed at us because they get a boner. Washroom's in the back, Sticky Fingers.

"For only five dollars a lovely lady will come right to your table..."

For instant gratification, get a magazine. You can touch the pictures as well as yourself, in private. But you come here and watch us touch ourselves. Fuckers. How do you get off on that?

"The cover charge includes a continuous stage show of our regular ladies, and a weekly guest performer..."

Stage show. A set of three songs: costume on; top off; the genital show.

"Check out the flaps on her," I hear one man whisper to another.

This is a table dance: Stand on a little square box and slowly undress. The costumes are designed to come off easily. First I show him my tits, play with them a bit. It's always kept cold in here so our nibs will be hard.

The men sit and stare with legs slightly apart.

Next, I pull up my dress and show him my snatch. They call it cunt, flaps, lips, labs, box, pussy, twat. Only men are supposed to use these words. We're encouraged to only use doctor's terms around the customers. But it's my body.

"Give the girls a hand! They all work hard for you!"

Jolene still standing naked on stage (except for her white and silver spurred cowboy boots) says, "Yeah, we work real hard!" She pumps her hand frantically in front of her pelvis like a guy jerking off.

I pull my dress back on and head for the dressing room. We use the ladies' washroom since this place isn't frequented by many other ladies.

As I approach the door, I can hear Karen crying in the dressing-room again.

That girl's got lungs. Someone asks if she's all right. Karen screams, "All right? When am I all right?" Karen's got class. Never closes the door on the stall.

"She used my blanket for her genital show!" screeches Karen from the toilet. "You know I hate it when someone takes my blanket! Uh oh...Is that my first song?" We both finish our piss and head out back to work.

"Here's our lovely lady, Karen, gentlemen!"

Karen, tears gone, all smiles, not only shows the tattoos on her ass, but her sex to the gentlemen. She lies on her back and flips her spread legs over her head. Karen has reddish hair and is freckled all over. She has an earring pierced in her labia. I wonder how she wipes herself when she goes to the washroom. I stop my table dance and run up the stage with my dress around my waist and slap Karen's ass to cheer her up. It always helps to kid around when we work. Keeps your mind off the monotony. I run back, and get back on the box. Let's continue, boys. Turn around and let it all fall to the ground. I'm so close to his face that I bet he can get a good whiff of what used to be up there. Take a deep breath buddy.

I pull on my dress again. It's harder to put on than to take off.

The man gets up.

Karen yells from the stage, "Did you have a good time, buddy? Huh? Come back soon! Real soon! We'll party!"

I remember my manners and say "Thanks" to the guy as he walks away.

"One - Two, One - Two," I pant and bend over in time to the music. "God, I hate Jane Fonda," I murmur out loud to myself.

"Cassiel" Rachel shouts. "I'm leaving now!"

"OK." Wiping my brow with one hand, I try to jam my tummy fat back into my body with the other. Holy fuck, I hope I'm not pregnant. I'm still on the Pill. The door slams as Rachel the Roommate leaves for the office. Nice job. But she has to do a hell of a lot more hours than me. Well, someone has to stay with the kids. I imagine Rachel in her nice little suit, a blouse and bow, sitting at her neat little receptionist desk, sweetly greeting all the assholes who come in to see the optometrist. Pay's shit too. He's a private practitioner with no partner. A small, but growing group of clientele, he claims.

Maybe I should go to the doctor and see if I'm preggo. But then I'll have to go off the Pill and my tits'll shrink. I need big boobies, baby. But then again, my tits will be bigger because of the milk. I wonder if some guys'll get turned on by a dancer with a big stomach. Ha! Maybe I'll get to headline that week! But then again, who wants to look at stretch marks?

I laugh aloud and place my hands on my stomach. It's not too big, I hope. My laughter stops. I have to be careful not to wake the children.

At least I know who the father might be, I start to think again. Not like Karen the Killing Queen. She holds the record for abortions out of all the women I know. I wonder if she's bitching about working my dinner shift. She needs her

nights free for her johns. "Love for money" is her slogan. Shouts it there, right on the street. She's not scared of the cops. But she's got no ties, no responsibilities. She just doesn't care.

The telephone rings and with glee I click off Jane Fonda and her leotard strangled group. It's Claude from the club. No, I tell him, I can't work today--it's Rachel's day at work. No, I can't get a sitter. What do you want me to do? Bring them in with me? Make them a part of the act? Claude laughs at that one. He says that he'll see me tonight and hangs up the phone.

I sit on the faded flowered couch and light up a cigarette. I should quit smoking in case I'm pregnant, I think. I trace the old golden pattern on the sofa with a finger and dash out the cigarette.

Fuck, I hope Rachel's not late coming home tonight. I do need the money.

"Where the fuck were you?" Karen screams at me as soon as I enter the club.

"What?" I close the back door.

"Fuckin' Jesus Christ! Son of a bitch!" Karen begins and walks away with a string of other obscenities. She probably mistook me for someone else. I take off my coat and throw it over my old wooden make-up chair. The other girls barely look at me as I get undressed.

"Darling," Claude throws his arms around me, dangerously slobbering his bottle of cold ale on me. Claude feels free to come into the ladies' change room.

"What's the difference?" he says. "I see you naked all the time."

"How are you, darling?" Claude kisses my breast.

"No hickies, Clod." I push away. Maybe I should lie and tell Claude I'm pregnant for sure, and I can't work for him any more because it's bad for the baby.

Looking in the mirror, Jolene fixes her blonde hair. You know she's a fake blonde because her pussy's dark.

"How ya doing, hon?" She squirts spray into her hair and holds the strand up with one hand until it dries.

"Okay."

"That's good."

"Is Karen working a double?"

"I dunno."

"She was supposed to work for me tonight."

"Sherri couldn't make it. She has exams next week and she says she's so-o far behind in her homework."

"Life's rough."

"Oh, I know," Jolene sighed. "It's 'cause her tits are so big and round that Claude lets her off easy."

"Good night?"

"Yeah, not bad. The new D.J.'s playing some decent music. Karen's got some good shit with her tonight. Of course, she's overdone it already. Lots of

guys want a table dance, so you'll pick up some good tips."

"Who's the special this week?"

"Barbarella--the Spanish Inquisitor. Holy Fuck! She's so greased up, I'm surprised her costume doesn't slide off!"

"I've seen her before. She's in good shape though."

"It's not what the assholes are looking at."

"Thanks. That's reassuring."

"You're welcome," smiles Jolene, releasing her hair. She put on her tasselled boots. "You're on for the next set, after me."

"Hey, don't let me hold you back!"

Jolene laughs and skips out. I pull on my g-string and lay out tonight's costume. Jolene sticks with her basic cowgirl outfit every night. I decided for a change that I'd bring a ballerina's costume. I get a kick out of it because Sherri, the university tool, thinks it has always been my secret ambition to be a ballerina and this job and this costume let me play out my fantasy. The body suit is a sheer pink and the skirt, white tulle. I even have point shoes. I put them on, but don't bother to take them off during my show. As Jolene says, that's not what the guys are looking at anyway.

I tie my hair up into a tight bun. My hair needs to be trimmed. Maybe I'll get some red highlights like Sherri to bring out my natural colour. I'll let my hair fall down during my act: The rebel ballerina. Laughing at my reflection, I think I should invest in a pair of glasses to go with this severe hair-style. I could be an

old-fashioned school marm, complete with a ruler. I could spank any naughty boy in the audience.

"What the fuck are you laughing at?" Karen enters completely naked from the washroom. "Are we on a fucking Disneyland ride or what?" Karen props one leg up on the counter and with her fingers, spread eagles her lips. She picks out the toilet paper from her earring.

"You're beautiful, you know that?" Karen shouts at me. She wipes her fingers on her stomach.

"Who needs paper towels, eh Karen?" I respond.

"Fuckin' beautiful! What a goddamn party!" She laughs and sits on the floor. I hear Jolene's second song come on. I hurry to finish getting ready.

"You OK?"

"Excellent! It's the best song ever written!" She gives me the thumbs up sign.

I push through the door and walk through the D.J.'s booth to get to the bar. Jolene crawls naked on the stage, stroking one of her boots between her legs. The music ends, but she doesn't stop. The D.J. waits until she is done.

"Give a big hand to our favourite lady...," the D.J. begins.

"Yeah, I'll give her a big hand so she can finish the job!" shouts a jerk from the back row.

Great, I think. How do I follow that one up? I climb the small case of stairs onto the platform. The music starts. It's Taylor Dayne or Tina Turner. I really

can't hear. All I feel is the beat. I can tell it's a woman's voice. Maybe it's Madonna; I like Madonna. I sway my hips from side to side and then remember that I'm supposed to be a ballerina. I try to do some classical movements, mostly the kind with my legs apart. It's kinda fun, really. Sometimes I can imagine myself right out of this place. In the reflection of one of the stage tiles, I can see myself, and I pretend I'm auditioning for the National ballet, and I'm blowing the rest of the competition away. The muscular, masterful choreographer loudly gives me instructions, which I quickly and flawlessly execute. Claude shouts at me to look up and smile. Up snaps my head. God, I hate to do that. I hate to look at the audience when I'm up here. I don't mind it when I'm off or table dancing. But when I'm on stage, I swear I see my father sitting in the audience.

I think about the day when I won't have to work here any more. Barbarella says: "Honey, you'll only leave when you *can't* work here any more."

When I get home, everybody's asleep. Fuck, I smell like smoke and I'm sticky all over from the spilled booze on my body. I put down the plastic A&P bag that holds my costume. Shit, I have to fucking wash it before tomorrow. Claude liked it so much, he wants me to wear it again and again. Christ, I figure I inhaled so much second-hand smoke tonight that it wouldn't hurt to have one of my own. I light up, sit on the couch and flick on the tv with the remote control. I turn the volume completely off. Rachel wakes up at the slightest little noise. Afraid of

robbers, I guess. Jesus, I'm so tired. I think I'll stay here and sleep on the couch.

A couple of guys bring in their laughing dates. All of them are plenty drunk. They're laughing, laughing. I wish I could refuse to go on. But I stand there naked as they drink and Claude hands the ladies a few helium balloons. I watch the ladies as their boyfriends put their protective arms around them. One of the women glances at me. Her eyes are like glass.

It's another late night at the club. Who am I kidding? It's always a goddamn late night at the club. Despite a few offers of a ride home, even from the new bouncer (I politely decline all of them by saying: "I live way across town"), I call a cab. I don't have enough money for a car, but I take cabs everywhere. It's a new guy who picks me up. Obviously, I've never seen him before. I don't try to make conversation. I just give him my address.

All the girls and I hope to get one of the regular guys to drive us home. We don't have to explain things and we don't get a hassle. Usually, one guy or another goes out of his way to pick us up--I think they hang around our area this time of the night, because they know we're just working people like they are and they appreciate our business. That is, we tip well.

This new guy asks what intersection I live closest to. I tell him my place is not too far away and I can direct him there. Then I can also make sure he takes the shortest route. But he insists on knowing the intersection. So I tell him he

can just drop me off on the corner of King and Walter, hoping, by now, that he has forgotten my address. When he comes to the intersection, he drives right by it.

I tell him to turn around, that he missed the turn. He doesn't say anything. He just keeps on driving. I look at his i.d. tag hung on the back of his seat and try to memorize his name and number in case I get out OK. I'm dressed normally. My costume is in a plastic bag by my feet. If anybody sees me, I won't look like a stripper.

He keeps driving, and I don't know where I am. His name and driver's number are swimming through my head as he stops the car and takes me outside.

Thank God all he wants to do is beat me up. I hope he doesn't give me a black eye. I have a hard time covering those up with make-up and some guys still like to look at faces.

I hitch a ride back with another cabbie. He's a nice guy, but doesn't offer any other help except to take me home for free. I haven't cried yet. I can't cry. I don't know why. I just haven't cried in a long time.

The next night, I tell the other girls at work what happened. I pass on a description, and the driver's name and numbers to them so they'll know not to get into his cab.

It's my day off, so there's plenty of time to do laundry, some cleaning, and

cook a decent supper. I take Jessica and Joey out to the park in the afternoon before I get down to doing some housework. It's such a nice day, the kids deserve to go out. These are the days when I feel like I'm doing OK.

Joey likes to play by himself with his trucks in the sandbox. He doesn't have many friends in this neighbourhood. It'll be better when he's back at school in the fall. None of the kids from around here go to his school.

I sit on the swing, holding Jessica in my lap. My baby. Her goldie locks brush against my cheek as she presses herself tight against me for safety. I rock back and forth slowly so she won't be afraid. Don't worry baby, I think. I won't let you fall.