

What's Left Behind

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ABSTRACT

Each of the stories in the collection, *What's Left Behind*, is shaped by death. Yet within the narratives themselves, the feared event does not come to pass. This detachment from the central drama offers the characters time and distance to reflect upon the encounter between everyday living and death. Against each backdrop of time and place and circumstance, characters struggle to understand and articulate their positions in a reality altered by a reflection on loss.

Rural life, and the type of familiarity which stems from long-term relationships in a smaller community, is the root of most character interactions and experiences. Because individuals have an awareness of everyone else's story, relationships may present the illusion of deep intimacy. Exploration of these relationships comes about most frequently through dialogue: what is or is not voiced. Conversations, both idle and urgent, play an important role in how characters reveal themselves and their "truths".

The collection touches upon a range of situations, from the catastrophic death of a child, to what is more commonly considered a "natural" end, such as the passing on of someone who has lived almost a century. These narratives explore what is left behind when death enters lives and consciousness: the mystery of what cannot be understood when characters are pushed to reflect upon their own mortality and that of others.

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The Viewing

"My shoes are killing me. I need to sit," Ginette said.

"You're the one who had to get all dolled up," Brenda said.

A row of wooden chairs lined one side of the windowless viewing room. Ginette chose a seat at the end of the row, furthest from her aunt, beside one of the conservative – and upon her closer examination, artificial – flower arrangements stationed in each corner on white pedestals. With both hands she placed her handbag, a patent leather match for her pumps, on the chair beside her and neatly crossed her legs. Her sister, Brenda, sat in the third chair and Brenda's husband, Ted, pulled the fourth one forward and angled it to exclude neither the casket nor the ladies from his view.

Ginette sighed in relief to be off her feet and away from the coffin. She didn't like having Aunt Lolo in her field of vision. This pre-burial observance, displaying the body so those gathered could see it one last time, Ginette thought absurd and morbid.

"They did a nice job," Brenda said.

Ginette had chosen not to look at her dead aunt when they first entered.

"Her cheeks need more colour," Ted said.

"I need new shoes," Ginette said.

"They could have put a smile on her, or at least a bit of a lift," Brenda said. "It would have looked more like her."

"She did always smile," Ginette said.

"So did you," Brenda said.

Ginette's eyebrows lifted.

Two nuns entered the stuffy room from the side door at the front of the room. They paid their respects at the casket and, after crossing themselves, approached the family members, who stood to accept their condolences.

"Sister Albertine," the short round one said.

"Sister Genevieve," the thin bent one said.

"Thank you so much for coming," Ginette said, stooping to shake their little hands.

"It would have meant so much to her," Ted said.

Brenda smiled and nodded.

"Bless you," the sisters said.

When the nuns had filed out, the family sat down again.

"They all wear vests," Ginette said.

Ted shrugged and shifted his weight again. He was a big man in a small chair.

"We're here until 1:30?" Ginette said.

"Mass is at 1:30," Brenda said. "Paul's not coming?"

Paul was Ginette's first husband. "No, but he sounded genuinely sorry," she said.

"Was always good at that," Ted said.

Ginette sighed. "Did you hear from Marty?" She started picking lint off her skirt.

"Marty?" Ted said.

Brenda answered, "Marty. You met him. Cousin. Martin and Nathalie?" She said to Ginette, "Didn't know if they'd make it. He had a meeting or something."

"I thought he farmed... gnus?" Ginette said.

Three more sisters appeared at the casket. Their small feet made almost no sound on the polished linoleum. The family stood.

"Sister Angele," the one with glasses said.

"Sister Marie-Claire," the one without glasses said.

"Sister Francine," the one without a vest said.

Ginette glanced down at her narrow new pumps. She'd need another pair of slip-ons to get through the next week. The blisters would take at least that to heal.

"Thank you so much for coming," Brenda said.

"It would have meant a lot to her," Ted said.

Ginette smiled and nodded.

"Not gnus," Ginette said when the sisters were gone. "You know...what are they called?"

"Gnus are from South America, I thought," Brenda said.

"Africa," Ted said.

"Come on - the round nose?" Ginette made an imaginary one in front of her face. "They're ugly as hell."

She glanced at the doorway: a lone nun was coming toward them, without first stopping at the casket. Ginette quickly stood, as did Brenda and Ted.

"It is so good of you to come," the sister said. She shook hands with Ted and Brenda. She held Ginette's hand in both of hers. "Your aunt prayed for you every day."

Ginette recognized her but couldn't remember her name. "Thank you, Sister."

The nun then knelt alongside the open casket, reaching out to touch Aunt Lolo's hands, which were folded together over a bible.

"What's her name? It starts with 'M'," Ginette whispered, sitting down. "Sister Margaret? Magdalene?"

"Doubt that," Brenda smirked. "Wasn't she across the hall?"

"No, that one had the walker. This one usually answered the door," Ginette said.

"You're not thinking of moose?" Brenda said.

"Moose?" Ginette squinted at her and turned toward the nun.

"Not her - Marty's thing," Brenda said.

"For God's sakes, Bren, I know what a moose looks like," Ginette said. She stood again to greet more sisters, the back of her shoes digging deeper into her feet.

"I know what you mean," Ted said when the nuns went over to the casket, comforting the sister already kneeling there. "It starts with a 'W'."

"Not 'M'?" Ginette said.

"You know. It's Indian or something?" Ted said to Brenda. "Wo.. Wo-ti...."

"Wapiti!" Ginette said.

She startled the nuns at the casket. They crossed themselves and left.

"Elk," Brenda said.

"No, not elk. Wapiti or -ees. That's what he's got," Ginette said.

"I was sure he worked downtown," Brenda said.

Nuns continued to flit in and out of the viewing room in pairs and threes until quarter past one. The family was then invited to see their aunt a final time before the casket was closed for the service. Ginette and Brenda shared the kneeler alongside the coffin, and Ted stood behind his wife, his hands resting on her shoulders.

Ginette slowly looked up from the kneeler and her skirt to her aunt. The absolute stillness of death immobilized Ginette. She stared and stared but there was nothing, nothing of her jolly aunt, just a pale, stern, motionless depiction of her living self. Was this to be how she would be remembered? Ginette thought she should try to pray but she was unable to close her eyes or concentrate, not with her aunt stretched out lifeless before her.

Aunt Lolo's hands were so smooth, her rosary placed between her thumb and index finger, resting on her worn bible. She had very few wrinkles for someone in her nineties. This was how Ginette imagined her mother would have aged, had she lived a long life like her youngest sister. Ginette thought of Aunt Lolo praying for her every day, maybe that her second marriage would last longer than the first. Ginette knew she looked better than most women twenty years her junior but despite this, her second husband ran off with one. Did Aunt Lolo smile about that too? Ginette shuddered, no, no, no. There were some people that did smile

about him leaving, but her loving aunt was only sad for her, praying for her to be okay. Ginette's throat started to ache.

She thought back to when she had first received the call that her aunt had suffered a massive stroke. The meaning of what the nurse said over the phone hadn't fully registered. After leaving a mostly unintelligible voice message for her sister, Ginette rushed out to buy flowers and went straight to the infirmary. In the car, she imagined Aunt Lolo's vivid smile at the sight of the yellow roses and carnations. She loved any yellow flowers, even the dandelions brought to her by children.

When Ginette entered the infirmary room, she was completely unprepared for her aunt's appearance. Her upper body was propped unevenly on pillows, the left side of her face collapsed with her mouth slack and open. And her hair looked so odd: it was puffed out at the sides but was pressed very flat to her forehead. Only the rosy cheeks looked like her Aunt Lolo. Ginette watched her aunt's chest and abdomen rise and fall, her breathing forced and audible over the hum of a small machine with tubes attached to her.

"Morphine pump," a nurse answered her unspoken question. "She's in a coma, dear. We're keeping her comfortable."

Ginette's face flushed at the memory of that first moment when she realized what was really happening in the hospital room. Her ninety-

three-year-old aunt's health had always been excellent, other than her being almost deaf.

"It's best this way, really. She never woke up," said a nun. She looked at the flowers Ginette was still clutching, "I'll find a vase for these. Oh, aren't they beautiful!"

"Thank you," Ginette whispered.

"She went to the library the day before last, you know, and took out two new books and was already halfway through one of them. Blessed with her eyesight to the end," said another nun at her aunt's bedside.

"The end" meant that the handwritten name card on the door -- "Sr. Laurianne" in unsteady Old English calligraphy -- was temporary, but not because the nursing staff would type up a proper one to replace it; the card and her aunt would likely be gone before the weekend. Nuns were brought to this wing of the infirmary to die and everyone Ginette had encountered seemed comfortable with that reality. They dropped in on her aunt, chatting away with her as though the poor woman were only asleep, as though she could hear them.

"Laurianne. Sister Laurianne," the nun who was at her bedside had called to her. "Your lovely niece is here to see you." She had stroked Aunt Lolo's forehead as she spoke, her hand resting there when she paused, flattening the hair. Ginette then understood the unusual shape of her aunt's hair; so many other sisters had done the same.

She tried to imagine her aunt still alive with her hair done as it was in the casket. It had never been so glamorous, each grey curl shaped and placed with care. Her hair even appeared soft but Ginette wouldn't dare touch it. She felt her sister's shoulder trembling against her. Brenda sniffed and reached for Ted's hand. It was Brenda when she was very small who had christened their aunt "Lolo" because Laurianne was too difficult to say. She would have laughed to see herself so fine, Ginette thought.

Two nuns asked the family to follow them to the chapel and then proceeded down a long corridor and up a shiny stairwell at a no-nonsense pace. Ginette didn't recall having ever passed through this part of the infirmary. The hallways were surely cleaner and whiter than any "heaven" she could imagine, and the nuns and nurses - she couldn't always tell the difference - dressed in starched white, with even whiter hair and spotless orthopedic footwear, made a faint squishy sound when they passed, as if they walked on clouds. Ginette coveted the pristine antiques, languishing along the corridors and hiding in the alcoves: grandfather clocks, oak sideboards and commodes, walnut coat racks and mirrors. It seemed ridiculous and even sad to her that such beauty could reside here, idle, unappreciated, untouched.

Her heels were raw. She leaned heavily on her sister and kept her voice low. "I thought more people would come."

"Everyone's busy," Brenda said.

"Ted will be the only man at the service," Ginette said.

"And the priest," Brenda said. "And maybe her 'boyfriend'."

"Sorry?" Ted said.

"The caretaker from the old residence. She used to get flustered when he shovelled the walk," Ginette said.

"He used to keep his empty cigarette packs for her," Brenda said.

"So did Paul," Ginette said. "It was Mary something."

"Who?" Brenda said.

"The nun who answered the door," Ginette said.

"Did she weave those little dogs out of the packs, too?" Ted asked.

They lost sight of the two nuns at another corner.

"Dammit what's their hurry?" Ginette said.

"Next time, wear something decent on your feet," Brenda said.

"Next time, maybe I'll be the one lying down."

"I'll pick out your shoes."

"You don't know my tastes," Ginette said.

"I know, I know. You always find the perfect match," Brenda said.

"Hm," Ginette said. "Obviously not."

"What? Your shoes are beautiful!" Brenda said.

“I didn’t mean shoes. You found Ted. I found...”

They both stopped. The spry nuns ahead of them had arrived at the chapel entrance. Ted stopped next to Brenda and Ginette, and stood in silence.

Ginette looked down, her head tilted. Her voice was clear, but her throat continued to ache. “I’m happy for you, you know that. Ted is so good. To you. And your kids.”

“I’m very lucky,” Brenda said.

“And I’m not,” Ginette looked up. She could see the nuns waiting for them.

“No, I didn’t mean...” Brenda’s expression was apologetic.

Ginette reached for her sister’s arm, wincing in pain at the small step she took.

“Let’s get you seated,” Brenda said, walking Ginette toward the tall wooden chapel doors. The nuns they had been following were waiting to usher them up the empty left side of the chapel to the front. On the right sat the sisters who had come to the viewing and others who had not; they filled over two-thirds of the benches. In the centre aisle sat the casket, now closed.

Ginette thought of weddings, her weddings, how guests were ushered to the left of the right, bride or groom’s side of the family. She swallowed and stopped again.

"Just a few more steps," said Brenda.

"No."

"But."

"No."

Brenda took a breath, "Please?"

"I can't," Ginette said.

"If Ben and I both helped you..."

"I can't go in there," Ginette was sobbing. "I won't."

A small bench was to the right of the chapel door. Brenda said, "Let's sit over here." When they were seated, she whispered to Ben, "Just tell them to start. We'll be in shortly."

"Want me to..."

"You go on in," Brenda said.

Ginette sniffed and sniffed, mascara running down her cheeks.

Brenda dug in her purse for tissues and gave them to her sister. She wiped her eyes and her nose. Then she attempted to slip a wounded foot out of her pump, but she had to pry it off with force. She breathed in sharply. Her sister did the same when she looked down and saw Ginette's foot. There was a deep red outline where the shoe had pressed into the flesh, visible even through the nylon stocking, which was stuck to her foot where she bled.

"Oh Ginny," Brenda said.

The more feeling came back to Ginette's crushed foot, the more she cried. She slowly twisted off the other pump. Her hand shook as she set it on the floor next to the right shoe. Brenda replaced the used tissues in her hand with clean ones.

From the bench outside, they started to hear the singing of the shaky soprano congregation. Ginette moved to lean back against the wall, so Brenda moved her arm up so Ginette could rest her head on her shoulder. They both sighed, at the same time causing them to smile a bit.

"You should have taken the elevator with Aunt Lolo," Brenda said.

"Maybe I should have just been a nun," Ginette said.

"You'd look good in a vest," Brenda said. "You look good in everything."

The singing stopped, and they heard the priest begin the mass.

"Probably only two men in there, Ted and the priest," Ginette said.

"Yeah."

Ginette looked down at her reddened feet and thought about forcing them back into her pumps, standing and walking.

"I guess we're in the right place if I can't walk out of here," Ginette said. "Should be able to find a wheelchair."

"Do you really think..."

"I don't know how that will work once we go to the cemetery of course."

"We'll figure it..."

"You'll push me around?" Ginette asked.

Brenda turned her head toward her.

"Somebody will have to. If I can't walk."

And then there's later, Ginette thought. Brenda and Ted? Ginette didn't even have kids to... But she's older than Brenda, so there was a chance she would die first.

"You'll pick out my shoes?" Ginette asked.

"What?"

"To be buried in. Or should I pick them out now so you don't have to shop? Fashion will change, though."

"Oh please, Ginny!"

Ginette kept thinking about burial shoes. Pointed or square toe? Wedge heel? Spike? That'd look great in the casket, hooker boots. They're for *intimate* use anyway, not walking, so maybe. Shoe size does stay the same as you age.

"But my feet could swell. Maybe I should pick two sizes of the same..."

"Stop it!"

Ginette was silent. The nuns were reciting a prayer. Then the priest spoke.

“Sorry. Shoes don’t matter,” Ginette said. “We didn’t even see Aunt Lolo’s.”

“No,” Brenda said.

“I guess I am lucky,” Ginette said. “She only ever had her hair done for her own funeral. I get my hair done all the time, and manicures, pedicures, facials...”

They both sighed again. They heard everyone stand in the chapel.

“Do you think you’ll be able to make it to the cemetery?”

Ginette leaned forward to look at her feet. “God, what a mess.”

Brenda nodded her head.

“And I’m a wreck,” Ginette said, holding the tissues black with mascara.

“You’re not.”

“I’ll go to the cemetery.” Ginette picked up her right shoe. She moved it in front of her foot. “I’ll try. This is going to hurt like hell.”

What I remember

"Bullshit" - the non-thinking man's poker - is a good Friday night game. If you can count, you can play. Sure, you can keep track of who has which cards. My wife Karen does that sometimes, but she's one of those women who remember things like dates, names, numbers. I prefer to figure out who's cheating just by watching how they play. Bluffing's the most important part. It's the only way you really win - unless you've got a horseshoe you-know-where.

"Two sixes," I say.

"Bullshit." Ed calls me.

"Add 'em to your collection," I say and reach for my beer. Sometimes I don't have to bluff.

Ed flips over the two top cards in the pile, and throws them down. "God damn it."

Donna and Karen shove the pile of cards toward him.

"Maybe the wife can hold some of those for you?" I say.

"Fuck yourself," Ed says.

Donna doesn't look up from the cards. "Nice."

"*You called me*, Ed. Not my fault I'm so bloody honest," I say.

"How many decks are we playing with? Christ!" More cards are falling out of Ed's hands than staying put. "There's got to be two hundred cards here," he says.

When Ed's sober, he'll kick your ass at cards from here till Sunday and well into next week. He'll figure anything out if there's a bit of strategy involved, and he's cocky as hell about it too, which can make you like him or hate him depending on whose game is on the line. But drinking puts him on the losing side of the table and tonight's no exception. You can't change the oil on your truck in the time it takes him to get himself bitched. In years of knowing Ed, I still haven't figured out a way to stop him from drinking himself under his own house when he's got a mind to, but I guess you can't really stop anyone from doing what they're set on. I feel sorry for Donna, having a husband like that, because when Ed's wasted he can become a bit melancholy or right miserable.

"One seven," Donna says, loudly, ignoring Ed. "Last card."

I watch her. "Flip it."

"Says who."

"Bullshit." I call her, with a straight face.

She flicks her hair over her shoulder and takes her card back without turning it over.

"Thought so," I say. That's not exactly true, but it was her last card and Ed had already picked everything up. I had nothing to lose.

My wife is a different story as far as cheating goes, maybe because we've been married for fifteen years. Almost fifteen years. Karen gives it away – snaps her cards a little louder, messes with her sweater, lowers her voice. Something changes when she's not sure. But I can't tell with Donna. If I really watch her, I

might notice the corners of her mouth twitching just a bit. I have to be paying really close attention to see it though. Otherwise, she's got a pretty good poker face. Damn good face, period.

"One eight," Karen says. She's telling the truth.

"Any day of the week, Ed," Donna says. "Nines."

"Yeah, yeah." Ed's shuffling through his pack of cards. "Why don't you get me a beer if you've got nothing to do?"

Donna whacks him on the shoulder and he spills half his cards on the deck.

"Shit," Ed says.

Karen stands to help him but Donna gets up and grabs her arm. "Leave him," Donna says. "The 'men' can sort it out."

"While you're up?" I shake my almost-empty beer can at Karen.

She shoots me a dirty look but she'll get me one. Donna closes the screen door behind them.

This spring I had the impression that Ed was letting up on the booze but come to think of it, I hadn't run into him much at all. I assumed he was busy seeding because he was renting more land. The wives see each other often enough with school and church stuff. The invitation for supper was a bit of a last minute deal, but Karen found us a sitter for the kids alright. Today is the anniversary of Blake's death. Their two younger kids were at sleepovers and so

Donna had invited people over to get Ed's mind off it. Another couple, Jen and Scott, were supposed to come too. I didn't quite catch why they didn't. When we arrived, the burgers were on the BBQ, and Ed was on his fourth beer.

Blake was their neighbour's kid. Ed and Donna never had a boy, just the one girl, so Ed took to the little guy like he was his own son. Blake's dad backed over him with the grain truck when he was three, right in their own driveway. When some folks told it, they'd add the word "accidentally." No shit. Kids move so fast, even his mom didn't see him run out. Everybody remembers exactly what he or she were doing when they got the news, same as when a president gets shot or a space shuttle explodes.

"Fuckin' hell," Ed says. He's bent over trying to gather up his cards. "I think some of them went under the deck."

"Forget it. We'll start a new game when they're back," I say.

"You bet," Ed says and throws his cards on the table face up.

I pull cigarettes from my jean jacket and light one up. "You?"

"Wife made me quit, remember?"

"Mine too," I take a long draw. "Since when do you listen to the old lady?"

"Since I married her. Christ, that's when," Ed says.

"So not when you first knocked her up?" I laugh.

"Fuck, Gary," Ed says, and gives me one hell of a look. I've seen him scrap for less.

“Okay, okay,” I say.

“Just because you can’t keep it at home...”

“Forget it, alright?” I’d had a bit of a thing going with a lady in Drumheller but that was done with so I don’t know why he’d bring it up now with Karen just inside.

I start gathering up the cards and can’t help but flip Donna’s last one. Her next turn would have been jacks. She had the Jack of Spades.

A car crawls into the driveway. I get a kick out of the way high school kids drive when parents might be watching. There are two girls in front, and one in the back.

“Amanda!” Ed yells at the house. His daughter’s about fifteen, I’m guessing, but my wife would know for sure. Amanda lets the screen door slam behind her and runs to the car without stopping.

“Bye Dad, bye Mr. Mudry,” she says, waving to us just before she gets in the back seat. She’s sure grown up since I last saw her. She’s got her mom’s good looks: nice dark hair, same as Donna’s, and long legs.

Ed stands up.

“She’s fine, Ed.” Donna is standing on the porch. I didn’t hear her come out.

“Yeah, I’ll just ...”

He's already over to the car, a beat-up Lada. I wouldn't know where a guy'd find a wreck like that around here. It's funny how the girls all look the same at that age, and damn fine too, with their tight T-shirts and make-up.

"That's Art and Angela's girl driving," Donna says to me, still watching Ed. "Just turned sixteen. First car in the 'gang' so it's a big deal, you know."

"Boy, she's a looker, that one," I say, sliding my arm around Donna's waist.

"Gary, can you just...!" She digs her elbow into my hand, and then pushes me away.

"Ouch! Can't a guy comment on the scenery?"

She puts her face right up to mine but Karen comes out of the house before she can blast me. Donna steps back. Karen looks at the two of us. She doesn't say anything about the cigarette.

"And the county just gravelled our road so take it easy or you'll fishtail." Ed's voice is getting louder. "Ditches are steep past the Carlson place too so slow down or you'll end up in one of them. Eyes on the road."

The driver nods without looking at Ed. She's gripping the wheel at two o'clock and ten o'clock. The car is still running.

Ed leans into the car. "Best to just forget about the radio and all that while you're driving. I know you girls won't be drinking, of course."

Even from the deck I can see Amanda's face is red. She's burning to get away, but Ed still has his hand on the door. Then he nails an eleven-thirty curfew on her.

"Eleven-thirty," Amanda says it slowly like she's hoping she's gotten it wrong. "Okay." She pauses. "Bye, dad." It is a request.

"All right then. Take it real easy. Real slow."

"Ed," Donna says.

"No later than eleven-thirty." Ed backs away from the car.

"Ed!"

"Have fun. Bye." Ed waves but he doesn't take his eyes off the girls until they're out of the driveway and over the rise. You can bet the driver is keeping her eyes on the road. Bloody Ed. At this rate, Amanda will be on the first bus out of town when she graduates.

"Too fucking young," Ed says, finally sitting down. He reaches for a can of beer from Donna.

"She's almost sixteen." Donna says it like she's said it before.

"Art's girls are really responsible," Karen says. "She's the second one, isn't she?"

"Yes. Sarah's oldest, then Susan is Amanda's age, and Sonia - she'd be..."
Donna says.

"Eleven," Karen says. "All 'S' names."

“Same age as Blake would have been.” Ed says it more to himself than to us. “Eleven.” He washes his words down with another huge mouthful of beer and makes a bitter face.

“Eight years already,” Karen says, shaking her head.

“To the day,” Donna says.

“That was the weekend of the Agri-Show down in Lethbridge,” I say, to change the subject. “Where’s it being held this year? Didn’t hear anything.”

No one answers. Donna won’t even look at me. I wonder what she remembers from that weekend.

About a month before the Agri-Show, Karen and I had invited a few couples over for a barbeque. Donna and Ed got a sitter for little Amanda, and our two-year old was at her grandmother’s house for the night. Karen was pregnant again. Jen and Scott were just back from Mexico and broke out a big bottle of tequila. All of us, except Karen, partied like we were back in high school. Ed fell over like a plank but forgot to put his hands out. I remember thinking to myself that it’d serve him right, the best-looking guy in town picking gravel out of his face for a week. Donna wasn’t too steady herself, but she had to get home for the sitter so I helped her haul Ed out to their truck. He was muttering off and on about his hair. Donna and I were laughing. We got Ed in through the passenger side and he passed out on the seat.

I walked Donna back to the driver's side. She looked worn out and said she was tired of driving Ed home all the time or something like that. I told her not to worry and leaned over to give her a big hug but instead I kissed her. That was something I had been wanting to do since high school. And then, all of a sudden, I had just done it - not a peck on the cheek but a real, soft kiss on the lips. It was something, that moment. My insides were all worked up like the first time I got laid. Her eyes were closed. Mine were open.

"Gary," she said.

"I'm such an asshole."

I remember feeling completely sober all of a sudden, aware of how close we were standing and how her hair smelled and even the tequila on her breath. We stood there for a few seconds more; the only sound was Ed snoring. She drove off before I could kiss her again, but I could still feel the pressure of my lips on hers - not too hard or soft or wet.

It's just not true what they say, that there are no secrets in a small town. You just have to be smart. There's a dip in our field, low and wide enough to park two trucks, where you can't be seen from the road or the farm. It's right across from the old cemetery and if you drive into it along the half-section divide, your tracks don't show. That's where we'd meet. Ed was always working or drinking, and my wife was too pregnant to get out much. It really wasn't a big deal.

When I think back to that show weekend, I mostly remember two things: the drive and the call. The drive down was early in the morning and you couldn't ask for a better day to be on the road. The sky was blue as it gets, with just the odd pair of wispy white clouds two-stepping off toward the horizon until you lost sight of them. I took my time and stayed to the side roads to check out how the crops were coming up along the way. My windows were down and my tunes were way up; I felt younger than I had in a while.

Spring that year was wet so the fields were good. I pulled up alongside a flax field and turned off my truck. Flax looks like acres of lake from far off; the first time I saw one, I thought that's what it was which made no sense at all, not around here. The little blue flowers follow the sun all day, and the wind ripples through it just like waves. This particular flax field caught my eye because it was sitting pretty, right up against a canola field - yellow as mustard - with some green barley facing it across the road. Those huge patches of colour were so bright, it seemed like the blue and yellow and green was coming right into my eyes. I stepped out of the truck to take it all in, listening to the wind and the crickets and the crow. I wondered if Donna drove this way, if she'd noticed this spot.

Donna was in my class at school, and good-looking and popular. Girls like her didn't date guys the same age; they'd go for the older ones with access to wheels and legal-aged friends who bootleg for them so we didn't really run in the same crowd. After graduation and a few years of college, she ended up back

here working part-time in the office at the grain elevators. I was here farming with dad.

Karen and I had been dating since Grade Ten and things were easy; Karen's like that – easy on the eyes, easy to be around. But with Donna back in town, I felt restless like a steer before a storm. We'd get talking every time I brought in a load of grain and, before long, we'd both be smiling about someone or something. She said that she didn't remember me being so funny in high school, and I told her she'd never given me the time of day in school so how would she know? I'd be at a party with Karen right next to me and, in my head, I was practising what story I'd tell Donna the next time I saw her, to see if I could make her laugh. There was just something between Donna and me.

I can tell you exactly where I was the first time I saw her and Ed kissing: I was coming out of the community hall and they were in front of his truck. Bloody disaster. I wanted to knock his teeth out and I'm not one to pick a fight. I never thought much of Ed; he was the guy who could get any girl he wanted. Donna and I had this special connection, but there was Ed neckin' her down.

Things got serious pretty quick between them – Donna got pregnant – and they got married. So I married Karen. Donna was off work for a few years, but when she came back, we picked up right where we left off except we joked about different stuff: being married, being parents. But even the way she asked about Karen, she was flirting with me. I didn't ask about Ed.

When I arrived at the show, I spotted Donna right away. Her booth was one of the busiest and not because of the posters they put up, or the caps they were giving away. There aren't a lot of ladies at agricultural fairs, plus Donna looks as good in a pair of jeans now as she did before she had Amanda. I felt like a king being the only person who could claim to know her. One guy even asked if she was my wife. I just smiled so he'd think she was. I stood taller and smarter for Donna than anyone else. There was just no game with Karen. I had to try harder with Donna, sure, but it was working.

I wandered around, checking my watch, and making sure there wasn't anyone from town. I can't say I recall a thing the different companies were selling that day. I thought it was all good. That's the kind of mood I was in.

Finally, I saw her start to put a few things away. I went over.

"So?"

"I need to change."

"I'm in 704. Come up when you're ready."

"Down. I'm 919."

"Should have guessed. You're the star."

"Piss off," she said.

I turned to leave.

"704?"

"Yup."

“Not even a fucking eulogy.” Ed says, and lets the screen door bang behind him. He’s got another beer open and the rest of a six-pack dangling from the other hand by the plastic rings that hold the top of the cans.

“Don’t,” Donna says.

Ed swings the beer around so I grab another. He’s been drinking harder since Amanda left. I’m doing alright myself.

“It’s your turn,” Donna says to me.

Ed and I had retrieved some of the cards from under the deck with the garden rake and a broom. I know there’s still a card or two under there but saying anything will only fire up the women.

“I’m sixes?”

“That was last turn. You’re tens.”

“I’m a ten, am I?” I put a pile of cards down to get rid of them. “Two tens.” I don’t think anyone’s even paying attention.

“I guess no one knew what to say,” Karen says.

“Should have tried,” Ed says.

“I’m sure they did try, Ed. I know they tried,” Karen says.

“Not hard enough,” Ed says. “That little guy deserved a eulogy.”

“Are we playing or not?” Donna says.

“Bullshit.” Karen calls me.

“Bloody hell.” I reach for the cards and wink at Donna. I’ll help her get Ed off the eulogy thing. “I remember when we got the call.”

Donna looks at me, and then Ed. He's focused on his cards.

"One Jack," Donna says, but I'm pretty sure it's not her turn.

"We?" Karen says.

Fuck. I look at my wife. Her head tilts just a bit to the side, like a bird listening, waiting. What had I told her when I came back from the show? Eight years ago is a long time. I didn't need to say much, that I remember, because of what happened to Blake. Something about...?

"My cousin," I say.

"You told me you never saw him," Karen says.

"Sure I did - my cousin." I'm not sober enough for this conversation. "We were having a drink when you called the hotel. We didn't have dinner though. Maybe that's what you're thinking?"

"No, no," Karen says in a low voice.

"I remember..." Donna's lip twitches "...I had a message from Ed at the hotel when I got in after being out with the sales reps."

Karen is watching.

Ed says, "She's out having a party with the reps while I'm here alone trying to take care of Amanda and get over to Dean and Tanya's. A whole lot of help you were that night."

"I drove back as fast ...," Donna says.

"Well, you should have been here. A wife's place is home at a time like that," Ed says.

"But how could I know that..." Donna says.

"I'm just saying that a decent wife..."

"Stop it!" Donna throws her cards down. She stomps into the house and slams the screen door behind her.

Karen does up another button on her sweater. She's the type that would go see how Donna's doing, but she doesn't move except to put her cards face down on the table.

"I kept calling and calling," Ed says. "No answer."

"Donna didn't know, Ed," I say.

"Well you weren't fucking here either," he says, focusing on me, "were you?"

I wait to see if he's going somewhere with that.

Ed looks at his watch again. "It's almost midnight, for Christ's sake.

Where is she?"

Karen says, "I think we should go."

"Too damn young," Ed says, and takes another long drink. "Poor fuckin' Dean. In hell every day, wishing he'd a just seen Blake."

I stand up and look back at the house. There's a long rectangle of light cast onto the lawn from a window in back of the kitchen. I wonder what room that is. Did Ed ever wonder if Donna was with me?

Donna showed up at my hotel room in a skirt.

I had picked up a mickey so we cracked the mini-bar fridge for mix and made ourselves some rye-7s. I remember feeling like I was the luckiest guy to be having a drink with Donna and her long legs, shootin' the breeze on a hotel bed with the whole night ahead of us. That had me all geared up because pickups just aren't much for messing around in unless you're some sort of acrobat.

The phone rang somewhere along our way to the bottom of the bottle.

"Karen," Donna said, but not in a mean way.

I asked her to give me a sec. I was feeling too good to worry about my wife. "Hello?"

It was Karen, crying. She told me Blake had been run over. I was looking in the mirror back at Donna in her skirt on the bed. She was looking at me, too.

Karen told me how Dean and Tanya had tried to rush him to the hospital but he had died on the way. Some of the men were going over first thing tomorrow to see if they could help with the farm, even if swathing hadn't really started yet. Karen was going to bring over a casserole and sandwiches or something and asked if I could come back that night. It didn't even seem real, to be listening to Karen cry with Donna right in front of me.

I told Karen I was on my way and not to worry. I hung up.

"Home?" Donna said. "Does she..."

"No, no, don't worry. She doesn't know." I remember feeling calm, just then, telling everyone not to worry. But when I started to tell her about Dean and Tanya's Blake, my face got hot. I saw in the mirror that I was dark red; I didn't

want to say it out loud because it could change everything. I finally just said it.

“Blake’s dead.”

“Oh god!” She sat up, covered her mouth and said it again, “Oh my god.”

I leaned over to hold her, to comfort her. She pushed me away.

“What?” I asked.

“Ed. He’ll be just...”

“Yeah, Karen’s pretty upset,” I told her.

I remember Donna looked at me like I was a complete idiot or asshole or both. Like tonight, when I was checking out Amanda’s friend: same look. She grabbed her purse. I said if anyone asked, we never ran into each other. I told her to drive safe, but she was already out the door.

Donna and I never did have sex in a bed, or anywhere after that.

There’s no wind tonight, and not a star in the sky. We couldn’t persuade Ed to go inside the house, and Donna won’t come out, so Karen goes in to say thanks for supper. What Ed’ll remember tomorrow when he’s sober, I don’t know, but right now he’s not talking to me, so we both make like we’re listening for the Lada. All I’m hearing are coyotes and a dog from the next farm barking at them. Karen comes out and asks for the truck key.

“You’re drunk,” she says.

“Been worse.”

She just holds out her hand and waits for me to put the keys in it. I do. She cuts me off heading to the driver's side of my truck and gets in.

It's good to be back on the road, even if Karen's harder on the stick than a first-time driver. She's mad all right. I try to keep my attention on the gravel but I'm having a time keeping my eyes open. I roll down my window to let some air in.

"I'm cold," Karen says.

I roll it up again.

"Babysitter'll be sleeping," I say.

Karen's face is serious in the light of the dashboard, like she's deep in conversation with herself. It's no good when she's mad. If I told Karen straight out, and I think about that, she'd have something on me. But really, it didn't have anything to do with her. And if this got to Ed, Donna told me it'd kill him – or he'd kill me. The accident was enough death and misery to last her a lifetime, she said, thank you very much, and she changed jobs. That was tough. But then I started hanging around with Ed so at least she wouldn't forget about me, or us. There's no one to blame that Donna and I have this connection.

Headlights appear in the distance coming from the direction of town.

"That'll be the girls there," I say. I picture Ed on the deck standing up as the Lada pulls in. Donna will be watching through the kitchen window.

Karen dims the lights and moves way over to the loose shoulder to give the girls lots of room to get by. When the vehicle comes a bit closer, Karen says, "You're wrong. Not them." Her voice is as sharp as I've ever heard it.

The lights are too high and far apart to be the Lada.

She stays over on the loose shoulder of the road, even after the king cab has gone by us. Tall grass is scratching the hell out of the wheel wells, and the tires on my side are close to slipping off the road completely. I watch a while, and then a while more, hoping she'll get over.

"The ditch is steep around here and I'm practically in it," I say.

She doesn't answer me, and she doesn't move away from the edge. I can't make out a thing in the darkness beyond the light of the high beams. It's just us and a bit of the road ahead, with grass alongside. The rest is black as the sky.

"Karen?" I try again.

We're both staring at the road and the ditch, especially the one on my side.

"You didn't see your cousin," Karen said.

"What are you...?" I just want us to get home.

"When Blake was killed," Karen says. "Eight years ago, the show weekend."

"God Karen... I don't remember. It was so long ago."

"You saw Donna," Karen says.

"I don't know! Probably, yeah. But I saw a lot of people. Did she say we saw each other? Is that what you went in the kitchen to ask? Shit!"

"I went in the kitchen to thank her for supper. I'm asking you: did you see each other?"

"I said we did."

"You said probably. Did you talk to her?"

She slows, shifts down and stops.

"Why are we..."

"Tell me what happened that night," Karen says. She looks straight ahead.

"Why don't we go home and talk about it in the morning."

"We can talk now."

"I'm too drunk, okay?"

She waits.

"We're in the middle of the road!"

"I'm over enough. It's not a blind hill and the park lights are on."

"What do you want me to say, Karen? That Donna and I had sex? Because we didn't. The phone rang and she left. And then I came..."

"She was in your room when I called? God!"

I don't say anything.

"When did it start? The show was when I was pregnant with Kim. Was it then? Before?"

"You're the one who remembers dates."

“For crying out loud! Forgive me if I don’t remember exactly when you’ve slept around!”

“Oh come on!”

“I’m not stupid, Gary.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

“Then stop treating me like it. Donna wasn’t the only one.”

“We didn’t have sex! How many times do I have to tell you?!”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Well, it does to me!”

“What, that you didn’t have sex with Donna?”

“NO, fuck!” I look at her. I’m pissed off. “What?”

Karen doesn’t look at me. I don’t know what to say.

She turns the key in the ignition and starts the truck. “It didn’t matter who you were with. You weren’t with me.” She puts it in first, and we start moving.

Headlights appear coming from the direction of town. They disappear briefly because of a hill, and then reappear, closer. Karen moves over.

I focus on the lights. This is a fuck of a situation. Karen knows about Donna and me. If something happened, like the weekend of the show, she’d forget about this crap of being pissed off. Right now, she’s driving like a pro, calm as all hell. If I were driving, I’d...

“Sometimes when I’m driving,” I say, “I picture the car or truck or whatever vehicle is coming toward me swerving out of control and flipping into the ditch. Just like that, Karen, I see it going off the road.”

She looks ahead to the oncoming vehicle.

“Then I always start thinking how easy it would be to crank the hell out of the wheel of my half-ton and run her straight into the ditch. It’d be so simple to do, driving my pickup off the road.” I pause. The vehicle is coming right up beside us. “And then I’m gone. No more crying. Just gone.”

I hear Karen sigh. She squints like she’s having a hard time seeing the road, like through tears or the lights of the other vehicle or something. I think about telling her not to worry about me killing myself to make her feel better, but I don’t. She’s not pissed off at me anymore. That’s all that counts.

Then she says, “It’s the Lada. Just the two girls going to Ed and Donna’s place last.” She slows down to make the turn onto our gravel road. “One less thing to worry about.”

She’s not crying. Her voice is steady.

Shit.

Seeing her

He lay on the sofa bed trying to think of what he would say to her but one sound after another disconnected his thoughts. His dad had left for work hours ago, his mom was out running errands and his brother hadn't come home from the night before but the house was not silent. The phone was ringing downstairs and the furnace roared to a pitch, extinguished itself, and then slowly thumped back to life again with late-summer uncertainty.

The noise outside also disturbed him. Even with the windows taped shut, he heard cars, conversations, dogs and children, all the way up to the second storey TV room that was once his bedroom. He remembered this side street where he grew up as being much quieter. Kids were yelling up at the window. The higher pitch of the young voices kept singing and singing at him.

- In bed all day!

- Again today!

The room was already very hot but the furnace started up again. He welcomed the heat because it helped calm his mind. Early afternoon sun pressed against the papered-over windows, breaking through where the tape had dried

and peeled. Drops of perspiration beaded and slid from his brow but he stayed under the wool covers without moving. The heat helped him tune down the noise. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see a shaft of light across the pillow, coming through where the window was cracked, the tape pulling away.

So much had changed since he left this town, since they dated in high school. He was a year older than she, and went away to university first. Later, she left to study in a different city. He wasn't sure what she studied.

The phone rang again.

Perhaps she had mentioned it on the phone or maybe not. He could ask her and that would be one of the things they would talk about – her studies. But then she would ask about his studies. He imagined himself saying, “I’ll never finish my degree or any degree. I can’t concentrate and even taking one class is too much sometimes.” But if he could just find the right medication...

- To make you dull, dull, dull.

- Not delusion-ul, ul, ul!

The pack of children howled with laughter.

- She’ll laugh too.

He sat up quickly and looked around.

“No, she won’t laugh,” he answered the voice coming from the other side of the door. “She’ll be surprised, remembering how smart I was in high school. A ‘brilliant young man’: her mom had called me exactly that. She’ll feel terrible for me.”

- Then she'll search the menu for a more positive direction for the conversation. And she'll check her watch for the time.

He was meeting her at the coffee shop. Maybe they would order lunch.

- But you never eat. If you don't eat, you'll die.

"Food tastes like rot," he said. When he had refused to eat for almost two weeks, a nurse had explained to him that death by starvation was excruciating. "I just want to be gone, with no fucking drama."

- You always swear.

He wanted an exit, like he was never born. Why couldn't he just disappear without everyone asking themselves what they did wrong and crying and all that crap? Here. Gone. Why was that so hard?

- Then get up and do it. Go away.

- Dull, dull, dull, delusional!

"Shut up you little bastards!" he shouted at the kids.

He saw the ray of sunlight has slid off his pillow. She was blond from the sun and her hair was always in their faces and mouths when they kissed. He tried to imagine her older and not tanned from the summer lifeguard job she had then, but he couldn't come up with any other portrait of her.

- She probably looks even better now. You look like shit. Don't let her see you. Don't *make* her see you.

When they said their goodbyes at the end of that summer, they wished each other well and promised to write, without illusions that their romance was

anything but situational, without declarations of “love” and “forever.” They were both strong academically and going off to university was normal. Their futures would diverge.

The band of sunlight reached across the brochures on the floor. Maybe she already knew, as everyone learned of everyone else’s business in a town this size, that he had been in and out of the hospital for the last year.

- Hand her the brochure “Living with mental illness” before you even start talking. Once she’s read it, answer any questions she has about the symptoms, diagnosis and treatment. Should you expect to live a normal life? There’s nothing *normal* about you.

He did not want her to know he had schizophrenia. No one understood what that meant and she still might not, even after reading the brochure. He certainly had no idea what it meant before it was the label for his condition.

- They don’t *want* to understand. It’s more interesting to think of it as a *split* personality instead of *no* personality like you.

But maybe if he did explain it to her, he thought. She knew him, and was the one who had called him to get together, to meet for coffee. He had such good memories of their relationship.

- It’s a sympathy “date”. She feels sorry for you. Because she’s such a nice girl, she’ll see you. It will give you something to discuss with your shrink, whoever the hell that is right now.

He didn't remember all the doctors but it didn't matter. They didn't help. Every one of them played the same game, asking him how he felt, what he heard, and then pretending that they didn't hear the same thing. Bringing up his ex-girlfriend could fill the next hour-long session.

He remembered the poster that used to be on the wall at the foot of the bed: two seagulls in flight that promised, "They can because they think they can".

Flying was something he knew he could do, but he was never able to attempt it at the institution. He hadn't seen the angel fly. She glided through the cafeteria that day among the other students.

- She wanted you to join her.

Going with her was the only thing that mattered. He wanted to be with her so badly and felt such deep, exquisite peace waiting to arrive. Someone from the staff had found him in the dumpster behind the cafeteria.

- That other brochure was written *just* for you. "Entertaining thoughts of suicide?" Everyone wants you gone. So go.

"Shut up! I know they do but I can't figure out how to do it if I can't fucking think because you won't shut the fuck up and get out!"

- We should castrate the bastard for that!

He pulled the blanket up and turned over to push his face into the pillow. He screamed until his ears rang and his skull throbbed. Sweat poured off his face and neck.

It was quiet enough for him to think and breath. He stayed on his stomach with his chin on his fist, next to his soaked pillow, and closed his eyes.

Someone was phoning the house again.

They had been seeing each other just a few weeks when he had called to say he would stop by sometime that afternoon. She would be home, she said. He hadn't said he intended to run the eleven miles to where she lived near the neighbouring town.

He heard someone come into the house, and go straight to the basement. His pair of Nikes was probably still down there.

Mile after mile, he had imagined telling her about his poems, books he was reading, music he loved most, and the courses he wanted to take in university: Greek mythology and Latin. But then an acute awareness of his body started interrupting his thoughts, occasionally earlier in his run, and then unrelentingly.

"Are you okay?"

It really wasn't a conscious effort on his part to test himself by running in the midday summer heat on an empty stomach. He just believed that once he made up his mind, he could do anything the laws of physics didn't rule out. Fasting improved his thinking. He didn't bring water.

- You were trying to impress her.

There was a knock on the door. "Answer me, please! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, mom."

“You still planning to go meet Tammy?”

“Yeah”.

“What time?”

“As soon as I have a bath”.

“You need anything washed or ironed?”

“Nope. Thanks”.

“Did you have anything to eat?”

“We’re having lunch together.”

“Oh. I pull out some clean towels for you.”

“Thanks.”

His mom went into the bathroom before going back down the stairs to the kitchen. He pulled up the blankets to his shoulders, and remembered how surprised and happy Tammy was to see him. She couldn’t believe he had run so far.

- She wasn’t happy. She thought you were crazy. Turns out she was right. And you looked like hell. She wanted you gone.

She went into the house to bring him a glass of water. He took a drink and poured the rest on his head. That had made her laugh. She insisted he let her drive him home. He didn’t remember how he convinced her to let him run back.

-You never even told her you only made it to your ex-girlfriend’s farm before you passed out.

She drove him home.

- You're such an asshole, lying to her! How many more lies are you going to tell her over coffee today?

He pinched the inside of his right wrist with the fingernails of his left hand until the voice was faint. The rank smell of his own sweat he preferred to what he smelled more and more often: death. When he used to collect garbage for the town, the most disgusting type of garbage was bags of lawn clippings that had been out in the heat for a long time. But the smell of death was different, permeating his clothing, the bedding, the air. The scent wasn't something slowly rotting, moulding or dying. He smelled the exact moment when living stopped, when the last whisper of existence was silenced. That is what he smelled and it frightened him.

He imagined her sitting alone in the coffee shop, twirling a strand of her fair hair in her fingertips, reading the ingredients on the ketchup bottle. She would wait a long time, longer than she would wait for a sane person. He knew expectations were lower for people like him. She would excuse him, forgive him. Maybe it was better this way; there were many things to tell her, but his scars suggested things he didn't want to share.

He heard his mom say hello to his brother. He took his runners off by kicking one foot straight out, until the shoe flew against the wall, and then the other. Kicking them off was one of the reasons he never tied them. His brother didn't come upstairs.

- He doesn't want to talk to you. You being here pisses him off.

Embarrasses him in front of his friends. You're the reason he doesn't have a girlfriend.

The wool blanket was itchy against his shoulders but he refused to move or scratch. He was disappointed to feel the heat in the room wane. There was more and more noise from the street as the children screamed at him, sang at him. He heard more voices than before. He only smelled death.

- Dull, dull, dull.

- Delu-sion-ul!

- Dull, dull, dull.

- Delu-sion-ul!

He pinched his wrist until his fingernails drew blood and the singing sounded far away, like the children had moved to the next street. Nero had used a year's supply of Rome's cinnamon to bury his wife Poppea. He had murdered her.

He smelled decay again so he sat up, breathing only through his mouth because the odour was so strong. Without looking at the small alarm clock beside the sofa, he decided there was not enough time to run a bath before he'd have to meet her but he hated showers - all that water coming at him. Everything felt like it was always coming at him. Everyone. Baths were more gentle; you lowered yourself in, the water rising around you as your weight descended. He

remembered reading about a sailor who was carried months at sea in a coffin of pepper. The body looked natural when it arrived.

She had probably travelled to Europe since they said their goodbyes.

- Tell her you smell death.

He could picture her and her friends with backpacks, boarding trains, taking pictures. He would love to hear her stories of beaches in Greece and wine in Paris.

- Tell you hear children taunting you.

She might think it unkind to tell him about places to which he would never travel. And he could offer so little in return.

- Tell her what you saw that day in the cafeteria.

He remembered wanting to follow her, trying to follow her, but he couldn't. When he started to come around in emergency, he was enraged at everyone who had "saved" him: doctors, nurses, especially the person who first found him.

- Well, if at first you don't succeed...

He just wanted silence.

- You don't deserve it.

- Are you still going to meet her?

- All those words you use to impress people actually just show you're stupid because you don't even use them right. Even if you could go back to university, you'd never pass a course much less get a degree.

“Honey? You getting up?” his mother called from the kitchen.

“Yes. God!!!”

He got up and went into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

- A little late for a bath. In bed all day and you don't make it any further than the bathroom? Why do you bother? You just didn't want to go.

He wanted to go. He had hoped to feel something good, like when they were together. He always loved being with her.

- But you've made sure you won't see her. And damn sure she won't see you. Anything so she doesn't see how fucked up you are.

He did want to go. The more he thinks about her, remembering their time together, the more he misses her, kissing her, holding her.

- She hated the way you kissed. The reason you didn't have sex in high school was because she didn't *want* to do a fucking thing with you. She had sex with the boyfriend before you and the guys after you.

He turned on the hot water. The tub wasn't clean but he didn't care. He concentrated on the water filling the tub while he took off his sweats and underwear.

- Look at you! No wonder she didn't want to have sex with you! Skinny as hell with chopped up wrists. Not a hell of a lot of guys to choose from if she ended up with you.

He didn't want the tub overflowing, which would draw attention to him bathing, so he added just enough cold to imagine being able to get in and shut the water off.

- She was too nice to tell you that she didn't give a damn about your awful poems. You bored the hell out of her with your books and shit. You're a lousy piece of crap!

He stepped in slowly, his feet, ankles and legs adjusting to the heat. Voices shouted awful names at him. Then he sunk his body in from the waist down, wincing when his penis and testicles reached the water. He heard screaming.

- Fucker! Prick! Bastard!

He bent his knees so he could lay back with his head under. The longer he held his breath, the less he heard the screaming until, finally, the voices were muted. The children didn't sing at him. The loudest sound was his heart beating.

He was able to think about that day, remembering the moments when he saw her. His body ached. Out of all the students in the cafeteria, she looked right at him, and gestured for him to follow. He so rarely felt pleasure but recalling when he had first noticed her always made him smile, his eyes opening wide, even under water.

When he could no longer hold his breath, he sat up so his mother wouldn't hear him coughing or choking. He felt dizzy, like his heart was pounding through his forehead. He flicked the water from his eyes so he could

see over the edge of the tub. The piece of glass he had pulled from the broken window in the TV room sat on the floor in a pool of water. When most of his body was under, the tub had overflowed.

The only sharp blade in the cafeteria kitchen had been a filleting knife but fish was never served. The knife was used to cut onions and tomatoes for hamburgers. He considered slicing across the scars on his left wrist down to his elbow. The water in the tub would turn red, hiding the scum on the surface because the tub hadn't been clean.

He smelled only the bathtub and himself. He wasn't afraid.

Tammy had told him of a night so peaceful and a lake so still that every star overhead was reflected – brilliant points of light – in the water's surface. Her dream was to swim in that lake. It would be swimming in the sky, weightless as the stars. He thought about when they talked all night, it was as though they had both sensed they had their whole lives in front of them.

He again thought about the experience of seeing her move that day in the cafeteria, of hearing her call out, of gesturing for him to follow. He was so lucky and so thankful.

- Cut your wrists.

He didn't want to live this life. Drowning himself in the bath had little chance of being successful. He first needed to take something strong enough to knock himself out. Otherwise, his physical reflex would kick in and bring him up for air.

- It's what you want, to be with her.

Now that his mother and brother were home, and his father was on his way, they would prevent his departure. If he did cut his wrists, he would bleed and bleed but they would keep him alive. That would decrease any chances in the immediate future to go to her.

- Stop waiting! What good has thinking about it ever done you?

He slid back and put his head under water.

- Thinking about killing yourself. Thinking about going to her. Thinking.

The piece of glass floated out of his hand and dropped, brushing against his thigh. All was still. His mind was almost silent. He smiled and opened his eyes. He was swimming in the lake of stars with her.

Transfiguration

Every Thursday morning, the ladies meet in the church basement. Over coffee and squares or cookies – but usually squares – they talk about the coming Sunday’s gospel and then discuss a spiritual book, copies of which are purchased by Diane at a discount from the Christian bookstore, The Word. “Where I earn my daily bread,” she says.

Today, Beth is standing just inside the basement door. This is the first time she has entered the church in over a year. She stopped coming to mass, meetings, or anything to do with the Father, Son or the Holy Spirit after her husband’s funeral. Jay had been chronically ill for the “better” – that was a joke of hers – part of their married life. Even today, she was uncertain she would attend the meeting but, here she is, church door swinging shut behind her. Beth hadn’t called any of the ladies; she didn’t want to disappoint them, Carmen especially, should she change her mind at the last minute.

At the sound of the door closing, Carmen turns around in her chair. She doesn't recognize Beth, not immediately: her coat is new, her hair is cut, her face is full and she is wearing sunglasses. But when the glasses come off, Carmen sees her friend.

"Beth!" Carmen stands up so quickly her chair tips. "Welcome back!" She hurries to the entryway, her smile resplendent. It is the smile she has saved for the day when Beth would return. Since she stopped attending the gatherings, not a day has passed that Carmen hasn't prayed for her and, every month, Carmen continues her practice of buying an extra missalette for Beth in case she comes back. Until recently, Carmen even called her with parish news on a fairly regular basis but the conversation was one-sided so the calls stopped.

Beth lowers her head - for a moment only - and then her gaze, black bangs swinging forward.

Carmen stops short. Until now, her awareness of the distance between her and Beth, of the many months apart, has been in her mind and heart. The discomfort she now feels is as physical and painful as a hand pushing her in the chest. She looks nervously to Beth's hair.

"I thought you had more grey than that." Carmen's voice is high and tight.

"I do. I always did. It's almost all grey now," Beth says.

"Oh. Looks nice," Carmen says.

“You would say that, something positive about a dye job,” Beth still hadn’t looked Carmen in the eye.

You used to say positive things too, Carmen thinks.

“It’s good to see you,” Beth says, peering up at Carmen.

“You too,” Carmen exhales, touched by the familiarity of Beth’s kindness.

“We’re just starting. I’ll grab you a chair.”

Beth removes her coat and hangs it with the others against the wall in the entryway. She changes from her boots into brown loafers she pulls from her shoulder bag. Carmen heads over to where the chairs are stacked with the wooden tables leaned against the back wall. Seventeen years ago, Beth and Carmen founded the Thursday women’s group as an inspirational break from being home with their young children. For so many years and hundreds of church functions, she and Beth unfolded and folded these clumsy metal chairs and long heavy tables. There isn’t a corner of the church basement that the two of them hadn’t scrubbed or painted, usually side-by-side, always first to arrive and last to leave.

The women slide their chairs back over the scratched linoleum to make room for one more as Carmen approaches the circle. The white and gold-speckled floor is the same Beth has in her kitchen; it came with the house. She had always told Carmen she meant to change it, but with her husband’s health, a good time never came. Carmen sets the chair down, lines her own seat up with the larger circle, and sits, remaining seated while the other women stand and

hug Beth. Each welcomes her back and comments on how great she looks. In her husband's last months, Beth's thinness rivalled his, the lines in her brow deep and the circles under her eyes ever-present. She accepts the compliments – without her trademark self-deprecation – and nudges her chair slightly back from the circle before sitting down. Carmen wonders if Beth ever did put something else over her old floor.

Beth did not attend most of the meetings in the weeks prior to Jay's passing; this was "understandable given the circumstances" the ladies would say, nodding to each other. About a month after the funeral, Carmen asked Beth when she might join the group again; Beth didn't know – soon, soon, she said. Thursdays came and went, with Beth continuing to miss the gatherings for one reason or another, and then for no reason at all. Carmen ceased inviting her. "Not that Beth needs an invitation," Carmen told Mrs. Lanman. When she had been absent for several months, Mrs. Lanman assured Carmen, "Everything comes back, right dear? The tides, the sun, the seasons. Beth will be back in the Lord's good time."

The meetings begin with an informal opening prayer, the "Our Father" and then the "Apostles' Creed." Up to a dozen women attend. Today, there are only six: Beth and Carmen, plus Cathy, Nettie, Diane, and eighty-year-old Mrs. Lanman. The ladies are seated in a circle close to the corner kitchen area, in front of the stage. Long banners pinned to wooden dowels hang on each side of the stage, with "GLORY TO GOD!" and "PRAISE HIS NAME!" in felt letters glued

onto blue and gold fabric. Similar banners, in red and green, frame the altar upstairs.

Cathy, the youngest of the ladies, teaches at Francois Xavier Elementary. She doesn't so much lead the meetings as start them off and keep time. Today, she asks Beth to read the gospel after the prayers. Carmen quickly slips her own missalette, already open to Sunday's reading with the other square pages folded underneath, into Beth's hand and searches for her second copy. It is not in her purse or her pocket but Carmen knows today's passage well. She wonders at the workings of the Lord: today's reading was the last piece of scripture Carmen and Beth discussed before her husband died.

Beth reads:

Mark 9: 2-9. Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James and John off by themselves with him and led them up a high mountain. He was transfigured before their eyes and his clothes became dazzling white - whiter than the work of any bleacher could make them. Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; the two were in conversation with Jesus. Then Peter spoke to Jesus: "Rabbi, how good it is for us to be here! Let us erect three booths on this site, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He hardly knew what to say, for they were all overcome with awe. A cloud came, overshadowing them, and out of the cloud a voice: "This is my Son, my beloved. Listen to him." Suddenly looking around they no longer saw anyone with them - only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he strictly enjoined them not to tell anyone what they had seen, before the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Diane: "Listen to him."

Nettie: "Overshadowing them."

Carmen: "How good it is for us to be here."

Mrs. Lanman: "Dazzling white."

Beth says nothing. There is a pause before Cathy says, "Uh, dazzling white."

After the reading, each woman says a word or phrase that resonates with her. Cathy feels bad for waiting – perhaps too long – for Beth to take her turn. She also feels bad for having asked Beth to read before noticing she didn't have a missalette. Beth's silence is palpable in today's smaller group. Apologizing to Beth would only draw more attention to her presence.

Cathy pushes her chin-length hair behind her ears and clears her throat, twice: "I think this is one of my favourite passages, you know. I just love imagining the dazzling white robes. Wow. Don't you wonder what that looked like?" Her missalette slips to the floor. "And... in another version I read, his robes are described as 'unearthly' and it says his face shone like the sun, and his clothes were radiant as light or something like that," Cathy says, retrieving her missalette and clearing her throat again. Her hair was cut recently; it doesn't stay back so she tries tucking it behind her ears.

Mrs. Lanman squints at the group and at her knitting through thick glasses that cover half her face. "Well my Susan, she's the middle girl, she saw a vision of the Virgin Mother like that you know, at Medjugorje, on her trip." Mrs. Lanman's five children and twelve grandchildren receive slippers at Christmas and on their birthdays.

"When you were reading, Beth," Nettie always speaks in a hush, as though she were revealing a secret. "I couldn't help thinking of the little girl in the paper, the one who had been abducted and kept by that man. I thought of those disciples being awed - afraid really - like that poor child."

Mrs. Lanman sits next to Nettie at the meetings so she can hear her. "And maybe they weren't even sure it was Jesus. His face was altered too, I'll bet," says Mrs. Lanman, looking up from half a purple and yellow slipper. The colour combination is unusual in November - more spring than fall - but Easter colours are always favourites with young girls, she claims. She tries to count back the months since Beth was last with them, but her aging mind is better at counting stitches.

"The Lord wasn't wearing a Halloween costume," Diane snuffs out loudly through her nose. "Of course they knew it was him."

Carmen laughs, louder than she intended. Diane has not really made a joke, but she laughs along. The others smile, including Beth, temporarily loosening the restraint of manners. Carmen feels no such release; she inhales and exhales deeply each time she looks at Beth. It is the type of sigh that serves as a pause before the posing of a weighty question: Why are you here? Patient and tolerant as Carmen has been for the entire year she waited for Beth to reappear in her life. This question - heavy, dark, silent - now intrudes upon Carmen's thoughts and prayers.

Beth is studying the missalette cover. Carmen follows her gaze, imagining her thoughts. Neither would ever claim to be impressed by the monthly cover artwork: predictable “realistic” biblical scenes featuring a fair, blue-eyed Jesus. The selection for this month’s cover is more abstract; the background is bright red, shaped like a fan and curved along the top. Etched into the red are pale silhouettes of Jesus on the cross and, above him, a dove or an angel – a winged creature. At the foot of the cross stand two figures, one on each side.

“There was the cloud, too,” Mrs. Lanman says.

“I would be afraid,” Nettie says.

“Not me. Jesus was there,” Diane says.

The two Marys or two soldiers? Carmen can’t determine who stands beside the cross. Father Loiselle – this was years ago – referred to Beth and Carmen as “the two Marys: always together in service to the Lord.” Would Beth remember that comment?

“Jesus was afraid before his death,” Nettie says. She is so slight, almost without definition, immaterial as a cloud. Nettie is often afraid, she has confessed to the group – of water, of the dark, of being alone.

“I’m just saying we have nothing to fear now,” Diane says, eyes flitting in Beth’s direction, “if we truly believe.” She adjusts the oversized wooden crucifix hanging between the pressed lapels of her blouse, and holds on to it tightly, other arm protectively around her stomach.

When Carmen glances down and over at the red cover again, she sees the shields: the figures are soldiers. She sits forward in her chair unable to find a comfortable position, and feels her own cross swing under her sweater. Diane will have also noticed, and the others too perhaps, that Beth no longer wears her tiny gold crucifix. Carmen and Beth used to joke about showing up for a meeting wearing even bigger crucifixes – Beth’s husband offered to nail together some lengths of two-by-four – for Diane’s benefit. They joked about a lot of things in the church, because it wasn’t perfect and neither were they. But leaving was never discussed. It wasn’t an option.

Diane continues, “The transfiguration was a miracle to make them believe that Jesus was The Son of God. Those boys needed a good scare to understand anything.” She doesn’t let go of her cross.

“I had thought of it as Jesus trying to prepare them for his coming death,” Nettie says. “To maybe show them that he would rise again like the prophets.”

“A weight of glory beyond all measure!” Mrs. Lanman loves to quote Corinthians.

“He shall wipe away every tear, and there shall be no more death or mourning, crying out or pain, for the former world has passed away!” Diane considers Revelations more inspired.

“It’s about hope then?” Nettie searches Diane’s face for affirmation.

Diane nods.

Beth will finally say something, Carmen thinks. She looks at this woman, her friend, who is rarely silent and barely polite when sharing what she believes, and Carmen knows Beth to have a strong personal opinion on exactly this interpretation of the transfiguration. During their last chat in the small lounge opposite Beth's husband's hospital room, Carmen had spoken about hope, as Nettie had just done.

"What hope?" Beth had said to Carmen. "There are no miracles on mountaintops here."

"Jay survived so many operations and a major transplant and lived! If that's not a mir..."

"It's not living, the life he has, what we have." Beth shook her head, and shook it even more when Carmen reached to hug her. "It's not anything at all." She rose to return to Jay's bedside.

Carmen sat in the lounge, praying well into the night for one more miracle. Beth needed one, she told the Lord.

But Jay stopped breathing before dawn. He died without any drama, no glory, Beth said. The temple curtain didn't tear in two, the skies didn't darken. He was sick for as long as Jesus walked the earth and almost died, again and again.

"Jesus only had to die once," Beth said. "And if Jesus was supposed to have suffered and died for our sins, why did my husband suffer so much just to die, with no resurrection?"

"If?" Carmen had been taken aback, but didn't dare say it out loud. She offered, "He's in a better place now."

"You don't know that, Carmen. No one knows that."

"Yes, they do. I do."

She believes it still, that Jay is somewhere watching over them, and interceding on behalf of Beth and her kids. It is very difficult, impossible really, for Carmen to imagine a life and, even more so, a death without a strong faith in something else, something better than this world. That Beth, in her hour of need, would refuse the one available source of comfort and hope that could give meaning to the loss of Jay – this was too bleak to comprehend. Faith was to be strengthened by suffering, not discarded. And so were friendships.

Beth says nothing to the group.

"I wondered how the disciples knew it was Moses and Elijah," says Mrs. Lanman.

"They weren't exactly contemporaries," Nettie says. "Elijah lived in, what, ninth century BC? Moses came a few centuries before that?"

Diane says, "Historical prophets. Folks at the time of Jesus heard plenty about Moses and Elijah."

"Well, it's not like they had photos of them in their long white beards."

Cathy tries for a second round of smiles.

"There are some things you just know," Diane says, not laughing.

"And some things you don't," Carmen says, speaking in Beth's direction.

Beth coughs into her cupped hand. The ladies look her way. She coughs again and excuses herself.

"Sacred mysteries," Diane says.

Carmen shakes her head and looks up – past the ceiling and the plastic fluorescent light covers full of dead flies – to the place in her mind where thoughts take shape and ascend in the form of prayer, but finds no peace nor understanding there. This cannot be the answer, this **women** Carmen barely recognizes. Among the ladies, the shared perception was that Beth had the truest, most solid faith foundation of any of them, "even yours," Cathy had once confessed to Carmen. She had prayed and believed in Beth even when some of the others started to doubt. Especially then. "You don't know her like I do," Carmen would say. "She'll be back." But this isn't "back". Carmen feels her cheeks flush, and her body heat rising from wearing such a thick, warm, and confining sweater. This can't be "back."

"Now, why those two?" Mrs. Lanman stops knitting, and ponders.

"I don't know," Nettie says. "Moses... was the lawgiver. Elijah..."

"Wasn't Elijah the one carried away in a chariot of fire?" says Mrs. Lanman.

"Moses. There was a man of faith," Diane says.

"But why was he on the mountain?" Nettie says.

Diane says, "No matter what the Lord asked, Moses..."

"The transfiguration really is about hope," Carmen says.

The ladies turn to her, surprised.

"No one's saying it isn't," Diane says, annoyed at the interruption.

"I'm just saying it is," Carmen says, even more forcefully. She closes her eyes, and feels her heart pounding. "I'm just saying that the moment that they - the disciples - experience, in glory with Moses and Elijah and then God, is a moment of grace." She opens her eyes and continues, daring only to look at the floor. "Everything's beautiful and powerful at that moment in the presence of God. It's overwhelming for Peter, you know. He just wants to stay there, in it. He just wants to put up tents." Her voice is shaky and her brow is damp. She tries to take a deeper breath, but it isn't enough to calm her.

"I think..." She pauses, losing her train of thought. She doesn't even look at Beth because she is certain Beth is still staring at the cover of the missalette.

"Carmen, I..." Beth says.

Carmen puts her hand up and out to silence her. "We have moments," but she pauses again. "It's clear." But it isn't clear, not anymore. She can't find the words. She's praying but the right words aren't coming to her. "There are no doubts. And then we don't.... and we don't know how...."

Carmen cannot look at Beth's face. She only sees her hands, folded over the missalette, and her familiar wedding band: the only jewellery besides the tiny gold crucifix she had ever seen Beth wear.

"But we can't stay there, and we can't... go back." Carmen's voice is almost a whisper.

The ladies are silent. Mrs. Lanman finishes counting a row of stitches for the third time and rummages around in her knitting bag for more wool. She takes longer than necessary; her balls of wool are stacked and ordered in rows by colour so she doesn't really need to search.

"Excuse me," Nettie says to Carmen.

Carmen is startled. Before she is able to slide her chair towards Beth to create an opening, Nettie rises and slips out of the circle. There is no wind or sound when she moves.

Without consulting her watch, Cathy says, "Oh look at the time. Coffee anyone?"

"Yes, sure," Diane says.

"Good, yes," Mrs. Lanman says.

"Whose turn was it to bring something?" Cathy says.

"Mine," Diane says.

"Not your heavenly carrot cake?" Cathy says.

"What else?" Diane smiles at the praise.

The three ladies push back from the circle, metal chair legs dragging, and move into the kitchen. Beth stands up with them. Carmen does not; she looks at the empty chairs pushed out in all directions and then stares down at the floor, at Beth's floor. Carmen notices a deep scratch near her foot; the edges of the linoleum are pulling up and filling with dirt.

Beth sits down again. "Same old linoleum."

Carmen knows that it can't be fixed. The whole floor needs to be changed.

"Thanks for the missalette," Beth says, holding it out to her. "Turns out I needed it."

Carmen takes it and, bending it in half, pushes it into her front pant pocket. She stands up, slings her purse over her shoulder and folds up her chair.

"You're not staying?" Beth asks.

Carmen carries her chair over to the others stacked against the wall.

Beth follows her. "Carmen."

Carmen doesn't say anything. She advances as though Beth is not present, walking right by her to the entryway where she collects her winter outerwear. Without changing into her boots or putting on her coat, Carmen pushes open the church basement door.

Beth hurries to the doorway. "Wait! Please?"

Carmen stops. She pulls the door closed again, dropping her boots and coat at her feet just inside. "Why?" She faces Beth. "Why didn't you just call?"

"I didn't want to disappoint you if I didn't come. Again."

"I don't just mean today. I stopped hoping. Stopped being disappointed."

Carmen shakes her head.

"I'm sorry Carmen."

"No one is judging you. None of us have been through what you have, so we're in no position to judge."

"I didn't think that. But I am sorry."

Carmen looks at Beth and leans against the wall. "For what?"

Beth sighed. "For hurting you. I just couldn't be with you. Or anyone from before."

"Not even God, apparently," Carmen says. "And when did I become just another 'anyone' from before?"

"You're not..."

Carmen cuts her off. "So that's it? No praying, no church, no God. Through with all of it?" Carmen says.

"It's not like..."

"Well what is it like exactly then? I don't understand. I just don't understand why you couldn't even see me. I thought I was your friend." Carmen slips down until she is seated on her coat on the floor.

"Yes, you were. But..."

"When I called, I felt like I was just annoying you. It wasn't anything like before."

"You didn't ever annoy me. I just felt like I was a burden, a cross you had to carry."

"So rather than being a burden, which you weren't, ever, you just leave. "

Beth sits on her heels so she's not standing above Carmen.

"I don't understand what would have helped. I just... it's hard to watch you turn your back on it. I think your faith is what pulled you through."

"I know you do."

“And you don’t.” Carmen’s voice is severe. “So what was it all then? All the time together, praying and talking and hoping and... That was nothing? A waste of time?”

“No! Of course not. It was time together. That’s what helped,” Beth says. “You were there for me.”

Carmen catches a drip off her nose with the back of her hand.

“But this is where we spent our time together, the church,” Beth sighs. “When Jay... was gone, I just couldn’t go to mass or be with the people from the group. Everything reminded me of trying to deal with his... sickness. Trying to understand.”

Carmen also sighs. “Hm.”

Beth hears voices behind her and stands. The women are out of the kitchen and ready to start the second part of the meeting. Carmen also stands and picks up her coat and boots. “Why don’t you stay?” Beth asks.

“No.” She pauses. “You?”

“Not if you’re leaving.”

“You won’t be back,” Carmen says.

“I might. I don’t know. I’m just starting to figure out what’s next.”

Carmen wishes they could talk, misses how they used to talk. But she knows that won’t happen. “God bless,” Carmen says.

“You too,” Beth says.

Carmen closes the metal door between them. On her third step, the missalette slips out her pocket. Carmen picks it up, and looks again at the cover art of pink and red silhouettes she had tried to decipher as it sat on Beth's lap. She opens the front cover and reads the caption:

Miraculous image on a rose petal in Quezon City, Philippines, that fell from the sky during Our Lady's apparitions. Hundreds of rose petals, with different images of the Life of Christ and the Holy Family, have been found.

Carmen shakes her head. Pictures on petals? She doesn't think she was asking for too much. She didn't pray for "miraculous". All she wanted was her friend to come back but in the end, she hadn't. Carmen pulls the cover off the missalette and puts it in one of her boots, pushing the missalette into her coat pocket. She doesn't want anything to remind her of the meeting when she last saw her friend.

The Kill

Rose slept in the afternoons under the white mosquito netting of the canopy bed. Ben helped her tuck in the sheet on the sides and bottom to keep her warm when the room chilled with the curtains drawn against the light.

He didn't know what to do with himself while she rested. Their first days at the South African reserve, he accomplished little more than a wandering appraisal of their spacious luxury chalet. He read and re-read the personal welcome note in silver script from the staff, and rearranged the large, winged seedpods scattered around it. He inspected the lacquered woodwork of their private bar, and ran his finger along the grout of the stonework in the bathroom – two showers, two sinks, and two toilets. Stretched out on the leather couch, he stared into the underside of the thatched roof, braced by dark, heavy beams. Wooden combs, with teeth as long as fingers, were framed in glass and suspended almost invisibly against light gold walls. He studied the enigmatic

faces carved into the top of each one. From their private deck, he watched for signs of life or movement in the forest. He looked in on Rose. He smoked.

When his watch showed four o'clock, Ben slid the strap of his camera bag over his shoulder and gently woke his wife from her nap. The sheet was still tucked in as she had moved so little. He left her to get ready, setting off down the footpath to the main veranda, where the guests would meet at quarter past for afternoon tea. Ben felt less self-conscious chatting with their young Shangaan ranger, Dumisani, before the lightly-creased, khaki-clad strangers arrived. Once the guests started appearing, Ben, in his habitual plaid shirt, stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans and drifted toward the edge of the veranda to lean on the railing. There he waited for Rose under the thatched roof that was supported by an immense jackalberry tree five-storeys high, feeling relief when she arrived. When the other guests were all present, Dumisani called the group of five or six together and led them along the camp's stone pathways to the open Land Rover. The tracker stood next to the vehicle, indifferent to the guests. He handed a rifle to Dumisani before taking a seat himself on an upholstered pad fixed to the front left corner of the hood. Dumisani climbed into the driver's seat on the right, hooking the rifle into the clips along the dash, and waved everyone in for the afternoon game drive.

Ben and Rose had journeyed to the private game reserve, withdrawing most of their savings to pay for the privilege of these drives. The trip was in itself an extravagant departure from the couple's small-town prairie existence in

Alberta. Ben had never been on a plane, and had worked the same job, in the parts department at the farmer's co-op, since high school. Rose had flown, but only once, to see her sister on the other side of the country. In the airports, it was Rose who handled their tickets and timing, deciding what was needed. She made the inquiries. Ben carried their bags and watched for gate and flight numbers. The habitual silences between them – worn smooth and circumspect in thirty-five years together – were frequently interrupted by expressions of disbelief that this journey was real.

On their longest flight, from London to Johannesburg overnight, Ben didn't sleep. He stared out the window for hours into the darkness, trying to see how high or how close they were, searching for any recognizable shapes on the land or in the sky. He wished he could focus on their destination, but even as he looked through the issues of National Geographic he had brought along, his mind wandered. Fond memories of the past gave way to thoughts about the future and how it might be. Next to him, Rose slept most of the journey. Her medication and the illness for which she took it weakened her. The frequent change of airports and time zones drained her completely. So Ben looked again and again outside, but there was nothing.

Their first glimpse of Kruger Park came on the short drive from the airstrip to the reserve. Rose noted the scenery, so much bush and forest. Ben was interested in what lived in that scenery: wild creatures whose size and might he perceived as mythical. There were few large animals in their agricultural

community: he watched hawks in the day, deer before dark, and heard coyotes at night.

Their initial days at the Londolozi Reserve were no more real to them than the journey had been. In the precarious light of dawn and dusk when predators were active and visible, the couple and other guests set out in the Land Rover across the exotic terrain of the bushveld. Dumi and the tracker shouted clipped Shangaan phrases to each other over the length of the hood and the roar of low gears, negotiating the branching, uneven dirt roads, and interpreting the traces of animal passings, indiscernible to the guests.

On the first drive, the vehicle rolled to a standstill under an umbrella-shaped acacia tree. Ben and Rose looked around but distinguished nothing in the brown grass. Then the reason for the stop pulled into focus: a large pride of lions stretched out in the warmth of the winter sun, just yards from the side of the Land Rover. Ben counted fourteen tan bellies, swishing tails, and twitching noses. Only when the engine started again and the vehicle was inching away from the lions did Ben realize he had not once raised his camera.

When he returned alone from breakfast the next morning, an elephant materialized from the stand of trees beside him. It passed in front of him and above him, striding soundlessly, gracefully, on great round cushioned pillars, before disappearing into the trees on the other side of the clearing. Again, Ben had nothing to show for it but a slack jaw and pounding heart.

After that, he tried to record every movement, every moment, on film: the ethereal fleeing of impala and nyala, the slow stately chewing of giraffes, the antics of dusty warthogs. He carried his camera even in the guest camp, where animals roamed more freely than people, checking often to see how many pictures he had taken, and how many remained before he would need to change the roll of film.

He thought their first leopard sighting a great disappointment. The female, feeding on a freshly-killed impala, was difficult to see in the fading daylight and high grass, and Ben was on the wrong side of the Land Rover for a clear shot. He complained to Rose. She wasn't even looking in the direction of the leopard.

"Just listen," she said. He heard only the grasses whispering in the evening breeze, but then he became aware of the quiet crunch and crack of bones.

Ben hadn't noticed but Rose remarked how everything took care of itself at the reserve. The bed smoothed itself out. The pillows fluffed up. The end of the toilet paper roll folded itself into a triangular point whenever the couple was absent from the room. When Ben went back to the room after a brief absence, he checked the toilet paper roll, reporting to Rose the end had indeed been folded. Every evening, chefs in high hats conjured dish after dish from leaping flames. Long tables set themselves beneath unfamiliar stars, and waited for guests to arrive.

Following lunch on their third day, Rose asked Ben what he had planned for the afternoon. He said he didn't mind staying in the room. She told him the gift shop sold film.

"And while you're there," she said, "maybe take a better look at those carved ostrich eggs and tell me what you think. I'm wondering if they're too fragile to take back for the kids."

Ben didn't remember seeing anything like that but said he would have a look for them. He shuffled out, came back to get his wallet, and left again. She was asleep by the time he returned with his rolls of film and carefully wrapped eggs. After watching her through the mosquito netting for a moment, he passed quietly through the room. He stood outside on the deck, smoking, next to their own private plunge pool, into which neither he nor Rose had yet ventured.

He mulled over the visit to the shop. The young man there had been so helpful, explaining which crafts were unique to the region, and which came from other parts of Africa. He knew so much about his vast country, Ben thought, and I know so little. Ben couldn't even imagine what he could say about Canada. The man then asked who would receive the gifts, and Ben started naming his grown children back home. More questions followed. Ben had never had a conversation with a black man but it was easy to talk about the kids and their spouses, jobs, and the grandchildren to this man. He asked Ben if he missed his family, and Ben realized how much he did.

When he put out his cigarette, he rolled up his jean cuffs and sat on the edge of the small pool with his feet in the cool water. Rose would like this, he thought. The man in the shop had encouraged Ben to try one of the afternoon guided nature walks while his wife rested. Ben decided to ask Rose.

It was a different guide, a young English man, who met Ben and four other guests to take them for a walk after lunch the next day. Ben shifted from left foot to right, watching for birds in the treetops until the guide arrived. He introduced himself as Kevin and shook hands with the two other couples, and then Ben.

“You alone?”

“No, no, my wife’s with me.”

“She’s on her way just now?”

“Oh, no. I mean she’s here, on the trip, but not for the walk.” Ben flushed and fiddled with his camera as though adjusting something.

Kevin smiled. “Fine then. We’re ready to go. Stay close behind me, and if we see anything, no one moves until I say so. All clear?”

The guests agreed. Ben nodded. Kevin slung his rifle over his shoulder before motioning them to follow him. One of the husbands invited Ben to go first; he did so, aware of the gaze of the others behind him. The group was still within the camp perimeter when Kevin stopped to show them fresh leopard and hyena tracks; he then told them to watch for crocodile trails when they were closer to the Sand River. All the guests were wide-eyed, with uneasy grins.

Ben kept his hands on his camera for the first minutes of the walk, but his stride soon lengthened and relaxed, arms swinging at his sides. He thought how much more exciting, even dangerous, it was to be on foot but he enjoyed the idea. It felt good to move, to watch and to listen with Kevin leading them. The group didn't encounter anything larger than a dung beetle on the two-hour walk, so Kevin pointed and explained, interpreting the lesser marvels of the veldt flora. Ben's thoughts wandered when the guide wasn't speaking. There would be so many photos to show the kids, and stories to tell. Rose could describe their room and the European dinners and the rich people from around the world with whom they rubbed shoulders. She was better at that. He'd tell the fellows at the shop and the legion about the animals they knew from television shows like *New Wilderness* and *Wild Kingdom*. He had seen them in real life.

It was a struggle, but Ben resisted waking Rose the instant he returned. He checked his watch but was too excited to sit down. He checked the time again a few minutes later and woke her to begin his recitation of all the things he had learned and thought on the walk. They call this one bit of scrub a potato bush, he said, and it smells just like boiled potatoes, no kidding. He followed her as she got dressed and brushed her teeth. One of the plants could be used as a toothbrush if you were stuck for one, he said. When she took her pills, he told her there were healing plants, too. And he told her Kevin swore it works wonders for some. He continued to tell her all about the guide and the group during their afternoon drive, shouting over the noise of the engine.

Later, when they were back in their room, Rose told Ben she wouldn't be going to dinner. "Just not up to it. I'm really not," she said, sinking into a leather chair.

"You can't just not eat," Ben said.

"We've got fruit here. I'll have that," she said, closing her eyes.

"Are you... okay?" Ben said, staring at Rose.

"Fine, really. Just not all that hungry."

Ben looked away with a deliberate sigh. He raked his fingers across the bald top of his head, the way he used to do when he had hair. "I guess I'll go sit there by myself."

"You won't be by yourself. Sit with Dumi. Or that nice German couple. Someone from the walk maybe?"

He crossed his arms and bit at the corner of his lower lip.

She sat up and kicked her shoes onto the woven mat. Closing her eyes again, she leaned back.

"You need to eat," he said.

"I will. I will. You go enjoy yourself."

Ben circled the room a few times before finally heading toward the door and muttering goodnight. On the short walk to the boma, he paused often to listen for sounds in the dark, inhaling the night air as if taking last breaths before a dive. Upon reaching the circular wooden enclosure, open to the sky, he hesitated just shy of the torchlight. He peeked in and was relieved to spot the

German couple, two empty chairs next to them. With his first step forward, he felt a rush of heat from inside.

Hours later, he was still talking about African wildlife, even with the safety escort who walked him back to the chalet. Conversation had flowed effortlessly all night and Ben was full of wine and stories. He didn't wake Rose when he entered the room, but quickly undressed in the light from the bedside lamp she had left on for him. He fell asleep to the rhythm of her breathing.

The next day, Rose joined Ben on the veranda but only to tell him she wouldn't be coming for the afternoon drive. Ben said he would stay back with her. No, no, no, she said, this is your dream trip.

"It's your trip too," he said. "You're missing meals and missing drives. Why are we here then? It's ridiculous!"

"Ben, I haven't missed all that much and besides, what's the difference? We're here. I don't really mind."

"Well, I mind. I'm doing everything alone!"

Rose paused. "If you go and take lots of pictures, we can both enjoy them... when we get back home. Please?"

Dumi was starting to gather the group to leave. Rose patted Ben's arm. He touched her hand. "I'll be back soon," he said, and quit the veranda with the others. He walked until the path started to curve and stopped, turning to wave to Rose but she wasn't looking. She was leaning against the railing on one elbow, looking toward the setting sun with her chin slightly raised as though trying to

catch the breeze or the warmth on her face. Ben reached for his camera and snapped three photographs, afraid she might move or turn. He jogged as best he could to catch up with the others, still holding his camera.

Ben and Rose usually sat in the backseat of the Land Rover. The other guests were already seated so Ben climbed up past them to the back and slid over to the left. Then he moved to the middle, and to the left again, remembering the tracker would be joining him in the back seat whenever they approached a predator. Dumi glanced over his shoulder to make sure everyone was seated and, seeing Ben alone, asked if his wife was coming. When Ben said no, Dumi suggested he take the empty passenger seat – an offer Ben gratefully accepted.

The Land Rover had just swung through the first series of bends when suddenly Dumi had both feet on the brake. A white rhinoceros shuffled its barrelled bulk down the middle of the road before veering into the grass on the left. Ben and Rose hadn't yet seen one. In case Rose never would, he shot the rest of his roll of film, zooming in on its prehistoric horn and the thick folds of its hide. Although the rhino continued to wait there in profile, large ears swivelling, Ben didn't load more film. He just watched, taking in every moment of the great animal's presence. Its small eye blinked.

Dumi spoke to Ben in a low voice, "It's trying to hear where we are because it can't see us very well."

That night over dinner, Ben told Rose about the rhinoceros, and listed off the wildebeest, kudu and other animals he had seen but not photographed. He

saved what happened at the airstrip – where he and Rose had touched down in a Cessna almost a week prior – for last, and became much more spirited in the telling. Dumi had parked there for a clear view of the moonrise, and the guests sat in darkness. No one spoke. Then the tracker switched on his spotlight and directed it straight down at the wheels near Ben.

“Three female lions, Rose, right there, eyes glowing up at me in the dark. No idea how long they’d been there. Tell you, makes my blood run cold to even think about it. Can you believe it?” His hand hit the table, tipping his wine glass. A waiter appeared and immediately wiped up the spill, placing a clean, full glass in front of him.

Rose assured him that nothing so exciting had happened back at camp. She had lingered on the veranda, watching the Shangaan women wash clothes in the river until the light faded. The reserve is really different, so peaceful, she said, without the guests around.

“Hm.” Ben thought it sounded lonely, but didn’t say so.

The next morning, Rose didn’t get up for the dawn drive. Ben considered staying in bed himself; he had been awakened in the night and hadn’t been able to fall asleep after. In his dream, he heard a long, deep, guttural cough, and then several more, in a slow, even rhythm. The sounds pulled him from the world of his dream into the waking one, but those few moments between the two realms, he thought he was hearing Rose choking. He turned to her, alarmed, eyes wide. She slept, her breathing soft. Ben lay still until his heart’s pounding subsided.

Then he heard the coughing again outside on their deck. He got up and looked out through the glass door, not daring to slide it open. The deck was empty and beyond, he saw only darkness. There was something about the sound, so wild and fearless and close, that made the hair on his arms stand up.

Ben did go on the morning drive without Rose but was the first one down from the Land Rover when the group returned. He hurried back to the room to find Rose still buried under the covers. While she dressed for breakfast, he smoked on the deck, studying the trees and grass, searching for any sign of what may have passed in the night. At breakfast, he told Rose he hadn't had a chance on the drive to ask Dumi about the noise from last night, but was hoping he'd come by their table.

"I didn't want to wake you up, but it was this coughing sound, really low but loud, coming from the deck."

"A lion," she said, nodding a little.

Ben stopped spreading jam on his toast. "Lion?"

"The staff here, yesterday. One of the ladies asked me if we'd heard a lion doing its territorial call. It sounds like coughs. She said it always seems like it's really close."

"Like it was right there in front of me, only I couldn't see a thing in the dark. I was just glad we were inside."

When Ben returned to the room to wake Rose for the afternoon drive, he was pleased to find her up and ready. He told her she looked rested. She smiled

and said she had cheated with a bit of lipstick and blush. This was to be their second to last drive; they would fly back to Johannesburg after lunch the next day, and from there would make their long journey home. The couple walked to the veranda together, had their coffee and joined Dumi and the group.

The sun was lowering itself into the warm colours bathing the horizon, after its daily trip across what Ben and Rose still joked as being the wrong half of the sky. Everything around them was painted lucent amber or shadowed blue and Ben was pleased. He imagined how well the photos would turn out. How special it would be to share their trip with family and friends after Rose caught up on her rest. Perhaps she would even be strong enough for them to travel to visit her sister in Ontario.

Before long, the vehicle drew near a pride of lions drinking and resting around a small pond. Dumi turned the engine off when they were close enough to hear tongues lapping and the rippling of water. There were three males with full manes, thick bodies and low bellies, and five sleek lionesses. It's a postcard, Ben whispered.

The tracker seated beside Ben hissed something at Dumi, causing Ben to jump. All the lions and lionesses flattened in the grass, out of sight. A squat warthog came into view, trotting over the rise, with its tail up like a flagpole. Before Ben could even imagine the natural course of events, two females leapt onto the small grey animal. It squealed and struggled under them. Ben heard the engine turn over, but the shrieks continued above the din of the motor. He saw

the males move in. Dumi tried to bring the Land Rover in closer for guests to take pictures, advancing, shifting, backing up, shifting, advancing on the uneven terrain. Three powerful males, muscled flanks pulling, tore the warthog away from the two lionesses, and continued to battle for the animal. They ripped at it and dragged it back and forth and around in the dirt. *Kill it, just kill the damn thing*, Ben was saying to himself, over and over. The warthog squealed higher, louder, incessant as the roar of the engine. Dumi was still shifting, still trying to move in, throwing the guests forward, jerking them back. Ben couldn't think, the squealing was so terrible, the movement jarring.

“Just stay put!” Ben shouted.

Ben felt Rose's hand on his forearm. The males continued to pull at the warthog. The insides, pink and red, separated, spilling out from its ashen skin but still it lived, and squealed and squealed. Ben wanted it to be over. He just wanted it to be over.

Finally, the animal's cries became faint, and then ceased.

The Land Rover, too, stopped and Dumi turned off the engine. Ben heard Rose swallow. He exhaled unevenly. The three males fed, audibly, shaggy beards stained crimson. Nearby at the water's edge, a lioness lay golden, quiescent as a sphinx, gazing heavily at the setting sun against a backdrop of swaying grassland, acacia trees and termite mounds. Ben felt the camera lifted from his lap. He saw Rose point the camera toward the distant landscape and sky, away

from the lions, the warthog and the pond. She snapped a single picture and lowered the camera, set it on her lap and folded her hands over top of it.

For the remainder of the game drive, the guests were subdued, the tone of the last dinner in the boma solemn. Ben and Rose sat apart from the others but even with their privacy, there was little to say.

They walked slowly back to the room, their safety escort waiting patiently at each turn of the path. At the twin sinks, they brushed their teeth and washed their faces in silence. Rose then put on her nightgown, but Ben sat down on her side of the bed without changing. "You know, Rose, I just thought it would be different."

She sat next to him. "The trip?"

He sighed under the weight of his thoughts. "No. Us. You getting sick. And..."

Rose leaned over and set her glasses down on the bedside table. Then she clasped her hands.

Ben spoke with his head bowed. "I guess I just thought it would be, well, I don't know what I thought would happen. I mean what age is this supposed to happen?"

Rose put her hand in his knee.

"Did we do the right thing, coming here?" he looked at Rose. "I mean you've..."

“Of course we did.” She stood to avoid his gaze. Then she bent over him, and softly swatted him on the hip to shoo him off the edge of the bed. “Of course. Of course,” she said.

He stood up and faced her, his head bowed and throat aching. They kissed goodnight, hugged. He lifted the white netting so she could slip underneath it.

Their last morning at Londolozi, the sky was a flat silver grey. Rain fell – a steady, light drizzle that beaded off the tips of the thatched buildings and leaves of the trees. Before the group had travelled far, the tracker thumped on the hood. The Land Rover stopped, he moved to the back seat beside Rose and Ben, and they started again. Turning off the road, they drove through an area where the grass was blackened by fire, the hardier brush still standing. They slowed and parked near five lionesses, proud noses and pointed chins in profile, undisturbed by the presence of the vehicle or the steady patter of drops. Twisting in his seat, Dumi confirmed, in a hushed voice, that these were the same females they had seen last evening.

Minutes passed. The guests peered out at the lionesses from the hoods of their yellow slickers, but they did not take photographs because of the rain. The tracker pointed to the three large males slowly weaving through low scrub toward the females. Dumi explained that the pride had likely separated in the night and was now meeting up again. One by one, the females stood up and stretched, and went to the males, lightly rubbing faces with them, nose to cheek.

When each in turn had touched, they all lay down in the same direction on the darkened earth, lions and lionesses.

Ben nudged Rose's hood to the side with his fingertips to see her face. She closed her eyes and reached for his hand without turning to him. In silence he watched, blinking away drops of morning rain.

Wife and Man

Others drift in but she enters with purpose, walking down the aisle with exaggerated motion in her hips as if pushing forward through deep water, eyes sweeping left, right. A pair of empty seats about halfway down catches her attention. Under a knitted brow, her gaze narrows and her focus shifts to take in the passengers coming toward her from the opposite end of the railway car. She pumps her elbows to increase her pace. Her eyebrows lift, pulling at her long face until it looks as though it has been drawn through the scarf at her throat. She shakes off her coat as she advances and, in a single action, swings it into the overhead bin, presses her handbag to her chest, and shoots over to the window seat. Her cropped brown hair rises above the seat back. She sits slightly forward, on the lookout.

A round man brings up the rear in a slow-moving column of passengers. She signals to him with a quick pawing motion and, satisfied she has caught his attention, sits back. When he arrives at the empty seat beside hers, he stops and

looks around before removing his dark serge coat, folding it in half over his forearm and placing it carefully in the luggage bin without disturbing hers.

“It’s bloody hot in here.” She talks to his standing reflection visible in her window.

He removes his plaid woollen cap and slides it into the bin before clicking it shut, and then smooths down his hair and his shirtfront. With a gentlemanly nod, he acknowledges the elderly couple sitting behind him before taking his own seat. It creaks loudly as he lowers himself into it.

She raises her voice over the noise and edges her elbow further to claim both of the armrests between them. “God, to think we’d still be standing out there in the station if it weren’t for me. Wouldn’t we? If I’d listened to you....” She forces a breath through her nose with a “hmmf.”

He speaks at half her speed and volume and doesn’t turn his head toward her. “Well, now we can sit here and wait for fifteen...”

“Better off here than out there! And it’s no thanks to you mister that we even have seats. I doubt we’d be sitting together at all if I didn’t get here so fast.”

He doesn’t say anything.

““Oh no, there’s no hurry.”” She singsongs an imitation of him. ““Plenty of t...””

She stops when she realizes her words are completely drowned out by the sounds coming from his seat, which creaks and cracks as he shifts his position forward and to the side, then back, slowly.

She waits until he stops before she continues. "Meanwhile, everyone else is snapping up all the best spots..." She doesn't turn to him or their reflections in the window beside her, directing her comments at the seat back in front of her. "Why does it have to be so damned hot in here? I'm sure hell has better ventilation." She sighs, with great purpose.

He rubs his hands together and clasps them in his lap.

"It's a lot, these trips to the city," he says.

"You didn't even do the driving this time," she says. Their son-in-law had convinced them to take the train, so their daughter picked them up when they arrived in the city and drove them to his medical appointment. "And *you* slept. Not like some people."

"Oh, I don't know about that," he says. "Boy oh boy, those kids sure have energy."

"It's ridiculous to have two dogs when they already have three kids. And no carpets!" For two nights, the wife and man occupied the spare bedroom in the basement under the hardwood laminate floor overhead. "But you snore through anything," she says.

After long minutes, the train jerks forward and emerges from the station. It is twilight and city lights begin to shine against a deepening sky; the other passengers have settled in and gaze calmly out the windows from both sides of the car. Conversations soften or cease altogether, and the couple sit in thoughtful silence for the first time since they boarded the train earlier in the week.

When the train clears the city limits, she reaches up to turn on her reading light, and rummages around in her purse. She begins flipping magazine pages too quickly for reading and offers a conciliatory cough. "Did you hear about Amy – she's Art and Sheila's oldest girl? Apparently, she's up and gone off to Indonesia."

"Oh."

"Yeah, and no one seems to know why."

"The family must know."

"Not even them, I heard. No one knows. No one. She just went."

She continues to turn pages.

"You need shots to go there, to Indonesia?" he says.

"Lots of shots before she left."

"I figured."

She settles back in her seat.

"Oh, and Marjolaine's husband is in whatcha-ma-callit Lithuania," she says.

"Lanny."

"Lenny."

"Lenny." He nods.

"You sure never know what you can catch in those countries."

"Nope." After a few minutes, he nods to himself again. "That's right there attached to Russia, isn't it?"

The conductor enters the car and begins collecting and punching tickets. She scrambles to find theirs well in advance of his arrival, and then holds them out in one hand over her husband's lap.

At the first clink, clink from the snack cart, she closes her magazine and puts it back in her purse. She takes her elbow off the armrests in order to pull out her tray, and puts his tray down for him. When the cart rolls to a stop next to them, she asks the attendant for two ham and cheese sandwiches and two coffees. He struggles to dig bills and change out of his pocket from under the tray across his lap. She busily frees their sandwiches from the white triangular forms, and spreads mayonnaise and mustard from little packets on all four halves with a plastic knife.

He picks up the second, unused knife. "You know, it's amazing, but these plastic things really cut," he says, running his thumb along the knife's edge.

She eats her two sandwich halves in as many minutes, and starts collecting items off both trays. He puts the knife on his lap under his tray so she doesn't clear it away. She sets the plastic containers together like bookends, and stuffs the napkins and utensils into a plastic bag she brought. Lifting his elbows out of her way, he reaches for his first sandwich half, studying the sandwich thoughtfully before choosing where to bite. With her arms crossed, she watches his reflection in the window. While he is still chewing the last mouthful of his second half, she uncrosses her arms to stir cream and sugar into the two Styrofoam cups, pulling back the small tabs on the lids.

He reaches for his coffee. "It'll be nice to get home." He takes a sip through the tiny square opening on the lip.

"Easy for you to say. I've got a bunch of cleaning waiting for me," she says.

"Well, it shouldn't have gotten any dirtier while we were away."

"Of course it gets dusty. You just never look any further than the end of your own nose. That's why you don't see it."

He makes a tiny sound, like he's about to speak, but then says nothing.

She says, "All I can say is you better clear your junk out of that house because when you die, it's me that'll get stuck with it."

He takes a sip of coffee, and another.

"You expect me to take care of everything after you die." She spits out the "d." "Well, that's not really fair is it? I certainly don't expect anyone to clean up after me dead or alive. Do I? But no, you expect me to do it when you're dead and gone."

He drinks more coffee. She doesn't touch hers.

"I'll sell everything off, that's what I'll do. Probably won't get anything for it - just haul the whole works out to the dump. All junk anyway."

He says a few words, in a very low voice.

"What?"

"It's not junk to me," he says again.

"Well it is to everyone else."

"No, no." He shifts in his seat. "No, remember those gas lamps – the metal ones with the tall part there? You made me get rid of them but turns out they were worth something, because they were a pair."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you..."

"*You're* the one who got rid of them! That was the day your cousin came and you were having a lie-down. *You* told him to help himself. *You* wanted to give them away for nothing. *You* were..."

"I don't recall th..."

"You always blame someone else for everything. Especially me." She turns to the window, shaking her head. "Especially me."

He puts his coffee down and folds his hands. She picks hers up.

When the attendant passes to clear away cups and garbage, she hands everything over, including his unfinished coffee. They stare straight ahead. She doesn't move. He doesn't move.

"Wonder when we'll get the test..." he says.

"Another week. Results are at least a week they said, maybe more," she says.

"I guess a fellow could probably clear out a bit of..." he says.

"Oh don't be ridiculous. You'll be around forever. You're the healthy one," she says. "It's me that has to watch. I've always had to be careful. So careful."

He shifts his weight in his seat. "We'll just wait then," he says.

"And they'll tell us it's nothing," she says. "These doctors - they know nothing."

Another ten minutes pass. They don't exchange a word or gesture. But suddenly both drop their gaze at the same moment to focus on their empty tables and reach for them. They lift, tilt and lower their small trays back into the armrests in unison; like a dance unconsciously synchronized, his movement on the right perfectly mirrors hers on the left.

She pauses, then pushes toward the armrests with her elbow. His larger elbow already occupies both.

With feigned regal indifference, the wife folds her arms and turns to the window. In it, she sees his reflection. She watches as he closes his eyes and lays his head back onto the rest, his image in the window clear in the darkness. But when they move into the town, the train slows for the first stop and he becomes difficult to see. The streetlights the train passes blur and then dissipate the reflection of the husband. He fades away, leaving only the image of the station where they stop.