LOOSE ENDS AND GOOD INTENTIONS

A Collection of Short Fiction

by

L. J. Collier, B.A.

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

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The undersigned hereby recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
acceptance of the thesis,

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Thesis Supervisor

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ABSTRACT

Beyond the more obvious motif of a quest for self-knowledge that each of these tales contain, are thematic subtleties that to examine too closely here would be to impose, and thereby limit, interpretation. So I will say only that what these stories share are men and women for whom youth has not guaranteed the alleged bliss of ignorance. Overwhelmed by a sense of discontinuity, they attempt, in their own peculiar ways, to balance who they are with who they might have been. Their beginnings, however, are lost, not only to time, but to mind, for they have been altered – not, as one might expect, by the aspirations of an adversary – but rather by an imbroglio of loose ends and good intentions.

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Introduction

"We know what the fight was like and we respect each other for making it. And anyone who has finished a book, whether the thing has been published or not, whether the thing is any good or not, is a colleague of ours." Kurt Vonnegut

All glory comes with daring to begin. Eugene F. Ware

When a man's willing and eager, the gods join in. Aeschylus

Loose Ends and Good Intentions will be my first published fiction. While writing this introduction, I remembered the words of Pinckney Benedict, in his own introduction to a story in an Iowa Writers' Workshop anthology: "The writer who prefaces his work runs the risk of proving himself beyond a shadow of a doubt to be a worthless horse's ass.... still here I am a writer with a preface."

This preface, like Smith's, is not so much about the stories themselves – but about the writing of them. How it got done and how it almost didn't. While working on these stories, I sometimes found myself wishing I'd opted to do an academic essay, and, more than once, considered burning all my beginnings and endings, never to write again. Eventually, I discovered what I already knew, that as tempting as escape seemed, life was

better on the inside – a mind-state many writers refer to as a curse and non-writers as a blessing.

Years ago, when I was living in an abandoned miner's cabin in the woods of Northern B.C., a couple, who live in the cabin up the trail a few miles, asked me what I did. I'm a writer, I said as innocently as I might have said I'm a construction worker. What I meant was that the work that I did was writing.

"We don't say we are writers," they told me. "We just say: 'We write.'"

I wondered what the distinction was. I was writing articles for a Whitehorse newspaper, attempting to bring alive the past with a series of articles about settlement in the area. I was also helping build the new volunteer fire hall in the town of Atlin, some ten miles – many more minutes – down the rough mountain road. My main job was to install fiberglass insulation in the walls and under the roof. Should I say I install rather than I am an installer? I wondered, indulging a penchant for abstract thought. Could installing insulation be as significant as installing information? The pieces were gathered, organized and fit together – both the insulation in the wall and the words in my articles. Both jobs would be acknowledged in the form of criticism or praise, both would be useful to the community and both the fiberglass insulation and the story would leave me itchy. Fiberglass worked its way down my sleeves and up my pant legs and, soon, under my skin. I could not see this irritant, but the more I scratched the more I needed to scratch. There was no running water in the cabin, only a shallow spring-fed stream nearby. Each night after an itchy steer along the cliffs I arrived home to run down the sloping trail, strip and ease myself into the shallow rock-bottomed stream. Fiberglass takes time to work its

way out of the skin, so I tried to keep all body parts submerged in icy water while monitoring the quick hard thud of a heart that seemed to stop momentarily upon entry.

Writing too leaves me needing to scratch. Even as I worry away at syntax, and witness the metamorphosis of meaning with the smallest shift or change of words the itchier I become. As with the fiberglass, there is always the discomfort of something lying just beneath the surface – something I need to extract or go mad.

“I am a writer,” I said. “No. You write,” they said. I did not understand at the time that what they may well have been trying to avoid were the overwhelming expectations imposed upon one who not only admits to writing but to being, in fact, a Writer – in the Upper Case. I wonder now how I could have missed my friends’ implication, for even then, when I found time between non-fiction deadlines to struggle at my prose, I did not equate my masochistic occupation with that of people whose names were on book covers. I had, myself, embraced some of the stereotypes imposed on writers. They were secretly in touch with all the answers, had an infinite source of knowledge – supplied by God – and if I ever met one, he or she would be dignified, silent, unperturbed, and able to read my mind.

The first time I did meet a writer in the flesh was at a literary festival in Toronto. Two of my favourite authors, after reading their work, sat at a table to sign books. I lined up reluctantly, feeling that this had to be a bother to the writers, but at the same time, that I would be disloyal not to line up. I arrived too soon at the front of the line, and silently placed my book, cover open, as inconspicuously as possible before the first writer and tried not to stare. When she looked up with a question, I faltered and barely managed the answer – my name. She asked when I was born, right to the hour, and after some mental

calculation, announced that I had entered this world on a full moon – just as she had. I watched, then, as she signed her book – from Marge Piercy, to ‘moonchild’ me. As inconceivable as it seemed, there it was – a Writer and I had a common trait! The spookiness of this exchange, however, convinced me that writers were indeed psychic.

Recently, I discovered a passage that addresses this writer-alias-Writer phenomenon. The author, Margaret Atwood (who was the other writer at the table that day), says in *Negotiating with the Dead*:

Anyone literate can make marks on a flat surface. Being a writer, however, seems to be a socially acknowledged role, and one that carries some sort of weight or impressive significance – we hear a capital W on Writer...but happy the writer who begins simply with the activity itself – the defacement of blank pieces of paper – without having first encountered the socially acknowledged role.

Authors who share tales of their attempts to capture a transient muse provide a lifeline to beginning scribes floundering in the quick sands of disillusion. If I am sure of anything after clinging greedily to these epistles from the other side, it is this: Beginning writers have to discover over and over that there is not one particular kind of person who writes, not one best way to write, and not one best time of life in which to write. There are as many ways to approach writing as there are writers – and even the best admit to a love-hate relationship with the passion that harnesses them alone to a desk – a passion that for many is discouraged or barely recognized by the people they most care for. Even the best may have an on-again off-again battle with doubt, despising their work one day, believing in it the next. Sooner or later most writers do battle with the demon, Despair, and the fight can exact a high price. Yet, there is one saving strategy writers have in common, both the world-renowned and the unknown: They go ahead and do it anyway.

Prologue

One of the challenges I faced while composing these tales was to adhere to a precept I'd learned when it was suggested at a workshop that my story's ending was too convenient and beyond the realm of credible.

"But I know this has really happened to someone," I protested.

The professor took my colleague's side. "It is still unbelievable."

And, so I learned the consequences of ignoring that seemingly innocuous adage about truth being stranger than fiction. In good prose: fiction must resemble truth, but truth must not resemble fiction. Marly Swick once explained when speaking of his work, that whenever he felt a story was on thin ice – verging on the unbelievable – he took comfort from the advice of writer, David Jauss, that the best fiction must "play chicken with melodrama." I hope Jauss is right, because there is a lot of chicken-playing involved in this writing.

These stories have led me through my own fiction workshop, wherein, during the seemingly endless revision and polishing, I learned what one learns in workshops – not so much how to write as how not to write. That worthwhile outcome, will be paired, I hope, with another: Someday, a striving fellow writer, searching for examples of a creative prose thesis will come upon this introduction and know he or she is not alone.

Loose Ends

I knew where she was. But the police didn't ask me.

"The cops called kids out of our class again," my brother Alex said between bites of corn. "They got to sit in the police car."

"They even took the officers' kids, and I think they looked scared," said James, two year's Alex's senior and practiced in the art of one-up-manship.

Luke, my oldest brother, was eating little and saying less. He'd been questioned the day before. The missing 12-year-old, Sarah, was his friend's little sister and my babysitter.

"She's in the woods."

My family stared at me. They didn't know where I heard these things.

"I don't know where you hear these things," my mother said.

"No, she's not – she went to see the ponies by the highway – you know, the kook's place." Alex twirled a finger at his temple, signing crazy for the pony man. He reached for the last brownie, but I was faster. Defended dessert in mouth, I slid off the bench and headed for the back door, already focused on "outside."

"Stay in the yard," my mother called. Her words grabbed the straps of my overalls and jerked me to a halt. Incarcerated. Only later would I realize the change her words portended. Now, intuitively, I knew this restriction was somehow tied to Sarah, and that no amount of whining would change my parents' minds. I knew also where Sarah had gone two days earlier. She'd been at the school swings with a friend. I was on the swing bars above them. Sarah was crying because her father wouldn't let her go to

the swimming pool. It was one of those steamy June days when the air didn't move. Adults couldn't sleep and kids had trouble keeping their clothes on. Sarah announced suddenly that she'd go swimming anyway, at the hole. I looked down at them. They were talking about the secret swimming hole, under the bridge on the well-travelled county road to town. If you weren't supposed to be going, the way to get there was through the bush.

I sat at the edge of our lawn and looked off into the woods. It always promised surprises. A step on a rotten log revealed a million miniature frogs, flashes of sunlight on water were fish, a stump in the swamp moved and became a snapping turtle. Paths always led to the unknown, even those I'd walked before. I leaned against the solid trees feeling their roots hold me to the earth. I made homes with fallen branches. All my questions were born here and all the answers, if I wanted them. In the woods by myself I was never alone. I went back to the others with so much to tell, yet didn't know a language that told it.

They found Sarah two days later, in a leafy indent on the floor of the woods, near the river. Her clothes were here and there. Searchers swore they'd already passed the place. That night the dinner table was quiet, but from me.

"Why'd someone hurt Sarah? What'd she do?"

"Maybe they didn't mean to hurt her," my mother suggested and gave my father her *you take over* look. "Maybe the man was afraid that she'd tell someone he was in the woods – trespassing."

“But, if she did that, she’d be in trouble too,” I pointed out, amazed my mother hadn’t seen this – and I was only five.

The next few days, our parents watched us sideways, didn’t say much at meals, and spent a long time in the kitchen talking after we’d gone upstairs. We listened at the heat vent. The provincial police had taken Luke’s friend, Eric, right out of class, and kept him at the base jail all night, asking questions. In the morning they took him to a real jail.

“They didn’t question anyone from town or the farms, just pinned it on an Air Force brat,” I heard my father say. “There’s no real evidence to tie the case up.” And there never would be, but Eric did not come back.

That Saturday afternoon, I was an Indian climbing onto the roof of the base store to jump the Sheriff. A line of black cars with lights on came slowly down the street, and parked at the church next door. I was startled to see my brother Luke in a car with Sarah’s family. He was 16, he was a boy, but he was crying.

“They’re going to bury Sarah,” my friend whispered, crawling up beside me. She was eight and knew about these things. We lay there on the hot slope of the roof, out of sight. It was a day like the last day I’d seen Sarah. No breeze, not a breath, just the sound of flies. Why had she taken her clothes off before she got to the river? You’d get all bitten and scratched. Did she have clothes on now? I didn’t want to see them take her out of the car trunk, where I figured they had her, put her into a hole and throw dirt on her face. But I waited. Maybe it wasn’t really her. Maybe something would happen, like on TV, and she’d be okay again.

The rest of the summer only my brothers were allowed to go to the woods alone. My mother told me it wasn't a place for little girls. She started to say that about a lot of things. But it was my world and painful to be kept away. I went.

There was something changed about the woods. I looked behind me often – for the stranger passing through, for the pony kook, for the boy next door. And where the path narrowed and grew darker I stopped. I stood there a long time. Then I went, down that path, to all the places that weren't for little girls

Who She Says She Is

You have your father's nose she said the first time we met. It wasn't what I'd imagined she'd say. In fact, I'd always been sensitive about my nose, my outstanding feature.

What I'd imagined she'd say was, well, nothing. We'd stop at a distance from each other, wordless. Then we'd take small tentative steps nearer. And at last, after looking right into each other's eyes as if into a mirror, we'd embrace in a long solemn cling as one would an overturned canoe. But it didn't happen.

We had arranged to meet by the information kiosk at the shopping center. I came up to it in a business-like way, actually getting in line as if to ask advice. I thought it would be a good idea to look her over first. Maybe at some level I had it all confused with meeting a blind date. What did I plan to do? Check her out, and if she wasn't all I'd thought she'd be, just slip away, lose myself in the crowd before I'd been spotted? I think I had the idea that there was nothing that couldn't be made to happen, that somehow I'd control the whole thing. Like making a movie.

We had walked right by each other. I don't mean we didn't see each other. We did. And I thought, No, wrong colour eyes. Which was crazy because I knew what colour her eyes would be and her hair. But that was the *her* I'd only recently learned about. The *her* I'd thought about most of my life had brown eyes. Talking eyes. These blue eyes were cautious, afraid to talk. As for what she was thinking about when we glanced at each other and kept walking, I'll never know. Anyway, there was no instant

recognition. We didn't run into each other's arms in tears. That's the kind of reunion you see on the news. That's the only kind they show.

We passed each other again and I saw that she was wearing the same shoes as the lady in the elevator at the apartment building. I remembered the shoes because she'd startled me by coming out of her apartment. Like a trespasser, I'd been moving cautiously toward the door I thought would be hers, when it opened. I pulled my hood over my head, adjusted my gloves, as if preparing to go outside, and moved back toward the elevator. We stood there side by side. Mine was a face she'd never seen in that building. I could feel her eyes on me and was glad I'd thrown up my hood. I knew it could be her. Or anyone else. Either way, I was standing next to a stranger. I was afraid she'd ask what I was doing on that floor. Who I was looking for. Who I was. I didn't want it to happen that way – quick like that. That's why I hadn't got as far as her door. I'd stood in the hall, trying to memorize being who I was then, before I rang the bell to deliver my card – anonymously. I had on a bicycle courier's jacket from my part-time job, and had brought a pad of delivery forms. This would guarantee a first look, I figured. Maybe the only one. Yet, standing next to her at the elevator, I was unable to raise my eyes. The replay of that long minute would always be of her shoes. Dainty, low-heeled, strap-backs. Practical for the summer. But, it was almost Christmas. Whoever she is, she spends on taxis, I thought, and finally glanced up, furtively. She was looking away from me, at an ad for alarm systems. Then, the elevator came.

On my way home, I bought a stamp and dropped the card into a mailbox.

I watched the woman sitting on a bench a few feet from me, afraid she would sense a stare. During my growing up, she had taken on many identities, from famous actress to disappeared-and-assumed-dead heroine, depending on my mood. I realized that I was now sacrificing all images to a final form. Her stylish black skirt and blue blouse matched her phone message description of what she said she'd be wearing. I couldn't ignore that. Standing just out of her line of vision I said her name aloud. It felt thick on my tongue, like chewing MacIntosh Toffee. What if I'd stressed the wrong syllable? I wasn't good at French names. She straightened her back as I spoke. When I moved next to her, she looked up. She didn't stand. I didn't sit. We looked at each other.

"You have your father's nose," she said, finally.

"The rest of my face is like yours," I said. "Don't you think?"

"You look like your father."

No! I can't, I thought. I wanted to stamp my foot, make a stand. This wasn't the dialogue I'd planned. "Is that good or bad?" I asked.

"Oh, he wasn't bad looking." She smiled a mouth smile, and her eyes were soft, sad-soft, just for a second, then silent. "He was a real charmer."

Is that good or bad? I didn't ask. She wanted to get out of the crowd and so did I. The Bob and Alice Restaurant was a few shops away. We ordered beer.

"Well," I said, holding up my glass. "A toast like this needs thought, but --"

"Cheers," my mother said putting her glass directly to her lips.

I was glad she drank beer. It could signify a certain lack of pretense, a certain adaptability. The waitress placed menus before us, and the banality of the act thrilled me.

The waitress doesn't know. I wanted to make an announcement. May I have your attention? What appears here to be two women drinking beer are in fact mother and –

“My friend here would like another beer,” my mother said to the waitress.

This wasn't the Walt Disney show.

I had begun to open the envelope in the elevator on the way up to my apartment. Already people are sending stupid Christmas cards, I thought. Likely some sales gimmick. I resented being made to think about holidays I did not celebrate. The elevator stopped on three, and, reading the card, I started to step out. I remember the door bouncing off my shoulder trying to close. When I did step out I could not think what it was I was doing. My apartment. My keys. I don't remember going inside.

“Ignore her Chantal,” my friend, Lise, repeated. She'd urged me to come over as soon as I'd called about the card. “She can get on with her life and you with yours. She thinks she needs to know you. But really, why would she?”

“How can I say to my daughter, get on with your life? Leave me out?” I knew my friend was saying what she thought I needed to hear. Wanted to hear. Did I? Lise splashed strong scalding coffee into my cup. I moved my bare arm. This wouldn't help me sleep. The coffee, the conversation. Yet, I'd needed to come. Since high school, we'd been there for each other. She offered a plate of small sugared donuts then set the dish on the side table next to a graduation photograph of Giselle, her daughter – a year younger than mine would have been. Is. Than mine is. Giselle, wearing one of those square hats with a tassel, wearing a saucy smile, her mother's. They shared the same forward way of talking, the same impatience with fools. As a baby, Giselle had often tried to climb onto

my knee. Just after her first birthday I quit my office job and left the city to look for work in a town, hours north. Office jobs were a dime a dozen then and I needed to get away.

Lise's child was past knee-sitting age, when I decided to return home.

"Did she send some proof? Some identification?" Lise asked again. "You did ask her didn't you? When she phoned?"

"Yes. She'll try to find the adoption papers. She'll bring them if - when - we meet."

Lise had insisted I ask Jennifer for the papers, reminding me of all the very convincing con-artists on "America's Most-Wanted." She'd seen a show, just the other day, where a widower had won a fair-sized lottery, and a young man turned up claiming to be a product of the older man's first romance. The widower bought a boat and he and said-son set off on a world cruise to get to know each other. The boat arrived in Hawaii with only said-son. He told the authorities that his father had taken over the wheel just after midnight and in the morning there'd been no sign of him. Apparently, he lost his balance while urinating overboard. Foul play might never have been suspected, but for the man's niece, who did some sleuthing. Eventually, she learned that said-son had heard the name of her uncle's first lover during a TV interview, when he'd won the money.

What will you do with the money? they'd asked her uncle. Well, I'd like a boat and someone to keep me company on it, the old man pondered. My wife didn't care much for the water. The only woman I knew who liked to be on the sea was Irmgard Lam, from high school. My first love affair. I imagine she's found another captain by now!

“But, I’m not a captain, I have no boat, and I have no fortune to steal,” I assured Lise when she concluded her story. And when I retire I’ll have only my pension. Besides, she’s my daughter.”

“How do you know? You only got a Christmas card in the mail and spoke to her on the phone. How did she track you down anyway?” Lise pretended to shiver. “I wouldn’t like that at all. To think that someone had been spying on my life like that.”

Yes, that's how it feels, I thought, but didn’t want to admit it. “She told me it took years. School records, newspaper announcements, obituaries, directories, phone listings. I found myself defending Jennifer. “But if she’d really been spying, she would have known I was divorced, living alone, and would not have worded the card so inconspicuously. *Remember the first time we met?* Below this question was her date of birth.

“So she’s smart. That’s more dangerous,” Lise insisted. “Still doesn’t prove she is who she says she is.” She dropped her voice. “And if she *is* who she says, why does she want to see you? People sue people for everything these days. Maybe she’ll claim emotional abuse for abandonment.”

“It wasn’t like that, Lise.”

The priest locked the door behind him. The coarse cloth of his black robes, with their musty wood wax scent were out of place in this room of bright walls, and shiny metal furniture that smelled of disinfectant. He sat on the edge of her bed. Touched her arm.

“I wish you had told me sooner, Chantal. It’s dangerous for you to be alone with this. A terrible thing. And you told no one?”

Chantal covered her arms with the blanket. “No,” she lied. But of course she’d told her mother. Everything.

“And did they ask about the father?” He studied her face.

“No, father.”

“Chantal, I want to be sure you understand. When you sign the papers, you are making a promise. A promise to the law, a promise to your child, and a promise to her new parents that you will never attempt to contact her in any way. You must never try to find her. To do so would be a crime. Do you understand?”

“Yes, father.”

“Good. And most importantly you are making a promise to God. And to lie to God is more than a crime, it is a great sin.”

“Yes, father.”

But father, there is already a great sin.

As if reading her mind the priest crossed himself. “May God forgive you my child.”

“Yes father.” *May you forgive me my child.*

The taxi was cold. It must have been parked for some time outside the hospital. The driver lit a cigarette and tuned the radio to the races. From the back seat Chantal watched the quick bright flame of his match. If she closed her eyes she could still see the flame. She shifted the blankets to cover the baby’s head, and waved the smoke away. A man on the sidewalk stood next to a clear plastic ball on a chain. The red lettering on the ball spelled the name of the hospital. There was a dollar bill folded once at the bottom. The

man shook a bracelet of bells, and the baby moved in her arms, fretting. It had cried as the doctor listened with the cold stethoscope and declared the three-month old in perfect health. Chantal knew, this much she had done well. The bells jangled again and the baby stirred. This child cried often. Did not like to be put down, even in sleep.

The taxi turned off on a side street, leaving the lively part of the city behind. She fixed her eyes on the curl of smoke from the driver's cigarette. Strange how, when he inhaled, it lit the whole area around him. Like a candle. But the glow fell short of her. Even through the lining of the long coat the vinyl seat was cool against her thighs. *If only he were here. Just this time.* She bundled the baby closer and leaned against the bony arm of the car door.

The taxi swayed as it turned the corner. Startled, Chantal looked at the meter. Five dollars already. And ticking. How much was it a minute? How many minutes had passed? How many were left? Her heart felt as if it were outside her body, just under her coat, pounding hard and fast. She made herself think of *after*. After it happened. She would move home again. Tell her father she hadn't liked living alone. Only her mother knew. Had she told the others, she would have lost them. But not her mother. Mothers stand by.

"Do they?" The driver was speaking to her.

Chantal caught her breath. "Pardon?"

"Do they live at 286? Is that the number you gave me?"

"Yes, yes." She searched the dark porches they were passing. The numbers were already in the two-hundreds. For the first time since getting into the cab, she looked down at the infant's face. She tried to take it all in, her baby's scent, the way the cheek

bones came up high under the brown eyes, the plentiful, but fine straight black hair.

Then she tried to memorize herself, who she was now. Before it happened.

The cab pulled up in front of a two-storey house with aluminum siding. Simple but adequate. She looked quickly about her. No fences, shared yards. Fields, woods nearby. So different from the city, where she'd grown up. A fall wind tossed the blanket away from the baby's face.

Halfway up the walk Chantel felt an arm on hers. "My fare, little mother?"

"Wait for me, just a few minutes." He looked surprised, then shrugged. She wished she could tell him to go – wished a different driver could be there when she came back to the car, alone. As she reached the bottom of the steps, the porch light came on, fixing her in its glare.

My mother smoked. Her hands were delicate, manicured, pale. I kept my own hands in my lap. They were still slightly stained with grease from working on my bicycle. I noticed for the first time how big my knuckles were. We looked across the table at each other then out the window at the snow piling higher on the wide window ledge. I had stored a lifetime of things to tell her. But too much had been accumulated. This sudden opening had brought it all together too quickly. I was blocked. I read the bottle in my hand.

"Guinness is good for you," I said. "Did you know? In England, pregnant women dri..." I had broken the ice with a wrecking ball.

"I won't feel guilty," she said in a low voice. "I won't."

I was startled. Then, suddenly, afraid.

“They told me you did your best.” As I spoke I reached instinctively to touch her hand. She moved it to her cigarette. “I never thought any differently,” I said. “What you did was – well, you could have – ”

She cut short my commendation. “No. That was illegal.”

The conversation moved from beer to food. Then we ordered some. Fries, dry chicken wings. Food you could talk around and didn’t have to worry about flying off your plate or dripping down your arm. It was after our order arrived, and I started to eat, that I became aware of how I was and wasn’t breathing. We ordered more beer, talked about our favourites – colours, music, reading, TV. The kind of people we liked, the kind who annoyed us. Surface talk, but enough to show a pattern of similarity. She didn’t seem impressed by this.

“Yes, that’s just how *I* feel!” I’d interrupt. But I wasn’t trying to talk about me. It was about us. She seemed to hear only the interruptions.

Watching her between the moments she was watching me, I wondered what she’d thought about, standing there by the kiosk – waiting. I’d wanted to spot her first. To see how she was with herself. I wondered if she’d considered leaving, and if, at the same time, she was afraid I wouldn’t show. Her phone message to meet had been the first call since our initial phone contact eight months earlier. I remember all the unimportant things about that first call. Holding the phone, looking out the patio window. A quick sun going, blood-deep oranges in a winter sky. Awed by the colour, feeling not much else and knowing I should be. I saw myself, in the reflection of the patio doors, sitting there at the table, posture deceptively calm, legs stretched out on another chair. The scene was all wrong. After we’d said we were who we were, she thanked me for the

Christmas card that we both knew wasn't sent as one. She couldn't remember naming me, she said. She hadn't. There were long silences. I wondered if she stood or sat, if she clutched the phone or held it tentatively. I had watched reunions on TV, watched teary-eyed. Now, I felt not even a tightening of the throat.

Our apartments were fifteen minutes apart. We could have met that night. But I didn't suggest it. Mom had invited me over for dinner. I hadn't kept her up to date, but she knew I'd been searching. As long as it makes you happy, she'd told me. Now, for the first time, I wondered what she hadn't said.

"My - friend - is expecting me for dinner tonight," the woman on the patio doors said into the phone. "I have to go. Can we meet tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" She sounded taken aback. No one spoke. Then, "I'll call you again."

A month passed before I knew that I'd have to be the one to call. Another month passed before I did.

"How do I know you are who you say you are?" Her voice was changed.

A chill crawled over me. *If I hang up fast I can make it unsaid.* "I'll try to get the papers," I told her. Another week passed. I dialed her number and hung up several times. Then shakily dialed again and let it ring.

"It would be better if we just let this rest a while," she said flatly.

Months passed again. A week before my birthday I came home to her message. We would meet.

It will be D-day, my mom used to say about plans that were important and scary.

A mom is someone you grow up knowing. The other kind are mothers. Just so you don't get confused.

When she opened her eyes there was blood everywhere. Peter and Rob were gone. She looked up from the floor. Blood was splattered from the door of the camper to the foldout table to where she lay. Beneath her it had pooled and branched into a small tributary on the uneven floor. Handprints were on the door latch and the table. Then she remembered the night, the pain living inside her. Trying not to disturb him but unable to keep still, she'd moaned into her pillow, twisting her body to find a position of relief, curling and uncurling herself into a small ball on the other side of the mattress. Four aspirin every hour and she prayed for dawn. If he was awake, he said nothing. On the other side of the camper, their friend mumbled in his sleep. She listened to the cacophony of nightlife, was nauseated by the smell of fetid marsh water. It had not bothered her before. So much decay even as life grew relentlessly. She stumbled outside to the water's edge again and threw up aspirin.

"Get up," Peter commanded, prodding her. "You're not going to sleep after keeping me awake all night." He was serious. Jennifer unfolded herself, and rolled over. The sheets stuck to her skin. She felt under them to a wet warmth and looked at her hand. The nausea, loss of weight – just late, she'd thought – that was all. She'd left the hospital clinic that time, before waiting for the results. In the waiting room, she'd been calm, reviewing her survival plan. If the tests were positive she'd have to find help, make arrangements – which kind? They didn't discuss it. It was as she sat in the outpatient

clinic, waiting for test results, that she noticed the poster. Blue uniforms and red sashes. The over-sized hats and trumpets and the plastic money-ball hanging on the chain. The Sally Annes. Then, for the first time, Jennifer remembered being told where she was born.

“Yaaaaaaaaa—Hooooooooooo!” It was Peter. He had seen the blood.

“Roy, get up old boy. I’m a free man again! We’re going to town to celebrate.”

Roy rolled to a sitting position, confused, then looking from one friend to the other, understood. “Jennifer, are you okay? You’re awfully pale. You should –”

“Stay and rest,” Peter finished for him. “C’mon Roy. By the time we get to town the bar will be open.”

“It’s seventy miles,” Peter. There’s nothing else around here. Maybe she –”

“It’s a woman’s thing, Roy. They’re used to it. She’ll be fine. C’mon. I’ll buy.”

Peter became angry then, seeing blood on the sweatshirt he’d slept in. He told her to wash it before he got back. As they were driving off, Jennifer went out to the truck. More aspirins. She’d forgotten to tell them. She needed other things too, but could not ask the boys to get them. “Yea sure,” Peter answered. She heard his truck radio from a long way down the road. Back inside, she wet her tee shirt with cold water and tried, weakly, to erase the drying blood, which seemed to be everywhere, sometimes in lumps. She needed to know, for sure, what had happened. Back in the city she would find a medical book. Dizzy, she chewed soda crackers and washed them down with cold tea. Then again, pain slammed through her body. She kneaded the sheets and braced herself for each onslaught, until, mercifully, exhaustion gave over to the anesthesia of sleep.

In the late afternoon, Jennifer woke to a stifling heat. The canvas walls were hot and flies swarmed in the putrid air. She gathered the bloody rags into a paper bag and tossed them onto the fire pit, then collected a bundle of cloth she'd set off from the rest and wrapped it in a clean handkerchief. Barefoot she walked through the warm prickly grass to the lake. A few meters from shore was a patch of conifers. She crawled to the cool beneath outspread branches and rested on the pine-needle floor, her back to a trunk, legs drawn up. It was safe here. And would always be green. With a stone she dug a small hole in the cool earth and placed the bundle inside. From the base of the tree she broke off a small dry branch and snapped it in two. Packing the fresh earth over the hole, she laid the sticks on top, in the shape of a cross. She would never know for sure. But just in case.

"Don't you like that one?" Chantal said, pointing to the lacy blouse in the shop window.

"No," I said, fearing she'd offer to buy it for me. "Too fancy. I'm not much for frills." *Should I have been less honest? Until we'd known each other longer?* She looked at my jeans and boots. "I used to think about - well, a grand daughter I could dress up."

And I used to think of finding siblings. But we'd learned that about each other. She had kept her door locked. And I had kept moving. Unexpectedly, this discovery of our similar patterns caused me a vague resentment.

The beer was wearing off, leaving a residue of exhaustion. Strangely I ached all over. As if I'd run a marathon without training for it. *Never spend more than an hour or two together the first time*, I'd read in the manual. Or was that the one for dating?

"I have to go home," she said. "I'm tired. Too tired."

My bicycle was locked nearby. I walked her to the bus stop. Standing there, waiting, I knew. But there was no control panel. No magic word. No time.

"When can we ..." I tried, but the noise of the street obliterated the effort. I looked down at my feet, to delay the bus coming. We waited there, side by side. My sneakers and those delicate shoes. I was struck briefly with the insane idea that perhaps an incredible mistake had occurred and this was not her, just someone with the same name. Yet, even as the thought formed, I knew the odds were a hundred percent in favour of her being who she said she was. Either way, I was standing next to a stranger. I glanced up furtively. She was looking away from me at an ad for alarm systems. Then the bus came.

Getting It All Together

Samson knew that it was going to happen any day now. He waited patiently for five o'clock when he could punch out and leave the toilets to Trish to clean. No one would ever guess how many times in twelve hours a cleaner was in the mall washrooms wiping off the seats, swishing out the bowl, drying off the sink counter and shining up the taps, sometimes refilling the toilet paper and soap dispenser. You had to use separate rags of course, except for that couple of times when he'd forgotten to bring a supply from the main office and didn't want to waste time going back. The blow dryer eliminated the mess of paper towels but left you stuck in situations like that. He made do with one rag – rinsing it in the sink between items.

When Trish showed up for work on time, Samson was relieved. He'd be able to make it to the place where his discovery was, exactly on schedule. He turned his supply cart over to her with a promise.

"One of these days, I'm going to show somebody something special, Trish. I'm going to get it all together. One of these days soon."

"What! A new magic detergent that really does get rid of that naughty brown ring?" Trish feigned wide-eyed amazement.

"No, not nothing about work. It's the place I go on the way home every day. You wait. I'll tell you when to come."

"Okay Sam. Whatever you say old boy." She rolled her eyes after he'd left and began to mutter to herself. After two years of working the evening shift sweeping and wiping up people's dirt, she'd developed this habit of conversing with the one person

who really wanted to hear all her sorrows. And she didn't give a damned who else listened in.

"This is what I work my way through university for?" she asked herself. "Well, you're too damned qualified to get a decent job, aren't you?"

Who the hell wouldn't be cautious about hiring the educated and experienced who applied for jobs that reduced them to scum-of-the-earth status, made them the untouchables, handlers of things unclean – there was a name for their type in every language and in English it was *poor stiff*. Whatever the lingo, it felt the same. And it felt the same even knowing she wasn't alone – knowing that a lot of the cleaning staff, security guards, and taxi drivers she'd met had been professionals where they'd come from, wherever that was. Here, some of them, from cultures where only men brought home the bread, told their wives they were going to work, then sat in groups in the mall, checking the classifieds. Often, they had learned English or French well enough to write qualifying trade exams or even to get white collar jobs. It was only the immigration department that kept them waiting, for years – or not waiting – working under the table, trying to keep the beat of their lives going. And when they couldn't, well, some had decided to leave the planet. Once in a while they'd take their youngest with them, so as not to burden the community.

"But I can't use that excuse can I? I was born here for God sakes! Something wrong with my head! No, just got to hang in." She looked around, aware that she'd raised her voice. Her monologue continued before she'd reached the next toilet stall.

"What if I can't get a real job and I'm stuck here with Sam. I'll kill myself. He's an okay guy and all, but what are we going to talk about? The merits of manual labour in

uniting the educated and uneducated classes? No. Want that you can live in commie land.” She looked around again. “No, thanks girl. You stay here and have bestowed upon your humble head the wonders to be learned from the mentally challenged.”

Samson meanwhile had stuffed his work shirt and cap that said Newtech Mall into his locker and pulled on the freshly hand-washed tee shirt. Just that morning, he’d taken it off the line tied between a bar on the window of his basement apartment and the handle of the fuse box inside the door. It was almost five-fifteen when he got to the subway station. He had to be downstairs on the platform by five-thirty-five at the latest. That would give him time to get to the spot and look at it before the five-forty train came. At this time of day the trains were only minutes apart. He couldn’t go down to the platform yet – it would be too early. He had to go at the exact time he had first made the discovery, a month ago. It was hard, but he always managed; he knew it was better that way. All that remained was for someone else to see. Then it would be all together.

Samson sat at the coffee bar. He asked for a coke, in the can, so he could take it with him if he had to, and he asked for a straw. That was what he’d done the day of his discovery. He watched the people going down the escalator and watched the people coming up. He liked to guess where they might be coming from or where they were going, or why they looked tired or why they looked happy. He wondered about the people with the nice clothes who had expensive looking watches and brief cases. He watched faces and wondered what it was made them look angry. Wondered why they were impatient getting on or off the train, or waiting for the waiter to serve them at the coffee bar. When he was new to this country, he’d been surprised at the great number of things that made people unhappy, things that he didn’t notice. Now, they did not surprise

him. Still, he watched, and thought about the people who passed. Now and then he saw, in a successful suit, a tired face that belonged to someone from his country. He would think about this, about himself in such a suit when it was his turn.

If Samson sat with his back to the station and looked at the shiny side of the steel napkin dispenser, he could see people a half-inch tall in the distance. As they came closer they grew and bent, their bodies jack-knifing on the corner of the dispenser, then growing suddenly fat, before disappearing off the edge. His own face looked longer and younger, but a sickly yellow.

A young couple were at the small table behind his stool. They were eating the sandwiches sold at the coffee shop. The bill was on the table and they set their money there, and looked at their fine watches and left. Samson moved to that table. He pulled the plate in front of himself and ate the crust of the sandwich the girl had left. She should have taken it with her if she was full. He finished the coffee the man hadn't finished, then took a quarter from the pile of change they'd left, walked over to his stool and left the money by his coke can as a tip. Checking his watch, Samson figured that he had only one minute to get to the special place before the train came. He wouldn't be able to look long, but he had to go there. If he missed even a day, it could all be ruined. And today, while watching the commuters rush for their trains, he had seen the sign announcing a renovation to the tunnel. There was no more time. Tomorrow, he would tell Trish that he had chosen her. That she was the one to see.

The next day, Trish came late and didn't really listen to Samson when he told her that on Monday, his day off, but her day on, he would come at the end of her shift and they would go to the station together.

“It’s important you don’t waste time changing, Trish. We have to be there early, in time to wait.”

“That makes sense Sam. Hurry up and wait. This isn’t the army Sam. And what are you talking about? Why should you escort me to the station? Don’t we see enough of each other as it is?” Trish didn’t want to talk like that to Sam. It just came out, that way. She’d never had patience for foolishness and less each day it seemed. Just because you don’t have an education doesn’t mean you can’t think things through, was how she saw it. Some things you do day in and day out and there’s no reason why you can’t train yourself to do them right. Children can be taught. Even animals learn.

Samson knew Trish was one of the subway people. One of the people who walked fast and straight into the station and out and didn’t like it if you tried to talk to them. He couldn’t have explained it, but the idea came to him now that maybe after she’d come with him, she wouldn’t be one of them anymore.

On Monday, he was at the staff room as promised, waiting for Trish to clock out. She locked up her supply cart early, then went to get the pail and mop. Samson helped her empty the dirty water and rinse the mop and stand it on the handle end so it would fall open and dry out a bit. Trish looked at him.

“You don’t have to do that Sam. I just leave them if I’m in a hurry. Why are you here on your day off?”

“You’ve got to come with me Trish. It’s today. Today is the right time to show you. I know.”

“Show me what?”

“My discovery, Trish. You’re the person I have to show it to.” Samson didn’t remind her that he’d explained it already. People forgot things.

“Oh yeah. Some kind of new ‘Even Shine’ tile wax they use on the station platform?”

“What?” Samson was confused, and starting to worry. Trish was already looking at her watch, but today she had to slow down or it wouldn’t work out right.

“You’ll have time Trish, it only takes a minute. But we have to go now.”

“Why me Sam? Why now? I have a class at six that I’m always late for as is. There’s no way I can go with you.”

“But, you’re going anyway Trish. Just, instead of catching the train right off, you can wait until the five-forty. And I’ll show you just before the train comes.”

“Why should I do that when you won’t tell me what it is?”

“I can’t tell you. It’s not for telling. But, you’ll be glad Trish. It needs to be seen to be all together.”

Trish pushed the card into the time slot and smiled at the sound of the metal punch cutting through the card. This was her best time of day. And she had her computer class to look forward to. She liked that. The quick response – the action she created with her hands. She made things happen that way. And it was all cut and dried. If you learned your stuff, you could get results. “Forget it Sam.”

After he’d hurried beside her the block to the station, Samson’s clean shirt was soaked in sweat. It wasn’t just the moving fast that made him breathless. He was worried that Trish wouldn’t wait for the five-forty. And he first had to talk her into waiting with him while he got a Coke at the coffee bar. How was he going to do that?

“Trish, let me show you the discovery. If I don’t, it will be too late. It’s decided. It has to be today. It has to be seen by someone else, Trish. Not just me. I’m not enough. It has to be today.”

Samson was talking fast now. Not like him. Trish didn’t answer. She was ahead of him, in line to go through the turnstile. She was only two people from being out the other side. Samson felt his stomach moving around. His face was red and dripping. He pushed his fingers through his damp oily hair. He forgot to shape it over the bald spot.

“Trish, I’ll work your shift for you tomorrow,” he had to shout now.

She stopped and looked at him. This would be perfect. Give her time to get caught up on that paper due at the end of the week.

“And the next day? Two days, then I’ll go with you.” What the heck, she’d do the same for him, wouldn’t she?

“Yes, okay, but don’t go through yet.”

Trish was turned, talking to Samson while the man behind her was pushing his body against hers, urging her forward, through the turnstile. She moved suddenly to face him, hands on hips, elbow cocked into his midriff.

“Sorry,” she smiled and pushed back past him.

“What are you talking about, Sammy?” Even if we wait, I only have ten minutes!”

“I know, but I’ve got to have a coke here. It’s what I do. Want a drink? I’ll buy.”

When they entered the restaurant the waiter looked at Samson and frowned. After serving them, he watched Samson. Trish noticed. The guy was a jerk. Probably didn’t wash his hands when he came out of the washroom and made sandwiches. In the cleft of his chin, a whitehead was ready to burst. Lucky she was only having coke.

“Is there any particular reason you are so fascinated with this man?” She asked the waiter.

The remark startled Samson. He hadn’t noticed the waiter. He’d been watching people. He had to do the same things he always did. Especially today.

“No, I happen to work here, and he comes every day!”

“So? Staring is not polite. Young man,” she added for effect, although she couldn’t have been much older. “Would you like his phone number? I could set you up.”

Samson was looking at his watch. They had to leave right now or they wouldn’t have time for the discovery. “Come on Trish.”

“Don’t hurry because of this jerk, Sam. Don’t let him push you around. You are the customer. This guy is working for you. Think about that, Sammy. Working for you! We don’t have to go anywhere.”

Things were getting too close. He had to convince Trish he didn’t care. He knew she wouldn’t let things go otherwise. She never let things go easily.

“Yeah, you’re right Trish. He’s like that sometimes. Having a bad day maybe.” He tried to keep his voice low, hoping the waiter would understand that he had to say this. Hoping he’d be allowed back in the restaurant. “If we don’t go now, I can’t show you. And you want me to work your shift right?”

Trish watched Samson leave the money for the cokes on the counter. Then she took the two dollars and replaced them with her own change, using all the pennies she could find. She counted it right to the cent, not leaving a tip.

Now was the hardest part, Samson thought. “We have to run Trish. There’s no time. Please.”

“Forget it. This is stupid. We’ll look ridiculous and I don’t want to get to class all sweaty.”

Samson saw that the time was five-thirty-eight. “But if I can’t show you, it won’t be seen. It might be too late. You want the next two days off right?”

Trish walked fast, not quite at a run. He jogged ahead turning to urge her on, like a kid at the zoo. They got to the platform. Samson’s heart leapt as the speaker above him commanded – “Stand back from the line! The train is arriving.”

“Come Trish, come!” He urged.

They had to walk inside the white line right next to the edge of the platform, because the crowd had moved forward and bunched together ready to board. He knew Trish didn’t like that. Samson was excited. He had to get to the end of the platform. Almost to where the train burst from the tunnel into the station. That was where the waiting area got really narrow. But it was near there he’d first discovered it. There, in the shadows under the escalator, behind the pillars. He’d seen it by the light of the arriving train. Only for a few seconds. But he knew it was real.

The air about them began to move as they raced down the platform. Trish looked behind and saw the light in the tunnel, and she wanted to stop but now could not. Something was going to happen, he’d said. Something was going to happen. And now every part of her body told her he was right. Running between the yellow line and the edge of the platform, as the train neared, she felt the elation – the power – of the risk and did not want to step into the safety of the crowd. She would stay on the ledge side of the line. On the edge. She could do this.

Samson, not as agile as Trish, focused hard on the space between the white line and the drop to the tracks. He usually did not have to run to get here. The thought of a misstep made his legs go weak and the white line seemed to shift, narrowing the gap. Then something began to happen. He had believed that if he came here each day at the same time something would be different, but good different, not this. The crowd was moving forward, pushed from behind by people eager to get on a train that had not yet arrived. Samson saw them come, washing toward the tracks. He stopped and Trish fell into him. She was speaking but her voice merged with the rumble of the approaching train. A back draft lifted her long hair from her shoulders, lifted it up around her head, held it writhing, then set it down again. A strand stuck to the corner of her mouth. Now, she was shouting, pushing him on. The train exploded into the station and brakes screamed. Like a halfback Samson suddenly ducked away from the track, between two pillars. Trish followed, grabbing him as they stopped. She laughed and it wasn't the laugh he was used to.

"Sam, it's chicken! Is that what you wanted to show me? Chicken? With a train?" She let out a whoop and it echoed there beneath the escalator.

An old woman boarding, a woman who'd watched them, looked down the length of the train now, but saw only the empty platform.

Samson waited. He would show her after the train began to move. He wasn't ready yet. As he fought to catch his breath, Trish became quiet. "So, what are we doing here, Sam?" She felt, for just a moment, unsure – a signal to be careful. To be ready. It angered her that of all people it was Sam here to witness this vulnerability. "C'mon, Sam. It's just a game, right? There's really nothing to see."

From the train a staticky voice announced that the doors were closing. Then the train jerked and moved out of the station.

“Okay, Trish. Come here.” Samson whispered. Trish didn’t hear, but saw his signal to follow. When she was next to him, he put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her down. “Watch your head.”

She crouched and followed him deeper under the escalator. When the angle between the escalator’s underside and the floor narrowed so that they could not walk upright, Samson dropped to his hands and knees. He waved Trish down beside him. Digging into his pocket he found the book of matches. They were damp from his sweat. The third match lit. Trish saw nothing at first but the spot of light imprinted on her retina. The match went out. When Samson lit the next one, she didn’t look at the fire, but kept her eyes on the floor. And she saw it then, the uneven black line forming a rectangle and the letters inside the line. They must have been scrawled with paint. A man’s name next to a period in time “1971 – 1999.” Snuggled deeper into the narrow V, where the escalator met the floor, was another rectangle – a smaller one, guarded by the bigger – a girl’s name, and a date “1997-1999.”

Trish watched Sam’s quick movements. He was lighting candles, many candles, stuck in their own wax to the floor around the makeshift grave-marker. The emergency supply from work. Another train was coming. Trish felt her hair floating up from her shoulders. She didn’t move.

Samson was ecstatic. He’d made it happen. He had got it all together.

HoUses

Swans, in pairs, effortlessly drifting in and out of shade cast by the weeping willows. The river rippling ever so slightly in the direction of the bridge. Ducks with little ones so tightly packed they were hard to count. Many bird sounds interrupted by the trill of the red-winged blackbird. Light, like the last sun of a July night, but it was May and only seven o'clock.

Despite this being a dry heat it needed respect, could easily become oppressive. Few had acclimatized to this early El Nino summer. Up the river from where Shane sat was his university. On the bank opposite was the hospital, hardly visible through the trees. His mother had died there. And it was there they'd taken his father after the heart attack. There'd been no need for a siren. On this side of the river the bicycle path rambled along the shore, paralleled by a quiet road whose old brick houses looked out onto the water. His father had grown up on the street leading down to this river. Between the end of that street and the water was a grassy open area. There had once been a makeshift wooden diving dock. There were wooden changing houses too, he'd been told. A larger city flowed around the river now. Weeds covered the shoreline and only risk-takers swam there.

Two small boys in cutoffs ran barefoot past him down to the water's edge. Shane was watching the boys when he heard a distant siren winding its way closer. The forlorn note stopped abruptly, then just as abruptly split the air again. He closed his eyes to think the mantra - *for the helpers, the helped, and those who care*. The siren was coming from the other side of the river, by the hospital it seemed. An ambulance, or maybe a police

car. Police cars often made him think of the time his brother hadn't come home. He'd woken late and lay quietly, wondering why his mother hadn't called him to get ready for Sunday school. If he could just lie still another thirty minutes it would be too late to go. The phone rang. He heard his mother's voice, a high bubbly sound like when she laughed while talking. But then his father took the phone and his mother rushed upstairs past him, her head turned away, and his stomach grew tight. He knocked on the bedroom door and when she didn't answer he went in anyway. He wasn't supposed to do that. She was lying on the bed, face in a pillow. *Don't mom, you're the mother.* But even as these thoughts formed he felt the shifting, knew that whatever was happening *just was*. Something had to be done to change things back.

"Mom it will be okay," he said, touching her hair, still hoping she'd sit up and pull him onto her knee, knowing she wouldn't.

"I know. It's okay, go downstairs."

"Was the phone call about Bruce? He tried.

"Yes.

"Is he dead?"

"No!" She began to cry again.

His bother must be badly hurt, maybe mangled in an accident. Like when the girl two houses down tried to get across their street between two cars and didn't make it. Part of her head was under the wheel. You don't walk after that, he'd thought. He imagined her walking across the street toward his house with her head flat on one side. But months later she'd returned to school with a head still round, missing only an ear and hair.

"He'll be all right, whatever happened, mom."

“Yes, he’s okay.” But her voice came apart with a flutter, like a house of cards collapsing into itself.

His father had called up the stairs then. Mother and he were going out. Shane was to finish breakfast and play with his older brother. He didn’t have to go to Sunday school.

“What happened?” he asked Edward after his parents had left.

“Never mind. Play cards.”

“Is Bruce dead?”

“No. It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.”

Edward played fish with him and let him win, he could tell. And there was none of his usual teasing. I will have to understand Bruce is dead, Shane told himself. He stirred his toast crust into his milk with a finger. I will have to try to make mom and dad forget him. He wondered if Edward would get Bruce’s room, and he’d have a room to himself. Don’t think about that. That’s awful. Bruce is dead. In the bathroom he looked in the mirror and said it aloud, “Bruce is dead.” But it didn’t feel bad. It didn’t feel like anything. What did feel bad was that he didn’t have to go to Sunday school, and his mother hadn’t scolded him for going into their room, and his brother wasn’t beating him at cards.

It was a long time before his parents came home. Bruce wasn’t with them.

“The police are bringing him home,” Edward whispered. Why did Edward know things he didn’t? He waited for the police car and Bruce. Then it came, but the lights weren’t flashing. And there was no siren. Not even that. Still, the curtains were moving inside the living room windows of the houses across the street. Bruce looked white and

tired but that was all. Shane felt an unexpected anger at his brother. In the bathroom he leaned over the toilet and threw up milk and bits of toast.

He was in his teens when they gave him the missing pieces of the story. It just came up at a Christmas dinner, when Bruce and Edward were home visiting for the holidays. Everyone laughed in the telling. Bruce turned red.

“Next time we’ll tell them to keep you,” his father said, cuffing Bruce.

“Daniel, don’t tell your son that!” their mother scolded. It was hard to tell sometimes whether or not she was serious. Everyone was surprised when Shane asked for details. How could he not know the story? Bruce had gotten drunk with his friend, Scott. They’d gone for a joy ride in Scott’s dad’s car. Scott ran the car off the road into a farmer’s field. When they couldn’t get the car out, they made themselves at home in a haystack and finished off the beer. A farmer’s pitchfork was their morning alarm. In the telling, Bruce bragged that he threw up in the cruiser on the way to the police station. The drinking age was twenty-one, and Bruce had been about seven years ahead of his patience.

The siren drowned the sounds of the river now. Shane could not tell from which direction it was coming. Then it ceased. Mission accomplished, he hoped. The thought came apart when noise jarred the space about him. He turned to see not an ambulance, but a fire truck. It was on *his* side of the river, coming down the street. No smoke, no sign of fire. The truck stopped a few doors from the river. Two men, weighted in heavy jackets and boots, swung down from the truck, grabbed respirators and rushed up wooden steps into a house. So that was it. The fire truck had been able to get there before the ambulance. It

wouldn't have happened that way in his father's time, Shane thought. He directed his mantra at the house this time then turned from it and faced the river.

The pain began in his stomach. Then from somewhere deeper a hurt rose, took itself through his ribs and chest. He tensed his shoulders and holding his knees began to rock with the effort to contain what was coming.

Shane's father, Daniel, had been four on that warm fall day. From the diving dock he saw the ambulance turn up his street. When he'd climbed the bank he could see past the changing houses, to the open screen door, saw the neighbours crowded onto the sidewalk outside the house – his house.

A robin landed on the grass in front of him. It was one of those moments he knew he'd always remember. He didn't know why. A second of clarity, ephemeral as dew, yet real as a mountain blocks the sun. This knowing had happened before - when? He didn't know, but recognized it as one remembers a face without a name or a place, with only a sense of foreboding. The sound of a small bell replaced the hole in the air left by the siren. There was clopping as a horse pulled the ice wagon into sight at the top of the street. Old Dupuis halted the mare and climbed down. Today no one came out to meet the iceman, no kids ran after the wagon to sneak rides on the back. Mr. Dupuis walked over to the yard where Mrs. Robertson was standing holding onto her kids. She was holding their heads against her, even though it looked like they were trying to get free. These were not *her* kids, Daniel realized suddenly. It was Agnes and Annie, his own younger sisters. But they should been having their nap. When he'd left for the river his

mother had told him to be quiet and not let the screen door slam. *If you see your father, tell him I need the ice money*, she'd called after him. But he'd kept going.

The iceman spoke to Mrs. Robertson, then walked quickly across the lawn, and disappeared up the steps of the veranda and into Daniel's house. Daniel felt he was watching a movie, silent but for the fuzzy sound of his heart in his ears. He did not move, willing the scene to freeze, the show to be over, the green innocent grass around his house not to change, not to betray him. A gust of wind stirred the willow at his side. He saw it move but felt no breeze. An ant crawled along his calf.

He would wonder later how long he had stood there before it happened. As he knew it would. As he had created it, made it happen by imagining and delivering it into the world of things possible. Men appeared from inside the house and carried the stretcher carefully down the steps. A sheet was spread the length of the stretcher, covering something. The men did not hurry. The neighbours looked at the ground now or down onto the heads of the children. No one looked at anyone else. It was as if they'd become strangers. After the stretcher was lifted into the back of the ambulance, Mrs. Robertson went into her own house with the twins. Others went inside their homes. The street became empty. No one called for him. He knew that no one would again. Never like before. Collapsing to his knees he held onto the grass with both hands and continued to look up the street. Shadows of tree trunks fell around him. After a time, Daniel saw his mother come out of the house with Doctor Delabio. He remembered that the doctor had come to the house to talk to his parents when Lilly next door had *teebee*. He had taken Lilly away and hadn't brought her back.

Daniel did not question how he knew he wouldn't see his father again. He had learned the signs of the grownups, the signs that felt dangerous. His house was not one in which self-expression was encouraged. Concerns were hushed, especially those of the adults, especially in front of the children. It wasn't very long ago that he'd heard his parents arguing. Nothing seemed okay after that. The adults started sending them outside more than usual. Even John and Henry's parents could be heard yelling inside and they weren't yellers. Then Russell's father didn't come home from work one day. And Daniel heard his father say that Russell's dad hadn't had work to go to for a while, but he'd left home as usual, every morning, with his lunch box. They found the lunch box by the railway tracks. Later, there was a 'for sale' sign on Russell's lawn, and then he and his mother went away too. And there was that man who worked in the railway office downtown and jumped out the window. Daniel wondered how anyone would try to jump to the ground from so high. He'd sprained his ankle once just jumping off a low branch of the climbing tree. Not long after the man jumped they found a lady and her two kids in the big river, behind the Parliament buildings. The world was falling apart, some people thought. Because Jesus was mad. His grandmother didn't think so. Jesus is not like that, she'd said. Would your father make bad things happen to you? Just the strap, he thought. It was still better than Jesus telling you to jump out a window.

Lately, his father had been mad at him for talking too much at dinner, and then he was mad at him for keeping quiet and then he was just mad all the time.

"He's tired," their mother warned, gathering the children against her apron and nudging them out to the verandah. "He's just tired."

But Daniel knew it had been the newspaper that first made his father angry. It had something to do with the big letters in black print on the front page and it being Tuesday. His mother and father were talking loud that day. There was something his father hadn't told her. His mother wanted to know why. When Daniel went into the kitchen his father was at the table, the reading glasses he wore at work sliding off his nose as he bent his head over the newspaper, as he always did when he got home. He was looking at the page with no pictures only numbers. His mother who didn't usually read the paper was holding the first page with the pictures.

"You can't change it now, Joe. Looking at the figures won't change it. Look at *this*." She laid the page with the big letters in front of him. Her voice was high, excited. There was nothing cooking for dinner yet. His parents noticed him then and his father, without a word, got up and went out the back door, coatless.

Later, after a supper his father hadn't come home to, his uncle came to their house. Daniel was at the kitchen table looking at the pictures and words of a book Emma had brought home. His mother was talking low but his uncle was loud, waving the page with the numbers around, poking at it with thick fingers that were always black under the nails, but it was okay because he fixed cars.

"Why should everybody lose because of a few damned gamblers!" his uncle shouted suddenly. "If they got out of the office and put their backs to work, then they'd know the value of money. They wouldn't be so quick to throw it away."

"Be quiet!" His mother hissed, and told Daniel to take the book up to his room.

Everybody talked about Tuesday now. But not his father. He'd never said much.

Someone touched Daniel's shoulders. He screamed, a short high note.

"Come home." It was Emma. Her face was white, mottled looking, the freckles standing out, even in the weak light of the full moon. She took Daniel's hand. If he asked her about it all, right then, she'd tell him, he thought. But he didn't want the words. His sister was holding his hand too tightly. He pulled away and followed her to the house.

Ambulances took you to the hospital, and later your family brought you home. Everyone knew that. But Daniel's father wasn't coming back. His mother, uncle, and Emma had dressed up and gone to see his father at a special place to say good-bye. Daniel and the smaller ones had been left behind with Mrs. Robertson. Father was with Jesus now, they told Daniel. Why? He wanted to ask where exactly his father and Jesus had gone. He thought sometimes there was a better question but couldn't find it.

Shane knew that old people lived in these older houses by the river. He tried to picture how his grandfather might have looked as an old man. But he found it hard to give life to the faded black and white image that had stood on his parents' dresser and now his. The photograph was from the waist up - a stern man, not yet thirty, in a suit jacket, a tight white collar buttoned about his neck, preacher-like. His hair was parted in the middle, combed back tightly. An arm was grasped formally around his wife's. Behind them, shoulder-high, was a wooden fence and the corner of a brick house. The picture was out of focus, details hard to make out.

Shane had looked for hints of his father in his grandfather's face. He thought of his dad as a boy, a boy called Daniel, living in that brick house with the wooden fence. It

wasn't very long ago that he'd learned of the deception in his father's casual explanations of his own father's passing, the myth of the peaceful departure in a favourite armchair.

Often now, Shane found himself walking along the river and up the street, slowing his pace to glance up at that third-story window, trying to connect his father's truths, then and now. Needing to know what his father had brought away from this house. His brother, Edward, had his own idea of the story. He had always known things Shane didn't. And then, unexpectedly, their father had as much as confirmed Edward's version – in a way – as if he'd seen a danger in nothing being said. It happened when he was driving Shane home from the hospital, after visiting his mother.

"You lived around here didn't you, dad?"

His father nodded, saying nothing.

"Will you show me," Shane dared, expecting anger.

But his father had turned off the route and taken him to a neighbourhood along the river. They'd parked and walked down the street toward the water.

"Which one, dad?"

His father touched his shoulder and they stopped across the street from a three-story brick house with a newly painted wooden fence. "There," he shrugged.

They stood looking at the house, Shane wondering how this felt to his father.

"I know you kids think that I wasn't telling it right – that I wouldn't or couldn't – but what I was first told is what I told you. There was a heart attack. The doctor reported a heart attack." He pointed to an upstairs window. "That's where they found him."

Shane had not asked for this much. After his father's sudden death, only months later, he thought about how close he'd come to asking for more. He thought about why

he hadn't. Then he wondered, for the first time, if his father really had more. Still, what was said – was said. Now it was Shane's. He began to build upon what he knew, upon the bits and pieces, giving to it dimension, colour, and the shape of truth.

Daniel had found his answer before he found the question. It happened a long time after they took his father away, when the iceman's horse kicked his dog, Shadow. At first it seemed only the ribs were broken. His mother laid Shadow in a box by the wood stove and snuggled a blanket around the animal. In the morning he was stiff. His eyes open. Daniel knew animals died. He'd seen squirrels pressed into the road, and he'd been told about the dying thing. When his uncle came for Shadow's body, Daniel asked where he would bury the dog.

“Don't worry,” his uncle had answered. “He'll be with your father.”

It was still a while before he got all the pieces together. One afternoon, Daniel had heard his mother and Mrs. Robertson talking about his sister, Emma, while they hung sheets out back. Emma had been sent home from school a few times for losing her temper. She rarely did her homework. That girl needed to pull her socks up. The women had stopped working and were standing close to each other on either side of the low fence.

“I'm sorry to hear that's still going on,” Mrs. Robertson said, shaking her head. “It's been more than a year now hasn't it?”

His mother lowered her voice. “The doctor said to be patient with her. That it's not unusual considering she was the one to find her father.”

Daniel started. Emma had found their father! She'd bring him back. Then he remembered what his uncle had said – his father was with Shadow. Realizing what his

mother meant, he began to think about Emma's find. He had no details. He imagined his father lying there in the armchair with the newspaper hung over his nose, his mouth open, like he often did after lunch. Sometimes he snored lightly. Not this time. The sun coming in the window behind him lit his hair and fell over the paper onto the carpet. Dust floated in the air like a Sunday afternoon. Emma had tried to wake their father, to ask if they could have ice money. The newspaper fell when she shook his sleeve. And there he was. Gone. Stiff, with his eyes open like Shadow had been. Daniel imagined it all with horror and then with wonder. He began to study his sister's face, tried to build the scene in his mind - the moment the newspaper falls away to reveal their father - that moment – for Emma – and find in it the anger she'd brought away. It wasn't until Daniel was married with three sons of his own that Emma helped him do that.

He'd come back to the city to be at the hospital with his mother. His younger sisters stayed on shift by the bed and he and Emma went outside for some air. They walked down a side street of enormous manicured lawns, and houses built at a time when each had its own character. He commented on this. How easy it was to believe that the original families still lived there.

"The house is up for sale again," Emma answered. He looked for a sign on the lawns, then realized she was talking about their old house. They'd only had one home. With their father gone, they'd become a family of tenants.

"The property is worth a lot now I guess," he said warily. Whenever his sister talked about the house she put herself into a mood.

“Mother had to sell it for practically nothing.” Emma scowled. “It was the only way to sell quickly. Even people with money wouldn’t live there if they found out what happened.”

“A lot of people die at home, Emma. People still move in.”

She stopped walking and turned to look at him. “You don’t know,” she said, feeling out the fact more than stating it. “You don’t know!” This time incredulous.

Daniel still had his armchair story. He would always have that, but superimposed now was Emma’s. That afternoon she’d been at the river watching him jump off the shallow end of the dock. Stay away from the deep end, she’d instructed, then ran back to the house to see if the iceman had come. She’d ask for a chunk for them to suck on. At their mother’s suggestion, Emma had gone upstairs to look for change on the dresser by her parent’s bed. She found a quarter, then began to tidy her braids in the mirror over the dresser. She half saw the reflection of the closet open behind her, the clothes hanging inside. The mind forms patterns according to the information it already has. In the pattern of light and shadow inside the closet, Emma thought she saw her father’s face.

Shane was still now. He ran a sleeve across his wet face and turned from the river to look back to where the fire truck had stopped, then the ambulance. A neighbour had moved the flower planters from the sides of the steep steps. Others had come out of their homes and gathered along the street in small groups, nodding, looking up now and then toward the house. The front door was ajar. It had been a while since anyone had gone in or out.

They came finally, together, in a cluster. Two fire fighters, their arms crossed between them, hands clasping one another's. An elderly man sat on this makeshift chair, leaning sideways against one of the men. The ambulance attendants pressed up on either side, one holding an oxygen tank, the other holding the mask to the patient's mouth. Shane recognized the old man as someone he often saw walking along the river's edge. Just today he'd seen him sitting slouched on a bench near the river. When Shane smiled the man hadn't responded – seemed to look through him. He'd wondered at this. But had kept going.

The waist-high stretcher was waiting on its wheels at the bottom of the steps. The man was wrapped and tied onto it and lifted into the back of the ambulance. Both vehicles left quietly.

The sun had disappeared now, taking with it the definition of his surroundings. Across the river the lights of the hospital blinked through the sparse foliage, the building itself a dim form. A bend upriver prevented him from seeing the lights of the university but Shane knew it was there. He looked along the river's edge for the swans, but could make out only the shadows of willows.

Chocolate Cake

She thought at first that everyone who passed disapproved of her legs on the next chair, even though she'd taken off her shoes, was wearing clean socks, and had only her bare calves touching the seat. Or was it the fact that she was taking up space but no longer drinking coffee? She looked around the patio and saw others clad in summer attire, the men in bright short-sleeved shirts, some with tank tops that revealed profuse underarm beards, the women in jerseys or sleeveless blouses. Most of the coffee drinkers were reading newspapers or paperback novels. A woman had a laptop computer opened on the table and her bemused expression did not reveal whether she was catching up on work or sharing this coffee time with a chat partner on the other side of the world. One man had his sandaled foot resting on the seat of a plastic chair, and was picking his nose.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” her school friend would have admonished her, as she had numerous times, most recently when Ija had timidly asked a waiter to return with another glass of water. “But I don't like to make him take extra trips,” she'd answered in defense.

At the next table a woman and child were eating double-chocolate chocolate cake. It was the kind of food she'd absolutely need to have, then after two bites want no more. Her stomach growled rudely, and she looked about to see if it had been heard. This could not be hunger, because she'd just finished off a large plate of spaghetti and two pork chops before coming here to get out of her room. She liked to watch the people who came in pairs to gossip, or with their kids, who were happy to sit still with large sweet

drinks and pastries, and illustrated children's books, while their parents leafed through magazines they'd borrowed from the adjoining bookstore.

Leaning over to pull a granola bar from her packsack, Ija felt the waist of her jeans tighten to expose a fleshy roll of skin above the band. The metal button at the top of the fly bit into her. With the sack as cover, she made small movements to pull her tee shirt out, then snuck a hand under it to undo the attacking button.

She wasn't fat, really. True, she had to buy jeans a size bigger this year, but didn't know why. Was it puberty? Heredity? She'd never know the answer to that one, because Ija Dubois Macdonald Korchinski Alvarez, despite having four last names, had never had a mother or father in the true sense of the word. She had been raised by four sisters and a mother, and there had also been a father in her life, but he like the others had received his family title from the church. The four nuns, returning from a volunteer night at the bingo, had found Ija bundled in colourful swaddling cloth, on the front seat of their twenty-year old Toyota Corolla. It was like them not to have locked the car doors. Despite the outdoor temperature of minus twenty Fahrenheit, the blankets were not very cold to the touch, so the baby couldn't have been there long.

The sisters took the black child home to the convent, where they roused Mother Superior from the warmth of her bed. Before much could be said or decided, the baby awoke and began to cry. As they removed it from the brilliant, intricately patterned and apparently hand-woven blanket, they noticed two things: the small silver chain about her wrist, with a tiny nameplate on which was scratched, 'Ija', and a note tucked in the baby's undershirt. The large misshapen letters had been shakily drawn in ink. *They not me stay here. Please my child your country. My danger.*

The note was set aside while a hand towel was improvised to serve as a diaper. During this time the words were not discussed but the sisters kept an eye on the frustratingly inscrutable countenance of Mother Superior. When the child was calmed by Sister Korchinski's CD version of Elvis's "Love Me Tender," they sat at the table in the small kitchen, joined hands, and prayed for guidance. Sister Ramirez knew it was out of order to break the silence and speak ahead of Mother Superior, but she felt the presence of the Holy Spirit and was given courage.

"We cannot tell the police, Mother. The baby will also be sent back to – we do not know where – but it has to be the truth what this woman says about danger – for her to abandon her child."

Mother Superior raised her eyebrows, but did not chastise the young nun. For she read in the faces of the others the same concern. She knew that their work with refugees, and, perhaps, also the stories of their own grandparents had taught them empathy for hearts held hostage at places in-between.

"I will speak to Father Patterson in the morning," she said, then took charge of the situation. Sister Madeleine was to drive to the church and scrabble through the basement to find the cradle they used for Jesus in the crèche scene during Christmas services. Sister Helen was to help her load the cradle into the car, but first, Sisters Donna and Maria were to be dropped off at the all-night drugstore to buy bottles, formula, and disposable diapers. When this had all been accomplished, and the child had been hymned to sleep in the cradle and mother superior was back in her bed, the four sisters sat again at the table. They knew that Father Patterson was a man of his own mind, one to oppose

authority when he felt a situation called for creative measures. And they knew that when it came to children, old Pat was a soft touch.

They did not want to wait, and decided to give Ija her adopted name that very night. Of course it had to be the name of the one who found her, and since they had all found her, there was no fair way to do it, but to give her all four of their surnames, which they missed hearing since joining the Order.

When Ija began to go to school, the administrators abbreviated Dubois-Macdonald-Korchinski-Alvarez to Dumackorez, so it was easier to record on forms. By the time the child arrived in third grade, the name had been further shortened to Dumack - Ija Dumack.

“What kind of a name is that?” adults would ask, wondering at her black skin, and asking themselves if there was more to be learned about Scottish heritage than they knew.

Another stomach contraction, painful, jerked her from her reverie. Could this be food poisoning? Or was it the sight of the chocolate cake that set off the pangs, a biological reaction she had no control over, her eyes signaling her brain – food ahead – consume. Perhaps her body needed chocolate right this moment. What was it they said chocolate was good for?

She had got into the habit of skimming through the latest vitamin and health food books, pecking at bits of advice and information concerning food supplements, food and the mind, food and longevity, food and happiness. Recently she'd read that the benefits of Prozac could be had with potatoes. That seemed odd to her considering the history of

discontent in Ireland, but made sense when she thought of the generally sanguine Prince Edward Islanders.

As convinced as Ija was about what she read concerning nutrition, she rarely remembered exactly which supplements and foods were important for what, and so, to make up for anything missed, binged for two days, each week, on raw vegetables alone. Despite this, the pounds mounted and she experienced a strange sense of alienation from her outer shell, as if it were a long-time close friend who'd become distant and uncommunicative. As she thought of this now and had no potatoes on hand to ward off impending despair, she decided it would be appropriate to have a small piece of cake. Because, whatever else she'd read about chocolate, she knew it was the food of love.

"Excuse me, ma'am!" the waiter said after bumping her arm on the way past. "Sorry," Ija apologized immediately.

Without warning, the clatter crack chinkle of a breaking dish sat her upright. That familiar bittersweet taste of fear resembling the smell of sulfur lingered on the back of her tongue. Trying to pinpoint the danger, she realized that the small boy with the cake had knocked his dish off the table. He was looking down at the brown gooey conglomeration, clumped like something left by a passing dog. For a moment Ija feared the child would slide off the chair and push his small fingers into the mess. But, when that didn't happen, she was disappointed. She swiped at the string of saliva dribbling from her lower lip, and was unable to look away from the cake. Ants had already deployed and were running a smooth tactical operation to transport the food out of enemy territory, to somewhere past the patio stones, on the crew-cut lawn. Admiring the

precision and teamwork of their community, and, in a way she did not understand, comforted by it, Ija willed them to hurry.

It was then that the thumping pain introduced itself between her ribs. She struggled to rise from the chair, but vertigo sat her back abruptly. Disoriented, she watched as the waiter appeared, carrying a dustpan and brush. He approached the brown mess, then dropped to his knees and began to shove handfuls into his mouth. Looking around at others to confirm whether or not what she was witnessing was real, Ija saw that no one was paying attention. Another spasm punched her stomach and she cried out. With this humiliation still fresh, she was overcome with the intense desire to kneel on the floor beside the waiter.

Exactly how long it took Ija to make up her mind to go through with it, or why, she would never know, but found herself beside the boy's table, a pair of canvas sneakers, with Big Bird on the toes, dangling to the left of her head. She was about to scoop a chunk of the mess into her mouth when the waiter objected.

"Please Ma'am, you mustn't. I will look after it." He glanced about quickly, as if watching for the boss. Ija thought it strange that she hadn't seen the waiter get up off his knees and noticed that there was no cake and icing on his hands.

Inside the coffee shop washroom, she held her wrists under cold water and studied her countenance in the mirror. It was pale under the artificial light, the eyes sunk in sockets of purplish skin. The nose had taken on an aquiline quality that seemed too large to embellish that small head. The skin on either side of the nose seemed taut, emphasizing cheekbones, and narrowing the bottom portion of the face. She pulled a bra strap back onto her shoulder, tucking it beneath her blouse. As she did, she felt the

protrusion of her collarbone. What disturbed her more was the rounded projection of bone between, and a little below, her breasts – in the sternum area, according to her book, “Your Body, Your Friend.”

When she was a child Ija had gone through a period of obsession with that bone. She’d quickly dirtied the thin white blouses the sisters laid out for her each day, until, as she’d hoped, they gave up and let her wear the heavier flannel shirts that boys wore. She was sure that the white blouses revealed the protrusion. Eventually, she became afraid that her sternum bone would burst through the skin. Even during the hottest summer days, she wore sweaters, hoping the heavier material would hide the sharp angle, contain the aberration. It wasn’t long before she was habitually pushing against the bone with the heel of her hand, but this made the place tender and even more difficult to forget. While attacking the spot, she cleared her throat, as if the sound would cover the strange preoccupation of her hands. Unfortunately, this had the opposite affect of bringing attention to herself, sometimes anger, as people assumed that her ‘uh-hem’ was a sign of impatience.

Before Ija was old enough to start school, she watched a group of girls, on the other side of the fence, talking amiably, on their way to class. She noticed the new leather of their school bags. Shining shoulder straps framed the flat perfection of their chests beneath blouses – chests with no jutting bones. She realized then, for the first time, that this was why she was different. This was why the sisters and Mother wore long black robes, and Father also, who lived in the church, apart. They were disguising their deformities. And she too would grow this way, her skeleton distorted gradually, twisted bones and bumps here and there. She too would be required to hide her body the

way Sisters Madeleine, Helen, Donna, and Maria covered theirs. Surely, this was why she was not at school with the others. *And they will keep me here unless I grow fat to hide this bone. Or they will keep me till I die.* She began to panic and slammed her sternum with her fists. As the pain coursed through her small frame, she felt the evil growth being exorcised. Then the idea came to her that she might be pushing the bone out her back. She could not reach to feel her back and, finding this too much to bear, began to cry, pounding herself until she collapsed onto the grass beside the schoolyard. Children were looking her way, but no one came. And later, no one spoke of her strangeness. *They are sparing my feelings because they know I am stuck in this body. This body that destroys me.* And the idea of being past it all, the idea of an end, calmed her.

By the time Ija left the bathroom, the craving for food had intensified. She could barely contain herself while waiting in line to buy chocolate cake. When she arrived at the counter the portions of cake appeared smaller than she remembered, and so it was necessary to buy a whole cake. Breaking pieces from it, she began to eat while walking back to the patio. Half the cake was gone by the time she reached the table. She sat down and winced at the hardness of the plastic seat. The ribs of the chair dug into her back. She had not noticed this earlier.

The cake was gone and yet it was as if she hadn't eaten, as if the food had escaped somehow past her stomach, into a leg they used to tell her was hollow. She looked toward her feet and was startled to see the pant legs sagging about her calves, hanging loosely off the knobs of her knees. The dull ache between her ribs had lost its blunt edge and now with razor efficiency sliced her torso, front to back. Hunger lived beneath her rib cage and was eating her organs, working its way through her body like some crazed tapeworm

that couldn't wait for the next serving. *Twenty minutes is the time it takes the brain in your stomach to tell the brain in your head it is full. Everyone knows that, and I have eaten only five minutes ago.* But the lust of her appetite would not be sated. She knew she'd spent the money she'd brought, but checked her pockets again, and was startled to find she did not have to squeeze her hands into them, against her thighs. She saw then that even with the fly buttoned, her jeans were gaping loose at the waist.

Home was a short walk away, but it might as well have been in another country, for she felt overpowered, as if she were being consumed by her own voracious craving. To get to her apartment and the refrigerator, she must first walk by a stretch of restaurants with outdoor patios. As she passed them, the pungent odour of blood filled her nostrils. Just on the other side of the wooden railing, a waiter was serving two rare steaks still sizzling in their juices. Ija watched as he set the dish down before an elderly couple, and the man sliced into flesh. She squatted to tie her shoe next to their table, on the opposite side of the railing, and saw the cut fill with tiny succulent pink bubbles of blood and grease.

After it had happened she would not be able to recall even considering the idea, would swear the move was in no way premeditated. She rose and reaching through the railing scooped the hot meat off the gentleman's plate. Ignoring scorched fingers and a burnt tongue, she tore at the flesh, and discovered her jaw muscles lacked the strength to bite down. She could not chew without discomfort in her teeth and gums. She fished in her mouth to extract what she thought was bone in the meat, and came up with a tooth.

When the robbed diner overcame his shock and spoke, Ija looked back at him, fat dripping down her chin, her forearms, running off her elbows. She continued to gnaw, as

astonished as he, and yet, not ashamed. She met his eyes coolly and directed her stare also at the female companion, and the two became silent. Ija could see herself as if she were standing outside her body. She was startled by the incongruous dignity of her expression, and recalled the face of a friend's mother. The mother had come, that day so long ago, into their fourth-grade classroom, after all the children had left, but Ija, who was in detention for looking out the window. Sister Macdonald was talking to the woman about having to discipline her boy, who'd stolen a watch from Mr. Harris, the gym instructor. He'd been caught when trying to sell the timepiece to the janitor, who recognized it at once as being the watch of the gym instructor.

"He is a good boy," the mother said, looking directly into the eyes of Sister Macdonald. She spoke with slow deliberation, so that the last consonant of each word could be clearly heard, the way she'd been instructed to speak English. "I taught him not to steal from the poor."

But the memory went beyond that incident. Staring at the man whose meat she'd taken, Ija felt her spine stiffen, felt the hairs on her arms and legs stand on end, and knew this face-off had happened before, happened long ago, happened often, but when, where? Her body convulsed, and she screamed involuntarily. Something was growing inside, filling her arms and legs, squeezing her organs hard against her ribs, swelling and rising into her throat and she gagged. Her body fought itself, the skin tightening around the torso, squeezing the chest like an undersized wetsuit, as if to contain her. She struggled to breathe and could see her ribs heave, ribs like leftovers, perfectly outlined beneath her sweat-soaked blouse.

Her scalp hurt and she felt the weight of her hair pulling her head back, bending her toward the ground like a branch in an ice storm and she was cold, a deep cold the sun could not reach. Her hair began to drop in clumps. Fingernails, now brittle, were cracking like blue robin's eggs, as if her torn insides sought a way out. As she felt blood course through her arteries, she understood clearly that she had never been just one, had always been many, from long times before.

The crushing heaviness of her body subsided, and she experienced a sense of drifting. All physical sensation began to diminish to be replaced by a longing beyond hunger. Exhausted, she gave over to it. People had gathered. Some only watched and some stepped forward to do what they could for the skeletal girl who lay curled in fetal position upon the hot asphalt. At that same moment, in a place far from there, an emaciated woman lay calmly on the floor of a tin shack held together by the weight of old rubber tires and stones. She had tied her hair neatly to keep it off her face. She had cleaned her body with water collected in a bowl the last time it rained. Against her chest, preserved from the damp and rats, she held her most valuable possession. The photograph brought a morsel of colour to the shelter – a younger woman, a smiling woman, who held in her arms a bundle, something precious, wrapped in the brilliant and intricately patterned blanket she had woven by hand.

Voices

The dwelling was little more than a hole cleared amidst the rubble. One side of the building remained standing, the stone fireplace its supporting pillar. A painting of his grandfather hung on the wall, absurdly intact. Exposed this way the rooms reminded him of a dollhouse his sister had played with, a gift that had come on a jet plane, from America. A gift from grandfather. Now a different kind of gift had come by jet plane, a package that had fallen through the air.

It was only because there were no other leads that Monnez had come back here to look for his sister. He had little hope that Anwah had managed to escape capture. She would have come out of hiding to look for food, warmth. They'd probably grabbed her the first day. An adult had little chance against these butchers; what chance did Anwah have, alone. But then, others, those nearer the point of impact, had lost more of themselves than their families.

Monnez jumped when an adolescent in a torn army coat and jeans scabbled across the debris. Slipping in the mud, head bent, he disappeared into the ruins of the village. Now, a small child scurried from behind a pile of bricks and rushed headlong into Monnez, clinging to his jacket. He examined the girl quickly for injuries and, hushing her, pulled from his pocket a heel of bread that he'd saved for his meal. She is like Anwah, he thought, only younger. And he wished his sister was the age of this girl, because, despite Anwah's childlike appeal, she was, at twelve, clearly on the doorsill of womanhood. A fact he knew his enemies would not miss.

As Monnez listened, he became aware of a form in the shadows, slumped across a pile of bricks, unmoving. It could be someone asleep, he told himself. Then he recognized the red and blue scarf gripped in a motionless hand. “Anwah!”

She heard his voice and looked up.

He remembers his mother handing him up a kind of doorstep into the arms of his uncle. He remembers the noise of engines and his mother’s mouth moving soundlessly. His mother – the coolness of her cotton dress with its familiar scent of cook smoke, spices and oil, and something else that she soothed on her hands after washing clothes. He liked to bury his face in the silkiness of her coat when she’d returned from the market, put his hands into the deep pockets looking to see what she’d brought him. His mother – her lips on his skin, the shape of her neck, the firm smooth curve of her cheek when he touched her face for attention and, looking into her laughing eyes, demanded “What did you bring me?”

“Myself!” she’d answer.

But that was all and not enough. Why couldn’t he remember the colour of her eyes, the colour of her hair? Was she a small woman? Fat?

The chime on the door jangled as he entered the café. He walked slowly to the back of shop, past tables where people read newspapers or talked. And, at one table, a woman sat alone, head bent. Dark hair fell onto her shoulders.

Excuse me, he said.

She heard his voice and looked up. They stared as cats who come face to face at a new corner. What had he hoped? Instant recognition? An embracing reunion? He had

expected tension but not this. In the woman's face he saw his own panic - the terror of looking for self in the eyes of a stranger.

As she began to speak a roar filled the room and he jumped, then blushed, realizing it was the shop's automatic coffee grinder. Exposed, needing to compress himself, he sat down, hunched on the edge of a straight-backed chair. The woman was watching the clerk intently, as if willing the grinder to stop. He saw her then – the shape of her neck when slightly turned, the smooth outline of her collarbone. And there seemed to be that faint familiar scent. Then she looked back at him and he knew he was mistaken. There was no smile hidden in these beaten eyes, nor could there have been. But, he needed to prolong the state of possibility, to stall defeat. For a moment he thought fantastically of going along with whatever this woman presented as evidence. He would affirm all her questions about him, play along, lie, and she would accept him as her son. The absurdity of this frightened him. Instead, he would say nothing, let her speak first, and play out the scene, however it was. The coffee grinder stopped abruptly and in the deafening silence he heard his own voice.

"What did you bring me?" he asked, then saw the guarded face of the stranger transform.

"Myself!" she answered with laughing eyes, and leaned forward to kiss his forehead.

Well, it should have happened that way. But, the woman reading looked too young. His mother would not have been the kind of girl who had men. Yet, he had played the script out in his head, as he had at other times with other women he did not speak to. As he had

since he was a child. Of course the details had changed as he'd grown. Once a school acquaintance with many look-alike brothers had asked him why he did not look like anyone in his family.

"It is my uncle I live with," he had explained. "I have his name. My father and mother found it necessary to stay back in our country."

"What do you mean 'our country'?" his friend challenged. This confused Monnez. At six, he was only beginning to understand that "our country" was not a place name, like Maple Creek or River Heights. He did not know how to answer. "I am named after Uncle and I do look like him – a little – don't you think?" he responded.

The other boy disagreed -- said that he'd never heard of a mother who gave children away. *She must have sold you*, he taunted, and earned a punch in the stomach.

After that, as the *sold* child, Monnez had created an extra version of the script. This time, when the grinder stopped, the woman at the table would be told she'd come too late. Now that she wanted him, he did not want her. She would beg forgiveness. And when he thought about this, usually at night sitting in his bed, he rocked his body back and forth against the headboard. Silly boy.

When Monnez asked his uncle why his aunt did not live with them, he was told that she had been hurt during the evacuation and did not recover.

"And my mother?" he asked.

"Your mother." His uncle never said *my sister*. "Your mother wanted you safe."

"Why did she not come too?"

Each time he asked this, his uncle would answer, "She loved you. It is enough to know."

According to his uncle, Monnez's parents had been separated before he was born. They had lost each other, in the old country, during the confusion of the evacuation. He found this hard to believe. *Evacuate the building immediately!* the principle of his school announced over the loud speaker whenever there was a fire drill. They had practiced many times. Each student held hands with a partner. They had never lost each other, despite the alarms and confusion. And they were only children. You couldn't lose someone unless you wanted to.

Whenever he began to imagine answers of his own to his questions, there would be a major change of scenario. He would wish his mother dead, then try to unwish it. And then couldn't stop thinking - what if? What if he'd made it happen? As he grew up, there were more revisions to the script, until he had four versions: the original - she hugs him tightly for a long time and then takes him home and introduces him to ten brothers and sisters who all look like him; the second, where he rejects her and leaves her there, begging him to stay; the third, where he finds her address only to learn from the maid at the door that his mother has just passed away, but she has left him a long letter and, finally, there was the new, less comfortable scenario in which she lives, but rather than asking for forgiveness, refuses all her child's attempts to communicate, even his letters.

He'd got this latter version from the one and only seekers meeting he'd attended, the meeting of the dispossessed, he'd called it. He'd gone to the meetings to learn the procedure of a search and to hear the stories of success. Instead, there was talk of rights to information, rights the searchers didn't have. There were no happy stories that day, only soap opera tales of disaster. The mother who'd died in the hospital, a week before her daughter found her – a week that the teenager had spent closing in on the trail,

working with the scant “non-identifying” and often incorrect information the government released, trying to trace a stranger through birth dates and old addresses. It was the no-name game, their own names, locked in gray filing cabinets. He’d walked out of the meeting, angry. He’d wanted answers, but not these answers.

Monnez held to his childhood perception of his mother, and his uncle did not speak of her. Of his father he had no image at all, and wondered at this. He wondered, too, why he did not have his father’s last name?

“You ask too many questions, little one,” his uncle answered, always.

When he was seventeen, Monnez moved resolutely from the custody of his guardian’s trust. Home alone, one day, he learned that his uncle, who seemed to want to ignore the past, kept its keepsakes in a desk. Buried beneath the bills and receipts was a worn leather booklet and on the cover in heavy black print was the name of the country of his ancestors. On the yellow pages inside were details about his uncle, his place of birth, countries he had passed through, and his entry visa to Canada. A much younger uncle than now looked wryly into the camera. From inside the booklet fell another black and white photograph, creased and with a corner missing. His uncle stands next to a girl. She wears a scarf and holds a child in her arms. Behind them, in a field, is a small plane with cargo doors open. He leafed back to his uncle’s entry visa. It had been stamped three years, almost to the day, of his own birth.

During the next year, Monnez studied, attended class, and worked serving fast food, for what seemed to him an eternity. Soon after his graduation, he had earned enough to pay

for plane fare to the country where his mother had chosen to stay – or been left behind – he couldn't know. The passport in his uncle's drawer had revealed the name of a village. He sometimes played with the idea of finding both his parents alive and together, but knew it was not reasonable to include his father in the discovery. If he did find his mother, it would be because she lived by the only last name with which he had to search – the last name of Uncle Monnez, her brother – the name that, strangely, had also become his own.

In the few free hours he had, Monnez read about the land he would return to, its history and politics. As he read, he was not unaware that the newer books did not choose a side, that the more he learned the more complex the issues became. When it seemed that the scales were tipped in favour of one people, he would discover an event deeper in the past and his justification was again imbalanced.

Monnez found in his uncle no guide for his thoughts, for the man who'd raised him rarely expressed his opinions of world events or even of his neighbours. Still, he was a charitable man and responded generously with his time or money when the community united to help someone cope. Monnez had acquired his uncle's compassion, yet with it came a restlessness, the need to act upon a cause. He did not find that challenge here; his life was not complicated or threatened in any way that mattered. A loyalty shaped itself into this void, and he began to form an alliance with his mother's people. It was the same appetite for cause that revealed itself, one day, when his uncle was in the room. They had been clearing away the supper dishes and listening to the television when news of an earthquake was reported. Both stopped what they were doing when the reporter named the region next to his mother's village. Monnez knew that the majority of people now

living in that region were the others. He glanced at the television to see a line of cloth-covered bodies laid out among the ruins.

“Good!” he said. “That’s good.” He spoke loudly enough for his uncle to hear – feeling it would please him to know of his nephew’s new political conscience. The man put down a cup he was drying and turned off the television. Monnez lifted his head to find his uncle staring at him, startled, then the look changed to one of perplexity. This too passed from his eyes to be replaced with an expression Monnez could not decipher.

“Is it good?”

“What do you mean?” Monnez responded carefully, unsure if his uncle was angry.

“The question is what do *you* mean?” His uncle spoke so quietly that Monnez leaned forward to hear his next words.

“Do you know these people who are lying under the buildings at this moment?”

“No, but – ”

“No, you do not – and if you did – what then?”

Monnez began to resent this impromptu interrogation. His uncle knew the answers – he had no right. “It is good they suffer – for what they did to you – to your wife – to our people.”

“Were you there?” His uncle matched his tone of impatience.

“No, but...”

“Did you find a book that tells you it works?”

“What works?”

“The killing. The killing that you keep alive with your mouth.”

“Killing is the only voice sometimes. And sometimes we win.”

“Do we?” His uncle spoke more gently now. “It is over then?”

He closes his book and looks about the café. His eyes are tired from studying in the dim light and he knows his vision has worsened since he first came here, armed with a traveler’s phrase book and his greatest survival aid – hope. Later, he had begun to bring with him a book of stories in his mother’s tongue and a bilingual dictionary. During the years of his coming the cafe owner and other regulars have encouraged him to use their language by engaging in easy small talk. But they do not ask why he is here. Each time he has entered the place, he has imagined all the scenarios, the best and the worst, or so he’d thought. But, the most recent scenario, the one to which he now considers abdication, is drafted by reality. And he fears there can be no further revision.

Years ago, as he’d saved patiently for the airline ticket to come here, Monnez had imagined himself knocking on her wooden door, the door like those of the old stone dwellings he’d seen in books. When, finally, he was able to follow a torn road to his mother’s village, he found no wooden doors to be knocked upon. Instead, abandoned ruins. In a nearby field was a cluster of stone markers. There were names, scratched on or sketched in black paint, but no dates. Some stones were almost invisible, worn down and covered with weeds and grass, the names faded. In one area, he found many markers of the same shape and size of stone, all of them weathered to a similar degree. A large group of villagers had died at the same time, he guessed. These markers seemed to be tended, the weeds removed and the grass shorter. He found his own last name on several stones and then the first name, as well, of his grandfather and nearby the names of aunts

he'd never met. He did not find his mother's name among the stones and was glad for that.

Back in the city, he studied the phone directory. Many people did not have phones, yet he found a few listings with his last name. The three people who answered told Monnez that they were sure he was no relation. Although it had been a small village, strangely, they could tell him nothing about his family.

At the city library, with the help of a clerk, he searched the microfiche copies of newspaper obituaries. He could scan only for names, and the words passing before his eyes nauseated him. Finally he spotted the obituary of his grandfather. It was little more than a list of family members, cousins, aunts and uncles he had never met. He read slowly to extend the moment and trembled, knowing the youngest, his mother, would be mentioned last, with even, perhaps, a married name he did not know – the name of his father. But it seemed that the editor of the column had made a mistake. At the end of the list, was his mother's first name, only. There was no explanation of her relationship to the family. No last name of any kind. What baffled him more was the absence of his own name among those of the grandchildren. He would have been two the year his grandfather died.

The night after he'd discovered the obituary, Monnez dreamt he was flying above the sea with his mother, flying as one flies in dreams, effortlessly, arms relaxed at his side, moving with the air currents, more like a fish than a bird. His mother's shining coat flapped in the wind noisily, and the noise grew until it hurt his ears and became the sound of an engine. Then, his uncle was beside him and he looked back to see his mother dropping behind. As he tried to follow her, a blast of air tossed him back, and he began to

plummet. He woke sitting up. When finally dream and reality sorted themselves out, he began to recall new details of his plane trip as a child. He remembered his uncle sitting next to him and buckling him into a seat. He remembered hearing his mother's voice small and distant but calling his name, anxiously. But the straps held and he could not stand to look out the window.

Unable to sleep more the night of his dream, Monnez had dressed and left his room. He found himself outside the city limits, and by the time the eastern sky defined the rocks and bushes along the broken road, the village ruins were before him. She was not here, he knew. But this was as close as he was able to come to his past, and hers, their common history. In the shadows amid the debris of a collapsed building, he thought he saw something move. Then, a man stepped through the shattered doorsill.

"Why are you here?" The stranger demanded.

Such rudeness should have been ignored. But there was something in the man's tone that made him want to co-operate. Monnez offered his name. As the man stared, saying nothing, Monnez wondered where he'd seen this face. In the city? Had he been followed here? His undersized nineteen-year old frame was no match against the older man's bulk. Stomach tensing, he prepared to run.

The stranger spoke again. "I live here." He pointed toward one of the ruins and Monnez saw that, unlike the others, it had a door. Candlelight moved on the wall inside.

"I care for them," the stranger gestured at the markers. "You came here before."

Monnez was surprised to hear English from a man who would live among ruins.

"Why do you not speak the language of this land to me?" he asked.

The man looked at Monnez. "Your face is of this land. But if you did live here you would not come to this village. Only a foreigner would. Only an American."

"I am not an American," Monnez said quickly, but realized the man would know little of the difference. "These are my people," he pointed in the direction of his grandfather's marker. "That is why I have their face."

"You are right." The man stepped back and laughed, but he was not smiling. "And you are wrong. These are your people, but yours is the face of the others."

It was the next day that Monnez had first come to this café. He came at the instructions of the grave-keeper, who had not given a time or even a day, but said only that they would meet there. He had left Monnez with reason to hope.

"She came here – to stand where you stand – sometimes she would speak to them," the old man had said gesturing toward the stones. And twice he had seen her at the market in the city, but only twice. Still, he would ask around.

Monnez could think of no reason why the grave-keeper would want to help him. He argued with himself about the validity of the old man's words. Until they talked again, he would not allow himself to consider anything he said as true. And, as much as he tried to forget, more than once he had the inconceivable thought that it might be best if the man did not appear at all.

After he waits hours for the man to come, Monnez tears a sheet from his study pad. He begins to write a letter to his mother. At first he feels shy, his writing is awkward. Then, he writes more quickly. He is not impeded by teenage reservations of confiding in a parent. Like a child he does not consider her a person unto herself, but as

an extension of him. He tells her all that he knows, all that matters in his life. He describes the events she had missed, his struggles, his accomplishments, his aspirations. She is the only one he can tell everything, without fear. As he writes, he begins to believe that he is capable of great things.

Three days pass. The afternoon sun has crossed the street and wandered behind an apartment complex, leaving the cafe gloomy. He has been there each day, since the doors opened, and failed to prevent himself from dozing at the table. Twice his head began to slide off his hand and he woke, panicked, and felt for the letter in his pocket.

Night has come. In half-sleep, he recognizes the chime of the cafe door. Someone pulls at the sleeve of his coat. Hearing a voice he opens his eyes and looks up at the man. He does not seem so threatening here, appears smaller, older, than Monnez remembers.

The man sits and refuses the offer of tea. "I have spoken to people who know your mother. They have told her you are here."

Monnez can feel his heart pump. He wants to laugh, to shout. The grave-keeper puts a hand firmly on his arm. "She is afraid, your mother."

"Not of me. She is not afraid of me!"

"Not of you," the man answers. "It is *for* you she is afraid. That is why she has made a promise not to know you."

"This promise again! Who to? Why?"

"To you." He will say no more. And will not reveal the name of his contacts. He stands to leave. Monnez, realizing that his protests will only hurry the man's departure, forces himself to be calm. He pushes the letter into his hands, begging him to

be sure she reads it. Inside is written his own promise – to his mother. He will be in that cafe, every day, until she comes.

At first it is intriguing keeping this covenant. Even after the initial disappointment of the first week when she does not come, he maintains a sense of expectation. She could still be considering what to do, he tells himself. Maybe she became ill. It would seem to her as if he'd returned from the dead. He must be patient. After a lifetime of waiting, this waiting is the least painful. He is determined that his story will not have an ending like any of those at the meeting. It will not, because he has written the letter, and in this sense, at least, his mother knows him.

As the days pass, he begins to ignore the sound of the chime on the door. Still, he continues to come to the cafe, directly from his night shift at the factory, and spends his days there. At the end of each day, at sunset, he leaves. In his room he eats little and falls into a restless sleep. A month is spent and then another, and he struggles not to think of reasons for her absence, but the ideas grow, feeding upon themselves with each hour that she does not come. Can his mother, having read the letter, not want to meet him? What did she think of the enclosed photograph he'd torn from his passport? Does he look like his father? He goes into the washroom and studies the face in the mirror. At first his reflection tells him nothing. He does not see the features of his mother, who he believes is the woman who holds the boy in his uncle's picture. In his mind he imposes over his face an older version of it. He studies the stubble he is nurturing on his chin and wonders if his father has a full beard. "The face of the others," the grave-keeper had told him. Thinking of the old man's words, he recalls again the television images of earthquake

victims, and his own words to his uncle that day. Now, inexplicably, the memory of this harsh rejection of his father's people stirs in him an empathy and with it – loyalty – as easily born as was his allegiance to his mother's people.

In the glass, he begins to see a weak man, a sneak, one who has made nothing of his life, and probably never will. He finds traces of cruelty in the lines about the eyes. She must have seen all this when he was yet a small child. Back at the table he waits, still. It is all he can do.

Monnez has not been able to find the old man at the graves. One evening, when he stays at the café longer than usual, until he knows he will sleep, he recalls vividly another late stay – the night the grave-keeper met him here. The old man was rising to go when Monnez pushed the letter into his hands. He had looked at the name on the envelope and back at Monnez. Then, saying nothing, left. He did not agree to deliver it. Monnez has thought of that night many times, but it is only now that he understands. He sees, also, that he has had this answer, has held it as if clenched in his fist, all these years.

He looks around the cafe, recognizing other regular customers, an elderly woman, an old couple, two younger men playing chess, and the younger woman who has left and returned to bury her head again in a book, heavy black hair obscuring her face. Monnez is not surprised that others spend so much time here. It is not unusual in this part of the city where, for many, the price of coffee is a small trade for warmth and a good reading light, luxuries their homes do not provide. As he watches the woman read, he imagines the feel of her skin, what it would be like to touch her cheek. His companions, at the factory, have tried to introduce him to their sisters or woman friends, and he has always

made the excuse that he had another appointment. The reader curls a finger behind her ear and sweeps her hair back from her face. Monnez is startled by a keen remorse. He wants to be next to a woman, to hold her, to laugh.

He realizes then that he will not come again to wait in this café. And, knowing this, he cannot stem a sense of deliverance. It is already past the hour to which he has promised to wait each day. But, today, he will stay until the café closes. He checks his watch. It is damp from the rain and the time has stopped.

She heard his voice and looked up.

“Excuse me, is it eight o’clock,” the man asked. He sat down heavily in the chair opposite her table.

A street person she thought instantly, then wondered why. His clothes were not caked with grime. There was no smell of alcohol. He was not clean-shaven but that was indicative of nothing these days. Still...

“Seven-thirty,” she answered quickly, in a voice that said *that’s all your getting from me.*

The man looked at her saying nothing. Here it comes -- how much will he ask for? she thought. It was the way his clothes hung on his body. The unfocused look. Body of a man, eyes of a child. She looked down at her book. A person should be able to have a cup of coffee. She’d buy him a coffee if that’s all it was. He’d probably say he wanted coffee then buy booze with the money. Well, better booze than drugs. But she was watching her pennies these days, had restricted herself to one cup a day so she could come here with her books, get away from the four walls of the tiny room.

She looked up again, annoyed, knowing he was still there. He stood up quickly then and reached for the door. As he was leaving, the phone at the back of the shop rang.

“Excuse me,” called the waiter. “Is there an Anwah here?”

The woman got up to answer the call. She hesitated, looking back at her coat and books. Only when she saw the stranger had left did she move toward the phone. The chime of the heavy door jangled briefly, as Monnez stepped out, onto the street.

Au Temps Perdu

Now her life, her ways were a lost language, too late to grasp.

“On cafay and lass frits sill vew plats.” J.P. mumbled up at the waiter, seeing the words in his head. He glanced at the other customers. But no one had heard him and if they had didn’t care. The waiter asked something about the order – the question mark being the only part of the question J.P. understood. “We,” he nodded, willing to eat anything at this point.

Would *she* have come here to this outdoor patio – would she have come alone? He didn’t think so. The breeze changed direction and smoke from the next table drifted over him. The middle-aged man was there with his audience, gesturing vehemently with his right arm, the left propped on the table, cigarette burning down to his thick yellow fingers. A prof? If so, the others, and certainly the younger man who held a cup below the inch of ash just as it fell, would be students of his. The university was nearby.

J.P. caught a word now and then that he knew – say bee-en...mowvey...kesk-ka say – sa?... Canada. The prof used that last one often. Probably one of those radical intellectuals who didn’t like the name of his country. He was almost glad not to understand the words – tired of it all – yet wondering if there was something being said right at that moment that would have carried the ideas past his brain, down into his guts, and he would know. And by knowing, might also know something of her.

One of the women at the table poured beer into the prof’s glass. The others watched him closely, concentration on their faces, an occasional nod, but silent, as if still in the auditorium. As if they did not want to clutter his ideas with their questions.

On the other side of the narrow street, a man walked his dog. But for his lack of height it could have been a friend that J.P. hadn't seen since leaving Calgary to search.

Eel ya on ann. There is one year. And he is no closer.

What he doesn't know is that he would stay on here awhile. He would fall asleep at night listening to structures objective and interrogative, articles definite and indefinite, nouns adjectives feminine and masculine, adjectives comparative and superlative, and pronouns reflexive, personal and possessive. Liaisons elude him. Until, at the table of le professeur, catching ten out of one hundred utterances, he would, himself, articulate, using both arms and some of his body. No longer locked into an easy silence, he would cling clumsily to a point, and more than once the unintended explosion of a water glass on patio stone would punctuate his words. After time he would become conscious of an impediment lifted. He would move imperfectly, still, but each day with less constraint, as if shedding a skin too tightly fit. And later, much later, he would seek a way out, aware of it only when the letter comes from home.

...and we understand son, have been trying to help, but there are no further records of her. Perhaps she has married.

He would read the first sentence again – words that he had imagined as a worst-case scenario. He would read them again, aware that a shift has occurred. And he would read them once more, shocked with the knowledge that somehow they have come to matter less. But now, the man with the dog has moved farther down the street and J.P. follows with his eyes, stretching out the sense of friend. Yesterday, as he'd unlocked his bicycle to leave the café, an old man stopped to admire it, nodding approval.

"Canadian Tire special – es- special!" J.P. offered.

The man pointed to his own 12-speed, propped against a post. The seat had one of those new gel-pads. He slapped the hard plastic seat of J.P.'s bicycle, rubbed his hip and grimaced. J.P. understood.

"We we! Jay beswin aussi," he nodded. *I need. Eel ya – there is. And so – eel ya? Is there?* He knows well these particular words. They get him by.

"Ah oui!" the stranger responded, smiling. JP relaxed. He'd stayed two days in Montreal and his poor French had not been taken lightly by some. This is his first attempt at conversation since arriving in Quebec City a week ago.

"Ou?" He'd asked, pointing to the man's bike seat.

"Canadian Tire," the old man laughed, pleased at their shared language.

On the street beyond the railing of the café a neatly dressed youth starts his motorcycle, then cuts the engine as a girl approaches. She could be the same age. The two speak and J.P. watches. Her expression is neither assuming nor deferential. Thick hair hangs easily down her back and over one shoulder. He's been noticing lately how the body settles so easily upon youth. A wholeness he feels was never his.

The sun hangs between the trees and an evening breeze lifts the edges of the awning and carries the professor's voice and the sounds of the kitchen to him. Traffic picks up and tires squeal round the corner of the narrow street. J.P. is upwind and not able to hear the two, cannot catch even the tone of voice. A silent movie. But this seems appropriate. He has learned to be present, yet not. Safe in his role of observer. Language has granted him an unexpected immunity.

The two are speaking in neat turns, as if from a script. He can tell they speak carefully. He thinks of oral exams where one out of place syllable or word at that particular moment will mark one indelibly. The face of the motorcyclist is not visible and J.P. depends on the girl's eyes to know both parts. Behind the candor he sees terror, or imagines it. Now the boy is refusing something – what? A change – to be reasonable – to compromise – to become accessible? She wants to protest, to raise her voice, to plead with him to see the unfairness of it all, but won't. J.P. holds her in his sight, willing it – that she keep her stance. She is not gaining ground. She would want to cry, he thinks.

The motorcyclist shakes his head slightly, looks down at the sleek red tank of his Yamaha, where he sees himself. In his hands he holds the helmet with the shield. When she speaks again he does not meet her eyes but hangs the helmet on the mirror, leans backward and prods a pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

Were they here all the time having coffee? Was this an extension of a planned meeting, an attempt at reconciliation, or had she run innocently into his words – words both unexpected and dreaded. She folds her arms and pushes her hair behind her ears, as if struggling to disguise their impact with small sane movements of her body.

Directing his attention to the spot, encompassing the two in his will, J.P. tries to slow the moments, stop the frame. Rewind. But, the momentum of the boy's reassurance moves them ahead. He has to work on the carburetor, he says to her. Maybe replace a gasket, and look at the presentation for the software package he is introducing to one of the clients tomorrow. It's a co-op job, but gives him a foot in the door. He tries hard to bury the consequence of what is not said, beneath carefully nurtured practicality.

The girl bends to scratch her ankle, the surprise of the mosquito her only expression, so for a moment J.P. believes everything is all right – he’s misread the scene. Then she rises and he sees the fear settle there again, in the space between the couple. He is aware that his stare is not touching her – has not initiated the usual reflex of looking back, as if not only space but a dimension of time lay between the café where he sits and the road where the couple meet. And the two are changed. A subtle event like the soft sudden and precise collapse of settled snow. The altered landscape noticed only by those trained to recognize disaster.

J.P. looks away. In a park near the café, a woman lifts a child from the wading pool. She wraps a towel around his shining body. Cool now in the late day breeze, J.P.’s own skin feels the warmth of the towel, the support of the woman’s arms. “Tu est froid mon petit,” she is saying. Then for the first time, in his mind’s eye, Jean Paul sees the face of a woman who has held him this way, spoken these sounds.

Free Bird With Purchase

Ray first saw the tangle of twisted limbs near the junction of highway eight and the old county road. He pulled onto the gravel shoulder immediately, but stopped the truck well ahead of the body. Getting out he shielded his eyes to look back, then leaned against the truck door and rolled a cigarette. Dust hung in the air from the unsettled dirt and stone. He looked back again at the spot he'd passed. No amount of hope was going to make what was lying there anything other than what it was. A fair-sized raven was sitting on the pile, pulling at something long and dark near the head. Ray picked up a rock and heaved it. The bird flapped up and out of the way, then settled back, ignoring its attacker.

Because there wasn't a breath of air stirring on that July day, the smell didn't start off slow and work its way up as he approached. It got him all at once at ten feet. Heat shimmering above the asphalt played tricks with his eyes, making the thing too big to be her, then too small to be her, making it lose shape so the limbs melded with the body, and he hoped wildly for a split second that it was a broken-up bag full of old clothes and scraps, something off the back of a garbage truck. Or it could be something heaved out the window by one of the out-of-towners, on their way home from camping by the lake.

Ray knew people from the city threw perfectly good things out. The last time he'd been down to the lake there was a silver Airstream filling up one of the camp clearings, must have been bigger than a bus. Bicycles were tied onto the back and there was an American flag hung off the roof. A couple of kids were batting a birdie back and forth over the picnic table. On the steps into the trailer sat a large-sized open bag of potato chips and a couple of bottles of Coca-Cola, luxuries his own family reserved for

company. Returning from his swim, Ray found the trailer gone, but left behind was a ripped bag of table scraps, including some T-bones, a New York Yankees baseball cap that looked like it had been in the lake, a baby doll with the arms torn off and an empty Michelob beer bottle. Ray kept the bottle and the cap, the same cap he's wearing now.

Taking a final drag he throws the stub onto the gravel, spits a piece of tobacco off his tongue and walks over to the body. Maggots are already on the job, so she must have been there awhile. But you could never tell, what with the heat night and day, humidity making it feel like forty even if you were used to it. He remembers reading a detective paperback where the cop learns about the circumstances of the death by studying insect tracks in the dirt around the victim. Maggots leave a trail when they've had enough and give up the body. There's more to it than this, but Ray can't remember, doesn't want to remember right now.

He walks back to the truck. A lot of ideas are piling themselves on top of each other. Ray thinks he'll just get in and drive off, let someone else discover this, but he doesn't go. He backs up and pulls out the shovel and a canvas bag. It's his day off, but he hasn't bothered to take the bags out of the truck. It's the second vehicle in the family and his for as long as he has the summer job. Weekends he's usually off, as it's no use picking up dead animals. There would be tons more of the creatures mowed down by folks going home Sunday night from camping or the beach. Evenings, the animals come out of the woods onto the warm road, mistaking the impending darkness for a promise of safety.

Heat rises from the asphalt, wraps about his legs. Sun is burning right through his shirt. The field itself is subdued by the onslaught. Only the odd bleep and chirrup is heard

from the ditch. Ray uses a shovel to shift the body onto the plastic. It takes two bags. One he pulls down from the head, the other over the legs. He is lifting the load onto the truck bed when he decides he will bury the mutt himself— right here. She isn't like the others. Gypsy knew him almost as well as he knew Caroline. Ray himself had helped pick the puppy out of the litter the year before last. And they'd made a good choice. A cross between Collie and Shepherd, not a wimpy dog, Gypsy. Never whining or snarling or making noise when there was no call for it. Not sniffing up to every stranger, but not mean either, and she never left Caroline's side. That's what made this so strange. Gypsy never left the farm without the girl. They walked to town sometimes along this road, the girl picking up bottles on the way, for extra cash. That was likely why the dog was on the road. But, Caroline would never have left her here, even dead.

Ray finishes the job, throws the shovel in the back and takes off his shirt. He sits on the running board looking out at the field and wonders how he's going to tell Caroline. And when. He has this information that she doesn't have, but needs. Somehow, this makes him feel better about their breaking up. It isn't a revenge thing. It's just that now he has something of her again. And it will connect them until he wants to let go his end. Without really deciding what to do, he drives into town. He will keep this thing for a while. He'll keep it that night at least, while he's at the movie alone and missing her, hold that power and choose to use it gently. When he decides to tell her about Gypsy, he'll tell her the dog died instantly, leave out the part about the hind end being twisted and mutilated, about the intestines hanging out, about how long it probably took the dog to die. Won't tell her he'd never seen a road kill this bad, that Gypsy must have been dragged a piece. Or worse. He'll hold her, tell her how he gave the animal a decent

burial, and take her there to the small mound where he's left a branch poking up to mark it. Stand with her as she says goodbye. Goodbye to the dog this time, not to him.

Ray doesn't get the chance to take the news to Caroline. It isn't until after hearing she missed school Friday - isn't until Randy, her little brother, tells him Caroline was last home Friday morning, that Ray tells his younger sister about the dog. He needs to tell someone, but wants still to be the one to tell Caroline. The next evening the police are at the door, and Ray has to go into the station. For a "talk," they say.

My parents weren't home when the police came for my brother. I was at school rehearsing for the grade six part in the year-end presentations. Ray's high school class had already been released for the summer. My parents were doing inventory that night and didn't lock up the furniture store until eight. When Ray didn't come home by midnight, they figured he'd stayed in town at a friend's and had forgotten to call. My mother didn't like him hanging around town, but he hadn't done anything really stupid for a while and with having a full-time summer job now, should be trusted, she figured.

Next day, there was still no sign of Ray. That's when life started changing for us. After phoning public works, where, as suspected, Ray hadn't shown up for work, my mother called his friends' homes. Dad drove around the countryside and checked out places Ray liked to hang out in town, like the pool hall, and the river behind the courthouse. It was there that he spotted Ray's truck, parked outside the county jail.

Ray wasn't the only friend Caroline had. I met her first. I was in grade five then and so was she, for the third time. She missed a lot of school. She was skinny and never

got tanned. There were these one-piece cotton dresses, she wore, with no sleeves. Called them shifts. Even in winter, she wore the same dresses, but with a sweater underneath. Her straw hair was always straying from the piece of wool she used to tie it back. I'd first discovered Caroline a couple of weeks into that school year. It was during recess and I was losing at allies. Boys had ways of cheating, then telling you that girls didn't know the rules. I pocketed the few I had left and climbed half way up to my watching spot in the Cherry tree, before I saw Carol already on my branch. She seemed to know that she was the one out of place, and moved to another fork after a shy hello. We met there a lot after that. Up in the branches, looking down at everyone and everything and especially looking out into the distance, I'd get this electric chill through me – like when I hit my funny bone, only all over. There was something out there, something bigger than I understood. Caroline said she knew what I meant – about the something – said we were part of it.

The day I found Caroline on my branch was the day she'd come to school with her hair gone or practically. It looked as if someone had taken a pair of garden shears and chopped at it two or three times, there were that many levels, but none hung even as far as her shoulders. I'd never seen a girl with really short hair before and I laughed. Everyone laughed. I thought Caroline was going to start yelling or crying, but she started laughing too. Later, when Miss Tabor had everyone settled down and we were studying for the spelling bee, I heard this little snicker and breathiness beside me and it was Caroline. She seemed to have trouble getting herself quiet. Sure her hair was funny, but I couldn't see it being that funny. Caroline kept right on holding her hand over her mouth and having these little outbursts. Miss Tabor looked up a couple of times but said

nothing. Caroline told me later that she'd fallen asleep with gum in her mouth the night before. She woke with a matted mess. Her father had bent her over the kitchen table, held her hair across the breadboard and hacked it off with a meat cleaver.

"I don't know where she is," Ray told them again and again, but it always came back to the dog. He had nightmares about that dog, crawling into the courtroom where he sat with manacles on his legs, wrists handcuffed – a real tough guy. The dog dragged himself up to Ray, maggots crawling in his eyes and nose, one leg hanging bloodied and useless.

"You buried me." He accused Ray. "You buried me. Tell them."

Then Caroline was beside him. They were in the tree fort, only it was beautiful, solid, a real little cabin in the branches and the dog was on the ground under the tree, healthy but whining, whining for Caroline.

"Let him come up," she said. "Let him come."

And then there was a knock on the trapdoor in the floor. Ray knew it was the dog. Caroline tried to open the door, but couldn't because someone was holding it shut. Ray would wake up at that point, soaked. He'd sit up, light a cigarette and listen to the crickets in the bushes around the jail. Traffic died before midnight in that town. Sometimes he'd hear the train far off. He'd close his eyes and see the crossing, the first one out of town, see the boxcars moving past slow. See himself holding Caroline's hand as they waited.

Knowing Caroline challenged everything I knew about home and family. They lived in a small brick farmhouse about a mile off the county road, right smack in the middle of a tall stand of poplar. It looked like some of the sketches I'd seen in Grimm's fairy tales. Until meeting Caroline, I'd never been allowed to go farther from town than out of sight of our bungalow, last house on the outskirts. But, although it was three miles by road to her house, it was also, I explained to my mother, just one mile behind us, across the cornfield. Usually I lost interest in things unrestricted, but not Caroline's house. The Spoule's were the only people I knew who locked their doors when they weren't away. Most of the time in summer even their screen doors were hooked shut. The screen on the front door, inside the verandah, was torn in half, letting in a ton of flies. Millions were stuck on the long sticky strip dangling right over the kitchen table. The orange tape was pretty well black with flies, most dead, some still kicking. Once, while we were making peanut butter sandwiches, a fly freed itself from the goop and landed in the jam pot minus a wing. Caroline fished it out with her fingers and went right on spreading that same jam on her sandwich. I did too, without a word. I figured it was like when my grandmother was a kid in England, in the war years. I was having what she called - an experience.

The kitchen wallpaper, with what you could see of the birdcage design, was peeled back near the corners and paint was flaking off the cupboards. A water pump handle leaned over a sink red with rust. On the floor, instead of linoleum tile like we had, were greying boards that came up in places when you walked on them. Besides the rickety table and kitchen chairs with rungs missing, was a big iron stove-oven contraption that worked on wood, and an icebox. I'd heard about those from my father, how the iceman would sell my grandparents ice from a horse-drawn cart. They kept the ice in a

cellar hole full of sawdust. On hot days kids liked to chip pieces of the ice out with kitchen knives and suck on it. But the ice kept better if kids weren't at it and the door was kept shut. Parents told children the story of the little boy or girl who disappeared and was found frozen solid.

“Coo Coo” Comes a small insistent voice outside the bars. “Coo! ”

Ray winces at his sister's imitation of a dove. She is improving. She comes almost every night, because kids under fourteen aren't allowed inside the prison. He knows that the only reason she doesn't get caught outside the jail is because the head guard, Norm, has decided she wouldn't. Norm had grown up in the town, had wanted to be a beat cop, he told Ray. But couldn't pass all the tests.

“It's okay, you know,” he explained. “I wanted a job where I was important - protecting the good guys. In here, sometimes, the good guys aren't on my side of the bars. I get my chance.”

Ray stands on his bed, bounces, grabs onto the bars and hoists himself up to support his elbows on the window ledge. He braces his sneakers against the rough wall. His kid sister is standing back from the building, standing between two bushes. A street lamp highlights the strawberry mop of her hair.

“Here,” she whispers loudly, and tosses something toward the window. It hits low and she runs to get it then tries again. She succeeds the fourth time and Ray holds the small flat package up to the street light. Bubble gum with hockey cards this time. It seems so long ago that he occupied himself with these. Cared.

“Thanks squirt.” He knows the cards took a good chunk of her chore allowance. They used to argue over who would wash and who would dry. He’d make a whip with his tea towel and flick it at her. When she tried to return the punishment, her towel would fall apart.

“Did you see the paper today?” she calls up to him “Mom bring it?”

“Yeah, looks good,” he says, knowing his sister is hopeful because they stopped searching the field along the highway for a body. She’s thinking that their finding no body is going to get him out.

The Spoule’s house was one of those yellow brick houses and not a lot bigger than ours but seemed it for lack of furniture. The living room had a Chesterfield with springs sticking up right where you sat, and there was a stuffed armchair that didn’t match. An old china cabinet leaned in the corner, the glass on one door missing. On the dusty shelves inside were two of those ceramic German beer mugs with silver tops and red-nosed faces of men shaped on the side. We had one in our livingroom that grandfather got overseas. It sat among the photographs of him and his war buddies. There was a silver-framed picture of mom and dad getting married and one of mom with me in her arms, holding Ray by the hand. He was looking away from the camera. That was what was odd about the Spoule’s place too, I guess. There were no family pictures on the walls, no landscape paintings, no china plates with blue boy or ceramic poodles that changed colour with the temperature, no calendars from the local dairy that the milkman brought every December. It was as if no one had really moved in.

Waiting for Caroline one day, I discovered a photograph, frameless, lying flat in the dust on an almost empty bookshelf. A young couple stood on the lawn in front of a cabin. Mountains were far off on one side of the cabin, and on the other a hill sloped down to a harbour. There were shapes of buildings and boats at a pier. The cabin was luxurious, what today you'd call a log home. One of those big picture windows was in the front, and there was a verandah, which looked like it went all the way around the house. The roof over the verandah had a balcony on top. There was no room for chinking between the logs. Dad says a well-constructed cabin doesn't need chinking. It will stand easily for two hundred years. Carved into the top and bottom of the window frames and doors was an ornamental trim. I thought of pictures I'd seen in books, of Switzerland.

"Did you live here?" I asked, sure it was only a place they'd visited.

"Yes," she said. "It's on the west coast. My dad built it – for my grandfather. He lived with us."

"Why didn't he live with your grandmother?"

"She died at camp."

I looked at Caroline, but she had her head down. "Bears?"

"No. My father said it wasn't that kind of camp. His family had to go there too, when he was fifteen. They shared a cabin with another family. My grandmother got pneumonia. She wasn't old yet."

I studied the photograph.

"Too bad she didn't get to live in this cabin. Why would you leave that for this?"

I swept my arm about the room, then realized my mistake. "I mean, you must miss it, the mountains and all. Will you go back?"

“My father sold it for money to move here.”

Whenever my grandmother saw something a person had made, something that might not even be perfect but they’d made themselves, whether it was a painting, a chair, a poem or even a recipe, she’d say the Lord gave you that talent. It’d be sin not to use it. I knew that it wasn’t the sinning that bothered Grandma; she wasn’t a fire and brimstone kind of believer. But, she believed in people and how they were connected to each other, and probably that was how she thought God came into the picture.

“Why doesn’t your dad build one like it here?” I asked.

Turning, I found Caroline looking at me as if I’d beat her out of that crystal alley she never played.

I was at the house once when Mr. Spoule returned. He came into the kitchen, gave Caroline and me the once-over and sat down heavily in the old armchair in the corner. His boots had tracked mud and hay across the room. He hadn’t shaven and his whiskers were grey like some of his hair.

Caroline climbed onto the kitchen counter to reach the plates, filled one with macaroni she’d made herself, and took it to her father. He ate where he was, balancing the dish on one knee, and mopping at the food with a piece of bread. Then he disappeared up the stairs, without a word. I knew Randy, Caroline’s little brother, was already in bed, but didn’t know Mrs. Spoule was home, until I heard voices. Only part of the talk was loud enough to hear. Mr. Spoule’s voice was low but forceful. “She should keep to herself.”

“No!” Mrs. Spoule said firmly. “I won’t have her part of that. It’s finished.”

“Is it finished, wife?”

For all practical purposes, Ray was guilty. The press and the general public had solved the mystery of Caroline's disappearance in record time. Ray's burying Gypsy was proof he was trying to cover up evidence. He'd killed the dog when it tried to protect its master. Then he'd taken care of Caroline. The motive was simple. He wanted sex, she didn't. Even her father must have been worried that Ray and Caroline would go too far. He'd admitted to following them to their tree fort once. He'd hidden outside the fort, listening. Heard nothing. They weren't talking. So what do you suppose they were doing?

"Lying there," Ray said in court. "We were lying there together looking at the leaves and sky." They'd talked about sex and she'd wanted him, but not yet. He hadn't pushed her.

The police searched the area in the woods for miles around the tree fort or what they'd found left of it. Someone had sawn half way through the trunk of the biggest supporting branch, then given up and gone to work on the fort itself. Someone who knew how to swing an ax and knew that the fastest way to break boards was by following the grain. No one was sure when this act of destruction had taken place. But Ray and Caroline had been there together, the day before her disappearance, the day she told Ray that her father didn't want her to see him. Ignore him, Ray had told her. She just wanted peace, she told Ray.

Of course there was evidence of Ray at the fort – a superman comic book, swimming trunks he changed into on hot days, and a pair of work pants with blood on them from road kill. That was the second most condemning piece of evidence. Ray's jeans with blood on them. A fox's blood, he told them. They took the clothing away for

tests. Animal blood it was, but the emotions the blood had inspired in the town left a permanent stain on his innocence.

I'd never been past the Spoule's kitchen. Caroline hadn't suggested we play in her room, and I figured she probably didn't have much to play with. In fact, I couldn't really imagine her playing at home. I was surprised when out of the blue she asked if I wanted to see her bedroom. This seemed like trespassing, somehow, though all this sensitivity and good manners on my part was what my dad would have called turning a new leaf. Upstairs the bare-floored halls were dusty. There was a musty clothes-hamper kind of smell to the walls. One room was bare except for a single mattress on the floor, with a sleeping bag on top. Randy's, I figured. I followed Caroline past what must have been her parent's room. Another mattress on the floor, but this one double. There were blankets and sheets in a tangle on top of it. Caroline's bedroom was shut. She surprised me by pulling a key from her pocket to unlock it. I wasn't ready for what I saw. A model child's bedroom – like right out of an Eaton's catalogue. Most of the room was occupied by a double four-poster bed with a canopy. Designs were carved into the posts and the legs of the bed. The headboard had several cabinets with sliding doors and a shelf on top with bookends of carved owls. I thought of the storybook pictures of princesses. The other furniture included a dresser, a wardrobe, and a desk and straight-backed chair. The blonde wood had been beautifully finished and it was all in the condition of furniture just built. A cedar chest sat at her end of the bed. It had a good smell that made the room larger somehow. There was a rocking horse, the kind you see in antique store windows.

Every feature of the saddle and face was hand-painted to the smallest detail, the eyelashes and eyeball, the design in the saddle. Miniature reins hung from a leather bridle.

Unlike the rest of the house, Caroline's room was perfectly neat and clean - bed made, furniture dusted, books in order according to size, desktop bare but for a scribbler and pencil.

I bounced down on the bed. "Did your father make this furniture, Caroline?" She nodded. Before I could comment beyond wow, we heard the truck drive up. I headed for the stairs, felt as if I'd been caught reading someone's diary. Caroline stopped to lock her bedroom door, before following me.

When I told my dad about Caroline's room, excited, because I knew he liked to talk about furniture, he only nodded, as if he'd expected it all along. His reaction was less disappointing when I got to the part about the rest of the house having almost no furniture, about boards underfoot and mattresses on the floor. When he heard this he seemed to tense or shift like people do when there's a quick pain somewhere. After a bit, he asked me to sit down and began to tell me about when Caroline's family had first come. Until that talk with my father, the Spoules had been - to me - like the families in new colouring books. Everything was there, but just in outline.

"When the first war was happening," my Dad began, "we were afraid the German Canadians - the Ukrainians - some other Europeans - would be on the wrong side. Would hurt us."

"We? Were you born then?"

“Okay, the government. Mr. Spoule was in high school then. He had to move with his family. They had to go to a camp on the prairie. After the war, they went back to the coast.”

“Mr. Spoule’s not German.”

“Well, he is. His name.”

My father told me it happened again in the second war - the last biggest one. “But, it was the Japanese who were forced to move,” Dad said. “As far as I know, Mr. Spoule wasn’t forced. Not by us.”

I was sure my dad had his facts wrong. My class had studied about the war and took part in Remembrance Day ceremonies. We had to learn a poem. Some of soldiers who died were from our town – brothers, fathers, uncles. We learned that. But Mr. Degroot told us nothing about Canadians having camp. There were no real Germans and Japanese here. Not the kind you’d worry about. The ones I knew were just people with accents from before, like a lot of the old people – like Mr. Degroot.

“Mr. Spoule was a furniture and cabinet maker when he came here,” my dad said. “But he quit that.”

“Furniture like we sell?”

“The furniture he made was fine. Different than factory. He could make anything people asked for.”

I told my father about the rocking horse and about the cabin in the photograph. The cabin Mr. Spoule and his father built. He listened, nodding, then said that he and Caroline’s father had got to talking once. He learned that out west, Spoule and his father had orders faster than they could build furniture.

“When his father died, he wanted to hire a boy – train him to make things with his hands. But, by then, boys were leaving for the next war. All that meant to Spoule’s business, at first, was that people had to wait longer for him to deliver their orders. Then the orders stopped coming.”

My father stared at the teapot. I waited. “New furniture was a luxury people couldn’t afford. That had something to do with it too, I imagine.”

I didn’t ask what he meant – too. Then he decided to tell me the rest. Shortly after the family moved into the farmhouse outside of our town, Mr. Spoule built another workshop and began to make furniture. He advertised in the town paper that he was looking for apprentices, local boys. When he opened his shop, there were only a few rockers, some dining room sets and china cabinets. But he hoped that once people saw his work, they would order more. He also set out a collection of birds he’d carved.

No one applied to apprentice, and no one came to the opening. My dad wanted to go, himself, he said. But that might have seemed like he was sizing up the competition. Later in the week he was buying gas at Lou’s Esso when he noticed Mrs. Spoule inside the restaurant talking to Lou. He went in to pay and introduced himself. Our name is the name of our furniture store so she knew right off who my dad was. He asked her how their opening had gone. She told him it hadn’t. When my dad did finally get by to Spoule’s shop, he found him reading the paper. The tools were clean and hanging in the work area. The floor was swept. There was no sawdust. Spoule kept the shop open for another year. He had a sign on the highway. The *Spoule’s* at the beginning was painted over. *Hand-crafted Furniture*, it said. *Free bird with purchase.*

Sometimes people from out of town stopped at Spoule's farm and bought small things they could tie on their car or put in the trunk. It wasn't enough to feed the family. Dad said half of the problem was that factory furniture was cheaper. Store-bought was the latest thing. I thought of the time I left the jacket my mother knit me with Maple trees on it, in the Maple tree, hoping she'd buy the next one. If you store bought you were doing okay.

"What was the other half of the problem?" I asked my father.

"People," he said.

One night Mr. Spoule's workshop burnt down. It burned hard and fast - like a well-built bonfire, my dad said. The smell of fuel was in the air. When the police went to investigate, Spoule told them to go home. Said it was his shop and he'd poured the gasoline and he'd lit the match. The shop wasn't insured.

"I didn't know about the rest until now, from you," my father said quietly.

"Rest of what?"

"I didn't know it wasn't just the shop furniture he'd burned."

Caroline's mother wasn't like any mother I knew. I never heard her tell Caroline things like "be in when the street lights come on," but of course there weren't any out there, or "you'd better learn to pick up your socks around here or you'll lose your privileges," or "do your homework before any radio." Caroline did more school work at home than at school, anyway, and nobody reminded her. Mrs. Spoule allowed Caroline and her brother to sleep and eat when they wanted. She didn't cook very much. Caroline did that for herself and sometimes for the whole family. She was allowed to go outside whenever she

wanted and stay up as long as she wanted. But there was one rule both Caroline and Randy had to follow. Their father's rule. If they weren't at school, they were expected to be around home, nowhere else. And I was the only friend Caroline had permission to bring home.

Mrs. Spoule seemed more like Caroline's distant relative than her mom. I tried to figure out what it was that made her that way. Most of the time, she kept her eyes lowered or looking off and they didn't tell you anything about what it was she was looking at. She was thin and wiry-framed, like her daughter, but while Caroline's body seemed alive with a kind of nervous tension, her mother's actions were slow, almost awkward. She seemed to be forgetting to breathe all the time or just didn't bother, because every few minutes she'd take this little gasp for air, then sigh. Seven shifts a week Mrs. Spoule waitressed at Lou's Truck Stop on the road into town. She carried plates of mashed potatoes and chops, on both arms, but usually didn't look like she could lift more than a cup of coffee.

One day I was doing Ray's route with him. We checked the main perimeter highways and found two skunks. Funny how skunks always die in the middle of the road. You'd think, if there was no time to get out of the way, the middle was the safest place to be. These two were squashed flat as cardboard so even the smell was squeezed out. After scraping them up, we stopped at Lou's for french fries and coke floats. Mrs. Spoule was pretty busy because it was lunchtime and even the counter stools were taken. She was heading to a booth with four truckers, trying to carry all their plates of hot beef sandwiches and chips. One of the truckers at the counter jumped up and offered to help,

actually taking the plates off her arms. Mrs. Spoule tried to say no, but it was too late. The boss, Lou, was watching this and didn't look happy.

"Hi, Mrs. Spoule, how is life treating you?" I asked when she came to take our order. That's how my dad talked to adults at our store, and as I was part of the labour force with Ray that day, I put forth my best.

"What," she said, in a startled way. She'd been putting down the serviettes and knives and forks. I wondered if she recognized me.

"I'm Caroline's friend. We do our homework together sometimes. At your place."

"Oh, yes." That was all. She got her pad and pen posed for our order, and while Ray was looking over the menu she gazed out the window. There was a farmer's field with those black and white Holsteins, that made me think of paint by number, and farther down a couple of horses grazing near the fence. But, right then, that all got blocked by tractor-trailers pulling out. She watched them go and looked like she was trying to see something particular, something important.

It wasn't till I'd known Caroline a couple of years that my brother started hanging around us. He'd always been careful not to be seen by his buddies playing with his kid sister, but I figured he could no longer resist checking out the rope in the barn that I'd gone on about. According to Ray, Caroline's farm wasn't a real farm. There was the sow with her brood and a few cows with enormous teats that I called tits not knowing better, and three egg chickens. In the back was a whole lawn of tomatoes and carrots and cucumbers and potatoes and, in the fall, squash and pumpkins. Mr. Spoule worked at the garden, leaving

the house to Caroline or chance. An old red barn, mostly grey now, was used to store cattle feed and hay. We'd jump from the beams of the barn onto the hay pile, sometimes swinging out over it by a rope. I figured this was all that a farm should be, except there wasn't a horse. Randy and I, being small, tried to saddle everything that had four legs - the sow, a cow and even, the dog, Gypsy. As our confidence grew we began to visit old McFarlane's mare, down the road. When the old man was in town we'd lead her to the fence and climb on bareback. Randy and I bounced around, legs too short to grip the mare's belly, until we couldn't keep upright anymore and jounced off into the dirt. Caroline rode easily. Like she'd been born riding bareback. Watching her ride, I got the idea that, if it wasn't for the fence, she would just keep on going.

Probably the most damning evidence against Ray was his own body. The night before he'd found Gypsy, he swerved to miss a large dead raccoon, then spotted the mangled guts of three cubs, all close together. He made a mental note of the spot for his pickup detail later, and was going to drive on when the truck's headlights illuminated the green eyes, and he saw a small dark shape scramble toward the trees. An orphan, must be. He'd pulled off the road and pushed through the high weeds at the side, heading toward the bush line. His foot went down for ground and came up empty. Ray fell headlong into the rocks and debris of a drainage ditch. It was hot and he was shirtless. His legs and arms were cut. Blood ran from the scratches of dead branches.

"The marks and bruises are consistent with a struggle," Doctor Addley told the police, two weeks after the fall, when they asked him to examine Ray. Addley was the only doctor within fifty miles, but his opinions weren't held in high esteem by the town.

He'd made mistakes before. He'd sent home a woman who'd come complaining of stomach pains. She was pregnant and afraid that something was wrong. Just indigestion, the doctor told her. It was five o'clock and he was closing up. Tuesday night was poker night and he'd hoped to have time to get a good meal and a drink before the game.

"There was no way to tell," he said later at the hospital, where the woman had been admitted after a miscarriage brought on by appendicitis. People said he should have admitted her for observation. But they didn't say it to him. A young boy deafened by his doctor's misdiagnosed ear infection was another victim of what they'd come to call Addley's addling.

So why, Ray wondered, was the town so confident in the man's opinion now? Especially considering that the missing girl Addley was so quick to write off as dead was Spoule's daughter. Addley had practically barred Spoule from town when the family first moved to the area, after the war. When Spoule applied to the Legion Club his acceptance was denied by one vote. Addley's.

Ray is lying in the dark now. Eyes open. He has watched the setting sun move the bars of the prison window up along the wall and across the ceiling, to dissolve into twilight. He hasn't moved off the bed and changes position only to smoke. Ray is under-aged, but Norm brings cigarettes when he comes to play checkers, and leaves the pack behind.

"Don't worry," he says. "It'll work out somehow. They wouldn't hang a kid. I don't know the last time they did that."

Ray is the youngest inmate on death row, in the country's history.

It's quiet in solitary, inside the thick stone walls of the historical jail. Almost peaceful. The first few months things felt a lot different. The damned walls were squeezing in on him. He couldn't breathe and had headaches constantly. His parents visited every day. In September they brought school books and homework assignments. After the sentencing, he lost interest in that and they brought magazines, but they never brought what he wanted most, news of a reprieve. Still, he should have been thankful for the visits. After all, his folks were taking turns making the forty-minute drive to the city every weekday, and came together on Sundays. Had done from day one when their frantic search found him in custody. He hadn't been allowed a phone call, like he'd seen in the movies. But exactly like in the movies, he'd been interrogated without cease for eight hours then for two hours every day after. It went on for a week. He had to sit so the lamp shone hard into his face. He'd become one of the creatures – emerald-eyed – caught in the lights.

On one visit, Ray's parents brought him a small-framed photograph. It was a picture of them all at a picnic table he'd built with his father. Ray is sitting before a birthday cake. His last, he thinks. Caroline had been there. She'd taken the picture. Ray handed the frame back to his mother. He gestured around the cell angrily. "For the wall?"

His mother had begun to tremble but did not cry. Still, his father gave her a look of exasperation and left. Ray would always feel bad about that. He'd sensed the tension between his parents for a while, had noticed they were no longer talking to each other, really, just to him. It wasn't long after that day when his mother moved to the city, to be near him. Ray knew that his parents' separation was more than a physical one. September

came around and he was still in jail. His sister was enrolled in a city school. His father didn't visit much. Yet, he drove the miles to the city, often, to talk to lawyers.

They never found Caroline's body. One day, around Christmas time that same year, Mrs. Spoule finished her shift early. It was a Wednesday, just after the supper rush and most of the truckers had eaten and gone or were just finishing the dregs of their coffee, smoking and stretching their legs out. Mrs. Spoule gave Randy a hamburger and fries. He'd been at Lou's since after school. When he'd finished eating, she handed her keys to the other waitress. Then she took Randy's hand and walked out of Lou's for the last time.

Mr. Spoule had dinner by himself, and ate alone again next morning. Later he called the restaurant, and asked for Mrs. Spoule.

"She hasn't shown up for work," Lou said. "You'd better call the police." Spoule hung up but didn't call the police.

Later on in the week, one of the regular truckers told Lou that he'd been at the restaurant the last evening Mrs. Spoule was there. He saw someone that he thought was her passing a kid – likely Randy – up into the cab of a tractor-trailer with American plates. He didn't recognize the driver. She climbed up herself and the truck pulled out heading south. Hauling lumber, he thought.

My brother did get a retrial and lost. He was in that cell for eight months, before the highest court in the land commuted his death sentence. But, they added a new one – ten years not less a day. There wasn't enough evidence to prove him innocent.

When it was pretty clear that my parents wouldn't be moving back together, my dad put the store and house up for sale and moved closer to the prison they'd sent Ray to. He offered the store to Mr. Spoule, for a reasonable price and terms that allowed a year to profit before he began payments. But Spoule wasn't accepting anything. When the town heard about the offer, the general consensus was that dad had made the gesture out of guilt for what his son did.

I live in the city now. People are friendly but only in a "hello, terrible weather today" kind of way. They don't really get to know you. That's okay. Ray got out last year and has changed his name and gone to work out west, on the oil rigs. None of us are in touch much. I completely forget about it all some days. But, then, before long, I'm going over it all again. There has to be at least one part I'm missing, a piece that would bring the whole picture into focus. It bothers my head. The piece I don't want – the scene I can't switch off is the one where Ray is telling me about the dog. He's sad, but excited. He wants me to keep his secret until he sees Caroline. I promise not to tell anyone. Next day, at school, in writing hour, I'm stuck for an idea. I write about the dog, adding a bit about the romance between Caroline and Ray, knowing it's okay to exaggerate in stories but not knowing enough to change their names. That's how my teacher, and then the police find out about Ray burying something.

The other pieces? The perfect furniture. Caroline and Randy not being allowed to play in town. The locked doors and empty rooms. Ray wanting Caroline. Mrs. Spoule's drifting look. Their log cabin out west. This town. Maybe there isn't anything missing, after all. Maybe it's all there.

Good Intentions

She was taking the fire stairs down from the laundry room on the top floor when she noticed the tent, a patch of sagging blue there among the barren bushes and thin grey trees. From the eighteenth floor she could not tell if the splotches in the snow about the tent were footprints or debris or just shadows. Or something else.

It had rained all week. Then, last night, the temperature had begun to drop rapidly from fifteen on its way to minus five. That's really only twenty something Fahrenheit she told herself. The snow had started to fall just after midnight. She'd woken to the rattle of the bedroom window. Icy air snaked its way inside her oversized T-shirt, raising her nipples, as she struggled to close the crack of space between window and frame. She noticed that the snow had stopped falling. The wind was scooping up the white hillocks that had gathered on the roof of the building's main entrance, just below her bedroom window. The window she was pulling at was secured by a thin ridge of ice. She let go, leaping back into the bed to burrow beneath the down comforter.

In the morning she withdrew the heavy drapes to reveal a safer sky, an after-storm blue that the sun would dilute as it moved toward noon and played off the fresh snow. In winter, the north-facing apartment was ever on the lee side of the sun. It was to look out on a brighter world that she'd started to take the stairs down from the laundry room. She was startled to see the tent there a few yards in from the river. She'd seen the tent in the woods every day on her way home from work along the road next to the river, but because of the lay of the land, she couldn't see it on the way to work, without turning around. Sometime at the end of October was the last time she'd noticed the blue amidst

the trees. It was after the clocks had been set back and already dusk by the time she left work. The tent no longer drew her eye from the river, where she watched for the beaver or the muskrat or whatever the creature was that seemed always to swim in the opposite direction she walked. She liked to watch it skim along, its own dark head the head of an arrow that formed and reformed in the water behind, only inches above the black silt of river bottom.

Even before the time change, she'd had to step more carefully, unsure if the dark places on the path were holes or shadows. It was then that she'd first wondered if the tent would be there much longer. Would he find a place? Why *he* she wondered. Only last year she'd lived in a tent, herself, until the snow was on the ground. With the vacancy rate in the city barely clearing zero, the few rooms or apartments that remained were priced beyond what she - what many - could afford. She had camped in the country but this tent was by a river inside the city, where sleep would not come easily to a woman alone, without the help of drink or drugs. So, it was probably *he*, a student maybe, or one of the street people. She hoped for the latter. A student would likely not be as toughened and once the cold set in would be too worn down by nights to do anything but sleep in class or in coffee shops during the day.

When the time change had brought night to the late afternoon, the tent disappeared to her. Now, startled by its blue presence on the frozen earth, her face grew warm. She felt caught, a sense of humiliation something like that she'd felt when accused of leaving her bicycle in the rain. She tucked the laundry basket more securely beneath her arm and continued the descent. The tent was visible to her until she'd passed below the fifth floor.

On the second day, the temperature rose only two degrees from its overnight low of minus ten. There was a wind-chill the radio said. She thought about that – the wind-chill is only how cold you feel with the wind on you – it is not the real temperature – was that right? Your skin didn't really actually get colder in the wind but your overall body heat was dissipated by the wind so you couldn't stay warm even when moving. Inside a tent among the trees, there would be no wind-chill, she decided. She wanted to make another trip to the laundry room, needed to wash the smell of mothballs from her flannel sheets. The heat in the building was out of her hands. The thermostat recorded 15 all the time - setting it higher or lower did nothing. The caretaker had come to look once when she'd phoned. He played with the coil, did something with a screwdriver. "I don't think this is connected to your radiator you know," he said. "*They* control the heat." The hallways were usually too hot. By the time she'd lugged groceries to the apartment her underclothes were soaked with perspiration.

Looking down on the tent, now, she wondered if its inhabitant came into the building late at night and caught a few hours sleep in the stairwell. She remembered with a start that last week, twice, she'd taken a crushed coke can off the sill of the side door leading out. And once a piece of folded cardboard. She had almost ignored the props, but there had been apartment break-ins. Just a day after she'd first moved into the building, she'd woken to the sound of her apartment door being slammed against its chain. Only the repairman, she'd thought, come to tighten the taps so it didn't take both hands to turn them on and off. Struggling to wake she'd gone to the door and saw the knife probing through the gap, hacking at the chain. Hidden from view, on the hinged side of the door,

she crept to the peephole. She saw the toque on the head of what appeared to be a short stocky man bent to his work.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, before she knew she would. The man ducked his head further and ran crouched down the hall. The frame of the door had been damaged around the bolt, the wood cut and chipped away. Thinking about it later, she knew that the thief had most likely entered the building by pretending to look for his key in the lobby then entering with someone else. Or he lived in this building. Still, now by habit, when she enters or exits the building, she pulls the outside door shut and dispels any objects meant to hold it open.

On the fourth day after she'd discovered the tent, she exited on the opposite end of the building. She was taking the bus to work these days and it did not travel the route along the river. The temperature that night had dropped more than usual. She put duct tape along the window frames and wore socks to bed. She dreamt that she was back at her tent, to pick up some supplies, searching among bookshelves inside what was suddenly a single-roomed shack – but she could not find what she needed. There was little light in the place and outside the picture window all was dark. Then a huge bear sauntered out from the bushes. The bear filled the window with its form and she knew that the glass pane was not a barrier should it decide to come in. Keeping low, she continued to search for whatever it was she wanted. Just then a truck came along the path and drove slowly around the shack. She saw the property owners inside the truck, the man and his wife and son and daughter-in-law. Where were the children? she wondered. The owner peered out of the truck, trying to see inside her place. Good thing the lights were off. The four people in the truck were calling to her but she did not hear the words,

only the intonation of a question. They drove away. She did not want them to know she was there for some reason, but wasn't sure what it was. She had the sense that she did not belong there now, that she had broken a rule. The bear backed away when the truck came but soon returned. She knew there was little time before it would sense her there and break the window. Then something was crushing down on her. She woke to the candid stare of her cat

.

Huddled over her morning cup of caffeine she listened to the radio weather reports of all the small towns in Ontario. Places with magical exclusive-sounding names: the Kawarthes, Haliburton, Nippissing, Huronia. They sounded like small planets that she wasn't from, or towns of a Hollywood movie, where citizens pulled together against floods and storms, against poison air and water, against all odds. No citizen, however reclusive, would be denied these acts of unspoken loyalty. Strangers were welcome for the distraction they brought, for the reminder of other places and for their business - welcome as long as they were passing through. If a tent were in the woods outside a small town, everyone would know. And everyone would know that everyone knew.

Perhaps today, she thought. Today she would go to him. But to say what? Do what? Invite this likely mentally ill, at least eccentric, vagabond in for the night to sleep on the couch? Then what? Ask him to return to the woods? She could write the names and addresses, phone numbers of the shelters for him - even offer to phone to find a bed free. But he would know about those places already. Wouldn't he? Unless he was an immigrant – a dangerous illegal immigrant. Suspicion moved its cloaked head. But then, no, if he were one of those, one of the fanatics, his organization would have provided

cash for a room. They would not want him squatting. Not want him to stand apart from the average citizen. What then? Take him food? It would freeze solid. Her sleeping bag? He would have to have those things already to have made it this long. She imagined bending down to a man huddled in a tent in the snow, handing him a bag of food and a blanket and walking away, leaving him there on top of the snow. Leaving him quickly.

"And here at home ..." the announcer was finally mentioning her city - "last night minus sixteen, expected low tonight minus twenty." He would already be dead or gone. Telling herself that there were other tenants whose apartments, unlike hers, looked directly down on the riverbank – and the tent – did not suggest a solution. She knew that to allow herself to think it so was to allow everyone the same. Christmas was next week. To go at Christmas was hypocritical. Today was a good day to act, she decided.

Dear journal: I am writing a story about a woman who lives alone in an apartment. When she uses the stairs of the building she can see outside. The place overlooks a woods alongside a river. She can see a tent among the trees. It is winter and the temperature is dropping almost daily. She is trying to decide what to do. I am writing this story about the tent that is outside my building. Since I have begun to write I have not gone to see if the tent is there. The story has no deadline. It is up to the girl.

The radio woke her. She overcame the lethargy of days without sun and dragged herself into the bathroom to the high-pitched time signal indicating the top of the hour. The newscaster spoke with trained disinterest. "Police answered a call from a downtown shop

owner today who reported finding a body in the doorway of his store. They arrived to discover a middle-aged man who they believed was not breathing. Paramedics found a pulse, however. The man, known only as Eddy, to local shop owners, was taken to hospital by ambulance, where doctors, after attempting to revive the man for almost an hour, pronounced him dead from hypothermia. Police are asking anyone who knows of his next of kin to come forward.”

Yes, it is definitely too late now, she thought. Because, it would be even colder here than downtown among the shops. The tent man would be gone - one way or the other. Something had come up the last time she'd planned to go to the tent. But she would go still, that afternoon, go, and if he were there, she would say - well, that part she has still to work out.

I walked home early from work today. Overcast, a premature twilight, but there was still enough light to see the tent in the bushes on the other side of the river. It looks smaller somehow or part is hidden by snow. I saw a documentary about hypothermia last night – three famous revival cases. Two Canadian children who'd wandered outside into winter, and a woman who'd been buried in an avalanche while skiing in Norway. In each case, the medical teams worked for days to thaw out the victims. The woman's heart took the longest to get beating again - more than sixteen hours, but they did not give up. After they got her heart beating they had to wait again while her other organs played havoc with her life before they began to function properly. I imagine that her boyfriend, who'd pulled her from her snow coffin, was there along with her family, all urging the doctors on. I imagine it was on the news and the whole town was pulling for her. The woman was

skiing again six months later as part of her recovery therapy. The doctors said that during those marathon revival sessions they'd learned three important points. When reviving victims of hypothermia: One - Never give up. Two - never give up. Three - Never give up.

Christmas had come and gone with no great adieu. She'd been invited to share Christmas dinner with a friend, her husband, and their friends. The turkey seemed huge. The carving of it was assigned to a student from China. He did not cut off only some of the meat for the platter; he worked with two knives. When she came to light the candles she saw that he was doing his job with fervor and the form of the bird was no longer apparent. Instead there were bones protruding from a mound of sliced meat. With so many people at the table, she knew her friend would not be sending the guests home with leftovers, as she often did when there was too much food. That meant she would not have to decide if it was a good idea to take turkey to the tent. But she would go still. Take some canned food – stew maybe - and maybe a blanket. Christmas was past. It would not be hypocritical to go now.

Boxing day was bitterly cold. The temperature had dropped steadily since breakfast and a northwest wind rattled the windows of the apartment. Upon leaving the building, she noticed the rabbit tracks and looked about her. Or were they squirrel tracks - the snow was too deep and soft to tell and squirrels left hop tracks too. She had a bag of shelled peanuts in her pocket. She liked to have that for her walks. Once, before the snow fell, but when the ground was already frozen, she had gone for her jog through the woods along the river. When she stopped to stretch and walk, where the trail narrowed

with undergrowth and overhanging branches, two squirrels approached her. They were smaller than the squirrels she'd fed in the summer – offspring perhaps - but she had brought nothing to feed them. She'd continued on, climbing down the rocks to the dry riverbed where she picked her way over the boulders, then, gripping dead weeds for support climbed the bank back to the path. At the top, bent to lace her shoe, she was startled by movement in the dry leaves. Something touched her leg. She leapt and saw the squirrel. It had a scar on its back like one seen earlier. The creature was at her feet, on its hind legs, teeth ready to grab whatever was offered. As she shifted away it moved with her, then finally gave up the endeavor. Next time she would come with food.

Dear Journal, I haven't been writing very much lately. As soon as I open my notebook, I become lethargic. It is as if I am drugged. Cannot keep my eyes open – am drawn into that enticing state of half-sleep. There are people all around reading and talking and buying coffee – even the noise of the coffee grinder does not draw me out of the stupor. I think – how foolish I must look asleep in this chair - yet I cannot open my eyes. Not to write. Not to go home. There is that sense of helplessness yet safety - as when you begin to doze as a child and hear, in your transcendent state, your mother and father talking. And you know they are there even when you are not there - don't have to participate in your own being.

On these sunless days, it is tempting to not get up. I used to wonder – what if the atmosphere goes through a drastic change – something we neither expect nor understand and the clouds remain always between ourselves and the sun. Beneath such a grey dome,

would our eyesight change to accommodate the poor light, or would we become accustomed to never seeing each other clearly?

Once when I was hitchhiking north from the prairies, in heavy snow, a wind came up. It whipped snow across the windshield of the half-ton I was in, and blew more snow from the fields, obscuring the highway. The driver turned onto a side road to go to his farm. I chose to get out there, to stay on the main road and try to get to Yellowknife. I did not know they had closed the road. It was odd that there were no cars at a time when everyone would be trying to get home after Christmas – back to school or work. For a long time I kept walking, head down, squinting against the sting of the wind. It was becoming increasingly harder to make progress. I looked up to find that the road, for all intents and purposes, was gone. Panicked, thinking I'd walked off into the field, I began to dig with my feet, and came to the frozen asphalt. The relief was fleeting, because, road or not, there were no cars. When my fingers began to freeze I tucked them under my shirt, into my armpits. I'd learned that, but couldn't remember where. I'd also learned somewhere about survival hills. The fastest way to make one is to walk around in a circle digging a trench and dumping the snow into a pile in the middle. If you don't have snowshoes to dig with and there is nothing like tree bark around, you dig with your hands. I managed to complete the circle and had only to hollow out the mound of snow in the middle and burrow into it. By then, however, what I wanted was to close my eyes and rest. I knew this was a bad idea, but that didn't seem to matter. I sat in the snow and was about to lie down when a grey bulk appeared where the road used to be. It moved slowly, becoming larger and transformed itself into a car. A police car. I remained sitting to watch it pass. I was thinking of the summer I'd hitchhiked across the prairies,

about three in a moonless morning. The few drivers who passed could not see me there in the dark. Finally, a cruiser had stopped. The officer recorded my name, then told me he couldn't take passengers, and drove off. Now, there was another police officer asking who I was, helping me stumble to the car. I took my time answering – told him I'd give my name only if he took me to the next town. "Of course," he said. "What else?" At the first service station, he bought me a coffee. Sitting there, letting the steam drift onto my frostbitten cheeks, it didn't seem like a big deal – to either of us, I think. The being cold so long – pain then numbness – like the time I missed the last city bus. It wasn't a big scene. He saved me. I told him my name. He didn't tell me his.

The tent was at the bottom of an incline, off the beaten path - beyond the trails of dog walkers, hikers and cross-country skiers. She had to hold onto branches on the side of the slope to the river to keep her feet from slipping on the icy crust of snow. She saw the squirrel nests high in the barren trees, but no sign of life. It would be too cold, she thought, and threw a handful of peanuts under the tree. There were no takers and no tracks. The creatures had not been out for a while or had abandoned their nests. She felt the grit of the shells and realized they were salted. Ballpark peanuts the bag had said. She saw the tent then - closer than she'd expected. It had collapsed a little into itself. In places around the edge of the tent plastic bottles of frozen water protruded from the snow. At the front, leaning against the closed flaps, was a bicycle. She noticed only one spot in the material that seemed to have an opening of any sort – a gap at the bottom of the tent, about six inches high. She moved closer and tried to peer under. The large bottoms of two rubber boots obscured further view. The angle of one of the boots told her that they

were probably empty. A human would not contort his feet that way. Feeling watched, she stood motionless beside the collapsed material, wondering if there could be enough room inside for a man to sit up - to live in. She looked about, trying to shrug off the sense of trespassing, then bent again and looked into the gap at the boot bottoms. What if he were there? She should speak, tell him where he could find help. She stood again and looked about the tent for another opening, then noticed there was almost no snow on the bicycle seat, as if it had been ridden that day. Yet, the tracks of bicycle tires and boots in the grey mottled snow about the tent were barely discernable. Had the snow on the seat slid off from its own weight? She looked through the opening at the boot bottoms again – had only to put her hand into the gap and lift the material to see past the boots. She did not move. A burden of snow slid from a pine bough near her. Large flakes began to fall and she saw that twilight had come. If he were in there he would not be alive, she reasoned. If he were alive he would have heard her approach and called out. And, if he were alive and choosing not to answer, she would be intruding to lift the flap. Even if he were not there at all, it would be an invasion of privacy to enter his home.

The longer she stands there, the more she becomes the intruder. Until it seems that even to speak is to trespass. Silence weighs on her. "Is anyone there?" Breath appears in the air but her voice does not carry, only the intonation of her words mimic a call. She waits for a response as if for a blow. After seconds or minutes, not sure which, she speaks again, more loudly. "I hope no one is there." She moves off, halfway up the hill, then stops to look back. Taking the bag of peanuts from her pocket, she arches her arm to throw, but doesn't. After climbing back down the slope, she leaves the bag at the opening,

near the boot bottoms. Peanuts are a good choice. They will not spoil and will thaw quickly in someone's hand.

Dear Journal: So many dark days. The temperature hovers at 0. A continual cloud cover, and occasional snow, not enough to break the bleak monotony. The cold is worse this way, trapping the city beneath a damp shroud. It works its way under the skin. Most of the time I cannot feel warm. As if I am always just out of the pool trying to make it to the change room. I have phoned into work sick. I cannot imagine going. Despite my good intentions, I cannot imagine taking life on at all. What must be done overwhelms me

*I am trying to read, making slow progress with a very thin book that I've had on my shelf since summer. It is called *The Needs of Strangers*. The author writes that people cannot have their requirements supplied by their community, and still belong to it. There is a silent agreement. To accept from others what the body needs, one must sacrifice what the spirit needs – to matter – if only to a greater cause than self.*

The weather had been warmer for almost two weeks. No new snow had fallen and what there was had disappeared completely from the roads and sidewalks, leaving a dirty residue of salt. She began to feel that the cold time, however brief, had come and gone. A fine gauze of denial veiled the knowledge that it was only the beginning of winter. If he were alive after all this time, she assured herself, he would not need help. But even before these thoughts, she had unknowingly submitted to the idea that she was not going to do anything. That she had stopped believing in the man in the tent. This, while a quiet voice continued to repeat, in a logical way, that there was something to be done. She took

the elevator both ways now to do the laundry, and when she left the building, always used the exit on the street side. Each morning she pulled back the curtains of her bedroom window, from which she could see only the tops of the trees against the sky. Deepest winter was late in coming. When it did, it came with a vengeance.