

Decline and Fall

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ABSTRACT

Decline and Fall

Michael Carbert

Decline and Fall tells the story of Matthew Roberts, a first year high school English teacher working in Caribou, a small mill and mining town on the north shore of Lake Superior. While struggling to adapt to his new circumstances, Matthew finds himself increasingly isolated and forced to confront the possibility that the ideals which motivated him to enter the teaching profession are obsolete in a time and place where formal education and literature have little value. The novel seeks to portray the conflict between Matthew's aspirations and a compromised educational system that has lost all integrity. Helping to dramatize this conflict are three other major characters. Amy Kimball is a troubled yet gifted young woman, a student in Matthew's grade ten English class who shares his enthusiasm for books and learning and who is regarded as a "freak" by most of her fellow students. Her mother, Donna, a custodian at the school, is a person of a completely different sort, a boozing, dope smoking, motorcycle driving woman who is increasingly frustrated by her daughter's eccentric behaviour and high ideals. Bill Brecker, Caribou High School's interim vice-principal, must accept the fact that the mode of education which he had worked to preserve for decades is giving way to a new pedagogical approach, one that values expediency and the appearance of right conduct over genuine

progress and learning. It could be postulated that a fifth character in this novel is the high school itself. The physical setting of the school and the behaviour of its students are described in detail, revealing a learning environment which is anything but wholesome and nurturing. Set against a backdrop of labour unrest and a looming teachers' strike, the novel seeks to highlight serious moral and cultural concerns in a manner reminiscent of Mordecai Richler's *Cocksure*, Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and, of course, Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall*.

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Chapter One

Bill Brecker arrived early to get a first-hand look at things before Vic McAuley showed up. It was dark, the driveway and parking lot still illuminated by the eerie glow of the sodium lights. Even from inside the car Bill could smell the sulphur, that wet, cloying odour from the pulp mill. One hand on the steering wheel, he slowly manoeuvred his Buick around the school, noting the yellowing shrubs, the run-down portables and the area of bare earth behind them covered in cigarette butts and plastic bottles, the weedy soccer field with its decaying wooden goal posts, the spots of crumbling concrete on the walkway and front steps of the big brown aluminum box that was Caribou High School.

Another crappy school in another miserable little town.

What Helen had said in the kitchen after Bill finished explaining who had called, the details of the offer, how much they would pay him. She'd muttered the words with a sigh, before looking up at Bill and quietly saying, "No thanks." Then she left the room, limping, her arthritic knee bothering her again. She returned wearing her big white sun hat and her gardening smock. Bill hadn't moved from the kitchen. She stopped and looked at him.

"Well, there's nothing to discuss, is there?" she had said. "Fine. Go. I'm not coming with you, but go if that's what you want. It doesn't matter to me." And then she had hobbled out to tend to her zinnias, the screen door slamming shut behind her.

Bill parked and slowly, in stages, extricated his six foot, six inch frame from the car, his back and knees still stiff from yesterday's long drive. Having left Winnipeg late morning, he had made good time, turning off the highway and coasting into the town of Caribou, "the Hub of the North Shore," just after seven. His first evening in town he

spent lying on his motel bed, the Sunday night game on, mixing himself rye and gingers and eating pizza. He had called Helen around eight to let her know everything was fine.

“Tell me again,” she had said. “What are they paying you?”

When he'd made his reservation at the Superior Six Motor Motel, he'd requested a non-smoking room with a firm bed. As he moved about the room, he detected stale tobacco smoke and the mattress sagged under him like a hammock. The pizza had arrived soggy and warm, cheese adhering to the lid of the cardboard box. The television picture was intermittently obscured by a trembling black vertical column that slowly, maddeningly, drifted from one side of the screen to the other. The boisterous men in the room next door, employees of the Ministry of Natural Resources according to the pick-up truck outside, thoroughly enjoyed themselves until well after one in the morning.

Another crappy school in another miserable little town.

He stood next to the car, thinking about Helen, the night sky turning dark blue on the horizon, before a set of headlights turned into the driveway and moved towards him. A huge, white SUV pulled in and a man with a thick moustache and curly hair got out. Bill figured this had to be McAuley. Smiling, he came around to look up at Bill and extended a hand.

“Bill?” he said.

“Yeah,” said Bill “Good morning.”

“Vic. Man, is it good to see you. Hope you weren't waiting long. How was the drive?”

“No problems,” said Bill. “Went fine.”

“That’s a long trip,” said McAuley. “Long drive.” There was an awkward pause, McAuley nodding. “Hell of a drive,” he said.

McAuley seemed to be still waking up. He stared out at the soccer field for a moment, blinking.

“Okay then,” he said. “Well, we’re very glad you’re here. I mean, really glad. So, let’s see. We’ll be meeting with Joyce and the director in...” He looked at his watch. “Jesus. Not for another two hours.” He looked up at Bill again. “Why are we here so early?”

“Well, you originally wanted me here a week ago. I thought we should hit the ground running.”

McAuley nodded. “Right you are. No time to waste, eh? All right. Let’s go in and get you oriented.” He turned and headed across the parking lot.

Vic McAuley was the Assistant to the board’s Director of Education, the man who’d called and asked if Bill would consider coming out of retirement to help a school that was “in crisis.”

“Our vice-principal’s in the hospital and when he gets out he’ll need another six months or more to fully recover,” he had told Bill over the phone. “With all the early retirements, the school lost nine full-time people last year, some excellent teachers, and we’ve been forced to hire mostly young, untested staff to replace them, five of them brand new. Relations with the union aren’t good; negotiations are deadlocked. We’re looking for someone to come in immediately, interim vice-principal, and we’re offering significant compensation for the person who can show leadership on a number of fronts.”

McAuley had recommended the Superior Six Motor Motel.

Following him across the parking lot and down a concrete walkway to the school, Bill took in the heavy gold watch, the expensive leather shoes, the overall look of affluence that went with his Escalade.

They used a side entrance to the school and walked down a dim corridor, McAuley flicking on fluorescent lights as he went, commenting that the morning custodial staff must be busy with something on the second floor. Their shoes were loud on the linoleum, echoing in the empty hallway.

“You got my fax?” asked Bill as they headed towards the office.

“Sorry?”

“I sent a fax two days ago. A proposed schedule for the coming week and a list of administrative priorities.”

“Um, no, I don’t recall...” McAuley stopped at a door, began searching through his keys. “No, I didn’t get a fax. Ah. Here we are.” He struggled for a moment with the lock. “Nope,” he said, taking the key out and searching again for the right one. “Just a second here.”

Vic finally got the door open and flicked on more lights. The main office was one large grey room with two smaller rooms inside. Vic unlocked a second door and opened it with a flourish. The room held a filing cabinet, a chair, and a large brown desk. To Bill it was the same office he’d had in Red Rock. Or Nakina. Or Flin Flon. A plastic-framed print of a Canadian goose in flight adorned one wall. Underneath the goose, in billowing red script, was the word, “Freedom.”

“Your office,” said McAuley. “Feel free to arrange things the way you like. Oh look at that.” He gestured to the brown desk. A blue tin sat on its surface. “That’s from

Joyce. Shortbread. She mentioned she was going to drop that off for you. Oh, and don't forget, you're coming over tonight. Arlene's looking forward to it. I'll be whipping up a batch of my famous ribs. You play cards?"

Bill stepped in, his hulking frame instantly shrinking the room's dimensions.

Sitting at the desk, he ignored the tin of shortbread. He began opening drawers.

"Well Vic, this is just great. Now, I need a set of keys with a master, a timetable, an enrolment list with phone numbers, a list of all delinquent students, and ..." He paused as if trying to remember something. "Oh yeah, I want the staff files," he said. "All of them. Now, please. Okay?"

"Uh, well..." McAuley glanced at his watch. "Linda, the secretary will be here, uh, soon, I think, and she..."

Bill slammed a drawer shut.

"No," he said. "Linda's not going to be blabbing to everybody about this guy from out of town snooping in the files. Okay? You are going to get me those files, please. And then you're going to get me up to speed on the contract negotiations. And then we'll talk about why this school has the worst test scores in the district. Okay?"

Later, alone in the office, the door closed, eating shortbread and brushing crumbs from his shirt front, he studied the files on all the newly hired staff members, especially the virgins. One had to keep a watchful eye on new teachers. Despite interviews, references, transcripts, letters of recommendation, it was impossible to know who you were dealing with until you saw them in action. A single novice teacher brought difficulties enough; considering what came out of the colleges these days, five represented potential chaos. Studying the documents on one of the new English teachers,

he had a strong sense of foreboding. The covering letter to his application got Bill's attention.

My teaching philosophy reflects a belief in a subject-centered approach, emphasizing the development of both independent and cooperative learning skills in an environment of mutual respect and reverence for the educational enterprise. As my past work in editing and publishing indicates, I believe strongly in the value of imaginative literature as part of a sound education. As no less a genius than Albert Einstein once said, true education offers the student "a vivid sense of the beautiful and the morally good." What better means of teaching such things than through the thoughtful reading of timeless works of poetry and prose, through the words of our greatest writers and thinkers?

Into the silence of his new office, Bill spoke aloud, "Matthew Theodore Roberts. They're gonna eat him alive."

Chapter Two

Matthew had entered the teaching profession for three reasons. One, he had inherited a strong sense of duty, a need to do good in the world, to help others. Two, he had also inherited a deep, life-long love of literature, and he saw teaching as a sensible and proper outlet for this enthusiasm, a means to both express this passion and pass it on to others. And three, he simply did not know what else he could do that would earn him a decent salary, plus pension and benefits. All in all, encouraged by friends and loved ones, it had seemed like a good idea at the time. Six weeks into his first semester of teaching and it was dawning on him that he may have made a terrible mistake.

This notion had actually taken root months before while attending teachers' college, when he began to sense the existence of a great discrepancy between his conceptions of teaching and the current reality of public education. It had sprung from the ground, a ripening, green shoot, when Matthew had begun looking for work and found that the world, because of various demographic factors, had little need of high-school English teachers. And now it was flourishing, thick tendrils and emerald-green leaves of doubt and dismay, spread in Matthew's brain like a tumour. Nothing could have prepared him for Caribou High. His worst fears and lowest expectations were continually being redefined by both staff and students. The black flower of despair was preparing to bloom.

It was Friday, the last class of the day, period D. Matthew sat at his desk and watched as the students in his 2G class (Grade Ten, General Studies) reluctantly wandered in, the slouching boys with their baseball caps and contemptuous grins, the girls with their bare midriffs and blank expressions of endless boredom. As usual, he had

already written the day's journal question on the board. Daily journal writing had been suggested to Matthew by veteran teacher Henry Spivack as a useful coping strategy for dealing with General Level students.

"It helps to calm them," he'd said. "Gets their brains working, you know? They sit down, try to write for a few minutes, and then they're a little easier to deal with."

Matthew had found the key was to demand a minimum number of sentences for their answers. Otherwise, they wrote a single sentence, or even a one word response. He had started by asking for eight and ten sentence paragraphs before gradually establishing four as the optimum number. A request of more than five sentences on some weightier topic was greeted with noises of distress and disbelief, as if he were asking them to parse sentences or write a précis. Matthew had learned to insist they copy down the question from the board before composing their answer, thus almost doubling the time needed to complete the assignment.

Once journal writing became routine, he introduced simple grammar exercises photocopied from an old work book intended for grade five. At the beginning, he'd listened to a constant refrain of "I can't do this," "I don't get it," "What's a subject?" but now having them ponder the difference between nouns and verbs effectively used up another ten to fifteen minutes.

Today's journal question was of a standard type: "Write five sentences about where you hope to be ten years from now. What will you be doing? Where do you want to live? Will you have a family? What steps must you take to achieve your goals?"

Six students were late. He sent them to the office for admission slips and revised the attendance. Ryan Harrison began to make gibbering noises as he scrawled his journal

entry with a pencil the size of a golf tee. Matthew double-checked his attendance card and put it by the door to be collected.

When Matthew attended high school, youths such as these – coarse, angry, from troubled homes – had mostly gone to the *other* high school in the town where he grew up. Nothing he'd learned at teachers' college had helped to prepare him for such students. Of course, it often seemed the only clear instruction he'd received from six months of such courses as "The School in Society," "Educational Psychology," and "Evaluation Theory," was to never, under any circumstances, touch the students.

It didn't take more than a couple of weeks for Matthew's 2G class to force him to abandon almost all pretence of control. Material he had planned to cover in two or three periods consumed weeks. Students played video games, listened to music, sent text messages on their tiny phones, or openly carried on conversations while Matthew attempted to address the class. Any type of group work was an exercise in futility. Fights broke out between the boys, screaming matches between the girls. The rest of the time students continually made comments, jokes, or obscene noises timed to disrupt the class and provoke the most entertaining response possible from Matthew. Various projectiles – spit balls, books, wads of gum – sailed through the air.

Sue Prontack, Matthew's department head, had been sympathetic. He met with her several times at the beginning of the semester, seeking guidance and advice. Naturally she had arranged things so she taught nothing but senior and advanced classes. Sometimes, after listening to Matthew describe his difficulties, she would stare into the middle distance and mutter, "I know, I know. You can't do anything with them. It's pointless." When not teaching English, Ms. Prontack served as a guidance counsellor.

News of Matthew's difficulties spread quickly. Drinking coffee in the staffroom one morning, Henry Spivack, who had taught history at Caribou for more than twenty years, asked to look over Matthew's class list. As he read down the names he kept muttering under his breath, "Oh shit," before bursting into harsh laughter that lasted for several seconds.

"Fred," he called to Fred Hicks, who stood bent over, rummaging amongst people's packed lunches in the refrigerator. "Fred, come here. You gotta see this."

Spivack suggested that Matthew experiment with different seating plans to try and keep the "hard cases" some distance from each other. "Spread 'em around the room, say four or five desks apart."

Matthew nodded and didn't bother to point out that since there were no fewer than nine students causing major problems and he had only six rows of desks, that this was in fact mathematically impossible.

Matthew was eventually driven to consult with the school's interim vice-principal. Bill Brecker was easily the largest man Matthew had ever met. He towered over everyone, his torso a massive wine barrel. White hair, kept trimmed to an army brush cut, covered a skull that seemed as huge as a buffalo's. Matthew's feelings towards Bill Brecker, inspired by both his physical presence and his no-nonsense demeanour during staff meetings, were of gratitude and deference. Unlike Mrs. Landry, the rarely seen principal, Bill maintained an active presence in the school, helping to maintain some semblance of order. Observing him striding through the halls between classes, Matthew was put in mind of a huge ship, an icebreaker, Bill's belly the iron hull, advancing

effortlessly as it parted a sea of confused bodies. Matthew imagined he could, if needed, shelter himself behind all that bulk and girth.

As Bill Brecker looked down the names on the class list, he raised his eyebrows and gave a soft whistle.

“Well, give it a few more weeks and we’ll yank Norm Carstairs outta there.”

“They tell me this is his third time taking the course.” Matthew mentioned this fact in hopes of it being confirmed. The course material was so simple he found it difficult to believe.

“Well, November first,” Bill said, handing the list back to him, “you remind me and I’ll be happy to fill out all the forms myself.”

“I don’t understand,” said Matthew. “Why wait until November first?”

“Because that’s the count date,” said Bill.

“The count date,” said Matthew.

“Yeah. We give the numbers to the ministry and they cut us a cheque.” He shrugged. “Can’t expel any students before then.”

Today was Friday, the second week of October. On Fridays the journal entries for the week were collected and handed in. The entries were not marked for grammar or spelling, though to receive credit for the work the students had to ensure all their sentences began with a capital letter and ended with a period. Matthew had to remind them of this requirement every single week, resulting in some students frantically inserting punctuation and capital letters before depositing a sheaf of crumpled paper on Matthew’s desk.

After checking their homework – a total of four students having bothered to complete it – Matthew wheeled out the overhead projector so they could take up the questions for the novel they were studying. The book was called *City Shadows* and chronicled the experiences of a teenaged girl named Kia who journeys from Moose Jaw to Montreal in search of her African roots and the father she has never known. Written at a grade six reading level, the book also dealt with the social dilemmas of AIDS, homelessness, racism, media violence, adult literacy, and the plight of the physically handicapped.

“Now then,” he said, adjusting the position of the machine. “The answers are here for you to copy down as we go.”

“B.C. bud!” shouted Dale Levesque. Dale was given to spontaneously shouting out references to drugs and sex.

“Dale, be quiet. Now, remember people, you need to have this information in your notes in order to study for the test at the end of next week.”

He waited. He heard the sounds of books being dropped on desktops, binder rings snapping open and shut, pages turning, the rustle of jackets and backpacks.

“B.C. bud!”

“Dale. Enough.”

“Sorry!”

“Jeremy, take off your hat. Gary. We’re taking up the questions for chapter four. You need to have your binder on your desk and ...”

“I forgot it at home,” said Gary. Ryan burst into one of his hyena laughs. Gary responded with an obscene gesture. Nate Henson was making farting noises.

“Gary. Gary! Then you need a piece of paper and a pen, right? Can you manage that Gary? You have a pen? Paper? Can someone please give Gary a piece of paper?”

Nicole Williams clicked open her binder and impatiently thrust a sheet of lined three-ring at Gary. “Right. Norman, are you with us? Norm? NORMAN!”

“What?” Laughter. Norman gazed at Matthew with bleary eyes, mouth agape.

Mitch Matchewan was doing something behind Matthew’s back. He was not going to turn around. A pencil sailed through the air in front of him. He chose to ignore it.

“So make sure you copy down any information you do not have in your notes. Someone read the first question and their answer, please. Jenny.”

As Jenny read haltingly in her high-pitched voice, Matthew patrolled the class. Rob Fraser sat doubled over, his face buried in his arms. Matthew rapped the side of the desk with his knuckles. When he didn’t stir Matthew touched his shoulder. Instantly, Rob Fraser’s head snapped up. He sneered at Matthew.

“That’s assault,” he said.

It was an unfortunate fact that Matthew’s day ended with his worst class. It invariably left him either deeply depressed or seething with rage. Before they were half-way through taking up the questions on chapter four of *City Shadows* he was red-faced and raving.

With several minutes remaining in the period, the students began packing up their books and preparing to leave, a practice Matthew usually tried to discourage. Today he simply retreated to his desk. He watched as they perched on their chairs, fidgeting and

anxiously glancing at the clock. Many of them, Matthew knew, were thinking of nothing but the second they could finally light up a cigarette once they were off school property. At the bell, they fled the room like a mob of escaping convicts.

For several minutes Matthew sat brooding behind his desk, listening to the students yelling and jostling in the hallway, the metal doors of the lockers slamming over and over again, the din drowning out the intercom calling for various people to report to the office. He remained there after the corridor had fallen silent, trying to muster the energy to go over his log book, consult material for the next day, organize handouts for photocopying.

He decided to get some marking in. As always, stacks of student assignments, some collected more than two weeks ago, thrown together on his desk in a pile a foot high, awaited his attention. Warily, he renewed the assault on his Grade Ten Advanced class poetry assignments.

A short while later, pen in hand, he was reading an essay on T. S. Eliot with mounting excitement and agitation.

This is Eliot at his truest, most emotionally piercing, as the aria rises “over endless plains.../Ringed by the flat horizon only,” asks, “What is the city over the mountains” that “cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air” only to end in the litany of judgement: *Falling towers/Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/ Vienna London/ Unreal*. That is the true climax of the poem before it ends in a wizardry of quotations from diverse sources that testify to the submission – peace at any price – that takes us back to the epigraph from

Petronious in the *Satyricon* with which the poem opens: “I saw with my own eyes, the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys said to her: *Sibyl, what do you want?* she answered: *I want to die.*”

Matthew knew of course that no high school student had composed these sentences. His excitement came from the sentences themselves; his agitation from the knowledge that a difficult ordeal now lay ahead. The paper would need to be shown to the vice-principal, his department head, possibly a guidance counsellor, maybe the student’s parents.

Matthew removed his glasses, closed his eyes and, between thumb and forefinger, massaged the bridge of his nose.

Just a few short weeks ago, Matthew would have laughed in amazement if he came across such an essay, a piece most of his students would be barely capable of reading, let alone composing. But outrageous acts of plagiarism occurred with such regularity that there was no longer anything the least bit shocking or funny about a student downloading and handing in Alfred Kazin or Lionel Trilling.

The paper had been submitted by Ed Chilton, a student with bleached hair who, according to his parents, was a hockey player of great promise. Matthew had met with them near the beginning of the semester after Ed had demonstrated his enthusiasm for English by failing to complete any assigned work and spending most of his class time playing video games in the cafeteria. Matthew remembered discussing the matter with a concerned Mrs. Chilton while her husband, wearing a Boston Bruins ski jacket, slouched behind her, chewing gum.

It was now past four o'clock but Matthew regularly worked late, marking or preparing for the next day's classes. Any minute, the janitorial staff would pipe the country music station through the school p.a. system. Then it would be time to leave.

He flung Ed Chilton's paper into his briefcase and snatched up the next one. It was from Kim Thompson, a petulant girl who openly sulked whenever asked to read something. Her essay was entitled "The Beauty of Nature: The Poetry of D. H. Lawrence." The title page was festooned with colourful stickers and pencil crayon tracings of Walt Disney animals. Matthew turned to the opening paragraph.

D. H. Lawrence is considered one of the best English writers. He was born in 1885 and died in 1930. Many poems by D. H. Lawrence were about animals and nature. He loved the world of nature. The amazing beauty of plants and animals were his inspiration. His best poems are about nature. He wrote poems about all different kinds of things in nature. He wrote many poems about animals. He wrote poems about flowers and trees. He wrote poems about snakes, birds, turtles and dogs. He wrote poems for all people who love nature.

As he finished the paragraph, Matthew's body went rigid and from behind clenched teeth he emitted a high-pitched whine, like the cry of an air-raid siren. He did this until he was out of breath. Then he closed his eyes and gently laid his head upon Kim Thompson's turtles and dogs. He descended into a soothing void of dark nothingness and entertained thoughts of giving up, surrendering, of just giving everyone top grades and

not bothering to mark up the papers, maybe not even bothering to read them. He thought about being a math teacher, of being able to mark a whole set of class assignments in the same time it took Matthew to evaluate three or four essays. He imagined what that would be like. He imagined the feathery-lightness of his empty briefcase on the walk home if he were a math teacher. The thought gave him shivers.

Matthew opened his eyes to find Kelso, one of the computer science teachers, bent over, staring at him. Not taking his eyes from Matthew, he leaned in close, his long narrow face like the blade of a carving knife.

“You’re hopeless, Mr. Roberts,” he said. “Completely hopeless.”

He stood up and sighed as he leafed through Matthew’s thin pile of graded essays.

“People are talking, Roberts. You should know, people are talking and they’re not saying nice things. You don’t seem to want to fit in. You come early, you stay late, you show up on Fridays wearing a fucking tie. And now *this*.” He brandished a paper.

“Circling and correcting every little mistake? In red ink? Just who do you think you are?”

He tossed the paper onto Matthew’s desk and shook his head.

“You poor bastard,” he said. “You poor, poor bastard.”

As if on cue, the p.a. system emitted a metallic shriek, followed by the mournful twang of a steel guitar.

Outside, the sky was the colour of dishwater and a violent wind was abusing the pines. The tattered flag flailed about on its aluminum pole like a hooked fish. Matthew took his usual route home, cutting through the small forest directly behind the school and

following the main street across town towards the pulp mill. As he passed the Max Milk, the 24 hour convenience store, a clump of loitering students called out to him mockingly.

He heard the train whistle as he walked past Greb's Hardware and cut behind the strip mall so he wouldn't have to stand at the crossing, feeling self-conscious as vehicles lined up beside him, faces staring from behind glass. Matthew watched the train. In his mind he saw the long line of boxcars as it approached the town, hugging the shore of the lake, following narrow ridges cut into the rock, winding in and out of inlets, until it was there, thundering past him on its way to civilization. Standing only a few feet away, he watched the endless chain of cars go by, different dimensions and colours, their surfaces marred by incomprehensible scrawlings of graffiti, feeling the vibrations through the earth, the massive wheels thumping rhythmically like the beating of a huge iron heart. His gaze followed the last car of the train as the bells ceased their monotonous ringing and the heavy clacking sound faded away.

The bear still lay on the second set of tracks. Several days before he had come across it on his way to school. The corpse lay on the tracks like a mound of dirt, a rounded hump of hair, the thick fur raised in places by the wind coming off the lake. He stood and stared at it. One paw was visible, its claws dull and harmless looking. Where the bear's head should have been was a purple wound.

He had already told people in the staffroom about it. No one seemed surprised to learn a bear had been wandering through the town. Gail Stinson said someone should maybe call the M.N.R.

"What's the M and R?" asked Matthew.

Everyone within earshot laughed.

“Man,” Fred Hicks had said. “You really *are* from the south.”

As before, Matthew paused on the tracks to regard the dead bear. Its continued presence confounded him. Why hadn't anyone come to take it away? He feared it might be some kind of sign or omen but its meaning eluded him.

Matthew's apartment was in a building situated not far past the tracks, near the abandoned hotel and next to the small park with the concrete cenotaph which was often used at night as an improvised skateboard park. The building was as old as the town, constructed as lodging for the men who worked at the mill. From his bedroom window he could see the mill and the lake. At night he listened to the clatter and rattle of machinery and the soft rumble of passing trains.

Matthew entered, dropped his briefcase in the hallway, staggered to the bedroom and immediately undressed. Clad only in briefs and socks, he went to the kitchen and began searching through his drawers and cupboards. Through the wall he heard the muffled chattering and canned laughter of the television in the next apartment. Rob Fraser and D.H. Lawrence, the taunts of the kids at Max Milk and the mutilated bear, all of it weighed on his brain like a heavy grey stone of self-loathing. A bottle of Scotch whiskey sat in one of his kitchen cupboards but he was guarding against drinking alone. Alcohol consumed in solitude only led to panic, sleeplessness, and an inability to get any marking done.

He left the kitchen and entered the adjoining living room, a small kitchen knife clenched in one hand. Dominating the room were three tall, half-empty bookshelves. Boxes of books were stacked around them on the floor, waiting to be opened. Matthew approached the bookshelves and kneeled. He took one of the unopened boxes, set it

down, and with the knife carefully slit it open. Inside were volumes wrapped in brown paper, novels, 19th century, Hardy, Austen, Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Dickens. He stared up at the bookshelves and tried to focus his mind on the question of where to shelve them. With the other hardcover novels? Or underneath the shelf devoted to 16th and 17th century authors – Jonson, Donne, Milton, and Shakespeare. Or maybe he should have a separate section for works in translation. His attention began to drift as he fought both to solve the problem and to resist the urge to drink. Drinking alone was bad. Unproductive. Not a good idea. He would shelve the books first.

He gazed up at the bookcases, their stoic silence a wordless reproach to his weakness, his despair. He had ordered the cases, the biggest he could find, from one of the town's three hardware stores and assembled them himself, a task involving borrowing tools from Sims, the drama teacher who lived across the street and sometimes gave Matthew rides to school. Matthew had injured two of his fingers and cracked the bookcases' fake wood-grain veneer in several places, but in the end managed to assemble and raise them, a trio of impassive idols, silent and waiting. It had cost Matthew hundreds of dollars to have his books shipped up to Caribou from Toronto. The opening of the boxes and the sorting of the books had become his primary means of relaxation at the end of the day. In order to prolong the task, he tried to limit himself to opening and emptying no more than one box per evening. Some evenings he opened no boxes and instead removed all of the books from the shelves so he could reorder and shelve them again.

But today had been a particularly difficult day, another day that led to Matthew wondering why he was here, questioning his decision to enter teaching. And Matthew was too aware of the pile of papers in his briefcase, papers waiting to be read and graded,

papers that would be waiting for him after he finished inspecting, perusing, and shelving his books, after he had eaten his solitary dinner. The bottle of twelve-year-old Scotch called to him. He imagined it glowing with a faint, golden light inside the cupboard's darkness as if it were a living thing. Gritting his teeth, he began sorting and piling books with renewed energy. It was only Tuesday. Stay sharp. Stay strong. He would group the 19th century authors together and see how much shelf space they filled.

Matthew had been encouraged to enter the field of education in part because the newspapers were full of stories about the baby boomers retiring, about the coming widespread shortage of qualified teachers. The previous spring, a month before the end of his year at teachers' college, one of his instructors informed him his chances of employment in the current circumstances were dim.

"English and history," the professor had said, shaking his head. "That's about the worst combination you could have, from a demand standpoint. English teachers are a dime a dozen. And they're more or less phasing out history. You're going to have a tough time."

"But everybody keeps talking about a teacher shortage."

"It's not really true. First of all, if you look closely at the demographics, enrollment is going to go down. And secondly, the baby-boomers for the most part are avoiding retirement. They're all up to their eyeballs in debt. A lot of them are double-dipping. They retire, get full pension, and then start picking up work, taking temporary positions or supply hours."

Matthew's applications to school boards in attractive areas of the country had met with a uniform silence. He had succeeded in securing two job interviews, leading to two

offers of employment. One was on a native reserve on the shores of Hudson Bay, an isolated fly-in community suffering from a housing shortage and bad water. The other was Caribou. He had rationalized accepting a position in such a remote town, surrounded by vast expanses of rocks and trees, by telling himself that there he would have the privacy and solitude necessary to help him finally finish his novel.

Matthew had been writing a novel since his days as an undergraduate at the University of Southern Ontario. Entitled *Rites of Passage*, it was to be a book which finally told the truth about Canada, about this country without a soul, by chronicling the saga of the Broadbent family, an imaginary dynasty which stretched from the shores of England to the harsh, untamed wilderness of the New World. He had typed up some two hundred pages but had been stuck in the War of 1812 for the last three years. Since arriving in Caribou he had not touched the manuscript. It was slowly dawning on him how bad it was. It was like a pound of flesh rotting in a cardboard box in his closet; the smell was horrible but he couldn't bring himself to throw it out.

Matthew reordered the 19th century volumes as he blended in the new additions so their spines formed a pleasing and orderly appearance on the shelf.

One drink. One small, modest drink. Sipped slowly. He had earned it.

He shook his head, jaw clenched, his face a rigid mask of self-control, and made himself reach again into the half-empty box. His hands unwrapped a hard-cover edition, slightly worn at the corners, of *Madame Bovary*. Underneath he found an assortment of thin paperbacks with smooth stiff covers, instantly distinguishable as books published by a small, Canadian literary press. Volumes of poetry. Canadian poetry. A set of familiar spines, different colours. An elegant type-face. A name: Richard Wells.

Richard Wells. Long neglected Canadian poet and editor. Author of fourteen volumes of verse, four essay collections, and countless pamphlets, broadsides, articles, and reviews. Acclaimed a few years ago by a critic in *Canada Book Review* writing on his *Selected Poems* as “one of the most original and accomplished poets in English literature.” This same book, Richard later told Matthew, went on to sell two hundred and eleven copies. To Matthew, Richard Wells was a rare person, an important man, an accomplished author, a true gentleman, and a genuine scholar, graduate of the University of Toronto in Philosophy and English. He was Matthew’s friend and mentor. And he had been the most devoted of husbands to Anne Wells, painter, engraver, and illustrator. And now he was in mourning, enveloped in a grief so dark and impenetrable Matthew knew he could scarcely imagine any point in living since his beloved wife of 48 years had been taken from him less than a year ago by a brain aneurysm. Richard Wells. Living alone now in Toronto. Drinking too much, smoking too much. In his mind Matthew saw him sitting alone in his old brick house in Parkdale, staring at his wife’s paintings and weeping.

Matthew set the stack of books down, stood up, and returned to the kitchen. He took down the green bottle, rinsed out one of the glasses left in the sink, poured out a small quantity of the amber liquid and knocked it back in one gulp. The Scotch was bracing yet soothing at the same time. Just a warmer, he told himself. A sample, an aperitif, as it were. No harm done. He made a mental bargain: he could have another drink if he left the books alone for now and immediately organized his work for the evening and did some tidying up, made a dent in the neglected mess that was his apartment. He nodded to himself. He poured another drink and turned back to the living

room which resembled the aftermath of some great struggle. In addition to the boxes and piles of books, the floor was littered with magazines, dirty socks, cd's, shoes, newspapers, notebooks, letters, plastic bags, and old pieces of furniture he'd picked up at garage sales, folding chairs and cheap, battered end tables. He used a metal card table for both a desk and a place to eat. He did not own a television. He did not have access to the internet.

The living room. Time to attack the living room and put things in some semblance of order. Setting aside his drink, he began randomly lifting and moving things, searching for the papers and books that he knew were here, lost amidst the debris, student assignments and quizzes, various forms he was supposed to fill out for the board or the union or the government or all three. Like the survivor of an earthquake or tsunami, Matthew began methodically sifting through the wreckage of his life.

Under a stack of old newspapers he found a pile of unmarked grammar quizzes from his 2A class. He had completely forgotten about them. Cursing, he retrieved his briefcase from the hallway and stuffed them inside. The case now bulged like the belly of a woman nine months pregnant. Concealed behind a mound of dirty clothes was another wad of papers, a mass of forms dealing with liability and safety procedures. And under that, a pile of unmarked journal entries. He read the first one:

Journal Question: Do you believe in UFO's or the possibility of alien life ever visiting Earth? Have you ever seen a UFO or know someone who has? If you ever had the chance to communicate with beings from another galaxy, what would you want to tell them about life on this planet or about

life here in Caribou? (Please copy down the question. Your answer should be a minimum of five (5) sentences.)

I never seen no ufos and if I did I'd get my dad's 44 and blow em away. I don't wanna meet no aliens. They might do experiements on me, freaky pervert stuff like on Xfiles. I don't wanna get probed. If they kidnaped me it might be awesome to be on the spaceship and see how it works and the controls and stuff. And then I wouldn't go to school and do stupid journal questions cuz SCHOOL SUCKS!!!!!!!!!!

At the bottom of the pile was a note, written in an elegant hand, cursive, something no longer taught. He had seen it before. It was from Amy Kimball who was in Matthew's 2A (Grade 10 Academic) class. She'd left it on his desk at the end of class.

When introducing the short story "Just Lather, That's All," you mentioned the Cuban revolution as well as political unrest in Chile and Nicaragua. However, it may have been more germane to have referred to the civil war in Columbia since that is where the author of this story lived. Also, the Cuban Revolution took place in 1961, not 1962. I apologize for my classmates' ignorance in not having even heard of either Castro or Pinochet. All this aside, I think your introduction to the story served its purpose.

Amy. What was he going to do with Amy?

The phone rang.

Matthew stood in the middle of the living room in his socks and underwear, in the midst of the small hopeful clearing he had managed to create, a circle of bare carpet in his tiny, crowded living room, and listened as the machine answered the call.

“Matthew,” said a woman’s voice. “Are you there? Pick up the phone, Matthew. We should talk. Are you there? Matthew, where are you?”

Chapter Three

Ms. Hitchcock, standing at the front of the class and holding aloft a plastic tube of “Astroglide” personal lubricant, stopped mid-sentence. Michelle Richard’s slender arm was raised again. The class froze. Michelle, who was thin and pale and liked to tell everyone she was a nymphomaniac, always had the best questions, the most embarrassing questions, the questions no one wanted to miss.

Amy, sitting in the far row near the windows, sighed theatrically, rolled her eyes, and slouched even lower in her chair, the plastic edge cutting into her spine, her back almost parallel with the floor.

Whore, she wanted to shout. Slut!

Ms. Hitchcock lowered the white tube in her hand to shoulder level and placed the other hand on her hip. She cocked her head slightly, indicating that even her patience, bolstered as it was by an abiding love for her students and a spirit of boundless positive energy, was being tested. Dressed as she was in colourful nylon and spandex, she looked at the moment to Amy like some star athlete endorsing a new brand of toothpaste, her head and face as round and puffy as a soccer ball. Other times, with her stocky build and short wiry hair, Amy was put in mind of a bull-dog, albeit, an affectionate bulldog, hungry for approval and always smiling, that same cheerful grin beaming now at her young charges from her bright, round, healthy-looking face.

“Yes, Michelle?” she said.

“So, like, I’m confused. Is the best way to use it on, like, the outside or the inside?”

“Well, I think I already explained that,” said Ms. Hitchcock.

“No you didn’t,” said Michelle.

“Uh, o-kay.” Blushing but still smiling, Ms. Hitchcock referred for a moment to some notes on her desk. “Well, as I *thought* we discussed, it’s a good idea to use it on both. Both ways. Okay?” She glanced at her notes again. “Um, yeah. So both the inside and the outside of ... the condom. All right?”

“But what if you’re not worried about, like, AIDS or anything? What if you don’t really need to use a condom for like, *oral* sex? Would you use lubricant then? Without a condom?”

The smile disappeared as Ms. Hitchcock’s broad shoulders collapsed and the class released a collective groan. Everyone knew what was coming. Someone hissed, “Michelle!” Ms. Hitchcock tossed the plastic tube onto the desk, her nylon jacket making little noises as she moved, and then the room was filled with the now-familiar plaintive cry, “Ladies! Please!”

Ms. Hitchcock, or “Hitch” as she liked to be called, was one of several new young teachers to arrive at Caribou High. She arrived full of positive energy and good intentions, telling her students on the first day of class that physical education was all about realizing “personal success” and “feeling good about who we are as women.”

“A healthy body and a healthy mind,” Ms. Hitchcock had said, “go hand-in-hand. And I’m here to help you, any way I can, to develop both.”

Amy had been able to keep a straight face through most of this pep talk but couldn’t help breaking into loud, sardonic laughter when the new teacher informed everyone that athletics was really more about developing “cooperative learning skills”

than it was about competition and winning. Amy also had nothing but scorn for Ms. Hitchcock's constant pandering, bubbly demeanour, and obvious desire to be liked by her students. She was always giving out candy and snacks and bestowing colourful ribbons and little trinkets. She regularly showed movies and constantly took photographs of the students in ridiculous poses, photos which she then decorated with smiley faces and stickers and posted on bulletin boards and the door of her office. In class she would often talk about herself, revealing things about her personal life. "I don't know if I'm supposed to be talking about this..." she would say, and then clapping her hands and pumping a fist she would declare, as if it were something she had to remind herself of, "...but you got to seize the teaching moment!" before sharing another private detail about her childhood or adolescence while Amy cringed and rolled her eyes and tried not to listen.

"Now listen up, ladies," said Ms. Hitchcock. "I can't stress this enough. You must *always* use a condom. Okay? This is a unit on safe sex. Safe sex. Remember? This has nothing to do with pregnancy and whether or not you happen to be on the pill. It doesn't matter. You must always, *always*, use a condom, okay? Got it?"

As she spoke, the class settled back into its normal atmosphere of distracted tedium. Girls were variously reading magazines, applying makeup, doing homework for other classes, eating, sending text messages, or listening to music. Amy continued to slouch in her chair, her head lolling backwards, and stare at the ceiling as Ms. Hitchcock tried to get the class back on track.

"So, let's stay focussed on the main issue here," she said in a slightly quavering voice, smiling again and picking up the tube of personal lubricant. "Safe sex. We are of course using condoms. No matter what. And it's smart to use lubricant as well." Her

voice trailed off and her cheeks took on a rosy glow. She referred again to her notes.

“Yes, so remember, we are learning about how to minimize the possibility of catching any of the fourteen” – she raised a forefinger to emphasize the point – “*fourteen* sexually transmitted diseases you are vulnerable to.” She paused, rallying herself, reassuming control. “Remember: you need to identify them for the test. What are some of them? Who knows them?”

Silence.

Amy sighed. She knew what was coming next. Everyone was aware Amy possessed a photographic memory.

“Anyone? Come on. Gimme one, one of those fourteen diseases.”

Amy knew she didn’t have to play along but she couldn’t stand the long uncomfortable silences, the agonizingly slow pace of class, if she didn’t.

Ms. Hitchcock scanned the room, her eyes lingering for a moment on Amy.

“Anyone?”

With a loud groan of frustration, Amy sat up in her chair, her face expressionless. She shouted out the strange names in a harsh, mechanical voice, without hesitating or faltering on a single syllable.

“Gonorrhea! Syphilis! Chlamydia! Lice! Herpes! Hepatitis C! Scabies! Bacterial Vaginosis! Chancroid! Acquired Immune Deficiency Virus! Trichomoniasis! Papillomavirus! Cytomegalovirus! Human T-Cell Lymphotropic virus!”

Finished, Amy slouched down again, her arms folded across her chest, the other girls silently laughing and exchanging wide-eyed glances.

“Uh, thank you, Amy,” said Ms. Hitchcock. “Wow. Great job. Now think about that guys. That list speaks for itself. So you must *always* use condoms, for *all* sexual acts. Now are we clear on this?” She paused. Sighed. Closed her eyes briefly. “Or do I have to show the video again?”

An immediate chorus of protest. “Oh god, no!” shouted someone. Ms. Hitchcock referred to a documentary, entitled “The Dying Flower,” which profiled women suffering from various sexually transmitted diseases, and featuring close-ups of lesions and genital warts.

The cries of protest eventually died down and Ms. Hitchcock nodded authoritatively, beaming her smile at the class. “Okay then,” she said.

“Condoms. Suck.”

It was Michelle again, half-lying on her desk, her pretty face, caked in powder and mascara and sporting a stud in her lower lip, cradled in her pale arms. There was another silence. Everyone watched Ms. Hitchcock to see how she would respond.

“Maybe they do,” she finally said. “But they could save your life. And do we really think they ... suck? Really? Come on, girls. Isn’t it that guys don’t like them and then they try to make us feel bad for insisting they use them?”

“I hate ‘em,” said Michelle. “They smell gross.”

Ms. Hitchcock’s smile faltered. Her face was turning red again. “Well,” she said. “You better get used to them.”

“I never use ‘em.”

“Michelle, please don’t start.”

“I’ve never caught anything. I think it’s all bullshit.”

“Yeah,” said Linda Cooper sitting behind Michelle. “Me too.”

“There’s like no way I’m sticking one of those in my mouth.”

“Ladies ...”

“Old people just hate the idea of teenagers having sex, so they try to make it scary and gross for us.”

“Did you hear that list?” said Ms. Hitchcock, gesturing towards Amy. “Just now? that list of fourteen ...”

“Do you use ‘em?” asked Michelle.

“Ha!” said Linda. “I bet not.”

“You have a boyfriend,” said Michelle. “You live with him. I’ll bet you like have sex whenever you want and you don’t use condoms.”

“Yeah, Hitch,” said another student, sensing her hesitancy. “What’s it like?”

“Come on, tell us.”

Ms. Hitchcock knew it was important not to panic. For a moment she regretted having divulged details of her personal life to the class. She had told them about Brad, her boyfriend, who, since he had been unable to find work, had moved with her to Caribou and looked after the cooking and cleaning. She had shared this information in order to help establish a positive and trusting relationship with her students. Now they were turning on her, challenging the one concept absolutely essential to the unit, a concept so simple and obvious it could not be questioned. She held up her hands to try and quiet the class.

“Okay,” she said. “Okay, okay. Listen. Yes, as you know, I have a partner. I am in a committed relationship.”

“You’re married,” someone said.

“No, Kayla, I am not married. I don’t believe in marriage.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m a feminist.”

“So?”

“Marriage is a patriarchal convention.”

“What?” said Linda.

“Marriage turns women into property.”

“I don’t get it,” said Michelle.

“Listen! The point is I am in a committed relationship, a committed monogamous relationship but ...”

“What’s that mean?” asked another student.

“Shut up,” said Michelle.

“What’s her boyfriend’s name?”

“...that doesn’t mean we don’t practise safe sex.”

“Brad.”

“Hey! Ladies! Listen! We still use condoms. Okay? Do you get it? We do. Brad and me. Use condoms. Every time. Okay?”

“Buy *why*?” cried Michelle, raising her hands in consternation, the rest of the class immediately settling down. “Why would you? It doesn’t make any sense!”

Ms. Hitchcock found herself confronting yet another difficult “teaching moment,” something discussed many times at teachers’ college. She aspired to be what they called “a courageous teacher,” a teacher strong enough to break down the artificial barriers

between teacher and student, to put her self, her life, her experiences, into the course curriculum. She viewed these teaching moments, *this* moment, as a test of her commitment to her profession, to her willingness to be uncompromisingly honest for the sake of her students.

“Okay, *listen*,” she said, her smile gone, the urgency in her voice compelling her students’ attention. “I am in a committed relationship. But I use condoms. I do. Because I refuse to be anything less than an independent woman. I am in control of my sex life, of my choices, of my...” She paused for a moment, gesturing with her hands, searching for the right word. “My *body*. Understand? *I* decide when we have sex. *I* decide how and when, and I take responsibility for my pleasure, my orgasms.”

Kelly Ferris raised her hand. “How old were you when you had your first orgasm?”

“Yeah, did you have it from sex or from...”

“Look! Stop! The main point is, Brad and I continue to practice *safe sex*. Why? Because, remember, when you have sex with someone, you are having sex with each and every person your partner has ever been with. So how can you know that your partner isn’t infecting you with something? Even after all the tests, how can you know for sure?”

She paused. She had them. Even Michelle was silent, listening, waiting.

“The truth is you *can’t* know. Because – and you need to understand this – men are incapable of fidelity, of being faithful. I know it’s difficult, but as women, at some point we have to grow up and we have to accept this painful fact. It’s impossible for a man to be truly loyal. And the stakes are simply too high now to delude ourselves, to give up control to them, to trust them.”

Some of the girls were glancing back now with concern at Mindy Wilson, who looked pale and shaken. Everyone knew she had recently discovered that her long-time boyfriend, Kevin Lewis, had been cheating on her with one of her best friends. She had been depressed and threatening suicide ever since.

“In their hearts men are always lusting after other women,” continued Ms. Hitchcock. “And at the first opportunity, if they think they can get away with it, they’ll sleep with just about anyone.” She shrugged her shoulders. “It’s better you know this and act accordingly. I’m sorry, people. It’s just the way they are.”

Muffled sobbing pierced the silence. At the back of the classroom, Mindy was weeping.

“It’s true,” she sobbed. “It’s really true.”

“Oh, Mindy,” cried Ms. Hitchcock, hurrying to the back of the class to give her a hug.

During this entire discussion, Amy had remained supine in her chair, staring at the ceiling, dumbfounded by the stupidity of her fellow students. She saw them all as sheep, sheep who were moronic enough to listen to Ms. Hitchcock, dense enough to think of her as a good teacher, corrupted enough to stake their lives on a piece of slimy latex. Once again she felt alone and alienated, like she had been mistakenly left behind by all the intelligent, thoughtful people who had moved on to establish civilization somewhere far, far away.

“What is wrong with all of you?” she said to the ceiling, the bank of fluorescent lights above. “Are you that lost?”

But no one was listening. The class was almost over and those who weren't consoling Mindy Wilson were putting their books away and grabbing their backpacks and jackets. There was only time for Michelle Richard, taking out a cigarette as she passed Amy's desk, to mutter "Shut the fuck up, you freak," before the buzzer sounded and everyone left.

In the hallway the girls couldn't stop talking about what Ms. Hitchcock had divulged to them and immediately began spreading the information to other students. Unfortunately for Amy, several of these same girls were in her drama class with Mr. Sims, so there was no relief from her feelings of disgust and isolation, feelings which only intensified as she watched some of these same girls excitedly chatting and laughing amongst themselves, until Mr. Sims finally arrived ten minutes late and started the class.

"Listen up," he said, motioning for everyone to sit on the carpeted floor of the drama room. "Today you'll be working on your group scenes again. Remember, graded performances start next week and I'm expecting all lines to be memorized. I want to talk for a minute about blocking. Remember, all actors must be facing the audience ..."

Amy, sitting cross-legged, was, like all the other girls, admiring Mr. Sims's blonde hair and blue eyes, his tanned skin and perfect teeth. Mr. Sims was different from the other teachers. He wore the kind of clothes the kids envied; he sported various piercings and tattoos, unique bracelets and necklaces. The girls couldn't stop talking about him and many confessed to having intense crushes. But Amy knew her feelings for Mr. Sims were more pure, more true. What she admired, aside from his chiselled good looks and square jaw, was his artistic soul. To Amy he was first and foremost that rare

teacher who really believed, as she did, in the power of art, a man who loved poetry and the creations of the human imagination. He was worldly and sensitive. He was passionate about acting and plays, a passion he exhibited in almost every class. And he was passionate about Thailand, where he had taught before coming to Caribou. He often shared stories with the class about his excursions into the rainforest, his surfing adventures and visits to mysterious ancient ruins.

Amy, like other girls, looked for opportunities to be alone with Mr. Sims, often lingering after class or dropping by the drama room at the end of the day. She was motivated in part because she hated the idea of the other girls with their coarse thoughts, greedy for him, monopolizing his time and boring him to death. Mr. Sims saw things in Amy that her mother never could. More than once, he had complimented her on her creativity and talent and he had even gone so far as to ask her to call him by his first name, Kevin.

Since the first day of class, Mr. Sims had been the subject of a continual swarm of rumours as girls speculated on the meaning of the different indecipherable tattoos on his arms or why he was single or if he was gay and who had happened to see him driving around town or visiting the supermarket. The latest gossip was that Linda Cooper had let him feel her up in the backseat of his truck one night near the trailer park, but despite Linda's failure to strenuously deny the story, Amy didn't believe it. Linda was just another whore who smoked cigarettes behind Mike's Milk, while Mr. Sims was a man of depth and vision, a man who would be unmoved by the superficial charms of thick mascara and large breasts. Amy believed this and this belief was only made more fervent and desperate by the fact that Linda Cooper happened to be in her drama group.

“So, as you rehearse,” Mr. Sims was saying, “remember to pay attention to where you’re standing, where you’re moving and where you are in relation to the other actors. Got it? Cool. You’ve got the rest of the period.”

Amy’s group was acting out an abridged version of the final scene of “A Streetcar Named Desire.” Amy had difficulty taking the project seriously even though it had been her idea to stage the scene. She had assumed she would play Blanche, a character she loved and felt she had so much in common with, but Linda had the part instead. How could that slut possibly play a tragic figure of such sensitivity and intelligence as Blanche Dubois? But Amy could do nothing about it. After more than one group, including theirs, had degenerated into shouting matches over who got which role, Mr. Sims went through the class and, seemingly at random, angrily assigned the parts. Amy was stunned when he pointed to Linda and said “Blanche.” What was he thinking? She also couldn’t understand why he chose Kyle for the part of Stanley. If one were searching for a macho jock to play Stanley, there was no need to look further than Brendan, who loved pro wrestling and pumped iron every day. But no, math and computer geek Kyle, who was short and small and obviously terrified of Linda, had to be Stanley.

Amy, angry and almost in tears, had gone to Mr. Sims in an effort to have him reconsider but he silenced her with a raised hand and turned away. He had already cautioned Amy about this scene as he felt it was likely too difficult. Now he had no sympathy for her.

Amy, full of enthusiasm for the project and already familiar with the play, was the unacknowledged director of her group. She told the others where to stand and how to move and what was wrong with their delivery. Since Mr. Sims had just talked to them

about blocking, Amy suggested they rehearse the part where Blanche tries to flee from the doctor and ends up confronting Stanley. But Linda, knowing how intimidated Kyle was, kept intentionally colliding with him and laughing when he flinched.

“Linda, quit fooling around.”

“What, I’m just trying to get Kyle to block my way. He’s supposed to block my way, right?”

“No, the script says he’s supposed to stand up *as if* to block your way.”

“Well, I think it would be more exciting if he really did, if he got in front of me,” said Linda. She stood looking down at poor Kyle and grinning. To Amy, their physical proximity only reinforced the absurdity of the situation. How could Stanley be almost a foot shorter than Blanche?

“Okay,” said Amy. “But don’t bump into him like that. It looks ridiculous.”

Linda turned to Kyle. “You should move in front of me then, in a threatening way. Like you’re gonna help the doctor catch me. Then I’ll run in, like, sheer terror.” She recoiled from him in mock horror.

“She’s right, Kyle. Stand assertively, like you’re in control. Maybe with your hands not stuck in your pockets.”

“Yeah, be brave,” said Linda. She squared herself in front of him, hands on her hips, her breasts jutting out at him. “Remember, you raped me last night, ya big stud.”

Kyle sighed. “Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he said.

Mr. Sims, wandering through the class, approached the group. Linda immediately moved to stand next to him.

“We’re having a little trouble getting started,” said Amy. “Okay, let’s go back to the beginning and use our scripts if we have to.”

Linda propped an elbow on Mr. Sims’s shoulder. She looked up at him and batted her eyelids.

“Oh, Kevin,” she said, her voice suddenly low and hoarse. “Save me from these cruel people. They’re going to take me away in a straight-jacket!”

“You know,” said Mr. Sims, ignoring her, “you only have four more classes to get this down. It’s not an easy scene and I still think you need to make some more cuts. Let me see a script.” He quickly flipped through the pages Amy had prepared for the group. “Why not take out a lot of this first part and begin here” – he jabbed a finger into the paper – “with Eunice saying ‘You look wonderful, Blanche.’ Then you can move right into the main action of the scene.”

“That is such a cool idea,” said Linda.

Amy was stunned. She would lose roughly half her lines, lines she had already memorized and practiced, after previously memorizing all of Blanche’s lines. And this made Linda even more the central performer of the entire scene.

“Now you can concentrate on a more simple set of stage directions,” said Mr. Sims.

“Awesome,” said Linda. “And we have less to memorize.”

You stupid bitch, Amy wanted to scream. You shut. You cow.

“Okay,” said Mr. Sims. “So spend more of your time now on polishing your blocking and working on your stage business. And remember to face your audience.”

Mr. Sims thrust the script at Amy as he moved to the next group that required his guidance.

“God,” said Linda as he walked away. “He’s so hot.”

Amy stared at Mr. Sims’s retreating back for several seconds with glistening eyes before leaping onto the nearest chair and stepping up onto the table. She stood there, amidst the noise of the class, the other students talking and laughing.

“Amy, what are you doing?”

She waited until Mr. Sims had turned and all eyes were looking up at her. She felt an electric charge surge through her body, her heart racing. She was trembling but her voice was steady and clear.

“And I’ll be buried at sea! Sewn up in a clean white sack! And dropped overboard, at noon, in the blaze of summer! And into an ocean as blue as my first lover’s eyes!”

Chapter Four

Matthew stood in the corridor with Henry Spivack, watching the students mill about and drift into the classrooms. Matthew's block A grade 9 class had just ended and on days when he didn't need to do any last second preparation for his 10A class, he sometimes visited with Spivack, who taught history in period B in the classroom directly across the hall. Being able to stand with a long-time staff member, to be seen by the students standing and talking with him, momentarily gave Matthew a feeling of security and belonging that otherwise did not exist for him. Spivack's raspy voice, shouting in exasperated tones about the Reformation or the spice trade ("Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Don't you kids know *anything*? C'mon, *think!*") was on occasion clearly audible in Matthew's classroom. Matthew had impressed Spivack during one of their first chats when in casual conversation about the school he made an offhand reference to Dante's *Inferno*.

"Whoa," said Spivack at the time, taken aback, his sardonic face momentarily lighting up. "Now don't go all intellectual on me there, kid. I might die of shock."

Spivack never failed to offer a cynical or despairing comment out of the corner of his mouth as they watched the students make their way to class. He seemed to alternately despise and pity them.

"Christ, it's enough to make you weep," he had muttered to Matthew. "Half these poor bastards don't even know where they are. Literally. Pull down a map some time and ask 'em to find Lake Superior. It's unbelievable."

He reserved his harshest words for the teachers at the elementary school on the other side of town. He had told Matthew more than once that the lot of them should be “lined up against a wall and shot.”

“These kids,” he said, shaking his head, “it’s amazing. Names mean nothing to them. Laurier? Churchill? Pearson? Nixon? No clue. They don’t even know who Christopher Columbus is. They’ve heard the name, sure, but they have no idea who he *is*. Hell, they got no concept of human civilization *existing* before about 1983. And I’m not just talking about the slope heads, either. I’m talking about healthy, intelligent young people. It’s a crime. I mean, what the hell are they teaching ‘em over there? They can’t write; they can barely read; they’re lazy as hell. It’s enough to make ya puke.”

Shortly after the start of the year, Spivack had offered Matthew some words of encouragement.

“Just remember, you can’t take anything for granted. And I mean, *nothing*. They won’t tell you this at your fancy orientation night, but if you’re teaching grade 9 or 10, you’re starting from fucking scratch. You can’t assume they know enough to put up their hand to ask a question, or to ask to go use the john, let alone what a *vowel* is, for chrissake. Parts of speech, grammar? Forget it. That’s right, kid. Your job is to try and teach Shakespeare to illiterates! Good luck!”

This morning, among other things, Spivack was upset by a recent memo deposited in the teachers’ mail slots. From Principal Landry, it outlined guidelines for use of the staff parking lot, reminding teachers not to use the spaces reserved for administration. He held the green sheet of paper in front of him and regarded it as if it were a curiosity, an artefact of some kind, an object deserving of prolonged study.

“*This* is what that ditzzy broad worries about,” he muttered. “*This* is what she lies awake at night thinking about. Look at this place, and this – *this* – is a major concern.” He turned to Matthew. “Last week I heard her bitching about how it drove her nuts that the custodial staff couldn’t get the floor in the foyer to really shine and sparkle. You know, get that nice buff gleam that she wants. They’ve tried everything but she’s still not satisfied. Can you believe it?”

Unfortunately, Matthew could. He did not have great confidence in Principal Landry, which caused him to view Bill Brecker as the person truly in charge of things. Like Matthew and at least half a dozen other staff members, Landry was new to Caribou High School, having served as a primary grade teacher for most of her career. Her hiring as principal was regarded by most of the staff as another typical bonehead move by the board. At the assembly in the gym on the first day of school, she had gushed about what an awesome school Caribou High was, how awesome the staff was, how incredibly proud she was to be their principal, how proud she was of each and every student, and how she knew, without any doubt, that this would be a wonderful, terrific, exciting, amazing, awesome year.

“It’s Friday,” said Spivack. “At three-thirty *sharp*, I’m going to the branch for a couple pops. You coming?”

“Branch” meant the Legion Hall.

“Uh, maybe,” said Matthew as they started to move apart in anticipation of the bell. The hallway was almost empty now. “See how the day goes.” Matthew, when possible, attempted to be non-committal with such invitations. He still found it difficult to socialize with the staff, to relax in their midst.

“Just what the hell do you think you’re doing?” bellowed Spivack.

A male student about to turn into Spivack’s classroom stopped and looked at him blankly.

“Am I seeing things? Did you just spit on the floor back there?”

The buzzer sounded. Matthew moved towards his classroom.

“What did you say?” shouted Spivack. “Would you care to repeat that please?”

Matthew entered and shut the door behind him.

“And if it’s not too much to ask,” he heard Spivack shout, “would you mind pulling up your pants?”

Matthew walked over to his desk and began taking attendance. Amy approached him.

“Good morning, Mr. Roberts.”

“Good morning, Amy.”

“I couldn’t help noticing you have a stack of papers on your desk.”

“That’s very observant of you, Amy.”

“They look like our poetry assignments.”

“Yeah,” shouted Kristen Potts from across the room. “Did you finally mark them?”

“God,” said Lindsay Chapman, “it’s about time.”

“Do we get them back today?” asked Amy, smiling, her entire body seeming to quiver in anticipation.

“Yes,” shouted Matthew. “I have graded your poetry assignments and I will hand them back at the end of the class. Now then, Amy please take your seat. Everyone, please

sit down and pay attention. You have several things to work on during this class, and as you see I have them listed on the board. Later we will take up the exercises on subject-verb agreement and prepositional phrases.”

In a few minutes the class was largely settled and the students were working quietly. Matthew sat at his desk with the attendance ledger and pretended to be absorbed in studying something. In actual fact he was admiring his Gallery of the Dead. During idle moments he liked to look at the posters which now covered one wall of the classroom. He had put them up a few days ago and they were still novel to him.

He considered again the strange fact that he had his own classroom. It was a luxury few teachers had. Even Prontack taught in three different rooms. She had repeatedly urged Matthew to liven up the otherwise drab room with decorations and posters, to make use of the bulletin boards. She had brought him colourful posters with large cartoon fonts that reminded the students to “Read to Succeed!” or showed multi-racial groups of smiling teenagers cavorting over slogans like “School Rules!,” “Express Yourself!,” and “Today is a Great Day to Learn Something New!” All of these he had taken and folded in quarters before tearing into small pieces.

During the grade nine unit on Greek mythology, Matthew devoted three full classes to having the students draw colourful depictions of Perseus slaying Medusa, Hercules doing battle with the Hydra, Zeus hurling thunderbolts. However, as gory and imaginative as many of these illustrations were, they succeeded in covering only a single bulletin board.

Then, idly rummaging around one night in the English Department supply room, he discovered behind a bookcase an old set of unused posters, portraits of great writers,

their paper yellowed and fragile, the ink slightly faded. The small storage room, a chaotic mess, a room no one ventured into unless necessary, was primarily a place for unused textbooks. Its shelves were cluttered with old workbooks, classroom sets of novels no one taught anymore, antiquated audio-visual equipment, unusable vinyl recordings of Richard Burton and Laurence Olivier reading Shakespeare. At more than one department meeting, Prontack had expressed anxiety over the room. “We’ve got to finally get that place cleaned up. It’s a disgrace. The dust alone ...”

Matthew was delighted to come across the posters. Most were head and shoulder portraits, with a few blow-ups of old drawings or engravings. There was Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, Dickens, Hardy, Austen, Kipling, Joyce, Auden, Frost, Eliot, and Beckett. Matthew was especially pleased by the portraits of Auden and Beckett, by their striking faces, creased and weathered, Auden’s like a slab of dried clay, Beckett’s like a hawk. Once up on the bulletin boards, the disembodied faces created an unsettling effect that Matthew found strangely satisfying. Their impassive gazes framed the room in silent judgement. To Matthew’s mind they stared down in mute opposition to so much that went on in the building, to special education and child-centered studies, to “co-operative learning” and “modified” curricula, to his students’ world of endless electronic diversions.

Matthew, while generally stressed about all aspects of his job, was at the moment particularly concerned about his grade 10 Academic class. He knew he was falling behind and had no idea how to correct the problem. Having been genuinely shocked by his students’ ignorance of basic writing techniques, Matthew felt duty-bound to give his Academic students, the students who were presumably university calibre, a crash course

in simple grammar. This consumed the equivalent of several classes, time he could ill afford given that they were almost a third of the way through the semester and he was barely starting the second unit on Shakespeare and *The Taming of the Shrew*.

“This is review, of course, right?” he had asked them after briskly going over sentence fragments and the differences between independent and subordinate clauses. The question was met with blank stares. “You’ve covered this before. Right? I mean, you have some understanding of these things.”

Nothing. Matthew couldn’t tell if they had all just tuned out on him or were uncertain of the material and embarrassed to admit it.

Matthew put down his chalk and wiped his hands together.

“Help me out here, people,” he said. “Give me a clue.”

Louis Rudman broke the silence. “What’s a clause?”

Subsequently, Matthew informed the class that the major poetry paper would be graded in a most stringent manner, that he was expecting papers with few, if any, grammatical errors. The next day Sue Prontack appeared in his classroom door, telling him she had received a phone call from a concerned parent, and asking him what exactly he was up to. This had in turn caused him to agonize over the grading of the papers, to consult different rubrics for assessment given to him by Prontack, to ponder the meaning of terms such as “language competency” and “clear expression of complex ideas.” He ended up re-evaluating several papers to which he had given C’s and D’s, raising the marks. He was genuinely confused as to what was expected of him. He was consciously resisting the idea that what people like Prontack wanted, what the system wanted, was for him to just go with the flow and pretend everything was okay.

At the end of the class he returned the papers. He had expected some tension over the grades but could not have anticipated being surrounded by a ring of female students, all of them livid or despondent to the point of tears, all demanding some kind of explanation or redress.

“Do you have any idea how hard I worked on this?” asked Kristen Potts, clenching her paper in tight fists, her face almost incandescent with rage. “I spent two whole nights, up until one in the morning! And I get an A minus?”

“Kristen, eighty percent is a very good mark,” said Matthew, “higher than the class average.”

“This is the lowest grade I’ve ever had! Ever! I don’t *believe* this!”

Kim Thompson stood and stared at her paper, speechless, seemingly in a state of shock.

Suzi Ibarrez waved her essay in Matthew’s face like an indignant barrister, demanding an explanation.

“Suzi, I’ve cited a number of grammar errors so I suggest ...”

Tamara Humphrey held up her paper for all to see. “Look at this title page,” she cried. “Look at it! I spent, like three friggin’ hours colouring it in. I don’t get credit for that?”

After the last distraught young woman had stormed out of the classroom, Matthew wearily fell into his chair. The usual chaos raged in the corridor as students collided and fought with one another to leave for the lunch hour, the constant slamming of locker doors, the shouts and screams, the shrill calls from the p.a. system that no one

heard. Somewhere down the hall an echoing toneless voice was shouting, *Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!*

“Don’t let them get to you, Mr. Roberts,” said Amy who remained sitting at her desk at the back of the classroom, casually organizing her books and papers before putting them into her battered leather briefcase. “They’re just not used to a teacher who actually takes grading seriously.”

“What I’d like to know,” said Matthew, “is when exactly an A minus became a bad mark.”

“It’s really just an excuse to get all worked up. They like to be dramatic. You shouldn’t let it bother you.”

“Thank you, Amy.”

“They’re just a bunch of philistines, anyway. They don’t care about learning, or books, or the life of the mind. They pretend to be all worried about their marks but of course what they’re *really* worried about is what party people are going to tonight.”

“Well, Amy, that’s...”

“How much beer they’re going to drink.”

“Okay. Enough.”

Amy gave him a plaintive look, as if she had to argue a painfully obvious fact.

“They are not going to be saved, Mr. Roberts. They are worldly and corrupted. They do not believe in higher things.”

“Right. And you’re still here because ...”

“It’s Friday.”

“Oh. Right.”

“You forgot.”

“It slipped my mind for a second.”

Justin Chadly emerged from the mob in the hallway and stood in the doorway, his toothy smile surrounded by festering boils.

“Ready to be slaughtered again?” he shouted at Matthew.

Matthew waved him in and Justin took down one of the chess sets from on top of the filing cabinets and brought it to Matthew’s desk. He held out two closed fists and Matthew tapped one. Justin opened it to reveal a black pawn. With a triumphant laugh, he began arranging the pieces.

It was Bill Brecker who suggested Matthew start a chess club. With the teachers choosing not to participate in extra-curricular activities while contract negotiations dragged on, Brecker had taken it upon himself to supervise the gym during lunch-hour and after-school. More than once Matthew had happened to see Bill at lunch, crimson faced and sweating through his shirt, struggling to help set up volleyball nets. Matthew liked Bill and was relying on him for the type of administrative support he knew he couldn’t get from Principal Landry, so it only seemed sensible to him to approach Bill and offer some assistance. For a few days he supervised the gym, watching the kids bat around a volleyball or play half-court basketball. A few days later, Gail Stinson, senior teacher of girls’ phys.ed. and health, approached Matthew in the staff room.

“I listen to you English teachers bitch about all the marking you gotta do,” she said.

She stood very close to Matthew who still had his hand in his mail slot, and spoke in a low, quiet voice. Her breath smelled of cigarettes. Gail Stinson was in her late fifties,

thin, haggard. She was wearing her usual blue track suit with yellow piping, a silver whistle hanging from her neck.

“Don’t you think lunch might be a good time to do some marking? You know we’re in the middle of negotiating a contract, right? Besides, who you think’s liable if you’re in there and some kid falls and busts his head open?”

The next day Matthew had a talk with Bill, who suggested that instead of supervising the gym, he set up a chess club. Under Matthew it was not so much a club as an informal grouping of students who drifted into Matthew’s classroom at lunch hour on Tuesdays and Fridays. Matthew had no interest in either organizing a tournament or taking the club members to one in some other town or city. Instead they simply played chess and ate lunch.

Within a few minutes half a dozen students were in the room playing chess, several others watching the games while they consumed their potato chips and soda pop. As usual, a small crowd surrounded Matthew’s desk to watch the game between the grade nine computer geek with the horrible complexion and the new English teacher. This had become a regular humiliation for Matthew. Their first match had ended after a total of seven moves. In the wake of his stressful confrontation with Kristin Potts and Suzi Ibarrez, Matthew wanted very badly to finally defeat Justin. As the game progressed and he worked harder to concentrate, each of his long-considered moves followed within seconds by one of Justin’s, this desire only intensified. Which made it all the more painful when Justin, having riddled his defences with ease, dispatched Matthew’s queen with a contemptuous smirk.

Justin moved off to play someone else and was immediately replaced, as always, by Amy. There was less interest in Matthew's matches with Amy and the observing students quickly drifted away. Matthew actually wished they might stick around to possibly inhibit Amy. Matthew was made uncomfortable by her tendency to gossip about other students, though she was sneaky about it, her revelations always couched in the most mundane of topics. In this manner she had revealed her attempted suicide to him. They had been discussing her timetable when, as an aside, she mentioned that her weekly meeting with Mr. Gill, the head guidance counsellor, was "a real drag."

"Oh," said Matthew, puzzled. "You have to see him every week?"

"Yeah," she said casually, "every Monday. Or sometimes Tuesday, if he's busy. He's nice. Very positive. He tells me to stop thinking about killing myself."

"Well," said Matthew. He didn't know what to say.

"That sounds like good advice," he finally commented.

"Yeah," said Amy. "I tried it once and it didn't work out very well, depending on how you look at it. So I guess I should decide whether I'm going to do it right the next time or forget the whole thing."

"Right," said Matthew.

He pretended to be concentrating on the game.

"That was this past July," she said. "Swallowed some pills. Got my stomach pumped. You know, the usual mess. Sure you want to do that?"

"Uh, maybe not," said Matthew, returning his queen to its original space.

As easily the brightest of Matthew's students in his Grade 10 Advanced class, as likely the brightest student in the entire school, Amy already presented certain

difficulties. He had to be on guard for her possibly correcting him in class. In an effort to challenge her, Matthew took extra time to adjust his lesson plans and look for supplementary readings. This was a conscious and deliberate effort on Matthew's part. He already resented the unrelenting focus of the entire system on the students who had behavioural problems, or difficulties in the home, or "special learning needs." He was keenly aware that if he listened to every recommendation made to him by the board, the Special Education department, his department head, and the government, that the end result would be a glorious celebration of mediocrity, with the truly capable students rarely pushed or tested beyond what came easily to them. He resented the constant lowering of the bar, the fear everyone had of the very concept of excellence, the fact that failure was something that happened to students only if they didn't make some kind of minimal effort. Matthew was determined to work against this system.

But the fact was Amy, while astonishingly intelligent and knowledgeable, had serious personal problems which could not be overlooked. Her father was dead and her mother, Donna, a strikingly attractive and still youthful woman, had something of a reputation. Within the school Amy was eccentric and rather isolated. She made little effort to fit in with the other students. While her features were on the plain side, she appeared to take little interest in her appearance. She was slightly short, plain, her figure thin and boyish. She wore no makeup and dressed conservatively. If she belonged to any clique, it was of the geeky variety, yet it was painfully obvious to Matthew that she really fit in with no one. None of the staff appeared particularly concerned about her and Matthew was often unclear in his mind as to how he should respond to her, especially as she had clearly cultivated a keen interest in him. She was a constant presence at the chess

club and had on a few occasions stopped by Matthew's room at the end of the school day to chat. Further complicating things was the regular presence of Donna in the school. He ran into her at different times, emptying garbage cans or steering the huge machine they used to clean the floors of the corridors.

The more Matthew learned about Amy's situation, the more he was surprised and relieved that she was not, as far as he could tell, chronically depressed or angry. He hoped her darkest days were behind her. She was given to occasional moments of weepiness, her pale face becoming flushed, her eyes tearing up, but these episodes were brief and appeared to pass with little response required of Matthew. She also could be petulant, complaining in general terms about the school, the town, her being bored out of her mind, but this was hardly unique. All in all, Matthew was thankful she wasn't more difficult or angry and feared that the worst might be being concealed and repressed, that Amy was the proverbial time bomb, another suicide attempt lurking in the near future.

Today she appeared relatively calm. This meant she was not likely to indulge in a venting session, but the danger was this could instead lead to another session of Caribou High gossip. She loved to reveal questionable information about students Matthew taught, always finding ways to ambush him. She had perfected this technique as the weeks went by, never failing to startle or unsettle Matthew with each new revelation, telling him one day how Kelly Harris was anorexic, another time how Tammy Gronger secretly sliced herself with razors, or how last year Cindy Lake had an abortion. Today though it appeared gossip was not on her mind. Instead Matthew was.

"I worry about you sometimes, Mr. Roberts," she announced after they were settled into their match, Amy having already taken two of his pawns and a bishop.

“Sometimes I think you care too much. Maybe no one else can see it, but I’ve noticed that big cross on your shoulders. It looks awfully heavy.”

A spasm of strangled laughter came from the direction of the other students.

“Justin,” Matthew called. “Settle down, please.”

“He just stole my meatball,” said one of the other students. More laughter.

“Justin, calm down or you’re out.”

“You freak,” said the other student.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Amy continued. “I admire your earnestness and I appreciate the enthusiasm you bring to your classes. I mean, last year I had Mrs. Prontack for English and I nearly died from boredom. I mean, I was sitting there, and it was like I had died. My body was stiff and cold, that’s how bored I was. Really, you have no idea how grateful I am you’re here. But I worry you’re going to burn yourself out.”

Matthew gritted his teeth and launched an assault on Amy’s queen with his knight, attempting a fork.

“But I imagine it’s tough when it’s your first year teaching. To be honest, I kind of feel sorry for you. It’s got to be one of the most frustrating jobs there could ever be. Especially in a place like this. And with the work-to-rule stuff and the parents hating you guys. And especially when you actually want to set some standards and push people a little bit.”

“It’s your move.”

“You know, challenge them, expand their horizons. But Mr. Roberts, is it worth it? Really, why make it tougher on yourself? Why take on the hopeless task of trying to

get these students to appreciate literature? I mean, you might as well be working with a bunch of chimpanzees for all the progress you'll make."

Seemingly oblivious to Matthew's gambit, Amy advanced a pawn.

"Take your little speech today. I mean, *I* know who Shakespeare is, and *I* know why it's important that we read him, but do you really think you can convince *these* kids that he's of any relevance to their lives? I mean, why do you even think that's your responsibility?"

With his lead knight, Matthew simultaneously put Amy's king and queen in check.

"I mean, do you really believe that saying Shakespeare is the greatest writer who ever lived carries any weight with these people?"

Matthew's heart sank as Amy nonchalantly took his knight with her bishop.

"You probably just killed Shakespeare for half the class right there."

Matthew in turn took her knight, but he knew the exchange would not end in his favour.

"And look at these posters. I mean, I like them, but what sort of impression do you think they give the other students? Now don't get me wrong. I'm just trying to help you out, Mr. Roberts. I really want you to keep teaching here. I just think you might have an overdeveloped sense of responsibility. You seem blind to the ironies inherent in your whole situation."

Matthew sighed.

“What am I going to do with you, Amy? Hmm? On top of everything else, on top of being incredibly bright, with a deep appreciation of Shakespeare and Tennessee Williams ...”

Amy dispatched Matthew’s bishop with her rooke, putting his queen in check.

“...You also possess a sophisticated understanding of irony. How am I supposed to teach you? And where does that come from anyway?”

Amy added Matthew’s bishop to her collection of captured pieces and looked up at him. “What, irony? Are you kidding me? Look at me, Mr. Roberts. Look at me, look at my mother, look at this town. How can I not appreciate irony?”

“Well, I’m afraid I can’t go along with your reasoning, Amy,” said Matthew as he moved his queen into line with Amy’s king. “If you can’t teach from the heart, if you can’t share with your students your enthusiasm and passion for your subject, then what’s the point? I refuse to be anything less than the best teacher I can be and it is my conviction that modelling that kind of professionalism and dedication is a valuable lesson for my students. Furthermore, if literature is to survive, if there is going to be in the future something resembling a community of readers and writers, then people like me have to step up and help make it happen. If I can turn on say two or three students per term to the pleasures of books and writing, if that’s all I can do, then I’ll have to be satisfied with that and no one can ask any more of me.”

Several seconds of silence elapsed. For a moment Matthew wondered if he’d said too much, said something wrong. Finally, Amy silently, carefully, moved her queen forward and looked up at Matthew with a sly smile, her eyes two limpid, glistening pools of admiration and joy.

“I knew that’s what you’d say,” she whispered fiercely. “I knew it.”

Matthew was taken aback by the tone of her voice and the intense look in her eyes. He could not hold her gaze and quickly looked back down at the chessboard. Several seconds passed. It finally occurred to him to ask about her essay.

“So ... I hope you weren’t as disappointed in your mark as some of the other students,” he said. “Your essay, I mean.” He picked up his queen and rashly, desperately, moved it halfway across the board, putting her king in check. “The grade.”

“No, I’m not disappointed at all.”

“I’m glad.”

“Is it the highest mark in the class?”

“As a matter of fact, it is.”

“You and me, Mr. Roberts,” said Amy, taking his queen with her knight, “we’re two of a kind, I think. We really are. And we don’t belong here, do we?”

“Well, here is where we are. We just have to keep going, hoping for better days ahead.”

“I get the message.”

“Good.” He reached down and with a flick of his hand, tipped over his king. “I forfeit.”

Chapter Five

At 7:20 am, Matthew, ripped from deep slumber by the high-pitched alarm, stumbled across the bedroom to the strategically placed plastic clock, shut it off, turned, and staggered back to bed. He awoke again in a state of panic at 7:48 and rushed into the bathroom. Fifteen minutes later Matthew was simultaneously brushing his teeth and tying his tie, while constantly peering through the window to see if Sims might emerge from his house before he could get outside and flag him down. He had just finished gathering up papers and assignments strewn about the living room when Sims came out his door – unhurried, carrying nothing. Matthew pulled his coat half on and grabbed his briefcase, stuffing papers inside it as he hurried down the stairs. The wind caught the screen door as he stepped outside, the blast of cold air almost tearing the handle from his grasp, pulling him off balance and onto the ground, one leg bent underneath him, the other sticking out over the edge of the stoop. Dropping his briefcase, he thrust an arm out, gesturing frantically at Sims who sat behind the wheel, letting the engine warm up. Minutes later, safe inside the truck, watching the scenery pass by – the parking lots and hydro wires, the sea gulls gathered on the aluminum roof of the arena, the pick-up trucks idling outside the donut shop – Matthew concentrated on slowing his pulse rate. It was going to be one of those days.

In the staff room, Matthew hung up his coat, put on his dress shoes, snatched up the papers and fliers waiting for him in his mail slot and then entered the staff room proper. He was relieved to find no one had bothered yet to brew coffee. Coffee not made by Matthew was invariably weak and undrinkable. He had taken to bringing in and hiding

his own can of Medaglia D'Oro. Crossing the room to get to the coffee maker he almost collided with Fred Hicks.

“Good morning,” said Matthew.

Hicks, dressed in his usual coveralls, briefly regarded Matthew and then theatrically sighed and shook his head.

“A tie?” he spat out. “Again? You need to lighten up, dude.”

Ten minutes later Matthew strode down the bustling hallway, carrying a cup of coffee and his briefcase, smiling and nodding and saying “good morning” to different people. He had roughly fifteen minutes, time enough to get himself oriented for the day. All of his classes were immersed in units of study: grade 9, short stories; grade 10 academic, *The Taming of the Shrew*; grade 10 general, still slogging through *City Shadows*. He took comfort in the fact he had done his photocopying the evening before.

In the lobby he had a fleeting glimpse of a senior girl crouched down, getting something out of her backpack, the low waist of her jeans revealing a good two inches of shadowy cleft. Matthew looked away and contemplated once again the benefits of school uniforms.

On the landing of the stairs going up to the second floor was the ardent couple Matthew had to pass by almost every morning. As usual they weren't speaking or kissing. They just stood there, holding each other close and gazing out the window.

Advancing down the hallway towards his classroom, Matthew noted again how bare the walls were. No posters advertising dances, or club activities, or meetings. No student drawings or paintings.

Matthew wasn't sure when exactly Ontario had dispensed with reciting the Lord's Prayer each morning. He couldn't remember if they still used it when he attended high school, which perhaps said something about the usefulness of it in the first place. While respectful of the reasons behind jettisoning the prayer, he was not impressed with Caribou High's substitute for it. Each morning, after the third buzzer and before the playing of the national anthem, one of the secretaries would say over the intercom, "Good morning. It's Tuesday, October 23rd. Your thought for the day..." and then read a slogan or bit of verse. Today's was typically trite and silly: "Don't be afraid to give your best to the small tasks of life. If you do the little jobs well, the big ones will take care of themselves."

The playing of the national anthem each morning was a source of some stress and frustration as well. He could not understand the widespread attitude of the students that there was nothing at all wrong with talking, dancing, listening to music, loudly chewing gum, or otherwise *doing things* while the anthem was being played. Matthew was not so fixated on propriety that he expected everyone to stand up straight and be absolutely still for the one minute it took to play the anthem, but what was the point of the exercise if people could just do whatever they wanted? Instead of a minute of shared reflection and identification, the playing of the anthem each morning was a daily reminder for Matthew that what appeared to him simple and straightforward was in fact a contentious matter amongst not only students but staff as well. Joanne Miller talked with her students while it was playing and seemed reluctant even to make them stand. Matthew had witnessed this one morning when he chose to stand in the hallway just outside his classroom door, the door to her room next to his. He made a point of never doing so again. But from time

to time he was compelled to go to the hallway to demand students stop making noise or cease shouting at each other during the anthem. In one instance he was alarmed to find that the people in question were teachers, standing in the hall and talking in conversational tones about the staff hockey pool.

“I got Sundin, eh.”

“Good pick.”

“I wanted Yzerman but Hicks got ‘im.”

“Sundin’s good. He’ll getcha lotta points.”

The other problem for Matthew was the music itself. Caribou High had five recorded versions of the national anthem which they played over the intercom on the exact same days, week after week. Two of the four versions seemed to Matthew appropriate, involving much brass and orchestration. On Tuesday’s however it was a tacky elevator music version, with tinkling bells and gratuitous piano. Thursday’s everyone was treated to a rendition performed entirely with electronic instruments, synthesized drums and “Star Trek” sound effects. On Friday’s, it was a corny *a cappella* version with a be-bop rhythm, performed by a Canadian pop act called The Nylons. Every Friday morning, Matthew, standing still and straight, prepared to reprimand any student who started dancing, fantasized about finding the tape or compact disc they used in the school office to play this version and burning it with a blowtorch.

The anthem was followed by morning announcements. Matthew, as always, had to ask students to be quiet. This, Matthew knew, was pointless since clearly no one listened to the announcements, but Matthew felt it important to reinforce the idea of respect for the school, not to mention courtesy for those imaginary students who

were trying to listen. These days, morning announcements were rather short anyway since teachers were still not taking part in extracurricular activities while contract negotiations with the board dragged on.

Matthew's grade 9 class was halfway through the short story unit for the course. There were questions to take up today and a new story to read. Matthew tried to work a balance between in-class reading and at-home, independent reading, but independent reading for several of the identified students was not a realistic expectation. In fact, the pressure to read everything in class was difficult to resist, despite how painful it sometimes was for him to listen to an otherwise intelligent and capable student struggle to properly read relatively simple English. But reading the stories in class simplified things. The fact was, asking students to do much of anything on their own was a severe gamble. The system was not oriented to allow for high failure rates and the semester was too short to grant time for students to make the necessary adjustments to salvage their grades if they got off to a poor start. Matthew felt safer giving the students every opportunity for success. Besides, it was what the system wanted, and what the students expected.

“Okay, people. Let's take up the questions for 'Boys and Girls' please.”

The stories Matthew taught to his grade 9 pupils were possible only because Matthew had almost unlimited access to the school photocopier. It was an essential aspect of his teaching. He could not bring himself to use the available textbooks. In this case, a grade 9 story textbook entitled *More Strawberries Please* was available and recommended to him by Prontack. It would have been easier for Matthew to have used it along with the accompanying Teacher's Manual, but one glance through the text and

Matthew knew it was out of the question. The stories were written at a level of complexity Matthew would have expected to find in a text for grade 5 or 6. They all had simplistic morals and messages. Many of them were preachy. Others were silly. Few of the author names Matthew recognized. The book reeked of committees and standards and educational directives. It had no connection to art.

So Matthew spent several hours in the staff workroom one evening cutting and pasting and photocopying, assembling his own modest class anthology. He included stories by Katherine Mansfield, Ernest Hemingway, Alice Munro, Guy Vanderhaeghe, James Thurber, and J.D. Salinger. Where he couldn't find questions for the stories, he devised his own. The class had been working through the anthology at a pace of two or three stories per week. Today they needed to discuss Alice Munro's "Boys and Girls" before moving on to Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants."

Matthew resented having to check homework. It seemed to him a waste of valuable class time, but there was a system imperative at work. If Matthew did not have enough marks, his grades could come into question. The more ticks and numbers on his mark sheets, the better. This point had been driven home to him by Prontack when she had shown him her grade ledger at the end of September. Already she had filled an entire page for one of her classes while he had failed to collect more than half a dozen marks for any of his.

He was pleased to find that most students had finished the questions for the Munro story and the ensuing discussion went reasonably well. He introduced the Hemingway story by talking for a minute about who Hemingway was before going on to discuss the idea of style.

“You’re going to notice a difference between Hemingway and the other writers we’ve looked at so far,” he said. “Pay attention to tone, to pacing, to diction. What is it that Hemingway was introducing into fiction writing that was new at the time, that was different, that made him unique? Okay, let’s start. And let’s have some new readers today. People who haven’t read before. Dan. Dan, come on, just the first paragraph.”

Dan Dumas was a shy, sometimes sullen, but thoughtful student, identified with a Learning Disability but as far as Matthew could see, reasonably capable. He peered up at Matthew and shook his head.

“Come on, Dan,” said Matthew, attempting to be cheery and upbeat. “Let’s give it a shot. One paragraph.”

“No,” said Dan, giving Matthew an expression of complete incredulity. A tense silence settled in.

“Uh, this is English class,” said Matthew. “We read and we write. And everyone gets a turn. One paragraph. No? Okay, how about the first couple of sentences.”

“I don’t want to read,” said Dan evenly, “and you can’t make me.”

Dan and Matthew locked eyes. Seconds passed.

“No, I can’t,” said Matthew quietly. He waited until Dan looked down at his book. “Okay. Who would like to read then?”

For the rest of the class Matthew, while trying to stay focussed on the work at hand, was gripped by a now familiar feeling of outrage, the sense that what authority he possessed as a teacher was a mirage, that the respect he had accorded teachers when he grew up had somehow vanished, disappeared, swept away by a tide of endless

compromises. He knew there was no point in sending Dan to the office. But he also knew he could not afford to allow a student to openly defy him without some kind of response.

They finished reading the story and Matthew assigned the questions for homework. When the buzzer sounded, Matthew said for all to hear, “Dan, I’d like to speak to you for a moment please.”

Dan sat in his desk with his backpack on and morosely played with his baseball cap. Matthew waited until the room was empty.

“So, what’s the problem, Dan?”

“I don’t have to read. It’s in my file.”

“In your file.”

“Yeah. You’re supposed to read it.”

“I’m familiar with it, Dan, but I don’t recall seeing anything in there that says you can’t read.”

“I can read,” said Dan. “But you can’t *make* me read in class. I don’t *have* to read. I don’t read in front of people.”

“Well, we all have to sometimes do things we’re not comfortable doing, Dan. That’s part of life. And that’s how we learn. That’s how we make progress. We push ourselves to do things we don’t want to do.”

Dan snorted and shook his head as if Matthew had just expressed a completely ridiculous notion. Scowling, he stared at the door.

“Can I go now?”

“Will you agree to try and read in class at least once? Just one time?”

“I don’t have to!” Dan shouted. “It’s in my file!”

There was a silence. They listened to the noises from the hallway.

“Can I go now? I’m gonna be late for class.”

Matthew sighed and stood up. “Yes. Go. Goodbye.”

Dan angrily stalked out and a minute later Matthew’s grade 10 advanced class began to drift in.

They were still working on *The Taming of the Shrew*. The unit had gone extremely well and Matthew was enormously pleased to see high school students enjoying Shakespeare, learning to not be intimidated by the language, to see how something written centuries before could address their concerns, to encounter a work of art that was universal in its themes and situations. Matthew enjoyed acting out scenes with them, occasionally indulging himself by taking the part of Petruchio and delivering the lines with great expression and volume, challenging the students to do the same. On one occasion, Amy had played Kate, and the banter between her and Matthew possessed a crackling energy.

“Nay, come, Kate, come, you must not look so sour.”

“It is my fashion when I see a crab.”

Though when the lines called for Matthew to take hold of Amy, he hesitated and settled for merely taking her hand, awkwardly clasping her fingertips.

“Nay, hear you, Kate, in sooth you scape not so.”

“I chafe you if I tarry. Let me go!”

He wasn’t sure why he had felt so uncomfortable and afterwards he tried not to think about it. The performance with Amy had led to him self-consciously emphasizing for the class the duelling aspect of the scene, describing it as a kind of dance, a ballet. But

in any case, his enthusiasm for the work had successfully rubbed off on the class. He put them in groups, having them act out different scenes, and he had been surprised to see the majority of the students put as much energy and effort into the work as they did, how they actively sought to give a good performance.

The problem was that the unit had gone so well that Matthew had been reluctant to end it. This was in part due to Matthew's regard for Amy and her responses to the class. Every time he had alluded in her presence to the fact that they should finish the unit in the near future, she had reacted with consternation and protested the idea. "Nooooo!" she would cry, her face falling and becoming a cartoon of extreme sadness and misery, Edvard Munch's "The Scream." Then, after only a few seconds, she would smile as she thought of a new project to do, or some aspect of the play they had yet to sufficiently explore in class. He was now hopelessly behind. They still had a novel study to complete, as well as a unit on essay writing. Not to mention the ongoing Independent Study Projects, or I.S.P.'s, worth a full twenty percent of their final grades. Which made it all the more frustrating to learn that the majority of today's class was to be given over to an assembly in the gymnasium.

Assemblies were organized by the board and primarily centered on the issues of drugs and alcohol. Again and again they were marched into the gym to listen to warnings from police officers, parents of youths who had overdosed or gone to jail, former addicts and alcoholics. They were barely two months into the semester and already this would be the fifth such event. Matthew wondered whether the people at the board actually believed these assemblies would lead to more prudent behaviour on the part of students, or whether this was just another ass-covering exercise, something the board could point to

and say, “See? We’re taking action. We’re being proactive. No one can say we’re not making an effort.” To Matthew, such assemblies were all well and good in theory, but they struck him as ultimately futile in terms of encouraging responsibility when students could routinely come to school late, skip class, not do their work, and still be in a position to get their credits and graduate.

He had forgotten about the planned assembly and it was the students who reminded him of it. He had planned to take up the questions for Act V, looking at Kate’s crucial final speech, which he hoped would lead to an involving class discussion on the larger themes of the play, a fitting ending to the unit. Now, it would have to wait. Which meant he had to push back the date for the final test on the unit. And the due date for their major writing assignment. And the start date for the unit on *Lord of the Flies*.

Another aspect of these assemblies which Matthew did not understand was the procedure for bringing the classes to the gym. Or, to be more accurate, the lack of one. Students did not sit as a class in the gym. Teachers were not asked to account for them. Instead, each grade was called down in turn but not with enough time to allow each section to get to the gym and find seating. The result was a mob scene outside the doors to the gymnasium and more than a few students discreetly slipping away, some brazenly going to their lockers, getting their jackets and heading outside. Matthew had once witnessed Principal Landry’s attention being called to a small group of students leaving the school and walking across the front lawn, her response being simply to take note of their names. Presumably they were to be given a detention for skipping. To Matthew’s astonishment, detentions were largely ignored by students. There was a widespread notion that the school lacked the authority to hold anyone in the building against their

will. Matthew had once overheard students referring to this question as a “human rights issue.”

Matthew managed to quickly cover with the class two *Taming of the Shrew* questions before the calls began over the intercom. When the students heard, “Grade Ten classes should now proceed ...” they immediately began gathering up their books and bags and making for the door. Matthew held up a hand. “Sit down, please!” he bellowed. He waited until they were quiet. “You are to leave your books and things in the classroom please,” he said. “You know that. Hopefully the presentation will not take up the rest of the class and if that’s the case I want us to try and take up the last three questions.”

Cries and groans greeted Matthew’s announcement. This meant if the assembly did go until the lunch hour, they would be inconvenienced by having to return to the classroom to get their things. Precious minutes would be taken from them. Matthew held firm.

“You are not to visit your lockers before going into the gym,” he pointed out.

The logical response of course was that thanks to the crush at the gym doors, there was plenty of time for students to go to their lockers, so why couldn’t they drop off their books and bags and then go to the gym?

“Because that is not the prescribed procedure,” said Matthew. “I’m not going to argue about this. You’re not to take your coats and books with you.”

“But Ms. Hitchcock lets us.”

“Yeah, so does Mr. Rickson.”

“This is so stupid.”

“Enough! Leave your things where they are. I will lock the door. Your belongings are safe here. Hopefully we’ll have some time before lunch to finish the questions. Let’s go.”

Matthew ignored the disgruntled mutterings of his students and waved them into the chaos of the hallway.

After much upheaval and shouting and jostling, they eventually entered the gym to be confronted by a rather odd looking assembly on the stage. In addition to Principal Landry standing off to one side and two uniformed police officers, there were three people seated in the middle of the stage. Matthew’s heart sank as he looked at them. They were all sporting various tattoos and piercings. The female had green and purple hair, shiny and lacquered and done up in a huge, spiky Mohawk. The skinny fellow sported an eye-patch and so much metal in his face he looked to Matthew like a medical experiment, or the unfortunate survivor of some kind of horrible accident. The third man was grossly obese, with a shaved head and goatee, and some kind of tattoo that stretched up from under his clothes and spread over much of his face.

After Principal Landry got everyone settled down and the usual introductions were given, she handed things over to the woman with the Mohawk who was, she informed everyone, a recovered heroin addict with HIV, out on parole after having served time for vehicular manslaughter. She spoke in a loud, high, slightly hysterical voice.

“We’re here today,” she told everyone, “to tell you our stories, okay? So listen up. We’re here for you. To tell you our stories and, you know, give you information on like how to avoid all the shit we’re dealing with. Things you should be aware of. You know, like, the movies and the music videos and all that? They make drugs look cool. You

know? They make it seem like being wild and partyin' all the time, drinkin,' and gettin' high, all that is what life's about. Well, like, listen up, cause like we're here to tell you, that's not where it's at, people. Okay? Straight up. You do *not* want to end up in our shoes. Believe me."

Matthew, standing at the back of the gym, moved towards the exit.

"My father was an alcoholic, okay? Now, I'm not makin' any excuses, but he ..."

Matthew quietly pushed the metal bar on the door and slipped into the hallway.

He could not bring himself to listen to these strange people tell their harrowing tales of squalor and misery. If he could have, he would have summoned all of his students to accompany him back to class, to spare them this grotesque spectacle. He made for the staff room. Inside he found several teachers and a few educational assistants. Likely though none of them had classes during block B. Matthew was aware he was being derelict of duty by leaving the gymnasium. He looked to see if any of the coffee he'd brewed earlier could be had but the half pot he'd left behind was gone. David Gill was discussing contract negotiations with Eric Rickson.

"Well, I can't really comment on that," Gill said. "You know. It's still ongoing. Hey!" he said to Matthew. "It's the chess man."

Matthew nodded and kept walking, heading for the telephone.

"You know about this guy?" Gill said to Rickson. "He's got a little chess club going for the kids."

"Oh yeah?"

Matthew picked up the phone and dialled his home number. When the answering machine picked up he punched in the code so he could listen to his messages.

“Yeah. A little extracurricular activity going on up in his room there.”

He was only doing this for appearance, so it didn't seem like he had come into the staff room for nothing. With Gill talking about the chess club, he would have to leave for the work room, maybe go on the internet.

“Gives the kids something to do.”

“Yeah. Some of 'em.”

He wasn't expecting there to be any messages but the robotic voice on his machine informed him that one had been recorded.

“Matthew,” said the voice of Richard Wells.

Matthew gripped the receiver and pressed it into his ear and raised a hand to block the other one.

“It's Richard.” The voice was unmistakable – formal, austere, precise. “I'm calling to thank you for your card. And the book. It arrived today. It was very thoughtful of you to send it to me.”

“I mean, it doesn't affect anything really, you know. It's not like he gets more than eight or nine kids up there.”

“I thought you might appreciate knowing it arrived in good condition.”

The words were just the slightest bit slurred and Matthew knew Richard must have called late the previous night. Matthew always turned the ringer on the phone off when he went to bed.

“It's not like he's coaching the friggin' basketball team or anything. Still...”

“Please do not concern yourself with calling me back. Though it would be lovely to talk with you at some point in the near future. Again, my thanks. Please give my regards to Jennifer when you speak to her. Goodbye.”

Richard had never called before at night. His voice on the machine, that slight and uncharacteristic muddying of his diction ... Matthew realized he had to have been drinking. He hung up and turned to face Gill.

“I find it hard to believe that the chess club could somehow undermine your bargaining position.”

Gill’s eyebrows went up. “Not just my bargaining position, buddy,” he said as Matthew walked past him and headed for the door. “You got something at stake too, you know.”

The work room was empty, silent except for the faint humming of various electronic equipment in states of readiness, the computers and photocopier. Matthew turned on the television and sat down at a computer terminal. The 24 hour news channel was interviewing a man whose young daughter had gone missing two days before from her trailer home in Texas. A convicted pedophile had been living in the area and had been taken in for questioning. Search parties were combing the area. They had been reporting on the story relentlessly for more than two days now.

“No, we haven’t given up hope. No, sir. We’re just waitin’ and prayin’, tryin’ to stay strong.”

“You believe she’s still alive.”

“We believe she’ll come back. God willing. She’s a good girl ...” The father’s voice cracked. “She’s my little angel,” he sobbed. As he began to weep, Matthew turned

to look. The camera stayed on the father. He was wearing a baseball cap and holding up a large photograph of a girl's smiling face. The interviewer said nothing. Seconds passed. "And I know ... I know she's ..." The father tried unsuccessfully to compose himself. "I know, I know she's in the care of the Lord."

"Cut away," said Matthew to the television. "Jesus. Cut away. Give the man some dignity!"

"I have faith in the Lord!" the man half sobbed, half shouted.

Matthew lunged up and turned off the television, hitting the power button with more force than necessary. He paced about the room. Who drank the rest of his coffee? Why the hell didn't anyone else bring in coffee? Where the hell had they found these deranged, mutilated criminals? Why were they taking valuable class time to have them infect the students with their negative energy, their irreparably damaged lives? He had no new email messages. He disinterestedly perused a couple of literary blogs he kept up with. He sat and ruminated on Richard. Unusual for him to phone. He had been drinking, no doubt about it. This should not have come as any surprise; Richard had told him he had taken up smoking and nightly drinking after Anne's death. Still, it was something of a shock to hear the effects of alcohol in his words, to discern in his voice the depth of his grief. Once again he saw Richard in his mind, sitting alone in his living room in the house in Toronto, staring at his wife's vibrant canvases, tears coursing down his face.

He returned to the assembly in time to see the bald man with the tattoo, standing in the middle of the stage, unroll a condom over his fist. He kept pulling on it, stretching it down. The students were rapt. Matthew was startled to see the condom reach down to almost half the length of his forearm. As if leading some kind of deranged assembly, an

anarchist group or a tribe of skinheads preparing for battle, the huge man saluted the students with his latex-encased arm. Glaring out at the audience with his goatee and his facial tattoo, arm aloft, he appeared to Matthew crazed, demonic.

“There you go, girls!” he shouted. “See? Next time your boyfriend says he don’t wanna use one cause it’s too tight, you know it’s bullshit.”

“You tell him, girls,” screamed the Mohawk woman, “no glove, no love!”

“Total bullshit!”

Matthew left again. He went up to his classroom and sat at his desk. Even in the unlikely occurrence that there would be time, he didn’t see much point in trying to take up the last *Taming of the Shrew* questions today. He thought how he shouldn’t have bothered preventing his students from taking their books and bags and visiting their lockers. What difference did it really make? The buzzer to end the class sounded. The students returned and hurriedly grabbed their things and left. Most did so without acknowledging Matthew. A few complained.

“My mom’s waiting for me,” said Kristen Potts as she snatched up her coat and backpack and left. “She’s gonna be pissed. Thanks a lot!”

It was Tuesday, which meant chess club. Matthew declined to play and instead sat at his desk and organized his marking while Justin and a few others hunched over their chess pieces and scarfed down their chips and energy bars. Amy came and loitered around his desk for a few minutes as he sorted through his piles of papers and assignments.

“I really have to question the educational value of that presentation,” said Amy, leaning against Matthew’s desk while eating a bag of Skittles. She looked pale and stressed and seemed slightly shaken by what she had just seen.

“Really,” said Matthew. He was sorting a stack of grade 9 writing assignments, organizing them for marking so he would grade the strongest students first, the weak students last. He found this helped to maintain something resembling an objective standard in terms of which papers deserved an A and which deserved a C minus or a D, failure being reserved of course only for papers that either were not submitted, or exhibited a complete inability to fulfill the mandate of the assignment, which in this case was to write a minimum five sentence paragraph on the significance of the two horses in “Boys and Girls.” Of course, those students who did not hand in the assignment could always submit it late; Matthew was mandated by school policy to accept it for grading, even if the student lacked a sufficient or documented excuse. Matthew had begun to wonder why they bothered with due dates at all. He fantasized sometimes about the eventual outcome of the current policies. Students could hand in any assignment at any time they chose after attending say, a dozen classes. Teachers would be inundated with piles of papers and projects at the very end of the term, all of which would receive top marks. Why not extend this charade to its logical conclusion?

“People are saying that these freaks *had* to come and talk to us,” said Amy. “That it was mandatory, part of the conditions of their parole. Do you know if that’s true?”

“I have no idea, Amy. Might be the case, I don’t know.”

“But I was thinking. If that’s true, who pays for it? I mean, it seems a bit weird if tax money pays for criminals to go around and talk at schools.”

Matthew sighed. "I really don't know anything about it. The school doesn't organize these things; the board does."

"I don't really see how they told us anything we didn't already know. Or stuff that, you know, any moron couldn't figure out. I mean, unless you're a complete idiot, how could you not know that hanging yourself while you masturbate is potentially dangerous?"

Matthew looked up at her. "They discussed that?"

"Well, they didn't exactly *discuss* it," said Amy. "But it was mentioned. Weren't you listening?"

A few minutes later Amy, thankfully, was playing chess with another student and Matthew was attempting to grade a set of quizzes from his grade 9 class when Heather Hanson entered the room with a couple of other senior girls whom Matthew did not know. Heather Hanson was in grade 11 and was the president of the students' council. She presented a marked contrast to Amy with her confidence and poise, her make-up and her long legs. Matthew instantly knew these girls were not dropping by to play chess.

"Hi, Mr. Roberts," said Heather. "We're organizing the Halloween dance for next Friday? And we were wondering if maybe, please, if you could maybe, you know, help supervise it?"

"Please, please, please," said one of the other girls.

"Oh," said Matthew, putting down his pen and turning to face them. "Next Friday. Well"

"Please, Mr. Roberts. Please, please, please. Mr. Brecker says we have to have six teachers to supervise and so far we've only got four and we've asked, like, everyone."

“Yeah,” said one of the other girls. “Really. Like, everyone.”

“Well, what does this involve? Do I have to be in the gym the whole time, because ...”

“No,” said Heather. “No, you just have to be, you know, around. Available.”

“Basically, you just need to be in the building. Mrs. Dunn is our advisor and you can talk to her about, you know, where to go and everything ...”

“It’s really easy. You just need to *be* there, and maybe in the gym for part of it, but not for like a long time or anything.”

“And do I have to dress up? Should I be in costume?”

This question caused the girls to laugh and fidget. Matthew found himself smiling. He was enjoying putting them on the spot, making them wait for an answer.

“Only if you want to,” said Heather.

“Well, I don’t know,” said Matthew with a theatrical sigh, putting it on as if they were asking a huge sacrifice of him. “Oh, I guess so. I’ll give up my Friday night just for you. Put me down for it.”

“Oh, thank you,” said Heather. “Thank you, thank you.”

“Awesome. Thanks so much,” said one of her companions. Smiling, they turned around, bumping into each other, and rushed out. As they left, Matthew caught Amy staring at him, her expression one of complete contempt, whether for the girls or for him, he didn’t know. He gave her a quizzical look and she turned back to her game.

Following the lunch hour, Matthew had his prep period. He didn’t have the choice of remaining in his classroom to work because currently during period C Gail Stinson conducted her senior girls’ health class in that room. Her health and fitness unit

had started a week prior and was scheduled to continue until November. The first time Gail and Matthew's paths crossed at the end of lunch, Gail had looked around the classroom at Matthew's "Gallery of the Dead" and said "Who the hell are all these guys?"

"Uh, famous writers," said Matthew. "You know. Some of the literary greats. Charles Dickens. Thomas Hardy."

"Great. I gotta teach in front of a bunch of disembodied heads."

Matthew locked up the classroom and left before Gail showed up. Briefcase in hand he returned downstairs, stopping in at the cafeteria in the common area to see if they had any sandwiches left. They didn't. He settled for a doughnut and decided to make some more coffee in the staffroom. Students were bustling and cavorting around the locker area, their cries and laughs echoing through the wide room with its huge glass windows and high ceilings. Snippets of lewd chatter were audible to Matthew, the kind of vulgar, aggressive talk, spoken by both boys and girls, that Matthew had been forced to accept as commonplace in the school.

Fuck you. I ain't bullshitting ya, fuck-face. Hey, dickwad! Cocksucker. Go fuck yerself. Chicks with dicks! Hey, ass-head!

Clusters of smiling girls, gossiping in low voices, stationed themselves next to open lockers and at different points around the room. Younger boys wrestled and rough-housed. Matthew counted four couples in passionate embrace as he walked back towards the main corridor, dodging bodies as he went. Ostensibly overseeing all this was Phil Abbott, the school's music teacher, who Matthew had spied sitting in the far corner of the room, reading a magazine.

Behind all the noise and commotion was a constant stream of calls over the p.a. system no one bothered to pay attention to.

“Hey, Mr. Roberts,” shouted someone as Matthew made his way through the crowd.

“Get to work, Mr. Roberts,” said another voice from behind. It sounded to Matthew like Gary Bursey.

“Yeah,” said someone else. “Do what you’re paid for.”

Over the doorway leading out of the common area was a large, colourful banner reading “Today is a Great Day to Learn Something New!”

In the staff room Matthew encountered the usual last minute flurry of activity as a few remaining teachers dashed around – putting their half-eaten lunches away, visiting the washroom, grabbing books and papers, shouting at one another about meetings, phone calls, paperwork. People were reminding one another about the staff meeting at the end of the day. Matthew had completely forgotten about it.

Matthew measured out spoonfuls of Medaglia D’Oro into the coffee maker. There was a hush after the last teacher left the room and the heavy door thudded shut a final time. Matthew looked around; he was alone in the staff room. In the hallway, a final garbled call came over the intercom for certain students to report. The third buzzer sounded. Class had officially begun.

Having block C as a “prep” period was problematic for a couple of reasons, the main one being that by the time its 75 minutes had elapsed, Matthew was invariably left feeling relaxed and tired. It didn’t seem to matter how much coffee he drank. His energy level was reduced, his focus not as sharp, making teaching in block D more difficult than

it already was. Most teachers agreed that the best prep periods to have were either A or D. In fact, though Matthew would never have told anyone this, on some days he would almost have preferred not to have had a prep period at all. The simple truth was, for him, very little “prep” was done during that time. The staff room was a difficult place to concentrate. Same with the work room. Matthew occasionally managed to get some reading done or some photocopying, but the temptation to goof off was difficult to resist after having been on the go for three or four. Prep time, as everyone knew, was one of the key issues in the ongoing contract negotiations.

Matthew gazed about the staff room. Someone had left a partially eaten sandwich on the table. Several empty paper coffee cups were stationed around it along with a copy of the day’s Thunder Bay newspaper. The chalkboard next to the refrigerator was covered with various notices: the staff meeting; a car for sale; a deadline for sign-ups for a class trip to the Thunder Bay art gallery; a meeting for the Christmas Party planning group; an appeal for donations for the “Hearts and Flowers” fund; a sign-up sheet for an upcoming lunch to be prepared and served by students in one of the “Life Skills” courses.

Next to the chalkboard was a photograph of the entire teaching staff, taken three or four years ago. For some reason there did not exist more recent photos. Once at the end of the day Spivack had gone over it with Matthew, telling him stories about different staff members, people who no longer worked at the school. Matthew couldn’t get out of his head the story Spivack had told him about the woman with the huge glasses and garish lipstick in the photo, a teacher who was still on staff though she hadn’t set foot in the school in almost three years. “Loony Leave,” Spivack had called it. She had taught chemistry and math at Caribou High. One morning she walked out of her grade ten

biology class and locked herself in a cubicle in the girls' washroom and refused to come out. She told anyone who came and tried to talk to her that she was fine, thank you, but she'd just wait there until everyone went home.

It occurred to Matthew now might be a good time to go see Jane Michano, the school's attendance counsellor. Jane's job was to monitor student attendance and follow up on any unexplained absences. Matthew hurried out of the staff room and strode down the hall, hoping this might be one of those rare instances where he could actually catch her in her office adjacent to the main office and speak with her. He arrived to find Jane sitting behind her desk, talking with a female student. Matthew stood and waited. He was not going to take a chance on missing her.

"But I told you," said the student, "I *had* to go home. It was an emergency."

"Yeah," replied Jane. "And like I told *you*, you're required to inform either me or the office that you are leaving the school. You can't just take off. We have to know where you are."

"Okay, I won't do it again. But why am I getting a detention? It was an *emergency*."

"Cause I called your mom and she doesn't know what you're talking about."

"But she doesn't *know* about it. It was a private thing."

"Private," said Jane.

"Yeah, like I can't tell my mom about it."

"But you said you went home. And she tells me she was there all day and you didn't get home until 4:30."

"Okay, I didn't go home. I had an emergency, a private emergency."

“Right,” said Jane. “You’re not eighteen yet. You’re not allowed to have ‘private emergencies.’ Okay? Until you’re eighteen, you call it an emergency, I call it skipping class. Either way, it’s a detention. Now if you supply me with a doctor’s note or something that explains why you had to leave the school, then we have something to talk about. Otherwise ...” Jane made a shooing motion with her hand. “Goodbye.”

“This is *so* unfair.” She looked at the white detention slip in her hand with astonishment and disgust.

“Bye-bye,” said Jane.

The student slowly turned to leave.

“This is such bullshit,” she said as she walked past Matthew.

“Yes, I know,” said Jane as the student left. “We are so mean and nasty and cruel.” She turned to Matthew. “What can I do for you, Mr. Roberts?”

“Sorry to bother you,” said Matthew.

“No bother at all. What’s up?”

“Rob Fraser,” said Matthew. “Absent block D yesterday.” Jane immediately began tapping keys on her computer. “But I’m certain I saw him earlier in the day. Was it a confirmed absence?”

Jane peered at her screen. “Nope,” she said. “I take it you’d like me to give him a detention?”

“Yes, please.”

Jane reached over and made a note on a pad of paper. “Done. Anything else?”

“Jenny Wilkinson.”

More tapping.

“I haven’t seen her in over a week.”

“Yeah,” said Jane. “I don’t know what’s going on with her.”

“I asked Bill about it and he told me not to worry, that he’d take care of it, but she’s falling way behind now.”

“Yeah, I’ll follow up and give her mom a call. See what they’re planning on doing.”

“She’s probably headed out of the class, right? I mean, I think she’s up to sixteen absences or something.”

“Yeah, well, as you know that’s not up to me.”

“I know.”

“I mean, if it were, there’s about thirty kids who’d be out on their asses. But it’s not, so ...” She turned to Matthew and shrugged her shoulders and sighed. “What are you gonna do?”

“Well, I don’t understand. We have an attendance policy, right? It’s in the Student Handbook.”

“You got it!”

“It says a maximum of twelve absences.”

“Right again!”

“But we’re not enforcing it.”

Jane did a quick drum roll on her desk and smashed an invisible cymbal. “And we have a winner!” she cried.

“Okay, well I just want you to be aware, I talked to Bill about Jenny, and he said to leave it with him, okay?”

Jane pointed a finger at Matthew and cocked it. "You got it, chief."

"That's on the record."

"You bet."

"Thanks, Jane."

"Any time, cowboy."

Matthew returned to the staffroom to find Kelso sitting on one of the couches, lounging, one arm thrown across the back of the sofa. While Kelso and Roberts shared the same prep period, Matthew rarely saw him. Kelso usually elected to stay in the computer lab, presumably surfing the web. Kelso was, without a doubt, the most irresponsible teacher Matthew had ever encountered. He dressed like the member of a frat house; he basically let his students do anything they wanted during class time; he showed movies at least once a week; he habitually came to staff meetings late and left early. The rumour was meetings had been held at the board level to look into trying to dismiss him, but adequate grounds could not be established. Matthew actively tried to avoid Kelso because he took every opportunity to tease and harass the younger teachers.

"Ah, Mr. Roberts," said Kelso. "The young, earnest, dedicated teacher of English. Hard at work. Let me guess: you've just come from another important meeting with our vice-principal. Or the attendance counsellor. Or your department head. Maybe all three, one after the other?"

Matthew ignored Kelso and went to the coffee machine only to discover he had forgotten to turn it on. He stared furiously at the plastic machine and fought himself quiet before reaching out and carefully pushing the red button. He stood and waited and

refused to turn his attention from the device until he heard the sounds of water being sucked up by its inner workings. He looked over to find Kelso smiling at him.

“Love the tie,” he said.

Matthew left and went across the hall to the staff work room. He opened the door to be greeted by the roar of the photocopier pumping away. Several teachers were sitting at computer terminals. The television was on. CNN was still covering the story of the missing girl. They were showing more images of her, photographs of her climbing a tree, hugging her dog, posing with her family. Her name was Melissa.

Matthew sat at an available computer and checked his email. There were no new messages. He quickly typed out an email to Richard:

Hello Richard. Thank you for phoning. Sorry I missed your call. I'm glad the book reached you. I saw it and remembered we'd talked about Franzen and the fact you had yet to read any of his work and I thought it might be nice to send it to you. I mean, after all, over the years you have given me so many books or recommend different titles. I'll always be grateful to you for turning me on to Nathanael West. And Richard Wilbur. And so many others. So it's my pleasure to, in some small way, return the favour. Though please don't feel obligated to read it. Anyway, it's been too long since we last talked. I have tried to call you on occasion but just haven't had the luck of catching you at home. And also, as you can imagine, being a first year teacher, well, it's everything I can do just to keep my head above

water. You wouldn't believe the things that go on here. High school has changed a little bit since you were running around that soccer field in High Park. Hell, it's changed a lot since I graduated. Anyway, have to run and do some more marking. Let's talk soon.

Yours,

Matthew

The bit about trying to call was something of an exaggeration. Contacting Richard had become a dilemma for Matthew. Before Anne's death, they had visited regularly, as often as once a month, always in the Manulife Centre on Bloor, where they could sit and drink coffee and talk and what music there was wasn't so loud as to be intrusive. They also exchanged emails regularly and on occasion spoke on the phone, usually to agree on another time to meet and talk. Matthew hugely enjoyed the time they spent together and had come to regard Richard as something of a mentor, a source of support and inspiration, and Matthew knew that Richard, who had no children, also enjoyed their visits. They rarely discussed writing, but they did talk a great deal about books, about writers, about Richard's experiences in the game of publishing, the absurd game that was trying to be a serious writer in Canada. However, after Anne's death, things had changed. Richard declined invitations to meet and their conversations on the phone were short and somewhat strained. Matthew didn't know what to say, didn't know how to adequately express his concern for Richard, especially since he could tell Richard hated to be pitied and also had little tolerance for expressions of sympathy or encouragement. They had met only once since Anne's death the previous April, and the meeting had been difficult,

partly because while Richard was struggling to cope and carry on alone, Matthew at the time was just starting to confront his own crisis: the lack of demand for English teachers, the questioning as to what exactly he was doing, the deep cracks appearing in the foundation of his marriage. Having come to Caribou, the situation was made more difficult. He didn't know how to explain his circumstances to Richard. And invariably the most convenient time to call was at the end of the day when Richard would be drinking. He had phoned once, shortly after arriving in town, at around eight in the evening and it had been difficult for Matthew to listen to Richard, this most articulate and sophisticated and learned of men, speak unclearly, continually pausing to search for the right words which he slurred. Matthew was lying. He had not tried to call.

Matthew hit "send" and returned to the staff room. Kelso was gone. The carafe in the coffee machine remained, except for a tiny amount of dark liquid at its bottom, inexplicably empty. Matthew saw, as he approached it, that the machine had been unplugged, its outlet taken now by the plug for an audibly working kettle, steam from it beginning to rise. The other plug in the outlet was filled by the microwave which also sat on the counter. Matthew stood and stared at all three appliances and wondered who would unplug the coffee machine when, obviously, someone was making coffee. He found it difficult not to conclude someone was deliberately toying with him. He thought of Kelso. While he was standing there, Stacey Dunn came in.

"Hi, Matthew," she said.

"Hi." He stopped himself from asking her if she had unplugged the coffee machine.

Stacey opened a cupboard door, took down a mug and a bag of tea. She poured hot water into the mug, unplugged the kettle, and left.

Matthew remained standing where he was for a minute before moving again to the coffee machine, plugging it in, and pushing the red button. Again, he waited until he could hear the machine beginning to work. He resolved not to leave the room until his coffee had been brewed. Wearily, he sat down at the table and began to peruse the day's copy of *The Thunder Bay Herald*. Marie Wilcox entered the room.

Marie Wilcox was the school's Special Education coordinator. She oversaw the Resource Room on the first floor where students identified with learning disabilities spent a certain amount of time, depending on their particular difficulties. She was continually dropping off letters and lists and memos in the teachers' mail slots, informing them of procedures, reminding them to read and then return the files on their identified students and then later to submit the Individualized Learning Plans for each of those students. Forms also had to be filled out updating Marie on each identified student's progress. A questionnaire was sent out every few weeks. The first time Matthew received these forms, he had spent two or three hours filling them out, providing detailed information on the conduct and performance of each student and including sample grades. A few days later he ran into Marie in the staff room.

"Did you get my forms, those update sheets?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah," said Marie. "Thanks."

"Did I fill them out properly?"

"Oh, well, uh, yeah. There was lots of information there. A lot. Which is fine.

You know, that's great."

“It’s what you wanted, isn’t it?” asked Matthew.

Maria paused, mouth open, as if not sure what to say. “Uh, yeah. Uh, you know, whatever you feel I should be aware of, you know, go ahead. That’s great.”

Matthew sensed she wasn’t telling him something. The next time the update forms were circulated, he took the opportunity, when alone in the staff room, to look at the completed forms the other teachers submitted to Marie. In each case they simply wrote “yes” or “no” to the questions on the sheet with no additional information. On sheet after sheet, the reports indicated everything was fine, all was going according to plan. Matthew felt he learned a valuable lesson that day.

Teachers were circulated a list of all the students at Caribou High identified with learning disabilities of one sort or another. Students were identified with these disabilities after extensive and thorough testing. Matthew counted the names on the sheets to discover that more than one hundred individuals, fully twenty-five percent of the student population at the school, were identified with such disabilities. He told Spivack.

“Yeah, it’s a scam. And no one questions it. You know why? Because parents don’t know what the hell they’re doing anymore. They don’t understand their own child’s behaviour, why little Jimmy won’t settle down, why he won’t listen to them, why he’s having trouble in school, why they can’t get him to do anything. They don’t want to face up to the possibility it has something to do with *them*, and the way they raise the kid. No, they *want* to be told their child’s got a problem, got a disability. It’s an excuse. Makes them feel less inadequate, less guilty, less responsible. They put the kid on the drugs and then they get to go to war.”

“War?” said Matthew.

“On behalf of poor, little Jimmy. Instead of teaching their kid things and maybe not letting him play video games eight hours a day, they put the responsibility on us and fight the teachers, the school, the board. *We* are the problem. Haven’t you figured that out yet? We’re the enemy. It’s perfect. Very convenient. Zero responsibility for *them*. ‘My child has a learning disability. You have to accommodate him. He has rights.’ Basically, it’s *our* responsibility to make sure the kid succeeds. Not his. Not the parents’. Ours. That’s the general attitude. And that’s the attitude the kid takes on too.” Spivack sighed and shrugged his shoulders. “It’s a sad situation, my friend.”

Marie walked in and looked around to see if anyone other than Matthew was in the staff room. “Uh, Matthew?” she said. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Sure,” said Matthew, looking up from the *Thunder Bay Herald* and its front page story on raccoons.

Marie sat down at the table opposite Matthew.

“Dan Dumas came to see me. You have him in block A?”

“Yes, I do.”

“He was upset. He said you asked him to read in class.”

“Yes.”

“But you’re aware he can be nervous about that kind of thing. It’s in his IPRC. And his IEP. And you read and signed off on both.”

“Yes, I did. I confess I didn’t commit them to memory, but ...”

“Well, you can’t force a student with ADD and CCT to read out loud in front of other students. You just can’t.”

“I don’t think ‘force’ is really the term to ...”

“And then after you put him in that position, it’s really unfair to single him out and hold him after class.”

The coffee maker coughed and sputtered.

“Well, I wanted to talk to him. It was only for a couple of minutes. I thought we should discuss the situation and see if he might consider trying to read a bit ...”

“No,” said Maria with an air of exasperation. “No, you don’t get it. You *can’t* ask him to do that. At all. You’re basically not allowed to.”

“You mean to tell me that I, as his English teacher, cannot ask him to *read*. This is absurd.”

“Not out loud. And actually, not for more than say five or ten minutes at a time in any case, I hope you realize. He’s an identified student. You can’t...”

“How am I supposed to help him learn and improve and develop his skills if I am unable to compel him to do things?”

Marie seemed baffled. She was shaking her head and squinting at Matthew.

“I’m sorry you don’t understand the protocol. This shouldn’t happen.”

“It’s not as if Dan is incapable of reading. I mean, if he has difficulty in terms of being nervous or self-conscious, that’s quite normal. It seems to me then he would *benefit* from the experience of reading to the class.”

“You don’t understand. It’s much more complicated than that. He’s been tested regularly since grade two. He’s been on different kinds of medication. We know the types of activities he’s just not capable or comfortable doing. This has all been documented. You read the information. This was all established in consultation with his parents and his past teachers and you can’t just ignore all that.”

“I’m not ignoring anything. I admit I had forgotten about that particular aspect of his ... situation. But it seems to me this is now a lost educational opportunity. If he can go to you and complain and then you come and talk to me, I mean, what is he learning here? At the very least, shouldn’t he be able to discuss things with me in a mature fashion?”

“I’m his advocate. That’s my job. He has enough to deal with ...”

“And are you going to advocate for him after he graduates? Are you going to intervene on his behalf when he refuses to do something at his place of employment and is reprimanded by his boss?”

The coffee maker, nearing the end of its brew cycle, emitted a series of harsh explosions, then fell silent.

Marie squinted at Matthew and shook her head. “What do they teach you at teachers’ college? This is my job. This is how the system works.”

Matthew was experiencing another of those horrible moments when what he saw as his duty as an English teacher, as someone charged with the responsibility of creating new readers of literature, was being cancelled out by the demands of “the system.”

“Okay, okay,” sighed Matthew. “You’re right. Fine.”

“Look, will you agree not to ask him to read in class? Please?”

“Yes,” sighed Matthew. “Yes, of course. I will never do that again. You can count on it.”

“Thank you,” said Maria. She stood up and left without another word. Matthew sat and stared out the window. He listened to pipes, the buzzing of things, the refrigerator, the fluorescent lights, the breathing of the coffee machine.

A sharp crackle came over the intercom: "Mrs. Wilcox, please contact the office. Mrs. Wilcox."

After several minutes he got up and poured himself a cup of coffee. He sat at the table, alone in the staff room, and sipped meditatively. He looked at the clock. It was quarter past two. With luck, he might be home in four, maybe four and a half hours, depending on how long the meeting dragged on for.

Meetings. Staff meetings. English department meetings. Union meetings. Meetings with parents. Meetings with the vice-principal. Meetings with the principal. Meetings with the Parents' Council. Meetings about procedures, about forms, about policies, about policy changes, about Ministry of Education guidelines, about changes to the guidelines, about curriculum, about changes to the curriculum. Meetings about negotiations, about committees, about meetings. Meetings about everything, it seemed to Matthew, but what was actually going on in the school, what was happening in the classrooms.

Four and a half hours. He realized he was being ridiculously optimistic. He had yet to do his prep for tomorrow. Once again, he'd probably be getting home around eight or nine, if not later.

The door opened and Bill Brecker entered, a sudden enormous presence in the small room. In his hand was a file folder. Leaning forward, he swivelled his huge head around before saying quietly, "Hey, Matthew."

"Hi, Bill."

Bill sighed as he straightened himself. He remained standing. He appeared to be in the process of becoming resigned to not being able to locate whoever he was searching for.

“I don’t suppose you’ve seen Marie.”

“Uh, actually, yes. She was just here a few minutes ago.”

“Oh. Talking with you?”

“Yes. She wanted to talk to me. About a student.”

“Okay. Well that explains things. No big deal. I’ll catch up with her back at the Resource Room.”

Bill blinked his eyes and looked around the staff room again.

“Well,” he said, “that was something else, wasn’t it? That presentation today.”

“Uh, yeah,” said Matthew. “You could say that. It was different all right.”

“Yeah, not what I expected.” Bill was looking out the window onto the driveway and the parking lot. “Maybe not what I would’ve wanted either. But the board set it up. Who knows what they were thinking.” He shrugged. “There you go. What are you gonna do?”

Matthew wasn’t sure what to say. There was a pause.

“Yeah,” said Matthew finally. “What are you gonna do?”

Bill turned and looked at Matthew. “I noticed you weren’t there for most of it. Don’t get in the habit of doing that. Okay?”

“Right. I won’t.”

“For your own good. People notice.”

“Right. You’re absolutely right.”

At that moment the buzzer sounded, signalling the end of block C.

Matthew poured himself more coffee, grabbed his things and headed back up to class. It was his normal practise to get back upstairs just before the bell, to time things so he could avoid the crush, the crowd, the chaos in between classes. Now he was in the midst of it again, forced to take it all in, as he made stuttering progress through the hall, having to stop or swerve to avoid hitting the students that came at him from all angles, holding his mug of coffee high and clear, clutching the pile of papers he had brought down to mark and hadn't even looked at.

Okay, he had that coming, that was fair, the mild admonishment from Brecker, he couldn't argue with that. He was right. No matter how absurd and offensive, it had been an official school function and he was supposed to have been helping to supervise the students, supervising his class. Fair enough. But this didn't disperse feelings of bitterness and frustration and embarrassment, feelings that seemed to lodge themselves in his scalp and under his shirt collar and down his back, like tiny bits of hair prickling his skin.

It wasn't, he knew, so much Bill's having noticed his absence from the assembly, but the confrontation with Marie. The concession he had been forced to make to Marie Wilcox disturbed him. He was keenly aware of its deeper implications. It was dawning on him that the autonomy he had thought he possessed as a teacher was in fact an illusion. Teaching was a creative act. It required space, freedom, a certain degree of autonomy. But if a student could openly defy him in class and then be supported by the school what authority did he actually possess? It was continually demanded of him and his fellow teachers to respond to the directives and concerns of the government, the board, the union, the administration, the Special Ed. department, the Community Advisory Council,

and the parents, effectively reducing him to a glorified bureaucrat, a lackey, a puppet. Why should his students respect him when it was obvious he had no real power? Of course the continuing problems in regards to labour relations and the stalled contract negotiations didn't help. Teachers were refusing to take part in extra-curricular projects and after-school activities and no doubt daily conversations were being held in households throughout the town about how selfish and lazy teachers were.

This school. This joke of a school. The general chaos in the hallways; the shouting and cursing and crass talk; the garbage strewn about; the girls in states of near undress; the couples groping each other; the graffiti; the t-shirts with obscene slogans and illustrations; the arrogant grins on the faces of the students who had no respect for the school, for education; the desultory looks on the students who were keen and interested and well-behaved.

In the area outside the office were different colourful posters, exhorting the students, punch lines to the cruel joke of this building masquerading as a place of learning.

“Attitude is a Little Thing that Makes a BIG Difference!”

“You Are the Author of Your Own Life Story!”

“Be a Problem Solver, Not a Problem Maker!”

Matthew reached his classroom to find several students waiting to be allowed in. Wordlessly he unlocked the door. He was prepared for the class, but he had yet to formulate a journal question for the day. Standing at the board, he pondered for a moment before one came to him fairly easily. He wrote: “Write a minimum of five sentences

about a time you were angry with the world. What caused you to be angry? How did you deal with your feelings? What did you learn?"

He finished writing the question and slammed the chalk down on the metal ledge.

Students were talking and milling about. When the final buzzer went Matthew immediately closed the door. "Okay, everyone. The journal question is on the board. Please copy it down and get to work."

"Can we watch a movie?" pleaded Stephanie Miller, who asked this question almost everyday.

"B.C. bud!" shouted Dale Levesque.

"Dale," said Matthew, "sit down and be quiet. Jeremy, take off your hat."

He walked back to his desk and began to take the attendance. The coffee was working. He felt angry but energized.

Leaning over his desk to take attendance, shading in the little circles on the computer sheet, Matthew was briefly arrested by the sight, not six feet away, of Kelly Ledson's bare midriff. She was standing next to Heidi Budge's desk, talking with her, idly stretching her arms above her head, the skimpy tank-top riding up, exposing most of her torso. For a moment his eyes took in her smooth skin, her curves.

He quickly looked down again at his attendance sheet, wondering for a moment if anyone had noticed. He gathered himself, tried to refocus.

He looked back up. "Kelly!" he snapped.

She spun around, startled, arms still folded over her head, mascara-laden eyes wide. Across the front of her tank-top, in small letters, were the words "Blondes tease but brunettes please."

“I asked you to sit down and get to work,” Matthew said.

She pouted, sulked. “Okay. Jeez.”

The door opened. Ryan Harrison and Rob Fraser stumbled in, laughing. Matthew pointed at them.

“Late slips, please.”

Ryan’s grin disappeared. “Oh, come on, man!” he cried. “It’s like thirty seconds!”

“I don’t care,” said Matthew. “Get your late slip. Now. Rob, you owe me an admit slip for yesterday.”

“Oh, my god,” cried Ryan, turning around and pushing Rob out the door. Rob was laughing.

“Someone’s pissed,” said Gary Bursey.

“Yeah, jeez,” said Heidi. “Someone having a bad day?”

Matthew ignored them. A few seconds later Norm Carstairs came in. Attendance sheet in hand, Matthew advanced towards him, pointing.

“Late slip,” he said.

Norm winced. “You gotta be kidding.”

“No,” said Matthew. “I’m not. You’re late.”

“Why you bein’ such a hard-ass?”

Matthew turned to confront him, moving so he was directly in front of him, staring at him. “Excuse me?”

The class froze. Norm started to open his mouth and Matthew raised an index finger in front of his face.

“Think carefully about what you’re going to say next,” said Matthew.

There was a pause. Norm smirked.

“Whatever,” he said, shaking his head and going back into the hallway.

“Yeah, whatever,” said Matthew. He turned back to the class. “I’m tired of people showing up late like it’s no big deal,” he said. “Like it doesn’t matter.” He put the attendance sheet by the door and returned to his desk.

“B.C. bud!” shouted Dale.

“Dale, if you yell that one more time, you’re out.”

“Sorry!” shouted Dale.

Matthew gave the class time to work on the journal question, during which Ryan, Rob, and Norm returned, smiling, waving their little yellow slips of paper.

“Thanks a lot, Mr. Roberts,” said Ryan as he took off his coat and sat down.

“Now I’ve got *two* detentions this week.”

Rob Fraser attempted to sit in the empty desk next to Gary Bursey but Matthew intercepted him by snapping his fingers and pointing to his assigned seat.

Matthew began distributing the day’s grammar exercise handout. It dealt with the correct use of adverbs. Moving down the rows, Matthew noticed that Jeremy Paternoster was wearing earplugs. Matthew did not allow the use of electronic gadgets such as i-pods and cell phones in his class. Other teachers did. At the first staff meeting of the year, Principal Landry had stated that a school-wide policy on these devices was “under consideration.”

“Jeremy,” said Matthew. “Turn it off and put it away.”

Jeremy looked up from his journal question and appeared to nod.

Matthew went to the board and quickly wrote out a few phrases:

RUN QUICKLY

WALK SLOWLY

TALK CLEARLY

“Adverbs,” he announced. “Words that modify what?”

Silence.

“We’ve discussed this more than once. Think. Look at these phrases.” He tapped on the board with the chalk. “All of these describe ...”

“Actions,” said Heidi.

“I would appreciate it if you put up your hand before speaking, thank you, but yes, Heidi is correct. Actions. Verbs. So, as we already discussed, adverbs are words that tell us more about actions, or modify verbs. Look at your exercise sheet. In part one you are to write in an appropriate adverb to complete the sentence. In part two...” He paused, noticing Jeremy. “Jeremy, turn off the Walkman.”

Jeremy stared at him blankly.

“Walkman,” laughed Ryan.

“Jeremy...” began Matthew.

“I TURNED IT OFF!” shouted Jeremy.

He had not moved. The device was in his hand, the earphones in his ears.

“It’s OFF!” he bellowed.

“Okay. Good,” said Matthew. “Now please take those out.” He pointed to his ears.

“I turned the friggin’ thing OFF! It’s OFF, you wanna see?” He held the device up high in the air.

“Good!” shouted Matthew back. “Great! Terrific! Now take those plastic things out of your ears NOW!”

Jeremy, his expression one of total disgust, sighed and shook his head and muttered under his breath as he slowly, deliberately, removed first one earphone and then the other.

“Thank you!” shouted Matthew. He paused for a second to collect himself. He could feel his pulse hammering in his temples. “So. As I was saying...” He held up the exercise sheet again. “In part two, you are to write a complete sentence using the adverb in the column on the left.” He paused again, bracing himself for the next confrontation. “Okay? Very simple exercises. Any questions?” He hoped to god there would not be any questions. Someone was making farting noises. Ryan was hunched over his desk, silently laughing.

“Chicks with dicks!” shouted Dale.

The students burst into raucous laughter.

“Out!” shouted Matthew. Dale hadn’t heard him. “Out!” he shouted again, pointing at the door.

“Sorry!” said Dale, smiling.

“Get out. Now.”

“Ah, c’mon,” said Dale. “It don’t mean anything.”

“OUT!”

With a smirk on his face, Dale began to pack up. Matthew was aware that most of the students simply enjoyed watching him lose his cool. Because of this, Dale's behaviour was not seen as stupid, or a waste of time, but was generally appreciated by the class. He had succeeded in providing an entertaining interlude.

After Dale left, the class eventually settled into a relative calm. Matthew waited a couple more minutes before pushing the button on the intercom.

"Yes?" came the voice through the metal screen over the speaker.

"Dale Levesque has been sent to the office for misbehaviour," said Matthew.

"Who?"

"Dale. Levesque."

"Yes?"

"I sent him to the office."

"Oh. Okay."

Matthew could tell from the tone of uncertainty in the voice that Dale had not made it to the office. This caused a flutter of anxiety in Matthew. He was quite conscious of the fact that Dale, despite having been sent out of the class, was still his responsibility, technically under his supervision. If at this moment he happened to be starting a fire in a trash bin or ripping the pages out of library books, Matthew could end up being called to account.

Matthew sat at his desk and dreaded what was to come. He had learned by this point that the worst thing, the most painful thing to be done with a group such as this one, was to actually interact with it. It was always safer to simply put instructions on the board or to distribute handouts and maintain a hands-off approach, which was why, as much as

possible, he avoided taking up exercises or discussing anything in class. But he had to discuss with them their Independent Study Assignment which was worth twenty percent of their final grade. There was no way to avoid it. The handouts, designed by Prontack, were ready. He had to distribute them and then attempt to explain what was required. To Matthew the nature of the project was ridiculous. It couldn't be less "independent" and what was required would, in Matthew's opinion, have hardly challenged a bright fifth grader.

He gave them roughly ten minutes to finish the journal question and work on the grammar exercises. He circulated around the classroom several times, helping some students with the grammar, trying to get others to stay on task. Norm Carstairs was sleeping. Matthew decided to leave him alone. Rob Fraser was drawing a picture, something with spaceships.

"Rob, have you copied down the journal question?"

"What?"

"I think it's great that you're taking an interest in art, but this is English class. Have you copied down the journal question?"

Rob sighed and slowly, reluctantly, began to unpack his binder from his backpack. Matthew stopped himself from pointing out that they were already twenty minutes into the class.

"Mr. Roberts?"

Kelly had her hand up.

"Can I go to the washroom?"

Matthew's strategy for dealing with washroom visits was to always refuse the first few requests because as soon as he said "yes" to anyone, suddenly half the class had to go too.

"No, Kelly, not right now."

"But I need to go."

"You just had a ten minute break twenty minutes ago."

"But I was outside."

"I see. You were outside having a cigarette and didn't have time to visit the washroom. Now you should get extra time to do that, right?"

"I really need to go."

"Well, we're going to discuss the Independent Study Project. This is very important. It'll take just a few minutes and then you can go, okay?"

Kelly sighed and began sulking, staring at the floor.

"Okay," said Matthew, moving back to his desk. "Those exercises are for homework. We'll take them up tomorrow." He began handing out the I.S.P. assignment sheets. Passing Norm Carstairs, he gave his desk a firm kick, waking him, and gave him the handout.

"As with all courses, you must complete an Independent Study Project. This is a major assignment, worth twenty percent of your final grade, so please pay attention. Yes, twenty percent. And some of you desperately need those marks. So, please listen as we go through the handout together and then you can ask any questions and everyone will understand exactly what is to be done."

Despite some groans of displeasure, the class remained relatively calm. Matthew pushed forward.

“So, look at page one of the handout. As it clearly states at the top, you will be doing an independent novel study.” More groans and sighs. “This means you will choose a novel, and after it has been approved by me, you will read it.”

“Can we do a book we’ve read before?”

“Let’s just go through the handout together and then you can ask questions. And I would appreciate it if – ”

“Will grammar count?”

“You raised your hand to ask a question, as I ask you to do every single day.”

“Will grammar count?”

“Yes. It will. Now, look at page one please. The project you hand in to me will have four components. See, near the top of the page there? The list of items? First, there’s a written proposal. You will find the form for the proposal at the back of this handout. Do not turn to it right now, please! Wait! *Wait!* We will look at it together in a minute, okay? Try to stay with me, here. Okay. So, you will be handing in a proposal, then you will be writing a Reading Journal, then a character sketch of one of the characters in your novel, plus a two page recommendation of this novel. Finally, you will make a brief oral presentation to the class about your novel.” He held up four fingers. “So, you will be handing in four things to me. Got it? A proposal, a Reading Journal, a character sketch, and a recommendation.”

“Can we do a book we’ve read before?”

“What’s a Reading Journal?”

“What’s this worth?”

“Now if you turn the page, you will see that you have a handout here for each of the four components you will be handing in, plus a handout on how to do the oral presentation. So everything is laid out for you. All you have to do is follow the instructions here.”

“What’s this worth?”

“Where do we get the book?”

“I’ll discuss that in a minute.”

“What’s this worth?”

“I already told you! It’s worth twenty percent! It says that right at the top of the sheet! First page! Twenty percent!”

“Okay. Jeez.”

Matthew paused, taking a second to calm himself. He noticed that Rob Fraser was not reading the handout with the class and paying attention but instead working again on his drawing of inter-galactic spacecraft.

“Rob? Paying attention?”

“Yeah,” said Rob and stopped drawing.

“This is important, Rob. Please put the drawing away.” Rob slid the sheet underneath his binder. “Okay. Leave it for now, please. You need to pay attention here. Because you really need to do well on this project in order to pass the course.”

Rob sighed and picked up the handout again and leaned back in his chair.

“Now then. The project is graded out of a possible score of one hundred marks. Look please at the breakdown of the evaluation. On page one. We’re still on page one.

First page. Right. See where it says evaluation? Now notice please, two things. Two important things to make note of here. One, you will be spending time in class reading your novel. And yes, you will get a grade for that. That's part of the evaluation. All you have to do is sit and quietly read, and you get fifteen marks. If I have to speak to you, if you can't stay on task and read, you lose marks."

"Oh, man."

"This sucks," said Gary Bursey, "so bad."

Matthew lowered the handout and looked at him. "What are you talking about? You get credit for doing what you're supposed to do anyway. You get *marks* for just sitting and reading."

"Well who wants to do that?" said Gary.

Matthew stared at Gary, blinking. He stopped himself from saying anything further. He resumed.

"So, yes, amazingly, you get a full fifteen marks just for sitting in class and reading. Then, we have the Reading Journal. It's worth thirty marks. That's a lot. More than any other component of the project. So you need to put some serious time and effort into the Reading Journal."

"What's a journal?"

"How do we do it?"

"So, turn to the second page—"

"Can we do a book that we've read before?"

"And you'll see how to do the Reading Journal. It's really very simple."

Rob was drawing again. Matthew casually walked over to Rob's desk but kept talking.

"So as you can see there, the Reading Journal is divided into five sections to make it easier for you."

Matthew reached down and attempted to pick up Rob Fraser's spaceship drawing. He grasped the sheet by its corner but as he pulled it, Rob pressed down on it with his hand and the paper ripped almost in two. For a moment their eyes met and Matthew saw in Rob Fraser's cold fury and loathing. Rob snatched up the I.S.P. handout and flung it in Matthew's face.

"Fuck you," he hissed.

Matthew, still holding the corner of the torn paper, tensed himself for a follow up blow, but Rob remained seated, still staring up at Matthew, his eyes full of hate. The class was completely silent.

"Okay," said Matthew quietly. "All right. You will go to the office and you will stay there until I come down to speak with you." Adrenalin was coursing through Matthew's body. He fought to remain calm. He finally let go of the drawing and backed away.

Rob Fraser began to noisily, angrily, put his books and things in his backpack. Matthew knew it was important to keep the class focused on the task at hand. He resumed speaking before Rob finished packing.

"Okay. So. Reading Journal. Five sections. As you can see, each section of the journal is broken down into a series of questions. For each section, all you have to do is read a few chapters of the book and then answer the questions. In complete sentences, I

remind you. Okay? Complete sentences. So, take a look. See how it's broken down?" The door slamming shut was like a gun going off. "So after reading the first two chapters of your book you answer the questions in Section One. Then after reading the next three chapters, you do Section Two, and so on."

Startled by the incident they had just witnessed, the students were quiet, docile, and Matthew took advantage of the ensuing calm to speed through the rest of the handout. Once finished, he asked them to take out their copies of *City Shadows*. Astonishingly, half of the novel remained to be read, testimony to how difficult it was to make any progress in the class.

"Okay, turn to page 83 and read quietly please. You can also use this time to finish the questions for chapter 12. Those are for homework. We'll take them up tomorrow. The grammar sheet is homework as well."

Kelly had her hand up and was rocking back and forth in her chair.

"Yes, go," said Matthew. "Hurry up."

She sprinted out of the room.

With most of the other students focused on their work, Matthew again pushed the intercom button.

"Yes?"

"Rob Fraser has been sent to the office for misbehaviour."

"Who?"

"Rob Fraser."

"Oh. Wait. Yes, he's here. Uh, who was the other student you sent?"

"Dale Levesque."

There was a pause.

“Who?”

“Dale. Levesque.”

Matthew could hear the secretary repeating the name and talking with someone.

“He’s not here,” she told Matthew.

“Okay. But Rob Fraser is there.”

“Yeah. He’s here.”

“Okay.”

“But Dale Levesque isn’t here.”

“I understand.”

“Okay.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

A minute later Kelly came back to class and there followed the predictable, endless series of requests to visit the washroom.

Matthew went to his desk and sat down and opened up his log book. It was important to make an entry on today’s class. It was entirely possible that Principal Landry or Bill Brecker might ask to see it. Matthew left the students to work, even though most of them were talking or otherwise goofing off, while he jotted down an account of the class and the incident with Rob Fraser. When he’d finished he found his copy of *City Shadows* and began flipping through the pages.

“Okay, let’s pick things up where Kia has found her brother in the bus station,” he announced.

Matthew worked to gain and keep their attention as he read and managed to do so until they reached the end of chapter 13. There were seven minutes left in the class.

“Can we go early?”

“Yeah, please?”

“Well, we’re all getting tired of this book, right?” said Matthew. “Let’s keep reading. The sooner we get through it the better, right?”

“Oh, god,” moaned Heidi.

For the next ten minutes Matthew read, aware that most of the students weren’t listening, but he didn’t care. He wanted this class to be over as much as they did, but he knew in terms of discipline and his tenuous hold over the students it would be a mistake to let them out early.

“When I’d finished talking, he looked at me in a way I had never seen before, like I wasn’t his friend, like he was ready to cut my throat. “Just shut up,” he said. “Just shut the hell up.” I was shocked but I didn’t want to show it. I just shrugged my shoulders and kept walking. All the rest of the way, I didn’t say a word. I decided he must be still worrying about his dad. I couldn’t remember mine, so I didn’t know how he felt.”

Matthew shut the book. “Okay. Tomorrow we take up the questions for chapter 12 and on Friday we go to the library to get started on the I.S.P. Please wait for the bell.”

Mercifully, it came less than a minute later.

Matthew took a little time to sit and gather himself, letting the bulk of the rush work its way through the hall before heading downstairs. With a staff meeting scheduled for right after school, there would be little time to discuss the Rob Fraser incident with Bill but it still needed to be dealt with.

Downstairs in the office, Rob Fraser was nowhere to be seen. Neither was Dale Levesque. Nor was Bill Brecker. Matthew approached Barbara at the front desk.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi. Uh, isn’t Rob Fraser supposed to be here?”

“I don’t know. I think Joyce talked to him.”

“Is Bill here?”

“No, he’s gone for the day.”

“Oh. Is Joyce available?”

“Let me check.” She got up and walked back to Principal Landry’s office. She reemerged a second later.

“You can go in,” she said.

Matthew had anticipated discussing the situation with Bill. He was far less certain as to how Joyce Landry might handle things. He walked into Principal Landry’s office.

“Hi, Matthew,” said Landry. “Sit down. I guess you had kind of a rough class, eh?”

Matthew shrugged his shoulders. “Not much rougher than usual, really.”

“I had a talk with Rob Fraser,” said Landry. “He told me about throwing the paper at you. He’s suspended.”

“Okay. Well. I appreciate that.”

“But I want to talk to you for a second. He says you took a drawing from him? And you tore it up?”

“No. That’s not the case.”

“Okay. What happened?”

Matthew sighed. "I was attempting to address the class. We were discussing their I.S.P. assignment. I asked Rob to put the drawing away and pay attention. He didn't. I tried to take it away from him, but he held onto it and it tore. Then he threw the I.S.P. handout in my face and told me to fuck off."

"Okay." Principal Landry appeared thoughtful. "So you did try to take the drawing from him."

"Right."

"I don't think that's what I would have done."

"Oh. Well ..."

"It belongs to him. I think we have to respect that. Personal belongings. That drawing may have meant a great deal to him."

"What?"

"And that's kind of close to a physical confrontation there. You really have to avoid that. It's easy for that kind of situation to escalate."

Matthew raised his hands. "Well, I want to be absolutely clear then. I never touched him."

"I understand," said Landry. "But also, I think there's the possibility for a student to be drawing something and to, you know, at the same time, listen to their teacher. I mean, that is possible."

"I was instructing the class. He is expected to listen. This is fundamental, isn't it? I'm the teacher. When I'm speaking, the students should pay attention."

"Yes, that's true, but it's not always that simple. You have to keep an open mind here."

“An open mind? Joyce, he’s failing the class. This has to be the simplest, the easiest, bordering on the most ridiculous English class I could ever imagine, and he’s failing.” Matthew stretched out his hands. “And on top of that, he’s a problem. He skips. He’s late. He disrupts the class on a regular basis. He’s failing. And you’re suggesting I’m too hard on him?”

“Well, Matthew, I feel I have to say something because it’s not even the end of October and this is now the fifth student in the class I’ve had to suspend for insubordination. I know it’s a tough group, but maybe you have to rethink a little how you’re approaching things. Look, we have a staff meeting. We can talk about this some more tomorrow or later in the week if you like. It might be good to discuss this with Sue as well.” She stood up. “For a first year teacher, you’re doing a very good job, Matthew. Just try to be ...” She paused, searching for the right words. “A bit more flexible maybe?”

Matthew stood up. “Why are all these problem students put into the same class?”

“I know,” she said, moving towards the door. “I know it’s a crazy class. It would be a tough assignment for any teacher. It’s just how the timetable worked out.”

“But I don’t understand why someone doesn’t take a look at that class list and say, ‘Hey, maybe this is a bad idea.’ I mean, not so much for the teacher, but what about the other students? The ones who aren’t causing problems? How is it fair to them?”

They moved into the main office, Landry shutting the door behind her.

“You’re right, but the timetable, that’s not really up to me. But you know, this is just part of the job. Look, we need to get into that meeting, okay?”

Since the actual staff room was too small accommodate the staff, staff meetings were held in the library. The teachers sat in clusters around different tables. Matthew, exhausted and feeling more anti-social than usual, had found an empty table at the very back of the room. He sat with one arm on the table, resting his head in his hand, staring without seeing at his yellow agenda sheet – “Cafeteria Supervision Schedule ... Hearts and Flowers committee ... Student Council ... Red Ribbon Fun Run.” Just as the meeting was getting under way, just as Principal Landry stood up and began to speak, Kelso came in. He sauntered around the perimeter of the library to make his way to the back and sit next to Matthew.

“Okay, first of all,” said Landry, “coming up in a couple of weeks is ‘Bring a Parent to School Day.’ Now this hasn’t been totally finalized yet because of the contract and so on but the Advisory Council is really pushing for this and ...”

Kelso leaned in close. “Grade ten general,” he said. “It’s written all over your face, Roberts. Another grim encounter with the crooked, the corrupted, the incorrigible. How long is it going to take you to understand? You’re wasting your valuable time and energy trying to teach the unteachable. No one is asking you to do this. You’re living in the past. Teaching is finished. We’re just wardens of a daycare facility. The sooner you understand that the better.”

“And I know,” continued Principal Landry, flashing her big, toothy smile for everyone, “that when those parents are here they’re going to be impressed. You bet. They’re going to be knocked out because we have an awesome staff and an amazing school and we deliver an awesome quality of education in all our classes.”

Chapter Six

Dean Martin was crooning about the pretty girls in New York. Crouched on the floor, Sims searched for something else to listen to.

“Now what th’ fuck did you do with my ‘Scavenger’ disc?”

“I don’t know,” said Matthew. “It’s there somewhere.” He took another sip of his drink. “So anyway, she says, ‘My son tells me you called him a moron. Is that true?’ Now think about it. I’ve called to inform her that her son has been late for class three times in one week, hasn’t done any homework, has lost his textbook, and is constantly disrupting the class. And her concern is if I might have called him a ‘moron.’”

“I hate it when you do this.”

“I mean, God *forbid*.”

“I really do.”

“I tell her, ‘I’ve had to move your son four times. He sits now right beside my desk. And I *still* have to yell at him for making monkey noises.’”

Sims stood up, sighing, and refilled the plastic tray with discs.

“He makes these hooting sounds. Like an ape or something.” Matthew’s brow momentarily furrowed, thinking about the strange creature that was Ryan Harrison. He sipped his drink.

“So anyway, she says, ‘He tells me you called him a moron. Is this true?’ And I came right back with, ‘No. I did not call him a moron. I do not call my students morons. But I let them know when they are acting *like* morons. There’s a difference.’”

Sims was putting cd's into plastic cases and stacking them next to the dvd player.

“So did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Call him a moron.”

“Oh, probably. Yeah. More than likely.”

Matthew sat in his usual chair, to one side of the little table they played cribbage on. His tie was loosened, top button undone, shirttail hanging out. Halfway through his second gin and tonic, he was relaxed and happy. He could feel the pleasure centres in his brain releasing their chemicals, soft little explosions of endorphins. He imagined his cerebral cortex lighting up like a pinball machine.

Sims was barefoot and had changed into what looked to Matthew like a pair of pyjama bottoms and a loose shirt embroidered with a design he claimed was of Mayan origin. It looked to Matthew like he was walking around with a placemat on his chest. The house was decorated to evoke a 60s, bohemian atmosphere with curtains of strung beads hung in the doorways, a stick of incense smouldering in the lap of a serene Buddha.

Sims went into the kitchen and came out carrying a drink and a red pen in one hand and a stack of ruled notebooks in the other. He sat down at the opposite side of the table with the notebooks in his lap. Opening one, he quickly turned to the last page of ballpoint scrawl and drew a large red checkmark. Then he tossed the notebook onto the floor and opened the next one. Again, he found the last page, drew a large checkmark, and dropped it on the floor.

Matthew, watching him, said, “What are you doing?”

Sims glanced up. "I'm marking." He drew another large checkmark. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

As usual, Sims had the television on, even though they weren't watching it, the sound turned off so they could listen to music. A beer commercial was on. A young woman in a bikini leaned over, her cleavage filling the screen. The image lasted no more than a second.

"You have Karen Holt, right? Did you see what she was wearing today?"

Sims nodded. "I know."

"I think you should be able to send them home when they dress like that. You should be able to say, 'I'm sorry but you are too much of a visual distraction. You are impeding my ability to do my job. Goodbye.' "

Sims dropped another notebook.

"Come back when you're not wearing clothes three sizes too small."

Matthew sipped his drink. He listened to his ice cubes tinkle.

Dean Martin was finished. After a series of mechanical whirrs and clicks, the stereo emitted a perfect digitized drumbeat that seemed to shake the room. Sims used a remote to turn the volume down.

"You know what Amy told me today?" said Matthew. "Did you hear about this?" He sat up straight. "She says there was this big party on the weekend. She told me who had it but I can't remember. Some guy in grade twelve. Get this. She says they were collecting the girls' bras at the door. Otherwise you couldn't get in. To get into the party, you had to give them your bra."

"Was Amy at the party?"

“Course not.”

“Well, come on.”

“She insisted she wasn’t making it up. And I don’t know, sounds plausible to me. I can see the girls going along with it. Some of ‘em, anyway.”

“Amy is very fucked up. And I’d say you’re spending too much time with her.”

“I know, I know,” sighed Matthew. “What can I do? She likes to talk to me. It’s that I’m willing to listen, I guess.” He watched tiny tonic bubbles rise to the surface. “She’s a very sensitive girl.”

“She’s like the rest of ‘em,” said Sims. “She wants attention.” He was moving through the notebooks with increasing speed. “You think she’s fragile and sensitive. Really she’s just very determined to get what she wants.”

“But this is different. I mean, she did try to kill herself.”

Sims glanced up. “Did she now?” He turned back to his notebooks. “It’s the ultimate attention-getting tactic, my friend. Now she has everyone feeling sorry for her. Including you.”

Matthew drained his drink. He crunched an ice cube.

“Jesus,” he said. “When did you get to be such a heartless prick?”

A fat man in a golf shirt was jumping up and down. He’d won a new car.

Sims gathered up the notebooks and took them back into the kitchen. He brought out another drink, put it on the end table, and went upstairs. While he was gone, Matthew also helped himself to the gin. As he passed the stereo he considered putting Dean Martin back on but Sims returned carrying a small wooden box. The box was covered with

ornate carvings, patterns, what looked to be Mayan hieroglyphics. He sat down with it in his lap.

“Dude, you’re not her therapist,” Sims said. “We have guidance counsellors for that.”

He removed several items from the box and put them on the end table. There was a refillable lighter; another rectangular piece of metal that looked possibly like a kind of jack-knife; a small wooden pipe; a dime-sized circular screen and then, inside a small clear plastic pouch, a dark square about the same size and shape as a nine volt battery. It looked like a highly compressed piece of fudge.

“This is your first year of teaching and my third. So let me explain something to you. I’ve seen this kind of thing before.”

Sims picked up the wooden pipe and the jack-knife instrument. He swung open the tiny lid which covered the bowl of the pipe. With the pointed arm that folded out from the metal tool, he began to scrape around the inside of the bowl. At intervals he stopped to tap black crumbs from the bowl into a long metal ashtray on the table.

“You’re getting all dramatic, thinking this is some sort of ...” He fluttered the cleaning tool in front of him. “... extraordinary situation. It isn’t. Teenage girls do crazy things. They have eating disorders and panic attacks. They get hysterical and try to kill themselves. Then they wake up one morning and they’re normal. Different hormones kick in or something. They calm down and try acting like adults.”

Matthew was looking at the dregs in the ashtray. The bottom of the ashtray was a relief of a Chinese dragon, angry eyes and nostrils, long tendrils emanating from its hairy snout.

“It could be a lot worse, you know,” said Sims. “She could have a parent who beats her. Or live in a home where they can’t pay the bills. See, she *wants* to feel sorry for herself. And you’re helping her do that.”

Sims put down the metal tool, picked up the tiny screen and inserted it in the bowl of the pipe, pushing it down with his finger. He opened the little plastic bag and pinched off a thick, tablet-sized piece of hash, compressing it briefly between thumb and forefinger before putting it in the pipe. Picking up the metal lighter, he rasped it to life with his thumb and held the flame over the pipe. He puffed, inhaled the smoke deep into his lungs and swung the wooden lid over the bowl of the pipe. He held both pipe and lighter out for Matthew.

Matthew always had slight difficulty with the operation. If he didn’t get the flame down into the bowl far enough and then took too long to get a controlled draw on the pipe, he ended up burning his thumb. But if he rushed himself, then he spent the next ten minutes coughing and choking, a burning feeling in his lungs for the rest of the night.

He burned his thumb.

They passed the pipe back and forth until Sims inspected its contents closely and emptied it.

Several minutes passed with them saying nothing, not moving, the room filled with techno music, staccato drumbeats and synthesized fuzz.

Sims slowly leaned over and searched painfully through his arsenal of plastic remotes lined up on the coffee table, trying two before finding the right one. He began channel surfing, random images flowing by at mindless speed. He stopped on a man lying in a glass coffin. The coffin was filled with snakes. Sims pointed a different remote at the

stereo and the music changed. A soothing wash of sound grew in volume, a swirling wave, slow and constant, punctuated by low rumblings like distant thunder. Matthew could feel the thunder in his feet and buttocks. The hash made his bones hum.

“I just want to say ...” He stopped, swallowed. “The thing that makes it ... difficult. Jesus.” He turned to Sims. “This is good stuff.”

Sims grunted and gave a slight nod.

Matthew paused. His thumb hurt but the pain was far away.

“It’s that she comes to me. See? She turns to me. I can’t ... ignore her.” He looked over at Sims. His eyes were dark and sleepy. “I can’t turn my back.” Matthew reached for his glass. Carefully lifted it. It was heavier than before. “I worry about her,” he said.

Sims stared at the television.

“I know she’s not the only girl ... who’s tried to kill herself, but ...” He sipped his drink. He forgot completely what he was going to say.

The snakes were now writhing over the man’s chest. They showed a close-up of the man’s face. He wore swimming goggles. He was sweating.

“And the other thing,” said Matthew, “she’s gifted.”

A tiny microphone was attached to his goggles. They watched his mouth moving.

“This time last year,” said Sims, “I was in Karon.”

“Very talented. Artistic.”

“No. Isan. I was in Isan.”

“This is not a good place for someone like that.”

“We found this little Lao temple. Ruins. Covered in vines.”

“And Donna keeps asking me about her.”

“We had this amazing dope.”

A python coiled itself around the man’s thigh.

“At night we made bonfires and danced.”

Another close-up. He appeared to be screaming.

“I dream about Thailand.”

“I don’t know what to say sometimes.”

“The golden Buddha of Wat Pho.”

A commercial. A man shaving on a space ship, surrounded by half-naked women.

“I feel like I’m trapped. Caught in the middle.”

“The stupas in Wat Chai.”

Quick shots of thighs, razors, cleavage. The man’s jaw being stroked by long fingers.

“But I can’t just ignore her,” said Matthew. “I can’t turn my back.”

Chapter Seven

There had been no sound. Or at least nothing audible to Matthew.

One moment he was answering questions about the upcoming grammar quiz, the class relatively subdued, and the next Nicole Williams was hastily backing away from Gary Bursey who sat in front of her, her expression one of disgust and horror. Stopped in mid-sentence, Matthew watched as she awkwardly wrenched her desk into the aisle and continued moving backwards, gripping the edges of the desktop with clenched fists and pushing with her feet.

“Nicole,” said Matthew. “What’s wrong?”

Various gasps and muffled cries rose up. Other students began moving their desks. Melanie Laskin, sitting in one of the far rows near the door, blurted out a cry of “Oh my god!” and put her hands to her face. Ryan Harrison, hunched over with the lower half of his face buried in his arms, was laughing silently, his upper body shaking.

The only student not reacting to the situation was Gary Bursey, who sat looking up at Matthew, his face working, holding back laughter.

Then the smell hit him.

His first reaction was to ignore it, to pretend to be unaffected and somehow immune to foul odours. But the stench was too powerful. He could barely open his mouth to speak. He gestured for the window to be opened and ordered Gary into the hallway.

“I can’t help it,” cried Gary.

“Get out!” said Matthew.

This was not the first such occurrence though the two previous incidents had taken place just before the end of class and were of lower potency. It seemed to Matthew an impossible situation. How did you punish someone for flatulence? Could you send the student to the office? What exactly did one say to the vice-principal?

A further complication was Matthew's awareness that he couldn't even shame Gary. If anything, he appeared to take pride in the suffocating power of his effluence.

Amidst the coughing and wailing, Matthew directed everyone to take out their copies of *City Shadows* and read on their own. After he had the class more or less settled down again, he left the room to confront Gary who was leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets looking very pleased with himself. Matthew glared at him.

"I can't help it," said Gary with a shrug. "It's the granola."

The remainder of the class was a lost cause as one student after another claimed to be ill and needed to visit the washroom. Ryan Harrison and Rob Fraser spent most of their time making farting noises and then swivelling their heads around, whispering "Who did that?"

Downstairs, Spivack was waiting for him in the staff room, sitting morosely on one of the couches and staring out the window. The room was otherwise empty.

"Well it's about time," he said as Matthew walked in. He immediately got to his feet and began buttoning his coat. "I was thinking of sending out a search party: find the other teacher who likes to read. Come on. Let's go. They're all waiting for us, fucking vultures."

Matthew gave Spivack a quizzical look.

Spivack sighed. "Come on, Roberts. You really gotta start paying attention. Can't you read?"

He gestured to the chalk board on one wall, next to the refrigerator. Matthew turned around and stared at it. It was covered with various messages and notices, some barely legible. The most obvious one stated in large capital letters, "ALL IPRC FORMS MUST BE IN ON FRIDAY BY THE LATEST!"

"Well it's not there *now*," said Spivack. "But it was up there most of the week. I have, again, won this month's fifty-fifty draw. Which means I have to spend my winnings buying beer for everyone. They just love it when the old man buys 'em beer. Have you had to buy beer for everyone at the Legion yet?"

"No," said Matthew.

"You're lucky. Well, let's go."

"I guess you don't know the drill yet," said Spivack in his car. He drove an old, beat up Volvo with metal bumpers. "Every month they have a fifty-fifty draw, and the winner always has to buy the beer at the fucking Legion on the last Friday of the month. So this month, guess what? I won. I don't even buy the tickets anymore. They just assume I'm in and take the money out of my winnings because for some mysterious reason I seem to win about six times a year. I guess they like to see the old guy get sauced up. And they know I'm a soft touch. You'll see. I'll end up blowing the whole pot and then some."

The Legion parking lot was crammed with vehicles. Inside they were greeted with a roar from a long, crowded table. Two of the older teachers scurried up and with

exaggerated courtesy, led Spivack to their end of the table and forced him to sit, people pounding him on the back or reaching over to shake his hand.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Matthew heard Spivack say. “Sit down and gimme a beer, ya bloodsuckers.”

The bartender carefully set a full tray on the table. Someone slammed down a cold, sweating bottle in front of Matthew. There was an air of urgency and desperation. Some people had two or three bottles lined up in front of them while others appeared already drunk.

As soon as Matthew finished one bottle of beer, another appeared before him. People took turns going up to the bar and bringing back fresh trays or summoning the bartender with shouts and raised fingers. Each time a tray arrived, Spivack would stand up and, smiling through gritted teeth, hand over his money while people applauded. Everyone was talking and yelling but no one bothered to include Matthew in the conversation. He didn't resent this for most of the talk centered in angry tones on the continuing difficulties with the board, stalled contract negotiations, rumours of a strike.

David Gill, the chief negotiator for the union, was giving people the inside scoop.

“See, for us it's either six outta eight, with a once a week on-call, or six point five half the year, the other half back to six. But see, they're pushing the seven outta eight and they just keep saying, 'Hey, that's the new ministry requirements, people.' Like, 'That's the fucking *law*.'”

Matthew was on his second beer when he spied Sims sitting at the other end of the table with some of the younger teachers. Sims waved Matthew down and pulled out a chair.

“Down there, the talk is of contracts, prep time, and politics. Here it’s about sex, drugs and rock ’n roll. Have a seat.”

Matthew found himself sitting between Sims and Stacey Dunn and across from Joanne Miller and Eric Rickson. Both Stacey and Joanne also taught English.

“If Sue were here,” said Stacey, “we could have a department meeting.”

“Stacey,” said Sims, “was just telling us some fascinating tales about teachers’ college. She says she found the whole experience to be a complete waste of time. I’m sure you’re as shocked as I am to hear *anyone* say such a thing.”

“Oh, shut up,” said Stacey. She turned to Matthew. “Where did you go?”

“Ottawa,” said Matthew. “It was a pretty bad program.”

“Ottawa,” said Rickson excitedly. “When you were there, you meet a guy named Bill?”

“What?” said Matthew.

“Oh, what was his name,” said Rickson to himself. He ran a hand through his hair and looked up at the ceiling. “Bill, uh ... Bill, Bill ...”

“I think it’s weird,” said Stacey, “how everybody *knows* teachers’ college is a complete joke, but it never changes. My dad says it was like that when he went. And the people who were there, the other students. I mean, wow. I’d look at some of ‘em and think, ‘I feel sorry for the kids who end up with you.’”

“I think there should be some kind of exam,” said Matthew. “When you consider just about anyone with a pulse can get a BA now, there really should be an entrance exam.”

“Barzooon!” shouted Rickson. “Bill Barzun! You ever run into ‘im? Big guy, pumps a lotta iron. *Huge* guns.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Joanne.

“No,” said Matthew. “Don’t remember a Bill Barzun.”

“Went to high school with the guy. Everybody called him ‘Barzooona’. ‘Hey, Barzooona!’”

“Entrance exams attract a certain kind of person,” said Joanne. “Look at the people who are lawyers and doctors. It’s all about money. Competition. Teaching needs people who are more sensitive, more ...”

“Or ‘Zoon Man.’ Or ‘The *Zooner!*’”

“But come on,” said Matthew. “Not just anyone can become say a policeman or an engineer or a brain surgeon. But just about *anybody* can get through teachers’ college and become a teacher. That doesn’t bother you?”

“Well I don’t think that’s true,” said Joanne. “That’s my point.”

“So what, only special people who can’t pass entrance exams should become teachers?”

Matthew regretted saying the words the second they left his mouth. He did not want to get into another futile argument with Joanne Miller, she of the Birkenstock sandals with wool socks, she of the hairy upper lip and patchouli oil. It had taken Matthew a few weeks to realize they disagreed about virtually everything. In retrospect, he couldn’t understand why he’d found this surprising.

“Excuse me,” said Sims standing up. “I make it a point to avoid serious conversations when I’m drinking beer at the Legion.” He gestured to Rickson. “Come on, Zoon Man.” They left in the direction of the pool table.

“What I’m saying is we want teachers who really care about the kids,” said Joanne. “We want teachers who ...”

“One of the amazing things about teachers’ college,” interrupted Matthew, “was on the very first day we had this big assembly. And the head of the department is up there proudly announcing that in the last several years, not a single student has failed to be teacher certified. I thought that was a very strange thing to be proud of. So in other words, any idiot with a degree can get through their program.”

“No,” said Joanne. “I think she was saying that they have a good program and people who attend there go on to be successful. She was trying to reassure people.”

“About what? Everybody knows it’s a joke.”

“Well, I’m just saying that’s how she was looking at it. And it’s not a joke. I learned a lot at teacher’s college. There were all sorts of important ideas in terms of educational theory, educational psychology. How children learn to read, for example. How the brain develops.”

“In my educational psychology course,” said Matthew, “we had a mid-term. It was on three chapters of our textbook. All multiple choice questions. The test was open book. And it was worth forty percent of our course mark.”

“The thing that drove me nuts was all the group work,” said Stacey. “I must’ve done about twenty group presentations. And having to watch everybody else’s, day after day. By the end of the year, I *hated* everybody.”

“And did you have something called a ‘Reflective Seminar’? Twice a week we had to sit around and discuss our feelings about things.”

“What’s wrong with that?” asked Joanne.

From the other end of the table there was the sound of empty bottles clinking and tipping over, somebody yelling. Fred Hicks, who taught shop and woodworking, was on his feet, swaying slightly, his sweaty face crimson. Hicks’ mode of dress never changed. Everyday he wore dark green coveralls and old workboots. He glowered at those sitting around him. His words were slurred and muddled by beer.

“No more,” he shouted. “That’s *it*.” He slashed a hand through the air. He appeared ready to attack someone. “Fourteen years I coach basketball. Fourteen fucking years! No more. That’s how they wanna be? Well, fuck ‘em then. Fuck ‘em all!”

“Here, here,” somebody yelled. Someone else clapped. “Give ‘em hell, Fred.”

Others stood and tried to calm Hicks, encouraging him to sit down. Spivack waved urgently for more beer.

Matthew needed to visit the washroom. He got up, bottle in hand, feeling slightly unsteady as he dodged bodies and moved towards the other side of the hall. Then Donna Kimball, Amy’s mother, was blocking his way, beer in hand, a bit unsteady, bumping into him, smiling, her dark eyes fixing his.

“Hey,” she said.

“Well,” said Matthew. “Hello.”

She raised her bottle of Molson Export. “Thanks for bringing the party, lucky man. You know, last month the winner was that new math teacher. I forget his name. Ricks. Or Rinks.”

“Rickson?”

“Yeah. He showed up, bought one round and left. What an asshole.” She took a swallow of beer, leaned forward, and with the hand holding the bottle jabbed a finger into Matthew’s shoulder. “You, though, are a class act.”

“Well, thanks, but actually I didn’t ... ”

“Some people are talking about headin’ over to Brews ‘n’ Cues later. You wanna come?”

“Well, I don’t know. Still have to teach tomorrow ...”

She stood there, smiling and staring at him, her dark eyes unwavering, unnerving. She was wearing her usual ensemble of jeans, t-shirt and leather jacket, a hint of femininity in the thin gold chain around her tanned neck. She finally closed her eyes briefly, signalling a change in subject.

“How’s she doing?”

Matthew was expecting this question. He paused to assume his concerned teacher persona.

“Fine, I think,” he said. “Everything’s basically okay, as far as I can tell. No worries in terms of the class, of course.”

“She likes the chess club. Says you beat her for the first time.”

“Well, I think she let me win, actually. How are things with you?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She looked away from Matthew, gazing around the room, her face instantly drawn and downcast. “I guess I should be getting home soon.” She considered her bottle, as if gauging how much time she had left. “We had a long talk last

week about her ... anxieties. The whole time I wanted to tell her to fix herself a rye and coke and chill out." She gave him a tight smile. "But I didn't."

"Well, I think it's good that you're taking time to talk with her about things. I'm sure she appreciates that."

"Yeah. Well. You wouldn't know it from her. I'm still not sensitive enough to her *needs*, apparently. I go out too much. I talk on the phone too much." She shrugged. "I've stopped smoking dope at home. She said that meant a lot to her."

"She worries about you."

Donna shook her head slightly. "She just worries. About everything. All the time. How do you live with someone like that?"

"Amy's a very intelligent, serious-minded young woman," said Matthew.

"You mean a nerd, right? A geek. What can I say? She got stuck with her dad's looks. When I was her age I had all kinds of boys after me." She took another swallow of beer. "You know, part of the problem is we're running out of things to talk about. You sort of expect it when they get to a certain age, but not this way."

She smiled suddenly, her dark eyes narrowing, and leaned in close.

"Maybe I should have you over for dinner some night," she said. "Then Amy and I could talk about our interest in the new English teacher."

Matthew felt his face getting hot. He really needed to pee. He opened his mouth and closed it again, then said, "Yeah. Sure. I mean ... maybe..." He held up his near-empty bottle and looked at it. "Excuse me for a minute," he said. "I need to ..." He gestured vaguely towards the washrooms and began to back away. He bumped into someone but kept going. Donna watched him, amused.

“Had any moose meat yet?” she asked.

Sims was standing in front of the mirror, smoothing back his golden hair. The electric hand dryer was still on.

“Ah, I was just thinking about you,” Sims shouted.

Matthew regarded the contents of the urinal, the sodden cigarette butts and melting ice and the blue rubber thing over the drain.

“A few of us,” said Sims, “have decided to depart for somewhere without fluorescent lights, country music or bitter old men. If you can bring yourself to abandon Mr. Spivack, why not tag along?”

Matthew sighed as he relaxed the muscles in his buttocks. He aimed his stream at the surviving ice cubes. It gave him pleasure to see them shift and fall and melt away.

The electric dryer clicked off, its roar giving way to the sound of water moving through pipes, voices from the bar.

“Saw you talking to Donna again,” said Sims. “I know she’s kinda hot, but you need to watch out for her, you know.” He cleared his throat and assumed his Monty Python voice. “*Mister Roberts*. Fraternizing with female staff members? Again? Need I remind you, young man, you remain a *probationary* teacher? Hmm?”

“She’s not a member of the teaching staff,” said Matthew, his voice echoing.

“Oh, I *see*,” said Sims. “Beg your pardon. I wasn’t aware you preferred older women. Well, do keep in mind her daughter is a student of yours.”

“Exactly,” said Matthew. “So I *have* to talk to her, don’t I?” He zipped his trousers and went to the sink. He rinsed his hands in frigid water. “She’s not *that* old, is she?”

Sims opened the door. “She has a fifteen year old daughter. How old do you think she is?”

“I don’t know,” said Matthew. “How old do you think I am?”

Matthew had another beer while people discussed what they wanted to do and organized themselves, figuring out who was sober enough to drive. Spivack, still sitting with Hicks and Gill, all morosely hunched over their beers, kept glancing over at Matthew who pretended not to notice. Donna was no where in sight. Matthew hoped she’d gone home.

Outside it was dark, a half moon suspended over the lake. There was a wind coming off the water and Matthew could hear waves breaking on the beach. A small group piled into Sims’s truck, all of the younger set. They drove to Sims place, a rented house one street away from the pulp mill. During the brief walk from the truck to the back door the night was filled with the sound of machines and the smell of sawdust. The lights from the mill blotted out the darkness. It appeared as a huge, tangled network of girders and pipes with white clouds of steam rising from it, the single massive smokestack a towering idol.

They sat in Sims’s living room sipping a sickeningly sweet yet powerful cocktail he claimed to have invented and dubbed “The Driftwood Doozie.” He said everyone had to try it because it contained a Bolivian liqueur that was impossible to get anywhere but in Bolivia, made from some rare, organic fruit that only grew in Bolivia, harvested by Bolivians. The stereo was playing some kind of trance music, electronic drumbeats with what sounded like monks chanting in the background.

Finishing his drink, Matthew sat on the sofa feeling both inebriated and profoundly bored. Stacey and Linda were talking about movies. Linda's absolute favourite movie of all time was "Titanic." Stacey agreed it was "a classic."

"I cry every time I watch it," said Linda. "Every time."

Sims was channel surfing with the sound off while discussing audio equipment with Rickson.

"But you gotta have the sub-woofer," said Rickson.

"No you don't," said Sims. "Those are Bose five fifty-one's. I got six of 'em. Plus a pre-amp. I don't need anything."

"There's no way it's as good without the sub-woofer."

"I don't think you understand the technical specifications of these speakers."

"The test is 'Star Wars,' said Rickson. "The beginning, eh? When the star destroyer comes in? Your windows should rattle. Play that and see if you don't need the big woof."

Sims said nothing.

"So we gonna play version four or what?"

"Whatever," said Sims wearily. "Go ahead."

Rickson dropped to his knees and pulled a black plastic box out from under the television. He tossed a small console into Sims's lap and found another one for himself. Sims had a remote in each hand and was pushing buttons. The television screen went blue, then black. Matthew watched as it began filling with spaceships. The spaceships fired lasers at one other. There was a blinding flash as a ship exploded. Another ship, flames streaming from it, crashed into what appeared to be a vast desert. A huge pyramid

loomed in the background. The words “Death Lair 4” appeared, and then the subtitle, “Reign of Blood.”

“Okay,” said Rickson excitedly. He sat cross-legged on the floor. “Level six, level six.”

The screen froze and then changed. They were inside a castle or dungeon, dim and menacing. Sims and Rickson, gripping their consoles with both hands, began pushing buttons with their thumbs, making soft *pocka, pocka* sounds. Two small gun sights appeared on the screen and began moving forward. An enemy soldier emerged from around a corner and was promptly disintegrated. The images were startling in their digitized realism, convincing and life-like. A second soldier, seemingly half-human, half-robot, appeared from behind a stone pillar and Rickson shot it in the head, its skull exploding, pink brain matter splattering.

“Yes!” shouted Rickson. He glanced over at Sims with a broad grin. “This,” he said, “kicks version three’s ass.”

Chapter Eight

Donna left the Legion and hurried home, drinking from a smuggled bottle of Ex, knowing she was late and feeling a little angry, a little mean. The party was going strong inside and though some of the older crowd had left, the younger set was still there, finishing drinks and figuring out where they were going next. Donna would have liked to party some more, especially with Sims and Matthew, even though she didn't always feel comfortable around the teachers, not having the education or the same interests, some of them, like that Stacey twit, really getting on her nerves. But she wanted to be free for a few hours, wanted it even more because she knew she couldn't have it, to relax and forget everything and put off going home for as long as possible. She wished Rita could have come out, but she was working night shifts at the school this month, mopping floors and emptying garbage bins. But it didn't matter, she had to get home. She'd left a message for Amy on the answering machine, assuring her she wouldn't be too late, that she'd be home for dinner. What time it was now she wasn't sure, but it had to be at least eight-thirty or nine. Amy would be at home waiting, waiting to give her shit.

A few minutes later she was standing on the corner of her street, smoking a cigarette, and looking at the house, her house, a three bedroom brick bungalow with a full basement, garage, nice big pine trees, and a nifty little deck in the back where she liked to throw the odd party. After her father died, Donna had got out of her tiny one bedroom place in the old part of town near the mill and moved here, to the neighbourhood behind the strip mall, two streets of brick houses built back in the 70's. She wasn't interested in the newer development around the elementary school, put up when they got the gold

mines going. To hell with better resale values, she didn't like all those wimpy little trees and being so far from everything, nobody around but young families, stay-at-home moms, all those little kids you're supposed to think are cute.

She'd bought the house outright, thanks to her share of the inheritance, paid in full, cash, no mortgage. That had raised a few eyebrows. Living hand to mouth in that shitty little apartment, her daughter taken away from her, no one could have imagined she came from money. More than one person had asked her, seriously, did she win the lottery? After Donna bought the house, her sister Sarah phoned from Toronto, upset, all ready to take up where the old man had left off.

"You bought a house up there? Why?"

"Maybe cause this happens to be where I live," said Donna. "What's it to you anyway?"

"But Donna, you can go anywhere now, you can do anything you like."

"What the hell do you mean by that? When couldn't I?"

"I mean, you have money now, you can go anywhere. Think of Amy. Come on, Caribou is not exactly ..."

"What? What is Caribou not exactly? Huh?"

"God, Donna, I can't believe you just did this without any consultation. Did you give any thought at all to what might be best for your own daughter?"

"You know, Sarah, I've had to take Dad's shit all these years. Now he's gone, you think I'm gonna take yours? Well, I got news for you, big sister. And Amy is doing just fine up here, thank you very much. Just fine."

“Donna, Amy is intellectually gifted. Mature way beyond her years. She’s university bound, scholarship material. She belongs in a school district where she can realize her potential. There’s no way they can offer her that up there.”

“What the hell do you know about it? What do you know about this town, about the schools up here? And how about this? How about you can start telling me how to raise my own daughter when you finally get a life and get some kids of your own. Okay? Or after you figure out how to give me back the two and a half years you and Dad took from me. How ‘bout that?”

“That’s bullshit, Donna, and you know it.”

“What’s bullshit is you calling me up and telling me how to live my life. What’s bullshit is you telling me I can’t look after my own daughter. Why don’t you leave me alone and go back to school, go back to getting another useless degree or something? Come on, hit those books, Sarah, it’s the only thing you’re good at. Get some more A’s to show off to everyone. Oh, wait a sec. Dad’s dead, so I guess there’s no one who cares now, is there? How do you like that? I hadn’t thought of that. Jeez, it must be tough not having anyone’s ass to kiss anymore. I bet you don’t know what to do with yourself. That’s why you’re calling me, isn’t it? Cause you’re sitting down there, you frigid little bitch, and you got nothing to do now that Daddy’s gone. Your whole life is pointless and empty now, so you just gotta call up your bad-girl sister and try and make her life miserable, do what Daddy would have wanted, right?”

Donna went on like this for so long and so loud, she hadn’t even noticed when Sarah hung up.

Now she stood on the corner of her dead-end street, across from the parking lot of the DH Foods Plaza, and stared at the house, all lit up from inside, and dreaded moving from the open air, a cool breeze coming in off the lake, into the stifling confines of a house which had become the site of a clash of wills, an enclosed battlefield with no escape from all the pain and mistakes of the past.

Donna couldn't talk to very many people about Amy, the main reason being the problems she had with her daughter were the complete opposite of the difficulties she heard other parents talking about. Other parents agonized over their kids' defiance and lack of respect for authority; their hating school and getting poor grades; their being unreliable and unwilling to help out around the home; their hanging out with the wrong crowd, doing drugs, coming home drunk at four in the morning. Donna wished she could join in these conversations but in fact she was pretty sure she'd enjoy having a typical type daughter who liked to gossip, talk on the phone, wear make-up and go to parties, who was starting to meet guys and date, who got into trouble occasionally. Instead she was stuck with a totally different kind of kid, a young woman who appeared determined to be anything but predictable or typical.

One time having coffee with Rita at Robyn's Donuts, the day after Amy had given her a forty minute lecture on why it was one's civic duty to save every little metal cap from her beer bottles so they could be recycled, she told Rita how Amy was slowly driving her insane, but she didn't get more than two minutes into her litany of complaints before Rita, her best friend in Caribou, told her to shut her mouth.

"Donna," she had said, stubbing out her cigarette. "Excuse me, but you better stop right there. In my opinion, you should thank god almighty you got the daughter you do. I

was talking to Beth Fishman two days ago. You know *her* daughter? Allison? Caught shoplifting again. Has to be in court next week. Beth's just about going out of her mind. So Amy nags you about stuff. So she's kind of different, doesn't fit in. So? You want a regular type daughter? Like mine? Sandra's doing okay now, but you got no idea what it took to get her through high school. No idea. She's fifteen, she has to have an abortion. I don't tell anybody this. An abortion. And this was before she got busted for drugs. You don't know, Donna, how tough it is to watch your child try, no matter what you do, *try* to go down into the gutter. It's like they *want* to waste their life and you have to fight them to stop it from happening. I work for her. I clean toilets, for her. So she can make something of herself. But from when she was fourteen to when she was eighteen, nineteen, I had to fight her every step of the way. It was a war. You know how many nights it was two, three in the morning and I had no idea where she was, what she was doing, my stomach in knots? And almost all the mothers I know have to fight that war. You think about that and then tell me how tough you've got it."

Donna in fact knew all about that war. She'd fought it for years, with her parents, her father, and would be fighting it, she often thought, for the rest of her life, but she didn't tell Rita that. Hell, she'd been caught shoplifting more than once herself, she knew all about that shit.

Donna drained her beer, tossed the empty into the ditch and stood there, smoking a cigarette, getting ready to go into the house, feeling bitchy and mean, when Tommy Michano came by in his old Ford pick-up. He smiled at her from inside the truck, Donna smiled back, and he pulled over. Tommy worked at the mill and he and Donna had dated one summer a few years back, back before Luis. He was eight years younger than Donna,

but she hadn't cared, didn't care. She liked that he knew it could never be serious. She always liked it better when she didn't have to explain anything, tell a guy her life story. Besides, Tommy was good-looking, part native, dark skin and dark eyes. Every once in a while they'd catch each other between boyfriends or girlfriends, spend a night or two together. Donna walked around to the driver's side and Tommy had already lowered the window and was looking at her, smiling, smoking a joint, Aerosmith playing on the stereo. He reached over and turned down the volume.

"Hey girl, you heading out? Wanna lift?"

The smell of the pot was like an irresistible promise to Donna of something wonderful and alive and when he held the joint out to her she didn't hesitate for a second.

"Hey Tommy," said Donna, standing there on the side of the street in her tight jeans and running shoes, switching the cigarette to her other hand and taking the jay. She looked at Tommy's face as she took a quick toke. He was looking good except for his eyes. They were sleepy looking, bloodshot, and Donna guessed he was getting off his shift, tired, maybe going to the Round Room for a couple of beers before heading home. She handed back the joint and exhaled. She was grateful for the pot; it would help take some of the meanness away.

"You got something going on?" said Tommy. "I'll give you a ride, if you want. Where you wanna go?"

"No, I'm good. Not going anywhere."

"Well, come on with me then. Let's get some beer and go back to my place."

For a second, she was tempted. She wanted to. Tommy could sometimes be a real bore, but the thought of being in bed with him, being able to avoid completely going home and dealing with Amy, it was almost too much to refuse.

“I got more of this shit,” said Tommy holding up the joint. “And some hash that’ll make you feel real good all over. Then, you know ...” He smiled and shrugged, looking her right in the eye. Tommy always had a great smile. She smiled back.

“No, Tommy, I don’t know. What?”

He passed the joint back to her. A couple of cars went by and for a second Donna wondered if someone might recognize her, but her next thought, so fast it completely cancelled out the first one, was: *Fuck ‘em.*

“Well, let’s see,” said Tommy. “I still got that movie you like. Maybe I’ll rub your shoulders for a while, give you a nice, long massage. Remember? Smoke some more weed. See where we go from there.”

“Where?” said Donna, enjoying Tommy’s forwardness. She took a good long drag on the joint and passed it back.

“You know where,” said Tommy, still holding her with his eyes. “It’d be good, baby. Eh? It’s been a while. Come on. Don’t make me beg, girl.”

“Beg,” said Donna, without exhaling.

“Jesus,” said Tommy laughing. “Gimme a break, woman. I just got off work.”

A passing car honked its horn.

“Come on, Tommy,” she said. “Beg a little bit.”

Tommy laughed. “No way. No begging, not me.” He took a quick toke on his joint. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Donna exhaled a long stream of smoke into the night and leaned forward slightly, crowding Tommy. She wasn't smiling anymore. She fixed him with her eyes. "I said: beg."

Tommy looked up at her and, as if he were remembering something, the smile faded from his face.

"Okay," he said quietly, smoke streaming from his nostrils. He sighed. "Okay." He paused for a moment, thinking, considering what to say. "Please. Please, Donna. Please, please, please come home with me, you hot, gorgeous woman, you sexy woman ..." He paused again. "With the best set of tits in Caribou. Yeah. Come on, you crazy woman. Come back to my place and let me show you a good time."

Tommy smiled and took another pull on his joint before stopping and adding, "Please. I meant to say, please."

Donna was still glaring at him, serious, grim. Another car passed and she finally gave him a smile.

"Not bad, Tommy," she said, backing away from the truck, releasing him. "Not bad, but not tonight. Some other time, okay?"

Tommy threw his head back. "Fuck, girl!" he shouted, pounding the steering wheel.

Donna reached through the window and pinched his cheek.

"Thanks for the smoke," she said as she walked away.

Tommy put his head out the window, looking at her as he put the truck in gear.

"You're one mean bitch, but man, you're looking good."

She kept walking and waved back to him without turning around, hearing him call out, "I'm gonna be after you now, woman!"

"Good luck," she yelled as he took off.

Donna wasn't surprised to find the door locked. From inside she could hear the stereo in the living room blaring out one of Amy's cd's, Ella Fitzgerald, Nina Simone, all that old jazz and show-tune crap. Donna had to bang on the door about twenty times before Amy finally turned the knob and walked away without opening it. As Donna entered she had a glimpse of Amy's back heading through the kitchen.

"Hey," she called. "Don't be rude."

"Ha!" replied Amy. "That's a good one!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Donna shouted. "I lost track of time." She was trying to keep her tone light but the dope was making it difficult. She didn't feel mean anymore but she also didn't feel sharp. "Let's not make a huge deal out of it, okay?"

As she shut the door behind her Donna noticed the air in the house was visible, something in it moving and floating, a shifting haze, and for a second she thought it was smoke before realizing the kitchen was full of steam. The window over the sink was covered with a sheet of glistening condensation. Stepping into the kitchen she was dumbfounded to see the table laden with stacks of dishes, glassware, pots and pans, piles of cutlery. Steam billowed from two pots on the stove, their metal lids trembling and rattling. The sink was brimming with soap laden water, mist rising from the twin basins.

"What the hell?" said Donna.

Amy emerged from the back hallway, her arms loaded with what Donna recognized as some of the plastic containers and tin cans that were stored in the

basement, crap she would've taken to the landfill except Amy insisted they be put aside for recycling. Amy marched to the sink and dumped it all into the hot, soapy water and then looked up at Donna.

“Well, hi there!” shouted Amy. “Thanks for stopping by!”

Amy's eyes were wide and bright, a bit crazed looking, and Donna knew there was no escaping a major confrontation. Instantly she could feel the meanness coming back, tightening up in her gut like a coiled snake.

“Jesus Christ,” said Donna, taking in the scene as she slipped off her running shoes.

“You reek of marijuana,” said Amy.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Amy threw her arms up, her hands dripping water and soap suds onto the floor.

“What's it look like I'm doing?” she shouted. “Everything in this house is filthy! Everything's always covered in a layer of dust and grime! I'm sick of it! Somebody has to do something about it! Somebody has to do some work around here!”

“Amy, calm down.”

“I am calm! I'm fine! What makes you think I'm not calm?”

Donna brought her hands up and standing in the kitchen pushed the heel of each hand into her eye sockets. “God,” she said, “I really don't need this right now.” In the blackness she saw flashing lights, flares, zinging tracers of neon colour. “I really don't.”

“Well, yeah,” said Amy, “god forbid anything gets in the way of you having a good time! What a nuisance to have a house and a daughter to look after!”

A voice was blaring out from the living room, some loud, obnoxious woman from the 1950's:

And everything I've got belongs to youuuuuuuuuuuuu!

“Stop yelling at me and turn that fucking music down.”

She lowered her hands and stared at the table covered in glassware and dishes.

“Hey, I know!” said Amy. “Let’s call up Rita and Mike Barrett or Steve Kenny, get them over here and let’s have a party! I mean, it’s been over two weeks since the last one! I’ll bet you’ve got a good buzz going, right? Why stop now?”

Donna looked at Amy, blinking her eyes.

“Two weeks? Christ, having a few friends over to hang out is not a party.”

“Oh, right! Sorry!” cried Amy. “Drinking and smoking dope until three in the morning, that’s not a party, that’s just standard, ordinary socializing. I guess playing loud music until the police come and tell you to turn it down, that’s like a regular neighbourhood get-together.”

“I’m turning that fucking music off,” muttered Donna. She left the kitchen and headed for the living room. Like some kind of gremlin or demonic imp, Amy followed close at her mother’s heel, shouting.

“And I loved it when you told the police officer to go fuck himself. Smart move! Great going!”

Donna had to fight to keep her composure as she entered the living room. Amy had rearranged the furniture again. The television was in the corner now, its screen turned to the wall, and the sofa was where the chair had been and the end tables were over by the stereo, which Donna now moved towards, desperate to shut off that shrill voice, that

jaunty rhythm, those screeching horns. She badly wanted a cigarette but she knew if she went out for one now it would only result in more jeers and insults from Amy. She cut the power to the stereo. The silence was jarring, briefly disorienting.

“You,” said Amy standing behind her, “have abysmal taste in music.”

Ignoring her, Donna began moving furniture. She gripped the television console and pulled it away from the wall.

“Of course!” said Amy. “Priority number one. Get that tube back in working order. What would you do without it? How could you live?”

“Please shut up.”

“God help us if mother and child actually have a conversation, actually communicate. You know, maybe ask each other what they did during the day, what’s new, how they’re feeling?”

“Why don’t you leave me alone and finish what you’re doing in the kitchen?”

“Why can’t you grow up and behave like a normal person! Like an adult, like a mother!”

“Amy, give it a fucking rest.”

“Why can’t you be responsible? Why can’t you do anything you say you’ll do? Being stuck in the middle of nowhere maybe wouldn’t drive me insane if I had a normal home to live in.”

Donna finished moving the television and stood up to face Amy. “I’m not the one who isn’t normal here, okay?” she said. “The weirdo in this house isn’t me. I was a little late. So what? You have to go crazy because I lost track of time?”

“I’m going crazy because you’re *always* late. All you care about is drinking beer and getting high and going out. And when you’re not going out or partying you sit there and watch TV all night.”

“Well, you have all your books and your diary and all that other crap,” said Donna, motioning vaguely towards Amy’s room as she searched for the remote control. “I have TV.” She found the remote between the sofa cushions, sat down, and switched on the television.

Donna turned the volume down and without moving her eyes from the screen said to Amy, “You haven’t asked about Mr. Roberts.”

“What do I care about Mr. Roberts?”

“Oh, I think you care. I know you care. He was at the Legion too. We talked about a few things.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet he loved hearing about the latest methods in deodorizing toilets or what your next tattoo’s going to be. I’m sure he found everything you had to say fascinating.”

“We talked about you for a bit. He’s interested in you of course. As your teacher.”

“I don’t care what you told him. I don’t care about what you do when you’re out. I care about when you’re here. I need you *here*.”

“I didn’t tell him anything he didn’t already know. But I can kind of see why you’re so interested in him. He’s kinda cute.”

“Well, he’s one man in this town who would never be interested in you.”

“You think so?”

“Talking to you, he must be bored out of his mind after about thirty seconds.”

“He didn’t seem bored to me. I invited him over for dinner.”

“What?”

“Yeah. Why not? You like him. I like him. He’s new in town. Must be kind of lonely.”

“Are you crazy? When?”

“We didn’t set anything up. I just mentioned it might be nice to have him over.”

“Well, forget it. No way.”

Donna shrugged. “Whatever. You don’t think a guy like him could ever be interested in me, eh?”

“See? See? Your mind on everything but me.”

“I said I was sorry.”

“Right. So what about dinner, huh?” said Amy.

Donna flicked through channels. “I’m okay. If you’re hungry, put a pizza in the oven.”

“So easy. Leave it to me. Great nutrition, too. Very healthy.”

“Amy,” said Donna, motioning towards the TV with the remote, “you remember the rule.”

“I don’t care about the rule. You didn’t come home when you said you would.”

“Amy.”

“I don’t want to eat alone. And I don’t want to eat in front of the TV.”

“You got a big job to finish in the kitchen.”

“It’s not fair! You just do whatever you want and you don’t give a shit about me!”

Donna looked up at Amy. "Okay," she said. "You know the rule." She put down the remote control, stood up, and went to the kitchen, taking the remote control with her. Amy immediately went to the television and turned it off. She then grabbed the seat cushions on the sofa and threw them on the floor. Donna returned carrying an empty coffee mug and an opened bottle of beer. Without saying a word, as if she had expected Amy to do what she did, she calmly put the beer and mug on the coffee table, replaced the seat cushions, turned on the television and, sitting down again, pulled her lighter and cigarettes from the breast pocket of her jacket. She was looking at the television screen as she calmly lit a cigarette, took a deep, pleasurable drag, and blew a long stream of smoke into the air. She took off her jacket and settled herself on the couch, getting comfortable. She then turned her head to look up at Amy and smile, the light from the television screen illuminating her face.

Amy marched out of the room and up the stairs, entered her bedroom and slammed the door.

Minutes passed. Donna was watching a Hollywood gossip show, the latest news on celebrities, their divorces and plastic surgeries. She drank her beer and smoked her cigarette, periodically tapping ash into the empty mug, and her eyes didn't leave the screen when Amy's door opened and she came down the stairs to collapse onto the couch beside her mother, nor when Amy buried her face in her lap and she felt Amy's hands clawing at her waist and thighs, mauling and hugging her, and she heard Amy hissing from behind tears and clenched teeth: "I hate you. I hate you. I hate you."

Chapter Nine

He never beat Donna. Not that he didn't try. Luis. Never beat her up, never put her in the hospital, never raped her, never got her on the ground, she never let it happen, not once. When the time came, she went to the cops and she made it sound good and she had the bruises and he had the history and it was very straightforward and they put him away for a while. She was taking care of things, managing the situation, dealing with Luis, taking care of Amy, protecting her, that was the main thing, the most important thing, and she had it all under control, just wanted a little time off, a little break, and she figured it was the least the old man could do, that it really wasn't too much to ask given the fact he'd abandoned his own child, rejected her, disowned her, wouldn't let her back in the house even when she asked him, wouldn't do it, the hard-hearted bastard. "You're on your own," that's what he'd said when she was crying, all her pride gone, begging him for help. "You *wanted* to be on your own, to be free, so you got what you wanted." The cold, heartless asshole. Looking his own daughter in the eye and telling her to fuck off, when she was hurting, down and really hurting with nowhere else to go. But at the time she wasn't surprised. It hurt, it stung more than anyone could know, but it wasn't a shock. It had always been that way. It had always been a war, a battle of wills, and he had never wavered, never backed down, and she saw it coming every time. But now he had a granddaughter, and Amy had stayed with them before, back when Donna had the first breakdown, back when Mom was still alive, so she didn't think it was asking too much.

Just a little break, a couple of weeks. A little time to get her shit together, get off the meth and get straightened out.

As a teenager, all the times her father had cut her down, fought with her, made her feel guilty, made her feel small, told her she wasn't good enough, every time, she had never been surprised. It was nothing new, the same old thing, she saw it coming every time and she didn't think he could hurt her anymore, that she was beyond hurting, that there was nothing he could do that would surprise her. So it stung all the more when she'd called to check which flight Amy was coming back on and her father proceeded to tell her that Amy was staying where she was, staying with him in Toronto for the time being, and there wasn't a thing she could do about it.

"Oh," he said, "I suppose you could get the police involved, accuse me of kidnapping, but who do you think they'll listen to, you or me? A well-established, retired professor, with not a single criminal offence, and capable, experienced legal counsel behind him, or an alcoholic woman with a history of petty crime and mental health problems? What do you think will happen, Donna? You go that route, and I promise you, I give you my solemn word, I'll sue for custody. And I'll win. Now I don't want to do that. So it's very simple: you get a restraining order against this Luis person and you get off the booze. Then, and only then, will you have your daughter back to live with you."

"You fucking asshole prick..."

"In the meantime, I'll pay your rent, help with your expenses, take care of any debts. Provided you do finally begin to clean up and start acting responsibly. That means A.A., Donna. That means you stick with it this time. That means you finally grow up and make your first priority giving my grand-daughter a decent life."

“I can’t believe this.”

“I’m doing this for Amy, Donna. And for you, though I gave up on you years ago. But I have to look out for my granddaughter. Well, someone has to try and fix things. I’ll take care of Amy here, where she happens to be very comfortable and happy, while you finally start to get control of your life. And I will do whatever it takes to help you. If you want to move south, I will make the necessary arrangements.”

“Fuck you.”

“Suit yourself. But until I see proof that she’s in no danger from that criminal you call a boyfriend, and that you have begun to live a stable life without drugs and alcohol, Amy is staying here. I think you will agree she will be well taken care of. She has my full attention and Sarah will help as well.”

What could she do? There was nothing she could do. And even if there was she couldn’t have done it, strung out on meth and booze and dope. She’d take the meth to keep going, to get things done, to stay on top of things, and then she’d use the beer to help ease back off the high but keep going, keep drinking to keep going, partying all the time, then a the dope to make a soft landing and crash every Sunday and just sleep for like sixteen hours, then up and just keep going, keep at it, every day a struggle but you just have to keep going and it doesn’t feel like a struggle when you take a hit and everything is bright and sharp again. She had two jobs, had held on to them for a while now, and the fact was they weren’t bad jobs in this town, but some weeks it was fifty, sixty hours and how was she supposed to do it, to keep going without the drugs, or to cope without the alcohol? She couldn’t do it, she couldn’t keep going and also carry around all this anger she had inside her, all this anger and hatred for what had been done

to her and where she was. It was everything she could do to keep from lashing out at every other person she talked to some days, everything she could do not to pour hot coffee in some asshole's lap or slam the plates down on the tables, let the food fly all over the place. Some days when it was busy, early morning, breakfast, shift change at the mill and other guys getting ready to head to the mine, everybody in a hurry, Donna carrying six plates at once, all that hot grease, the smell, eggs and potatoes and oily sausages, sometimes she just wanted to stop and drop it all in the middle of the diner, all the plates, all the food, let it all crash to the floor, she didn't give a shit about all these assholes, these filthy, stinking men feeding their fat guts. Every morning she had to put up with their crap, she had to let them look at her, checking her out, giving her those looks and making stupid cracks about cans, about great big cans of coffee, or about headlights, huge headlights you could see for miles, or about jugs, big round jugs of milk.

There was this one guy, worked at the mill, dressed in coveralls, all grimy and filthy and stinking like shit, and he was always looking at her and making wisecracks and smiling, in the diner four, five days a week, and every time, every single time he was there he had to say something about how hot the coffee was, how hot the breakfast was, how hot things were at the Superior Six Diner when Donna was working. He was the one started all the cracks about cans and jugs and headlights and kept pushing and pushing, dreaming, Donna wouldn't in a million years go near the guy, but he kept pushing and joking and looking and smiling. Once, in the midst of a little back-and-forth banter with Donna, he even stood up and grabbed the zipper on his coveralls like he was gonna take 'em off. "Let's go, baby!" he said. "I'm ready when you are!" all his friends laughing, and Donna just looked at him and said, "In your dreams, Shorty," and he didn't like that,

she could tell from how his face fell, he didn't care for that at all, cause he *was* kind of short, and then he started getting surly, getting nasty, until Donna stopped one of his pals on the way back from the washroom one day and told him, "If your buddy doesn't cool it, if he doesn't lay off, I'm gonna start spitting on your eggs," so at least they'd know she didn't appreciate it, that it had gone too far. And the very next day, when he told Donna he'd been working on these fittings, trying to get these pipes to join up right, and using all this lubrication, slamming them into each other, and how the whole time he was thinking of her as he tried to get this pipe to fit in right, Donna, as she reached over to pick up an empty plate, just accidentally, for a second, let the coffee pot rest on his leg. She didn't smile or laugh at his jokes anymore and she wasn't smiling when she said to him, right in front of Jake, her boss, him coming out from the kitchen when he heard all the shouting, "Well, I'm sorry but I thought you liked it *hot*, Shorty," and the next thing he wasn't having breakfast anymore at the Superior Six but instead over at Katie's Kitchen in the mall and that was fine by her.

Twenty, twenty-five, sometimes thirty hours a week at the diner and the odd shift at Brews 'n' Cues, every couple of weeks or so, when her friend Gail who worked regular there needed a night off, though Donna didn't envy Gail at all, had no desire to work steady there even if the tips were better. Working at Brews 'n' Cues meant every single night someone was trying to pick you up, not harass you or give you a hard time, but trying to talk you into actually going home with them, which got tiresome, got exhausting, who needs it. Plus Rudy, the guy who owned the place, tall with nice eyes and a great butt, it was a bit tricky working with him and keeping his hands off you in the back room when you'd already slept with him a few times. But the main reason she

didn't want to work regular there was because of the night she'd been working behind the bar and Rudy had stepped out to do a drop at the bank and this fight started up between a native kid and a miner and when Donna saw the blood, when Donna saw the native kid smash the miner's mouth with the butt end of a beer mug and all this blood came gushing out on the guy's chin and was splattering everywhere as they kept fighting, next thing she knew Donna was out from behind the bar and grabbing this stupid native girl who was trying to break them up, grabbing her by the hair and pushing her down and slamming her head on the floor and biting the hand the native bitch had pushed into her face, biting it until she felt the blood, could taste blood in her mouth, and she kept punching and slapping and beating on this girl, beating her up so bad everyone forgot about the two guys fighting, though she was smart about it and got up off her before the cops got there so she could tell them she was just trying to break it up, she just wanted to stop the fight before things got out of hand and then that bitch turned on her and she was acting in self-defence, had the scratch marks to prove it. The cops bought it, took the two guys away and left her, but the next day they came by her place and had a little chat because the native girl was in the hospital with a broken jaw and a fucked-up eyeball and they knew Donna wasn't being straight with them. And that was why she didn't want to work steady at Brews 'n' Cues or any other bar in Caribou because the truth was she really didn't know why she beat the shit out of that girl, why she needed to hurt someone, to make someone bleed, and fights broke out from time to time, it happened, and she didn't know when she might end up doing that same kind of thing again. Could end up in jail for the first time in her life. No thanks.

So the diner, the occasional shift at the bar, and then thirty hours or so a week at the SAAN, working in the back, a stock girl, a go-fer, best job she'd ever had. It was great because you weren't working with the customers, you didn't have to deal with people much or take a lot of bullshit from some uptight supervisor, and it helped keep her in shape, moving boxes around and carrying things, helping to load or unload trucks, hauling bags of garbage and tying up bundles of cardboard. She was the only female working in the back, working with one or two other guys per shift, and she liked it. They were all younger and they joked around but didn't give her a hard time, didn't try to push her around, didn't make an issue out of her being a woman. She'd got the job when during her interview she said to Steve, the boss, "I'm reliable, in shape, I know how to handle a forklift, and I can do anything a man can do when it comes to this kind of work," and she stood up, went over to the heavy wooden desk Steve was sitting behind, crouched down and lifted one side of it right off the floor, high, no problem, papers and pens sliding into Steve's lap. Got his attention. Though other things did too, as he let her know later. Donna wasn't really into him, but getting Steve off every once in a while and then listening to him bitch about his wife for a few minutes in the back seat of his car kept things smooth and guaranteed a steady supply of meth if her own dealer ever didn't come through for her.

And she needed it. Of course she did. How else could she keep everything going, working all these hours, and putting up with everyone's shit, and taking care of her daughter, and trying to deal with Luis, the man she loved more than anyone, more than any man before, the man who walked into the Superior Six in his leathers, carrying his helmet, his Harley parked out front, walked in, tall, all in black, and stood there like he

was waiting to be seated, waiting to be escorted to his table, like he was royalty, looking at her, just standing there looking at her marching in and out of the kitchen until she went up to him, held out a menu and asked if he was there for lunch and he said, "No. I don't think so," looking at her, not taking the menu, sliding off his shades and really looking at her with those black eyes. "I thought I came in here to eat," he said. "But I know now that's not the real reason I'm here." "Oh," said Donna. "Well, the washrooms are for customers only," though she knew what he meant, the way he was looking at her. He smiled and nodded and said, "My name is Luis. And you are ..." "Busy as hell. It's lunch. Maybe you could take a seat." "No," he said, "not right now. Donna." Reading the stupid name tag on her shirt and sliding his shades back on. "I'll come back when it's not busy as hell." And he left, but he did come back an hour later, and sat in the half empty restaurant and drank coffee and joked about how bad it was and made her laugh and flirted with her and that's how it started.

He was tall, good looking, different, and he drove a motorcycle, which was the clincher. Donna had a weakness for motorcycles, always did, from a young age, they got her in a lot of trouble. You could even say they were the start of *all* her troubles, her first boyfriend having one back in Toronto when she was fifteen and the wildness started and all the fighting with her dad. You could almost say when she turned fifteen she got on the back of a bike and had never gotten off, got on the back of that shitty little Yamaha he had and let it take her wherever it wanted to go, to other motorcycles and other guys and places all over the country. Ben, Amy's father, had one too, a Harley, Donna's first Harley, and it took them all over the country, out to the east coast, and then back, and then north and up to Terrace Bay on the north shore of Lake Superior where he had

friends and a job was waiting for him at the pulp mill. And then Donna was pregnant and he wanted it and she had the baby, a little girl, and they were a family, living in a two bedroom apartment and they knew people in town and things were normal, it was so normal, so surprisingly normal. Ben wanted them to have another child but then the mill shut down and he couldn't find work and the money was getting tight and they started arguing more and more and then he was gone. Dead. Hit by a train in the middle of the night, nobody knowing what he was doing there, walking alone on the tracks. They got to him and resuscitated him, got him breathing, but there wasn't any point in even getting the chopper ready, the helicopter that would have taken him to Thunder Bay, all his insides were busted up, he never regained consciousness, died in the emergency room. They came and banged on Donna's door at three in the morning but by the time she got to the hospital he was gone. What was he doing out there? How could he have not heard the train coming? Who knew? Who could say? It was a mystery. He left behind some life insurance and the Harley and two weeks after the funeral Donna got some friends to take care of Amy and she hit the road, headed south to Toronto, to give her parents one last chance to have a normal life with their own daughter and the grand-daughter they knew nothing about.

One last chance. That's how she looked at it. Not as, Mom and Dad, it's your long-lost daughter and I need your help, but instead: one last chance for us to ever be a family. In the four years since she'd settled in Terrace Bay with Ben, she hadn't spoken to anyone in her family, not once. She'd sent them a post-card telling them she was fine and where she was living, and in return every few months she'd receive a letter from her mother, always brief, a short run-down of family news, which inevitably involved

something about how Sarah had won an award or finished another degree or her father had received another honour of some kind and, despite being officially retired and collecting his pension, was still teaching. Teaching. School. Everyone in her family obsessed with learning, books, taking courses, and it was the one thing Donna hated the most, couldn't stand, couldn't be a part of, couldn't, from the very beginning, relate to this fixation with academic success, with reading and writing, with grades and degrees. In kindergarten even, the teacher had warned Donna's mother she was a bit behind the other kids, that she had trouble picking up certain things, that she was a bit anti-social, was reluctant to join in with the others or take part in group activities. Things never improved much and as the years went by, increasingly, Donna just couldn't see the point. Why did she have to sit still, indoors, for endless hours every day, bored out of her mind, when all she wanted to do was go outside and run around and do things and be free? She had never enjoyed it, never liked being told what to do and what to think, hated the whole thing, and her parents were totally baffled, mystified, completely unprepared to help her, it was always just frustration and anger and fear, as if Donna was intentionally, wilfully, maliciously making their lives difficult.

Yes, the battles began a long time ago, even before she started rebelling in earnest, even before the great clashes with her father over where she had been, why she was late, who she was with, what was on her breath, where did she get the money, and who did she think she was. Even before all that, there had already been much fierce combat over report cards and homework, over phone calls from school and unfinished projects she never told them about and desperate, hopeless, last-second cramming for tests. And through it all, the question that ran like a never-ending mantra, spoken and

unspoken, underneath all their attempts to control her, through all their lectures and punishments, the one question, driving her insane, that they could never stop asking and she could never answer: Why aren't you more like your sister? She would never forgive them for that. She would never forget and forgive the love they withheld because she wasn't who they wanted her to be, because she wasn't like Sarah, quiet, calm, serious, studious Sarah, straight A's on everything, nothing but success and achievement. Sarah as well was never a source of understanding or support, but like her parents, looked at Donna as if she were some sort of freak, as if she were the physical representation of an imponderable mystery, namely, why did anyone fail? Why did anyone *not* succeed? Why would someone not want to do well in school? What was so troublesome about it? All you had to do was be disciplined and orderly, persistent and industrious. What could be simpler? What was the problem? You did your homework, you checked it over when you were finished, you paid attention in class, you answered the teacher's questions, you asked for help if you needed it, you made sure you got a good sleep every night and presto! – straight A's, continual progress, and the approval of your parents. What was so tough about all this? What was the problem? What exactly didn't the little sister understand about it all? And if there was a problem, if there was something the younger sister couldn't quite grasp on her own, why didn't she just watch and learn? Over and over again: your sister does this, and your sister does that, and your sister learned to handle that this way, and your sister found the best way to deal with that problem was by doing this, and your sister is an amazing, wonderful, stupendous success and we're so incredibly proud of her – what the hell is wrong with *you*?

One last chance. This was it. And she made the trip down and it all unfolded the way she thought it would. They hadn't changed one bit. And the fact she'd been gone for five years, had been on her own all that time and not once asked for their help, didn't appear to faze them at all. She wasn't an adult, their adult daughter, an equal, grown up and worthy of respect. No, she was still "The Problem." She was still a child, the problem child, the child they could never make sense of. They couldn't see past her motorcycle and her leather jacket and her tight jeans and her smoking habit – all of which her mother commented on within ten minutes of opening the door – to realize that their youngest daughter was an adult now, capable of living her own life. Even the fact that her boyfriend had recently died a horrible, accidental death didn't seem to cut much ice with them. Their chief response was "Why didn't you tell us? Why didn't you call?" Immediately followed by those pained looks and the head wagging that said, "We knew it would turn out this way. Oh god, why didn't you listen to us?" Despite herself, despite her own lack of optimism, Donna was still taken aback by their lack of sympathy, though she tried to take into account the fact that they were in shock. She hadn't let them know she was coming. Halfway down the highway, in-between the Sault and Sudbury, it occurred to her she should maybe check and see if they were home, called on a pay phone and when her mom answered she hung up. They were there. Fine. Good. She didn't want them to know she was coming down. She wanted the advantage of surprise, wanted to suddenly appear at the door and force them to face her, see their reactions.

Fourteen hundred clicks from the north shore to Toronto. She took her time, stopping when she felt like it, talking to people, checking out the scenery, pulling over at almost every lookout point on the highway, sleeping in campgrounds and cheap motels.

In her mind, this was a very significant road-trip, something new and different, a journey that marked the end of her wild years and the beginning of adulthood, the end of being the rebellious bad kid, the one no one could reach, no one could touch, the one who refused every request, every stricture, defiant for the sake of defiance, it was time to let all that go, to move on and for the sake of her daughter, become someone new, someone responsible, someone who could finally see the larger picture, understanding the things she owed and the people she was connected to, understanding that these things were larger than herself and all the wildness of the last six, seven years. But she had been wrong. She drove into Toronto and parked in front of the house in the Annex, that huge old pile of red brick and antique furniture and she didn't find parents at all ready to forgive, at all ready to move on, to see her as a different person, as an adult.

One night. That was it. She wasn't there twenty-four hours before her father started in and the battle lines were drawn up again and she was out the door and back on the highway. Fuck this. He began with how hard the last few years had been on her mother, how Donna had no idea what kind of hell they had been through, before moving on to the ultimatums, telling her that there necessarily would be rules to follow if she wanted to stay with them, there would be limits, and she had better be prepared to live with that. Still smarting from their initial reaction, and sitting in that same kitchen where she had sat years before and endured his lectures and tirades, and feeling once again the coldness of that house, the chill of that cerebral, detached household, and starting now to wonder to herself: what had she been thinking? Did she really think she could live here? Again? Had she seriously thought she could get up every morning and come into *this* kitchen in *this* house? With them? Had she been out of her mind? Thinking these

thoughts and looking at the same old linoleum on the kitchen floor, feeling dizzy, almost faint, she could not bring herself to say one word: “Yes.” One simple word. “Are you going to listen to us? Are you going to abide by our rules? Are you going to change? Are you sorry? Are you going to be a good girl? Are you going to listen to your mommy and daddy now?” All she had had to do was say, “Yes,” and the opportunity to live there and to reconcile and to find a way to rebuild those family connections would have opened up, would have been possible. But she couldn’t do it. She could not swallow her pride and she could not stop herself from resenting the fact that her father was, again, after all this time, talking about “rules.” Once again, he wanted to win. Once again, she had to accept his terms. Once again, she had to give in. And she couldn’t do it.

She didn’t argue, she didn’t tell her father how she felt, she just sat there and refused to say a word and when he finally gave up and went upstairs, fuming, furious, shaking his head, she got her bag and her helmet and she went out the back and she walked the bike down to the end of the alley so they wouldn’t even know she was gone until it was too late. And she felt a great calm as she put on her helmet, and as the engine roared to life, and as she navigated the traffic on Bathurst Street, heading north to the highway, she felt a great calm because she took satisfaction from the pain she was inflicting on them. The pain and the loss and the heartache that would come their way when they eventually realized they had cut themselves off from their grandchild, their only grandchild. They’d already lost out on the first three and a half years and Donna took grim satisfaction from the fact that it would be another three, five, seven years, maybe longer, before they would ever get to meet her. One last chance. One last chance, and they had blown it. And they would finally understand this and regret everything

when she told them, years from now, about Amy. She pictured different scenarios, different scenes, where she told them about the child they never knew, trying to imagine a situation that would result in the maximum amount of pain and regret. They didn't know it, but she already had her revenge against them. They didn't know it, but they'd blown much more than a chance to reconcile with their problem daughter. But they would know. Eventually. All in good time, Mom and Dad. All in good fucking time.

Donna had done the drive south in less than twenty-four hours, but it took her five days to get home. She'd planned to be in Toronto for at least three or four days and had given her friends enough money to see it through and take care of Amy. She didn't call and let them know she was headed back but instead crossed the border and went cruising around in northern Michigan, cheap gas and cheaper booze, lonely stretches of highway and little towns. The weather was bad and she ended up staying in seedy motels, hanging out in roadhouses and shitty little bars. More than once she ended up with a man. Barely three weeks since Ben's death and she was getting wasted and fucking strangers in motel rooms. And you know what? It was all right. It was okay. It felt good. She'd been restless for a while now and they were good looking guys, they turned her on, and it was all right. And she woke up in the morning feeling no regrets and got a coffee and got back out on the highway and put some miles between herself and the last man and she was already looking forward to the next one. The next town, the next bar, the next man, the next adventure. And she began to wonder: what if she just kept going? What if she just kept driving and wandering, living for kicks and seeing what she could find? And it hit her, it hit her when she was getting close to Caribou, sitting at a look-out point off the highway near Red Rock and smoking a joint, staring out at all that water, Lake Superior, biggest,

deepest lake in the world, so big it had swells, it had tides, all that water, incomprehensible, beyond understanding, like a night sky full of stars, gazing out and really feeling how big and ancient that lake was, and suddenly the thought came into her head: I'm a man.

That was it. That was the problem. That was the root problem and that was the answer. Why was she so fucked up? Why couldn't she get along with her family? Why couldn't she live the way other women did, go along with all the bullshit and all the rules? Why did she have so much meanness in her? Because she was a man locked up inside a woman's body, a *womanly* body, a body that men wanted, a body of dramatic curves and softness but also strong and substantial and she wasn't afraid to use it, for sex or work or giving birth or whatever she needed to do. But really it wasn't what she wanted to be. She was tired of it. She was sick of carrying around this body that men were always bothering her about, always trying to get their hands on. Instead she wanted what they had. She wanted the muscles and the hardness, all those angles and corners. She wanted those big arms and shoulders. She wanted a cock. She wanted to know what it felt like to have a cock. She couldn't come, she'd never had an orgasm, though she loved sex, but she was jealous of men because they always came and because they got to do the fucking. The men fucked and the women got fucked. It wasn't fair. She'd always been angry about how men got to do whatever they wanted, they could always just pick up and leave, they had this right to always walk away, to put work first, to put themselves first, and women had to pick up after them and clean up their mess and cater to their needs, it was expected, and she wanted no part of it. *She* wanted to be the one who worked. *She* wanted to be the one who could do what she liked, go where she liked, pick

up and leave if she wanted to. Sitting there, looking at that huge lake, that endless expanse of water, feeling the breeze on her face, she thought back to the last man she'd been with, just a couple nights ago, how when they were in bed it had turned into a kind of fight, which is what she wanted, what she liked. She didn't want gentle and tender; she wanted rough and fast and scratching and biting and she liked to fight to see who would end up on top and when she was on top she liked to hold the man down and really ride him hard and she noticed how a lot of men didn't like this, Ben had hated it, but with this last guy she didn't care, he wasn't big, a bit skinny, and she was strong enough to just do what she wanted. She held him down and rode him and rode him and she told him, "Don't come, don't come, don't you dare come," and when he did she sneered at him and shook her head and made him feel like shit. "Don't worry," he'd said. "Give me some time. I can do it again." And this just made her laugh. What a wimp. He didn't even know when he was being insulted, when a woman was treating him with disdain and disgust. She turned on the TV and drank some more rye and when he said he could do it again she ignored him, kept laughing at the television even though she didn't really find any of it funny. And in the morning, she couldn't believe it, he wanted to cuddle! He wanted to lie close and spoon her and she got out of bed and said, "What the hell are you doing?" And then he wanted to talk, started asking her questions and hinting that he hoped they'd get together again soon, and she was like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." She couldn't wait for him to leave and when he did she felt this great relief and when she was out on the highway again, driving fast, the bike between her legs, she felt great, she felt good, and she never thought about him again until just now. Wasn't this exactly the kind of thing she'd heard her own girlfriends complain about, bitching about how men would just fuck them and

then roll over and fall asleep, didn't want to talk, didn't want to hold them? Well, she'd never wanted that. Fact was she was always asleep before Ben was and sometimes he'd complain about it.

Now she had it all figured out. She was a man. It all made sense now. And then it hit her, sitting at that lonely lookout point on the highway, looking at the lake and listening to all those big transport trucks rumble past: she didn't want the child. She never really wanted to have it, she never really wanted to be a mother, she didn't want to be a mother now. She didn't want to be tied down and have to look after someone else's needs but she was caught, she was trapped, she had a child who needed her and despite everything Donna loved her and would do anything for her but, god, it hurt so much to realize now who she really was and what she really wanted and to know it was too late. When she told Ben she was pregnant he was so happy and he wanted it, wanted it so much he made *her* want it, but deep down she didn't. She knew that now. Why had it taken her so long to figure this out? If she had known maybe she wouldn't have been so hard on Ben. That's why she resented him, why she started fighting with him more and more, and never caring how much she hurt him. The truth was she hadn't enjoyed being a mother. The truth was most of the time, taking care of the baby, playing with the baby, she was bored out of her mind. She didn't get it. She didn't get that thing where you could just stare at the baby and "ooh" and "ahh" and gush about how beautiful it was.

For her, it was just a baby. You couldn't talk to it, it didn't understand you, it was far away in its little baby world. It was all one way. For Donna, the novelty wore off pretty fast and then it was just a lot of work. A lot of work, a lot of aggravation, and a lot of sleepless nights. Meeting its demands. Responding to it. All one way. It didn't take

long for Donna to feel like she was being bossed around again, being controlled, the baby telling her what to do, when to feed it, when to change its diapers and clean up its shit, when to get up in the night after having slept for maybe an hour and try and get it calmed down again, make it stop wailing and crying. Sometimes Amy would scream and shriek so loud it would chill Donna to the bone, give her the shivers, crying and screeching like some kind of wild animal out in the bush, like an evil monkey, like something living in the trees, trying to warn the members of its pack of approaching danger. Other times it sounded to Donna like a mocking cry, a taunt, goading Donna, as if the baby was saying to her: How do you like it? How do you like having the bad kid now, the difficult child, the child you don't understand and don't know what to do with? How do you like it? Those were the moments when she wanted to squeeze the baby, pinch it, make it hurt, shake it. Sometimes she just lay in bed and put her fingers in her ears and it gave her pleasure to ignore it, to let it suffer. They would get complaints from the neighbours, all this bawling and screaming. As if the baby were furious about something, angry at them, angry at the world. Donna wondered if maybe this baby didn't want to be here, wished it hadn't been born, was already figuring out how hard this life could be and didn't want to go through with it, asking already a question Donna had asked many times: why the hell was I born? What am I doing here anyway? What is it all for? A wise baby. An angry baby. Knowing already that what lay ahead was a lot of pain and struggle and heartbreak.

It was all coming clear to Donna now, for the first time, and she wondered for a second if she could just get back on that bike and keep going, keep riding, forget about Amy, forget about her family, forget about Ben, start over, abandon everything and just be a man, alone in the world, out to prove nothing to no one, just looking for adventure

and kicks and accepting the loneliness of life, embracing the loneliness, and taking satisfaction from being able to just do what she wanted when she wanted. But she didn't think about it for long. She was all that little girl had. She knew that. She couldn't turn her back on her. And it had been six days and a part of her missed her, couldn't wait to see her again, ached to hold her, even if she knew only a few hours after she got back her little baby would be driving her crazy and Donna would be telling her again, "You better settle down. You better behave, little girl, or you're gonna be sorry, I ain't kidding around."

She stood up and looked out at that huge lake and while nothing was solved, nothing was changed, she took a certain satisfaction from having finally figured this much out. It had all been wrong from the start. It was nobody's fault. She should have been born a man, but she wasn't and that was that. She got back on her bike and gunned the engine and headed home.

Back in Terrace Bay, alone with a four-year-old child. Living off the life insurance. Hoping for a miracle. The mill had closed and there were just no jobs available, nothing out there. She really had no idea what to do, what would happen. She was thinking about moving to Thunder Bay or Winnipeg, but she was reluctant to just pick up and move with a child, knowing that that meant selling the Harley, getting some shitty job where she'd have to wear a uniform and ask people if they wanted fries with that. She was alone for a while, just her and Amy but that didn't last long. Men. Meeting men. Never difficult for her. They were always pretty simple creatures to her. Very predictable. Easy to understand, easy to handle. The problem, she knew, was her. The problem was the anger emanating from her past, anger which she could never get rid of

no matter what she did, no matter how much booze she drank, or weed she smoked, no matter how many miles she put between herself and that past, that anger was always there, smouldering under the surface of things, biding its time, ready to flare up at any second and burn anyone or anything it touched. She knew she had a problem. She knew it the first time she hit Ben, hit him hard, hurt him bad. He had crumpled up and fell back against the wall. And she had looked at him for a second before she hit him again.

It hadn't been four months since the funeral before she started her first affair with a married man. She entered her married man phase. Suddenly attached men were exactly what she wanted. She started with Ben's best friend, Marko, whose wife, Cathy, she had never liked. Marko would tell his wife he was going to a friend's to watch the game, or that he had to go into work a bit early, park his truck on the opposite side of the block from Donna's place and use the back door to the apartment building. For Donna it was perfect. No mess, no fuss, no problems. He'd show up, stay for an hour or so and that would be it. No long conversations, no expectations. And if she ever felt uncomfortable, needed to get some space, get away from him, that was easy too: "I need to check on Amy." Married men. They didn't look to you for trust or reassurance or sensitivity. They didn't want you to engage in long talks about what they were doing with their life. The whole point was not to examine anything too closely, not to overthink anything, not to reflect on why you were doing what you were doing. You both knew it was wrong and you just did it and got it over with and then maybe a week or so later you did it again. At one point she had three of them on the go, three men sneaking over to see her, three men telling lies so they could drop by for an hour and a half every four or five days.

Once a week she would hire a babysitter and go with some girls she knew to the Legion branch for bingo night and then head over to the Red Dog for a few drinks. Lots of laughs, and such a fucking relief to get out of the apartment. It was at the Red Dog she met Vic and the simple truth was part of the attraction was that little band of gold on his left hand. But with Vic, things quickly became a bit more serious and she soon quit seeing the other guys. Maybe it had something to do with Vic not living in Terrace Bay but in Caribou, a town an hour's drive east on the highway. It made things more relaxed. Vic didn't stay for an hour or two, but for a day or two, and there was less anxiety about getting caught, less tension. While that same tension had been thrilling before, had been the source of the excitement with the other married men, there was something pleasurable in its absence, in the transgression of adultery without the presence of fear. It was still exciting but somehow more fun. Also with Vic there was less a feeling of need, of him needing to have her. It was more like she was his new favourite playmate or something. He was a big man, thick, broad in the chest and shoulders and Donna could indulge for the first time in feeling a bit like a little girl, like his special girl that he wanted to take care of. Maybe it also had to do with Vic being older, more mature, successful. Vic drove a Cadillac, a huge SUV that as soon as Donna got into it she felt special, felt slick, felt like she was in some kind of high-class nightclub. He wore a gold watch and nice clothes and never raised his voice, had a smooth manner about him, confidence, poise. He worked for the Superior-Greenstone Board of Education, was Assistant to the Director of Education and in charge of about six different committees and was on the road all the time, driving to different towns, different schools, nothing but meetings and conferences and motels. He'd taught for a few years, a long time ago, but now he rarely saw the inside

of a classroom. Instead he was one of those people who made decisions about what went on in those classrooms.

At first Donna was leery about getting involved with someone educated, someone involved with schools and education, but it didn't take her long to figure Vic out and realize it didn't make much difference. It wasn't like he was obsessed with reading and learning and books like her dad. He wasn't like him at all. Truth was, Vic really didn't give a shit about education. He never talked about teaching or about any books he was reading. His mind was more on politics, contract negotiations, finding ways to stick it to the unions. Don't get Vic started on the unions, something she told herself after listening to another boring harangue about how greedy and selfish teachers were, how the unions were wrecking the whole system, bankrupting it. For a few months Vic came and stayed with her every couple of weeks, usually for two or three days and Donna was surprised how well they got on, how comfortable it was, how nice he was with Amy and at some point she just decided this was it, she wanted him. Why not? Who cared if he was twenty-six years older than her. So what? He made her feel safe and comfortable. Everything was smooth with Vic, smooth and calm and easy. And who cared what anyone thought? If she had to stay in one place and be a mother and a wife, why shouldn't she get a man who made great money, could take all the pressure off and give her the finer things in life? So she told him to stop seeing her, told him to get lost, told him she wasn't some cheap whore he could just bang when he felt like it, when he was on the road and feeling lonely, away from his wife and kids. And that was all it took. The next thing she knows he's telling her how he's made up his mind, how he wants a new life, with her and Amy, that he's had enough of that cold bitch, depressed and on Prozac, always tired, never goes

out or has any fun, never touches him, just watches TV all the time. The daughter was starting medical school, the younger son began university that fall, this was the perfect time to make the change. He gave her a ring, a promise ring he called it, and they started looking at real estate listings, and for a month or so everything was hunky-dory, everything was a honeymoon and lovey-dovey, but then Donna was like, what are we waiting for? There's nothing holding me here. Me and Amy can move anytime. If we're gonna do this, let's *do* it. And Vic said: Damn it, you're right. But there was no way he could make the break just yet. He had to get things sorted out financially, he had to be careful, the alimony could be murder, he had to do some research, meet with his lawyer, and she was like, well are we doing this or not? And he said, you're damn right we are; life is short. And within a month he'd rented a little apartment in Caribou and moved Donna and Amy into it, wouldn't go near them during the move but paid for everything, and as soon as they got settled in and all the furniture Vic ordered was delivered, as soon as all the boxes were unpacked and Donna realized she had made this huge change of a kind she had never made before, as soon as there was no turning back for both of them, everything went to shit.

It started with the furniture. Donna phoned Vic at his office to let him know the new beds and sofa were at the Sears depot, waiting to be picked up and he was like, "Well, I ordered it. I paid for it. Maybe you could take care of the delivery, okay?" And Donna said, "Well, how? Who do I call? I don't know anyone in town and the guy at the Sears depot said they won't deliver. Can't we use your truck?" And he told her they couldn't, because, didn't she understand, this was a small town and people talked and he wasn't ready yet to be seen delivering furniture to an apartment where a young single

mother lived. "What the hell is this, Vic?" shouted Donna. "What is going on? Are we together or what?" Donna couldn't handle the uncertainty, the waiting, knowing he was in the same town now, living in a nice four bedroom place just a five minute drive away but he couldn't come over. She was seeing less of him since she moved to his town, had been with him only once since they moved here and that was only for a couple of hours late on the first night. Since then, nothing. She began to get an uneasy feeling. She was more alone than ever. She was stuck in this shitty little apartment near the pulp mill and all she was doing was taking care of her kid and drinking beer and watching TV. What else could she do? She had sense enough to get Amy enrolled in daycare. Vic sent her a cheque to pay for it and at least now she had some time to herself, but that quickly just turned into time when she was alone in the apartment wondering what the hell she was doing there. She was drinking more. She'd go back to bed after taking Amy to daycare, get up around noon and by two or three she'd have her first drink of the day. She was careful not to get too hammered before Amy got home so she could fix something to eat, but by six or seven she'd be fairly boozed up. Then, once Amy was safely stationed in front of the television, or in bed, it would be time to start making phone calls. She would always give Vic nine calls, because there were three numbers, and she liked the symmetry of it, three calls to three numbers. Three strikes and you're out. She'd start with the cell phone. Roughly half the time he'd take the call and then tell her why he couldn't come over or he'd leave her hanging, tell her he'd see if he could get away around nine or ten. Some of the time he was in a motel room in Red Rock or Nipigon so at least they could talk for a while. He'd be all sweet on the phone and tell her to just be patient, everything was going to work out, just give him some time. If he wasn't on the

road, his tone was totally different. He'd be short with her, kind of curt; sometimes he'd even get angry. But if she knew he was in town, and he didn't pick up the cell phone, then she'd leave three messages asking him to call her. She'd wait a few minutes and then she'd try the work number, the phone at his office, and do the same thing. She'd wait another ten or fifteen minutes and then if he still didn't call, she'd phone his home number, the number he begged her not to call, the number where if Arlene, his wife, picked up, she'd put her hand over the mouthpiece and just wait, listen to Arlene keep saying "Hello?" and thinking to herself, what the fuck am I doing with this joker? What am I doing and why am I here and what am I going to do now? Some nights she'd call friends in Terrace Bay but none of them thought much of Vic, they'd warned her against moving, and they weren't feeling too sorry for her.

It was winter, the Harley was under a thick tarp in the yard behind the house where they lived in a second floor apartment and the days were incredibly short and she started a new routine because more and more she couldn't sleep. She'd walk Amy to daycare, get a coffee at the diner, then pick up a few things at the liquor store, get home and start mixing rye and cokes. Now things were starting to get out of hand and she knew it but she didn't care. She was focussing on the bare necessities. She didn't have to worry about the rent because Vic paid it. She'd hit the grocery store on Thursdays or Fridays, she liked to be there when it was busy, full of people, and she'd stock up on frozen dinners, pizzas, cookies, chips, canned soups and stews, toilet paper. Sometimes she'd buy a few videos, cartoons and kiddie movies for Amy. Most days she didn't need to leave the apartment except to walk Amy to daycare and walk her back. She'd always stop outside the community centre where the daycare was located, she never went inside

anymore. She didn't want to see or talk to anyone. The community centre was a block away from the Superior Greenstone Board of Education building where Vic's office was. She would stand and watch Amy go in, greeted at the door by one of the daycare workers, and then she'd always look over at the board office and see if Vic's big Cadillac was in the parking lot. She'd fantasize about going over there, about walking in and paying him a visit. But she had to stay focussed on the essentials. She was barely holding things together, but she knew it was important to at least keep certain critical things covered. She took Amy to the medical clinic for a check up. She got her new clothes at the Goodwill. She'd watch the clock and even if she was half-smashed at two in the afternoon she'd say to herself, out loud in the empty apartment, "Okay, what are we having for dinner, Donna? What are you gonna feed your little girl? Do you need to take something out of the freezer? Let's see what we got."

She knew now she had made a mistake but she couldn't undo it. She'd made her bet and now she had to play out the hand. She was waiting for Vic, depending on him, trying to believe he was going to come around, come through. If he did, this would all be just a hard time she had to get through, it would be worth it, it would be okay. He kept telling her, "Just hang in there. Soon we're going to have a nice place of our own. A nice house for the three of us. Just give me a little more time." And as time went on, Donna couldn't believe how stupid she'd been. Her mistake had been giving in too easy, taking that stupid ring from him and getting all excited and happy. She'd let her guard down. Stupid, stupid, stupid. She knew better than that. She knew better than to trust a man to be a man, to come through for her, to put her first. When it came to the showdown, he backed off, and then he started blaming her. "Christ Donna, you have to give me time to

make this work. You're driving me fucking crazy. You're ruining everything. You think this is easy? You think I can just snap my fingers and make it all come together? There's a lot of money involved here. There's a marriage of twenty-seven years to deal with. Twenty-seven years! You don't just pack a suitcase and start living in an apartment on the other side of town, fer chrissake!" Which is what Donna didn't get. That's *exactly* what Vic was supposed to do.

There came a point when she couldn't take it anymore. He'd been out of town, on the road, for five days straight, and there had been nights when for some reason she couldn't reach him on the cell and he didn't call. She felt him pulling away. He hadn't stopped by in almost two weeks, hadn't been around for one of those lazy-ass visits he made now, stopping by for like half an hour, an hour, then practically running out of there, telling her as he left she'd better cut back on the booze. She couldn't take it. She was going crazy. She had no friends. She was crying now. Crying at six in the evening, pitch black outside, Amy watching television in the other room, and Donna would be in the bedroom with the cell phone and a bottle of rye, going out of her mind. She hadn't talked to Vic in days and she finally just called his home number and got Arlene and after the third "Hello?" Donna just started balling, started crying and wailing and asking over and over, "Where's Vic? Where is he? Where is that lying asshole bastard?"

Vic didn't come over, he didn't have a long talk with her, he didn't tell her to her face that it was over. Instead a few days later a case worker from Child Welfare dropped by for a visit. By this time it had been over two months since he'd moved Amy and Donna to Caribou and he was covering his tracks. He told Arlene about a crazy woman he'd met in a bar in Terrace Bay who mistook his kindness for romantic interest and kept

bothering him and calling him and harassing him, stalking him, had actually moved to Caribou. She was out of her mind, crazy, insane, and he didn't know what to do. Child Services sent the case worker around at about five in the afternoon one day and when they found Donna so drunk she couldn't talk, the apartment a filthy mess, Amy by herself in the bedroom, not having been to daycare for almost a week, they decided to move in. They took Amy into custody and put Donna in the hospital and after she'd sobered up a bit they started asking questions, wanting to know what relatives they could call, people who could take Amy in and care for her. And Donna, exhausted and broken, her first thought was: What a great idea. Why hadn't I thought of that?

She wouldn't fight them anymore. Instead, let them take care of Amy for a while and let her get some rest for a change, get some help. What a fucking relief. Yes, please, take her. Everyone just leave me alone and let me rest and recover and wonder why I wasn't born a man. So she told them about her parents in Toronto and then asked if she could make the call. Her father answered the phone and Donna asked for her mother, but she wasn't home, she was out shopping or something, so Donna tried to tell her father the situation but she started crying and the case worker, this fat woman with big hair and lots of makeup, she took the phone away and spoke to Donna's father for a few minutes. And then Donna, lying in the hospital bed, was reaching out for the phone again, Please, she said, please, please let me talk to him for a minute, please. The case worker said, "Your daughter would like to speak to you," and gave Donna the phone but then stood nearby, watching and waiting, and Donna had to ask for privacy, had to ask to be left alone, and reluctantly the case worker went into the hallway. Donna started off talking to her father in a hoarse whisper and was holding herself together pretty well, but by the end, by the

time the case worker and a nurse managed to finally wrestle the phone away from her, she was crying and screaming, shouting for all to hear: "How does it feel? Huh? Tell me. Tell me, Dad. Please, tell me how it feels. You cheated me, so I cheated you. Get it? In the end, you lose. YOU lose, not me. See? How does it feel? Tell me! I was never good enough! You made me feel like shit! Well, how does it feel? Huh? All this time, you had a grandchild and you didn't know it. I wish I could see the look on your face. I wanna see your face. Oh, god, why can't I tell it to your face? Say something! Fucking say something, you heartless prick! Tell me how it feels! Tell me! TELL ME!"

Chapter Ten

On a narrow shelf directly above the stove, amidst dusty tins and bottles of various seasonings, there stood a figurine, a wooden carving, of a beaver standing erect and dressed in the uniform of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. It had been carved out of wood and then painted, but the craftsman had apparently not been equal to the task. Instead of looking comical, the figure, some eight inches high, appeared to Matthew grotesque. In fact, instead of a beaver Matthew had at first glance seen an unfortunate person with some kind of affliction or disfigurement – leprosy? elephantiasis? – who, despite his handicap, proudly wore the uniform of the nation’s beloved “Mounties.” Through a hole in the rodent’s bulbous brown paw, a white plastic straw had been inserted, on which hung a rigid Canadian flag made from construction paper. The white of the flag was no longer white, but a greasy, mottled yellow.

Where, thought Matthew, is his taser gun?

“After we die, that’s it,” said Amy. “Belief in an afterlife is infantile. Our whole lives are just an unceasing march towards oblivion. It’s an intolerable truth so we devise fantasies and conceits to make life tolerable.”

“Amy,” said Zona as she chewed a mouthful of salad, “you can say whatever you like. I was there. I crossed to the other side and came back.”

“You almost died and your short circuiting brain gave you a first class light and laser show.”

“You got it wrong, girl.”

“I don’t think so. Remember, you’re not the only one here to almost make that trip.”

Had Matthew been asked to describe the meal, the food, the word that came to mind was “hearty.” Everything Donna had prepared was edible, much of it enjoyable, though he didn’t know what it all was and no one had bothered to tell him. While Amy and Zona were arguing, he’d taken his first mouthfuls with a certain hesitation. Familiar were the garden salad with vinaigrette – he had watched Donna prepare it – and the fresh bread, but what he thought of as an approximation of Irish stew had a flavour he couldn’t quite place, a subtle yet distinct tanginess, the meat a bit chewy. And the multi-coloured mixture which he thought of as the vegetable medley contained chunks and pieces impossible to identify. The bits of carrot and green pepper were plain enough, but the rest was a salty, vaguely curry-flavoured mystery. Maybe not curry. Definitely cumin. Possibly turmeric. The sausages were good, spicy, a bit dry but flavourful. He had managed to catch Donna’s eye in the midst of this bickering.

“Everything,” he said, gesturing to his plate, “is wonderful. Delicious. Thank you.”

Donna had merely smiled in reply, enjoying it seemed, the ongoing confrontation between her daughter and her friend.

“Well, you maybe didn’t get that far, know what I mean?” said Zona. “They got you to the hospital pretty fast, got you resuscitated and everything. As far as I know you weren’t actually, you know ... dead.”

“How do you know? How could you know anything about that?”

“Well, you weren’t clinically dead, right? You had a pulse. Look, what can I tell you? I went over to the other side. I saw the pure being of light and I know what’s waiting for us after we die. That really, we *don’t* die. If you don’t believe me, that’s okay.”

“Why do we have to talk about this again?” said Donna.

“We’re all on our own spiritual journey.”

“Don’t ask me. I didn’t invite her over,” said Amy.

“If you’re not ready to accept what I’m telling you, that’s okay.”

“Whatever,” said Amy.

“But I know what I saw. I know I’m a witness to the light.”

Matthew was having trouble following the conversation. He was trying to understand where this argument had come from while trying not to think too deeply about Amy, about Amy living here, in this house, with a mother like Donna, having to deal with people like Zona on a regular basis. He was trying to keep at bay his habitual feelings of concern and responsibility.

“And I have to talk about it if it comes up. Those were my instructions.”

“Who brought it up?” said Amy.

Matthew began to wonder why he was here, having dinner with one of his students and her mother, feeling uncomfortable, as if something was going on that he didn’t quite understand. Once Donna had telephoned and asked him to come to dinner, he had not questioned the idea of accepting the invitation. But now the general awkwardness of the situation caused Matthew to speculate that they’d forgotten until the last minute that he was supposed to come over. Or maybe Matthew’s expectations were simply out of

alignment again. He knew his sense of formality and decorum, passed on to him by his rather serious-minded, WASP parents, was something shared by fewer and fewer people. If his own mother had invited a high school teacher to dinner, she would have spent three solid days scrubbing and cleaning and tidying until every visible surface in the house gleamed and not a single object looked out of place. Not for the first time, he reflected how bothersome it was to have expectations of decorum which the general population did not share. One was constantly wasting time and mental energy fretting over details of behaviour about which no one else really cared.

For example, before coming over he had spent a good half hour trying to decide what to wear and it had become a rather stressful little episode for Matthew. To his mind, being invited over for dinner meant you dressed and conducted yourself so as to indicate your respect and appreciation for the invitation. As well, he had to factor in that he was Amy's teacher. It didn't make sense to him to pretend he was just going over to a friend's house, to Sims's place for example; he felt obligated to carry himself in a manner similar to how he conducted himself at the high school. He'd picked out his sky-blue, button-down dress shirt and his blue tie with the gold stripes for the occasion, even though he suspected this was too formal. While he knew he was likely overdressed, he was more comfortable erring on the side of propriety than taking the chance of sending the wrong message.

Then he walked over to their house and even before he entered he was simultaneously wishing he hadn't agreed to come over and cursing himself for having worn his teaching uniform. It was Saturday, his time to recuperate and relax and get ready for another gruelling week and here he was feeling as stiff and tense as he often did

going into class. It was the weekend, for god's sake! And then he was angry at himself regarding his choice of dress because a single glance at Donna's house told him he was overcompensating. For starters, she really needed to get her act together and do something about this lawn. The entire front yard was just a depressing expanse of flat, dead grass and dried up soil, dotted with clumps of weeds and ants' nests. Walking up the driveway, looking at this moonscape, Matthew felt his mood falter. Then it was impossible not to also notice that the metal porch railing badly needed a coat of paint, the windows were in sorry shape, and a three foot long section of the eaves trough was missing. He reflected on the fact that Donna wore nothing but t-shirts and jeans with her black leather jacket. It was as if she were a teenager, attempting to carry on a normal adult life and not quite making the grade.

As if to confirm this, when he'd arrived Donna wore nothing but a faded, skimpy t-shirt reading "Don't Mess with Texas" and a pair of snug-fitting cotton track pants. Sitting at the kitchen table, sipping wine, he'd tried not to look at her too much as she bustled around the kitchen, but how could he not notice again her body, all those curves, as she darted about, barefoot, checking the contents of different pots and pans on the stove and chopping vegetables with a long chef's knife. Matthew found it unsettling that, even in this outfit, *especially* in this outfit, and in a house and a kitchen that was not exactly clean, not exactly spotless and sparkling, she looked less like a harried, distracted single mother approaching middle age than a university student making dinner for her roommates in residence.

Then Zona, a friend of Donna's and a waitress at the Superior Six restaurant, had arrived, and Amy and *her* friend Naomi had emerged from the basement, and before

Matthew could even be introduced to these people, before everyone was even sitting down, he found himself regarding a steaming plate of food set in front of him, wondering from where he was supposed to obtain a fork and knife, and listening to Amy and Zona argue about life after death.

Naomi, Matthew realized, could not be a student at Caribou High. He was sure he had never seen her before. The poor girl was albino and rail thin and hunched over in her chair, picking at her food, her eyes flicking up to take long looks at Matthew while Amy and Zona argued. At one point, feeling the pressure of her gaze, he'd looked back and smiled. She had immediately hunched over even more and averted her face, staring down into her lap.

"What do you think, Mr. Roberts?" asked Amy.

"Uh, me? Well, I, uh, to be honest, I don't really have an opinion," he stammered.

"I mean, of course it's a fascinating topic, but ..."

"You're just being polite," said Donna, smiling at him.

"Let him talk!" said Amy.

"Well, naturally," said Matthew, turning to Zona, "I'm curious about what happened."

"No, no, no," said Amy.

"Sorry?" said Matthew.

"Relax, Amy," said Zona.

"What I meant was," said Amy, "do you believe in life after death?"

"I'll give him the short version."

"Well, I don't know," said Matthew. "It's a mystery, isn't it?"

“I don’t have to always give the detailed version,” said Zona.

Naomi was staring at Matthew again and chewing with her mouth open. Donna, looking back and forth between Amy and Zona, appeared to be highly amused. She had stopped eating altogether. Zona set down her knife and fork and, folding her hands in her lap, turned to Matthew.

“Okay,” she began. “During an operation, I had a severe allergic reaction to anaesthetic and went into cardiac arrest. I was dead, the doctors tell me, for a good three, three and a half minutes.”

She paused.

“Wow,” said Matthew.

“As soon as my heart stopped, I left my body. I can’t explain it. I was totally conscious of everything and I just drifted up out of my body, very easily and quickly. I was up near the ceiling looking down at myself, watching the doctors and nurses rushing around, trying to resuscitate me.”

Amy sighed and began shaking her head.

“And as I’m up there, looking down at myself, I feel totally calm. But then there’s this noise, a kind of buzzing noise, getting louder and louder, and it’s distracting me, causing me to pay less and less attention to what’s going on in the room.”

“Just skip to the part where you talk to Jesus,” said Amy.

“Amy,” said Donna.

“Then I get pulled into this tunnel. It’s like I’ve left this world and I’m being taken into a different reality, a different dimension, as I speed through this tunnel. And I don’t feel frightened at all. I’m moving very fast but I feel totally calm, at peace. And

then ahead of me, there's this light. It's getting brighter and closer, and I just keep moving towards it and as I do, the light gets stronger and stronger."

Amy leaned over and whispered something to Naomi.

"Fascinating," said Matthew as he took a mouthful of stew.

Naomi began giggling and then choking.

"So I reach the light and the light is all around me and I feel a presence." Zona now closed her eyes, her face a mask of complete serenity. "I can't see anything, like a body or a face, but I know someone is with me, someone who cares for me and loves me. All I feel is love and calmness. And this being of light lets me see my life, everything up to that point in my life. It happens in a flash. It's my entire life, every second of it, but I experienced it all instantaneously. And then the presence, which I understood to be Jesus Christ, he communicated with me and he said, "You have much to do and much to learn. It's not your time yet. Go and tell everyone you can about the light and the love that's waiting here for them."

There was a silence. Everyone was looking at Zona.

"Amazing," said Matthew.

Zona opened her eyes. "And that's it," she said. "I mean there's a lot more to it, but that's the long and short of it really, the most important part. The next thing I know I'm waking up in the hospital. See, Amy? It didn't take that long."

"Yeah, yeah," said Amy, cutting up her sausage into little bits. "You left out the part where Jesus talks to you about masturbating."

"Amy," said Donna.

Zona smiled and turned to Matthew. "That's not really true. He did have some ... thoughts on my love life, on sexuality."

"Oh," said Matthew.

"We actually discussed a number of things, different aspects of my personal life."

"Amazing. And you remember everything."

"Absolutely. Every second of it. And I think about it all the time."

"And you talk about it all the time," said Amy.

"Yes," said Zona, smiling and still sitting with her hands folded in her lap. "I do."

There was another silence.

Naomi, looking at Zona, said, "I think it's beautiful."

"Okay," said Amy, trying to interrupt her, "enough please about Zone's near-death experience. We've only heard this about six hundred times."

"Well, I haven't," said Naomi quietly. "I think it's beautiful. And I believe you, totally."

"Thank you," said Zona.

"I think life is full of mysteries that we don't understand."

Amy had stopped eating and was staring at Naomi.

"I believe in aliens and I think there's more to life than people want us to know. They don't want us to know the truth."

"What are you talking about?" said Amy.

Naomi turned to Matthew. She was speaking very rapidly. "Aliens live among us. They've helped humans build civilizations all through time. They built the pyramids. I think Jesus was an alien."

“Really,” said Matthew, mildly horrified to realize Naomi was every bit as weird as she appeared to be.

“Oh my god,” said Amy, blushing, turning away from Naomi and staring down at her plate. “This is officially the last time you are having dinner in this house.”

“Amy,” said Donna.

“Have you read *Lord of the Rings*?” asked Naomi, looking intently at Matthew. “I’ve watched it twenty-six times. Some people believe *Lord of the Rings* wasn’t written by J.R.R. Tolkien but is really the ancient story of a lost civilization that existed thousands and thousands of years ago, long before the Egyptians or anyone else we know about.”

Matthew chewed his food.

“Okay,” said Amy. “Thank you.”

“I did not know that,” said Zona. “That’s fascinating.”

“Yeah,” said Naomi. “And like, England and Ireland are full of all these old stones and statues, like Stonehenge, you know? And nobody knows why they’re there, or how they built them or anything, and I think aliens ...”

“Okay,” said Amy. “Enough.”

“... helped ancient civilizations to build them and then they...”

“Thank you, Naomi, thank you. I have one thing I would like to say please. Okay?”

Matthew could feel himself becoming tired, drained. The tension in the room; the conflict between Amy and Zona; Naomi’s bizarre pronouncements; the evident stress under which Amy lived; the oddly detached attitude Donna appeared to have towards all

of this; Donna's skimpy t-shirt – it was all wearing away at his nerves. He drank more wine.

“All of these fantasies,” Amy began, gesturing with her fork at both Zona and Naomi. “All these dreams that make us think life is something other than an incomprehensible accident of the cosmos, all they do is prevent us from facing up to the harsh reality of life, the unfairness and randomness of it all. It's a human responsibility to confront the cruelty and the meaninglessness of it all because only then do we truly appreciate the marvel of our own existence. Only then do we see how noble human beings can be *despite* the emptiness and pointlessness of everything. Everything we do matters *more* when we accept the brutal facts of life, when we see how fragile and transitive and precious everything is. And only then do we see that the only things that really matter are beauty and truth and ...”

Amy stopped as the tears began to well up in her eyes. The silence went on for several seconds.

“Oh Christ,” said Donna fiercely pushing back from the table and casting her eyes up to the ceiling.

“And love,” whispered Amy.

Matthew found himself staring at the Mountie beaver.

“Amy,” said Donna, standing up. “Enough with the tears, okay?” She began to gather up plates from the table. “Would anyone like more stew?” she asked.

He wondered how exactly Fred Hicks would introduce this type of project in his shop class.

“And *truth*,” said Amy, the tears rolling down her face and popping out of her eyes. “Truth, Naomi. Don’t confuse art and history.”

“Okay,” said Naomi, looking up at Amy and stroking her arm. “I’m sorry.”

“I’ve told you, there’s truth in art but that’s *different*.”

Before giving them the wood and the tools, did Hicks explain to his students the significance of the beaver in Canadian history?

“So,” said Donna to Matthew as she continued to clear off the table. “How’d you like your first taste of moose meat?”

“Moose meat?” he said, grateful for the question. “Really?”

“Yep,” said Donna. “The real thing.”

“Well, I had no idea.”

“Totally natural and organic” said Zona.

“Really,” said Matthew. “Well, it was good. Very good.”

“Yeah, Donna got a bull this year,” said Zona.

“Really. So, this is meat that you actually hunted?”

“Yeah, of course,” said Zona. “She gets one every year, isn’t that right, Donna?”

“Pretty much,” said Donna. “Who wants more wine?”

“Yes, please,” said Matthew. “Well, moose meat,” he said, attempting to feign great enthusiasm, hoping that by firmly getting everyone on to a new topic the atmosphere might improve. “I didn’t know you hunted. You have to tell me all about this.”

“I don’t normally eat meat,” said Zona. “This is the only kind I’ll have.”

Matthew nodded. “Really?”

“I refuse to be a part of the ongoing animal holocaust.”

Matthew nodded and fell silent.

“It’s truly disgusting what they do on farms now,” said Zona.

Donna came to the table with a fresh bottle of wine and refilled glasses. Matthew smiled gratefully and sipped. He forced himself not to say anything. He hoped Zona would forget about farms and slaughterhouses. He was avoiding looking at Amy as well. He stared at the absurd wooden beaver.

“It was a present,” said Amy.

“Sorry?” said Matthew.

Amy was looking at him. “It was a gift to Mom. From Buzzer.”

“Oh,” said Donna, standing at the counter, preparing some kind of dessert. “You talking ‘bout Rufus?”

“If it were up to me, we would have thrown it out a long time ago.”

“No way I’m throwin’ out Rufus.”

“I mean, he’s a nice kid and everything but ...”

“Buzzer is the best.”

“Buzzer?” said Matthew.

“Yeah,” said Amy. “You know. Buzzer.”

“No, I don’t ...”

“Mr. Smiley-Face,” said Donna.

“You know,” said Amy. “Buzzer! The happiest guy at Caribou High!” Amy seemed to have regained her composure. She was finishing her last bites of sausage.

“He’s in love with Mom.”

“Buzzer,” said Donna, bringing slices of lemon meringue pie to the table, “loves everyone.”

“Not the way he loves you, Mom.”

“Well,” said Donna, wiping her hands on a dish towel and taking a sip of wine, “Buzzer is real sweet.”

It occurred to Matthew that they had to be referring to the student who, accompanied by an educational assistant, sometimes came around to the classrooms to pick up the attendance sheets. Matthew had also noticed him in the hallways, always laughing and smiling and joking with other staff members. He had once overheard Ms. Hitchcock talking with him, teasing him about something, causing him to laugh uncontrollably. It was obvious he was mentally handicapped, incapable of complex speech or expression. On more than one occasion Matthew had attempted to exchange a greeting with him when he had picked up the attendance sheet but he had been unable to respond. Matthew recalled now some of the students shouting out, “Hey, Buzzer!”

“Seems to me,” he said, “that wouldn’t be an easy thing to make. More difficult than your average student project, like a bowl or a towel rack.” Matthew knew next to nothing about woodworking or shop class.

“Yeah,” said Donna, sitting down again. “He didn’t actually make it, you know. He might have painted it.”

“Right,” said Matthew.

“He has an E.A. for every class. Probably one of the other students did the carving or something, I don’t know.”

“Everyone loves Buzzer, but I hear he can be a real problem at times,” said Amy. “Swearing and throwing things, being violent. I haven’t seen anything like that, but that’s what I’ve heard.”

“Really?” said Zona. “Is he dangerous?”

“I don’t know,” said Amy.

“I don’t understand why they have people like that in the regular schools,” said Donna. “When I was growing up, handicapped people had their own teachers and classes. Makes more sense to me. Give the gimps and mental cases their own space.”

“Oh my god. Mom!”

“Relax,” said Donna, smiling. “I’m just messin’ with ya.”

“Well,” said Zona. “I think it can be good for other kids to interact with people like that. But not if they’re violent.”

“What do you think,” said Donna to Matthew. “Should retards be in the regular schools?”

“Mom! Please!”

Matthew was seized by a great desire to talk, to see if he could clear away the awkwardness and tension with words. He pounced on the subject with fresh energy.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know, but I do think we’re asking too much of our schools. Know what I mean? They’re becoming this place where the rest of society dumps all its problems. What are our schools really for? What is their function in society? Does anyone know?”

He was speaking very quickly, with great urgency, punctuating his remarks with hand gestures.

“I think one of the misconceptions at work right now is this idea you can educate everyone. Many people just aren’t cut out for academic learning, for sitting in classrooms, concentrating, training their minds, spending hours and hours just reading and thinking and writing.”

“I hear ya,” said Donna, smiling and nodding.

“I suspect it’s a very small percentage of people who are suited for this and that this percentage is actually getting smaller and smaller now. But as a result of pursuing this utopian vision of trying to educate everyone, which is insane really, the schools are now primarily focussed on all the kids with problems, all the kids with learning disabilities and family problems and behavioural problems and ADD and everything else. No one pays much attention to the bright, capable kids who aren’t being challenged or pushed, who are largely bored out of their minds.”

“I hear ya,” said Amy, rolling her eyes as she mimicked her mother.

“I honestly think no one has the slightest clue what we’re supposed to be doing. They just keep pouring money into this great big hole and kids with degrees pop out the other end, but what do they know? What have they learned? What are they really capable of doing?”

“Jesus,” said Zona, giving Matthew a quizzical look. “And you’re a new teacher. You sound like my old man.”

Matthew shrugged. “Yeah, I know. People call me cynical, a pessimist, but I disagree. I just think I’m just paying attention. It’s only been seven years since I graduated high school and I barely recognize it. And what drives me nuts is no one talks about what’s going on.” He sat up in his chair and turned to Zona. “Look. Education

really isn't that complicated. You decide on a course of study and you give instruction and the student works to learn. But now we have to accommodate every individual student, and cater to every different learning style, and it seems like every third or fourth student has some kind of learning disability, but the main disability I see is no one knows how to concentrate. No one knows how to work hard. No one knows how to just turn off the television and exercise a little discipline."

"Now this is the Mr. Roberts I've heard about," said Donna.

"Sorry," said Matthew, suddenly feeling mortified, self-conscious. "I'll stop. Enough." He impulsively slammed the surface of the table with a fist, shifting cutlery. There was a silence.

"Sorry," he said again.

Four female faces were staring at him. He smiled.

"Where might I find a washroom?"

He was conscious of leaving an awkward silence behind him and found himself wishing the washroom were somehow much further away from everyone, that the house, instead of being a duplex, had a second or third story, that he could be in a room quite distant from the whole scene of this dinner and these people. He found the light and closed the door and pushed in the knob to lock it and then immediately lunged at the mirror to confront himself.

"Shut up," he hissed, his face inches from the glass. "Shut up, shut up, just shut the fuck up."

Why did he have to do that? Why, whenever he had the slightest opportunity, did he feel compelled to pontificate about public education as if others cared, as if others really wanted to know what he thought about the whole enterprise?

Because they didn't care. That was why. Because no one cared and no one was listening and meanwhile everything was falling apart. He needed someone to listen to him. He had something urgent to tell people. Listen to me: we are in a state of emergency. I have a friend, a poet, named Richard Wells, a good and noble man who has devoted his entire life to furthering the values of truth and intelligence and beauty. And no one cares. He has written some of the most exquisite poems I have ever read, and no one cares. He has, for virtually no material recompense, worked for forty years for the cause of literature and he has received no recognition. This signifies something. This is the canary in the coalmine. Why is no one listening? Can't they see it? And here he was, hoping to do something about it through teaching and now he saw that far from helping to form a bulwark against the rising flood of ignorance and mediocrity, the schools were actively encouraging corruption and debasement. Was he the only one who could see the tragedy that was unfolding? Didn't anyone care?

Matthew sighed and sat on the edge of the tub. He put his head in his hands and stared at the tiled floor, bits of grime and hair lodged in tiny crevices. He concentrated on calming himself, steadying his breathing. He should not have accepted Donna's invitation. Instead of here, he should be at home, judiciously enjoying a drink or two as he marked a stack of papers, or hanging out with Sims, watching the hockey game and playing cribbage, getting mildly pissed on his bizarre cocktails. No, he should have politely declined. He sensed that by coming he had mortally compromised his

professional relationship with Amy. Here there was a war going on and now he was in the middle of it. So why had he come here?

He stood in front of the toilet and gingerly lifted the seat, trying to ignore the grime on the rim and all around where the toilet's cover and seat met. On the lid of the toilet tank was a visible layer of dust. He unzipped and tried to aim for the sides of the bowl, not wanting his urinating to be audible.

He knew why, though he resisted the truth. The answer had been in front of him, dancing around the kitchen in a tight t-shirt while he sat and watched.

Other questions floated around in his brain. Who was this Naomi girl? Was Amy's social status so low she had to resort to such pitiable companionship? How did Amy manage to cope? Her suicide attempt hovered in the air like a ghost, like something palpable and terrifying. He had been amazed at her casual reference to it as well as taken aback by everyone's, including his own, lack of response. Then again, what did one say?

He carefully lowered the seat and lid of the toilet and flushed. Washing his hands, he was careful to avoid getting his shirt sleeves into the various blobs of – what? toothpaste? hand cream? shampoo? – which surrounded the basin. Shutting off the tap, his fingers carried away a slimy clot of something, soap he hoped, which he had difficulty shaking off. The general lack of cleanliness would have offended Matthew if hadn't felt certain that until an hour or so before he arrived, Donna had forgotten he was coming over.

He confronted again his face, the lines and wrinkles, blue patches around both eyes, hot, red stains over both cheeks. He glanced at his watch.

“Half an hour,” he whispered to himself. “I’m sorry, but I really can’t stay. This was wonderful. The meal was excellent. But I’m beat and I have a big stack of papers to mark. I really have to go. Thank you very much.”

He entered the kitchen to find it abandoned, the table littered with dishes and pieces of pie. He could hear the sound of Amy and Naomi talking in the basement and then laughter coming from the back door. He felt a draft.

“Hello?” he said.

He smelled marijuana.

“Out here.” Donna’s voice.

“Just a second.” Zona’s voice.

He crossed the kitchen and found them standing huddled just outside the back door, sharing a joint. Zona held up the tiny roach. “Want a toke?” she asked.

“No thanks. Look, it’s been great and I really enjoyed the meal...”

“You can’t go yet,” said Zona.

“Get inside,” said Donna exhaling. “It’s fuckin’ freezing.”

Zona threw the roach away and they both rushed in, Donna slamming the door behind her.

“We just finished dinner, you can’t leave yet,” said Donna.

“Yeah,” said Zona. “It’s rude to eat and run.”

“How about a cup of coffee. Or some more wine?”

Donna, rubbing her arms to warm herself, bumped into Matthew. “Scuse me,” she said and gave him one of her sly smiles. “You have to stay.”

“I do?” said Matthew.

“Of course. We just smoked a joint and you have to make sure we don’t trip out and do anything stupid.”

“Well,” said Matthew, “if I’m going to stay you have to tell me more about hunting. Moose hunting.”

“Yeah,” said Zona. “Donna the hunter.”

“I’m curious.”

“Okay,” said Donna. “Whatever.”

“Hey,” said Zona, “Let’s watch one of your videos.”

“A video,” said Matthew.

“Yeah, she hunts with Jake and his kids. They always make a video. Let’s watch one,” she said to Donna.

“Sure.” She grabbed the half full wine bottle and her glass and led the way into the living room.

“Jake?”

“The old dickhead who makes your hot turkey sandwiches,” said Donna. She crouched and began searching through a disordered pile of videos in the television stand.

“What?” said Matthew.

“My boss,” said Zona. “Our boss. Used to be Donna’s boss. He runs the restaurant at the Superior Six.”

“Here we are,” said Donna as she slid a videocassette into the VCR. “This is from a couple years ago. I got a bull that year too.”

Zona and Matthew sat down as Donna studied a remote and pushed buttons. There was a blast of white noise as the video started. Eventually the television showed a

skinny, sandy-haired youth who looked vaguely familiar to Matthew, standing in what looked to him like a tree fort.

“This is Chet’s blind,” said Donna.

“Hey, Chet,” said the person holding the camera.

Chet held his rifle up by one hand and gave a thumbs up sign with the other. He was wearing binoculars and a t-shirt that said in large block letters, “Too drunk to fuck.”

“How are ya?”

“What?”

“How’s it goin’?”

Chet shrugged. “Good.”

“Seen anything?”

“No.”

“Say something for the camera.”

Chet looked away and mumbled something.

“C’mon, tell us how the hunt’s goin’.”

“Is Dad still pissed?”

“What, about the Coleman? Yeah.”

“That was your fault, not mine.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Asshole.”

“Whatever.”

“Are we having beans?”

“What?”

“Are we having beans again for supper?”

“I don’t know.”

“So, who is this?” said Matthew. “And what’s a blind?”

“Chet is Jake’s younger son,” said Zona. “A blind is just a cover for the shooter.”

“You call the moose and they come to you,” said Donna. “You wait in the blind ‘till they get close enough for a good shot.”

“Who’s doing the camera work?”

“Cody,” said Donna. “Jake’s older son. He’s at the mill now.”

“Chet and Cody,” said Matthew.

The video cut to an interior scene. Chet and an older man were sitting in front of the camera, bottles of Export in hand, empty bottles on the table. The camera zoomed in on the older man, grinning, wrinkles and missing teeth, smoking a cigarette. When the camera zoomed back out, a large colour photograph on the plywood wall behind became visible: a smiling, naked woman, a breast cupped in each hand.

“Hey! Get this,” shouted the older man, laughing. There was the sound of chairs scraping, bottles clinking together. “Hey, get this on camera.”

“This is inside their camp,” said Donna. “That’s Jake.”

Matthew didn’t recognize him.

“Get a load of this, eh.”

“Fuck off, Dad!”

“This is Chet’s idea of a tattoo. C’mon, check this...”

“He likes to tease Chet,” said Donna. “Always gives him a hard time.”

She pressed a button on her remote.

“This isn’t that interesting.”

A blur of silent images whipped by, too fast to make sense of, a fuzzy white band across the middle of the screen.

“Okay, here.”

Sound returned. Donna was in a blind now, a cigarette in her mouth. She gestured with her rifle and took her cigarette out and blew smoke at the camera. Whoever was holding the camera was breathing heavily.

“There she is.”

“This is my blind. This is the same day I got my bull.”

“Show us yer tits, woman.”

“Oh, sorry,” Donna laughed. “Cody was such an asshole that trip.”

The picture cut to rubber boots moving through watery sludge.

“Okay, this is it. Right here. This is the one I got.”

The camera stayed on boots and mud and water for several seconds and then slowly panned up. Ahead a large black mound, difficult to distinguish due to the jiggling camera, lay partially submerged.

“That’s the one,” said Donna, smiling, pointing proudly at the television. “He’s mine.”

The camera closed in on the black mound. Matthew saw it was a dead moose, lying on its side, its antlers rising above the reeds and marsh plants. From behind the camera was the sound of heavy breathing.

“Oh man.”

“Aw, fuck. Look at that.”

“Right in the fuckin’ swamp.”

The camera focussed on the body of the bull. It lay on its side, half-immersed in black water, one lifeless eye gazing upward.

“Christ, Donna,” said the person holding the camera, Cody, his voice close and loud. “You could have let her go just a few more yards and we’d be on dry land.”

The camera shifted to show Donna and Jake and another young man walking single file, approaching the dead animal. They were all wearing high rubber boots and lugging things, rifles, spools of rope, cases of gear.

“I mean, if you’d let him take this rise here” – the camera shifted over to a nearby point of high land and back, as if the speaker were pointing with it – “we wouldn’t have to work in all this fucking mud.”

“Cody,” said his father, “shut the fuck up.”

“I missed two shots,” said Donna. “I wasn’t gonna let it get away.”

The group assembled around the moose and began opening cases and taking out tools and things.

“It’s like ten feet,” said Cody, his voice loud from behind the camera. “And you would’ve had a better shot too. Now we gotta get it out of all this mud ‘n shit.”

The camera stayed on Donna who looked to be about twenty feet away from. She stared back at the camera, at Cody, with an intensely annoyed expression on her face. The wind played with her hair. The camera zoomed in. Her face filled the television screen. She looked, Matthew realized, strangely beautiful in this setting, standing in front of a dead moose in an endless expanse of trees and mud and rocks. Her white face was flecked with mud. She kept staring into the camera with those dark eyes.

“Oh, I remember this,” said Zona.

“Cody!” The father was off camera now. “What did I just tell ya?”

A hoarse whisper came from close to the microphone now, from Cody.

“I love you.”

“What?” said Donna, staring at the camera, scowling. “What’s your problem, Cody?”

The camera pulled back from Donna and then panned around to show Jake knotting a rope around one of the bull’s legs. “Cody, shut that goddamn camera off and get over here.”

“I wanna video this whole thing,” said Cody.

“Here,” said Donna. “Gimme the camera and help your dad.”

A senseless jumble of whirling images and noise followed before the screen went blank for a second. Then the image returned to show Jake, a chainsaw in one hand, struggling to keep his balance as he worked to position himself over the massive carcass, almost toppling.

“Jesus fuck,” he shouted.

“They were so pissed at me,” said Donna, staring at the television. “It wasn’t my fault, though. I hit it, but it kept running. And then I missed twice. And then I finally hit it again but it went down right into the fucking bog.”

“How close was it when you shot it?” asked Matthew.

“The first shot ...” She was thinking. “I don’t know. Maybe forty yards.” She brought her hands up as if she were holding a rifle and sighted at the floor. “It came across the creek and I waited and then it turned away from me, so I shot and clipped it in

the hindquarters. Then it ran.” She swung her invisible rifle to her left and jerked her hands to simulate shooting the gun. “And I fired again, and again, and the third shot got it right in the back.” She brought her imaginary gun down. “And then it just stumbled into this swamp,” she gestured at the television, “before it went down.”

The fierce whine of the chainsaw started up.

“Show him your rifle,” said Zona.

“What for?”

“You look funny pretending you’re shooting one. Show it to him.”

“You wanna see it?”

“Sure,” said Matthew.

On the television, Jake was cutting off the moose’s legs. He stopped for a moment, still trying to establish his footing. “Jesus fucking Christ,” he shouted.

Donna and Zona were laughing. “They were so pissed off,” said Donna. “It was really hard to butcher it in the swamp.”

“They butcher it right there?” asked Matthew.

“Yeah. ’Course. What else are they gonna do? The thing weighs about seven hundred pounds.”

“Get your gun,” said Zona.

Donna left and was back a few seconds later carrying her rifle. She handled it with an ease that made it clear she was comfortable with the weapon, had no doubt fired it many times. Entering the living room, Donna abruptly dropped into a crouch and pointed the weapon at Matthew.

“Gimme all your money, motherfucka,” she growled.

“Donna’s a really good shot,” said Zona.

Donna approached and held the gun out to Matthew. He took it and held it in front of him.

“Very nice,” said Matthew.

She took it back and sighted at the television with it.

“It wasn’t cheap,” said Donna. She pulled the lever back to cock the gun, a sharp, surprisingly loud metallic sound. “But if you’re gonna spend the money, why not get the best?”

“Why not,” said Matthew.

Jake was shouting at someone. “Hold it. Hold it! No! Fuck! Like this! Like this, see? Now hold it!”

They watched as the men on the television began cutting the beast into sections. Jake had slit the belly open with a knife and was carefully removing the lower organs, letting the blue-grey intestines unravel and slide into the water.

“Cliff wants a gun now,” said Zona.

“Yeah?” said Donna. “Mitch gonna take him hunting?”

“I don’t know. I said, ‘Last year it was a motorcycle. This year it’s a ski-doo. Maybe we could hold off on getting a gun.’ He didn’t want to hear that.”

The moose looked naked and indecent, the thick hide cut open and folded back, the marbled flesh, streaks of red and white, exposed to the air.

“Give me the other knife,” said Jake. “No, the long one.” There were sounds of water sloshing, equipment clanking. “Christ. My foot’s stuck.”

Donna chuckled and shook her head. “What a day. They had a hell of a time gettin’ it outta there.”

It wasn’t until Matthew turned away from the sight of Jake using the chainsaw to cut off the moose’s head, presumably to have it stuffed and mounted, that Matthew noticed Amy standing in the doorway to the living room, waiting, watching, her eyes fixed on Matthew.

Chapter Eleven

Matthew watched from the staffroom as the mini-vans and SUVs filled up the parking lot. One after another, the vehicles slowed, turned into the laneway, and eased past the front lawn with its row of ragged saplings. Half an hour before the interviews were to start, and the parking lot was already a glittering expanse of chrome and tinted glass.

David Gill, whistling, sauntered into the staffroom, swinging his empty coffee mug. He went over, stood beside Matthew, and looked out at the parking lot.

“Hard to believe, isn’t it,” he said, “we barely get a twenty percent turnout.”

Matthew watched a glum-looking middle-aged couple slam the doors of their mini-van and stride towards the school. He thought he read in their grim expressions the angry sense of entitlement that comes from paying property taxes and giving up your own ambitions for those of your offspring.

“Relax,” said Gill. He slapped Matthew on the back, startling him. “You’ll be fine.” He turned and went back to deposit his mug in the sink. “They won’t bite,” he said.

The day before, Bill Brecker had held a meeting in the library for new teachers only. He gave them several points of advice.

“First of all, do not sit at your desk. You want to avoid doing anything that emphasizes that you’re an authority figure. Take three student desks and move them up to the front of the class so they are facing each other. You sit in one, the parents in the other two. Let the parents take the lead. They will usually indicate what they’re prepared to hear. Emphasize the positive. Instead of ‘Jimmy doesn’t do his work,’ or ‘Jimmy comes

to class unprepared,' you say, 'Jimmy is capable of working more efficiently.' Say nothing that could potentially upset the parents. Do not in any way question their conception of their child's potential. Avoid confrontation. I'll repeat that. Avoid confrontation."

Spivack also had some useful advice. He approached Matthew in the staffroom during his prep period.

"Your dance-card filled up?" he asked.

Matthew gave him a quizzical look.

"You know, your little visits with the parents. New teachers tend to attract idle curiosity."

"Ryan Harrison's father is threatening to show."

"Let me tell you how to handle these things."

Spivack pulled up a chair next to Matthew and sat down. Leaning in close, he spoke in a confidential tone.

"For every student whose parents are coming to visit, get yourself a nice new file folder, see. Make a print-out of the student's marks. Get a few work samples – tests, assignments, quizzes. Put them in the file folder. And when you meet with the parents, have that folder in front of you. Now don't tell them what it is or anything. Just let it sit there on the desk. Maybe move it around a bit with your fingers while you're talking. Maybe glance inside as you answer a question. Otherwise, leave it alone, let it be mysterious. It's *your* file folder, see? And it has power. It reminds them you're not *completely* irrelevant."

Passing through the foyer where early arrivals were milling about and chatting, enjoying the free coffee and donuts, Matthew walked up to his classroom and studied the interview schedule taped to his door. He taught a total of eighty-one students. Parents or guardians of fourteen students had signed up for one of the twelve minute time slots available over two evenings.

He sat at his desk and for the umpteenth time browsed through his little stack of stiff, new file folders. He stood up again and paced about the room. He had spent an hour after school tidying up the bulletin boards, concealing graffiti, removing school notices that had been ripped or defaced. He'd taken care in selecting the three student desks to be used for the meetings, finding ones with as few obscenities and vulgar cartoons scratched into them.

He was having second thoughts about his "Gallery of the Dead." He wondered how strange all these disembodied faces might look to some of the parents coming in.

He wandered into the barren corridor. Joanne Miller was preparing for her interviews next door. He glanced at her schedule. It indicated she would be visiting with the parents of seven students.

"Hi," said Matthew.

"Hi," said Joanne. She was finishing taking all the plastic chairs down from the desks.

"Looks like a light evening for you."

"Sorry?"

Matthew tapped the interview schedule. "I'm envious."

“Oh. Well, that’s pretty standard really,” said Joanne. “It’s unusual to get more than ten or twelve appointments.”

“Really? I’ve got fourteen.”

“Yeah, well, you’re one of the new guys. Plus, you know. You’ve been making some waves.”

“Waves?”

“Yeah. You know. Yelling at the kids. Making ‘em do grammar. Getting students suspended for plagiarism.”

Matthew didn’t know what to say.

“I mean, none of that is necessarily ...” She put the last chair down and straightened it meditatively. “Bad.” She paused and looked about the room, inspecting it. “A bit unusual, maybe. Gets people talking.”

“Really,” said Matthew. “I hadn’t thought of that.” He immediately felt self-conscious, seeing himself through the eyes of others. He became keenly aware of how different he and Joanne Miller were, in almost every respect. He was dressed in what he thought of as his teaching uniform: leather shoes, pressed trousers, dress shirt and tie. Joanne wore what looked to Matthew like a pair of heavy rubber clogs, her wool socks exposed at the heel, and a pair of baggy utility pants, festooned with huge pockets down the sides, and, as always, a wool sweater, this one sporting an image on the front of a dog, an Irish Setter. Matthew was surprised at how many teachers appeared to enjoy wearing clothing that sported slogans and pictures, just like the students. Fred Hicks sometimes wore a sweatshirt with a portrait of Elmer Fudd on the front.

“Well, it maybe makes some of the parents more curious,” said Joanne as she straightened some of the cards tacked to one of her bulletin boards. Each card had a word on it and was lined up underneath a banner that read “Contemporary Issues.” Each word represented a topic which the students were ostensibly concerned about, each printed evidently by a different student in magic marker. Matthew noticed with some inner distress that a few of the words were misspelled: “Raicism,” “Divercity,” “Goverment.” He thought briefly about pointing this out to Joanne but stopped himself.

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense,” he said.

“But I wouldn’t get stressed about it or anything,” said Joanne. “Chances are they won’t all show up.” She looked at him. “Are you okay?”

Matthew became conscious of the fact he was grimacing. He also realized that his right hand, thrust into a pocket, was clenching his keys so hard their teeth were jabbing painfully into his palm.

“Yes, yes,” he said, straightening up, forcing himself to smile. “I’m fine.”

Footsteps. Someone was approaching from behind. Throat-clearing noises.

“Mr. Roberts?”

Matthew turned. Glasses. Large anxious eyes. On the man’s back was a huge red and white duffel bag. The man extended a hand.

“Hi. I’m Bob Chapman?” His grip was cold and brief. “I know I’m early but I’ve got a hockey game in twenty minutes.”

“Okay, what I wanna say, right off the top here, what I want you to know, okay, is, look: we got the message. Really. We got it. Okay? I had a talk with his mother. And a

long talk with him the other night. A serious talk. And I told him, 'That's it.'" A hand as thick as an axe head chopped the air. "And believe me, he got the message. Oh, yeah. He knows, there's no more foolin' around."

Sam Harrison was nodding his head now, looking at Matthew, his eyebrows raised.

"Oh, yeah. You bet. He knows now, he's gotta buckle down. So we got the message. And I'm glad you called us. I'm sorry you had to call more than once, but ..."

Sam shrugged and seemed to pause to reflect, his slightly bloodshot eyes drifting around the room, the thick fingers of one hand, stained yellow, tapping on the desk. He wore a leather jacket with numbers and logos that referred, Matthew guessed, to a union of some sort. His round, jowly face was darkly tanned and covered with a few days growth of stubble.

He sighed.

"Whattya gonna do? You know, his mother works too, and we got four others so ..." He shrugged again. "He's basically a good kid, you know? He just, well, I dunno why he doesn't do better in school. I think it's a question of, you know, growin' up. He's a little young. A little goofy. A little silly. You know?"

And most of the time, thought Matthew, nodding, a little stoned.

"Anyway, I'll be talkin' to him again tonight. It's about time he got serious. I told him, 'No more goin' out on weeknights 'till you get caught up.' I grabbed the Playstation, gave it a couple of good whacks. Oh, yeah. *Serious* talk."

Sam was nodding again with his eyebrows arched up, that look that said, *You better fuckin' believe it, buddy. I shit you not.*

“So I think you’re gonna see a big change. Okay? Thanks very much.”

They stood, noisily, awkwardly extricating themselves from the constraints of the student desks, Matthew mashing his kneecap again.

Sam held out a meaty, calloused hand.

“And don’t you worry,” he said as he pumped Matthew’s arm, leaning forward a little, smiling, looking him in the eye. “I don’t believe a word comes outta the little prick’s mouth.”

“Ow! Fuck!”

Mrs. Levesque had her hand up and was aiming for another blow. Dale squirmed away, his upper body leaning half out of the desk, his own hands in front of his face. She settled for a loud slap on an upraised arm. Then a cuff to the back of the head.

“Stop it! Jesus!”

Dale Levesque was bussed in from the Pic River Reserve. It was unexpected, if not unusual, for the parents of a native student to come for an interview, but Dale’s mother had made the trip and for some reason had dragged her petulant son along with her. After detailing for Mrs. Levesque an abridged list of Dale’s behavioural excesses, she startled Matthew, and her son, by turning and slapping him smartly across the face.

Mrs. Levesque turned back to Matthew.

“What are his grades?”

“It ain’t just *me*,” barked Dale as he slouched back down in his desk and crossed his arms. His cheek was already reddening.

Matthew wasn’t sure how to react. He opened the file folder.

“Well, he’s failing the course, as I said. He’s passed one out of four tests and he’s failed to hand in any assignments. And out of sixteen possible homework marks, he has two.”

Mrs. Levesque nodded. Then cuffed her son again, a backhander this time.

“Ow!” said Dale.

She fixed him with dark eyes.

“You make me ashamed.”

There was a brief staring contest which Mrs. Levesque won, Dale pretending to check for blood. Mrs. Levesque turned back to Matthew.

“What’s he gotta do to pass?”

Matthew cleared his throat.

“Well, he just has to start doing some work. I mean, none of these assignments are really difficult. There’s no doubt in my mind that if Dale applies himself he can succeed. In class, when he isn’t causing problems, he demonstrates adequate reading and writing skills that should allow him to do well. He just has to settle down and do the work. If he completes any past assignments, I’ll give him half credit. That should put him in a position to do okay as long as he keeps up to date from now on.”

She turned back to Dale who flinched, hands flying up for protection.

“You gotta do your work,” she said.

“I don’t wanna.”

She glared at him. “You talk back, you’re really gonna get it. You’re gonna do your work.”

“I don’t wanna,” said Dale.

Mrs. Levesque swatted at her son, her slaps landing on his upraised arms.

Matthew cleared his throat again. He pretended to read something in the file folder.

“Get out,” she said. “Get out and go wait in the hall.”

She and Matthew watched as Dale, keeping his eyes averted, slithered out of his desk and swaggered out of the room.

“And shut the door,” called Mrs. Levesque after him.

They heard Dale mutter “Fuckin’ bitch,” and then the door slam shut.

Mrs. Levesque turned to Matthew.

“I’m sorry,” she said. Her face and body seemed to abruptly soften and droop. She wearily brought her purse up onto the desk and began searching in it.

“I do what I can, but he’s spoiled. He lived a few years with his aunt and uncle. They let him run wild. He’s got three other brothers, they ain’t like him. Don’t worry, I know what he’s like. I know him. You bet.”

Her hands rummaged as she peered into the purse.

“They should’ve held him back. When I was a kid, you didn’t do yer work, you failed. He doesn’t do any work, they keep puttin’ him ahead.”

She brought a clear plastic vial out of her purse and began working at the lid with bony fingers, the knuckles lined.

“I asked his other teachers, ‘Why don’t you fail him?’ but they say they don’t do that no more.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe if he fails, he’ll learn somethin’.”

She managed to get the lid open.

“Maybe,” said Matthew.

She tipped two tiny green pills into her hand and casually tossed them into her mouth. She swallowed, fixed the plastic lid back on, and dropped the vial into her purse.

She looked at Matthew. He saw a gaunt face, etched by years of hard living, the ruins of a once beautiful woman, prominent cheekbones and dark eyes. A thin, pale scar snaked down the side of one jaw and across her throat.

“I should tell you,” said Matthew haltingly, “uh, I may have to discuss this incident with a guidance counsellor.”

“Oh?”

“It’ll likely, I hope, go no further than that, but I really, well, I have no choice.”

“Oh, I see. I’m a bad mother. I understand.”

“No, please, I don’t think you’re a bad parent, Mrs. Levesque. Who am I to judge? But I’m a new teacher, and these days, I mean ...”

Mrs. Levesque’s expression remained impassive, her gaze fixed on Matthew. He could feel his face getting hot. He regretted saying anything. He felt ashamed of himself.

“You gonna fail him?”

“Well, at the rate he’s going, I won’t have any choice.”

She nodded, a distracted, barely discernible bobbing of her head.

“He’s gonna be just like his old man,” she said with a sigh. “I see it now.”

Matthew was nodding. “I understand your concern.”

“She has never received a grade like this before.” Mrs. Thompson leaned over to emphasize the point. “Never.”

Matthew nodded.

“Never.”

“Well, as I said, it is just one assignment.”

“She has always been an ‘A’ student.”

“Well, everyone has an off day, Mrs. Thompson. Perhaps she – ”

“I think your expectations are too high.”

Matthew raised a hand and shrugged his shoulders briefly, as if to concede the point, to admit Mrs. Thompson had a right to her opinion.

“Well, we are talking here about fairly straightforward grammar and sentence structure. She’s in grade ten. Now is the time for her to start paying a little more attention to these things.”

“I don’t think you fully understand the effect this can have on a young person’s sense of worth. She worked very, very hard on that assignment and I can tell you right now, she has never received a grade below A minus on a major assignment. Never. And to work so hard and to be given a, a ...” Mrs. Thompson’s face assumed an expression of outraged disbelief. “... a *sixty-five*?”

Mrs. Thompson shook her head.

“I really don’t think you understand what impact this has.” She was staring at Matthew now with helpless incredulity, as if he were some kind of alien life form. “I really don’t.”

“Well,” said Matthew. “As I mentioned before, a C is not a failure and should not be considered a failure. It’s a grade that indicates there’s room for improvement, that aspects of her writing – her sentence structure, the organization of her argument, the

things I mentioned before – she needs to work on these elements and improve. It doesn't mean she can't do better or that ...”

“It's not right.”

“Pardon me?”

Mrs. Thompson was shaking her head slightly, her jaw set, staring now at the file folder in front of Matthew.

“It's not right.”

“I'm not sure ...”

“The power you have.”

“The power?”

“You're just a person, like everybody else. You went to university. Well, so what?” She was looking at Matthew now. “My nephew has a university degree and he's an idiot. You have the power to crush people, to make them feel worthless. Why should you have that power? My little girl came home so upset.” Her voice caught, wavered for a moment. “She wouldn't *eat*. She felt like a failure. *You* did this to her. Why should you have that power?”

“Mrs. Thompson, please. This is one essay. I've already said, I would be happy to work with Kim and help her with future assignments. Let's not put too much importance on a single ...”

“You're wrong. You're wrong about her. We'll show you. You'll see.”

“But one essay, one mark, shouldn't be seen as ...”

“We'll show you.”

It was almost ten o'clock when the final parent stood up and thanked him and left him sitting there on the plastic chair, his knee throbbing. While engrossed in his last few interviews, Matthew had seen several staff members pass by his door and knew he was likely the last teacher left in the building. His shoulder and neck muscles were so tight he could hardly turn his head. He was exhausted yet at the same time full of frustration and pent up energy. While he felt as if he could sleep for a week, he also had the urge to go onto the roof of the school and bellow at the sky. He saw himself for a moment chopping wood. Yes, that was something they did up here wasn't it, chop logs of wood with an axe? He imagined how satisfying it would feel to smash pieces of wood in half, to heave the axe high in the air and then hear the gratifying crunch as he brought it down with all his strength.

As he was getting ready to leave, Donna appeared at the door. She gave Matthew a smile as she leaned against the wall, her thumbs hooked into the pockets of her jeans.

"Hey," she said.

"Hi, Donna."

"I didn't make an appointment but I was hoping maybe we could talk a bit?"

Matthew was standing in front of his desk, sorting out all the file folders. He abruptly dropped them on the desk, letting them slide back into disorder, and stretched out his hands in exasperation.

"I don't know, Donna, I mean, what's there left to talk about? She's doing great. She has the highest marks in the class and if we offered a program for gifted kids, she'd

be in it. Otherwise it's a matter of patiently listening to her go on and on and on about ..."

"Okay, okay," said Donna, still smiling. "Jesus. Relax. I was kidding."

Matthew sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry. It's been a rough night."

"Look, you wanna get outta here? I could give you a ride home."

Matthew knew the responsible thing to do was to politely decline. He hesitated, but only for a second.

"God, yes," he said. "Let's go." He began stuffing things into his briefcase.

"Leave all that," said Donna, waving her hand at his papers and notebooks. "Just leave it and c'mon."

Outside a cold wind had come up. Matthew had forgotten that Donna rode a motorcycle. It stood alone in the parking lot, all chrome and gleaming black metal.

"Oh shit," said Matthew, buttoning up his coat.

"What?"

"Well, isn't it a little cold to be still driving your bike?"

"It's not cold, city boy," she said with a laugh. "Here, you can have the helmet."

Once on the bike, Matthew felt even more unnerved. With the helmet on, his head felt too heavy for his neck. Part of him knew this wasn't a good idea, but another part of him couldn't wait to feel the thrust of the engine as the bike roared down the street. He couldn't recall the last time he'd been on a motorcycle. The faster they got away from the school, the faster he could leave Sam Harrison and Mrs. Thompson and everyone else behind. He was sure someone would see them together but he decided he didn't care. He

wondered for a moment where to put his hands. The engine roared to life and then settled into a rumbling, irregular growl as Donna pulled on a pair of black leather gloves.

“Uh, Donna,” he said, his voice somehow sounding both loud and muffled from underneath the tight helmet. “Where should I put my feet?”

Donna nodded, evidently unable to hear him. She turned away, took hold of the handle bars, and kicked back the metal stand, the weight of the huge motorcycle settling beneath them. She used her feet to guide the bike off the sidewalk. Matthew reached behind him and found a metal bar to hold. He found some purchase for his feet, resting them on something that he hoped wouldn't get hot and burn his shoes. They rolled slowly down the laneway towards the street, Donna allowing the bike to idle forward, her dark hair fluttering behind her.

When they got to the corner they stopped. Donna turned and reached back to grab his arm.

“C'mon,” she shouted, pulling him, pressing his arm against her waist. “I don't want you falling off.”

Feeling awkward and self-conscious, Matthew shifted his weight and leaned forward. He felt an unmistakable erotic thrill as his hands tightened on the place where he could find the best hold, around her pelvic bones. It was a sensation only made more intense as the bike abruptly jerked forward and they roared down the empty street, the thrust of the acceleration knocking Matthew's head and shoulders back, forcing him to squeeze her hips even more as she shifted gears and accelerated. Her buttocks were pressed firmly into his groin.

There were, for Matthew, a couple of terrifying moments. She took a corner at high speed, Matthew panicking as the bike dipped low and he felt for a second like he was losing his balance. When they crossed the railroad tracks she hardly slowed at all, crashing over them, the bike airborne for a split-second and again Matthew thought they were about to wipe out. They sped past the post-office and the Catholic church, the mill looming up ahead of them as they began the descent down Mill Road towards the lake.

But instead of heading down his street and dropping him off, Donna drove past the burned out hotel and the abandoned rail yard behind it, and then turned onto a dirt road Matthew had never noticed before. It led off one of the paved streets and followed a chain link fence sectioning off part of the mill site from the rest of the town. Unlit, the road ascended steeply, thin, spiky trees rising up around them on either side, and Donna increased her speed, the engine louder than ever, the motorcycle's single headlight piercing and scattering the darkness as they sped forward. Matthew tried to get Donna's attention, but whether she couldn't hear him or was ignoring him, he couldn't say.

They approached a gate with a large sign that read "Private road – No trespassing" in bold red letters but Donna hardly slowed at all as she dipped off to the side to pass around it. They drove uphill for some distance, the trail rough, strewn with potholes and loose gravel, the trees on either side thinning out. They were climbing the hill, moving away from the pulp mill and the town, further into rough territory, further into the darkness. The lights of civilization they were leaving behind. The road entered into denser bush as it curved around the side of the hill, becoming rougher, gravel giving way to large stones and deeper potholes and patches of thick mud. Donna had to slow down to negotiate the more rugged terrain, but then the trees on either side fell away and

Matthew saw they were following a road cut into the rock, gouged out of the side of the hill that towered above the pulp mill except they were now on the other side of the hill. Below them was a steep drop to the lake which Matthew tried not to look at. He instead gazed out over the water, spangles of moonlight on the lake's textured surface. Then abruptly they were heading downhill and the bike picked up speed. Several times their momentum was broken by half-buried stones embedded in the road. The road cut inland and for several minutes Matthew could not see the lake as they drove away from it. He wanted to tell Donna to stop, to go back and let him admire the view. The road continued downhill, steeper now, Donna slowing, alternately using her brakes and allowing gravity to take them down. Then they were turning, slowing, before emerging from darkness, rocks on one side, the hillside on the other, into an opening, into moonlight, and there was the lake again, below them, closer, and Donna jerked the bike to a halt.

They were on an outcrop of bare rock, a perch, overlooking the water, a kind of natural platform, cut off from the town, all evidence of Caribou and the mill blotted out by the hill behind them. Donna dismounted and Matthew took off the confining helmet. All he could hear was the water, waves thudding and crashing and then the sound of the water washing back into the lake.

Donna, standing at the edge of the cliff, turned and smiled at him, the wind playing with her dark hair. She had that same look on her face, a kind of mocking smile, but Matthew, for the first time, felt like he understood the look. She wanted to show him things, to share things with the young man from the big city, to be able to smile at him and say, "I'll bet you've never done this before." They were still quite high up, a good

eighty feet or more, the waves breaking on the rocks below. The moonlight illuminated the whitecaps.

“This is amazing,” he said.

“Yeah, you can’t hike here,” she said. “It’s too far. The only way is with a bike. It’s trespassing anyway. The mill owns it. But I come here at night sometimes. Sort of my private spot.” She turned and began walking up the hill, into the darkness. “C’mon,” she said.

Matthew followed and they began climbing the side of the hill, following a narrow path he could barely see. The climb was steep and within a minute Donna was well ahead of him, her shadow intermittently visible as a silhouette against the sky, moving above him. Matthew was beginning to wonder why they couldn’t have stayed where they were, when Donna seemed to disappear, the outline of her head and shoulders vanishing. When Matthew caught up he found her sitting on another, much smaller outcrop of rock, smoking a cigarette, sitting with her back against the hillside. It was as if the space were tailor made for two people to lean back and look at the lake. Matthew sat down beside her. From their small perch the view was even more impressive, the lake lit by moonlight, illuminated whitecaps, appearing and then vanishing, stretching into the distance. Donna unzipped her jacket and brought out a small silver flask. She unscrewed the cap, took a swallow, and held it out to Matthew.

“Rye,” she said, smiling again.

“Thanks,” said Matthew. “I think I could use a little of that.”

The whiskey burned his throat. They took turns with the flask as they looked out at the moon and the water. Donna lit what Matthew assumed was another cigarette before

recognizing the sweet, pungent aroma of high grade marijuana. She inhaled deeply from the joint before offering it. He hesitated briefly before taking it from her. He decided that an unspoken promise was being made, that he was being asked to trust her, to trust that she would never tell anyone about this. He realized that Donna was continually narrowing the space between them and this made him feel uneasy and excited at the same time.

Within seconds of exhaling he could feel everything inside him loosen and let go, like a building slowly collapsing in an earthquake. His mind detached itself from all the worries of his life and zeroed in on the present moment. They wordlessly shared the joint before Donna flicked a tiny point of orange light out at the lake. Matthew slouched down until he was almost prostrate, only his head propped up, his feet on the edge of the rock. When he closed his eyes he had the sensation he was floating high above the lake, all the pressure and worry melting away and turning his blood into honey, making him feel heavy and slow and calm. He imagined he could feel the lake right underneath him, feel the heavy movements of all that water, not the waves, but the deep, undulating currents beneath. He gazed at the sky. It was unlike anything he had seen since childhood, the darkness covered and crowded with stars, glittering and countless.

Wordlessly, Donna moved closer to Matthew, her body lightly nestling in against his. The contact sent a thick current of electricity buzzing over his skin.

“Look at the stars,” he said. “You know, I haven’t seen a sky like this for years. I think it’s a crime how we can’t see the stars anymore ...”

“Yeah,” she said, and then nothing more as she took his arm and looped it around her, moving in closer. Matthew, stoned and dazed, decided this was okay, this was innocent enough. He felt comfortable with it.

“Yeah, it’s beautiful here,” said Matthew. “What a night...”

Her mouth was on his neck briefly, and then her warm breath was in his ear. He willed himself not to react. He felt her hand rest lightly on his belly, then slip into his coat and under his shirt. It was as cold as the silver flask and the touch of it on his bare skin took his breath away. He turned his head to say something, to discourage her, but as he did her hand left his stomach and swiftly clutched the back of his head, wrenching his hair painfully, pulling him to her with startling force. Her first kiss was not exploratory or speculative but assertive and commanding, greedy, her mouth open, enveloping his. She swiftly moved on top of him, pinning him, her full weight on his abdomen. Matthew found it difficult to breathe. She clutched his wrist and brought his hand to her breasts, writhing on top of him with increasing fervour. Something, a stone, was pressing into his back, Donna’s rhythmic movements causing it to dig into his spine. She mistook his struggle to move off of it for rising passion and began moaning as her hands moved under his clothes, taking possession of him. Matthew fought to push her back but she was surprisingly strong and evidently not easily discouraged. Matthew sensed she was used to having her way, to simply taking what she wanted.

“Wait,” he gasped. “Wait a second.”

Donna ignored him, one of her hands struggling with his belt buckle. She was forcing him to make a quick decision and as his mind tried to calculate what to do, what he wanted, he thought of Amy. Briefly her face rose up before him, moon-like and

unblinking, her eyes filled with tears. Donna was biting his neck. She'd unbuckled his belt and one hand was rubbing and kneading his groin while the other sought to undo his trousers.

"Stop," he said, more firmly. "Donna. Stop."

She ignored him and just as she had succeeded in unzipping him, Matthew seized Donna's arms and lifted her up and off of him, holding her at arms length, holding her still.

"What?" she demanded, her eyes flashing in the dark, not concerned or curious, but angry, incredulous. "What? What's wrong?"

He held her there for a moment, breathing hard, then said firmly, "We can't do this."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," said Donna. She broke free and roughly pushed herself off him, her knees and hands pressing painfully into him as she stood up. She stepped away sat down heavily, putting a few feet between them. She stared out at the lake, shaking her head as Matthew did up his pants.

"I'm sorry," said Matthew.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," said Matthew. "There's nothing wrong with me." He buckled his belt and then raised himself to a sitting position. His heart was thudding in his chest. He felt slightly dizzy. "I can't do this, okay? It isn't right."

Donna was silent. She took out a cigarette.

"I'm attracted to you," he said. "Of course I am. But you're my student's mother. I don't know if there are exactly rules against this, but ..." He sighed. "It's not right."

He heard a metallic clink and saw her cup the flame from her Zippo. She took a long draw on the cigarette as she put the lighter in her jacket.

“You know,” she said, “if I left right now, if I just took off, it would take you all night to get back to town.”

Matthew listened to the sound of the waves below.

“I imagine that’s true.”

He glanced over at her. She was staring at the lake. She took another drag from her cigarette.

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess I’d probably be lost forever. I’d fall into the lake and drown. The search party would never find me.”

“Are you gay?”

“No,” he said wearily. “No, I am not gay.”

“Some of the kids might be surprised to hear that.”

“What?”

“Some of ‘em, they think you and Sims must be getting it on.”

“Yeah, right.”

Donna reclined, getting more comfortable, stretching out and looking up at the sky.

“Well, he does give you rides to school,” she said. “Sometimes picks you up at the end of the day. And,” she paused to draw on her cigarette, “people have seen you shopping together at Franklin’s.”

“Are you serious?”

“And you do go on, I hear, about how wonderful it is to read poetry.”

“I don’t believe this.”

Donna laughed, still not looking at him. “It’s a small town, Mr. Roberts.”

“So if a couple of men stop off at the grocery store, they’re gay?”

“I don’t know. People like to talk. But you’re both not married, right? Both single. Both into art and stuff. Seem to spend a lot of time together ...” Donna shrugged her shoulders and glanced at him, smiling.

Matthew stared out at the lake and laughed. No matter what he did, he realized now, he would never be understood by his students. They would never appreciate what he was attempting to accomplish. The only one who could see it was Amy. Everything he was trying to do was futile.

“What a waste,” he muttered, shaking his head.

Now it was his turn to feel angry. He didn’t really care that anyone might think he was a homosexual, though Donna’s taunt, as transparent as it was, did hit a vulnerable spot; he had not touched a woman in many months. It was more the realization that coming to Caribou was a ridiculous mistake. A stupid, naïve, incredibly costly mistake.

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered. And then he found himself on his feet, trying to leave, scrambling up the hill, turning his back on Donna and moving as fast as he could away from her.

“Where are you going?” she called.

He marched through scrub and brush that he couldn’t really see, keeping up a brisk, steady pace, occasionally falling forward and using his hands to keep moving. Faintly, he heard Donna call out to him, her voice obscured by the sound of the waves. The ground leveled off a bit and he kept going, putting Donna and the town and pulp mill

behind him, moving towards the side of the hill that faced nothing but open water. Twice he lost his footing completely and both times simply scrambled up and kept going, passing underneath a huge ledge of rock and moving into its shadow. He was vaguely aware that this was dangerous, that he could conceivably fall and lose control and end up dying on the rocks below, but then he cast the thought aside and kept moving up and forward, wanting to get as far away from Donna as he could, circling around the hill until he was out of breath. He stopped and stumbled and fell to his knees, thinking for a moment how ridiculous this all was, and then rearing backwards, gulping air, bracing himself against the hill, he gave out a great bellow of anger and frustration at the black water before him. "Fuck!" he screamed. Then again. And again. Before collapsing backwards to a sitting position, breathing hard, staring out at the endless black lake. Far off a radio tower was blinking, a red light flashing in the darkness. Barely visible underneath it, rimmed by moonlight, were the dark outlines of the islands in the bay, graceful, rounded hills of solid rock, older than one could imagine. As he tried to calm himself, he reflected on the fact that after human life had passed from the planet, those islands would still be there. The hill he sat on would still be here. The lake would still be here. This would all be here for millions of years, long after humanity had destroyed itself. He watched the piercing red light blink on and off.

This thought was of some small comfort.

Chapter 12

It was Monday night. The Packers and the Rams. Bill had been looking forward to it, but the game turned out to be a bust. In the fourth quarter, Green Bay was ahead by almost thirty points. Al Michaels was making stupid jokes about turkeys.

Bill went to the kitchen to get another beer. He was waiting for Helen to call back. She was over visiting with Tom, their son, and his new live-in girlfriend. Elise. Eliza. Something like that. Tom had met her less than three months ago and before Bill had heard anything about it, before he'd even met her, they were shacked up. So easy. So simple. Well, Bill thought, we'll see if this one lasts. Helen liked her. Said she was "very grounded," whatever that meant. But Helen usually had good judgement about these kinds of things. She was usually right.

Another crappy school in another miserable little town.

Should have listened to her. Here it was, just into November, and Bill was regretting the whole thing, wishing he'd never agreed to come here. Previous to this, since retiring, Bill had found working as a hired gun satisfying. He'd discovered school boards were quite happy to pay big money to get a competent, experienced administrator to come in and clean up their messes. He'd straightened out a few schools and Caribou High wasn't really any more screwed up than the others, but this time he just didn't have the energy. Maybe it was because Helen wasn't around. Deciding to come out here on his own, he never would have guessed he'd end up missing her as much as he did.

But that really wasn't it. Settling back on the couch with a fresh Budweiser, flicking through the fifty or so channels of nothing worth watching, Bill knew what the

real problem was. It was female, a tiny thing, about five foot five in heels, with big white teeth and an empty head.

Joyce Landry.

It was people like her who were ruining the whole system. He had seen this kind of thing before. It was becoming commonplace. For twenty years she had taught primary grades. Then she starts to move up. She starts taking all the supplementary courses, getting all those certificates, all those merit badges that mean absolutely nothing, starts schmoozing with people in the board, gets on some committees. And all through this she's so positive, so full of energy, so enthusiastic. Such a team player. And nobody seems to notice she's actually not that bright, and not that good a teacher, uncomfortable with confrontation and incapable of imposing discipline. Despite the fact she has no experience working with high-school kids, she's got that impressive looking C.V. and she gives a great interview, and suddenly she's the principal at Caribou High. And then, over time, people at the board office start to wonder what the hell they were thinking. Vic McAuley had been rather candid.

"Frankly, she's in over her head," he'd told Bill on the phone. "We need someone like you, somebody with a lot of experience, who can come in and give her some guidance, help her work on her weaknesses."

But Landry had made it clear she wasn't that interested in listening to Bill. In fact, she avoided meeting with him more than was absolutely necessary, while at the same time referring most problems and difficulties to him. Over and over again, Bill heard the same phrase from secretaries, from teachers: "Joyce said I should talk to you about this."

Bill finally confronted her and demanded a much clearer division of labour.

“Okay, here’s the deal,” he’d told her. “You obviously want me to handle all the tough stuff: discipline, students, staff, and individual parents. Fine. But in return, you take care of the board, the union, the Advisory Council and the Parents’ Council, okay? And you lead the staff meetings. Sound fair?”

Not that she had a choice. He’d already gone over to the board office and given them an earful and they in turn had told Joyce they were not prepared to go looking for another interim V.P., that she had to make this work. His complaints had also gotten him this apartment, an upgrade on the initial housing arrangement. Cheaper though than the housing allowance; the difference he pocketed every month was almost enough to cover his food and booze.

So he had things operating reasonably well, except for the fact that he and Joyce barely spoke, which inevitably created some difficulties. But if he were to be completely honest, he’d have to admit he was largely just going through the motions. There was just too much that was fucked up, too much for one person to correct. The staff was demoralized and burdened with an excess of inexperienced teachers. The school’s attendance and late policies didn’t make any sense. The board and Joyce were cowering from parents, giving in every time some kid’s mom protested a suspension or a failing grade. Everyone was running scared. Take this pain in the ass, Prontack, head of the English department, coming to see him every other day about something. They had made her department head at the end of last year and why, he had no idea. She had no clue what she was doing. She didn’t seem to understand that no one cared what happened in English classes as long as the pass/failure rates stayed pretty much the same. So some parents were complaining and she had some new teachers to break in. What was so

difficult about that? But she was just too nervous, too conscious of the divide between appearance and reality. Yes, the school was a mess. Yes, students were graduating who could barely read and write. Did she think this problem had developed overnight? Did she think it could be fixed in one semester or one year? Did she really think that she would be held accountable? By who? By him? By the board? By the government? What didn't she understand about the simple fact that in education, no one is held accountable? How did she think someone like Joyce Landry got to be principal? Having gained her lofty position, it seemed all she thought about was the possibility someone might be looking over shoulder. "Cover your ass." It might as well be the motto of the school, of the board, hell, of the whole system, come to think of it.

So Prontack was all freaked out over this weirdo, Roberts. He wasn't playing by the rules; he wasn't doing things the normal way, and so she had it in for him. Week after week, it was Roberts did this, and Roberts did that. Nothing she brought up actually represented any kind of serious problem until yesterday she came in and shut the door and sat down.

"My understanding of the Education Act," she began, "is that, as Department Head, I'm ultimately responsible for ensuring the proper delivery of the program under my direction and as such I can be held liable for any failure to deliver that program."

Bill nodded, sighed and leaned forward over his desk so as to reassure Ms. Prontack that she had his full attention. He had learned from experience that this helped to speed things up.

"Well, I'm concerned about the delivery of the program in one of the classes being taught by Matthew Roberts. To be specific, his Grade Ten Academic class."

“What’s the problem?”

“Well, I don’t understand how this has happened, but he’s behind by a good three weeks in the course. It’s November and he’s still stuck in the second unit. He has an entire novel study to do, plus units on essay writing, short stories, and Media Literacy. I can’t see how he’s going to fit it all in.”

Bill nodded. “Okay. He’s behind in the course.”

“Yes. And I’m not sure what I should do.”

“How did you find out about this?”

“He told me. He came to me and said, ‘I think you should be aware that I’m behind in my 2A class.’ I was like, ‘Okay.’ I didn’t know what to say at first. But then it occurred to me, you know, this could be a problem. This could affect me.”

“Well, this isn’t that ...” Bill searched for the judicious word. “Exceptional. He’s not the first teacher to fall behind in a course.”

“No, but it’s the first under my watch. So I’m coming to tell you because I think it should be on the record that, you know, this isn’t my fault.”

“It’s not your fault, Sue. Duly noted. Not to worry. If it would make you feel better, I’ll have a word with him. Okay?”

“I just don’t trust his judgement. I received another complaint about him from a parent. He’s going outside the prescribed curriculum, using books and materials other than what has been made available to him. He had his grade nine class read a Hemingway story that deals with abortion.”

“Oh, boy.”

“And when I asked him about it, he was not the least bit apologetic. I mean, he talks like he’s teaching a college class in ... I don’t know, advanced literature or something. I just don’t think he really gets how things work around here.”

“All right,” said Bill. “If you like I’ll have a word with him. Try to get him straightened out.”

“Well, I think you or Joyce should definitely talk to him. About this and some of the other things we’ve discussed about. And also ...” She paused. “I think you should be aware, there has been some talk, rumours, regarding him and a female student.”

“Oh? What student?”

“Amy Kimball.”

“Oh, right. The one they say is gifted.”

“Yes. She’s in the class we were just talking about. And she also attends his little chess club meetings at lunch.”

“So what kind of rumours are you hearing?”

“Well, someone actually came to me and expressed concern. There’s no evidence that anything has happened between them, but she ...”

“Who?” asked Bill in a tone that indicated he was no longer interested in “rumours.”

Prontack drew a breath. “Her mother. Donna Kimball.”

Bill’s eyebrows went up. “Really? Why didn’t you tell her to come talk to me? Or Joyce?”

“Well, she doesn’t have any first-hand evidence. She hasn’t witnessed anything. She just has a bad feeling about it. She says they spend quite a bit of time together at the

school and Amy talks about him a lot at home. That's really it. So, I don't know. I'm not sure how much credence to give what she says."

"She's the child's mother," said Bill. "We have to take her concerns seriously. Even if they are probably paranoid delusions." Bill had heard a few things about Donna Kimball. And he felt certain Matthew wouldn't cross the line with anyone. He wasn't the type. "Okay. Not a word about this to anyone. And I mean no one. Understood?"

"Of course."

"I'll have a talk with Roberts, remind him he's on probation. It's time we got things out in the open."

Prontack stood up.

"Do you want me present?"

"No. Don't worry about it. Let me handle it." Something he heard himself saying more often than he would have liked. "But it's important you not tell anyone about this. Understood? Not Joyce, not any other staff members, I mean no one. This is strictly between you and me. Got it?"

"Yes, yes. Of course."

The next day Bill went looking for Matthew during block C, his prep period. He had found him in the staff room making coffee and told him to come by and see him at the end of the day. Matthew gave him a puzzled look.

"Just want to talk about a few things," he said, smiling. "No big deal. We should schedule an appraisal for sometime soon. We can discuss that and some other stuff that's come up. Okay?"

Bill knew this consultation had all the makings of a difficult one. There were too many negative issues to be raised at one time. It was unavoidable that Matthew was going to feel ambushed. Aware of this, once Matthew had closed the door and sat down, Bill took the direct approach.

“Okay, Matthew. A few things to clear up here.” Bill consulted the list he’d drawn up. “First of all, you’re way behind in your 2A class. Now that’s not anything to get too worried about, but it’s important you get things back on track as soon as possible. Think you can do that for me?”

“Yes, of course,” said Matthew. “Why are you—”

“Yeah, Sue came and talked to me. That’s okay. It’s part of her job to keep me informed. So, I’m just checking with you on these things. Okay? No big deal. It’s not uncommon for teachers to fall behind sometimes. But it’s important you learn from this, okay?”

“Yes, of course. I volunteered this information to Sue. I didn’t know she would...”

“Look, she tells me everything. Okay? Let’s get past that. No one’s going behind your back. No one’s out to get you. You’re a new teacher, so naturally we’re looking out for you, right? We have to keep an eye on new teachers. It takes some time for people to find their footing and that’s normal. You bring a lot of strengths to your position, but we’ve got a few concerns. Let’s just go over them as quickly as we can.”

“Okay. Fine.”

“All right. Next: we’ve had some calls from parents. There seems to be some concerns about your grading. You’re kind of a hard marker and the kids aren’t used to

that, okay? We've had a few upset students, a few upset parents. I'm not asking you to turn into a limp dick on this kind of thing. I respect a tough grader. But maybe try to be more mindful of how people are going to respond to your handing out a lot of C's and D's. It's a rare thing now. You have to consider the fact that a D these days is basically a failure. Keep that in mind and then grade accordingly."

"But that doesn't make any sense."

"What?"

"That a D is a failure."

"Well, that's how it's perceived now."

"But it's not a failure. I mean, a student could get D's in all their courses and then graduate. Right? I mean, just to get your high-school now, you don't need a certain average."

Bill raised a hand and briefly closed his eyes.

"I see your point but I don't want to argue about this. You know what I'm getting at." He checked his list. "Okay. Next. Also relating to calls from parents. Is it true you recently taught in your grade 9 class a short story that involves abortion?"

"You're kidding."

Bill said nothing.

"I don't know what to say."

"Well, maybe just answer the question."

"Yes. We read a story by Ernest Hemingway that touches on that subject."

"Did you find that story in a textbook approved for use in this school?"

Matthew laughed briefly and shook his head. "No, I did not."

“Well, two recommendations then. First, save the controversial topics for senior classes. Senior academic classes, actually. Second, try to use the materials we have available for you.”

“Those materials, as you call them, are, for the most part, of inferior quality.”

“Inferior? They are approved by the ministry and the board. Anything you teach from them is completely safe. You cannot go wrong with those texts. If a parent or student complains about anything taught out of those books, I will back you up one hundred percent. But if you’re going to bring in your own materials that are of questionable merit, then I –”

“Questionable merit? Ernest Hemingway?”

“Then I can’t defend you,” Bill continued. “Matthew, your job is not to teach what you think is great literature. Your job is to carry out your duties according to the guidelines set out by the government, the board, and the administration of this school. Okay?”

Matthew stared out the window of Bill’s office onto the front lawn. The grass was brown and dead.

“Next,” said Bill. “Amy Kimball.”

Matthew waited for Bill to continue but he didn’t. Matthew turned away from the window. Bill was staring at him.

“Yes?” said Matthew.

“Amy Kimball,” repeated Bill. “Anything I should know about?”

“Pardon me?” said Matthew. “What do you mean? How she’s doing?”

“Maybe,” said Bill. “How would you describe your relationship with her?”

“Uh, positive, I think. Good. Why?”

“Would you say you’re closer to her than most of your other students?”

“I guess I would have to agree with that. I’m ...” Matthew paused. “I’m friends with her mother. They had me over to their house for dinner recently.”

Bill nodded and sighed. He looked down at his desk. “You want to be careful, Matthew. This is a small town. Okay? You just want to be careful. You don’t want to give anyone reason to think something inappropriate might be taking place.”

“Inappropriate. Bill, am I on trial here or something?”

“I told you. We have some concerns and I just want to clear things up. Clear the air, so to speak.”

“I can’t believe this. Inappropriate. How could anyone ...”

“Look, if you tell me your relationship with the girl hasn’t crossed the line, I believe you. You’re not being accused of anything. I’m just cautioning you. This is a small town. People talk.”

“But I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“That’s not the point. You understand that. Rumours start up for no reason. All I’m saying is, don’t give people a reason to talk. Okay?”

“But the other concerns you have. All of it. I haven’t done anything wrong. I work hard. I’ve tried to be the best teacher I can be.”

“And your efforts are appreciated. Try not to take this personally. Just understand, in addition to trying to be the best teacher you can be, you also have to try and fit in. Right? With this school and this town.”

Matthew nodded. He waited. He looked out the window again.

“Understand?” asked Bill.

“Yeah,” said Matthew. “I understand. Anything else?”

“No. That’s about it. Just keep in mind you’re a new teacher; you’re on probation. None of these things by themselves is a major problem. But together they add up to a teacher who is still adjusting to things. I’m simply encouraging you to make the necessary adjustments.”

“Yes. I understand,” said Matthew, more loudly now. “I think I get it. You’re telling me I should give in to the culture of mediocrity and low standards at this school. You’re telling me not to expect so much, not to demand so much. You’re telling me to use second-rate teaching materials and leave my imagination and my enthusiasm at home. And you’re telling me that my behaviour and the way I interact with my students should conform to the most cynical of attitudes. I think I understand completely.”

“Now, hold it right there.”

Matthew stood up. “What? I get it. I’m hearing you loud and clear.”

“I did not say that ...”

“Look, I don’t want to take up any more of your time than necessary, Bill. Okay? You won’t have to worry about me because I’m done. Okay? I quit.”

Bill nodded and began gathering up the papers on his desk.

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that. I’m going to proceed on the basis that you’re upset and maybe need a little time to cool off.”

“I’m not upset!” said Matthew. “I’m just telling you: I understand what you want from me and I can’t do it.”

Bill raised a hand again, holding it up like a stop sign. "Just take it easy, okay. Just stop right there, before you say anything you might regret."

"I can't do it, Bill!" Matthew's face was red.

Bill nodded. "Let's just stop there and agree we've had a productive meeting and we can both walk away and think things over. All right? If you want to meet tomorrow or the day after, my door is always open."

Matthew, still shaking his head, began to laugh. He stared at Bill, smiling, his face crimson, chuckling. Bill waited for him to stop but he didn't. Matthew kept laughing.

Bill stood up. "Well, like I said, let's just agree we've had a meeting of the minds and we both have things to think about."

Matthew finally finished laughing. "Yeah, sure," he said. He shook his head some more and without another word, left the office.

The game was almost over. Bill got up to get another beer and on his way to the fridge the phone rang. It was Helen.

"Oh, you should see them, Bill," she said. "I think this is it. I really do. I've never seen Tom so happy. They're so in love. And tonight, when she was out of the room, he told me, he wanted to buy her a ring. He asked if you and I might be willing to help him with that. I said 'Well, let's wait and see. It's a bit fast, isn't it?' But he can tell I like her. I think we should, Bill. Don't you? Help him out a bit more?"

"I don't know," said Bill. "Whatever you think."

"How are you? How are you feeling?" Her voice dropped down into that tone of irritated concern that bothered him and comforted him at the same time. "I hope you're not drinking too much."

“I’m fine. I’m good. Don’t worry. Listen, Helen, I’ve been thinking.”

“Yes?”

“I think this is it. This is... this will be the last one.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’ve had enough.” He put his empty beer bottle on the kitchen counter.

“Too much bullshit.”

“Oh, Bill. I worry about you. You can’t stay on until June with that attitude. It’s not healthy.”

“I’m fine,” said Bill, though she had a point. Just the word “June” gave him a sinking feeling in his guts. Thinking about another six months of this crap almost caused his knees to buckle.

“Come home. Tell them you’ll stay on until Christmas break and then that’s it. Come home, Bill.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“Bill. Please. Think. The time...”

“I know,” said Bill.

“We don’t know how much time we have.”

“I know.”

“So do it.” Her voice was now hard and authoritative. “Tell them it’s a medical issue. Tell them I’m ill. Tell them anything you want. If you’re finally done, then you’re done. Come home.”

For a moment, Bill thought of Matthew. He thought of the things he’d said to him. He knew Helen was right.