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I know you are, but what am I?

Stories

Heather Birrell

A Thesis

in

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of

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ABSTRACT

I know you are, but what am I?
Stories

Heather Birrell

This fictional work is a collection of short stories that revolves around characters wrestling with complex personal relationships. Straining to overcome their cynicism and not be merely "clever" about love and friendship, they find themselves caught in self-conscious quests, which, in turn, leave them dizzy with options, scared, and to some extent paralyzed by what they perceive to be ambiguous situations. The stories are set in large Canadian cities, and these settings play an important yet subtle role in the lives of the characters, who struggle with issues of alienation and urban decay.

In memory of my father,
who taught me,
when I couldn't find the words,
to just doodle-doo-doo it.

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I've heard all the melodies
From the blues to rhapsodies
They all come and go, but there's one I know
That'll linger and tease
I found all the blues a pest
Rhapsodies to me are jest
So if you want to please me
Just take this one request

Please play for me that sweet melody
Called doodle-doo-doo
I like the rest but what I like best
Is doodle-doo-doo
Simplest thing, there's nothing much to it
You don't have to sing, you just doodle-doo-doo it
I love it so, wherever I go
I doodle, doo, doodle-doo, doo.

"Doodle-doo-doo"
Music and Lyrics: Art Kassel and Mel Steitzel

But what we can't say, we can't say
And we can't whistle it either.

F.P. Ramsay

Just When I Oughta Say Nix

GENE SAT across from Caroline and the tray of sushi, sixteen smoke-coloured rolls arranged like jewels or fancy paperweights or delicacies, which they were. At least for Caroline. Or this is what Gene liked to believe and she let him. She even let him guide her hand with his fan-fingered one as she fumbled with the chopsticks. She opened and shut the wooden sticks like jaws in front of her face, in the air over the sushi. "Arrgh, snap," she said, because it looked like a finger puppet crocodile. Gene chuckled at her, his teeth suddenly spreading, scattering across his face like lucky dice. And he'd done it again, somehow made her feel as if she was more than the sum of her parts, that somehow, in the end, or at least by dessert, she would come out on top, in the money, ahead of the game. She wished there were some cool and collected way she could talk to him, that there was a way to present her thoughts to him neatly, to arrange them aesthetically and serve them up without the messy mishmash of emotion.

The restaurant was decorated simply, lots of clean lines and too-sharp angles. The tablecloths were white, the placemats red and painstakingly placed.

"Very Japanese," Gene had whispered to her, as they walked in. He was standing now, mumbling excuses or endearments and patting at the pockets of his faded chinos. Caroline watched him walk towards the washrooms, his strides long and casual. She was left to squint into the glare of the tablecloth, where the sushi rolls sat patiently; sixteen multicoloured eyes staring up at her. Arrgh, snap. She leaned down close to them, to their centres, so that they could hear.

"Luck be a lady tonight... I was a Broadway musical star in another life," she told them, in a stage whisper, but they weren't listening, they didn't even blink. "I bet he went to call his wife." One of the California rolls unravelled slightly. This was a sign, she decided. A sign that he was indeed calling his wife. A sign that she should get up and leave and take the crocodile jaws with her or a sign that California rolls were merely, as their name suggested, laid back and West Coastish and liked to unwind. Lately she had been putting more and more faith in signs and past lives, in omens and astrology. It wasn't that she didn't recognize that they were merely a foil for thwarted ambition and what she liked to call directed rationalization, because she did. It was just that --

Gene sat down with a sigh. This was how Caroline described him telepathically to the relaxed California roll when he returned from the bathroom. Gene sighed like no one else she knew, so that, instead of appearing gloomy, he resembled someone who had, after a long hike, shrugged off a sweaty monster of a knapsack. Today, she thought, she would like to shock him out of his ease, to shake him or poke him or push him into a semblance of irritation. She was about to speak when he reached over and picked a piece of lint from her sweater with a delicacy she found heartbreaking, flicking the dusty offender into the space behind his chair. It was these small gestures that surprised her every time, how he could be both cavalier and caring at once, infuse such a small act with such love. She re-transmitted the message, fighting back tears. *Gene sat down with a sigh.* Arrgh, snap.

THE NIGHT Gene and Caroline met she had parted her hair differently. She

remembered because she had to use more than the recommended egg-size amount of hair mousse. She had squished enough of the stuff into the palm of her hand to hatch a whole gaggle of dinosaurs by the time she was finished. But the effect was worth it. Only one wavy tendril escaped from behind the hook of her ear, and her forehead was framed as if by an elegant, if slightly stiff, curtain. She even bought silver eyeshadow, special. They met at a film party, over a punch bowl. She had offered to ladle some of the electric red liquid into his outstretched cup.

It was funny how the place you met a person could shape your relationship, give it colour. Caroline sometimes imagined there was an aura that hovered around spaces over food. It was an aura that shifted and changed as clouds are affected by the bodies of water beneath them. The punch made the air seem charged and dangerous; a red flag to Caroline's bull. She didn't look up at Gene until he was tipping his glass up and over his face, the way one is wont to do with dainty, impractical punch glasses. At first glance, he looked like a clown with a crystal nose; a high class circus performer. When she looked again it was if she was seeing him through a kaleidescope; the light reflecting and refracting through the crystal, bouncing off his round spectacles, tinted by the cranberry-vodka, and imbued with a sort of cheap effervescence by the bubbles of the ginger ale. "Thanks," he said, his eyes fixed on the escaped curl by her cheek. "Yeah," she said, and shoved an hors d'oeuvre in her mouth.

Later, after their host, a tall angular woman in a backless dress and copper bangles, had introduced them, he whistled through his teeth as she walked away.

"Geez, she's got legs up to her armpits...."

Caroline nodded, stuck out her hip as if her body were a sentence that needed punctuation, and smoothed the stray hair into place. "Yeah, but I bet she'd have to run around in the shower to get wet."

She was surprised at how happy she was to have made him laugh. She found her smile, which she had intended to be sardonic, bursting out of itself into goofy grindom. His laugh was one that took her aback, quite literally. It hit her square in the centre of the chest, above the sternum, like something soft and heavy; a large beanbag, or a haggis. It was the kind of laugh that made you want more, made you want to find the funny button and keep pressing. It surrounded you like humidity, or a mother's love.

IT WAS this laugh that held her to him now, that kept her from upending her green tea onto his beige lap, from gathering herself and her chopsticks wordlessly and exiting stage left. Gene was motioning to the waitress, a tall angular woman dressed in a kimono. She turned and strode over to their table with a grace Caroline had tried unsuccessfully to achieve for years as a teenager. Caroline's parents had unfortunately seen fit to enroll her in Highland dancing lessons as a child. Instead of exposing her to the requisite *jetés* and *pliés* popular girls had to master to be considered cool, they had forced her into kilts and black ribboned shoes she learned to lace tightly up her calves. After class she would linger in the hallway to catch a glimpse of the ballet instructor, a tall angular woman with a fluttering voice, fluttering eyelids and fluttering hands. Everything about her was fluttering, in the best sort of way. When she got home, Caroline would practise waving her arms like the branches of a tree in the wind in front of the mirror and straighten her spine in the hopes of adding a millimetre or two to her height.

She pulled back her shoulders, placed her feet squarely on the floor, and rearranged her napkin on her lap.

"There," she said, as if tucking her knees in to bed.

"What's that honey? Do you want something to drink?" Gene reached across the table and lifted her hand to his mouth. She realized he was going to kiss her palm; a gesture she found too intimate for public places. The slow tenderness of it all made her blush. The waitress was staring at the ring on Gene's finger, at Caroline's poppy-coloured cheeks. The line of her gaze made an arrow almost visible in the air; its pointy end aimed at Caroline's guilty homewrecker's heart like the trail left by angry bees on Saturday morning cartoons. She did not refill the water glasses. Caroline was used to this sort of treatment from waitresses; they had a sixth sense when it came to divining infidelity. Usually it didn't bother her too much -- she found it flattering that anyone would even consider her a femme fatale -- but there was something in the way this particular waitress turned her back on the table that she found offensive, not to mention the fact that she had kidnapped the disheveled California roll.

Gene was still holding her hand across the table, his eyes searching, trawling her face for a sign, a ripple of anxiety or anger. It was true that she used to enjoy the recklessness and subterfuge of her affair with Gene more; the way they arranged their meetings in hushed tones over the phone and rendezvoused on dark corners at bus stops, or under street lamps. She'd even bought a trench coat. She thought she was different from all the other women she had met who dated married men.

"IT'S LIKE a game," she had told her sister Yvonne, who called from

Vancouver weekly to check up on her and recommend new grains to add to her diet.

"You're smoking again, aren't you?" Yvonne replied, then put down the phone to hoist her baby to the other hip. "You've got to find a relationship where there isn't so much darn strategy involved."

But that's the part I like, Caroline insisted silently, picturing Yvonne's sandaled feet, the dried flowers hanging on the wall next to the framed photograph of her partner, Gil. She looked around her own apartment. She had painted the walls a glossy eggplant colour when she moved in, in the hopes that the sheen and luxuriance would make her feel more sleek and healthy than she actually was. Instead, the walls made the room seem dim and pretentious, as if they were sneering at Caroline's inexpensive (but decent looking!) bamboo furniture. It was a terrible match, she thought, pushing some books and a pink pom-pommed tennis sock from one of the basket chairs. She wondered if eggplants even grew on the same continent as bamboo. It occurred to her that she didn't even know where bamboo grew.

"Yvonne, does Gil know anything about trees and plants -- ecology stuff, or does he just stick to creatures of the deep?"

"Of course he does. We're all part of the same giant, interconnected *ecosystem* you know."

Gil was a marine biologist; a career path he'd chosen, Caroline believed, simply because sometimes it was easier to become the stuff of school-boy chants than to spend your entire life railing against them. *Gil the fish face.* This is what the kids used to call him, in a sing song, as he floundered on the sidelines of the playground, Yvonne once explained to Caroline, in hushed, empathetic tones. Gil was the sort of man Caroline would never allow

herself to fall in love with; his eyes were too wide. They were frightening, like oceans or trash compactors. Things you could not see to the bottom of.

Once, while visiting Yvonne just after she'd had Cam, Caroline had walked in on the three of them, lying across the bed in folds of fabric and flesh. When Gil turned toward her in the doorway, his eyes were still soft from staring at his son, and Caroline felt as if she was being inundated by the love and liquidity in his gaze. He patted the comforter and gestured for her to come and sit with them on the bed, but she could not move from her spot in the doorway. She was paralyzed. By awe or embarrassment, she still could not say which exactly.

"Care, are you still there?" Yvonne sounded slightly annoyed.

"Uh-huh. Y'know, the other day I was in a café and I overheard the guy at the next table say that the only thing he's allergic to is the mundane... That, and his brother."

"I can tell by your voice you're not getting enough vegetables."

"Uh-huh. Can I speak to Cam, please?" Cam was four months old and perfect, his face a plate of carefully arranged tiny gourmet features, his small body pink and poised for growth.

"I'll put him on."

"Okay, but this is a private conversation, Yvonne... Hi,Cam. Yeah, that sucks. When I come to visit I'll take you out for fries and a malted. We can talk Fisher Price vs. Mattel, you can show me your new teeth, and explain to me how it is you always smell so goddamn good...."

"Caroline, did you use the word damn? I wish you wouldn't, and it sounds like you're chain-smoking; it's practically coming through the holes in the receiver."

It was true. She had been smoking more, the used butts piling up in saucers around her apartment like offerings to the goddess Carcinogenia, that gravelly-voiced, world-weary woman who lurks in café corners. As for her diet -- it had become monochromatic. Today was pale yellow day -- cornflakes, two slices of toast, chips and a stale package of peanuts.

"I'm in control," Caroline said, and stuck her finger into a pile of ashes in a cereal bowl near the phone, drawing sideways figure eights. Infinity.

"Okay," Yvonne replied and paused before adding, "just so long as you're monitoring your self-esteem." Yvonne was always saying stuff like that; she believed hearts could be charted, fine-tuned. And Caroline had once believed she was right, that she could control the shape of her love, squish her heart into the jell-o mold that best suited her mood, so that, at the right moment, it would slide free, solid, quivering, and perfectly shaped.

SHE AND Gene hadn't slept together until after what must have been their fourteenth date. Instead, he picked her up from work and drove her home in his four-door Volvo and they steamed up the windows of the car making out like over-eager teenagers. In between make-out sessions, Gene would show Caroline photos of his wife, Joyce, and tell long convoluted stories that involved either his neurotic dog or famous film sets he had worked on in LA. Caroline would pretend to listen, her breaths coming too quickly, like a starlet on a famous film set, or a neurotic dog. In the pictures, Joyce was always in motion, her hair loose and flying free, her mouth frozen mid-exclamation. She had the kind of face that was described in books as having "planes" and "mysterious shadows". Caroline had an off-centre dimple in her chin, and sometimes, especially lately, dark shadowy crescents under her

eyes.

When she had finally convinced Gene that it would be both more practical and more comfortable to grope at each other without the obstacle of the gear shift -- a clumsy extra phallus that embarrassed them both -- the sex was frantic and graceless. She kept thinking of the slap fights she'd had as a child with her best friend Suzanne. *You fight like a girl.* Without the benefit of older brothers, their school girl tussles had been half-hearted; ineffectual flurries of limp-wristed frustration. Neither of them knew how to throw a punch.

The hotel room they rented was dingy and small, and Caroline was left with the unenviable task of waking Gene in time for him to get back home for supper. But what made Caroline love Gene, finally, was how he slept, his arm slung heavy across her back, his face muscles slack and surrendered. He slept as if he was falling through the air, free form, with no need of a parachute. She would cherish those few moments in late afternoon when, having rushed through the sex part, she could watch him in the fading light of day. For Caroline, sleeping was work. It involved overcoming crowds of thoughts, pushing through them to the other side, and even then, it wasn't long before she'd have to jostle her way to calm again. She imagined that if she had Gene to sleep beside, consistently, at nighttime, his easy slumber might rub off on her. She imagined them entering sleep together.

CAROLINE HAD been leafing through the city's news and entertainment weekly (News or entertainment -- was there much difference, really?) the previous Sunday morning, when she came across an ad in the classified section, under workshops and self-improvement. *Regain confidence!*

Comfort your inner child! Love without insecurity! it exclaimed, and underneath, in large bold type, was a phone number. She picked up the paper and punched the self-esteem numbers quickly into her telephone, then waited while it rang on the other end, an extended electronic heartbeat, one strong, one weak, one strong, one weak.

On the way to the public library where the workshop was to be held, Caroline ran into Jack, one of the many indigents in her neighbourhood who followed his own particular, arrhythmic internal narrative. He was good-looking but slightly cross-eyed, with hair that stuck out like the rays of a grade one sun, and a belt made of Loblaws bags. Caroline, shaken, had apologized, but Jack just shuddered, as if stricken with a sudden and supernatural chill, and handed her a piece of paper, folded crookedly upon itself like a child's fan, or thought Caroline, like a life.

"Tell me," he said, swatting at the air, "what you think."

Sometimes, some mornings, when the sun hung in the sky like something trampled underfoot, dingy and two dimensional, Jack would walk Caroline, jerkily, all the way to New Horizons, the alternative high school where she worked. In the schoolyard, the kids would lower their eyelids like Venetian blinds, angle them so that they could surmise the situations through the slits. They were between the ages of twelve and fifteen and talked a lot about the newest juice bar in town, and how to deal with issues they were having with their parents. Caroline thought they liked her, in a non-commital, egalitarian sort of way. In the classroom, they would blink and blithely call her by her first name, arch their eyebrows only slightly when she suggested a brushstroke, or lectured on colour and form.

Most of them sketched large, abstract egg-like shapes, and sometimes

spirals, then gritted their teeth as they threw colours onto the canvas. One of them, the smallest, Sacha, smiled at her often, and only painted in purple. Sometimes she would stay late to help Caroline rinse brushes. Caroline would stand over the large sinks watching the colours swirl down the drains as Sacha explained to her how little time they had, really, to clean the air, the water and the sky. When Caroline looked up from the swirling she was always surprised at the degree of sadness in Sacha's eyes. It was more textured and stoic than the despair of adolescence; it scared her in a way she could not name. Besides the sadness, there was a passive resistance in Caroline's students that emerged startlingly, in flashes of orange on the canvas, or in unconscious gestures of concentration. It spoke of a wisdom their BMW-driving parents seemed to have bypassed. They didn't get angry. But sometimes, if the barometric pressure had risen, or the planets were not properly aligned, they would raise their voices. *Mi-iss.* Two syllables; the second soaring in thin complaint. "Mi-iss, he's really disturbing me." And she would send them out in the hallway to resolve their differences. To negotiate a settlement.

"WILL THAT be all for you, Mi-iss?" The waitress was back, her hands two white doilies dancing around the edges of the table. *That's Miss Tress to you, honey.* Caroline wondered how Joyce of the free-flowing hair might respond to such uncivil conduct. She mustered all her dignity and looked her accuser in the eye.

"Yes, that's all, but could you bring the leftovers to me in a doggie bag? Please?" The waitress retreated with what Caroline thought to be a modicum of defeat in her long-limbed strides. Gene was smiling, his head tilted slightly

to the side, examining Caroline as if she were a badly executed cubist painting. She thought that Gene would probably respond best if she was direct, if she faced the issue head-on, without wavering. Caroline once believed Gene loved her because he suspected she saw through him, and she did. But she wished that she didn't. More than anything, Caroline wanted to be able to make Gene laugh again, to dazzle him with self-deprecation, to reserve a place for them in the badly patchworked remains of the world.

"Gene," she said, and clicked her chopsticks twice for emphasis before placing them neatly side by side on the white tablecloth, "we have to talk."

Gene flicked his tongue like a salamander, the tip in and outing at the corner of his mouth, then nodded so slowly Caroline could not be sure he wasn't simply stretching his neck muscles. There was a clump of white on his lapel; a starchy corsage of mismanaged rice. He was not couth, Gene, or even that handsome, but he was uninhibited. He was brave. Last month he had surprised her with a weekend away; they had spent two nights in Stratford while his wife visited her mother in Ottawa. The bed and breakfast had dark wood panelling in the dining room, and a large four-poster bed which made Caroline feel both unworthy and pampered at once. On the walls were old playbills in walnut frames, and a small black and white sketch of Anne Hathaway's cottage in the real Stratford in England. Caroline loved the sketch for its tininess and fine scratchy lines and would often study it while Gene was in the bathroom at the end of the well-carpeted hall. On Sunday, Gene rented a tandem bicycle and they rode along the river, stopping to throw the Canada geese balled-up bits of bread. It was on one of these stops that Caroline had asked Gene about Joyce, whether she had minded that he was not with her in Ottawa. Gene had steered the bicycle off the path so that

they could coast down towards the river bank. Caroline found herself pedalling uselessly while gripping the second set of immobilized handlebars. The sun was sinking tiredly, mottling the sky with pink pot-bellied clouds. Gene climbed off the bike and bent to examine a patch of wildflowers growing out of an abandoned garbage can, then turned to look at the river, which was muddy and laced with pop cans.

"Joyce is an independent woman. She can manage on her own." He threw his voice out across the water, skipped it like a flat stone along the shoreline. "Who's Anne Hathaway, anyhow?"

"She was Shakespeare's girlfriend."

"Oh." He turned and walked towards her, a small grey-green goose turd clinging to the hem of his jeans. "I love you Caroline."

"I LOVE you, too," Caroline muttered into her napkin, leaving a plum-coloured lipstick stain in its centre.

"What do you want to talk about, hon'?" Gene leaned in towards her as if tacking into a crosswind. "I'm listening." But Caroline could not believe that he was. What her students did before they began to paint -- their palettes mixed and at the ready, their mouths slightly open like slow motion goldfish -- that was listening. She wondered whether Gene had ever really loved her, or whether he had simply used the mantra to drown out the encroaching din of domesticity. A three syllable rosary of sound; a prayer of fear and forgetting.

WHEN CAROLINE had finally arrived at the library where the workshop was to be held, there was a message on the chalk board in the foyer. *Self-esteem is*

on the 4th floor, it said, in large pale yellow bubble letters. Caroline was reading the message for the third time when she heard a pair of heels clipping across the floor, measured and efficient-sounding. She turned to come face-to-face with a tall, angular woman with a clipboard under one arm and glowing blonde hair.

"Hi," the woman said, and thrust out her hand, "you must be here for the workshop. There's coffee upstairs, just follow me." The way her arms folded into her sides reminded Caroline of an insect, the elbows collapsing neatly against her ribs. Caroline told her she would have to use the ladies' room first.

"Okay -- it's just down the hallway and to your right." The arms came out again; a praying mantis directing traffic.

What was the clipboard for? Maybe it was a simple matter of all the lost souls who had shown up simply locating and retrieving their self-esteem. It could be that it was neatly boxed and filed in a storeroom on the fourth floor and the woman had merely to find their names, then gesture to the stock boy who would hand over a package of all that they had spent days, weeks, years, carefully eroding. But it seemed to Caroline that there would have to be some form of initiation, or presentation of proof -- how else could they insure that each client received the correct box? Getting stuck with someone else's self-esteem might be just as arduous as having none at all. It would probably be best, Caroline decided, if she gave her proof in song, something catchy and lighthearted perhaps. *I'm just a girl who can't say no, I'm in a terrible fix. I always say c'mon let's go, just when I oughta say NIX.* A finishing flourish and a little soft shoe and the insect woman would nod, check off a square on the clipboard sheet and signal to the stock boy,

enunciating clearly. *"Number two-three-oh-one."*

Caroline read the sign again. She could hear the woman's heels clicking above her like impatient castanets. Through the large double doors of the entrance, out on the street, she could see a skinny bike courier yelling at a man in a blue minivan. She turned and walked towards the doors, taking one last look at the bubble letters, which seemed, for a moment, to float off the board and into the shushed atmosphere of the foyer.

WHEN CAROLINE came home from the workshop there was a message on the answering machine from Gene inviting her to lunch, for sushi, at an upscale, uptown restaurant. She listened to the message twice, then archived it. On the floor by the front door was a note from her downstairs neighbour Julie, asking her if she wouldn't mind letting the dog out, since she would be gone for the evening. Caroline was friendly with Julie, and loved the anchored feeling she got holding her dog Simone's leather leash. She decided to take the dog to the park. She was making her way towards the dog run when she noticed a woman in a red lycra suit. She was speedwalking down the path, her hips swinging back and forth in the shape of a forced smile, a tight arc of movement side to side. She was beautiful; a tall angular woman with a straight aquiline nose. The woman's sneakers made a steady snare drum beat on the gravel and her longish, muscled frame was accented only by the bulge of her belly; a low, round shape perched on the bones of her pelvis like a basketball rimshot suspended. She was pregnant. And she was, Caroline was forced to admit, Joyce. Joyce of countless exclaiming photos, Joyce of the loose and flying hair. Pregnant Joyce. Simone was tugging at her leash, making a curious weepy noise. Caroline turned to quiet her as the

woman strode closer. The air around them was pock-marked by sunshine and fall leaves and the wind was rustling in the tree branches like something trying to escape. Caroline stopped to steady herself against a graffitied park bench. Against the flushed surface of her cheek she could feel the force of Cam's small baby breaths, despite the miles, despite the weather systems separating them.

CAROLINE REACHED into her bag for a tissue; her nose was running and she was reluctant to use the already soiled napkin for fear of the waitress' reproving eye. Stuck to her wallet she noticed the note from Jack, creased and crummy-looking. She unfolded it in her lap. It was a cartoon. A man with hair like a sea anemone stood on a giant slab of iron. *Weightlifting for the Insane*, the caption read.

"Caroline?" Gene shifted back in his chair.

"Yes?"

"What did you want to talk about?"

"CFCs."

"What?"

"CFCs. It's the stuff that comes out our air conditioners and it's making a hole in the sky. One of my students was telling me about it the other night after school -- it's in coffee cups too..."

"Yeah, I know. I think I better take you home."

Gene stood up with a sigh.

THE MORNING after her lunch with Gene, Caroline came out of her apartment to find Jack on the stoop, sighing loudly, two wadded up kleenexes

blossoming from his nostrils like dragon smoke. The air was brash and summery, hugging close, like a giant palm. Caroline stopped, placed a two dollar coin in Jack's outstretched hand.

"You got a bleeding nose, Jack?" With concern.

Jack brushed some imaginary dust from his lapel, straightened his tie.

As she was putting away her wallet, Caroline drove her fingernail into the styrofoam container of sushi she had packed for lunch. It made a muffled crunch. Her sleep had been filled with nightmares in which the sky resembled an oversized sports dome pierced by harsh and deadly rays of light. "There are some things we can *choose*," she had told Gene the afternoon before, as he reached over to kiss her in the car. She had surprised herself with the force she used to push him away, and had not allowed herself to cry until she was safely inside the front door. Her tears tasted like oceans, like life.

Caroline passed the box of sushi to Jack and wished him good morning before continuing down the path. *Chlor-oh-flor-oh!-carbons, chlor-oh-flor-oh!-carbons*, she sang, all the way to work. And the sun kept shining.

The Handkerchief

...I sally forth, half-sad, half-proud,
And I come to the velvet, imperial crowd,
The wine-red, the gold, the crimson, the pied,
The dahlias that reign by the garden-side.

from *Frost Tonight* by Edith M. Thomas

1.

Dear Sarah,

I was looking at my lips today, thinking how much I used to envy yours -- their thin delicacy. It's funny, but I quite like my lips now, the way they curve when I smile, they're good plump lips really, and they don't bleed lipstick the way other women's seem to. Anyway, I was looking at my lips and I was remembering our first dance classes together -- the tiny bathroom off Mrs. Brown's studio where we'd make-up -- all those tiny tubes and exotic scents, and the way you'd smack your lips together after you pressed the lipstick along them.... Do you remember Mrs. Brown? I always loved the way she tucked her blouses. It was so casual and classy at once. She had flat feet you know, but oh! how she could dance. And you were so beautiful -- your red hair pulled back in a bun -- your steps so small and correct, you were always so co-ordinated! I always felt like such a lout next to you, even though Mrs. Brown told me I danced with *feeling*.

Anyway, I suppose it would seem, in fact it probably does seem funny to you that I would write after all these years (well, I suppose it isn't that long, but it seems it) just to reminisce, especially since we parted on not-so-friendly terms and you're right. It's not the only reason I'm writing. It's that Susan,

my youngest daughter (the one who worked at a woman's centre and pierced her nose!) is moving, with her son, to Seattle, and I agreed to help her out (Lord knows why -- that Jacob is regular hell-on-wheels!). I thought that since we'll be on that side of the continent, it might be appropriate to come for a visit, if it's not inconvenient for you, that is. I've heard the weather in Victoria is lovely in the summer, and it looks so pretty in the pictures -- all those flowers! Do drop me a line and let me know if it would be alright for me to visit. It would be a true delight to see you again after this "break" we've had.

All my love,

Clarice

P.S. Do you remember the day my Charlie and your Geoff barged into class wearing those ridiculous suits? I thought I would bust a gut laughing but Mrs. Brown handled it so well.

P.P.S. Is William around much? You must have been so proud when he landed that job at the law firm.

SARAH HUTCHINSON refolded the freesia-scented letter along its creases and carefully slid it back in its envelope. There were still some breakfast dishes to be done and weeds to be pulled in the front garden. The mailman had been early and had startled her out of a newspaper article on the changing Russia. She was rereading a paragraph that explained the complex and problematic shift to a capitalist state when the *fwip, fwip, fwip, kathunk* of a large stack of fliers interrupted her. It was annoying the way these mailmen

barged in at all times of the day, with no consideration for a person's routine. Out of spite and a fruitless sense of revenge, she had left the stack lying on the welcome mat well into the afternoon, pausing once or twice in the course of her chores to glare at it. When she had finally cooled down long enough to rifle through what had been so unceremoniously dumped, the clock on the stove read 4:27 and she had already had her afternoon tea and biscuit.

Sarah had not heard from Clarice in just over three years; a fact that had, in the first few incommunicado months, unnerved her. Reticence was a quality she attributed more to herself than to her florid friend. Lately, however, she admitted to a sense of relief at the silence between them. Clarice's letters were always rife with the brand of sly compliments that unnerved Sarah. She spent hours composing replies she felt could somehow return them in kind. She *had* been the better dancer of the two of them, and she had always suspected Mrs. Brown of coddling Clarice with her talk of *feeling* and *expression*.

Sarah draped her wet tea towel over the back of a chair and pulled her gardening gloves from the junk drawer next to the stove. She had noticed yesterday that the lilies of the valley were beginning to choke off some of the more delicate flowers. The evening primrose was suffering. As a child, she had loved the small white lilies for their strong, heady scent, but today she found the smell cloying; it made her gag, like the worst kind of nostalgia. Her correspondence with Clarice, before the "break", had been fairly regular, and Sarah considered it necessary and good. She was a woman who believed in maintaining relationships, and always felt it a minor personal failure when a friend or acquaintance from her past severed ties, or simply dropped out of her communicative orbit. Lately, too many of her friends had been dying,

and although she found this betrayal less cutting than the other, more deliberate snubs, she still considered their absence somewhat of an offense.

Sarah and Clarice had come to Canada from Carlisle, a good-sized town in the north of England, on the same steamer, both of them twenty-one and newly married. The year was 1958 and the ship was packed with people just like the newlyweds -- eager young couples with fathers who worked in fishshops or in the coal mines. Young, adventurous people who nevertheless remembered their first delectable taste of chocolate after the rationing was finally over, and who, if they closed their eyes, could still hear the bombs whistling overhead, and feel their mothers' hands clamped tight around their ears. The ship felt luxurious and large to them, despite the crowds, and Sarah still got shivers remembering the way the velvet ropes in the stairwells swung with the rocking of the ship. There was something almost sexy about those ropes, their colour and rich sheen. Sarah and Clarice were several of the lucky few who were not confined to their tiny cabins with seasickness; both of them having somehow, miraculously, managed to find their sea legs early in the journey. Geoff and Charlie were not so lucky; one glance at the roiling ocean would send them back down below, fingers pressed over pursed lips.

Sarah could remember the way Clarice bounced on the balls of her feet, craned her neck forward and sniffed enthusiastically as they entered Montreal harbour. It was as if there was an agent of excitement in the very atmosphere. Some unique, airborne smelling salt, inspiring perkiness. To be fair. Sarah had also felt a prickling of anticipation at the sight of the Old Port. *Bonjour,* she had whispered to herself, and *Je vous en prie.* The idea of a new place thrilled her; it was the idea of marriage which did not. Geoff and Charlie had

not yet come up on deck; they were too busy playing poker with a couple of equally land-loving Irishmen they had become friendly with. She turned to Clarice, who was still bouncing, her hands clutched around the rail.

"Do you love Charlie? I mean *really* love him? So much you would jump over this rail and swim to shore if he asked you to? So much you would risk bedragglement?" This was a game the two women had played since they were girls -- a silly game of dare and one-upmanship, and proof. Clarice twirled around, giggling.

"Of course I would. I'm already so *be*dazzled by my *bel*oved, it's not much of a stretch to *be*draggled..." She gave Sarah a little shove, and then a kiss on the cheek. Besides their shared girlhood, *this* was what bound Sarah to Clarice, this surprising capacity for affection, this demonstrativeness that emerged so unexpectedly, so wonderfully. Sarah did not much like to be touched, and was especially uncomfortable with hugs and even handshakes, in public. But Clarice had a physical way of reaching out that disarmed her, and had, on occasion, even made her blush.

The first time Sarah had seen her, Clarice was riding her bicycle; a chubby girl with red cheeks and scraggly pigtails, a brown satchel slung over one shoulder. Sarah was walking home from school, through the laneway that stretched behind the row of council houses, of which her family's was one. It was a grey November day, and Sarah was watching the satchel bump against the girl's rear end as she pedalled over the cobblestones. She was thinking of her cat, and a verse her mother had once written in her autograph book in careful cursive letters. "*Above all to thine,*" it read, on the first line, and then, underneath, "*Own self be true.*" She wasn't sure what the verse meant, although her mother had told her it was from Shakespeare, so

she was sure it had Meaning. The first line sounded like something from a prayer, and the second like a sort of commandment, although Sarah had a feeling it wasn't very grammatical.

"Own self," she said softly and patted her chest, as if signing to someone who spoke a foreign language. Then, "Be true!" She spoke this more loudly and assertively, and was surprised to see the girl on the bicycle turn her head to look back at her. Sarah imagined the verse probably meant you should always be truthful, and never lie. She had some idea why her mother would write this, since she had once tried to cover up the question of a missing plate with an unlikely falsehood involving the cat. (Sarah had been using the plate to transport stones from one end of the garden to the other when it slipped and broke into nine splintered ungluable pieces.) "Be true!" she said again, forcefully, so that her words made quick clouds of mist as she spoke them. This time, the girl riding up ahead turned her head all the way around to face Sarah. At the same time she turned her handlebars so that the bicycle veered sharply to the right and then fell heavily, with its rider, to the ground.

By the time Sarah got to the scene of the accident, the pig-tailed cyclist had pulled herself out from under her bicycle and was brushing herself off, although she was still crying loudly, and, it seemed to Sarah, rather showily.

"Are you alright?" Sarah looked into the girl's tear-stained face, then picked up the brown satchel which had fallen into a patch of raspberries growing in the hedgerow. The girl took the satchel and pulled it over her head.

"I'm fine," she said, and sniffed twice, heartily, in reassurance. Sarah passed over the hankie her mother made sure she carried with her every day,

then asked the girl her name.

"It's Clah-reece, as in French, not Claaa-riss." the girl replied, and dabbed at her nostrils with the handkerchief. "Would you like to see something revolting?" Clah-reece picked up her bicycle and gestured for Sarah to follow. So Sarah did.

FROM MONTREAL the newly arrived couples travelled by bus to Toronto, where they settled. Geoff and Charlie found work quickly, Geoff in a small import/export business where he took care of the books and Charlie in a plastics factory as a machinist. The two women gave birth to their first children within months of each other and shared babysitting and nursing tips. Then, when Sarah's son William was two, Geoff was promoted and offered a transfer to the accounting department of the company's branch in Vancouver. Sarah had welcomed the move. She and Geoff had been skitting around each other for the last six months; slippery-footed animals on a large expanse of ice. Nighttimes, they would lie in bed reading until one of them began to nod off, leaving his or her tented book to slide down the bedspread and onto the floor. The more alert of the two would then reach over, gingerly, to turn off the lamp over the headboard. They would sleep in the same separate fashion, dreaming their way to the conclusions of their books, and away from each other.

THE LETTER Sarah received after Clarice discovered the handkerchief in Charlie's closet was full of histrionics (as much as one can translate histrionics to the page) and the overly emphatic accusations of the broken-hearted. Sarah had shot back a one-page missive in which she accused Clarice

of being naive and unoriginal, with an archaic sense of morality. Besides, she added, it was so many years ago! The moment after the letter was posted it made Sarah ashamed in the most desperate manner, so that she would not leave her house for three days, for fear her shame was somehow legible, and, by its very obsessive intensity, criminal.

Charlie had been dead for two years of liver cancer when Clarice was cleaning out his closet and found the initialized hankie. Sarah's mother had embroidered them for her as a bon voyage gift, and they were quite pretty -- tiny blue forget-me-nots with black staring centres sewn along the scalloped edges. Sarah, normally far from covetous, had clung to the handkerchieves on the voyage to Canada with an uncharacteristic sentimentality. Clarice had brought her to tears halfway across the Atlantic by snatching one of the hankies from Sarah's sleeve and waving it over the churning water.

"It's a white flag for surrender," she squealed, and did a sort of Highland fling at the rail, throwing her arms and legs every which way. Nausea and frustration had brought Sarah, quite literally, to her knees, and she stayed there, prostrate and sobbing, until Clarice placed the hankie, daintily, royally, on her bowed head.

Sarah had left the hankie in Clarice and Charlie's bedroom the morning after her divorce was finalized. Her son William was staying with a friend for the weekend, so she had driven straight from the courthouse to the airport and had hopped the first plane to Toronto, in the hopes that Clarice would be able to provide some of the solace she so desperately craved. Clarice would sit her down, ply her with tea and biscuits, then listen and respond with the drama and indignation Sarah could only muster within the confines of her own head. And perhaps, she thought, wonderingly, perhaps Clarice

could *advise* her. There had always been an effortlessness and easy manner in Clarice's marriage that puzzled Sarah. She supposed it had something to do with Charlie; his rumpled way of getting to the crux of matters.

The truth of the matter was, that for all the unhappiness and stagnation she had felt within her own marriage, she had very little idea of how to survive *without* it. She was scared of being alone. She had played out her confession of desolation so many times in her head that she half-expected Clarice to not only be home and available, but also to be completely conversant with an emotional life Sarah had made it a point to conceal in her written correspondence. But Clarice had gone away for the weekend, up to the Muskokas for a quilting bee (of all things!), and it was Charlie who greeted her at the door, his face puffy from sleep, his red terrycloth robe wrapped hastily aound the bulge of his small belly. She meant only to stay for a few minutes, to say her hellos and be on her way, but Charlie insisted on fixing her a drink and urged her to sit, please sit.

"Clarice and I always thought that maybe you two were having some problems, but we didn't want to pry. We figured you'd tell us if you wanted us to know, in good time." Charlie stood up and went to fix Sarah another drink. Sarah stared at the coffee table; a low oval of oak with round coasters scattered, casually, on its surface. Of course they had always known. How arrogant of her to think she could somehow conceal all her apprehensions and hesitations, cloak them in a worldliness she did not feel. What must this body of hers say, when she wasn't paying attention, and even when she was? She lifted her drink and noticed she had placed the glass directly on the wood, so that the moisture from the bottom left a shiny, reflective ring.

THEY WERE dancing, Clarice and Sarah, holding each other gently around the waist, at the shoulder. "*One*, two, three, *one*, two, three...." It was a waltz, and Sarah was leading. The record player was on low, so it would not wake the children, and Charlie and Geoff were in the kitchen, fixing drinks.

"Well, Mrs. Geoff, how does it feel to be the wife of such an important man?" Clarice inquired, batting her eyelashes at Sarah, and feigning a swoon. Clarice broke free from the waltz and began to gallop around the room. "I wanna go west, into the sunset, where the skies are never cloudy all the day," she sang. The gathering was a celebration of Geoff's promotion and transfer.

"I'm not going to the *wild* west. It's Vancouver for God's sake." But Sarah sang along anyway.

"Wanna be in open places, don't wanna be closed in. Ride until my legs are bowed, say howdy! with a grin. I wanna go west, into the sunset, where a man can be a man and still be free-ee-ee!" The two women flopped down onto the couch and laughed until their laughs became sighs. It was Charlie who had stuck his head around the corner, shushing them.

"Mind the children, they're asleep, you know. Besides, I think I liked the waltz better." He turned the music up again and took Sarah for an impromptu turn around the room, matching her small steps, his torso upright and proper. Sarah's cheeks were red from twirling with Clarice, and to be held so *concertedly* by Charlie made them burn with something like embarrassment.

SARAH HAD been fixing her tights when Geoff and Charlie barged into Mrs. Brown's dance class that day. It was Clarice's familiar giggle that had prompted her to look up from the sagging stocking. Charlie was two-stepping

Clarice clownishly around the perimeter of the room, throwing exaggerated winks to rapt onlookers. Sarah hadn't noticed Geoff until he sidled up beside her and asked her to join him in a dance. His eyes were a steady reflective brown and there was stiffness in his carriage she recognized; a sameness in their postures she approved of and might have mistaken for love.

SARAH CLOSED her eyes and allowed herself to feel only the sweep and sway of the music and the closeness of Charlie's breath against her cheek. When the record ended, he pulled her against him briefly, then stepped away and bent from the waist in an odd kind of bow. In the kitchen doorway, Geoff stood watching, a drink in each hand, while Clarice stacked the coasters on the coffee table, then fanned them out, stacked them and fanned them out again.

2.

Dear Sarah,

Thank-you for your prompt reply to my letter. You're right, it's probably a good idea to avoid the tourist-y bits of town, but I would so like to go whale-watching. Susan was telling me about this activist-type man who actually rams into whaling boats to prevent them from hunting the poor creatures! Do you believe it? It seems a little extreme to me, but I suppose I'd feel differently if I were a whale!

My flight arrives on the 16th of June at 3:35 pm and the flight number is 667 (Air Canada), in case there are any changes. It's a good idea to call at least two hours before, the gentleman told me, but I guess you would know that, being such a cosmopolitan sort of person. I'm not sure what sort of

clothes I should bring -- maybe you could write back and let me know what the weather has been like?

Susan and Jacob will be staying at a Bed and Breakfast in town, but I was hoping I could stay with you, since money is a little bit tight for me right now, what with just my widow's allowance. I'm more than willing to help with groceries and cleaning. It will be as if we're roommates! We'll be leaving for Seattle on the 21st, and after that it's back to old clothes and porridge!

Looking forward to seeing you soon,

Clarice

That was just like Clarice, to volunteer Sarah as a hostess, then follow the whole thing up with chatty exclamation points. Sarah pulled crossly at the crab grass that was overtaking the back corner of the lawn. Her son kept urging her to try one of the new lawn care companies that come around to the house in their green uniforms and mini vans, but she couldn't stomach the idea of all those chemicals seeping into her flower beds. William always sighed and called her a crazy vegetarian when she explained this to him. In fact, she was not a vegetarian at all; she had merely stopped eating red meat for health reasons, and believed firmly that if anyone wanted to stop the evil land and resource gobbling corporations, they should go to the London School for Economics and learn how to fight the big guys on their own level. She didn't suppose it would do much good to sit around in vegan cafés wearing sandals on her feet and a smug expression on her face. Still, she had never told William this, and she did love growing things.

Sarah traced her gardening passion back to the days she had spent in the woods outside of Carlisle, rambling with Clarice along narrow paths where the small trees formed canopies overhead and woodland creatures nosed about in the underbrush. As girls, they had known practically all the names of the wildflowers in the woods, and those they did not know they christened themselves, or dismissed as weeds. To either side of the path hedge bindweed grew like a carpet; white bell-shaped flowers the size of a child's fist that wrapped themselves, vine-like around the other flowers, spreading underground to make new plants. The tiny white starry heads of field daisies nodded yes, yes, yes to the girls as they passed by. There were yellow babies' buttons (one of Clarice's inventions -- to go with the Baby's Breath, she said), and brambleberries, the ripe ones black and bursting sour on their tongues. There were stinging nettles and sticky willies too; prickly thorns and burrs that hid amongst the rose bushes and stuck to their schoolgirl socks. But it was the mugwort that held the girls' attention, although not for its appearance, which was unremarkably pretty, but for its name, which to Clarice was an abomination.

"Who could give such an innocent little flower such an ugly name?" she demanded, fingering one of the tiny red petals and pulling at the tough stem. Sarah, who had been nudging at anthills with the side of her black oxford, turned to Clarice, who looked as if she was about to cry.

"C'mon, then, don't be daft, 'A rose by any other name would smell as sweet,' remember?" Sarah stepped closer and patted her friend on the shoulder, her eyes searching out the wild strawberry patch they had seen a few yards back.

"Would it though, really? I mean maybe this poor flower could have

been more if it was only given the chance. Don't you think?" Clarice's eyes were brimming with tears.

Sarah nodded her head and took a step back. "I suppose. I certainly wouldn't want to be called common cudweed."

Clarice suddenly dropped to the ground, overcome, Sarah imagined, with despair. Then she began to shake, her hands and feet vibrating the vines.

"Or convulsionus!" she screamed, and sent her body spasming, with laughter and excitement, amidst the pale pink flowers.

"It's convolvulus, not convulsionus, you mugwort!" Sarah kicked at the still shuddering body with her foot.

That was how it was with Clarice, Sarah thought, as she poked and prodded at her own garden, you just couldn't trust her. One moment she was waxing philosophical, her eyes glazed like a Christmas pudding, the questions and suppositions flying from her mouth as if she had been possessed by some ancient thinker with too much time on his hands, and the next she was laughing. As if she had been released! As if the simple posing of the question were enough.

When Sarah had found the infamous handkerchief enclosed with the letter from Clarice, with not so much as a mention of it in the letter itself, this is what she thought of -- Clarice's questions, so serious and so pointed. And maybe that's all the handkerchief was -- a question, although if it was indeed a question, Sarah could not imagine what the question could be. After all, she had already admitted to her mistake, already confessed her wrongdoing. Besides, thought Sarah, it seemed more like a reproof than a question. Or maybe just proof. Yes, it was a proof, it was a dare, but where was the one-

upmanship in all of this? It was all too Shakespearean -- a too-obvious plot device in an old, old story that ended with all the women dead and smothered. Sarah was not going to stand for it. She brought the handkerchief up to her face, as if to smell it, or rub it against her cheek, then thought better of the gesture, and brought it back down to the table where she folded it neatly. Later, she carried the handkerchief upstairs, with some freshly washed linens, and place it in the top drawer of her dresser, with the winking forget-me-nots facing down.

3.

Dear Sarah,

I've started this letter a thousand times, it seems, and every time I do, I feel that what I've written isn't quite what I mean to say, but that's how it is with letters isn't it? To actually pull the thoughts from your brain and arrange them on the page, to construct sentences -- there's too much of a gap between the real feeling and the words that end up there, all lined up with commas and periods between. Whenever I write letters I feel a little bit as if I'm lying, as if the letter I'm sending is not from me, but from a put-on me, a much *superimposed*, yet somehow insubstantial me, if that makes any sense.

I know that when you came here, you were upset and tired from the divorce proceedings and the travel. I felt so badly about Clarice not being here and wanted so desperately to do what she would have done, to react with her loyalty and -- is there any other way to say it? -- energy, that I lost myself in the process, and am not sure I have regained that self since. Even this has not been set down properly -- of course I know that Clarice would not have slept with you, or bungled things the way I did, and I'm not trying to excuse myself

for my unhusbandly behaviour... I just wanted you to know that my intentions, however badly they materialized, were not to hurt you or to hurt Clarice. I know you probably can't forgive me, but maybe you can try to understand this. I hope you are well, and that William is also fine.

Fondly,

Charlie

Sarah had left the window open in her bedroom to let in the ocean breeze with its salty tang and soft warmth. She picked up Charlie's letter and re-read it, before replacing it in the round flowered tin where she kept all of her correspondence.

She walked to the window. Out on the beach a boy was picking up shells and bits of driftwood, then discarding them quickly, as if he had in mind very specific criteria that determined their suitability. Farther out, a sailboat bobbed perfectly in the azure waves, the sky stretching blankly behind. When Sarah had first moved to the island, she believed it was for the mild climate, and the feeling of community so very like the small-town England she had left behind. But now she wondered if she had not been attracted to the sense of risk involved in being perched, like this, at the edge of the world, with so much sky to confront each and every waking day. In some ways, it reminded Sarah of that first boat ride with Clarice; the ripeness of possibility that only manifests itself in moments of arrival.

THAT FIRST day in the laneway, Clarice had led Sarah to her backyard shed where, sleeping in the corner, on an old army blanket, was an old mutt of a

dog. At first Sarah thought he might be dead, because of the way his legs were splayed to either side of him, but when she got closer she could see his belly was rising slightly, his nose twitching.

"Look!" Clarice whispered loudly, gesturing towards the dog's genitals. Sarah shook her head, and closed her eyes tightly. "C'mon, then, you're not chicken are you?"

Sarah opened her eyes.

"Do you see, do you see?" Clarice called out excitedly. "He's only got one of them! We call him Hitler, you know why, don't you?" Sarah shook her head no, still examining, from a distance, the purplish sac of skin that protruded like a fleshy bauble from the dog's groin. Clarice began to sing and march up and down the length of the tool shed, swinging her arms and lifting her knees high. "Hitler has only got one ball, Goering has two but very small, Himmler is very similar, and Goebbels has no balls at all... One, two, three, four." She grabbed Sarah's arm, pulled her into line beside her, and they marched like that, side-by-side, up and down the shed for the next hour.

And then they were friends. Sarah remembers that after supper that night, once the dishes had been washed, and her homework done, she had climbed the stairs to her mother's room, where she practised in front of the small oval make-up mirror. "It's Clah-reece, not Claaa-riss."

And maybe, she thought now, with astonishment, this was what she had been doing all her life, looking into her own reflection and mouthing Clarice's name, so that the two girls, the two women, the two selves, over the years, had merged, the two personalities melded. Charlie, too, she thought, had let himself be pulled into Clarice's swirling orbit, so that his motives, at the point where he should have been most husbandly, as he put it, were not

his own, but borrowed from his wife! Could it be that over time, in so many carefully chosen and sealed words, she and Clarice had somehow intersected, their trajectories crossing in some bizarre alchemy of spirit? It was certainly true that sometimes Sarah caught herself thinking of Clarice not as a former friend but as a former self. But for Clarice? Clarice just kept on being Clarice, with all her gumption and crudeness and loyalty. She was certain that Clarice, with the exception of that awful moment of betrayal, had never stopped to consider herself Sarah's double, foil, or rival. Instead, she had remained one of the few people in the world who would, without being asked, invite herself into Sarah's home.

4.

grilled chicken w/fresh basil
new potatoes
green beans
steamed carrots w/glaze
mixed greens w/nasturtiums
dessert?

Sarah put down her pen and swiped at some crumbs on the kitchen table. She had decided the dinner for Clarice's arrival should be simple, but flavorful -- something nourishing but not too filling. If Clarice were anything like her, she probably wouldn't want anything heavy after the flight. Sarah always felt slightly disoriented and queasy at the end of a journey, no matter how far she had travelled. She wondered if Clarice would eat the nasturtiums. Yes, Clarice would no doubt try the flowers, and even if she

didn't enjoy them very much, there *was* something naughty about actually chomping down on the blossoms. Besides, they added such a festive and delicate air to the salad. She wasn't sure about the dessert. She knew Clarice had a sweet tooth, or had, the last time she could remember. And she liked lemon meringue. She would have to buy the pie shell, she wasn't much one for baking pastry. Yes, lemon meringue would do fine. She decided she had time to run and pick up the pastry shell before Clarice arrived; it was only 2:07, and the plane didn't arrive until after 3. Maybe she'd pick up a bottle of wine too. She wouldn't want to appear unprepared.

"YOU DON'T have to worry about my not taking precautions. You know, I mean, being prepared. I had a vasectomy seven years ago." Charlie was talking to the ceiling, rubbing at the back of his head.

Sarah looked at him, dazed. She was not sure she understood what he was talking about. Their lovemaking had been solemn and awkward, and at times polite, although not in a distant way. "Could you please move a little further down, or back?" Sarah heard herself saying, several times, in a voice not her own but borrowed from a good-natured bus driver. With Geoff she had never talked at all, had in fact seldom moved. When they were first married, Sarah hadn't minded the immobility awfully much; it was enough to be close to Geoff, to watch the wide expanse of his chest above her like a giant inverted pyramid. It awed her, that chest, much more than his penis, which she found pleasant enough while it was moving inside of her, but ugly and extraneous otherwise. And now here she was, with Charlie, her best friend's husband. In bed. He was rubbing his hand across his head, still, as if the skull itself was a good luck charm, or a magic lamp. Sarah watched him

for a moment. She supposed this was one of his habits, a habit Clarice had noted many times before she, Sarah, had known it existed. She supposed Clarice, now, after so many years of marriage, noted it without really noticing it. Or maybe not. It could be it irked her to no end, and she nagged him about it incessantly, or maybe her irritation was milder, more benevolent. Perhaps she teased him about it, did clownish imitations. But what was this talk of vasectomies, precautions, preparedness? It made her sad, to hear him talk like this, when they had so recently, so definitively, gone ahead and done the unthinkable. Was there not another realm one entered, outside of precautions, and other rational measures, when one did the unthinkable? And, if not, how were they to proceed from here? Sarah began to cry.

Charlie put his arms around her, and started to say something, then thought better of it. Sarah reached down to find her pants, at the side of the bed where they lay crumpled, and rummaged through the pocket for her handkerchief. She pulled it out and blew her nose.

"I think I had better leave," is what she said. Although it was not what she meant. But how could she say what she meant? To mean something; to strain towards an intention or emotion or connotation -- it was all she had ever done her entire life, Sarah thought, and look where it got her. Maybe it was easier, for now, to ignore what it was that she or Charlie had meant. But Charlie didn't seem to share her thinking.

"I'm so sorry, Sarah, please stay, we should talk about this, shouldn't we?" He had stopped rubbing his head and was lying back against the headboard, the sheets wrapped, mummy-like, around his middle.

He was apologizing to her? She got up and began putting on her clothes. "There's nothing to talk about, Charlie. As far as I'm concerned, this

didn't happen. I have to get back to William. Tell Clarice I'll call her next week," Most of which was far from what she meant.

She also hadn't meant to leave the handkerchief, soiled as it was, lying on the pillow, discarded like a candy wrapper, or a baby's nappie.

WHEN SARAH came home from the market, Clarice's suitcase was sitting on the front porch. It was an old brown suitcase, in fairly good condition, although it had seen some wear and tear, and Sarah could see where Clarice had carefully replaced the binding. Sarah unlocked the door. Clarice's plane must have been early. She must think Sarah a terrible hostess. Oh well, she was probably sitting out back, enjoying the sunshine. Sarah put the wine in the refrigerator then climbed the stairs to the bedroom to fetch a face cloth. She wanted to freshen up a bit before she greeted Clarice.

In the bathroom, the faucet glinted up at her, offering a slightly wavy reflection of her face. It was how she felt; a little wavy around the edges, as if she were sweating too much, and couldn't find a place to sit and rest, wipe her brow. But that was silly, it wasn't that hot, and she was in her own bathroom for God's sake. "Own self," she whispered, "be true." She pulled the curtains aside so that she could see, out the window, to the backyard below. The window was frosted; through the pane the garden looked like an impressionist painting. Clarice was standing near the nasturtiums, whose leaves were smudged pancakes of green, the flowers only slightly smaller orange splodges. The frosted scene made everything borderless and sedate. Clarice moved slowly over to the nasturtiums, plucked a flower, and held it aloft, then brought it up to her mouth, as if, somehow, she knew Sarah was watching.

Sarah closed the toilet lid and sat down, her forehead resting in the heel of her hands. There had been a time, she remembered, when she would have run to Clarice, her thoughts rushing and cartwheeling with the anticipation.

"Clah-reece!" she might have called, "What *are* you doing, dallying by the dahlias?" And Clarice might have wrapped her arms around her. Perhaps they would have stood like that, in the garden on the edge of the world, until it was dark.

The Present Perfect

IN MONTREAL people walk on rooftops. Fiona has seen them, strolling casually around brick chimneys and bubble skylights and steel vents curved like periscopes. When she first moved to the city in July she would often sit on her small balcony with its zigzag of staircases above and below, and peer out over the roofs, following the small figures as they moved across the sky, some bending to fix and check, check and fix, others simply stopping to stand, hands cupped over their eyes, as they scanned the horizon. Sometimes she was certain they were looking at her, and she would lift her hand and wave, a quick but insistent flutter, as if they had arranged to meet, and were waiting, searchingly, on opposite street corners. No one had ever waved back, and this, somehow, was a comfort to Fiona, an affirmation that the roofwalkers' presence had less to do with an aimlessness of spirit than a spiritual purpose not available to her.

Fiona had left her home in Toronto because, in the space of four weeks, her boyfriend of six years had left her, her cat had died, and her parents had blithely sold the family home and migrated to Florida, dragging their new hand luggage and waving their hands behind them like flightless birds. When Henry called her from work with his "big news", Fiona assumed it had something to do with his job as a pharmacist -- a promotion or a transfer maybe -- or something about one of the new Queen-size mattresses they had their eye on at Sleep World, a domestic detail she could absorb and modify, then lob back at him, with a spin. She was used to this back-and-forthing, she enjoyed it, she didn't know anything else. So that when he told her he was leaving she felt less shocked or indignant than weightless, without context.

He was leaving, he said, because he had to know, he had to find out what was out there, in the world, but more importantly, within himself. Within yourself? What did it mean to look within yourself? And what could you ever hope to find there, beneath the layers, without the help of someone who had lived beside you, amongst your gestures and debris? But these were all questions Fiona thought of later, after Henry had boarded the plane, after her cat Mimi had staggered home, her face bleeding and broken. They were questions that surfaced fully formed in her mind, like sea monsters -- palpable, if fantastic and fleeting.

Within weeks of that first phone call, Henry had sold or given away all of the furniture they agreed was his to sell, in a series of well-attended yard sales. Fiona called in sick but refused to help with the sales, instead choosing to oversee the exchanges from an upstairs window, where she sat like a trapped insect, her face butting against the screen. Henry was stupidly magnanimous in his transactions, letting certain items go for a pittance to men and women dressed in too much black and denim and silver, offering cryptic advice to eager-looking students, and actually apologizing for the condition of Fiona's favourite wing-backed chair. He made two neat piles of the contents of the kitchen cupboards, divided the remaining curry powder into two small jars, and carefully placed a stubby end of ginger root on the top of Fiona's pile where it sat, looking, Fiona thought, like a swollen chicken foot, the final ingredient in a voodoo-ish concoction.

Fiona's mother was convinced Henry was having an affair.

"There's no other *reasonable* explanation, Fi, it has to be a woman," she said, and cupped the back of Fiona's head against her shoulder. Fiona was crying for the first time since the break-up, long convulsive sobs that felt like

sneezing or coming; that same amount of sadness and relief. They were sitting in the stark strangeness of the living room Fiona had known as a child, on two upside-down milk crates. Fiona's parents had also sold off most of their furniture, with much less psychological difficulty. It seemed they had simply shrugged off the accoutrements of their past, or shed it as if it were an old itchy skin. Fiona's mother was giving her the big blue couch treatment (without the couch); the head rub and back of the throat noises that meant safety, that meant *There, there*. The last time she had been forced like this into the warm crook of her mother's neck, she had been sixteen, her womb scraped clean in a clean white office.

She loved her mother for her suggestion, as much as she knew it could not be true. There was something reassuringly horrifying about the idea of Henry with another woman; she could imagine herself accusing him, brandishing a lipsticked shirt, screaming. But she knew Henry was *not* having an affair, and this is what scared her most. She knew that what had happened to Henry had overtaken him in the middle of the day, in broad daylight, perhaps while he was looking out the window, or labelling an antibiotic. It was a transgression much more serious than any sexual betrayal, a smooth and bloodless denial of the life he had led with her.

After the initial shock of the announcement had passed, Fiona had asked him what he was going to do. "India," he said, "I'm going to India to find my path." Fiona was only prevented from outright guffawing by the intensity of his tone. Henry had never mentioned his lack of path before, had in fact never even doubted the decisions he made in his life. It had always been Fiona who was unsure, unsettled by the cloud of options that hovered around every step she took towards career, towards family. "Easy does it,"

Henry would say, when she came home in tears from the advertising agency where she had worked for the past three and a half years. He would run the tips of his fingers over her back until her breathing slowed and the webs of thought reined themselves in. "Bloom where you're planted," her mother said, when she called in a panic, a series of what-ifs spilling from her mouth. And Fiona had. She had taken the man and the job and been happy. She bloomed where she was planted. When life handed her lemons, she made lemonade.

Fiona's father was brusque, dismissive, and superstitious. "I always knew there was something funny about that guy," he said, peeling at the plaster over the fireplace. These were the kind of comments that used to infuriate Fiona with their vague banality and absolute conviction, but today she found her father's loyalty far more comforting than her mother's rationalizations. There was nothing rational about having your heart ambushed. It was too much like something you'd watch on the evening news, shaking your head, glad you had the option of changing the channel. Fiona's mother was looking for cause and effect, a logical sequence, while her father understood that sometimes events don't follow, people can go crooked, the world go awry.

THE DAY she arrived in Montreal she had buzzed at the first brownstone apartment she saw, encouraged by the red and white "A Louer" sign in the window. Fiona had chosen Montreal because she knew the rents were reasonable, and because, from the few times she had visited, it seemed to her a comfortable place to be heartbroken. The crowds there didn't seem to *get on with it* the same way they did in Toronto, and no one was looking to settle.

She liked the idea that, on the country's national holiday, everyone packed up their belongings and moved. Here, instead of digging in their heels, people kicked them up. Instead of becoming resigned, Montrealers relocated and redecorated.

The concierge of the building was friendly and slightly fatherly; he assured her that she had chosen a good neighbourhood and that the men in black coats and black hats walking the streets were not hostile.

"They wouldn't touch you if you dragged them behind a bush," he said, and rotated his index fingers near his temples, making what Fiona thought to be, at the time, the sign for coo-coo, but later understood, ashamedly, to be an imitation of the single ringlets of the Chassidic Jew. Later she would come to depend on the stern, knee-socked presence of the men in black -- their stride so purposeful and unflinching -- but at the time she had simply nodded and smiled. The apartment he showed her was large for the price, although oddly laid out, with hallways that bulged suddenly into rooms, like the body of a boa constrictor after a feeding. There was a cat lying on the windowsill.

"Shoo," said the concierge, and pushed it down. "It belongs to the neighbour."

"What part of town are we in? I mean, what's this neighbourhood called?" Fiona was looking out the window at the laundromat across the street, from which two boys with orange and green mohawks were emerging, smoking cigarettes and laughing. They stopped to talk to a young couple in dreadlocks. The dreadlocked man had a baby strapped to his chest. The woman was carrying a straw bag full of groceries.

"*This*," the concierge stopped and pointed to his feet, "this is Mile-End.

The whole area..." Now he waved his arms expansively, "is the Plateau, the flat part after the Mountain. It's very popular with the artists and the young people."

Ah, yes. The Land of Mile-End, on the Plateau After the Mountain. This was not Canada, or even Quebec, it was the land of Narnia, Fiona thought, as the concierge led her to still another Kingdom of Spare Oom.

She asked to pay month-to-month and he agreed, somewhat reluctantly, his long eyebrow hairs skimming his eyelids. Now she supposed she could have signed for a year without consequence, but she still liked the feeling of impermanence it gave her to know that there were no sign-on-the-dotted line documents to bind her, that she could find her way up to the roof one day, take one last look at the glittering cross at the top of Mount Royal, the hopeful treetops and garbage-littered laneways and leave as she had come, with one small suitcase and a snack for the train.

IN FRENCH, Fiona remembered, instead of saying "I miss you", you say "Tu me manques", or, "You are missing from me". This is what she practised saying to an imaginary Henry in her mirror. She thought it was probably important to say these words with a pout, or a bit of a pucker, and sometimes she perched an old army green beret on her head for added authenticity. But out on the street she felt anything but authentic. She noticed that the women in her neighbourhood had a sort of gritty beauty about them she couldn't quite place. Sometimes she thought it was because they sweated more profusely, or bathed less, and didn't care. Other times, she thought it had to with the fact that they wore lipstick to buy groceries (defiant shades of mulberry and ruby), and left their lips daringly bare when they went out to

dine. But mostly she felt inauthentic, she surmised, because she was without Henry.

She joined the local library and checked out books called *India: Its People, India: Its Natural Resources, India: Its Cuisine,* and *India: It's the Place To Be!* Sometimes she dreamed of Henry weaving his way along the streets of Bombay, pushing through crowds, his eyes flitting like eager debutantes from one set of facial features to another. And suddenly she too, Fiona, was in the dream, in the crowd, her eyes also searching, waiting for Henry to lock onto her gaze. Waiting for Henry to understand that, after all, Fiona was that part of himself he had been missing. Inevitably, her parents made an appearance, their faces tanned and paradoxically wrinkle-free in the crowd of dark-skinned strangers. They wore white cotton shirts and unfettered smiles, and they had their arms linked in a kind of loose love knot.

SHE HADN'T expected to get a job as soon as she did. She wore her best suit to the interview and made mental lists of her strengths and weaknesses on the way to the language school on the metro. Dependable; good-humoured; enthusiastic and creative teacher. Hard worker. Punctual. The manual she had at home said that your "weaknesses" should be ruses; humble admissions of qualities your employer might actually consider strengths. "I sometimes become overly involved in my work," she whispered into her handbag.

Actually, Fiona had very little experience with teaching. She had once led a storytime group at a daycare she worked at in high school, and a twitchy social conscience, combined with a charismatically left-leaning university

roommate, had convinced her to tutor a young offender as part of a literacy program her second year. Other than that, her only experience with a second language had been at the ad agency, where her boss, sometimes, by virtue of Fiona's high school French, asked her to try her hand at translating copy. Fortunately, the interview turned out to be less of a test than a recruitment; ten eager candidates crowded around a conference table while an equally eager "pedagogical advisor" tried to convince them of their suitability for the position.

Within two weeks, Fiona had four contracts, teaching at various corporations around the city. The agency sent her to places with names like Laval or LaSalle, rhymy places that belonged in jump rope songs. One of her contracts was in Ile des Soeurs, or Nun's Island, a small settlement of low-rise office buildings and fresh-looking housing. The island had one strip mall, complete with a small wooden bridge that curved over a fake stream and made a satisfyingly hollow hoof-y sound when Fiona walked on it to get to the washrooms. There was a special express bus she had to take to get to the island that zoomed over the water on a wide strip of highway. This was Fiona's favourite part of the journey -- she felt a certain solidarity with her fellow commuters as they sat looking out over the St. Lawrence to either side, their bags clutched in their laps. She imagined they were feeling, like her, the excitement and risk of this particular ride. Fiona had never been much for history, but she thought she felt something of the arrogance and terrible naivete of Jacques Cartier bubbling in her breast as the cold sea air rushed in through the sliding window beside her ear. This was not a voyage in increments! This bus would not stop until it got to the other side!

The groups she taught were small, and the students were, for the most

part, happy to get away from their desks for an afternoon or two. They wandered in clutching company coffee cups, or novelty mugs that had been left in the cupboard that read "World's Best Dad" or "Pobody's Nerfect" or "Black coffee drinkers make better lovers and I have the mug to prove it". Fiona had once tried translating them, awkwardly, with very mixed results from her students, who seemed to think she might be making fun of them.

"The present perfect," Fiona told her classes, "doesn't really have an equivalent in French. It begins at a point in the past, and continues up to the present, and possibly into the future. It might seem to you that because it is perfect, it's finished, an event completed, but it's not." Fiona drew a timeline on the white shiny board using an orange magic marker. The present she marked in the middle with a scribbly dot. She hesitated before drawing another dot slightly to the left of the first one. This was the past. Then she drew an arrow in green magic marker from the second dot to the first dot, from the past to the present. "We might say, for example, I have eaten many bananas. In other words, up to this point, I have eaten bananas, and it's entirely possible that I may continue eating bananas in the future. We just don't know." She drew another arrow from the present into the empty line of the future, then turned to look at the class, her face open and inviting as a peeled banana.

FIONA WAS sitting at the breakfast table one morning in early August, trying to read the newspaper, when she saw a man outside her window. Her building was two stories higher than the one next door, so that her balcony was level with the neighbouring flat-topped roof. The concierge had informed her proudly when she asked that he was also responsible for the

smaller building and that there was a famous musician living in one of the larger, more expensive units. She had, on several occasions, noticed beer bottles, and the soggy end of a blanket strewn across the roof. Once there had been a pigeon nesting and cooing in a woman's high-heeled boot. Still, it surprised her, to look up at another human, at eye-level, so close. She was sipping her coffee slowly, gnawing at a bagel and still considering a return to bed, when the man began pacing back and forth, peering into the windows of the apartments adjacent to hers. She stood up, tugged at the bottom of her oversized T-shirt. Who was this man? Could it be the famous musician, and, if so, why was he casing the joint? Should she confront him? She stepped onto the balcony, careful not to let the T-shirt ride up over her thighs. The man hurried over, and Fiona noticed he wore a heavy tool-belt strapped around his blue-jeaned hips. Fiona had always liked tool belts for their swaggering air of usefulness. She gave a half-smile of invitation.

"Bonjour Madame, vous habitez ce logement-la?"

She sighed. It was difficult to remain coy in a second language.

"Oui, comment est-ce que je peux vous aider?" It always seemed to her there were too many pronouns in French, or too little difference between what was plural and what was polite. She raised her eyebrows questioningly, apologetically. The man stared at her.

"You speak English?" He kicked at the edge of the roof, his thumbs hooked through his belt loops.

"Yeah." Defeated.

"I was wondering if I could buy some water off you. I'm trying to fix the air conditioning unit and I can't hook it up from here. I mean, I could give you ten bucks."

Fiona wasn't quite sure what he wanted her to do. She stared at his tool belt. "Okay."

The man pulled a hose up from behind him. It was slightly thicker than a garden hose, although it looked to be made of the same malleable rubber.

"If you could just grab a hold of this when I throw it over, I think you should be able to attach it to your sink."

Fiona nodded and stretched out her hand.

"Actually, you better just get out of the way. I don't want to hit you."

"Oh. Alright." Fiona moved inside. The hose flew through the air between the buildings like a snake possessed and landed on her balcony with a clank, the metal spout caught for a second between the rails. She picked it up gingerly and walked over to the sink. The spout was too big, it slipped off the faucet when she tried to screw it on.

"It's too big," she called out to the man.

"Damn," he said, and stomped his work-booted foot, "I'll see if I have a washer." He reached into his bag and pulled out a tiny silver ring. "Here," he gestured and drew back his hand.

He was going to throw it at her! This small, shiny, useful thing! She watched it sail through the air and stretched out her hand to catch it. The washer spun and arced, the sun glinting off its bevelled sides. The man was also watching, scratching his head and frowning at her.

She missed.

The washer spiralled down quickly and landed somewhere in the narrow strip of grass between the buildings. The man huffed and threw his arms in the air.

"Great. *Now* I have to go all the way downstairs to get a new one. If I have another one that is." He glared at her and stomped away.

Fiona watched his retreating back and bum, denim-clad and strong. "I have missed the washer. I have missed an opportunity," she said to the neighbour's cat, who had somehow found his way into her apartment again. The cat followed her into the bedroom and lay down on her computer keyboard.

"It's true that sometimes there is really not much difference between the simple past and the present perfect," she explained to him when he looked at her. "Sometimes it is more of a change in nuance than a big change in sense. It's the expectation that the action may be repeated, or, conversely, may not be repeated for a specific reason that makes the present perfect unique." The cat blinked twice, then closed its eyes. Fiona put on her favourite Madonna C.D. and sang along with her eyes closed, her hips swaying. It was amazing how the words came to her, like a bouncy liturgy, trite and true. "Get into the groove, boy, you've got to prove your love to me-ee-ee-ee." The repairman would have to find another water supply.

"YOUR FATHER thinks you should come visit us, Fi. I told him you were busy with your new life -- that you weren't interested in hangin' around us old people, but he thinks a vacation is a good idea. So I promised him I would mention it to you anyway. How are you? Did you get my e-mail? It's the first time I've ever used the Internet -- it's very cool."

Fiona was sitting on the futon, the neighbour's cat in her lap, a pile of workbooks on the floor next to her lamp. She had been planning on doing a little marking in bed, with the help of a glass of cheap Chilean wine from the

dépanneur, when the phone rang.

"Actually, I wouldn't mind a little Florida sunshine, but I'll probably wait till the weather gets worse here." She looked out the window to Mount Royal in the distance, where the trees were still leafy and green, stalwart in the face of the rambling city that surrounded them. She imagined her parents in the shade of a broad-leafed palm tree, their lives tethered behind them like giant air balloons that had borne them up and over, to this place, this sunny beach, these lapping, lukewarm waters. "Are you guys okay? Do you like the condo?" Fiona shoved the cat away and lay down, shrugging the phone to her ear.

"The condo's great, but your dad's going nuts with nothing to fix. You know how he is with relaxation time. Hey, honey, have you heard from Henry at all?" Her mother's question was like her wardrobe, pre-planned masquerading as casual. Fiona lied.

"Mmm, hmm, I got a postcard, he seems to be doing really well. I guess I'll hear from him when he gets back. I think he really just needed this time on his own."

"You're probably right. Well, we love you and miss you, here, down south. Keep on keepin' on, eh, Fi? You just gotta bloom --"

"Where you're planted. I know, mom. Say hello to dad for me."

Fiona hung up the phone. The cat was asleep at her feet, making small engine noises. She rubbed its head until it began to purr.

"Le chat ronronne," she said, and felt her tongue vibrating at the back of her throat.

FIONA WAS careful to start all of her classes with conversation, casually.

Sometimes she talked about a current event, sometimes she took an odd or surprising fact from the back page of the *Globe & Mail*, the Social Studies feature. When the day was slow, the air stale, and she could see an eerie, computer-induced glow reflected in the eyes of her students, she revealed too much trying to lure them in, provided details of her relationship with her ex she supposed were probably best left unsaid.

"The present perfect may also be used to denote a repeated action in the past. For instance -- *Henry and I* ***have eaten*** *at that Thai restaurant many times; the coconut milk stirfry is really quite delicious...* Or -- *I* ***have tried*** *to get in touch with Henry several times this week through his mother, but she seems to know as little, if not less than I do about her son's whereabouts.*"

FIONA BEGAN having an affair with one of her students. He was shy and tall; an attractive, stooping combination, and he seemed to think she had cracked the code to the English language, that it was not something she grew up in, like a fish in water, but instead a series of secrets imparted to her by a mysterious superior. She did little to dispossess him of this notion. Later, she would wonder why more ESL teachers were not involved romantically with their students. It would occur to her that the makeshift set of symbols and gestures, the drawn-out syllables, the exaggerated charade -- all of these attempts to be *understood* -- were so very like the secret languages created and inhabited by lovers.

Henry had always told her that what he loved about her, about them, was how well they *fit*; the easy rocking of their lovemaking, their bodies twined together in sleep. With André it was different, halting. He was lanky; his limbs hung off the sides of her bed. He was all splayed parts and

complicated angles. Sex involved a constant and very physical reordering. After they had negotiated themselves to climax, André would fold himself up and begin his bilingual inventory of Fiona's body.

"Les lèvres; lips. Le cou; neck. Les épaules; shoulders. La clavicule; collarbone. Les seins..."

Fiona used to believe it was important, especially for women, to avoid perceiving one's body in parts. She had often told Henry she hoped he stressed the importance of holistic healing when he dealt with his customers. "I only have about five minutes, Fi, and these are seniors we're talking about here." Henry had been practical that way.

But when André parcelled her out the way he did, Fiona had to admit to a certain thrill, a floaty feeling at the top of her head. It was the same feeling she got sometimes at the hairdresser's, as the stylist separated and snipped, his eyes fixed on a new Fiona in the mirror, a parallel-universe Fiona, a woman Fiona could never hope to know. She supposed this was objectification.

André was from France; he had been transferred to Quebec by his software company, a large multinational whose head offices were in Chicago. Once he had mastered English he was hoping to move to the American office, but in the meantime he was happy to cook for Fiona in his small flat.

"The Québécois, they want to be their own country in the truest, bluest sense, non?" he asked her, while ladling Vichyssoise into her shallow soup bowl.

"Mmm, hmm," Fiona replied, holding the soup in her mouth for longer than necessary and noticing the complicated place setting. At home, she used a fork for everything except soup and cereal. She couldn't

understand how André had so quickly acquired such a complete set of cutlery. When she had arrived at his apartment that evening, there were three sleek forks, a stolid-looking knife and a pair of spoons winking up at her from the table. André sat down, shook his napkin between her and the soup.

"Well, yes, but they still want to maintain some links to Canada." She scraped the bottom of her soup bowl and put her spoon down, carefully, beside its mate. "That was amazing."

"Ah. So they are trying to kill two dead horses with one stone." He placed a plate of coq au vin in front of her. She began to cut it tentatively, marvelling at the weight of the knife in her hand. André looked at her as though he might have asked a question.

"Not exactly." She poured him some more wine, took a bite of chicken, rolled the sauces around on her tongue. He was still looking at her, waving the napkin in inquisitive arcs. "It's birds, or else just one dead horse," she began to explain, but André just smiled at her and rushed off into the kitchen to check on the crème brulée, shaking his head and muttering under his breath.

ONE DAY, after an afternoon of paperwork at the language school, Fiona came home to a message from Henry on the machine. She was listening to it intently when the line beeped once, then twice quickly, the code for long distance, for high priority, for do not delay! She imagined it was probably her mother's weekly check-up call and considered ignoring it, something she found almost impossible to do, despite the fact she knew the call would be re-routed to the answering machine. As a teenager, she had learned how to bypass the busy signal.

"I'd like to make an emergency breakthrough," she would tell the operator, in her best distraught voice, as her friends listened, breathless, in the background. "Yes, of course it's important, it's an *emergency*, it's an *emergency breakthrough*." Now, of course, with call-waiting, it was always an emergency, it was always possible to break through. She answered the call.

"Hello?"

"Fiona?"

It was Henry. Henry on hold and Henry on the line. "How are you Henry, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm visiting this ashram near Hyderabad and I've been taking these posture workshops." Henry was slightly breathless, and the long-distance line made his phrasing telegraphic. Declarative. Important-sounding.

"It's absolutely incredible. We do these sun salutations every morning and practise selflessness. It's great -- you should really try yoga, Fiona -- it's wonderfully freeing."

Fiona had tried yoga once, when she was going through a particularly hard time at work, although it had not been at Henry's urging. She went to the classes faithfully, twice a week for three weeks, but then she missed one for some reason -- a flu bug? a meeting? -- and hadn't gone back. Now the only thing she remembered about them was the way the instructor used to add syllables to words, stretch them out in order to guide the class, soothingly, through the exercises. Ex-hah-ah-la-tion. Trans-feh-ehr. In-hah-ah-la-tion.

"So, when are you planning to come home, Henry?" She tried to stretch out the sounds, to keep the pleading out of her voice.

"Oh, I don't think I am -- at least not for a long while -- I'm trying not

to plan at all, y'see. I met this guy from New Mexico -- we're thinking of travelling up through the Himalayas. He knows someone in Katmandu, and I've always wanted to see Tibet... Anyway, just thought I'd call and let you know I'm okay...."

Let her know he was okay? Fiona held the phone away from her ear, so that Henry's voice was still audible, but unintelligible; a news broadcast in a language not her own. What was most irksome to Fiona was that, in some crevice of her heart, she knew that Henry loved her, still, from across the wide and weird expanse of world. What she could not fathom was this voice she held in her hand like a hot potato, this Henry, but not-Henry. She brought the phone back up to her ear.

"Yeah, I'm glad you did, but I actually have to go. I have someone on the other line. But take good care of yourself and everything."

"Oh, that's exactly what I'm doing. Finally, taking care of my *self*."

Fiona hung up the phone and sat down on the floor. The only other time she had heard Henry so high, so fast-talking, was the night he had misfilled a prescription and had had to devise a plan to get the drugs back, before the patient took them, and without revealing that he had made a mistake. Then, she had attributed his flushed cheeks and frantic pacing to a worry bordering on panic, but now she wondered if he had not been thriving on the crisis. What was it that she had missed, and how could she have missed it? Was love believing in someone or something so completely that it swallowed you, and you lived quite happily, never knowing you were in the belly of the thing until suddenly you were disgorged, unprepared, into an unfamiliar world? Or maybe not so suddenly... Maybe, like some thick cloud, all that atmospheric affection gradually, secretly, seeped away.

SOME DAYS Fiona believed she had somehow, subliminally, forced Henry into his voyage of discovery and out of their relationship. She was not unaware of the power of the aside, the muffled comment, the unconscious clench (of teeth, of fists, or of less obvious parts of the anatomy). She knew that, if she squinted her mind's eye hard enough, she could come up with, if not concrete reasons, at least diaphanous premises for his leaving. Still, she had watched her parents squirm their way through such miscommunications and emerge, if not exactly butterfly-like, at least with some measure of grace from the temporary cocoons they had built for themselves.

There was only one incident that stood out in her mind as a possible catalyst for Henry's behaviour. It was an argument, more of a discussion, really, they had had one evening over a story Henry had read in the paper on his way home in the subway.

"You should read this article," he said, after she had kissed him hello at the door. He was flicking at the page and shaking his head. "It's so incredibly sad." And the story *was* sad. A Japanese exchange student studying in the States had been killed two nights earlier because of an unfortunate misunderstanding. He had been invited to a Hallowe'en party and had gamely disguised himself -- as Frankenstein or a superhero, Henry imagined. The story didn't say. Somehow, unwittingly, the student arrived at the wrong address, and the man who answered the door felt compelled to defend his home. He waved a gun at the student and yelled "Freeze!". But the student did not freeze. Instead of reaching for the sky, he had extended his hands out towards the gunman, in a gesture of pleading or prayer, or, perhaps, a half-hearted attempt at humour. A trick-or-treat in the face of

terror. The parents of the student, in their grief and incomprehension, were certain their son had misheard the gunman. "I think he must have thought the American said *Please,*" they were quoted as saying.

"It's terrible, isn't it?" Henry had asked, watching her closely. "That we can so easily mistake someone's intentions -- I mean *Freeze -- Please.* It's just bizarre."

It seemed to Fiona that Henry had missed the point. Didn't it have more to do with cultural differences, with the right to bear arms, with the rights of the individual versus the safety of the collective? And when had the Americans ever said please?

"Henry," she said, "when have the Americans ever said please?"

Henry stared at her, and seemed about to say something either witty or retributive, then shook his head, close-mouthed and disappointed. She had let him down somehow, had ignored the wet puppy-dog gleam in his eyes. He had thrown something long and loose and rope-like in her direction; a noose or a life-buoy, and she had pretended not to see it. At the time, Fiona had felt a small nugget of satisfaction lodge in her throat, but now -- picturing his collapsed expression -- she felt only a puzzled regret.

ANDRE TOOK Fiona for ice cream and she told him about Henry -- the phone calls, the ashrams. He listened without speaking throughout her account, squeezed her hand at all the hard parts. It was times like this Fiona understood that what she really wanted from André was not passion, or even *com*passion, but a sort of tender complicity; the knowledge that if she were ever arrested, the police would be on the lookout for a sidekick. Maybe it was all anybody ever wanted -- someone to help pull one over on that knave

named loneliness. Someone to drive the getaway car. André asked her what kind of ice cream she was eating.

"It's vanilla, with chunks of walnuts and stuff, with chocolate fudge swirls."

"Squirrels?" he said, and gave her a wary look.

"Oui," she replied, "les écureuils dans la crème glacée." Her accent was bad, and it made him smile.

"For all intensive purpose," he said, and looked into her eyes, "you should be forgetting about this guy. What you need is someone to put some springs in your feet."

SOMETIMES, ON those hurtling bus rides across the St. Lawrence, Fiona thought she could feel her entire life around her; as if she could actually sense the whole of it, in the atmosphere, in the sky and sea to either side of the concrete bridge. It occurred to her that her birth and death were not really that far apart, and she often imagined these momentous events detachedly, as if she were watching a well-made documentary. Her death she less saw than intuited, in flashes of light on the water, or the lurching of the bus as it changed lanes. It was discomfiting, to feel one's own death, but it was not frightening. It made her think of Henry and his searching, and most times it made her feel used up and a bit empty -- *épuisée* was the word in French. But what seemed more revelatory to Fiona, although she supposed they were less far-fetched, were the dream trances in which she was introduced to her beginnings. Fiona, who had never been able to remember her childhood (a fact that had prompted her to remark jokingly to friends that this was either because it was incredibly traumatic or incredibly uneventful), this same Fiona

could see her head crowning through her mother's vagina, scraggly and red; could feel the soft grapefruit of it in the doctor's large palm, and could sense a cry straining in her lungs, like a breath, only more emphatic.

FIONA SAT on her balcony one day in early September, staring out across the hydro wires and TV antennae to the red and gold-tipped trees at the top of the mountain and thought to herself that she did not feel lonely. "I do not feel lonely," she said to the neighbour cat, who was eating what looked like the remains of some old poutine on the balcony next to hers. "I have not felt lonely for some time now." She thought that she missed Henry a little, in the same way she sometimes ached thinking of a view she had been forced to leave behind, or the way her feet used to carry her, instinctively, to the nearest bus stop, and afterwards she could not recall exactly how she got there. But she did not feel lonely.

She was shading her eyes, straining to see the time on the clock tower three streets over when she saw the concierge on the neighbouring roof. He was poking around with what looked like a broom handle, prodding at the tennis balls and empty coke cans that had landed next to the miraculous mounds of grass that grew out of the gravel. She watched him for a moment, then shouted a hello, feeling a bit embarrassed and voyeuristic at not having identified herself at the first sight of him. He turned and smiled at her.

"You know, the woman who used to live here, she would grow moss up here, then use it in her artwork. It was quite beautiful, really. You do artwork?" He walked over to the edge of the roof, closer to Fiona's balcony.

"No. Well, sort of." Lately she had taken to doodling on napkins and the backs of photocopies -- swirls and spirals -- small vortexes that went on

forever. "I have the rent for you, I can give it to you when you come down." Fiona gestured towards the fire escape.

"No, no, no, you can give it to me here." The concierge pointed to the roof and then to the distance between himself and Fiona; a deep, dark elongated rectangle between the buildings. He extended his stick across the gap and grinned.

"Oh no, it's okay, I can give it to you when you come down." Fiona looked down into the gap and half-shrugged an apology. The concierge began picking up bits of leftover moss and string, in the hopes, she realized, of fashioning some sort of sticky grabber for the end of his stick. "Uh, I have Scotch tape," she said and went inside to find her chequebook. When she came out he was tying a pop can carefully onto one end of the stick.

"You can roll up the cheque and push it inside the hole," he called out excitedly without looking up. But the can was too heavy and would not stay, and eventually Fiona persuaded him to extend the stick to her side as it was, without modification. She rolled the tape and fastened the cheque to the sticky spiral. The concierge drew the stick back in towards him, slowly, like a makeshift fishing pole, and retrieved the cheque from the end. Then he began to laugh. He bent his knees slightly with each gasping inhale, and Fiona was reminded of a musical she had once seen about a man dancing on a roof. It was that time of day when the sun is making up its mind to lower itself, clouds clutching at the small of its back like a pregnant woman preparing to sit.

"Thank-you," said the concierge, and wiped a tear from his cheek with the back of his hand.

"No problem," Fiona replied, and reached behind her to close the door.

This was how it was, she decided. One moment you are living with a pharmacist in a semi-detached, your life unrolling before you like satin ribbon, something pretty and smooth that catches the light, and the next -- your life is rooftops, spreading to either side of you like rectangular lily pads, the sun settling, slowly, into the dark slits between them.

Rock 'n' Roll Heaven

"WE'RE CAUGHT in a trap, and I can't walk out, because I love you too much, baby..."

The Elvis was crooning from centre stage, his blue suede shoes shuffling across the scuffed planks in a groin-first duck-walk. He wasn't too bad, really, Victor thought, although he lacked something of the slack-jawed sensuality of the real thing. Anyway, he was better than the house band; a motley group of half-assed musicians with flat shifty eyes. He wondered what Lucy thought of Rock 'n' Roll Heaven. From what he could make out, her eyes were closed. The room was dim, and they had been seated at a table in the corner, which might have been romantic if the waiter had not cursorily denied Lucy's request for a candle. Maybe she was enraptured by the mood, and the music. Victor had seen her lose herself in art or love before; her head dropping slightly to the side in a single free-floating moment of revelation or ecstasy. It was more likely, however, that she was tired, or, as she had often been lately, angry at him in a feathery, inarticulate way.

Victor had been given the tickets by one of his students at the music school. They were printed with black and red ink and had serrated tear off portions at the top and bottom. In the middle portion was a silhouette of a tiny man with a bouffant hairdo and tight pants playing an electric guitar. "Rock 'n' Roll Heaven," the tickets read, "Toronto's Very Own Las Vegas Style Show". Victor had never been to dinner theatre before, and felt a prickling of anticipation mixed with a certain degree of dread at participating in something that seemed to him depressingly grown-up, despite the fact that he had just celebrated his thirty-first birthday. It was doubtful there'd be

anything suitable on the menu for Lucy and himself, both strict vegetarians, but it *was* a free dinner, and it had been a long time since they'd had a night out together. They were both so low on cash they had spent the last six weeks recycling leftovers and dipping into the selection of canned goods Lucy had stockpiled at the back of the pantry for emergencies. More important than the free dinner, however, was this time they would spend together, away from the hum and bustle of their lives. There were things between them they needed to sniff out and dig up, to gnaw at like old soup bones, until they were both too tired of the taste, or else ready to re-bury the remains.

He was not sure when the trouble had started, but Victor knew that for the last month it had been bad. It was bad because Lucy wanted a baby and Victor didn't. Bad because Victor was of the "Wait-and-see, I still love you..." persuasion and Lucy was of the "If you love me, why can't you do this for me?" ilk. They had thrown around rationalizations; they had lobbed accusations; they had even hurled a few epithets. They were living, squintingly, in the dusky exhausted light that creeps away at the end of something; a day, a life, a love affair.

THE WAITERS were tight-lipped and slim-hipped. It had reached a point, Victor decided, where gay waiters were no longer a happy novelty, but a cranky cliché. Theirs made a half-hearted show of letting him taste the wine, which he dutifully held in his mouth for a few seconds, then, smiling widely, declared acceptable.

"As long as it's got a kick to it," he said, and started to chuckle conspiratorially, then stopped. They had ordered the least expensive bottle on the menu. Drinks were not included with dinner.

On the stage, Elvis was crooking his finger at a woman in the first row, imploring her to join him in a dance. He swivelled his hips and held out his hand to help her up onto the platform. The woman was fortyish, with short dyed strawberry blonde hair, brown lipstick smeared into the lines she had drawn around her mouth, and a thin white vinyl belt cinching the waist of her bell-bottom jeans. She giggled and sang with the King, even threw in a little bump and grind every now and again.

Victor knew there was only one way to deal with a situation like this, and that was to make it all into a big joke. He could picture himself describing the bell-bottomed woman's happy fanaticism to his friends, while laughing a laugh that had less to do with joy than with a grudging elitism. It was necessary, these days, to make fun of everything (but only slightly and never cruelly) and not to admit, in any outright manner, to your true likes and dislikes. As a musician, Victor found it easy to maintain this attitude. Then again, people could accept a little passion from him, as long as it was confined to his music.

And when Victor played his drums, nothing could touch him. He was locked into the pulse of the world; oceans, skyscrapers and mountains, CD-ROMs, seagulls and smokestacks, the pre-shudder weightlessness of orgasm -- all that mess and mystery and majesty made its way into his hands when they found their grip, loose and ready, on the sticks. He loved it all -- the smooth hush of the brushes, the goofy punctuation of the high hat, the clamour of the cymbal, the boom of the bass drum. It entered and enveloped him at once. It rocked him to his very core. Yet somehow it all floated away when he imagined a child, so tiny, dependent, and more complex and -- how else to say it? -- fleshy, than any musical score. He knew he would do anything, just

about, not to lose the feeling his drums, with their taut skins begging for touch, instilled in him.

But to be openly passionate about something meant you were engaged in life's dizzying, high-stepping dance, and to voice this, out loud, was tantamount to committing hari-kari. Cynicism was the strategy an artist or a leftie adopted for skulking around the debris of society; it was a means of not looking too hard or loving too much.

Last week one of his buddies in the film business had taken him to a premiere screening of a new 3D movie that used the latest state of the art technology to recreate the sights and sounds of the disappearing rainforest. Victor had sat, rapt, throughout the entire show, his head throbbing in time with the soundtrack. It was like a mirage. It *was* a mirage. Several times he found himself reaching out to touch a quivering leaf, or ducking out of the trajectory of a squawking tropical bird. Later, outside, his friend remarked that it had reached a point where the imitation was always more interesting that the authentic, that the closer you came to recreating the original, the more fascinating and awe-inspiring your project became. Victor understood from this that irony was a stance you had to maintain constantly; a state from which it was ill-advised to fall.

It sometimes seemed to Victor that Lucy had not so much fallen from that state as been born completely unaware of it. She often said things that shocked him in their sheer guilelessness. Once, while they were discussing the possibility of a child, he had listened to her free-fall into fantasy as she hypothesized about everything from their future child's star sign (Taurus, she was quite sure of it) to the colour of wallpaper and the model of bassinet for the baby's new room.

"Lucy," he said, and he knew his tone was gratingly reasonable, "we rent a small one-bedroom apartment. We sometimes have trouble making the rent. How are we going to afford all this?"

She had looked at him as though he were from another planet. It was a planet where people whose thoughts behaved like the members of a marching band, proceeding in orderly fashion along a prescribed route, were welcomed and revered. It was a planet in a universe far, far, away from Lucy's world.

Victor gulped at his wine.

VICTOR WAS drunk off of one glass of red wine. Lucy could tell because of the way he ended his sentences too soon, as if they had fallen just short of the breadth of his ideas. They were discussing stockbrokers, feeling magnanimous.

"Y'know they're not all bad, Fadi's friend Mike knows this one guy who teaches transcendental meditation on the weekends, and he only invests in those companies that are, y'know, kind to the environment and stuff..." Victor lifted his empty glass then put it down again.

"Some of them really do enjoy their jobs, and they're smart too, I mean you have to be to survive in that world." Lucy was widening her eyes and shoving her chin forward across the table like an airborne poker chip.

"Hey," Victor said, "there's nothing wrong with being shell fish."

"I guess not." But Lucy did not believe this. There was something very wrong with being selfish. It meant that you dove straight into that murky meanness that pooled in the bottom of your heart and just stayed there, paddling around in the lukewarm ooze until you couldn't or wouldn't

remember anything else. Lately, she was afraid that she was being dragged down, unaware, into that part of herself that defied and outwitted any impulse towards good deeds.

Lucy was a poet. She was a poet who yearned. She used to yearn for the perfect word, or the perfect phrase; the way a word, just a word, could spring up off the page and hit you, SMACK! between the eyes or between the nipples. But these days she was sick of words; their sneaky way of sheathing meaning. She was sick of art and its prickly all-over-the-placeness. Art was extemporaneous and everlasting, it was frivolous and momentous, it was duplicitous and sincere. Why couldn't art be just one thing? The one thing Lucy knew she would understand was the hard grasp of a child's hand in hers.

Lucy's parents were from Poland and had come to this country with "nothing but the clothes on our backs and hope in our hearts." Her mother couldn't understand the path she had chosen. "Lucy! A poet? If you want to succeed you've got to make something of yourself." And, now, Lucy realized, she really did want to make something of herself. Quite literally.

When Lucy was asked to describe her work, on grant applications, or at cocktail parties, she usually talked about "the poetry of the everyday".

"I write about the banal, the menial, you know, how the universal, the transcendental can be encapsulated in the small, seemingly inconsequential occcurrences that surround us. I mean I write about whatever happens to me, I guess." But what was now dawning on Lucy, like a lazy sunrise, was the fact that she was no longer actually living the everyday, she was merely observing it, tracking and attempting to trap it at every turn. A baby was an anchor, an absolute, a tangible. It was impossible to just sit back and observe a baby. A

baby had needs, it drew you into its orbit surely and quickly. A baby, Lucy thought to herself, was hope incarnate. This was trite, but true, Lucy knew. Trite, but true. She repeated the phrase in her head and swayed along to the music.

The Elvis stepped down from the stage and made his way over to where she was sitting. "I juss' wanna be your teddy bear..." he sang and took her hand. Lucy could see where his ochre-coloured pancake make-up had begun to run from the sweat. He had very neat teeth, this Elvis. They were a bleached synthetic white and almost perfectly square. He brought his face closer to hers, and, as he whispered his last note, kissed her, softly, yearningly, on the cheek. Then he turned, and, throwing one last smoldering glance her way, made his way back up to the stage. For a moment, Lucy actually felt some of the starstruck wonder that was being demanded of her, but then she remembered. She was angry. She was angry at Victor and his smug practicality; his regimented rhythm, his one-two approach to their relationship.

"Victor," she whispered urgently, and reached out to take his free hand, "without a baby our relationship is nothing but a sort of bivouac of love."

Victor, who had been balancing a forkful of pasta primavera, allowed a soggy piece of broccoli and a spiral noodle to slide back into his bowl. "What does bivouac mean?"

"Something temporary, like we're just camping out indefinitely, with very little shelter from the storm."

He stared at her, her round flushed cheeks and small slim wrists. "And you think a baby will be shelter from the storm?"

"Yes, well, no, but it will be something, something real, you know?"

"And this?" Victor drew the space between them with his hands. "This is not real?"

"Of course it is, it's just that I'm not sure it's enough." Lucy sighed and shifted her chair to the side so that she could see past him to the stage, where the M.C. had donned a sombrero and was strumming an out-of-tune ukelele.

Victor understood this signal to mean the conversation was on hold until Lucy came up with another word or set of words to describe how she was feeling. Sometimes he wondered if what Lucy said was ever only what Lucy was thinking. It seemed more likely to him that she spent these silent pauses skimming through her very own in-house thesaurus, attempting to locate the most exact and unique linguistic receptacles for each emerging thought. He used to admire this in her, the way she could riff off words, savouring them like hard candies on her tongue. He remembered how entranced she had been the first time he described his playing, how she'd made him repeat words like "hemeola".

"It's one rhythm sort of imposed over another rhythm," he had explained to her perfunctorily, and turned back to tuning his drum heads.

"Ah," she exclaimed, and when he looked up, her eyes were shining as if she had just been handed a golden egg. But Lucy was never so pleased with Victor's actual rhythms. Just the other day she had opened the door to his practice room, her mouth pinched, eyes narrowed.

"Do you think you could maybe not *bang* quite so loudly? I really need to have absolute quiet to think."

And yet here she was, in Rock 'n' Roll Heaven, snapping her fingers and stamping her feet. "If you believe in forever," the band sang, "life is just

a one-night stand..." and Lucy bounced up and down to the beat. When she noticed Victor looking at her she picked up the program and made her own little show of studying it.

A new concert-comedy show taking you back to the 50's and 60's heyday of rock 'n' roll! Live music performed by North America's most talented singer/impressionists and the Rock 'n' Roll Heaven band! the program trumpeted. Lucy reread the paragraph four times.

When she was a child she had believed a heyday was literally a day when one shouted Hey! either in surprise or indignation. But now the only heydays that came her way were the ones where she found herself calling out, loudly, for attention. *Hey you! Over here! Hey!* With a baby, Lucy knew, there would be no shouting for recognition. A baby knew where its loyalties lay; a baby was born with a built-in allegiance. There was an unconditional there Lucy knew she could work with.

Back on the stage the M.C. was winding down his between-act patter. "And next up, ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce to you a man whose career spanned over forty years, including his work as a soloist and as a lead vocalist for The Drifters, the fabulous Mr. Ben... E.... King!"

The clumsy drum roll crescendoed in a tinny clap and the band launched into its intro. Victor allowed his head to sink into his hands, and surreptitiously plugged his ears with his thumbs. He scanned the restaurant. Across from their table, in a better lit area, a fifty-something mob boss was talking animatedly, romancing his spring chicken of a lady friend. Victor stared at the woman's cartoon cleavage and the chunky gold rings on the man's fingers. He watched as the man leaned over, whispered something in the woman's ear, then leaned over again to kiss her neck.

Lucy was craning her neck forward to see the stage.

"Hey Lucy!" He called to her from across what seemed an insurmountable distance. There was a mountain range, or a desert between them, he thought. A land mass that would require expensive specialized equipment or hump-backed mammals to cross.

"Ooh, goody," Lucy said, when she saw him looking at her, "I love Ben E. King," and let out an uninhibited squeak of delight. Victor was sure Ben E. King was in fact singing a Sam Cooke tune, but he didn't say anything.

"Now I don't claim to be an A student, but I'm tryin' to be..." Ben E. King was sweating and laughing as he sang, wiping his brow with the back of his sleeve. Lucy was singing along.

"'Cause maybe by being an A student, baby, I could win your love for me..."

LUCY AND Victor met in the emergency room of Mount Sinai hospital three years before. Victor had been attacked by a homeless man while fishing in his pocket for change, and Lucy was in for an asthma attack prompted by high pollen counts and a cloying humidity that sealed in the pollution over the city like a giant tupperware lid.

"What happened to you?" Victor remembered Lucy asking, with a note of alarm in her voice, between wheezes.

He had shrugged and swallowed the lump that had been forming in his throat since he arrived, panting and bleeding, at the hospital. This woman was too primed for conversation, he decided, too ready to collect friends in a place where alliances were, by their very nature, temporary and forced.

The emergency room was not as he remembered it from the occasional, casual childhood visit. It was not as clean or as antiseptic as he would have liked. There was a forced matter-of-factness to the nurses and he was struck by the sticky smell of resignation in the air. The urgency and adrenaline that had fuelled his trip to the hospital had been replaced by the realization that there were no instant cures here, no quicker picker uppers or Mr. Fix-its. Instead, he could see an uncomfortable knowledge spreading like a slow stain in everybody's eyes. It was the realization that they had all, somewhat unwittingly, entered a place where time was protracted, and relief deferred.

The homeless man had punched him twice, hard, in the face, and, as he came stumbling into the hospital, a nurse had handed him a white rectangle of gauze, which he was now pressing over the cut above his eye. His lip was still bleeding slightly, and when he reached up to check it, the florescent lights made the blood on his finger appear a glowing purple colour, much less attention-seeking than the fire engine red that had poured forth on the street. Victor felt his face contort and realized he was dangerously close to tears.

The wheezing woman was staring at him, at the blood. She had long dirty blonde hair which was pulled back into a messy knot at the back of her head, and as she stared she pulled strands from behind her ears and twisted them around her fingers.

"Maybe I should get you a nurse." She got up and began scanning the room. There was one nurse in sight; Victor could see her pink-skirted rump and well-muscled calves as she bent to assess a coughing child. He turned to the woman, who was waving and calling in the nurse's direction.

"No, that's okay, really. Please --"

She stopped waving and looked at him inquiringly. Her eyes were a uniform bottomless brown, the eyebrows plucked into thin scraggly arcs. There was something in the slight upturn of her lips (half-smile, half-hopelessness) that invited confession.

"I really was trying to help... I thought he understood... He didn't have to hit me quite so hard..." The words came tumbling from his mouth, clumsy and unbidden. Victor realized he had not yet reached the point where he could shape his experience into what would surely become a compelling urban anecdote. He was still too mired in the stony soup of emotion that had overtaken him the moment he saw that fist, all taut skin and knobby knuckles, sailing, sailing, sailing towards him. The woman nodded and raised her eyebrows, then took a loud rasping breath. Victor reached over and touched her arm.

"Are *you* alright?" He felt suddenly ashamed at having so harshly judged her. A place like this demanded solidarity, even if it was a hungry makeshift solidarity born of sublimated competition. This was no place for survival of the fittest! Even the merely fit were frowned upon in the ER. It was the damaged and the weak, having dropped away from the herd, who found their way here, gazing longingly back at those who had galloped on to greener pastures.

The woman smiled and held out her hand for him to shake. "I'm Lucy," she said and took his non-bloody hand in hers.

"Victor. Pleased to meet you. You know when I was a kid I used to want to hurt myself?"

Lucy nodded encouragingly.

"There was this one guy, Gary Sherman, who broke his forearm right

before the end of school -- grade five I think it was -- and the girls just flocked towards him. They all wanted to sign it or ask him how it happened. It was his right arm too, so he got to cruise through the year doing all the tests orally. Then one day he came to school and he had his brother write *I fell off my bike* with three exclamations in black magic marker on the bottom of the cast, so that if anyone asked he just had to flash it like this..." Victor bent his arm and raised it in a stiff yet triumphant salute. "Man, I loved that guy."

Lucy leaned forward. "For me it was Tanya Skelton. Her finger got slammed in the car door, and the top of it actually came right off." She stopped to act out the accident, squealing and following the flying bit of finger through the air with her eyes. "They had to transport it in a baggie with some ice, then graft it back on. It was the grossest and sexiest thing she could have done."

Victor nodded sympathetically.

(What Lucy did not tell Victor was that when she was twelve, she had been rushed to this same emergency room, barely able to stand, hands clutched to her belly, emitting soundless, open-mouthed cries. Her appendix had ruptured, the toxins leaking out inside of her like an oil spill. The pain came not in waves, which Lucy had always imagined as smooth finite swells of discomfort, but in long languorous bouts of pure agony. When the pain did ebb, briefly, she was only lucid for long enough to be indignant. Whose body was this, rebelling and reneging? How could it be that her workings, the very stuff of her, was so unfathomable; that there was a whole untamed world inside she would never be privy to? Then she would be whisked back into the pain; the nausea and stabbing relentlessness, until finally, thankfully, she felt the world go first gray, then grainy, and found no amount of blinking

could bring it back.)

Later Victor would tell his friends that this was when he fell for Lucy, and sometimes he believed it. It was true that, listening to her talk, he had felt an immediate, unprecedented, and not unromantic sense of camaraderie spring up between them. Still he was not sure she was the kind of woman he could "see himself" with, whatever that meant. He thought it meant she was too prone to metaphors, and not, as his mother would have put it, "hardheaded" enough.

Sometimes Victor believed it was the similarity of their injuries -- the fact that they were both so unprepared for the malignance of the city they loved -- that had bound them together. Still, they were city dwellers from birth -- they should have been used to it -- the way the environment can turn, rear up and come at you, claws extended, a murderous, retributive look in its eyes. But it *had* shocked them, and he thought it must have been this shock, or the nonchalance they adopted in its stead, that determined the course of their relationship.

VICTOR WAS still hungry. He scanned the restaurant for the uppity waiter. There was one woman working the floor. She was lanky with a beaked nose and beige hair. Over her arm she carried a large basket from which she was grabbing crusty buns with long silver tongs and tossing them roughly onto the diners' bread plates. Victor suspected she was a witch. A large screen had been lowered above the stage and the MC was announcing a John Lennon retrospective slide show. Lucy was twirling her hair around her index finger, examining the ends for telltale splits. For once, the band was silent, its members slumped over their instruments, arms hanging limply at their

sides.

The first slide was a close up of Lennon, his trademark granny glasses perched low on his nose. There was a loud crackle, then the PA system began to play.

"All we are saying, is give peace a chance..."

Victor sat back in his chair and focused his attention on the images flashing by. In his head the projected photographs began to merge with scenes from a dream that he had had the night before. The dream was coming back to him in elusive snatches, like someone or something familiar glimpsed from around a corner. In the dream, he was in a taxi cab, with too many people, and the taxi cab was speeding down a large street that might have been a highway. No, it wasn't a highway, it was definitely a wide street. The people in the taxi cab were arguing and laughing. He was pretty sure they were on their way home from a party. He was quite certain he had been drinking, and wanted very badly to be home.

On the screen John, Paul, Ringo and George were bopping open-mouthed in their stove pipe pants, then striding close-mouthed and serious across a strawberry field.

When the taxi stopped, Victor remembered, it was at a loading dock, with boxes and shipping crates piled high on all sides.

"Y'say you want a revolution, we'ell y'know, we all wanna change the world..."

Lucy was not watching the slide show. She was watching Victor, whose eyes were trained like missiles on the large screen. His hair had grown longish since she'd met him, the sides starting to fan out slightly above his ears, and she could see a patch of shaded skin just above his chin that he had

missed with the shaver. His mouth was drawn in upon itself as if he were about to chew on something soft and extraordinary tasting and she could see the few soft hairs that sprouted on his fingers as he rapped his knuckles on the table. She wanted to touch those hairs.

"Y'know it's gonna be alright, it's gonna be alright!"

Lucy knew she had said things, petty, reckless things that flew from her mouth like drunken sparrows, flitting and dangerous. She and Victor were themselves like hungry vultures who circled around and around both each other and the hapless unborn, until they all plummeted, graceless and dizzy, to the ground. Life, Lucy decided, was either boring or melodramatic, and almost always sentimental. Life was not art, no matter how hard she tried to make it so.

"Oh-blah-dee, oh-blah-dah, life goes on, la, la, la..."

If you sat back and hummed along, she realized, this was what it was about: cliché after cliché, strung like pearls through the years. And maybe it was dangerous to rely on them, those universal truths, but it was also dangerous to ignore them completely in the search for something more unique. Maybe this, this life that surrounded them like ozone, fragile and already full of holes, maybe it was enough.

VICTOR COULDN'T understand why the cab was stopping. He just wanted to go home to Lucy and his drums. He was tired, and beneath the laughter of the people from the cab, who had spilled out into the spaces between the stacked cargo, he could hear a thin wailing sound that made him want first to flee and then to sleep. But the cabbie had disappeared, and Victor's cabmates seemed unconcerned about his whereabouts. They were passing around a

mickey of gin and a crumpled pack of cigarettes.

John and Yoko were lounging, naked, across the expanse of the screen.

"I wanna hold your ha-ah-ah-and, I wanna hold your hand." Victor really did want to hold Lucy's hand, but the dream would not let him.

As he surveyed the loading dock, the wailing seemed to get louder, until he had no choice but to seek out its source. He pushed aside some refrigerator-sized boxes, which seemed to him inappropriately light, and found his way into a clearing of sorts. Between a forklift and another fridge box stood a giant iron cage. Inside the cage was the source of the wailing; a young, very frightened buffalo. The beast's fur was wet, and, as he drew closer, Victor noticed that it was shivering. When he reached through the bars to touch the wet fur, the buffalo shuffled backwards slightly, then resumed its keening. Victor pressed his face up against the cage. He wanted nothing more than to be able to comfort the creature, to cradle its shaggy unkempt head against his chest. He peered through the bars. "Hey," he said. The buffalo raised its eyes to meet his, and as it did, its wail became less like a cry and more like a song. It was the most melancholy and astonishing melody Victor had ever heard. He might have described it as otherworldly, but for its texture, which was so imperfect and full-bodied that it could only have had earthly origins.

FOR THE finale, two large dry ice machines released clouds of chalky smoke into the dining room, and the band broke into a Beatles medley. In the hallway that led to the kitchen, Lucy could just make out the waiters, who were leaning up against the walls, swaying their hips and snapping their fingers. She smiled at them and blew a kiss in solidarity, though she was sure

they could not see her through the haze.

Victor reached over and took Lucy's hand in his.

"And when I touch you, I feel happy inside...."

Something inside him opened up; a giant flap in his soul. He felt a slow leak of love for Lucy and for the band, with their well-worn progressions, and trite trio of chords.

"Lucy, I just can't. Last night there was this buffalo in a cage... He was singing, and the song -- Lucy -- it was like a song from the saddest, rawest part of the world..."

Lucy was nodding at him, like she had that first night in the hospital. It was all too complicated, Victor thought: the dream, the buffalo, the sadness, the baby. He squeezed Lucy's hand and took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry Lucy, I'm just not ready."

"Help! I need somebody! She loves me, yeah, yeah, yeah!" the band sang.

As Lucy was lying on the operating table on the day of her appendectomy, the surgeon prepped to make the first cut, the anesthesiologist had whispered in her ear, urgently, "Taste like onions, taste like onions?" Less of a question than a frantic affirmation. No, she shook her head, no! Fiercely, she denied. Until, miraculously, it did, she did! She tasted onions! Then, nothing. Blankness. And when she woke up, the very first thing she felt was the wincing, mincing pain of the stitches they had laid like a railway across her abdomen. The most painful poisonous part of her had been excised while she slept, her skin now sutured neatly over the wound.

That was how she forgave Victor, undeniably and miraculously. Sometimes forgiveness will do that, creep up on you, despite yourself, and

without warning, like hate or art. Like the taste of onions when you least expect it.

The Homebody

Through the front window, which she had arranged that morning -- yellow daffodils and tangerine tulips for spring -- Eva could see the commuters slowing, although their urgency remained, tucked in the nervous extremity of their limbs; tapping toes, twitching fingers. She watched the people as they passed by; a crowd of the stubborn and the homesick, eager for the comfort of their own living rooms. Eva was also anxious to be home. She looked down at her left breast, touched it, and brushed at the collar of her jacket, as if at a spot, or a piece of fluff, then shook her head and watched as three tiny carnation petals floated from her too-long bangs to the grimy floor. The petals must have got caught when she was wrapping a bouquet, folding the paper expertly around the carefully selected flowers.

She locked the cash register, turned out the lights, and pulled the door shut behind her. Outside, the neon sign above the green and white awning flickered its message: *Garden of Eden Florist -- For Every Occasion!* Beside the blue lettering, two nudes, male and female, held hands, their bodies outlined in hot pink, their private parts punctuated by happy-faced daisies.

Eva joined the crowd on the sidewalk and allowed herself to be jostled along to the subway. On the way down to the platform she stood very still, tried to suppress the nauseated feeling that always overtook her on the escalator. Today the queasiness was compounded by the fact that it was Friday -- Alan would be home in three days -- and Eva was not yet sure what she was going to tell him about the woman she had discovered in the bed. She stepped onto the subway, her bag bumping her knees. As she sat she rubbed her thighs, then lowered her eyelashes on the Toronto rushhour.

The train arrived at Museum. It was almost Eva's stop. She felt herself being bounced back and forth between commuters as if in a lurching, poorly anchored pinball machine. Then she felt the smoothness of a Bay Street businessman's suit against her cheek, and looked up into a pair of placid eyes. She noticed they were the same colour as the man's briefcase. She imagined him putting on his features everyday with his necktie, positioning them carefully on his tanned face. It was a mystery to Eva how other people wore their selves; how they moved through their lives as if they were confident of the boundaries of their bodies.

In the downtown florist where Eva worked, she often catered to business men's harried floral needs. They would hurry in through the door, shake the rain off their umbrellas, or stamp the snow from their boots, then turn their gazes towards her. She would look up from the petals she was sweeping or the water she was changing and ask, "May I help you?" "Yes," they would say, "yes, I think you can."

The subway stopped, then stopped, then stopped again; a series of brakings whose noise broke even the purgatorial silence of those unwilling and inbetween.

Now Eva found herself crouching over a woman's lap, having narrowly avoided sitting in it. The woman stared at an ad for apple-flavored breakfast bars and wrinkled her nose. Beside the breakfast bar ad was a large photo of Michelangelo's "David", his body lithe and white, and a small but colourful reproduction of the Sistine Chapel, positioned in such a way that God's heavy hand pointed directly at David's vulnerable-looking chest. Adam seemed to have been conveniently forgotten. Under this collage was a message which entreated commuters to *Come check out this hunk at the*

Uffizi Gallery! Call Paradise Travel NOW for more info on rates and package deals. The breakfast bar woman cleared her throat and sniffed at Eva, who shuffled backwards slightly to avoid unneccessary physical contact.

Eva would normally have found her fellow travellers cold and unaccommodating, but today she found their reactions, however slight, somewhat comforting. She positioned herself in the middle of the car and held tightly to a pole. She could see her reflection in the window as they slid through the tunnel. When the train reached the station she found herself moving towards the opening doors, and had already stepped onto the platform before she realized she was at the wrong stop. She had been staring at her own reflection -- a smudgy-looking face punctuated by too-large earrings and framed by the small window in the silver sliding door -- and she had lost her bearings.

EVA LET herself into the apartment, flicked on the light, and kicked off her shoes in a series of unthinking motions. She was planning on doing the dishes. This calmed her, this prospect of hands in hot soapy water, feet planted shoulder-width apart, whole place settings passing assembly-line-like through her system of wash-rinse-dry. Besides, the kitchen held no secrets. She had domesticated it long ago. In the bedroom housekeeping seemed an intrusive, almost colonizing task. She was only sometimes ashamed and usually awed by the clusters of dust which grew in wild clusters in the corners of her ceiling. There were fewer rules in the bedroom, especially since the other woman had arrived.

Recently she had found one of her sweat socks hanging from the stained glass lampshade in the hallway. When she picked it up to sniff, the

odour was terrible; a heady, rubbery stink. Still, she had not been able to bring herself to wash the sock, although she could not say why. It sat, perched on the rim of her hamper for days, until she finally picked it up, rolled it into a neat ball and tucked it away at the back of her closet. On another occasion (again the result of a suspicious smell) Eva had discovered a tray of microwave lasagna nestled under the bed, half-eaten and moldy, the cheese forming a large solid puddle.

Eva knew her domesticity was one of the qualities Alan most admired in her. It wasn't, she reasoned, that she liked housework. In fact, she loathed it. Ever since the day she had come home from school to find her mother scrubbing obsessively at an elusive spot on her family's living room rug, cursing with the mad certainty of Lady Macbeth, Eva had vowed to clean only when necessary and to stick to earth tones when it came to carpeting. No, it wasn't that she liked housework, it was that she loved her home. It was old, and poorly insulated, with dreary hallways, too narrow for even a shopping cart to pass through. But it was hers. Rented, yes, but occupied, filled up, by her. She remembered how many times she had dreamt of a home of her own as a child; how she obsessed more than the other girls over the playing of house; how she had snuck out from beneath the auspices of her mother, old army blankets in tow, to drape the trees of the ravine near their house and watch the sun set through the thinning fibres and the canopy of branches. It was a home, a haven fully of pointy sticks and scurrying potato bugs, but a home nonetheless.

From the window on the third floor of her flat Eva could see the red, white and green flag of the Italian Embassy flying in the distance; her gateway to the Old Country. She had never been to Italy, she just loved all things

Italian. Before Alan moved in she would sit at the window for hours and watch the comings and goings of the women and men who frequented the embassy and imagine their impassioned and heavily-accented wranglings. There was something wild and free in their gestures, something angry and wilful in their embraces. The Italian fantasies always ended with dishes being broken and athletic lovemaking in the midst of tangled sweaty sheets and heaving bosoms.

Eva reached her hands down into the dishwater and felt around for another plate. She liked to do the large dinner plates first, then move on to the smaller stoneware, and finish up with the silverware. She wondered how it would feel to break a dish, purposefully, to send it flying free without regret or reproach. She thought about all the times she had broken dishes accidentally; a wine glass slipping from her hands as if bidden by some household demon, a crystal platter sent flying in an unpremeditated arc. And her mother's voice, quiet and slightly querulous, rising from the debris. *Butter* fingers, Clumsy *Girl*. So that Eva, as a child, had begun to think of herself as the Butter Girl, a soft yellowish person who could not quite get a grip.

But the Italians were different; they made a point of letting go, of lashing out. She knew that not all Italians acted this way, was aware of the stereotypical nature of her daydreaming. In fact, it was usually this shamed realization that pulled Eva out of her reveries, back to the scene framed by her drafty bay window.

She used to love the Toronto skyline, its clean lines and neat angles. Lately, however, she could not shake the feeling that there was something lifeless and empty about the buildings that pierced the clouds in well-behaved

rows. In the past, she had imagined the CN Tower as a concrete beanstalk; a modern passageway to the estate of a rich and angry giant in the sky, although she had heard Alan refer to it several times, with a smirk, as "The world's tallest *erection* to progress." Now, when she followed it upwards with her eyes, she saw only a towering but lifeless tree, a tree without branches or roots, that had sprung up only to prove it could thrive in the murky air that surrounded it.

Once the cutlery tray was full, Eva pulled a glass from the side of the dish rack and began dropping several pieces of silverware at a time into it, rinsing them in handfuls. She knew that when she was finished she would have to consider going into the bedroom. This prospect should have slowed her movements, added deliberation to her well-honed dishwashing reflexes. Instead, it was making her angry. She had resolved that she was not going to sleep on the couch tonight. There was no use denying that the woman in the bedroom scared her. What was most frightening was not simply that she was there, but that she somehow made Eva feel like the foreigner.

It was the day after Alan left that she had first noticed signs of the woman, although, when she scrolled back through her memory, she could recall other incidences that may have been clues. One weekend, when Alan had gone away to visit his father, she had come home on Saturday night to what she supposed was a neighbour's party. Strangely, as she approached her own apartment door, she could swear she heard the steady thrumming of a bass line and the patter of a rock music station chattering behind it. If she strained, she could even make out the accompanying thump of an enthusiastic, if heavy-footed dancer. Yet, when she opened the door, the living room was empty, the TV a blank-faced totem staring back at her.

But that day after Alan's departure, there was no doubt in her mind that the woman had moved in, and that she was not going to be a gracious houseguest. Eva found toe nail clippings with flecks of red polish on her bathroom floor, and an electric blue mascara perched on the rim of the sink. When she tiptoed towards the bedroom, she was greeted by a loud squawk, of the sort she imagined a pteradactyl might emit if threatened, although she could sense the woman was beautiful and vain, less like a leathery-winged thing than a preening, earthbound peacock. But, she could not help but also feel that the woman *was* prehistoric, from a time before incidents and events cloaked themselves in an order that surged forward, always, and refused anomaly. She was a shored-up creature of long ago, who had lived unnoticed, adapting to her changing surroundings, hiding from the kind of modern day disasters that might one day cause her extinction. She was an astonishing and irate refugee from paradise.

Eva was glad Alan was away. He would have smiled at her nervousness, waved away her theories as though they were untraceable smells, and nibbled at her ear.

It had been two months since he'd left, his guitar case strapped to his back like a baby. Maybe she should have gone with him. He had asked her enough times, in that "Live a little!" tone of his. But Tucson just seemed so far away. Eva could imagine going there for a visit -- she would wear pretty scarves in her hair and they would rent a convertible. She thought she would have liked to see tumbleweed. But Alan had said three months, at least, and there weren't enough green, growing things there to keep Eva occupied. Tucson, Arizona. The first time she had seen it written she pronounced it completely wrong, assuming it was spelt phonetically. Even

now, she had to constantly remind herself that the first syllable rhymed with "moo". Alan teased her endlessly about that, kissing her collarbone between jibes. Eva wondered, now that he was gone, if he had really wanted her to come, or whether he simply enjoyed seeing her discomfort at having to refuse him.

"I'm a homebody," she had told him, and was embarrassed to find herself stamping her feet with what she imagined must be indignation.

"And what a body," Alan said, with a certain degree of proprietary pride, while tugging at her sweatshirt. They made love in the hallway, rolling up against the baseboards. When Eva came, she pictured the hot pink in the centre of a two-tone lily; the way the colour seeps through the white of the petals. She was so busy with the image and the feeling it induced she did not cry out.

"Honey," said Alan, "what were you thinking about?"

"I was thinking about a flower," she replied, leaning her head against his shoulder.

"Uh-huh, figures. That's why you don't come, you know, you're too easily distracted." He pulled on his jeans and kissed her on the forehead.

"I'm gonna miss you," Alan said when he left, and pressed his hand to his ribcage. "It's like you're a part of me or something." He had ducked out the door, the collar of his shirt pointing up from his rainjacket like a backward glance. And Eva used to feel as though she were a part of Alan, an offshoot of his personality. The first time they made love she had the curious sensation that it was she who was inside of him, as if some seed of her body had sensed an ancient kinship. It was airy inside Alan, and blue; there were no anchors there, only sky and space, and the thin wispy cloud of his spirit.

Just being close to his body distracted her, sent her mind toppling over itself so that she could not think straight.

She remembered some of the late night telephone conversations they had when they first started seeing each other; how thrilled she'd felt to finally discover someone she recognized, who seemed to recognize her. It was if, she told her friend Grace, hesitatingly, as if they had a shared history that could only be glimpsed or grasped in the pauses between the words, and it was those wordless pauses she lived for when they spoke. She listened carefully to his breath, and imagined she could hear his thoughts with each exhalation.

Sometimes she thought Alan's fascination with her had something to do with her job; the fact that she spent her days amongst the exotic blossoms of the tropics, even in the midst of Toronto's slushy dun-coloured days. She had once tried telling him as much.

"You know flowers are a plant's way of dressing up, attracting a mate. They're foreplay, really. Maybe that's why so many people love them."

Alan had looked at her funny, as if he didn't recognize her. "You're crazy, Ev. Flowers, man, they're innocence, they're love, they're nature's way of prettying things up, of making them pure."

Eva dunked the final fork and decided to leave the garlic press for later. The thought of peeling the leftover bits of clove from the grate after it had been marinating in dishwater turned her stomach. She decided to listen to some music in the living room to prepare herself for the ordeal that lay ahead. The stereo was Alan's, a fancy one with an equalizer and various other knobs she was afraid to touch. Since he had moved in, she had annexed most of her tapes to a stack of shoeboxes she kept in her closet. They were mostly mixed tapes, with swirly lettering on the spines that read "Cool

Tunes for Ev" or "Mucho Mega Mix" and they contained disparate selections from her teenage years, as well as more recent popular classics. She decided she was not going to risk a premature encounter with the woman in order to retrieve them. She glanced over Alan's neatly stacked CD collection. It was arranged alphabetically according to artist and was comprised, for the most part, of jazz recordings by male musicians. Alan believed her music was crappy but sort of cute. Eva had once told Alan she believed his music was complicated and (she was proud of this word) *inaccessible.*

Maybe listening to music was a stupid idea. She walked in measured steps from corner to corner of the large room, counted the plaster of Paris swirls on the ceiling then sat, heavily, in the corner of the bay window, under the waving stems of her favourite spider plant.

It was a hazy view -- the clouds were hanging low in the sky and the pane needed washing. Still, she could just make out the Wongs' dog on the front porch across the street. The dog was watching a lame pigeon, lazily. A businessman was striding down the sidewalk, his briefcase swinging by his side like a pendulum.

Eva closed her eyes.

Last night she had dreamt of her first date with Alan. They had met in the hardware store at the end of her street as she stood, straining to reach the lightbulbs on the top shelf. When her fingers finally reached the edge of the lowest box, she felt the stack begin to teeter and closed her eyes in anticipation of the tinkle of frosted glass and filament on linoleum. Instead, she was treated to a showbiz-like "Ta-dah!" from a tall bearded man in whose arms the lighbulbs were precariously balanced. They had gone for coffee and four-fruit pie at a local café. Alan still made jokes about how Eva lit up his life.

Eva supposed it was the sort of story made for family legend.

In the dream, Alan's face became a map, his nose the boot of Italy, and the café fell away into the Mediterranean. Eva was floating above the scene like a genie. In her hand she held a golden fork. When she pointed her fork to a spot on the map, she found herself being whisked down past the compass and between the lines of longitude and latitude until the sensation of falling was too heady and she woke up, her hands clutching at the upholstery.

Eva opened her eyes.

The Wongs' dog was stepping tentatively around the porch now, lifting its paws high in the air like a fancy show horse, trying to avoid the wet spots beside the blue recycling bin. There was a rubber welcome mat at the top of the stairs which had begun to disintegrate around the edges, leaving patches of mold on the faded wooden boards. Still another man with a briefcase was making his way down the street. Eva closed her eyes again, hopefully, but the dream was gone. The dog skirted the welcome mat, then retreated into the doorway.

Alan was a jazz musician; he played guitar at several clubs around town, always with his eyes closed. When they had first started dating, Eva went to all of the gigs, sat by herself, sipped at red wine and wished that she smoked. Usually she was the only woman in a cluster of men, their fingers small rhythmic animals snapping in their laps. Eva would close her eyes too, hoping that by shutting out the sight of so many busy fingers and intent faces she could come closer to the mystery of the music itself. Instead she saw only the prohibitive black lines of a musical staff striped across her eyelids, with carefree-looking quarter notes nestling in the spaces, daring her to decipher them. Sometimes she focused on the tapping of Alan's food, the heel-toe

certainty of it. She watched the way it caused the room to move; the huge upside-down U-lights of the candles dancing on the walls above the tables like dancing gods. Later, Alan might invite some of his friends back to the flat where they would lounge in a scattered semi-circle, pass a joint and listen to some tunes; the smoky sweet air and the strains of a saxophone player wreathing their tousled heads. "*Heavy*, man," they said. "He's a really *heavy* player."

Later, after she realized Alan was not being funny or flippant when he stroked the womanly curves of his guitar and suggested in a caramel-coated voice that "she" was his other "lover", Eva stopped going to the dark bars as frequently.

The woman in the bed was not musical though; Eva had heard her singing loudly and off-key to commercial jingles several times -- the way she herself liked to sing when Alan wasn't around, repeating the chorus endlessly, diving into the catchiness of it all headfirst. Before Alan had hung his monogrammed towels on the back of the bathroom door, she used to love singing in the shower; how the wails and crescendoes bounced off the steamy walls and echoed around the small room. She decided to confront the woman, to introduce herself, to ask for a name. It seemed important to her that she do this.

But first she'd need some ammunition, a weapon maybe. She went back to the kitchen to rifle through the newly clean kitchen implements. A mixing spoon? Too motherly. A rolling pin? Too clichéd. She opened the fridge in case there were some tools in there she might have forgotten.

Eva stood in the arctic glow of the refrigerator for several moments, enumerating the leftovers. The cold air was welcome and refreshing, and for

several moments she wondered if it might not be possible to stand there forever, or simply step into the vegetable drawer and tuck herself away. She thought that, despite the temperature, it would probably be cozy, nestled in that lush and leafy place between the coriander and the Romaine lettuce, and she would not have to worry about disturbing the visitor in the other room. Often, at work, when she was sure there were not customers to be served, she would step into the flower fridge and stand amongst the expensive and exotic blossoms, inhaling their perfumes as goosebumps crept along the insides of her arms. The scents made her feel open and wanton, as if she were the keeper of a divine and naughty secret.

She tried not to keep cut flowers at home. It was enough to be among the raw amputated stems in her working day; at night she allowed only the green gasps of house plants to whisper in on her dreams. But sometimes, when she couldn't sleep, or some city sound had jolted her from slumber, she would get up and dig her fingers into the soil of her potted azalea, just to feel the richness, the rootedness, the loamy love of it.

She peered into the fridge again. Its shushing hum had calmed her; she no longer felt the same urgency of purpose around the subject of the other woman. In fact, she was beginning to feel slightly kindly towards her. At the moment, the woman in the bedroom was quiet. Her presence in the flat, which had first seemed invasive, now seemed to Eva, if not welcome, at least benign. Alan by this point might have called in from the living room, berated her for using too much electricity, or wondered whether she wouldn't mind making him a sandwich.

The cutlery shifted in the dish rack, its metallic clanging piercing a hole in the purring rhythms of the kitchen. Eva realized she was cold. Her

nipples were erect and rubbing uncomfortably agains her tank top, while her teeth chattered a quick and uneven beat. She reached instinctively for a leftover slice of apple pie and closed the door hard, sending a large pear-shaped fridge magnet and Alan's latest postcard clattering to the floor. She picked up the postcard and flipped it over.

Alan's handwriting was round and friendly-looking, and it always surprised her. It was a sixteen-year old's curling script, and she half-expected to see tiny hearts and happy faces dotting the "i"s, or simply bordering the message in neat lines, for no other reason than the fact that sometimes the words did not seem to be quite enough. *Hey honey!* he had written, and underneath: *I'm staying at this dude ranch at the base of the Dragoon Mountains. The free jazz workshops are heavy and it's great playing cowboy! Tomorrow I'm meeting with a bass player from Bisbee to talk about maybe setting up a regular gig in Tucson. Hope you're not too lonely without me. Love A.* The photo on the front showed a group of men on horses galloping down a dusty trail and the ruins in the background were described as "crumbling adobe".

Eva looked over at the pie, which she had set on the counter next to the fridge. Her grandmother had made it, special, last week, from a recipe that had been in the family for generations. She paused before fetching a piece of her mother's white bone china from the top shelf of the cupboard, then arranged the slice carefully on the small plate. Then she picked out a clean fork and placed it perpendicular to the slice. This way she could grab the handle if the woman tried anything funny.

As she walked down the hall to the bedroom she paused in front of each poster or painting she had carefully hung when she first moved in,

staring them down. She stopped in front of a laminated poster of the three graces by Botticelli to read the fine print. Underneath the dancing women, whose fleshy thighs caused their clinging gowns to billow and fold, in nearly illegible black script, were the words *Uffizi Gallery, Florence.*

As she neared the bedroom, Eva could hear singing. She crept closer, and pressed her ear against the uneven grain of the door. There were trumpets, and she swore she could hear a harp. And above it all, there was a voice, out of tune and lusty: *If you wanna see the devil run, shoot him in the bum with the gospel gun...* Eva decided against knocking. "Bisbee," she said to herself for courage. Then, "Adobee." As she turned the doorknob, the music faded, then stopped. She stepped into the room and heard a sigh from the direction of the bed. The fork teetered on the edge of the plate and fell to the ground. Eva picked it up, wiped it on her jeans, and righted it on her plate in time to see a head disappear under the comforter as the woman reached her arms above her in a stretch.

The woman's hair was red and flowing on the pillow. Eva wanted to touch the hair that scattered like small sleepy snakes, to pull it and braid it and perhaps even snip at it, but she was worried about waking the woman, who was now snoring loudly, her breaths exiting her body in slightly menacing rumbles. She crept closer and lowered herself onto the bed, being careful to distribute her weight evenly so as not to create an uncomfortable dip in the mattress. She set the pie down on the night table and slid her hand under the comforter. Eva ran her hand up the woman's body, trailing her fingers as though the skin she touched were lakewater and the bed a slow-moving canoe. The woman shifted slightly, then moaned. Eva stopped at the woman's neck and pressed her fingers gently into the doughy flesh beside

the Adam's Apple.

Before Eva had dropped out of school to work at the florist full-time, Eva had taken some pre-med courses, casually, with the vague notion that one day, if she was lucky, she might live the life of a *professional* woman -- a doctor or even a physician's assistant, something respectable and determined. Something that involved flesh and bone. She could feel the woman's blood beating against her index finger through its thin, bluish tube.

The pounding reminded her of the tiny toads she caught on the banks of the Humber River as a child. Together, she and a neighbour boy would traipse through the bullrushes to the edge of the water and poke at lazy crayfish with knobby sticks, waiting. When the toads leapt from their muddy nests the two of them would scoop them up just to feel the frantic jumping in their closed fists. Sometimes, when Eva and the boy were bored or brave, they would burrow into the scraggly bushes and pull down their pants. They stared at each other's genitals with the same degree of interest they showed the crayfish, although they touched more tentatively. When they were tired of this they zipped up their jeans and pelted each other with pine cones or dug into the river bank with their stubby fingers. She thought they were best friends. She wished she could remember his name.

THAT NIGHT on the couch Eva dreamt she and the woman from the bedroom were sitting in the branches of an olive tree. She thought she was a pigeon. She felt like a pigeon. Homely and beady-eyed. When she looked over at the other woman she saw only white feathers, and a human face in place of the beak. Then they were not pigeons at all, but people, naked except for large olives perched on each of their nipples and cloves of garlic strung

around their bellies like pearls. Eva noticed her olives were green while the other woman's were black. She wondered if this was significant. Dancing around the olive grove, hands linked, were thirty Italian men, also naked, except for large frilly fig leaves placed over their crotches. The air was soft with the scent of freshly cut grass and crushed grapes and Eva felt as if she were a little drunk from the smells and the light, which shone down through the branches in a gentle net of life. The other woman had begun dancing with the men, flirting with them, both individually and collectively, batting her eyelids and tossing her hair. Eva noticed the way the woman's hips moved, like the sea, or a slow but somehow happy song, and wished she knew how to dance. As Eva walked, it seemed to her as if the earth cradled the soles of her feet and sent her bouncingly on to the next patch of grass. There was a heaviness in her heart that nevertheless made her feel glad. She felt full. Perhaps it was not possible to blush in a dream, but Eva believed that she did; a ripe and glad blush that she felt rising quickly to the apples of her cheeks. It was a blush not of embarrassment, but of pride. The other woman held out her hand to her, and made a sound like a cross between a hiss and the wind, her lips parting over her shiny white teeth.

Eva opened her eyes.

At 3:45 am, after lying awake for an hour, she went to the kitchen and wrote a note:

Alan,

I've gone to Firenze (that's Italian for Florence). I think it might be a good idea if you moved out for a while. You can stay with my grandmother until you

find a new place. Sorry about this but
my home just wasn't, anymore.

Eva

P.S. There's leftover apple pie in the fridge.

P.P.S. I forgot, we ate it.

After wiping the counters and tying up a bag of garbage, Eva went to bed. She climbed under the covers from the wrong end and slithered her way towards the sleeping body. Then she hooked her chin over the woman's shoulder and wrapped her arms around her belly so that their knees were slotted together, their breathing synchronized.

When the morning sun opened her eyes, Eva stretched, then patted down the puffiness of the comforter. The bed was empty. She rose from the bed, ran her palms along the sides of her naked body and picked up the pie plate. The sound it made as it shattered against the wall was like laughter, tinkling and free, and the scattering white shards of china reminded her of doves, of feathers, and of flight.

I know you are, but what am I?

TIM WAS standing at the urinal when it happened. It was late to be in school, close to 6pm, and there were only two bathrooms open, the one on the third floor, and the one in the basement. He had just come from an extra long band practice; the teacher had kept him and another trumpet player to go over a section that wasn't coming together. He had chosen the basement bathroom because it was usually quiet and cleaner than the one upstairs and he had just finished peeing when he heard a noise from one of the stalls. His first impulse was to review the last few minutes to make sure he had not been inadvertently talking or singing to himself. He looked at the tiny blue-grey tiles above the urinal and nodded. He remembered mouthing the words to a detergent commercial and running through a list of homework assignments in his head, but didn't think he had said anything out loud. He pulled up his zipper and was washing his hands when he heard his name.

"Hey, Tim." It was Richie. Tim couldn't see him in the shiny aluminum-like surface that passed for a mirror, so he figured he must be in the stall.

"How'd you know it was me, man?" He wiped his hands on his jeans, a long, bracing motion, more for courage than hygiene.

"Your fuckin' shoes, man." For a moment Tim was flattered that Richie had noted the type of shoes he wore, but something in the voice from the stall made him reluctant to say anything to this effect. He stood leaning up against the rim of the sink for several moments before he heard another sound. It was a retching, gurgly sound, halfway between a hork and a sob, and it ricocheted around the bathroom like a gunshot gone wrong.

"Are you alright?" He hated himself for asking, for not pushing open the swinging door and going to Richie, just going to him as someone would, unhesitating, go to a friend in need. The sound came again, only softer this time, as though it were losing steam.

"Yeah, I'm fine man, get outta here." The toilet flushed, and over the loud sighing of the tank and despite his assurance, Richie began to talk. Tim stood without moving, his eyes locked into his own gaze in the mirror.

"You're my friend, right?"

Tim nodded, then, feeling stupid, realized Richie couldn't see him from the stall.

"We used fuckin' baseball bats that Joey took from the phys. ed. department. Man, they had the fuckin' school motto on the handle." Richie put on a bad English accent. "*Happy is one who discovers the causes of things*. Bullshit, man. We drank two two-fours between the three of us, so we were feeling buzzed y'know. And Spiro had his old man's car, so we decided to have some fun. Fuckin' fags like deers in headlights. I was happy to stay in the car -- 's not like I wanted to go chasin' after no fudge packers. Fuck. But Joey said we should teach them they can't go on with their *abhorrent* behaviour. That's the word he used -- ab-*whore*-ent -- do you fuckin' believe it? So we get out of the car and start hoofin' it after some guy we saw by some bushes with his dick in his hand and Joey catches him, but we forgot the baseball bats at the car so he makes me go get them. I come back and he's already wailin' on the guy. The guy's down like an armadillo, all curled up to protect his abdomen and shit and Joey grabs the bat from me and just swings it..."

Richie, up to this point, had been talking too fast, the words distinct but

beginning to nudge up against each other. Now he slowed down, drew out the syllables as if trying to convince himself of the sounds.

"When you think about it, you think of a crack, wood on bone, something loud. But it's a fuckin' thud, soft as shit. Spiro's kickin' the guy and yelling something about one less faggot and lookin' at me like I'm chicken shit, so I take the bat and bring it down on his chest, and then I can't stop myself, I just keep swinging until he stops making this *ouf* noise. And I notice there's blood coming out of his ears, not a lot but enough, so I back off. But Joey's still goin' at it, even though me and Spiro are backing off. When he finally stops, it's like the guy isn't a person anymore, y'know, it's like he's just this fuckin' mess of rags and blood and arms and legs, so we run back to the car and we drive away. That's it man, we just drive away. And now it's like I'm living in this fuckin' cloud, and I just can't breathe. I didn't want to fuckin' kill him, man, you gotta believe me, you believe me don't you?"

Richie was crying now, in long shuddering breaths, and he must have been supporting himself against the walls of the stall because Tim could see them shaking in time with his sobs. He took a step back, towards the bathroom door.

"You believe me, don't you?" Tim thought he heard a note of menace in Richie's tone.

"Yes." Tim looked at Richie's shoes, then at the trembling wall that separated them.

IT TOOK the police two weeks and one day to figure it out. They came to the school and arrested Spiro and Richie, and they found Joey a few days later. He had been sleeping in the back of a friend's car, in the parking lot of the pool

hall, and there were rumours he had tried to escape the cops by jumping the hall's chain link fence. Tim woke every one of those fifteen nights before the arrests, his pillow crumpled and moist with nightmares. The nightmares were similar to those he had experienced as a child; the setting a dense forest in the last days of autumn, the ground wet and cushioned by leaves. He was running, and ahead of him the trees were bending in the wind. Behind him there were footsteps, slow and steady, and no matter how fast he ran, the footsteps always drew closer. The difference with these new dreams was that sometimes, as his feet sunk and scrambled in the mud, he was Richie, baseball bat in hand, adrenaline and alcohol making his mouth dry. And other times, he was a faggot and fudge packer, his heart skittish with terror.

TIM LOOKED up into the vacant staring eyes of a giant woman on the bus shelter's billboard, then down at his watch. He was going to be late for his shift at the daycare. Whenever he thought of Richie lately it was as if his mind had to bend over backwards, and he not only winced at the straining, but also resented it. He had heard from a high school friend that Richie's release date was coming up, and this morning there had been a piece in the paper, buried on one of the back pages of the front section among house fires and remote natural disasters. The article explained that because Richie was a young offender at the time the crime was committed, he had received a reduced sentence, and would be released on parole from a Kingston jail, despite protests from the family of the victim.

Every so often, over the last eight years, Tim had found himself wondering about Richie, although there was a tumble of events to distract him -- his mother's illness and death, a new apartment, university, a job, and

a girlfriend who strolled casually and miraculously in and out of his life. He wondered whether Anne had seen the article. Tim had once tried to tell her about Richie, on one of those weekend mornings in her apartment when the sun through the curtains and her breath on his shoulder made him feel relaxed and powerful, like a minor but well-worshipped god. She had listened carefully to his description of the confession in the bathroom, her knees hugged to her chest. When he finished, she had begun to talk, telling him stories about gay-bashings her friends had experienced, and the queer theory class she had taken the previous semester.

For Anne there was always a pattern, a framework into which your life, no matter how raggedy, could be made to fit. It frustrated Tim that she had not grasped what he thought to be the *essence* of the experience, the there's-a-place-inside-of-me-that's-forever-changed of it all. Now he wished he had tried harder to make her understand. He missed the way her hands traced phantom patterns in the air while she talked, each word spilling out of her mouth like a gold nugget, or a baby; something precious for which she was solely responsible.

The Richie thoughts usually began with what he called a trailing scarf of a memory; a small detail in his peripheral vision, or a muffled noise from the next room. They were memories he was tempted to ignore, details he would have liked to have left alone. But he never did, he always picked them up, weighed them in his hand as if testing fruits at the green grocer's, then felt too guilty, having touched them, to put them back on the shelf.

Today the hybrid scent of cigarettes and hairspray that hovered in the air around the bus stop pushed him into thoughts of Lori, Richie's old girlfriend. Richie had only been one grade higher than Tim in high school,

although he was two years older. Even this slight difference in grade level had been a big deal back then. All the years the two boys had spent playing together as children were obliterated by the fact that Richie was welcome in the Senior courtyard while Tim most definitely was not. In fact, Richie had been welcome in the Senior courtyard since he entered high school and began selling dope to the school's popular crowd. Not that Richie was popular. He wasn't. He was too poor, too direct, and too truly reckless for that to be the case.

For the most part, Tim did not have cause or opportunity to see Richie at school, and that was just fine by him. But sometimes, after band practice, when all but two of the school's entrances were locked, Tim would have to leave by the Senior doors, and it was then that he and Richie would be forced into an awkward dance of recognition. There was a covered pathway leading up to the door, close enough to the warmth of the foyer in winter, and with enough visibility to ensure good business deals year-round. Richie would stand near the door, one hand lolling at his side, a cigarette burning between his fingers until the ash hung long and limp. He wore sleeveless T-shirts in the warmer months, and on the top of his wiry arms tiny puckered cigarette burns bloomed. Tim had heard him regaling his friends with the history of these, and other welts, well into the evening, before heading, Tim imagined, towards the billiard hall or the greasy spoon around the corner.

Lori was almost always at Richie's side. She was shortish and full-hipped, with a loud staccato voice, and make-up that was not, as Tim's mother might have put it, subtle. But she had eyes that danced and challenged, and, unlike many of the girls on the inside of the school, who Tim had observed loitering around their boyfriends' lockers with slumped

shoulders and frightened faces, she seemed to have as much a say in the relationship as Richie himself. She always smiled at Tim in a sexy way when he passed, her lips parting slowly over her braced teeth, leaving small crimson flecks of colour on the silver brackets. Richie himself never smiled, choosing instead to acknowledge Tim with a jerking head motion halfway between a nod and a challenge. Later, in bed, Tim would think of Lori; her molded hair and tight jeans, and the way she looked at him as if she knew the answer to the riddle of his teenage years.

TIM HAD met Anne at a loft party eleven months ago, at a friend of a friend's. He didn't know many people there, and because he didn't smoke, had busied himself looking at the murals which graced three of the four walls. They were mostly purple, with spirals and topsy-turvy figure eights and sometimes faces, elongated and gloomy. He didn't like them very much. He couldn't imagine waking up every day to their swirling message, whatever that message might be. He stepped back a few paces to see if he couldn't get a better perspective, tilting his head back and squinting his eyes. It didn't really work, and in the process of distancing himself from the painting, he stumbled over a guy and knocked over his drink. The guy was not big, but Tim could sense he had the tightly wound energy of a karate star, or a large feline animal, or someone like Richie. "FF-uh-uhck," said the feline guy, and bent to pick up the bottle. Tim turned to apologize, but the guy was gone, towards the kitchen to replace his lost beer, he assumed.

He was examining the bottom corner of one of the murals, up close this time, when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Hey, can I ask you a question?" There didn't seem to be any animosity

in the feline guy's tone, but Tim felt nervous nevertheless. His nervousness didn't so much have to do with the threat he felt sure was coming, but more with how they were going to get to the threat; the preliminaries. Tim knew it was a sign of bad things to come when people *asked* whether they could ask a question. The guy was shifting from foot to foot. Tim nodded his head. The guy moved closer.

"Do you suck cock?"

Tim sighed. It wasn't the question's content that made him uncomfortable so much as his now having to find a way to answer.

"Sometimes," is what he said. And afterwards he didn't know why he'd said it. He supposed it probably had something to do with the unfortunate mix of confusion and bravado running through his veins. The truth of the matter was that he had never sucked cock, and he doubted that he ever would, but as a response this seemed a little run-of-the-mill. To say *yes* out and out would have been construed as smart-assy, even it were true, and it wasn't as if Tim wanted to fight. He was scared, that much was certain. He was just hedging his bets. *Sometimes.*

The feline guy looked through his eyes, as if he could somehow see past them, to a prompter or a cue card.

"I thought so. Faggot."

Tim looked at the guy's shoes. They were dirty sneakers with holes in the toes, and a clump of something grassy hanging from one of the laces. It seemed to him he stared at those laces for a very long time, the same way, he later thought, you can look up in the middle of an exam, with the steady scratching of pen and paper surrounding you, and wonder, unhurriedly, what brought you to this particular point in your life, and why everyone looked so

serious.

That was when Anne had grabbed his arm, pulled him away, laughing.

"There you are, I've been looking all over for you," she sang out, guiding him by the elbow away from the murals. When they were safely out on the balcony, she lit a cigarette, inhaled hard. "You looked like you needed rescuing," she said, and leaned back over the railing, her short bleached blond hair bristling in the wind.

USUALLY, TIM loved his job. His working with children was in no way an altruistic career choice; he simply felt more comfortable with kids than with adults. Everyone said kids were great because they were *so honest*, but Tim didn't think they were any more honest than the rest of the world. He was scanning the schoolyard for evidence of scraped knees, or illegal ball-whipping, when Diego, absorbed in kicking at the woodchips that covered the playground's surface, bumped into him. Diego was five-going-on-six, and always thinking.

"Tim?" he said, and sat down on the bottom rung of the monkey bars.

"Yes, Diego?" Tim liked Diego, but was worried at the way he could so easily cut himself off from the rest of the kids, wandering away from a tag game, oblivious, or sitting down in the middle of the hokey-pokey to examine something in the carpet.

"At recess today I thought of a bad word you could tell somebody if they're your enemy." Diego gripped the vertical bars of the climbing frame and leaned back.

"What's the bad word?" Tim asked, leaning down to eye-level. Diego looked shocked. Apparently Tim had missed the point.

"I can't tell you, you're not my enemy." The thin boy shuffled off, pushing at an empty tire swing as he went. Tim thought about following him but was distracted by a group of four-year olds pulling small buds off the recently planted oak behind the sandbox and pushing them up each other's noses.

"Don't you know that's not good for the tree!" he yelled, more loudly than he meant to. The children turned to him, surprised. One of them began to cry in heaving gasps, sending a mucousy bud flying from her nostril. Sometimes, to his dismay, Tim found himself getting peevish and overly earnest with the kids; berating them for curiosity, or lecturing them, lengthily, on safety regulations. Lately, when he wasn't looking, he would feel anger creeping up on him like a sly, selfish dog, the blood gathering in his face in a hot rash. He would watch, in an inexplicable rage, as a five-year old poured a mountain of glue onto a sheet of construction paper, or pushed over the sand table for the hundredth time.

When Anne had told Tim she needed some space, he had felt this same rage gathering at the back of his throat, like tears, only more acidic. He had finally understood the expression "I was so angry I could spit." It was as if his anger had a language of his own, before words and beyond gesture. So he swallowed it. When Anne got angry, which wasn't very often, it was always explosive; a burst of hot-eyed frustration. She would rage against the injustices in the world, rail against the "systems" she saw controlling them all, depriving those who needed the most. Sometimes she would begin to cry, as if she were somehow personally responsible, or, in some far off netherworld, would be held *accountable* for the sufferings of strangers. Last night, when he called to speak with her, Tim had tried to remain calm, but

removed. He hummed pop songs in his head, or counted the moles on his forearm while she tried to reason with him.

"Relationships are sort of like carpools y'know. I mean someone picks you up on the road of life, and they give you that lift you need. But eventually, it has to happen, you reach your destination and you have to part ways. It's sad but it's necessary. I don't mean to sound cold, Tim. I mean it doesn't mean we won't meet again, somewhere farther down the road...."

This was the coda to the original breaking-up speech Anne had offered Tim. Only this time they were breaking up on the phone. Breaking up by phone was something you were never supposed to do. There was an unwritten law that said it was bad form, bad karma. Tim wondered why this was. He imagined the rule was probably invented by a break-upee, convinced that the crumpled sadness of his or her face would cause the offender to reconsider, to set things right, to return the victim's countenance to its original, less bunched form. He carried the phone over to the mirror and began making faces, some sad, most offended. Then he relaxed his features into what he thought was probably his neutral, listening face, and began nodding at what Anne was saying, pursing his lips as if he understood.

TIM LEFT for his lunch break a little early. He had forgotten to pick up the afternoon snack, and had to make his way over to the Safeway before his yard duty started. The day was overcast and humid. A yellow fog smeared the sky over the city, and the sun stayed hidden. This morning a kid had bit him, still another cried because of him. His coffee tasted bitter, the photocopier jammed.

When Tim had mentioned his job to Anne for the first time, she got

the look most women got when he mentioned he worked with children. She tilted her head slightly to the left while he described his position (Assistant Supervisor) and some of his responsibilities (scheduling, knee bandaging, craft planning). He played up his more "adult" tasks in the hopes that she would not, as some women also did, begin to coo at him, as if he were a pet, or an adorable male saint. To his relief she had seemed genuinely interested, and had asked him questions which made him believe she thought of him as more than a glorified babysitter.

In fact, Anne had a job as a part-time clown and face-painter, a job she took very seriously. She had even gone to clown school, a detail Tim found both laughable and attractive. Later, he would invite her to school for an afternoon and would fall in love with her when she treated the group, who were in the middle of a unit on farm animals, to a sincere but terrible rooster imitation, her large blue eyes bulging, and her long neck muscles straining like the poles of a pup tent.

In her apartment, he found stringy balloons scattered on counters and coffee tables, and half-made balloon sculptures perched on top of the TV or shoved into the closet. Once, he found a note scrawled in red ink on the bedroom floor: *1. Always store your balloons in a cool dry place. 2. Never give a small child red or pink balloons! If they eat them, they're very difficult to spot in the mouth or throat.* There was danger everywhere, always, thought Tim, and it was up to him and the clowns to spot it, where it lay, between the tongue and the voice box -- a burst balloon, or a bad word waiting to be hurled out into the world.

THERE WAS a summer when Tim must have been nine or ten when he and

Richie had spent a lot of time together. Tim's dad was working nights, and liked to have peace and quiet in the daytime hours, so the boys would take their bikes down to the ravine and practise jumping off small muddy cliffs. Sometimes they would set fires with Tim's magnifying glass; watch leaves and ants crumple in slow motion under the lens. If the fires got too big, Richie would stamp them out with a kind of ritualistic deliberation. There was never a doubt in Tim's mind that Richie was in charge of the fire-setting. In fact, there were times when Richie would berate Tim, albeit gently, for his overzealous burning of the struggling insects they held pinched between their fingers. It was if there was an unspoken quota of sacrifices allowed each day -- a number only Richie, somehow, unquestionably, had access to. Once, while Tim was bending close to examine his efforts with a small pile of twirlygigs and a half-dead moth, the front of his T-shirt caught fire, the flames lapping at his chest. He couldn't remember if he cried out, or how long it took Richie to reach him, but it couldn't have been long, the only evidence of the incident being a small pear-shaped piece of skin between his nipples; less like a scar than the underside of an old scab. What he did remember was the sound of Richie's voice, big in his ear, as he hugged him to his chest, the smell of charred cloth and the hushing rush of the river in the background.

WHEN TIM got back from lunch, the kids were already outside, running back and forth on the swinging bridge of the jungle gym. (It always scared him when they did that; he had to suppress the urge to tell them to be careful, be *careful*!) In the corners of the yard small groups of children huddled, making plans, passing around secrets like coins. He took up his post near the orange tube slide, leaned up against one of the wooden supports. He felt tired. He

had spent half the night with Anne on the phone, trying to be friends. The truth was, and Tim knew this better than he cared to admit, he didn't want to be *just* friends. Her logical and straightforward tone had been driving him crazy, and he found himself responding to her suggestions in the same way he had heard kids defending themselves against too many taunts, turning everything around to absolve themselves of the accusations. *I know you are, but what am I?* He had done this one too many times, he supposed, when she stopped talking, just stopped and breathed, carefully. *Logically,* he thought.

"What, the silent treatment now?" he asked, too loudly.

"Tim, I wish you would stop acting so childish." She sounded defeated.

"Yeah, well I wish you would stop acting like such a bitch."

She hung up.

He hadn't meant to say it, wasn't even sure where it had come from. "I take it back," he whispered to the reproach of the dial tone.

"Hey Tim, I think we better take the kids in." It was Maria, one of his co-workers, and she was looking at him closely. "It's raining pretty hard."

Tim looked up, felt the drops on his face. They were round and heavy and they left splotches on the pavement that gave off a sort of dirty, sad smell.

"Okay, I'll bring up the rear." He began herding the kids towards the doors, nudging them slightly, and calling out to the leftovers, who lingered under the jungle gym's platforms, or crouched in archways. Diego was, as usual, the last to come in. It wasn't that he was dawdling, he was just moving very slowly. Tim walked behind him up the stairs.

When Tim had graduated from Early Childhood Education, his father

had begrudgingly come to the ceremony, had watched his son bow his head to he chancellor with the rest of his mostly female classmates as they received their hard-won diplomas. Afterwards, he had teased Tim about the male-female ratio of his class, hinted that the only reason Tim had spent four years wiping noses and studying child psychology was to be near so many beautiful women. And it was true that when Tim first started the program, the women had flocked towards him, drawn, he now supposed, to the fact that he was male, and somehow, by virtue of his career choice, safe. It wasn't that they believed he was gay (that would have almost been better), it was that they saw him as a sensitive and neutral ambassador of manhood, a sort of Switzerland between the sexes. It also had something to do with his face. It had that quality that invited confidences -- open? concerned? slightly gullible? -- he wasn't sure. He had often tried to narrow it down to a particular feature, had spend days holding his mouth in a different way, or flaring his nostrils slightly, hoping this would prevent female friends accosting him in the hallway with news of the latest break-up or family crisis. Sometimes Tim thought it was this quality that had prompted Richie to confide in him that day. Other times he thought it was just happenstance, or something somehow related to fate.

At this point Richie might be stepping outside, as a free man, for the first time in years. The same kind of raindrops that had fallen on Tim's upturned face might have landed, splashily, on Richie's head and shoulders. Tim imagined Lori had come to meet him, although, realistically, he supposed it was not possible they were still together. Still. He could picture her, standing in the rain, her hair shorter now, maybe streaked, the same fierce look in her eyes. He imagined Richie would not hug her at first, too

accustomed to visits where touch was tempered by a guard's watchful gaze.

Tim's limbs felt heavy. He was glad he didn't have to walk more quickly. Diego stopped on the landing.

"Is Maria a model?" He turned and looked up at Tim.

"I don't think so, Dee, why do you ask?" Tim took the boy's hand in an attempt to hurry him up.

"She's got very shiny hair." Diego began to walk again.

It was true. Maria's hair was cut in a smooth bob, so that even the institutional track lighting in the hallways coaxed glints and highlights from the red-brown cap. Tim reached up and touched his own hair, which was beginning to recede in the same V-pattern as his father's. He kept his eyes fixed on the back of Maria's head, which kept moving forward, sure and purposeful, at the head of the line.

Diego sighed as they entered the classroom.

"What's up?" Tim helped him with his knapsack.

"So many doors. Doors to the school, doors to the classroom, doors to my house, doors to my bedroom." He sighed again. "I wish we could just fly through the doors."

"Yeah, that would be cool."

"Not with the plane companies though, 'cause then we'd have to pay them money. Just with our arms." Diego spread his arms to either side of him and zoomed off to sit with some other kids at a small table with small chairs. Tim turned to straighten up some neglected knapsacks and rainjackets. The bags were colourful and dirty at once, having been dragged through puddles and sandboxes. There were banana peels and yogurt containers, action figures and crumpled, crayoned bits of paper rattling

around inside. It was amazing the things kids lugged around with them -- all the leavings and unfinished business of their sprawling young lives. He could feel those lives around him, bristling and bright, reaching out in all directions towards the future.

Tim looked over at Diego. He was sitting, transfixed, pouring a mountain of glue onto a green sheet of construction paper. Maria was reading a story to a small group of five-year-olds on the carpet, her face stretched with the effort. At the far table, two older kids were arguing over whose turn it was to play on the computer, their voices growing steadily louder and more belligerent. He looked back to Diego, who was now spreading the glue in wide circles on the paper with the tips of his fingers. Tim stretched out his arms, pointed himself towards the computer, and flew over to settle the dispute.