

Lockburn Steady: A Novel

Megan Findlay

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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

May 2008

© Megan Findlay, 2008



Library and  
Archives Canada

Published Heritage  
Branch

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

Bibliothèque et  
Archives Canada

Direction du  
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file    Votre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-42473-5*  
*Our file    Notre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-42473-5*

**NOTICE:**

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

**AVIS:**

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

---

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

  
**Canada**

## Lockburn Steady: A Novel

Megan Findlay

*Lockburn Steady* is the story of a fictional farming community in Central Ontario, told through the perspectives of four dissimilar figures. Ramsay Lockburn, the novel's central figure, returns to Garland after an absence of nearly six years, weighed by the news that he has promised his family's abandoned farm to a team of investors hoping to establish a profitable recreational ranch. His very presence threatens the fragile community and aggravates the tensions between Garland's various inhabitants, including Jimmy Loeber, once a teenage farmhand on the prospering Lockburn estate, now an apprentice in a failing junkyard business. Like Ramsay's young niece and nephew, also narrators of the novel, Jimmy fosters private reasons for wanting to keep the farm away from Ramsay. Rivalling interests intensify in Garland until an impulsive act of arson, and its resulting tragedy, violently reunite the community and restore in Ramsay a forgotten sense of belonging and responsibility.

Each chapter of *Lockburn Steady* is told in the third person but from the alternating perspective of one of four characters. This technique of rotating subjects is often employed by writers as universal as William Faulkner (*As I Lay Dying* is one example) and as precise and devastating as Kent Haruf, whose novel *Plainsong* closely informs this text. By revealing Garland through these contrasting figures, this novel builds a rural community from the perspective of both the inexperienced child and the insecure adult, and attempts to explore the possibility of reconciliation between these divergent, often adversarial figures.

**Ramsay.**

Ramsay pulled into the drive just after the dinner hour, the evening light beginning to reach low across the road. Gravel popped under his tires as he eased the car to a stop. He leaned into the new quiet, thinking it was funny how things shrink and grow shabby when you don't look at them a while. There it was, the sagging split-rail fence rimming the barnyard like an unraveled rope, and the barn itself, once sturdy and dominant, now a skeleton picked clean.

Ramsay stayed in the car a minute, tidying up the fast food bags and crushed plastic cups scattered on the seat beside him. When he finally climbed out and turned towards the house, it was with a deliberate, reluctant slowness. He wasn't sure he wanted to see it after all, and he had to make himself look up from his boots. Chipped red brick, gingerbread latticework peeling grey under the eaves, cracked windows. Vines clawing their way up the porch railings and twining over the brick to meet the high roof. Across the lawn dandelions and thistles crowding each other, the air above vibrating with insects. Ramsay crossed below three dying maple trees and approached the flowerbeds, overgrown and distinguishable from the rest of the wilderness only by the blackened railway ties that sectioned them off against the brick wall. Alongside the flowerbeds were three stone pickle barrels, no higher than Ramsay's knees and almost entirely hidden by long fingers of fern and stray hayseed.

Ramsay tugged up his pant legs and squatted in the ferns, one hand on the warm red brick to keep him steady, the other scraping aside the domed lid of the middle barrel. A wretched, spoiled-sweet smell erupted from inside and a whorl of gnats spun free and disappeared. He stared into the dankness of the barrel, then lowered one hand inside and

felt around with his fingertips until he touched the ragged edge of a key. He lifted it out, still with its same old twist tie looped through it, then replaced the stone lid and climbed the half-rotted steps of the veranda.

As he heard the clunk of the deadbolt, Ramsay couldn't help expecting the noise of the dogs sliding and clicking across the wood floor, couldn't help glancing to the window, thinking he'd see his mother there, hands cupped around her face to see who had come home.

He nudged the door open with his toe and stared a minute into the hall, feeling the trapped air on his face, smelling of must and mouse shit. The boot mat still sat opposite the door in the breezeway, empty now, and beside that the little wooden chair splattered with white paint from the summer they did the kitchen cupboards. Ramsay stared at these things for a long time, too long, so that when he finally stirred his eyes had grown heavy and his mind thick like river mud. He kept his shoes on as he crossed through the front parlor. Everything was layered with a grey lace of cobwebs and dust—the couch propped on bricks, the bookshelves set into the wall, the old piano and its narrow bench.

Ramsay stopped in the wide, columned doorway that led from parlor to kitchen and closed his eyes.

No need to linger. He'd seen it, hadn't he? That's all he'd meant to do.

But he opened his eyes and moved forward instead of back, stepped into the kitchen, looked around. He faced the old range, and below it the kindling box still held several strips of bark. The chimney had been crudely removed, leaving a hole in the kitchen ceiling that looked towards another hole in the roof and, beyond that, the evening sky.

Ramsay rapped his knuckles softly on the old pine table, which made him realize at once how quiet the whole place was. The birdsong that drifted down the chimney hole only made the house itself seem more silent, a silence that pulled right from his chest, sucking the air out of his lungs. He dropped into one of the chairs facing the window—the farm hand’s spot, at one time, when there was enough work to hire out—and sat for a moment, drawing in shallow, stale breaths, staring at the worn squares of linoleum under his feet. After a moment he stood and walked over to the counter and twisted a tap. He heard a distant pinging noise, then nothing. On the windowsill above the sink was a row of china saucers, each rimmed with dirt where little flowerpots had once been. In the center of one lay a curled fly. Through the window Ramsay could see the raspberry bushes, gone wild and dense.

Further along the counter, below the cupboards, whose doors were scuffed and still crowded with pinned-up newspaper recipes, Ramsay found a Tupperware container and a folded sheet of paper. He picked up the container first and lifted a corner. A dank smell uncurled from inside and he made out a dozen muffins, filmed by a blue mould.

On the paper he read:

*Dear R—*

*Welcome back. Figured you'd come here first. The muffins are for you. If you're thinking of staying at the Motor Lodge then don't. You're welcome here and we've fit a bed in the sun porch for you. 923-7824 is our number in case you didn't bring it with you but you don't need to call first. Looking forward to seeing you and I know Mum is too.*

*Kelly*

Ramsay tucked the note into his shirt pocket and leaned over the sink to force

open the kitchen window. He had to carefully pile the saucers in the sink and then bang along the sides of the window with his fist, but at last he managed to heave the heavy frame upwards and prop it with a stick of wood that lay on the other side. He took up the container and pitched the muffins out into the weeds. A gust sailed in through the window and a split-second later the breezeway door swung into its frame with a terrific crash. Ramsay wasn't one to believe in ghosts, but goose bumps pimpled his arms in the stillness after the crash and he left without inspecting the upstairs bedrooms.

The outside light was a relief, the feel of the breeze, the sound of the birds. He couldn't bring himself to get back in the hot car. He wandered towards the barn, following the driveway, which became just a track beyond the barnyard fence, with a line of grass and milkweed down the middle. It wasn't until he was walking alongside the barn itself, examining the places where boards had fallen away to reveal the lonely, rotting stalls inside, that Ramsay gradually became aware of a machine's rolling growl, holding steady below the birdsong.

Picking his way carefully past ancient clusters of sheep raisins and massive thistles, Ramsay followed the curve of the ground up around the barn and stood at the crest of the gangway. Beyond the edge of the barnyard, past a cluster of rusted wagon hitches and old tin barrels, past the crooked line of the mossy rail fence, stretched a wide field of wheat, rippling like white sand in the evening light. Far across on its furthest edge Ramsay could see a combine, pulling along above the horizon.

He walked down the gangway and cut a careful path through the grass around the rusted machinery, and stood at the fence watching the combine. He plucked at his shirt, grateful for the breeze. He felt a strange, pleasant sense of sympathy for the entire scene

before him, the sunset and the yellow field and the tractor, and he almost turned away, wanting to leave it undisturbed—but then the machine rounded the bottom corner of the field and started towards him.

The glare of the sun kept him from seeing who sat inside the cab, but Ramsay had a good idea. The combine moved slowly towards him, shearing away another neat row, and finally pulled to a stop a few yards from where Ramsay stood, heaving louder for a long moment before choking to stillness. The cab door swung open and one enormous boot stepped down to the running board, then another to the field, and finally there was Lorne Shannon, touching the peak of his battered Federation of Agriculture cap in greeting. He smiled a wide, genuine smile and shook his head as he walked slowly towards the fence.

“Well, well,” he said, drawing up opposite Ramsay. “Lord love a duck. If it ain’t the man hisself.”

Ramsay felt suddenly shy as Lorne extended his hand. He looked just the same as he did years ago—cheeks still scalded red from the wind and sun, a spray of grey whiskers over his chin, eyes bright. Lorne released Ramsay’s hand and pushed back his ball cap to scratch his forehead. He lifted one boot onto the lowest rail of the fence. “When’d you get back, now?” he asked. He spoke easily, as though this was the most normal thing in the world, two men talking over a fence in the evening light. As though Ramsay hadn’t been gone at all, and everything was normal and expected.

“Just came in now,” Ramsay said, lifting his foot to the rail alongside Lorne’s.

“You staying long?”

“A week or two, see how things go. You’re still crossing the road to keep this



place in shape, I see?"

Lorne turned a little to look out over the field, and in profile Ramsay could suddenly see where age was claiming him—a sprouting of white hair from under his cap, a pattern of wrinkles on his earlobe.

"Just this field here and the next one over," Lorne was saying. "I use some hay for my own few animals over there, sell the grain. Figured your father wouldn't want me to just watch the whole place go to wreck and ruin."

Before he could answer, something sharp caught in Ramsay's throat and he began to hack into his fist, turning himself away from Lorne.

From somewhere deep in his pockets Lorne produced a handkerchief and handed it over the fence to Ramsay. "Gotta get you used to the country air again, my boy," he said. "Been in the city too long, breathing that mani-fractured no-good stuff."

Ramsay, his breath returning, and patted his lips politely with a corner of the yellowed, dusty-smelling kerchief. He wanted to start the whole meeting over again, wanted to be the one with the confident handshake, the one with the questions. He wondered how to excuse himself and get back to the car. How do two men, talking over a fence in the evening light, escape each other?

But then Lorne reached over and landed a hand firmly on Ramsay's shoulder, looked him in the eye, and said, "Pleasure to have you back, Ramsay boy. Does an old farmer good to see the young stock about, taking an interest."

Ramsay felt a flicker of guilt, and he turned away and pressed his wrist against his eyes, which were streaming from the coughing fit. Before he could say anything Lorne pulled his hand back and held it in the air between them, his elbow planted on the top

fence rail.

“Whad’ya think?” he asked, wiggling his fingers. Where the knuckle on Lorne’s index finger should have been there was a puckered knot of tender-pink skin, and above it the finger was clean gone.

“What happened there?” Ramsay managed, his voice torn up from the coughing.

Lorne turned his hand slowly before his own eyes, admiring it like a diamond.

“Goddamned manure belt, last spring. Wasn’t pulling anything at all so I climbed up there to loosen the block, goddamned belt got going again on its own, couldn’t pull clear in time. Hungry thing nearly chewed off my whole hand! Now my finger’s somewhere in the bottom of the pig pit, howd’ya like that?”

Ramsay smiled.

“Fifty years of farming,” Lorne continued, “never lost one finger or toe til now. Still, makes for some fun. That niece and nephew of yours, you should hear ’em squeal when I pretend one of ’em ate my finger in a hot dog. Boy!”

Lorne rubbed one eye with the puckered stump. With his other eye he examined Ramsay.

“You seen those kids yet?” he asked.

“Not so far.”

“So not in a while then.”

“Not since... well, guess I saw them when Tassa was just brand new.”

“Little babies. Chee,” said Lorne, smiling. “You’re in for something. They’re strong farts now. Even little Tass. Smart, too.”

“I’ll bet.”

“You’re staying with them? Your sister and Amos?”

Ramsay thought a moment, looking back to where the sun was just slipping off the walls of the old barn. “Not tonight,” he said finally. “Don’t want to barge in on everybody this time of day. I’ll just go over to the Motor Lodge.”

Lorne took his foot from the bottom rail and bounced his fist on the fencepost. “Here now,” he said. “You’ll come across and stay with us.”

“I couldn’t...”

“Never mind your couldn’ts. Marla and me’d be happy to have you. Sure you want some adjusting time before you face the whole boiling brood. We’ll harbour you safe.”

Ramsay picked at a plug of wood in the fence rail. “I don’t want Marla to go to trouble—”

“No trouble,” Lorne cut in. “It’ll do an old man good, have someone to catch up with. You’re about the most exciting thing to happen round here in ages.”

Ramsay began to feel relief stretch warm through his stomach, which surprised him. He thought he had wanted to be alone.

“You know something,” he said, smiling at Lorne, “I think I’ll just do that.”

“Right you will. Now, I can finish this field in the morning, but I’ve got to get the combine to bed and put out the feed. Won’t be twenty minutes. You go on ahead to Marla and I’ll be there quick.”

He touched his cap again and began to turn away, but after a step or two he paused and looked back.

“Only thing is,” he added, “you just might have to be real clear to Marla. You

know, when she first sees you. You just might have to remind her who y'are." Then he brightened and added, "After all, look at you! Just a wee string of a thing last we saw you, now a real man!" And he turned and walked off towards the combine. As Ramsay walked back through the grass and over the gangway he heard the machine chuff to life behind him.

The Shannons lived straight across the highway from the old farm, but a line of poplar trees hid their place from where Ramsay stood next to his car, pulling the keys from his pocket. The fading light made his chest feel tight. He wanted a drink. When he started his car, the engine noise surprised him, set him in a hurry. At the highway he glanced left and right and saw only Lorne's sputtering combine a ways off, bumping along the shoulder towards a gate in his own fields.

The Shannons' lane ran nearly a half-kilometer between cornfields before sweeping up next to the house and barns. As he pulled up, Ramsay was surprised by how tidy the place was. The drive shed looked recently painted, and inside sat a Ford pick-up that Ramsay recognized, despite its rusted-out underbelly and missing tailgate. An enormous maple tree stood in the side yard, shading the garden shed and the hose hanging on its wall. A tire hung from its branches, and as Ramsay crossed to the porch carrying his overnight bag he noticed a patch of ground worn bald below the swing.

The inside wooden door opened the same moment Ramsay knocked and a tiny woman shuffled up to the screen and peered at him.

"Hello there, Marla," said Ramsay, strangely wishing he had a cap he could slide off his head and twist in front of him. He moved his bag from one to the other and back

again, then remembered what Lorne had told him. "It's me," he offered.

The screen door scraped the porch wood as she pushed it open. Ramsay smiled into the face of Marla Shannon, a face he hardly knew, saddled with a new, creased looseness that pillowed under her eyes and gathered above the collar of her blouse. Bright, powdered spots on each slack cheek made the rest of her skin look dull and grey. Still, he recognized the smile that slowly appeared, and the way she lifted one hand to pat her hair, coiled into a grey bun above her neck.

"Well!" she breathed. "Frankie Lockburn! I wasn't expecting you."

Ramsay forced the shock back down his throat and managed a bit of a chuckle. "No no, Marla...it's me. Remember? Ramsay. I'm...I just got here, from the city. Ran into Lorne across the way there, he sent me over, said maybe I could..." Ramsay's voice trailed off and he glanced towards the barnyard, then at his boots.

"Oh yes," Marla said after a moment. Her voice sounded vague. "Come in, come in. Lorne'll be here soon, I expect."

Ramsay wondered if it was too late for him to go back to his car and take a room at the motel. He could go to Kelly's first thing in the morning, avoid this altogether.

Marla stood back in the shadows of the house and held the door open, so he stepped in. Heavy drapes muted what evening light remained. The room felt distantly familiar to Ramsay—it was lined with old, fusty clutter, and the table was piled high with papers and receipts never thrown away. A Christmas bag lay on its side, spilling tissue paper. A pile of wool looped towards the floor. From the kitchen trailed the lost notes of a radio, some gospel show, soft hymns that drifted through the room like the dust itself.

"Place seems same as ever," he said, pulling off his shoes and setting them on the

floor with his bag. Then, worried he sounded critical, he added, “Just as homey.”

“You’ll want something to eat,” said Marla. She motioned to a chair next to the table and Ramsay crossed the room, avoiding a coil of yellow flypaper hanging from the ceiling, and sat down. After a moment, when Marla didn’t move, he stood up again. She stared evenly at him for an uncomfortable minute or two, then went into the kitchen.

Ramsay slowly sat again. He glanced at the basement door, wondering when Lorne would appear. He remembered a shower in the basement of this house, a grotty job set up for the farmer returning, grimy from his day’s work. Ramsay listened for the strain of water pipes but heard only Marla’s voice coming from the next room, and then Marla herself reappeared, carrying an enormous, beat-up looking photo album, which she heaved onto the table in front of Ramsay.

“They’re precious things, aren’t they,” she was saying. “I always knew you’d come to see. God love them.”

She opened the album with a thump and began turning the pages, giving Ramsay barely a chance to glimpse the blurred black-and-white faces smiling at each other, landscapes covered in snow, groups of people sitting together on a couch. Finally, when she was nearly at the last page, Marla stopped and tapped a colour photo of two small children, a girl sitting with her legs through a tire swing and a boy behind her, reaching out to push. Ramsay recognized the tire swing from outside, with the little bald patch of dirt underneath. It took him a minute longer to recognize the children, and even then it wasn’t so much recognition as deduction—the blue eyes on the girl, the boy’s closed smile and crown of red hair.

“Tassa and Mitchell,” he said out loud.

“Of course,” said Marla. “I always knew you’d love them.”

She left the album open and moved to the kitchen, a narrow room behind Ramsay with a single counter down one side and a matching green stove and fridge on the other.

“You’ll want something to eat,” he heard her say again, over the sound of rattling dishes.

Ramsay turned the page and studied the next photo, a shot of Lorne with Tassa on his shoulders, her arms circling his chin and his Federation of Agriculture hat on her head, hiding her eyes.

In that moment he heard the clatter of footsteps on the basement stairs and then the door burst open. The room seemed to fill up with Lorne, who thumped Ramsay on the back and laughed. His hair was combed neatly back from his forehead and he smelled of Pears soap, rich and spicy.

“So the lady of the house let you in,” he said, then stepped to the kitchen and kissed Marla on her forehead. With Marla there beside him, dishing cold mashed potatoes onto a pair of plates, Ramsay saw how truly big Lorne was, with his hands that nearly hid the mess of cutlery he lifted from a drawer, arms that reached to a ledge above the cupboards and pulled down a plain green wine bottle.

“My own brew,” said Lorne, walking over and setting the bottle down in front of Ramsay, along with the cutlery. “Maybe not what you’re used to, Ramsay boy, but it’ll do you good, it will. Special recipe.”

He went back to the kitchen where Marla was sliding the two plates into the warm oven and lifted a pair of glasses from the drain rack. He sat next to Ramsay and patted the papers and receipts scattered about the tabletop until he found a corkscrew.

“That one there’s going to be a real farmer,” Lorne said, tapping Mitchell in the tire swing picture which still lay open before Ramsay. “Strong as a little bull. Doesn’t mind the work. Says he’s going to be just like Grandpa Shannon one day. Here, a drop to wash it down.”

Ramsay lifted the album out of the way and pulled his glass closer. “So you spend a lot of time with them?”

“A bit, yeah, a bit. We bring ’em along to church most Sundays. It started once Mitchell got old enough to watch out for his sister, so they began wandering over here, at first just watching. I remember coming out into the corral some mornings and I’d just see these two little white faces peeking at me through the fence. I don’t know when they started calling us Grandma and Grandpa Shannon. Strange, eh? Little things. Got their own way of ordering the world.”

“Tassa knows to write her own name,” Marla said, suddenly appearing with the two plates and setting them down in front of the men. Lorne picked out two forks from the pile of cutlery and handed one to Ramsay, who examined the meal before him—slices of beef, steamed carrots, a mountain of mashed potato. A moment later Marla set down a gravy float before them.

“That’s right!” Lorne said. “Marla taught Tass her letters. Learned in no time, sweet girl. A mind like a trap. Can’t say anything around her you don’t want repeated. Now I remember once not long ago, I was telling her dad about how Mackey Liftick sent his son out shooting for ducks in my back fields, spooking the horses. And those are Marla’s ducks. Anyway, to Amos I commented that Mackey was a dirty old bugger, not knowing the kids were about. Next Sunday outside the church I’ve got Tassa by the hand



and there's Mackey walking on the other side of the street, and don't I hear Tass say to her brother, look Mitchy, there's a dirty old bugger. Imagine hearing that from such a thing! I didn't know to laugh or holler."

They sat laughing for a while. Lorne topped off his glass and the wine, though too bitter, helped to relax Ramsay, make him feel soothed and pleasantly tired.

"Your mother, she seems to be doing just fine, if you wanted to know," said Lorne finally.

"I was wondering. Guess I'll see her tomorrow."

"They've got her a real nice set-up there. Little wee trailer home brought over from somewhere. Set it up by the orchard, you know where I mean, picked out a good spot. Right close to the house but still far enough to feel like her own."

"Sounds ideal."

"I wouldn't go that far, but it's certainly the next best thing. She'll be glad to see you, Ramsay boy, don't you doubt it. Glad as could be. To happy reunions."

Lorne held up his glass and Ramsay did the same.

Then Marla, who had been moving around the kitchen, stepped up and squeezed Ramsay's shoulders. "My memory's just terrible these days," she said. "Remind me of your telephone number and I'll ring across the road and see who'll join us for a drop."

Ramsay couldn't think of what to say so he looked to Lorne, who carefully set down his knife and fork on the edge of his plate, wiped his mouth, then stood and folded his enormous arms around Marla until she nearly disappeared, her cheek pressed against his clean shirt.

"Now Marla, this here isn't Frank," he said. "It's Ramsay, Frankie's *boy*. Come

back from the city to visit. The old place across the road is empty now, you know that.”

Lorne winked at Ramsay, who smiled then looked down at his plate. He didn't remember anyone ever hugging anyone else like that. Lorne swayed with Marla in his arms, reciting names. “Frank and Hannah. Ramsay and Kelly. Kelly and Amos. Little Mitchell, sweet little Tassa.”

Ramsay crushed the potatoes under his fork and nodded.

“It's a lot to keep track of,” Lorne was saying quietly into Marla's grey hair.

“There's a lot to remember.”

Ramsay, wanting something to do, took up his near-empty plate and carried it past Lorne and Marla to the kitchen. Marla pulled herself from Lorne's arms and hurried to Ramsay's side, pushing him gently away from the sink.

“Now now,” she said, “you're the guest, you go on and enjoy yourself.”

“Thank you, Marla,” said Ramsay, reaching for the tea towel to dry his hands.

“Thank you for everything.”

“God love you,” she answered, fiddling with the taps.

Lorne and Ramsay carried their glasses and the bottle onto the porch and sat in the light from the kitchen window, staring out over the dark garden and the barnyard beyond. The breeze carried with it the scent of straw and manure. They didn't say much to each other, just leaned against the porch steps, letting the wine warm their stomachs.

Finally Lorne said, “You heard Marla was ill.”

“I didn't, no,” Ramsay answered.

Lorne stretched out his legs until his heels rested on the flagstone set in the grass.

“We all get confused these days,” he said to his feet. “Lotsa changes, more'n a

person can keep up with.”

Lorne paused. Ramsay cleared his throat and said, “Hm.” He shined the heel of his boot with his thumb.

“She carries the brunt of it, is all,” Lorne went on. “Makes her right angry sometimes, as well it should. But she’s just fine. More good days than bad.” He rolled his head to look at Ramsay. The furrows under his eyes deepened as he smiled. “Always has the most marvelous dinner on the table for me, right as rain.”

Lorne’s teeth were beginning to stain from the drink, and his eyes now seemed unfocused. Ramsay himself was feeling the spin a little, his right arm looped through the porch railings, eyes fixed ahead on the tilting fence row that ran up to the drive shed. The two of them sat listening to insects tick against the kitchen window. After a while Lorne tossed the dregs of his glass on to the lawn and pulled himself to his feet. Ramsay did the same.

“You remember where the guest room is, Ramsay? Front of the house. Just up the stairs, straight ahead.” As he talked, Lorne slipped an arm around the screen door and pulled out a pair of boots. “Bathroom to the right of that. I’m just going to check up on the animals.”

“You want company?”

Lorne shook his head. “Nah. You don’t wanna bother yourself with that muck and slop this time’a day. Won’t take me a minute.” And he clomped down the last two steps and ambled off, lifting his hand with its stumpy finger to wave goodnight.

Ramsay took their glasses into the house and stood them up in the sink. Marla was nowhere about. He found his overnight bag by the door and made his way up the

stairs in the low light, feeling along the hallway to the door at the end. He found a light switch just inside and stood in the pale, humming glow, looking around.

The room wasn't small, but its fussy floral wallpaper gave it a cluttered feeling. He opened a top drawer of the dressing table, curious to see if anything was kept there. The drawer was lined with a cut of the same floral wallpaper, and it held tidy stacks of folded handkerchiefs just like Lorne's. Ramsay lifted one out and held it to his nose. It smelled of perfumed soap and a touch of must. He folded it and slipped it into his shirt pocket. Then he emptied his pant pockets into a chipped washbasin: pen and sunglasses and Kelly's crushed note from his shirt pocket, car keys, wallet, fistful of change. He began to loosen his belt, but paused and glanced towards the window. Baked insect shells lay scattered between the double panes. No curtains. The window looked across the Shannons' front yard and along their scooping driveway between the cornfields, all the way to the dark outlying highway. He undressed down to his underwear right there on the spot, squarely in front of the window, enjoying the freedom of it, the endlessness of garden and grass and distant, craggy wood line instead of the flickering specter of a neighbour's television set.

Ramsay piled his clothes on a tiny rocking chair next to the bed. Just as he bent to tug the sheets free of their tight corners, the whine of hinges made him jump around to see Marla peeking in at the door, her hair loose over the shoulders of a long nightdress. Ramsay grabbed for the quilt to cover himself, but somehow the sight of her long, silver hair embarrassed him more than his own underwear. She didn't speak, so after a moment Ramsay asked, "Everything all right?"

"Frankie, dear," she said, smiling.

“Oh...”

“You like your coffee black in the morning?”

Ramsay hesitated. “Black’s fine.”

“With oatmeal? And raisins?”

“Sounds just fine.”

“I remember,” she said, letting go of the doorknob and wagging her finger at him.

“Always the same for you.”

She smiled again and retreated, scraping the door closed behind her, leaving Ramsay alone in the dim light with the quilt clutched around his waist.

## **Mitchell and Tassa.**

The numbers glowed 5:42 when Mitchell lifted his head from his pillow to have a look. He could hear the first of the birds outside. He felt fully awake, but he was not supposed to leave his bed before 6 a.m. for Any Reason. That included looking at his books or going outside to pet Hardy, but it didn't include going pee, so he climbed down from the top bunk and crossed the hall to the bathroom, where he pulled down his pajamas in front of the toilet.

While Mitchell waited, he spun each of his mother's bottles and jars so that their labels faced evenly forward beside the sink. After he had pulled up his pajama bottoms he climbed onto the edge of the bathtub and stretched himself as high as he could to look out the little window at the deep-water sky. He could see over the side yard, which sloped away from the house towards the apple orchard. His grandmother's trailer sat right on the seam where the smooth lawn met the mottled orchard earth. Mitchell liked the waxy patch of red and yellow flowers, like crayon dots, that grew around the cinder blocks at either end of the trailer. As he looked, his toes gripping the edge of the tub, a light chimed on inside. He stepped down to the floor and when he closed his eyes he could see an imprint of the glowing curtains against the swimming darkness of his eyelids.

5:49 now. The bedroom window leaked in enough pale light for Mitchell to find a pair of pants in one dresser drawer, a t-shirt in another, and some underwear and a ball of socks from the top one. Then he eased open the closet door and found a small pair of brown corduroy overalls and a long-sleeved purple shirt, and he untangled two purple socks from the bin on the floor. She liked things to match and he was good at that. He

laid these clothes out so that there was a big flat Mitchell and a little flat Tassa spread on the floor and then he sat down with his back against the wall and watched the clock.

At 6 a.m. and zero seconds, Mitchell went over to the bottom bunk and sat down heavily enough that the little lump under the covers bounced a few times on the mattress.

“Is it tomorrow?” piped a sleep-soft voice.

“It is.” His sister’s white face appeared, plastered over with streaks of blonde hair.

“Arms up,” Mitchell ordered, and Tassa sat up and reached for the beams of the top bunk with her fingertips. Mitchell peeled off her nighty, the one with yellow ducks along the collar, and plucked up her purple shirt from the floor.

“You have to do the buttons for me, Mitch.”

“I do them for you every day, don’t I?”

And he waited while his sister pushed her arms through the shirtsleeves, first the wrong way around and then the right way, and then he did the buttons. He flapped her overalls alive in the air. When he took off his own pajama shirt he let it get stuck and pretended he had lost his head until Tassa squealed so much that he had to stop, worried they’d wake their parents.

Together they crept out of the bedroom and past the closed door next to it and down the stairs towards the darkness of the landing. Here there were no windows for the morning glow to reach them and Tassa slipped her hand into Mitchell’s. They moved past the landing and through the kitchen to the mudroom, where Mitchell rummaged around for their coats and rubber boots. They heard a shuffling and snorting against the outside door and Tassa pulled it open. In bounded Hardy, all damp and slobbering and

wiggling everywhere.

“He’s saying, hurry up, hurry up, it’s tomorrow!” Tassa whispered, tugging on her second boot.

Outside the morning stayed suspended in the air with the songbirds. On the ground everything was still shadowy and cool. Mitchell and Tassa stopped to examine a caterpillar hunched on a gatepost. Their breath made ghosts in the air. Mitchell pretended he was blowing out smoke, like his grandmother. Hardy squeezed under the barnyard fence and loped along with his nose pushing through the grass, doubling back every few paces to investigate a new scent. Mitchell unchained the barnyard gate and held it open for Tassa to squeeze through, then he followed her and chained it up again. Their rubber boots thunked against their legs as they walked up the grassy laneway to the barn, where Mitchell stretched to reach the string that drew aside the deadbolt on the door. Inside they took turns stepping into a shallow bucket of murky black water that smelled of oil and soap. Mitchell reached up and flicked four light switches in a row and the barn hummed alive over their heads. They could hear grunting, gravelly noises stirring around them. Hardy barked at the door and Mitchell hollered at him to stay put.

There was another door beside them that looked into a small farm office lined with shelves of battered notepads and rags and a big, wobbly desk down the middle of the floor. It smelled like barley and paper. Mitchell left Tassa in the room and moved off deeper into the barn.

“You play too!” she hollered after him, pushing out her lips in a way she thought was menacing.

“You know I got my chores to do.”



“Why can’t I have chores?”

Wisps of Tassa’s hair had escaped yesterday’s pigtails, and she tugged one into her mouth and sucked on it.

“Well, all right,” Mitchell said. “We’ll find you some chores, if that’s what you want.”

Tassa and Mitchell crossed through the barn, between stalls holding wide-bellied pigs who lolled on their sides in the straw, heaving wet sighs and flicking their ears. They got all the way through to the back, where soft clucking noises drifted above the spicy smells of the barn. Mitchell stopped and pointed to a feed sack hunched up against a wall near the chicken pens. The bottom corner of the sack had been chewed open and a trail of grain bled onto the floor.

“That’s your chore,” Mitchell said. “Find out who’s putting holes in the feed bags and tell them to quit it.”

Tassa poked at the hole with her finger. Mitchell went to the chicken pen, where a dozen white birds bumped around each other and scurried towards the low boards that fenced them in.

“All right, all right, get back,” Mitchell scolded as he flung one leg and then the other over the boards and shoved about the chickens with his boot. He reached the door to the chicken run and shouldered it open. The outside light had exploded into daytime yellows and whites. The chickens flapped and scabbled around Mitchell’s feet and tumbled into the narrow run where they’d spend the morning, pecking the stubbly earth. When Mitchell turned back towards the pen, he saw one chicken remaining, flung on its side in a corner. Tassa was leaning over the boards, prodding the heap of feathers with a

broom handle.

“Quit it,” Mitchell told her. He leaned over the chicken. Its rubbery feet were curled together like old-people hands at church. He lifted the bird up by its neck and held it in the air.

“What happened to him?” Tassa whispered.

“It’s a she.”

“What happened to her?”

“Couldn’t say.”

“Sick?”

Mitchell turned the bird in the light from the chicken run. Its wings hung out from its body and below them clung gummy clots of blood and dung.

“Mitch?”

“I guess she had some sort of thing wrong with her.”

“Where will you put him? Her?”

Mitchell thought about that. “In the meat freezer,” he said finally.

“You aren’t going to bury her?”

“Hardy would dig her up and eat her. And get sick.”

“And die too?”

“Maybe. Probably.”

Mitchell let Tassa poke the bird twice more until he was absolutely sure it was dead. Then he pointed to the feed sack with the hole in the bottom and said, “Find the margarine tub inside, and fill it halfway with the grain, then sprinkle it out there for them to eat. I’ll be back.”

“I want to go with you.”

“I’m just going to put it in the freezer.”

“But I want to see you do it.”

So the two of them left the barn and crossed to the smaller building opposite. Hardy bounded towards them and tried to get at the chicken hanging from Mitchell’s hand but Tassa flung the broom handle as far as she could and he took off after that instead. Mitchell knew his father might look for that later, but he didn’t say anything. Inside the other building, which they called the sheep barn even though there were no sheep anymore, Mitchell and Tassa walked along past the workbench and the empty sheep pen to the enormous white freezer in the back. There were piles of brown packages inside, all labeled in black marker. At one end of the freezer hung an empty wire basket, where Mitchell laid the chicken. Its head flopped through the mesh towards the packages.

“Should we say a prayer?” Tassa asked.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s only a chicken.”

“But what if its mother will miss it? Will it go to Heaven?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“Marla says God loves all things. Even flies and groundhogs.”

“Well then, I guess he likes chickens all right.” Mitchell started to close the lid.

“But wait! I want a prayer.”

“Hurry it up. We got things to do.”

“But I can only remember one.”

“Say it then.”

“But it’s not even really a prayer.”

“For Pete’s sake...”

“God bless this food!” Tassa shouted in one breath. “Which now we take! And do us good! For Jesus’ sake! Amen!”

The freezer fell shut with a slam.

They went outside and crossed to the barn again. Mitchell chased the chickens back out into the run and scattered grain for them to peck at, then put a board across the door so they’d stay out there. He lifted each of their three drinking trays into the gutter and tipped out the grayish, phlegmy water, then turned the hose on them. Plumes of yellow-brown chicken dung swirled away around his boots. He filled the jugs with fresh water then lifted each one into the pen again. When he was all finished he took Tassa over to the deep sink at the far end of the pig stalls and held her up while she washed her hands three times with a bar of gritty black soap.

The fresh air outside felt good after the barn-spice of manure. Across the barnyard they could see their mother come out of the house and start down the lawn towards the trailer.

“Ma!” shouted Tassa, cupping her hands around her mouth. “We had a chicken funeral! And now we’re going over for breakfast!”

Their mother stopped and waved her hand, then shouted something back. Her words dropped away in the air, and all they heard was the very edge of her voice, echoing off the metal sides of the sheep barn. Mitchell said, “Come on, she knows where we’re going.”

The two of them crossed the back of the barnyard at a run. Mitchell gripped

Tassa's arm as she followed him over the back fence, and they took off along the wooded thread between the fields, Hardy circling ahead of them.

They followed the edge of the woods at the back of the farm and galloped into the cornfields, where the stalks already reached above their heads. They wove through the glossy jungle together, catching flickering glances of Hardy's tail ahead of them, until Mitchell leaned close to Tassa's ear and shouted, "You know, I heard Lorne say last week that he caught sight of a monster in the cornfield. So watch out!"

Tassa leapt in delighted fright and took off, running as hard as she could with her pigtails bouncing behind her. Mitchell followed, keeping a foot or two behind, reaching ahead now and then to swipe at her back. "I'm after you!" he shouted. "I'm going to get you and stew you in a pot for pigtail soup!"

The corn stalks whipped over her head. When Mitchell craned his neck he could see the Shannon farmhouse bouncing towards them over the green horizon. Tassa stumbled a little, her feet moving too fast for her to make sense of them. They were right at the edge of the cornfield when she pitched towards the Shannons' gravel driveway. Mitchell lunged for her just as he saw another pair of arms reach out and scoop her up.

"We were just running," Mitchell said, stepping out of the field and leaning forward to catch his breath. "Playing tag, and—"

He stopped. The man who caught his sister, who still held her up, was a stranger—much smaller than Lorne Shannon, with hair as bright and blazing as fire, just like Mitchell's. His body was tensed forward and he gripped Tassa around her middle. She had her arms flung over her head for protection and stayed still as a post until Mitchell reached out for her. She pressed up against him and whimpered into his armpit.

Mitchell and the man stared at each other a long moment, and it was only Hardy, who crashed out of the field a few yards up and galloped towards them, barking hoarsely, who broke the silence.

“Didn’t expect to see anyone out here this early,” the stranger said, shoving Hardy away from his crotch. His voice was low and quiet. “Sorry if I gave you a fright, little miss.”

Tassa shuffled to one side of Mitchell and peeked up at the stranger.

Hardy ignored the stranger’s swats and pushed his nose again between the man’s legs. “You must be Mitch,” the stranger said. “And your sister here, Tassa. Am I far off?”

Tassa sucked on her fingers and looked at Mitchell. He nodded to the man, then seized Hardy’s collar and yanked him back.

“I hear you’re quite the young farmer,” the man said to Mitchell. “Up at the crack of dawn to survey the crops, eh? You know who I am?”

Tassa pressed her face back into Mitchell’s armpit. Mitchell could tell from the vibrations of her throat against his arm that she was saying something.

“We’ll be going,” he said, and turned back towards the cornfield, pulling Hardy behind him.

“Just a minute, now,” called the stranger, but Mitchell pressed through the cornrows with Hardy and Tassa and the man stayed behind.

## Jimmy.

The new litter of puppies wormed around each other in a cracked kiddy pool outside the junkyard office. Every time Jimmy tried to get near them old Lola would peel her lips back and growl like she wanted blood. Hungry for a bit of his forearm if he dared try to pick one up. Jimmy couldn't help feeling hurt by this. Only his father could approach the three male dogs without danger, but Lola had always been sweet to Jimmy, stretching out on her front legs when he came near, eager for a gentle wrestle. Now she warned him away with wolfish ferocity. He watched her and the pups from a dusty office window. He decided that what he felt was called loneliness.

The three potential fathers swaggered up and down at the end of their chains, casting out lines of saliva each time they snapped at a fly. Jimmy could see them, too, from the junkyard office. Their testicles swung like hen eggs nested in nylon. They were all named "Bear." At night Jimmy's father released them into the yard to guard the junk. Jim could hear them from his bedroom—the sharp, hard barks of attack and retreat as they hunted down a skunk or a family of coons and wrestled each other for the pulpy carcass. One Bear was missing an ear. The other two had limps in their hind legs. A blaze of bald ground was worn in a semi-circle at the end of their chains. Once in a while one or two of the pups managed to scramble over the lip of the kiddy pool and toddle towards the kennel. The Bears ignored these escapees with something like embarrassed indifference. Sooner or later Lola stalked forward and herded them back to the pool.

When they were a week and a half old Jimmy discovered that if he wore an old catcher's mitt he could scoop one up quick as anything without losing a strip of skin to the bitch's snap. He developed an early-morning habit of coming out to the junkyard not

long after his father had chained up the Bears and scooping himself a puppy. He'd carry it with him into an old teardrop camper parked at the back of the yard and lie with it on the bare mattress, staring out the camper door and making plans. He liked to think that by the time that squirming, nervous little puppy got to be as big and fierce as the Bears, he'd be running the whole yard on his own. He knew how to do it, too. Get rid of all the useless junk that his father had lazily accumulated over the years—old oil drums and wagon axles and tractor tires that bred mosquito colonies in late summer. Keep anything with an engine. He told himself to go visit the school bus headquarters out on the highway, thinking maybe they could use a mechanic who knew as much as him. It was worth asking. Make some money, and one day—Jimmy held out his arm and the puppy kicked and needled at it with its tiny teeth—one day open a full-service collision centre. Here at the yard. Sure, he didn't want to move anywhere. Stay here, watch out for his parents in their old age. He imagined asking his father for advice now and then, just to make him part of it all. He congratulated himself on being so thoughtful.

On this morning, he was startled out of his daydream by the noise of crunching gravel outside the camper. Half a moment later Joyce Rae stuck her head in the door.

“You out here?” she asked.

“Heya, baby sweets,” Jimmy answered. He rose and clambered down from the trailer with the puppy hooked under his arm. In all the times she had walked down the road from her house to his, all the times she had crossed the junkyard to find him half-asleep in the camper, she had never gone inside herself. Neither one of them spoke it but the truth was that she might not fit. She was no little girl but Jimmy liked her all the



more for it. He didn't mind that when they walked side-by-side, crossing the yard to the office, she had several inches all around on him.

They paused on a rotting church pew shaded by a carved-up poplar and Jimmy fumbled his hand over onto her leg.

"Got plans for today?" he asked her. The puppy tumbled away and nosed around the dirt at his feet.

"Today don't matter," she said. "It's plans for the long run that I'm thinking of these days."

"That farm?"

"It's no passing phase, Jimmy Loeber," she told him. The edges of her hair, cut short for summer, were damp and clinging. She shoved them back with her palm. "If you're marryin' me like you say you are—"

"Course I am."

A squirrel scuttled across the path and the puppy fell back on its rear in alarm.

"If you *are*," Rae continued, "then you know I don't want to live on a junkyard. I want to live on a proper farm. And that one's empty already and you know it, besides, from all your work there."

Jimmy tried not to show it, but truth was this conversation always made him feel small and useless. He wished Rae would hold his hand and ask him what he thought they should name their children, like she used to last winter after he proposed. He wanted his first son to be James. Like his father, and like him. He was a good man who upheld tradition.

"This yard's a tradition," he said suddenly.

Rae snorted. "Growing a junkyard isn't a tradition," she said. "Farming is."

Jimmy pulled his hand back into his own lap, hoping she'd notice and feel hurt.

"Anyway," she went on. "I came to ask, did you see the paper yesterday?"

Jimmy shook his head. He watched his father leave the yard office and walk across the driveway towards their house for breakfast. He wondered what he and his father would work on that morning. They had a fleet of push mowers salvaged from the dump that weren't far from working order. They could sell for twenty-five each if he and his dad could get them running smoothly.

"This is the week our announcement is supposed to be there," Rae was telling him. "Think I'll catch a ride into town to see Phil and pick one up."

Jimmy flinched. Rae noticed and she smiled.

"Don't worry," she said. "Phil's got too much chicken grease under his fingernails. What I like is good old fashioned motor grease." And she lifted Jimmy's hand from his lap and gave it a dry kiss. Jimmy shifted and grinned.

"Well, get me a copy, wouldya," he said. "And let's be together tonight."

"Can't." Joyce stood up and waited for Jimmy to follow. The puppy galloped around her legs and she pushed it away with her foot.

"Why not?"

"Because the wedding is five weeks from today if you'd care to notice, and I always said that the whole month before we wouldn't be together like that. I got to wear that white dress and I don't want to feel like a hussy doing it."

"You're no hussy if you're with me," he told her. "And five weeks is more than a month."

“An extra week can’t hurt. Sides, it’ll make our wedding night all the more special, see?” And she walked away from him, ignoring the puppy who scrambled out of her way. An oval of sweat sponged across the back of her shirt. Jimmy picked up the puppy and held it to his face. It smelled like earth and something gingery, and that’s what he concentrated on.

## Ramsay.

Breakfast was rolled oats and coffee, balanced on TV trays in the back porch of the Shannons' house.

"Call this our breakfast nook," Lorne told Ramsay as he lifted a decaying potted plant from a folding chair and balanced it on a small table, heaped with scraps of fabric. Ramsay sat in the empty chair and Lorne found a place on an old sun-bleached sofa. Marla sat next to him. She wasn't eating but nodded happily at Ramsay every time he blew across a spoonful of hot cereal.

"Saw those two kids," Ramsay said, putting down his spoon.

"Let me guess." Lorne hefted his feet onto an archaic sewing machine, parked in the middle of the room. "Came bursting out of the corn patch at ninety miles an hour."

"Didn't seem too happy to see me."

Lorne chuckled. "Hope you didn't scare em too bad. I need Mitch's help this afternoon getting the livestock truck loaded up."

"Looked at me like I was out to murder him," Ramsay said. He couldn't keep the note of injury out of his voice. It bothered him that his own sister's kids ran terrified from him.

"Ah, don't worry about them," Lorne told him. "Mitchell's a shy kid but he'll come around. Tassa you won't have any trouble with. She's a little charmer, that one."

"Good coffee?" Marla asked, as Ramsay set his empty mug down.

"Sure is."

"Like heaven," Lorne said, and he leaned over and kissed her wetly on the cheek.

"Guess I'll go over to Kelly's this morning," Ramsay said, looking away.

He helped clear the dishes into the kitchen but Marla flapped him away with a dishtowel when he tried to rinse out his mug. Out on the front porch Lorne shook his hand.

“That oatmeal’ll keep you chugging all day long,” he said with a wink, and trotted down the steps. As he crossed towards the barnyard he called, “Just show them something they haven’t seen before, and they’ll adore you!”

Ramsay felt foolish getting into his car only to drive a hundred metres down the highway to his sister’s place, so he turned the other way towards town. It was a brilliant day, with the sky scrubbed clean and far, the pavement seeming to glitter. The highway became the main street of the village just a few kilometers along, and he slowed and rolled down the windows as he approached. At the edge of town the familiar “Welcome to Garland” sign still stood, freshly painted brown and white, with pairs of silhouetted square dancers nailed along the top. Clustered in the grass at its feet were a half dozen homemade councilman signs for a fall election, and Ramsay felt a twinge of regret that he knew only one of the names, Brad Ferrier, his brother-in-law’s cousin or some such. Uncle, maybe. Hard to remember who’s related how.

As he rolled along the main street he searched himself for emotion, waiting to feel nostalgia or sadness or anything at all. He noticed a stump on the lawn of number 92 where there used to be a horse-chestnut, a karate studio where he remembered a Christian bookstore, an expansive new mural painted on the wall of the public school. Two very young, very pregnant girls emerged from the small brick library and watched Ramsay

drive past. He nodded to them and looked away, wondering how old they must've been when he was last around. Fourteen, maybe thirteen.

He pulled into the parking lot of the small grocery plaza near the town centre, looking for a pay phone. What used to be a butcher's was now something called News 'n Chicken, its door propped open with a case of diet Pepsi and a filthy looking man with a smeared apron sitting on the bench out front, smoking. A phone booth covered in lipstick numbers and pierced hearts stood beside the bench.

"Nice day," Ramsay said, as he walked past the man, who eyed him and nodded slowly. The scent of cheap candy and twice-fried meat wafted out of the shop. "Not workin'," the man said, when Ramsay lifted the greasy receiver.

"Oh. Thanks." Ramsay stepped away. "Know where I might make a call?"

The man was still eyeing him, tipping his cigarette thoughtfully up and down with his tongue. Ramsay was about to leave when the man said, "You from around here?"

"Well, I've—"

"You Ramsay Lockburn?"

Ramsay started and looked again at the man, who ground out his cigarette on the arm of the bench and stood up. "Got a phone in back, here. Long distance?"

"Well, yes, matter fact."

"Buy a bucket of chicken and we'll call it even."

Ramsay followed the man into the News 'n Chicken. He couldn't for the life of him work out who this was. Maybe a guy his father hired one summer on the farm? An old acquaintance from his high school days?

The shop was crowded with cheap plastic toys, kazoos and bubble wands and pink heart-shaped sunglasses. Squashed along one wall was the chicken counter, with two glinting, yellowish birds turning on spits behind a glass cover. A fleet of deep fryers was wedged in behind, with clots of meat sizzling in two of them. Ramsay laid a hand carefully across his stomach.

“In there,” said the man, gesturing to a doorway behind the counter, hung over with strips of plastic. “On your right. Try to be quick about it. And don’t forget the chicken. You’re buying the extra large family feast.”

The dimness in the narrow room behind the plastic flaps blinded Ramsay. He groped along the wall on his right until his hands found an electric chord that led to a rotary phone bolted on the wall. He waited a moment for his eyes to adjust, and then cranked in the number. In the shop outside he heard a loud woman’s voice, answered by the rattling laugh of the man.

The secretary answered on the first ring. “Leonard Narrows, please,” Ramsay said. The phone crackled and echoed.

“Mister Narrows is in meetings all morning,” replied the voice, all sweetness and distance. “Can I ask who’s calling?”

He felt relieved. He could now make out a wall of cardboard boxes, held up by sagging garbage bags. A small table sat in one corner with an overflowing ash tray on it and two different Playboy calendars, 1987 and 1989, pinned side by side on the wall above. Ramsay wanted badly to escape back into the street.

“That’s all right,” he said. “It’s only Ramsay Lockburn. I’ll—”

“Just a moment, please,” came the quick reply. The loud woman’s voice out in the shop droned on. Ramsay parted the plastic just enough to see her. She was very large and round, with dimpled elbows that she parked on the chicken counter in front of her while she leaned forward and talked to the man at the deep fryers.

“And I said, they won’t catch me with my eyes closed! One hundred fifty for a goddam used wedding dress!”

Ramsay strained to see her better, feeling a stir of familiarity. He couldn’t for the life of him place her, though.

There was a fumbling noise on the phone line and a man’s voice spoke up.

“Ramsay!”

“Hello, Leonard.”

“I’ve been looking forward to your call. Did you get the flyers I sent over to you before you left?”

“I did. I’ve got them. They’re—”

“Good. Excellent. Very good. You’ve arrived, then? What’s it—” The sound of rustling papers. “Garland?”

“Garland, yes. That’s where I am.”

“Country paradise?”

“Well, you know, something like that.”

“I sure hope so. We hired the best advertisers in the city to do the mock-up of those flyers. Did you see the job they did? It’s incredible. ‘Rustic Ranch Getaway.’”

“I saw that.”

“‘Unparalleled scenic beauty.’”



“That’s right.”

“So what condition is the place in now?”

“Well, fairly good, considering it’s been empty these five-six years.”

“Good. Excellent. It’ll be two weeks before I can get there with the insurance man. You got the real estate agent set up?”

“Well, being honest here, I’ve yet to talk to my family.”

“Did you give them a flyer?”

“Well, no. Thought I’d wait until I’ve—”

“Show them the flyer, Ramsay. It’s brilliant. It’ll convince them.”

“I’ll do that, then.”

“That agency did a contract for Coca Cola once, you know that?”

“I didn’t, no.”

“Best in the city. You sure you don’t want me to set up the estate agent? We’ve got corporate people working for us. Could arrange the whole thing.”

“That’s all right. I’ve got someone in mind,” Ramsay assured him. Just then the woman out in the shop erupted into seismic laughter.

“Great goodness!” Leonard exclaimed. “The locals?”

Ramsay peered towards the door and jumped to see the man’s face level with his own, watching him through the plastic.

“A lively bunch, out there!” Leonard exclaimed. “I like that! That’ll be good for business! We should put that on the flyer.”

Ramsay promised to call again in a week or so and set the phone in its cradle.

The man stepped back to let him squeeze around the counter. The large woman sat on a

stool, holding a chicken leg over a paper plate. She picked at her teeth with her tongue and watched him.

“Well,” said Ramsay, turning to the man behind the counter. “Thanks for that.”

“Nine fifty,” said the man, pushing a grease-spotted paper bucket towards him.

“Of course.” Ramsay took a ten from his wallet and laid it down next to the woman’s paper plate. He smiled at her, still trying to call up a name, but she looked away and took a bite of her chicken.

“See you around, then,” Ramsay said finally, taking the bucket.

The woman set down her chicken leg and began licking her fingers. The man took the ten and punched a button on an old, grinding register. Ramsay left.

He put the chicken on the car seat next to him and leaned across to roll down the passenger window. He thought about dumping it in a public garbage but felt somehow nervous he would be spotted. Small town paranoia creeping back on him, he thought. He held up two fingers to salute a trio of old men sitting outside the Junction Pub in the morning sunshine. They watched him curiously as he drove past.

All the way back out of town he smelled fried chicken and when he finally pulled up outside of his sister’s farmhouse he opened all of his car doors and took the bucket with him. No one seemed to be about. He noticed the trailer at the edge of the orchard, set up on cinder blocks and circled with bright flowers. He crossed to the house and found the mudroom door unlocked, but when he stood in the kitchen and called, no one answered. He breathed deeply and tried to find his sister somewhere in the scent of this house, some familiar thread of her, but there was too much clutter in the air. Smells of

window cleaner and cinnamon and the fried chicken that he carried. He set the bucket in the sink. The noise of a door grinding on its hinges made him lean towards the window. His mother stepped down from the trailer and started up the lawn towards the house. With each step towards him he registered a new change: her rounded back, the way she wore her sweater like its fit didn't matter, the weightless look of her cloudy-white hair. She looked up and paused, eyes right on him, then waved her hand and turned back towards the trailer. He caught up with her when she was nearly there.

“You looked like a ghost of your father standing there with your face in the window,” was the first thing she said when he reached her side. “Lucky I saw you come up the driveway or I would've died myself.”

He helped her up the trailer steps and when she turned to face him he said, “Well. I've come back.”

“So you have,” she replied. “And not in too big a hurry.”

The thing to do, he thought, was to hug her. Hug his mother. He stepped forward and tried to put his arms around her, but his boot caught on the bottom step and he lurched ahead, the side of his face crushing awkwardly into her stomach. He made like that was what he'd meant to do, and he squeezed her a moment, feeling foolish when she patted his hair.

“I've got more years in me yet,” she said. “You'll waste your time, trying to squeeze me dead right now.”

“Oh, ma.” He stepped away but saw that she was smiling. She gestured for him to follow her inside the trailer.

The trailer seemed no bigger than a breadbox, squeezed full of books and kitchen dishes and a sagging tweed chair that Ramsay recognized. Two rooms, the kitchen and the living space, were vaguely divided where the white of the kitchen cupboards rolled into the chocolate-brown bookshelves that seemed too large and heavy for such a tiny space. Crowded on the shelves were hundreds of books, many sprawling face-down as though they had been read halfway and abandoned. A string looped from one end of the shelves to the other and was hung over with greeting cards, giving the whole area a messy, comfortable look. As he slowly turned to take it all in, his mother suddenly pushed her arms under his and gripped him in a quick, surprisingly strong embrace.

“It *is* something to see you,” she said into his shirtfront. Then she abruptly let him go and began fiddling with a slat of wood hanging from the wall, which lifted on double hinges and rested on a brace that she set up underneath. She took a jam jar full of pink flowers and set it on the table.

“Kids brought me those.” She shook an electric kettle near her ear then held it under a tap.

“I saw those kids this morning,” Ramsay said. He noticed two chairs stacked next to the door and he pulled them apart and set them up next to the table.

“When did you get here, then?” she asked him, sounding surprised.

“Well. Last night, actually. Late. Thought I’d wait til this morning to come throwing myself on you and Kelly.”

“That was foolish. You stayed at the Motor Lodge, I suppose?” She plugged in the kettle and lifted two coffee mugs from the drain rack.

“Actually. Lorne and—Next door.”

“Lorne and *Marla's*,” she said. “Don’t be daft.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”

“One thing I learned, Ramsay, does no good to dance around.”

“Sorry.”

“Your father didn’t know much better. But *I* know better than to stay any kind of angry at a dead man and a poor woman with half her mind left.”

“Geez ma,” Ramsay said, dropping into one of the chairs. “You don’t waste any time getting down to things, do you?”

She took a margarine lid from the sink and centered it on the table, then rummaged in a drawer for a pack of cigarettes and lighter. “Speaking of getting down to things,” she said. She turned her face away from him to blow out a trail of smoke, then tapped ash into the margarine lid. “When Kelly told me you were coming back, I said to myself, there’s a reason for that. I said, he’s not just coming back to smell the flowers and eat the berries.”

“Since when have you been smoking?” Ramsay asked. The kettle began to sputter and she pinched the cigarette in her lips and stood to get it.

“Since I decided I needed at least one vice or they’d declare me a saint,” she told him out of one corner of her mouth. “Black?”

“Black’s fine.”

“Always like your father. That’s good. You’d have to go up to the house for milk.”

Ramsay noticed for the first time that there was no fridge wedged into the tiny kitchen. His mother dropped a tea bag in each of the mugs and poured out the steaming water.

“Amos got me all fitted up with plumbing and electricity here,” she told him.

“It’s a miracle what that man knows to do. Fridge is no big deal.”

“Well, it’s good to see you out of that—” Ramsay paused.

“That what, Ramsay?” She reached for a box of crackers and smiled at him.

“Mental institution?”

“Ma.”

“Well I’m sorry, but ‘Extendicare Facility’ is somewhat of a misnomer.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re back here now. Place okay in the winter?”

“Guess I’ll find out, won’t I?”

For something to do, Ramsay put two crackers in his mouth. They were old and had gone soft and tasteless. His mother put the box back on the counter without taking any herself.

“Now tell me,” she said. “You were a good boy to visit me when I was put away, but now you’re here for the first time in...” Her eyes slid away as she did the math in her head. Ramsay bolted his cup of grey tea to get the gluey crackers down.

“I came to see that niece and nephew of mine,” he managed, choking a little.

“Oh, posh,” she replied sharply. “You came for more than that or I’m the Queen of England. I know you, despite the years.”

“Well.” Ramsay dipped his tea bag in and out of the mug. He took a deep breath. “Matter of fact, I’ve got something to ask,” he began. “But I’ve got to get a thing from the car first.”

“What kind of a thing?”

“It’s a—it’s nothing. Just want to show you something.”

“Tell me what it is first, then I’ll tell you if I want to see it or not.”

Ramsay turned his mug slowly on the table, watching the remaining tea slug from side to side.

“I’ve got a flyer to show you, that’s all. It’s an idea I have.”

“A flyer!”

“For—the old farm.”

“The old—!” she stopped and turned abruptly away from him.

“I’m sorry.”

“Ram.” She was staring out the small kitchen window. Her cigarette hovered near her lips, between two fingers. “If you go around saying sorry all the time you’re going to take the stuffing right out of those words, and then you’ll have nothing to say when you truly mean it.”

“I’m—” He sighed. His mother stood to dump the ash and her spent cigarette into a small garbage bag tied up beneath the sink.

“Here’s the truth, Ramsay,” she said, turning back to him. “We have to save it.”

“I don’t want it demolished or anything,” Ramsay said. “I want to save it, too. Preserve it right. If you’ll just let me get the—”

“It’s for Mitchell.”

That stopped him. “Mitchell?”

His mother nodded. Ramsay jerked his thumb towards the farmhouse. “*That* Mitchell?”

“Don’t be thick, now,” his mother warned him. “I figured you were here about the farm, and not to trade in your fancy car for a tractor, either. Up, up!” she held her palm to him when he started to speak. “I don’t need to hear! The point is, Ramsay, it’s delightful to see you, but if your only purpose for visiting is to pull that farm out from under us, you might as well push off right now. And I’m not alone in thinking that.”

Ramsay rubbed at his earlobe and tried to find a reply. He felt about five years old just then, the taste of crackers still in his mouth, his mother’s voice cutting through him.

“I thought—you’d be happy to see it taken care of,” he said. He knew he sounded sullen and was angry because of it. “I never intended to pull anything from under you.”

A busy shuffling noise outside the trailer door interrupted him.

“Go on,” said his mother when he glanced at her. He opened the door and an enormous beast exploded into the trailer, a whipping, slobbering thing with an anvil head that plowed books off the shelves and shoved at every item on the counter. It took a few seconds for Ramsay to recover himself and recognize the dog that he had met that morning, with the two kids.

“Who’s my great big boy? Who’s my pal? Who is he?” Ramsay’s mother cooed and laughed as the dog hoisted itself onto its hind legs and pushed at her chin with its massive shoebox snout. With her free hand she dug into the cracker box and tossed one of them above her. The dog snapped it out of the air.



“You’re fattening up that dog of ours to eat him.”

Ramsay turned towards the voice behind him and was instantly crushed in a bear hug.

“You are such an idiot, Ramsay!” his sister said, breaking her hug only to slap him across the shoulder. “You said you’d be getting here two weeks ago!”

Ramsay grinned. After spending those long minutes squeezed into this smoky trailer with his mother’s unexpected firmness, it was an incredible pleasure to see his sister standing in front of him. She had her masses of red hair caught up under a kerchief and a smile twitched at her lips. He caught her hands and gave them a squeeze. “I said I’d *try* to be here two weeks ago. Took longer than that.”

“Took you four years, by my count!” she proclaimed.

“Ramsay comes bearing *flyers*,” his mother called.

“And fried chicken, apparently,” laughed Kelly.

“He wants to get rid of the farm,” his mother persisted. “Big money plans.”

Kelly rolled her head back. “Five minutes,” she said to the ceiling. “Five minutes without starting this argument, *please!*”

“Does no good to dance around,” his mother muttered. “Does it, Hardy, old boy?”

“Come on,” Kelly said, hooking her arm through Ramsay’s and pulling him onto the lawn. Hardy bounded out of the trailer and galloped ahead of them. “A celebratory lunch for my long-lost brother and his big, evil money plans. You coming, Mom? Peanut butter sandwiches. And fried chicken.”

“Give an old woman a minute to collect herself,” she replied from inside, and they heard the clatter of dishes in the sink.

Ramsay stood next to his sister, facing up the lawn towards the farmhouse. The two kids were up there, circling his car like startled animals, cupping their hands around their faces to look suspiciously in the windows, standing back to study the license plate. The little girl was tracing something with her finger in the dust above the rear tire.

“They told me you scared the bejeezus out of them this morning,” Kelly said. She bumped him with her shoulder.

“Guess I might’ve,” Ramsay said. “Mom tells me that Mitchell is going to take over the old farm.”

“Five minutes!” Kelly exclaimed. “I swear, all I ever hear about is that farm. Mother worrying over it, Lorne asking Amos about it, Mitchell begging me to describe its floor plan as a bedtime story. It must be something in the water. It’s an epidemic of obsession.”

Hardy lifted a leg over the front tire of Ramsay’s car.

“Go on,” Kelly said, bumping him with a shoulder. “I’ll help mom. You go and meet them proper. Show them you’re not the boogey man they think you are.”

“What if I am?” Ramsay asked, but she turned back into the trailer and left him alone to cross the lawn towards the kids.

The little girl was the first to notice him and she darted to her brother’s side and burrowed herself under his arm. Ramsay stopped a couple of feet short of his car. He planted his hands on his knees and leaned forward to study the boy at eye level. He had a Lockburn head of thick red hair, but everything else about him was pale and skinny, his

throat hooked like a baby bird's, his arms dangling too far out of his shirtsleeves. When Ramsay straightened he noticed the boy's arm tighten around his sister's shoulders.

Ramsay held out his hand. "Shall we try this over again?" he asked. The boy hesitated. His right arm was guarding his sister, so finally he lifted his left hand and Ramsay gave it a brief, awkward shake.

"Now, do you remember me?" Ramsay asked. The boy dropped his hand and said nothing.

"From a few years back? When your sister was born?"

The boy lifted one shoulder in a barely perceptible shrug. The little girl rolled her face so she could watch him out of one eye.

"Hello, Tassa!" he said loudly. She gripped her brother's shirt and smiled.

An uncle, Ramsay told himself. I must behave as an uncle to these kids.

He could only think of one thing to do. He looked at the trailer. Then his hand touched the handkerchief he had put in his pocket at Lorne's. The little girl continued to watch him out of one eye as he pulled the handkerchief out of his pocket and draped it over his forearm. He reached a hand towards her head, slowly, holding her gaze steady, and she let him get close enough to touch her hair. The boy shuffled protectively as Ramsay pretended to pluck one of the soft strands from her head and thread it through an imaginary needle. He wore an exaggerated grimace, stuck his tongue out in concentration, and wet the tip of the imaginary hair to stab it through the needle. Finally he worked the handkerchief into a sharp point between his thumb and forefinger and pushed the imaginary needle and thread through, rolling the cloth under his thumb so that it tugged after the needle like magic.

The little girl turned fully towards him, pushing back her brother's arm, her mouth open in delight. Mitchell stared with determined curiosity at the handkerchief and Ramsay noticed his move at his side to mimic the trick. He held out the handkerchief to the boy.

"Your grandfather, my father, taught me that trick," Ramsay said. Mitchell took the handkerchief and put it in his pocket. He stared without a word at Ramsay.

"You, you want to see what I can do?" exclaimed the little girl, bursting suddenly through her shyness.

"Tassa!" Mitchell warned in alarm, but she ignored him and stepped towards Ramsay. She squeezed her eyes shut and pulled at her eyelashes. Ramsay winced. She managed to turn each eyelid inside out and proudly turned her face to Ramsay, her eyes rimmed with grotesque red flesh.

"Oh, well, that's something, isn't it," Ramsay stammered.

"She's not supposed to do that," Mitchell muttered, tugging his sister towards him.

"Mom says they could get stuck like that!" Tassa reported happily. She blinked and her eyelids turned right side out again.

"Oh my," said Ramsay. "That would be a shame."

"There's a chicken in the meat freezer," she added.

"Come on," Mitchell commanded. He steered his sister towards the house. He spoke gruffly but Ramsay was certain he caught a smile at the edge of his lips. When the kids were partway up the lawn Mitchell stopped and turned back towards Ramsay.

"You coming?" he called.

## Jimmy.

He pulled up outside the real estate office in the early morning, the hood of the pick-up nosing just inside the shade of an enormous maple. Joyce Rae cranked her window down an inch and popped her cigarette butt through.

“Cold winter ahead,” she said. “Be nice finally living in that place, where there’s a woodstove. Where’s my purse?”

Jimmy was studying the side view mirror. Rae saw him and craned around to face the back window. Lisa Hamyl was strolling down the sidewalk towards them, with swirls of rusted leaves lifting around her stockings.

“You get your eyes off her legs,” Rae warned. Jimmy rubbed his chin with one hand. He loved the sandpaper noise it made, the movie-star feel of his own stubble.

“Talked to my dad this morning,” he told Rae. “Said real estate agents are useless, and they grab your money for nothing.”

“You’re dad’s been too long in his junkyard,” Rae asked. “Think he knows a thing about real estate? Sides, what money’s she gonna grab? We know what we’re after. Let’s just go get it.”

“We got some money. Don’t talk like we don’t.”

Lisa carried a briefcase and held back waves of blonde hair with her free hand as she stepped carefully around a pile of dog shit. When she looked up she noticed Rae eyeing her out the back window of the truck. For a moment the women just watched each other like stiff cats, then Lisa smiled. Rae turned back around in her seat.

“Y’see, Jim?” she said. “We’re already friends. Stop your worrying. And stop scratching your chin that way. Didn’t anyone ever teach you to shave?”

“You sure that was Ramsay Lockburn you saw yesterday?”

Rae rolled her head in an exaggerated circle. “For the five thousandth time, *yes*. Saw him, heard him, know that he’s selling. He was talking about it on Phil’s phone. I heard every word.” Rae looked back out the window. “Sure takes her jolly time,” she commented.

The real estate office was in a brick house with window boxes lining the porch railing and ROYAL LEPAGE RCR stenciled in the window. Jimmy and Rae watched as Lisa stooped partway up the cement steps to collect a rolled newspaper, then paused again to look over the window boxes and pinch away a few deadheads.

Jimmy turned to stare ahead of him at the post office, where someone had tied a dog to a stop sign. The dog strained against its leash and barked up a fury at the passing traffic on Main Street. A man in Harley Davidson jacket stepped out of the post office and smacked the dog across the snout with a bundle of paper.

Jimmy’s gaze drifted back to the house.

“Looks like we’re clear,” he said, seeing an open sign propped below the stenciled letters. He got down from the truck and walked around to Rae’s door, which opened only from the outside. She swung her legs out and squirmed to the edge of the seat.

“You remember what we want in there,” she warned.

“I know well enough,” Jimmy answered, holding his hand out to her. She seized it and slid heavily onto the road, then took her purse from the seat behind her. Jimmy followed her along the hedge path and up the porch steps and stood gazing at the flower boxes while Rae looked around for a doorbell. “Guess we just go in,” she said, and

waited for Jimmy to step around her and open the door.

Lisa was sitting on the other side of a long wooden desk with her briefcase lying closed in front of her and the paper open on top. With one hand she held her hair up behind her head while she used her teeth to pinch open a bobby pin. The office smelled of clean white paper, and of air that was fresher than outside.

“I saw you two already waiting,” Lisa said, ducking her head forward as she pushed a pin into her hair. “Your appointment’s at nine-thirty, but since I saw you.”

“We’re sorry for being early.” Jimmy stepped ahead and Rae appeared behind him, filling the doorway.

Lisa lowered her arms and shook her head lightly from side to side. A single blonde strand fell loose and she tucked it behind her ear. “Why don’t you each have a seat?” she told them.

Jimmy and Rae sat in two chairs facing Lisa. At the edge of the desk closest to them sat a pad of postcard-sized stationary and a dish of peppermint candy. Rae set her purse on the desk and fished a candy from the bowl. She looked around the room and slipped her feet from her sandals, jiggling one foot on top of the other.

“I just read the good news this morning,” Lisa said. She picked up *The Garland Herald* and shuffled through the pages. “Buck and Doe,” she read. “For James Loeber and Joyce Rae Kirk. Saturday, September 11th.” She crushed the paper into her lap. “Isn’t that fantastic. Congratulations, James and Joyce Rae, that’s beautiful.”

Rae plucked at the front of her shirt to settle it over her middle.

“I’m just Rae. And he goes by Jimmy.”

“Thank you,” Jimmy said.

“Well, I’m so glad to hear there’ll be a wedding.” Lisa smiled and pointed to a poster of photos on the wall, mostly small prints of little bungalows and empty grass lots.

“We’ve got a few places on the market that are just perfect for young newlyweds.”

“We’ll need a nursery,” Rae put in. The candy in her mouth clicked on her teeth as she studied the wall of photos. “We’re planning for a family right off.”

“Wonderful,” said Lisa. She swiveled in her chair and lifted a binder from a bookshelf behind her. “We’ll find you something just perfect. Have you got a price range in mind?”

Rae closed the candy wrapper inside her fist. Both women looked at Jimmy.

“Well,” he said. He tipped his chair back on two legs and rubbed his chin. “We thought we’d get a whaddyacallit, a mortgage.”

“I see.” Lisa held the binder on its spine and ran her thumb over the coloured tabs. “Have you met with your banker?”

“No,” Rae cut in, “but s’pose we have a look at our choices first, before we get ahead a ourselves with bankers and that.”

“Right, then,” Lisa answered. Her thumb slipped in between the pages. “Let’s start with what sort of place you’ve got in mind and go from there.”

“A good sort of place,” said Rae. “Don’t show us any old leaned-over shacks. I saw Mackey Liftick’s cracked-up place is for sale, behind the mill. Don’t bother showing us places like that.”

“Right, no old holes,” Lisa said, and laughed quietly. Rae puckered her cheeks around her candy and rolled her eyes at Jimmy.

“Have a look here,” Lisa said, and spun the binder to face them. Jimmy rolled his



chair to all fours and leaned forward with Rae to study a photo of a small, yellow-sided house. Icicles lined the edge of the roof above a rangy stand of cedars. A bank of snow, streaked brown where the plow had leaned into it, crushed the house's windowless front wall.

"Good starter home," Lisa said. "Three bedrooms. You could turn one into a nursery." She smiled at Rae but only Jimmy looked up to notice.

"Says, 'Handyman's Special,'" he pointed out.

"Do you enjoy working with your hands?" she asked. Jimmy's face flared and he glanced at Rae. "Are you a man likes to have his tools around him," Lisa continued, "building and creating things for himself and his family?"

"Just hold here a minute," Rae cut in suddenly. "Before we get excited about building and creating, tell us why this place's all covered in snow. We're into September now. No one wanted to buy this house at all since last winter?"

"We've been keeping it for just the right couple," Lisa explained.

"You been keeping it for a coupla suckers, is what you've been doing." Rae shuffled up straight in her chair and looked at Jimmy. "Waste of time," she said to him. "Let's just ask her. Go on, Jimmy."

Jimmy rubbed a knuckle in his ear. "I'm not going to," he said finally. He felt his blush deepen. "She won't know anything about it, I'm telling you."

Lisa looked at them, pleasantly curious.

"Lord sakes," breathed Rae. She turned to Lisa. "We were wonderin..." Before she went on she reached for another candy. When she pulled at the twists of cellophane the candy spun out of the wrapper and onto the floor, where it skidded out of sight below

the desk. Jimmy leaned way down his chair and fished around for it with one hand.

“We wanted to ask,” Rae continued, kicking a little at Jimmy’s arm with her toes. “What about the old empty place out down the highway, old place with those big trees out front? That place’d suit us just fine.”

Jimmy found the candy and sat up quickly. A feathery dizziness drifted through him. He braced one hand against the edge of the desk and set the candy down beside the dish. It was coated with gray dust.

Lisa watched Jimmy for a moment, then folded the binder shut and tugged at the pages inside until they all lay flat. “You mean the Lockburn place?” she asked at last, looking up at Rae.

“That’s the one. How much for that?”

Lisa leaned back in her chair and tapped her lips with her finger. After a moment she said, “I don’t believe that farm is for *sale*. It would have to be for *sale* for me to know anything about it.”

Jimmy took a noisy breath.

“Well, maybe just use your ’magination,” he said. “Everyone knows the place, was the nicest farm in the township. I used to work there myself, helping out. You know it too and sure you have some idea what it’d go for. You might as well. Else I’m never gonna get my peace.”

He wished he had winked when he said that. He sensed Rae straining like a balloon about to burst, but she stayed quiet.

“I’m afraid I just have nothing,” Lisa said, and she opened her hands in front of her on the desk to show them. “That place has been empty for—seems like so long, now.

I haven't heard anything about a sale."

"What else are they gonna do with it?" Rae said. "Make a theme park?"

Jimmy rubbed his palms against his knees. "Well, what would you say?" he ventured again. "If you just imagined?"

"It's really not possible for me to pull those figures out of the blue."

"But if you had to."

"Why don't we have another look here?" Lisa opened the binder on a blue tab. "I believe I have a farm or two going for..."

"No need," Rae broke in. She drove her feet back into her sandals and pulled her purse into her lap.

"We're sorry to bother you with this," Jimmy said to Lisa. He reached out and touched Rae's arm. "It's just – we heard Ramsay Lockburn's back and we thought maybe it was to get the place sold up. Thought maybe by chance he'd a talked with you already and we'd be the first to come along and, you know, get a deal or something. I used to help work that farm, y'see, when Frank was still alive. But it's all right. Let's see this here binder some more."

But Rae's hand darted out and slammed the binder shut just as Jimmy reached for it. "Don't you start up," she said to him. "Don't you start with your sorrys and your binder. We talked about this. Ever since you could first lift a kitten you helped out there with the seeding, the haying, the rounding up, for them Lockburns. We talked this over. That place is as much ours as theirs and we're getting it. We're living there and that's what you tol' me when you asked me to marry you and that's what we're doing."

"I'm sorry," Lisa broke in. "Did you say Ramsay Lockburn is back in town?"

“You see?” Jimmy said quietly to Rae. “Whatever is happening with that old farm, she don’t know about it. We asked her and it’s not as we hoped but that’s just that. Why’n’t we go on to my place and talk this over with my dad.” He tugged the binder out from under Rae’s palm and passed it back to Lisa.

“Oh—” said Lisa, in a strange sort of way. Jimmy and Rae waited for her to say more but she just stared at the binder.

“Suppose we take your card or something,” Jimmy ventured.

“Oh, yes, of course.” Lisa seemed suddenly restored to herself. She opened a drawer and found a business card, which she handed to Jimmy. “That’s got both my office and my home number. Call anytime you’d like.”

Jimmy slipped the card in his shirt pocket and stood. Rae hauled herself up next to him.

“We just want that place set in our own hands where it can be rightly lived in, is all,” Rae told Lisa. Her cheeks were pink. Jimmy could smell the peppermint on her breath. “It’s a sad shame to see it everyday, sagging like a dropped apple.”

“You don’t see it every day,” Jimmy told her, leading her around to the door. “Only when I drive you past.”

He nodded to Lisa, but she had turned around to put the binder away.

The maple’s shadow had slipped off the hood of the truck and now lay across the sidewalk. The dog outside the post office was lying down now and managing only a couple of worn-out woofs at the odd passerby. Rae took a cigarette from under the elastic band on the visor above her. “Well, Miss High and Mighty thought she had us all figured out,” she said, the cigarette bouncing on her lips. “When you went down for that

candy, Jim? You better not've been looking anywhere but at the floor, I swear. Did you see that place she tried to show us? I know what that place was. Recognized it. Place is down by the mill, right down by the Lifticks'. Didn't I tell her no places like that? Thought she had us figured out. If she's so smart as that, how come she didn't have two words to say bout the Lockburn place?"

"Place isn't for sale after all, I guess," Jimmy said. The steering column whined as he turned onto the highway. "She only knows about for sale places."

"Place is too for sale," Rae snapped. "Don't you remember? I heard that Ramsay Lockburn myself, yapping about it on Phil's phone in back." She twisted in her seat to face Jimmy. "You know what I think? They're keeping it a secret. Wasn't Ramsay Lockburn and Lisa goddam Hamyl a thing at one time? I'll bet they're back in cahoots. Only gonna show the farm to people they like. And you think she likes us? Think she's gonna give us any kinda chance? Well, she's not. You heard her reading our announcement like it was a funny joke. Pretending she gives a damn that we're marrying, the whole time proolly thinking what a funny joke it is."

Jimmy didn't answer.

"Ain't no farm better'n that one." Rae turned back to look out the window next to her. "Ain't no house better for raising up our kids. Don't you think, Jim?"

Jimmy slowed and turned onto the dirt road that led off to the east, away from Garland. He fishtailed a little on the loose gravel. Finally he said, "You know, that Lockburn house, sometimes I think about it. And sometimes I think it must have bad luck. I think maybe it's cursed or something."

"You don't believe that!"

“I think I might.”

Rae pressed a palm against the dashboard and turned again to look at Jimmy.

“You never told me any a this before now. What’re you going on about, all’a sudden?”

“Well, think. Why are none a them Lockburns living there now?”

“Because they’ve got other places to be. I don’t know. Who can understand ’em.”

“It’s because not a one wants to live in a cursed house.”

“I don’t believe it!”

“Well, I might.” The truck bucked over a pothole and a cloud of dust soared up behind them. “Look what happened,” Jimmy went on. “Big old beauty of a farmhouse, best house around, and old lady Lockburn living like a canned sardine only a mile away.”

“She’s too old to live in that house on her own.”

“Well, in my mind she’s too smart to. She knows the house is cursed. Drove her husband to another lady’s bed. She knows and everyone knows but it don’t ever get said.”

“Well, *you’d* never...”

“I’m not saying I’d ever. I’m just saying it is what it is.”

“Well, don’t think I’d do the same. Don’t think I’d keep all quiet, tucked into a trailer home. I’d come screaming at your balls with the kitchen scissors if you tried something like that.”

“I know you would.” Jimmy reached over to pat her knee.

They bounced along in silence a while, the ditch grass slapping along the side of

the truck. A gopher ambled onto the road, then whirled away when it saw them coming.

“If you’re so spooked by an old house,” Rae said, “why’d you tell me you’d move me there when we get married? Feeding me lies and horseshit?”

“Joyce Rae,” Jimmy answered, squinting into his side mirror just as the gopher reappeared behind them, “I was so crazy about you, I’d a said about anything to get your yes.”

“You *was* so crazy about me?”

“Am, Joycey, I *am* crazy.”

Jimmy glanced at Rae and saw she was smiling a little. Something in his chest soared.

“I’d keep a nice house,” she said, staring out at the woods that rattled past.

“I know that.”

“Don’t think I’d keep a slob’s house. It’d be no house where your friends could sit around with their bellies hanging out like a pig’s ass.”

“I wouldn’t want a house like that.”

“Our kids’ll grow up nice.”

“I know they will.” Jimmy slowed to make the drive last longer.

“You’re crazy, with your talk of curses. You’re off your goddamn rocker.”

“Maybe I am. Gonna marry you, ain’t I?”

Three enormous, lazy birds lifted from the road a few yards in front of them, revealing a bolt of animal gut in the gravel. Jimmy swerved to straddle it between the truck’s tires.

“One thing I know,” Rae said, just as they slowed and turned into a weedy

driveway. "We're deserving folks. Someone's gonna live in that house again, and I'll be damned if it ain't gonna be us."



**Ramsay.**

He had been in Garland only a few days, and already something had closed up tight in Ramsay's stomach. At Kelly and Amos's place he lay on the pull-out couch that nearly filled the small front room, feeling every coiled spring press into his back. If he stretched out to his full length, his feet hung off the end. At his head was a door that faced the side yard and rattled in the night breeze, but the pull-out blocked it from use. All along the wall to Ramsay's right were windows, their bottom halves curtained by fussy lace that brushed over his face at night when he wedged open the window. To his left was a French door with frosted panes that opened into the rest of the house, but the bed blocked that too, so that to get in and out of the tiny room he had to hobble across the mattress on his knees.

Every morning in the cramped room, Ramsay opened his eyes feeling tense with anxiety, and then he would remember: the old farm. Each time he tried to mention it, his mother or Kelly broke him off with some observation about the meal they were eating or the likelihood of early frost. He wanted an honest talk with his brother-in-law, but Amos seemed never in one place, and certainly never ready for a conversation, always bolting his meals over the sink with his eyes on the barnyard or giving Ramsay a quiet hello as he came in at night and fixed himself a Scotch Toddy to take up to bed.

On the third morning, Ramsay woke abruptly and could tell from the pale glow above the curtains that it was still quite early, so he was startled when he rolled over and saw Mitchell's face staring down at him through the French door where one of the frosted panes had been broken and removed. Almost as soon as Ramsay saw him, the boy slipped away and Ramsay heard a loud clatter on the other side of the door. He shoved

back the covers and heaved himself up onto his knees. He wanted to talk to the child, who was the quietest boy Ramsay had ever seen, always looking around with guarded, unblinking eyes and disappearing for hours at a time with his sister beside him. Ramsay tried to swing open the French door but it drove into some object on the other side.

When Ramsay peered out he saw a stool on its side in the hall, and no sign of the boy.

Kneeling on his bed, Ramsay could see down the wide hallway through to the kitchen. He pulled the French door shut again and sat a moment on the mattress, pushing his hands into his eyes, watching kaleidoscope colours swirl through the darkness of his eyelids. He wanted an enormous bed with a large television facing him, and he wanted soft sheets and deep pillows and a day with nothing to do and no one expecting his call. After a long time, he forced himself to fish around the floor for yesterday's clothes and a new pair of underwear.

Facing him was Kelly and Amos's makeshift farm office, an oversized solicitor's desk and a leather-seated chair squeezed into the end of the narrow porch. A desk calendar lay below a new touchtone telephone with an uncoiled cord that pooled on the floor below. Two upright file boxes stood flush against the far edge of the desk. Ramsay hefted himself off the bed and into the chair, where he could study the file tabs. Taxes. Certificates. Books—1993. Insurance—Farm. Insurance—Life and Health.

Ramsay felt the urge to pick up the tidy boxes and shake them out over the floor. He diverted himself by opening a desk drawer, which held a stack of scrap paper and a calculator and a tray of pens and pencils. Ramsay licked his thumb and selected a sheet of the paper. He picked out a pen that read "Garland Frames and Faucets—since 1959." At the top of the paper he wrote: "1. Call Marcus Polasek." His mind immediately

produced the image of a tall, well-dressed man, standing with his shoulder hunched against the rotting factory doorway, plucking at his goatee while his eyes calmly followed Ramsay's desperate gestures. Ramsay felt a pulse of nervous energy trill through his body. He smoothed the paper under his hand and added, "Tell him the money is nearly ready."

He heard the sound of children's voices from outside. He lifted himself out of the chair a little, enough to see across the top edge of the curtain. Mitchell and Tassa were weaving down the laneway towards the barnyard, the dog galloping next to them. Tassa carried a folded umbrella nearly as tall as herself, and she stopped to poke it into the creek. Mitchell lunged for something in the mud and knelt with his hands cupped at his feet, and Tassa scurried over and crouched next to him, straining to peer through his fingers.

Ramsay sat again. He picked up the pen and wrote "2. Tell Kelly." After a pause he leaned back and began looking through the remaining drawers with more determination than before. Finally he found a phone book on a shelf hidden just above the floor.

There were only two real estate brokers for all of Garland & Area, so it was easy to find Lisa Hamyl. The advertisement included a photograph of her standing next to a For Sale sign, with a SOLD board in her hands. Ramsay held the phone book close to his face. He tipped it towards the light. He turned the page over to see if there was any more of the same ad. He looked at the ceiling and took a deep breath.

She was thinner than he remembered, her legs longer, her hair more blonde. She wore a black pantsuit with a deep neckline and a pearl necklace around her throat. He

wondered if those pearls could be real and for some reason that thought buckled him over. He laid his forehead on the phone book and closed his eyes and stayed that way for a long time, breathing in the smell of newsprint.

The sound of mattress springs made him jump. Kelly crawled over the bed and stood up beside him at the desk.

“Morning, Mr. Early Riser,” she teased. “Times sure have changed! You want some breakfast?”

He fumbled to close the phone book but the piece of paper slipped out and drifted to their feet.

“Tell me what?” Kelly asked, picking it up.

Ramsay paused. He had a strange, trembling feeling in his hands. He forced himself to stand and put his arm around his sister. “Let’s go outside,” he said. “I’ve got to show you something in my car.”

It was cool outside, and their feet left a silky trail in the dew where they crossed the lawn to the driveway. Ramsay sat beside Kelly on the bumper of his car while she slowly unfolded the brochure he had taken from a box in the trunk, reading every line, holding it up to examine every photograph.

“It’s just a mock-up,” he said. She was silent. “There’ll be a professional photographer to capture it all once it’s ready. And I don’t know if that name will stay.”

She reached the end and carefully folded it up again.

“I don’t get it,” she said after a minute. “Rustic Ridge Country Getaway?”

“I mean, if you have a better idea of a name, we can suggest it.” He hopped up and stood in front of her, trying to read her expression. “It’s still early. Still in the preliminary planning stages.”

He had a shock when she turned her eyes to him. Her face had hardened. Something in her expression stung him, like she was barely keeping herself from walking away, or from flinging the brochure into his face.

“Ramsay,” she said slowly. “What is all this.”

“Okay.” He scrubbed his face with his hands and then looked at her over his fingertips. “From the beginning?”

“That would be good.”

“All right. Here goes.” For some reason he knelt and touched her knees. It was like his body was separate from his mind, like he was watching himself from the top of the poplars. “Thing is, I’ve got an idea that would do us all—well, it could make us all pretty comfortable. I got the plans all drawn out, if you want to see them...”

Kelly held up a hand. “Just—just tell me, Ramsay.”

He stood up again. He turned to look out over the barnyard, then turned back. “Okay, Kel. Here’s the thing. I’ve been doing okay in the city. Last coupla years, I’ve really been pulling in a nice living.”

He kneaded his hands together under his chin. Looking at her while he talked was difficult. In fact, every aspect of this was more difficult than he was prepared for.

“I’ve been working for this guy, Hugh McTaggart. Hired me on as a scout for him, after I knew the city a bit, after I’d lived there a year or two. Met him when he started coming all the time to the Duke. Nice downtown pub. I worked there a while,

served Hugh his drinks. Guy ordered strawberry martinis, you ever hear of that? No Bud Lite for that kinda man, tell you. Always said it was his midday pick-me-up.”

Ramsay looked Kelly over for any sign of a smile. She raised her eyebrows at him and he rattled on.

“Well, Hugh, he made his riches the strangest way. He’d tell me about it while he sat there sipping. See, he’d buy up the shabbiest, ugliest places in the city. Landlords of those places, they don’t live too well. Cheap rent, deadbeat tenants, too many repairs. So Hugh? He comes along, offers these landlords a price to buy them out. He’ll buy a whole block of these places at a time, see, for almost nothing. Then he’ll gut ’em, shake ’em out, remodel ’em and sell ’em to rich kids. It’s fashionable, see, to think you’re living poor while you’ve got jets in the bathtub and a rooftop terrace, ever hear of that?”

All at once, Ramsay felt like he simply couldn’t stop talking. Like he’d been pooling up words ever since he got back to Garland and set eyes on that old farm, and now the dam was breaking. He paced the driveway in front of Kelly, orating to the poplars, gesturing to the sun that hung only a thumb’s width above the fields, picking up a flyer to slap against his palm. He talked about the day Hugh offered to hire him on as a scout for old buildings, about how he was so happy that he quit his bartending job then and there and went out with Hugh to chomp cigars in a fancy hotel bar. The way he felt when he orchestrated his first deal, a yellow-brick tenement with nicotine walls, and Hugh’s approving handshake. His first tailored suit. The sense of money in his pocket, like bundled silk.

“I’ve started to learn the ropes,” he continued. Kelly followed him with her eyes as he walked back and forth in front of her, praying to himself that she wouldn’t stop

him, that her patience would hold until he got to the end. “Learned how it all goes— Hugh signs, pays out, hires one of five or six contractors he’s got on a rotating system, who give him a deal for all the business he brings. Sells the units thirty, forty times the price he paid the landlords, then walks away, stinking rich.”

“Ramsay—”

He centred himself in front of her and held up his hand. “Just....okay? A few months ago I started thinking, why’s it only McTaggart makes these deals, rakes in the big money? I started thinking about my own situation. About... well, about home, I guess.”

“You mean, *our* home.”

“Well, a bit, I guess, yeah. I started putting it all together. And then I found a place. Best one yet. An old foundry right on the waterfront, edge of the city, abandoned for years. Brownstone, deep foundation, ceilings forty feet high. Could put fifteen, twenty big condos in there, easy. Rooftop pool, maybe. So I tracked the guy who owns it, a kid, inherited it from his father or something. Young guy, Marcus. Polish or something, weird accent. When I tossed some numbers at him, should’ve seen him. Could hardly put a pen in his hand fast enough.”

Kelly stood up and held out the flyer to him.

“But d’you see?” Ramsay caught her arm. “I took it for *nothing*. A song. I even have contractors tired of McTaggart, wanting to come on with me and do the place over. I’ve got it all lined up.”

“Except?”

“No except. I’ve got it. Everything’s arranged. We just need to sell, and then it’ll all be put in motion. Once they’ve drafted floor plans I can advertise the condos. In a year or two we’ll have made—”

“Stop.” Kelly held up her hand. She closed her eyes and asked, “Tell me you don’t mean to sell our old farm.”

“Well.” He searched around him, looked down at the orchard, tried to find the right words. “I had enough saved for the down. Paid it two weeks ago.”

“Oh, Lord.” Her voice wasn’t angry. It wasn’t anything. It was empty, airless, a vacuum.

“Well I thought, none of us are living there anyway! Thought you could have a share in this building project, join up with me! Mom too! She could get one of the first condos, get her outta that trailer. We’d all be comfortable.

“We want that farm to stay in the family,” she said quietly.

“For Mitch, I know, Mom told me. But he won’t *need* to farm! He could do anything! With more deals like this, you could send those kids to college five times each, if they wanted!”

“No.”

“What?”

“No.”

She started up the lawn towards the house.

“But Kel,” he called after her. “I’ve already got a buyer!”

She stopped and turned slowly around to face him. He was frightened by the way she looked at him—calm and wintry in the face of his widening helplessness.



“The other thing is,” he said, moving towards her, “I thought Lisa could be part of this. Lisa Hamyl? She could arrange the details. Collect the commission, which’ll be huge. It’s a benefit to the whole community, you see?”

“Ramsay,” she said. “You want to turn our family home into a circus for the idle rich. What did you want me to say?”

“Can we at least talk about this?”

She came back down to him.

“Are you in trouble?”

“Yes.”

“How bad?”

Ramsay looked at the ground. “I’ve got to pay for the foundry. I’ve signed on.”

“Can you get out of it? Look at me. Can you?”

Her gaze was steady. He suddenly realized, with a strange sense of relief, that Kelly was going to help him. One way or another. It might be hard help, tough as she was, but she wouldn’t leave him to drown. And in a moment of immense guilt and gratefulness, he said, “I don’t know. I’ll have to try.”

“Come on in for breakfast, then.” She started up the lawn again. Ramsay went back to shut up his car. He picked up the flyer and turned to look out over the barnyard. There was Mitchell, far out beside the barn, walking up and down the chicken run with a cup in his hand, scattering something for the birds at his feet. Pausing to count them, his finger jabbing the air. Shaking his head and starting the count over.

Ramsay folded the brochure into his pocket and started up the lawn towards the house.

## **Mitchell and Tassa.**

At three forty-five, Tassa tied her jacket sleeves around her neck and sat out on the front porch to wait for her mother. Hardy lowered himself onto the grass a few feet away, then bucked with two explosive sneezes and stood again, startled at himself.

“Blessyoublessyou,” Tassa told him, and threw him a dried raisin.

It had rained earlier in the day, and across the lawn fallen leaves cupped the rainwater like tiny, brittle tea saucers. Tassa’s mother came out of the house wearing an old hunting jacket with a bright orange X spray-painted on the back and held Tassa’s hand as they walked together down the driveway. They lingered near the wild raspberry bushes and Tassa found a tiny blue eggshell that fit the tip of her little finger like a thimble. Her mother accepted it and promised to put it on the shelf beside the kitchen sink, among the barnyard animal salt-and-pepper shakers.

At last they reached the wide ditch that crossed under the lane where it met the highway. Mitchell’s bicycle lay in the tall grass at the top of the ditch, where he’d left it that morning. Hardy galloped around it and plunged down between the cattails and pushed his whole face into the ditchwater, snorting up clutches of bubbles. Tassa watched the road and listened fiercely but all she could hear was the wash of wind through the trees and Hardy’s snorting.

“When?” she asked.

“Now,” her mother answered, and just like that the school bus appeared around a bend in the highway and rattled to a stop in front of their mailbox. Tassa stared up at the row of faces pressed to the windows, and they stared back at her. Hardy hauled himself up the ditch bank and when the bus’s door flipped open he tried to push right up onto the

steps inside. A voice called out “Hardy, git, git!”, and Mitchell appeared, pushing around the dog and looking down at his new red-and-blue wool jacket, smeared across with mud. The bus driver touched his hat to Tassa’s mother and then swung the door shut. The bus wheezed off down the highway. Tassa waved at the four red faces staring through its back windows. No one waved back at her.

“Never mind,” said their mother, seeing Mitchell pick at his sweater. “You kept it clean all day and that’s what I asked for.” She zipped it right up under his chin, the way it had been modeled in the Sears catalogue, and then she pulled his backpack over both shoulders and flattened his crown of red hair.

“Was it a good first day?” she asked and Mitchell replied, “Good enough.” Tassa tugged at his backpack until he twisted out of it and gave it to her.

“Why don’t you guys come up and be with your grandma and me,” his mother said. “We could get a game of Chinese Checkers going.”

Tassa pulled her head out of the backpack and looked hopefully at Mitchell.

“Told Lorne we’d go over there and help him out,” he said.

Their mother smiled. “Guess that’s smart. While the weather’s still nice.”

She took Mitchell’s bag and told him to look after his sister, be home for supper, not bother Lorne and Marla if they seemed like they wanted to be alone, and not bike down the middle of the highway.

After she left Tassa said, “I heard some things today.”

Mitchell seized his bicycle and hauled it out of the weeds.

“What things.”

“I went under the window like you said. At the sheep barn, while Dad and Uncle Ramsay were in there. At first I couldn’t hear anything and then I heard Dad say, Now listen here, blah blah, I forget that part. And Uncle Ramsay said, It’s already a deal. And Dad said, You can’t do this and Uncle Ramsay said, Who are you to talk.” She whipped a cattail around for dramatic effect. “And then... I forget the rest.”

“No you don’t.”

“Well, it was bad words.”

“Like what?” Mitchell pulled a long tangle of grass from the spokes. “It’s not bad if you’re just repeating,” he told her.

“Okay. Like the F-word and the B-word.”

“Which B-word?”

She put her hand on his arm and pulled him down towards her. “*Balls!*” she whispered.

“And then what?”

“And then Mom saw me from the kitchen window and yelled because I was supposed to be in my nap. And then I got a whack on the bum and I cried so I got a box of raisins afterwards. Here, I saved you some.”

Tassa took out the squashed box and held it to her brother. He tipped the remaining raisins into his mouth and tucked the box away in his pocket.

“You’re an okay spy,” he said to her. “Except that you have a nap time.”

He held the bike steady while she climbed onto the handlebars and then he got on behind her and steered them along the gravel at the edge of the highway. Hardy followed them in the ditch. This was the long way around to Lorne’s, the road way, but they

sometimes took it for the reward of flying down the Shannons' sloping driveway without touching the pedals. Before that, though, Mitchell crossed the highway and turned the bike as far as he dared go down the lane of the old abandoned farm. He knew something about that farm, but not much. From the mouth of the lane he studied it for the hundredth time—the leaning barn, the humps of dark machines left to rust, the weedy wheel tracks leading out towards the fields.

Tassa was used to waiting while Mitchell stared. “What about Christmas,” she said after a while, picking bits of fluff from the cattail and watching them drift away in the breeze. “You could ask for it.”

Mitchell thought for a moment, and then answered, “It’s not that kind of want.” He turned the bike away and called for Hardy. They crossed the highway carefully, then started down the Shannons' long driveway. Tassa held her legs straight out to the side and her jacket whipped behind her so that Mitchell had to lean far to one side to see around it. When they rounded the house they saw Lorne out in the barnyard chopping wood. Marla was out there too, sitting in a lawn chair with a bright yellow afghan tucked around her legs. She bounced her knees as the children walked towards her and they saw that cradled in her lap was a radio, its plastic shell bleached pale on one end where the sun usually reached it through the kitchen window.

“Isn’t it funny,” she called as Mitchell and Tassa approached. Lorne planted his axe into the chopping block and looked up. “All those years bringing the world to us, and now we get to bring it to the world. That’s what Lorne said.”

The radio was turned to top volume, playing a stream of choral music from the local station as loudly as it could, but the endlessness of space around them muted every note. Tassa put her ear near the speaker.

“I can’t COME to the banquet!” Marla sang along to the hymn. “Don’t BOTHER me now!”

She lifted a corner of the afghan and Tassa climbed beneath, pleased with the novelty of holding a radio on her lap in the middle of the barnyard. Hardy sniffed along the extension chord, following it to where it disappeared into the barn.

Mitchell took off his Sears sweater and hung it carefully over the rail fence next to Lorne’s overcoat.

“Thought long as there’s work out here to do,” Lorne said to him, “might as well be entertained while we do it, eh Mitch?” He hung his cap on the axe handle and patted his forehead with a handkerchief. Thick sections of tree trunk sat nearby, ready to be split, and Mitchell selected one and arranged it on the chopping block next to the axe.

“First day back at the grind?” Lorne asked him.

“Yeah. Fourth grade.”

He examined the axe. In the chair Tassa couldn’t resist touching one of the radio knobs, and the hymn dissolved into static. She looked at Marla in a panic. Lorne went over and adjusted it back.

“I have MARRIED a wife, I have BOUGHT me a cow!” sang Marla.

“Don’t want school to make you soft,” Lorne said, coming back to Mitchell. He pulled the axe out of the block and held it out. Mitchell took it and weighed it in his hands. With the afternoon choir concert drifting faintly over the woodpile, he squared his

feet and hauled the axe high over his head, then brought it down fast, letting the handle slide through his fingers. It caught the block of wood just off centre and sank so deep that when Mitchell struggled to lift the blade again, the whole block came with it. He whacked it down, lifted, then whacked it down deeper in the gummy wood, until at last the axe cut clear and a thin wedge flew free and spun to the ground. Tassa and Marla quit singing to clap and cheer.

“Got some kindling,” Lorne said, picking up the piece and shoving it under the top wire of a pallet. “Now get us some good meaty firewood, if you please.”

Mitchell missed most of the blocks of wood that Lorne put in front of him, but he loved the feel of his arms swinging over his head and the vibrations through his shoulders when the axe hit. He kept at it until, exhausted, he handed the axe back to Lorne and hunched up against the rail fence, his arms feeling weak and weightless.

“So how’re things going with your uncle visiting?” Lorne asked, steadying a new block of wood in front of him.

“All right, I guess,” Mitch answered. “Except I’ve got a thing to ask you.”

Lorne lifted the axe above his head. “Ask away.”

“It’s nothing,” Mitchell said. He stood near his sweater and picked at the mud that clung to the wool. “It’s just about the old farm over there, right across. Where Mom used to live, and Uncle Ramsay.”

“I know the place.”

“Well, I just thought—I figured maybe I’d live there one day.”

Lorne balanced a wood block on its end and stood back. “That so?”

“I guess so. I just always thought that. You’d farm here, and Dad would farm over there,” Mitchell looked across the cornfields. “And I would farm across the way.”

“Keep a wife and a cow?” Lorne looked up and winked. Mitchell turned back to his sweater. “Well, maybe just with Tass.”

“WHAT?” shouted Tassa, taking her ear from the radio speaker.

“It’s just...” Mitchell watched Lorne swing the axe down, straight and sure. “Now Uncle Ramsay’s here, and seems they’re all talking about that place. Kind of angry. I think... I wonder if something’s going to happen to it.”

Lorne balanced another block of wood in front of him and paused to rub at a knuckle in his eye. Mitchell wasn’t really watching him. He was thinking about how hard it was to say anything worth saying, anything important. Words toppled one by one out of his brain, like bales thrown from the loft to the pigpens below, so that he was left with no way to ask for help. He was thinking that probably Lorne wouldn’t understand, didn’t have a hope of understanding. That’s when a dragonfly landed on the block of wood, and that’s when Mitchell reached out to brush it away, not noticing that Lorne had raised the axe again.

He darted his hand back just as the wood flew apart, and he grinned helplessly at Lorne, embarrassed that he had come so close to an accident. But Lorne didn’t smile back. He immediately dropped the axe and crouched in front of Mitchell. Tassa wormed down from the chair and ran up.

“Heaven have mercy,” Marla said. She stood up and the radio tumbled onto the ground. The choral music played on.



“Easy, now.” Lorne pulled out his handkerchief and squeezed it over Mitchell’s finger. Blood bloomed through the material. Suddenly, Mitchell wanted to throw up. He looked away. His hand felt singed and electric, like he was trying to hold a hot light bulb in his palm. Lorne unfolded the handkerchief and he and Tassa peered inside. “Looks only a nick,” Lorne was saying. Mitchell hardly heard. “We’ll get you to the doctor. Lucky it’s Tuesday and he’s in Garland. Keep you hand high up, Mitchell, like this.” And Lorne picked Mitchell right up in his arms and carried him all the way across the barnyard to his pick-up truck. Marla left the radio on the ground and followed with Tassa.

“My sweater,” Mitchell said to Tassa as Lorne set him down in the truck cab. Tassa turned to run back but Lorne caught her arm. “Never mind,” he said. His voice was hard. Tassa looked up at him, surprised. She climbed into the truck and knelt beside Mitchell with her face pressed into his neck. Mitchell gripped his wrist and held his left hand in the air. He tried not to look at it, but couldn’t help it. The handkerchief was sponged through with blood. His finger drummed wide, sharp pulses across his hand.

Lorne got Marla into the cab beside Tassa and then he ran around and started the truck down the driveway.

“Tassa,” Mitchell said quietly. “In my pocket. Front one.”

Tassa sniffled. She wormed a hand into Mitchell’s pocket and pulled out the handkerchief that their Uncle Ramsay had given him. Mitchell took it and pressed it over Lorne’s, then he looked away. His eyes were fixed on the rear view mirror when Hardy burst from the cornfield, barking and racing after them, confused that he was being left behind.

**Ramsay.**

It had rained over the lunch hour, and beads of water showered Ramsay's bare head as he paced about among the pine trees at the edge of the barnyard. He pressed his hand against his hair, then rubbed it over his face, thinking the cool rainwater might shock away the redness he felt in his cheeks. Never anyone so stubborn, he thought, and like a child he kicked at the fence with his boot. Never anyone so unwilling to listen to another man's ideas. And Amos Ferrier, cousin of a councilman, never even lived at the Lockburn farm, never even had anything invested there. A town boy turned farmer.

Ramsay spat into the grass on the other side of the fence and watched his saliva shrug down a milkweed stem. Then, disgusted with himself, he straightened and shook his shirt cuffs down over his wrists. He had thought, fool that he was, that he and Amos would be able to talk, man to man, like the brothers-in-law they were. Had thought that, away from his mother and sister's sentimentality, they could work out what to do with the old farm like rational creatures, with everyone's best interest in mind. He hadn't counted on Amos's hard look and slow, quiet words that flared abruptly into anger when Ramsay began talking dollars and cents.

From his spot at the fence he glimpsed a school bus heaving away along the highway, and was surprised to realize he'd been standing out there for the better part of the afternoon. Ramsay left the pine grove and started back towards the farmhouse, angry in equal parts at Amos, at himself, at the weather that hadn't showed warmth or sunlight in days. He saw Kelly coming up the driveway with a child's backpack in her hand.

"You've been stomping around the barnyard all afternoon," she said to him when they met. "Think you could do something useful?"

Ramsay didn't stop. "Come on," he said as he walked past her.

"Where are you going?"

"To see the river," he said over his shoulder to her. "See if that spot is still there."

"I can't," she told him. "Someone around here's got to make dinner." Then, as he kept walking, she called after him, "What spot?"

Ramsay didn't answer, and stopped only when another voice called him. Both he and Kelly looked towards the trailer at the bottom of the lawn, where their mother stepped outside.

"Did I hear you're going for a walk?" she called.

Ramsay rolled his head on his shoulders and pushed his knuckles into his neck. His mother walked up the lawn, tugging a jacket over her shoulders. She held a mottled walking stick and as she made her way across the grass towards Ramsay she said, "A walk to the river is just the ticket."

"It's a bit far," Ramsay said. She slid a little on the wet grass and he darted over to catch her. As she gripped his arm she looked into his face and said, "I know where you mean. We'll take the road up as far as the forest trail."

Ramsay looked to his sister, but she only gave him a helpless shrug and turned for the house. His mother started off ahead of him, picking her way carefully between potholes.

They had to walk briefly on the shoulder of the highway to reach the 22<sup>nd</sup> sideroad, and Ramsay stayed close behind his mother, arms bent to grab her if she should wobble too far towards the ditch on one side or the asphalt on the other. The sideroad, which ran along the eastern edge of the Ferrier farm on this side of the highway and the

Lockburn farm on the other side, was an unmaintained service road used mostly by farmers wanting wood from the forest, which connected the Ferrier and Shannon farms with all the other land on the south side of the highway. Ramsay and Evelyn walked in silence along this narrow road, under a canopy of centuries-old maple trees which darkened the already gloomy daylight around them. Ramsay had to slow his step to stay next to his mother, who paused now and then to adjust her coat or tuck her hair away from her face.

“Only time I don’t need a smoke,” she said, when she paused to dab at her nose with a tissue. “When I’m outside, just after a rain. Smell that earth.”

When they reached the wagon track that dipped away from the road and into the wood, she took Ramsay’s arm and said, “You were talking to Amos today?”

“I was,” said Ramsay, wondering briefly how much time his mother spent alone at the windows of her trailer.

“And it didn’t go as you’d thought, eh?”

The track leveled out past the ditch and Evelyn pulled her arm away and swung her walking stick in front of her, pressing it through the fallen leaves, following the firm ground.

“Not exactly,” said Ramsay, and neither of them spoke after that.

The forest smelled of dampness and sweet, leathery leaves, and even faintly of machine oil from the tractors used to haul trees for winter burning. Ramsay felt that the smells were almost tangible, like a fine, soft dust that filled his lungs and made his eyes water, not for discomfort but for another kind of feeling, strange and sad and distant. He felt ashamed and hurried ahead of his mother, listening for the river and pressing his

wrists into his eyes.

The river, which was wide and powerful enough to be a danger in springtime and a joy in the scorching summer, followed the forest behind the Ferrier and Shannon farms before arching northward and crossing under the highway towards Lockburn land. The wagon track veered gradually towards it until, through the trees on his left, Ramsay could see water, pushing murky-grey under the dull sky. They were likely on Shannon land now, though no one had ever bothered to make a clear survey of where the two properties met in the forest. Ramsay stopped and when his mother reached him he said, "There it is." Then, attempting friendliness, he added, "Been a long time since I've been out here, eh."

His mother paused to glance through the trees at the river, then continued down the track.

"Think we should get home?" Ramsay called, hesitating.

"Not until you see what you came to see," she answered without turning.

Ramsay filled his cheeks and exhaled slowly. He watched his mother pick along the uneven ground, her walking stick swinging and wobbling beside her like another leg. Finally, still within earshot, she stopped and turned off the track, disappearing into the trees beside the water.

When Ramsay reached her she had made her way down a short, steep bank of mud that leveled into a roily shore, broken here and there by turtleback rocks. His mother stepped out of the mud and onto one of the rocks. Ramsay began to inch down the bank.

"Come on," he urged her, holding out his hand. "Might rain again and we'll get

washed away in all this muck.”

“There,” his mother said, as if he hadn’t spoken. She pointed with her stick towards two old lawn chairs that leaned into each other further down the shore, sunk almost to their tattered seats in the mud.

“Will you look at that,” Ramsay said quickly. “Still there. Kelly and me brought those out when we were kids. Thought we’d fish.”

He picked his way over the chairs and tried to wrench one loose, but the mud held it. He stumbled and thrust an arm out to steady himself, but his hand broke right through the mesh seat and into the mud. He tried to laugh as he straightened himself. When he looked at his mother she was watching him solemnly, her hands folded over her stick.

“Ramsay,” she said. “Don’t talk to your mother like she’s a fool. I know who put those chairs there.”

He stood with one arm dirty to the elbow and looked down at the sunken chairs.

“Tell me,” his mother said. “Did you ever catch your father here?”

Ramsay slid one finger through the mud on his skin and flicked the gathered dirt away. He shrugged and shook his head at the same time.

“What about your sister?”

“No. Neither of us.” He worked his way towards the water’s edge and bent to wash himself off. “Cold,” he said, and felt stupid.

They were both silent for a while as Ramsay cupped handfuls of water over his arm. Finally he stood and shook his hands out, slinging water from his fingertips.

“Guess we should head back,” he told her. He started towards the trees and turned to offer an arm to his mother, but she didn’t move.

“It’s no wonder you haven’t any interest in keeping our old home,” she said, staring off down the river. “I haven’t either, really. Why should I?”

Finally she stepped off the rock and moved towards Ramsay, who still held out his arm to her.

“When it comes down to it, though,” she said, “that farm, this whole area, is still part of a history that is ours to keep. No exchange of money or hands will change that. Do you understand?”

Ramsay took her weight on his arm and helped her up the short slope. For a brief moment the sun worked through a hole in the clouds and stunned the autumn leaves. When his mother was balanced safely on the firm ground, Ramsay turned and forced his way back over to the chairs. He planted his feet as steadily as he could and took hold of a chair with both hands. He threw his weight back, heaving upwards until the chair sucked free from the ground. Clods of dirt and two or three writhing insects dropped from its legs as Ramsay flung it into the water.

The next chair, loosened from the struggle with the first, lifted more easily and as Ramsay held it over his head he heard a strange noise escape his throat, a cowboy *heeya* that immediately embarrassed him. He threw with all his might and waited while the chairs sank before turning back and working his way up towards his mother. When he passed beside her she said quietly, “There you go, then,” and he heard her take up step behind him on the wagon track.

When he reached the road he turned around and waited while his mother caught up, picking her way over the leaves and groping for his hand as she climbed from the ditch and onto the gravel. They said nothing as they started towards the highway, and

gradually Ramsay drew ahead of her again, hands dangling at his sides, listening to the sound of her walking stick scraping the gravel behind him.

They hadn't gone far along the shoulder of the highway when an old blue pick-up crossed the middle line and drew up at Ramsay's shoulder. Amos tipped his cap at Evelyn. Kelly sat beside him, looking pale and worried. She touched Amos's arm and said, quietly enough that Ramsay barely heard her over the truck's noise, "Mitch has had an accident. Lorne's got him at the doctor."

"Oh dear." Ramsay's mother touched her throat. "What kind of accident?"

"Lorne says not terrible," Amos said loudly. He touched the gas and the truck began rolling away. "Couple of stitches," he called back to them. "You be all right a while?"

"We're fine," Ramsay answered, though Amos had been looking only at Evelyn.

Ramsay and his mother walked slowly up the driveway. He led her to the trailer and waited while she found her cigarettes, then they crossed to the house and sat opposite each other at the patio table.

"Poor young kid," Ramsay said, fiddling with the lever on the big table umbrella between them. "Hope it's nothing."

"I'm sure it's nothing serious." His mother paused to light a cigarette.

"Maybe we should go into town," Ramsay said. "Or maybe we could cook something up. What's the boy like to eat?"

His mother laughed a little to herself. She looked earnestly at Ramsay. "Cooking up some food isn't going to make him like you, my dear," she said.

Ramsay felt embarrassed. "That's not it," he said. "I just want to. You know."



Help.”

His mother ignored him. “He’s not very fond of me, either,” she said. “Tassa, she’s a dear. Easy to win over. Mitchell... what use has he for us? Gets his world all sorted out, then I appear out of nowhere, start living on his front lawn. Probably was too young to even remember when his grandfather died, remember a time when I was still here. Probably thinks I’m an ogre from under the bridge, like he reads about, instead of his grandmother.”

“Lorne says they call him Grandpa sometimes,” said Ramsay. He felt an immediate pang of guilt, so he added, as though to make up for it, “I doubt they think you’re an ogre.”

His mother sighed and stood. Ramsay started up to give her a hand but she waved him away. “Going to retire inside a while,” she said. “Rest my feet.”

She started across the porch towards the house. At the door, she paused. Ramsay chipped at the paint on the table with his thumbnail.

“Buttered popcorn,” said his mother, turning towards him from the doorway.

Ramsay looked up. “What?”

“Buttered popcorn. It’s Mitchell’s favourite. The air popper melts the butter right on a little tray and you just sprinkle it over.”

She smiled and went slowly inside. Ramsay stayed a long time on the porch, resting his head on his folded arms.

## Jimmy.

Rae noticed the truck parked outside Junction Pub as she stood at the magazine stand in the News 'n Chicken. She was holding a copy of *Wedding Bells*, tipping it back and forth so that the fluorescent-light glare slipped around the cover like a pat of melted butter.

“Phil,” she called as she glanced up through the grill on the storefront window.

“That Amos Ferrier’s truck?”

The man at the fried chicken counter planted a finger on his newspaper page and looked up. “Where’s that, now?”

“Across there, at the Junction.”

He jerked his head forward so his glasses dropped down his nose. “Looks so.”

“I’ve gotta use your phone.”

“Wait now. You gonna buy that magazine this time?”

She flipped it back onto the rack, upside-down. “Someone’s been reading it already,” she said. “You oughta keep a lookout.”

Phil sniffed and looked back down at the paper.

“Don’t bung it up too long,” he said. “I’m ’specting a call.”

“I bet. Health Inspector. I know you two are real friendly.”

As she squeezed around the deep fryers Phil rolled up his newspaper and smacked her across the backside.

Jimmy was sitting at his kitchen table, looking over a small engine laid out on newspaper.

“Look here,” his father said, wriggling his index finger between the greasy metal plates and tapping a bolt head. “Shorn right down.”

The door to the kitchen stood open and a thin, sharp breeze sailed in, rattling the newspaper and smelling of damp leaves. Outside in the mottled grass a push-mower lay upside down with its blades to the sky. A trail of motor oil spotted the brown grass and then the kitchen floor. Jimmy took the wrench his father held out to him and tried to slip it around the bolt just as the phone started up.

“Phone’s ringin’!” his mother hollered from the living room, over the noise of the television. Jimmy set down the wrench and went out to the hallway where the phone hung on the wall beside the front door.

“He’s there, at the Junction,” Rae told him when he picked up. “I saw Amos Ferrier’s truck parked outside and I bet Lockburn’s there with him, having a drink.”

“Dad’s showing me an engine.”

“I don’t care about your engines. You got to get over there quick, Jim, ’fore he leaves.”

“But listen, what do you think about me getting a job at the school bus headquarters? I think they’re looking for someone.”

“What I think is that you’ve got to get over to the pub, Jim, and do like we said. All casual, like the idea just occurred to you.”

“I know how to act.”

“I bet. I’m at the News ’n Chicken right now, come over when you’re done and tell me about it.”

“Why don’t you come with me?”

“If I come with you, it’ll look strange, like a ambush. You got to do this.” After a pause, she added, “That old farm’s got a drive shed, be about perfect for opening a shop, right on the highway.”

“I guess you’re right.” Jimmy cuffed his toes against the doorjamb. “Don’t go telling Phil Potts about our plans, okay?”

“I’ll tell who I tell. He’s probably listening now anyway. Ain’t you, Phil?”

“All right, all right.” Jimmy slipped a hand in his pocket for his truck keys. “Don’t move off. I’ll see you soon.”

He hung up and stood a minute next to the door, picking at a tear in the wallpaper. He could hear his father tapping a wrench on the engine plate, then scraping his chair back. Jimmy pictured him slipping a finger between the gears, feeling for signs of tension, his eyes staring ahead at a water stain on the wall.

Jimmy left the hall and crossed the kitchen behind his father’s chair and sat down to pull on his boots.

“Got to go out, Ma,” he called towards the living room. His father picked up the wrench and resumed tapping.

“Seein’ Joyce Rae?” his mother hollered. He could hear the springs in her chair release as she hunched up a little to hear him. “Tell her it’ll be a rerun tomorrow, I checked the guide a’ready. But tell her she should come over anyhow so we can plan the food. I’m worried about the food for your Buck’n Doe.”

“I’ll tell her.”

“You think cold meats, or hot?”

Jimmy leaned his head against the cool wall. “Ma, I thought people brought food

*for* us. Sort of a donation thing.”

“Well yeah, but we don’t wanna be a buncha freeloaders, do we?” The springs squealed again as she settled back. “Gotta offer something.”

“Hot then. I’ll see you in a while, Ma.”

“Hot meat cost money. Whole purpose, to *make* money.” Her voice was disappearing already, settling inside the wings of the room. Jimmy thought of saying to hell with it, of tucking a grease cloth in the waist of his jeans and offering to hold a flashlight over his father’s shoulder. But then he remembered how last winter, when he set himself down on one knee and held out the gold-painted ring he had convinced his mother to lend him, Rae had told him that he was the only man she could ever see through to marrying. He knew, the same way he knew when to salvage a car part and when to leave it, that he’d have to do it all for her.

He paused near his father. “She wants me to ask Ramsay Lockburn if he’ll let us have the farm,” he said, “in return for our labouring the fields and fixin’ up the barn and that. Keeping it up. And paying him in little amounts, as we’re able.”

His father picked up the engine and turned it half around, then set it gently back onto the newspaper. They both sensed Jimmy’s mother turning down the television volume so she’d hear. His father said, “Better set off now or you’ll never get away.”

The trip into Garland took only a few minutes. He drove in from the east end as he always did, past the gas bar that sprawled where the highway and the main street met, past the fairgrounds and the livestock barns and the rows of one-storey houses with plastic deer and Jesus figurines stabbed into their front lawns. He pulled up outside the

Junction Bar & Grill. He looked across towards the News 'n Chicken shop, but he couldn't see much through the peel of grease and dirt over the windows.

The Junction had five cement steps leading up to its door and iron railings to help patrons in all states negotiate their way to and from the street. Some passing child had left a teddy bear with spring-locked arms clipped around the lowest iron rung. He stared at the bear and gathered his courage. When he pushed through the door he walked straight to the bar, knowing if he stood too long in the doorway he'd look foolish. He noticed a handful of figures sitting around drinks at the front of the room, but didn't look long enough to see who they were. Music played, a plunking guitar and a sneering voice. There was no bartender around. He rested his arms on the sticky countertop, pretending to examine the shelf of liquor bottles that faced him while he listened for familiar voices. He spread his hands on the counter, concentrating on their pattern of veins and raised scars and trying to call an image of Ramsay Lockburn into his mind. Trying to picture him as a nice guy, a guy willing to talk over a drink. He wondered if Ramsay was looking at him at that moment, if he felt the same creeping sense that both a hundred years and none at all had passed since they had last worked together in the Lockburn fields, last seen each other curse and sweat and chew a strand of hay. But then, Ramsay had never been much of a field worker. Jimmy turned his hands over and studied his palms, still greasy from the motor work. Ramsay, when young, had always seemed to be on his way somewhere, dressed more sharply than anyone, red hair glossed back with a spicy-smelling cream, eager with excuses and flatteries. Leaving Jimmy and a couple of other high school boys to do the work his father needed doing.

At last, Jimmy cranked slowly around on his stool and took a look about him. He

tried to seem as casual as he could. Four diamond-shaped windows along the street-side wall were propped open with crumpled beer cans. The bile-coloured stained glass cast the whole bar in an orange glow, with bolts of dusty sunlight shooting through the air here and there. Jimmy looked over the near-empty room, past the group of people at the front—then back to them. Wait. That was Amos Ferrier there, Jimmy was sure of it. A common enough face around town, the sort of man to nod politely at people he knew, but not much more. And across from him—Jimmy strained to see in the dim light. Kelly Lockburn. No—Kelly Ferrier, now. Two little kids sitting next to her, one of them hidden behind a pint glass frothing over with chocolate milk, the other, a boy, looking Jimmy straight in the eye.

Jimmy turned back towards his hands. The image of Ramsay that he had strained to conjure in his mind dissolved, and in its place was Kelly, carrying lunch out to the fields for him and the other boys. Kelly with a coin-sized circle of sweat on her shirt between her breasts. Shaking up a thermos and handing it to Jimmy, red hair flying across her eyes as she smiled at him.

Jimmy jumped when the bartender suddenly appeared in front of him and asked his order. It was an old man he recognized, his nose brindled with red lumps, hair shorn so close it was like a fine grey sand rubbed into his scalp.

“Pint,” Jimmy said quickly. “Any at all.”

The bartender turned away and Jimmy slid off the stool and slunk for the door. He kept his chin tucked low and was just lifting his hand to push his way onto the street when a woman’s voice, reluctant but warm as steam, called out, “Jimmy Loeber?”

He hesitated with his hand on the door.

“Jimmy?” Kelly said again. Jimmy turned slowly. He stared at his right shoelace, which was about to come loose. Hello, he rehearsed in his mind. Kelly Ferrier? It’s been some time. Mind if I sit a minute?

“That you in there?” she asked. Jimmy glanced up. The two kids next to her stared at him with sparrow eyes, fixed and startled.

The bartender nudged past Jimmy and tossed a coaster onto the table. He set down a glass of beer, sloshing some over the rim.

“Be four even.”

“Four even?” Jimmy drove his hand into his pocket and picked through a palmful of change, pinching out the lint. From the edge of his vision he sensed a shared look between Amos and Kelly. The little girl tucked herself behind her pint of chocolate milk.

“Listen, Jimmy,” said Kelly, reaching up to brush his arm. “I’ve got this. Whyn’t you join us for a drink? It’s been ages. Years.”

“No no,” said Jimmy. “I mean, yes, happy to join you for a quick minute I s’pose, but I’ve got money here, just a moment—”

The bartender coughed loosely and folded his arms over his chest.

“Just sit down and let us buy you a drink, kid,” Amos suddenly said. He shoved a chair away from the table with his boot. Jimmy flushed and dropped into it as Kelly selected a bill from her pocket and handed it up to the bartender.

There was a moment of shuffling silence. Jimmy took a long swallow of beer.

“So,” said Kelly at last. “Fancy meeting you here. I haven’t talked to you in— must be—funny, I just saw your name in the paper. What was... that’s right, you’re getting married, aren’t you!”



She squeezed his arm. Jimmy watched her hand retreat back onto her lap.

“Times sure change, don’t they now?” she said, and nodded enthusiastically at Amos.

Another silence. What brings you here, Jimmy said in his mind. You look just the same as ten years ago.

“Oh!” Kelly exclaimed. Everyone jumped. “You’ve met my husband, Amos?”

Amos nodded. “How doin,” he said. Jimmy thrust out his hand and after a pause Amos accepted it in a shake.

“There’s Tassa, my youngest,” Kelly said, gesturing to the glass of milk. “And Mitchell, our recent invalid.”

The boy, red hair like his mother’s, obliged her by lifting his fist onto the table. The only extended finger was tightly wrapped in gauze.

“We’re just from the doctor’s,” Kelly explained. “Bit of an accident. Stopping here for a treat, y’see.”

Jimmy nodded and tried to look impressed. The bartender rescued him by wandering up with two plates of burgers and fries. The little girl peeked around her drink and began to cheer quietly. While Amos took out his wallet to pay, Kelly leaned towards Jimmy and said, “You know, Jimmy, it’s so funny. I was just thinking about you the other day, out of the blue. And not just because of the announcement in the paper, either.”

In a rush Jimmy said, “I was just wondering a bit. About. Oh—well.” Jimmy gestured desperately to the boy. “What happened, anyhow?”

“Axe fell on it.” It was the little girl who spoke, all eagerness, like she’d been waiting since he sat down for him to ask that question. “Like this.” She karate-chopped the table in demonstration.

“Lordy,” said Jimmy.

“How’ve you been keeping yourself, Jimmy?” Kelly asked. “Still getting farm work?”

“Well, matter fact.” Jimmy shuffled forward in his chair, hoping to get some traction, some purchase on the words he needed. “Rae and me—we’re thinking of getting into the farming business, yeah.”

Amos was pushing two fingers over his lips, studying the coffee mug in front of him.

“You were always a good worker,” Kelly said. “I remember. Always starting early and ending late. Probably spent more hours on our place than I did, at one time.”

“Why thanks.” Jimmy closed his eyes and braced for one final superhuman effort. “Matter fact. I wanted to know—I mean, it’s just a general thing, really, since I’ve run into you and all—you guys, have you got plans for that farm? I mean, selling plans? Just wondering.”

Amos rolled his head back and stared at the ceiling. Jimmy panicked. “No need to tell me,” he stammered, looking around at everyone, even the kids. “Just a passing thought is all. Actually I think I’ll run a collision centre. Stay at my dad’s yard.”

Silence followed.

“I’m good at engines,” Jimmy added pitifully.

“Hang in there, kid,” said Amos suddenly. “Never mind your collision centre. You might get your chance on that farm yet. As a groundskeeper on the ‘greatest piece of farmland this side of God’s rear.’”

“The what? Who?”

“That’s not fair,” Kelly said quietly to Amos. “He’s just trying to take care of us.”

“You saw those brochures?” Amos muttered. “Take care of himself, more like it.”

Jimmy couldn’t move. He wanted to leave, but he also wanted to listen. Across from him, the little boy looked alarmed. He tucked his bandaged hand underneath the table.

Amos took a deep breath. “I’m sorry,” he said. He drummed his fingertips on either side of the coffee cup. “I’m a bit heated up today.” He looked around and cuffed the boy lightly on the chin. “You all right there, partner?”

“What will happen?” the boy asked in a tiny, unsteady voice.

“We’ll bring you back in three weeks to get the stitches out,” his mother said briskly. She pushed some French fries towards him.

“But...the farm?” Jimmy ventured. His own voice sounded to him as unsteady as the boy’s. They shared a look, he and the kid, of sharp and familiar panic. For a moment Jimmy felt braver. “It’s... is it being sold off?”

Amos opened his mouth to speak but Kelly cut him off. “Nothing is happening just yet,” she said. Her voice had cooled. She sounded efficient and rehearsed. She

sounded, Jimmy realized, like she was ready for him to leave. The novelty had expired.

“We’re just testing out different ideas at this stage, Jimmy.”

“But who will farm it? And keep it up?” Jimmy asked.

“Yeah,” repeated the boy. “Who will farm it?”

Kelly pinched her lips in a tight smile. After a moment she said, “Now, you’re having a Buck and Doe, Jimmy? I think I saw?”

Jimmy picked up his beer in confusion. “Rae and me, yeah, this Friday night, at the arena.” He took a drink to give himself a free moment. On the tail of his last swallow he said, “Be a pleasure to have you both there.” He stared into his empty glass. “And Ramsay. If, you know. If he’s about.”

Kelly patted around the little girl’s mouth with a napkin. “We just might, Jimmy,” she said. “You know, that might be a real nice thing. Thank you.”

“Well.” Jimmy stumbled up from his chair and shoved it awkwardly back under the table, driving it into Amos’s boot. “Thanks kindly for the drink. And good luck to you.”

What sort of good luck he had in mind was a mystery, and he cursed himself all the way out to the street.

Rae was at the News ’n Chicken like she said, sitting out front on a cement bench with a box of chicken on one side and Phil Potts on the other. Phil had his apron flung over his shoulder and his hands tucked in his armpits. He lifted one elbow to rub vigorously around his nose as Jimmy walked up. “Well?” Rae asked.

“You’ll never get that farm,” Phil put in, when Jimmy hesitated.

“Shit, Rae,” Jimmy complained.

She shrugged. “We were hard up for things to talk about. Sides, Phil here, he’s got ideas.”

“I know what’s what,” Phil agreed.

Jimmy sat down on the curb. He was unaccustomed to beer, and felt he might be sick, sitting there with the chicken-grease heat of the shop drifting out to him.

“Ramsay wasn’t there,” he said into his hands. He hung his head towards his knees, hoping for the nausea to pass. Just then someone called from across the street, and Jimmy looked up to see those two kids coming down the steps of the Junction, with Amos and Kelly behind them. The little girl waved across the street at Jimmy. He lifted his hand in return.

“Lookit that,” Phil said. “Someone’s made a new friend.”

“They might be coming to our Buck and Doe,” Jimmy said to Rae. “Amos and Kelly. And Ramsay, I think. Maybe.”

Rae snorted. “And bringing the deed with them?”

“I didn’t ask them about the deed. I only know there’s some kind of trouble with the farm. Some kind of disagreement.”

Rae was quiet for a moment. From the box next to her she lifted a chicken wing, examined it, then set it back down. “You didn’t ask about the farm.”

“Well, I did. A bit.”

“But you didn’t ask if it was for *sale*. You didn’t ask about our *proposal*.”

“I—it didn’t seem like a good moment. For them. That boy, he nearly lost his hand today. Axe to his finger.”

Rae ignored him. "And there's some kind of trouble with the farm," she said, "but you don't know what *kinda* trouble."

Jimmy picked up a penny from the asphalt and examined its date. "S'right."

"Well, what the hell were you doing in there, then?"

"We saw what he was doing," Phil leered. "Making new little friends." He imitated the little girl's wave, flopping his hand around in the air. "Better watchit, Rae, you got competition now."

"Rae, come on home with me. Let's talk in the truck."

"I'm fine where I am," Rae answered. She webbed her fingers together over her stomach and looked past Jimmy at the parking lot.

"My mom wants you over," Jimmy tried again. "She wants to know what meat to have, hot or cold. I told her hot."

Rae nodded. Jimmy waited a minute, then stood up and walked off alone towards his truck.

## **Mitchell and Tassa.**

Mitchell sat Tassa on the bottom stair, facing the sun porch. It was getting late, almost 9 o'clock. The hall smelled like tuna fish sandwiches. He could hear his mother and Uncle Ramsay upstairs, talking quietly. Something about a dance. Did you try this on, How does this look, Have you got any boot polish. Mitch kept an ear on those soft noises as he knelt in front of Tassa.

"If anyone comes down the stairs while I'm there, what do you do?" he asked her. She reached over and knocked softly on the French door.

"Good girl. Don't move." He started away.

"Mitchell!"

"What?"

"Let me see it one more time."

He knelt again and picked at the top of the bandage until it peeled back and pulled the gauze with it. Tassa peered in.

"How many, again?" she asked.

"Five stitches."

She counted then with her little finger.

"Time's up," Mitchell told her, pinning the bandage back in place. "You'll stay here?"

"Am I a spy?"

"You're my lookout."

He slipped around the door and lay stomach-down on the foldout bed. The room smelled like sweat and laundry soap. He wiggled over the mattress until he reached the

foot of the bed, where he could slip his hand beneath and drag out the duffel bag. With his good hand he rummaged through balls of socks, a little case with a shaving kit inside, some underwear, an uninteresting book. He began to pat the smaller pockets outside the bag. He found some folded papers and he opened them eagerly, but all they said was something about Jiffy Car Rental, and a column of numbers.

He was about to expand his search to the papers on his parents' desk when his mother's voice in the hall directly outside the French door stopped him.

"Look at that," her mother was saying. "Should have been in bed an hour ago. Where's Amos?"

Mitchell moved his head the tiniest amount possible to see out the crack in the French door. He saw Tassa slumped across the two bottom stairs, sleeping soundly. Flashes of his mother's dress as she turned and fussed in front of the mirror that faced the stairs.

"I just believe that it's a bit strange." His uncle's slow step coming down the stairs, pausing above Tassa. Mitchell looked wildly around him. He peered into the narrow space between the mattress and the far wall, trying to judge if he could squeeze in.

"I suppose maybe you're right," his mother said.

"I've got nothing against Lorne and Marla," Ramsay went on. Mitchell strained to hear. "I mean, in spite of everything. But they're too old to be looking after little kids. That could've been Mitchell's whole hand. Could've been his arm. You say you want that boy to farm, but you think he'll do that with his limbs missing?"

"Don't be morbid."



“Kel, all I’m saying is it sometimes takes an outside eye to see these things.”

Mitchell’s good hand clutched at the blanket. He could see Ramsay now, next to his mother, cinching a bootstrap tie around his neck. Behind him Tassa sighed and stirred a little.

“Let me find Mitch and get them to bed,” Kelly said. “Amos’ll be in from chores and then we’re off, all right?”

She lifted Tassa and carried her up the stairs. Mitchell watched her go in mute panic. Ramsay stepped back to examine himself, and in that instant his eyes slid away from the mirror and looked directly at Mitchell. He looked surprised. He reached forward and touched the door so that it drifted open.

They stared at each other. Mitchell was still on his stomach, still clutching the blanket. “I wanted another handkerchief,” he said quietly. “For that trick.”

Ramsay studied Mitchell a moment more, then looked back to the mirror and gave his tie another careful, slow cinch.

“That was my only one,” he said finally.

“Oh.” Mitchell looked away. “I got it all bloody.”

Ramsay sat down on the edge of the mattress. “How’s that finger?” he asked.

“It’s all right.”

“Sore?”

“Not too much.”

Ramsay pushed his palm into the mattress next to him, as though testing its hold. “I remember one time,” he said, “I was fixing to build myself a go-kart, I was ten-eleven, bit older than you. Thought I could drive it all over Garland so fast I’d get all the

paperboy routes and make myself rich before my first voice crack. So I figured for a good go-kart like that I'd need an engine, y'see, and I knew a place with lots of engines just sitting by, just waiting for me to make my pick."

Mitchell's arms were numb from supporting his weight. He rolled over onto his back and propped his bandaged finger next to him.

"That place was an old junkyard, lots of cars and broken-up machinery, a kid's heaven. It's still there but don't get any ideas. One night I dressed up all in black and I snuck over there, thinking myself a comic book train robber I s'pose, tossing my flashlight over the chain-link fence and climbing after it."

He paused. Mitchell picked at the edge of his bandage. He could hear his mother's footsteps moving lightly overhead. Then he realized Ramsay was waiting for something, and he looked around to see that his uncle had hauled up his pant leg and was showing off a trio of parallel scars, each the length of a new pencil, running from anklebone to halfway up his shin.

"Guard dogs. My luck." Ramsay shook his head. "No sooner had I got in there than I got out again, with those dogs jawing at my heels like I was their first sighted meal in a month. One got his claws into me but somehow I got away. Fell down the other side of the fence, though. Knocked me out cold."

Mitchell's hand twitched forward.

"It's all right. Go on."

Mitchell jerked his hand back onto his stomach.

"Well," Ramsay went on, rolling down his pant leg. "Didn't come to until the morning, with Jimmy Loeber bending over me, smacking at my cheeks. It was his

father's junk yard and Lord've helped me if his father found me there, instead of him. He got me home and had some story for my mother, too. Some story made me a hero, I forget what. Tried to rescue a drowning lamb or some such, cut up on the rocks. All that blood."

Mitchell sat up. "What happened to the dogs?"

"The dogs?"

"Was anyone looking after them?"

Ramsay hesitated, then stood up to face the hall mirror again. "Someone musta been," he said. "Couldn't say really."

"Oh."

Mitchell crawled forward and slipped around his uncle. He started up the stairs.

"Now wait," Ramsay called to him. Mitchell stopped and turned around. Ramsay twisted his lips in a funny way, thinking to himself. Finally he said, "You want me to make up some popcorn before we go?"

"We're not allowed the have it every day like that," Mitchell told him, and continued up the stairs.

## Ramsay.

The night of Jimmy's Loeber's Buck and Doe came down heavy and cold, rain lashing at the truck windows and oiling up the road so that Ramsay stayed down below fifty along the highway to Garland. He drove Amos's truck, because Kelly, in the passenger seat, balanced a tray of tuna sandwiches on her lap that would've stunk up his rental car. The old pick-up, already alive to the ceiling with the smell of cow shit and something like boiled milk, didn't much matter.

"Going to be freezing rain," Kelly said. Wet leaves whipped away from the hood of the truck and caught themselves in the windshield wipers.

"Maybe shoulda stayed home," Ramsay muttered. The scars on his leg, scars he hadn't bothered about in years, itched him. He thought of that boy's blank face. Wondering after the dogs. What a thing to ask, when your uncle has just told you an adventure story, life-or-death, and a true one too.

"You could drop me there, come back in a coupla hours," Kelly offered. "Go home, help Amos keep an eye on the kids."

"Those kids don't want me around," Ramsay said. "Come to think of it, neither does Amos."

"Oh, Ramsay." Kelly patted his knee. "Always anxious for everyone to like you, but never knowing how it's done."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Kelly just laughed a little and shook her head. "Nothing. Just that, you expect an awful lot of good feeling from people, considering."

"Considering what?"

“Never mind.” She picked at a corner of the plastic wrap and the smell of fish and pickles rose up. “We’re going to a party. Let’s just be happy.”

“You expect an awful lot of good feeling from *me*, considering.”

They listened a while to the whack of the windshield wipers. Ahead Ramsay could see the one set of traffic lights leading into Garland, swinging from a cable above the highway.

“Remind me again,” he said, slowing for the turn. “Why are we going to this thing?”

“For Jimmy. Remember Jimmy? Three years eating dinner at our table? Scrawny little guy, but Dad’s favourite hire?”

“Of course I remember him. I just don’t *know* him. Don’t know what I’d say to him if I saw him.”

“Telling me,” Kelly said. “Should’ve heard me when we saw him the other day. Rattling on. But there was just something *about* him. Something so—like he wanted to be friendly, but had no idea where to start. He was like some poor old beggar twisting his cap in front of us. I felt sorry for him. Next thing I know I’m making tuna sandwiches and putting on my best dress.”

“So we’re here for charitable work?” All along Main Street the sidewalk puddles reflected the streetlights like cracked yolks.

“Well, I for one think it’ll do you good,” Kelly told him as they turned into the arena lot, which was packed with pick-ups. “You spend all your time either making those mysterious phone calls a yours, or wandering in circles in the barnyard. Do you no harm to have a drink with your old friends.”

Ramsay laughed. "So which is he? A poor old panhandler, or an old friend?"

"One thing. He was pretty curious about the old farm."

"That right?" He drove slowly through the parking lot, bumping over puddles, looking for a spot. "A sentimental, I seem to remember."

"Ram, I think he might want to live there."

"Live there? You mean, like, rent it?"

She shrugged. "Or buy it."

"The guy's inheriting a junkyard, Kelly. He's not buying a farm anytime soon. Not for more than a sack of potatoes and a handshake, anyway." Ramsay stopped in the driving lane, near the arena doors. "You go on in," he said. "I've got one thing to do in town and then I'll come join you."

"In town? At this time?"

"I'll join you in ten minutes."

Kelly looked at him curiously, then got out and ran through the rain to the arena, trying to keep the sandwiches sheltered under her jacket. She stood against the wall under the eaves and called something that he couldn't hear. He waved and pulled his door closed. He drove off with her framed in his rear view, hurrying towards the doors.

He had looked at the advertisement enough times to remember the address. At the post office he made a left, crawling down the street in the streaking rain, studying the house numbers. There it was, number 89, the company name stenciled in the window. He hadn't been sure what he'd do when he got there. He was in fact surprised to see a light on inside. He checked his watch. Quarter past nine. He wondered if she shared the

office with any other realtors.

He paused a moment to examine himself in the mirror. Where he had shaved that evening his skin felt scorched and tender. Around his neck hung the ridiculous bootlace tie that Kelly had lent him from Amos's closet. Ramsay tried for a minute to get it off, but the clasp caught and he gave up. He kicked the driver's door open and stepped out into the rain, which was starting to thin.

The sidewalk leading up the little house was slick and held the brightness of the streetlamps. He felt like he was in a movie, like a camera crew was crouching behind him, following the precise clicks of his boot heels as he went down the walkway. At the foot of the porch steps he sacrificed dignity and leaned as far over the railing as he could, trying to peer through a break in the curtain. In the precise moment that he managed to glimpse a desk with a lamp shining above it, he heard the door open ahead of him and a woman's voice, loudly concealing its fright, say, "Can I help you with something?"

Ramsay struggled upright. He patted his chest, feeling first for a tie and then remembering he was only wearing that bootlace thing. He made himself stand still. He hadn't gotten a good look, but the voice gave him hope, distantly familiar around its edges. If it was her, she would recognize him. If it wasn't, he would just—

"Ramsay?"

He lifted his face. She was framed by the glow of the room, her blonde hair tied back in a haphazard way, her clothes comfortable, jeans and an airy sort of blouse, off-hours clothes. She touched her throat with her fingertips.

"Hello Lisa."

She came down the porch steps so quickly that Ramsay involuntarily drew back

in alarm. She moved her hand over her forehead, as though to judge her temperature.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m—” he looked around at his truck. “I’m on my way to a—a Buck and Doe. I guess. Thought I’d—”

“What are you doing *here*?” her voice was insistent, almost panicky. Ramsay glanced behind her towards the office, wondering if there was someone else with her.

“What are you doing in *Garland*?”

“Oh, Garland? Well, seeing the family, you know, seeing the old—”

“Stop.” She held up her hand. “Let me... just, stop.”

Ramsay fell quiet. She stared past him at the street for a long, unsteady moment, chewing the inside of her cheek. Then she said, briskly, without any warmth to spare, “You want to come in?”

He followed her up the porch steps. Something ached inside his chest. He permitted himself only one glance upwards at her legs. He wondered if she had heard that he was in town, if she had stayed late in her office every evening, where he’d be able to find her, waiting for him to arrive—it seemed both crucial and impossible to find answers to these questions.

When they got inside she turned to say something to him but he stopped her by gathering her into his arms. He had the film crew feeling again. She turned her face to one side. Her body felt stiff. After a moment she slowly lifted her arms and held his shoulders. Then she stepped away and he let go.

“You still fit,” he said. “I remember that feeling.”

She didn’t say anything. She walked around behind the desk at the centre of the



room and stood with her back to him, one hand at her face. Ramsay began to follow her but she turned abruptly.

“Shall we sit?” she said.

They each took a client chair and Ramsay turned his so that he faced her directly.

“I’m not much for these things,” he said. “But it sure is good to see you again, Lisa. I suppose—well, it’s the truth. I missed you.”

He reached for her hand and held it until she drew it back into her lap. She wore a ring, he noticed, but it was on her right hand, and he felt relieved.

“It *is* a bit strange,” she said. “You just... showing up, like this.”

Ramsay fidgeted. Through the short sleeve of Lisa’s blouse he could see the edge of her brassiere. He picked a peppermint out of a candy dish on the desk and untwisted the wrapper.

“You’ve got yourself an office?” he said. *Stupid.*

“Yes.”

He set the bit of candy wrapper on the edge of the desk and for some reason unknown to him he offered her the peppermint in the palm of his hand. This made her smile a little.

“No, thank you,” she said, and her eyes slid away from him.

“We’ve got to catch up.” Ramsay set the peppermint beside the wrapper.

“How long have you been in town?” she asked suddenly, turning to look at him square in the eyes. This startled him a little.

“Oh,” he said vaguely, “a week or so, give or take. Few days.”

She held his eyes a moment more then looked away again. The small smile was

gone. Ramsay felt an out-of-control sense of dread in his guts.

“Working late?” he asked.

“How did you know I’d be here?” she said, turning again to him.

He shrugged a little. Spun the candy on the desktop. “Saw the light on, thought I’d check. Listen. Do you want to come with me? Let me get you a drink?”

“Where?”

“Well, at the Buck and Doe, I suppose. I was just on my way.”

Lisa was silent. A strand of hair drifted down towards her shoulder and she tucked it behind her ear.

“For Jimmy Loeber,” Ramsay offered. “I forget the bride.”

“Joyce Rae Kirk,” Lisa said. “They were in here last week, asking about places.”

“There you go, it’ll be good for business if you come.” Ramsay tried to produce enough energy in his voice for both of them. “Be friendlier than the competitors.”

“They were asking about *your* place.”

“Beg pardon?”

“The old farm. They wanted to know about that.”

She was watching him. He rubbed his knees. This room made him nervous, something about having an office in a house, a desk and chairs where there should have been a sofa and a television set.

“Don’t know quite yet what’s doing with that place,” he said. “Don’t see how—”

“I’m going to stay here,” she interrupted. “You go on.”

“I’d like you to come.” He shifted forward and moved for her hand again, but she crossed her legs and wedged it under her knee.

“We could catch up. I’d like to catch up with you, Lisa. Old times’ sake.”

“I can’t just drop things. I’m tired. You go.”

“Well, but can I buy you a drink some other time?”

She hesitated, then stood up and went around the desk. She took a business card from a drawer and handed it to him.

“Just your business number?”

“Ramsay,” she said, “are you *actually* going to call me?”

“Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I? Didn’t I say that I missed you?”

He leaned the smallest bit forward and she plucked the card out of his hand. As she picked up a pen and leaned over it on the desk, Ramsay forced himself to look out the window.

“My home,” she said, handing the card back to him.

“Thank you. Is there... should I expect anyone else to answer when I call?”

“Oh, Ramsay,” she said. Her voice was so full of resignation that Ramsay felt, just for a moment, like handing the card back and leaving. Instead he stood up and walked around the desk, then kissed her awkwardly on one cheek. He went to the doorway and lingered there. She didn’t follow him.

“Goodnight, then,” he said.

“Yes. Goodnight.”

She stepped into the doorway and watched him as he walked away. Her silhouette fell long across the walkway. When he got to his truck Ramsay turned to wave, but she was gone.

**Jimmy.**

“When he gets here, Jimmy, you don’t wait, y’hear? You go right up to him.”

Phil handed Jimmy another beer. He cracked it open and took a long drink.

People reared and laughed and swung around him. Another drink. He felt powerful. He felt like his shoulders were expanding. Like he was bursting through the seams of his father’s funeral suit and about to grow five stories high.

“D’you hear?” Rae insisted.

“I hear.”

“Tell him what we said.”

“I’ll tell him.”

“What did we say?”

“Farm’s ours.”

“Because?”

“Because!” Jimmy got unsteadily to his feet. Everything in his brain sank to his stomach, then swung back up again. The band started a new song, Elvis, and a cheer went up in the dance hall. “Oy-oy!” Jimmy cheered with them. “Because I worked at that farm too hard!” His arms were stretching inches longer, were bulging with muscle. He flung one of them around Rae. “And there’s a barn could be a machine shop!”

Rae laughed. “Sounds like you’re right ready, for once,” she said. “Now put down that drink and come dance with your fiancée, you crazy old coot.”

**Ramsay.**

He lingered in the lobby of the arena, listening to the sound of country music that thumped from the dance hall above him. The lobby smelled of vinegar chips. The rubber floor was cut up from people's skate blades, marking a path from the changing rooms to the rink. He approached the wide windows that looked out over the ice. A new dance was starting in the hall above and the ceiling shook with people's stamping feet. Ramsay wondered if anyone had ever taken the boy, Mitchell, to skate. For a moment he thought maybe he'd offer. Then he remembered Kelly's words, that he always wanted everyone's approval, and he felt an old bitterness shoving around in his mind, cracking up all his good thoughts.

He got Lisa's card out of his shirt pocket and turned it over. She had written out her phone number very carefully, pressing hard on the pen. When he ran his finger over it he could feel the indentations.

He left the rink windows and walked slowly up the stairs to the dance hall. A group of people surged towards him and he pressed himself against the rail to let them by. His idea was to find Kelly, have a quick drink, maybe shake Jimmy's hand. Maybe. Then hightail it back to the peace and quiet of his pullout bed, where he could think over what had happened with Lisa, imagine her again.

The hall was lined along either side with wooden chairs strung over with streamers and balloons. At the far side of the hall was a stage, where a band played. Through the mess of people who crushed up against each other to dance and talk and laugh Ramsay caught a glimpse of a makeshift bar. He recognized most of the people that he pushed past, at least vaguely, and some of them even reached out to stop him and

say hello.

“Frank Lockburn’s oldest,” he heard a voice say nearby. “Unusual name, I forget what.”

He passed the food table, guarded by three large women. He recognized Mrs. Loeber, Jimmy’s mother, who was whacking at flies with a rolled-up newspaper. He didn’t see Kelly anywhere but her tuna sandwiches were piled at the end of the table and several of the top slices of bread had slid off and fallen to the floor.

The bar was two fold-up church tables pushed end-to-end in front of the stage. A few liquor bottles lined the edge of the stage above two kegs and a row of coolers. A teenaged boy who Ramsay didn’t recognize scurried back and forth, pulling plastic cups off a stack at his feet and filling them up for the people shouting orders. A kicked-up tin box sat square in the middle of one of the tables and people tossed in money and counted out their own change. An unopened can of Coke weighed down the bills. Ramsay had to lean far over the table to shout in the boy’s ear, the band above them slamming out Elvis as hard as they could.

Ramsay put five bucks under the Coke can and the boy set down a cup of fizzy something. He opened a Ziplock bag and fished out a ragged slice of lime that he jammed onto the rim. Ramsay thanked him and turned back towards the floor with his drink. Something was sagging in him and he took a cautious sip, hoping alcohol would bolster him up a little. The drink was foul, like too many types of liquor punched up with cola, but he got it down and felt better.

He began to work his way down the other side of the room looking for his sister, but he saw only a wash of faces he could recognize but not identify—faces that glanced

at him with what he thought was bored disapproval. He found an empty seat along the edge of the hall and thought he'd stay there, just watch, wait for Kelly to pass by. He looped the bootstrap tie around his fingers. How much better it would be if Lisa were with him.

Someone stepped in front of his view of the crowd. Ramsay looked up. It was Jimmy Loeber, rubbing his chin and staring down at him, swaying a little. He wore a tired, oversized suit with a pair of scuffed black basketball shoes, and his eyes were washed red, as though scorched from the effort of focusing. He looked no older than he had back when Ramsay knew him at the farm, trotting around after his father like a beaten but eager puppy.

Ramsay stood up, which was awkward to do, because Jimmy stood so close and didn't move back any. He stank of beer and deviled eggs gone off.

"Hey, Jimmy," Ramsay said. "Good to see you again. Congratulations. Fine party."

"Ramsay Lockburn," said Jimmy. He erupted into a fit of sharp coughs, which he quelled with a long swig from a beer bottle.

"The same," Ramsay said. He began to sit, thinking Jimmy might do the same. But Jimmy just stood where he was, rubbing his cheek, squinting around at the dance floor behind him. Ramsay straightened again.

"Got some talk for you," Jimmy told him, in a voice that seemed a parody of toughness.

"Well, talk away, Jimmy," he said. "How's the junkyard business?"

"It's about your farm."

Ramsay looked around for Kelly. A surge of irritation soured him. He wanted to be back in that real estate office. Wanted to be in his truck with Lisa. In his bed. Instead he was here with this wasted crowd, listening to Jimmy Loeber cluck about the farm. He was so bloody sick of the farm.

“’Fraid I got to push off, Jim,” he said. He tried to maneuver around the smaller man but Jimmy scurried to block his way.

“I worked on that farm fer a loooooong time, doncha member.”

“I remember. We all appreciated it. But the farm’s not for sale, I’m afraid. I’ll see you.”

“I heard, I know.” He stepped again into Ramsay’s way. People nearby had stopped talking and were staring at the pair of them. “You loaded it off on a bunch of bums from the city.” Jimmy pushed his tongue around in his mouth, feeling for words, his eyes trawling through the crowd. “I’m getting married,” he said.

“I know that, Jimmy.”

“My *wife*. My *wife* wants that farm and I said, I’ll get that farm for ya. I *said* that. I said, I could make somethin’a that farm for ya, Joyce Rae. I could make it up to be a machine shop *and* a farm. Both. I know how.”

“I know you could, Jim. Whyn’t you come by Amos’s place sometime and we’ll have a drink.”

“How much?”

Ramsay’s hands twitched at his sides. He tried to take a calming breath. “Well,” he said carefully, “the barn is going to need to be torn down and built up again, or at the



very least new framing, keep it upright, and the house is likely rotting in its foundation from six winter melts without a pump, not to mention the septic, and—”

“How much?”

“Listen, Jimmy. I’ve got folks interested already, tell you the truth. We’re working out details.”

“Folks? You got *folks*? What about the folks saved you from your father by working your share of the jobs three summers in a row? Folks seen you up from when you were eye level to the cattails?”

“Jim,” said Ramsay, “No one needed to save me from my father. And you’re younger’n I am. You ain’t seen me up from anything. You’d better—”

But Jimmy wasn’t listening. He arched his arm back and Ramsay saw with surprise that he was about to take this kid’s beer bottle to his head. In less than half a second, all irritation flooded out of him, and he felt only a faint, weary sense of pity. This kid in an oversized suit. This dance hall and its wilted balloons.

He reached for Jimmy’s arm, meaning only to wrench away the bottle. Jimmy twisted away in alarm as though Ramsay had swung at him, and when he fell, it was a sprawling, flailing kind of fall, the bottle landing first and smashing hard and far, Jimmy crashing after it. Ramsay lunged to try and catch the boy, swing him away from the broken glass, but he couldn’t move fast enough.

The music stopped. Jimmy whimpered. The crowd that circled them lurched apart and Joyce Rae appeared, damp at the collar, eyes as round as boiled eggs.

No one seemed able to move, so Ramsay reached a hand down. Jimmy accepted it and got slowly and unsteadily back to his feet. He looked himself over fearfully,

picking at the suit that was now wet through with beer. There didn't seem to be any blood. Ramsay gave his hand a little shake. "Good luck," he said. He looked over at Joyce Rae and nodded. She stared back at him with a red glow curdling all around the edges of her face and into the neck of her dress. Then Ramsay turned away and excused himself through the crowd. He met Kelly pushing her way towards him.

"My god!" she said. "I heard but I couldn't see! What happened?"

"You ready to leave this minute?"

She looked bewildered. "Well, yeah, I guess, I just got to get my tray—" She noticed Ramsay's face. "Never mind, it's not important. Let's go."

He squeezed her arm as they hurried down the stairs. While she looked for her jacket in the coatroom he went out to bring the truck around. The steady rain somehow held him upright all the way across the parking lot.

**Jimmy.**

Jimmy felt like his whole bleeding self was sloshing up against the walls of his head, a great wave of pain and pity pressing into the back of his eyeballs. Beside him was Rae—he felt her all hot and smelling like hard soap. Then he saw the crowds around him.

“I talked,” Jimmy said, and turned around and around to find Rae’s face. “I talked to him a’right, tried my best.”

“Kid got the wind knocked outta him,” someone said.

“Jim,” said another voice, “You want ice? Bar’s got ice.”

Jimmy tried to pull the picture of Rae together in his mind as she took hold of him and straightened him out.

“Beauty of a dress,” he said.

“What in hell,” she answered.

Jimmy shrugged.

Rae turned to the crowd. “You all go back to dancing,” she said. “S’all right. Where’s the goddam music! Are we paying you to stare? Everyone, thanks for being here, now get yer feet busy ’stead a your gawking eyes.”

People whacked Jimmy on the back as they turned away. He stumbled and felt a jolt in his guts, like an elevator starting up, a lurch and then a sinking.

“It’s hopeless, Rae,” he said to her.

“Not yet, it isn’t,” she answered. “I seen him go out the door. He threw you on the floor in front a everybody when you were just tryin’a have a conversation. He owes you now. He’s got to save face.”

Jimmy looked past her at the exit, but he couldn't see straight to it because Phil Potts was coming towards them, scuffing up the floor with his swagger and spit.

"Let's jus' dance," Jimmy said, turning back to Rae. "That's what this is for, isn't it? This is for dancing, this party. Let me dance with you."

But Phil pulled up just then, still smelling of the chicken fry and rolling a bit of toothpick between his lips.

"He's just left," Phil said, the pick bobbing on his bottom lip. "Reared off in that red pick-up a Amos's."

"Okay Jim, here's what you do," said Rae. The people on the floor were dancing, but Jimmy could tell they were looking at him, taking turns peering over each other's shoulders.

"You catch up with him in your truck, get him to stop, pull over, whatever."

"Why's that?"

"Because we invited him here to this party for a reason. Think I want a Lockburn kicking around without a good reason? It's like you said, they're bad luck. But this is our time, Jim. You go and you show him how goddamned determined you are. You tell him he's forgiven for knocking you over, you tell some story about when you two were kids, you tell him anything that gets him feeling kind, like you're family or something. Then you tell him nicely that that farm should go to us so we can work it over and make it something. He'll listen to you then. He will. It's our time, Jimmy, remember. And take Phil with you."

"Phil?"

"Yeah, case Ramsay knocks your lights right out and you need back-up."

The rain felt like cat's claws on his face as Jimmy left the arena without his jacket and dashed across the parking lot to his truck.

"We'll be after him and back in half an hour," Phil said as he trotted beside Jimmy. "You're leaving as a boy who still lives on a junk heap with his mother, but you'll come back a man with a farm to his name!"

"Long as I come back at all," said Jimmy to himself. He unlocked the truck door and glanced up through the rain at the hall windows, where dancers' silhouettes twirled past in the yellow glow.

A deep pothole at the edge of the parking lot nearly bottomed out the pick-up. Phil gripped the handle above his passenger door with both hands and whooped like a cowboy.

"Helluva night, Jim," he said. Then he cranked down his window and leaned out into the thrashing rain. "Look out, Ramsay boy!" he shouted. "We're comin' ta getcha!"

"Get back in," Jimmy hollered at him, and took one hand off the wheel to yank at Phil's shirt. "We're not gonna get nobody. Just gonna talk to him like men. Like Rae said."

"You know," Phil said, sitting back and reaching down to turn up the heater. "You sure take a lotta smacking around from old Joyce Rae there, eh?"

"Shut up, Phil."

"I'm jus' saying. If it was me."

"You ever been in love, Phil?"

"Sure. Lotsa times. I was in love with your ma last week down behind the barn,

matter fact.”

“Fuck you. I’m talking for real.”

“Well what kinda pansy question is that? Next you’ll be reciting poetry to me.

Turn that way. Bet he’s gone off for his sister’s, the bugger.”

For a while Jimmy tried to stay quiet, but he couldn’t. “It’s sad for you,” he said, and shook his sleeve down to wipe the windshield where it fogged up. “Grown-up son of a bitch, never knowed love.”

“Listen to you!” Phil plucked the bit of toothpick from the edge of his lip and flicked it on the cab floor. “Man going off to war, and at the same time talking bout being in goddam love. You’re a walking counter-diction, you are.”

Something burning hot and fast rose up Jimmy’s throat, like water at a rolling boil, hissing out of him. He pressed his gas foot right down and the truck struggled loud up the highway, sending shoots of water out behind. Soon Jimmy could see red light way up the road, and he willed the truck forward, almost started bucking right there in his seat to get it moving faster.

“It’s Lockburn,” he said, when he saw the lights up ahead break into a left-turn signal. “We’re getting him.”

## **Mitchell and Tassa.**

Before he opened his eyes, Mitchell saw a pattern of shattered glass against the darkness of his eyelids. He felt more than heard the silence that swelled afterwards like a cloud of steam in the bedroom, until he had to speak just to be able to breathe again. And what he said was: "Tassa?"

From down below a tiny voice answered, still ragged from sleep: "What *was* it?"

Mitchell looked at his clock. 11:15. He sat up, careful of his bandaged finger, and put his feet over the edge of his bunk. Tassa touched his ankle.

"Mitch?"

"I don't know. Just wait a minute."

He could hear movement in the bedroom next door, where his father had laid down to wait for their mother to get back from the dance. Mitchell listened to the heavy footsteps cross from his parents' bed to the window, then, more quickly, from the window to the door and out into the hall. A moment later their bedroom door opened and their father appeared against the brilliant hall light.

"Lay down, Mitchell. Go back to sleep. I'm just going outside a minute."

"Daddy?"

"Back to sleep, Tassa. It was only a tree falling." And then he left.

Mitchell waited until he heard the downstairs kitchen door crashing shut and then he lowered himself onto the bedroom floor.

"I'm going," he whispered to Tassa. His could make out her head on the pillow and her fists rubbing hard at her eyes.

"Wait for me," she whispered back.

They stayed in their pajamas and crept down the hall to the top of the stairs, where Mitchell put a finger on his lips and leaned forward to listen. After a while he started down and Tassa followed. Both of them stayed to the edge of each step, where the wood didn't creak as much. At the bottom of the stairs they peered around the sun porch door and there was the pullout bed with the sheets all tangled but no one in it.

In the mudroom Mitchell lifted Tassa around her middle and maneuvered her feet into her rubber boots that stood near the door. Her pajamas bunched up around her knees and he tried to tuck them down to her feet.

"Here," he said, and handed her his own black raincoat. "Wear mine. It'll cover you up."

"What'll you wear?"

"This." He took down the old hunting jacket with the spray-painted X on the back and put it on. It reached almost to the floor. He kept his bandaged finger inside and it took some shoving to get the stiff canvas sleeve up above his other wrist. He stepped into his own pair of boots and pulled them on over his pajamas.

"Put your hood up," he told his sister, and she did, her hands swimming up the sleeves of the raincoat. Then she stood there with her face almost hidden and the raincoat hanging off her from neck to floor. Outside, the unlatched screen door caught the wind and crashed into the frame.

"I don't want to go," Tassa said.

Mitchell felt for the zipper on the hunting jacket while he looked at her.

"There's something bad out there," she told him.

"There's nothing bad," he said. "Only rain and wind and Dad." So she lifted one



arm and Mitchell found her hand under the plastic sleeve of the raincoat.

They held their heads down against the wind and rain that drove almost straight across the lawn. At the porch steps Mitchell lifted Tassa by the arms and set her down again in the grass beside him. Across the lawn and down where the apple trees clattered in the wind he could see a light on in his grandmother's trailer and two heads, hers and their mother's, bent together inside the window.

There was a small crowd gathered at the end of the driveway, but nobody saw Tassa and Mitch. They stood off to the side, under the cedar branches that almost closed right around them. They peered out at the three men who stood where the driveway met the highway, two with their shirts soaked through and another with a dark blanket over his shoulders. There was one pick-up truck that looked like their dad's parked alongside the edge of the road with its tailgate down. Another pick-up stood nose-first in the ditch, with its back wheels stuck up in the air like it was in a handstand. The three men—one shivering and shaking like he was about to collapse—were looking down into the ditch where the nose of the pick-up was sinking into the muck. Mitchell stepped forward two steps, out of the cedar branches.

And then he saw.

He took hold again of Tassa's hand and whispered, "All right, we been," and then he turned her around and started her towards the house, but then their uncle's voice called out through the rain: "Amos, here, it's your kids!"

Mitchell stopped, and Tassa stopped beside him. They turned together to face the men.

Their father had been crouching down in the ditch and now he stood very, very

slowly to look at them, like his feet were stuck in quicksand, like he had a great weight in his arms. And then Tassa tilted her head way back so she could see out from under Mitchell's hood. She saw the way her father's back sagged with effort as he struggled up the edge of the ditch, and she saw the mass of muddy fur gathered up against his chest. As the rain came in around her hood and ran down her face and under the front of her pajamas, she saw that it was Hardy in her father's arms.

The other men, their uncle Ramsay and the two they didn't know, reached out and helped their father up the last of the bank. He went over to where his truck was sitting at the edge of the road and lay the dog in the truck bed, very carefully, even turned his paws in beside him so they wouldn't get banged when he slammed the tailgate closed.

Mitchell and Tassa stood still as the rain rattled down onto the truck bed. Then Ramsay stepped forward. He unwound the blanket from his shoulders and held it out to Mitchell. Mitchell looked up at his uncle, whose hair was plastered like red daggers against his forehead and whose strange tie waved in the wind like spider legs. Mitchell looked down at the blanket. He felt for his sister's hand, found it, and pulled her fast towards the house, through the puddles and up the grassy lawn. Tassa lost a boot in a puddle but Mitchell pulled at her, wouldn't let her stop.

Inside the mudroom he began peeling her jacket off. One of her pajama legs was soaked through from losing the boot and she stood pushed up against the kitchen door while Mitchell took off the old hunting jacket and threw it down into the corner, then took off each one of his boots and threw them after it. He stood looking at the pile he had made, and the puddle that was forming beneath it, and after a moment he said, "That son of a bitch."

Both of them stayed quiet a while and thought about the words. Then Tassa tried them out too, very softly. "Son of a *Bitch*."

They didn't say anything else that night as they went upstairs and got ready for bed again. Mitchell found them each an old pair of clean pajamas and he lay down next to Tassa on her bed and turned a flashlight on so they would not have to be so alone. He listened to her quiet hiccup sobs and he put his hand on her hair. When they heard their father's footsteps on the stairs they turned off the light and closed their eyes.

## Ramsay.

The window of Room 4 at the Garland Motor Inn was grimy with the milk-white streaks left over from a dog's tongue. Ramsay spat on the corner of a towel and rubbed at the glass for the sake of something to do. His eyes stung from so little sleep. It had continued raining all night and now the grey sky hung low enough to touch. Near the road Matthew Bannon, the motel's operator, tipped back his cap and shuffled letters on a roadside billboard.

At last a car bumped over the lip of the parking lot and stopped outside the Dancing Pig café at the end of the motel. Ramsay stepped behind the fringe of orange curtain. Inside the car Lisa sat still, staring at Matt Bannon in her rearview mirror, working her tongue over her teeth. When she got out of the car she paused to adjust the heel of her shoe and slide a pair of sunglasses over her hair, despite the sunless sky. As she walked towards the Dancing Pig, Matt Bannon called out to her, and she smiled over her shoulder at him. In Room 4 the curtain rod tipped out of its cradle and tumbled over Ramsay's head.

He untangled himself, took a moment to discover that his wallet was in his pocket, and stepped out the door of his small room.

He stepped inside the café and surveyed the empty booths. The place smelled of bacon and hairspray. At the far end of the counter an old boom box bleated noise from a Top-40 station and Ramsay could hear a woman's voice singing belatedly along. After a moment the singing stopped and Tammy Bannon leaned through the empty window connecting the café with the kitchen and nodded to Ramsay. "She's just in the ladies' room," Tammy told him, flapping a tea-towel towards the far wall. "Said to tell you

she'll be right back. Coffee?"

"You bet," said Ramsay, and he lowered himself into a booth next to the window. Tammy appeared and leaned her hip against the table as she filled his mug. "Seen you at Jimmy Loeber's Buck and Doe last night," she said. Ramsay pressed his lips together and nodded.

"Jimmy all right? Heard you went after him."

He pinched a napkin from the metal holder at his elbow and balled it up in a fist.

"Think Jimmy'll be fine."

She leveled the coffee pot and stood looking at him. Ramsay fixed his eyes at a mark on the wall. "Misunderstanding," he said.

"The same misunderstanding that got you sleeping at the Motor Lodge?" she asked. She pushed a finger under the blue kerchief on her head and scratched at her scalp. "Anyway," she continued, not caring that he didn't answer. "You back in Garland to stay, or what?"

Ramsay tried to ignore her, hoping she'd leave. He stared out the window at the sign by the highway. **BINGO TUESDAY \$6 CARD DONT BE A CRABBER BRING YR DABBER.**

"Well, Jimmy's in here often," Tammy carried on. "I know him pretty well, I guess. Whoops, there's your date." And she turned and sashayed back to the counter.

Ramsay hastily picked up his coffee mug and watched Lisa over the rim as she walked slowly towards him. His heart flickered and dove in his chest. He lowered his mug when she stopped at the edge of the table.

"Good morning, beauty," he said. It was an old greeting that felt like chalk on his tongue now, thick and distasteful. He cursed himself.

Lisa moved towards the bench opposite him and hesitated. She turned her purse around and around in front of her, fidgeting with the clasp.

“Before I sit down,” she said finally. She looked over his head and out the window. “I’d just like to say, you’re an incredible bastard.”

“Well,” Ramsay said, trying to hide his flinch with a smile. “We’re off to a good start, aren’t we.” He patted the table opposite him.

“You don’t even know why, do you?”

He slid his hand slowly back to his coffee mug.

“Of course I know why.”

“Then tell me.”

“I’m sorry I called you so late last night.”

“What time *was* it that you called?”

“I don’t know. After midnight.”

“It was 4 a.m.” She paused. “But that’s not why. That’s not even close.”

Ramsay took a long breath and blew it out slowly. He glanced at the café counter. Tammy stood just inside the kitchen window, her head bowed over something, her ear to their conversation.

“Please,” he said quietly. “Please, just sit down.”

She set her purse down on the table and folded her arms.

“Last night,” Ramsay stammered, “When I stopped by. Well, I’m not quite sure...” He willed her to act normally. The way he remembered her.

“I suppose I just wanted to have a proper conversation with you,” he said. “And. Maybe I wanted to apologize. Set things right.”

Lisa rolled her face towards the ceiling, then gave in and perched on the bench opposite. Tammy was at the table instantly, filling a coffee cup for her.

“Eating today?” she asked sweetly. She reached a hand into her apron pocket and produced two laminated menus. “Special’s pig-in-a-blanket. Got Matt back there cooking his own recipe for the batter.”

“You can’t apologize if you don’t know what for,” Lisa said to Ramsay. Tammy made a face like a surprised doll and backed away towards the counter.

There was a long silence between them. For something to do Ramsay opened a plastic cup of cream and laced it into his coffee. He wanted to comfort her. He did. He wanted to speak to her straight. But when he reached for those words, they rushed away from him.

“How long did you stay working last night?” he asked, and slumped a little.

Lisa folded her hands under the table. “I’m only a staying here a minute,” she said. “And maybe not even that long.”

Ramsay tapped his coffee mug with his fingernails. “Hey,” he exclaimed. “You missed excitement last night. Jimmy Loeber? He lost his mind. Tried to clock me with a beer bottle. Has he always been that crazy and I just never noticed?”

“Why are you staying at the Motor Lodge, Ramsay?”

He slid the menu around the surface of the table. A smiling cartoon sun on the top corner announced, “All-Day Breakfast.” The “All-Day” was scratched over with ballpoint, and above it was printed “6am-10am.”

“Beats Kelly’s pullout couch,” he said, and forced a chuckle. He felt like a fool ten times over. What did she want him to say? She looked out the window and Ramsay

followed her gaze. It had begun to rain again. They stared together at a cluster of slick, wet picnic tables, chained to an iron ring in the wall. Lopsided patio umbrellas with their wings folded in speared each table through the centre. Ramsay stole glances at Lisa.

What was she waiting for?

“Lisa,” he said. He dipped his head and finally caught her gaze. She shifted and looked at him. “How *are* you?” he said. He wanted her to hear that he was being earnest. That he truly wanted to know.

“I’m—” For a moment she looked uncertain. She pinched her lips into a thin line. Then she looked straight at him and said, “I didn’t think I would care. But I do. You were here for *days* before you even... I had to hear it from...”

“Oh.” Ramsay stared at the table.

“And now...”

“I see.” He looked again at the picnic tables. A seagull with a missing leg hopped about in the grass, picking at soggy French fries. “I suppose I’ve been...not always thoughtful.”

“No. Not always.”

“Lisa?” He pushed his hands over the table towards her. She stared at them like she would a thief’s.

“When you left Garland I asked you for an address,” she said. “Do you remember that? You had borrowed your dad’s car. We were parked by the railroad bridge.”

“I remember.”

“The midnight train went past.”

“Yes.”



Lisa sighed. "You wrote out an address on a postcard and mailed it to me after you left. I thought you had all the same ideas as me. I rode my bike out to see the midnight train almost every night for months. And I wrote you dozens of letters."

Despair, like a frozen winter lake, silenced everything else in Ramsay's mind.

"Do you know," she asked, "why I am now a real estate broker?"

He drew back, confused. He looked over at the counter and caught Tammy staring at him. She started as though she had forgotten where she was, then busied herself with the dials on the boom box.

"I only took that real estate course," Lisa continued, "because I wanted to be close to you, Ramsay. And it was inexpensive and only a year long. I wanted to follow you to the city. Surprise you. So the first day I got there I went straight from the bus station to the address that you had given me. Where I'd been sending all those letters. And what did I find?"

"I only—I wanted—"

"A public library."

He stared at his coffee mug.

"I stopped people on the street, Ramsay. I showed them the address. Said your name over and over."

"Lisa."

"I thought there'd been a mistake."

"I'm sorry," he said to the window. "I was an idiot, then."

"They kept a shoebox," she said quietly. "I asked at the library counter and they gave it to me. Every letter was there."

“I wanted to have a nice place all set up for you before I told you about it.”

“I sat down on those library steps and planned out the rest of my life without you in it.”

“Lisa, I wanted you there all along. But it was rough at the beginning.”

She tossed her head, as though shaking off all of his words. “I’m not going to stay angry with you,” she said. “But I’m not going to hold your hand and make you feel better about yourself, either.”

He felt a flash of irritation, but he pushed it down and said nothing.

Lisa stood up. He knew he should leave her alone. He followed the sound of her heels clipping towards the café door. Let her go, he said to himself. Just let her leave. But anguish was needling through him, sharp and frantic, overriding every other instinct. He got up and made it out to her just as she was swinging the driver’s door closed. He pointed to her closed window.

She rolled it down. Ramsay braced a hand on either side of the doorframe and leaned in. “Lisa,” he said. “I wanted to see you because.... I’m not the same any more. I’ve changed, even since yesterday. Since an hour ago. Please.”

She nodded. “Hope that’s so,” she said. She shifted into reverse and all Ramsay could do was step away and watch her go.

A voice behind him made Ramsay look around. “Sorry! Oh, sorry.” Tammy Bannon leaned out the door of the café, flapping her tea towel. “Five dollars for those two coffees,” she called. “When you’re ready.”

Out on the highway, livestock trucks shook past, wings of muck lifting from their tires.

## Jimmy.

He woke late, or late for him at least, and he lay a moment staring at a fly-spotted ceiling, before he sorted out that he must still be there, at Amos and Kelly's place, and that what seemed now like years ago had only been the night before. His clothes felt damp and cold. The pullout bed strained and wheezed between narrow walls as he got to his knees and pushed open the door on his left. He looked into an empty hallway that ended with a kitchen, hearing only the heavy ticking of a clock. When he felt sure he was alone, he got up and moved into the hall. A nauseating lightness flooded him and he stood a moment, braced against the wall, waiting for it to pass. When he finally raised his eyes he found himself staring at an aerial photograph of a large farm. His eyes swam over the L-shaped barn roof, wheat fields on three sides, the scrubby sugar bush that grew denser towards the river. He remembered it all so well.

Slowly, Jimmy turned and made his way to the kitchen, looking around for his boots, his truck keys. He paused at a window over the sink and stared out into the grey morning. Runnels of mud carved up the gravel driveway. The grass was flat and slick. Down at the bottom of the lawn sat a trailer on cement blocks, framed by a tidy flowerbed. Under a stand of cedar trees, close to the barnyard, Jimmy strained to make out a figure at work with a shovel, back bent, a pile of earth accumulating beside him.

"He's burying Hardy."

Jimmy started and turned to see Kelly Ferrier standing in the kitchen doorway.

"The kids' dog."

He rubbed his palm on his chest. He had no idea what to say, how to escape. She still felt almost a stranger to him, standing there in a man's plaid shirt, sleeves rolled up

to reveal freckled arms, hands on her waist. When Jimmy didn't speak, she asked, "You want to use our phone, call someone?"

Jimmy felt the nausea returning. His right hand flew out to grip the edge of the sink. Kelly caught him by the other arm. They moved awkwardly together towards a kitchen chair.

"I have to tell you," she said, as she helped him down. "Last night was real stupid of you. That could've been my kids you hit. Could've been anybody."

He kept his eyes low. Over by the kitchen door he spotted his boots standing in a pool of dirty water.

"I'm sorry," he managed. He shifted to stand again but she touched his shoulder and he dropped back.

"We didn't call the cops," Kelly said. "Didn't want them coming all the way out here just to write you up a fine. But I hope you know. That was real dumb and now the kids've lost their dog."

Jimmy looked down in his lap and nodded. Visions wormed their way through his mind. Ramsay reaching an arm down to help him up off the dance floor, then the same arm reaching to help him out of a weedy ditch in the pouring rain. Seeing Amos appearing through the streaming dark, and then those kids like little black ghosts, and Phil Potts running off down the road like a headless chicken.

"Those kids okay?"

She shrugged. "They're safe, that's what you mean," she said. "But I didn't want them around to see Hardy get buried, or the man who killed him. Took them first thing this morning to our neighbours' place."

“Tell ’em... tell ’em I’ll make it up to ’em. Somehow or other.” He plucked at his damp shirt.

Kelly said, “You want coffee?”

“Thanks, but I’ll just push off.” He managed to stand. He went over and pulled on his boots, swaying into the wall as he stood on one foot then the other. “And thanks too for the bed,” he added.

Kelly took a pot over to the sink. “Jimmy, your truck is sunk nose-first in our ditch. Have some coffee.”

She filled the pot and placed it on the stove, then got down three mugs and a jar of instant from a cupboard above her. He sensed all her movements through the corner of his eye as he stared at his boots. He was thinking of her again carrying lunch out to the field, red hair flying down around her face. His own face grew hot and he struggled to push the images away. When he lifted his eyes a little he could see clear out the window to Amos, who was standing still now, leaning on the shovel and staring down into the hole he’d dug.

“I know I’ve caused you some trouble,” he said. Kelly scooped coffee into each of the mugs and didn’t speak.

“If I could just call my dad, he’ll help tow me outta there,” he said. “Don’t want to trouble you more’n I have.”

Kelly pointed her spoon at the chair he’d left. Reluctantly he pulled off his boots and went over there to sit, hands in his lap.

She turned from the stove. “I want you to tell me what all’s going on,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“Tell me what got you swinging at my brother last night, then driving like a bat outta hell to run him off the road.”

Jimmy saw that her hair was duller now, her face round and pale behind that old spray of freckles. He couldn't for the life of him think of a single word to say.

“Okay, then I'll take a guess,” she continued. “You heard about Ramsay selling away that place like it was an old car. Except unlike us you decided to take immediate action.”

A noise from the mudroom made Jimmy sit up suddenly, his heart flickering against his ribs.

“Don't worry,” Kelly told him. “Ramsay's not here.”

The kitchen door swung open and Amos appeared, arms muddied up to his elbows, the top half off his workman's overalls swinging down around his waist below his T-shirt.

“Bloody hard work,” he said to Kelly. He looked down at his socks, damp from the puddle left by Jimmy's boots, then up at Jimmy himself.

Before Jimmy had a chance to sort out what kind of greeting to offer, a liver-spotted hand reached from the mudroom and nudged Amos out the way, and a small woman with a cloud of white hair walked into the middle of the kitchen and looked around. She wore a turtleneck and her pants billowed from her waist like milkweed pods. She reached out and gave Kelly's arm a squeeze, and in the same moment spotted Jimmy where he slouched in his chair at the table.

“Well, if it isn't the man of the hour,” she said as she came towards him.

“What's the matter? Never seen an old lady before?”

“Course—I mean—” And suddenly he added two and two. Mrs. Evelyn Lockburn.

The older woman sat herself down and waved over her shoulder to Kelly without turning. “Nother coffee here, please,” she called, then she leaned towards Jimmy and half-whispered, “Service here is slow, but the drinks ain’t half bad.”

Jimmy opened and closed his mouth.

“You heard I was shipped out to a loony bin after Frank died,” Evelyn said.

“Mom,” Kelly interrupted, coming over to set a mug down in front of her. “You weren’t *shipped*. And it wasn’t a loony bin by any stretch.”

“Shipped,” Evelyn repeated. “Second class.”

Jimmy stared from one woman to the other, trying to sort them out.

“And now I’ve got the trailer,” she said, jerking her thumb towards the window.

Jimmy nodded and the faintest smile touched Evelyn’s lips. “I guess not much of our news makes its way to your corner of the world anymore, eh Jim?”

He nodded again, then shrugged, unsure of what she expected. Amos gripped the doorframe with one hand and examined the bottom of his damp sock.

“Tell me,” Evelyn said, her voice low as though no one but Jimmy could hear her, “about Joyce Rae.”

Jimmy rubbed his shoulder. “Well,” he said. He cleared his throat. He looked around and noticed Kelly leaning towards Amos, whispering something.

“Well, she’s....”

Evelyn nodded encouragement. Her eyes, grey and framed with pockets of wrinkles that looped down her face, were fixed on Jimmy.

“She keeps me on my toes,” Jimmy said at last, irritated with himself. He wondered where Rae was just then. Probably sitting at the News’n Chicken, watching Phil Potts act out Jimmy’s crash. Probably she’d show up here any minute, Phil’d give her a ride, rescue him from here and take him back to their lives.

Evelyn said, “And you like that in a woman.”

Jimmy shrugged. “Nine years,” he said finally. “When we get married, it’ll be ten.”

Evelyn counted out the years on the tabletop. “So you were together when Frank and I were still there, then. When you were hired on, helping out with the farm.”

Jimmy swung his gaze again towards the kitchen, where Amos leaned back on the counter next to Kelly, both of them watching him.

“Well, yeah, that’s right,” he managed. C’mon Rae, girl, he thought. Find a way to get here and spring me loose, love of God.

Evelyn took a drink of her coffee, and nodded as she swallowed. “So did Rae ever come out to our farm? Y’know, to meetcha or something?”

Jimmy felt like he had cotton balls stuffed deep into his ears, fogging up his brain, pulling the sense out of her words.

“I... um... well she doesn’t drive, y’see. But I think she was with me once or twice when I came by to finish something up, some small job.”

“Big girl?” Evelyn asked, and she circled one arm in front of her.

“Mom!” Kelly cut in.

Evelyn ignored her. “Well, Jim?”

“Uh. She’s. She’s bigger’n I am, tell the truth, yeah.”



“Hey.” Evelyn raised her palms. “Whatever floats your boat, my dear. I’m not on this earth to judge. But I do think I remember her, then, sitting down there on my front steps few autumns back, waiting for you.”

Jimmy nodded. Amos quietly muttered something as he turned towards the sink and began washing his hands and arms.

“Asked would it be all right for her to smoke there, I’m remembering right.” Her eyes looked past Jimmy, fixed on some moment in the past. “I’ve just started smoking myself,” she said, leaning in on him. “Always thought it was filthy, but lately things have been a bit ‘what the heck’ in my life. Gets you a nice rush, doesn’t it? Cigarettes? Like angels in your brain. Y’see, your wife and I, we already got two things in common. We’re both fond of a smoke, and we’re fond of you.”

“Okay,” said Kelly suddenly, coming over and sitting down next to her mother at the table. She put a hand on the older woman’s arm. “Time to get to the point, Mom.”

“Easy now,” said Evelyn, rolling her shoulder to free herself. “I know where I’m going. Point is, Jimmy.” She spoke in the same low, conspiratorial voice, looking him right in the eye. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you a long time, but never knew enough about you to properly pin you down. And then you pretty near dropped from the sky on top of us last night. Unfortunate you had to land on top of old Hardy in the process.”

“Talk to me?” Jimmy felt he had done enough talking to last him into old age.

“Thing is,” she said to him, “I’d like to see you back on that farm. Heck, you worked it as much as Frank over those years.” For a moment her eyes shifted away.

“More, even.”

Kelly looked past her mother to watch Jimmy. At the sink Amos was quietly

listening, staring out into the yard and running his hands over his damp hair.

“Y’see, Jim,” said Evelyn. “Imagine being me, living in a tin box on my daughter’s lawn while my idiot son—pardon me—my *son* deals out my homestead to strangers, like cards at a poker game. But there’s an arrangement can be made to benefit all of us. S’why I wanted to know about Rae. I know you’ve got th’experience to do a right job, Jimmy. I’m an excellent judge of people and I remember you well, little thing throwing bales around like he was Hercules, pretty much running the place while my *son* ran off like a fart in a windstorm.”

Her words were starting to stick in Jimmy’s mind and arrange themselves in order. A fragile excitement began at the base of his guts and snaked its way upwards. To keep himself calm he twisted his thumb under the table until he felt the knuckle pop.

“See, as the bereaved widow I’ve got the deed in my name. But Lord help me, I’ll never live in that farmhouse again. And Kelly’s got Amos here, a good farm going. Long as our old place sits empty and full of cobwebs, Ramsay’s got a case to make, crazy as it sounds. S’where you come in, Jim. Now listen.”

She paused and checked his face, making sure he was focused. He nodded. It was all he could manage.

“Here’s what I propose. You and your young bride keep the place up, keep the operation going more or less, and when Mitchell gets old enough, he helps. Catch is, Mitch gets old enough and wants to farm it himself, you let him. By then maybe you’ve made enough to get a place yourselves, if you’re smart and careful.”

The kitchen was silent. Kelly and Evelyn stared at Jimmy. He felt the coffee curdle in his stomach.

“You mean...” he began.

Kelly looked impatient, but Evelyn smiled at Jimmy and nodded.

“Consider it a conditional loan,” she said. “And the farm is yours.”

“There’s a lot more to work out,” Amos interrupted in a loud, warning voice.

Jimmy suddenly realized he was trying to read his future in Evelyn Lockburn’s eyes, and he blinked and turned away, embarrassed.

“Number one,” Amos was saying, “we don’t want to be dealing with a guy drives drunk in rainstorms.”

Jimmy looked down into his lap.

“Number two, that farmhouse is in a sad state. Take a lot of work to get it livable for the winter. You’ll need your own farm equipment, too.”

“Aren’t you just full of assumptions,” Evelyn said, twisting to see her son-in-law. “Boy’s just been offered this. Got to give him a chance to make up his mind. Here, Jimmy,” she said, “go on through to their office, right through there, past the living room. Phone’s there. Take your time.”

Jimmy stumbled up out of his chair. He paused and, hardly hearing his own voice, said, “I’d like—I’ve thought before—think that old drive shed, front of the barn, could be a machine shop some sort?”

“No junkyard?” Evelyn said.

“No. No junkyard.”

“Then maybe, yes, a machine shop is just the ticket. Amos here can get his tractor tuned up.”

Jimmy nodded and hurried from the room.

Standing at the foot of the foldout bed, where Amos and Kelly had their farm office, Jimmy paused and examined his hands in the thin daylight. He was trying to remember the layout of the Lockburn kitchen, where he'd sat nearly every day for three summers in a row, too self-conscious to ask for something as simple as the milk to be passed, too embarrassed by his dirty hands to reach for it himself. Old Frank Lockburn, pinning his red beard to his neck with one hand while leaning forward to scoop chicken pie into his mouth, anxious to finish with the inconvenience of eating and get back to work. Ramsay sputtering on about things to do in town, reasons why he'd not be helping to muck out pens or drive the tractor that afternoon. And that must be Evelyn Lockburn, that woman in his memory who is scraping dishes and peeking under pot lids, now and then putting a hand on his shoulder and asking quietly would he like more tea while it was still hot.

Jimmy picked up the phone receiver from its cradle and held it to his ear. Rae in that same kitchen. Rae having his lunch all ready for him when he came in from chores. Before he could think through the credibility of this vision, he punched in her number. She picked up on the first ring.

“Heya. It’s Jim.”

“Well I didn’t think it was the King of France. Phil told me you’re at the Ferrier’s place.”

“I am. And you’ll never—”

“Well, you’re a holy bastard, Jimmy Loeber, left me high and dry at our own buck and doe!”

“Listen. You *told* me—”

“Had to get a ride home with my *parents*. You know how humiliating that was?”

“I’m sorry, Rae.”

“Didn’t even have a partner for the last dance. Almost didn’t get to dance at all, ‘til Phil Potts got back. *That’s* a gentleman.”

“Phil?”

“Girl’s not supposed to wake up on her own, morning after her Buck and Doe!”

“But you *sent me* after Ramsay Lockburn.”

“Did I tell you, ‘Go follow Ramsay home and see if he’ll fix you a nice hot drink and give you a hug and don’t worry a thing about me?’”

Jimmy ducked his chin down and traced circles on the desk with his fingertips.

“I killed their dog,” he said.

“Phil said you ran your truck right into the ditch. It better not be too busted up.”

“That dog belonged to those little Ferrier kids.”

“Did you hear me?”

“I heard you.”

“So? Are you all nice cozy friends now? I’m sure they’re thrilled to have the likes of you knocking around their house. What’ve they said to you? You find anything out?”

A drizzle had started up over the yard, and Jimmy looked out and saw the pile of dirt left under the cedars, only a few feet beyond the window where he stood. “I want to see you face to face,” he said.

“Well you’ve made that a bit difficult.” Rae sighed loudly. “Listen, Jim, I been

thinking about us.”

“Oh please, Rae, no.”

“And talking to Phil a bit.”

“Rae, just listen a me, I got to tell you—”

“We’re struggling, Jim. Fact a the matter, we’re hanging on by a thread, you and me.”

“Don’t.”

“I told you when you ast me to marry you, I said, no junkyards, no engines, no fooling around. And all you done, been doing, is fooling around. More upset about a goddam dead dog than your own fiancé’s deprivation.”

“Did Phil say something to you?”

“Think I need Phil to describe what’s right in fronta me? Maybe you were right, Jim. There’s a curse on the Lockburn place. It’s the ‘ain’t no one but shit-head Lockburns got any rights around here’ curse. And now you’re buying into it.”

Jimmy sat down on the edge of the mattress. He could see through the open French door that Amos was still at the sink, facing the table, speaking something to the others.

“Take for instance you going to the Junction pub.” Rae paused for Jimmy to say something but he kept silent. “Sent you in there, thinking you could make something happen. Wheel and deal, make the earth shake, make some propositions.”

“But Ramsay wasn’t there.”

“Instead you come out, no more advanced in the world than how you went in, ’cept now you’re sweet friends with some sticky little four-year-old girl.”

“Well that’s—”

“I’m not meaning to hurt you, Jimmy. Just that I think now’s the time for us to decide, not later.”

“Decide what?”

“I don’t want to live on a junkyard.”

“Yes. You’ve said as much.”

“And truth? I don’t want to have a husband doesn’t listen to me, doesn’t make happen what I ask for, simple enough. Husband that leaves me quite alone to dance with any old cowboy at my own Buck and Doe. Though to be fair lots a them got a good step.”

There was a long pause.

“Well,” said Jimmy. He felt himself rolling up like a pill bug under a cat’s nose.

“Sounds like you’ve about decided.”

“Tell you mother she’ll have to watch Wednesday television on her own a while.”

Jimmy took the receiver from his ear and held it in his lap. He could hear Rae’s voice carrying on. When he held it back to his ear, there was a shuffling noise and the line went dead.

He came back out into the kitchen and found Amos with his boots on, waiting in the mudroom door. Kelly and Evelyn looked up at Jimmy from the table.

“I got—” he began. He looked severely down at his feet and cleared his throat several times. “One of our dogs had a litter, few weeks back,” he said. “Maybe your kids’d like one of those puppies. Brown and white little things, this big.” He cupped his

hands and looked up at Kelly. She smiled a little and said, "They might, Jimmy. We'll have to ask them."

"All right." He turned to Evelyn. "Wish I could show you how grateful I am, Mrs. Lockburn."

She bounced her hand on the tabletop. "Right!" she said. "You can start by coming outside and helping get that poor old dog into the ground. Then we'll talk more. You need to be anywhere before lunchtime? Bet Amos could use you for the morning at least."

They went as a group out into the rain and headed for the stand of cedars, Jimmy a few paces behind, staring at their backs and thinking nothing much at all.



## **Mitchell & Tassa.**

He hooked his arms under Tassa's armpits, keeping his injured hand safe in front of her, and staggered forward across the wild yard. Without Hardy to sniff on ahead she was afraid of stepping on a beehive, or into a hole that would swallow her up. She pulled her legs up to keep her feet high out of the weeds and wouldn't look out from under her baseball cap. Mitchell set her down on the bottom step of the porch.

"We're here," he said.

Tassa stared at her feet. Her hair sprouted out the back of her baseball hat and he gave it a tug.

He left her on the step and walked up to the front door. "Are there ghosts?" she said finally. Mitchell examined the lock, then stepped up onto an old tinderbox and peered in a window at the front parlor.

"I think I want to go home."

"No you don't." He turned back to her. "Come here."

"I want to go see Lorne and Marla."

"Tassa." He shifted his balance on the box and held out a hand to her.

She reached high for the old railing and stepped up onto the porch. Mitchell took her arm and swung her up beside him. "Look in there," he said. She stood on her tiptoes and strained to see over the ledge.

"You see? It's all ready for us," Mitchell said. "Haunted houses don't have couches and pianos."

Tassa gripped his coat in her fist and stayed quiet.

They left the porch, this time with Tassa on Mitchell's back, and followed the

house around to the front, past the sunken veranda. At the back of the house the ground sloped upwards towards a brambly patch of old garden. Bony fingers of vine trailed up the house wall to the roof. Tassa and Mitchell walked around a stoop of painted logs with a rusted clothesline reel at the top. The line itself hung down into the grass. Past the stoop was a line of raspberry bushes, taller and denser than the ones at Lorne's. The raspberries that still clung there were fat and graying, and collapsed like weak balloons between Mitchell's fingers.

Then Tassa patted his shoulder and pointed towards an open window in the house wall, a few feet above the ground, where the vines had been torn away.

He started to lower her but she cried out, so he hunched her up again and hurried back to the side door and got the tinder box. He brought it around to the open window and tried to find a level spot on the ground but Tassa's arms clinging around his neck made him cough and lose his balance. He went over to the clothesline pole and made her get off.

"Don't be crying," he said. He took her hand and closed her fingers around the clothesline where it dipped into the weeds. The movement sent a cascade of water drops off the line and onto their heads. "Just hold on here," he said, "and don't let go. I'll be right back."

He left her standing with the clothesline in one hand and went back to the tinderbox. When he stood on it he could just get his elbows over the window ledge. He checked that his bandage was secure, and then with great effort he wiggled and pulled his way upwards. He crashed down the other side, over a kitchen counter and onto the floor, where he crouched a long time, gripping his hand and waiting for the burning-hot pain in

his finger to wash itself away.

He got to his feet and leaned over the counter to the window.

“Don’t you let go, all right?” He shouted to Tassa. “I’ll go through and open the door and come and get you. All right?”

He could see that she was starting to cry, but trying not to. She swung the clothesline back and forth in her fist.

“See that?” he shouted. He pointed to a ripple of wind moving through the weeds near the spoiled garden.

“That’s Hardy. That’s him running. He’ll keep watch while we’re here.”

While she was staring at the rippling grass he slipped away and looked around the kitchen. Across from the window was a fat woodstove, cold under his hand. The chimney was gone and Mitchell could see clear up through the holes left behind, all the way to the grey sky. He left the kitchen and wandered into a hallway. He examined the staircase, which disappeared into darkness. He realized they would need a flashlight. He went into the front room and played three of the piano keys. Two of them worked and their noise startled him.

At the end of the hallway he unlocked the side door and jumped over the porch steps into the weeds. Again he followed the house around the front veranda and into the opposite yard, where he stopped and stood still in the grass, his heart striking up hard against his chest. Tassa was gone. He looked past the clothesline at the raspberry patch, then turned a half-circle and studied the garden. He wanted to call her name but was afraid of his own voice. The wind had grown stronger, it was in the tips of the trees now, whipping leaves from their branches.

Then he saw her, far out in the field, zig-zagging through grass nearly as tall as she was.

He ran. She had almost reached the far fence line. Twice she disappeared, as though something had yanked her under. When she bobbed back up again she kept running.

“Tassa!” he finally managed to call. She didn’t listen. He had nearly reached her when she fell under the grass again, and as she got to her feet he grabbed her around the middle.

“You were *wrong!*” she shouted at him. She tried to twist away. “He’s not out here! I can’t find him anywhere!”

“Okay now,” he said. She stopped struggling and he let go. He held out one hand. “Okay, all right. Come here.”

“NO!” she screamed. She turned to run but Mitchell swung out and caught her again and hauled her towards him until the back of her head was under his chin. He could feel her shaking against his ribs. It began to rain and he bent low at his waist, covering her. She was shouting something between sobs and finally Mitchell understood. “*Hate* him!” she was saying, over and over, flailing inside his arms.

“I know,” Mitchell told her. Rainwater dripped from his hair and funneled under his chin. “That’s why we got to run away.”

## Ramsay.

Ramsay dreamt of being on a plane, flying over a city. In the dream he traveled first class, had his drink brought to him on a silver tray, sucked shrimp and spat pink tails into a jeweled dish. The plane flew low and under it swirled landscapes of glass and steel, twists of highway, bubbles of hockey arenas and football stadiums. In his dream, Ramsay smiled—then dark clouds blocked his view of the city. The plane began to jerk and hop about in the air. Rain flecked the little round window beside Ramsay, then evolved into spits and gusts of hail. A door at the front of the plane tore open, sucking out napkins, pillows, suitcases. Ramsay gripped his armrests and watched in horror as first the pilot, then the co-pilot, then every long-legged stewardess blew him a kiss and somersaulted out the door and into the storm. Ramsay felt the plane's sickening tailspin, caught glimpses of the ground hurtling closer with each flash of lightening. And the hail, pounding and pounding at the window—

Ramsay's mind opened before his eyes. The pounding shimmered into the noise of a fist on wood. He struggled a moment, rolled onto his side, reached out to touch the floor. Then he sat up.

He felt for his pants and a shirt, but the pounding noise cluttered his mind so that he couldn't concentrate on what his fingers touched. Finally he hid himself behind the door and opened it just enough to peer out.

Amos Ferrier stood in the glare of his pick-up's high beams, glowing in his fur-trimmed parka and skullcap, one fist in the air where he had been pounding.

"Jesus," said Ramsay. "You look like the Angel of Hell."

"Get dressed," Amos told him, already turning away.

Ramsay's lungs burned in the cold air as he watched Amos haul himself back into the pick-up. He was still partly on the plunging airplane, his legs weak beneath him. He closed the door and squinted through the peephole into the pick-up's high beams, then swept his fingers over the wallpaper until he found the light switch.

A picture of Lisa drifted through his mind, from three, four days ago—when was it?—reversing out of the parking lot, swinging onto the highway towards town, the livestock trucks hauling past.

Ramsay stepped around the papers spread over the floor and plucked his clothes from a chair. Strange time for Amos to want a talk, he thought, if that's what this was. But he'd take it. He'd take almost anything now.

Amos had the truck rolling away before Ramsay had even swung the passenger door shut.

"Hell of a way to invite me back," Ramsay joked, holding his hands near the dashboard heater then pressing his warm palms on his face. Amos glanced at him, then reached an arm into the space behind the bench seat and hauled up an old canvas hunting jacket. "You'll want this on," he said.

"All right," said Ramsay. "You're making me nervous now."

Amos slowed the truck on the dark road. Ramsay really did feel his stomach sink as he took stock: his near-silent, inscrutable brother-in-law, who had only recently ordered him out of his house, now driving him off somewhere in the dead of night with who knows what sliding around in the truck bed back there.

"About last Friday," Ramsay began, but was interrupted when Amos suddenly stamped the brakes and sent them fishtailing to a dusty stop alongside the ditch weeds.

Ramsay began to speak but Amos held up his hand, then cranked down the driver's window and peered into the darkness. After a few seconds he thrust his arm again into the space behind the seats and rummaged around until he found a flashlight. Without a word he flung open his door and disappeared behind the truck. Ramsay twisted to follow the flashlight beam as it trained over the gravel road and out into the fields beyond. It swung back and forth, picking up nothing but grass and weeds, until finally it flickered off and a moment later Amos reappeared at the driver's side.

"Thought I saw someone," he said as he yanked the truck back into drive and started slowly away.

"This about... is this about me?" It was as close as Ramsay could bring himself to opening a conversation with Amos.

"No, dammit," said Amos. "This is *not* about you."

Ramsay asked nothing more as Amos's truck rattled past his own driveway, then slowed and turned in at the Shannons'. The headlights lit up fingers of cornstalks that reached over the driveway and brushed the flanks of the truck. Ahead Ramsay could see lights on in the front rooms, and a dark figure at the window watching them approach. When they pulled up next to the oak tree, Kelly appeared on the porch, one arm on her hip, the other waving to them and then nervously pushing through her hair.

"Take that," Amos reminded Ramsay, pushing the hunting jacket onto his lap.

Kelly came down from the porch and met them on the lawn. Her face was white and both Ramsay and Amos reached out to touch her.

"What's this about?" Ramsay said.

"You didn't explain?" Kelly said to Amos, drawing away to look at him. Then

the porch door opened once more and Lorne shuffled forward. He was wearing his usual chore clothes—an old down coat over a workman’s plaid shirt and coarse pants, his heavy boots on his feet. His eyes were pillowed in dark circles. His hair was pushed up from the back, standing at the crown and waving in the night breeze. He looked whipped and frightened out there on the dark porch, rubbing the stump of his finger against his opposite palm and staring across the lawn.

Ramsay felt a hammering panic seize him, followed almost instantly by a rationalizing calm. “Tell me what’s happened,” he said. “Where’s Marla.”

“It’s just, you see...” Lorne sighed. His shoulders sagged so that he stood nearly at Amos’s height, a rare thing for a man so large.

“Well, Ramsay. I just can’t seem to find her.”

Amos disappeared into the house and came back out with three flashlights. Ramsay began putting on the hunting jacket.

“I looked all around the house,” Lorne was saying, as Kelly guided him to a folding chair. “In the drive shed. Around behind the barn. Sometimes she likes it there, you know, where you can see the woods and the moon. Sometimes I find her there in the daytime. Sometimes we have picnics—when it’s warm...”

His voice trailed off and he touched the stump of his finger to his face, rubbing at an eyelid. Amos came down onto the lawn and handed a light to Ramsay.

“We’ll spread out,” he said. “It’s only been an hour or two. She’s likely not wandered far. You go up through the cornfields and check around the old farm across the way. I’ll go look over the back fields here, and the wood. Kelly’ll drive the roads. Come back here once you’ve had a good look.”



Lorne was waving away Kelly's hands and heaving himself onto his feet again. He came down and took a flashlight.

"I'll go with you, Amos," he said quietly. "Help you find your way around those back fields."

"Now just a minute," Ramsay said. "We might telephone into town. Get some cruisers out with searchlights. Do this proper."

Lorne held up a hand. "If it comes to that, we will," he said. "Not before."

Kelly crossed the lawn and took the truck keys from Amos. Without speaking the small group split up, Amos and Lorne off towards the barnyard, Kelly to the truck, Ramsay turning towards the cornfields that churned like a black sea outside the trembling flashlight beam.

## Jimmy.

Jimmy lay back on his bed in the darkness of the bedroom and set an unlit cigarette on his lips. Through the floor he could hear the bubbling noise of his mother's television set. Now and then her chair squealed as she adjusted herself.

He tipped the cigarette back and forth with his tongue while he thought, for the thousandth time, about two things at once: the prospect of closing his eyes to sleep in the master bedroom of the Lockburn farm, and the great septic illness that Rae had left in his guts when she told him not to come for her anymore.

Jimmy rolled his head on the pillow and faced the window. After three days of storm clouds and rain, the night stretched clear and far. Bats darted in the moonlight. His father's truck, running badly since being hauled from the Ferrier's ditch, turned and choked up the driveway, which set the Bears boiling and baying at the ends of their chains.

Everything would be all right, Jimmy told himself, because of his plan. He had smoothed it over by degrees, wave after wave of careful thinking up here on his narrow bed, until he had convinced himself it would work. It was so simple. Just waiting for him. He would arrange to see the Ferriers and Evelyn Lockburn at Lisa Hamyl's office, where he would have them draw up a written agreement, and everyone would sign. He would borrow his father's funeral suit, which his mother had cleaned, and leave the bashed-up truck parked on a different street so Amos wouldn't see it again and be disgusted. Then he would take his copy of the agreement over to the News 'n Chicken where Phil Potts had given Rae a job. His mother had told him about that when she had come home with their Saturday night chicken. Saw Rae in there with a nametag, she

said, sitting up next to that creature Phil Potts. Her lips were purple. She had a lollipop shoved in her cheek. Said she didn't care that she was missing watching TV with me Wednesdays. You dodged a bullet, Jim. Huge damned bullet.

Jimmy's father killed the truck's engine and hollered at the dogs. Something crashed against the chain-link fence and they yelped and were silent.

He would walk up to her and lay down the agreement under her eyes on the counter, then give her a moment to read it. He would nod to Phil like he didn't give a damn.

Jimmy opened his mouth to see if the cigarette would stick to his bottom lip. It clung a moment, then detached and fell onto his chest. He stared around the room. All the familiar objects stared back—the dresser with its clutter of deodorants and broken cassette tapes on top, the mirror behind his door with Rae's high school graduation picture stuck in the frame. Next to him a cockeyed bedside table leaned into the mattress. Jimmy set the cigarette on one side of the table and then caught it as it rolled off the other. His father was in the house now, and the television noise sputtered then cut out.

He hadn't told Rae yet about the farm, and what Evelyn Lockburn had promised him. The moment she said she was through with him and his junkyard home was the moment that Jimmy began to think up his plan, and nothing else would do. He wanted something solid. He needed to put something in her hands. A piece of paper. A guarantee. He didn't care about the collision centre anymore. He just wanted her waking up next to him in the master bedroom, with everything forgotten and the future their own. Jimmy closed his eyes. Once Rae saw the signed agreement... once she realized he was serious all along, that he was the kind of man who would provide for

her... Jimmy opened his eyes again and stood up so fast that he swayed on his feet. He stepped shakily over to his bedroom door and plucked the picture of Rae from the mirror.

He went back to his bed and collapsed on his side. Tomorrow he would find the note in his wallet where Evelyn Lockburn had written her phone number, then he would look up Lisa Hamyl in the directory. By this time tomorrow night he could be back in his truck with Rae sitting next to him and Phil Potts a distant memory.

The picture of Rae rested in his curled fingers and he studied it until his eyelids fell.

## **Mitchell & Tassa.**

They both sat on the same side of the kitchen table, which they usually didn't do. Mitchell's place was with his back to the window, and Tassa's place was opposite, on top of the phone book which was on top of the chair. But because Grandma Evelyn was with them there were different rules. The first different rule was that even though the clock on the microwave said 12:34, and all of the windows were so dark that they couldn't see anything in them but their own reflections, they were still awake and sitting at the table. Another different rule was that they were drinking hot chocolate, which was usually only allowed on Sundays, and this wasn't a Sunday, it was something else, some in-between time that had no day at all.

"When?" asked Tassa again.

"Whenever they have any news to tell us," said Grandma Evelyn, who sat opposite them, in Mitchell's spot. Mitchell left his chair and went over the phone on the wall. He lifted the receiver out of its cradle and listened to the long, empty note that made a red line in his head, and he hung up again.

"We could help them look," he said.

Evelyn shook her head. "We'd better stay here, dear," she told him. "We'd be no good getting ourselves lost out there, would we? Come and sit with your sister, Mitchell. Finish your hot drink."

"We know this whole place." Mitchell stayed where he was, next to the phone.

"We'd never get lost. Not in a thousand million years."

Evelyn smiled. "I suppose that's true," she said. "But we'd better wait anyhow. People like us just have to do what we're told sometimes."

“If we had Hardy,” Mitchell said quietly, walking back to his chair, “he’d find her.”

Tassa stopped licking her hot chocolate spoon and let it drop onto her lap. She covered her face with her hands. Mitchell put his arm around her.

“Checkers?” said Evelyn. “You guys like checkers? I’ve got a set in the trailer.”

“We’ve got a set here,” said Mitchell. Evelyn nodded brightly at him, but he didn’t move. They listened to the clock in the living room tick past each second. Mitchell imagined the sound of the phone ringing, and pictured them all jumping at the noise. He picked the sticky spoon from Tassa’s lap and set it on the table. She was already in her nightgown and was struggling to stay awake, her hair squashed around her damp face, her body swaying against Mitchell.

“Where’s our uncle?” Mitchell asked suddenly.

Evelyn looked surprised. “Well, helping with the search, I suppose,” she said.

“But helping with the search *where?*”

Evelyn studied Mitchell, who was holding the edge of the table to keep himself upright as his sister leaned more and more heavily against him, her head rolling forward.

“Do you think she’d better go to bed?” asked Evelyn gently, rising from her chair.

“She’ll be fine,” Mitchell said, jostling Tassa a little so that she sat upright again, looking wearily at her brother. “We want to keep waiting.”

“Then let’s at least move to the living room, where she can lie down.”

Mitchell tried to dip his arms underneath Tassa to carry her, but she squirmed away and stood up, her mouth unhinging in an enormous yawn. When they got to the living room she walked over to a couch and dropped head-first into it, her feet hanging

over the floor, one arm circling the couch pillow and pulling it towards herself.

“All right,” said Mitchell.

“All right what?” asked Evelyn.

“Let’s play checkers.”

Evelyn tucked Tassa beneath an afghan. “Good idea. Why don’t you set it up.”

“I can’t. I forgot. Our set is missing some pieces.”

Evelyn looked away from him, out the bay windows, which faced the front lawn, where the porch light reached over a few feet of grass and then faded, leaving the fringe of trees along the driveway to total darkness.

“I’ll get mine, then,” she said. “Give me a chance for some air.”

Mitchell listened as she went back to the kitchen and opened the door to the mudroom. He heard the snap of her cigarette lighter and then the squeal-*bang* of the porch door as she went outside. He bent over Tassa.

“Wake up!” he said. He picked up her arm and let it fall. She moaned. Mitchell ran to mudroom and took their coats from two low hooks, then stepped into his own boots and picked up hers. He glanced out the mudroom door and saw his grandmother, standing outside her trailer with one foot on a cement step, staring at the orchard. At her lips the orange pinprick-glow of her cigarette flared and dimmed.

In the living room he heaved at Tassa until she was sitting, whimpering and covering her eyes.

“Is it tomorrow?” she asked.

“Get your coat on. It’s time to go.”

“Where’s Marla?”

“It’s all right. Come on.”

“I want Marla and Lorne!” she wailed, but she let Mitchell slide her feet into her boots and she held out her arms for the jacket.

“Wait here,” he told her, and ran back to the kitchen. The trailer light was on now, and Evelyn inside. He opened a cupboard and took down a box of cookies which he stuffed inside his coat. In the mudroom he found a flashlight. Then an idea occurred to him and he dashed as fast as he could through the kitchen, down the hall, up the stairs two at a time to their bedroom.

When he crossed back through the kitchen he saw his grandmother stepping out of the trailer with a box under one arm. He left the window and went back to Tassa, who was standing in the middle of the floor, her arms inside her coat, the empty sleeves dangling at her side.

“Out through the woodshed,” he said, and went over the door beside the fireplace and forced it open with his shoulder. The air in the woodshed was cold and sharp with the smell of fresh-cut wood, stacked above their heads in long, deep rows. They pushed along next to the wall, Mitchell holding one of Tassa’s empty sleeves like a leash, and unlatched the farther door that led outside. Mitchell nearly fell down the three or four stairs that dipped towards the lawn, and he turned and helped Tassa, who was struggling to push her arms out the jacket sleeves. When they both got their feet on the grass they ran under the poplars and around behind the line of young cedars that their mother had planted at the edge of the vegetable garden. The far fence was low and made of only two taut wires that used to give an electric shock to keep the sheep away. Mitchell lifted Tassa over and then he took a leap. His foot caught the top wire as he sailed over. He



landed on his knees and his one good hand. He kept his bandaged finger upright as he got slowly to his feet and checked his knees for cuts. They were in the sheep-grazing pasture that stretched all the way from the vegetable garden to the sideroad, but they couldn't go straight across because there was nothing there to keep them hidden.

Mitchell got Tassa onto his back, and together they followed the electric fence all the way around the edge of the pasture and then over the far side and onto the gravel road.

Once he thought he heard a voice shouting, and he stopped under a tree to listen, but could only hear the wind. His eyes stung with fright. Around his neck Tassa's arms tightened so that he could hardly breathe. Slowly they carried on and when they finally got to the highway they stayed what seemed a long time in the ditch, waiting until they were sure there were no cars or trucks coming over the hill before loping across towards the old farm.

They came up the driveway snuggled against each other and taking small, uncertain steps. When they got to the bunch of trees on the lawn beside the porch they stood still for a while, staring at where the moon rubbed pale light into the inky windows. They were both trembling now. Mitchell turned on the flashlight and pulled Tassa after him towards the house.

"It'll be all right," he said, for both of them.

The door was unlocked, as he had left it. Tassa clung to his side as he turned the flashlight down the hallway, into the kitchen. Out of the wind, they had only the house's noises to hear, the creak of the floor under their feet, the shifts and taps in the walls.

"This is the bravest we've ever been," Mitchell said, and then he started up the stairs.

When they got to the top he pulled Tassa through the first doorway they came to, and moved the flashlight over the small room. Twin beds, still quilted but without pillows, took up most of the space. At their foot was a small, black window. Opposite the doorway where Mitchell and Tassa stood was a low-ceilinged closet with no door. Mitchell went towards it. There was a hole in the floor and ceiling of the closet, where the kitchen chimney had once passed through. Tassa huddled closer to her brother.

Mitchell set the flashlight down on the windowsill so that the room stayed lit and then he hauled the quilts off each of the beds, and the bed sheets after them, and balled everything into the closet where he began to arrange a sort of nest in the corner, away from the hole, with a window of sky above them. As he worked Tassa stayed shaking at his side, never letting go his jacket. When he was finished he pulled Tassa's fingers free from his sleeve and made her slide out of her jacket. She shivered in her nightgown, watching him for instructions. Once he had helped her climb under the blankets, he stood again, and went back to the twin beds.

"You're coming in here too aren't you?" she almost shouted, flinging aside the blankets and staring at him with huge, terrified eyes.

"Don't worry," he told her. He lifted a mattress from one of the beds and staggered with it to the closet, where he leaned it in the doorframe. He went back for the flashlight and then squeezed around the mattress into the closet, where Tassa immediately reached out and gripped his sleeve. He pulled the mattress over the gap he had made, and they were perfectly sealed in. He set the flashlight on its end on one of the shelves. From inside his jacket he took out the cookies, which he set next to the flashlight. With Tassa watching him he reached into his jacket again, and this time

retrieved something small and flat, which he turned to show her in the dim light. It was a framed picture of Mitchell and Tassa rolling in the bright, summer grass, their limbs flung out in delight, Hardy on his hind legs above them, prancing, his tongue unrolled.

Mitchell fumbled for the brace behind the picture frame and set it down on the shelf, under the light.

Tassa's grip loosened on his arm and gradually she slumped down into the blankets. Mitchell switched off the flashlight to save batteries and lay a long time in the darkness, staring up at the sky, imagining himself much older than he was, and much braver.

## Ramsay.

As he crossed the highway and tried to peer through the scrub lining the driveway to the old farm, Ramsay wondered if he should call for her. He tried once, quietly, just to test his voice against the night wind, but the blackness slapped the sound back into him. He moved slowly up the driveway, swinging his light, both hoping and dreading that it would pick up two scared eyes peering from behind a tree.

Then he froze.

There was a truck parked in the driveway, the engine only recently killed, still pinging below the hood. He leaned towards the passenger's window, but saw only an empty bench seat with the stuffing prodding through the seams, a dirty air freshener dangling from the mirror. He took another step and examined the canvas tarp lumped in the truck bed. Just as he was stealing himself to dip the flashlight under the canvas, a noise at the house made him duck, his knees on the gravel. He listened, not daring to look until several long seconds had gone by, and then he went down almost on his stomach and peered out from below the truck, trying to get a view of the house.

A pair of feet on the top step of the porch. Ramsay dipped lower. Two fat legs, a hand gripping something boxy, the other on the railing. A wide body lowering itself down the porch steps then crossing the grass and pausing at the far corner of the truck. Ramsay tucked his chin to his chest for a moment, then pushed himself to his feet.

Joyce Rae Kirk with a gas can in her hand. Ramsay gripped the edge of the truck. She looked him over with an appraising eye, and didn't move. The wind caught her in the back and her coat flared around her like a cobra's hood. Ramsay's mouth opened and his lips shaped sounds that didn't surface. Joyce said nothing, and in the end Ramsay

could only drop his arm from the truck bed and watch as she stepped past him. The gas can, when she tossed it in, spun over the canvas and bumped the other side.

“Heya,” said a low voice a few feet off, and Ramsay turned and saw that guy that ran the chicken shop standing in the grass at the foot of the porch.

It wasn't fright that Ramsay felt after his shock subsided, but acute discomfort, almost embarrassment, standing between this enormous woman with her whistling nasal breath and the scrawny man who bobbed across the lawn like a toying cat, his eyes narrow.

Ramsay coughed and said, “You—You seen anyone 'round here?”

Beside him Joyce hefted her shoulders to her ears and looked at Phil.

“Not me,” he said. He flicked at his chin with his thumb.

“You had a good look in there?” Ramsay persisted. He felt as though the trees and the ceiling of stars above them were amplifying his voice now, making it unnecessarily loud after it left his lips.

“We did, yup,” Phil answered. He rolled up on his toes. “Went through every room, sure.”

For a moment the three of them stood like wild, shuffling animals, not looking anywhere, not able to speak.

“You managed to get this place sold yet?” Phil said finally. Ramsay felt Joyce Rae beside him, exhaling a coil of hot air about his neck. Phil's smile was straight and pained, like a skeleton's ceaseless grin. From his pocket he slid a barbecue lighter. He tossed it and caught it by the neck, held the handle out for Ramsay.

The house seemed to lean over them, gaping and voiceless, its dimensions

blunting the starlight behind it.

Joyce touched Ramsay's shoulder.

"You're like us," she said to his back in her flinty voice. "This place'll never be ours, and it'll never be nobody's. It's cursed and it keeps us in bad luck."

The trees above them rattled. When Ramsay glanced away towards the road he saw a far-off light rolling down the highway, maybe Kelly in the truck, coming home with Marla tucked beside her.

"You're sure," Ramsay said, "no one's around here."

"Shit, Lockburns," spat Joyce, and turned away, her feet grinding the gravel.

"Always so goddamned stuck in their own minds."

"Yes," Phil said slowly. "On my mother's grave."

"Well. Suppose I haven't reason to look then."

Ramsay stepped away and headed back down the driveway, his eyes on his boots.

**Lorne.**

It took a long time, though he knew the way well, to get to the woods and then to find the logging track. Lorne suffered Amos to call her name and search the trees when an animal pattered close, though he knew it would yield nothing. It was the first night without rain in some time and as he walked Lorne brushed the trees with his fingertips, marking the ones which were tattered and diseased, thinking simple thoughts about firewood. He stopped near a white birch and pressed his palm to the papery bark, like notched and gnarled bone, gliding his light from black root to bleached tip.

Amos looked back. "All right?" he called. Lorne's flashlight fell and he bent very slowly to pick it up. The ceiling of branches above him shook where some nocturnal bird crouched and took off.

When they got near the river Lorne needed Amos to help him over the lip of the embankment, which was quite steep this far along. As he gripped the younger man's shoulder and felt with his boot for a firm bit of ground, he wondered how she could have done it all alone. Amos pointed his light up and down the bank but Lorne kept his on his feet. He knew that if she was down there in all of that mud, Amos would quietly let him know.

It was brighter down on the floor of the riverbank, where the trees ended and moonlight tinted the water like white glass.

Lorne started upstream and Amos followed. He didn't ask what sort of trail they were following and Lorne was grateful. They moved very slowly, the water boiling over rocks on their right, the forest leaning over their heads on the left. Every few steps Amos broke from behind Lorne and hauled himself up the bank to peer into the trees.

After a long time of plodding through the mud, Lorne began to feel self-conscious about Amos behind him, who now and then hurled a shout into the night and paused to listen. He wanted Amos to leave him alone now, and at the same time he wanted almost to be carried, or to fall sideways into the water and let his body spin away on the current.

He needed his own voice.

“Amos,” he said, interrupting another shout. Amos quickened his pace so that he was beside Lorne, where he’d be able to hear over the noise of the river.

“Last I saw Marla was this morning, when we had our breakfast.”

Amos, who already knew this, said, “She’s probably looking for us, same as we’re looking for her.” Lorne knew Amos as a man who didn’t speak comfort easily, and he had no heart to explain that these words were useless. He nodded.

“Lately, there’s been—” Lorne’s desire to talk had already left him, as quickly as it had come. “I can’t find her even when she’s next to me,” he said finally. “But I think I know where she goes. Where she’s gone. From listening to her.”

He gestured ahead of them. The river was beginning to curve and the forest pushed further and further away from them, and Lorne judged that they were on Amos’s land now. He wondered if they had gone too far, or if maybe, under this pale light, he had become too certain of finding her seated, hands in her lap, turning to him with her vague, peaked smile.

Amos, who had pulled ahead of Lorne, stopped and held his light over the ground in front of them. The riverbank was wide and boggy in this spot, pitted here and there by sunken rock. A crater of churned mud scooped below Amos’s light and clawed towards the river. Amos walked all around the hole and partway up the bank, searching into the



trees, staring at the water. He came back down into the mud and followed the river a few more feet, then stopped. His flashlight circled a small, clear footprint. He looked for another but could find only the turmoil of mud and rock.

Lorne, at the edge of the cavity, swayed and dipped onto one knee. Amos saw this and tried to hurry to his side but it was difficult to move through all of that mud.

Lorne touched the light to the water and then swung it away again. The current was deep and fast. His other knee dropped beneath him and he leaned forward on his hands, his forehead touching the mud, and shouted for the first time.

## **Mitchell and Tassa.**

“Chocolate-chip bread pudding,” the woman read out loud. She was fat. Mitchell watched her from the stovepipe hole in the closet. He kept one hand over Tassa’s eyes, and wrapped his other arm around her head so that she couldn’t hear. He was afraid of her crying out.

The woman was pulling down the bits of newspaper that were taped to the kitchen cupboards and stuffing them up her sleeve. “Pineapple Upside Down Cake,” she read. “Old-fashioned Cinnamon Coffee Cake. Dump Cake. Dump Cake!”

Mitchell pressed his foot against the mattress that leaned on the closet doorframe and pushed it out until he could see the window.

**Ramsay.**

Ramsay climbed the steps to the Shannon house with a tidal panic in his limbs. He paused for two long moments and studied the tree line along the dark highway, then pushed into the front room where Lorne and Amos sat near each other at the table, a whiskey bottle between them.

“We’ve called in for the police,” Amos said without looking up. He picked at the label on the bottle. Beside him hunched Lorne, eyes staring at nothing, covered over with drying mud like a cracked shell. He seemed unaware of the glass in front of him, cut crystal, the Sunday-dinner good stuff from the china cabinet.

“We went along the river.” Amos rolled his head back and stared at the ceiling. “There’re footprints. Someone’s been out there, right to the water.”

At once Lorne cut in with a jammed, parched voice: “I knew of an old spot of hers there.”

“Oh no.” Ramsay stepped forward. “Oh no, don’t think—Lorne, I was there, I went out there, those are *my* tracks you saw. Don’t you start thinking—”

“*Small* footprints,” Amos interrupted, and he shifted forward, his elbows on the table. “Sign of a struggle.” He looked quickly at Lorne, an apology in his face. Lorne, though, had his eyes closed. He seemed no longer to be listening. When the phone suddenly rang, sharp and loud, he was the only one who didn’t jump. He just slumped forward a little more. Ramsay went over to the phone and paused before picking it up.

“Yeah?”

“Ramsay?” His mother’s urgent voice, loud enough that Amos could hear.

“We haven’t any news,” he told her. “Better keep the line clear.” He started to hang up.

“Oh dear. Oh, my dear.” There was dread in her voice. “It’s the kids.”

Amos stood and his chair clattered to the floor.

“The kids?” Ramsay moved the receiver to his other ear. Through the crescent window in the Shannons’ front door he watched three sets of flashing lights move up the driveway.

“They went out through the woodshed and I looked as much as I could without help. I don’t know what’s *happening* tonight!”

Amos seized the receiver and shouted into the line. Ramsay didn’t listen to his words. Lorne lifted his head very slowly and his eyes met Ramsay’s. Ramsay felt his heart nearly stop in one sickened, squeezing moment. He tore the door open and barreled down the steps. The five police officers who were crossing the lawn reached out their arms and caught him as he fell towards the grass. Staring between the cluster of uniforms around him, Ramsay saw a flickering light lick up from behind the highway tree line.

## Jimmy.

The ringing phone knocked him sharply out of sleep. He sat up on his bed, still dressed, and felt something crumple in his fingers. He looked down. Rae's picture was mashed into a ball and when he picked it open a web of cracks obscured her face.

His father's voice was an indistinct rumble, traveling from the telephone in the master bedroom through the wall to where Jimmy sat. He heard his parents' bedroom door clatter open and his father's footsteps taking the stairs two-by-two. Jimmy's window was still open and a cold, sharp air traveled over him. In a vague way, still marred by sleep, he remembered one winter night years back when he and his father had gone out to stand near a neighbour whose plough had rolled off the road and pinned him below. They waited for an ambulance, whispering things to the neighbour, while the plough's spotlight held steady over the red snow.

It's not yet winter, Jimmy reasoned. His mind was clogged with sleep.

Suddenly his ceiling light burst on and there was his mother, leaning in the bedroom doorway.

"You'd best go with him," she said. Downstairs the front door slammed and Jimmy heard his father's boots on the gravel below his window. The Bears took up their barking. Jimmy fell back onto his bed and hauled a pillow over his face.

"Turn out the damn light, Ma."

"All right then," she said, pouting. The light went out. "Just thought you'd want to see the Lockburn place in flames, is all."

Jimmy lurched up from his bed just as his mother yanked his door closed. He reeled over to the window and leaned far out over the driveway, the heavy windowpane sinking down onto his shoulders.

“Hold up!” he hollered. The truck was already rolling away. Jimmy let go of the windowsill and waved his arms. “Hold up, Pa! Jus’ wait!”

He pulled out of the window and it slammed behind him as he crossed his room and flew into the hallway. His mother stood against the wall to let him pass.

“Nothing stupid,” she called after him as he thudded down the stairs. He reached his father’s truck as it jolted slowly down the driveway and swung himself into the truck bed. His father picked up speed once he was in, and they left deep tire marks rounding the corner onto the dirt road. Jimmy pulled aside the window at the back of the cab and leaned in next to his father.

“Can’t wait around with a call like that,” his father said. He clenched the steering wheel and peered at Jimmy in the rear view, eyes small and tired.

“I know.”

“Didn’t think you’d want to be there for this, anyway.”

“It’s okay. They’ll need all the help.”

He pulled his shoulders out of the window and sat with his back on the cab, looking at the road tinted red from the truck’s taillights. His mind told him, She must have meant some other farm, said Lockburn just to get him going. His gut told him she hadn’t.

Still a long way from the highway they slowed, and Jimmy leaned out from the bed and saw another truck coming towards them. His father flashed the headlights and held his arm out and the oncoming truck rolled to the side and waited.

Phil Potts parked his elbow on the lip of the driver's window and leaned out. He winked at Jimmy. Beside him Joyce Rae took a cigarette from her mouth and smiled. She was wearing a coat that Jimmy didn't recognize. Her lips were painted red.

"Fire at the Lockburn place." If Jimmy's father cared that it was Joyce Rae over there smiling while his son grimaced behind him, he didn't show it.

Phil spat into the dirt between the two rattling trucks. "Don't say?" he commented.

"All help needed."

Phil bobbed his head. "We'll be there," he said. "Wouldn't miss it." Jimmy stared at Rae and she stared out her passenger window, into the trees.

"Strange creature of a thing," observed Jimmy's father as he accelerated away from them. Jimmy leaned back and watched Phil's truck, which didn't move from the side of the road for as long as he could see it.

**Mitchell and Tassa.**

They smelled it before they heard it, and at first Mitchell thought the fat woman had built a fire in the front room and was settling in for the night. But when he lay on his stomach and poked his head through the chimney hole in the floor, he saw a curl of smoke hook the kitchen door and a bolt of terror shot through him. He waited with his head hanging down until he felt steady again, and then he sat up and built a pillar of blankets around Tassa, leaving only her small white face visible. She wormed a fist free and clutched the edge of his sweater.

“Mitch?” She peeked at his grave face and watched his quivering hands tuck the blankets beneath her, again and again. “Should we pray?”

He didn’t answer. He looked up at the patch of sky in the ceiling and thought about ropes made from sheets tied together. He wondered if he knew the right knot to make. He tried to remember if Lorne had ever taught him about knots.

“God bless this food.” They could now hear popping and splintering noises below them. A haze of smoke coiled slowly up through the hole in the floor. “Which now we take... and do us good...”

Mitchell plugged up the hole with another blanket. He wondered if they would be safe, sealed inside the closet. For a moment the thought comforted him. He gripped the edge of the mattress and tried to pull it forward to fill the doorway, but then stopped. Something white glided and bumped out of the smoke, like a soap bubble in a black storm, turning round and round until it became a human shape. Pale hands reached towards Mitchell. He put himself in front of Tassa and peeked around the mattress. A voice like a far-off train whistle said, “Ramsay?”



## **Garland.**

It would take another seven or eight minutes for the fire engines to arrive from the next town over, and in the meantime pick-up trucks and old cars pulled up nose-to-tail far down the road, like it was a Sunday School picnic, and people ran towards the farmhouse carrying buckets and axes and shouting contradictory instructions to each other.

Someone found an outdoor faucet at the barn and someone else ran and got a hose from one of the trucks, but after a first hopeful blast the water pressure died out. The five policemen who had raced across from the Shannons' farm organized two chains of people from the ditch to the house and buckets of murky-brown standing water were passed from grasp to grasp and flung in the window at the side porch.

The youngest policemen, who had done some training as a fireman before switching to highway patrol to save his new wife the worry, soaked a rag in ditchwater and tied it around his face. He went up the veranda and through the front door, where the fire hadn't yet reached. He felt through the smoke until his hands grasped something solid and he picked it up and flung it out towards the lawn. He groped further into the room, bent nearly double under the smoke, until the heat nearly overwhelmed him and he turned and felt his way back into the fresh air. He looked down at what he had rescued. It was an old table lamp, and the force of its landing had smashed it into a dozen pieces.

Ramsay had come over in one of the police cars with Lorne hunched beside him, because no one wanted the old man to stay alone with his grief and the whiskey. And now he saw Lorne standing at the end of the driveway, his hand groping the air beside

him as though expecting something to lean on. Ramsay pulled in another man to take his place in the bucket line and ran over to him.

“Lorne,” he said. “You’ve got to move, now. The fire crew will want to pull in.” He took the old man’s arm and led him around to the far side of the house, as far from the fire and the shouting, rushing men as he could. Lorne stood trembling beneath the trees at the edge of the lawn, where the light from the fire and car headlights didn’t reach. Ramsay lowered him the long, long distance to the grass, his back against a tree, and then stood helplessly by. He wanted in part to run back and join the line, in part to sit down and put his arms around the old man. And then he realized that he had never in his life wanted so badly to embrace somebody.

“Wait here,” he said, uselessly. He dashed off to one of the cars near the road and found a blanket thrown over its backseat. He pulled it off and ran it back to Lorne, where he crouched to tuck it around the old man’s shoulders.

“She might be at home now,” he said. “Wondering where everyone’s gone.”

Lorne showed no sign of hearing him. Ramsay could hear the distant peal of fire engines.

“Will you be all right here?” he asked. One corner of the blanket fell from Lorne’s shoulder and Ramsay tugged it up again, then stood and looked doubtfully at him, sitting so helplessly in the dark, staring ahead like a blind man. And just as Ramsay was about to run back to the front of the house to join the bucket line again, Lorne made a noise like he had taken a punch to his guts, and lifted his hand to point at the house. Ramsay turned to look, and in the same second that his mind registered the sight, he was already running and hollering for help. Tassa, hanging from the roof, bare feet bicycling

madly over the brick, gripped around the wrists by two small hands—one with a bandaged finger.

Ramsay threw his arms up beneath her and stretched as tall as he could until he felt his belly tearing in two.

“I’ll catch her!” he screamed. “Let her go! I’ve got her!”

She twisted her face towards him. She seemed like a tiny, lost phantom snagged on the wall, her nightgown blowing around her.

Ramsay pushed his hands through the ivy, thinking he could haul himself higher, but it was dry as bone and tore away in his grasp. Other men rushed up to him. A policeman said he would find a ladder and ran off. Ramsay pulled the nearest man towards him, a teenager with eyes as round as dollars, intoxicated by the excitement of peril.

“You know Amos and Kelly Ferrier?” Ramsay asked. The kid nodded, his gaze floating away, caught now by the swing of red lights against the far-off trees. Ramsay gave him a shake. “Dammit! You find them, and keep them the hell away from here for now, you got it?”

The boy’s face turned solemn and he hurried importantly away. The remaining men, in wordless agreement, went to the clothesline pole a few feet away and threw their shoulders into it, heaving it towards the brick.

“All right, Mitchell,” Ramsay called up. “All right, just a second more! Just hang on there! Good boy!”

At last the log tipped from the earth and plunged forward towards the brick under Tassa’s toes. Someone immediately started up the pole but Ramsay hauled him back and

went up himself. The others crowded forward to hold the pole steady, but Ramsay felt it bank and strain beneath him anyway, his feet scrabbling for toeholds on the smooth wood. When he grabbed for the clothesline reel it ripped away and he nearly rolled off with it. He steadied himself and reached for her. His hand fell just short of her feet. He tried to climb higher, gain two or three inches, and reached upwards again—his fingertips brushed her heel, and then he had it between his thumb and finger. He could see her face, blue eyes fixed on him, filled with terror and pleading. “All right,” he mouthed. The men below braced themselves and stared upwards.

“All right,” Ramsay said out loud. He willed himself taller, his arms longer. It felt as though his limbs were empty, had no muscle, no bone to keep them firm and strong. Panic made him giddy.

“Okay, Mitchell,” he shouted. “I’ve got her!” He was at the very tip of the log, his feet balanced on its narrow crown. It canted to one side and his hands flew over the brick, trying to find a hold, keep himself upright. Dizziness swept through him. The men below staggered and heaved against it, getting it straight again.

Ramsay held her ankle. Thin as a matchstick in his hand.

“Let her go, Mitch! She’s all right!”

He looked up and saw Mitchell looking back at him over the edge of the roof, his face strained and panicked. And in that second, as Ramsay craned further towards Tassa, he saw Mitchell trying to make a decision: relinquish his sister to Ramsay, or pull her back up towards him.

“It’s okay,” Ramsay said as steadily as he could. “I won’t hurt her, Mitchell.”

The bandaged hand let go, then flailed to catch her again. Tassa dipped and Ramsay caught her around the thigh.

“I’ve got her! I’ve got her, now! That’s it!”

She dropped onto him all at once and it was all Ramsay could do to clamp one arm roughly around her waist and arch his back against the fall.

It shocked him, how near to the ground he actually was. He fell into a dozen ready hands and then Amos was in front of him, tears all down his dirty face. The teenage boy hung behind, twisting his hands, glancing apologetically at Ramsay.

“Give her here,” Amos said, and gathered Tassa out of Ramsay’s arms. She hooked her arms and legs behind her father and only then began to scream.

Ramsay motioned for help to steady the pole again but someone pulled him back and pointed. A fire truck was rolling towards them and men waved their hands and pointed up to where Mitchell had been. Two firefighters carrying axes clipped themselves to a rope and climbed onto the platform at the top of the truck, which lifted them level with the roof. Ramsay watched them disappear over the edge and then he sank to his knees and breathed in the cool air that hung over the grass.

The firefighters knew there was a second child, but as they crept along the perimeter of the roof they found no one. Smoke was just beginning to drift through a hole where a chimney had been and the two men acted quickly, slipping through to the bedroom below and tagging off to do a search around the edges of the room, their backs bent below the smoke. Long seconds passed before one of them finally found the boy in the hallway, lying on his stomach with his face pressed into his elbow, coughing sharply.

He rolled away when he saw the fireman and cowered against a wall. The fireman thought maybe the boy was afraid of his axe so he laid it down and held out his hand. “Come on now,” he said, loudly and urgently. The boy kicked at his hand and tried to crawl away down the hall. Smoke poured up the stairs and folded around fireman and child, nearly blinding them to each other. When the boy was at last caught around the waist and hauled back towards the bedroom window he fought powerfully, screaming and gripping anything he could—the doorframe, the window ledge. “No! You can’t!” he hollered, beating against the fireman who stood on the platform outside the bedroom window to receive him. His voice cracked with hysteria. “You can’t! Let me back! I need to get her!”

The boy’s father took him out of the fireman’s arms and carried him to a cool spot in the grass. A paramedic hurried up to check him over. His mother appeared, spectral above him, a floating face. Someone tried to fix an oxygen mask over his mouth and nose but he swatted it away.

“No!” he screamed, over and over. His voice rose high and thin. “She wouldn’t leave!”

Kelly pressed her son’s hair back from his face. “Shhhh, it’s all right,” she soothed. She signaled for more water. “Tassa’s going to be fine.”

He strained and flailed once more, then finally went limp, his limbs flung out over the grass. “She wouldn’t leave,” he told his mother weakly, then closed his eyes.

Now that the fire crew had arrived, most of the local people stood back to watch the house, covering their mouths and foreheads with their hands and mumbling pointless, imperfect things to each other.

“She’s beyond crying,” Jimmy heard a man near him say. He turned to see who it was but the faces behind him all seemed alike, turned up towards the house, reflecting the dancing fire.

Jimmy felt exhausted from the bucket line, the panic, all of the urgency. He watched the firemen’s hoses pummel the house. Flames jetted from every downstairs window and smoke coursed from the seams of the roof. A few volunteer fighters, too stubborn or proud to step down in deference to the professional crew, ran back and forth in front of the house with fire extinguishers and axes. The firefighters tried to warn them back but they only surged forward again, hollering encouragement to each other, a ragged and excited army. Jimmy saw his father among them, using a barrel lid to shovel earth through a low window and into the flames. He was grimacing with concentration, pausing only for a second or two to shake the sweat out of his hair and take a few heaving breaths.

Jimmy turned away and groped through the crowd until he reached the ditch. He climbed down the bank into the water and threw up into the grass on other side. One string of saliva clung to his lip and as he watched it swing and detach he thought suddenly of the Bears, and Lola with her puppies, and wondered if any of them had been fed that night. Then he felt stupid for having such a useless thought. And then he felt like crying.

He gripped his throat, trying to choke himself back to his senses. The water around his legs felt all right. Cold and sharp. It held him. He bent down, thinking he'd get onto his knees, immerse himself.

Someone called from the top of the bank.

"Y'all right there?"

He glanced up.

"Oh," said Ramsay. "Jim."

Ramsay hesitated a moment, looking around him, then began climbing down.

Anyone who happened to look would have seen two men standing side by side in knee-deep ditchwater, their arms crossed over their chests, their eyes fixed sternly on the sky above. They stayed that way a long time, until Ramsay dropped his head to rest his neck and put his hands in his pockets for something to wipe his face. A puzzled look swam into his eyes. Jimmy watched as Ramsay fished out a small bunch of glossy paper from his pocket. Ramsay stared at the thing in his hand, turning it slowly over, pulling it open to read it. Then Ramsay began to laugh darkly. He turned around before he reached the top and offered Jimmy a hand up.

The fireman who found Marla Shannon got her out of an upstairs window just minutes before the floor collapsed. The waiting crowd quietly parted as the ambulance bumped through them towards the highway. The fireman who had carried her out stood among a small group of men with his helmet hanging down his back and a look of disbelief on his face. He pointed to a ring-shaped burn on his palm. "From a brass



button on her dress,” he said. “When I saw her, I knew. Should’ve seen how her hands were folded. But I needed to feel her heart to be sure so I pulled off my glove.”

Several of the men listening turned away to hide their scorn. But a young policeman, the one who had tried to rescue the table lamp, handed him a cup of water and said, “At least we got those kids out.” Everyone murmured in agreement.

By dawn all that was left of the farmhouse was a brick shell surrounding the charred, steaming rubble. The police tied a line of caution tape from tree to tree around the site. Men who had been there all night sat with their backs against the barnyard fence and stared at the sunrise, thanking the Lord’s good will that it wasn’t their own house that had been destroyed. Their wives arrived with thermoses of coffee and the Garland Bakery sent around a bread truck full of day-old doughnuts. Children rode up on their bicycles and tried to get close enough to take a bit of scorched wood as a souvenir. The ones who knew Mitchell Ferrier from school bragged to the ones who didn’t.

Lorne sat on the edge of the Ferrier’s porch, facing the cornfields, his hands on his knees. He said nothing, and appeared to hear none of the helpless, futile things that Amos and Kelly said to him. He stayed there while they took turns sitting next to him and lying beside the children on the master bed, anxiously wondering if and how to wake them from their kicking, whimpering sleep.

After a long time Evelyn Lockburn came out of the house and crossed the porch very slowly, carrying a mug of tea. She smiled to Amos when he stood up to offer his place. She sat next to Lorne in silence, blowing lightly across the tea, listening to the

early morning birds. After a while she set down the tea and pressed her warm hands over his. He stirred and looked down at her in surprise.

Ramsay stepped alone into the Shannons' quiet front room. The whiskey bottle and crystal glasses were still on the table. He found Lorne's Federation of Agriculture hat hooked on the wall and he took it into his hands, turning it slowly, seeing the band of sweat around its rim and the place on its peak that was worn to a shine, where Lorne always touched it in greeting. Ramsay put it carefully into the canvas bag that Kelly had given him. Then he turned to wave Jimmy inside.

"Something clean for him to wear," he said, just to fill the silence of the house. "And his wallet and that. You look down here?"

Ramsay watched Jimmy pick up a fallen chair and replace the cap on the whiskey bottle, then he went around to the narrow staircase, dragging his fingers along the bumpy wallpaper. The sun came in the east windows at the top of the house and lit the upstairs hall where Ramsay stood a few moments, before crossing to the door of the master bedroom.

The bed was neatly made, with two side-by-side depressions where Ramsay imagined Lorne and Marla sitting, buttoning up their shirts, Lorne merrily listing off all the jobs he planned for the morning. Matching bedside tables flanked the bed, each with a small lamp, one with a farmer's almanac lying face down and the other with an old-fashioned alarm clock that whirred and clicked with each passing minute that Ramsay stood in the doorway. The room smelled of bodies, powdered and lotioned, asleep and awake, the same ritual followed a hundred thousand times on a hundred thousand

mornings. Ramsay shook himself and crossed to the dresser. A large, heavy mirror leaned against the wall above it, and in front of that stood two oval photographs in dull gold frames, both black and white portraits of stern-looking gentleman standing behind their seated wives. Another photograph without a frame lying face-up behind a dish of hairpins. Ramsay picked it up and blew dust from its surface. The photographer must have been standing in the tilled cornfield in front of the Shannon house, facing the highway and the row of trees that hid the Lockburn farm. A tractor hauling a wagonload of hay bales was on the far edge of the photograph, as though it had crept into view at the last moment and was not really supposed to be there. The man on the tractor was grainy and small and impossible to identify, back from a day of haying, waving his hat to the photographer in the cornfield. Ramsay set it back down on the dresser, but then picked it up again. The man on the tractor both puzzled and saddened him, forever holding up his hat, all of him together no larger than a fingerprint.

Finally he set it down very slowly and turned away, forcing himself into action. He opened the closet and sorted through the mix of clothes squeezed into the rail, women's dresses and men's things alike. He found a denim button-up shirt that he thought he remembered Lorne wearing, and some pants folded on the shelf above. He went back to the dresser and avoided looking at the photograph as he opened up the drawers and found one full of Lorne's underpants and socks. He quickly took two or three pairs of each and stuffed them down into the bag.

He heard the porch door bang and he drifted as if asleep to the window, carrying the canvas bag. He saw Jimmy go down the steps and wander across the lawn with his hands in his pockets, turning towards the barnyard, standing in the brilliant light that

edged around the house. Ramsay watched Jimmy shake his head at some passing thought, then turn and walk slowly down the fence line, pausing to rattle a rail in its crib and follow the dive of a swallow with his eye.

A child, Ramsay thought, seeing Jimmy bend to pick up a stick and fling it out towards the corn. But no, he corrected himself: a man who is lost. Nearly the same thing, but less of a hope for the man. A junk heap. A pile of smoldering beams. Clutching at the future like a drowning swimmer.

The bag slid from his arm and onto the floor.

Jimmy wandered to the car and leaned against it, eyes shut. As Ramsay watched him take his hands out of his pockets and fold them behind his head, another feeling turned over and shook itself—an awakening of pleasure, a delicate, egg-shaped sensation in his stomach that spread outwards like a warm wash. As simple and complete as walking out of a cold cellar and into daylight. He stared in wonder at the man leaning on the car, then picked up the bag and turned towards the door, slowly, suspiciously. The feeling stayed with him, though. It survived the stairs, the walk across the crowded front room, and was still there when Ramsay opened the porch door and stepped outside.

Jimmy opened his eyes when he heard Ramsay and said, “Livestock’ll need feeding.”

“You’re right,” said Ramsay, standing on the lawn. “Might as well now as ever.”

He plucked a bit of tall grass from the fence line as they passed into the barnyard, walking in and out of sunlight. He took measured breaths and kept his gaze up. He felt dizzy. The tips of the cornstalks, the smell of woodchips—a farmer on a tractor, waving

at a photographer in a cornfield. An old man with his boot on a fence rail, touching his cap.

Before long he knew he would be back to phone calls, police investigations, and that awkward, muffling distance between himself and everyone else—but not just yet. Here he was, standing with a stem of grass in his lips, and there was Jimmy hauling open the barn door and disappearing inside. He threw away the stem of grass and stepped up to the barn door, thinking, all right. Here's something that's found you. Follow it and refuse to be lost again.