Interim City: Seven Stories

Frank Babics

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ABSTRACT

Interim City: Seven Stories

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The stories contained in this collection revolve around a group of characters living in a nearly abandoned city. As the world around them becomes increasingly barren, they awaken from their mental stupor and attempt to enforce changes in their lives. Yet having been in a stupor they lack the tools for proper introspection and their attempts at change, though sincere, are largely superficial. As the world around them continues to dwindle they become almost ghost-like, and memory has become fragmented and unreliable. Lacking a cohesive past they are unable to gain a proper understanding of their selves, and are unable to free themselves from their physical environment. Like the city, they too are in the process of withering away.

DEDICATION

For My Parents

Anna Boda Babics

George Babics

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LAWS OF INERTIA

1

A man I didn't know appeared every morning at my house. He paced the courtyard, crushing the dusty late autumn leaves, while I watched from behind the curtains upstairs. His suit and hat were grey, the shoes white; I couldn't see his face. Beneath his arm he clutched a bulky leather bag, sleek and glistening black; a strapless oversized purse. Every morning he paced that courtyard for up to four hours. I watched him for over a month but knew as soon as I set eyes on him that he was looking for me.

My house was at the bottom of a cul-de-sac on Four Lanes Road at the edge of the city. I was the only one living on Four Lanes. It was a dark night when I broke a back window and climbed inside, making the empty house my home. I had been there for a year when the man I didn't know first appeared. Like me he came from the city, the only place Four Lanes leads to. I had left the city wanting solitude and now it seemed someone from the city wanted me. I did not want to be found. After a month of watching this man from behind the upstairs curtains I decided to snatch his bulky black leather purse.

I had no qualms about stealing. Since I fled my life I was forced to provide for myself through alternative means. I had the patience, the time and the practice, and I was certain that within minutes that purse would be mine. In the courtyard was a cobbled path, laid out like a crescent moon with both ends opening onto Four Lanes. Along the crescent was a bench, and facing the bench was a birdbath. Every morning the

man set the bag in the bowl of the bath and paced the crescent back and forth with his hands clasped behind his back. At each end of the path he stopped, looked up Four Lanes, and after a minute or two turned around and walked the other way. Back and forth like a pendulum. After an hour he sat on a bench and dozed with his head tilted to one side.

Early one morning I waited in the bushes by the house and watched him appear like a dusty speck at the top of Four Lanes. He made his way toward me. As soon as he reached the courtyard he began to pace up and down the crescent. I waited for an hour as he paced, and remained motionless when he finally rested the bag into the birdbath and settled on the bench. It wasn't long before his head bobbed forward as he was dozing off, and I slipped from the bushes and moved slowly up the grass until I was crouching directly behind him. The purse was resting on the edge of the bath just ahead of me, almost in reach, separated only by the narrow cobbled path and his sleeping body. The leather was sleek and it shone in the sunlight; I could swear that even from where I was crouching I could see my reflection in its side. I took a deep breath and sprinted toward the birdbath, grabbed the purse tightly in my arms and in a flash I was running, my heart pounding firmly in my chest as I headed up Four Lanes back toward the city.

2

It was warm for October. The sun was bright and the air was still; I couldn't remember the last time it felt good to be outside. It was early and I was the only one on the streets. All was quiet as I walked beneath the overhanging trees and between thick

suburban bushes. I was thinking that it must have been the weekend and that everyone was asleep, and the only person I saw was not a person but a cat who scampered away as soon as I appeared.

The first person I saw was on Boulevar Street. It was a narrow side-street with a crumbling sidewalk and a row of aging apartment buildings. There were no overhanging trees and the bushes here were grey and withered and turning to dust. A man was sitting on the steps of the building at the corner, smoking a cigarette.

"Hello," I said. My voice felt oddly rough; I hadn't spoken to anyone since moving into Four Lanes.

The man looked at me and let out a puff of smoke.

"Where can I get something to eat?" I asked.

He looked at me for half a minute, then turned his head to look up and down the street. "The bus station's open," he said. "Two blocks around that corner."

"Two blocks?" I said, surprised; I didn't realise I was so close to City Centre. The city was suddenly a great deal smaller than I remembered it, and I wondered if it had shrunk while I was away. I thanked him in a blur and rounded the corner.

There were a few people scattered around the bus station. Sleeping on benches, waiting for a bus or generally milling about. This was where the homeless gathered when it was cold outside and I realised that this morning I too had become homeless. At the little café I bought a pre-wrapped sandwich of processed cheese and some kind of meat, and a large cup of coffee. The woman at the cash didn't say a word, didn't even look at me.

The station opened onto The Great Square, the city's central point. It was a large

park, a little over eight hundred acres. A narrow artificial river ran through it, culminating in a lake near the park's centre. In the lake sat the stone figure of a large man draped in tattered cloth, his face firm and muscles stiff as he forced open the mouth of a large, scaly sea monster. He appeared to be in search of something, some lost treasure or ill-fated shipmate. From the creature's mouth poured water, only now the water pressure was low and instead of a gushing stream the water merely trickled over the monster's sides. Beside the lake and in the centre of The Great Square was a boulder. It was believed to have been the first stone excavated from the riverside when the settlers decided to expand their land beyond the reaches of the river. The boulder was cast aside and neglected until an architect transplanted it a few years back to commemorate the city's hundred and fiftieth anniversary. Looking at it now I was oddly impressed: it was enormous, rough and scarred by various chips and depressions, its surface covered in so many little shadows that it seemed to conceal a thousand little secrets.

I sat on a bench facing the stone, my back to the lake, and devoured my sandwich. I was surprised at how hungry I was. I had lost weight since moving out to Four Lanes. When I was half-way through my coffee I opened the clasp of the black purse.

The first thing I pulled out was a photo. A Polaroid, worn on one side. In it were standing two men, well dressed and open-mouthed, caught in the middle of a healthy laugh. The one on the right was tall and broad, good looking with thick dark hair and white teeth. He was in the centre of the frame, his prominent features and obvious charisma overshadowed everything around him. The second, smaller and less significant man was me. I was stunned at how unimportant I appeared to be. Since I

could recall only a handful of its details, my past life was not worth remembering. I couldn't tell how much younger I was in the photo, three or five or seven years. Maybe fifteen. Looking at myself I felt as though I'd aged drastically over the past year. I weighed more in the photo and my hair was combed and neat. I wore a striped suit and a matching blue tie, my left hand on the other man's elbow as we laughed. I was looking at him while he was facing the camera, but he was squinting and I couldn't tell where he was looking. I didn't know who this man was.

Behind us through the window was the city, spreading out in a vast tapestry of steel, glass and concrete, all the way down to the water. The city is an island in the middle of the sea, attached to the mainland by a long bridge at the west end, not too far from Four Lanes.

At the back of the photo, neatly printed in black ink, were the words: "Remember us Ashley Kepler." The absence of punctuation prevented me from knowing if it was a question or a command. I knew only that I was Ashley Kepler.

I placed the photo in my jacket and reached again into the bag. This time I pulled out a glove. A large, padded workman's glove, yellow with a grey band encircling it just below the fingers and around the thumb. It was only slightly worn, the stiffness worked out just enough to make it comfortable. It belonged to the left hand and fit perfectly onto mine.

The next item was a silver dollar, large and round and polished to a shine. On one side was the profile of an older man with stringy hair; on the other was a large boat with imposing masts. The date read 1847. It was in excellent condition for a coin that old, but I knew nothing about change and couldn't determine its actual value.

A box of matches came out next. It was emblazoned with a tilted *CH* encircled by

tiny blue stars, the logo for the City Hotel. The hotel loomed above me now, blocking out the sun. It sat facing the eastern edge of the Great Square, a modern glass frame topped by an aging, old-fashioned neon sign. At night when the sign flashed it lit the sky purple.

My hand was back in the bag and I was bitten, blood seeping from a cut on my index finger. The bag was deep and dark and I couldn't discern any shapes, but it was doubtful there was anything living in there. I sucked the blood from my finger and wrapped it in a napkin and the discarded plastic wrap of my sandwich. Gently I reached back in and pulled out a blade. It was an odd tool: a long steel bar with a suction cup attached at one end and a blade at its centre, both facing out in the same direction like a letter F. It was surprisingly light and the grip at the bottom of the bar made it easy to handle. I couldn't guess at its purpose but the blade was cold and sharp and I was sure it could easily slice through bone.

A man appeared and sat down beside me. Startled, I dropped the blade into the bag. I was angry at myself for not noticing his approach. He had a cigarette between his lips and was trying to light it with a drugstore lighter. I felt odd sitting there with an open bag on my lap and an assortment of objects on the bench beside me. I didn't belong there but as long as I was there I wanted to fit in. I drank some of the coffee and wished I had bought a newspaper. The man kept trying to light his cigarette and I considered gathering up my items and leaving.

"Would you mind?" the man asked.

I turned to look at him, tying to look annoyed so he'd think he was interrupting something important and maybe he would excuse himself and leave. But instead he was smiling, shaking the lighter at me.

"Can I borrow a match?" he asked. He was in his mid-forties, rumpled and

unshaven. He had a receding hairline and I could see a dark mole a the side of his scalp. He wore a long coat that fit like a blanket over his thin frame, and around his neck was a wrinkled yellow tie.

"I don't smoke," I said.

"I do and it'd be great if I could have one of your matches."

I felt completely foolish and I may even have blushed. Having been alone so long I had little opportunity to appear foolish, and it irritated me that I succeeded as soon as opportunity presented itself. I handed the matches over, and considered returning to the isolation of Four Lanes.

"The hotel," he said, looking at the symbol on the matchbox. "I thought they'd closed down."

"I just got in," I said. "I don't think I'll be here long." The man nodded and lit his cigarette, watching me the entire time. I felt self-conscious and didn't know what to do. "I'm looking for somebody," I said.

He smiled at that. "Whoever you're looking for probably isn't here." He finished lighting his cigarette and laughed, spitting out a cloud of smoke. "Even if he is here you should consider looking for him somewhere else. I'm on my way out. I'm waiting for the eight-thirty bus but it hasn't come into the station yet. Happens every day. Schedules are useless when there are no longer enough passengers to fill a bus. It's not that no one wants to leave; it's just that there are so few of us still around. It's my turn now and I'm gonna sit here till that bus arrives." He tossed the matches back onto the bench and quietly smoked his cigarette.

The park was oddly deserted. Normally it was filled with people sitting on the benches and on the grass or simply passing through. I could even remember rushing

through here myself, hurrying past the Great Stone and bumping shoulders with those crossing my path or heading the other way. My memories of the park were so strong I had the impression that I used to live around here. The financial district lay just south of the bus station and park, its slim buildings spiking up into the sky. It was possible I once worked there.

The man lit a fresh cigarette with the glowing tip of the previous one. He seemed lost in his thoughts and I turned back to my bag. Avoiding the blade I pulled out a cheap plastic wristwatch. It was digital and black, with a single red button beneath its screen. I tied it around my left wrist, pressed the button and watched the numbers light up in a bright flash of yellow. It was twelve o'clock. Time was skipping away, the morning gone despite my early start. I heard a rumble and a small white mail truck sped across the lawn at the southern end of the park so quickly, I thought it was going to crash.

I almost missed the final item in the bag. It was a ticket to a guided tour of the *Mistress K.*, one of a handful of derelict ships lining the port. There was no date on the ticket but an annual schedule was printed on its back. I searched the chart for October and found a daily noon-hour tour, weekdays only.

"What day of the week is it?" I asked.

"Friday," the smoking man said.

"Noon on weekdays," I said aloud and couldn't help but laugh. I sat in the sun looking up at the vacancy sign above the hotel, thinking I should get a room for the weekend. I didn't have money, but if the hotel really was shut down I could force my way in and move into the nicest possible suite. I sat considering my options, toying with the silver dollar. I was passing it from finger to finger on my right hand, flipping it effortlessly down the short line of my hand and then quickly back up again. I had no

idea I could do such a thing and was surprised at how easy it was. I wondered if there was anything else I could do that I wasn't aware of. I packed up the purse and finished my coffee, though it was cold, and I tossed my garbage into the trashcan beside the bench, including the makeshift bandage I'd wound around my finger, which had now stopped bleeding. I looked at my watch and saw that it was 11:51. I felt a cold chill prickling in my cheeks as the blood was drained from my face. How could half a day have passed so suddenly when all I'd accomplished was to rummage through a bag I didn't own and talk to a man I'd never met? It was as though by opening that bag I had somehow distorted the world around me.

The man was still beside me. "Do you have the time?" I asked.

"The time for what?" he said.

"The time of day."

He looked up at the sky, then down at his watch. "Ten forty-five," he said.

I was beginning to feel dizzy. "How long have I been here?"

"I don't know," he said. "I've only just met you."

I looked again at my watch; it read 11:49. "I don't get it," I said.

He looked at my wrist. "Something wrong with your stopwatch?"

"Stopwatch?" I asked. I understood only when I noticed the time change to 11:48. It was a countdown.

3

Tributary Road curved diagonally across the city. It was once a small stream connecting the waters north and south of the island, as though it had once been split in

two. When the city was established the river was drained, filled and transformed into a road. It was an oddly crooked road among the graph-like streets of the city. It was too narrow to be a major artery, and it was preferred by pedestrians and cyclists. It was clean, well-maintained with its small trees and bushes lining both sides. It cut across the Great Square, and I followed its smooth curves down to the port. At twelve o'clock I was climbing the roped plank and boarded the *Mistress K.*

I was greeted by a pale and thin guide in an ill-fitting blue and white uniform. She was around thirty, with tangled blond hair and too many lines on her face. She saw me but didn't bother discarding her cigarette. She was sitting on a deck chair and stood up slowly as I approached. "Hello," she said, looking at me as though trying to determine whether or not I was really there.

"Afternoon," I said. I wanted to reach out and touch her to assure her that I was real, but instead I handed her my ticket.

"Oh," she said, stepping back. She threw her cigarette aside and brushed out her uniform. "Welcome aboard the *Mistress K.*," she said, standing up straight. I thought for a moment she was going to salute me.

"You don't get much attention out here," I said.

"None at all," she said. She leaned in toward me and whispered, "You're the first so far this month, and the summer was unusually quiet. Not many people pass through anymore, and the locals just don't care."

"You weren't expecting to see me?" I asked, thinking maybe the ticket had been planted for me.

"I wasn't expecting to see anyone."

"And the name Kepler doesn't mean anything to you?"

She shrugged. "A lot of people sailed this ship," she said.

"Then tell me about them."

She smiled at that and immediately relaxed. I saw then that she was pretty and not as drained as I'd first thought. Again she stood up straight and began her introduction, only now she was more lively. "Welcome aboard the *Mistress K.* My name is Grace and I will be your guide. When circling the deck, please be careful not to lean too far over the railings; I'm not a very good swimmer."

I think the crowd was supposed to laugh at that, but all I heard were a pair of gulls crying out in the distance. As Grace told her audience about the *Mistress K.*, I looked up at the three large masts reaching into the sky. I made my way along the deck and Grace followed at a distance. The walkway along the port was deserted. As a boy I used to come down here in the summer and look at the ships. There was a coast guard vessel that patrolled these waters and I used to watch its impressive figure glide along the waves and thought that one day I would be a member of its crew. Years later I learned that a tragic accident forced the ship to come ashore, and though by then I had forgotten about my childhood dream, I was nonetheless upset by the grounding of that ship. There was no need for surveillance today; the port was still and the only cargo sneaking in were the scraps of garbage riding the waves to settle in clumps beneath the silent wharves.

"For nearly a century the port was all that existed here," Grace was saying. "It was framed on one end by the water and on the other by a wall of rock. It was built by the merchants who passed regularly by the island, and it was set up as a secret trading post, where they could sell and trade with one another. A community was established and soon its reputation was set: it was said that here you could get your hands on

anything imaginable. It became a hideout for pirates and criminals and anyone who did not want to be found. Even the military would come by on secret furlough, though there never was any trouble among the men gathered here. This is where you came if you did not want to exist. But no one lived here permanently, and the harsh winters kept everyone away for three months of every year. Because it lacked permanence, the port became known as Interim Station.

"Eventually its location in the centre of a merchant route attracted men from the mainland who decided to establish a city here. The *Mistress K.* arrived with her first load. She was a cargo vessel, responsible for shipping labour to the site. As the city grew more hands were needed and the *Mistress K.* was the busiest ship on the water. After a year tragedy struck: the *Mistress K.* disappeared, its cargo unaccounted for.

"On a damp November morning, the watchmen at the port noticed a shadow bobbing in the distance. As the fog cleared and the sky brightened, the men recognized her as the *Mistress K.* Yet she remained at sea, unwilling to come to shore. A group of men rowed out to meet her, and in disbelief they boarded an empty ship. Two hundred and fifty men she was carrying when she set out, yet not a soul, passenger or crew, was found. No corpse was ever recovered and none of the men were ever heard from again. Yet somehow, despite the distance she was required to travel, the *Mistress K.* managed on her own to make it back to port."

She stopped here, a dramatic pause, and I admit I was drawn into the tale. A chill wind drifted off the water and across the deck. "I don't believe in ghosts," I said, but she only smiled.

"The ship isn't haunted," she said. "Not a trace of the men resurfaced, living or ghost. Yet the sailors wanted to set the ship on fire, believing the souls of the missing

were trapped aboard and needed to be released. The owners refused to waste a perfectly good vessel, and though it remained intact no one was willing to take charge of her, so she has sat here at port since, along with the souls of the missing."

"It isn't true, of course," I said, not knowing what else to say.

"Would you like to visit the lower decks?" She stepped to the hatch and pulled it open.

"My father used to bring me here," I said. "I remember I used to watch the ships, and so he took me onto one of these museums. I can't remember which one and it really doesn't matter. The stories are the same, more or less, and I don't believe any of them. We went down to the lower decks and it was crowded; this was in summer and tourists were swarming the riverfront. I couldn't breathe down there and I don't remember exactly what happened but my father had to carry me out. I must've fainted. I remember waking up in his arms beneath the shade of a tree. He told me I hadn't missed anything. He said there was absolutely nothing down there, and I believed him. There's really no reason for me to go down since I know there's nothing there."

"You might be surprised at what you'll see."

"Thank you for your time. You've been entertaining. I do hope business picks up for you," I said, and I did mean it. I turned and walked back along the deck and around the masts, and though I wanted to hurry I took my time, measuring each step. My hands were trembling a little and I made fists around the ropes as I stumbled down the plank.

4

The lobby of the City Hotel was enormous. The ceiling was held high by three

impressive marble columns, each surrounded on the ground by large, green plants. Warm, red carpeting covered the lobby floor, and couches and armchairs were grouped together in cozy little squares. I expected the chandelier but not the trickling fountains at each end of the room. Cherubs were urinating in the pond at one end and a large fish was spitting up water at the other. On the left was a row of old-fashioned phone booths, each with its own cushioned seat and wood door for privacy. The reception counter was straight ahead, spanning nearly the entire length of the room. There was a time when it was fully staffed, and when the seats and booths were filled with guests, but today I was the only one there.

"Good afternoon," a voice said. A tall man was stooped over behind the reception counter. He was in his mid-sixties, dressed in the conservative dark blue hotel uniform, the star-circled *CH* insignia on its breast.

I approached the counter and noticed two passages extending beyond the lobby: on the left past the phone booths was a small corridor housing the elevators, four on each side, and on the right was a pair of glass doors and a placard reading CLOSED. There was no explanation, no apology, though I supposed a deserted hotel had no one to apologise to.

"Good afternoon," I said to the man behind the counter.

"Good afternoon, sir." He had a slight accent I couldn't place, and emitted a slight whistle when pronouncing his esses. "Please fill this in."

He placed a check-in card and a pen on the counter and I started to fill in the details, my name and date of birth, how long I was planning to stay. I peered over the counter and saw that he was searching through a large ledger filled with messy writing. For an empty hotel he seemed unusually busy, a little too unconcerned about a potential

client.

"I was wondering if one of your guests was expecting me."

"I'm fairly certain they aren't," he said.

"Maybe you would like to check your notes? Maybe ask me who I am?"

"Who you are is irrelevant. We have no guests so you can imagine how low their expectations are."

I couldn't tell if he was making fun of me but I took an immediate liking to the man. It was odd; I couldn't remember the last time I liked anybody. I looked at his name tag and my mouth fell open. The name on the tag was "Ashley."

"That's me," I said, pointing to his chest.

This time he looked up. "I doubt it very much, sir."

"Ashley, I mean. My name is Ashley Kepler."

He looked at my finger and I drew it back. "I like to be called Ash," I said. "Maybe someone left a message?"

The other Ashley flipped through the pages of a clipboard, then rummaged in a basket filled with bits of paper. It was possible he was toying with me, checking through garbage and flipping through the supply list. "No one," he said, shaking his head.

"Are you sure? I mean, are you absolutely certain?"

"As far as I can tell, absolutely nobody seems to want to see you." He returned to the messy ledger.

"Thank you for checking," I said. I stood watching him, but he continued to work as though I wasn't there. "Do you have any rooms available?"

"Several," he said.

"I thought this place would be bustling this time of year. I expected to see people lounging around and reading papers and smoking cigars. Friends meeting friends and husbands meeting mistresses. The things that are supposed to go on in hotel lobbies, like mysterious crates being carried out and private detectives hiding behind magazines, their guns loaded and ready."

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. I wasn't sure if he was thinking, holding back tears or simply irritated by my presence. "I try not to look at the lobby anymore," he said. "It was once wonderfully active and to see it so quiet and empty... Suites and ballrooms and two vast auditoriums, and we've had to shut down most of the floors. Staff have left or been sent away and we can't afford to run things as we used to. The problem is, nobody comes here anymore."

I sank into an armchair with the purse in my lap. I opened the clasp and went over the items one by one, searching for some detail that could guide me. I was toying with the silver dollar, once again flipping it from finger to finger. Playing with the dollar seemed to calm me and I sat back, trying to come up with two options I might be able to flip between.

I sat there for some time doing nothing since I didn't know what to do. I was facing the front doors, waiting for someone to walk inside, but nobody appeared. Occasionally someone strolled by, head bent, or rushing forward so that all I could see was a blur. Nobody stopped or even glanced my way. The sky was getting darker and I did not want the sun to disappear. Even though I was inside and could not see the sky, I wanted to know that the sun was still up there. It was a few minutes after two o'clock and my stopwatch read 8:06.

I stopped toying with the coin and let it sit on the arm of my chair. I asked myself what a silver dollar or the year 1847 had to do with a derelict ship or a fancy hotel and what any of it had to do with me. Then I had an idea.

I went over to the elevators and hit the button. Lights flashed and as if competing for customers, three doors slid open. I hopped into the nearest elevator. The walls were carpeted and matched those of the lobby floor. I looked at the number pad on the right; there were too many buttons. Sub-basements and separate underground parking levels along with row upon row of numbered keys and a few letters near the top. I had the impression that this is where the entire city was hiding out, and that slowly, one by one we were each being drawn in here somehow to be shut away forever in one of its rooms. At the top were a number of letter keys. R was probably the roof, but I couldn't make out the others: A, M and K. Auditorium, Maintenance, Kloset? I hit the 18 and the doors slid shut, facing me with my reflection. I looked as though I'd been searching these streets for years instead of hours. There were many new lines on my face and though I felt energetic I looked exhausted and emaciated. The year I spent at Four Lanes couldn't have been good for my health after all.

The doors slid open and I was on the eighteenth floor. The corridor was dark, lit only by the exit signs at either end. I heard the doors close behind me, the elevator humming its descent and taking my haggard reflection with it. I walked along the passage reading the number on each door. Each wing had a different set of numbers, the 1810s or the 1820s and so on. I found the 1840s easily enough but that wing had only six doors and a maintenance closet. I worked my way patiently along each corridor until I arrived unexpectedly back at the elevators. I was careful not to miss any of the side passages but anything was possible in that darkness. I searched the floor a second time

and once again I was standing by the elevators without having found my room. I was sure it was somewhere in the building. I tried the handle of the maintenance closet but it was locked, and my knock didn't even produce an echo.

Back in the elevator I pressed each letter in turn, but the only lettered floor I could access was R. I rose slowly in that box, ignoring my reflection and instead listening to the gentle murmur of well-oiled machinery. At least the hotel wasn't falling apart, and I realised then how safe I felt in that building.

It was windy on the roof. The sun had almost completely disappeared and the sky looked like it was preparing to storm. My watch was showing 5:57 and in a second it flashed down to 5:56.

The roof was immense. Remove the walls and the doors on the inside and this is what each floor would look like, a massive chunk of the city. Otherwise there was nothing uncommon up there, the usual ventilation equipment and assorted heating and cooling vents. There were some weather-worn building supplies stacked at one end, probably left over and forgotten since the last round of renovations. I walked the length of the roof, and though I kept at a few feet away from the drop I moved carefully, making sure my balance wouldn't get disturbed by the wind.

The view was incredible. The Great Square lay across Mid-Street, and I could see the tall, thin building of the financial sector a few blocks below the bus station. The port lay below the industrial block, and the old warehouse and factory buildings made up the filthier part of the view. The university and college campuses were out east, and the wealthier homes and shopping districts lined the north shore. The waters were restless and the waves were rising in the wind, ready to pour in and wash the city out to sea. I

searched for Four Lanes and my former home but I couldn't find it in the darkness. The bridge to the mainland was too far away. There was so much down there that I needed a telescope to observe each part of the city amid the chaos of its detail.

Suspended over one end of the roof was a window washing ramp. Its levers and pulleys had been removed, transforming the once moveable ramp into a permanent fixture. It swayed a little in the stronger gusts of wind and I wondered how much rust and decay it could sustain before it crumbled and plummeted to the street.

The door of the stairwell was locked, so I took the elevator to the highest floor I could access and climbed the stairs from there but encountered a wall. The passage was blocked off, the top floors completely sealed from the rest of the building. I wondered if someone was hiding in there.

5

The phone rang and I opened my eyes. Ashley's voice was behind me, murmuring softly for a minute before hanging up. I was sitting in the armchair and behind the glass of the front door was a thick black wall. I couldn't see anyone on the street but it didn't mean there was nobody there. All I could see in the glass my own reflection, and I smiled to think it had left the elevator to join me in the lobby.

I stood up feeling cramped but rested. Ashley was at the counter and the clock above him said 8:31. I had been asleep for almost four hours.

"Reservation?" I asked, nodding to the phone.

"It happens every day," he said. "At exactly 8:30 at night the phone rings and there is nobody there. No breathing, no snickering, absolutely nothing. The display reads "Unknown Caller," and I answer it every time but there is never anyone there."

"Just because you can't hear anything doesn't mean there's nothing there."

"I tell myself not to answer, at least once to let it go on ringing. Just to see what will happen. But I get nervous standing here, listening to the ring, and I think that maybe the caller will think I have left and will never call again, so I answer it. I don't like that there is never anybody there, but it will be a terrible thing if he never calls again."

I put my bag on the countertop and rested my hands on its clasp. "How many of the floors are closed off?" I asked.

"We're only using three," he said.

"That's not what I asked. Some of the floors are completely sealed off"

"We have nice rooms on the second floor. I can let you have any room on the second floor."

"I don't want a room on the second floor."

"I can let you have *every* room on the second floor."

"I want room 1847," I said.

"I can't let you have that room."

"It's the room I want. It came recommended."

"We have nicer rooms on the second floor," he said.

"What if I wanted the topmost floor? How could I get to it?"

"You could climb in from the outside."

His comment was like a jab to my chest, and I had to clench my fists to stop from grabbing his collar. My stopwatch was blaring 1:55. I couldn't tell if he was toying with me. He seemed sincere and maybe he just wasn't used to talking to people.

"Who is staying in room 1847?" I asked.

"There is nobody staying in that room," he said.

"Then who was the last person staying there?"

"You must realise I can't release that kind of information."

"Then when was it last occupied? Ten years ago? Six months? Was there someone there this morning? In a grey suit with white shoes, perhaps?" I removed the photo from my jacket pocket and set it on the counter. "Was this man here?"

He looked at the picture. "That's you, sir. Wouldn't you know where you were staying this morning?"

"What about the other man?" I asked.

"I can't release that kind of information," he said. "But I can save you some trouble by letting you know that we don't have a room 1847."

Ashley was gone and I poured the contents of the bag onto the counter-top. Blade, matches, left glove and silver dollar. The stopwatch was on my wrist and I no longer had the tour ticket for the *Mistress K.* I couldn't see a pattern.

"You like my coffee," Ashley said. He placed a tray on the counter, two mugs and a sugar bowl, the *CH* with its orbiting stars on their sides.

"You must know this place well," I said.

"Been here forty-seven years. Started as bellboy right here in this room. My first day I fell down that staircase and chipped my tooth. If you listen closely you can hear a

slight whistle on my esses. Listen: Sisyphus, Sisyphus. Barely noticeable so I never bothered having it fixed."

"It's a long time. Nearly half a century."

"I've watched this city change. It was vibrant when I was young, and now I wake in the mornings and look out the window half expecting it not to be there anymore."

"Unfortunately my memory isn't very clear. I have a few glimpses but nothing concrete. I can see myself hurrying through the Great Square, late for something important, or maybe I'm running away. Truth is I don't know what I'm doing, just doing it, as though someone else has been living my life. It's not that I mind; I just wished he'd taken some notes."

"I feel sometimes that I've lived the lives of others, though I've rarely set foot from this building. I've met thousands of people, more in a day than you meet each year. When you were in diapers I was running bags up and down those stairs."

He had me laughing and I liked him for it. "I wasn't born yet for diapers," I said. "I'm not even forty."

"No need to be shy with me," he said. "I'm a little more worn down than you, but we aren't that far apart."

"Your chipped tooth is older than I am," I said.

The check-in card I had filled out was on the counter and he pointed to the date of birth. "You were born the same year I started working here."

I looked at the calendar tacked to the board behind him, and back to what I had written on the card.

"We'll both be celebrating an anniversary come spring," he said. "Our forty-eighth."

6

My reflection was again in the glass. It wasn't a haggard me but an older me. It was like looking into the future. Ten years had gone by in a flash, and I couldn't remember a thing I'd done. A year at Four Lanes was a decade, and I had accomplished absolutely nothing. I wondered what it was I was trying to get away from, and ten years is long enough to make me forget.

Ashley was vacuuming the rug and the soft hum was strangely soothing. I wanted to sit there for the rest of my life. I didn't even need a room, just that armchair.

Ashley came over to my side and dropped something into my lap. "I believe this is yours," he said.

In my lap was the yellow and silver workman's glove. I slipped my hand into it and began making fists. It was comfortable, worn just enough so I could close my right fist. But something about it was not quite right, and I sat making fists and looking at the glove. In the glass my reflection was also making fists, and watching him I realised what was different: the glove in the box was for the left hand while this one fit the right. It wasn't the same glove but its pair.

"Ashley!" I called.

He continued vacuuming.

I grabbed the cord and yanked it from the wall.

"Was I too loud?" he asked.

"Where did you find this?" I asked. I was angry, unable to shake the feeling that he was toying with me.

"It was underneath your chair," he said.

I ran to the chair and on my hands and knees I reached underneath. There was nothing there. I went back to the counter. "Come here," I said, and in a moment he was standing beside me.

I placed the right glove beside the left and set all the items in a row. My stopwatch was telling me there was only an hour and three minutes remaining.

"If you were missing something," I said, "where would you look for it?

"I suppose it depends on what that something is."

"Say you were missing something but had no idea what that something was, where would you look for it?"

He looked the objects over, from one side to the other, and slowly back again. I had the impression he was reluctant to answer. I wanted him to take his time, trusting that he could figure this mess out for me, but I was too impatient and slapped him on the shoulder. "What do you see," I said. "Tell me what you see."

"If you don't know what that something is, perhaps you can consider what it isn't. Narrow your possibilities."

I looked at the objects again, collected in a neat row.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"The pieces of someone else's life. This is supposed to lead me to someone, but it isn't complete. Whoever put this together forgot to include something."

"Maybe he didn't forget. Maybe that person doesn't want to be found."

"But he brought me here," I said. "All the way to the lobby of this hotel. He must be here somewhere, but the only one here is you."

"I'm not the only one," he said.

In that instant my skin grew cold. "Who else is here?" I asked.

"You are."

I slammed my fist on the counter. "Will you stop playing with me?" I shouted.

"You said these things were the pieces of someone else's life. That might not be completely accurate."

"Then what are they the pieces of?"

"Not of someone *else*'s life," he said, "but the pieces of *your* life. Perhaps that gentleman in grey was returning them to you."

Ashley wasn't bright but at least he was logical. While I was busy making assumptions, he was providing conclusions. These were the pieces of a past that required ten years to forget.

"Everything moves in two directions," Ashley said, "backwards and forwards. You've used the gloves already. To make your way back you need to use them backwards, in a sense. You need to use them in the opposite direction from how you last used them. Did you use them to lift something, to pull something or to grip something? Moving backwards you would need to either drop it, push it or to let it go."

"These are only fragments," I said. "There's nothing connecting them."

"They are your fragments," he said. "The thing that connects them is you. To understand what is missing you need to figure out what is already here. If a glove is not missing then what it holds is not here. Perhaps what it holds is too big for this bag?"

I hadn't thought of that. "Okay, I'll give you that. But what is too big to fit in the bag but small enough to fit inside an object that sits in the bag?"

He was nodding his head. "A good one, that. But a glove doesn't close the way a bag does. You close your fist and something can still trail through the ends, the way you

grip a bat or the handle of a broom. Perhaps it's a ladder. Perhaps you had climbed down from somewhere and are expected now to climb back up."

"But a ladder is too thick for a tight fist, and besides, why would I need to wear gloves to climb a ladder? The thing I held was thinner and coarser."

"A rope?" he said. "You would use a glove to avoid the burn."

"Have you seen any ropes dangling anywhere?"

"We are narrowing the possibilities. Soon we will be able to see what is not here."

I picked up the blade. "What is missing here?"

"That's an easy one," he said.

"Will I need to kill somebody with it?"

That made him laugh. "Heavens, no," he said. He was bending forward, holding a hand over his mouth. "Don't be silly. That's just a glass cutter. The suction fits onto the glass and the blade cuts in a circular pattern. It's a fancy one, too. The blade is adjustable so you can cut in different sizes. Look at how sharp the blade is. I bet it can cut through the thickest commercial glass."

7

I was on the roof. It was dark and the wind was gusting and it was cold. Winter was coming early this year. I had the gloves on and the bag was in my hands and I was heading for the window washers' ramp. I realised that the ramp was stripped down not because it was no longer useful, but to ensure that it wouldn't be moved. The ramp looked different. It wasn't the darkness and it hadn't changed physically, but its new-

found significance altered it in my mind's eye. It no longer looked abandoned; it looked as if it were waiting, and it was waiting for me.

I leaned over the edge of the roof, careful so the wind wouldn't haul me over. The platform wasn't too far below but I couldn't tell which floor it was attached to. I dropped the purse onto the platform; there was no other way to take it down. I gripped the cables and told myself not to look down. The adrenaline pumping through me kept me from panicking. I'd never been afraid of heights but I'd never been so exposed this high up. As soon as I felt a break in the winds I let go. The cable roared in my gloves, the sound of tearing open a cloth sack. I fell faster than I'd anticipated, and I lost control. I slid outward into the wind and struck the platform on my knees. I yelled out and fell backward, letting go of the cable. My back hit the railing and the unexpected weight pushed the ramp away from the building and out into mid air. The entire mechanism groaned as though woken from hibernation, and we slipped out about three or four feet away from the building and the wind came howling at us, trying to knock me away. It let us go and we swung back hard, slamming into the black glass of the hotel.

The glass was covered in a misty finish to prevent birds from striking against it, and prevented me from looking in. It was dark out there and my reflection must've stayed somewhere inside. I groped in the darkness until I found the bag, relieved it hadn't gone over. I removed the glass cutter and pressed the suction against the glass, making sure it held. The glass was thick but the blade sliced through it efficiently, and after a few revolutions an eight-inch wide circle of glass came away. I peeked through the hole but it was too dark to see anything. I continued removing eight-inch circles until I the hole was wide enough for me to fit through. In half an hour I was standing on the other side.

The matches helped me light my way until I found the main switch. I flicked it on and the room leaped at me and I nearly toppled over. The room was massive; it occupied the entire floor, yet it was well furnished and comfortable. Shelves lined the columns and couches and chairs were arranged in a way that I could sit down comfortably no matter where I was. There were a number of plants but they had long been dead. From every angle I could see the city sprawled out around me. Telescopes were set out every few feet so I could look deeper into the city.

The room was dusty and the glass needed cleaning but that was to be expected after ten years. Through the dust I could clearly see that this room was mine; the K on the elevator pad was for Kepler.

There was a knock at the door near the centre of the room. The electronic latch required a pass code and I entered 1-8-4-7. The door slid open and Ashley came in, pushing a trolley of food.

"I thought you might be hungry," he said. He wheeled the trolley over to a table and the smell of food struck me hard. "I'll have your room ready in a day or two."

"You set this all up," I said.

"One morning you were gone and the floor was locked so I couldn't get in. Somehow you managed to find another way out. But you left that for me on the counter downstairs. All I had to do was find you."

"The man in the photo."

"You were supposed to watch over the city, but then when *he* disappeared you must've panicked. You never were capable on your own. For ten years I've been here alone, watching the city die. Everything was running smoothly, and *he* decided to disappear."

"Why the stopwatch?" I asked.

He smiled. "That was mine. A clever idea. You needed the incentive. It was always that way with you: you need to be pushed. On your own you're a sleeping puppet, so I needed to add some strings." He was standing by the door. "Your journals are on those shelves. You'll remember soon enough."

The city was dark outside. There were more lights in the sky than on the ground, and I couldn't remember ever seeing a sky that clear. Even from inside I could see the wind; it whipped around the building and lashed out at the glass. The first thing I needed was to have the broken pane replaced. The main lights were on and from outside the floor must've appeared like a beacon or an inland lighthouse. The bag's contents were spilled on the floor amid the broken glass. My life wasn't made up of much, just a few scattered pieces of the past. I turned out the lights and looked at the city. It was comforting to know I had my very own little piece of this world.

MY BODY UPSTAIRS

It was in the guestroom I found my body. Flat on its back when I walked in, naked and pale, and I covered it with a patched quilt I found in the trunk by the foot of the bed. A long flight and an empty house in a city I thought I'd never see again. So I pulled up a chair to the side of the bed to see which of us would wake up first. Surely this couldn't be real, and within minutes I fell asleep.

A knock at the door and I opened my eyes. I was slumped in the chair, facing my body on the bed, wondering if it was as sore as mine. It was definitely my body. It had that smooth chin, the small freckled nose and the high forehead. It even had that mole behind the right ear, I had the nerve to check. You can find almost anything in other peoples' homes but it strikes the gut when that anything you find is you. I closed the door quietly, afraid my body would wake, and I headed downstairs to answer the knock.

Standing there was Mrs. Thupper from next door. She never did use the bell and her bony fists had rapped on that door so often and for so many years that the hinges rattled to the rhythm of her pounding.

"Tracy!" she called and I collided with the word. Funny the things you forget. I dropped that name years ago and would've preferred not hearing it again. "It's so nice to see you," she said in that chalkboard voice I thought I'd never hear again. She went on scraping comments off her throat like how I haven't changed and what a success I must've become. She'd still be droning on today and into next year had I not cut her short.

"It's Curt," I said. "I don't use Tracy anymore."

Her jaw hung open and I thought her false teeth would slip out and fall to the floor. "That was your grandfather's name," she said. People her age were supposed to forget details, not force you to remember them. Mrs. Thupper was different somehow. I'd been away ten years and she hadn't changed an inch; as a child I thought she'd lived a thousand years and couldn't get any older. She'd always been different and always been alive and I don't think either of those things ever would change.

"You received my note," she said.

"Your postcard, yes." I pulled it from my pocket.

"I was worried it hadn't reached you."

"Must've been delayed," I said. Truth is I took my time getting here. I wasn't in a hurry and even now I don't know exactly why I came. I hadn't been back in since I first left. I had no reason to return as I'd established a life elsewhere, and had I known I'd find my body in bed I never would have come.

"Will you be staying?" Mrs. Thupper asked.

"The weekend only," I said. It was Friday and I arrived the night before. There was no one at the house and I had to trudge through the snow to the back door. I had to break the glass to get at the lock. I'd always hated winter. Now there was a hole in the back door and my shoes were wet and I wished my body was sensible enough to have picked up the phone and told me not to come. "It's just for the weekend," I repeated. "I leave Monday morning, first thing." I'm not sure why I went on like that. I needed to set up these boundaries, but not for Thupper's sake; she'd whine for me to stay regardless of what I'd said. The boundaries weren't for me either; I'd set those up years ago. I was

letting the house know that I wasn't coming back. My stay here was, as it had always been, temporary.

"I would've called," Mrs. Thupper said, "only I don't have your telephone number."

"Perfectly fine," I said, wondering how she'd found my address. My name was different but the face was the same and she may have recognised it somewhere. I was somebody in my new life.

"Have you been upstairs?" I asked.

"You know I'd never go inside without an invitation." She was looking past me, hoping for one now, but I wanted her as far away as she could be tossed.

"When did you last see my parents?"

"That was over at the Timber house for the farewell. They've moved away, you know. Little Connie Timber... You two were dancing partners. I can still see it now as if it were yesterday. I used to watch the two of you from the porch as you twirled her in your little hands."

Something gripped at me and I nearly slammed the door. "We were barely alive yet so it doesn't count. When was this party?"

"It was a Friday," she said. "I remember because they left the next day, which was a Saturday. If you have a calendar I might remember exactly." She was looking past me again and I thought her eyeballs would squeeze in and shove me aside.

"I'm stepping out for supplies." Just enough for the weekend, I told myself. It was something I needed to emphasise.

"We'll have supper then, you and I." As she said it she lit up like a hen dashed against an electric fence. Her face grew contorted and messy, the skin stretching side to

side until it was smooth as a grape, and in a flash it reversed back to its wrinkled raisin state as she tried to hide her joy. "I'll make those little wafers you used to like so much. You and Connie just about lived off those things. It will be like you were little all over again."

"I'll never be little again," I snapped and pushed the door shut. I didn't need these memories to clutter my life. It was like raising the dead and as far as I was concerned the dead should stay buried. If they were wanted we'd have found a cure by now.

I looked at the postcard she'd sent me. She'd printed it herself, it seemed. A blue and white drawing of stick people linked in a circle, hand in hand. Looked like the logo for some health foundation. On the blank side she'd scrawled in neat print a few small words: "Tracy this is Mrs. Thupper. Your parents are missing."

The staircase leading to the top floor was just behind the inside landing, and I sat on the bottom step, leaning against the banister. I was feeling a little feverish and I had to fight against the temptation of Mrs. Thupper's hospitality. I didn't have time for luxuries. It was Friday and I needed to settle my parents' affairs and be back at my real life by Monday afternoon. I placed my arms around the banister and gave it a squeeze. It was instinctive. I searched around its base until I felt my initials carved into the wood by my little hand so many years ago. I'd headed down to Connie's one summer morning but she shunned me for the company of a new neighbourhood boy, told me to crawl along home, and dragged the new kid out to The Walrus for ice cream. I ran inside and searched for my parents, tears streaming down my cheeks and chin. They weren't in the house or in the yard and I sat alone on those steps with my arms wrapped tightly

around the banister. For a week that banister was my friend and comfort post. My parents barely noticed me sitting there, didn't ask me to move aside when they tried to squeeze by, and so I clung to the wood and carved my initials into it. At the end of the week Connie appeared at the door acting as if nothing had happened, and as determined as I was not to, and as much as I hated myself for doing it, I let go of the banister and joined her outside.

I headed down to The Walrus wanting some lunch and maybe a piece of their apple crumb pie. If I had to suffer the backlash of the past, the least I could offer myself was a slice of the little good it had to offer. Half a block away I could see it was boarded up. The once glass doors were impenetrable wood and the windows were covered in old newsprint. The sign was still up but the neon was burnt dead. Piles of snow had been ploughed up around the building, forming uneven mounds, like waves in a white, foamy ocean, and The Walrus looked like it was sinking.

I peeked in the glass through gaps in the paper. I could see the long counter at the far end, the take-out sign hanging as it always had over the cash register. The booths were all intact, lining the left and right walls, and surrounded by their chairs the small tables stood in the centre of the room. Though abandoned The Walrus was perfectly preserved, and I could almost see people shifting about in the seats and behind the counter. I could see each imperfect face and every crooked smile as the forms floated back and forth beyond the dirty glass. Strange what you remember, the details that swing back at you. I recalled that strict unspoken rule obliging kids to sit at the counter or at the tables. The booths on the left were reserved for the teens while the ones on the right were occupied daily by the same group of retired men. Over by the corner was the

booth where Connie and I used to share. I could almost see us now, sitting there side by side, my hand underneath the table making its clumsy way up her leg. She pushes it firmly away but then snuggles up to me, so in an instant my hand is back, slipping over the thigh until Connie takes a finger and pulls it back and I scream.

I stepped back and wiped my breath from the glass. There was nothing to gain by watching these ghosts and stuffing my hands in the pockets of my jacket I quickly walked away.

Percy's was where it always was and I knew I could at least get a paper and cigarettes. I was fourteen when I bought my first pack of smokes, and with every pack he sold me Percy smirked and shook his head, though he never said a word to my parents.

The guy at the cash I'd never seen before and it didn't matter since he was barely alive. Just sat there, eyes closed and a sleepy grunt response to the open door and my loud hello. I couldn't help but be loud in that silence.

"Where's Percy?" I asked.

He lifted his head and stared at me, blinking as though not sure if I was really there.

"The owner," I said.

"Nobody owns this place," he said and returned to his coma.

The milk had gone bad but there was canned food enough for the weekend. I didn't normally eat the stuff and grabbed a random assortment along with a jar of instant coffee. A week-old paper was all I could find and when the corpse at the cash

didn't open his eyes I grabbed from behind the counter the remaining packs of cigarettes. I bagged my groceries, threw money on the counter and left without a word.

Walking through the empty streets I retraced my steps in the snow. Already dark and thick flakes were beginning to fall. It was humid and a grey haze was taking shape around the neighbourhood. I felt like I was walking in a snow globe. A solitary figure with a bag of canned goods between small, empty houses. I wanted to see someone, anyone, as long as they were flesh and blood and didn't mind moving a little. Once I thought I heard some children laughing and I ran toward their voices, but when I turned the corner there was no one there. For a moment the swirling snow formed odd silhouettes and I thought I was surrounded by the spirits of my childhood friends, but the wind picked up and the silhouettes fell apart as if the spirits were crumbling to dust.

Again I entered the house through the back door, this time so Lady Thupper wouldn't see me. I tossed the groceries on the coffee table and one of the cans left a scratch on the glossy surface. My dad found that table at a garage sale for a couple of bucks. He stripped it and varnished it to a shine so the wood looked encased in an almost invisible cocoon. He was handy like that and managed to keep all his old furniture from turning to powder. I'd scratched it like that once before, tore a streak right down its middle. I rubbed and rubbed at that scratch until it faded ghost-like and I was certain no one would notice. Some weeks went by and I had completely forgotten about the scratch until my dad surprised me with a severe lecture. It wasn't the scratch that disappointed him but my attempt at concealing it. I stood there for a minute thinking about my dad and that lecture and about how hard he'd worked at restoring all

this furniture, and it made me smile to think that in the long run it had all been worthless.

My dad was quiet but severe. He rarely complimented but always criticized. There was a proper method to follow for every mundane task, from confessing mistakes and making apologies, to organizing a bookshelf and chewing your food. He did not like deviations and watched me closely at the dinner table and sometimes when I brushed my teeth.

Where my dad was severe my mom was serene. She never scolded, never said anything and I doubt she ever took notice of anything I did. Always lost in her thoughts she moved through life humming to herself, oblivious to the outside world. She busied herself preserving vegetables. She planted the yard throughout spring and summer and in the fall jars lined every surface in the house. Everything was infested with the smell of vinegar and garlic and dill and whatever else she used. I was often overcome with nausea and had to flee the house, stumbling half-maddened by fumes down the street to Connie's. Sometimes I was forced to drag my sleeping bag out to the yard and spend the night in the crisp autumn air.

It was late and I was tired and of course I couldn't sleep outside. I couldn't sleep in my old room either, not with me in there. My parents' bedroom wasn't an option; it just didn't feel right. To avoid the upstairs I went to the basement. Down here was my dad's workshop, always cluttered with old and broken furniture. Shelves he had built lined the main room and were always stocked with my mom's preserve jars. There was little down there now. Some supplies and a few tools were neatly arranged on the workbench, and the remaining preserve jars were empty. The back room had a deep blue wall-to-wall carpet that I always thought as "The Blue Room." The carpet was still

there and only slightly faded, and to my surprise the room was strewn with an odd assortment of objects: a pair of slippers and an old jacket, a dirty plate, food wrappers and half a loaf of bread. There was a dirty mattress on the floor and the window had been forced open. Someone was squatting down here.

The basement door was locked and I was settled on the couch, wrapped in the dining room table cloth. My cans and smokes and the week-old paper were beside me on the table. I received a strange sense of comfort from these objects and wanted them near me. Along with my small travel bag they were the only things in that house that were truly mine. I tried reading the paper but it was old news. I wanted to get hold of something more up-to-date; I needed contact with the outside world of today, and wanted evidence that it still existed.

A knock at the door and I opened my eyes. Again I woke late and felt unusually rested. I was so hungry that before anything, before even a cigarette, I opened a tin and swallowed some meat. I'm not sure what it was but it was soft and wet and it slipped easily down my throat. Mrs. Thupper called out what was once my name and did it so softly that I almost believed there were neighbours around to disturb. I sat smoking on the couch, and as soon as she was gone I started searching through the house.

I shut the curtains and blocked the hole in the back door pane. Once safe I went through my parents' closets and drawers. I was methodical, starting with the den and the little desk in the corner, another of my dad's restorations. I couldn't find any legal papers, copies of a will or deeds to the house, but I found a lot of photos. They kept their albums on the bookshelf by the TV beside the atlases, dictionaries and other reference

books. The albums were organized chronologically and every detail was clearly printed behind each photo, from date to location to who the bodies belonged to. Now I was finding photos in every drawer I opened. They were shots of my parents looking only a little older than I'd last seen them. They were with a man my age who didn't look a thing like me. He was well-dressed in a casual blazer and open collar, and seemed to smile a lot. He was good-looking, with strong features, and tall, bending low to press his chin against my mom's forehead. He looked the same in each photo, with similar clothes and an identical smile, like a mannequin or gargoyle. He had one long arm wrapped around my mother and I didn't like that. My dad was there too, wearing a grin I'd never seen. I knew it shouldn't bother me but bother me it did. I shuffled through the photos again and again and that gargoyle kept appearing and re-appearing. They were in this house but they were also at the docks and at the market and at the Great Square in City Centre.

I searched through every shelf and every drawer. It wasn't diligence; I was avoiding the upstairs. I thought of heading out for a walk, maybe grab a bite of something hot or catch a movie at the cinema. Maybe the pool hall was still where I remembered it to be. I grabbed my jacket and laced up my shoes but I couldn't step out that door. I was scared of seeing everything shut down, afraid of finding a padlock bolted to my past. It's one thing to shut out the past but it isn't natural for the past to take control and shut out the living.

For lunch I settled on canned ravioli. According to the label it was just like mom used to make it but I couldn't remember my mom ever making ravioli. I opened the can and its contents slid into the pot in a single jelly lump. I had to peel it apart with the edge of a spoon. The oddly synthetic smell struck me hard and I felt ravenous. I couldn't

wait until it was properly heated and I spooned it out of the pot and into my mouth so quickly I had to work out the remaining cold lumps with my tongue. I thought of how I never woke to the aroma of home cooking. Instead I'd jolt awake to the sharp slap of vinegar as my mom petrified some unfortunate vegetable. I'd flee on an empty stomach over to Connie's, who made me sit underneath the front porch and play house. She made earth cakes and brown soup and asked me if it didn't just smell like home cooking but it always tasted like mud. Once she made me eat a worm. Wouldn't let me leave until I swallowed it all and proved it to her by letting her look down my throat. But I didn't want to think about that. I didn't want to think about Connie at all.

What I wanted was to return to my job and my apartment and the routine I'd struggled to build and maintain. I'd spent years ridding myself of the lives of others and wanted the comfort of my own. Having fought to rid my life of this place I resented being stuck here and I couldn't understand why I had come back. If only this place didn't exist.

There was a crash in the basement.

I grabbed a cleaver from its drawer, unlocked the basement door and ran downstairs, my feet pounding hard against the bare wood steps. I was feeling scared and angry and pumped for violence, and the knife made me feel invincible. "Where are you!" I yelled and the rage in my voice was so unexpected that for a moment I thought someone was shouting at me.

"Tracy?" a voice said from The Blue Room. "That you, Trace?"

I stepped inside and turned on the light. There was a thin, older man cowering in the corner. He wore a brown beard speckled with grey and his clothes were too big for his body. He stank of sweat and cigarettes.

"Tracy," he said again and started slowly toward me. I think he was crying when he wrapped his thin arms around my neck.

"Uncle Toby?" I was stunned and dropped the knife. The man squatting in my parents' house was my uncle, what was left of him. I remembered a tall, chunky distinguished-looking man who liked to drink wine and chew cigars. I used to like sitting on his lap and listening to him laugh and smell his cigar and his cologne. Now I couldn't bear his stench and pushed him away from me.

We sat in The Blue Room, Uncle Toby on the mattress and me on a rickety stool. Toby used to manage one of the shipping and storage warehouses by the port. With the collapse of the industry nearly everyone at the docks lost his job. That was nearly five years ago, he told me. He couldn't find work and after two years his money was all gone. He'd been squatting ever since.

"There's quite a few of us," he said. "But we get along together. There isn't much competition with so many empty houses. I was at the docks for a time with a couple of mates but when Charlie's dogs disappeared he threw himself off a wharf and came bobbing back up a corpse. That was reason enough for me to leave. So I made my way north. Spent some time in City Centre in one of the abandoned buildings in the financial district, only it got cold and I was lonely in all that space. I continued north and eventually settled here. There's something comforting about sleeping in a house that belongs to family."

"Where are my parents?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I was too proud to accept their help and told them I'd found work at another port in another city. Haven't spoken to them since. When I arrived a month or so ago, they'd already left."

"You know anything about some guy, my age. Saw him in some pictures upstairs. Big teeth and dark hair. Seems touchy-feely."

"Exchange student," Toby said. "Rented a room after you left."

"Rented my room, you mean." I don't know why I said that. It hasn't been my room in years.

"A room, your room... who cares? Leave the way you did and you're not entitled to a room of your own."

"You don't know what it was like."

"You were a victim of a middle-class childhood. A comfortable home and good parents. Good thing you got out."

"I couldn't exist in this house."

"I cherish all my memories of this house, so I came back. Why did you come back?"

"I got a letter."

"Doesn't take much to get you moving. If we'd known where you'd gone we'd have inundated you with letters."

"Have you been upstairs?" I asked.

"I didn't touch anything," he said.

"That's not what I'm saying. Have you been upstairs at all?"

"My first day here, I took a bath."

"Did you see anybody?" I asked. "Anybody at all?"

He frowned at me. "Who the hell would I have seen?"

A knock at the door and I opened my eyes. It was Sunday and I'd fallen asleep on the filthy mattress. Toby was gone but I was hoping he'd return. Mrs. Thupper was persistent that morning, her voice seeping in through the cracks in the wall, telling me she'd prepared lunch. I was tempted to call out to her, wanting to know what she'd made and asking if she would mind bringing it down to me. Instead I waited until she was gone and I climbed up to the kitchen for a cup of instant coffee.

There was a note from Uncle Toby in the mail slot. It took a few minutes to decipher the handwriting, but I was pretty sure it read: "Heading for the bridge. This is no way for a man to live." He was right: this was no way for anyone to live and it was time I got ready to leave.

It never felt right being in my parents' bedroom. As a kid I used to sneak in and open their dresser drawers and carefully slide my little hands over each article, searching for something out of the ordinary. It felt criminal, as though by stepping over that threshold I were breaching some empirical moral code. I felt horribly guilty at encroaching upon my dad's neatly rolled-up socks and my mom's over-sized plastic jewellery. I left the room each time convinced it was my last visit, but as soon as opportunity arose I lunged at its invitation. Even the nagging feeling of being watched couldn't keep me away. I suspected they knew I was sneaking around and I was convinced that if I opened the closet door my dad would jump at me with raised fists and deliver a lecture more stern than any previous lie of mine had generated. But what frightened me most was the certainty that at any moment from beneath the neatly made

bed my mom would grip my ankle. I was driven by an insatiable curiosity, confident that I was only steps away from discovering evidence that these two were not my parents. I trembled at the thought that they weren't even human but flesh-covered androids built and maintained with the sole purpose of keeping an artificial eye of me. I searched through their papers hoping to stumble on blueprints, alien tools or photographs of their partially dismantled bodies, revealing tubes and wires and flashing lights. Maybe I would find a picture of a young, attractive couple with those same freckles and bright blue eyes that neither of my pseudo-parents had passed on to me. But I was constantly disappointed in my search; the only thing in that room that did not belong was me.

Stepping into my parents' room now was like slipping into those awkward childhood shoes. The guilt struck me like a second door. Everything in there was as I remembered it, only oddly smaller, as if I had found the past through the frame of a doll's house. But the trembling in my chest seemed greater; that certainty of being watched by artificial eyes had returned.

It was in their bedroom closet where I found more photos. That gargoyle had his arm around a grown-up Connie. I looked carefully at each photo, at the house and the happy couple. The children were all identical so I couldn't tell how many there were. And my parents stood out like proud grandparents who weren't grandparents at all. I sat heavily on the bed feeling strangely relieved; everything had worked out for everyone.

I had my doubts when I waited for Connie at the bus station where we'd planned to meet one morning and flee town together. But before she arrived I bought my own ticket to someplace else and rode off on my bus before she even stepped foot in the station. I've often thought about Connie looking for me at the station, and though the

image is vivid I will never know if she ever showed up. It would've been like her to change her mind on a whim, and I was tired of her whims.

I had no reason to feel guilty at having left so suddenly and without explanation since it was clear that nobody's life was affected by it. My parents had gained a son they were proud of, and Connie had stepped up from hunching underneath the front steps playing house. I'd been hovering in someone else's place and by leaving had simply allowed the universe to take on its natural shape. Meanwhile I had what I'd always wanted, a world of my own. I was content with my new life, my career and overall success, and could not understand why I was crying.

Sweating and overheated, I ran the cold water in the kitchen sink and stuck my head underneath the tap. I wrapped a cold wet towel around my neck.

A knock at the door and I could picture Mrs. Thupper peeking in through the mail slot. I ran from the kitchen to let her in.

"Tracy!" she called. She looked genuinely concerned. "Is everything all right?"

I grabbed her elbow and pulled her inside. I helped her with her coat and boots and pulled her deeper into the house until we stood together in the kitchen.

"You must have a fever," she said. The water was dripping steadily from my scalp.

"I must've caught something," I said. I didn't know what else to say but would have said anything to keep her there. I did not want to be alone in that house anymore.

"You're shaking," she said. "You should be in bed."

"Yes," I said and I started to laugh. I wanted to tell her I was already there. "Upstairs," I said, pointing at the ceiling. "If you'll put some sheets on the bed. My old room, you know."

She watched me for a moment and nodded her head. "Of course. I'll fix the bed for you and then we'll get you some soup."

She left the kitchen and padded out into the hall and toward the stairs. She climbed those steps so slowly I could hear each dull thud of her feet against the carpet, step by agonizing step. My head was aflame and my ears were ringing, I could almost see steam rising from my neck. I didn't dare run the water or make any kind of noise and risk missing even one of Thupper's plodding steps. The *thudthudthud* of the dripping faucet hurt my head and I twisted the tap as hard as I could until my face flashed fire and I thought it would melt. It was quiet up there, no retreating footsteps or cries of surprise or laughter or conversation. I couldn't even tell which room she was in and all I could do was wait. Ice cold water trickled down from my hair and into my neck and all the way down the ribs of my spine.

After a thousand years Old Thupper's thudding resumed, coming down toward me. It was slower yet louder and I thought for a moment that maybe, just maybe it wasn't her coming down those stairs.

"Tracy?" Mrs. Thupper whispered from down the hall.

"In here," I said, wondering what I sounded like. I walked toward her voice.

"Tracy?" She asked again. She was standing by the front door, boots and coat already on.

I looked up the staircase.

"It's waiting for you," she said. "The sheets are clean and I found an extra blanket. Get some sleep and I'll be by in a couple of hours with some soup."

"Thank you," I said absently.

She was half-way out the door. "That's the first time you've ever thanked me for anything."

"Is it?" I asked, still looking up the staircase.

"You always were a selfish child."

I was in the room, in the chair and on the bed. I was wrapped in the patched quilt Mrs. Thupper left folded on the trunk. I couldn't take my eyes off my body and I knew there was nothing I could do until Mrs. Thupper returned. Maybe she'd see us then, side by side, and maybe then she'd notice and maybe then she'd do something. But of course it was a lie. There was no body there. I could see it and I could touch it but it wasn't really there. It existed only in my fevered brain, and though I believed this without doubt, I could still see the body on the bed and hope that someone else would see it too.

I looked closely at my face and had the odd sensation I was being watched. I wanted to look behind me at the door and in the closet but couldn't stop staring at my face. The freckles on my nose bothered me; I never liked them. I wanted to reach out and wipe them away but I didn't dare disturb its sleep. It was oddly soothing to watch myself lying so still. I grew calmer and cooler and soon my fever was gone and my head was dry. It was getting late and outside the light began to fade, and with nothing else to do I sat there feeling calm, staring at my body and at my face. And at the knock at the door I opened my eyes.

THAT SUNDAY IN SPRING WHEN I ALMOST

She's the last available woman so I ask her to dinner. I take her to the Forty-Seven, that place on Carver down near the docks where they serve fish. I want to impress her. I wear my brown pinstripes and a black tie. The tie has a spot but I manage to hide it with a well-placed clip. She wears a yellow dress, something simple, and I am nervous. I tell her she can order anything she wants but all she asks for is the grilled cheese. When her plate arrives she takes the sandwich apart and makes tracks in the cheese with her fork. She does it slowly, carefully retracing each groove as the cheese oozes over her tracks. Soon the cheese cools and her tracks harden.

"You sure you don't want any wine?" I ask.

"Whatever you like," she says.

'Wine is for occasions," I tell her, waving the waiter over. He ignores me.

"Occasions?" she says.

"Of course," I say. "Why do you think I brought you here?"

"You said you were hungry."

"Sure I'm hungry. I wouldn't have brought you here if I wasn't hungry."

"Apparently not," she says and returns to her cheese.

Her reply bothers me. She's agreeing with me but doesn't actually agree with me. I don't say anything. I don't want to ruin the evening. Instead I look down at my plate and consider making tracks in my steak, but that would be childish. I cut into my meat and the waiter appears. As I raise my hand to catch his eye my knife strikes bone and the steak leaps forward. I look down to see a bite-sized potato roll across the tablecloth

and strike the edge of her water glass. I stare at the potato. I think of popping it into my mouth as if nothing's happened. Maybe I can make a joke and we can laugh and it wouldn't be so awkward but I can't think of anything funny to say. There isn't anything funny about a potato.

I'm too tense, I tell myself, and sit back in my chair. My fidgeting is making her nervous and she continues to play with her cheese. I will not be angry. She can sit there and graze at her food all night but I will not let her behaviour mar the evening. I will brush the comment aside and start some conversation and she will see that I can take control of an awkward situation. Only, I don't know what to say.

We met in the building where she works and we've had coffee once or twice in the cafeteria. She was always nice and knew how to smile in a way that made me want to smile. A little dull, but polite. If only she wasn't so quiet. She was hesitant to meet me tonight but eventually agreed. A little on the shy side, I think. And lonely—she doesn't get out much. Her name is Charlie and she works at the reception desk of one of the buildings in the financial district I deliver packages to every morning. She smiles when she sees me and asks me how I am. "How are you?" she says, and she means it. Not many people really mean it. Most don't even look at me. They're on the phone or reading the paper or just pretending I'm not there. Even when they sign the clipboard they pretend I'm not there, as if the clipboard magically appears and hovers over them waiting for a signature. We've recently gone digital, so now to sign my electronic pad they need to use my pen; it's the only thing that'll register on the screen. My electronic pad can scan an order number so the record appears on its screen. It's got this neat silver pen that I use to press numbers with to access the menus and you need to sign the pad with that same silver pen. I feel them squirm and try not touch my fingers when I

hand it to them, and sometimes when they sign they don't return the pen and I need to ask for it. I say "Excuse me, sir" or "Excuse me, ma'am," always polite. Sometimes they make me wait, pretending they don't hear me or that there's an incoming call they need to take when the phone hasn't even rung. Sometimes with my pen in hand they try to make a note, but of course my pen doesn't write on paper and for a moment they think it's out of ink. They shake it and try it again, sometimes frustrated they tear the sheet or pad on which they've been trying to write. Once they realise they're error they're forced to look at me. I always smile, thinking how foolish they appear. But I never laugh; I'm much too polite for that.

But Charlie always looks at me and asks "How are you?" and means it. When I got tangled in the cord of my new scanner and knocked the parcels to the floor she laughed. I thought at first she was laughing at me and felt foolish, but she stood up to help me gather the boxes and letters from the floor and I knew she wasn't laughing at me and I too began to laugh. I don't know why but I couldn't stop laughing, and somehow I got the nerve to ask if she'd had lunch. She laughed again and said it was only a quarter to ten and I felt foolish. But she said we could have a quick coffee as she was due for a break. We had lunch a little later when I could time my route so that I'd stop at her desk at noon and it was nice. I think I had the ham on rye.

Now its Sunday and the first day of spring and we're having dinner. I know these things don't normally happen on a Sunday and maybe I should've thought it through, but it's easier sometimes when you don't have to think. Besides, the first day of spring marks a new beginning and Charlie and I are something new.

Yet even now, sitting here, I'm thinking too much and still I don't know what to say. It would help if I knew a little more about her. I don't even know where she's from. I

don't know if her parents are alive or if she has any siblings. I wonder for a moment if she has any siblings and if she does, I wonder if they look like her.

"That's a nice brooch," I tell her, glad that I've thought of something to say. She doesn't respond. "Really. It's nice. I like it." I lean in to take a look. It's a simple, polished metal brooch. Silver, only it's not really silver. At least I don't think it's really silver. I don't know what real silver is supposed to look like but somehow I know this isn't real. It's an ant, I notice. Odd, I wonder why anyone would want to wear a bug.

"Thank you," she says.

"I like it. It's nice."

"It was a gift," she says. "My aunt gave it to me," and she giggles a little.

It's an odd little giggle and I wonder why she's giggling. I wonder if she's making fun of me. I can't tell now if she's smiling because she thinks she's being funny or because she thinks I'm being foolish. I'd like to smile with her, and if she's trying to be funny my smile will tell her I think she's funny too, but if she's making fun of me my smile will only confirm my foolishness.

She starts again to trace the cheese tracks with her fork. Up and down and side to side. I want to take the fork from her hand and slam it down on the table but I know she won't like that. Maybe I can take it from her and use it to pick up my stray potato? The potato can be a pretence to take the fork away from her. Only I have my own fork and she'd wonder why I need two.

"It's a good thing we came here," I say.

"Yes, it's nice. I've never been here before."

"I mean it's good we didn't go to a picnic."

She stops making tracks. "Why would we go to a picnic?"

"I just mean it's good we didn't." She just stares at me and I can see she doesn't understand. "Because of the ants," I tell her, but I hate to explain. "Because you shouldn't bring ants to a picnic."

She smiles a slight smile that tells me nothing. I try to think of something else to say but instead I look for the waiter. He's nowhere to be seen. I've never been here before but I drive by every day on my work route. I have this route I stick to, my little routine. First I drive to the warehouse near the docks, then I head north on Mid-Street and up to the City Hotel. I circle the Great Square and make my way through the maze of the financial district. I mapped it out myself and even drew up a little city map of my own. Not the entire city, of course, just the part I drive through. All the buildings I visit are clearly marked so I never miss a stop, not as long as I follow my route. Even if I'm not required to visit a particular building I will stick to every line of ink on my route. The thing is, I get distracted easily. I have a hard time remembering details so I need to follow a clearly defined pattern. That way it becomes instinctive and I don't need to remember. Not consciously, anyway. A person can forget anything but instinct propels them forward.

It's a large restaurant, the Forty-Seven. It doesn't look large on the outside. It's decorated with colourful bouquets and has ivy creeping up the wooden banisters. I can't tell if any of it is real. There's no glass so you can't see outside. Or inside, I suppose, if you were outside. Instead there are mirrors, so the place seems larger than it is and I can't tell how large it really is. Makes it seem more crowded too. There aren't as many people here as I thought there would be, not as many as there appeared to be when I first walked in. I look in the mirrors and I can see more people but of course they aren't really here. I see myself in a mirror but I too am not really here.

The table on my left catches my eye. Dangling from an ear is a single pearl that catches the light and catches my attention. I wonder if it's imitation. It dangles from the ear of a woman in a simple blue dress. She's animated, so the pearl bounces happily beside her head, glad to be dangling from that ear.

"They don't allow substitutions," Charlie says.

"What's that?" I ask. I'm a little annoyed at the interruption but try not to show it.

"Substitutions," she says. "They don't allow them. I wanted salad instead of fries but the waiter said they won't allow it. He said I can have the side order or appetizer but that I'd also be getting fries. You get what you're given and not necessarily what you want. I'm thinking I'll order salad for dessert. You think they'll let me get away with ordering it for dessert?"

She's leaning forward and smiling. I can't tell if she's being serious.

The waiter finally arrives and looks at me with those raised eyebrows all fancy waiters seem to have. It's hard to tell one waiter from another, as if they've all dropped off the same assembly line, manufactured according to precise blueprints. Part of the universal plan. Only this one's defective. It's got this lazy eye that drags over to the outside while the other remains fixed. I can't tell if he's focused on me or catching a glimpse of the pearl-eared woman on my left. "A litre of red," I tell him. "House red. Two glasses," I add, raising two fingers in front of his good eye to make sure he understands.

"Excuse me," Charlie says, and taking her purse she heads to the washroom. I stand a little when she gets up. I think I'm supposed to and I don't want to disappoint her so I remain half-standing for a moment until I'm sure she's several paces away.

I sit back down and look at the mirrors wishing they were windows. It's spring and warm out and I know what that means. Seasons have meaning and springtime is change, appropriate for a new beginning. And maybe it's drizzling and people are out in light jackets strolling arm in arm, and if they were able to look in here they would see me here with Charlie and they would smile at me and I would nod in return. But all I have is a mirror and all I see is me since Charlie isn't even here.

The table beside me is the only other one that's occupied, I notice. And our waiter is the only waiter here. I've always imagined this place filled with people and it bothers me that we're the only ones here. Normally I can't afford such outings so it would be nice if someone else were here.

The girl in blue is telling a story. Her eyes are bright, hands active as they underline each crucial plot point. Her audience is spellbound. A middle-aged couple and a young man. The men look alike: Similar jawbones and receding hairline. Identical sideburns even, as if they stand side-by-side in the bathroom mirror taking turns with a communal razor. All grins and familial pride. The blue girl is likely the young man's prize, and mom and dad are aglow.

Charlie returns as the waiter brings over the wine. They smile at each other. Only when she's seated does he pour the wine. He does it expertly and with ease. Well designed, this assembly line waiter. Never does a drop leaving the carafe threaten to strike anything but glass. I watch him closely, wondering if the world looks any different to his lazy eye.

The wine is surprisingly good and I raise my glass to Charlie. Suddenly I feel better and I smile at her. She's not terribly attractive. Not in an objective, empirical sense; there won't be a patented assembly of Charlies in this world. Her features are

sharp: Cheekbones and nose protrude at distinct angles, her sharp chin is aimed at me and her ears stick out like fingerposts. She looks like a coat rack.

Her hair is beautiful. It falls straight from the roots to underneath her chin where thick brown curls bounce around her neck. It's as if there's a collection of yoyos draped over her head. I have an urge to twirl them between my fingers and I drink more wine. The pearly woman laughs beside me and I feel flushed.

"Is everything okay?" the waiter asks. I forget he's still here. He bends over Charlie, smiling at her. "How's the wine?" he asks in an almost whisper. Almost whispering, wanting me to hear but wanting me to suspect that it wasn't intended for me to hear. He tilts his head to look at me but his lazy eye is still on Charlie. "Is everything okay?" he says again. I wonder if he's mocking me.

"Sure," I say, smiling and waving my glass in the air. "Why wouldn't it be? Everything's as it should be. We're a happy little pair, aren't we? Sweetheart." My *sweetheart* is piercing. Each *t* clips at the air and the hiss of the *s* nearly splits my tongue in two. I watch him closely as I say it. I want him to see that I'm onto him, that I know his little game and he'd be best off backing away, tail and all.

"Very well," he says, and retreats to the other table.

I sit back and take another sip. The wine is delicious. I decide that I've never had wine this good.

"What was that about?" Charlie asks.

I nearly burst out laughing and a little wine trickles down my chin. I feel elated. A little too elated, I think, but I don't care. I decide that tonight I won't hold back. I won't check myself for every word and every thought and instead just ease myself into the

world around me as though I belong to it. "It's spring," I say aloud and I decide that this moment marks a new beginning.

"My father used to collect things," I tell her. I don't know why I'm saying this; the words slip out as if I'm exhaling them. I haven't thought about this in years but as I talk about it the events unfold as though I were making it all up. But it did happen and somehow it's important for me to tell her. "A real, genuine collector," I say. "He'd walk around the neighbourhood and pick things up. He'd just rummage through people's yards, their garbage and recycling and so forth. The neighbours thought they had raccoons but eventually realised it was only my father. Someone once threw something at his head, a bottle I think, thinking he was some oversized rodent, and my dad just showed up at the door, bleeding at the scalp and proudly holding up an empty picture frame. At first the neighbours complained but eventually they left him alone. He was quiet most of the time and it was all junk so nobody really cared. My mom never got used to it. She kept asking him to stop, saying we weren't beggars and finally forbade him from bringing any of his trash into the house. That's what she called it, his "trash." She was firm, my mom. Never yelled, never cried. You couldn't argue with her though, not with that tone she had and those commanding eyes. So he stored it all in the yard. In little piles all around, everything organized. He had a wood pile, a stone pile, and so forth. The paper pile he had to store in the tool shed to protect it from rain. Random things were scattered around. I used to want to go out there and play but my mother wouldn't let me. 'You'll cut yourself and get gangrene,' she used to say."

Charlie is laughing. She is covering her mouth with one hand while the other is holding onto the edge of the table. I've never seen her laugh like this and I like it. She's

even put her fork down. It makes me feel good to see her laughing like this. I don't want her to stop.

"Construction sites were his favourite. He'd find planks of wood, window panes, bathroom fixtures. He'd take the car out if he knew renovations were being done somewhere, or a building was going up or another coming down. Some of the stuff he used to fix up the house. He re-did the walkway with bricks and flat stones. Every stone on the walkway was different but it was nice. It was a little crooked and I tripped a couple of times but I was proud of it because no one else had a walkway like the one my dad built."

She's still laughing and it feels good. I want to continue but I can't remember anything else. I wanted to tell her I tripped and scraped my knee on that walkway and bled a good deal and that I still have a small scar on my knee, but I skip that part. I'm not sure why but I don't like to think of that scar so I just skip it and pretend it never happened. I drink more wine, thinking it'll help me remember something else, but I'm blocked at the knee and I know there must be more so I drink more wine. Charlie's laugh shrinks to a smile. My memory has never been very good and the harder I think the less I can remember. I think of making up a story or of embellishing something I've already said, but it's too late. She's talking now, telling me of about her childhood. I think maybe I've heard this story but I can't remember. I try to imagine her as a little girl, with her thick curls and those sharp features, but I can't get a clear image. For some reason I can't believe she ever was a little girl.

I look over at the pearly-eared woman. Her dress is knee-length and her calf muscles flex as she leans forward on her chair, her weight on her toes. The man beside

her is clearly smitten. I can see his hand reach instinctively toward her, then quickly pull back. He wants to touch her but doesn't dare. He wants to grope her beneath that table.

Charlie is laughing and I smile. I don't know why she's laughing. Then I smile again because I remember that I like to hear her laugh. I try to recall what I was just telling her and realise that she wasn't laughing at something I said. She was the one talking so it couldn't have been something I said that made her laugh. I stop smiling and look away. I feel disappointed but I'm not sure why. Maybe she wanted me to laugh, I tell myself. Maybe I should be laughing to make her feel good the way her laughing makes me feel good, only I can't laugh as I'm feeling disappointed.

"Are you okay?" she asks, leaning in and taking my hand. I pull it away without thinking. She's never touched me before. I feel warm and a little dizzy. It must be the wine.

"I need to go to the washroom," I tell her, getting up and almost knocking my chair over. I steady the chair in its place and head off, but I stop and turn back. 'Thank you," I say. "Thank you for asking. And for making me laugh. I needed a good laugh." I walk away, feeling foolish for having said that since I don't think I actually laughed.

I walk by the waiter and I turn aside so that my back is to him when I pass. That way he won't notice me and I won't feel his lazy eye dragging itself across my face. I reach the washroom and push the door but it doesn't open. I push again, using both arms and the weight of my body but still it doesn't open and I can't understand why anyone would lock up a restaurant washroom during supper and I push again, thinking it must be open and feeling foolish for having to push so much. I'm sweating now and I leave streaks on the door as my hands slide along it as I push. I don't want to leave the streaks so I kick at the door instead and it's hot here and I'm finding it difficult to

breathe. There's pressure now against my palm as though my hands were swelling and the door pushes me, fighting back and surprised I leap away. The door is open now and a man is standing there and looking at me.

"Are you all right?" he asks.

"Of course I'm all right," I tell him. "Why would I not be all right?"

He is still looking at me and he looks familiar. He looks like the man seated at the table beside mine, the one smitten with the pearly eared woman, only he's much older now and I wonder what has made him age suddenly.

"You seem to be having trouble," he says. He has a bit of an accent, I notice. I can't place it, but he speaks slowly, carefully pronouncing each syllable.

"Why should I be troubled?" I ask. I say it loudly since I have nothing to hide.

"My apologies. You look a little pale." He pauses and looks around for an instant before leaning in toward me. "There's no need to shout," he whispers.

"I'm not shouting," I tell him. I say it calmly. I consider saying it again, articulating each syllable so he can understand what I'm saying. I suspect he's an idiot. "I am not shout-ting." Then I smile to show him that I'm not troubled and have no reason to shout. I pat him on the shoulder, not wanting him to feel foolish for having accused me of shouting since it's obvious now how calm I am. Just because he's slow-witted doesn't mean he should feel foolish, even though he had the nerve to halt a stranger without provocation simply to accuse him of being troubled. Anyone making such accusations, in public no less, must have a contorted view of the world. I want to tell him all this, in my calm and steady voice, only I realise he's walked away so I step into the washroom.

I stand by the sink and wash my face. It's so warm in here that I'm genuinely sweating. I will tell the waiter to reduce the heat. Winter is officially over and the spring is warm. I look at my face in the mirror. It's a nice face, except for that mole beneath the left eye. I don't like that mole and I don't understand why I have anything beneath my left eye. I don't know where it came from and I don't remember when it first appeared and sometimes I think it's always been there. My eyes are blue and they are a nice blue, my best feature. I am thirty years old and my face is nicer than when I was twenty. Today is my thirtieth birthday and I feel good about that. It's a new season and a new decade and I'm severing myself from the past. Charlie is here and that is different and I decide that this moment marks the beginning of something new.

The door opens and I see him in the mirror; the boy from the pearly-eared table. He nods to me with that foolish grin of his. Happy as a clam, so the saying goes. It suits him: happy as a hollow shell that drifts unaware along the ocean floor with no control over the senseless pattern of existence it traces in the dirt. Eventually to have its soft innards plucked for food and the shell cast aside, split in two. He lets his clammy self into a stall and locks the door. Locks the door as though he thinks I plan to join him. But I wonder at my anger. A clammy halfwit with no control is not something that should make me angry. But it's not exactly anger I'm feeling. Instinctively I just don't like him. Still, I have no reason to show such aggression and instead I should be civil and pity him his clamminess. So I take a moment to pity him, and I leave.

Heading back to my table something odd happens: I sit beside the pearl-eared girl. I stop by the vacant chair beside her and without thinking I sit down. I look at the girl for a moment, but I hesitate only for a second, the fragment of an instant, and I say to her, "The wine here is superb. You really should try the red." Then with a nod to her

friends I stand up and step away. I do this slowly, looking about me as though it were the most natural thing for a person to do. Sitting here facing Charlie, where I belong, I notice the man from the washroom door is at the table. He must've had the same odd experience as me, only I managed to step away. He probably couldn't think of anything appropriate to say to save himself and now he's trapped there, at the table, with his Charlie sitting somewhere all alone. I see him whispering and grinning that grin of his as he's forced to pretend he belongs in order to avoid appearing foolish. He glances over at me from time to time, no doubt envious of my quick-witted escape. And then it strikes me: This is something I can tell Charlie. I'm certain this'll make her laugh.

Only Charlie is frowning and I can't quite read her expression. She looks worried, or concerned. She's probably worried that she about losing me to another table. This makes me smile. I like that she's worried, it proves that she cares. I care too and I don't want her to worry so I reach out to take her hand, but her hand isn't on the table and without at first realising it I pick up the bite-sized potato that was resting against her water glass.

"Is everything okay?" I ask, my voice tender.

"Yes," she says. "But... but what about you?" she asks, emphasizing the *you*. "Is everything all right with *you*?"

"Of course," I say, almost laughing. I'm touched that she can shove her worries aside and ask about me. "Of course everything's okay with me. Can't be better, really. I'm having a marvellous time. Here, with you. Are you having a nice time?"

She's looking at me, still frowning, her head tilted to one side. Suddenly she smiles. "Yes," she says. "Actually, I am having a nice time." She sits back in her chair and the frown is gone. "Tell me more. About your family. About you when you were a little

boy. You've never spoken like this before. You hardly speak at all. You always seem so... so far away. I really didn't think I'd hear from you since the last time we had lunch. But this is nice. I like this."

I smile again and this time I'm not pretending. I'm glad she likes it; it makes me feel good that she likes it. I try to think of something to tell her, of other things that might've happened. It's difficult; I don't normally think about these sorts of things. Sometimes I forget that anything ever did happen. It's as if I came in here and sat down and this is where everything begins and nothing existed before this very moment. This is the starting point. But she's looking at me and waiting, and I don't want to disappoint her. I try to think about being a child and about my parents and the house we lived in but nothing comes to me. I can barely even see the house and I'm not sure where in the city it is. Maybe if I embellish what I've told her earlier, but somehow I can't remember what I said. I'm sure I said something since she just confirmed it herself.

"What part did you like best?" I ask.

"I liked it all," she says, laughing a little. "I liked the way you told it. It's like a puzzle, you know, and you had all the pieces fitting nicely together."

"But which piece of the puzzle did you like best? Which piece that made you laugh the most?"

She laughs a little more. "It's sweet that you're insecure about all this. But you don't have to worry. I know you're probably not used to sharing, but really, you don't need to worry so much."

I think of making something up. That would be easier than remembering. But I fight back the urge; I want this to be real.

"Do you believe me?" I ask, without wanting to ask but it just comes out. "I mean, the stuff I told you before."

"Of course," she says. "Why wouldn't I?"

"It's just that you don't really know me. Not really, anyway. And because you don't know me you don't have to believe me. You don't owe me that, at least not yet. It'd be easier, in fact, if you didn't believe me. You're running a great risk by placing so much faith in me. So if you don't believe me, it's perfectly okay. I'd even trust you more if at this stage you didn't believe me."

She's laughing again and I'm not sure why. "Of course I believe you," she says. She takes a sip of her wine. "I believe everything you've said. So far, anyway," and she winks at me. I don't understand that wink. I've never seen her wink and I don't know what she's telling me. Maybe she's warning me, telling me to watch my step because she's onto me. That's a lot of pressure and I should be worried but I can't help but smile. In fact, I'm grinning uncontrollably. So far she believes everything I've said so everything I've said so far must be true. My heart is pounding and the world around me seems to be moving slowly. Charlie and I are united. There's a barrier between us and the world, like we're sitting in a fishbowl and the world around us is drowning. I look around me and for once the world is incredibly clear. The room is large and empty yet that doesn't bother me anymore. The clammy man has returned to his table and I notice that his double is sitting there too, and I wonder why in a world so large and so empty there exists two of them and only one of me. I look over at Charlie but she isn't me and I look over her shoulder at the mirror and there I am.

"I don't understand," Charlie says. She isn't smiling now but once again is wearing that frown. She is being serious and I try to listen to what she's saying. "Every

time we get together I do all the talking. I'm gonna be honest with you, so listen. Please just listen and don't get upset. I wasn't gonna come out tonight. Every time we get together I talk and I talk while you just sit there smiling and nodding your head. I'm pretty sure you've drifted off a couple of times, looking around the room, studying the scenery or whatever it is you do, and eventually you remember I'm here and you come back to me. You're like a comet spinning in its own little orbit and you revolve around the room, and once in your lonely cycle you come back to this sphere. This sphere where you find me not knowing what to do with myself. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I think about what she says and I try to understand what she means. Only she keeps talking and how can I understand her if she keeps on talking? I'm pretty sure I've disappointed her and I'm feeling a little guilty. She's still talking and I know she wants me to listen but I can't listen if she keeps on talking. I'm feeling warm and it's as though there's this pressure around my head and I don't want to be here anymore. I want to be in my truck and on my route with my parcels and my map and even with the new equipment I'll be okay.

"Does this make any sense to you?" she asks.

The pearly girl is putting on her coat at the coat check by the door, and the clam helps her with it, as if she were a child. He brushes something from her shoulder and she takes his arm, smiling up at him. They don't say anything but there seems to be something passing between them. His hand is on her back and they walk together through the door. I tell myself I must help Charlie with her coat and maybe there will be something on her shoulder I can brush away. A piece of fluff, maybe. I can brush her shoulder even if there was nothing there to brush away. I think to myself how easy

everything would be if only I could brush the world away. But I shouldn't have such thoughts. Not now when it's finally spring and a Sunday and just maybe it's drizzling outside and I think it will be nice if we were to go for a walk.

When I look up Charlie is gone. I look around to see if I can find her but she isn't here, so I look out the window to see if she's left but all I see is my reflection looking in at me. The bill is on the table and I pick it up and see the grilled cheese sandwich so I know that she's been here though we didn't even share dessert. Our table is cleared and the waiter clears his throat and behind me without warning the lights go dark. I finish my wine and put on my jacket and the waiter opens the door, wishing me goodnight. I pat him on the shoulder and I step outside. It is warm and there is a light spring drizzle and that makes me smile, and as I step off the curb and into the empty street I decide that this moment marks the beginning of something new.

CRICKETS IN SUMMERTIME

Four in the morning and the street is alive with the sound of crickets. Slater emerges from his back door with shovel in hand and starts to dig up his yard. He begins in the middle and works his way out, and in an hour the grass is all cleared and the sun has begun to rise. He leans the shovel by the door and disappears inside. In a minute the sun will strike the steel of the shovel; it's going to be another hot day.

Duncan watches from his second floor window across the fence. He's been awake for some time, lying in bed dripping sweat, windows open and that rusted fan clattering atop the dresser. He's surprised to see Slater, hasn't seen him all summer and thought he'd moved away, thought that he and the Widower Faggerty were the only ones left on the block. Duncan watches the sunlight claw its way up the handle of the shovel and decides to get ready for work.

There's no air conditioning in the truck so he opens the windows and hopes for a draft. He's glad the truck is white since white is supposed to reflect sunlight and keep the inside a little cooler. He doesn't know if this is true but clings to the idea. He takes the long way to work. There's no traffic and he doesn't bother stopping at the lights or slowing at the turns. He enjoys the breeze at the window and the silence on the streets, though it would be nice sometimes to have someone to talk to.

The post office faces the northern end of the Great Square, and when Duncan arrives the sun is already scorching. He drives right up to the steps and hops up to and through the front doors. There's nobody there but a bag is waiting by the door as it waits every weekday morning. There is only the one bag so he knows that Logan has

been here already today. This is unusual since Logan makes his deliveries only when he wants to which is usually once a week and never on a Monday. There are only two carriers left: Logan delivers to the south while Duncan handles the north. Duncan does his best to maintain a regular routine, and drives in every morning Monday through Friday. It doesn't matter if there is only one letter or a couple of postcards. It doesn't matter if there is nothing at all.

He dumps the contents of the bag onto the floor of the truck. A dozen letters, bills mostly, two postcards and a package for Mrs. Thupper. Every few days there is a small package for Eliza Thupper and it's a welcome break in his routine. She will invite him in for a cold drink or some tea and usually a baked snack, and because her house is air conditioned through and through and he has little else to do he will gratefully accept.

He drives over to the only operational gas station this part of the city where he fills his own tank and cleans his own windshield and pays cash to the old man inside who will never say hello. As he drives he reads the postcards. The first one today is from Sonday's sister June, inviting her out west to stay with her family. June sends one postcard invitation each month, and Duncan is waiting for Sonday to finally accept. The other postcard is for the Butcher on Land's End, and all it says is "No more deliveries."

Duncan doesn't need to check the addresses since he knows where everyone lives. He chooses a different route every day. He makes a game of it by devising some rule he will limit himself to. Today he can only drive on streets receiving mail. He will do anything to stick to this rule and rolls through alleyways, parking lots and deserted playgrounds, making unusual detours and ruining lawns. Despite this limitation he has finished his deliveries by noon, and as the height of the day's heat will soon strike, he hurries over to Mrs. Thupper's house.

The old lady answers the door as soon as he rings the bell. Mrs. Thupper always acts surprised to see him, though he comes by with a package two or three times a week. "It's Duncan," she announces, turning her head as though there were somebody inside to listen.

"I've a package for you," Duncan says and holds it up. He always feels a little shy and awkward around the woman and is therefore overly polite.

"Why don't you bring it inside," she says and steps aside to let him pass. Duncan looks down at his shoes and smiles and hesitates before taking his first step. "I've just baked some scones," Mrs. Thupper says, and Duncan can smell them in the crisp air conditioned air.

The scones are warm and soft and the jam is sour sweet. They sit in the den on the fluffy cushions of the couch and Duncan curls his toes against the woolly carpet. The tea is bitter and Duncan doesn't like it. He never likes her tea and sips it slowly but can barely finish one cup. Mrs. Thupper doesn't offer him sugar and he won't take any milk. What Duncan likes less than the tea is the little dog on the carpet in the centre of the room. Mrs. Thupper talks about Old Bruce and about the adventurous things he did when he was still alive. "Isn't that so?" she asks the dog every once in a while as she tells Duncan a story. "Bruce was there," she sometimes says, "he was there so he knows what it was like." But Bruce just sits happily on the woolly carpet and stares at Duncan with its glass eyes.

Duncan can never remember what the dog has done. He can never remember the details of any of Mrs. Thupper's stories. She's lived on this street and in this house

for half a century, and her mind is a vast catalogue of the hundreds of neighbours she has known. Her stories are so detailed that Duncan wonders sometimes if she makes them up. He tells himself to pay attention, to ask more questions and take notes so that maybe he can later have her repeat an anecdote and catch her in a lie. He would never say anything to her but will at least know if she were historian or story-teller. If she were story-teller then he could continue to doze off on that couch with his belly full of warm bread, and it would be alright not to listen because he would only be listening to lies. Lately it's been harder to stay awake. He hasn't been sleeping well what with the heat and the incessant chirping of the crickets that seem to be multiplying in these temperatures. He closes his eyes and leans back and tries to smile or look thoughtful and to occasionally mutter some kind of agreement, and whenever he hears her say "Isn't that right, Bruce?" he nods his head.

Mrs. Thupper is always ripe and energetic, her voice firm and never stumbling over names or dates, always certain of every detail. She is talking now about Sheila Frosted from up the road who lost one of her children in a road accident twenty-two years ago and never did get over it. Eventually she left her husband and moved away and no one ever heard from her again. "And you'd never believe..." Duncan half hears Mrs. Thupper saying. "You'll never believe how good and absolutely youthful she looked this morning."

Duncan jolts up and nearly spills his tea. "Saw her this morning!" he says.

Mrs. Thupper laughs. "You couldn't have seen her this morning. She's been gone for over ten years."

Duncan feels foolish and sets his tea aside. "Please excuse me," he says, and climbs the stairs to the washroom. He washes his face with cold water, forcing the

grogginess aside. He tells himself he must stop falling asleep. He never was a good listener. All the women he has known have accused him of this and that is likely why he lives alone. He looks out the bathroom window at the house next door and its empty yard and the empty street in front. It's a kind of vacuum this old woman is living in, he thinks. At least he still has Slater and the Widower Faggerty. She has only Bruce. Every time he sees her she is filled with energy, probably a result of having company. He thinks that though she is old, compared to her he is dead. Nothing but a corpse propped up on her couch.

Something outside catches Duncan's eye. He looks to the street but sees nothing, yet he is sure there was movement. There it is again; it's the curtain in the window across the street. It's swaying as though someone has pushed it aside. Of course it can be anything, but for a moment Duncan thinks that someone was standing there watching him.

o o o

That night, Duncan sits in a lawn chair on the roof of his house. It is still hot but outside at night the heat is bearable. He is drinking cold beer from a tall glass, a small cooler at his feet. Two roof-tops to his left is the Widower Faggerty also seated in a lawn chair. Faggerty has set up bright bulbs on his roof, pointing them in all directions. He tells Duncan it helps to keep the crickets away. "They're quieter in the light," he says, lighting a cigar. He's been turning on those lights since the heat wave began and the crickets started their noise. "I just don't want them getting into the house."

Duncan is looking into Slater's yard but it's dark and he can't make out the details. He sees what he thinks is the shovel still leaning by the door. He wants to ask Faggerty to shine one of the lights over to the yard so he can see exactly what Slater has done, but he is too shy. There is nothing to look at in the distance but a few scattered lights. There are more lights in the sky than on the ground and the moon is grey and round with an eroding edge.

"Slater's back," Duncan says.

"Just needed some time," Faggerty says. "I know what that's like."

"He was taking up the yard last night, real early. I thought he'd left for good."

Faggerty grins. "I sure know what that's like."

"We should go over, see if he's alright."

"Leave it alone, Duncan."

"Maybe he needs company. Someone to talk things over with."

"He'll kill you," Faggerty says. "When my wife skipped out on me I did some crazy things, and if anyone had the nerve to interrupt me 'cause he thought I needed company I swear I would've strangled him with my hands. So what if he digs up his yard? Let him dig up all the yards he wants, and fill them up with grief and cement."

"He was *doing* something," Duncan says. "He was too focused, too concentrated. Determined. He's digging for a reason, not just blowing off steam."

"I'll tell you about blowing off steam." Faggerty chuckles and drags at his cigar, burying his head in a cloud of smoke. "First thing I did when Kat left me was start cataloguing death. Sudden violent death. Car crashes and murders and avalanches and the rest. Suicides and gunshot blasts and lightning strikes. Anything and everything I could read about in the paper and catch on the evening news. I used to catalogue them

by date and time and even had this complex rating system to try to figure out what is the worst ways to die. Did this for months and let me tell you I was determined too. But it kept me together. Having something to keep me by myself and focused and not go crazy outside where I could hurt someone was what I needed. I was fine so long as nobody came knocking at my door wanting company."

Duncan shakes his head and pours another beer. "It was in his eyes and in the way he was moving and I saw it in the sweat on his face. He's building something. What's odd is when he comes out of the house I can swear the crickets quiet down, like they're watching him too."

Faggerty laughs and slaps his thigh. "Then you go on over and count the bugs and be sure to tell them to stay out of my house."

"Everyone needs company and maybe we can help him build. Maybe it's a pool. It'd good be to have a pool in this heat."

"Just let him be nuts for a couple of weeks. We all need to get crazy once in a while, get a little heated up and blow off some steam." He looks over at Duncan. "Well, everyone except maybe you."

o o o

Next morning is Tuesday and Duncan rises at his usual time. He's slept well despite the heat and the crickets and thinks it must've been that second beer. He steps to the window and the sun is rising and he looks down into Slater's yard. There is a hole in its centre about three feet deep and the discarded earth forms a horse shoe along

three fences. There's no sign of Slater, and though Duncan would like to stay and watch and maybe even pay the man a visit, he must get ready for work.

There's another package for Mrs. Thupper today. Two days in a row is unusual but Duncan is glad to visit her again. Well rested, he is resolved to take part in her conversation. He will drink the bitter tea and not eat too much to avoid getting sleepy and he will involve himself in her stories. He puts the box and the handful of letters beside him on the floor. There is a catalogue addressed to someone who has long since moved away and Duncan places this on the growing discard pile at the back of the truck.

He decides this morning to drive up to the river and sit in the shade of a tree on the shore and maybe catch a breeze from off the water. He's always liked it there with the larger houses and the small private boats skidding recklessly across the water. Now of course there's nothing to break the current and Duncan thinks he might one day bring Slater or even the Widower up here for some fishing.

Mrs. Thupper's package is light, about eight or nine inches long and four inches deep. The markings are from overseas but Duncan doesn't recognize the stamps. There is a blue and white image of stick people linked in a circle, hand in hand. He thinks it might be tea but knows she wouldn't be receiving so much. The packages are of different sizes and probably contain different things. Or different parts of one thing, he thinks. Sitting here in the shade by the water feeling a slight breeze through the open window he wants to know what is in the box. He's never cared before but the sudden determined resolve to involve himself more actively in her life has set off this unusual desire. Besides, Duncan has opened packages before. What he can't repackage he can

always place in a plastic bag with that sticker apologizing for the inconvenience and explaining how the item was unfortunately damaged somewhere in transit.

Now he is peeling the clear tape from the brown paper just enough to slip out the box underneath. He is careful not to tear the paper and this takes time as there is an exaggerated amount of tape, but eventually he pulls the box free. It is a plain glossy white cardboard box with a lid. He removes the lid and amid the cotton and cloth and a little Styrofoam is a petrified human hand.

Duncan spends the rest of the day driving around the South End. He's decided he needs a change of scenery and will not be making any deliveries today. It's been some time since he's been down here and he feels almost awkward, as though he were encroaching on Logan's territory. Dividing the city between them was like putting up an invisible fence.

Duncan was never comfortable down here amid the warehouses and factories and the port. He's always preferred the quiet life. His dad used to tell him that if he didn't do well in school he would end up down south. His father would glare at Duncan and make a fist and point his thumb over his right shoulder every time he was threatening him about "down south." It didn't matter which way he was facing, failure was always just behind his father's right shoulder.

Duncan is surprised to find that without the crowds and the noise it doesn't look much different from the north. A little more worn and tired looking but everything is older down here. Despite his father's threats, Duncan is seeing it now as a historical gateway to the north. Duncan's neighbourhood would never have been built had it not been for the success of the port and the industrial sector. Of course there is no

comparison between shorelines. Down here the industrial waterway and years of naval traffic have turned the water a thick filmy brown. Here the water sludges back and forth as though beating itself drunkenly against the walls of the port, while in the north the currents are at their leisure to glide along the soft sands and grass and stone.

He stops at a little diner near the waterfront and has some tomato soup and a roast beef sandwich. Model sailing boats and driftwood sit on shelves lining the walls. He is the only one there and the waiter appears only to serve him, though Duncan secretly wishes for conversation. Duncan is glad to have the catalogue from the discard pile of the van and flips through it as he eats. He looks at almost every page, comparing prices and features and wondering if certain items come in a different colour. He takes his time and for a little while he is so engrossed that the world ceases to exist.

After lunch he drives along the port and stops at *The Mistress K.* The old derelict ship has been sitting there for exactly one hundred years. That's what his dad used to tell him: "That ship's been there *exactly* one hundred years and it'll be there when you and I are gone." His father brought him to the ship for a guided tour and the guide said it's been sitting there for over a hundred and fifty years and nobody contradicted her. Yet whenever the subject came up and sometimes when there was no subject at all, his dad continued to say, "That ship's been sitting there *exactly* one hundred years and she'll be there when we're all dead and gone."

It is dark now and Duncan realizes he has lost track of time. He has not made his deliveries for the first time since that day last winter when the city was snowed in. And now it is late and Duncan is tired and wants to be home.

Flashing orange lights in the distance lead him up a small side-street. There is an ambulance parked in front of a brick building and the attendants are rolling a stretcher

toward its open doors. The body is wrapped tightly and the attendants are struggling in the evening heat, their white shirts soaked in sweat. It's the humidity, Duncan thinks. People just die in this heat.

"People just die," Faggerty says later that night on the roof. He is blowing smoke rings and watching them hover in the still air. "If it were cold they'd still be dying."

"I see it when I drive around at night. The humidity and the orange flashing lights. They don't have anything better to do, do they? Like they just drive around at night waiting to find your body lying there in the heat."

"Slater's been busy."

Duncan sits forward. "You spoke to him?"

"Came back with a trunk-load of supplies. Bags of cement and tools. Pickaxes and the like. Canisters of fuel."

"Did he say what he was building?"

"He's blowing off steam."

"What did he say?"

"I didn't talk to him. I've been watching from the house."

Duncan looks into the yard. He can't quite make out the oil canisters or the new tools but he can almost feel them sitting there in the yard, waiting to become a part of something. "It can't be too big, whatever it is. A wine cellar or cold room. The fuel is for some machine he's got or will soon be getting. A pump maybe. It's gotta be a room of some kind."

"Maybe a padded cell," Faggerty says. "Big enough for three."

The smell of Faggerty's cigar is strong or maybe Duncan is over-sensitive tonight. Even the crickets seem louder. "I think we should pay him a visit."

"Let it alone. Remember, we didn't bother you."

Duncan tried to see Faggerty's face through the clouds of smoke. "What do you mean?"

"When it was your time to be alone and a little crazy."

"I don't know what you mean." He sneezed from the smell of cigar.

"Always in control and looking out for others. There's nothing crazier than maintaining this routine of yours. Your job and everything when really there's so little left to do. You could've built an entire amusement park in your own yard with the time on your hands."

"Is that what bothers you, that I still have a job when everyone else is forced to move away. This city's become a retirement home."

"It's like a morgue, Duncan. And these houses are the mausoleums." Faggerty sits up and leans forward, his voice fading to a whisper so that Duncan needs to strain to hear him above the constant chirping: "Tell me, Duncan, why did your wife leave you?"

"My wife?" Duncan asks. "She didn't leave me."

"Then where is she, Duncan?"

"She disappeared."

"And her car and I bet her clothes too and likely every little piece of her."

"I came home and she wasn't here. Her things were all gone. It was as though she never existed. She didn't leave a note and that wasn't like her. Usually she leaves notes every time she steps out of the house."

"You didn't phone her parents or check with her friends? She must've gone somewhere."

"It was as if she never existed. As if I'd never been married so there was no point in me looking for her. No point looking for someone who doesn't exist."

"But what of the rest of us Duncan? To me she was real and to me she existed. She exists still, somewhere." Faggerty laughs quietly to himself. "You know, she sent me a couple of letters. Afterwards, I mean. Logan brought them to me while you were out. You know she was here at my place, the day she drove off?"

"She wouldn't do that. She barely knew you. Told me she didn't like the way you treated Kat before she took off."

"She came over and we had coffee."

"She didn't drink coffee."

"I even gave her a little something to steady her nerves. She'd been crying, you know."

"You know what she said about you? Told me she didn't like your smell. The cigars and the sweat. Said you stink."

Faggerty smiles. "You sure pay close attention to someone who doesn't exist."

Duncan reaches for the cooler and pulls out another beer.

"We had coffee and a little brandy and we talked. She was worried about you. Didn't know if it was right to just up and leave you. Asked me what it was like for me when Kat left, and I told her the truth. I told her it was maddening at first but that I managed. Had a little breakdown, I told her. Did some crazy things. Beat the paper boy, for instance. I'm sure you remember. He rang the doorbell for some back pay and I guess he picked the wrong time or rang once too often but whatever it was it pushed me

off the tightrope I was balancing on. So I was a little demented for a while but it passed. When your life falls apart you need to become another person before you can move on. The breakdown is a kind of metamorphosis. A process of change, of becoming somebody else. I told her you'd have a breakdown too but that you'd get over it. Told her you needed one, even. That a good solid breakdown would do you some good. She was afraid for you so I promised her I'd keep an eye on you and make sure you'd come to no harm. And here I've watched you these last four or five years and nothing's happened. Not a single thing. You're just not able to become somebody else. Unable or unwilling."

The crickets are chirping and Duncan wonders why they won't stop. He wonders for the first time how they can keep up that incessant noise night after night after night. They have taken over the city, infested it like a plague and are generating all this heat. But Duncan knows this is all fancy, that the heat is beginning to get to him. He drinks his beer but regrets having opened it; he doesn't want it anymore. It is not as cold as he'd anticipated, and somehow flat in his mouth. "Was she upset?" he asks. "I mean, was she crying or anything?"

"Perfectly rational, really. She probably thought it through for months. You know what she's like, so careful and considerate. You were lucky to have her."

"Did she leave anything or tell you anything? For me, I mean? A message or something?"

"A message? Don't think so. Never really thought of it. Walked through my door and I never saw her again. I practically threw her out, told her to leave before the doubts started to creep in. I practically threw her out of both our houses."

o o o

It's mid-morning Wednesday when Duncan finally gets out of bed. His neck and shoulders are sore from too much sleep. He doesn't remember coming to bed, changing into briefs and switching on that rattling fan.

He looks out at Slater's progress: there is a pickaxe in the hole and broken rock strewn about. Must've been a hard night, Duncan thinks and feels unusually sympathetic. He wants to step out, take up that pickaxe and turn that boulder to dust. He refuses to believe it is part of a breakdown; the work is too meticulous, too deliberate. He decides that later today he will offer Slater a hand.

But first he will settle something in his own house. It's too late for work today and it's been years since he's taken on a project at home. He decides to clean up and maybe do something in the basement where it must be cooler. He looks in the dresser for his work clothes and pulls out a nightgown. It's Lina's drawer, filled with her nicer things. Filled also with her smell. Faint, it is there nonetheless, as though she's been sitting right there in that drawer and just stepped out a moment ago to run an errand. Duncan pulls out her things and tosses them onto the floor. He searches through the house and finds more of her belongings in drawers and closets and hidden away in the basement. The second bedroom is filled with her things and he spends that day and the next filling bags with her clothes and a few other things she's left behind. Not wanting them in the house he stores them in the back of the mail truck.

He is exhausted following the two days of cleaning in this heat and heads up through the attic to the roof. The crickets seem more active tonight and he thinks he can hear them hopping around in Slater's yard. Perhaps its an echo from the hole in the

ground. It is Thursday night and he hasn't gone to work but he doesn't mind since he's been busy. He wants to thank Faggerty for their talk and to apologize for being so stubborn. He is keenly aware that Faggerty has done him a great favour. He slumps into his chair, feeling almost giddy, ready to laugh at the world. This is the first time he's felt this way since Lina left. Faggerty's lights are turned off. Duncan pulls his pocket light out and shines it onto Faggerty's roof and in its glare he can see the old man slumped in his chair. He sees immediately that Faggerty is dead.

o o o

The middle of the night and Duncan's pillow is wet. Sweat trickles into his ears and the chirping of the crickets seems to be coming from far away. He feels as though his head were encased in glass. He wants to turn on the old fan but doesn't want to leave his bed. Even Slater's deep grunts and the clink of the pickaxe striking rock does not attract him to the window. Every time he closes his eyes he pictures Faggerty's bloated body slumped in the lawn chair. To fight off the image he concentrates on the crickets and tries to uncover some pattern in their song. He thinks that with time he will be able to decipher their sounds and understand what they are asking for. But Slater's digging and chopping breaks the rhythm; the crickets seem to stumble in their music every time the pickaxe strikes. It's almost as if Slater is hunting them down one by one. He can almost see Slater standing in the dark of his yard, searching for the little creatures in the grass and the dirt and between the pieces of rock. He shakes the image away, but it's replaced with a small box and a hand crawling out. He sits up in bed and uses the sheet to wipe the sweat from his face, and he thinks of Lina and wonders why she left. He

can't push this question away and sits there wanting her. He sits in bed the rest of the night unable to do anything other than want.

At midnight on Friday Duncan parks his van three blocks from Mrs. Thupper's house. Light is flickering in the window upstairs; she is in the bedroom watching TV. Duncan walks around the house and into the yard. It's dark back here and the crickets seem louder but he knows this is only his imagination. He's never been in her yard and moves slowly, avoiding every shadow that may be an obstacle. He moves carefully, for even though there is no one around he is afraid he will be seen. He has his pocket light in hand but doesn't switch it on. He knows no one will see it but the sudden light will silence the crickets and Mrs. Thupper will come down to investigate.

He thinks he knows where the back door is and moves toward it. He comes to a porch and climbs the steps on his hands and knees. With each step forward he brushes the dirt from his palms. He is afraid of what he might grasp in the dark, a fistful of crickets or another human hand.

He brushes the steel of a door frame and feels the outline to make sure it's the door. It's so dark he can't see the knob and has to find it by touch. His palms are clammy and covered in dirt and when he finally finds the knob he is surprised that it is not round as he expected but a flat handle. His thumb presses against the lock and the brief click startles him. He is breathing deeply now and his clothes are completely drenched. The door is locked and he doesn't know what else to try. He thinks maybe he should pay her another visit, drink her tea and excuse himself to go to the washroom. Only he'd head for the kitchen instead and unlock that back door. Only he can't imagine sitting on her couch with another package in the house.

He takes the light from his pocket and cups one hand over its tip to block the glare as best he can. He aims it at the glass of the door and switches it on, and standing there staring right at him is a man.

Duncan falls back and drops the light and for a moment the crickets stop their noise. The man is tall and lean and there is something monstrous about him, his face deformed or misshapen, but the impression is fleeting and Duncan crawls as fast as he can toward the side of the house. Something grabs him from behind and the crickets resume their chirping, louder now it seems as if yelling at Duncan, telling him to get away. He kicks frantically at his assailant but it won't let go. He half-notices that he is moaning, lying on his back with flailing arms and legs until finally he is free. A pot falls over and breaks and he can see from the dim light that it is only a plant that was caught around his ankle. He stands up and runs to the side of the house where he stops to catch his breath and forces himself to stop that awful moaning. A light goes on above him and he knows Mrs. Thupper is on her way down. From the glare he can see the window of the house next door and there again is a figure holding the curtain aside. Duncan heads to the front of the house just as the main lights flare up and ignite the middle of the street in a flaming arc of light. The crickets are knocked into silence. Duncan is stunned in the midst of this flash and he looks around to see that in each house is a figure looking down at him and he screams.

o o o

Slater opens his front door. His eyes are clouded with sleep and his beard is thick and streaked with grey. He looks older, Duncan thinks. Those good looks and firm features no longer evident.

"Duncan," Slater says. He smiles and opens the door wider. "What time is it? The sun's barely up."

"Faggerty's dead," Duncan says. His cheeks are streaked with tears.

"It's okay," Slater pulls him into the house. "C'mon. We'll get you cleaned up and you can help me find my shoes."

The stench on Faggerty's roof is incredible. His body is slumped in the chair, swollen a bright red in the morning sun. There are flies everywhere. Duncan can't look at the body. He's pressing the cold towel Slater gave him to his forehead only it isn't cold anymore so he presses it instead over his nose and mouth.

"My God," Slater says. He is shaking his head and pinching his nostrils. "You just found him like this?"

Duncan doesn't answer. He is trying to fight off the urge to be sick.

"My God," Slater says again and can't stop shaking his head. "He must've been here for hours."

"I found him here," Duncan says. "Just like this."

"Why aren't you at work?"

"It's Saturday."

"Saturday," Slater says slowly. "Today is Saturday." He looks over to his yard. "Of course," he says. "You don't work on Saturdays. I seem to have lost track of time. It's this

heat, you know. The heat and the noise and you just don't know what's going on around you anymore."

"We should bury him," Duncan says.

Slater looks back to the body. "We have to call somebody."

"Let's just bury him." Duncan can feel the tears starting up again.

"I'm calling an ambulance," Slater says. He's looking at the body and shaking his head. "Must've been days."

o o o

There's a storm on its way and relief from the heat. That is what the voice on the radio says. Duncan has recovered the truck and is making an unusual Sunday delivery. The mail has been piling up but really it isn't much of a pile. Along with the mail Duncan drops off Lina's belongings. He leaves the clothes where he knows women are living; everything else he drops off randomly, making sure that everyone on his route receives something. As he is making these deliveries he realises that he has been keeping track of these peoples' lives. From postcards and notices and a thousand little clues he has been unconsciously learning about each of the remaining residents on his route. Yet to them he does not exist. Now he can leave some clue to his own existence behind, some artefact tying him to this world.

Finished now and pleased with himself, Duncan drives over to see Mrs. Thupper. He sits in the truck and examines the hand; he can see that it is not real, but a soft plastic. From up close it does not even look real, and Duncan is embarrassed that he has been avoiding Mrs. Thupper's house.

He rings her bell but there is no answer. He rings again and knocks on the door until finally it opens a crack and Mrs. Thupper's face appears. She smiles when she recognizes him and opens the door. He can see how tired she is, how aged and haggard she looks, and wonders what she does all alone on a Sunday. Duncan holds up the package and she sees it has been opened. She looks at him and smiles. It is a girlish smile and she puts a frail hand to her lips to suppress a giggle. "I'm afraid I've been a bad girl."

"I thought at first it was real," Duncan says when toast and tea are served.

"I'm almost finished," Mrs. Thupper says. She is nearly bursting with excitement. "There's only the couple next door," she says. "I'm having a little trouble with them."

The body from the kitchen the other night is standing by the window in the den. He is tall and thin and Duncan can now see that what he sensed as being monstrous and misshapen were the man's missing ears.

"It's incredible," Duncan says and he means it. The body is incredibly life-like that he is gripped with the urge of introducing himself to it. He touches the figure's cheek and feels only the cold plastic. "The must've taken years," he says.

"You'd never believe what you can accomplish with so much time on your hands. I order the individual parts so all I have left to do is assemble them. I give the specifications and even have some photos to work with, so really it's not so bad. A little costly, I'll admit, but well worth it. Soon I'll have the neighbourhood back to what it once was. Isn't that so, Bruce?"

Duncan puts his hands on the old lady's shoulders. "I want you to move onto my block. We can be neighbours and see each other every day. We'll be three and I'm sure you'll like Slater."

She is smiling when she shakes her head. "Down in the basement is one of me. Promise me that when I'm buried you'll bring her up here to Bruce."

o o o

Duncan is sitting with Slater on the roof. They've set up Faggerty's lights and brought up an extra lawn chair from the attic. The crickets are loud but the rumbling in the distance will soon bring relief.

"Do you think they'll drown?" Duncan asks.

"I hope so," he says. "It's the crickets, really, more than the heat. I can take another few degrees but one more of those things and I swear I'll lose my mind."

There was more rumbling in the distance and a flash of light. "Faggerty thought you were having a breakdown. On edge after your wife left. He didn't think you were building anything, just blowing off steam and keeping yourself busy."

Slater laughs and shakes his head. "You can't blame him, really. I must've looked insane. It's not something most suburbanites do. At least he had a theory."

"You were too focused," Duncan tells him. "Too determined. It was clear you had some purpose."

"Of course," Slater says and he laughs again. "I'm gonna miss the Widower. We haven't spoken for some weeks but I've known him since...It's been a long time."

Duncan opens two more beers and hands one over to Slater. "I'll help you," he says. "I've got the time and I think I'll blow up too if I don't keep busy. I've decided to deliver the mail once a week, like Logan does. It makes more sense. I'll help with whatever it is you're putting up. It's the work I need; I don't even care what you're building."

"I thought it was obvious," Slater says. "I thought you'd all figured it out."

Duncan is almost embarrassed and shakes his head. "Swimming pool?"

At this Slater laughs aloud and spills some beer. Duncan can't help but join him until the rumbling strikes again and the wind starts to pick up.

"I'm not building anything," Slater says. He needs to raise his voice over the increasing rush of wind. "It's about breaking things down, about destroying them."

"Destroying what?" Duncan yells.

"The crickets! Didn't you notice when you were over how much louder they are at my place? They must've gone underground and built a nest beneath my house. I need to get down there to find them. Once I do that I'll destroy every last one of them. I've got fuel and smoke bombs and the materials to rebuild afterwards. I can't just sit there living with that nest beneath my feet." He is yelling now as the winds are howling and Duncan strains to listen. "You can hear them in the basement too, you know, and pretty soon they'll be coming inside and there just won't be enough room left for me. Faggerty was right, they'll be taking over and forcing us out like everybody else. That's why my wife left, you know. It's the crickets."

The winds are screaming now and lifting dust and dirt into the air. Duncan drops his beer and one of the spotlights bursts. He shuts his eyes and tries to find his way back

to the attic. Slater is still in his chair, smiling to himself. "It'll soon be over!" Duncan hears him say. "Just let me take care of it!"

There's a sharp crack and the lights go out. By now Duncan is inside brushing the dust off his clothes and calling out to Slater. Outside the rain hits hard and the house shakes at the sudden impact. Duncan continues to call out to Slater but there is no answer.

AFTER THE RAINS

It was Wednesday, the rains had stopped, and as if from a haze Paveman awoke to find a man living in his bedroom closet. The door was open and the light was on, and at the back, seven feet deep on a pile of old couch cushions, was a man reading a magazine. He looked up and smiled. "You should get some new material," he said, friendly. He was large but fit comfortably in the tight space. He wore an old sweatshirt and a pair of flannel boxers. "Get your things," he said. "You'll be late for work. Besides, I have some important things to tend to." He tossed the magazine onto a cardboard box, stretched himself along the cushions, and facing the wall he promptly fell asleep.

Paveman removed his overalls from the hook behind the door. He wondered why this man was asleep in his closet. He thought of waking him and asking but did not want to be rude. The man started gently to snore and Paveman reached in to turn off the light. He looked at the magazine the man had been reading and saw that it was a real estate brochure he had picked up some weeks ago to read on the bus. He did not remember having read it, and quietly switched off the lights.

o o o

Paveman was at work, standing in his overalls looking at fruit. There were eight waxed boxes on his table and he was surprised to find that each box was filled with fresh blueberries. One by one he emptied the boxes and could find nothing other than blueberries. With only blueberries to sell, he thought, this will be a slow day. He measured out the berries and shared them among his different baskets and priced them

at market value. He had been doing this now for seven years, standing by his table selling fruit. This morning Paveman was ashamed of the spread on his table, embarrassed at having only blueberries to sell. He thought maybe he should stand in front of the table for a change and maybe then no one would notice that all he had were blueberries, but after seven years of standing behind the table he was sure the other vendors would notice the change and recognize that something was wrong. And something was wrong, Paveman was certain. There must have been a mistake.

But the farm had never made any mistakes. Not in seven years and not with Paveman. He wanted to notify someone of the error but there was no one to notify. Paveman had never met his employers. He had applied for the position seven years ago by answering an ad in the local paper. When his parents passed away and left him their house he had no choice but to go to work. He had no training and no experience and not knowing what else to do he had applied for every available position. All he wanted was a regular paycheck and a certain amount of responsibility. He received a contract by mail, and within a week found himself at the market west of the docks, standing behind a table with several boxes of fruit. His salary was deposited into his account at the beginning of each month while he deposited the market profits at a nearby bank at the end of each day. The work was steady and consistent, and until this morning there had not been the slightest change in his routine.

He looked up at the old clock tower that overlooked the market. The hands on the face were set to a quarter after three. For seven years now the clock was set to a quarter after three, its face frozen since Paveman first arrived at the market. Yet Paveman knew it was now a little after eight-thirty in the morning. Exactly a little after eight-thirty. Having established a firm routine he could accurately tell time through his

actions; his hands were better tuned to the movements of the sun than any clock tower in the city. This morning, wanting for once the day to end early, Paveman's hands were unconsciously active.

o o o

"Call me Kurtis," the man said that evening when Paveman stepped through the door of his house on Green's End. Kurtis followed Paveman into the bedroom.

"We need to talk," Paveman said. He did not like that Kurtis followed him into the bedroom. He wanted to remove his overalls and get cleaned up; he wanted privacy. On the bedroom floor was a trail of earth leading to the bedroom closet.

"Look what I've got!" Kurtis held up a ceramic pot and in it was a small plant. He was clearly excited, smiling at Paveman and holding up the pot. "It's a creeper," he said. "One of those ivy plants that cling to walls and to trees and to anything. It'd cling to you to, if you let it. Look at that vine. It's small now, but it'll grow. Just you wait; it'll grow."

"We need to talk," Paveman said again. He stood up straight and cleared his throat. He did not know how to begin. "There's something we need to talk about," he said.

"Look at it," Kurtis said. He was friendly but insistent, and held the pot up to Paveman so that Paveman was forced to look.

"It's a nice plant," Paveman said.

"But you only glanced at it. Take a good look. A good long look."

Paveman looked. Despite his resolve he was impressed: it was a nice plant. The vine was thick and strong, the leaves with their crinkly edges were a healthy deep green. "It is a nice plant," Pavement said, unable to stop himself. "A very nice plant."

"Look at the leaves," Kurtis said. "They're rhomboid."

"Rhomboid," Paveman repeated. He wanted to touch it. He wanted to run his finger along the edge of a crinkly green leaf to see if it were sharp. "Very nice," he said again, not knowing what else to say. And as he spoke his enthusiasm grew. It was easier to talk about the plant than to talk about the man. "I don't think I've ever seen a nicer plant. It's the nicest plant in the city, I'm sure." He knew the things he was saying were ridiculous but he couldn't stop himself.

The man was quiet for a moment, looking from Paveman to the plant. With his free hand he stroked his jaw as he looked from the plant to Paveman and back again. "I will leave it here," he said decisively, setting it down on the shelf just outside the closet door. "'Here where you can see it. Since you like it so much. Then you can watch it grow."

Paveman held up his hands. "No!" he said. It was almost a shout. "That's not necessary. We'll leave it outside where it can get some sun."

"Don't be shy," Kurtis said. "I don't mind sharing. Plants as nice as these are meant to be shared."

Paveman didn't know what to say and stood awkwardly between Kurtis and the plant. His hands were still raised and he didn't know what to do with them. He let them drop to his sides but then felt awkward just standing there with his hands at his sides.

"I need to warn you," Kurtis said. "I know these vines and they love to grow. Watch it closely; you may need to cut it back. Close your eyes for a second and the next thing you know you're living in a jungle."

"A jungle," Paveman said.

Kurtis yawned and stretched his arms out, and for a moment Paveman thought he was going to give him a hug. "I guess I'll be off to bed," he said, and a moment later the closet door was shut.

o o o

The next morning, underneath the dirty market canopy, Paveman stared at the boxes on his table. Once again they were filled only with blueberries. He looked up at the clock tower and wondered if there was a way to climb to the top and what he would see from there. He looked back to the boxes and they were still filled only with blueberries. He didn't want to deal just in blueberries. He wanted some variety, the feel of something different between his fingers, the smell of something new.

A week passed and still all he received were blueberries. By the end of the week he began to wonder if he was responsible: perhaps he was being punished for something he had done? It was absurd, but it nagged at him every day, and he couldn't help but wonder what it was he had done wrong. The second week was worse: not only did he continue receiving blueberries, but now there were only six waxed boxes.

Every evening he tried to talk to Kurtis, but the man was so friendly and seemed so genuinely happy to see Paveman that he was caught off guard and didn't have the heart to say anything. In the mornings he would resolve to speak with the man but in

the evenings he never had the courage. On the bus ride from Green's End Avenue down to the market he would decide to spend the day building a strategy to evict Kurtis, but every morning when he opened his boxes to discover nothing but blueberries he instead spent his days wondering what it was that he had done wrong.

A month passed this way and the ivy continued to grow.

o o o

On the Monday of the new month in the middle of the day when Paveman was trying to decide if he should eat his sandwich, Kurtis appeared.

"Hello Paveman!" he said. "How's the blueberry business?"

"I'm not running a blueberry business," Paveman said, glancing around to make sure that the nearby vendors were not listening. "It's a general produce business. We just happen at the moment to be specializing in blueberries. It's only temporary. Later we will have squash."

"I came to get some fertilizer and thought I would drop in to see how you were."

"How did you know I work here?"

"Where else would you work? Where else would a blueberry vendor work?"

"How did you know what I did? What do *you* do when I'm not at home?"

"Today I need to organize," Kurtis said with a sigh. "Can I have those empty boxes?" He pointed at the six waxed boxes underneath Paveman's table.

"Did you follow me here?" Paveman asked.

Kurtis laughed. "All I did was ask the strawberry man. That man over there. I asked him where Paveman the blueberry vendor had his table and he pointed to you."

"I'm a private man," Paveman said. "I don't need for people to know where I am all the time. I can be anywhere, absolutely anywhere in this world, and I don't need for people to know."

"It'd really help me if I had those boxes."

"Did you know that I almost didn't come to work this morning? I left the house thinking, what would happen if didn't go to work? I can go to City Centre; I haven't been there in years. You know, I can't remember the last time I was in City Centre."

"It's still there," Kurtis said. "Maybe we go this weekend."

"I don't want to go to City Centre. That's not the point. The point is I *can* go, if I wanted to, and I could've gone this morning."

"Then you should go," Kurtis said. "Maybe you should want to go, and I'd go with you. We'll go together, you and I, but on the weekend. Today I'd like to have those boxes."

"Why should I want to go anywhere when I can come here?" Paveman hit his table with a fist. He was getting fired up now, and wanted suddenly to argue, to make a scene. He looked at the nearby vendors hoping they were listening, but did not see anybody nearby. He wanted the other vendors to see that he was not a man to be taken lightly, that he was not a man who you could point to but instead a man you would turn away from.

Kurtis walked away with the six waxed boxes. Paveman wanted to follow but he could not leave his station. He slowly circled his area as if in orbit around his berries and tried to locate the strawberry man. There were tables just like his lining the market

row upon row. One man sold lettuce while a woman had a cooler filled with fresh eggs. There was a man standing at an empty table and Paveman could not understand what he was trying to sell. There were so many tables that most of them were empty and unused. The strawberry vendor was only a few tables to his right, and Paveman approached the strawberry table but remained at a distance from the man. He did not want the others to think they were friends; he did not want anyone to think that he would associate with someone specializing in only one type of fruit. He was, after all, a multi-produce man, and there was some pride in that. This man in front of him knew only strawberries.

"Excuse me," Paveman said.

The man looked up. He saw Paveman and took a step back. This pleased Paveman. With his back straight and arms on hips he believed he was intimidating. The man looked from side to side and back at Paveman. "Hello," he said. Then suddenly, without warning, his face brightened. He smiled widely at Paveman and raised his hands in friendly greeting as though they had known each other for years. He was a small man, bone thin and thin-haired. His smile was wide and it wrinkled his face so that in a flash he seemed to age a hundred years. "Well, well, well," he said. "A fine day, Mr. Paveman. A fine day indeed. Glad all that rain is gone, aren't you? We're all so glad it's finally ended. Quite the storm indeed."

Paveman wanted to agree. It was a fine day, after all. The sun was warm and there was a light breeze that kept it from being too hot. Paveman wanted to agree and to make a comment about the breeze but he was there for a reason and this little man was not going to deflect his purpose with small talk. "Is there a reason you should point at me?" Paveman asked.

The man's smile disappeared and he appeared to suddenly regain his youth. "I beg your pardon?"

"I am a private man. If anyone asks about me, just pretend I don't exist." With that he walked away. He wanted to run, to hurry back to his table but he knew that if he ran his point would be lost. So he walked slowly though he was trembling and feeling cold. He walked slowly until he saw two boys at his table stuffing their pockets with his blueberries. This was something new and he did not know how to react. He stood still a moment and watched the two boys making a mess of their hands and of their clothes as they stuffed their pockets with blueberries. "Stop!" he yelled and lurched forward. It was an impulsive act and he nearly tripped, stumbling and kicking up stones until he reached his table and clung tightly to its edges to prevent from falling over. He was breathing heavily. He looked up to see the two boys, laughing, disappear down the aisles of the market.

o o o

That evening his house was filled with smoke. Alarmed, Paveman ran to the bedroom closet. Kurtis was sitting on a box smoking a cigar and looking at a road map. He noticed Paveman and smiled. "Tell me," he said, "what's a nice place, not too far from here? Somewhere to settle down in?"

"I don't know any places away from here," Paveman said. As he said it he remembered when he was ten or eleven and his parents took him on a summer late road trip over the bridge and out of the city. They visited a series of small towns and he distinctly remembered the one with the curving roads and the roundabouts and the

dead-ends that made his mother laugh and his father swear. There was a small park in the centre of the town where they stopped for a picnic lunch and there was a man in the distance sitting on a bench and reading a newspaper. The man did not move, and as he ate Paveman stared at the man on the bench and could not tell if the man was real or if he was the statue of a man reading a newspaper. Birds flew around him but the man did not flinch, nor did the birds land near him. At any moment Paveman was certain the man would turn the page of his paper, but as he leaned forward anticipating the action, a part of himself felt that the pages of the paper would remain unturned. He could not imagine any article to be so absolutely absorbing, yet from that distance he could not see the man's eyes and could not tell if he were awake or asleep. His arms were not getting tired though they rested comfortably, one on the arm of a bench and the other on what appeared to be a large handbag. When Paveman finally decided that the man was a statue he saw him move, but his father had just pulled him away and he could not tell if the man had moved or if it what he saw was the illusion of movement. When he turned back the man was still sitting on the bench and reading his newspaper. As they drove away Paveman thought to himself that he wanted to be like that man. He wanted to sit by himself while people stared at him and wondered whether or not he was real. "There is a nice place," Paveman said. "A nice place not too far away."

"Really?" Kurtis asked.

Paveman was nodding his head. "There is a place but I don't know what it's called and I don't know where it is, but I am sure that it exists."

Kurtis was now standing at the door. "Looks good, doesn't it?" he said, pointing his cigar at the plant. "I dug it up down at the docks. They were everywhere there, young sprouts all around. They appeared right after the rains, just shot up

unexpectedly. No one's seen them before, like they were brought in by the river from someplace else. I figured they didn't belong to anyone so I brought one home. Do you think that was wrong?"

Paveman saw that the vines had moved up to the ceiling and down to the floor. They were covered in healthy, green leaves, and Paveman was struck with the realization that he had not watered the plant at all. He had been so distracted lately that he did not even think of watering it. It was as though he believed the plant could survive on growth alone.

Paveman considered planting the vine outside, and when Kurtis was asleep he stepped out into the yard. He had not been in the yard for a long time and it was completely overgrown. The yard was his father's responsibility and after his death it was almost as if it had ceased to exist. There were weeds growing in large clumps amid the thick grass, and the bushes lining the picket fence seemed to have exploded, their branches jutting out chaotically. His father used to trim those bushes so that each side was perfectly flat. He planted vegetables and herbs along the back and now even the bird baths sat filthy and unused. Since he had taken over the house, Paveman lived solely on the first floor. He closed off both the basement and the bedrooms at the top, and though he never intended on closing off the yard he had simply forgotten that it was sitting back there behind the kitchen door. Paveman went to the front of the house to look at the small front yard and driveway, and there too the lawn was completely unkempt, as though the house were derelict. He knew the mower and garden tools were still in the shed hidden behind the monstrous bushes out back, and decided that he must put the house back in order. But it was a nice warm evening, and Pavemen decided instead to go for a walk. The streets were quiet and there was a FOR SALE sign planted

into the front lawn of the house across the street. The houses along Green's End were almost identical, Paveman noticed. Each brick building has two floors and a front lawn, and each building was separated from its neighbour by a picket fence. Some fences were white, some brown and a few were even green. One fence further down was made of iron. The street lights came on and the sky was growing dark. The bulb over Paveman sputtered and went out.

Paveman walked east on Green's End Avenue toward the park on Three Bears Road. It was a walk he liked to take as a boy. It was quiet but for the rustling leaves and his own shuffling steps. He heard a car in the distance and some kind of rumbling further away, enough noise to know that the city lived on outside his little world.

The further he walked the more FOR SALE signs he saw and he wondered if this was the time of year when people generally moved. It was a warm evening and he thought that perhaps people liked to move when it was warm. He reached the park on Three Bears and circled it part-way until he arrived at the path that guided visitors through the grounds. As a boy he used to simply run in across the grass and head toward the playground. Tonight he followed the path between the trees and bushes and lamp-posts. The branches hung low and the grass had not been cut. It was a nice park but needed some tending and Paveman thought that his father would have fixed it up nicely. He came across a bench and decided to sit for a few minutes.

Paveman thought about the recent events in his life. He could not remember when so many new things had happened so quickly, and wondered what he could have done to attract these events. He did not believe that things happened on their own, and he did not believe in coincidence. Since these changes revolved around him, he was certain he was responsible for them. Yet he could not imagine what he was being

punished for. It was true that he had been a little aggressive lately. The strawberry man was only trying to be helpful by pointing him out; no harm was actually done. Kurtis too was always friendly. Not only had he given Paveman that plant, but he had been taking good care of it while Paveman was at work. He could not understand where all this aggression had come from, and wondered if maybe he was always like this. He tried to look into the past to see what he had been like as a boy, but as he looked into the past he could not see himself. Aside from a few fleeting memories, it was as though he did not exist in his own past. Every time he did catch sight of himself it was as though he were looking at somebody else. He could see the figure in the park reading his newspaper and he could see himself running across the grass toward the playground, but he could not see anything else. He wondered where he could have gone to, and began shuffling through the various images in his mind in search of himself. Image after image flashed by, but there were so few items that the same pictures kept reappearing. He saw his house, the playground and the market, and he even saw Kurtis and the strawberry man. He looked further back and saw his father trying to repair the old toaster, and his mother wrapping herself up in the orange shawl she liked to wear whenever she went to City Centre to do some shopping. And there Paveman saw himself, behind that orange shawl, clutching at his mother's skirt. There was a storm out and his mother was wrapping the shawl around her head and shoulders and reaching back to pull Paveman close against her legs, but he was already there, clutching frightened at her skirt as though he expected to be blown away. The storm had taken them by surprise. They were out shopping for a new toaster as the old one had broken down, and even though his father was convinced he could fix it, his mother took Paveman down to the mall in City Centre to look for a new and modern toaster. There was a spark of lightning and a

spark too when his father shocked himself. He was grinning a strange little grin and rubbing the injured hand, saying "I'm not fit for this sort of thing," over and over again while rubbing his hands together. "I'll get it yet," he insisted. "Just you watch, I'll get it yet." Meanwhile, Paveman and his mother were clutching at each other in the middle of a storm and that was all of himself that Paveman could remember.

o o o

The next morning Paveman felt different. He was calm and even a little light-headed, almost giddy. For the first time in many years he did not want to be at the market and took his time setting up the table. The clock tower's hands were still frozen, and he now thought that if he could climb up there he might try to turn those hands back. He stood at his table and looked around the market as if for the first time. The market was unusually quiet. He thought back to his first visit seven years ago, and remembered how invisible he had felt amid the crowd and the noise and the smells. He remembered the boxes and their fruits that were impatient to be displayed, and he had to hurry to have everything set up before the market gates opened. There were so many boxes to unpack that first morning, and today there were only four. He had more time to himself in the morning and tried to think back to when his shipments began decreasing, but it happened so gradually that he could not isolate a time. He wondered how long he had been standing around thinking instead of opening boxes and arranging fruit, and he wondered what he had been thinking all those mornings. Could a person eventually run out of things to think about? Would the same thoughts keep recurring every morning because there just was not enough to think about? He looked at the other vendors.

There were not as many vendors there as he had imagined, and many of the tables were empty. It occurred to Paveman right then that the market had been unusually quiet lately. He walked over to the strawberry man and saw that he too had only a few baskets on his table.

"Slow morning," Paveman said.

The man looked up and seeing Paveman took a step backward. He did not say anything.

"Slow morning, what?" Paveman repeated, but still the man did not say anything. "Listen," Paveman said with a slight stutter, "I really shouldn't have said what I said the other day. I mean, the other day yesterday. I mean, your pointing me out was helpful and I was just a little off." The man still did not say anything, and though he finished saying what he felt he should say, he stood at the strawberry table and began swaying side to side on his feet. "You were right, you know," he said. "About the weather being nice. You were right, it was nice. Only I was a little off."

The man cleared his throat and nodded his head. "Yes," he said. "I know what you mean. It's all been stressful lately and we've all had a hard time with it. I didn't like what you said but it's been stressful and we've all been a little, as you say, off."

"Yes," Paveman said. "That's exactly it! It's been stressful lately and sometimes I don't know what to do. It's as if the world is changing right before my very eyes."

"You've hit that nail on its head," the strawberry man said. "All you want is to maintain a little stability and it all falls apart, suddenly and without warning."

"You've noticed it too," Paveman said. He felt relieved to be able to talk to someone.

"We're all affected, every last one of us. It's harder for me, you know; I'm just too old for this. You're still young so you'll have no trouble finding something else. Guys like me don't have many options left. I'm trying to find the courage to ask my son if I could move down and stay with them for a while. I've packed up the house but can't get myself to pick up that phone."

"You can stay with me," Paveman said. "I've plenty of room."

"That is a generous offer, absolutely generous." He gripped Paveman's hand. "But I'm not ready to retire. There isn't any work left around here and with the market closing down next week we'll be completely stuck."

"Completely stuck," Paveman said. He released his hand from the other man's grip .

"Imagine: I've been doing this for close to thirty years. It's the only thing I know and soon it won't be here anymore."

"It won't be here," Paveman said. He was cold and dizzy and his head was beginning to throb."

"But I have my family," the strawberry man said. "I just need to pick up that phone."

Paveman returned to his table and sat on its edge, massaging his temples. The market was closing down. He had received the notice in the mail but he did not think it could be possible and simply tossed it aside. He wondered now how long ago that had been.

The two boys who had pocketed his blueberries the day before sat underneath a vacant table playing some game with a handful of pebbles. Paveman called out to them and saw them stiffen, ready to turn and flee. He took his sandwich from the pocket of his

overalls and held it out to them and instinctively they leaned forward. He nodded the sandwich up and down as if to say "It's okay, I made it for you." Slowly the boys approached him, knees bent and backs stooped, eyes on the food. Paveman broke the sandwich in two and handed each boy a piece which they grabbed and scurried away. The day was quiet and for the first time in seven years Paveman did not sell a thing.

o o o

When he returned home the ivy was creeping out the front window and along the brick toward the roof. Paveman stood admiring the house. The lawn was freshly mown and raked, and the driveway was swept clean. It was a beautiful warm late summer afternoon, and Paveman almost wanted to be somewhere else.

Inside, the waxed boxes Kurtis had taken from the market were filled and taped up and sitting by the front door. The rooms had been aired out and the fresh smell of earth seemed to be everywhere. The closet too was cleaned out and Paveman's magazines and clothes were neatly stacked on the shelves and on the floor. There was no one at the house.

Paveman stood outside at the doorstep of his house with his hands on his hips, thinking that anyone passing by would wave to him and think that he was lucky to own such a house. But no one was passing by. Paveman walked to the street and looked at the house and pretended he was passing by, thinking that if someone were standing on the doorstep he would wave to let the owner know that he was lucky to have such a house. He looked up and down the street but there was no one anywhere on Green's End.

Paveman walked to the front window, gripped the thick vines and pulled. They seemed sturdy enough. Still in his overalls and work shoes he hoisted himself onto the window sill, and finding a foothold amid the vines he began to pull himself up. It was warm but the cool late summer breeze felt good against his face. Half-way up the house he stopped to catch his breath. His heart was pounding and his throat was dry but he still felt good. He remembered that once his father had gone up the roof and Paveman was not allowed to follow. His father rolled out the long ladder and leaned it against the back of the house and told Paveman that it was his job to hold the ladder steady. He took the responsibility seriously and clutched tightly at the bars. He watched his father's work boots climb the ladder above him, and with each step a little dirt and soil fell from the soles and sprinkled Paveman's face and hair. He would not let the dust and soil distract him from his job, and clutched the ladder even more tightly against these elements. Then his father stepped off the ladder over the rim and disappeared onto the roof. Paveman continued looking up and all he could see was a clear blue sky. There was no sign of his father; it was as though he had stepped off of this earth. Clutching the ladder Paveman felt very much alone, and though he knew instinctively that his father would soon re-appear and climb back down and praise him for doing so well at holding the ladder, he felt oddly afraid, as though he were unexpectedly alone in this world. He stood now on the vines thinking about being alone and he wondered why he was remembering these distant events. He looked up the wall toward the roof and thought that maybe his father was still up there and he could meet him once again. But he knew that was silly because his father did reappear and did praise him that day so many years ago for the excellent job he did at holding the ladder.

On the roof Paveman was surprised to see that it was carpeted with thin young

furry vines and fresh new baby leaves. He thought if he stared at them long enough he was sure to see them grow. There seemed to be fewer vines and more leaves on the roof, and there were small buds that were erupting into little white cotton flowers. Paveman sat on the edge of the roof and looked past the neighbourhood toward the city. Across the street there was a white van and two men carrying boxes from his neighbour's house. They were packing the van quickly and not too carefully and Paveman wanted to tell them there was no rush. "Where are you going?" Paveman asked, but they did not hear him and hurried back into the house. Every time they reappeared Paveman asked them where they were headed but they did not notice. One of the movers dropped a box and some papers fell out. The other mover, a larger man in a filthy tank-top, unshaven and angry-looking yelled at his partner. "Where are you heading?" Paveman called out and then they noticed him. The two men looked at each other and the larger man called back, "We're headed out of town," he said. "Where out of town?" Paveman asked, but the men had already returned to loading their truck.

Paveman sat and watched the city. He had lived his entire life on Green's End Avenue and had not seen much of the city. Now it seemed to be fading away. He decided that he would stay and get acquainted with each of its neighbourhoods. His savings over the last seven years were considerable and he had so few expenses that he could afford not to work for a while. He looked toward City Centre but could not see beyond the series of vacant billboards at the edge of his neighbourhood. He decided that tomorrow he would go past those billboards and into City Centre, and maybe he would buy a car and learn to drive and go on a little road trip to see if the man with the newspaper was still reading on his bench. The wind had picked up and Paveman felt a shiver. He watched as the wind grabbed hold of the cotton flowers and tore them from their buds

and carried them into the sky, over the neighbourhood toward the city. In a few minutes the sky was filled with cotton and Paveman felt a tug at his overalls. The vines were growing and as they grew they clung to his clothes and like little children tugged and yanked at his cuffs. He smiled and sat there and continued to watch the pollen drift out toward the city. The movers had gone though he did not notice them leave, and he saw that it was growing dark and the breeze was getting a little cool. Soon he would need to go inside. But he continued to sit out there and to watch the cotton drift by and soon he could see his breath in the wind. Summer was over.

NOVEMBER BENEATH THE WHARF

One

"My little sister took a picture of God," J.D. said. He was staring into his spoon, making faces. "She was ten at the time," he said. "Maybe nine. I can't remember." We were having soup at that little brick shed near the waterfront. Model sailing ships and pale driftwood sat on shelves lining the walls.

"What kind of camera did she use?" I asked.

"Polaroid. First picture she ever took. Last, too, for all I know." He dipped the spoon into his bowl and began to stir. He was having tomato and rice.

My own broth was clear and I could see the pattern at the bottom of the bowl, a criss-crossing of lines. A motif must have existed but I couldn't make it out. I'd never noticed it before. We'd been coming here for a long time, J.D. and I, but sometimes it seems like we'd never been here before. We used to come nearly every day between moves, but work had come to a standstill. It was a good job and kept us busy. We were both boss only it was J.D.'s van so he made the decisions and did all the driving. J.D. said there was no more work because we'd moved everyone away, evacuated the city. Habits are hard to break and we continued coming for our soup. J.D. liked soup and the place was always quiet, even back when the city was thriving. I didn't mind the silence only J.D. had become restless and I didn't like him that way. He was fine working but now he'd do anything to keep occupied. He'd even taken up reading. And with no work we'd

begun to talk and I'm not used to conversation. It was awkward having to come up with things to say.

"I'm thinking of growing a beard," J.D. said. "Or a goatee. Think I'd look good in a goatee?" His chin was small, no cleft. Dark eyes deeply set beneath bushy eyebrows.

"Where'd she take the picture?"

"Down at the port," he said. "She was waiting for dad to come ashore. It was in November; I remember that. Now, why the hell do I remember that?" He stopped stirring and pressed the spoon into his mouth. J.D. always brought his own spoon to the restaurant. He didn't like to put things into his mouth and controlled it as best he could.

"The port is nice in November," I said. "It's not too cold and you don't get burned like in summer."

"What the hell do you know about the port?"

I looked outside and the street was deserted. It was noon but already it was dark. I wondered if there was gonna be rain.

"A goatee would make me look mean," J.D. said. He was staring into the spoon again, gritting his teeth. "I need to look mean."

I reached for a roll but there was no butter in the basket and the waiter wasn't around. He was always at the back preparing something. Even though he had few customers he was always fussing in the kitchen. The room was poorly lit and crammed with too many tables and chairs. We were always the only ones there and I wondered about the number of chairs. They served sandwiches too but all we ever ordered was soup.

"How can you eat that?" J.D. asked.

I looked into my bowl: chicken broth and vermicelli noodles. I didn't care for the diced celery and carrot as they were too crunchy for soup, so I picked them out and wiped them onto a napkin. The noodles had sat too long in the broth and wiggled whenever I bumped the table with my knee. But the broth itself was nicely spiced.

"It's homemade," I said.

"It's chicken! You know what those things eat? They eat anything. Anything and everything. They're practically cannibals."

"They make it here," I said. "It says so on the menu. They make it fresh, right here."

"Your brain'll get infected and you'll get sick ideas. Then you're gonna die."

I watched the street waiting for a car to drive by or someone to pass and maybe look in at us. Look in and smile or nod, letting me know we were really there.

"Maybe I'll grow sideburns," J.D. said. "What do you think? Sideburns and a goatee? I need to look mean."

"Get a scar," I told him.

J.D. rapped his spoon against my ear. "That's your infected brain," he said. The sting was sharp and for a moment I thought I was bleeding but it was only tomato broth. J.D. was good with his spoon.

"It was by the water," J.D. said. "Underneath a wharf where the garbage always collects. Dad was stationed as a coast guard on a patrol ship. She went down there looking for him. Snuck away from school to see if she could find him at the port. Mum gave her hell when she found out. She's got a place of her own now and works over at some pretentious art gallery. One of those little local dumps no one ever goes to. A warehouse for junk, but don't tell her I said that."

"At least she's working."

"Don't give me that," J.D. said, waving his spoon at me. "Besides, it isn't just work. She uses their studio and its supplies and they put her things on display. It doesn't cost her anything, only everything she makes in that studio belongs to the gallery."

"Is she any good?"

"She advertises." He pulled a newspaper clipping from his wallet and placed it on the table. "Sells the stuff she stuffs makes at home. Uses any material she can get her hands on."

Outside a thick shadow was spreading over the street as though a lid were sliding across the city and blocking out the sky. It's gonna rain, I thought. Inside the lights began to flicker.

"It's the ozone," J.D. said. "It blocks currents like a sheet of lead. Blocks thought waves, even. Can you believe that? Inhale enough ozone and brain circuits get cut."

I pushed my plate aside. "What does she make?"

J.D. dipped his spoon in water and wiped it with his napkin. "Heads," he said. "Sometimes furniture, but mostly she makes heads." He dropped the spoon in his breast pocket.

I looked at his face, at the sunken eyes and sharp cheekbones. "The beard," I said. "I think you should go for the beard."

"November," he said, shaking his head. "That was the morning her father finally came ashore."

Two

I was surprised at how small she was. Five feet, maybe less. Definitely less. Her hair was cropped short and spiked out in all directions. She was sitting at the reception table of the gallery, cutting pictures from a department store catalogue. The scissors were enormous in her tiny hands. I stepped closer and saw she was cutting out the models so that a small heap of paper bodies lay on the table-top. She was using a pair of all-purpose scissors. Shears, really. Yet she was cutting expertly along the borders of each body. The snipping echoed in the empty room and I shivered at the sound as another body fell.

"I'm here about the ad," I said, a little too loudly.

"What ad?" she asked without looking up.

"The ad," I said. "The one in the paper."

"Which paper?"

I took the clipping from my pocket and examined it. I looked along the edges and turned it over and looked again along the edges. I tried to read the back but the words had been lopped off and all I could make out in oversized, bold lettering was AKE. "I don't know," I said.

Snip and another body fell.

I cleared my throat. "It's about the masks," I said. I wanted to be calm and assertive. Mostly assertive. I looked down at her and kept a steady gaze. "It says you have masks and to come here to inquire. It says so right here. It says 'inquire.'" I was pointing at the clipping, wanting her to look.

"They're heads," she said, without looking up. "The paper wouldn't print 'heads' so I had to write 'masks.' But really they're heads." She let the catalogue fall onto the

table-top and looked up at me, scissors still in hand. Her eyes were round and green and so large that I almost refused to believe how small she was.

I tried to make eye contact but she was looking directly at me, and every time I raised my head and saw her staring I had to drop it again. Instead I looked at the clipping. I looked at AKE and wondered what it meant. But I couldn't not look at her. I cleared my throat: "It's just that..." I said, allowing my voice to trail off as though I were formulating my thoughts. I didn't know what to say. I didn't even know why I'd come. But I had to say something and I blurted a half-finished thought: "I'm interested in purchasing your head."

Her eyes were large and wide as though she were in perpetual shock. Only she was calm, a calm I never knew existed. She stared at me with that wide-eyed emerald stare and said, "Then follow me."

o o o

It rained that day and the streets were sleek and glistening underneath the flickering city lights. It was a Tuesday; I remember it being a Tuesday. But it might've been a Wednesday. We were heading toward her apartment and I was avoiding the puddles because I hate having wet feet. Her head was just above my elbow and I watched it bob neatly up and down as we walked side by side. I wanted to take her hand but it didn't seem right so I stuffed both of mine in my pockets.

"Do you sell anything else?" I asked, not knowing what else to say. I felt as if I had so much to tell her and there was so much I wanted to know but I couldn't think of anything to say nor anything to ask. But this was a beginning, I thought to myself. I was

certain I would think of other things to say and this certainty was calming. "I need a couch," I added unexpectedly, and I was proud that I'd thought of something so quickly. I hadn't even planned on saying it, and I knew then that I would have no trouble. "I don't have a couch so I need one," I added.

"I'm not selling any couches. I have chairs but no couches. I have about a dozen chairs I'm selling."

"Twelve chairs?" I couldn't think what I'd use them for.

"Thirteen, actually, but it's easier to just say 'dozen.' Only they're not chairs, really. Not anymore. They're stools. I have a dozen stools I'm selling."

"I don't need chairs," I said, shaking my head to make it clear. "I need a couch. I need only one couch."

"They used to be chairs but I sawed off the backs so now they're stools."

I stepped into a puddle and swore beneath my breath. I stopped to shake the water from my sneaker. It was surprisingly cold and I shook my foot from side to side, balancing on the other. My shoe and sock were both soaked through and I felt the cold moist sock against the flesh of my warm foot. I stood there, shaking my sneaker and imagining my foot wrinkling up as it absorbed the water from my sock. I looked up to see her bobbing away across the glistening street. I stopped shaking and hurried to catch up to her. It was dark and I didn't know this part of the city. She was small but she was quick and I had to hustle to catch up.

"Why?" I called just before I was once again by her side. "Why'd you take the backs off?"

"I had chairs but I didn't have a table. I sawed the backs off the chairs and I used the wood to build myself a table. I don't need the chairs anymore."

"How much are you asking for the table?"

"The table's not for sale."

"You're selling the chairs but you're keeping the table. You had chairs but no table and now you want a table with no chairs?"

"I no longer have the table." She turned the corner and I followed, slipping a little. It was unusually dark out, or maybe I only thought that since there was no one around. Water squished from my shoe with every step, creating a suction whistle as my foot pressed down and then came up for air.

"What did you do with the table?" I asked.

"I took it apart. No," she said, frowning a little. "Not exactly. I removed the legs."

"But why'd you remove the legs if you have so many chairs?"

"I have stools," she said, "not chairs. The ad in the paper said to inquire about heads. Not about the things I don't have anymore. I hate dwelling on the past."

Without warning she quickened her pace and I had to trot a little to keep up with her. I felt that I'd annoyed her. I was interested and I wanted her to see that I was interested and not just talking simply to talk. I knew I had to stop about the table but I hadn't yet thought of anything else to say. I wasn't used to this sort of thing and I didn't want to make a mistake. I was angry at myself for having thought it was so easy. I could've been better prepared. If only I hadn't been distracted by the puddle. It didn't help that I had to rush so much. She was small but her strides were quick. It was a warm evening and my back was moist and clinging to my shirt. I could've talked about that, but I didn't think it was something I could've talked about. I thought of taking her hand and maybe then I wouldn't need to say anything, but somehow I knew that wasn't right

so I stuffed mine into my pockets. The water in my sneaker was warm now and I was convinced my foot had pruned up and the sensation made me shiver.

"Is it much further?" I asked. I was beginning to tire. We were walking quickly and I wasn't used to so much walking. I didn't know where we were but we seemed to be the only ones there. The streets were wet and strewn with paper and other debris. A FOR SALE sign lay in the middle of the road. I looked at her but she didn't say anything. I was thinking of something else to say, thinking that I'd said the wrong thing. Then it came to me as we passed a shop with boarded up windows and a padlock on its door. "Do you live alone?" I asked, trying not to smile but pleased that I'd thought of something to say.

"I'm the only one in the building," she said. "I'm waiting for a letter of eviction or something. Maybe someone'll show up at my door. Do you think they'll actually send someone? Maybe they'll just board up the place with me still inside. Imagine having an entire building for a coffin."

"They wouldn't do that!" I said, disturbed at the thought. "I don't think they'd do that. They'll probably send someone to knock on your door."

"I think they'll send a letter; why would anyone want to come here?"

"It must be quiet, if you're the only one."

"Once I had a cat but it disappeared. Then I got a plant but it died."

"What kind of plant did you have?" I asked. We turned another corner but she hadn't yet slowed down and the sweat was beginning to trickle down my neck. The water in my sneaker was hot now and I thought my foot was going to boil. I looked at her again: Her head was bobbing neatly beside me and again I wanted to take her hand

but I realised it was only because I was tired and was having trouble keeping up with her.

"I don't know anything about plants," she said. "It was planty. Planty and plantish, green leaves and all. An authentic, three-dimensional plant. Only now it's dead so it's not terribly planty at all. Now it's a stick. A short, brown stick sticking out of dry dirt."

She came to a sudden stop and looked right at me. She smiled, revealing a small gap between her two front teeth. "We're here," she said. My knees gave way and I fell gratefully onto her glistening steps.

o o o

Three stools stood by the counter in the kitchenette. The others lined the adjacent wall in two symmetrical rows. In the far wall, between the kitchenette and the rows of stools, was a solitary window covered by a thin, blue curtain. Beneath the window was a mattress. A blanket was dragged over to one side onto the floor, left like that as she'd crawled out of bed that morning, no doubt. The rest of the room was a cluttered mess. Clothes lay singly and in small heaps across the floor. The walls were bare but for cracks. I couldn't see the plant. Nor were there any heads.

She disappeared behind the door by the kitchenette. I heard water running. I went to the window and drew the curtains aside. It felt good to not be walking. Outside it was dark and I didn't recognize the city. I didn't know how long we'd been walking, how far we'd gone or where we were. I was worn out, wet from the rain and my sweat and I couldn't recognize the city. I'd been born here. I'd never left but for those boyhood

Sunday afternoons in the countryside I can no longer remember. Back when my father was still alive. Now I was in a strange room with a woman I'd just met whose name I didn't know in a city I'd spent my entire life in but couldn't now recognize. I tried to focus on the building facing me but I couldn't make it out in the darkness. All I could make out was a tall neon sign in the distance that seemed to hover above the city. VACANCY, it read with a purple and flickering Y. I pressed my face to the glass trying to make out the outline of a window or a brick across the street. If only the glass weren't so smudged. We'd walked up two flights or maybe three, so we must've been on the third or the fourth floor. There was a dim light in one of the ground-floor windows of the building facing me. A streetlamp was faintly lit, flickering as streetlamps do. Light reflected from the puddles by the edge of the road. I looked up but couldn't find the moon. There were no stars, no light of any kind up there, only a thick black lid. I was in an unfamiliar city with no moon; I'd lived my entire life in an unfamiliar city with no moon. Then I saw a shadow move. I was certain of it and my certainty was assured as something disturbed the glow in the window across the street. I wiped the smudge off the glass with my sleeve as best I could and stared fixedly at the building across the street. A shadow soon appeared outside beside the building. Something dangled from each hand, swaying and lifeless. It was as though the figure was holding two balloons filled with water. I peered closer but the shadow disappeared into the alley. A minute later the dim glow in the window was extinguished. All was black but for the flickering lamp and its puddle reflection and the sign in the sky that read VACANCY. I looked further down and there it was. Sitting on the windowsill was the stick that had once been a plant.

"You won't find any out there," she said from behind me.

I spun around.

"You won't find any heads out there." She was draped in a blue-green plaid robe meant for a body half a foot taller than hers. It dragged along the floor and made her look as though she were melting, her skin falling away in thick plaid layers. Her hair was washed and I could smell something sweet on her. Sticky sweet, like red liquorice.

She walked over to the pantry. I followed and watched her open the door.

The lower shelves were lined with them: Wooden bulbs that could sit comfortably in the palm of a child's hand. They were not quite organised and not quite in disarray. Most stood solidly on the stumps of their necks while others had rolled onto an ear. She took one down and handed it to me: Its face was expressionless. Detailed yet expressionless. Vacant eyes and features that lacked a sense of character. Yet each feature was expertly carved with a steady hand. Bald and sexless with less expression than a warehouse mannequin. Yet each eye, each nose, each set of lips and pair of ears was almost human.

"You can paint them yourself," she said, taking another off a shelf. "You can even add some lines. If you're good with a knife. Wrinkles, maybe. If you want. You can do to them whatever you want."

The head was light, as if hollow. I turned it over: There were no marks at the back. No signature, even. Only that smooth gliding decline where the skull dissolved into the neck.

"They're mourners," she said. "Part of a piece I never finished and now I never will. I don't need them anymore."

"I thought I'd be able to hang them on the wall," I said, not knowing what else to say. "But they're not like that. I thought they'd be masks but they're nothing like masks

at all." I was shaking my head; I didn't know what else to say. "I wouldn't know where to hang them."

"You can use them as bedposts. Does your bed have a frame? You see, they don't need to mourn anymore. They can watch over you as you sleep."

I turned the head back over. I didn't know what to say. We were standing by the pantry holding heads and I could smell her almost red liquorice smell. I was still shaking my head, I realised, and made myself stop. Instead I tried to smile. I lifted the head to my nose and sniffed. It smelled like dry wood. I shook it from side to side expecting to hear something. A rattle, maybe. Maybe some music. There was nothing.

"You can paint them," she said. "That can be fun. However you want. Paint them and give them away as gifts. It can be a theme, like. You can give them to family and friends on holidays." She was looking at me. Her lips were open and I could see the small gap between her two front teeth. "Or you can use them as ornaments for your Christmas tree. Make them to look like the apostles and hang them on your tree. Or like Jesus, even." Her voice was rising in pitch; she was getting excited. She giggled and I couldn't help but smile. "I know! You can put them in the garden. You can place them around your garden like gnomes. Only they're not really gnomes but you can pretend. Get them little red and green hats. Little Santa hats. With bells, even. Jingle bells." She was laughing now, a girlish laugh and her laugh was contagious. "You can make believe," she was saying through her laughter, through her sticky sweet red liquorice laughter. She began removing the heads from the pantry and setting them on the floor. I thought she was going to trip in her robe, but she kept gliding in and out of the pantry as though she were on wheels. "You can have a party," she said. "You can give them all names and have them introduce themselves. Say things like 'How do you do?' and 'Nice of you to

come.' Whatever it is people say at parties. This one can have a bow tie," she said, placing it onto the floor. "This one can wear a cap. A cap with some logo or other. A corporate logo or maybe something funny like 'Head of the Family' or 'A-head of its time.' Then you can dance in a circle, like this, around and around like this until you all get dizzy and you all fall down." She dropped into a heap of plaid, giggling and breathing heavily.

I was tired and I couldn't think of anything to say. I looked into the pantry, thinking maybe she'd left behind a head and I could take it and join her on the floor but the pantry was bare. I looked at her, then at the head staring vacantly up from my hand, and back at her. "I don't know how to paint."

o o o

Beside her on the mattress I thought she was asleep. She'd asked me to shower and when I returned wrapped in a pink and white striped towel she was in bed in her bathrobe blanket. I turned off the light and lay down beside her where she'd made some room. I thought she was asleep and didn't want to wake her but as soon as I was settled she spoke.

"The last time my father went out on patrol I didn't think he was coming back. I was told he wasn't coming back; I was told he'd died. And dead people aren't supposed to come back. That's the rule. I was really scared the day he did come back."

She rolled over and her face was so close to mine I could feel her hot breath in my ear.

"My father disappeared," she said. "They told me he'd had an accident. 'Lost at sea,' they said. Thrown overboard, somehow. There wasn't even a storm. I didn't believe them. The sea was calm and where was the body? 'Lost,' they said, but how do you lose a body? My mom tried to reason with me. Know what she said? She said that when someone special died, God kept their bodies. Can you believe that? It was an honour, she said, and I should be proud." She moved in closer and I felt her breath move down to my neck. "I was confused when he came back. I was angry with him because I thought it meant he wasn't special after all. But finally I understood: I was being punished. That's why he came back. He could've gone anywhere he wanted but he came back to me. He was sent back to punish me."

We lay in silence for a few minutes. I was staring up at the dark, feeling her warm breath against my neck. I wanted to touch her but didn't know how.

"My dad was a banker," I said. "When he died he stayed away. It was winter and bitter cold. It was a Thursday. Every Thursday he had a chicken salad sandwich wrapped in tin foil. Why do you think I remember that? I don't even think about him anymore. Not really. Not even when I go to the bank. But I do remember the sandwich. Why do you think that is? I was young but got over it soon, I think, but my mom was never the same. She had a breakdown and completely lost her head."

She giggled into my neck. "That's silly," she said. "That just doesn't make sense. No one loses their head. No one ever."

I felt her shaking her head against my shoulder. I tried to look at her, to see her expression, but it was too dark.

"Only God can take your head away," she said.

o o o

I don't know how long I'd been asleep. It was her voice that woke me. It was dark and she was pressed up against me.

"Will you do something for me?" she asked.

Yes, I said. Anything. I couldn't open my eyes. I'd do anything for you.

o o o

I awoke once again. Pitch black, as they say. As though someone had pitched a cloak over the city, I suppose. Pitched black. A black so deep and dense I felt that I was floating away. But her voice reigned me in.

"Will you do something for me?" she asked. Her breath was warm against my shoulder.

Anything, I said, though I didn't say anything. I hadn't said a word. I strained to open my eyes, to turn and face her. "Yes," I managed to whisper. I felt her pull away as I turned my head to face her. "Yes," I said, a little louder. All I could see were her large emerald eyes, blinking occasionally in the dark. I heard rumbling as something heavy turned onto the street and headed toward us. It grew consistently louder and for an instant the room was filled with a blinking, orange light. It filtered through the thin curtains and appeared like light shadows against the walls. For an instant I saw her clearly beside me, melting away in her plaid robe as she was watching me.

"Of course," I said. "Of course I'll do something for you." I was nodding my head but I was nodding off. The orange was gone and the rumbling was fading away. Anything, I said, but I was already asleep.

o o o

"Have you ever taken anything?" she asked. "Something that didn't belong to you." This time I was wide awake. The sun was beginning to rise and I could see the outline of her body. The room continued to brighten and her features became clearer, as though she was forming before my very eyes. The stools were lined up in rows against the wall, patient and attentive.

"Yes," I said. "Of course I have." It felt good to be talking and I had something to say. I realised all I needed was a question, something to goad me. I rolled over onto my side to face her. "When I was a kid I took my dad's chequebook and his favourite pen. I went around the schoolyard handing out cheques. I was imitating my dad. I'd scribble on a cheque, tear it from the book and hand it to whomever was around. I'd say things like, 'Don't spend it all at once,' or 'Get something nice for the family.' I didn't know what I was saying. I'd deepen my voice, like this: 'Something nice for the wife; something expensive for the mistress.' Just like my dad, slapping them on the back. Can you believe that? I was eight years-old. Maybe ten, I don't know. It felt good slapping them on the back like that. I had no idea what I was doing. 'Don't spend it all at the liquor store,' I'd say in my deep voice. It felt really good."

"I like that," she said. "I like that you gave them all away."

"I was generous," I said. I was light-headed and felt like laughing. "The most generous kid in the schoolyard."

"Did you get into trouble?" she asked.

"Trouble?" I didn't know what she meant. "I wasn't hurting anyone."

"I mean with your father. Was he angry with you?"

"Why would he be angry?" I asked. "I wasn't hurting anyone."

"You ruined his cheques. Was he angry that you took his pen and ruined his cheques."

I thought back, but only for a moment, and I pushed the thought away. "I don't know. What I mean is, I don't remember. It's not important, not if I can't remember."

"Would you do something for me?" she asked.

"Of course," I said, staring into her emerald eyes. "Of course I'll do something for you."

She smiled. "There's a painting at the gallery. It's in the back room, hanging on the far wall. Imagine the gallery is a lower case t. Can you picture that? A little t with that slight curl at its feet. You enter at the curl and you go straight. Take a right past the reception desk, past where you first saw me. You go up the long body of the t, a narrow hallway. In the hallway on your left there's a door that leads to the kitchen. The main showroom faces the kitchen door, on your right. But if you keep straight, all the way up the t you'll be in the back room. It's the tip of the t. If you come out of the kitchen you turn a left and head straight. Can you picture it?"

"Clearly," I said. I was wide awake and as I lay there beside her I could hear the thumping of my heart. I had an urge to take her hand.

"The door will be locked but there's a key in the kitchen. It's in the tin in the cupboard above the small fridge. I put it there today before we left. The room is cluttered but you'll see against the back wall a canvas covered in cloth. Can you picture it?"

"Clearly."

"It's just sitting there covered in a white dust cloth."

She was clear now, fully formed in the light. That tiny nose speckled with a dozen rusted freckles. Those sharp cheekbones and the thin lips, the gap between her two front teeth. The cropped and messy hair.

"Beautiful," I tell her.

"Can you picture it?"

"Clearly. I can see the cloth and smell the dust."

She was smiling and I felt happy. I put my hand on her shoulder, without thinking. I watched her smile and I squeezed her shoulder.

"It's called *November*," she said.

"Beautiful," I said. I was smiling too.

"The painting," she said. "The painting's called *November Beneath the Wharf*."

o o o

It was afternoon when I awoke. I was hungry. She was gone and her robe lay in a heap on the floor. I was hungry and late in meeting J.D. I got up and remembered how nice her shoulder had felt against my palm. The towel was still around my waist and I noticed it had left grooves in my skin. I ran my fingers along these pink grooves and the

skin was numb. I rubbed at it, wanting it to fade away, but it only went from pink to red. I looked around: The heads were all gone, back in the pantry, no doubt. My clothes were on top of the kitchenette counter, dry and neatly folded. I stopped rubbing and got dressed. I was wide awake but needed something to eat. I needed to find J.D. I pulled the curtain aside, looked outside and felt a jolt: The restaurant was across the street. How had I not recognized it? But it didn't matter; there it was. And there was J.D., inside by the window.

Three

There was a bruise beneath J.D.'s right eye. It darkened the socket of his already deep-set eyes, giving the impression that the eye had withdrawn into the back of his skull. There was a wide cut in the centre of his lower lip. He hadn't shaved and the stubble grew in random patches over his face. It made him look dirty.

"What happened to you?" I asked. His head was bent forward over his bowl, his spoon at his side.

"Where do the chickens come from?" J.D. asked. "The local poultry farms were shut down over a year ago. The birds were sick, infested with some contagious disease. You remember how everyone panicked and all the poultry miles over were collected and put down, their bodies burned to ash. Prices went up and we had a bit of a shortage. With these farms closed how does this place get its chicken?"

"Maybe they're frozen," I said.

"But the menu says it's all fresh, made fresh from fresh ingredients. Tell me, where are these chickens coming from?" He was looking at me with bloodshot eyes.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

"It hurts my lip," he said, fingering the cut. I thought for a moment there were tears in his eyes. "The soup," he said. "It hurts my lip to eat."

I reached for a bun and tore it apart but there was no butter in the basket. J.D. slurped at his soup, grimaced and slurped.

"I need to ask you something," I said to J.D.

"I can't taste anything," he said. "What's the point of soup if you can't taste it?"

I took a bite of my chicken. It tasted different, somehow. I took another bite and moved the piece around my mouth. It came apart and I swallowed. I looked at the broken bun on my plate and wished there was butter.

"There won't be any more work for us," J.D. said. "Everyone's gone away. So I've started something new. Something different."

He seemed embarrassed but I wasn't upset. We hadn't received a call in weeks. I couldn't even remember moving anyone; it was as though we'd never moved a soul. "When do you leave?" I asked.

"That's just it," he said, grabbing my arm and smiling. "It's here in the city. Right downtown, so we can still have lunch. When I have time, of course. This place'll be closing soon but I'm sure there's another somewhere."

"Closing?" I asked, surprised. I hadn't heard anything; I hadn't even seen a sign.

"It's not official yet," he said. "But they'll be closing soon."

Outside the street was silent and a grey mist was seeping in from the harbour.

"We're gonna find a cure," he said, still smiling. "We're gonna clean this city and make them all come back. We'll even clear out the ozone. Imagine, we'll be able to see things clearly again without all that ozone in the air."

"That's good," I said. "It's good that you got a job. But we have one more move."

"Impossible," he said.

"Just one more move."

"Where?" he asked.

"It's a small job and not very far. We've gotta move this piece of art."

Four

The icebox was cramped; I barely fit. And cold. God it was cold. My arms were wrapped around my shins and my head was bent forward, my forehead on my knees. I had someone's lunch pressed to my lips. I didn't want it to go bad so I left it in with me. No one's to know I was there, she'd insisted. No one. If only I'd worn some gloves.

She'd let me into the kitchen before she locked up. All I had to do was hide until everyone had gone. Then I'd slip out. Easy. As simple as falling asleep. That's what she said: "It'll be as simple as falling asleep." Only I did fall asleep.

I pushed my shoulder hard against the door. My shoulder bone stabbed but the door wouldn't open. I tried to swing from side to side to build momentum and greater strength against the door, but the space inside was cramped and I was moving so slowly and I felt so weak. There was a lurch and I nearly toppled over with the fridge. It nearly toppled over onto its door and I would've been trapped. Trapped for good with no one to find me. I need to calm down, I thought to myself. Don't panic, I thought. I wanted to say it aloud but my lips were numb. But I wasn't panicking; I was petrified. I was trapped in an icebox in the kitchen of a fourth-fifth-sixth-rate gallery warehouse. And I was tired. I pressed my leg against the door, pushing hard with my knee. I clenched my

eyes shut and tried to think of something, anything, to ward off the stabbing pain in my knee and the numbness in my bones. I thought of a blazing campfire, an oil-burning lantern and a freshly-filled hot water bottle; I thought of Hell and brimstone and Helios above in his chariot circling the sun; I thought of expressions like tongues afire, eternal flame and being in heat; I thought of arson, pyromania and I even thought of napalm. Finally I thought of my father. I thought of my father lighting his cigar and tossing the match in the wood-burning stove he'd set up in the tool shed out back. There he'd sit for hours on end, a bottle of gin at his side. I thought of how one night something caught and the shed took fire. The blaze roared scorching and melting and the shed burned to the ground. He must've fallen asleep, they said. The yard was filled with ash, with charred garden implements, their wood handles incinerated, and bits of glass from the bottle of gin that exploded beside him in the heat. No one mentioned the scorched bone and melted flesh. He sure liked his gin, was all they dared to say.

The door clicked open and I fell to the floor. The plastic container fell with a clack onto the cracked tiles, slid across the floor and smacked against the far wall. I'll get it in a minute, I told myself. Just one minute. I tried to crawl away but my limbs were numb and trembling so I curled up on the floor. I wanted to moan but couldn't make a sound. I clenched my eyes shut, willing myself to cry but the tears were icicles behind my lids. Soon I would find the painting, I told myself, over and over. Soon I would find the painting. But I needed a minute and in a minute I was asleep.

o o o

There wasn't a sound as I pushed the door open. Staring down the dark hallway I had no idea what time it was. I thought of J.D. and wondered if he'd show. The hallway was dark but darkened more with the prospect of J.D. not having shown. But I was sure he'd come. I was convinced. But I wondered if he'd have stayed. I didn't know how long I'd been asleep.

I stepped out into the hallway and immediately I heard the alarm. I heard the voices and the snarling dogs and I turned my head. There was nothing there. Not a shadow, not a sound.

I was sweating as I stepped down the hallway but there was nothing there. It was easy. As simple as falling asleep. Pitter-patter up and down the dark hallway and I had the canvas in its dust cloth in my hands and into the kitchen. I remembered to retrieve the lunch from underneath the table. I even took the time to look: Chicken rice. It was all as simple as falling asleep but I was wide awake. I'd never felt so awake before. If only J.D. had come; if only he was still there.

The emergency fire escape was in the room. She'd assured me the alarm didn't work. Not in a run-down wreck like this, she'd said. And what was there to steal and who was there to steal it? But I was ready for anything. I'd slip stealthily in and around the labyrinthine alleyways. I was even dressed in black. But I'd forgotten the gloves. There was my mistake. I wondered if they'd find my fingerprints. On the doors and walls and inside the fridge and on the chicken rice.

I looked out the window but couldn't see the van. The glass was grimy but there was clearly no van sitting behind the grime. I was at a loss; I didn't know this part of town. If only I hadn't relied on J.D. All I needed was to get to the restaurant, to get near the restaurant and I'd orient myself. I could hail a cab if there were still cabs around and

if I'd brought some cash. But I couldn't remember the name of the restaurant. For the life of me I couldn't remember what it was called. I held my breath and envisioned the labyrinthine alleyways out beyond the grimy glass. I saw the dark, wet passages, the broken crates and disembowelled garbage bags; I saw forms scurry from shadow to shadow and I saw shadows scurry from form to form. It was another world I couldn't recognize in a city I was beginning to believe was no longer my home. But I was resolved not to fail. I let go of my breath, grabbed the canvas and rushed out the door. And there was J.D. asleep at the wheel. But he awoke the instant I stepped out. The very instant. He awoke at the roaring of the alarm.

o o o

J.D. wide awake at the wheel, speeding across deserted streets, wide grin and laughing. A baseball bat at his side, leaning against his leg. My ears ringing with screeching tires and J.D.'s high-pitched laugh. "Snap out of it!" J.D. yells, a streak of red on his cheek, blood on the bat. Outside buildings flash by in a blur of brick; the street itself nothing but a band of wet pavement. And the people: There are no people. Only J.D. and that awful laugh.

A sharp slap at the side of my head and all was quiet. There were no sirens and screeching cars and I'd been the one laughing. Had there even been an alarm? I couldn't tell.

We were driving slowly through the dark, narrow streets. There wasn't a sound but the occasional splash as we hit a puddle. I wondered when it had rained. J.D. was a careful driver. I looked over at him: Deeply sunken eyes locked onto the road ahead.

There was a blood-stripe on the freshly-shaven cheek. J.D. looked good in a goatee. The bat rested against his leg, rolling slightly with each turn as though kneading him like dough.

"What you got?" he asked.

I looked into my lap; I'd brought the chicken rice. I felt giggles fighting to rise but I held them down. "Supper," I said, smiling a little. "Just a little supper."

J.D. grinned. "You sure came prepared," he said. "I'd never expect such organization from you. But you did it. You did it, buddy."

I rolled the window down and tossed the container out. It clattered against wet pavement and shadowed off into the darkness behind us.

"First day on the job." J.D. said. "If only you'd seen me." I hadn't seen him grinning like that in a long time. "If only you'd been there. I was superb."

I looked out, at the city. It was enveloped in a mist as though steam had erupted from its sweltering belly. The rain had put the fire out; all was calm. I wondered where all the people had gone to. Surely someone must be out? All around us the streetlights began to flicker and I thought of the cut currents. The ozone was thick tonight. I tried to fight through the fog and the ozone so the world could become clear again.

"J.D.?" I asked, watching the lights. "How come you never call me by my name?"

"What're you talking about?"

"Why do you never say my name, J.D.?"

"I don't know what you're saying."

"And what's 'J.D.'? What the hell's that?" I took a deep breath; I needed to stay calm. I knew I had to be clear and even then I wasn't sure he'd understand. "I've been thinking, J.D. About the restaurant. What's it called?"

"What restaurant?"

"Every day, J.D. Where we have lunch. For how long, now? Months, years? How long have we been lunching together?"

"What difference does it make? It's lunch."

Then it struck me what I really wanted to know: "What's her name, J.D.? I'd really like to know. What's your sister's name?"

J.D. began to laugh and he pressed the accelerator so we stormed through the empty streets. "You should've seen me," he said. "First day on the job and I was batting a thousand. I've figured it out and settled accounts. Just hold your breath, buddy. Remember to hold your breath."

Five

Her window was dark. I set the canvas down against some garbage out of sight of the street. As if anyone was even there to notice. I was to wait for the light to appear in her window. I wasn't sure which window was hers and I couldn't remember which floor she lived on. She was the only one in the building so if a light did go on across the street it would be hers. I watched the rows and columns of windows and paced the alley back and forth, side to side, avoiding puddles. I didn't want to move up and down and deeper into the alley for fear I'd miss the light. I wanted very much to kick at something but I knew not to make noise. I tried to think of a song or a poem, something to recite to take my mind off my itching foot, but I couldn't think of any songs and I don't know anything about poetry. So I quickened my pace but the alley was narrow and I was forced to turn at every four or five steps until I was getting dizzy. I was beginning to

sweat; it was a humid November night. Just as I was making another turn I heard a splash and spatter. In the alley was a shadow, hunched forward as it made a sudden halt. I thought for a moment it was my shadow or maybe a reflection but there was something swaying lifelessly in each of its hands. It was the figure I'd seen from her window. It made a sound like a gurgle and shrank back into the alley. Without thinking I plunged after it. Pursuing that shadow, flanked by garbage and debris and streaming rows of night-red brick I felt as if I was falling. That the wall at the end was the ground and I was plummeting toward it, the air around me blazing by in streaks of brick and I knew the landing would hurt. I would've kept falling had I not fallen; I fell as fell, tripped up by some shard or other and I lay hard on my back, panting. And there it was. I felt suddenly elated despite the pain in my back. There was the moon. Not quite full but present and bright, having pitched that cloak momentarily from the city. I lay there, breathing heavily, and I smiled. It felt good to see the moon, to just lie there and smile. But as I lay there the moon began to flicker.

I turned my head aside: There was a door sunk deeply in the brick. I didn't notice it as I was falling. I tried the handle; it was open. Leading down were four steps. Maybe five. I saw the cord swaying from the ceiling in the centre of the room. I pulled on it and a dim glow spread itself across the darkness of the room. And I saw the cages. Twenty, thirty, maybe forty in columns and rows against the walls. Small and twisted wire mesh, bent and battered. They raise their own chickens, I thought. The stone floor was matted with bits of straw, rags and carpet fragments. It was uneven but oddly soft. And oddly silent. I stepped further in; the chickens were dead. I looked in each cage and they were all dead. Broken bodies and feathers sopped in blood. I hurried for the door, tripping in the dim light. I grabbed at the door but it wouldn't open. I beat on it with my fists,

grasped and tugged but it was the wrong door, a different handle. Leading deeper into the brick. I spun around in a murky whirl; I couldn't find the door. Brick, stone and straw spun around me but the cages held tight. I grasped at the cord and watched it swirl. I grasped at it again and fell to my knees. I wanted to scream and it hit me then. It hit hard, that smell. J.D. had warned me: Hold your breath, buddy. I looked up and saw the moon through the open door and through tears I crawled at it.

Outside in the alley with the mist and the flickering moon I saw that across the street a light was on.

Last

She was kneeling on the mattress and stuffing her clothes into a bag. I set the canvas down flat atop the stools and stood there in the centre of the room. She slammed the bag onto the floor and I noticed the oval anchor patch on its front. She grabbed the zipper and tugged. "Sometimes you have to fight with it," she said, gritting her teeth.

I removed the dust cover, filthy now from the alley. It took a moment to realise what the image was: A view from beneath a wharf. The dark water was covered with garbage that had been dragged in by the waves. The bottom of the wharf was a ceiling blocking out the sun but straight ahead was blue sky. Between the wharf and the filthy water, in the distance was a ship. "You were there," I said, looking at the painting that had once been a photo.

"It's not what you think," she said. She was beside me now, looking at the canvas with me.

"You took a picture down there," I said. "This was in the picture."

There was a body in the water. It was wearing a coast guard uniform and floated face down amid the garbage.

"It was an accident," she said. "A terrible accident. His body was missing for a long time, but I knew it'd be at the port, they just didn't know where to look."

The body was rigid in the water, half submerged in garbage. It looked as if it were floating away from the canvas. The body was oddly shaped, bloated from being submerged so long in water. And above the stump of the neck was garbage. Nothing but garbage where the head should've been.

"It's like I said the other night." She dragged her bag over and grabbed the canvas with her free hand. She moved over to the open door. "It's like I told you," she said before disappearing forever. "Only God can take your head away."

SONDAY ON THE CORNER

Sonday stood in the rain waiting for the doors to open and the children to come out, but there were no more children and the doors remained shut. It was July, the summer school session was half over and though there were no children attending Sonday had a contract; she had no choice but to stand outside on the corner in the rain.

Banister was at his window, looking out. Sonday raised her hand and waved her bright STOP sign at him but he didn't seem to notice her. She stood in the grey afternoon, and though wrapped in municipal fluorescent orange rain gear, she felt invisible to the world.

Terence Banister was this year's summer school staff. While Sonday had no one to guide across the street, Banister had no one to teach. The only child signed up for summer classes was a dwarfish boy with plump cheeks and a false limp who refused to cross the street at the corner so that Sonday had to chase after him in the middle of the road. He stopped attending class when without notice his mother packed up and drove them out of the city. Yet because he had been enrolled Sonday and Banister had both signed contracts and were now required to come in for work.

Sonday stood on the intersection of Mid-Street and River, looking up and down each street in turn, seeing nobody. Mid-Street, the main north-south artery splitting the city in two, was unusually quiet. River Road had always been quiet. A middle-class residential street, it housed not only the school's main entrance, but six blocks east all in a row, it displayed a set of identical apartment buildings that included Sonday's own. She watched these two streets five days a week but in this rain could see little beyond

the globe of mist that seemed to envelop the entire block.

She stepped into the shelter of the school's entrance, hoping that Banister would come out and keep her company. But Banister never came out. He parked in the lot behind the building and used the back entrance so that Sonday only ever saw him when he stood behind the grimy glass of his classroom window. Sonday could not enter the building; it was specified in her contract that she always remain outdoors. Instead she tried to wave her bright STOP sign in his direction, hoping a flash of red would catch his eye. She had tried throwing stones at his window; the school grounds were littered with them as the building aged and cracked. Once she lay down in the middle of the road, flat on her back with her arms splayed out, thinking he would see her and rush outside in a desperate attempt to revive her. She lay still for close to an hour and Banister did not notice her at all.

Half past noon and Sonday was done for the day. That afternoon as every afternoon she collected her mail from the lobby of her building. All she found was another postcard from her sister June, pleading with her to leave the city and come stay with her and the family. The city had nothing left to offer, June insisted, and besides, Sonday had a career to cultivate.

There was a crash on the stairs above. "Leave the couch. Leave it, I said!" It was Julius from down the hall. "Just grab that trunk. The rest can stay." Two men appeared carrying a small, fading trunk down the steps and Sonday had to press her body against the maintenance closet in order to let them pass. The first mover went by without looking at her, calling out, "Hold it higher. Watch your step. Higher!" He was unshaven and smelled of sweat. The other one looked at her but then looked shyly away. He had

smooth features and deep blue eyes.

Julius hurried behind them, a large plastic bag tossed over one shoulder. "I saw him drive out this morning," he said to Sonday. "But you can't be too sure; he might just circle back. He's always around, always standing right beside you and you don't even know it. Like he lives inside the walls."

"I didn't know you were leaving," Sonday said.

"My train's leaving tomorrow and I'll just crash at the station tonight."

She gave him a quick hug. "I'm glad you're getting away."

"I'm leaving most of my stuff behind," he said. "Take what you want. I'll make sure to leave the door open."

The tuna was still outside on the fire escape. A month it had been since Shackles, her three year-old black and white tabby cat, did not return from its morning alley stroll. Every night and every morning since, Sonday placed a mouthful of canned tuna on a small dish on the fire escape, thinking that even if Shackles didn't want to come home anymore, he would at least drop in for something to eat. Sonday was beginning to accept the fact that he wasn't coming back, and imagined that he was out walking along the train tracks with a bit of linen tied to the end of a pole he carried over one shoulder.

Afternoons and early evenings Sonday played her piano. Not since last summer had she played in public and now that Julius had moved out she was no longer going to hear the occasional sounds of applause from down the hall. With Julius and Shackles both gone she no longer had an audience, and while she played she was conscious of the silence surrounding her, and thought that if no one could hear her it was as though she did not exist.

In the morning the tuna was still on its plate, diluted with water. Rain was falling heavily and as she stood on the fire escape Sonday could see the brown paint peeling away from the wood and the rust forming on the iron handrails. The brick was dark, saturated with water, and breaking apart. Soon it would revert back to sand and mud and straw, and it would float away along the streets toward the pier and into the river where it would be washed away.

Albert was in the lobby, an empty leash dangling from his hand. "Morning, Sonday," he said. Albert never looked her in the eye; Sonday did not think he could look any woman in the eye.

"How are you Albert?"

"I don't suppose you've seen my Venus?" he said.

"I'm sorry, Albert," she said, shaking her head.

"It's been a week now, you know. Usually she doesn't leave my side. Usually she'll bark when she doesn't know where I am."

"It seems everyone is leaving us, Albert."

The maintenance closet opened and Mr. Sneed appeared, a hammer in one hand.

"She left you, Al," he said. "All good women disappear."

"I'll see you," Sonday said quickly to Albert and headed for the door.

"Where'd Julius go?" Sneed called. "You got him hiding up there in your room?" He stepped to the front door, blocking her path. "You planning to skip out next? I let Julius stay on partials these last couple of months and he takes off on me. One by one and that means you'll be next."

"I have a job, Sneed. I don't owe you anything other than rent."

"But it's you, isn't it? You're dispatching them one by one, cornering them here and there and convincing them to take off the moment I step outside. What'll you do when there's no one left? Finally start living your own life? That's the ultimate goal. Start living when all that's left in this city is you."

The trees lining both Mid-Street and River Road were drooping from the weight of water. Sonday couldn't see too far in the distance from the thick and humid mist; it was as though steam were rising up through the concrete of the street.

A figure appeared south down on Mid-Street, a black speck on the canvas of road. It grew larger as it came closer and in the mist and the rain the tiny speck swelled up and became a smudge. A block away the smudge became a man. It was the first person Sonday had seen on that road since the dwarfish boy had been whisked away. She crossed the street diagonally to intercept him on the opposite corner, thinking she could help guide him across and say hello and maybe he would say something and stay for a few minutes to keep her company. Her heart raced with child-like glee as the figure stepped onto her block and continued toward her. He was dressed completely in black. His raincoat was long and sleek, almost shiny amid the grey surroundings. On his head was a wide-brimmed hat, and he walked with his head hanging low so that Sonday could not see his face. Her mouth was dry and she licked her lips, wanting to tilt her head back and open her mouth but afraid that if she would take her eyes off of the figure for even half a minute he might disappear. When the man was only a few steps away, Sonday raised her hand in greeting, barely aware that she had raised her shiny red STOP sign. But the man did not stop. He did not even look at her but turned the corner

and headed east down River. Sonday watched him until he shrank in the mist and became once again a tiny speck in the distance.

Sonday looked up to Banister's window hoping that he too had seen the dark figure, but on this morning Banister's blinds were tightly shut.

Every morning for the next three mornings Sonday saw the stranger, and she saw him again every afternoon. Every morning he walked up Mid-Street and turned east on River, and every afternoon he came back on River and toward south on Mid-Street. He never looked at her and Sonday felt uncommonly shy and could not get herself to say hello. He was faceless, a black mass like a plastic sheet floating around the corner and up the street. Every morning Sonday waited anxiously for that speck to appear in the distance, and make its way toward her. Yet every morning he would reach the corner and simply step around her as though she were another wet and drooping bush.

On the fourth morning she followed him.

At first she hesitated at the curb, uncomfortable with the idea; it was the first time she would break any of the terms of her contract. Banister's shades were drawn tight, and it was unlikely anyone else would be watching her. She took a deep breath and with stiff legs headed down River in pursuit of the dark figure.

The streaming rain and the hazy air were good camouflage, but Sonday was conscious of her fluorescent orange rain gear and tried to hang back as far as she could without losing sight of her prey. Had she planned it properly she could have brought a dark coat of her own and slipped it over her shoulders as soon as she tore herself away from her post.

The figure continued steadily along River Road, not looking up or changing his pace. He did not even look side to side at the intersections, as though he knew exactly what lay around each and every corner of the city. Of course, Sonday knew no one would expect anything to come charging down these streets, but she continued instinctively to look and make sure her path was safe before plunging ahead. She did not need to follow the man for long; only a handful of blocks to her own building. And there he went inside.

Sonday waited in the doorway of the building across from her own, a building identical to hers only vacant, its front door boarded shut. She stood there until noon but the man did not reappear. She hurried back to her post, excited at the prospect of having a new neighbour, but knowing rationally that the man was not a new tenant. If he were, Sneed would have been in a better mood. It was unlikely that Albert had any visitors during the day, and if he did it was less likely that the visitor would return every day on four consecutive days. It was possible that her building was not the glass man's destination. He may have been a potential buyer, or a city inspector, or he may have stepped in at that moment for a respite from the rain. It was one of the few remaining buildings on the street not yet boarded up and the front lock did not always latch. That he did not reappear after three hours was not unusual, since he could have gone inside and slipped through the back door at the other end or fallen asleep somewhere in the dry and warmth while Sonday stood shivering across the street.

She waited for him to return that afternoon, kept her eyes steadily focused at the wall of mist down River Road, but he did not reappear. Banister eventually opened his blinds and stood by the window, but Sonday did not bother waving to him. He looked

distracted, deep in thought, standing still and gazing ahead. The school windows were covered with grime and dirty water ran down the sides of the building so that Banister appeared to be standing behind a flowing brown cloud or a wave of greasy smoke. When he stepped away from the window it was like watching a man drown.

That evening her tuna had disappeared. The plate on the fire escape was empty and the unopened cans were missing from her kitchen cabinets. Someone had been in her apartment.

The following morning she waited for Banister to drive into the parking lot. The parking entrance was at the side, opening onto Mid-Street, while to the left was the schoolyard and playground. Sonday stood in the small alcove that led to the back entrance and looked out at the empty and broken lot. She was surprised at the number of puddles that had formed and imagined Banister passing through the gates paddling a canoe. The school grounds were coming apart, had been for years, the asphalt cracking open and weeds and grass pushing their way through. In her memories of childhood she saw clear and smooth pavement. The parking lot had always been off-limits to children, and Sonday was never brave enough to climb the fence that separated yard from lot. While her sister hurried over to peek into the silent and waiting cars, Sonday stood with her body pressed hard to the fence and looked longingly at the flat pavement and neatly ordered vehicles. There was something about their neatness that appealed to her even as a child, and she imagined that one day she would own a handful of cars and park them in tidy little rows in her own private parking lot.

Banister's car sputtered into the yard. Though he had a designated spot, he

stopped his car directly in front of the alcove, splashing dirty water onto Sonday's orange suit. He stepped out, his head bent in the rain. He was wearing a long beige coat and matching hat, carried an old briefcase with a broken handle in one hand, and a large camouflage army sack slung over the opposite shoulder.

Sonday was smiling at him, feeling oddly nervous. "Nice to have some rain for a change, isn't it?"

Banister was startled and nearly dropped his bags. His head was down and nearly collided with Sonday in the alcove, though she had the strange impression that had she kept quiet Banister would have walked right through her.

"Good morning," she said, conscious of the tremor in her voice.

"Yes," Banister said and tried to move past her. She stepped into his path.

"I was wondering if you wouldn't mind just looking up at me?"

Now in the shelter Banister raised his head and removed his hat. He looked at her and she could see a question sitting there in his cold grey eyes. She felt strangely relieved. "I'm sorry," she said, letting out a nervous laugh. "It's just no one's looked at me in so long I was beginning to think I didn't exist."

Banister smiled. "It's so quiet sometimes, I'm not surprised. Sitting up there in class I sometimes imagine that I'm the sole figure in a picture. All around me empty desks. A strange feeling. Sometimes I think someone's looking right at that photograph, looking right at me, only I can't see him at all."

Sonday laughed and felt somewhat guilty for having stared at him in his window. She wanted to tell him he had only to look outside to see the culprit, but said instead, "Will you stand with me out front?"

They stood side by side in the front alcove.

"I picture you lecturing to an empty room," Sonday said. She felt calm and talkative now that she wasn't alone. With her nerves in check she felt almost giddy.

"I keep busy," Banister said.

"Keeping order in the classroom, I bet."

"I'm writing a book." He was standing rigid, staring straight ahead as though he were talking to himself. Up close he looked a little gaunt, his flesh stretched over his cheeks to reveal the outline of small but sharp cheekbones. Sonday could not tell how old he was, but suspected he was considerably younger than he looked.

"I'm collecting local history and urban myth. Hard sometimes to tell one from the other, really, but you need it all to capture this place. The city is sick, and before it drops away into the void that dead cities fall into, I want to set its pieces down. Then, some time later, someplace else, someone might remember it once existed."

"It'll revive," Sonday said. "Maybe after all this rain people will begin sprouting up from the ground."

"It's the second half of summer and what's more likely is that a frost will hit us early and everything will turn to ice."

"It'll bounce back."

"What makes you so sure?" He turned to look at her, and Sonday thought there was a little smile beneath those sharp cheekbones.

"It just has to. I grew up here and everything I know is here and everyone I've ever known has been so tightly woven to this city that if it died, I think I would die with it."

"You can always move."

"I don't think I could. My sister keeps asking me to hop onto a train heading south and move in with her. I could get steady work teaching piano and playing regular gigs. She manages a swank jazz bar."

"Sounds ideal."

"But it just has to get better. It doesn't have a choice."

"You refuse to leave an ailing city so the city has to heal itself to accommodate you."

"Don't I sound terrible," she laughed. "If I leave, it won't be me but somebody else out there living that new, ideal life. If I were to go I'd be leaving too much of myself behind."

"I'd consider your sister's offer. The person you will become will be a better person than the person you will leave behind. This city has run out of good people. It has run out of good."

"A little dramatic, professor."

"Look out there," Banister said, nodding toward the rain soaked streets. "Look at the steam rising up from the sewers and from the cracks in the asphalt. You can even see it coming up from the soil and between the blades of grass."

"It's just mist."

"Imagine that this city has beneath it a raging furnace that fuels it, that makes everything from the cars to the buildings to the people move. This city was once a great economic centre, with its vast port and its factories, its surrounding markets and the art district and three major newspapers. This city was once alive. Yet the fire raging in its core has been dwindling and now the rains have come to put it out. All this water is dousing the flames and the steam is rising through the crust. Soon the furnace will be

filled only with ash, and there will be a cold dead hunk of machinery rusting down there, with nothing remaining above to rekindle and refuel it."

"And this is your book."

Banister shook his head. "I'm focusing on past glory, not on the decay."

Thunder crackled in the distance and Sonday shivered. She looked at her watch; the dark figure should be stepping around that corner now.

"Do you see them too?" Banister asked

Sonday's heart seemed to flicker for a moment; she never imagined that Banister had seen the inky figure. Or were there more than one? She could almost see an army of sleekly clad men walking in the rain and marching single file into her apartment.

"They're becoming brave, you know." Banister said. "They don't keep to the dark corners anymore, the alleyways and along the pier. They're multiplying as we're dwindling away and already they outnumber us ten to one."

He was looking into the distance and Sonday was sure he was not talking about the dark man or any kind of man at all. Was he talking about the ghosts of the past? Sitting up there alone behind the shades or standing by the window looking out, he was seeing the faces of those he was writing about. They were haunting him in some odd way, populating the empty streets as he was trying to conserve the memories of them.

"I'm not sure what you mean," Sonday said.

"The little devils. They're coming up from the ground and out of the shadows. The ground is cracking and breaking away and the little imps are filling up the streets. They're sometimes hard to spot so you need to seek them out."

It's the rain, Sonday thought. We're both seeing creatures in this mist and rain. She wanted more than anything then for the rain to stop and the air to clear and then

maybe they would both be able to see the world a little more clearly.

Sonday looked again at her watch and knew that her vision would not be stepping onto Mid-Street that day.

"You have a brother," Banister said. "Invested a small fortune in the city some time ago. Ran for mayor, as I recall."

"I *had* a brother," Sonday said. "He raised us, my sister and I, when our parents passed away. He was several years older than us."

"I'd like to talk to him. Interview him for my research. Some gaps he could fill in."

Sonday shook her head. "I haven't heard from him in a long time. He sent us to live with an aunt when I was about ten. He went overseas and the next time I saw him was a photograph in the local paper some years later. You tell me the ground's cracking up and I think he may have fallen inside."

"Into the furnace?"

"Pardon me?"

"I do have work to do," Banister said. He took a step toward the door but stopped and looked back over his shoulder. "I did enjoy our chat. I hope you won't mind if I join you out here from time to time." He disappeared behind the door and Sonday was alone.

The next morning Sonday broke a second contract rule by entering the school. Banister's shades were drawn and she wanted to see what he was doing up there.

It was dark inside. The corridor extended on both sides but the stairs were directly ahead, facing the front entrance. She climbed them slowly, her rubber boots squelching loudly in the stairwell. She thought of removing them but could not risk

being discovered barefoot in the school corridors. On the second floor she headed down the passage toward Banister's classroom. She squelched slowly by an open door and peeked in to see rows of empty desks. She moved on to Banister's room, feeling nervous and needing suddenly to use the washroom. It was her excuse if Banister were to come out and find her, even though they both knew she was not allowed to leave her post outside. She pulled at the door saying, "I'm soooo sorry but with all this rain..." but the room was empty. The beige coat was folded over a child's desk with its matching hat resting on top. The old briefcase with the broken handle sat on the floor. Sonday knew then that Banister was the dark man.

When the dark man Banister appeared that afternoon turning onto Mid-Street, Sonday followed him. They walked south for nearly an hour, when ahead of her the figure suddenly disappeared. To Sonday, a block and half behind, it was as though a blot of ink was suddenly wiped off a grimy photograph. She froze for a moment, then rushed ahead and saw that he must have entered City Hotel.

The entrance was completely deserted and there was no one to greet Sonday as she approached the front doors. The lobby was enormous. The ceiling was held high by three impressive marble columns, each surrounded on the ground by large, green plants. Warm, red carpeting covered the lobby floor, and couches and armchairs were grouped together in cozy little squares. From the ceiling at the centre dangled a chandelier, and at each end of the room were large water fountains: Cherubs urinating in a pond at one end and a large fish was spitting up water at the other. On the left was a row of old-fashioned phone booths, each with its own cushioned seat and wood door for privacy. The reception counter was straight ahead, spanning nearly the entire length of

the room.

It was dry and warm and Sonday circled the lobby, looking at the seats and wanting to slip out of her rubber boots and her fluorescent orange rain gear and curl onto the softest of the cushions. Someone will appear with a pillow and a blanket and a steaming cup of tea and Sonday will ask that a TV be rolled in and tuned to—

"Good afternoon," a voice said. There was a tall, thin man smiling at her from the reception counter.

"Hello," she said.

"A nice, quiet room?" the man asked.

"I'd love one," Sonday said. "But I just... I came here with a friend. He was right ahead of me, I don't know how I could have missed him." She tried to laugh but could only manage a smile.

"No one's been here today, miss."

"It was just a minute ago. A little pale and dressed all in black."

"I can't remember the last time someone walked through those doors."

"I was right behind him. I *saw* him come in."

"I never miss anybody," the man said, and pointed to a monitor on the wall. "You'll recognize the lobby," he said, raising a remote. Sonday watched the bird's eye view of the room and saw it slowly rewind. She saw herself contemplating the couch, circling the room backwards, looking all around her until finally the door swung slowly open and she exited. Then she watched an empty room as the time in the corner of the image wound its way backwards. Twenty minutes into the past and still the room remained empty. The dark man never stepped into the lobby, did not come anywhere near those glass doors. It was as though he did not exist.

On the door of her apartment was a note: LOOK IN THE BASEMENT. She had the inexplicable feeling that it had to do with Shackles, though she knew it was unlikely he could have been hiding down there all this time.

Sonday dreaded going to the basement. It housed the storage area and laundry facilities, but she did not need the additional space and preferred to lug her laundry to the little art-house coffee shop laundromat hidden away on a quiet block behind the building. When it closed down last spring, Sonday began to limit her washing as best she could, resorting to the bathroom sink whenever possible. It wasn't the darkness of the basement that made her nervous, instead it was the swampy odour and the damp air, and especially that old furnace chugging away in the back room.

The lights in the stairwell hummed and flickered and her rubber feet squelched on the wood steps. When she set foot on the basement floor it splashed around her feet as though it were melting. "Wonderful," she said aloud. The water was maybe an inch deep and she was glad she had not removed her rubbers.

The fluorescent ceiling lights in the basement corridor were on and flickering; someone was down here. Or someone had forgotten to switch off the lights, despite Sneed's handwritten warnings plastering the walls.

The passage was thick with mist. Half-way down the corridor on each side was an opening; the laundry room was on the left and the lockers were on the right. At the end of the corridor was a thick metal door. Walking down the path was walking further underground as the floor was noticeably slanted, and Sonday walked deeper in water. She peeked into the laundry room; it was empty. The lights in the storage area were off, and Sonday was not prepared to reach in and search for the dangling switch. "Hello,"

she said instead, but it was barely a whisper.

She stared at the metal door and the mist was so thick she could barely make out its sign, though she knew that it read HEATING & MAINTENANCE, and that below it was a small fading electric thunderbolt. Through the mist she felt the door's handle, grabbed it and yanked, but it was sizzling hot and she was forced to let go. The door swung back with a heavy bang and the thud echoed up and down along the walls. Sonday heard a moan behind the door. It was a drawn out sound as though someone was trying to say "olive" but could not get past the first syllable. Wrapping her hand in the sleeves of her sweater and raincoat, she grasped the handle, and straining her muscles pulled open the heavy door. Through the mist a hazy light appeared as she peered into the room. A shadow slithered along the wall and behind a water tank. There was a brief clank and another unfinished "olive."

The heat and mist were thick and the dangling bulb in the ceiling centre sprayed the room with moving shadows. Sonday rushed to stand beneath the bulb to keep the shadows at bay. Her palms were blistered from the sizzling door handle and she was hot and sweaty and called out to the water tank, "Come out, damnit!"

Splashing out from the corner was Albert, the empty dog leash in his hand.

"Albert!" Sonday yelled. "What the hell are you doing down here?"

Albert stood by the wall, looking at his feet.

"You scared me to death," Sonday said, but felt so relieved she almost laughed. "Was there a note on your door too?"

"I was hiding," Albert said.

"Did you put that note on my door?"

"I thought you were Mr. Sneed. He told me he didn't want me down here if it

wasn't for laundry. I come down looking for Venus. The furnace was clanking and I thought maybe somehow she'd gotten trapped inside. It's been a week now, you know."

Sonday looked at the old furnace. "Did you find anything?"

"Of course he didn't find anything," Sneed said from the doorway. "You think I've got a zoo down here?"

"Get out of my way, Sneed," Sonday said.

"This place is off limits; should've been locked. You planning a little getaway? Telling Al here about the wonders of the outside world."

Sonday shook her head; she wanted a hot shower and a good rest. She didn't care what either of these men did. "Back off Sneed. It's too hot for this."

"What are doing to me?" Sneed said. His tone was different somehow, less aggressive. He was almost pleading. "I'm trying to run a business and make a life and you're chasing everyone away. One by one until they're all gone and I'm all alone in this pit. I don't understand why you're doing this to me."

Sonday pushed past him, shouldering him aside. She hurried splashing to the stairs and climbed away from the heat and damp. Sneed's pleading voice followed her along the walls: "I just don't understand."

It was morning and Sonday was standing in the front door shelter of the school. Water was dripping from every branch along the street and the grass had turned to mud. The intersection was a cross-current of two rivers, and the sewer grates were gurgling black water. The dark man did not appear that morning and Sonday stood shivering, wishing she were home; wishing she had the nerve to leave her post and call it a day. She thought about her sister and her niece and nephew, imagining them rolling

in the dry and warm grass of her sister's sunny garden.

She looked at the school and thought that if June had moved on from here, so could she. She looked through the glass doors and inside along the corridors. As a late blooming little girl she had fought her way through a mass of taller children in those narrow passages, only as a little girl those walls did not seem as close together as they now appeared. She was the youngest of three. June was a flirt even at ten. She was sporty and energetic, always getting into trouble. Now she was married and happily settled, managing a small jazz bar. Her brother was eighteen years older than her. He raised them, passing them on in order to make a life for himself, a life that excluded his two young siblings. For a time he succeeded, helping to promote the city by investing in trade and architecture, restoring the Great Square and renovating the buildings surrounding it. When he restored the City Hotel, he made sure to keep its dated purple neon sign. It was like him to blend the ancient and modern, as he did with the waterfront, where he scattered the old ships along the port, docking them permanently and opening them to the public as a series of mini-museums, while inviting modern ships to pull in beside them as trade continued to flow.

Yet despite these achievements his attempts to settle in public office failed. Running for mayor under the guise of a civic saviour he should have been guaranteed victory, but lost in a landslide. Sonday had kept a close eye on his career, flipping through all three local papers in search of his name. His defeat in the mayoral elections led to a self-imposed exile, and Sonday could no longer locate his name in the papers. For several weeks she limited her search to the obituary pages.

She could never discuss any of this with June, who clung to the idea that their brother and once sole parent had abandoned them in order to seek riches and fame.

Sonday refused to believe this; she knew he had always loved the city. Despite all the years and the distance and the fact that he seemed to have fallen off the earth, she sometimes missed him terribly.

A piece of brick fell beside her, breaking her reverie. It was a small chunk and it landed like mud, dissolving as she stared at it. This entire city is melting away, Sonday thought. This school was once a solid two-story structure housing up to three hundred children, and now it was an empty shell. Sonday followed the cracks along the brick. A deep fissure lined the bottom, where brick met cement just a foot above the ground. It was as though the earth had tried to bite off the school and left behind a gaping wound. The basement windows were boarded up because the glass kept shattering. She could imagine muddy water gushing into the basement.

Then she realised that the note on her door said to look in the basement. It said nothing about which basement.

The school basement was bright and clean, not at all what Sonday had expected. As a girl it had been off limits, and though the doors were unlocked she never considered venturing down, despite her curiosity at what it was like down there. June once told her that one of the older boys in her class snuck down on a dare and was never seen again, and while Sonday knew her sister was making it up, she managed nonetheless to picture a daring boy, determined but secretly afraid, stepping into a shadowy underground cavern and disappearing in the darkness. Entering the basement today, that little boy was vividly displayed in her mind, and with a nervous laugh she wondered if she would bump into him now.

At the end of the corridor was the maintenance area, larger than the one in her

building. The door was open and she could hear the furnace rumbling away and all she could think was that it was pumping heat into an empty building. But there was someone in there: heavy breathing and grunts and a few shuffling steps. Sonday walked up to the open door and took a few small steps inside. There was a figure in front of the open furnace door, and with the handle of a broom it was stuffing something into the surging flames.

"Banister?" Sonday whispered.

He turned around and stepped away from the furnace door; the flames leaped out as if startled and lit up the room. In the light Sonday saw that the floor was covered with the corpses of various small animals, mostly cats and dogs.

"I don't know how I can keep up," Banister said. "It's like I was telling you: they keep multiplying. And they're getting brave. I could've sworn last night they were in my yard. I could hear them scratching around the house, as if they were trying to get inside. Once they kept to alleyways and all they ever wanted was food. And now..." He spread his hands apart and shook his head. "Now they want it all."

Sonday spent the rest of the week at home. The rain decreased to a drizzle but by the weekend it picked up again and the sky began to thunder. She dozed feverishly in bed, and between abrupt and aggressive sessions at the piano, she cleaned out her apartment, discarding everything that might remind her of Shackles.

Early Monday morning she was in the doorway of the post office around the corner from the Mid-Street Hotel. From here she look through the Great Square at the hotel's front doors. She stood there morning and afternoon and when the dark man appeared on Thursday she followed him inside. The concierge saw her at once and

called out, "Sir!" Sonday froze, looking at the two men.

"It's all right," the dark man said without turning around. "Let her come up." He walked over to the elevators and she followed him quickly, unwilling to lose sight of him again. In the elevator he removed his hat and held it so it so the water dripped away from him. "I was down at the harbour today and the pier is submerged. Had you seen me from a distance you would've thought I was walking on water."

Sonday was looking at the pale, thin face. This man was not her brother.

"If this keeps up," the man said, "my room at the top will be the only dry place in the city."

The door opened and he motioned for Sonday to step out. When she did she nearly fell over. The entire floor was a single room, the elevator opening near its centre. Sonday was surrounded by glass and an incredible view of nearly every inch of the city.

Sonday stood in a pair of oversized slippers the man had given her. They were white and her feet were encased in a soft cotton lining that did not suit the room nor the man. She declined the offer of a matching robe. The room was well furnished: seats and sofas and small tables covered most of the surface, with a number tall green plants and a few bookcases. The carpet was identical to that of the lobby, warm and thick and very clean. Beneath his rainsuit the man wore brown corduroys and a casual beige blazer, everything a full size too large for his thin frame. The man from the reception desk had brought them tea and Sonday held the hot mug tightly in both hands. She walked along the glass frame of the room, looking out at the misty cityscape. There were several telescopes set up at various points, and Sonday looked through those aiming north. One was focused directly at her apartment, another at the intersection by her school.

Through one lens she could see Banister sitting in his classroom and working on what was probably his book, and through another she could see the doorstep of the post office she had been waiting at since Monday.

"My name is Kepler," he said. "Please call me Ash."

"My brother built these rooms, didn't he?"

"It was his idea," Kepler said. "I was supposed to look after the city, but I'm afraid I've been neglecting my duties. I failed him, and I don't know where he is."

Sonday looked outside. She could see the steam rising between the buildings all around them. She tried to peer beyond the city limits but the air was so thick it had encased them in a cocoon of mist.

"It isn't too late," Kepler said. "I came back to make amends and I think I can save this city."

"You left that note on my door," Sonday said.

He took her by the hand and brought her down to the floor below. It was nearly identical to the one they had just left, only it also housed two pianos and a black and white tabby cat. "Shackles?" Sonday called and the cat slipped underneath a sofa. She skipped over to the sofa but stopped in front of it. "It isn't Shackles," she said.

"But its close," Kepler said. "It might as well be the same thing."

Sonday shook her head. "This isn't what I want."

"This is everything that's ever interested you. How can you not want it?"

"Just because it's what I had doesn't mean it's what I want."

"You can have everything the city has to offer. Look around you; it's all yours. Every little brick and every piece of metal and glass."

"This isn't what I want at all!" she shouted, surprised at how vicious she

sounded. "There isn't anything here for me."

"We need your help," Kepler said. I can't do this all by myself."

She was shaking her head. "You're sick. You and Banister and that man downstairs. Just like this city you're all sick. There isn't anything here for me, not anymore."

Sonday was curled up on a bench at the bus station. She had six hours to wait until her bus was scheduled to arrive. There was no one at the ticket booth and a hand-written note informed her that all schedules were subject to change without notice. There were only two others at the station, a woman with a shopping cart stocked full with plastic bags, and a man asleep on a bench in a dirty coat and wrinkled yellow tie.

Sonday found a child's bright blue blanket and lay on the wide bench wrapped up and warm. Not since she had been a little girl had she been on an outbound bus, and was looking forward to sitting on the reclining seat, looking out the window at the blurred landscape shooting by.