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**163**

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**A Jar of Minnows**

**Thomas A. Abray**

**A Thesis**

**in**

**The Department**

**of**

**English**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
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## **ABSTRACT**

**A Jar of Minnows**

**Thomas A. Abray**

This creative writing thesis takes the form of a short novel narrated in the first person by a thirteen year-old boy, Lawrence Bole, who is on vacation with his family. When the novel opens, Lawrence is stuck in a tree. He proceeds to recount those events which he thinks led to his current predicament. As he examines his memories of the three summers he has visited Lake Chewanuk, he gradually comes to realise his own weaknesses and mistakes, but at the same time he is, almost inadvertently, sketching the lives of the people near him, namely his family and a few cohabitants at the lake.

Though the narrative voice often sounds like an adolescent's, the conditions of narration—solitary, stuck in a tree—allow for some divergence from a purely spoken dialect to the level of cogitation or consciousness. This way, limitations of communication do not prevent the expression of the narrator's observations and creative ideas.

The novel is made up of 39 short chapters. Because of the narrator's attention to detail, each chapter resembles a snap shot of a moment that as far as the narrator is concerned contains important information. Taken together, the chapters create a textual slideshow

that the narrator seems to be submitting as evidence in a sort of self-conducted trial.

As the narrative comes to an end, Lawrence is on the verge of deciding whether or not he is ready to put into practice what he has recently learned. He hesitates, however, because this would introduce him to a world he may not be ready to join.



*for Amélie Baillargeon*

## A Jar of Minnows

1.

The hollow narrowed as I climbed higher, so I started looking around for the first branch and I found that it was still over my head. I wasn't going to be able to continue in the hollow all the way up, so I gradually worked my way out, all except for my left foot. The rest of me clung to the trunk for all I was worth and kept inching up. That was the moment when I should have stopped to think, "What is wrong with this picture?"

But I didn't, of course. I had a toehold on the way up, but to get my foot into a firm position in the hollow while hanging down would be impossible. So I'm stuck, and in more ways than one.

I wish I could escape from today into the future. How about September? Grade eight. I already know Mr. Stammer from

gymnastics. He was nice enough when he spotted me on the horse, but how will he compare to Miss Odell, who was worth a laugh, but famous for keeping you at recess. "I have a feeling that you understood the story," she'd say, "and that you read the questions, but the way you answer makes no sense." She made me tell her what I meant over and over, and kept saying, "That's what you have to write. Start at the beginning. Answer the first part first. How do you expect to be understood?" We wrote out the answers together.

I can imagine her here now, pulling herself over the branch. Panting and whewing. I'd notice her hiking boots. If I had a pair like that I'd fit them with red laces too.

Enough about my boots, she'd say. What in the world are you doing up here?

2.

Dad overlapped the lake and trees and some of the sky. He smiled as he showed off three long narrow fish. The table overlapped his legs and I overlapped part of the table.

When I look at this photo in the album, I am always surprised. Mom is not there, which is funny because I probably wouldn't remember our first summer at Lake Chewanuk without the photo. And in my memory of the photo she is there, setting the piece of film on

the bench of the picnic table, telling me not to touch. Dad could not touch either because his hands were messy with fish. I don't know what kind they were, but he found out later that they weren't in season.

Mom exhaled her feelings.

"Tired?" Dad asked.

"Back is sore."

"If I could carry it, I would."

"I'm sure."

Dad sliced from neck to tail, emptied the guts onto the newspaper, then cut off the head and pushed it aside.

Mom picked up the photo and gripped the red arrows. The covering came off with a squeak. She waved it in the air then held it up. Ribbons of red, purple and blue wrapped around themselves like colours in gasoline. They almost seemed alive as they gradually flowed into place.

### 3.

We didn't come back to Lake Chewanuk for a long time. Emily and Julie were born, so Mom and Dad probably thought three were too many little kids to take on a vacation, especially with a lake right there to drown in.

We always said that Julie was the only one who hadn't been, since Emily was there inside of Mom. When Dad and I asked her if she remembered, she usually said no, but once she played along. She said she remembered it well, that she even had *fond* memories. But then Julie complained that it was impossible and therefore a lie, and so Emily took it back.

Then two Christmases ago Mom and Dad decided that we were ready to return, all of us, for real, so we sent off our application for two weeks in the summer. That's the only way to do it if you want to get in early because there is no phone in the winter at Lake Chewanuk. You send your application and you wait. It took a total of four weeks before we received a letter back. It was typed and I was allowed to read it first. Part of it said, "We are also happy to be able confirm at the present time your cottage number. You will be staying in COTTAGE 1." We had many discussions about whether or not that would be the best cottage and if it was why did we get it. I had a theory that it was the oldest cottage, seeing that it had the first number, but I didn't know why it was given to us.

When we finally got here we were all interested to see exactly what "Cottage 1" looked like. Mom and Dad told us to stay in the car, though, while they went down to check in. We were too excited. There was a glimpse of the lake between the cottages, and that was all I needed to get me down there. I walked down to the lake and then

turned around. I could see the whole place from there. The yellow and green cottages. Yellow walls, green trim. Fifteen or twenty of them exactly the same, except for tiny differences in size and shape. They were scattered here and there at different angles over the side of the hill. The only thing regular about the pattern was that each one was about one clothesline from the next. I couldn't see number 1, but I assumed that it wasn't going to be drastically different from all the rest.

At the ends of the resort the grass turned into forest. At the one end I could see through to someone's house. The other end was solid trees. Down by the end with the house a woman in a long skirt was moving around with a butterfly net. She wore a straw gardener's hat that was kept on her head by a red scarf tied under her chin.

Along the shore was a row of docks. Each one had a small boat tied to it. At the end of the row was a boat house, big and yellow with green trim, and past that a square dock that surrounded a swimming area where the water is shallow for kids.

It was like looking in our photo album, except everything was in the wrong place. I'd imagined that the pictures in the album went from left to right. The cottage, the lake, the boat, the swing, the dock. What I saw was like somebody had taken the pictures and mixed them all up. It took me a minute or two to put everything back in order.

Emily came down to where I was standing.

"Remember it?" I asked her.

“Not quite. You?”

“In a way.”

“It does remind me of the pictures,” she said.

“From when I was little.”

“Over there. . .” She pointed to the clump of trees near the shuffle board. In the middle of the trees there was an empty picnic table.

There was a radio playing in the cottage behind us. Over top of the radio I could hear voices. It sounded like people were carrying on a conversation while they were in different rooms. “It’s so orange,” someone said. Someone else said, “It’s orange, but it’s not too orange!”

4.

I think it’d be more comfortable if I turned the other way.

Unfortunately, that means no more room for Miss Odell. If I turn like that and put my back there against the trunk, it’s not exactly soft on the back, but much easier on the bum. And privacy again.

We had a revolving method for taking turns going fishing with Dad. There was room for four in the boat, but he didn’t like more than three. He said it wasn’t the same. Everybody’s line gets crossed and the noise of talking wakes up all the fish. Julie said that the fish

needed to be woken up or else they wouldn't be able to eat breakfast, but Dad was not convinced.

Mom was easy to please about fishing, though. She was happy to go out once. As she said, she just wanted a taste. Shuffleboard is more her thing. Almost every night they held a tournament and the winner got some small prize, like a Frisbee, a can of insect spray, or a fishing lure. Every night the adults congregated down there with beer and plastic glasses underneath the coloured lights, waiting for their turn to challenge. Until bedtime, the little kids kept themselves from getting bored by running from tree to tree pretending that no one could see them. If there weren't a lot of people, I went into the boathouse to the game room and played Ping-Pong.

The first time I was shy. I didn't know if it was for anybody to use or if it was part of the manager's house. The manager and his wife live upstairs above the office. I was standing outside the game room listening to ptick-ptuck, ptick-ptuck, which I knew right away was the sound of the white ball jumping back and forth over the little net. I pulled the door open a bit and listened some more. No one told me to get lost and the sound of the ball didn't stop, so I went in all the way.

Apart from a couple of benches the only thing in the room was a Ping-Pong table. I liked the emptiness, the echoes, and also the feeling that the lake was beneath my feet.



Three people were in there, the woman and the man who were playing, and a girl who was sitting up on a countertop watching the action. I wandered the room while I kept track of the game with one eye. Nobody said hello or anything, but that was okay. I just pretended I wasn't even there.

The man was beating the woman pretty badly. At one point he looked over at the girl and said, "You're next, sweetheart."

The girl slid her eyes back and forth across the table. "No way," she said, and I liked that.

"Come on," the man said.

"I refuse."

"Chicken."

"Don't use psychology on me," the girl said.

The man laughed at this as he hit the ball across the table. His face stayed in a smile as the ball went back and forth. The other player, the woman, was suffering, saying "uh" and "darn it" every few seconds.

I moved over to the other wall, which had a cork board and things tacked up, and read the little advertisements and the posters. A fisherman would take you on his boat and show you the best spots. There was a poster that said, "Tractor Pull Extravaganza. (On the BEACH!) Come one, come all. Good time to be had."

I heard the woman say, "I forfeit."

"I need one more point to win," the man told her.

"I concede."

The man looked around the room as if he was bewildered. "You can't concede at Ping-Pong," he told us.

"I do," the woman said, dropping her paddle on the table.

The man rushed to stop her from leaving. "Wait. For the sake of formality, to set an example for the youngsters."

The woman stopped.

"Just take the paddle and stand there a second."

In the middle of this I decided to continue with my tour around the room. I was going to pass by the side of the Ping-Pong table that I hadn't been on. Then I realised that I'd have to cut between the girl and the table, so I stopped, but really it was too late to stop because I would have had to turn one hundred and eighty degrees, which would have made it seem like I didn't want to walk past the girl, so I continued as I had planned. I tried to keep my eyes to myself, but I wasn't so good at it and I saw her wave a couple of fingers at me. I might have ignored that, but then she said "hi" too, so I was forced to respond in some way. I waved and ducked.

The woman had picked up the paddle. She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth and looked at the man in a way I've never really seen anybody look at anybody.

"I need the ball," the man said.

The ball was on the floor in the corner. The woman half looked around for it, but she looked over the wrong shoulder. The girl jumped down from the counter and said that she would get it. She ran over to the corner and tossed the ball to the man.

“Ready?” he asked the woman. She nodded and he served. It wasn’t too hard a serve, but it was hard enough. I didn’t think the woman was even going to move, but at the last second when the ball was almost past her, she swiped at it angrily. The ball bounced off the table beneath her swing, hit the wall, and fell onto the floor. “There you go. I’m going to watch shuffleboard.”

It was pretty awkward, the way the woman left like that, but the man pretended not to notice. “Next contestant,” he said, and the girl slipped down off the workbench. I went to sit down on a chair on the other side of the table. “First,” said the man, as he swung the paddle through the air, “introductions. Who am I playing against?”

“Katherine,” said the girl.

“Bill. Pleased to meet you.” He held out his hand and Katherine shook it.

“Pleased to meet you,” she said.

Bill swivelled around like one of the players on my old NHL Head-to-Head hockey game. “And who are you?”

“Lawrence.”

“Lawrence,” he repeated, as if there was something funny about my name, or as if I had said it in a funny way. Then he skated over and shook my hand. “Pleased to meet you.”

Katherine came over too. She also said hi and shook my hand. It was the first time I had shaken hands with any girl except my sisters and I was impressed that she gripped hard.

Bill let Katherine serve first. The serve was good and it went by him. I don’t know whether he let it, or not. He picked the ball up off the floor, and secretly but not too secretly, slipped it into his back pocket. “Whoops. No more ball. Can’t play. Game over.”

He talked a lot while they played. Mainly it was to Katherine, but sometimes me too. If he said something that he thought was funny, he’d look over to get me on his side. At one point, out of the blue, he asked us if we wanted to see something and he pulled out his wallet and found a little piece of paper in it. “Have a look at that,” he said when he handed it to me. It was a photo of a dog, a German Shepherd. “Pretty cute, eh?”

Katherine looked over. “What is it?” she asked.

“Picture of my girlfriend.” I handed Katherine the photo. “Love of my life. You’re supposed to have a picture of someone who loves you in your wallet. She’s the only one loves me.” He laughed.

“Oh, poor you,” said Katherine.

“And my mom. But she’s supposed to anyway, right? And you can’t have a picture of your mother in your wallet.”

Katherine handed the picture back.

“Your turn,” Bill said to her. “Who’s in your wallet?”

“No one.”

“There you go,” Bill said to me, pointing across the table with his paddle. He was about to serve, but then he took a few steps over to where I was and whispered, “That’s about as sweet as they come.”

Emily and Julie came in then. Julie walked over to the table and shook the net experimentally.

“We got the pros coming in now,” Bill said. “I oughta step aside.”

## 5.

A few days later I was in the game room again. A family was there having a mini tournament. The two sons were older than me. They were the size of their father and I think they were probably still growing. The tournament seemed to be down to the finals. It was one son against the next and they both wanted to win. Whenever they had the chance, they would hit the ball as hard as they could right at one another. Their mother was cheering quite a bit, but their father was telling them that there was no need for them to kill each other. He’d

just shake his head and say, "C'mon. Fair play. What's this all about? Let's have some fair play."

One of them eventually triumphed, and a few seconds later they all disappeared out the door. Just for something to do I took the ball and a paddle and I played by myself against the one bare wall the way that our neighbour does against the side of his house with a tennis racket. I hit the ball so that it bounced off the floor, against the wall, then back to me. I had done it like that a few times, when I heard someone come in through the door to the office. I tried to catch the ball before it bounced again. Without looking behind me I dropped the paddle on the table and pretended that it had never been in my hand at all.

"I'm working," Katherine said, "but I can probably play a quick game if you help me listen to the door." She went out to do something, but she was back in a second. I was just reaching out to get back the paddle. She laughed at me. "It won't bite," she said.

I didn't say anything.

"Have you seen that movie?" she asked. "*The Man From Tomorrow?*"

"I heard of it."

"'Bout a guy who goes back in time. . . ?"

I shook my head.

“He goes back in time, back to medieval times, with castles and moats, and he’s really fascinated by it all, but he has to be careful in case he affects something too much because then he won’t be born. You know what I mean? For example, if he killed his great-great-great-great-et cetera grandfather, then he wouldn’t be born. That’s what happens, too. He saves this little serf kid from the . . . the man in charge—”

When she talked she leaned over to the left, like there was a pole or something that she had to look around to see me.

“—what do you call that, not the friar but—you know?—Well of course, anyway, that guy is the guy from the future’s great-great-great et cetera et cetera grandfather and he’s evil. The guy can’t do anything about it, though, because, then he wouldn’t be born—” She picked up her paddle and waved me to serve. “—The guy’s not even supposed to *touch* anything. He’s just supposed to *observe*. In fact, he’s not even suppose to observe. He’s just testing the time machine. Whatever he observes they have to wipe out from his memory when he gets back. His knowledge could change the present, and they’re not supposed to get knowledge that way. I don’t really understand that part.”

I served the ball across to her gently so that she could hit it back.

“You kind of remind me of a time traveller,” she said. “You walk around like you’re not supposed to touch anything or affect anything in case it changes the future.”

I hit the ball back to her. I didn't know what to say.

"I don't mean it as an insult," she said. "How much do you think that guy could really change before it would affect his time hundreds of years later? I think he'd really have to kill his grandfather or something big like that."

"I think he would just have to touch something," I said.

"Just one little thing?"

"Sure."

"I don't know. I think it would take more."

I offered my opinion. "If he scared a bird that was supposed to go somewhere and lay an egg. Then the bird didn't lay an egg. Maybe that egg was going to be so important in someone's life. Maybe someone who was starving was supposed to eat the egg to stay alive, but now he would die."

"But what are the chances of that?" she asked, hitting the ball back to me.

"I don't know."

We weren't really playing at all. Just slapping the ball back and forth. We were quiet for a second and then she got her smirk back.

"How about this?" she said. "What if that guy was *supposed* to go back in time and *supposed* to scare the bird and change things so that he *could* be born? I bet you nobody ever thought about that."

"Probably somebody thought about it some time."



“Nope,” she said, “nobody. Nobody *ever* thought about it before.”

6.

The more I think about her idea of going back in time, the more I like it. Exactly. Who’s to say the man from tomorrow wasn’t supposed to interfere? Maybe he’s not supposed to, but then again, maybe he is. Who can say? No one. Anyway, that was a great conversation we had that day, probably my best one, before or since. I think I was making Katherine happy then. She really seemed to enjoy it. Unfortunately that kind of thing has not happened this year.

Not to say that things haven’t been good at all this year. I have had what I call the Lake Chewanuk feeling, even if it’s been a little bit harder to find. But there’s something different about it. Describing the difference, though, is about as difficult as a nail hammering itself. The Lake Chewanuk feeling comes out of nowhere and vanishes into thin air. In between it might make you sing, or run, or even just close your eyes and examine the backs of your eyelids for something that you’ve never seen before. After a while the feeling will disappear, which is frustrating at first, except you can be consoled by the fact that some day down the road it’ll return to you. It won’t be real, of course, it’ll be a memory. But that’s fine, because personally I prefer memories. You wait and wait for the real thing and then it only happens once.

Memories are different. They can happen many times. They might not return every day, but still they return. And when they do, they don't stress you out, or give you a concussion, or make people angry. Sure, you need real things first to make memories, but I don't care, I still vote for memories.

7.

She slid a Styrofoam cup across the counter. Leeches floated around in the water like raw giblets. I handed her the dollar my dad had just given me, a new one that felt crisp and perfectly smooth.

"Catching lots of fish?" she asked.

"There's not so many," I told her.

"I hear it's too hot," she said.

"Maybe."

There was a little lamp over the counter, and as she leaned forward to hand me my change I could see that her eyes were squinting from sleeping and that a pillow had creased her cheek. "I would show you how to catch a fish," she said.

I stowed the change in my pocket, 50¢ made up of 2 quarters, and reached for the leeches.

"Do you go fishing every day?" she asked.

"My dad does. I take turns with my sisters."

“That’s fun.”

“But a turtle ate my fish,” I told her.

“What!”

“My dad left it on the string in the water overnight to keep it fresh.”

“And a turtle . . .”

“Yeah, when I went to see it in the morning. It was half-eaten.”

“God. That’s a—”

“It was a snapping turtle.”

She shortened her neck and said, “I didn’t think there were any snapping turtles. I don’t want to go swimming now. Come out of the water with my *foot* half eaten.” I think she was imagining her foot being like my fish. I didn’t know what to say. “Ug, I’m going to have nightmares now,” she said.

## 8.

I had dreams.

Not sleeping dreams, but every night, before I fell asleep, I imagined that Katherine and I were walking together.

We had a picnic in the woods, by the lake. After we finished eating I took her for a walk through our neighbourhood. Bernie was driving his car down the road. He stopped and leaned out of the

window and said, "Hey you," to Katherine, but she just ignored him and then we went to the arena, where she watched and I played. The game was very close. My team was playing against our great rival, Guelph. It was so close that both of the teams were getting frustrated. Finally the big guy on their team, the one with the green helmet, charged at me from half-way across the ice and cross-checked me into the boards. It knocked the wind right out of me so that I had to recuperate on the bench until the end of the game. I looked over my shoulder into the stands a couple of times to see if Katherine looked disappointed. I couldn't imagine her face, whether it look worried or disappointed, or even something else.

I wanted us to be back at Lake Chewanuk, so I saw the Lake on a sunny day from the top of the hill. I saw Katherine floating a ways out from shore. She was on her back and she had her arms out at the sides, and every once and a while she would kick one of her feet and a little bit of water would turn white for a second. All around her the lake shimmered. I wanted to be there, in the water, but I also wanted to look at it at the same time. I wanted to be in two places at once.

The sun descended, or rather the earth turned, and it was night, and then morning again. I got out of bed and wandered down by the water, by myself. No one else was awake. I wasn't expecting it, but Katherine was there. She was in her bathing suit.

"Look who's here. Do you want to swim out to the raft?"

The water felt warm, the way it sometimes does early in the morning, when the air is cool. We grunted along, with our noses just above the water, but then, at that point, something went wrong. I couldn't help it. A snapping turtle came up from the bottom of the lake and bit Katherine's foot. Her toe, to be precise. Her daddy-toe.

She yelled and jumped out of the water onto the raft. Still, the turtle hung on for dear life with its sharp beak. Any second the toe was going to snap right off.

So I crumpled up that dream and tried again.

"Look who's here!" It was Katherine, but now she had longer hair, and it was blond, and she had on a bikini. We walked into the lake and started swimming. I did everything I could. I fought with all my might, but I couldn't stop the turtle from coming again.

Katherine screamed. It was louder than before. She was on the dock this time, not the raft, hopping up and down on one leg. Now she had on a regular bathing suit. She reached for the turtle, but she seemed afraid that he might bite all the way through if she got him angry. I kicked my own foot and the top of the sheet travelled from my neck down to my waist.

I turned over and tried again, but the same thing happened. The turtle came up out of nowhere. I started to sweat. I just couldn't take it any more. I had to get out of bed.

In the kitchen I got down a plastic cup to take a drink of water.

When I turned on the tap the water came out, and, when I turned it off, the water stopped. On. Off. Just the way I wanted.

9.

“What was your name again?” Bill asked me. He stretched his paddle out to me, one face up, one face down, as if there was something on it that he wanted to show me.

I told him my name again, but he must have remembered it before I said it, because he didn’t do anything to show that he’d heard.

“The cure, I think, lies in competition. Enough fooling around. Enough dilly-dally. What say we have a single knock-out tournament? You guys start.” He pointed at Katherine with his finger and me with the paddle. “The winner’ll play me.” He pointed at us with his paddle and raised his eyebrows to know if we agreed.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

Bill gave me his paddle and dodged around the table to pick up an empty plastic glass. “I’ll be back to separate the men from the boys.” The clump of his boots filled the room for a second. Then the door slammed behind him and it was just Katherine and me, face-to-face across the table.

I bounced the ball and gave it a tap with my paddle.

Katherine yelled, "Wait!" and caught the ball.

"What?"

She squeezed the ball and jostled it up and down like she wanted to figure out how much it weighed. At the same time she was looking to the left out the little window above the benches. I looked, too. Because of the angle I could only see things in the distance, the last cottage, a scrap of bush, the farthest dock. Two motor boats floated beside the dock. The weight of the Ping-Pong ball was not written anywhere.

Katherine looked back at the ball. "We have to play for something." The friction between her fingers and the ball made a crisp, dry sound, as she threw it into the air. "It's more fun that way." The ball landed in her palm. I heard a quiet sound like two hands rubbing together once.

"The winner plays Bill," I told her.

"No, but we have to play for something else."

"Like what?"

"If I win—"

"If you win, what?" I thought.

"—then I get to go fishing with you."

"Don't you go fishing with your Dad?"

"My dad doesn't fish," she said.

"He lives right beside the lake and he doesn't fish?"

She put both hands down on the table very quickly. The paddle made a clump sound. "No. I mean, no, I don't *live* here." Her eyebrows wormed together and she laughed and looked at me like I was funny. "That's not my dad." She was pointing upstairs to where I thought she lived with her father.

"Your step-father?"

"My uncle," she said. "And she's my uncle's second wife, my step-aunt, my I don't know what. I call her Carole. I live in Windsor. I just come here for two weeks in the summer to work and visit and swim and everything."

"Because I was going to ask you," I said. "We came once before when I was little and if you lived here maybe I saw you."

"Nope," she said. "Before my time. Are we still betting?"

The first serve was scurrying across the table toward me. I got my paddle up and tilted it at the right angle so that when the ball bounced back in the other direction, it cleared the net by about one millimetre, ducked under Katherine's swing and kissed the white line sweetly.

It was only one point, but it made me think of winning. When I thought of winning I thought of the bet. When I thought of the bet, I thought of what I was going to win. Then I realised. I wasn't going to win anything because we'd only made half of it. If Katherine won, she got to come fishing with me. If I won, I got what?



“I was here a couple of times when I was little,” Katherine said, “with my parents, but I don’t really remember. It’s all mixed up with the other times that I came.”

Worrying about the bet took my concentration off the game. The score quickly jumped to 6-2 for Katherine. The door squeezed open and Julie came in. She had a towel wrapped around her neck like a fancy scarf. When she reached the middle of the room, she stopped dead and yelled, “We’re going swimming.” Then, more quietly, she said to me, “I’m supposed to come and tell you.”

“He’ll be finished very soon,” Katherine said.

A bee started to buzz around inside of me to keep me from thinking clearly. It flew over the net at the same time as the ball. I was so mixed up that when I swung I missed the stupid ball. I didn’t even touch it.

“Do you smell that?” Katherine asked.

Julie looked at her with curiosity. “What?”

Katherine sniffed the air like a cat and looked at me. “Is that fish?”

I didn’t return a single serve after that.

Slumped at the kitchen table, I practised the art of procrastination. I couldn't quite see from where I was. The window gave me the side of the next cottage and the porch light of the one after that. And because of the angle, the screen door opened into darkness.

I could hear, though. All the noise came from the shuffleboard tournament. The pucks whispered across the cement and then "tocked" against one another. The people gabbed or laughed, sometimes hoorayed. In the meantime, the bug light hummed patiently while it waited to fry the next curious mosquito. *ZZZZZZ*pitskew! One less bloodsucker to worry about.

I had the cottage to myself. Mom and Dad were playing partners, and Emily and Julie were out there with them, watching and making friends among the lawn chairs.

Chink chink chink. The sound of steel against steel.

After supper Mom had found a sort of puzzle in her closet. It consisted of three weirdly-shaped pieces of steel. Two of them were connected permanently. You would actually have to bend the steel to get them apart. The other piece *looked* like it was permanently connected, but it wasn't, or at least we were pretty sure that it wasn't. Mom had tried for a second and said, "It's impossible. They're not supposed to come apart." But she was just joking. It was obviously a puzzle.

I sat at the table with the puzzle in my lap, twisting and turning it back and forth and up and down and every which way. Some things were happening. One thing, I discovered, wouldn't work. I was tempted to try it because it looked as if you just had to bend the steel a little bit then the other piece would fit through, and it would be so easy to finish it. But you had to be careful not to think that. It was a decoy. After careful examination I concluded that nothing would have to be bent if you found the real right way.

I was still trying to find this real right way when Dad stepped in. He asked me how it was coming and then continued on to the kitchen. I heard him go into the freezer, the cupboard, the fridge. Various kitchen sounds followed, then the fridge opened and closed again. "Do me a favour, Lawrence, will you? Make some more ice cubes." He let the screen door bang shut behind him. His hands were full.

I tinkered away at the puzzle. Of course, I didn't forget to do the ice. One tray still held a few cubes. I cracked them out into a bowl. The trays I ran under the tap. I tried to fill them up as even as possible. They were different than the trays that we had at home. The cubes they made were smaller. I stacked the trays, and carried them in one hand. With my other hand I opened the door of the fridge, held it with my knee, reached back to the counter for the bowl of already frozen cubes, being careful not to spill water off the trays in my other hand, and inserted the whole works into the freezer.

I turned off the kitchen light and returned to my tinkering. This time I held the contraption upside-down in the hopes that I'd see something that I hadn't seen before. I stretched my legs out underneath the table while my eye traced along the edge of the smallest piece of steel, looking for the "knot" in the mess of curves and loops.

It felt good to have the cottage to myself. However, it didn't last long.

Mom was wearing her orange summer dress and she had her hair pinned up on the top of her head. Each of her hands held an empty glass, and she shook them to let me know what she was doing. I could hear the shrunken ice-cubes swirl around inside. "Still working on that thing?" She sounded impressed when she asked it. With the back of her hand she turned on the kitchen light, then went to the sink and dumped out the glasses. "Would you believe we won?" she said to me. I heard the same pattern of fridge and cupboard door opening as with Dad. She clinked ice-cubes while I clinked the puzzle. "Oh, somebody is making more" she said. She had noticed my work.

"Me."

"Thank you, Lawrence."

"I doubt they're hard yet."

"No, they're not. That's okay." She opened a drawer and rummaged through the utensils. "There are some nice people here," she said, out of the blue.

It seemed like a strange thing to say all of a sudden.

“Really nice people.” She turned off the kitchen light and stepped over to the table. It was peculiar the way she held the drinks up in the air in front of her. It was so she could see them, I guess, and not spill them. And for a few seconds she just watched me. Then she commented, “Determination, eh?”

“I think it’s impossible,” I told her, as I gave the puzzle a little shake.

“I’m sure you’ll get it,” she told me, with less than all her interest. She was looking up at the ceiling, at the long fluorescent bulb. It was the only light on in the cottage. “That’s such a crappy light,” she observed.

I looked up to refresh my memory. “It buzzes, too.” I thought she would like that comment.

“Well.” She gave the light half a second’s worth of thought, and then she turned back to me as if I had suddenly done something surprising and even impressive. “I heard something about you,” she said.

“*Me?*”

“You don’t know what I’m talking about?”

“No. I don’t think.”

“You’re not supposed to take somebody fishing tomorrow?”

“Ah-”

She quickly decided not to waste her time plumbing the depths of my mind. "Listen," she said. "Leave that thing alone for a second. It's impossible. And come with me."

11.

I'd heard it was a rule that the kids weren't allowed to play shuffleboard, but there she was.

Katherine shuffleboarding with her uncle against somebody's grandparents. They were friendly-looking grandparents, but they certainly had the competitive spirit. The manager looked very at home up there on the board strutting his stuff. I suppose he was at home after all. But he seemed more interested in talking to the spectators than winning.

Maybe it was having the status of manager's niece that let Katherine play. Or if seriousness counted, she obviously deserved to be up there more than her uncle. She was so into it that every time the puck went down the board, no matter who had shot it, she twisted and swayed her body as if she herself was the puck trying to get to where it wanted to be.

I sat at a picnic table near the end of the board with my parents. They were engaged in conversation with a man who had come in that day in a big boat. They were leaving me "undisturbed" to make plans

with Katherine for fishing the next day. I squirmed on the bench till Katherine had to follow her pucks back to my end of the board. When she saw me she squinted hello out of the corner of her eye and then turned to watch the woman's pucks slide down to attack her own. I tried repeatedly to get my voice working, at least I think I did, but I couldn't speak to her. I don't know why. My night of failure consisted of that, over and over again.

12.

"Son."

My dad woke me in the morning. When I told him I wasn't going fishing he asked "How come?" with an annoying amount of concern. When I said that I didn't know why, he pushed aside the folding door, stepped into my room, and ordered me to turn over and look at him.

I could tell that he had just woken up himself because he was sporting nothing but undies.

"What happened?"

He was slightly hunched over the way he is in the morning when he's half-naked, whether from chilliness or trying to hide himself.

"Nothing."

"Come on. You're supposed to go fishing."

"We're not going."

“I’m going to let you use the boat.”

“Thanks, but I don’t need it.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know,” I said lamely, “’cause I didn’t ask.”

“What?”

“I didn’t ask.”

He gave it a second, lifted his feet one at a time like a horse does.

“We’ll go then,” he said. “Come on.”

He was outside waiting for me when I opened the door. It was a great fresh morning. I looked around at all there was to see. The boathouse looked smart perched out yellow and green over the dimpled lake. It looked quiet, too. The curtains in the upstairs apartment hung straight down, closed for sleeping. “Do we need leeches?” I asked.

“Nope.”

We crossed to where our rental was tied up in the middle of the row of docks. I didn’t look into the office when we went by. On the last dock a man and woman loaded up a boat. They were all jiggled out with outdoorsy stuff. Hats with lures dripping off them, brown vests with zippers. I don’t think I’d want one of those hats, but a vest like that might be neat.

The dock squished with our weight when we stepped onto it and it kept squishing while we crept around untying the ropes. Dad puffed on a cigarette without taking it out of his mouth. When he leant over



to stow the tackle and poles, I held the boat. He stood up and took the cigarette out of his mouth. "I got it," he said.

I let go and jumped in.

We had started our holidays by trolling, then, on the advice of someone Dad had been talking to, we'd switched to leeches. The little blood-suckers had appealed to a couple of fish, but the results weren't astounding, so we'd gone back to trolling. It was no worse for actually hooking fish, plus it suited my father better. Sitting still for hours staring at each other like frogs seemed to depress him more than anything else. Puttering back and forth across the lake at least gave him the illusion that he was accomplishing something, whether or not it actually produced any fish.

And trolling somehow makes it easier to talk. You don't feel as if you need to have a whole conversation at once, since there're always little things that can be used as excuses for interrupting your thoughts. If you don't like something that somebody says, you can suddenly reel in your line as if you just got a nibble. After you've realised that it was just a weed that your lure happened to brush against, it's easy to pretend that the last remarks are nothing but distant memories. This is a tactic that I resorted to once or twice on that last morning of last year's vacation.

My father spat into the water. "You really screwed up, Lawrence,"

he said. His face was contorted in a way that it would be if he'd just eaten something awful.

"What?"

"You were supposed to take that little girl out fishing." It sounded funny to call Katherine a little girl.

"I was too shy to ask her."

Even though my eyes stayed stuck to the tip of my pole, I could still see his disgusted look. "Too what?" he asked.

"Shy."

"No," he disagreed. "Selfish."

He told me about how talking about shyness was focussing on myself, which was wrong. There was another perspective to see it from. Katherine's. From there my not taking her fishing was selfish. He said that she obviously wanted to go fishing, or else she wouldn't have mentioned it in the first place. I said that it was a bet, that she did not ask, but he said that she had asked and that I was very stupid not to realise that. He said again that shy was just focussing on myself, that focussing on others would show my selfishness, and then maybe I would decide not to be shy. He said that it was something I could decide not to do.

He told me his whole theory. I hated it quite a bit, even though I didn't understand all of it. I pretended to have many nibbles. After a while I stopped answering his questions and looks. This made him

fed up. He turned the boat around and brought us back to the resort, where he tied the ropes and carried the tackle and rods up to the cottage without saying a word.

We never talked about his theory again, but I've been thinking about it. Sometimes I wanted to tell him how it was wrong. I didn't, but maybe I tried to convince him in another way. By showing him. Whenever being selfish had nothing to do with being shy, I tried to go against it. I didn't always make a big decision to do this. It's just that when certain situations came up and I had a choice to be not selfish, I'd take it, and then I'd wonder if he'd noticed. It doesn't matter now, though, after what happened today. Even if he did notice before, today's scandal will be enough to override all the other proofs I ever gave him. And it'll probably take lots of proofs to override the proof of today.

13.

We all had a job to do to get ready to hit the road. I started being the sweeper, whisking up all the sand we'd tracked in over the past two weeks. Dad went up to get the car and he drove it down slowly across the lawn right to the door. You are allowed to do that on moving day if the ground's not soaked.

Julie had squeezed all her clothes into her mini suitcase and now she decided for the first time in her life that she wanted to sweep. I was nice enough to give her the broom. It was a crap sweeper. And I started helping Dad carry the big stuff to the car.

We were almost finished when Mom sighed and looked around and said how about one more swim before we go. It'd be a long winter. Our bathing suits were still on the line. Mom said, "There you go, good thing we're swimming, otherwise we might've forgotten these." They all got dressed and went down to the lake. I didn't have the water bug just then, so I stayed.

Mom told me to check around for anything we might have forgotten. There wasn't anything really. When I was looking, though, I saw the puzzle beside my bed, and I thought for a second that it might be alright to take it. Maybe somebody else had forgotten it and they'd never know now if I took it. It seemed likely, but I left it there anyway. Maybe some other time I'd see one the same and I could buy it, or at least try it.

I sat out on the front steps and watched them all swim. No one was being too crazy. Probably because we were just about to go. I got sad for a second just from seeing them saying good-bye to the water.

Out of the corner of my eye furls of hair waved in the wind. Katherine stood in front to the boathouse talking to someone. She talked for a while, then she walked toward me. At first it seemed like

she wasn't getting closer at all. Suddenly, though, she took one more step and was standing over me. She smiled a little. I hadn't said anything yet, and neither had she. She reached out with her arm and gave me a friendly push. It made me lose my balance and I had to catch myself with my hand.

"Captain," she said.

She walked down to the beach where my family was. The girls were closest to shore and I heard her ask them if the water wasn't too cold.

## Part 2

14.

One Sunday in the winter Mom and Julie made stew together. They had to leave it to boil for a long time. They watched a TV show and then they went back to the kitchen to taste it. When they lifted off the lid, something strange happened. Two flies escaped from the boiling stew. They told me when I got home from hockey practice. They were still astounded. I can see why. Two dozey winter flies. Julie walked around with the flyswatter but she couldn't find them anywhere.

### Part 3

15.

We passed the mound of white stones and the billboard of Jesus. We passed the Bo and Hetty Brock and Sons Farms. I remember that one because they usually don't put the mom up on the side of the barn in those big white letters.

A pickup passed us. On the door it said, "Dewitt Bros. Farms." Dad told me what "bros." means. I thought it was weird. I said, "I don't got no *broze*."

We passed a hitchhiker with a towering green backpack. "Sorry, buddy. Full load."

A cloud moved and suddenly the countryside became brighter.

"We won't forget ice this year, will we dear?"

“No we won’t.”

“It’s half the price if we get it at the gas station outside of town. We found that out.”

After a couple of hours I finally saw bits of blue through the trees. I could smell it when I breathed in deeply. Through a gap in the trees I saw the glittering wrinkles. On the other side of the water stood the blue trees. The lake came right up to them.

“I think it’s high,” I said.

We remembered the ice and we crossed a bridge beside the lock. My dad asked me, “Remember how to get there?” And I had to tell him the rest of the way. There were only three turns. It was easy. First we had to turn at the sand, then the mini-bikes, then it was just the resort and we turned into the parking lot.

We could see the lake through the spaces between the cottages. I swore it did look higher, fuller. The swimming area would be deeper. The current might be stronger.

16.

They gave us a different cottage than last year. This one is a little ways up the hill. We have a clear view of the lake from the dining room. Mom likes it because it is a little bit farther away from all the noise. Dad pointed out that he’d have a shorter walk to the boat in the



morning. He told us that he was going fishing every damn morning come hell or high water.

The first morning I went with him and caught a fish. It was the right kind for the season and it was big enough, too. We didn't leave it out overnight for any snapping turtle to devour either. Instead, we devoured it ourselves. Dad caught one too so we had that as well. We cooked them on the barbecue with lemon wrapped up in tin foil, which is something we learned last year.

The cottage is a bit bigger this year, but I think the walls are even thinner. When I was lying in bed trying to fall asleep I could hear Julie and Emily whispering on the other side of the wall. They were arguing about who would win between Moby Dick and a shark. I heard Julie say, "A shark is not going to kill Moby Dick. Do you know how big he is?" "But sharks are killers," Julie said. "Whales don't even eat meat. Their diet is based solely on plankton. Do you know what plankton are?"

I knew. Plankton is like moss that floats on the top of the water way out in the middle of the ocean. It's useless to anybody except a whale, who needs it to live. A whale has to eat so much plankton to stay alive that he has to keep his mouth open non-stop 24 hours a day. That's one reason why whales don't sleep.

I checked the boathouse for Katherine many times but I didn't see her anywhere. I wanted to ask the manager or his wife if she was here.

I got into the Lake Chewanuk rhythm of fishing, eating, playing Ping-Pong, putting on and taking off bathing suits, usually semi-wet ones, dock-sitting, boat-riding, et cetera, et cetera. I borrowed some of the girls' paper and I tried to draw. Early in the morning before anyone else woke up I drew a perfectly round circle. It was the best circle that I have ever drawn. No one was awake yet, so I took the circle and I turned it into a bald man. It didn't look very good. I think I preferred it as a circle.

The weather was very hot. Hot and muggy and still. One night the mosquitoes were really bad and they would just stick to you like a magnet if they got anywhere near you. It was so bad that people stopped playing shuffleboard and went inside. Mom and Dad invited a man and a woman to come over to our cabin. The man didn't come at first because he had to go back to their cottage to get his wife's drink. The rest of us rushed into the cottage and slammed the door. Julie and I plopped down on the couch. It's the grossest couch ever. The upholstery is scum-green and it has a texture like dried scabs. It's so ugly that we all avoid sitting on it whenever possible. But since we were having company we had no choice.

Mom and the woman sat at the table, while Dad made drinks in the kitchen. The woman squeezed in between the table and the windows, where the girls or I usually sit. It was possible for her because she was so thin. When she sat down all upright the way she did she looked like a rod of asparagus, especially with her long neck and her curly hair. Mom was telling her about how we had a different cottage than the year before and she was smiling and nodding her head. When it was her turn to speak she looked over at Julie and me. Mom had kind of forgotten our existence, but she suddenly asked us if we had met Mrs. Baron. Mrs. Baron gave a big nod as if she agreed it was time to be introduced.

“This is Julie,” Mom said, “my youngest. And this is the boy, Lawrence.”

“Oh, it’s a boy!” Julie exclaimed.

Mrs. Baron pretended not to hear. “Julie and Lawrence,” she said, “*very* nice to meet you!”

She questioned us on our ages and our grades and asked us if we were having a good time at the lake.

Dad came out of the kitchen with two drinks, one for Mom and one for him. “Are you sure I can’t get you something?” he asked Mrs. Baron.

“No, no, Doug will be back in a second.”

"You guys?" Dad asked. He only serves us on special occasions, like when company is over, or in the middle of a good TV show.

"I can get it," I said.

"I can get it," Emily said.

"Everyone's so willing to serve," Mrs. Baron said.

"This one's Emily," Mom said, putting her hand on Emily's shoulder.

"Very nice to meet you," Mrs. Baron said. "You're the artistic one. I can see it in your face."

There was a little knock on the door then. I was already moving to open it up. Before I got there it pushed open a little bit. A bottle of wine came through the crack, followed immediately by a large sweaty man. Every one said hello to him and he said, "Muss-quito soup." Then he looked around at me and my sisters and said, "My god, I've walked into a den of bandits here."

Dad handed a cup to Julie, then to me. I sniffed it and discovered that it was lemonade.

Mr. Baron reached his hand out to Dad and they shook. "Hi, Russ," he said.

"Hey."

Mr. Baron held up the bottle of wine. "Got a drink?"

"Yeah, I do. I'm good," he said. Then he took his usual chair at the end of the table.

“Got something from the cellar here, if you’d like.” Mr. Baron said that to Mom.

She had one arm slung over the back of her chair. “I’m fine at the moment, Doug.” She took a sip from her glass to show him.

“Just you and me,” Mr. Baron said to his wife.

“Here, Doug,” my mom said, “have a seat.”

“Is it chilled?” Mrs. Baron asked her husband.

Mr. Baron was positioning the chair. “Not bad,” he said. But he touched the bottle just to be sure.

Dad jumped up as if he had just remembered something he had forgotten a long time ago. He strode into the kitchen and started to rummage around. A few minutes later he stepped back out. “There don’t seem to be any wine glasses.”

“There’s none in ours either,” Mrs. Baron said.

“I can get you a juice glass? Or a water glass? A coffee mug?”

“Whatever,” Mrs. Baron answered. “We can sip from a cow’s trough if we have to.”

“We wouldn’t make you do that,” Mom said.

“It’s not the container, is it?” Mrs. Baron asked. She looked at me for an answer, but I didn’t have time to give one before she suggested one herself. “Isn’t it what’s inside?” She smiled at me as if we had just shared a secret.

Dad planted two juice glasses on the table in front of Mr. Baron. Then he held out a corkscrew made of a thin rusty screw, two brass rings, and a crooked piece of smooth wood. "I'll leave that contraption to you. I'm no good with those things."

Mr. Baron took the corkscrew and sat it down on the table so that he could peel the wrapper off the top of the bottle. When he was finished with that, he set the scrap on the table and picked up the corkscrew again.

"They never work worth a damn," Mom said.

Mr. Baron's lips moved as he examined it. He hefted it in his hand, as if he was trying to guess how much it weighed. "That's a relic," he said.

"Looks like it's opened a bottle or two," Dad agreed.

Mr. Baron continued to look at it. I could tell that all of us wanted to reach out and take it from him and open the bottle ourselves.

"Do you collect antiques?" Mom asked him.

"I look around," he said. Then he referred to his wife. "We don't have the room for it, do we?"

"Not at the moment."

"I guess you do have to have some place to put it when you buy it," Mom said.

Mr. Baron had stuck the end of the screw into the cork and was using the wooden lever to wind it in. When it got as far as it would

go, he carefully poked his pointer fingers, which were quite thick and fleshy, into the rings and pulled them down.

The cork moved a quarter of an inch. "Works like a charm," he said.

Just before the cork was all the way out of the bottle, Mr. Baron accidentally pulled it on an angle and the tip broke. He kept working away, though. He pulled the corkscrew out and twisted off the piece that was stuck on the screw and put the corkscrew back in to try to screw into the part that was still stuck. As soon as he pushed, the tip of the cork split in half and fell down into the wine with the tiniest little splash. "Damn it." He used a very polite tone when he said it.

Mrs. Baron reached across the table for the bottle and a glass. She poured out some wine. "Not to worry," she said. "We'll pick it out."

"Dry cork," Mr. Baron explained. "Nothing wrong with the screw." He held it up for us to see.

When he had the chance to talk about it, we all saw that Mr. Baron was a real expert in antique things. Mom suggested that there were probably a lot of old barns up around here filled with all kinds of old country-style antiques. Mr. Baron agreed. He was very excited by that idea. He said that the amazing thing was that if you find things in the right place you can get them for next to nothing. A friend of his found an old wind-up phonograph at the dump and he took it home for nothing, but then you can go into an antique store in downtown

Toronto and pay an arm and a leg for a tea cup. The difference is the finder's fee. He said that's what you're really paying for. If you want somebody else to find it for you, then you have to pay. If you take the time and the trouble to find it yourself, well then, you don't need to be rich to have some nice old things. Everyone agreed that it made sense.

The mention of the barns got Mrs. Baron telling us about the area, and then her Daddy. She called him "Daddy". He had owned the land that the resort was on, so when she was little she came up here every summer for almost twenty years.

"It wasn't a resort then," she said. "There were two lots. One was empty. Daddy intended to keep it that way so we'd have more privacy. We had a cabin on the one beside, which would have started right about where this cabin is. The cabin was back a bit. The lake used to flood more than, every year, right up to here. So Daddy built the cabin up there, about where the last cabin is. And I'll tell you, it was much more primitive than this."

"I'll bet it was," Mom said. "No indoor plumbing, I'm sure."

"Oh, no way."

"Natural plumbing," I said.

"That's about exactly it."

"Maybe that's *your* old corkscrew," Emily suggested.

"I might even be older than that," Mrs. Baron said.



“Maybe not,” Mr. Baron speculated. He was looking at the corkscrew.

“No, we had no wine that I remember. Daddy had his rye. That was his drink.”

“You don’t come back here every summer?” Mom wondered.

“It’s off and on now for a few years. This guy—“ she pointed to the boathouse—“only bought it in sixty-two, I think.”

“His father, wasn’t it?” Mr. Baron suggested.

“Yes, that’s right. It was his father who already had it but started building all the cottages in sixty-two, around there anyway, and then I think this guy took it over when the father was too old.”

“Your father sold it to them?”

“My father died in fifty-eight. He never had a will, never believed in that sort of thing, so it was chaos. My brothers wanted to sell it, because it was getting to be valued property. They were developing up and around all through here. Mom didn’t care. She was civilised. She didn’t love coming out here, seeing Daddy get wild every summer. It had that effect on him. And she was in shock from his death. Didn’t want to think about pieces of paper and pieces of land. So my brothers sold it, put the money aside to look after Mom and divide up between us later.”

“Amazing what a death can do to the family,” Dad said.

Mrs. Baron interlocked her fingers and pulled her hands apart slowly. "I've seen it happen. It wasn't so bad with us. We got through it." She sipped her wine and set it down. It was quiet. "Anyway, I wanted the land. And at one point my husband at the time and I offered to buy it, anonymously. Completely anonymously. We thought we were being smart, we'd avoid the family politics. We'd tell them well after it was all over. Eventually build a nice place and invite everyone over. We figured they'd forgive us if we did that. I have no problem with them, I love them, but let the place be mine and I'll lend it to them whenever they want. You want something to get done, you put one person in charge, not seven, not three."

I looked at Dad to agree. "I agree," he said, folding his arms.

"Brilliant plan we had, but it backfired."

"Oh, no."

"We put in a bid, what we thought was a fair bid, and wouldn't you know it—"

"O my god, they rejected it," Mom guessed.

"They rejected it flat."

"They smelled a rat," Mr. Baron said.

"They did not. I'm sure of it. They got a better deal. Before we could decide what to do, someone else came along with the right money at the right time and, ching-ching, it was theirs."

"Unbelievable."

Mrs. Baron took a drink of wine. I could see her throat sliding up and down like a rooster's. She put down her juice glass. "That's how *I* felt."

"Tell me Doug," Mom said, "Do you play cards?"

They got talking and they decided that they were going to play. Mom suggested Bridge or Euchre. Mrs. Baron asked if we knew how to play, and Mom said that I could play a little, and that Julie couldn't hold all the cards for Bridge.

Mrs. Baron swallowed some wine. "There's too many of us to play Euchre," she said. "Why don't I show you a game we can all play."

Julie agreed.

"A betting game," Mrs. Baron added.

Then Mr. Baron knew what she was talking about. "Oh, that's a good game," he said.

Mom went to find the cards and Dad took his and Mom's glasses to the kitchen for a refill. It was almost dark outside. The earth was turning completely away from the sun. But we could still see the lake, or at least a black splotch where we knew the lake was.

"Is it hotter than hell in here?" Dad asked as he came back from the kitchen, "or is it just my imagination?"

"There's not an ounce of breeze coming through those screens."

"It's just your imagination."

"Sure."

“It’s actually quite cool.”

Mom found the cards and took them out of the pack. She asked Mrs. Baron if we needed the jokers and Mrs. Baron looked at her husband. “I find it’s better without,” he said. “It’s a little more ruthless.”

We all brought chairs up to the table and prepared to listen to Mrs. Baron tell us the rules of the game.

18.

The game was called Grace. At least that is what she always called it. She thought that it might have another name, but since being in grace was a big part of the game, she started calling it Grace when she was a little girl spending her summers at Lake Chewanuk.

“Wait,” she said. “It’s not a big betting game, but you’re going to need three nickels.”

How the game works is that everybody starts with three nickels. Each hand that you lose costs five cents. The winner is the last player to lose all of his money.

The dealer gives each person, including himself, four cards. At first, you are not allowed to look at the front cards. You must arrange them in a rectangle.



Depending on how superstitious you are you might want to take the time to decide which card to put where, because after all the cards are set up, you are only allowed one *quick* look at the bottom two cards. This is important as the game gets going.

On each hand you want to have the lowest total of all your cards added. The Jacks, Queens, and Kings are ten. Aces are one. So if you have an Ace, a Knight, a six, and a two, your total is, let me see, nineteen.

After everyone has taken a peek at the two closest cards, the person to the left of the dealer is allowed to take one card from the top of the deck, which the dealer just put face-down on the table. You can look at this card and then you exchange it with one of the cards that you already have. Don't forget, you have to do this without looking at your cards. In fact, you can never look at your cards again until the end of the game, so you better start remembering everything you do.

Once you've decided which card you don't want, you put it face-up beside the deck. Hopefully, it wasn't an Ace that was in the back row and that you forgot about. Now the next person, the person to your

left, can either pick up your old card, or take a chance choosing from the top of the face-down deck.

You keep doing this all the way around. In fact, you'll probably do it for a couple of rounds or more. But when you think that you have some pretty low cards and when it's your turn again, you don't take a card. Instead you knock your knuckles on the table. It's the sound that nobody wants to hear because it means that they all get only one more chance to take a card. So it goes around the table like before, with everybody hoping he gets a good card and gives away a ten, until it gets back to you. You don't go, though. You turn over all of your cards and add them up. It might come to six. Now everyone else turns over the rest of the cards. If anyone else's total is the same or less than yours, six or lower in this case, then you lose and you have to put a nickel in the pot. But if you do have the lowest total, then it's everyone else who has to put a nickel in the pot. After everyone has paid his dues, you play another hand. This time the person to the left of the last dealer has the honour of shuffling and dealing.

After you lose three times, you will be down, but not out. This is where grace comes in. You can continue to play *in grace* until you're in a situation where you have to pay and can't. So, if I'm in grace and I win, then I can keep playing. I don't get out of grace, but I don't die either. And since there is no limit to how long I can play in grace, if I keep winning hands, then I might even win the whole game. Next to

you'll survive one more hand or suddenly turn into a mere spectator waiting to see who will win.

We played a couple of practice hands just to make sure that we understood. Instead of actually having to play, we just said, "Oh, so you'd be paying a nickel there into the pot," and the person who would have had to pay a nickel put a finger protectively on the little triangle of change sitting on the table in front of him.

Once she knew the rules Emily did not want to play. "It's luck," she said, as she sat back in her chair and rolled her hands into the hem of her shirt.

Mrs. Baron said that it wasn't luck. "You'll see once we start for real." She smiled at Emily. "It's really a memory game."

Emily wasn't convinced. "It's still a lot of luck." She pushed her chair back. She doesn't like to play games that involve luck.

The rest of us played only one game, which Mom won. We had fun, but the Barons were finished their wine, and with all of the bodies the cottage was as hot as Godzilla's armpit.

"Thank you for protecting us from the mosquitoes." The Barons stood by the door, ready to leave.

"Thank you for teaching us a new game."

"Fishing tomorrow?" Mr. Baron asked Dad.

"Probably."

“Probably.”

“It’ll be a good day,” said Mrs. Baron. She looked through the screen.

I didn’t know what she meant. I don’t think Dad did either, but he said, “Hope so.”

“Something my father said,” Mrs. Baron told us. “Mosquitoes in the evening, fish in the morning.”

19.

That day was like a steaming sponge and nobody wanted to do anything. To fill up the hours I did things like visit the game room, seven times to be precise. Every time the two paddles sat there waiting to be used.

I also went swimming twice.

That night was awful sleeping again. After I tossed and turned the whole night, morning still hadn’t come. I woke up and everything was grey. You couldn’t even tell where the sun was in the sky.

Noonish, when I went swimming, everyone was saying, “Let it rain. We need to get rid of the humidity.” A little later, the grey started to turn darker and became very windy. I heard someone say that it would blow over. A man with one of those golf visors that don’t have



the hat part looked up at the sky. "It'll blow over," he said. He wanted to take his little nephews out in a motor boat for a ride.

"The leaves know," a woman said. She was looking up into the tree above her head and smiling. "They're turned upside down. That's what they do."

The wind got stronger. The force of it beat the force of gravity on the lawn chairs. One-by-one the chairs flipped onto their sides. Then gravity had them again.

At the end of the lake purple was spreading across the sky, making the day darker and darker. "That's tornado weather," my father said. A young man in a moustache and a body shirt closed up his cooler, stuffed his chair under his arm and started marching toward the cottages.

Within a few minutes the grounds were almost deserted. The only people I saw were Emily and Julie. They were down by the swings at the end of the resort. I went down there to play with them. On the way down, I saw this empty box of gum lying on the ground and picked it up. There was a little see-through window on it and I had a funny idea. I opened the box up and tore a little hole in the side. Then I put it back together. Now I could see through the back and through the plastic window.

The girls were swinging in the wind, seeing how high they could go and letting their hair fly around in the breeze. When they saw me

coming, I said, "I got a camera" and I started to make the sound of taking pictures. I walked around them in a circle pretending to take lots of pictures sideways, and from different angles. They thought it was funny. They threw their hair even more and they swung higher. I peered through the little hole, clicking away, and watching them go back and forth. I couldn't see much, but I pretended. I knelt down on one knee where the grass was worn down to sand and aimed my camera upwards to get a picture of Julie at the top of her swing. When she swung back down, the edge of the wooden seat caught me perfectly just above the eye.

My mother has a great belief in the toughness of the human body. I think she wouldn't have been inclined to take me to a doctor, except everyone kept saying things like how deep it looked and that I might have a concussion. Mrs. Baron came over and looked at me. She said that the thing is these things will heal on their own, but a couple of stitches can make it close up that much faster. Then there is less of a chance of an infection and a scar. Dad was wincing and saying that it must hurt. He agreed that it was probably best to go to a doctor. Someone, a woman, not Mrs. Baron, another one who looked a bit like her, went down to the office to get directions to an emergency.

Mom wrapped me up with ice and towels and got her keys and her purse. We walked up to the car, Mrs. Baron, Emily and Julie

following us. I got into the front passenger seat. Mom climbed into the other side. I shut my door and waited. I could feel my left eye swelling up second by second. I wanted to take off the towel to see how bloody it was, but they'd told me not to remove it.

Mom arranged her purse on the seat and then dug into it and took out her sunglasses. She put them on. She realised that there wasn't any sun. She said something to herself. She took them off, put them back into her purse. She left her purse on the seat and she got back out of the car. Mrs. Baron was standing there by the left front fender explaining everything to the girls and answering their questions. Mom stood with them with her arms folded across her chest, waiting.

The woman came jogging up the hill with a yellow piece of paper in her hand. She had that funny jog that some women have, with her shoulders up around her ears and her arms bent up around her chin. She handed Mom the paper.

We drove into town with the piece of paper on the dashboard. Mom attempted to question me about just what the hell I was trying to do putting my head in front of the swing. At that moment she seemed more worried about me mentally than physically. I rested the right side of my head against the window and pretended that I was suffering too much to speak. The vibrations made my head feel somewhat better.

It was still "tornado conditions", as my Dad said, and there were

no people or cars anywhere in the town. It was like a Sunday afternoon.

We turned left and went half a block before we saw the sign for Dr. Cooper on the front lawn of an old white house.

Dr. R.L. Cooper Family Dentist
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The sign was metal and it was supported by a metal post. On either side of it, a couple of yards away, a big elm tree stood, its trunk as thick as a forty-gallon drum.

The room we stepped into was a front porch that had been redecorated into a waiting room. Straight across from the door we'd come in were two other doors exactly the same. The one on the left opened and I didn't so much see the man who came through it first as I did what was behind it. There were a dining room and a living room. Both were filled with fancy old furniture made out of shiny wood. The rooms were dark, just like the waiting room we had walked into, but I could see through them to the back window, which was covered with thick curtains but still had a little crack in the middle that I could see through out to the backyard. I couldn't really make anything out back there. I just saw light and lots of green, maybe hedges. But the door quickly shut, and there was suddenly an old man standing in front of

us. I presumed it was Dr. Cooper.

We said hello to him. He nodded to say, "Of course, I say hello back to you," then turned to his left and took three steps to the other door. At the door he stopped, looked a little bit over his shoulder but mainly down at the two inch thick carpet:

"From, ah, Lake Chewanuk. Is that right?"

"Yes," Mom said.

He turned the glass knob and gave the door a sudden shove.

"Manager's wife over there gave me a call. Come on in."

We entered. Dr. Cooper went over to the sink and turned on the water. I sat down on the edge of the dentist chair that was in the middle of the room. Mom stood near me with her purse under her arm. I was being very careful to keep the towel on my forehead, since I was in the doctor's presence. I thought he would appreciate it.

My arms were getting tired, though, and I was having to switch back and forth between them more often. The doctor was at the sink for a while before I noticed what he was doing. He was washing his hands. There was a problem with his soap dispenser. The pump wouldn't work, so he had to screw off the lid and pour the soap onto his hands, then put the lid back on and wash his hands. After his hands were washed he decided to rinse off the soap dispenser. That got one hand soapy again, so he had to rinse them once more.

The sink was in a countertop like people have in their kitchens. On the corner of the counter sat a stack of white towels that looked like that had just been put there. He took the top one and dried his hands. While he was doing all of this, I don't know why, I got the feeling that he was disappointed with me, at least that he was unhappy to be bothered. Maybe it was his afternoon off.

After his hands were dry he opened a drawer, just like the one we keep knives and forks in, took out a case, opened the case and put on the glasses that were inside. The frames were black and they made him look intelligent. "Let's have a look," he said. Before he reached me, he gave Mom half a glance and sort of a sign and pinched his lips together. It made me feel somewhat better.

I removed the towel from my head and pulled back my hair in order for him to consider the evidence more clearly. It only took him a second before he turned to my mother and told her that he couldn't freeze it. Mom didn't say anything. Just like me I'm sure she didn't know exactly what he meant. Why couldn't he freeze? Didn't he have the stuff? Or is it dangerous to freeze things near the eye. Later, when we got back to the cottage and tried to explain what happened, no one understood why he couldn't freeze.

He was at his counter again, pulling things down from a shelf. There wasn't enough of something, though, maybe string, so he had to go through a doorway that had no door into a small back room. He

returned with a little box and turned away from us and fiddled for a minute or two before turning around and telling me, “Why don’t you lay back and make your self comfortable?”

I inched myself back on the chair and then he pumped it up and spun it closer to the stool that he had next to it. He turned on the overhead light that they use for looking into your mouth. I was probably looking kind of white just at the idea of no freezing, because he told me that it was as easy as fixing a button. Then he began cleaning around the cut with a napkin. That only took a second. The next thing I knew he was holding a needle and thread in front of my face. I closed my eyes and he began to sew.

It was not the worst pain that I ever felt in my life. Maybe the fourth worst, right after slamming my finger in the car door. The prick was bad, but I think that the feeling of the thread going through was even worse. The friction sent shivers down to my peter and my toes.

When he was finished I had to wait on the edge of the chair with a Band-Aid over my eyes while Mom filled out the forms. She and the doctor started talking about where we were from and how long we were staying. He started to ask me the usual questions, and while he did so he wrapped his hand, which was very big, around my upper arm and kept squeezing it very hard. He smiled while he said, “You’re a healthy kid, eh? You won’t be for long if you keep throwing yourself in front of moving objects. You’re a healthy kid, but you’re not a cat. One life . .

..” Stuff like that, and squeezing my arm like crazy all the time, just to let me know who was boss. Mom smiled like she thought it was funny. She always likes old men of that sort. I don’t mind them either, I guess, but you’re just not in the mood two seconds after having your head bashed in.

20.

I was resting myself on the sofa, the scabby, green one, with my feet, laced in my white running shoes, hanging over the end, safely beyond the required distance that shoes are to remain from all couches, upholstered chairs, actually chairs in general, as well as beds.

“He’s right there,” a voice said.

I had intended to answer the door, but I was giving it a second, waiting for a knock. But there wasn’t one. Dad poked his head out of the kitchen and hollered at whoever it was before they needed to injure their knuckles.

It was the Barons and the lady who looked like Mrs. Baron, the one who’d run down to get Dr. Cooper’s address. They had arrived to inspect my injury. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, there wasn’t much to see. All the blood had been cleaned away and now there was a medium-sized Band-Aid stuck at an angle over my right eye.



Dad made them all a drink and he brought me a pop, since I was the guest of honour. They all sat down around the table and looked at me while I sat on the couch, smirking and telling them about the gas station guy, the old house, and most importantly how it was a dentist that had stitched me up. Everyone had a comment to make about that, and some of them told their own stories, usually about how you could get the strangest mixtures of jacks-of-all-trades.

Then, of course, the one I knew was coming came. Mr. Baron asked me if I'd got my teeth checked while I was there. And that started some going to the dentist stories, and some having teeth pulled out stories. These were usually kind of gory, took place at home, and involved a door or a pair of pliers and a father. This reminded me that I hadn't been frozen and that's when I talked about that.

Julie stepped up on to the couch and stood beside me, so that my head was only about up to her waist. She patted me on the head. "I'm sorry," she said.

"It wasn't your fault."

"Yes, it was."

"It wasn't your fault at all." She knew it wasn't, but she liked the dramatic effect of apologising. It worked too, because everyone told her that she couldn't blame herself. Mrs. Baron said, it wasn't anybody's fault. Dad disagreed with this, I'm sure, but he didn't want to come right out and say that I deserved it. He just sort of reminded me by

saying that he couldn't wait until I got my film developed, since they should be good pictures, which was quite an effective reminder.

Meanwhile, Mr. Manager came by. He was a little dressed up, just half a notch above the rest of us, like he always is. We invited him in, but he was fine standing in the doorway with his hand on the latch.

First, he asked how everybody was, then he asked about me specifically. We didn't want him to worry. Three of us answered him at the same time. We told him I was fine. It was just a little cut. He looked at my eye and nodded. Then he left us with a smile and a comment about the weather. As he closed the door behind himself, he put his hand in his pocket and jangled his keys, or maybe it was his change.

Mom said, "Every time something like this happens he has to worry he's gonna be sued. It's really kind of crazy when you think about it. One little cut like this and he could lose his whole resort."

The woman who looked like Mrs. Baron had something to say about this. "They have a responsibility to keep their property safe."

"Within reason," Mom said. "There's only so much you can do."

"I'll tell you, my aunt wouldn't be anywhere if she hadn'ta sued." Even though the woman didn't know us, she didn't seem shy to make herself at home. She was stretching one arm across the table as she talked and was resting some of her weight on it in a relaxed way. Her talking, though, was pretty energetic. She told us that her aunt was

walking through a mall when a sign fell on her head. She couldn't work any more she was hurt so bad. She was actually close to retirement already, but she still needed to work for a while because she wasn't eligible for her pension yet. "She woulda been out in the street if she hadn'ta sued," the woman said. "Mind you, she only got nickels and dimes out of it."

"You hear some stories, though," Dad said, "where some guy jumps out of a hotel window and then the family sues the hotel for not having bars on the windows. That's a joke if you ask me."

We talked about suing for a few more minutes. My stomach was growling like a lion, but no one heard. Julie finally cleared the place, though, when she asked Mom how much longer we were going to wait before we ate. The Barons and the other woman took that as their cue.

After our dinner we heard footsteps on the stairs again. This time it was the manager's wife. I could see her peering through the screen as she hammered the door with her fist. When we called to her to come in, she marched into the middle of the room and stood there in her grass-stained running shoes with a three-pronged garden tool in one hand and a fistful of weeds in the other.

"How's the boy?" she asked.

"He's fine."

"Right." She looked at me. "How's the head?"

"Stitches there, but doesn't hurt too much."

“So they gave you stitches. Where’d you go? You went to the hospital, didn’t you?”

“Dr. Cooper.”

“The dentist,” Emily said from her seat behind the table.

The manager’s wife looked from me to Mom to Dad.

I think we all knew what she wanted. She was worried that we were going to sue her for something.

“I don’t understand how it happened,” she said. This was the moment where I was supposed to say that it was my fault.

“I got hit in the head with the swing seat,” I said.

“It’s not sharp,” the manager’s wife said. “I went to have a look at it. It’s just a wooden seat.”

I was considering telling the whole story.

“You know,” she said, “with kids running around here all day we have to make sure there are no sharp edges on anything, stones are even, no broken glass in the grass.”

“I can imagine,” Mom said. I could tell she didn’t like the way the woman was talking.

Dad was a duck with water dripping off his back. He sipped his drink and reclined in his chair.

Now the manager’s wife wanted to know all about Cooper. “Did the dentist write anything down by any chance? Maybe I should phone him, just to see, well you know, we’ll see.” She didn’t want to insult

us so she kind of let that idea slip away. There was a lull after this and then my mom said her thing.

“It’s very nice of you to drop by and show your concern for Lawrence. He cut his head playing, he needed a few stitches. Now he is fine and he will be fine. There’s no need for you to worry any longer about this . . .”—I could see her thinking of different words—“. . . incident.”

“The important thing is he’s all right, isn’t it?” asked the manager’s wife.

## 21.

On the horizon the storm was still waiting. Across the lake and above the forest the clouds changed shape quickly enough for my eye to notice. Maybe it was raining over there, thirty kilometres away.

I walked down to the lake and stood on the narrow beach, just on the edge of the wet sand, which I find messes your shoes less than dry sand. I stood there for a while, just watching the lake. Waves travelled toward the shore and broke their tiny break almost at my feet. Further out the water was flat.

A medium-sized powerboat approached slowly from the east, followed devotedly by a deep, growing V.

At first the boat was silent, but then gradually the motor became loud enough to hear. Soon I could hear the sound of music as well, though the motor was too loud for me to recognise what song was playing.

There must have been a lot of people on the boat because it was sunk down pretty deep in the water. The only person that I could see, though, was the one in the driver's seat. I couldn't tell if it was a he or a she because the boat was probably a hundred metres away, and also because whoever it was had on a rain parka with the hood up. As the boat went past, the driver waved. I think it was at me. And I waved back. Then, because of the angle, I could see that the boat was towing a dinghy.

Later, I wandered into the game room where Emily and Julie were playing Ping-Pong. I got the distinct feeling that my presence was not appreciated, but they were almost finished anyway. They told me the Barons were coming over to play cards. So I waited for them to finish. Then we went up to the cottage together.

Mr. Baron was dealing the cards. He pushed one off the top of the deck with the thumb of his left hand and then clipped it between the pointer-finger and thumb of his right-hand. Both of his hands were large. All of his fingers were thick. But he could handle those cards very well. With nonchalant finger-flicks he slid them one at a time into a gift-

pile in front of you. When each pile had four cards, he slapped down the left-overs and flipped over the top one for everyone to wonder about. A four of diamonds.

I arranged my cards into a square and then I peeked at the bottom two. A ten of Hearts and a seven of Spades. I'd have to get rid of both of them if I wanted to survive. Seventeen is even high as a total score, let alone half a score.

Mom was sitting on the left of Mr. Baron. When everyone looked ready she reached out to the deck. She didn't take the four. She drew from the upside-down pile. It must have been a half-decent card because she kept it and threw out an eight of spades. Then it was my turn. Instead of taking the eight I went for the upside-down pile. The gamble turned out to be worth it. I got a four of diamonds.

Not great but okay. Now I had to decide what to do with it. I was definitely going to keep it, but I didn't know if I should put it in my bottom row, which would have been the safe choice, or take a gamble again and pull one of the cards out of the top row. If I did that, there was always the chance that the card I pulled would be lower than a four. That's a cringer when that happens, especially when it's an Ace. But there is one good thing about changing the top cards earlier in the game. Then you know what you have up there, as long as you don't forget, or get confused, which can happen easily enough with all those

different numbers floating around, and especially after a couple of games.

So I did it. I picked from the back row. I suppose there could be a bit of a decision between the left back card and the right back card, but right from the first night we played I made it my policy to always take from the left side first. I could have tried to use my intuition about which side was the highest, but I figured that gambling like that would end up having a 50/50 success rate, or worse. So to help me remember what I had and hadn't changed I always started from the left, at least unless I had a really strong intuition or else everything had been making me lose.

The back left card was a four. That's the other thing. Sometimes it can work out even. Except sometimes even is really ahead, since now I knew what I had back there.

Mrs. Baron was to my left. She took my four and quickly plopped it into her back row. I guess she liked to know what she had back there too. Her move worked out a little better than mine because the card she replaced was a fat old King. That's nice when you can lower your score by six just like that on your first move. With that kind of progress you know you're going to end up doing well in the end.

We continued around the table, one, two, three times before Mr. Baron knocked. From the first time that we played I knew that he did not usually knock unless he was pretty certain he would win.



We all turned over our cards, exposing them mercilessly to everyone else's inquisitive looks, and sure enough Mr. Baron was the lowest with three aces and a two. The rest of us put a nickel in the pot.

Three hands and I was in grace. It seems like that's the way it usually goes for me. I'm the type of player who seems to always be in grace. Some people never lose and everyone else is dead, and they still have their fifteen cents, but me, the game starts and boom boom boom, three losses, I'm in grace, and if I still win it's obviously not by much.

Somewhere in the card games that night Mr. Baron remembered that he'd forgotten something back at the cottage. He said to Mrs. Baron, "Did I leave something back at the cottage?" and then they exchanged about 47 looks and he finally said that he'd be right back.

What it was was that he had a little minnow net that I'm sure was for Emily. From the conversation after, I could sort of tell that he had been talking with her before about catching minnows, which I had no idea about. I never knew they were buddies. But I guess when he came in the cottage he saw all of us there and he suddenly realised about how you can't give one kid a present without also giving something to all the other kids, so I think it was just then that he all of a sudden decided that the net was for all of us. Still, the predicament made him shy and so he ended up not giving it in that nice a way. He handed it to Emily, and then as she reached for it he pulled it back and made a little circle and said, "For all of yas there," and then he gave it to her. It's

mainly because of later that I know it was probably for her. As we kept playing he would talk about some trick for catching minnows and where to find them and when he did he would always say this to Emily.

We played quite a few games that night, but the Barons finally left, and then we kids went to bed, and it must have been my eventful day or something, but I fell asleep in about two seconds flat. I did wake up in the middle of the night. I could hear my parents talking and then I heard the door open and close but I don't know exactly if they or one of them was coming or going. It was pretty hot even in the middle of the night, but I fell back asleep in one second flat this time, and I don't remember anything, not even a dream, until I came back to life the next morning.

## 22.

A water-filled Mason jar stood in the middle of the breakfast table, presiding over the plates, forks, knives, spoons, basket, salt and pepper shakers, jam, peanut butter, butter, napkins, glasses, and so on. Three minnows took turns darting half-heartedly from one side of the jar to the other, where they would take a break to nip at the meniscus.

Through the jar I could see the day and the lake. The first was grey and the second was calm.

On the corner of the table sat the minnow net. A little river of water was running from it toward the edge of the table, but it had not quite made it all the way, and it was hard to tell if it would because it was already getting thinner in some places because of evaporation.

Mom was in the kitchen making scrambled eggs.

“What’s this?” I asked her.

Mom looked up to see what I was talking about. “Emily wants to tell you.”

“Emily got them with her net?”

“Yes. She wants to tell you. Where have you been anyways?”

“Nowhere. Sleeping,” I said, as I watched her liquify a measuring cup of eggs with a fork.

“Tomorrow we’re going out for breakfast,” she informed me.

“It looks good,” I told her about the breakfast she was making.

“Where is Emily?”

“They went down to get me more milk.”

“And Julie?”

“Yep.”

I sat down sideways on a chair at the table so that I could watch the minnows. They were all roughly the same colours. Silver, grey, and black. But one was slightly darker. That one and another one were about the same size. The third one was smaller. It was actually so thin

that its tail was see-through, or at least it looked that way. But it was zipping around too fast for me to be sure.

“Where’s Dad?” I asked. I was wondering if he had seen the minnows.

“He’s fishing.”

“I didn’t know that he was going today.”

“Neither did I,” she said.

“By himself?”

“Oh yeah. I think.”

Milk is required for scrambled eggs, which I am actually able to make. The trick is to beat the eggs well. Beat them before you add milk and beat them after you’ve added the milk. Beat them with a fork or a wire beater, but a fork is fine if you have a good arm. Mom is an impressive beater. And now she was able to continue with the beating process because Emily and Julie had returned with the milk.

Emily ran to the kitchen with the big-sized carton in her arms without looking at me. “Did you tell him?” she asked Mom in a loud and excited voice.

“He asked, but he’s waiting for you,” Mom answered. She took the milk, gave it a shake, opened it, and added some to the eggs.

Julie had jumped up onto a chair and now she was leaning across the table so that she could tap her fingernail against the glass of the Mason jar. “Did you see them?” she asked. Her hair had been

ried back by Mom, who can't stand it when their hair is in their eyes, and she was dressed in a clean T-shirt. Maybe it was the walk down to the store that had done it, but she looked like she had been awake for hours doing something fun.

"No," I said. "See what?"

She tapped her finger on the glass. "Fish."

Emily sat down at the other end of the table, closest to the kitchen and right across from Julie. She watched Julie try to get the minnows' attention.

"Who got them," I asked Emily, "you?"

"I got them," she said, before I'd finished my question. She looked at the little creatures that she had captured and then said to me, "Give me the net."

She showed me exactly how she had caught them by leaning off of the end of the dock. "It's not easy," she told me, putting her fist in the net and making it expand. "The net's not really that big."

The minnows mesmerised us as we ate our scrambled eggs and toast. "It's like a bouquet of flowers," Mom said, "except it's fish."

Julie wanted to know what Emily was going to do with them. She thought maybe we should try to take them home and put them in an aquarium, but Emily didn't want to do that. She didn't know what she would do with them, except she didn't want to take them home.

"Well, it was very clever of you," Mom said. "Very very clever."

Emily leaned over her plate and put her finger against the jar. One minnow darted over, thinking to sniff her finger, but it couldn't and quickly darted away.

Even though Mom didn't say much about Dad going fishing by himself without informing anyone, I could tell she was thinking about it. She didn't particularly seem mad or sad, but she was acting differently. It was almost as if she was purposely having fun and being in a good mood because of his absence. For instance, she suddenly got this idea that she was going to teach us all how to play shuffleboard. We told her that kids weren't allowed, but she said the we'd go see if the board was being used, and if it wasn't it wouldn't hurt anybody for us to play for a half an hour or so.

Luckily, the only thing on the shuffleboard was sand. I made it my job to sweep it away, while Mom went into get the pucks and poles from the office. When she got back I asked her who was working, but it wasn't Katherine.

At shuffleboard it was me and Emily against Mom and Julie, and even with Mom not trying they managed to mangle us pretty well. This fact was agreed upon by a kid who was watching us. I had never seen him before he appeared standing with his hands fitted into his back pockets on the side of the slope that led from the cottages down the lake. He watched from there for a couple of minutes, but he didn't

wait long before he came over and stood right beside the shuffleboard and started commenting on the game.

He was obviously older than me, by at least two years, maybe even more. He wasn't a giant, but he was taller than me. He also looked muscular, not really muscular like in a football player way, but skinny muscular. You could see the veins on his forearms and something that looked like bark beneath his fingernails. It might even have been bark, but probably not. Still, it looked like bark. I couldn't see this when we were playing shuffleboard but I saw it later.

Friendly people can be friendly, but so can people who aren't. When he started talking to us, I thought that he was the friendly type who really is not friendly. Mom on the other hand seemed to love him, especially that day. Every time she made a shot, he told her some compliment, either "good shot" or "nice eye" or something in that family.

"What's your name?" my mother asked him.

"Phil," he said quickly. In the way he said his name I thought I heard the violent thing about him that I sensed.

"Do you play this game?"

He tightened his neck and his jaw. "I've never played," he answered.

Mom tipped her pole toward him. "How about you fill in for me?"

Phil stepped back. "No. Play," he said. "I've never played."

"Neither have they," she said about us.

“What’s your name?” he asked, lifting his chin to her.

“My name’s Beverly,” she said. I was surprised that she said her first name, because she always tells us to call adults mister and Mrs., and she always, when she is meeting kids, introduces herself as Mrs. Bole. She held the pole out a little further and he accepted like somebody had just handed him a shovel and said, “Go to work.”

We all got introduced and we played a couple of rounds together, while my mother watched. For the first few shots Phil wasn’t very good. His puck either petered out in the middle of the board or it shot off the end, stirred up a cloud of dust, and buried itself in the sand. He smiled at me and said, “Takes a while to get just the right force there?” It didn’t take him that long, though. Pretty soon he was sliding them right into the triangle almost every shot.

Mom congratulated some of his shots and they talked about the hot weather.

A little later, she walked over to the canteen and came back with a package of cigarettes. She sat down in one of the wooden chairs and smoked a cigarette. She doesn’t smoke that often, so it’s always weird to see her when she does.

“Shame on you,” Julie told her. “It’ll kill you.”

But Mom didn’t seem to mind. She just crossed her legs and puffed away.



The frying pan crackled with grilled cheese sandwiches. We sipped our pops and attempted to get the attention of the minnows as we waited.

Phil told us that he and his mother were treating themselves to a three-bedroom cottage, even though there were just two of them. He said that his mother just got a good job so she could afford it now. His father wasn't able to take a vacation, but might drive up for a day or two if he got the time.

Phil finished his glass of pop and asked my mother if she had more. He went into the kitchen to get it himself. When he came back he set the glass down on the table and gave himself a tour of the cottage by sticking his head into the bathroom and the bedrooms one by one. "I think it's a bit bigger than ours," he informed us, as he returned to the table.

I still wondered what exactly he was, but it wasn't easy to tell by the way he looked. It was possible that he was a rocker because he wore a pair of tight blue jeans and a T-shirt with medium-length sleeves that hung down to just past his elbows. His hair parted in the middle, puffed over his ears and slid down the back of his neck the same as some rockers, but it wasn't long enough to say head-banger all over it. And he looked a little more athletic than most head-bangers do too, and whereas I find a lot of head-bangers are pretty zitty, he just had a

couple of small ones behind his jaw, near his ear. He also didn't have that fuzzy moustache. He must shave sometimes. I don't have to, yet. I hope I never will. I'm barely afflicted with acne yet, either.

There's no doubt that I don't look like I'd fit in his gang. For some reason, though, he seemed to kind of like me. Maybe he appreciated my stitched-face look. He did ask me how it happened. After I told him all about it and everything, I asked him if he ever had stitches, and he held out his hand with his fingers spread apart. Julie and Emily were right there too, and we all looked. On the side of his second smallest finger from almost the palm of his hand to almost the tip of his finger ran one thin squiggly white line with short white lines crossing it. Out of the corner of my eye I could see him watching our faces as we looked at it. I could tell that he was waiting for us to ask how he did it, but none of us had the nerve. Instead, I asked him if he played hockey. He shook his head a little bit without saying anything. "You?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. But he didn't ask me any more about it. We went on to talk about the resort. Emily, Julie, and I told him everything we knew that was possible to do. I could see him thinking, but it was hard to tell which one he liked the best.

After lunch Mom took out another cigarette to smoke. Phil leaned forward over the table. "Beverly?" he said quietly.

Mom looked up from the end of her cigarette.

"Could I bum a cigarette from you?"

She put the lighter on top of the pack and slid it to the other side of the brown table top. "Help yourself," she said. Phil pushed up the inside of the pack with his thumb and quickly a cigarette was in his hands, mouth and being lit by a flame in his knuckled fingers. He puffed in, leaned back, and then out, directing the smoke in a thin stream sideways down from the small spout of his cigarette face. My sisters and I watched in disbelief.

Mom told us about being a little girl moving from town to town with her parents. One day after school she sat in somebody's front yard crying until a woman came out and asked her what was wrong. When Mom said she was lost, the woman asked if she knew her address. Mom told her something-something, Edmonton, and the woman jumped back like Mom had suddenly turned into an insect. "My dear," she said, "do you know where you are now?" But Mom didn't know. "You're in Victoria, B.C. British Columbia."

"Moving and moving," Mom said. "I didn't even know where I was living half the time."

24.

Hanging near the bottom of the jar were pieces of the spider Emily had just fed the minnows. Beside the jar, on the table, languished scattered crumbs from the toast of the sandwiches.

The little fish are long and lively. Now they follow one another like elephants, tail to trunk, as they survey the sides of the squarish jar. I take pen and paper and at the table that they sit on I sit with my tongue out to concentrate on drawing the shape of the jar. But the line between the water and the air, which was the jar, also hosted the lines of the room.

In the jar that had been in the room all day I saw the room. In the jar that had not been there all day, the jar I drew wasn't the walls, the window, the sun, the couch, or me drawing it all.

To draw the jar I have to draw the room. But it isn't easy to draw a square room in a see-through jar on a flat piece of paper. Even Emily, who is a better drawer, can't do it.

## 25.

We swam. "We" meaning Emily, Julie, and me, Lawrence.

Emily hung her head over the edge of the raft looking for fish.

Julie was stretched out with her back on the wooden planks with her bare belly and her eyes to the clouded sky. She closed her eyes with pizzazz and swept the hair off of her brow with straight fingers both hands at once by hitting her forehead lightly at an angle. "This is boring," she said.

Emily's voice came up through the planks: "Find something to do."

"There's nothing," Julie complained.

But I thought there was something. A water fight. And I sprinkled lake water onto Julie's stomach.

"Daaont," she screamed.

"What?"

She whined again, "Don't," and then she stood up and began to cry. Tears started dropping from her cheeks.

Emily peered up from the lake. She looked funny because the ends of her hair were drenched. Now on either side of her face hung a dripping rag of hair.

Julie's tantrum was just getting up speed. Emily and I both tried to calm her down, but she was in a bona fide bad mood. The more nice things we said, the more she wanted to yell and cry. First she yelled that she wanted to go in. We said, "Sure, you can go in," except she didn't want to go back in the water. I told her that she was going to have to go in the water, but she said no. Then I told her that she shouldn'ta swum out to the raft if she didn't want to swim back. I also made the mistake of adding that only babies could not swim back to where they swam from. She tried to kill me at that point, so I had to grab her wrists to prevent her. That was about where she really lost it.

The water always feels a little cold after you've been on the raft long enough to dry off. At least it's just a couple of strokes to the dock. I jumped out, ran up to the cottage, grabbed the air mattress, and took it back out to the raft. By the time I got there Julie had quieted down a little.

My plan would have worked great if Julie had only co-operated. Instead, she fell down onto the raft and stretched out stiff as a board. She did not want to be on the water even on an air mattress. Every time I touched her to try and lift her, she squealed. Soon enough, we discovered that she would let us roll her, though, if we did it slowly and carefully. So we gradually rolled her from the centre of the raft to the edge. Then Emily got the mattress organised along the edge and held it there while I gave Julie one last roll onto the mattress. I don't think she actually thought that we would do that because there was a bit of a drop from the raft down to the mattress. She began crying then and saying that she was hurt somewhere. We couldn't understand what she was saying though. I was pretty sure that she was all right anyway.

We gave her a good push toward the dock. As she glided across the water I could tell that she was considering not moving and just letting the mattress float around until somebody came to get her. The mattress hit the dock and bounced off a little and she lay there like a banana peel for about half a second before she reached out for the dock and climbed ashore, leaving the mattress drifting on the lake. Her

bare feet beat across the grass as she ran to the cottage where Mom was.

Phil came down to the lake in his bathing suit with a towel around his neck. He saw us and waved. When he reached the sand, he looked around and then walked out onto the dock. He put his towel in a pile at the edge of the dock near the shore. He came out to the corner of the dock and asked us how it was going. He was about to jump in but he looked like he was thinking of something. He turned around and went back for his towel, brought it back and sat it on the very corner of the dock. He asked us if we had been swimming a long time, and then he put his hands above his head and dove. The water was too black for me to see him for a few seconds. He eventually returned to the atmosphere a couple of feet from the raft, shaking his hair and spitting bilge water, as my father calls it.

The air mattress was floating between the raft and the dock. Phil had just swum under it. He asked whose it was. When I told him that it was ours, he asked if he could use it for a second. I said sure and he went and got it and brought it back a bit closer to the raft. He got out of the water quickly and backed up to one edge, then took two long steps and flew off the other side, diving right over the mattress. He emerged shaking his head and spitting bilge water. "Have you done it that far?" he asked me. I told him that I wasn't sure. Emily said to me quietly that I couldn't do it. She said not even to try it. I backed up

to the edge like Phil'd done, got a quick run and sprung into the air, sailing briefly before gravity won me back.

I emerged from the lake and stuck out my tongue.

"Nicely done," Phil said.

"Did I actually clear it?"

"You did actually," Emily said.

"By a mile, eh?" Phil urged. "Come on. Let's move it out a bit further and try again."

Distance diving engrossed our attention for the remains of the afternoon. It must have, because I did not even notice when Dad returned from fishing. Emily and I went back to the cottage about suppertime and Dad was there with a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken and some styrofoam containers of salad. Coleslaw, potato salad and bean salad. The chicken wasn't hot any more. Mom wanted to heat it up, but Dad said that it'd be too much trouble. A little breeze started up while we ate, still a pretty hot and steamy breeze but a breeze at least. The chicken was fine cold. I will sometimes even eat it for leftovers in the morning right out of the fridge. Julie was there. She looked like she had taken a nap. She was being very quite and giving Emily and me silent looks of hatred. The salad wasn't the greatest. The coleslaw was runny. The potato tasted medicinal. And I've never been a big fan of bean salad at any time.



Nobody mentioned where Dad had been, or why he'd been gone for so long. I imagine that was the topic of conversation after dinner when Mom and Dad went out for a drive.

While they were gone we took the minnows down to the lake in front of the cottage where the boats are. Emily tilted the jar and the water ran out. The three little fish wiggled ferociously against the current until the water was almost gone and there was no current. Then they relaxed and fell with the last drops of water plunk plunk plunk into the lake.

At first they didn't move at all. We thought they were dead. After a few seconds, though, they came back to life. They took a couple of little circles where they were near the top of the water, and then in a blink of an eye they disappeared into the nethermost depths of the lake.

26.

I removed my runners and left them on the patch of sand that was accumulating in the corner of my room. Sitting on my bed with my hands on my stomach, I imagined that I was swimming and saw Katherine in a boat a little ways down the lake. For some reason she stood up. The boat rocked from side to side and she was thrown into the water. There was a quiet splash. I swam to her as quickly as I could.

But why? She could swim.

I had to change what I was imagining. How about if she hit her head. On the edge of the boat. She was knocked unconscious. It did not cut her, but she was out for a minute, long enough for a couple of spoonfuls of water to get in her lungs. Then I came up beside her, turned her over and pulled her into shore, a sandy cove with trees whose trunks looked like the trunks of palm trees and whose tops were hidden by the ceiling of my bedroom. I rolled her onto her back on the sand and she coughed herself back to consciousness.

“You saved me,” she said.

I thought about this for a minute, imagining her lips and her eyes and her nostrils, swollen from nearly drowning. The curtains in my room were pulled over the window. The orange light that they gave off lit up Katherine’s skin and the white sand in the cove.

“Lawrence,” she whispered. Her eyelashes shivered, her lips parted, and her head fell to the side. I caught it, though, and turned her so that I could look into her eyes.

“What?” I asked.

“You are my dream. I admire. I love—”

No, that’s wrong. You don’t jump right to “I love you”. You have to take your time. She had to say, “Put your head here and warm me up,” and took my ears in her hands and pushed my cheek to her chest.

I thought about this feeling for a while. It made me feel like I was floating on the air mattress. Then when I thought about the skin of my cheek against the skin of her breast, the sunlight skipped across the sand and curled up in the soft skin of her neck, shoulder—

But would I have been able to see her skin? In the boat she would have had a shirt on. What kind of shirt had I imagined, and how could I get it off of her?

27.

It was the next morning. The ground was soft and the grass was damp from rain that'd fallen during the night. I went up the hill, away from the lake, and walked out to the road. To get to town and to the highway you had to turn right. I had never gone in the other direction so I turned left and followed along as the road entered into a tunnel created by the trees that grew on either side of the road.

The road had no line down the centre of it. It curved this way and that. As I walked down the middle of it I had the impression that I was gradually descending. Maybe it was just my imagination. Since I couldn't see any horizon, only trees and the rolly land, I couldn't judge.

On the left a gravel road led into the trees. I turned down it to see if I could walk all the way to the water. A few crunching steps on the stones, though, and I noticed a "Private Lane" sign. I reversed out to

the road and kept going. I passed two more laneways that were also private. I didn't take them.

I came over the top of one little hill and saw a little stream at the bottom of the next dip. When I got to it, I stopped and crossed my arms over the brown, wooden rail that might keep a pedestrian but, for sure, no car from slipping into the drink. The stream flowed past probably a little quicker and a little higher than usual because of the rain the night before. The water was cloudy with dirt that it carried along with it. Still, in some places I could see through to the sandy bottom and the odd weed swaying with the steady current. The smell of the rain-filled stream and the water-soaked leaves was good.

Near the bridge the grass on the bank grew as it wanted but further upstream someone had nicely trimmed right down to the water. At least it looked that way. It was hard to tell since the riverbed curved to the left and leafy branches kept out the morning sunlight.

Just past the bridge a high blue-green hedge poured through and over a farm-style fence. In fact, the fence had been soaked up so much by the exploding hedge that I didn't notice it at first. I was walking on the shoulder of the road. Within a few seconds I noticed a tall wooden gate that interrupted the hedge and fence. The funny thing about the gate was that no driveway or pathway led to it. If there was a house here, or anything here, where did the cars park, and why wasn't the

grass worn down? Of course, I needed to go see about this for myself.

I crossed the shallow ditch. The gate looked like it had been built for privacy. It was one of those wooden ones with a layer on the inside and a layer on the outside. You could see past one layer but you only end up at the back of the next layer. There is a trick, though. If you put your eye up close and look through at an angle, then you get a little sliver of what is on the other side. And this is what I did.

A slice of a trellis, leaves, a curve of a vine with a small red flower on it, raggedy lawn, clumps of bushes, a garden of flowers that I recognised as peonies, a large tree trunk, and a hedge that was trimmed a little more than the one by the road, but still didn't look anything like the square hedges we have back home.

I assumed it was some sort of park. I pushed the gate. It was not locked.

A large garden or park spread over wavy ground that disappeared into bushes and trees in the distance at the back to my left. Off on the right the land dipped down to where I knew the stream was. Here and there flowers, all sizes all colours, stems, trunks, leaves, grass, vines.

I stepped through the gateway.

"Can I help you?" said a man's voice.

I panicked for a sec. My left foot reached to take back the step it had just made. But the man was now in front of me and he was ordering me to come into the garden.

“Come this way,” he said, moving me forward so that he could shut the gate.

“I was lost,” I said, but he had turned his back to me and was now walking into the garden expecting me to follow him. We went a couple of steps along the sort of path, and he stopped beside a bunch of flowers to tell me what they were. The yellow petals were nearly dead but, the stalks and the leaves looked healthy. “They’ve bloomed for this year,” the man said. “They were very beautiful.” He looked at me to see my reaction, but I did not know what to say. We continued on a bit further until we came to a patch of tall red flowers. “These are my poppies,” he explained. “They were planted a long time ago. I don’t need to touch them from year to year. The RCMP would like me to cut them. Over there, that is actually a weed, but I like the look of it, and it’s not strangling anything out.” He looked at me again. “What do you think?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

We walked along beside another hedge. Through this hedge there grew a vine whose tissue-paper, purple flowers decorated the branches like butterflies. The grass along the bottom of the hedge had not been cut, so it grew in tufts where it wanted to. The man continued to talk about the garden. He didn’t ask me again what I thought of things. At first I’d been worried that I was going to be in trouble for trespassing,

but now it seemed that my only punishment was to follow him around listening to the descriptions of his garden.

We left the area where most of the flowers were and headed for a small hill. When we came over the top of this hill, I saw a delicious-looking pond. A few green lily pads floated around the edges. The rest of it was still and black. My bones ached to jump out of my clothes through a rainbow arc and plunge head-first into the middle of the water. As if he'd read my thoughts, the man told me that the water was very cold. "It's fed by a spring," he said. "If the sun's not out it can get pretty cold."

He let me admire the view for a second and then he spoke again. "My breakfast is waiting for me," he said, "but take your time if you please."

"Okay," I said. "I think I'll go, too."

"You don't have to," he said, as he walked away from me backwards.

"No. I have to get back."

"As you wish," he said. I had the feeling he was disappointed. He turned his back and walked away without another word. Maybe since I didn't stay he thought that I hadn't come to see his garden, but was really going to steal or wreck something. To show that I at least wasn't going to do anything like that, I left as quickly as possible.

“Your chick’s here.”

Panic set in. In order to kill it, I pretended that I hadn’t heard.

It was the next afternoon. I was on my bed looking at the books.

Phil was speaking to me from outside the window.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Readin’.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Should go over to the mini-bikes with me?”

“Where?”

“If you’re bored. Just down there.”

“Does it cost?”

“Twenty for the whole afternoon.”

“I don’t have twenty dollars.”

“I’m coming in.”

He went around and came in the door. I met him in the living room.

“What are ya doing?” he asked me.

“Readin’,” I said.

“So do you want to go?”

“I couldn’t get twenty dollars.”



“I got twenty. Come and watch. Maybe you can go on for a spin.”

“I don’t know. I think I’m going swimming.”

“You’re just dying to get down there to that girl, aren’t ya?”

Phil left, but I was still in there a little later when my father took up his position in the doorway and asked me what I was doing. I could see that he was bored. “It’s too nice to be inside,” he said. “How ‘bout a game of Ping-Pong?”

“Ping-Pong’s inside too,” I said.

“Well, at least it’s doing something.”

I could tell my comment’d stung him a bit so I did not argue. I wanted to be in the game room, but not by myself. By yourself it’s too conspicuous. So we went down together. On the way, he tripped me with his foot and I fell down onto the grass. After that we were even.

The table was taken by a young couple when we got there, but they said that they had had enough and they would give us the table when they finished that game. My father and I stood with our backs to the wall watching. We were making the couple shy, especially the girl, who looked over at us and laughed, said “Whoops”, and smiled if she made a mistake. The man was about as good as the girl, but he never looked over at us once.

We heard a crash and I felt a tremor come up through my feet and in through my shoulder blades. My father shook his head in a

circle. The ball went past the girl, who was too surprised to worry about it.

“What was that?”

The ball click-click-click-clicked on the floor faster and faster until it had lost most of its potential energy and only quivered back and forth on the boards like a Weeble-Wobble. Proof that it wasn't truly a sphere.

“It didn't sound good,” the girl was saying.

“I don't think it was.” My dad shook his head. “Maybe a meeting between a boat and a dock.”

The screaming had already started. First a woman, just screaming and a few “Gods!” Then a man, who had maybe boiled for a few seconds quietly in shock until the lid blew off and swear words flew everywhere. In the game room we all looked at one another.

The tones of voices were the kind that make your ears prick up and then you wonder what to do. My dad ran out through the screen door to the gas pumps. A man's voice was coming through the screen. “Sorry, sorry, sorry,” he was saying

I started to follow Dad. Before I even got to the door, I could hear him saying, “Hey, hey,” in a way that I had never heard him talk. It was as if he wanted to calm someone down.

I looked out the door. A collision it was. An ugly one, too. Between a houseboat and a regular boat. The regular boat, which

was about 40 feet long, with an inboard motor, glossy black body and white leather seats, was tied up to the dock, probably to get gas. The houseboat, which was about 60 feet long, square, and heavy, must have come in too quickly. The pointed end of the right pontoon was stuck into the fibreglass of the rear of the first boat, which was already about half a foot lower in the water at the back than it should have been, thanks to the water it was taking on.

I barely had the time to examine all the damage, though, since there was some real drama going on.

First I saw a woman, with sunglasses, cut-off shorts, long legs, long hair, top half of a bikini, lipstick, expressions and movements of pretend disbelief and real bitchiness, standing up in the cockpit of the damaged boat. Second, I saw a man with a black moustache, bikini bathing suit, Hawaiian short-sleeved T-shirt, barefoot, resembling Magnum PI, but shorter and not quite as macho, screaming, yelling, challenging, and shaking fists at the third person, a frightened man, who looked as if he had been trying to take his family on the perfect summer vacation, scrambling up a ladder toward the roof of the houseboat. Fourth, a family: a young woman, who could have been the mother or the daughter, or a cousin, or a friend of the family, looking quietly through a window in the houseboat toward the roof, a boy leaning on the railing at the back of the houseboat, two girls poking their heads out here and there, and a woman, probably actually the

mom. who was short, stocky, with blondish grey hair, trying to get onto the dock, which was difficult, since the houseboat wasn't actually tied up, only attached by its left front pontoon to the power boat, and so it was floating, drifting a little, a few feet from the dock.

I guessed that the man in the moustache was the driver of the hit boat. He was about to jump onto the houseboat and chase the other driver so that he could "smash some fuckin' brains into his idiot skull." He was flailing his arms and head all around him.

I poked my head out of the door a little more and saw the boy who ran the gas pumps standing off near the boathouse as still as a tree. The man in the moustache turned to him and stared as if he were deciding whether to attack him or ask him for help. Finally he shook his head in disgust, said something about houseboats on the canal, and ran forward toward the gas pump, which he kicked hard with his bare foot. I cringed at the thought of it. He didn't seem to mind, though. He suddenly turned and lunged for the houseboat. It had drifted a little closer to the dock. He landed safely on the right front pontoon and started going up the ladder after the driver, the father of the houseboat family.

The driver of the houseboat was screaming desperately, "It was a fucking accident! An accident!"

The woman on the powerboat leaned forward and yelled back at

him, "The Titanic was an accident, too! Is that a fucking excuse?" She didn't seem too smart.

My father was in the middle of the action. His back was up about as high as a cat's. He jumped onto the houseboat after the man with the moustache and shouted at him to calm down before he hurt somebody.

"Hurt him!?" the man hollered, "I'm going to tear his head off." He was so loud and so upset that his voice crackled the way a kid's does just before he is about to start crying. He scrambled onto the roof and started after the other driver. The other driver, though, was having nothing to do with him. He quickly slid down the ladder at the back of the boat and jumped onto the dock. Then the moustached man started back down the ladder he had just climbed. My father was at the bottom waiting for him.

"What's your name?" my father asked him.

"Fuck off."

"Russell Bole," my dad said and he held out his hand.

The man put his finger against my Dad's chest and shoved him disrespectfully. "I told you to fuck off."

"It's none of your business," the woman on the powerboat added.

Dad ignored her and watched the moustached man jump onto the dock. The driver of the houseboat was bleeding from his chest. He must have smashed it on something. I saw him edging toward the

door, hoping that it was an escape route, but maybe not wanting to leave his family floating at the mercy of the mad man.

As I stepped back into the game room to get out of the houseboat driver's way, I bumped heads with the man who'd been playing Ping-Ping. It hurt me quite a bit and I turned around to see the damage I'd done to him. The next thing I noticed there was no yelling outside. I heard my dad jump onto the dock. It was still quiet for a second or two, then I heard thumping feet, and a few "fucks" and "shits". I looked out to see what was going on.

The houseboat driver came straight toward the door in a terrible hurry and I jumped backward again. I heard my father yell something and I saw his arm, but I didn't see the rest because I had to move out of the way of the door as the driver burned through it.

I heard a man yelp and then splash.

I pushed past the houseboat driver and ran onto the dock. My father was standing with the lifesaver in his hand waiting to see if the powerboat driver, who was treading water in the lake, would need it.

"What the hell—" said someone who was behind me. It was the manager, in dress shoes and a fluffy blue shirt, looking as if he'd just returned from town. He was coming out through the door that led in to the store. Right behind him, with two hands holding the door, hair tied up in red ribbons, with dark make-up around the eyes, stood Katherine. I turned quickly and watched as they lifted the man out of the lake.

He was drenched to the bone, and for the time being at least he was quiet.

I stood beside Katherine on the corner of the dock while we waited. The manager had already called the police, but it took them forever to get there. When the car finally came bouncing across the lawn with its revolving blue and red lights and little whoop just as it stopped, a couple of people laughed. It was a little too late. Still, the policeman wanted to hear everything. Even though we'd all been wandering around, he asked us all to wait on the dock and one by one he called people into the game room to say what they thought had happened.

It was pretty quiet on the dock, so it felt strange talking to Katherine.

What's the first thing she said to me after not seeing me for a year?

"What happened to your face?"

So I had to explain the stitches. Which mainly had the effect of making me seem like a weirdo. Katherine's reaction was basically like my mother's. "What the hell were you doing sticking your head in front of a swing." Except she didn't say "hell". She did all of a sudden get the brilliant idea of calling me Frankenstein. I tried not to take it too hard. And, in fact, it was actually worth a laugh.

I've got to thank my stitches, because when the police came out of the game room Katherine and I were snickering so much that he promptly decided we couldn't be good witnesses and so he dismissed us from the dock. "Let's just have the principals here," he said, pointing for us to go onto the shore.

Fine with me.

Katherine moved to the door that led to the store. "I'm working," she told me.

"Ah."

"Yeah. 'Ah.'"

"Have fun."

"For sure." The door went flap behind her.

I trekked to the cottage, leaving my father in the hands of the law.

## 29.

The mosquitoes haven't found me. Yet. Maybe it's the breeze. But if I'm still here after dark . . .

Will I still be here after dark? Or will Katherine . . . ?

If I still care. Let me try imagining that I don't, that I could leave here right now and never see her. That doesn't feel so bad in my stomach. There's even a tingle on the tips of my shoulders for it. Freedom, I guess.



But if she came and found me in the tree, offered to climb up here beside me. That doesn't feel so bad in my stomach either.

Speaking of which, a little food would be nice too. Food and a pillow, not for my head. My rump. But stamina beats speed, pain leads to gain, and one day I'll wish that I'd kept up here longer, won't I? Not to mention that fact that Miss Odell would know I haven't finished. As she used to say, I don't want any "And then I woke up" endings. That was for me, who never finished the stories I started.

30.

The cigarette smoke from Mom's and Dad's cigarettes was pulled out horizontally through the screen by the breeze. Each line of smoke moved like a loose string that was being rolled onto a kite handle.

I pulled up a chair.

"Eventful afternoon," my mother said to me. I didn't know what the official story was, or if my father was in trouble for throwing someone into the lake, so I kept my response to a minimum.

Dad sipped his drink.

Mom added another topic to the pot. "Emily and Julie have gone to set the minnows free."

"They always go without me."

“You should play with them a little more often. Then you’d be around when they go.”

“I play with them.”

My mother just looked at me. “Are you hungry?”

“Not starving, but I could eat.”

“In about five minutes I’m going to warm up some soup. And I made a salad. Nothing from the Ritz, but it’ll be healthy.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “It’s a good day for soup.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

I could tell that there was a tension cloud floating above the table that no one wanted to look at. For the moment it was almost as if the appropriateness of dinner was the only thing in the world.

“It’s not too too hot for soup like it is sometimes in the summer,” I suggested.

“No, you’re right.” My mother shook her glass so that the ice cubes clinked together. “As soon as I finish this.”

My father wasn’t talking. I could tell that he was trying hard to relax, but his feet were dug so firmly into the floor that it looked like he was going to sprint out of the cottage any second. He was trying hard to stay pleasant, though. And he came up with a pretty good approach.

“Think you can find fifteen cents around here somewhere?”

“Probably,” I answered. I looked at him for an explanation, but his look told me that he had nothing to add at the moment. I was

supposed to guess. He was trying so hard to be playful. I appreciated it, so I told myself not to make any smart comments. “Grace?”

He nodded slowly.

“The Barons?”

He nodded again while my mother picked up the deck of cards, which I hadn’t really taken noticed of, and dropped them in the centre of the table. “There you go,” she said, standing up from her chair, “but first, soup.”

The cards drip from Mr. Baron’s left hand to his right and then around the table. Four times. Seven cards each round, including the ones that he gives to himself.

We all arrange our cards two-in-the-back two-in-the-front and look quick at the front two, mine being the 6 and 8 of Hearts.

Remember where they are.

The top undealt card is faceup. A 5 of Spades. And Mom, the first to the dealer’s left, decides whether or not . . . whether or not . . . whether or not . . .

Her eyes get crooked with deciding. Julie’s impatience whistles out over her half-grown front tooth. Then out goes Mom’s hand to gamble on the mystery card. Will she have luck on her side tonight?

You could say so. She was soon knocking, catching us all in the

middle of major hand renovations. Mr. Baron nudged his remaining two nickels back and forth like peas on an after-dinner plate.

Mrs. Baron had been trying to catch my eye for the past twenty minutes, but I had been too quick for her. Now Mom was shuffling the cards. In the meantime, Mrs. Baron went for the direct method.

“Lawrence.”

In the corner of the room the wood panelling wasn't perfect. There was a crack where one piece didn't meet the other. In the opening you saw old wallpaper that had never been taken off.

“Mrs. Baron's talking to you.”

“Yes?”

“I see you've made a friend,” she said.

It took me a second to realise that she was talking about Phil.

“Who?” my father asked.

“Phil,” Mom said. “You know him.”

“Oh, right.”

My mother looked at him strangely.

“Bit of a . . .” He was challenging Mom's look, but it kept him from finishing. I guess he didn't need to, though. He'd said it all in those three words.

“You can say it,” Mrs. Baron encouraged. “You're the father. Pronounce your verdict.”

Maybe he's the father, but Mom's look is the silencer.

“Doesn’t make a good impression?” Mr. Baron suggested.

“I like him,” Mom said. “He makes himself at home. I like someone who makes himself at home.”

Mrs. Baron looked at Dad for confirmation.

“He’s alright.”

“Maybe a kid who hasn’t had all the advantages of a family?” Mrs. Baron suggested.

The cards were in front of us and we’d started another hand.

“What’s ‘advantage’,” Julie asked.

“To have a better opportunity,” Mrs. Baron said , but Julie still looked confused.

“‘Good thing’,” I said. “She means basically ‘good thing’.”

“It means a little more than that,” Mom offered.

“But for her to understand it’s easier if you just say ‘good thing’.

Dad thought aloud. “This idea of having all the advantages, I really don’t know if that’s an excuse. Did I have these advantages that you are talking about?”

Mom began, “Your parents never had a lot of money—”

“A lot of money? We were poor. My dad died of a heart attack digging a ditch.”

“Poor, maybe,” Mom said, “but he wasn’t a ditchdigger. He worked for the PUC.”

“Yeah, digging ditches.”

“Anyways, maybe you didn’t have a lot of money, but you had two good parents who were devoted to you.”

“They wanted to be, but they didn’t have a lot of time. There were six of us and they both worked. We had to fend for ourselves.”

“But you had love,” Mrs. Baron said, as if she had known my father and his family her whole life, “and your parents must have been very good models for you to learn from, even if they didn’t actually have the time to sit down and go on vacations with you, the way you do with your kids.” She ended smiling and accepting the 2 of Clubs that Mom had left her.

“They were excellent models,” Dad said.

Mom turned to Mrs. Baron as if she had something private to ask her. “Isn’t the weather so nice tonight?”

“It is.”

“It’s all what you make of it,” Mr. Baron told us. “I don’t know this kid or his parents or what he’s like. But you can come out of . . . of . . . adversity with a lot going for you.” He had just drawn a card and he thought for a second about whether or not to keep it before putting it face up on the discard pile. “The really tough thing to talk about—” he looked at us all kindly— “is why some do well under tough conditions and some are permanently damaged. That to me is the absurdity. That’s the place where you can’t lay blame. You can react. It’s only

natural. But you can't say to somebody, 'How come you got wounded by this or that? Or how come you're the type to be . . . you know . . . to be—'

"—Sure," said Mom. "And none of us are perfect, are we? I know I'm certainly not."

There were a couple grunts of agreement, meaning not that Mom wasn't perfect but that the grunter too wasn't perfect and knew it.

"Somebody knock," Dad pleaded. "We're going to be out of cards."

Mr. Baron looked at Dad. "I'll warn you." He laughed. "I'm going to next time."

"Are ya?"

He did and he won.

We all threw in our nickels. Dad tossed his with a special fling and let his hand drop on the table. He looked at me with a frown.

"Broke?" I asked.

"Busted."

"Well, you're still in grace."

"Luckily. Or that'd be it for your old man."

"You could still win even."

Mr. Baron agreed, but Dad looked sceptical.

Emily had been in her bedroom most of the night, so when it was time for us to go to bed I went in to see what she'd been doing. She was

sitting on the corner of the bed with her legs crossed and her minnow drawings were spread out everywhere. A marker cap was stuck in her mouth and the marker itself was being used to outline the shape of a minnow that she had done in pencil before. I asked her if I could help but she said no. There were a couple of markers on the floor so I picked one of them up and did a little bit of drawing myself. I had hardly touched the marker to the page and she was asking me what I was planning to do.

“You’re missing something on this one.”

“What?”

“Just a sec.”

Julie saw what I was doing in she got in the spirit too. Emily tried to intervene, but she couldn’t keep up to the two of us. When we were finished, we gave the drawings back. We had both drawn moustaches below the fish’s noses. Emily didn’t say anything but I could tell she was not impressed. She tore up both the sheets and jammed the pieces underneath her pillow.

I went to bed feeling like a jerk. I tried to feel less guilty by telling myself that I would learn a lesson.

Don’t draw moustaches on people’s fish.

When I was in bed I felt like I missed Katherine. Maybe I’d never seen her enough to say I missed her, but I did. My bed wasn’t too big.



Still I could have made a bit of space for her in two seconds. I thought, She's only about fifty feet away. Imagine if no walls were there. We would almost feel like we were sleeping in the same room. Then I wouldn't miss her so much. I could talk to her without even yelling that loud. I'd be able to see her.

Why shouldn't she sleep here with me? Physically it would be so easy. About thirty steps. Then her voice and her knee sliding under the covers. And not a bad night for sleeping either.

I could almost feel her beside me. The feeling was so nice that I did not want to fall asleep. My brain was like a film projector, projecting her beside me, and I felt like I do sometimes in movies. And even though I could not always keep the same thing projected, since what I thought about changed, that didn't matter because just like after a movie, the feeling would stay with me until I slept, even a little after, although not forever.

I thought about tomorrow and I projected where I would see Katherine and what we would say. "Good morning!"—"Oh, good morning, sleepy head." I had the feeling of what it would be like when we looked sideways at each other with our shoulder blades tightened up because we were leaning back on our arms.

I wanted it to be tomorrow. I could get the great feeling going now, but that wasn't the same as if it was real, and I would have walked right out of my skin to have us really being friends.

I imagined that we took a picture together in one of those booths. We made funny faces at each other, but through the funny faces you could see our friendly smirks.

In the dining room the adults laughed. Mrs. Baron told Dad that she had heard something about policing before the police came. That was her way of saying it. Dad didn't say much at first. He was reluctant. Mom said more. I could tell from what she said that she knew the story from Dad.

Mr. Baron made a comment about houseboats and how they were really as clumsy as hell. Dad agreed. And Mrs. Baron, who pretty much grew up on the waterway, and then coming back as much as she did as an adult, had seen the houseboats multiply like rabbits.

"What do you expect?" Mom asked. "You have these families who can't afford a *boat* boat, and who maybe don't want to look after a boat all year round, or they just plain don't want a boat, but at the same time they want to have a nice scenic vacation on the water."

"And they can rent one of these things for a few hundred dollars a week," Dad continued.

"Exactly," said Mom. There was a little laugh. I couldn't tell who it was. Then some more murmuring. After that, I guess the little interruption was over because I heard Mrs. Baron's voice very well.

"Russell," she said, "tell us the story!"

Now Dad did talk more. He told the whole story from start to finish. From the Ping-Pong to the crane. And of course he had some details that I didn't know about, for instance what the policeman said to him. It seemed like he and the policeman got along. The policeman told Dad that this was the third such incident he'd been called to this summer. The other two happened right by the lock, but still. The policeman said that he knew it was instinct to want to step into these things and put an end to the nonsense, but if he were giving purely legal advice, though he's not a lawyer, he'd say keep your distance unless somebody's about to be killed. Otherwise you'll get yourself hurt or sued. He'd even seen the two jerks who had started a fight turn on the guy who wanted to break it up and beat the royal shit out of him. You don't know what people are going to do when they're in that state.

That part was interesting to hear. All the rest of the story I knew, except for the parts that he got wrong, for instance, what the woman in the bikini said and what the kids on the houseboat were doing. I wanted to get up and help out on those points but I didn't. I decided to give him some slack for once.

After that they talked about violence for a while, and then Mrs. Baron said at the end of the day she always preferred a man's man. She got it from her father, she said, who was the type of man's man that you can only get these days on special order.

Is there such a thing as a boy's boy? I like being athletic but I don't ever want to have anything as ugly as whiskers growing out of my face. If I could look like anything I would look like Katherine's twin, the same as her but a boy, with a bell nose, hooded eyes and silky skin. Then I would be so much like her that she would not find me strange. She would think my lips were hers and she would try to speak by putting her tongue between them.

I slipped my feet into the water.

Katherine spoke. "Feels good first thing in the morning."

31.

I heard Emily repeating something to my father that Mr. Baron had told her the other day.

"Fish don't like soap."

Still my father wanted to rinse the jar out with hot water. In a few minutes they'll be leaving to catch the day's minnows.

At the opposite end of the resort from the beach, down at the last boat dock, the minnows always congregate around a post that looks like part of an old dock.

Emily realised that she'd forgotten the net. Dad offered to go back for it, but Emily said it would be alright. She flipped off her shoes. She was wearing shorts and a halter top. The jar was balanced in

her hands. She held it carefully as she began to walk out in the lake. Her steps were careful and quiet. Around her the lake was as calm as a glass of water. She moved forward like a duck until the water was up to the bottom of her shorts. Then she stopped. She wanted to scoop some water into the jar. My father had not said anything yet, had not even warned her or asked her what she was doing. Still, he could not quite relax. He paced back and forth slowly, his hands in his bluejean pockets, or at least his finger. That's all that fits.

Emily moved into deeper water. Her shorts were now soaked. She had to hold the jar up a little higher to keep it out of water. Her pace was even slower, either because she was being careful or being quiet. It was now clear where she was going.

Out at the post the water was nearly to her armpits. She was completely soaked. My father would have called her back, but it was too late.

She balanced the jar on top of the post and then turned her attention to the minnows. Peering into the water, she slowly, very slowly, changed position. After a while, she seemed to find a place she liked, a place where the minnows were, and she lowered herself, so that the water was now right up to her nose. From the shore it even seemed to be above her nose, but it wasn't really because she stayed still too long not to be breathing. My father stopped pacing and stood up tall to watch her.

After a few minutes Emily raised herself up, so that the water was only at her armpits again, even a little below. Then she raised her arms out of the lake. Water dripped from her hands, which were clasped together in a ball. Standing on her tip-toes, she reached her hands over the jar. From the shore it was impossible to see what she was doing.

When she finished, she picked up the jar and waded back to the shore.

My father said, "How the hell did you do that?"

A dazed minnow was fluttering in the jar.

"It's hard," Emily said. "I think one's enough for today."

My father put his hand on the back of Emily's neck and they walked back to the cottage just like that. When they got there, Emily put the jar in the centre of the kitchen table.

As Mom had said before, it almost had the same effect as flowers.

32.

*Jeremiah was a bullfrog,*

*Was a good friend of mine.*

*I never understood a single word he said,*

*But I helped him drink his wine!*

*And he always had some mighty fine wine!*

Phil sang if not *at* then *near* the top of his lungs. His voice even pushed aside the revving engine and splashing of the waves against the hull. When he and the engine did meet on the same note, a nuclear fusion caused mushroom clouds of volume to explode in my ears.

At first I wasn't singing, but then the noise of the motor gave me confidence. It was like a choir that was too big for my voice to be found in.

That morning my parents had gone to Christmas Village with Emily and Julie. I'd opted to stay at the resort. It was allowed as long as I made all of the beds. I did my room last. Before I started on the bed I sat down on it and randomly picked up a book from the book shelf. This one was called *One Day in June*. The cover had a picture of a girl driving a convertible car down a country road. The girl had hair that flew straight back like an orange flag in the breeze. Her lips were glossy red and her eyes blue and determined. She wore a nice white blouse with the sleeves rolled up and two buttons undone at the top. The car was nice, too.

I opened the book and read a sentence. "She clamped her muscular legs around the colt's neck." It was just a little bit after that when Phil pummelled the door.

He didn't actually say, "Since your parents aren't here, let's take the boat." But within about thirty seconds of hearing that I was alone, he suggested that I should give him a tour of the lake.

“Your decision,” was his understanding position.

I swayed back and forth trying to imagine what my father would say.

“Maybe today’s a good day for the mini-bikes,” he said.

“I don’t have any money.”

“You don’t have any money.”

“It *would* be cool to go out on the boat,” I said.

“Yes, it would.”

“So we should.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I said. Now that I had made a decision I was very sure. Sometimes Dad is strict about these thing, but other times he says, “Sure, go for it.” So it’s hard to tell what he’s going to say. But I thought, No, this is a time when he would say “Go for it”. He likes to see me make friends. So if he were here . . . yes, I think I know.

*You know I love the ladies*

*Love to have my fun.*

*I’m a high night flyer and a rainbow rider*

*A straight-shootin’ son of a gun.*

*I said a straight-shootin’ son of a gun.*



I faced the left side of the boat and steered with my left hand. Phil faced the right. That way we could see each other when we talked, or sang.

“A lot of boats are coming through the lock,” I yelled, pointing at the main lane of the canal, which was marked along the way with red and green buoys. Most of the time I went along the shore where it was nice, but sometimes when a bigger boat passed I charged the wake, so that we could jump. We didn’t totally jump, but it felt like we did.

Phil smiled at me. “We should go through.”

The lock had just closed when we got there. So I steered over to the side and Phil took the rope that was in the front of the boat and I took the one in the back and we tied some big knots so that the boat wouldn’t float away. Then Phil put on a pair of sunglasses that I had never seen him wearing and we walked over to see the lock.

There was a park right around there, with cut grass and some signs saying “Canada” and “Trent-Severn Waterway”. We went right up beside the lock and sat on a bench. It was kind of hot now that we weren’t moving and we weren’t saying much, just watching the boats go slowly down as the water went out of the lock. Some of the passengers from the boats had gone ashore, but at least one person stayed on each boat and sometimes more. On one boat there was a couple of little kids who looked quite fascinated as they realised, kind of like I just did, that

basically they were in a big bathtub and someone had just pulled the plug.

There was one pretty nice sailboat in there. The sail was all wrapped around the pole the way you always see it. There was a couple. The guy at one end, the girl at the other. Both of them wore striped shirts, and looked very calm, as if they had done this a hundred and one times.

Out on the front of one boat was a girl sunbathing in a bikini. She was lying there as if she was right out in the middle of the ocean or something. Her bathing suit was yellow. She was lying on her stomach on top of a towel that looked as if it had a huge picture of a tiger on it. Her head was turned the other way so I couldn't see her face. I saw Phil looking at her, too.

"You should have been in the boathouse last night," he said. "We were down there kidding Kathy."

He still had his sunglasses on. They were mirrored. Personally, I thought he looked like a dork. He was checking out the girl who was sun tanning, but after a second he turned his head in my direction. I looked at him and I could see myself in his glasses, not just my eyes, but almost all of me. I guess it was because of the curve but they made you so small.

"I told her she smelled like pickles," Phil laughed.

I could even see some of the canal and the lock behind me and the railing that went around it and half of a boat. In that picture it almost took me a second to recognise myself. I looked older than I do in bathroom mirrors, but also more normal. I looked like somebody I wouldn't even notice if it wasn't me.

Phil was saying something else. "You know how she likes it, eh?"

"No."

"Doggy-style. She asked me first and I told her I liked it that way and then she said she did too."

The boats were getting down to the bottom. The girl in the bikini still hadn't moved. I thought that she might have fallen asleep. It seemed unlikely with all the noise of the water gushing out, but you never know. For a second I thought that I would run around and say, "Hey, you awake. Don't fall asleep like that in the sun." But I guess if she really had been asleep, somebody on her boat would've woken her up.

The big doors at the end of the lock started to open like castle gates and the water swilled between the two halves like there was a tornado brewing below. The drivers of the boats put their hands on the ignition. They waited as long as they could but you could see that they were dying to start up their motors. There was even a sign that said, "Do not run engine until the green light is on," but somebody just couldn't wait. A r-r-r-roommba-oomba-oomba filled the lock. A

couple of seconds later someone else gave in too. This time the engine was a bit smaller and it just went dugga-dugga-dugga-dugga. Then there was a low gurgling sound coming from the back of the lock. A third engine, revving low. After that pretty much all the others joined in, too. Less than a minute later the green light went on and the boats could go out. It was interesting how they had to do it, alternating, one from one side, then one from the next.

Phil and I both stood up at the same time and started walking back to our boat slowly. I was ahead and Phil was following me.

“What’s up, Larry?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I had pretty much decided that I didn’t want to go through the lock.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I don’t feel like going through the lock.”

“Why?”

“We shouldn’t.”

“Well, why.”

“I don’t know if ya can. You might have to have something.”

“You don’t,” he said.

We were facing each other now, standing right at the edge of the cement wall where the boat was tied up. “But I don’t want to go through,” I said.

“Why? Anybody can.”

**“You don’t know that.”**

**“I fuckin’ know that.”**

**I bent down to untie one of the ropes. I wasn’t about to argue with him. It was my father’s boat. He was renting it. If I didn’t want to go through the lock it didn’t require an explanation.**

**That’s when I realised that I never had liked Phil and I never would. I wished that I had never agreed to take him for a ride. He was untying the front of the boat and got his knot done a lot faster than I got mine done because I was having trouble figuring out how I had tied it.**

**He was stepping down into the boat. “I’m driving, then,” he said.**

**The lake was really shimmering now. The sun was reflecting off the water right into my eyes and, when I looked out over the surface I saw the shimmers travelling erratically all over it like some sort of crazy glowing creature, an insect or something. It was as if I knew he was going to say it sometime and I had already made up my mind that though he strike me dead he wouldn’t drive that boat over any lake.**

**What do you have there? That’s my lip, my curled lip, and what do you have there? My jeans. And at the end of those? My foot. What’s that? A hundred and forty pounds. While that’s a hundred and fifteen pounds. But how much do the callouses of your hands weigh and why do you have them? Because I was bad. Does badness do**

that? You mean how. How then? From working, from fighting, from worrying. What do you mean? It was the time I spent.

Do we fight here or here? Here. I'll throw you into the frickin' water if you don't take your goddamn hands off that thing. Who do you think you are? I don't know. I didn't come out here to fight. I thought you were a nice guy, not a freakin' wimp ass. I'm not. But that's a fist in your back for you if you don't buzz off. Don't fight with me. I'll throw you in that goddamned lake in two seconds. Look at me. If I whip you you'll know it. Your parents will know it. Your mom will come crying to my mom and I'll be back at Craymore so take your hand off the throttle. You. I don't feel pain. Try me. Put your finger nails right in. Try me. We used to do it for fun at Craymore. Shoulda kept you locked up. Don't fucking say that. You get confused, you go there, they treat you like a murderer. Keep that up and we're both going to go right over. Don't cry, either. You cry and I will kick the shit out of you. Like fuck.

Can't even make me bleed. There's an elbow. There's my nails. I'll get you off there.

I thought he was going to rip the skin off my hands. So I punched him from underneath. My fist came up and hit him in the jaw, hard but not too hard, and then he went mad and punched me over the top three or four times around the ears, my left cheek, and my neck, until I was crouched in the bottom of the boat.

"Nobody hits me in the face," he said.

I could hear engine sounds and I was really hoping that nobody was coming over to see us. I knew that the longer I lay in the bottom of the boat the more likely it was that someone would come, because if they had seen us fight and they had seen me drop down they might think that I was hurt. I didn't know what I wanted to do, except kill Phil, but I knew that I never could. I hardly ever got in fights, but I hate that feeling of being beaten, of having someone's fist put you down and then hang there in the air as if it could keep coming down on you as much as it wanted to.

"Where you going?" he said.

"I'm fucking fuck walking home, you fuck."

"What are you doing?"

Not only was I a ways down from the resort but I was also on the wrong side of the lake. But since I didn't know how to get to a road, I started walking in the direction of the resort, even if I was on the wrong side of the lake. Phil yelled after me again, but I didn't say anything. Then he ran after me. "Listen. Buddy. Listen. Lawrence. I'm not about to get in shit for this. Listen. I apologise. I apologise. I apologise."

Phil was being nice and shitty at the same time. He said, "Is it the girl? I take everything back. The girl's yours. She's your friend. Go be friends with her. Come back to the boat. You drive the boat." I was running out of park about this time. Sick memory. I was like some

robot. When I hit the fence I turned on a dime but kept walking. He had to keep up to me. I didn't want to go back to the boat, though, so I turned again. Pretty fuckin' silly. Phil saying, "You're a good guy. I know you are. You'll always be a good guy. I'll always be a shit. You'll always be a good guy. Come back to the boat. Drive the boat."

I started it without looking at him. Drove back without talking to him. My nose was running and I kept checking it for blood, but there wasn't any.

*Joy to the world,*

*All the boys and girls.*

*Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea.*

*Joy to you and me.*

*Everybody now!*

33.

The Barons were over for dinner. We were eating fish. Mrs. Baron said my name and then leaned across the table so that her face almost touched mine.

"Last night I remembered something," she said. "This is something that I had forgotten for a long time."



For some reason I did not like the sound of this. Don't ask me why. I just didn't like the way that she leaned right into my face.

"I told you before that I used to come here."

She was waiting for me to say something.

"When I was a little girl," she added.

She was still waiting. In fact everybody was waiting. Out of the corner of my eye I could see my father giving me a look. "Hm," I said.

"My family actually owned this property. When I was little. And even when I wasn't so little."

"You knew that, Lawrence," my mom said.

"Yeah," I said.

"You know what I'm talking about?" Mrs. Baron asked. She had leaned back in her seat and she was now looking at me with owl eyes.

"Yeah."

"Well last night I remembered and I thought, 'This is something for Lawrence. This is something he would like with his camera and his walking about and always looking at things.' Just the way you watch and I can see you taking every thing in. Not saying so much but taking everything in."

My mother nodded.

Mrs. Baron continued. "When I was about your age I discovered something. I would walk down that way, off of our lot and through the trees. It curves a little bit away from the lake, or it seems to, and

then it comes out at the inlet. So it's following the water, you just don't know it until you hit the water again. And then, back then, you could look across the inlet into the trees on the other side and there in the trees there was one tree that, just the way it curved with the branches, looked like an old man. The face of an old man. Do you know what I mean, the way you can sometimes see something like that?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Baron looked at my father to see if he understood too.

"Yes," he said.

"Lawrence, I want to tell you, I would really like to see that old man again, to at least see if he is there. But I have a problem."

She was leaning across the table again. Her face and was so close that I could have fed her a forkful of fish if I'd wanted to. Instead, I waited to hear her problem.

"You see," she said, "I don't think these old eyes can see a tree across that inlet, let alone an old man in a tree." She gave me a sort of smile. "Are you my man?"

My father laughed half of a chuckle.

"Not tonight," she added. "Tomorrow, in the full daylight we'll go out there together and I'll be the memory and you'll be the eyes."

If only I had known what I was getting myself into, but I nodded okay, and then added "sure" in words.

"Shall we make it a date?"

Now I let out half of a chuckle.

“He laughs at me when I offer to make a date,” she said to my parents.

“He’s not the romantic type,” my mother said.

“How about one o’clock?” Mrs. Baron said to me.

“Okay.”

“Or earlier? How about noon?” she suggested.

“That’s fine.”

“High noon,” she said, “you will come calling at my cottage. I look forward to it. And bring your good eyes.”

#### 34.

This morning when we returned from fishing, Katherine was sitting on the end of our dock eating toast. We coasted up beside her as Dad cut the motor.

“Good day,” she said, standing up to help us with the rope.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hi,” said my dad.

I took hold of the dock and pulled the boat closer so that I could tie us up. Katherine offered to take the rope from Dad so that she could tie the back for him.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I got it.” He wasn’t in any great mood. It was one of those days when he pretends that he is being nice and he offers to do things, but he takes it to such an extent that you know he is doing it because he’s actually mad about something. Now he stepped out of the boat, tied the rope, and began to collect the two poles, the tackle, and everything else in the boat, which is usually my job. “I’ll meet you up at the cottage,” he said.

“See ya later,” Katherine said to him, but he was already stepping onto the beach and he didn’t turn around, just sort of lifted the tackle box a bit to show that he’d heard.

I stepped back into the boat and sat down to undo my life jacket. Katherine looked around at the boat:

“I don’t see any fish.”

“We didn’t catch any.”

“Sucks.”

“Maybe tomorrow.”

“So you guys have been here a week already.”

“Almost two weeks.”

“Right, but like the week before I got here.”

“Yeah, we go Saturday.”

She sat back down on the dock. There was no more toast for her to eat. She had finished it. “We haven’t played Ping-Pong yet,” she said.

I rocked the boat a little from side-to-side. "No," I said. "And we won't have much more time."

She was leaning over the side of the dock, rinsing her hands in the water. She shook the water off of her hands, but then she seemed to get an idea and she put them back in the water. "Catch." She flipped some water in my direction. I pretended to catch it, but it didn't reach me.

"Yeah right."

"I'm sorry." She was flicking the water off of her hands again. "I just had to. You know."

"You just have to soak people now and again."

"Exactly. You know me so well. It's my way."

"You're pretty bad," I said, rocking the boat again.

She placed her hands behind her and sat with her feet straight out in front of her. She turned her head and nudged her bare shoulder with her chin, like she was scratching. "No, no, no," she said. "I should correct that before it gets around. I'm really not." She looked at me on an angle. She looked at me for a couple of good seconds. "You know that," she added.

"Oh, I do," I said.

"Because you are the man from tomorrow."

"That's right."

"I remember." She looked across all of the docks, as if she was thinking. "Have you seen the movie, yet?"

"Ah, no. I haven't"

"You should."

"I would like to."

"Hey, you know?"

"What?"

"We're going swimming today."

I would have liked to say something but I was afraid that it would be the wrong thing. Sometimes you have a feeling where somebody is going with a conversation and you don't want to make her swerve off of the path.

"It's a special place," she said, "my secret place."

"Ah."

"Requires special permission. You don't know it," she said. She wasn't mean about it. She just had no idea that I could know. "It's not open to the public."

"Really."

"But would you like to know it?"

"For swimming. I like swimming in new places."

"I don't know exactly what time yet. I have to work in the canteen. Are you going to be around the cottage this afternoon?"

"Sure."

“Then I’ll come and find you.”

35.

We weren’t all sitting down to eat eggs together because it was what Mom calls a free-for-all day, which means that you just go get your own bowl of cereal and/or toast.

Mom and the girls were supposed to go to a bazaar, while Dad was supposed to play in the men’s-only shuffleboard tournament. And, of course, I had my own plans, too.

By noon I had the place to myself. Any other day I would’ve been happy doing my own thing without having to worry about doing stuff for other people and staying out of their way after I was finished. Today, though, I was too antsy about my swimming date with Katherine. Not only had she invited me to go with her, specifically invited me, but she also knew the pond that I had discovered and liked, too. I thought about that a lot. I hadn’t swam in it yet, of course, but just by looking I could tell I would like it.

Even though I was happy, my nerves were so bad that I must have looked pretty spaced out. I don’t think I sat in one place for more than about five minutes. It took a turn on each bed, the couch, and pretty much every chair. I had Emily’s jar of minnows to keep me company, and I tried to kill some time attempting to draw them

again. That's what accounted for me sitting on every chair, because I moved all around the table trying for a perspective that would be easiest just to draw a jar and minnows without having to get the whole room in there too. I have to say no place really made it easier. Either you had the reflection of the room, or of yourself, or of the lake, or there was just blinding light shining right in your eyes. I wished that there were some drawings around for me to look at to see how it was done, but there weren't, so I gave up.

Needless to say I had decided not to go with Mrs. Baron. It wasn't too hard a decision to make. First of all, her plan sounded boring. Second of all, I didn't like the way she'd asked me, her tone of voice, and doing it right in front of my parents where I didn't even have the choice to say no if I wanted to. Third of all, nothing could have dragged me away from that cabin with Katherine on her way.

At least I hoped she was on her way. The waiting started to get to me. By two o'clock I'd started to wander outside, not far from the cottage, but sitting in there was giving me cabin fever. I needed to move. Unfortunately, Katherine had never said a time. All she'd said was this afternoon. But the afternoon could be any time between noon and five. Or does the afternoon go to six? Maybe in the summer the afternoon is longer than it is in the winter. I hoped not, but anyway, I realised that I shouldn't worry, yet. I went back inside and tried to kill some time thumbing through the books.



Dad kind of took me by surprise. He was back from the antique sale and now he was just getting a drink before he went down to the tournament. He was rushing around back and forth, but suddenly he stopped and poked his head into my room. He looked at me for a second before he said anything. Then he asked, "You been out with Mrs. Baron?"

"Ah, no." I said it like I had sort of forgotten it. "You better get over there right now," he said, accompanying it with a serious look.

"I'll just finish this," I said, shaking the book.

"I think now's better," he said.

I gradually got up, more nervous than ever. The later it was the more chance Katherine had of coming, or so I thought. Plus now I was feeling a little guilty for not going with Mrs. Baron because I realised that I could have gone and gotten back in time to see Katherine. I was also afraid because my dad seemed in a punishing mood, and his punishments are much louder and more painful when my mother and sisters aren't around.

I looked at my shirt as if it was dirty, then slowly pulled it off. My father wasn't in the doorway any more, but I was still acting this out for him. I never knew when he might poke his head back in. I hefted my suitcase up from the floor and opened it on the bed. It was going to take me a second to find a clean shirt in there, and maybe I wouldn't

even find one. Then I might've remembered that the air-conditioned one was hanging out on the line.

I didn't have to stall that long, though. Dad poked his head back in.

"I'm going down to the tournament," he said. "I'll see ya later."

I grabbed a shirt and pretended that I was putting it on. "See ya. Good luck."

"I'll need it," he replied. And then he was gone, out the door and down to the shuffleboard.

I guess I knew that at some point I would be getting into trouble for ditching Mrs. Baron. I also knew that it wasn't a particularly nice thing to do. At the moment, though, I wasn't really thinking about that. I didn't want to, I couldn't, I didn't. That's all I know. I just sat there, even more nervous than before. In fact, now I was still. Whereas kind of nervous makes me antsy, really nervous makes me paralysed. And that's about what I was at there.

36.

Sometime a little after three forty-seven the hinges on the door of our cottage were given a strength-test by my father. They passed the test. And so did the spring. Just as hard as my Dad pulled it, the door rebounded back at him. I don't know exactly where it hit him, but there

was a small rip in the screen the next time I was able to check. Maybe he got his hand back just in time to protect himself.

No door was going to be an obstacle for my father. The look he had when he came into my room told me that he would've fought off lions in order to get to me. So if anything the rebounding probably just added fuel to his fire.

During the time I'd been waiting I really was tempted to go over to Mrs. Baron's cottage and get her. If anybody knew how much I actually thought about it, maybe they would've felt differently about me. Nobody appreciated my predicament, though. If Katherine had only told me what time she was coming. But it's that waiting problem of when you have two things to do and you think you shouldn't do the first one in case you miss the second one, and the longer you wait to do the first one, the more likely you are to miss the second, but as time goes by you start to see that you could have done the first one no problem, so you wonder if you should do it now because you might be looking back later thinking, "I had time to do that twice, maybe I should do it now."

My father's problem is that he hates being embarrassed. Maybe he still would have gotten mad at me if Mr. Baron hadn't come down and said, "Hey, Doug, you know my wife is up there waiting . . . just a kid I know . . . maybe I could go up there and send him over . . ." Or whatever he said, and my father turning red for two reasons and saying, "I'll take care of it," maybe Mr. Baron adding, "don't mean to put the

little guy in trouble with the old man,” and my dad already walking away, going, “No.”

Well, yes.

I would say that him coming to me, picking me up by the scruff of the neck and carrying me out of the cottage, and then us yelling at each other in the middle of the resort, and me bawling, and him kicking my ass all the way to the Baron’s, telling me to apologise, and me knocking and going in and bawling in front of Mrs. Baron, and her looking like she was going to either start crying or phone the police, and looking out the window at my Dad standing there listening, and then me saying, “I’m sorry I didn’t come take you for the walk to see an old man in the tree like you wanted and asked, and so my Dad told me to tell you I’m sorry,” and me leaving before she could say anything, and him kicking my ass back home and telling me to wait for him, and Mr. Baron coming up with some serious look and glaring at me like I killed his wife or something, and them men having to talk, so at least I could get a head start back to the cottage, and me finding the girls and Mom there, and her saying, “What? What? What?” and me quickly complaining about Dad and him coming in to hear and yell, and Mom screaming for him to stop the loudest I ever heard her, and her telling me to leave, just leave, go for a walk, and me leaving, and hearing her voice asking Dad what the hell all had happened, and me running across the resort

and stirring up looks, and escaping into the woods, down the path, and up a tree is “putting the little guy in trouble with the old man”.

The fusses people make about things.

I suppose there'll have to be a better apology for Mrs. Baron coming, though I know I'll probably avoid it if I can.

Mr. Baron I'm not so sure about. I may not like him any more. That look he gave me with all of the seriousness and all of the accusatoriness. And about what? I don't like that adult trick of looking at you or talking to you like you just killed somebody. Nobody talks to them like that unless they *have* killed somebody.

Maybe it's instinctive.

Was that voices, or my imagination? It's not quite shuffleboard hour yet.

I wonder what Phil did to get sent to reform school. Clarence St. Public School has some bad kids and there's one guy I play hockey with, Edward “Buffy” Bufford, who's been caught stealing about six times, but none of them went to reform school.

I've never seen Craymore but I've heard about it. My father has a friend who lives not too far from it. The area around there is quite nice. It's out in the country, with lots of fields and nature. I've wondered before what it's like.

I've thought of going to reform school. I don't know why. I thought I might like the life-style, because I could train my body all of the time. One of the things you're allowed to do is work out, so I would just work out and run and play sports. As for being locked in my room half the day, I'm the kind of person who might not mind that either. I'm sure some of the other guys and maybe some of the people who work there can be rough and mean and maybe dangerous, but I think that once they saw the kind of person I am, that I don't want to hurt anybody else, they would treat me alright. That's the way it kind of is usually. Guys will want to beat you up when they first meet you, but then when they know you more, and if you're not the type to start fights or make fun of people, they'll stop wanting to beat you up. That's most of the time, not all of the time, of course.

I have that idea that I would like prison. I have that some of the time. But I also have the idea that I would hate it. It's a fear. I can imagine it coming over me if I was really ever locked in a room. How I wouldn't be able to breathe. How I would just totally panic and throw myself at the wall, even crash my head into it. I have a theory that anything you want should happen. If it doesn't happen and you're still alive, then you didn't REALLY want it. If I want to get through a wall, then I crash into it. If that hurts, I stop. That means I've decided that I want to stay in the room more than I want to be outside the room, because being outside the room actually could mean being dead if the

walls are cement. So we actually do what we want to do. That's the theory. But does it mean I really don't want the things I think I want? I'm probably missing something.

37.

From the path footsteps and voices. Flicker of clothes through the trees. Pink, blue and yellow. Towel colours. Laughter.

"Who goes there?"

No more footsteps. Voices though, but too quiet to hear words.

"Hey."

"Hey." Two voices

I can't make it out. Is that Phil walking up the path with a crooked look up into the trees, stopping. "Lawrence? Holy shit."

"Well, well, well," Katherine adds from behind Phil, spotting me for herself. "Come swimming."

"Small problem," I say.

"Which is?"

"I think I need a hand down."

They come crumpling through the briars and stand below me. The method for taking me down is discussed. I will hang by my arms. Phil will grab my legs and ease me down. Katherine wonders if he can

lift me. I wiggle onto my belly, get the best grip possible and hang down.

Phil's got me and eases and tightens and eases and tightens his arms so I can slide through. Katherine holds my back so we don't topple over together.

Earth.

"How long have you been stuck up there?" Phil asks.

"I don't know. Maybe a couple of hours."

Katherine laughs. "What's going on?"

"What?"

"Your parents were just kind of weird." She tilts her head to look at me better.

"We went to get you," Phil explains.

"It's a long story," I say.

"Let's walk and talk. You can tell us on the way." He turns and starts climbing through the briars back toward the path.

"On the way where?" I ask, following Phil, stepping high through the briars.

Katherine is behind me, swearing a little at the burrs that are attacking her towel. "Swimming," she says. "We're going to the pond."

"Yes," Phil wonders, "where exactly am I going?" He stops, steps aside and looks at us both with his blue eyes, crooked lip, dark-blue,



light-blue and white-striped T-shirt, terry towel, arms at his sides, jean shorts.

“I should probably tell my parents where I’m going?”

“They should know,” Katherine says. “I told your dad why I was looking for you. He said he was sure you’d like to come.”

“I should get a bathing suit. I don’t have a towel.”

Phil points at my shorts: “Those work.” He puts his towel over my shoulder. “Now you have a towel.” He looks at Katherine and asks, “Now where’re we going?”

“Do I have to lead?” She stomps past us down the trail. Phil points for me to follow, then brings up the rear. I can see he’s willing to forget the other day for the moment. Nice about the towel, though it doesn’t smell the same as ours.

I tell Katherine again that I know about the pond where we are going. This time she seems to hear me and she is surprised. She questions me with disbelief about how I got caught trespassing. It’s amazing to her that I had the nerve to walk into the garden. As soon as she says it, though, she changes her mind. She says that it may not be so out of character after all. In fact, it may be exactly in character. I like the way that she can change her mind so quickly, as if, unlike most people, she’s removed the hood from her engine so that you can see all the parts in motion as they work to make the car move.

Phil seems more interested in these speculations than I ever thought he would be. When he first got to Craymore, he met so many guys and he had to make quick opinions about them in order to survive. One night, after he'd been there six weeks, he was lying in his bed thinking back to his first days, and he realised how different his first impressions were compared to the versions of the guys he actually knew then. It was like holding up two pictures, a before and an after, and marvelling at the lack of similarity.

Katherine opens the gate. She must notice the unsure looks on our faces. "Don't worry," she says. "I have special permission." She makes sure that the gate clicks behind us. It seems like it is something important that she has to do. One of the stipulations for getting permission to enter the garden. "But don't you think," she says to Phil, "that at the same time your first impressions were right?"

"No. That's what I said. They were all wrong."

"See, I would think that there was something right about them."

"That's a contradiction," Phil says lowly, as his eyes get their first glimpse of the pond.

"I don't have a problem with that," Katherine replies.

Katherine dives first, to show us that the water is deep enough to go in head first. We dive and swim, and swim and dive. Phil and Katherine splash water at each other and Phil dives down and attacks her foot from the depths to try to scare her. It doesn't seem like Phil's

heart is in it, though. The garden preoccupies him. As he treads water he looks over his shoulders as if he expects the grass and the bushes to fold over on top of him, smothering him in sod. Katherine seems to notice the looks he's casting in every direction and she suggests that he go look around. He must have been wanting to because he immediately takes my new towel to his feet, forces his toes into his permanently-laced shoes, and struts off toward the river without a good-bye. There's something funny about this, the way he's on a mission or something. Katherine and I, who are still treading water, look at each other and grunt out laughs. This puts us on the same wavelength. I can feel it in my stomach. "I don't have a problem with contradictions either," I say.

"I know," she exclaims. "I see them everywhere. Nobody can tell me that they don't exist."

Under the water my feet pedal an imaginary bicycle to keep me from sinking.

"So what happened with your parents anyway?"

"Nothing."

She repeats the word, but in a questioning form. "Nothing?" Then she takes a deep breath and disappears under the water. I expect to see her come up near the far bank. That's the logical direction to go in. As I wait I consider adding a little something to my "nothing", so that I don't look rude. On one hand just saying "nothing" makes it look like something, on the other hand a little something can be a convincing

nothing. I don't know exactly what I'm going to say, but I've got the direction, I'm ready, except Katherine hasn't appeared yet. I wonder if she's drowning, and if I should dive down and reach around for her body.

The water folds over my head and drains into my mouth, which has opened wide with a surprised yelp. The arm around my knees releases and I scramble to the air for a tide-me-over breath, and then doggy-paddle to the bank. I'm holding off on the cough that's building up like a sneeze in my lungs. But as soon as my toes touch mud it comes. The gallon of water that went down the wrong hole is coming up the same passage in violent coughs that shudder my brain and chisel my eardrums.

I can feel Katherine coast up behind me. She says, "Nothing, eh? If you want out of this pond alive you'd better start talking."

I breathe experimentally. I can feel the pond water still floating in my bronchial tubes. "I was about to elaborate," I said.

"Elaborate,' my ass. Did you happen to notice that Phil and I did not laugh or make fun of you even though we found you stuck in a tree? It's a pretty easy situation to make fun of, but it didn't take the King of Siam to see that something was wrong."

I don't know anything about the King of Siam, but I promise to tell the whole story. In exchange she agrees to let me crawl out of the pond and suffer more comfortably in the grass.

When I begin the story, she is sitting cross-legged in front of me. I can hardly say two sentences without her interrupting with what I think Miss Odell would call pointed questions. She asks things like, “Do you think your parents left you alone today knowingly?” and “Do you blame me for all of this because you thought I was late?” And I think I answer pretty well. I don’t blame her, of course. In fact, I try not to make her part in my afternoon too big a deal, because I have never, in my whole life, sat in front of a girl, not counting sisters, or maybe even *counting* sisters, and been the exclusive focus of her attention. I don’t want to wreck it by expressing my love or anything like that.

“Just tell me,” she says, “please tell me that you know what you absolutely have to do tomorrow.”

Phil returns looking pretty casual, dragging his feet on the grass as if he were slouching through a living room in slippers. He announces a discovery, but casually, not with any great hoopla. “Just decided. I’d take a stream over a lake. Hands down.” Then he adds the sound effects of water trickling over rocks.

Last night I found the right thoughts to fall asleep relatively happy, considering.

I woke up in a similar mood.

Unfortunately, today is obedience day. My father speaks to me quietly and kindly, while I act like a reformed criminal who's thankful to have a second chance. So I'm happy and unhappy at the same time.

I have diarrhoea, which is, I guess, my nerves talking. I hate getting it in the summer. I hate getting it any time, but in the heat is the worst.

Breakfast is free-for-all. After toast and cereal and washing my dishes as part of not making new messes on leaving day, I put on my shoes and exit the cottage.

It'll always be a nice day when you have to leave a vacation spot.

A badminton net is being set up between the cottages and the lake. That would have been fun. Maybe next year.

I continue on across the resort. One car is already being packed, a truck actually, one of those mini-pick-ups, with a topper on the back. Three women just a little bit younger than my Mom carry armfuls of stuff out in a stream. You'd think they were moving out of a regular house. It's funny, but I don't recognise any of them.

I continue past them and past a couple of other cottages that look like they're in the middle of being emptied out. Then I get to the

cottage I'm looking for. I climb the stairs. Through the screen I can see Mr. Baron sitting at the head of the table, with a cup in front of him. At the same time that he looks over, I hear from somewhere else in the cottage Mrs. Baron's voice. "Come in." Mr. Baron pushes back his chair as he's about to stand up. I open the door slowly and step in and onto a woven mat that feels slippery on the tile floor. Mr. Baron stands right up and comes toward me. His look is serious enough, but it doesn't give the impression that he thinks I am a murderer. "Lawrence," he says, "good morning." Then he holds out his hand for me to shake. His hand is massive and his grip is quick but not a steel vice that breaks your fingers.

"Good morning."

"How are you?" he says. "Sit down?" He looks at the chairs one at a time sort of curiously, as if he's not sure which one would suit me best.

Instead of taking his offer I explain myself. "I was just wondering if, um, Mrs. Baron would like to go for a walk today." Just as I say this, Mrs. Baron calls from the bedroom, "Who is it?"

"I don't know," Mr. Baron says to me, "but I think she would." Then to her, without raising his voice, he says, "It's Lawrence." I don't think she hears, though, because she is already sliding open the folding door. I think she is a little surprised to see me, actually. She leans back suddenly and her arms come up and cross in front of her chest

before falling back to her sides. “Good morning,” she says. There’s a slightly uncomfortable look in her, and the way she heads straight across the living room–dining room area to the kitchen shows that I make her a little nervous. I’ve only been in the room twenty seconds but it seems like yesterday, combined with the fact that I only ever really talked to her in our dining room in front of my parents, has changed our relationship drastically. It’s kind of like when you happen to run into a teacher in the grocery store or some place out of school. They act so different than they do in your classroom. That’s a fact.

And the fact here is that Mrs. Baron is shy of me, at least for the moment. She’s opening the fridge in the kitchen and asking Mr. Baron what they have for breakfast. He and I watch her for a second from where we stand and then he says to her, “Lawrence thought you might want to make up your date from yesterday.” He looks at me, “That’s about what you said, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

The fridge in this cottage is very small. Mrs. Baron is able to see us over the door that she is holding open. She looks back and forth from me to Mr. Baron like she is waiting for us to say something. I think that she doesn’t know quite what to do, so she is pretending that it is still our turn to talk. I can see now that she really must have just woken up, which is funny because I would have thought of the Barons as early risers, like us, but they’re not, and this makes me feel a little



bit superior to them. I don't know why, but that's just the way it is with our family. We tend to make fun of people who sleep in late and also people who take a while to get going in the morning. This morning, at least, Mrs. Baron looks like both of those.

She's still Mrs. Baron, though, and after another second of rolling her eyes over us, she makes a move to close the fridge door.

"Lawrence," she says. She says it kind of slowly and with warmth, like I am her son and I have just returned home from being missing.

Bedraggled in her long creased baby-blue shorts and a short-sleeved, also creased, V-neck T-shirt that was once white, she also looks healthier than I usually think of her. She's barefoot and stands with her legs apart and her toes pointing outside, the littlest bit like a shortstop. Her arms are at her sides but lifted out a wee bit so that it looks like she's waiting for me to go over there and get a hug. Of course, that's a bit of an exaggeration. That's not what happens.

"Give me two minutes," she says, and she returns to the bedroom.

Mr. Baron pulls a chair out from the table. "Look here," he says, "have a seat."

He and I have hardly sat down, though, when Mrs. Baron reappears with a pair of socks in one hand and a pair of tennis shoes in the other. She sits down on the edge of the couch, which isn't quite as ugly as the one in our cottage, and begins to put on her socks. She

uses the rolling up method. First, she collects the whole length of the sock between her thumb and forefinger, then she dips her left toe into the roll this has created, and then she unravels the roll. The last step is to put her thumbs inside the sock and straighten it around her. There's one foot. Now the next. Mr. Baron and I watch her without saying anything. I guess we don't know what to say to each other. The important thing is for me to get Mrs. Baron to the inlet. After I've done that, then maybe we can all talk again. Maybe.

"I'm coming," Mrs. Baron says as she loosens the laces in her shoes. She slides her feet into the shoes and then ties them up. As she finishes the second bow, she says, "There we go."

"It's not too far, Lawrence, eh," she says as we go out the door. Mr. Baron tells us not to get lost, and I tell him that we won't. "No," Mrs. Baron repeats, "it's not that far."

I would have been afraid we didn't have anything to talk about, but now she's given me an idea. Still, I'm waiting a minute before I use it.

Down the hill we go toward the lake. Mrs. Baron keeps looking up toward the sky and saying that it is such a nice day. I should say what I have to say soon, before she changes the topic too much. But the fence takes all of our attention. It seems that the only way for her to get over it is for me to stand on it and hold it squashed down while she steps over it. It's obviously not the greatest for the fence, and there

are probably people who wouldn't want us to do it. I can see Mrs. Baron making up her mind. "Okay," she says, stepping back while I work to get the fence controlled under my feet and down to the ground. I can tell that she is purposely not looking behind her to see if anybody's watching.

But now we're on our way. And I take the opportunity to mention that I know that path and the inlet quite well. Mrs. Baron is a little surprised to hear this. I think she almost sounds disappointed.

I'm a little worried about her walking on the path. There are a lot of roots that loop out of the ground and then back in, creating quite nice tripping devices if you're not watching. And maybe it's because she didn't have a chance to wake up much, but she's quite clumsy, I have to say.

She also takes her time, which is good, because that way she won't fall. But it's also a bit frustrating when you're used to doing things at your own speed. "Look at those pine cones!" she exclaims, stopping and pointing just a little off to the side of the path. Evidently, I'm a cub scout, as well as a pair of young eyes. "Do you see that?" she asks.

"Yep."

We pass my tree, the tree that held me hostage for a couple of hours yesterday. I think of mentioning it to Mrs. Baron, but she might ask why I was up there and that would sort of stir up everything that happened and didn't happen during that whole event.

I wonder if she is in any way leery of being alone with me in the woods. She seems a bit afraid, but I think that is just the woods, those roots that are causing her so many problems.

“Did I say it wasn’t too far?” she asks, panting a little.

I laugh. “It’s just up here. You can see the clearing.” I just say it to answer her, but she stops to look ahead, and I wait for her.

She squints for a second and then gives up. “If you say so,” she says.

“Look up there through the leaves. You can see more light, more sky.” I point for her.

“You’re right,” she says and pats me on the back. “You lead on, Lawrence.”

I’m not exactly sure why she cares about this old man so much. Personally, my parents don’t talk about when they were kids that often. Still, even if you don’t talk about it every day, I suppose there must be some things that you always remember. If these things involve a place, then it’s fun to go back and visit them. But maybe she really doesn’t care about this old man very much. That would be more realistic. I never heard of an adult caring about that sort of thing actually. She said that she woke up thinking about him and then she thought that I’d be the one to help her see him, but that’s not necessarily completely true. See could have thought of the whole thing when she was sitting at our table, drinking wine and talking. Maybe all she wanted to do was

have someone to go for a walk with. If that's the case then maybe it doesn't even matter if we see him. Maybe we just need to walk down there and look around, and then go home. On the way back we can talk about how we saw something that looked like something, but still that wasn't quite him, we think, we're sure. No we didn't find him.

But then again maybe we will. I've heard of things like that before. A rock that looks like a lion's head and a edge of a mountain that looked like the profile of an old woman. So you never know.

We curve to the right and suddenly everything opens up and we're at the inlet. The sand cuts out very gradually and the water is not very deep. Out in the middle there are some bullrushes, at least I think that's what you call them, those long green stems that have brown cylinders on the end that look exactly like cigars. Mrs. Baron goes "whew", puts her hands on her hips and looks around. I watch her to see what she's looking at. The stream at the end of the inlet, the bullrushes, the middle of the lake, where a sailboat is passing by with its sails down.

"This is it," she says. She looks over her shoulder at me and smiles sort of a half-price smile that says, "Just my silly memory and my silly life, nothing too important." That's how I understand it anyway. I don't exactly know what we were doing here, and she probably doesn't either, but just now I think that I'm willing. I don't

want to stand here all morning, even though there's not much of it left, but a couple of minutes, I suppose I can do that.

She's making a visor with her hand to protect her eyes. "The thing is," she says, "you can't see it from over there. It's over there, but you have to see it from here." She points at the ground beneath us, though she's still got the visor going and is looking out from underneath it. "That's *really* far across there," she says.

"Maybe the water's higher than it used to be," I suggest.

"I'm afraid not," she said.

Then she makes the visor with the right hand and uses the left to point. She seems to be pointing for herself for a second, before turning to me to let me know she's ready. Now I stand behind her shoulder and look along her arm. I never realised until now, but I'm not that much shorter than her. I can use her arm like the snout of a gun and follow it along to the target.

Keeping her arm straight, she makes a circle. "In that area," she says. "God forbid you're going to see something," she adds.

I look along her arm. I have zero expectations, but something strange happens. I feel like I'm looking deep into Mrs. Baron's eyes. Like the hypnotist in a movie I saw who said, "I'm looking into your eyes, deep into your eyes, back, back in time, all the way into your childhood, when you were a little girl. You had a pet, didn't you." And the woman said in a hypnotised voice, "I missed her." Like that. I

have the impression that Mrs. Baron was asking me to look back into her life and see her as a little girl, standing there in a dress, thinking that she was seeing something interesting that she will remember her whole life and that would make her interesting just for remembering it. I kind of feel like I can imagine it actually, maybe because I suddenly feel like she trusts me so much, trusts me to see and to tell that I see. It is all pretty clear for a second or two.

“Is it still there?” she asks.

I wonder what those trees might have looked like thirty years ago. It must have been at least that long, if not longer, since she was a girl. If someone had cut those trees down the day after she was thirteen, they could have half grown back by now. I don't think that's quite the case, though. They aren't particularly tall trees, but some look old, at least unhealthy, with hardly any leaves. There's even a couple that have lost their branches, and one that's busted right in the trunk. It had started to fall and then got caught up in the branches of another. Now it'll be lodged there at half-way until some incredibly windy night comes along and manages to knock it to the ground. I can only imagine what she saw thirty or more years ago and I have no idea if it resembled anything I can see this morning.

“Yes,” I say.

“Off beside that big one, isn't it?”

“I’m not sure what big one you’re talking about, but I think it’s in that general area.”

For a moment we stare in silence along her arm and the line it draws across the inlet and into the mess of woods on the other side. She is seeing. I lend her my concentration until I feel her relax. She inhales, drops her arm, stretches out her back.

“Trees never age,” she says. “They do, but so slowly. One tree can watch us come and go and come and go.” She turns and looks at me. “I said you could do it.” She places her thumbs beside my eyes and her fingers around the back of my head and gives me a friendly shake. I can tell she is examining my cut, offering her eyes back to me, “No infection. How’s it feeling?”

“I almost forgot about it,” I said.

“Well, you might have just a tiny scar to remember your summer vacation by.”

I guess I make a face that shows I don’t want a scar.

“Not to worry,” she says. “Your face will grow around it and it will look fine.”

Then she turns and looks back at the inlet. She seems to give it very careful consideration. Then she tells me, “I used to enjoy swimming here. The water was always a little bit warmer than it was anywhere else.”



She smiles and directs us back down the path. “And you could skinny-dip, too. Ha ha. Imagine me, swimming by moonlight . . .”

39.

I’m sitting in my corner in the back seat of the car, apparently waiting for Dad to find my sisters and Mom to finish up in the office, but actually waiting for the right moment to sneak down to the boathouse and say good-bye to Katherine.

It seems our family is in a rare state of disorganisation. Packing up didn’t go as smoothly as our usual manoeuvres. I am partly to blame for this, according to Dad, since I disappeared without warning or permission after breakfast. When I returned, he said, “Do me favour. Get in the car and wait. Then I’ll at least know where one person is.”

“But I have to finish packing,” I said, and he gave me two minutes, no more, to do what I had to do.

I did not tell him where I went when I disappeared and I don’t know if I ever will. Even though he would surely appreciate what I did, and that would have the benefit of making life a little easier for me here and there, since he’d be more predisposed to trust me, give me responsibility, that sort of thing, there’s also something I like about him not knowing. At the moment he thinks that I wasn’t nice to Mrs. Baron, but he’s wrong. And that’s what I like, knowing that he is wrong

about me. Some day, if he ever brings up the issue, especially in relation to one of his little theories, I'll be able to say, "I can show you exactly how little you know."

I don't see him, and I hope he's in the washroom preparing for the long car ride because I'm making this my chance. I push forward the seat and climb out of the car.

Katherine's not in the office. The manager and his wife are both behind the counter for check-outs and check-ins, so I guess she's not needed. The game room is empty and the lights are turned off, which probably means no one has even been in there yet today. The sight of the table makes me want to pick up a paddle and tap a ball around, but I don't have time to linger.

On a whim I check the gas bar.

"Hello."

She's in cut-offs and rubber boots. In one hand she's got the nozzle of a garden hose. In the other, a long-armed squeegee. It looks like she's in the middle of cleaning the deck around the gas pump.

She asks, "What's up?"

I'm staring into the tops of her boots.

She notices. "Like 'em?"

"I've got a pair just like them," I say.

"They're the coolest things. So what's up?" she asks.

"We're just getting ready to go?"

“You’re gone today, Phil’s gone today.”

“You’ll be lonely,” I suggest.

“Oh, no. There’s always something to do.”

It’s not quite the good-bye I expected, but it’s not as bad as it looks, and after all she is working. You can’t force people to get all in the good-bye frame of mind when they’ve got a squeegee in their hand.

I walk up the hill to the car. This time everyone is waiting for me. Emily and Julie are tucked into the backseat, Mom’s in her place, and Dad is standing watch beside the front fender. When he sees me, he waves “hurry up”, opens his door, and holds the seat forward for me to climb in the back.

We are quiet at first. Even the back seat riders are quiet. Emily looking out her window. Me looking out mine. Julie with her head up to see between the seats and over the dashboard. As Dad takes us down the narrow lakeside roads that eventually lead to the highway, Mom half-turns and looks into the backseat to see how we are all doing. Once she is satisfied, she turns toward the windshield. Then, as if she suddenly has a thought, she looks back and asks, “Where’d you go off to this morning?” I can see my father’s eyes suddenly appear in the rear-view mirror.

I’m not exactly sure how I want to respond, so I bide my time. “I went for a walk,” I say. This answer leaves me open. I still have a

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**163**

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