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**LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ
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The
Malory Arms
Stories

P. Scott Lawrence

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

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for the degree of Master of Arts at
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ABSTRACT

The Malory Arms Stories

P. Scott Lawrence

The stories in this thesis are set in and around a small apartment building called the Malory Arms. The stories are thus linked by place, as well as by the characters themselves, many of whom appear, in greater or lesser roles, in more than one story.

The physical setting these characters share would seem to suggest a sense of connectedness. For a variety of reasons, however, these people often find themselves isolated, both from each other and from their surroundings. In response, many create their own, largely private, worlds.

The structure, tone, and style of each story is, to a degree, designed to reflect the kind of world each character has created for himself. Each piece, in other words, is designed to speak with its own particular voice.

THE
MALORY ARMS
STORIES

Acknowledgements

"Concerning the Egg" and "Minutes of An Evening"
appeared in *Exile*, Vol. 9, Nos. 2 3 & 4.

Thanks to Elizabeth, for
knowing when and how to push --
And to Nancy, for her endurance

...in the dim underworld of
fiction, the great glazed tank of
art, strange silent subjects float.

— Henry James, "The Middle Years"

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The Malory Arms

Although claims have often been made to the contrary, Brooks Barnett, once a well-known architect in this town (he built Branwen Castle, accidentally destroyed by fire during this town's centennial celebrations), did not design the Malory Arms. For a short time he did own the property on which it was constructed, as well as the building itself. But Barnett's son Edwin was in fact the architect.

Because of a feud between Brooks Barnett and the mayor of that era, Armand Leclerc (the dispute allegedly involved unspecified debts), the apartment building was originally situated outside of town. The secluded package of land, close by a break in the trees on the southern bank of the river (which boasted a popular bathing beach at that time), was only accessible by dirt road, and services were for a

time very limited. Over the years, however, the town crept outwards in all directions. In 1947, when a new slate of municipal leaders were elected, taking control from Leclerc who was mayor well into his nineties, the town's limits were officially extended beyond the lot line of the Malory Arms.

The apartment building, faced with limestone, is U-shaped and has three wings. The outer corners of the east and west wings feature flat-capped turrets, each supported by two simply chiselled corbels.

Problems in transporting the limestone nearly caused the project to be scrapped. The stone was quarried one hundred and seventy miles north of town and shipped in by railroad. To get the slabs across the river, horse drawn wagons were used. The bridge they had to cross was never intended to support so much weight, and towards the end of construction, it collapsed. Two horses died instantly, another had to be shot, and a new bridge had to be built. When the river is low, two huge slabs of stone can still be seen lying in its bed.

The Malory Arms is three storeys high, and there are six apartments, of varying size, in each wing. All of the apartments on the two top floors have balconies that overlook the courtyard. Their original carved wooden railings have since been replaced with wrought iron.

Much of the courtyard is paved with cobblestones. They

were not specified in the original plans, but twice, when the builders tried to plant a lawn, dairy cows that grazed down by the river came up to the property and ate the seed. Three narrow brick paths lead from the courtyard to the main doors of each wing. The centre of the courtyard was not paved; at present a mulberry tree is growing there.

Seven years after the Malory Arms was completed, an unusually fierce spring flood unsettled the building's foundation. There was no serious structural damage, but the building has been slightly off kilter ever since. From the street, the turret on the west wing is visibly shorter than that on the east.

The seasons here change the appearance of the Malory Arms. In autumn the lines of the building seem to sharpen and, by the end of December, the limestone takes on a severe aspect and the building looks like an ice-castle. During the winter months winds whip along the river and up the hill to the courtyard, packing snow in so tightly that it squeaks like styrofoam underfoot. With spring thaw the outlines of the building soften.

Summer nights are extremely humid in this town, but the mornings are cool, so at dawn heavy dew stipples the courtyard. Sunlight refracts off the beads of dew and appears to send out sparks. Some mornings a tawny-coloured mist rises from the river and creeps into the cradle of the

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The Malory Arms

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courtyard in waves. When this happens, the colour of the limestone shifts to a greenish pastel, the courtyard passes in and out of vision, and the building seems to move.

The Malory Arms was the only building Edwin Barnett ever designed or built; soon after its completion, he was involved in an accident that ended his career. He was once asked what he thought of his one effort. Edwin Barnett answered immediately.

"It will have to do," he said.

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When the Elections Came to Town

In no uncertain terms, as was her wont, Mary McWhinnie spoke her mind:

"If this promotion doesn't come through, I will be very unhappy."

Three months before the Elections came to this town, Horace and Mary McWhinnie were living behind a harness racing park in southern Saskatchewan. Horace worked for a manufacturer of glues and adhesives, and at that time was confident his fortunes were on the rise: the shop foreman was retiring, and Horace, because of his 22 years of seniority, believed he had an inside track on the position. He'd planned to celebrate by taking a trip to the Calgary Stampede.

"Pack your spurs, Mary," Horace said. "We're as good

as on our way."

Mary wasn't so sure.

"My heel itches," she warned. Since childhood Mary's left heel had itched whenever something she didn't expect was about to happen. The first time, when she was six, her brother was born.

Horace was optimistic by nature.

"Let's hope it itches for the better," he said.

But Mary's instincts were correct. A new employee, John Roeneke, got the job.

Roeneke had been a jockey until, in his mid-twenties, he discovered he had an abnormal thyroid. His hands and feet had grown out of all proportion, and he came to blame the whole world for his condition. Beneath his quick whip, Horace, normally a friendly man with a high-pitched laugh that accentuated his rather prominent front teeth, soon began to fade.

As luck would have it, however, the day Roeneke was promoted Mary received a letter from her brother Martin. He wrote to say he'd been felled by arthritis, and desperately needed someone to help him run the family business, Mullins Hardware Supply. Would Horace would be interested?

Mary had her doubts, and didn't immediately tell Horace about the letter. She remembered how it felt to move away from home. And they'd both heard and read about the

political problems in Martin's part of the country. Mary knew Horace didn't wish to get involved in all that.

"There's something wrong with easterners, Mary," he'd once said, only half in jest, while watching a television report concerning the kidnapping and subsequent murder of a provincial government official. "Maybe they're too close to Europe."

But Horace seemed beaten. He'd started walking with a stoop, and Mary missed his shrill laugh. Finally, as he peeled his workshirt from his bowed back one night, Horace confessed:

"I can't brook the man, Mary. I'm getting saddle sores."

"Enough is enough, Horace," Mary said. She showed him the letter. Horace didn't even bother to read it all the way through. The next morning he and Mary gave up the lease on their house in southern Saskatchewan and turned to the east, towards the province, and the town, that Mary had grown up in.

Two months before the Elections came to town, Mary's brother found them a home at the Malory Arms.

"This building was considered charming, once," Mary

told Horace. Their apartment was on the first floor, in the centre block, and their front window looked out on a courtyard, the focal point of which was a cement obelisk. The neighbours they saw said hello.

The week they moved in Mary went to mail a postcard only to find that the mailbox she had seen there the day before had disappeared. When she inquired at the post office, a clerk shrugged and explained it had been blown up in the night.

Mary told Horace what the postal clerk had said, but Horace didn't seem to think it was very important. He was very excited about their new life. After half a lifetime in a factory, he saw the opportunity to prove himself a man of vision. He'd secretly fancied himself something of an innovator ever since he'd won a \$25 prize for devising a whimsical slogan -- "We'd like to teach the world to cling" -- that the glue company back in Saskatchewan adopted for their letterhead. Three days into his job at the hardware store, he discovered the brochures sent out by hardware wholesalers. He took to them like a child to a Christmas catalogue, and would work the pages until they were as soft and pliable as flannel, always on the lookout for a new item. The ink from the paper blackened the whorls of Horace's thumbs.

"You look like you've just been fingerprinted," Mary

said.

For her part, in order that she might better serve the majority of their customers at the hardware store, Mary began taking French lessons at a nearby high school. One night, when classes were cancelled because of a march by some day students who protested the arrest of a colleague suspected of sabotaging federal government property, she walked home with a Mrs. Dunphy, who lived three buildings down the street with her twenty year old son. Both Mary and Mrs. Dunphy were having a difficult time conjugating the future tense, so they quickly became friends. Mrs. Dunphy was separated, and she loved to tell stories about how her husband couldn't get along without her. "Il reviendra," she'd say.

Mrs. Dunphy encouraged Mary to join the Sew and So Club at the Anglican Church. Most of the girls Mary had grown up with had left town when they married, so she was grateful for the chance to join the community. Back in Saskatchewan she'd had trouble making friends, and had never felt as if she'd fit in.

At that first meeting, however, Mary caused an uproar. When she found out that the church was sponsoring a lottery, with a trip to Florida as the first prize, she got up out of her seat and said that she couldn't condone such an enterprise.

"You did the right thing," Horace would later tell her.

But the other women thought Mary, being a newcomer, had no business passing judgement, and one called her impertinent. Mary stuck to her guns, and everyone grew more upset by the minute. Mrs. Dunphy finally suggested that Mary leave. That was the last time they spoke to each other.

Mary was very hurt.

"All things considered, outside work hours maybe it would be best if we kept to ourselves," she said.

Horace, on the other hand, was an immediate success. Claiming to be inspired by the details of everyday life, he introduced plastic plumbing pipe and washerless faucets into the town. When he painted their spare bedroom, and encountered an unusual number of dust balls, he went through his catalogues and discovered a paint brush that cleaned the strip of wall in the path of its bristles. Horace was particularly amazed by this device. All someone had done was put two good ideas together. The first shipment sold out in a week.

"All it takes is a little imagination," Horace said.

After her falling out with the women of the Sew and So club, Mary needed something to keep her busy. She worked out a deal with the trust company that administered the Malory Arms. In exchange for tending the courtyard -- the

manager of the trust company mentioned that he'd like to see the obelisk taken away -- and replacing burnt out light bulbs in the stairwells and hallways, the McWhinnie's rent was reduced.

"If nothing else, I want control over my own corner of the world," she explained.

Mary was particularly concerned with the courtyard.

"We'll be staying home a lot now, so I want it looking nice," she told Horace. "That's what the owners of the Malory Arms pay us to do."

She had never liked the cement obelisk that decorated the courtyard of the Malory Arms; at one time it had even given her nightmares. It was painted lime green, and what looked like a wooden leg projected from its peak.

Over the years the wooden leg had decomposed. The thigh area was riddled with holes and crawling with fat black ants, and someone had carved the initials of a local radical organization into the shin.

"This will never do," Mary said.

"Agreed," Horace replied.

"It's a question of taste," Mary concluded.

The next day Horace brought two Mountie statsons home from the hardware store.

"No need to fear going outside, Mary," he explained.

"Here we've got all-weather headgear that will keep us

protected from both rain and shine."

Horace and Mary put their stetsons on, pulled the drawstrings taut, and went out to the courtyard. Covering the obelisk with a sheet of polyethylene, Horace and Mary went at it with sledgehammers, and pounded everything but the leg, which Mary dared not touch, into the earth.

"Now what?" Mary asked.

"I'm afraid I'm stumped," Horace said.

Hats in hand, Horace and Mary gazed down at the rubble for a long time. Mary picked up a handful of cement dust.

"A temporary failure of our imaginations, Horace," she said.

It was Horace's fascination with hardware catalogues that solved the problem of the courtyard.

One May morning, while he was at work, Mary's heel itched terribly. While she soaked it in salts a catalogue from a hardware notions manufacturer in Bangor, Maine was delivered to the apartment. Mary flipped through the pages.

As she reached page 113, the itching suddenly ceased.

Mary phoned Horace and told him to come home right away.

When he arrived Mary was pacing the halls. She'd torn

the page from the catalogue, and held it up to Horace's eyes.

"They're perfect," Mary said.

"Do you think so?" Horace asked. He picked up the telephone.

"Yes," Mary said. "Oh yes."

One month before the Elections came to town, Horace dialed Bangor.

The lawn ornaments arrived in a single crate, which had to be picked up at the customs office. If she'd had her way, Mary would have opened it right there. When they got home Horace lugged the crate into the courtyard. Before he even had a chance to straighten up Mary was prying off the lid.

She was even more pleased with the real thing than she was with the pictures in the hardware catalogue. Lying atop a bed of shredded newspaper, huddled in each others arms, were Jack & Jill. They were sold as a unit, joined as they were by flesh coloured cord that passed through eyelets in their wrists.

"It's all right," Mary cooed, "the worst is over."

The figures were expensive, but extremely life-like.

Jack & Jill had blue glass eyes and held, he with the fingers of his left hand, she in the palm of her right, a yellow plastic bucket. The material with which they were made was elastic and tepid to the touch, like genuine skin. According to Horace's calculations, at twenty-five paces it took a keener eye than his to tell them apart from the real thing.

It took Horace and Mary almost an hour to set them up in the courtyard. Jack & Jill were smiling and Horace arranged them so they faced the street. Mary filled Jack & Jill's pail with water because she was afraid it might be flipped in a breeze. Then, sitting in their living room behind a partially drawn blind, Horace and Mary waited to see the neighbours' reactions. When Bauer came home he dropped a penny in the bucket and made a wish. Mrs. Hamilton patted Jack's head. Her friend Miss Shufelt stopped to talk.

They watched Jack & Jill from their living room window until well after midnight. More people passed through the courtyard, and most stopped to look. In the moonlight the figures were even more realistic. From time to time Mary believed she saw one or the other move. Horace couldn't disagree.

After Horace and Mary went to bed there were thunderstorms. Mary wanted to go out to check on Jack &

Jill, but Horace assured her that they'd be all right. As soon as the sun rose the next morning, however, Mary's fears were confirmed.

Jack & Jill's clothes were ruined, the bucket had blown out of their hands, and Jill's hair was knotted right down to the roots.

"At least they're both still standing," Horace said.

Mary noticed that Jack's baby finger was stretched across the exposed knuckles of Jill's right hand.

"Look at that," she said.

"He's protecting her," Horace laughed. "In case they should fall."

Three weeks before the Elections came to town, debates raged. Both political parties claimed to know best what the God-given rights of the people should be, and each political party's list of God-given rights was different. Many people in town began to align themselves with one side or the other. The *News Leader* kept a running tab.

Horace and Mary put together a care kit for Jack & Jill.

Each morning they put on their hats and took a knapsack into the courtyard. Mary would ask Jack & Jill if they'd

spent a pleasant evening, and fill them in on the news of the day.

"Another mailbox bombed," she would say. "And because of the Elections the Queen's visit has been postponed indefinitely."

Horace would laugh and ask Mary if she'd be surprised if one day they answered her. He bought Jack & Jill red flannel shirts and clear plastic raincoats which, when not needed, were tucked away in the bib pockets of their denim overalls. He also invented a device with which he pulled the dirt and dust from their clothes, affixing scotch tape, sticky side up, to a paint roller. With damp blue terry cloths Mary would wipe Jack and Jill's faces, and with comb and brush she'd tease Jill's curly hair. The sun bleached it so white that it looked like a dandelion about to burst. Horace worried about hitting one of them with the lawn mower, so Mary added a pair of cloth-cutting shears to the kit, and clipped the grass that grew around and between their rubber feet. With the shears she also made Jack & Jill miniature felt versions of the Mountie stetsons she and Horace wore.

"I think they give the lawn real character," Horace said. He'd decided to order some to put up for sale in the store.

"And a certain *je ne sais quoi*, too," Mary added,

putting her French lessons to good use.

One morning Horace spoke to Jack & Jill first.

"We're in for a bit of excitement," he told them.

A headline in the *News Leader* quoted the leadership candidate of the party favoured to win the province as stating: "We'll be bringing the Elections to your town." According to the paper, he was planning a walk-past along the road by the river's edge so he could formally announce his intention, once elected, to replace the river with the kind of sewer system that better befit a technologically advanced people. The promise, if made official, seemed sure to win over the town.

Over the next few days, because so many local organizations wanted to get involved, it became clear that the walk-past would have to be a parade.

The parade was scheduled to pass right in front of the Malory Arms. The day before the Elections came to town a platform was set up at the water's edge, in full view of Horace and Mary's front steps. A city works crew assembled refreshment booths, and technicians laid microphone cables and hung loudspeakers in the trees surrounding the platform. Media from all over the province were scheduled to attend. It was going to be like a carnival.

That night Horace and Mary McWhinnie watched *Nitely News*. The producers had included a shot of the Malory Arms,

and there in the courtyard were Jack & Jill. As soon as the broadcast was over, Horace and Mary went to bed, wanting to miss none of the next day's activities.

All through the night Mary's left heel itched and she had terrible nightmares. She would wonder later why she hadn't immediately realized that something was wrong.

Just after ten on Saturday morning, with a brass band and majorette escort, the future premier's motorcade drew up to the stage. The mayor, in his Chevrolet, followed close behind. A large crowd had already gathered, many with lunch bags and folding chairs, and as the premier and his platform party seated themselves, they watched a marching band from a high school in the next town and a float carrying a man in a cage pass by. From their front steps, Horace and Mary, binoculars raised, looked over the heads of the crowd, and waited for the speeches to begin. Some of their neighbours were out too, even Bauer and his wife, who were dressed to go sailing, in nylon windbreakers and canvas topsiders.

"Something is missing," Mary whispered.

"They'll begin soon," Horace replied.

After the mayor gave his opening remarks, the leader of the party began his speech. He said it was the god-given right of a people to be the masters in their own house. Then he added, with a grin, that he was sure his wife, Yvette, wouldn't mind. Many people laughed at his joke.

A group of schoolchildren waving baby blue banners marched up to the reviewing stand as the man who would be premier spoke of throwing off the yokes of oppression and taking control of one's destiny.

"We have a chance to take the future by the throat," he said. Someone in the crowd had a trumpet, and blew a fanfare normally heard only at hockey games.

"But something is missing," Mary repeated.

"I don't know about that," Horace said. "He sure seems able to stir up this crowd."

The schoolchildren waved their banners higher. The future leader then stated what most people had come to hear: rivers were meant for swimming, boating, and fishing, not for depositing raw sewage in.

"It can't be," Mary whispered.

As the crowd cheered she grabbed Horace's arm and pulled him into the courtyard. Jack & Jill's pail had been filled with fresh manure. Someone had torn the buttons from Jill's shirt and drawn a picture of a hand cupping the rounded nubs of her breasts. And there were two yellowed footprints in the grass where Jack had once stood.

The celebrations by the river continued until dusk.

Mary washed Jill and mended her blouse; Horace cleaned and bleached her pail.

"I can't believe it," Mary said over and over again. "I can't believe it."

"It's just a prank, Mary," Horace said.

Horace was willing to forget the incident, and had almost convinced Mary to do the same. But the next morning, when he opened the front door to get his paper, he found a package.

A note inside the package warned that they had better keep the rest of their *famille* out of sight: she was an eyesore, represented imported culture, and was an example of the worst kind of cultural imperialism. The note was stapled to one of Jack's fingers. *Comité Contre la Colonialisme*, it was signed.

Horace phoned Mary's brother and told him he wouldn't be going in to the store.

"This is scaring the Dickens out of Mary," Horace told him.

Horace brought Jill inside the house and closed her in the spare room, away from the window. Then he telephoned the police, who came over and filled out a report. When Horace pressed, they admitted that the crime seemed like a kidnapping, but didn't take any of it very seriously.

Mary scribbled in a crossword puzzle book, and didn't

say a single word all day.

"Funny things are happening around here," Horace told Martip. "If you care to look at them that way, anyways."

That night Mary broke her silence. She began to cry, and she cried for so long that, the next morning, she woke up hoarse.

On the second day following what Horace and Mary were calling an abduction, they recieved a box filled with Jack's hair. This time the kidnappers warned them not to contact the police.

"That'll be the last time we open our front door to get a look at an election parade," Horace said.

On the third day, one of Jack's ears arrived by courier. There was no note.

"It's not safe to go outside anymore, in this town," Horace said.

Mary insisted that Horace hide Jill in the closet of the spare room. Then she took to her bed. Twice Horace looked in on her. Both times her eyes were wide open, but she didn't respond to his voice.

"She just lay there, on her stomach, all spread out across the bed," Horace told Mary's brother. "As if she'd been hit on the head with a stick."

The Elections were held and, as the media had foreseen, the candidate that had come to this town won. For three days, cars filled with supporters drove up and down the town's streets, horns blaring, celebrating the event. And for three nights, some of them stopped outside the Malory Arms and flashed their headlights at Horace and Mary's front window. Horace and Mary sat behind their drawn blinds, and jumped every time a shaft of light pierced the darkness of the room.

The ear was the last they heard from the kidnapers. But word of the kidnaping had spread. A magazine in the province's capital, *La Vie en Nord*, offered a reward if the perpetrators of the abduction would come forward. The editors were convinced that their struggle, and the action they saw fit to take, would make an interesting feature story. Within a week the reward was collected.

"Two weeks after the Elections left town a full colour picture of the smiling kidnapers appeared on *La Vie En Nord*'s cover, below the bold caption: *Les Jeunes Croises*. The kidnapers claimed they were out on the night before the Elections came to town only to encourage people to make their houses present a pleasant face to the street. But when they saw the lawn ornaments in the courtyard of the Malory Arms, "a lightbulb was opened in our heads."

What upset Horace and Mary the most was the fact that the journalists had interviewed the neighbours, and the neighbours had agreed to speak.

"I kept expecting to look out my window one morning and find they'd been joined in the courtyard by a little black jockey, or a flock of pink flamingoes," commented Lambert, a young man in the next block of the Malory Arms.

The new leader of the province was also interviewed. He wished to assure the population that his party could not officially condone such an unkind act. It was essentially inelegant, he said, but added that the lawn ornaments had to be seen, it was unavoidable, as cultural irritants.

"They are like a piece of glass in our eyes," he explained, "and can anyone reasonable deny it is the God-given right of a people to try to take that glass out?"

One of the kidnappers regretted that the McWhinnies were upset so much by it all.

"But it was just a joke," he said. "After all, they weren't real. They aren't humans."

Horace read the article aloud to Mary.

"As far as I'm concerned, I'd just as soon be anything but a human," Mary said. "I'm ashamed to be a human."

After the celebrations died down and the town returned to normal, the trust company that managed the Malory Arms contacted the McWhinnies by mail. They said they regretted the incident, and promised to look into the possibility of compensation as soon as possible. They also told Horace and Mary they thought a flower bed, perhaps filled with fleurs-de-lys, would do nicely in the newly vacated space.

Horace thought it would be best if they simply tried to forget everything that had happened.

"The worst is over," he said.

Mary felt as if she'd been personally assaulted, but was willing to admit that, in all the commotion surrounding the Elections, perhaps she'd lost her perspective, perhaps things had been blown out of all proportion.

Nevertheless, she kept Jill hidden inside the spare room closet.

Mary was working in the courtyard one afternoon, preparing the earth for a flower bed, and she heard a crash. When she got inside the apartment she saw there was glass all over the floor of the spare room. A Mountie stetson lay up against the closet door, balanced on its brim. Someone had thrown it through the window. It was brand new; whoever had thrown it hadn't removed the price sticker, which bore the logo of Mullins Hardware Supply.

Horace and Mary quit their responsibilities at the

Malory Arms and took over the apartment above the hardware store. It was tiny and they had to either store or throw out many of their possessions, but it overlooked the parking lot, which was generally well-lit. Horace believed that, should a situation arise, it could be easily defended.

On moving day Mary decided to take Jill with them. She and Horace went to the closet in the spare room.

He opened the door. At first he thought Jill wasn't there. He switched on the light. The instant Horace and Mary spotted her they thought they saw the expression on Jill's face change. She crouched in the corner, her hands white at the knuckles, tightly wrapped around the handle of her pail. She appeared absolutely terrified, her mouth and eyes as wide as the moon.

"Oh my god," Mary said, "she looks as though she expects to be shot."

"Come, Mary," Horace said.

He slammed the door shut and locked it. Mary took his arm. As they turned away, they heard Jill's yellow plastic bucket clatter to the floor. It was a long time before they were able to convince themselves that they had just been imagining things.

The Mulberry Tree

After the Elections left town and the superintendant's apartment in the Malory Arms was vacated, Avery and Louie Michaels moved in. Mr. Michaels had recently retired and, because he'd worked since his teens, he looked forward to being able to care for the courtyard. Mrs. Michaels was five years older than her husband, and looked forward to some rest.

The Michaelises knew nothing of what had happened at the Malory Arms before their arrival. During their first few days in the apartment they busied themselves with unpacking and getting settled. Only after they'd been there a week did Mr. Michaels attempt to pry open the locked door to the spare room closet.

Inside they discovered the life-sized figure of the

little girl. She wore a red-flannel shirt, which was torn into shreds at the chest, held on to a yellow plastic bucket with both hands, and crouched against the far wall of the closet. She looked as if she was trying to hide. When a neighbour explained that the girl had been in the courtyard during the Elections and was a target for politically motivated vandalism, Mr. Michaels judged it would be best for all concerned if the courtyard was left alone, at least until the spring.

He also suggested to his wife that they dispose of the figure of the girl. But Mrs. Michaels had been charmed.

Because she had been ill, Mr. Michaels didn't press the issue. Earlier in the summer while holidaying in Prince Edward Island, Mrs. Michaels had caught a slight cold that she didn't seem able to shake. It had hung on for so long that she carried a box of tissues with her wherever she went, even if that was just from one room to another. The house was always littered with tissues. They lay crumpled on the floors, table tops, and underneath chairs, and looked like the heads of pink carnations. Retrieving and disposing of the tissues had become such a part of Mr. Michaels' daily life that he'd begun to imagine how they must look plummeting down the building's pipes, winding through the sewers beneath the city streets, and finally bursting from the earth and into the river.

For a while the Michaelses left the figure of the girl where they'd found her, but over the winter her presence in the spare room closet began to haunt Mrs. Michaels. Each time she thought of the terrified expression on the girl's face, or merely happened to pass by the closet, she grew short of breath and her throat made deep gurgling sounds, as if it was full of water. Despite herself, she took to referring to the girl as Annie. Twice she discussed with her husband ways in which they might make Annie feel less afraid.

"There must be something we can do for her," she'd say.

As the winter wore on her preoccupation with the girl increased. One day while her husband was out, Mrs. Michaels took Annie from the closet, cleaned her up, and measured her. Then, with a length of Asian silk she'd been saving for years, she began to sew Annie a blouse.

Mrs. Michaels had had a fondness for silk ever since Mr. Michaels had first courted her. He'd taken her to a little theatre production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado*. They'd driven to the theatre in a borrowed Hillman that had red leather seats as smooth as polished rosewood. She remembered that the theatre hummed with low voices before the play began, and twice Mr. Michaels' hand had accidentally brushed, and paused atop, her own.

The instant the curtains opened she was dazzled by the

sight of the costumes. They were yellow and blue and vermilion and the silk audibly shimmered. Her vision was blurred for the rest of the show, and the stage looked like the surface of a pond, ruffling in a breeze.

Mr. Michaels didn't say anything when he found out what his wife was doing, but when he saw her sitting and talking with Annie in the living room one day, he decided that the girl would have to be sent away. He contacted a cousin who had just bought her own home in a suburb of Rochester, N.Y., and she agreed to take her.

Mrs. Michaels protested, saying it was almost like putting up a child for adoption. She even wept, but Mr. Michaels was insistent. Finally she agreed. Before Annie was shipped away, however, Mrs. Michaels removed the red silk blouse, folded it into a tiny square, and hid it inside the lid of her jewelry box. After Annie was gone, and whenever Mr. Michaels was out doing the groceries or running errands, she would unfold the silk, press it with a smooth wooden block that she'd heated in the oven, and then once more secret it away.

By springtime, Mrs. Michaels was confined to the apartment and Mr. Michaels was anxious to do a little work

outdoors. He thought the courtyard needed some colour, so he asked his wife if she'd like him to plant carnations.

"You could watch them grow from the front window, Louie," he said.

Mrs. Michaels told her husband that she'd like him to plant a mulberry tree instead.

"I don't know if that's a good idea," Mr. Michaels said. "I don't even know if it's possible."

"Maybe it isn't," Mrs. Michaels replied. "But maybe that doesn't matter."

Mr. Michaels had heard that his neighbour, a young man named Lambert, was studying landscape architecture. He caught up with him in the courtyard one day and asked his advice. Lambert was showing his dog a trick, but paused long enough to tell Mr. Michaels that the tree wouldn't grow.

"Moraceae," he said. "Pantropical. This climate is hardly ideal. The poor silkworms! Did you know that in China they used to execute anyone who exported the eggs?"

"Mrs. Michaels wants the tree," Mr. Michaels said.

Lambert gestured towards the small patch of cracked grey earth at the centre of the courtyard.

"It would be like planting an orchid in cement."

Mr. Michaels chipped at a corner of the patch with the heel of his shoe.

"She believes it can grow," he said.

"This world is terribly inhospitable," Lambert insisted. Lambert's dog barked.

Mr. Michaels told his wife what Lambert had said, and asked her again if there was anything else she'd like him to plant.

"It will grow if we want it too," she replied.

So late the next evening, working in the moonlight that the apartment building cradled in its wings, Mr. Michaels planted the tree. Lambert and his dog came out of their apartment to watch.

"It's not as if she's asking for the moon," Mr. Michaels said.

A week passed and it appeared that Lambert had been right; the leaves on the mulberry tree browned at the tips, and the bark peeled off its branches like old paint. As much as Mr. Michaels worked, the ground remained as impermeable as cement, and the water he poured from the yellow plastic bucket that had once belonged to Annie collected in pools at its base. Their next door neighbour, Harriet Hamilton, suggested that he drop two tea bags into the water. The tea stained the earth around the tree a dark brown, but its roots still didn't take hold.

Each day, while he worked, Mrs. Michaels sat by the front window, waiting.

Then one night, after he'd finished picking up all of his wife's crumpled tissues and seen her to bed, Mr. Michaels went to the kitchen. He was making himself a cup of Ovaltine when he heard a low rumbling sound that he thought was coming from his wife's chest. The lid on the sugar bowl, which was black and shaped like a top hat, tipped.

Mr. Michaels hurried to the bedroom to check on his wife. He whispered her name, but she seemed to be asleep.

The next morning a man on the radio said there had been an earth tremor the night before, and the water table had been affected. The river had dropped over three feet and some of the local people had risen early and were scavenging a newly bared section of river bottom. One man had reportedly found a 1957 Hillman with red leather seats.

Mr. Michaels looked out his front window. The earth around his tree had been furrowed and upturned. And poking up through the earth, as if it had been planted there, was a crumpled pink tissue.

Mr. Michaels went out to tend to the tree. The water from his yellow plastic bucket rushed, like a magnet to the pole, through the furrows and into the soil. Within the week its roots wound themselves deep into the earth, and were feeding off the rich river runoff.

From her place by the window, propped up by pillows,

Mrs. Michaels saw the mulberry tree grow.

One morning not long afterwards Mrs. Michaels woke and found it nearly impossible to catch her breath. When Mr. Michaels rose and asked her what she'd like for breakfast, she told him that she'd just as soon stay in bed for a while. Towards noon he offered to carry her into the front room and set up a cot, but Mrs. Michaels said no, it wasn't necessary. When she coughed she felt as if her throat was being cleared of an ocean.

Each day Mr. Michaels tended to his tree and took care of his wife. Sometimes he ran errands or went to see Mrs. Hamilton, who lately had been suffering from dizzy spells. But he felt badly that his wife couldn't get up to look at the mulberry. After every errand or visit he'd bring back reports, some of which he made up.

"Mrs. Hamilton says it's a lovely tree, Louie. Even Lambert has said so. And it is. It's marvellous. Soon I'll get you out to see it up close."

"You don't have to," Mrs. Michaels would say. "I can hear it."

Mr. Michaels spent as much time with her as he could. By the end of a day he was exhausted, but Mrs. Michaels

never seemed to sleep. He asked her about it once and she smiled and said she got plenty of rest, that he was just being silly to worry about it, so he never mentioned it again.

Each night before falling to sleep, Mr. Michaels would look over at his wife, whose eyes were wide and focussed on the ceiling, and ask her if she would be alright by herself for the next few hours.

She would tell him she'd be fine, that she felt fine, and would wait for his breathing to slow and deepen. Then, after the rest of the building was silent and swamped in a blackness as thick as fur, Louie Michaels would lie awake, surrounded by crumpled pink tissues, and hear the leaves of the mulberry tree shimmering. She would hear the silkworms edging their way along the leaves, and for a moment now and again she could catch and hold her breath and listen to the sound of the silkworms munching, munching her the most elegant silk gown the world had ever seen.

Concerning the Egg

Simon tugs the front door of the greystone building closed, shutting out the rain that skitters off the herringbone brickwork of the courtyard, and lugs his groceries up the three flights of stairs to his apartment. A neighbour, Bauer, is wandering in the hallways. Simon asks him who he's looking for, then shows him out.

In the kitchen, water seeps through the wall beneath the flooded window sill, feeding a mottled, sponge-like stain. Simon sets his bags on the table and stuffs paper towels along the ledge. The wettest bag immediately tips over and *Casserole Cookery*, a book he'd picked up at the checkout counter, slides onto the floor.

It lands on its spine and falls open at a recipe for egg and bean casserole. Simon looks it over quickly, then

gets the ingredients ready.

* * *

Through cookbooks, Simon first learned to read. Late one afternoon, still a year before Simon began school, it occurred to his mother that it would be handy to have an assistant in the kitchen, someone to recite recipes while she manipulated ingredients. Louise Aiken's *Canadian Girl's Cookbook* was Simon's primer.

It was also through cookbooks that Simon first learned of the egg's infinite possibilities. In a general way, eggs were a vital part of any well-orchestrated meal, necessary in cakes and meringues, breadings and batters. Even their shells had a purpose when it came to brewing a mellow cup of coffee.

But eggs really shone, Simon soon learned, in a solo role: in Eggs Benedict, souffles, and timbales, or simply boiled, poached, fried, coddled, and devilled.

* * *

Simon is reading about the latest luke-warm success of

the City Symphony in the Sunday paper when the oven-timer buzzes. He shuts down the gas, stretches on tiptoe for the asbestos mitts that are tucked away in a cupboard above the refrigerator, then squats to take the casserole from the oven.

The breadcrumb and egg crust is a deep shade of gold, on the verge of bubbling and ready to burst. The tip of a bean peeks through the surface and the scent of mushroom sauce fills the air. Simon spoons a serving onto his plate, wipes a bit of moisture from the creases in his forehead with a mitted hand, and sits down to eat.

So this is it, he thinks. He scoops up a forkful of the food and puffs repeatedly at the rising steam.

Tomorrow she'll be here.

* * *

The odor of the casserole follows Simon as he goes downstairs to retrieve his rare recording of *Show Boat*. Lambert is standing in the middle of his living room trying out a new trick on his old dog.

"Something smells delicious," Lambert says. Lambert is studying landscape architecture, but to support himself while he is in school he puts on magic shows for birthday

parties, anniversaries, and Bar Mitzvahs.

"Come and watch this," he says, taking Simon by the elbow and leading him into the room.

The huge dog sits and waits for them. He has an off-white coat that approximates the colour of the deep pile carpeting in the room, and mismatched eyes: one sky blue, the other brown, as earth.

"Finished with my Robeson?" Simon asks.

Lambert dangles a rubber newspaper in front of the dog's snout, snaps his fingers, and makes the toy paper disappear up the sleeve of his kimono. The dog closes his mouth and sniffs.

"Got it all on tape. It's wonderful," Lambert says, "but it does make my Leon howl." The dog walks slowly around Lambert. Suddenly he stops, cocks his ears, and plucks the rubber paper from Lambert's robe.

"This trick isn't quite perfected yet."

"So I see," Simon says.

"Perhaps you don't realize how rare a truly great sleight-of-hand artist is," Lambert offers.

The dog stares up at Simon, blinks his blue eye, and runs to the corner of the room, the newspaper firmly clamped in his jaws. Lambert crouches beside him.

"That's a pretty boy," he says. The dog claws at the wall, looking for a place to bury his paper.

"I try everything out on him first. And I was very careful," Lambert says, pointing to the album. "Voices like his are gifts from the gods. Voices like his are magic."

"You may be right," Simon replies.

The dog keeps clawing at the wall.

* * *

Simon flicks off the table lamp and stands perfectly still, listening to the rushing sound, like air escaping from a bellows, that the sudden disappearance of light makes. Then he takes a careful step; in the first few seconds of darkness, the furniture in the living room has vanished.

Guided by memory and shadows, Simon creeps across to the window seat. He blinks rapidly to accustom his eyes to the dull-edged outlines surrounding him. It is a warm summer night, and scores of shadflies up from the river clot the sky around the streetlights and cling to his window screens like shreds of yellow newsprint.

Whistling softly, Simon slides along the polished pine bench that runs half the length of the wall. A feeble breeze, damp as a woman's breath, glances off his cheek, and Simon presses his face to the screen. A taxicab pulls up to

the courtyard steps, the driver leaning on his horn. The Michaels' appear in the courtyard and make their way tentatively through a gang of children who are chattering shrilly at the foot of the steps. He is supporting her about the waist, she is clutching a handful of tissues to her mouth. The horn stops honking, the Michaels' get in, and the taxi drives out of sight.

Simon eases the window shut and fiddles with the cafe shutters so as to block out the light from the street.

He moves over to the wall unit and runs his fingers along the row of records, as if he is reading Braille.

* * *

Simon has only one dictionary on his bookshelves, a *Concise Oxford*. Later, he will buy them by the bagful. They will be of a specialized variety, and Simon will become something of a collector.

* * *

Simon presses button that sets the tonearm in motion and sits back on his heels. The needle floats down

to the record surface and, after a slight hesitation, finds its way into the grooves. The record spins around once, and a sliver of shuttered light catches a warp in its surface; twice, and the light catches his eye; a third time, and Simon raises his hands to ear level, cocks his head, and lets his eyelids droop. Then -- at precisely the right instant -- Simon swings his arms down and forward and conducts the opening notes to the *Original Movie Soundtrack of Show Boat*:

Ol' Man River
Dat Ol' Man River

Robeson sings in a voice that shakes the room, in a voice as deep and massive as the river itself. Simon shivers, lies back, and lets the music wash over him:

He must know somethin'
But don't say nothin'...

As Robeson's voice weaves with the waterline on the riverbank, Simon grins, closes his eyes, and lets the river lap at his toes, while on the far shore, Robeson sits with his hands clasped about one bent knee and gazes out over the world. Simon watches Robeson grasp the notes between his jaws, suck them deep into his chest and then, like a conjurer pulling rabbits from a top hat, set them free again, transfigured into warm wet objects that float across the river to roll around in the palms of Simon's hands.

Simon starts to sing, stretching the arteries in his

neck as taut as boat's cables, and Robeson's eyes widen as he builds towards a crescendo:

*He keeps on rollin'
Along....*

Silence at once fills the room. Simon feels a pressure on his eardrums, as if he were underwater. He lights a cigarette and collapses onto the sofa, happy and comfortable as a note in Robeson's chest.

The dog downstairs growls, in a voice almost human.

Simon rubs the smoke from his eyes.

* * *

Simon dangles his elbows over the wrought-iron railing of his balcony, gazes up at the clear black sky, and works at a shred of lettuce trapped in his molars with the tip of his tongue. The apartment building is made up of three blocks joined in the shape of a horseshoe; balconies ring each of its three storeys and overlook the courtyard, in the centre of which grows a mulberry tree.

An airplane pops up over the horizon beyond the river, too far away for the drone of its engines to be heard. On its wings, like cat's eyes, blink green lights. Simon recalls the nightmare cat he'd known who'd come and sit on the outside sill of his bedroom window to stare at him. The

only place Simon could hide was directly beneath that same window.

Obviously couldn't see through walls, Simon muses.

A doorhinge squeeks and Simon shifts his attention from the airplane to the west block of the building. Bauer walks out onto his third storey balcony and cranes his neck towards the sky. He'd lost his wife months before in a boating accident, but still expects to find her.

"Might be a satellite, or perhaps a falling star," Bauer shouts, pointing to the plane.

"Lovely night," Simon says.

Bauer sets up his homemade telescope and spreads a map out on the metal table at his side. Then he raises his hand and frames the moon between his thumb and index finger. It looks as though it's being held in the hinged jaws of a bird.

"Three quarters of the universe is in darkness," Bauer says. He bends down and squints into the telescope.

"Not driving tonight?" Simon asks.

"But it is to be hoped," Bauer continues, "that this is on the wane." He steps back from the telescope and runs his hands across the map.

The plane draws closer, then flips onto its side and veers towards the airport.

Bauer rests his head in his hands and begins to weep.

"Why are you hiding?" he says.

Simon says goodnight and goes back inside.

* * *

Just after sunrise on a Monday morning, Madelaine crowds through the doorway, arms wrapped around paint cans, brushes, and rags. Her brother and a friend struggle up the stairs with additional supplies. At the end of the week, Simon will ask Madelaine, with shouts and hand signals, if he reminds her of a male Helen Keller. Madelaine will reply by moving her lips, not making a sound.

On the first day, Simon's bedroom and study exchange identities.

"Musical rooms," Madelaine says.

On the second day, new carpeting is laid in the study and the bedroom walls are painted pale orange.

"Tangerine," Madelaine says.

On the third day Madelaine's brother asks Simon how long it's been since the house was last painted. Simon says he can't remember. Madelaine's brother frowns, rubs his hand across the kitchen wall and shakes a warning finger at Simon. His friend is cleaning the brushes and doesn't say a word, but it seems to Simon that he might be giggling.

Simon asks Madelaine what the next day's transformations will be.

* * *

Madelaine's hand will be poised above the mixing bowl, a cracked eggshell pinched between her fingers.

"Do something," she'll whisper. "Can't you do something."

* * *

Saturday the furniture is rolled back into the living room. Madelaine arranges two chairs by the wall where the sofa once was, nudges the sofa against the wall where the wall-unit had been, and lines up the stereo opposite. Sketches and prints are rehung about a complicated tapestry, and around noon the last ashtray is set in place on the corner of the glass-topped coffee table.

Madelaine collapses into an armchair and grins.

"Happy?"

"Now it's mine, too," she says.

Madelaine stumbles into the bedroom and sleeps through

the entire afternoon, evening, and night. On Sunday, she's awake long enough to eat a bowl of split-pea soup and take a quick bath; then she turns on the TV, lies down on the sofa, and tries to watch *Double Indemnity*. But before Fred MacMurray slaps Barbara Stanwyck's face, she's asleep.

For the next few days Simon gropes about the apartment. Only the kitchen escaped major rearrangement, and Simon spends as much time there as he can, tinkering with old familiar recipes. In the living room, he waves his hands at the air behind his back when he bends to sit, making sure there's something there.

* * *

Whose fault is it? Simon will later wonder. Mine, or the egg's?

Which came first?

* * *

Simon and Madelaine live most of the next week in bed. She shows Simon the faint white scar notching the web of skin between her left thumb and forefinger; he tells

Madelaine about his first cooking triumph, Brome Lake Duckling. In the heat and humidity of mid-August, Madelaine's black hair thickens and fans out across the sheets, leaving a trail of tiny dark creases on the pillowcase. Simon's moustache curls around his lip, beads of moisture clinging to the tips of each hair.

Despite a neighbour's complaint about the noise, they keep all their windows open, but the air inside their apartment still does not to stir. Madelaine expects fish to come swimming through the air and Simon says he could wring water from his bones. A fan swirls the heat around and there's a bath towel on the night table with which they dry each other. The sheets are sweet with perspiration and they're startled to find how easily they slip from each other's arms.

* * *

Most evenings, Simon prepares dinner. He loves the way Madelaine eats, the way she cradles each morsel of food on her tongue, the way she nudges it slowly around the inside of her mouth, the way she puffs her cheeks out slightly as she swallows. One menu: eggplant farcie, smoked Atlantic salmon, and an overchilled chablis. Madelaine raves. The

next night: thinly sliced prosciutto on honeydew melons, an entree of veal timbales, with a dessert of rhubarb crisp smothered in cream. Madelaine cheers.

They eat in the bedroom, using the mattress for a table, and leave their empty dishes piled atop the chest of drawers until the next day. Simon is flattered by Madelaine's appetites.

* * *

Madelaine insists that they weigh themselves every morning. She's happy to find that any weight they may have put on at dinner has completely melted away.

* * *

Simon and Madelaine lie on canvas lounge chairs and drink glass after glass of rum and iced tea, which they pour from a sterling silver pitcher that sweats over the coffee table. The sofa is upholstered in wool and makes them itch. Simon turns on the television and they settle in to watch a human affairs program.

The opening feature is narrated by a lanky blonde woman

in her late thirties and concerns a couple who have thirteen children and live in twin house trailers on the fringes of the Arizona desert. The father works in a nearby town as a systems analyst, while his wife stays home and takes care of the children. They raise their own beef cattle, keep a small herd of milkers, a flock of chickens, and an assortment of cats, dogs, and lizards. All of the children are adopted and are either physically or mentally handicapped. Those that are able play touch football, and the rest cheer from the sidelines.

The interviewer singles out a younger girl who has curly brown hair combed across her forehead, held in place with a red ribbon. The girl appears smaller than anyone else, and a slow camera pan reveals she was born without legs. Her natural mother, the interviewer explains, was probably an addict.

Madelaine brings her hands up to her face. Simon wonders if he should change the channel.

The interviewer asks the small girl what she wants out of life. The girl's father looks off somewhere to the left of the camera. The small girl tells the interviewer of her secret wish is to one day wear the patent leather party shoes that she keeps in a box beneath her bed.

A tabby cat jumps up on the bed and paws at her high-buttoned blue dress. The girl laughs and explains that

he's just sleepy.

The cat hides beneath the girl's dress.

"Stop it..."

Simon gets up and turns off the set.

* * *

After Madelaine's skin dries out, her body shrinking, Simon will start collecting dictionaries of fable, myth, and symbol.

All he can get his hands on.

* * *

Simon snatches up a palmful of crushed eggshells from the Tupperware bowl, fills the glass carafe with ice-water, and grinds up a mix of French and Columbian beans. Re-tying his dressing gown sash, he pads to the living room and waits for the smell of brewing coffee to wake Madelaine.

The late morning sun arranges itself over the courtyard, its rays enclosed in parenthesis by the east and west blocks of the building. A few gulls have wandered up from the river and hover about the street, searching for

stray garbage. One of them lands and is immediately pounced on by half a dozen others.

Simon leans over the back of the window seat. A boy is playing in the courtyard. He is in a chest harness attached to a long leash that is tied to the mulberry tree. His parents, sitting on the cement stairs, are eating spoonfuls of chocolate pudding from green tins. The boy makes an imaginary telescope out of his curled left fist.

Then Simon sees Bauer stepping out of the front door of his building. The boy puts his eye to the telescope and peers across the courtyard.

"Why are you hiding," the boy says in a deep voice.

Bauer stops and hunts for the voice. The boy has camouflaged himself in the branches of the tree.

Simon giggles.

"Quick, come and see this..."

Simon turns back to find the boy's telescope aimed at him. Bauer is still trying to locate the voice and is looking up. So are the boy's parents, still spooning pudding.

Simon slams the shutters closed. He fumbles with his bathrobe.

Madelaine laughs.

"Who's watching who?" she says.

* * *

In one of the dictionaries of symbol Simon picks up, he will read that the egg, in heiroglyphs, stood for potentiality.

In another he will read that Pliny had a Druid's egg, whose properties ensured he would come out on top in any contest, and also be courted by those in power.

He'll read that the alchemists believed the egg was the repository for all matter and thought.

He'll read that the Egyptians were awed to a point of frenzy when they realized that, within the eggshell, a secret animal growth took place.

He'll read that the ancient Chinese believed man had been hatched from an egg and dropped from heaven.

He'll read that the Hindus and Phoenicians claimed the world was egg-shaped and had itself been hatched from an egg made by a Creator fond of disguises.

He'll read of an early Spanish sect, the Isabelites, who maintained it had occurred to God on the second day of creation that the chicken should be formed inside of the eggshell. The Isabelites were the only group who tried to determine the state of the egg on the first day of creation, and although they believed its existence at this time

couldn't be questioned, they came up with little plausible information.

Simon will read all of this aloud to Madelaine and Lambert's dog, neither of whom will show any interest.

* * *

Madelaine sits at the kitchen table sipping coffee. Steam rising from her cup dissolves the sleep from the corners of her eyes. On the clothesline between their back balcony and the telephone pole, sheets flap in the wind like flags.

"Nothing stays the same," she tells Simon, who is kneading her hunched shoulders. "After a while I was even afraid to blink, so I kept my eyes open."

In the dream, she says, she was sitting in her father's house and heard a noise coming from the other side of the den. When she turned, she found herself staring at a giant television screen, odd because her father had never owned a television. Then she turned to talk to her father and he was gone. The room was filled with pink carnations and white-haired women in 17th century dress, dancing a minuet. Finally, the television became an aquarium, stocked with bug-eyed fish. Lined up with their mouths to the glass, air

bubbles rose from the tips of their whiskers.

"You shouldn't read before bed," Simon says. "Or maybe you ate something last night that didn't agree with you."

Madelaine says it was always some sort of sound that made her shift her attention from one corner of the room to another. Sometimes the noise was like a scraping. Sometimes it was no louder than a shuffling of feet. And sometimes it seemed as if someone was giggling.

Simon giggles.

"It does sound a bit funny."

"Every time I turned my back," Madelaine says, "the whole world did a quick change." She shakes her head.

"Like musical chairs," Simon explains.

Madelaine peeks over her shoulder.

"Boo," Simon says.

* * *

After a dinner of Indian chicken curry and brown rice, garnished with toasted almond slivers and raisins and washed down with mugs of stout, Simon leads Madelaige into the living room.

He pulls the record from the shelves and sets it on the turntable. Madelaine groans. Simon sets the tonearm in

motion, crouches so his eyes are parallel to the disc, and looks for the warp. The needle floats down.

He lies between the speakers with Madelaine beside him. Simon clasps her fingers and raises their hands together in the air.

The room is filled with Robeson --

Ol' Man River
'Dat Ol' Man River

The music laps against the walls and ceiling, and the floorboards vibrate like piano wire along the length of Simon's back.

He must know somethin'
But don't say nothin'

Simon grins. Robeson's voice, smooth as water, reaches inside him, each note a great dark hand, kneading his stomach, pulling him inside out. Simon clears his throat and sings.

He keeps on rblin'

Madelaine sits up and rubs her ears.

"It's a little loud!"

"Sing!"

Madelaine gets to her feet. The orchestra swells.

Along....

The floorboards creak, drowning out the echo at the end of the song.

"My ears," Madelaine says. Simon pulls himself,

dripping, from the water. The dog downstairs sounds as if he's trying to scratch his way through the ceiling.

* * *

A few days later Simon will ask Madelaine to listen again.

"This kind of music isn't being made any more," he will say.

Madelaine will stare into her lap and Simon will mutter to himself: "Whatever happened to singers like this?"

Madelaine will tug at her lower lip.

"They're dead."

* * *

Simon and Madelaine go down to the river. It had rained all day. Pinpricks of light, like stars caught in a metal web, glisten on the bridge.

Madelaine pulls Simon along to the water's edge. Near a clump of reeds, Simon asks Madelaine if she's heard the local saying, about the water being too thin to plow and too thick to drink. The moon slides out of the clouds. The

river looks like a moving gap in the landscape.

Madelaine kneels. A bullfrog blinks, water slipping back and forth across his slick green hide. Croaking, throat bulging and phosphorescent, it looks ready to leap. Madelaine's face is half-lit by the moon.

"Can you pick it up for me?"

"What?"

"Let's see if we can make it fly."

Simon stares.

Madelaine says she's read a newspaper article about some people in a tiny village in southern Greece who woke up one morning and saw that it was raining tiny frogs. The sky was filled with them, and the villagers took this as a sign, but scientists in Athens claimed they must have been scooped up in Africa by cyclonic winds, and the frogs — none of whom weighed more than two ounces — had begun their journey as eggs and had been hatched in mid-air. The villagers hadn't felt the winds and none of the frogs were hurt in the fall. They believed the animals could fly.

"Anything you can imagine happening will happen," Madelaine concludes.

Simon cups the frog in his hands.

"Toss it up over the water. Gently..."

* * *

The street is deserted when Simon and Madelaine walk back to their building. They hold each other going up the courtyard steps, still slick from the rain.

"Everyone's asleep," Simon whispers at their door.

"Listen," she says. Through their walls, they hear Bauer, weeping.

"Why are you hiding," he cries.

* * *

Sometimes Madelaine does the cooking.

* * *

Simon and Madelaine lie in bed, sipping reconstituted orange juice, sharing a cigarette, planning the day. Since summer is drawing to a close they decide to spend the afternoon by the beaver pond in the park.

Madelaine sits cross-legged on the edge of the bed and runs her brush through her hair. Simon contemplates the way her pale hand curls around the rosewood handle, the way each

stroke of the brush makes a hundred ordered furrows in her hair.

"Hungry?"

"It's your turn," Simon yawns. "Surprise me."

* * *

Madelaine's got the skillets on the stove, a dab of butter clinging to the lip of one, a tablespoon of peanut oil floating in the other. On the counter, there's a bowl of eggs, a green pepper, half a pint of mushrooms, and a drained tin of sardines. Simon pours coffee beans into the mill and tucks four slices of honey bread into the toaster.

"Italian omelettes," Madelaine says, tossing slices of green peppers and mushrooms into one of the skillets.

"Ah, *frittata*."

Madelaine cracks the first egg and whisks it around the bowl until the yolk and the white fluff up. With the second egg, she brings her hand down to the rim of the bowl with a conductor's flourish. Simon spoons plum jam into matching porcelain pots. Madelaine balances the third egg in the palm of her hand. It feels hollow.

"Must be a pullet," she says.

Her hand meets the mixing bowl. Madelaine sucks in her

breath. Her hand freezes over the bowl. Pinched between thumb and forefinger are the halves of the eggshell.

"Do something," she whispers.

Floating atop the pool of egg is a thick, white, two-inch slug. The coffee mill screams, chewing up the beans. Madelaine's mouthing the words.

"Do something."

* * *

Madelaine leaves her room for dinner. She nibbles at the corner of a cracker, then vomits. Simon guides her out onto the balcony. She's wearing her terry-cloth robe.

"Chances are, something like this could never happen again,"

"Chances are," she says slowly, "that it will. That's the way it works. Anything you imagine happening will."

"You've got to put it out of your mind." Simon cups his hands around his ears, then flings them away from his head, as if he's pulling a memory from his mind and throwing it into space.

"Do this," Simon says.

Madelaine looks away.

* * *

When Madelaine sleeps her body is coiled as tightly as a fist, taking up no more than a quarter of the bed. Simon stays on the balcony.

In the courtyard, Mr. Michaels is pouring water from a yellow plastic bucket onto the mulberry tree. Simon hasn't seen him or his wife for weeks.

The boy from the east block has been out again: ringing the tree are his furrows, which seem to grow from the trunk like rays from the core of a star. The water glistens like mercury, rushing from the yellow bucket, through the furrows, to the roots of the tree.

* * *

"There are limits to fear," Simon tells Madelaine. "It's just a matter of perspective."

Madelaine refuses to eat. "Whose perspective?" she asks. Nothing Simon cooks interests her.

She begins to shrink.

Her body, Simon thinks, is nibbling away at itself.

* * *

Simon leaves the apartment, hoping that time to herself will do Madelaine a world of wonders. When he returns, she is curled up on the couch, her bathrobe tucked under her feet. Lambert's dog is there, too, sitting in the armchair beside her.

"It was looking up at me," Madelaine says.

Simon pulls the dog out of the chair. Selecting a dictionary, he starts to read.

* * *

"...clay eggs left there as signs of eternity," Simon concludes.

"You see?" He thumbs through the pages, and without looking up says: "These things must have happened before."

Madelaine stares into her lap.

"I swear it was looking at me."

The dog goes to the window and looks out over the courtyard.

* * *

Madelaine's bone white nightgown fans out freely behind her feet as she walks down the hallway. Her scent has become too sweet: The skin on her neck hangs in folds, like wattles.

She is disappearing, Simon thinks, into the folds of her skin. Ounce by ounce by ounce.

Madelaine pauses by the living room window. The light shining through makes her gown transparent, her limbs just faint spidery outlines. Simon is afraid he'd find himself hugging nothing but cloth.

I'm watching her body devour itself.

Madelaine whirls around and glares. Her eyes and mouth seem to be receding into her face.

"Who's watching who," she says.

* * *

There is a party in the parking lot behind the building. Someone has strung Chinese lamps along one of the clotheslines. In the slight breeze, light skitters across the asphalt. Lambert is performing at the party.

Simon sets a glass and a bottle of gin and a bottle of

tonic on the butcherblock table. He listens to the hum of the party and knows Lambert has begun when he hears *Show Boat* playing.

Robeson starts singing. Lambert's dog starts to howl. To drown him out, the volume on the tape deck is increased. Each line Robeson sings is louder than the last. The tape distorts. Robeson's voice cracks. Simon gets up from the table.

The bedroom blind is pulled down below the window sill and the room is pitch black. Simon puts his fingertips to the wall and feels his way past the chest of drawers to his night table. He sits on the edge of the bed and lights a cigarette. He sees, stretched across his pillow, her spidery forearm. As he reaches out, it slides away, beyond the glow of his cigarette. His hands come up with nothing but cloth. Over the murmur of the party the dog growls and tears around in frantic circles.

* * *

Simon knocks at Bauer's door. It swings open.

"Bauer?"

Simon waits for a moment, then walks through the living room to the balcony.

Bauer is adjusting the focus on his telescope. He covers an eye with one hand and scans the sky.

"I can't see her," Bauer says. He frets with his lens. "Why is she hiding?"

"Yes," Simon nods, "she's gone."

He spreads Bauer's map of the universe out on the metal table and runs his fingers along the worn folds in the paper. The river bullfrogs are croaking. The sound carries through the sky as though amplified through loudspeakers suspended high above the water.

Conversation in the Courtyard

Roger's mother is lying on a lawn chair in the courtyard, on a patch of lawn just beneath the living room window of her apartment. She wakes, and notices that a length of frayed rope dangles from the gas pipe that runs up the side of the building.

"Roger!"

Roger, down by the river, turns. He is wearing a headband cut from a white cotton pillowcase. On it he's painted interlocking diamonds, in many different colours.

"Get back here!"

Roger scales the riverbank, Indian-style. He has a bow in one hand, an arrow in the other. The other end of the frayed rope is attached to his jacket harness, and drags behind him. Something is stuck to the tip of his arrow.

"What are you doing?"

Roger is taking a catfish off the tip of his arrow. He strokes its whiskers, lets them flutter across the palm of his hand.

"You scared me, Roger."

Roger says nothing. His mother brushes a black ant from her arm, then looks down at the grass to make sure it is gone.

Roger goes to the mulberry tree.

"You could get killed."

Roger crouches.

"Now what are you doing?"

Roger is digging at the base of the mulberry tree.

"You're making an awful mess."

Roger plants the catfish in the hole, tail up, then covers it with dirt.

"I'll have to get you another rope." His mother lies back, covers her eyes with a towel, and spreads her arms to the sun.

Roger sits on the fish.

The door of the apartment block opposite opens. Roger raises his hand to his eye, curls it into a telescope, and peers at Bauer. Bauer pauses, then peers back.

"That's not much good," he mumbles. "You'll never find anything with that." Still talking, Bauer walks through the

courtyard and down to the street, where his car is parked. Roger tracks him through his telescope.

"What was he saying?" Roger's mother asks.

Roger is swivelling, getting his mother in his sights. She spoons chocolate pudding from a green tin. Her white skin is covered with lotion, and gleams.

Roger's mother takes the towel from her forehead, sits up, and blinks.

"You look silly," she says. "Very silly."

Roger is twisting his hand, adjusting his focus.

"Stop it. Right now."

Roger squints, and her white skin explodes into light, like a flashbulb. He readjusts and she is just a tiny black dot, the size of an ant, eating from a tin of pudding.

She tells him again that he looks silly.

Roger is shifting the telescope to his other eye.

It all depends upon the way you choose to look at things, as far as he is concerned.

Minutes Of An Evening

Early one bleak and wintery evening, a young man and his wife stepped from their respective buses, approached their apartment building from opposite ends of the block, and met at the foot of their courtyard steps. A discussion ensued. Despite Dan's aversion to the body politic and Debby's distaste for all things athletic, it was hastily agreed that their city was a city: 1) Where there was an everpresent threat of blizzard and power outage, 2) Where portly, smooth-headed men of vision contemplated at enormous length a set of blueprints for an advanced network of tunnels and conduits that would allegedly replace the river as a primary sewage treatment plant, 3) From which (the headlines proclaimed and the experts agreed) a wrestler of international calibre, regardless of weight class, would

never emerge. Debby also commented that their neighbourhood was the sort of neighbourhood that lacked a restaurant of any repute but could lay claim to a regrettable overplus of take-out counters. Dan concluded the discussion by adding that their street was the kind of street where everyone habitually returned home after a more or less full day of work, except for the bearded cab driver from the corner block who'd lost both his sense of direction and his wife in a boating mishap a few months earlier.

Inside their clean and well-lighted kitchen, Debby fried pork sausages, stirred a potful of beef consommé and wondered when she might find time to do the vacuuming, while Dan sat at the butcherblock table, ignored the cigarette burning down towards his knuckles, and studied the evening newspaper. New York traders maintained that gold futures were down and copper was going for a song. Art dealers reported that a Pollock had just outpriced a Cézanne at a public auction. Financial analysts wagged their index fingers at an international group of panicky speculators and cautioned against premature concern.

Debby crossed the floor.

Love me? she asked. Dan put the paper down and stood up.

Sometimes without reservation, he said.

Hug, Debby said. Dan wrapped his arms around her waist

and squeezed. When she laughed he felt the tremor in his forearms.

I'm convinced, Debby said. Dan flicked a strand of hair away from her ear and began to nibble.

Who's your big chief, Mirimani? he whispered.

Enough, Debby said, shifting her attention back to the stove and turning down the heat. Over the hiss of sizzling sausages she thought she heard the couple next door disciplining their dog.

You dirty dirty bitch, one of the men was saying.

Dan noticed that the jut of Debby's shoulder blades tested the tight warp and weft of her black wool sweater.

Want me to set the table now? he asked, stepping his fingertips up her vertebrae.

Wouldn't that be a treat, she said.

Dan nodded and winked. She was aware that her string of pearls, under the stovehood light, glowed discreetly.

Dan collected two stainless knives and forks, two bamboo place mats and the papier-mache salt and pepper shakers and decided that there was something very fetching about a woman in apron and pearls. He carried the utensils down the hallway to the living room, set everything atop the walnut veneer coffee table, and scuffled back to the kitchen to retrieve two glasses of soda water, their tan paper napkins and a tub of margarine.

Dan said he'd never seen the carpets quite so soiled and returned to the living room.

Debby took the bubbling soup off the burner, added two cups of Insta-Rice to the pot and, as she set the mixture on the countertop to the left of the stove, noted that Dan had left the newspaper disarranged across the table. While waiting for the pellets of rice to soak up the water and soften, she flipped through the special home furnishings insert. It was clear that taupe had reached a level of popularity few other colours could boast of. Debby and Dan owned nothing in taupe. Their kitchen, where it wasn't white, was avocado and rust. And much of the rust, she had often shown Dan, was real. Debby picked up a fork and wondered aloud who in the world was happy. The plump and splitting sausages were stabbed and rolled.

Mine look about done, Dan said, re-entering the kitchen. The blackstriped pork skins stared up from the pan. Dan affected a helpful expression. Debby glared.

If they're not cooked well enough you'll get tapeworms, Debby said softly, but without kindness.

She turned back to the stove and wrinkled up her face in an attitude of concentration. Dan crept up behind her and lightly kissed the nape of her neck. Debby reminded Dan that the ink from his newspaper could conceivably ruin their table. Dan privately recalled that period in their lives

when they'd made love everywhere -- including the kitchen table -- freely and without compunction. The sausages twisted around in their shallow of grease, grinning disembodied grins.

Debby carted the heaped plates into the living room and dinner was served. Dan turned on the television and *Nitely News* began. Their Toshiba Blackstripe was but three days old. On the night it was delivered Debby and Dan faithfully followed the instructions given them by the Owner's Manual and had tuned into every channel their cable service offered in order to compare picture resolutions. When Debby announced that unless something was done immediately there would be no milk for their cereal the next morning, a brief discussion ensued concerning whose turn it was to leave the house. On his way to the *dépanneur*, Dan had paused in the street and marvelled at the light that lunged recklessly at the walls of their living room. He was of the opinion that the predominant colour was blue, and noted it was of a richer hue than any of the other blues that lunged at the walls of the other living rooms in their apartment complex.

Debby and Dan ate dinner. Debby tried to chew quietly, Dan made an effort not to scrape his fork across his plate,

and both watched the news intently. The week before, a forty-six year old woman and her twenty year old son had been shot in an apartment just three buildings down the street.

Notwithstanding their efforts to the contrary, Debby and Dan recalled that the picture the film editors for *Nightly News* had selected showed the woman lying with one arm dangling through the wrought-iron bars of her balcony railing and out into space.

Debby and Dan had left their apartment that night and gone to a Robert Montgomery film festival.

We haven't been out in a very long time, Dan said between screenings. Debby agreed.

The consommé in the hollows of Debby and Dan's dishes was soaked up with hunks of onion bread. Debby went to the kitchen and returned with second helpings of rice. Dan said that the weather girl was certainly under thirty-five. Debby said that the woman owed her looks, which after all weren't that impressive, to the talents of a large staff of crack make-up men. Dan suggested that the weather girl had slept with at least the anchorman, and probably the sportscaster, and perhaps even the night editor on the

police desk as well. Gesturing towards the apartment across the hall, he said he was willing to concede that the make-up men might be out of the question. Debby asked Dan if he wasn't a bit bored with the tangled workings of his brain.

The anchorman took a break and the lights on his carpeted set dimmed.

In spite of their flagging attention, Debby and Dan were reminded that their particular brand of acrylic floor protection was superior to most others currently on the market, none of which could be struck with a ball-peen hammer and expected to survive. Dan complained about his back and Debby pointed out that an aching back was invariably caused by less than taut abdominals. Dan took a deep breath and held it. Ignoring him, preferring instead to focus on the television, Debby asked Dan in her little girl voice if he believed it was easy to hold down a job and care for a home at the same time. Dan said he was sure it wasn't, and he loved her very much for trying.

Debby tilted her head and grinned and Dan pinched the last cold grains of rice between the tines of his fork. There was a knock at the door. Dan squinted into the peephole and Bauer the cabdriver appeared. Dan opened the door. Bauer grabbed Dan's hand and shook it.

At last, he sighed.

You've got the wrong house, Dan said. Bauer raised

himself on tiptoe, peered over Dan's shoulder, then turned and wandered out. Debby wondered if they should have asked him in.

The anchorman returned and announced that the City Fathers were still considering a plan that would see the river replaced by a more technologically innovative waste disposal system. He looked serious and concerned. Then, twisting in his chair to accommodate a different camera, he spoke, for the first time as far as Debby could recall, of ergonomics. The camera panned to the sportscaster who claimed to be personally ashamed of the fact that his fine city seemed utterly incapable of raising a world-ranked wrestler. He mentioned various European athletic programmes, a few of which, he asserted, were headed by men philosophically excited by their ability to turn athletes into soulless machines, machines that, moreover, would never experience the God-given sense of freedom enjoyed by everyone who lived on this side of the wide Atlantic. His face was pale and pocked and he was somewhat out of breath. The anchorman asked the sportscaster if he'd ever done any wrestling himself in his younger days. They exchanged smiles and chuckles. The weather girl seemed momentarily surprised by the camera's attentions and, in perplexed tones, said she was fairly sure it would snow -- a cold front was moving in from Hudson's Bay.

Dan said this served as a demonstration of the necessity/mother of invention proposition.

This is why they've always been in the blanket business, he clarified.

And coats, Debby added, Hudson's Bay coats, and I think you're talking about supply and demand.

Cinnamon and raisin brioches, broken into slivers and meticulously margarined, were munched on, and cups of milky tea were sipped. Dan noted that the whole house smelled -- pleasantly, he was quick to mention -- of thoroughly cooked and undeniably wormless sausages. Debby laughed and left her chair to join Dan on the couch.

Dan asked Debby if she was tired. Debby stretched her neck and yawned.

Obviously, she replied.

The anchorman, on behalf of the entire cast and crew at *Nitely News*, wished Debby and Dan a good evening.

You'll feel better after you've cleaned everything up and had a bath, Dan said.

After all that I'll be dead, Debby countered.

You'll see, Dan said. He tucked a hand inside Debby's sweater and began to massage her shoulder.

And besides, I don't feel very well. Maybe it's the sausages, Debby said.

Dan stood up.

Maybe I'll go out, he said.

Those sausages were awfully greasy, Debby said.

I could go downtown. For a drink. Its been a long time since I've gone downtown for a drink. While he hesitated he tried to look pensive and independant.

Fine, Debby said.

Just as the *U.S.S. Enterprise* began gliding across their television screen on its way towards another frontier, Debby was called away to the telephone.

I really am sorry, Debby began.

Her sister Diane had been over to dinner the day before and had brought along her five year old son, Darren. Dressed as a billy goat, he sported a wrinkled rubber mask, an angel-hair goatee, two plastic horns, and a set of rubber lips that curled over long yellow teeth. Dan laughed and Diane said kids will be kids

I really am sorry, Debby said again.

Baa, baa, Darren had said, sniffing at Debby and Dan.

Baa, baa? Dan asked.

Debby and Dan had thought he was very funny.

They'd eaten a ratatouille that Diane thought might have been a bit on the watery side, and adjourned to the

living room to finish the bottle of full-bodied bordeaux.

I know you didn't mean to be mean, Debby said, twisting the telephone cord around and around her wrist. Scotty, losing his composure, paced the bridge of the *Enterprise* and tried to contact Spock and Captain Kirk.

They'd poured a last glass of wine. Then Diane picked up a clump of dried mud from the carpet, set it down in an ashtray and asked Debby whether her vacuum was on the blink. Dan told Debby that he wished she'd take her boots off in the house because: 1) she'd be more comfortable, 2) she wouldn't have use an emery board to soften her feet, and, 3) her dirty heels were digging into the carpets. Diane asked for a tissue so that she might wipe her fingers. Debby told Dan to keep his bloody opinions to himself.

Diane picked up the empty bottle of Bordeaux.

I think we've all had just about enough, she said.

Dan lit a cigarette and asked his sister-in-law if she'd consider minding her own goddamned business. Diane's son whinnied, and as he was being ushered out of the apartment he discovered that the farting sound he could make with his mouth was given added resonance by his extra set of latex lips.

Debby hung up. Captain Kirk and his crew were trying to decide how best to deal with a gaggle of prolific tribbles.

Our life is a good one, Dan said.

We need a child, Debby replied.

Dan lit a cigarette and Debby curled up in her chair to read the newspaper. Despite the record-breaking prices paid at auction, she considered Cézanne an infinitely better painter.

Things don't seem right, she said. Dan grunted. For a moment Debby looked as if she might cry. Dan stroked her hair. Debby sat back, flipped to another section of the newspaper, and began to read aloud:

Gower Simpson was sitting in his home on Bethune Street in Peterborough, Ontario one day last week...

Dan told her he'd already read that particular article.

...When he decided to open the front door and let in some air, Debby continued. Dan dabbed out his cigarette and sat down on Debby's lap, crushing the newspaper. Giggling, Debby poked him in the kidney with one hand and pushed him off her knees with the other. Promising that he would return, Dan picked up his cutlery, cup, plate, and the tub of margarine and carried it all into the kitchen. Except for the tub, everything was placed in the sink.

While you're out there, get the vacuum for me, Debby



called. Dan believed she had a lovely voice, recalled the tales of the sirens, and freely admitted to himself that, were he a sailor, he would surely have to be lashed to the mast.

The rug is absolutely loamy. You can actually see the dirt, Debby continued. Her voice was muffled. Dan concluded that she was crouched on her hands and knees, face pressed close to the floor. Lure me to my doom, he whispered.

Dan opened the linen closet door only to find that their Eureka! power vacuum wasn't there. A systematic search of all the other closets in the house was initiated. The trick, he knew, was to think like a vacuum. His head buried in the bedroom closet, having had no luck at all in his quest for the errant machine, Dan repeated to himself: *There is something eternally fetching about a woman in apron and pearls....*

Danny? Debby called.

Can't find it! he shouted back, sitting on the floor of the closet beneath a row of clothes.

What?

Every cupboard and closet in the house was ransacked one last time. Dan then knelt down beside the bed, suddenly as certain as a dog about to flush a covey of partridge that he had uncovered the Eureka!'s hiding place. Dan rubbed his

hands together and peered beneath.

It wasn't there. Dan wondered for a moment if a vacuum could wander off of its own accord, and if it could, what conditions would encourage it to do so. Then he quit the search and changed out of his clothes, hanging them neatly on the bedroom doorknob. By the time he stepped into the shower he'd forgotten all about the vanished machine and hummed to himself, using the drone of the falling water as accompaniment and the moon peeking through the skylight as an audience: *There is something eternally and ineffably fetching....*

Debby seized Dan's clothes, stuffed them into the washing machine, and doused them with a double dose of laundry soap. She decided that waiting until he turned off the shower before switching on the machine, tempting as it was to make his shower a cold one, was the more prudent course of action. She glanced around the kitchen for the Eureka!, then under the table, then down the hall.

After showering, shaving, and brushing his teeth, Dan tried trimming the hairs from his nostrils. The sewing scissors shook in his hand. He began to hum, but the tune went nowhere, and Dan rued the fact that he didn't know the melody to any song of love and conquest. He slapped a palmful of cologne on each cheek and stepped out of the bathroom, a cloud of steam chasing about his heels.

Cheese knife in hand, Debby stood by the kitchen sink scraping bits of black sausage skin from the fry pan. Dan shrank at the sound.

Where did you put it, Debby asked. Dan danced up behind her and grinned. Debby turned from the sink.

Dan stamped his legs. His buttocks wobbled. He jerked his arms through the air. Tiny droplets of moisture flew from his hair.

Debby let him know that she'd had a very busy day at work and was therefore in no mood for any idiotic joking around. Dan continued to dance, telling himself all the while that it was probably of no significance that she was brandishing a knife.

You're crazy, Debby said.

About you, Dan sang.

Debby raised the knife and flailed at the drops of flying water.

Dan skipped out of the kitchen and into the bedroom, put on his robe, brushed his hair, and surveyed the results in the full-length mirror that hung on the inside of the closet door. A strong wind blew up; the roof timbers creaked and the velour curtains billowed. Dan closed the window and noticed it had begun to snow. He took a deep breath and did a few knee bends. On the television McCoy and Captain Kirk shared a joke at Spock's expense and the

closing theme from *Star Trek* was played.

Debby finished the dishes, rinsed out the sink, and transferred Dan's clothes to the dryer. Then she went into the living room and telephoned her sister. The line was busy. Debby dialed her mother's number. That was busy too.

Debby ran her toes through the carpet and wondered what Dan had done with their Eureka! She heard him puffing in the bedroom. Debby lay down on the couch and adjusted a cushion beneath her head. Her temples throbbed. She took off her glasses, shut her eyes, and wished that she could hear what Diane was telling her mother.

Dan walked quietly into the room and sat at Debby's feet. He began massaging her arches and toes. Debby didn't move. The pace of the massage increased.

Mam, Debby murmured.

You've got a lovely mouth, Dan whispered.

Debby smiled. Dan moved his other hand to her neck and let her pearls slip through his fingers. Debby turned her head. Dan hooked his thumb around the strand of pearls and edged his fingertips slowly towards her breasts. Debby opened her eyes.

You'll break them, she said.

They're too soft to break.

Debby nudged Dan's hand away. He caressed the coarse weave of Debby's tartan skirt and took hold of the kilt pin

that lay across her thigh. Debby didn't move. Dan ran his hand along her stocking.

Not now, Debby cautioned, and not here.

But we all might be gone tomorrow, Dan reasoned, and I've got an idea. He lay down beside her.

Debby asked that he please leave her alone. Dan kissed her and she pulled away. Dan stroked her hair and asked her to try to remember the fun they'd had the first few months they'd spent together, and Debby said she didn't think that had anything to do with anything and said she needed a bath. Dan disagreed and wondered aloud what in the hell was wrong. Debby told Dan for the last time that he should bug off, that she wasn't even mildly interested.

Dan sat up, lit a cigarette, and told Debby that he thought her thighs were a little on the plump side. Debby informed Dan that the smell of smoke was on absolutely everything, including his breath.

Dan tilted his head in Debby's direction and exhaled.

Debby shouted that it massacred the senses and made him taste like a very old man. Dan wondered aloud how it could kill something that was already dead and said he wasn't too surprised that she knew how a very old man tasted.

Debby faced the window.

Fuck off, she said. Fuck off.

Dan turned away. Debby began, silently, to cry.

Outside, snow clung to the mulberry tree, to the cobblestones in the courtyard, and even to the streets, but melted as it met the steaming river. On the T.V. two less than world-calibre wrestlers wrestled.

Where is it, Danny, she said. Where has it gone.

I don't know, Dan said. I just don't know.

It can't just go away all by itself, can it?

A special bulletin reported that the evening's city council meeting had disbanded in chaos. Debby took Dan's hands and pressed them hard against her knees. She stared out of the window at the string of lights perched on the bridge in the distance, and Dan looked up from the floor, to Debby's lap, at their knot of hands.



Ghoststeps

We've got a good view of the courtyard from my bed, Leon and I. Most mornings, just after dawn, gulls make parabolic swoops past my window, bits of garbage clenched in their jaws. I keep squares of cardboard on the night table, use emerald magic markers to give the gulls points for the curves they carve in the air. Aaaaah! Aaaaah! they shout as I hold the cards up to the window and flash their scores, which are, on the average, in the 5.6 range. What in God's name are they cheering about? The scores aren't that good.

This morning we witnessed a new manoeuver. A piece of garbage flew by the window with a gull in its mouth. I'm sure it thought no-one was looking, but Leon and I were. It made no noise, it was trying to be secretive, but we caught it, and knew at once what was happening: the world was

running in reverse for a moment. I suppose it has to, once in a while, to catch up with itself.

Mornings are always such a challenge to credulity. Leon agrees.

Leon is my old dog. He and I are on our own now, creating our lives; minute by minute. There's a world out there, and work to do in it, but for the moment it has to wait. I've got important inner business, to make my world here. One I can control. I will make the outline. I will make the choices.

So I'm lying in my bed with magic markers, colouring in a portrait of Leon. He is standing by the window, beeping. He is beeping because his eyes are like sonar, sounding the deep blue outdoors.

You're beeping again, Leon, I say.

I wish he wouldn't. It upsets me. He's made it clear that he does it as a service to travellers. Leon is a lighthouse, of a sort.

He's left us, Leon. He's left us and there's nothing we can do.

Leon turns, tilts his head to one side. Make up your mind, Lambert, he is saying.

We had a friend here with us, until three days ago. He said he had an appointment with a better life. I made a fool of myself, making promises, telling lies. I let things

get too close, I let things go too far. He left while Leon was asleep. That was unconscionable. Leon was his dog too. Leon thinks he vanished into thin air.

The bitch.

He's a ghost, Leon. They're all ghosts out there, now. Listen to the ghoststeps.

Leon and I will not leave this room. Not until we can do so elegantly.

I'm using a vermilion magic marker to indicate the lighthouse beacon, but I'm hesitant, torn. This is the problem: I was brought up to believe it was important not to let your crayon stray outside the edges. Now I hear it doesn't matter; indeed, it's often preferable to make a bloody mess. That scares me. A lot of things scare me.

Leon turns back to the window and perks up his ears.

I'll say this for him: he is dogged.

Leon sniffs. He'd like the world to know what a disappointing human I've become.

He's right, I agree. I simply don't want to belong to that world any longer. It is all too real. The building we live in is crumbling away, and the walls in this room are full of plaster mites. I've never seen them, but I know

they're there -- I can hear them in the middle of the night, nibbling. And the next morning there is a little pile of plaster dust, half the size of an anthill, in one corner of the room. The morning after that, another pile, in another corner. Nothing has ever crawled out of them, yet. Also in that world, a mustachioed hombre, in gold lame regalia, invaded the Spanish Parliament. According to the *News Leader*, he was trying to take it hostage. He waved his pistol like a baton and wore an odd black hat that strongly resembled Mouseketeer's ears. No matter how hard I try, I can't connect this up with anything else I know. And Channel 7 is running a made-for-television movie, a madcap comedy about the nuclear arms race entitled *W-h-o-o-p-s*. Is this what holds us together? Is the world dangling in space on a series of hyphens?

Leon shrugs. He wants me to know that everything comes in bits and pieces, that that's the way things are.

I don't care. For the time being, I choose not to let my marker stray outside the lines.

Fred is looking at television, *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*, I believe. Leon is looking at Fred looking at television. I am looking at Leon looking at Fred looking at

television.

I love them both to death.

Fred is the new member in our family. He's painfully cute, in a fishy sort of way, and he does a wonderful job of replacing the missing. Let us say we found him, in his aquarium, in the shallow water at the river's edge, and Leon insisted we take him home. So Fred is Leon's pet just as Leon is my pet. Although we think Fred is special, we decided to call him Fred because Fred is a good pedestrian name for a good pedestrian fish. In the real world, Freds wear rubber-soled shoes, felt fedoras, and rarely cause a fuss. Freds have heavy beard growth and pale faces; at day's end, with their five o'clock shadows, they all look a bit green around the gills. I put Fred on the bureau next to the TV; the blue glow from the screen makes him look -- and feel too, I think -- quite dashing. Leon enjoys him. And there is something about the way his gills pump that makes me want to weep. He's got the heart of a lion. I want him to feel at home here.

Leon is watching Fred doing his water dance. Fred is looking for a girl guppy, I think.

As a rule, Leon takes good care of Fred, he is a good

father. He knows things. I myself solicit his opinion, from time to time. I'm convinced he has lived forever. With a tan magic marker I'm picturing him in the middle of a rain forest, head twisted halfway around, like an owl's. He is witnessing some of the more spectacular blips in evolutionary history. All around him the forest hums with curious activity.

We entertain Fred, help his life along in any way we can. I'm telling him a story about piscian evolution. He looks as though he needs something to look forward to.

Once upon a time, Fred, there were those among your race who decided to crawl out of the water. Many died, but a lucky few had lungs that exploded into being the instant they met the air. For a while they were very happy, and danced around a campfire, but very soon they discovered they couldn't go back once they'd taken the leap. It might have been during spawning season, Fred. In time they learned to adapt to this but some of them still missed the sensation of floating around in relative peace and quiet, so they had a meeting and decided they'd try to fly.

Fred is trying to climb the glass of the aquarium. I think I'm making him edgy. He takes these things altogether too seriously.

That's all right, Fred, I say. When I was just a little boy, I wished desperately to be a horse. I've always

wanted to be something other than what I am. The fish weren't the only ones, Fred. There were tree-climbing horses then too. With tails like wire. They'd hang from the highest branches, whinnying with glee. Then one day, without any warning, the experiment was terminated. A succession of dull thuds was heard throughout the forest!

Leon glowers. He disagrees with my telling.

Sometimes he can be so dogmatic.

I'm sorry, Leon. I'm sorry.

I know I'm bitchy, I know I'm bitchy because I've been told. I try to explain to Leon again, it's just fear. I must keep things in order, there is too much random material out there, and it's hard to keep it from getting in. We're travelling through the universe, pinned to our galaxy, at 1,350,000 miles per hour. That's far too fast. The standard human brain weighs about half as much as a full-grown chihuahua. In the history of Iceland there has only been one armed robbery. On the average, a human being laughs 16 times a day. The robot population of Japan is 16,500, and climbing. Some of the robots are programmed to whinny gleefully.

Fred is banging at the glass of his aquarium, trying to

get at a shadfly. These shadflies make me frantic. Every night they flutter up from the river, get through the screens and into the bed. They catch themselves up in the hair on my legs, twittering, twittering. By morning most of them have died and lie on the sheets, about my legs, like peeled skin. I feed them to Fred.

Leon wants to play. He's rolling on his back and swinging all four paws in the air.

I'm not in the mood, I tell him.

I used to be in the mood, all the time. When Leon first wandered in off the street I showed him some of my magic tricks. I used to perform, for pocket money, at birthday parties and the like. I bought a brand new deck of cards -- pictures of beagles, I thought he'd like that -- and filed the edges ever so slightly so they tapered at one end. Then I held the deck behind my back.

Pick a card, Leon, I said. He did, but then he caught me turning the deck upside down, and yawned. I did much better with the rubber newspaper trick -- making it vanish up the sleeve of my kimono -- and he looked very upset, tearing around in circles, clawing at the walls.

Since then, I've been convinced that he knows more than he's willing to let on. I taught him what I know, now it's his turn. I tell him I'd like to be a dog. A golden magic marker to colour in a thick double-coat of hair that will

repel the weather. A darker shade for a set of leathery earflaps. And a coral pink, like Fred's palm tree, for the deep whorled ears.

I want to be able to hear a pin drop in the next apartment.

I want to be able to hear a dog whistle, so I can hum along with whatever tune is being played.

I want a dog's night vision, I want to be able to see the ghosts that move around in the dark.

Things vanish, don't they, Leon?

Leon shows me his teeth.

He isn't coming back, Leon, he isn't coming back. And there's not a goddamned thing you can do about it.

Yesterday Leon howled at Fred. Fred slunk into a corner of his aquarium and hid behind a pink palm tree. I tried to coax him out, even opened a fresh tin of mosquito larvae. But he was hurt. Leon knew just what to do. He put his paws up on the bureau and dropped one of his rubber balls into the tank. You'd think that Fred would have figured he was being bombed, but no, he seemed to grasp the conciliatory nature of the gesture. After the storm in his home abated, he shimmied out from behind the palm and put

his nose to the glass. Bubbles rose from his open mouth. Leon put his snout to the glass too, and licked. It was something to see.

Once, a long time ago, I saw a hanging man. I was riding my bicycle, my red Raleigh, down the cinder path through the woods. I rode through the meadow behind the sugar shanty, then up the hill through a dense butternut grove, and suddenly I felt as if someone had kicked me in the head. Twice. Not intentionally, but lightly, lightly. And there he was, the man, hanging.

Well, not exactly. All I saw at first were the bottoms of his brand new shoes. He'd used his belt, evidently: the cuffs of his slacks were bunched around his shoetops. The police had a lot of questions for me; I don't remember all of them. "No," I said. "I don't know," I said. "Can I go?" Then.

"Yes," I said. I told them I knew the hanging man. After all, seeing someone hanging is at least as personal as seeing someone naked, so shouldn't I have said I knew him? He deserved at least that much. He'd bought new shoes. They were dangling over my head. Slippery light-tan soles, specks of crushed cinder impressed upon them. And etched in black ink across each: *Second*. I don't know what his name was. I've always thought of him as Mr. Second. A French name?

I stayed on my red Raleigh the whole time, in case Mr. Second moved. My feet, barely touched the ground. One shpelace was loose. I didn't dare bend down to re-tie it.

I can't remember anymore how many of these details are factual. It isn't important. They fit into the picture and they are necessary. They are necessary because they make my own world real. They are necessary because they tell me how I see.

Earlier today I thought things were proceeding nicely, I thought we had them under control. But Leon is at the window again. I'm beginning to suspect that someone snuck in here during the night and glued a Bosch painting to it, pane by pane by pane. I tell Leon to get down. The courtyard swarms, too many ghoststeps clicking off the cobblestones. They are in a state of dazzlement out there. Dazzled simply because they exist. Dazzled because, for yet another day, the sun is crossing the sky. Dazzled because they've successfully sidestepped a trillion potential dangers.

One kid looks like a homunculous. He's wearing an Indian headband and he's burying something under the mulberry tree. Its branches encircle him like the rim of a

bell. In my view -- I know something about these things -- that tree needs pruning. It needs a little geometric pressure, for its own well-being. In the twilight it looks like a rain-soaked hen.

I ask Leon if he's ever seen the gardens at Versailles. King Louis knew all about the absolutes of form. From the sky the trees and bushes resemble a child's set of blocks -- a circle, a triangle, a square -- artfully arranged on a carpet. That's what someone has to do here. The mulberry tree needs taming. It has been coloured outside the lines.

I'm trying my best to keep my magic markers within them. I have to think the shapes things take are important. Geometry, that's what it all comes down to. The pyramids are really just a demonstration of geometric principle. It's no miracle how they were built, simply the use of the right shapes and a few levers, and a million or two slaves. The problem is we just can't conceive of that much organized effort. Sometimes we've really got minnowy imaginations.

I refuse to give up. When my hand tires, I'll wave my toes around, drawing shapes in the air, or draw with tip of my tongue on the backs of my teeth. I have to keep going. No matter what happens, I am not going to leave this room. Not yet.

Leon is standing on his hind legs, squinting.

Get away from the window, Leon, I say. You're

listening to ghosts, ghosts wandering aimlessly throughout the universe. Think of them as aural illusions.

Leon whines.

Fred is growing legs. I noticed it for the first time this morning, and I don't know what to make of it.

Leon presses his nose to the glass of Fred's aquarium. His head is tilted to one side and he looks puzzled. He is worried about Fred, but Fred doesn't realize it. Fred retreats behind his palm. The rainbow down his side shimmers. He is 3/4 of an inch of fear.

Leon growls, fiercely. I tell him to stop it. I tell him he's often afraid too. When he sleeps he claws at the walls and whimpers. His voice sounds human.

What are your nightmares like, Leon? Do you dream about being chased, by a car? Do you dream about death by drowning, at the hands of a vengeful hydrant? Nosing into a bush and being burned? Being cornered and attacked in the night by bully dogs? Are bully dogs the ones who don't wear collars?

And what's Fred here afraid of? Cat food commercials? *Field and Stream*?

We have to make light of these things. There's no

other way to bear them.

I've made a list of some things that terrify me:

Trees. From which long pants hang.

Little girls in Broadway plays, who sing like Ethel Mermaid.

Black cats. How common.

Asphalt, when it cracks and heaves. Something is struggling to get out.

The movie *Cabaret*. Especially Joel Grey.

Cinder chips, when clinging for dear life to the light-tan soles of new shoes.

Leon snorts, again expressing his disappointment. I don't want to disappoint him.

Leon, do you remember how he --

Talk to me Leon, come up on the bed and keep me warm.

Leon is lapping up Fred's water.

I tell him to stop it, I tell him he's being a bonehead.

Fred's legs continue to grow. They are long enough now so he can wiggle them on the gravel bottom of his aquarium. He looks like he's trying to run.

I believe he is making a statement. He's bored with

the shape he's been given, and he wants out.

I understand how he feels. I too am tired of the shape I've been given. Tired of the whole damn hopeful species. There's got to be a magical door somewhere we can pass through, and be transformed.

I want to be taken to see the Wizard. I want to be something other than what I am. I've wanted this ever since I felt those shoes on my scalp while riding my red Raleigh through the woods. Once I wished I was a character in a comic strip. They have the luxury of being able to deal with the same set of confusions forever; rarely do any new ones crop up to confuse the issue. Their lives are based upon a premise, and they've always got that to cling to. And they never age.

Out there in the world, too many things fall apart too often, no matter what we do. The centre cannot hold, the centre cannot hold. The Centre can't even shake hands.

All afternoon I've been reading a Fodor's travel guide. Fodor tells me that manatees have become quite a tourist draw in some parts of the world. They live in warm and sheltered waters, a reasonable choice for a home. I could colour myself in as a manatee. Browsing on sea vegetation

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-- I won't eat any fish, I tell Fred -- it would be like a salad diet. I'll colour in great masses of dark flesh, such great masses that I could cuddle myself in my own folds. Smooth, flowing lines. And be able to feed both Leon and Fred from my little leathery tits.

I want to be a manatee, Leon.

Leon tried to bite Fred yesterday. What was he thinking of? Since then he's been ignoring Fred totally. He hasn't even looked at him. He seems to disapprove of what's going on. This has made Fred sullen. He's silent and floating in place, opening and closing his mouth, as if he's issuing a warning. Bubbles cling to his whiskertips, rise, and pop.

Cave canus, Fred.

I've been feeding him extra fly's wings. He needs the strength.

Make me a fin, Leon, make me a fin.

I want to swim out of this room.

This evening, Fred sprouted little feet.

I've got a red magic marker and I'm colouring his booties. He'll quickly discover how harshly the earth will treat his feet. For some reason, though, I'm starting to

feel afraid for him. We must proceed carefully with Fred.

I don't know why I'm this way. Some days I'm afraid of everything. I imagine walking down the street, fearing I'll be cornered by everyone who's begging, whether for money or religion or sympathy, and I'm afraid I won't be able to tell which one of them is for real. I imagine riding a bus, and someone is causing a commotion, and I'm afraid that it will bother the driver and lead to some sort of confrontation in which I'll be forced, obliged somehow, to participate. I imagine going into a bank and having a teller, who makes less in a year than it takes to properly feed and house Fred, look at my signature as if it was written with guppy juice and expose me as a fraud. I'm afraid when I pick up the telephone that someone will speak to me in a tongue I can't quite place, because surely they're speaking to me that way in order to threaten me without fear of reprisal. *I don't understand a word. Not a single word.* And I'm afraid of those films that document some manner of tree maggot swarming over and eating a tree; and I'm afraid of those reports the newspapers love to print, concerning life-threatening diseases that only stop being life-threatening when those maggots from the movie are busily snacking on you.

And I'm afraid when I'm afraid, afraid to be afraid.

The shadflies in here have woven themselves into the hair on my legs. I'm going to be rid of them, once and for all. I'm getting my razor and soap. I'm going to shave my legs.

Leon watches me.

As I slide the razor across my calf I tell him that a manatee's upper lip is divided into two parts. It closes on weeds and water grasses like a pair of pliers.

Leon runs his snout along my leg.

You know another name for manatees, Leon? Sirenians. Mermaids, Leon, mermaids. Big, an abundance of flesh, but sleek and beautiful and, oh Leon, the way I'd glide through the water would make you pant. Take a close look at my legs. Run your whiskers across them again. Now that they're shaved, it's impossible to deny they're lovely.

Leon walks to the window and peers across the courtyard.

Get away from the window, Leon.

Our neighbour Bauer is out on his balcony, looking for the moon. It seems he can't find it, which is unusual. He never misses. Perhaps the moon isn't where it's supposed to be tonight. Something may have disturbed its orbit, it has lost its way. Or we have.

How does it happen? How is it that, no matter how many the maps, we lose our way?

Leon sulks. Leon pretends to sleep.

He's a friendly dog. But he never turns his back, on anyone or anything. He doesn't ever give anyone the opportunity to look him square in the face. He sleeps with one eye open.

Leon rests his head on his paws and pretends to ignore me.

I've considered all that, Leon, but how can anyone expect to fall really deeply into sleep that way?

Leon glances at me sidelong. One sad eye flickers.

Sometimes Leon thinks I am an awesomely dumb animal.

Listen, Leon. On a still night, a manatee's flapping lips and crunching teeth can be heard two hundred yards away.

I'm finding it trickier and trickier to breathe. Are my lungs devolving? My skin is very slick, but my upper lip is dry and cracking. I'm trying to grip the tip of my tongue with it.

Leon looks impatient.

Do you want to go for a swim, Leon? Say yes. Please

say yes. I need to be convinced of this absolutely.

Fred's whiskers are getting thicker. I think he's growing a moustache. I think I see the onset of an arm or two as well. They're just nubs at this point.

He's threatening to climb right out of his tank.

Somehow there's a rock in his tank, beside the palm. I don't remember putting it there. Fred is experimenting, in small doses, with life on dry land. The water level in his tank is dangerously low. I'm worried about Fred. He's gotten carried away. What in the world am I doing to him?

Fred is sticking his head out of the water.

Leon refuses to budge.

I'm begging you, Leon. We've got to do everything in our power stop him.

Stop him, Leon.

Last night things went too far. I couldn't draw them back. Fred was hanging upside down from his palm tree.

Get down, Fred, I said, get down.

Leon looked at me as though I'd lost my mind.

Fred started to swing, rocking his aquarium. He was looking out the window and had his eyes on the river.

Help him, Leon, I said. Help him.

Leon started digging at the wall behind Fred's aquarium.

Last night things went too far. I couldn't will them back. Fred is gone. It took me a long time to realize that, from the moment he came here, he was departing by degrees.

I wished you luck, Fred.

I wished you all the best.

Leon is at the window, looking out. He won't listen to me, won't look at me. I think he wants to go too.

I'm sorry, Leon. I wanted with all my strength to tell him that Lambert and Leon and Fred have made a very safe world for themselves. But I can't do it. Not all the time. I can't always colour within the lines. Some things just won't fit.

I had to try. Maybe for a while, just for a while, it took my mind off other things. It let me adjust my perspective.

I was so damn tired of hoping.

I was afraid of what's out there.

I'm afraid to be alone.

Do you remember when you first came here, Leon? I told you there was only one thing a magician, even an amateur, had to learn. Only one trick. And that was how to hold everything at a distance.

But that's not quite right. Controlling the distance everything is held at is more like it. Distance. Magicians need subjects to transform into objects. A Pretty Assistant to transform into a Pretty Vanished-Into-Thin-Air Assistant. A Bewildered Rabbit to transform into a Bewildered Easter Bouquet.

Making things disappear is one thing; that I can do. Making them re-appear is another. That's the supreme illusion. Here I'm not quite so accomplished. For this you have to change an object into a subject.

Leon looks me dead to the eye.

Is there anything out there, Leon? Anything but ghosts?

Rondo

Since Feb. 15, 1973, when Sarah Howard closed and locked its door behind her, no one has lived in the one room apartment on the top floor of the Malory Arms. In the corner of the east block, its only window is hidden from street-view by a huge and ancient maple tree. Some of the tenants of the Malory Arms refer to the tiny apartment as the music room.

Edwin Barnett was its first tenant. He moved in in 1903, when he was released from hospital, and lived there, by himself, for thirteen years. One of the only people who saw him during these years was his mother, Katherine. She visited frequently, usually in the evening. Each time she passed by the maple in front of his window she would pause, praying she'd hear music coming from his apartment. What

she invariably heard instead, echoing through the courtyard, were the sounds of his carving instruments.

As a girl, Katherine Malory wanted desperately to be a musician. Growing up in Exeter, her most vivid memory of childhood was of the day, when she was six, that her mother took her to an outdoor concert in London. From that point on Katherine dreamed of performing in a symphony orchestra, preferably in the string section. But her father, an Anglican minister who preached throughout Devonshire and who had once traced his ancestry back to one of the Norman horsemen in the Bayeux tapestry, was staunchly opposed to any such dreams. The Reverend Malcolm Malory believed that the human voice, raised in hymn and perhaps accompanied by a pipe organ, was music enough. In his opinion, anything requiring more elaborate orchestration, whether sacred or profane, was showy, and furthermore led some people to conclude that "the glory of man outshone the glory of God."

As a young woman, Katherine resented her father very much for denying her her dream. The resentment faded only when she married Brooks Barnett, the well-known architect of Branwen Castle. For Katherine, marriage signified a kind of freedom. She determined, despite her father's beliefs, to pass on her love of music to her children.

Edwin was Katherine's only child. A quiet and attentive boy, his first years were unavoidably influenced

by his grandfather. He grew up believing that God watched over him, although later in life, when he lost his leg and, for the week following, saw that the leg continued to cast a shadow, he would discover that even God could be caught by surprise.

But Katherine made sure he also grew up with the opportunity to become a musician. When he was nine years old, she engaged a Russian woman, Miss Sabin, to give him piano lessons. With Katherine's encouragement and Miss Sabin's instruction, Edwin worked diligently. For the first few years his progress was notable -- he was runner-up in a Devonshire piano competition for pre-teens -- and the Barnett home was filled with music.

As Edwin reached his mid-teens, however, he stopped improving. The problem was that his hands were very small.

"The hands of a pygmy," his father joked, on more than one occasion.

Katherine took Edwin to a number of doctors, but all they could recommend for his condition were stretching exercises, none of which seemed to help at all. Realizing he didn't have the temperament to be a teacher, and not satisfied with being merely a good musician, Edwin grew increasingly discouraged. By 1898 he had all but given up his studies. Katherine made one last effort to keep her dream alive. On his eighteenth birthday she took Edwin to

the Crystal Palace in London to see Pablo Casals perform. Listening to Casals work magic on the cello just made Edwin more morose, but it was an event Katherine would forever consider the high point of her life. The next year, faced with two or three troublesome debts, Brooks Barnett gathered up his family and set sail for Canada. It was, he'd heard, a country desperately in need of architects and planners.

Once settled in this country Edwin, at his father's urging, gave up the dream. "Like your father," his father said, "you have the hands of a draftsman."

Although Katherine still held on to the hope that Edwin would change his mind, she knew at this point it would be futile to object. But for the rest of her life harboured the suspicion that both her husband and her father had something to do with Edwin's small hands.

Edwin did not ever mention his music again.

Over the next three years he learned all he could from his father about drafting, mechanics, and the history of architecture and design. As often as possible, he accompanied his father to building sites. Edwin was quite pleased with some of the sketches he did for Branwen Castle, though none of the ideas advanced in these rough drawings made it into the final plan intact. At the end of these three years Brooks Barnett assigned Edwin a project of his own: to design and build an apartment building on a secluded

package of land on the outskirts of town.

Edwin, who tended to be solitary even at the best of times, virtually disappeared while he worked on the project. Within three months his meticulous plans were complete. Much to Katherine's surprise, in April of 1903, just before construction was to begin, Edwin announced that the building would be called the Malory Arms.

The Malory Arms was his first and last project: just after its completion, his left leg was crushed when he was struck by a runaway milk wagon owned by Auguste Lalonde. The leg had to be amputated, and he was hospitalized for six months.

When released, Edwin moved into the small corner apartment on the top floor of the east block. Reclusive after the accident, he had but a single goal: to carve a perfect wooden leg. With an array of chisels, knives, and a foot-powered lathe, Edwin would obsessively work one section of maple wood after another. He never reached his goal. No matter how long or how hard he worked, he found he could not sculpt a limb as smooth and responsive as a piano's ivory key.

In 1918, like so many others at the time, he succumbed to influenza. Because of the mild hysteria surrounding the epidemic, Edwin's apartment wasn't rented for over a year after his death. Until that time, his family retained the

lease. Katherine continued to visit the apartment, once a week, to clean and polish his carving instruments, and to make sure they were lined up neatly on the felt cloth beside the lathe.

Auguste Lalonde, the owner and driver of the runaway milkwagon that crushed Edwin Barnett's leg, was trampled by his horses in the accident, but not fatally injured. Though he let his route dwindle, he was able to continue working for quite a few years, until arthritis forced him to retire prematurely in June 1914, in the same week Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo. Auguste's eldest son Donald, fifteen at the time, took over the route.

While Donald grew up, the business floundered. Donald was a large man but timid by nature, and at one point he was down to one horse and a delivery schedule that could be covered in a morning. Then, at nineteen, he married Carole Aquilino whose father, a farmer with a herd of forty five Holsteins, was his main supplier. Marriage turned Donald's fortunes around. Carole had an instinctive and acute grasp of economics. She saw that this town was starting to grow and, despite the hard times Donald was having, she decided that the business would be best served by expansion and

diversification. An amateur numerologist, Carole determined, through a complicated series of calculations involving astrological data, that 1921 would be a year in which fate would look kindly on her husband. In the meantime, they had two children, Auguste and Manon. Each took after one of their parents; Manon would grow up with her mother's dark, sloe-eyed good looks, while Auguste was slender and relatively fair.

"It is time to take a chance," Carole announced on New Year's morning of the chosen year. With financial help from her father, the Lalondes began modernizing their operation. Carole's predictions were right on the mark. By 1930, *Les Laiteries Lalonde* had been incorporated and consisted of a pasteurization and cream separator plant, and a fleet of five trucks. Auguste and Manon Lalonde were then eleven and ten years old.

At about this time Brooks Barnett, in one of his more successful financial transactions, sold the Malory Arms to a group of businessmen from Glasgow, who had come to town to open a rubber processing factory.

The Scots, led by Alistair Acheson, were committed to the growth of this town. To this end they lent money to some of these businessmen, one of whom was Donald Lalonde. Donald and Carole, made brave by the successes of the past decade, wished to expand their plant facilities once again,

convinced they could be the primary suppliers of dairy products to the whole county.

Though they couldn't have foreseen it at the time, they borrowed more money than world events would allow. Just after their new factory was completed, and two new trucks purchased, the Depression came to town. Within fifteen months, Donald, like many other local entrepreneurs, was faced with debt payments he couldn't meet. Alistair Acheson and his group, who seemed to have unlimited resources, expressed an interest in buying him out.

At first Donald declined their offer; he didn't believe the bad times could go on forever. But times didn't get better quickly enough, and the Scottish businessmen were very determined. They pressured the farmers who were Donald's suppliers -- many had wives and children working in the rubber factory -- and even Carole's parents eventually had to toe the line, or face complete ruin. In 1937, Donald sold the dairy.

While Donald and Carole were preparing to move their family to a new home sixty miles away, Manon announced she wouldn't be going with them. An extremely attractive sixteen year old, she had fallen in love with Alistair Acheson's son, Stuart.

"We're going to be married," she said.

Celeste Ranger, who had once, for a week, been engaged

to Stuart, was maid of honour at the wedding. There were only three other witnesses, all friends of Stuart's. Neither set of parents attended. Without much money -- they depended on a small monthly income that Stuart got from a trust fund -- Manon and Stuart moved into the small top-floor apartment in the east wing of the Malory Arms.

Five months later, in the apartment, their only child, a boy, was born. Ten weeks premature, and no larger than Stuart's hand, he didn't make a single sound and wasn't strong enough to survive a day. Manon was inconsolable; Stuart withdrew completely. His parents made an effort to get him to leave Manon and come back home, but Stuart angrily refused. Convinced that their lives had been cursed, he and Manon lived together in the one-room apartment for another year, speaking to each other only when it was absolutely necessary. When the Second World War began, Stuart sailed overseas and signed up with the British. He worked his way up to the rank of lieutenant, and in his few letters home his spirits seemed to be improving. In his last letter to Manon, posted in North Africa, he mentioned how he looked forward to a new start. In 1942, fighting under Montgomery against Rommel's troops at Alamein, he was listed as Missing-in-Action.

Celeste Ranger did her best to comfort Manon, and moved in with her for a time. Celeste was an energetic girl --

some thought her wild -- who was a favorite actress in the town's only theatre company. Founded in 1941 as part of the war effort, the company was intended to be strictly amateur, but their productions were so popular that, by the time the war ended and those who'd fought had returned home, they were able to hire some professional actors from out of town. Their production of the *Mikado*, which they staged annually, was always a great success, both critically and financially. For six years running, Celeste was cast as Yum Yum. While she lived with Manon, the sound of her voice, as clear and highly pitched as a piccolo, rang throughout the Malory Arms.

Manon eventually gave up trying to locate her husband -- as far as she knew, no-one in the world ever heard from him again -- and patched up her differences with her parents. Manon and Celeste left the one-room apartment in the Malory Arms at the same time, Manon going back to her parents, Celeste moving in with Ben Howard, an aspiring actor and set designer from Springfield, Mass.

The English-speaking community, in the late 40's, would not stand for such living arrangements. Somehow, they felt Celeste had betrayed their good faith.

"Isn't that just the way it will happen with some people," they said.

Their star attraction ostracized, the theatre company suffered. Ben and Celeste organized an amateur troupe to serve the French community, and for a while it looked as though it might take off, but when television was introduced into this town, the venture failed.

Ben Howard lived with Celeste for three years, but married Helen Primmerman. The marriage caught many people by surprise, but in time Ben and Helen Howard came to be regarded as the happiest couple in town. Helen, who had once done costume work for the theatre company, was active in the Sew and So Club at the Anglican Church, and her quilts -- particularly those with the pattern of her own invention, which she called Wheel and Spoke -- were always much in demand at bazaars. Ben got a job as an editorial page cartoonist for the *News Leader*, and was a success; in 1954, he won a provincial newspaper award for his portrait of the town's former mayor, Armand Leclerc, who had retired to the country. The caricature pictured the ninety-six year old Leclerc in his farmhouse kitchen, his animals serving as furniture.

The next year, on Feb. 15, Helen gave birth to a daughter, Sarah. In later years Ben would swear she'd been born with musical ability.

"She came into the world humming," he'd claim.

Sarah was a lanky girl, easily a head taller than any of her friends, with dark auburn hair that she wore in a pageboy. Before she was five years old, she had become startlingly skilled at weaving intricate sculptures out of twine. She worked with great speed, often down by the river where she'd listen to the bullfrogs singing, and made designs so complex that she often couldn't get her fingers free of them, and her mother would have to take scissors to cut the twine loose.

In the late fifties, the town grew as fast as Sarah did. New businesses sprung up everywhere, a local television station went on the air, and the City Symphony was established. As these new enterprises entered the city, one old one was being forced out. With the advent of plastics and synthetics, the influence of the Scottish businessmen, now primarily the Acheson family, waned. Their flagship operation, the rubber company, was in trouble, and a polio scare in 1959 saw their fortunes decline further. Although health officials guessed the virus was being carried by the river, a rumour spread that the polio was transmitted through dairy products, and many people in the town were willingly convinced. The Acheson family divested themselves of most of their holdings; the Malory Arms was bought by Godwin Trust, and young Auguste Lalonde returned

to town to reclaim his father's dairy.

Sarah attended Parkside School. Despite her build, she was not very athletic. In second grade, while trying to hide from the rest of her gym class behind a rack of volleyballs, she found a dust-covered cello. Years later Sarah would tell her mother that she was able to hear how the instrument could sound the moment she touched her hand to its maple neck.

Sarah immediately lost all interest in the world around her. She discovered she had the ability to think and dream not only in words and images, but in musical notation. Indeed, as she became more and more involved with her playing, she would often find it easiest to express whatever she was feeling with a musical phrase. She claimed that she didn't have to learn how to play the cello -- she had to learn how to let the cello play. The pleasure, she said, was in hearing what it could do.

By the time she was ten her technique was brilliant, the dexterity she displayed with her twine sculptures transferred to the cello's strings. In 1965 Sarah gave her first recital, in the Anglican Church Hall; three years later, the City Symphony invited her as guest soloist for its inaugural Young People's Concert. Her performance piece was Dvorak's *Rondo*.

"She obviously loves her instrument, as all good

musicians must," one critic said. "What is most unique, however, is that her instrument quite plainly responds, and returns that love tenfold."

There is a photograph of her in the files of the *News Leader*, taken at the concert. Sarah cradles the cello with authority, her left hand easily reaching all the way around the base of its neck. Her head rests on the instrument, on the hand-carved tuning keys, and they appear to be joined; because of its colour, it is impossible to tell from the photograph where Sarah's hair ends and the cello begins.

In 1970 Sarah performed twice more with the City Symphony. She was sixteen. That summer, with the recommendation of the symphony's conductor, Ben enrolled her at the Conservatory. From that point on Sarah seemed, more than ever, to thrive on the pressure her talent imposed.

Ben rented the small corner apartment on the top floor of the Malory Arms for Sarah to use as a studio. Working on her own, her only audience the huge maple tree outside her window, she learned great discipline. For two years, two years in which she barely left the studio except to attend classes, the courtyard of the Malory Arms resounded with her music. Every evening, just after dark, Ben would have to telephone her and tell her to come home.

The autumn after she got her degree -- she was the youngest person ever to have graduated from the Conservatory

-- Sarah was asked to accompany the City Symphony on a national tour. Preparing for the tour, she rehearsed obsessively. She began sleeping over at the studio, not even answering her father's calls. Ben and Helen barely saw her for two months. They worried that she might be taking it all too seriously, but Sarah assured them that this wasn't the case, she just needed to work hard if they wanted her to do her best.

Then, a week before the tour was to begin, Sarah stopped practicing. She left her cello in the studio and came home.

"I need some time apart from it," she said.

On Jan. 19, 1975, the symphony left town. Ben and Helen agreed that Sarah seemed unusually reluctant, but blamed it on nerves.

On the first leg of the tour, the City Symphony, and Sarah in particular, was a great success. Her performance of Dvorak's *Rondo* was singled out by all the critics for special mention.

"Her playing is not flawless," one critic stated, "but it is as close to flawless as one dares to come."

After they'd been on the road for two weeks, however, the reviewers, while continuing to praise Sarah's technical skill, began to wonder if all the travelling wasn't taking its toll.

While the symphony was still in southern Ontario, Sarah abruptly quit. The letter she wrote to her parents arrived home two days after her decision was reported in the *News Leader*. She explained she was happier this way, and was going to stay in Ontario for a while.

"Why," Ben wrote her.

"It's simple," Sarah replied. "I don't hear it anymore."

On Feb. 15, her birthday, Sarah brought the man she was living with home to meet her parents. She was home only for that day.

In the early evening, alone, Sarah took her cello back to the studio in the Malory Arms. Without turning on any lights, she removed it from its case, wiped the maple neck with a felt cloth, and ran the bow, once, across its strings. Then she carefully leaned it against the wall, behind her music stand, and left.

The telephone in the studio is still connected, and Ben and Helen call every day, on the chance that she's returned. Once a week Ben visits the studio. He dusts the cello with the felt cloth, then tunes the strings. The sound echoes across the courtyard.

More Conversations in the Courtyard

I

An older man is standing in the courtyard with a bucket in his hand. Yellow plastic -- the bucket, that is. In a window of the apartment building, at his back, there is an older woman, both hands resting on the sill, looking out.

He stands in the courtyard, apparently without moving, for five minutes.

Someone approaches. It is a lovely day.

The someone who approaches sees the older man standing in the courtyard, apparently without moving, with a yellow plastic bucket in his hand, and thinks: I will not say it is a lovely day, even though it is.

He pauses for a moment to think.

--Look at that tree, he finally says.

--Yes, the older man replies, quickly, as if he'd been waiting there, for five minutes, just to hear someone say precisely that. It's shimmering, isn't it?

--Shimmering it is, it sure is.

--My wife, you see, knew it would.

The someone who approached thinks: A lot of people are convinced that the people they love, or have grown accustomed to loving, have privileged information. That is the source of their continuing attraction, their mystery. But I won't say that, either.

--Just look at that tree!

II

Fetch me a miracle, Leon.

Fetch!

You're useless. Sometimes you can be such a disappointment. Can't you do anything a normal dog does? Is this asking too much?

We've made it all the way out here, we might as well do something. Very well, we'll sing. But you've got to promise to run. The song requires running. Who'll chase who? Okay, here we go.

*All around the mulberry bush,
The monkey chased the weasel,
The monkey thought it was all in fun --*

You are not running. Reconsider. Let me whisper four little letters to you. S-P-C-A....

Alright, one last try now, just for fun.

Fetch, Leon.

Fetch!

You don't want to? Fine. Forget about it. Put it out of your mind. Put it out forever.

I'm sorry. I'm very sorry. I realize it's not your fault. I realize you're doing your best.

Oh for God's sake please please fetch --

III

The mulberry tree shimmers.

--Tweet!

--Tweet tweet, tweet...

Footfalls, in staggered time. Two are sharp, high-heeled. The other two soft, like whisk brooms whisking. Moccasins?

Faintly, from somewhere in the apartment building, they hear music.

--Nod.

--Nod, half smile.

As they move away both, for a fraction of an instant, catch themselves in mid-footstep and tilt their heads toward, the deep and hollow sound. Then continue on.

That's about it, more or less.

Tea With Mrs. Sharples

One summer afternoon, just before two, Harriet Hamilton peeked out her living room window. In the next block of apartments Paul Robeson was singing "Ol' Man River" at a volume that made her eardrums flutter, like moths' wings. In the courtyard the woman from the new family was sunning herself in a bathing suit that didn't quite cover her bottom, unaware that her son had unhooked his harness and was making his way down towards the river, Indian-style.

Annabel would soon return from her weekly visit with the psychologist. She was supposed to be looking after Harriet, though she could barely take care of herself. Even on dry summer days Annabel wore billy boots.

"We're not living on a farm, you know," Harriet had often reminded her. Annabel's whole person smelled like

warm rubber.

Harriet poured herself a glass of sherry. Despite the August heat she needed something to keep her blood from turning to ice. As it was she felt as if hat pins were floating through her veins.

The decanter was nearly empty. Annabel had said it would take a miracle to persuade her to re-fill it. Harriet wrapped an angora shawl about her shoulders and sat down in her highbacked chair.

"Oh, help," she sighed. "Let me out of here."

Harriet wondered if she was too far beyond the age when a woman could reasonably expect someone to appear at her front door and rescue her. How did those girls in the fairy books manage it? Harriet tipped the sherry to her lips. Breathless girls, hopeless girls, girls with long golden hair or with feet that were just the size some prince in tights desired.

She rested her head on a doily draped over the back of the chair and had just begun to daydream that she was a dancer when flurry of beating wings startled her to her feet. She spread her arms and groped at the air for balance.

"Ye gods and little fishhooks," Harriet said.

Her steps short and tentative, as if she were barefoot and the floor pebbled, Harriet walked to the bay window and

raised a corner of the muslin drapes. Chirping and annoyed, the sparrows rose in a soft brown cloud, hovered motionless for an instant, then re-settled themselves atop the eaves of the far block. The mulberry tree quivered and the new boy's head appeared from beneath the branches. He held up his arrow upon which a catfish was impaled. His mother rolled over and shouted at him not to shoot the birds. Annabel appeared and trudged up the courtyard steps.

Rescue, thought Harriet.

* * *

Harriet was still angry at her husband. For a long time after Charles passed away she'd waited to hear from him; he'd promised that she would. Occasionally she thought she heard his voice, but it always turned out to be something else: an announcer speaking on the radio in someone else's apartment, a wind squeaking through a crack under the door, or the neighbour's dog who, although as large as an deer, often whimpered after dark.

Harriet eventually gave up on Charles, and rearranged her life. At least twice a week, over the last seven years, she'd met with friends for afternoon tea. But in recent months many of those friends had gone, and those that hadn't

had either taken leave of their senses or were about to. In the next block of the apartment building, Louie Michaels was sick in bed and waiting for a vacancy at the Villa Mont St. Suplice. Alice Shufelt, who'd been Harriet's best friend, claimed she was too tired to either entertain or leave her home.

Harriet couldn't blame her. She hadn't felt like setting foot from the house since the woman down the street, and her twenty year old son, were shot and dumped out on their balcony. In the newspaper photograph it had looked as though they'd been entirely covered by falling snow.

* * *

Harriet broke up a crust of bread and scattered the crumbs on her window ledge. On the day Mr. Michaels had planted the mulberry tree in the courtyard, every single sparrow in the world had gathered, chattered, and agreed to make it their social centre. Since that time the leaves of the tree had shimmered constantly, forever in motion.

Harriet watched one of the smaller sparrows, who was just learning to use his wings. He zigzagged through the sky, ricocheted off a lamp post, and plopped onto the ledge. At first he was too busy investigating the bits of

bread and the cracks in the cement to notice her, but when Harriet tapped her fingernail on the windowpane, he looked up.

Harriet asked him if he thought he'd like flying, once he got it right. The bird staggered a couple of steps closer.

"It won't be long," Harriet told him. The bird offered her a tentative peck.

"Don't bump your nose," Harriet warned him.

The bird blinked and banged his head against the pane.

* * *

Just before she'd gone into seclusion, Alice had taken Harriet into her confidence.

"I never said anything," Alice said, "but I never did get used to the smell of Winston's cigars."

Alice was taking leave of her senses by degrees. During the war she was always excited because Winston Churchill was often on the radio and Alice was madly in love with him.

At the foot of the courtyard steps she took Alice's arm and told her a funny story about Charles. When he was in training for the air force he used to fly low over his

mother's house and drop off a canvas sack of dirty laundry. Alice sniffed at the air and whispered that she'd found a way to stop missing Winston.

"The more I think of him," Alice said, "the more real he seems to get."

Harriet walked up the steps, wondering if that was true.

* * *

Harriet tiptoed into the kitchen and saw that the lunch dishes hadn't yet been put away. Annabel was napping in the spare room. She had spent the greater part of the morning washing Harriet's undergarments, which were now draped over the shower rod, and her lower back was bothering her again. Annabel was recuperating from a nervous collapse brought about because her husband had left her for a distant cousin he'd met for the first time at a Church Social.

Harriet listened to Annabel groaning in her sleep. Soon her groans would be loud enough to frighten the daylight out of the birds in the mulberry tree.

Harriet plugged the tea kettle into the outlet on the stove. For the moment the sparrows in the courtyard were calm, but the apartment echoed with the steady pong of water

dripping from the shower rod into the bathtub. Harriet suspected that Annabel didn't wring things out properly just to annoy her.

The kettle gurgled and in a few seconds began to whistle. Harriet reached out to pull the plug and tried to remember if, in all her years, she'd ever met anyone named Annabel that she really liked.

She took her hand away from the plug and waited for the whistle to grow into a screech.

Annabel cried out from the day-bed.

"Are you all right out there?"

Harriet watched the steam wend towards the ceiling.

"Mrs. Hamilton!"

Harriet took her blue delft teapot down from the cupboard.

"Where are you?"

Harriet scalded the teapot.

Annabel appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"Oh," she sighed. "You had me scared there for a minute." Harriet tried to look surprised.

"But I'm fine," she said. "Just fine."

"When I heard ---"

"Did you have a bad dream? If you'd like, you can tell me about it. Those doctors you see aren't the only ones who can listen, you know."

Annabel shifted her weight from one foot to another. Both bare, Harriet noticed. Bare and stout.

"If anything were to happen to you while I was here --" Harriet took Annabel's arm and led her down the hallway.

"You needn't worry so," Harriet said. "Just go back to bed and rest your poor back. And I'll see about finding you some slippers."

The springs in the day-bed whined as Annabel lay back down. In the courtyard, the sparrows started up again. Harriet refilled the kettle. Its weight caused her wrist to tingle.

* * *

Harriet's mother had once asked the doctor to take a good look at Harriet's feet. He did so, and told her that she'd always have trouble with bunions and corns. The condition was likely hereditary.

"Isn't there anything I can do?" Harriet asked.

"You could try not letting your feet touch the floor," the doctor winked.

* * *



Harriet took a cup of tea and a plate of shortbread biscuits into the living room and turned on the television, which Annabel had equipped with an oversized luminous dial. She'd also bought her a half dozen high-intensity lamps, whose goosenecks curled around the backs of each chair and hovered above every table top in the room. Annabel had switched a few of them on even though sunlight streamed through the bay window.

The television came to life and a dog appeared, nosing about the gutters on Coronation Street. Bet Lynch was tending the bar today at Rovers Return Inn, and her hair, as always, was a mess. Harriet put down her cup and broke off a piece of biscuit. Though she found it hard to distinguish the features of people, she met for the first time, she could see this group as clearly as her husband had been able to feel his missing finger.

Bet slapped a glass down in front of Ray Langton. Harriet wondered if he and Diedre were speaking again. Diedre loved Ray very much, and Harriet felt sorry for her.

"Langton is a rotter, Deidre," Harriet warned.

Mavis Riley and Rita Littlewood -- the sort of redhead that would always catch Charles' eye -- had just seated themselves at their table when Stanley and Hilda Ogden rushed into the room. Stanley always put Harriet in mind of

a walrus.

"You'll never guess who's back," Hilda said. "You'll never guess who's back and who at this very moment is on her way here."

"Who?" Harriet said.

Suddenly everyone turned in their seats and faced the front doors of the pub. Harriet looked around too. But by now some people had stood, blocking Harriet's view. Mavis Riley peered through the crowd and, goggle eyes goggling, tried to speak to Rita, who was, as usual, acting as if the commotion didn't affect her in the least.

"Wait until you get your breath back, Mavis," Harriet said.

Ray Langton pretended to cower behind the open end of the bar.

"Treat your weary eyes to this vision, Gentlemen and Ladies," he said in a stage whisper. "Now we'd best be on our toes."

Harriet still couldn't get a clear view of the speaker. She sipped her tea, which lately had tasted more like the tissue of the bags than the leaves themselves.

"Cheeky monkeys," a woman rasped. "I'll smack your legs."

Harriet sat up. The crowd parted and an old woman in a hairnet scrutinized the assembled. She had the features of

an owl, and Harriet recognized her immediately.

"Mrs. Sharples," Harriet said.

"Nothing much changed here, I see," Mrs. Sharples said.

Stanley Ogden groaned, his mouth poised on the lip of his mug of stout. Mavis once again lost her breath. Rita arranged her hair.

Harriet stood beside the television.

"I've missed you, Mrs. Sharples," she said. "And we're all glad to have you back."

* * *

Harriet dreamed she was alone on a stage, lit by a single soft-focussed spot. She was so light on her feet that a series of leaps took her higher and higher until her slippers no longer touched the stage.

Her heart fluttering, she felt a pair of hands pushing firmly on her shoulders. Harriet held her breath and heard the tendons in the fingers creaking as they eased their grip.

"Oh my," was all she could think to say.

Harriet opened her eyes. The hands disappeared. Only then did she realize that they had been pushing her back because her body had been rising off the bed.

"Oh my," she repeated over and over, "oh my oh my oh my."

She closed her eyes again and the sounds of the world outside of her apartment seemed amplified. She heard rain piercing the membranes of the clouds, rushing down the gutterpipe and between the courtyard cobblestones, finally sinking with a sigh into the earth.

The next morning, while spreading apricot jam across the lightly browned face of an English muffin, Harriet wondered about her soul.

* * *

The familiar scent of lilac greeted Harriet as she opened the clothes closet. She squinted into the full-length mirror and adjusted her slip. At some time or another, when she hadn't been looking, her skin had taken on the look of a dried onion.

"Nothing but bones," Harriet told the mirror. "I've got the gangliest arms God ever gave to either man or beast."

She took down a dress with a green floral print and was smoothing it over her hipbones when she heard a light pecking at the front door. Annabel was trying to insert her

key into the lock. She was rarely successful.

"Why she even bothers trying the key is just beyond me," Harriet said as she went to let her in.

Annabel lumbered through the doorway, eyes red-rimmed and flitting nervously about the hall.

"What's the matter," Harriet asked. "Were you shot at?"

Annabel dropped her net bag. Laundry soap from an opened box spilled to the floor.

"Not as far as I saw," Annabel mumbled. She bent over and scooped the detergent into a pile. Harriet studied her. Annabel pulled off her billy boots, rolled down her pantlegs, and straightened up. They stood facing each other for a moment.

"I'll make us some tea?" Annabel said finally.

"Yes, you do that, dear. That would be lovely."

Annabel picked up her bag and turned towards the kitchen.

"Don't you look just fine this morning, Mrs. Hamilton."

Harriet watched Annabel trudge down the hall.

Just beyond me, she thought.

* * *

Mr. Michaels unpacked the groceries he'd picked up for

Harriet. He's done her shopping ever since the shooting down the street.

"How is Bauer?" Harriet asked. Mr. Michaels looked in on the cab driver in the corner block from time to time.

"No luck yet," Mr. Michaels replied.

"I've been feeling very dizzy lately," Harriet told him.

"Dizzy's nothing to bother about," Mr. Michaels said. He smiled and pulled a blue and gold tin of English Breakfast tea from the bottom of the grocery bag. It was Harriet's favorite.

"Voila," he said.

"You lovely man!"

She made them both a cup, and while they sipped, she told him about her dream. Harriet knew that Louie Michaels had frequent nightmares. When she got to the part where she'd seemed to be floating, she suddenly felt embarrassed.

"I don't know why I'm talking about these silly things," Harriet said.

Mr. Michaels took a moment to think things over. He poured more tea. He was embarrassed too.

"Maybe you need to get out and see friends more," he said.

Harriet waited for him to continue.

"Good tea," he said.

He took a shortbread cookie and said he had to be off: Louie would be wondering what was keeping him. Harriet asked how she was.

"I don't think she'll need to go now," he said. "Though she does still tell me she hears silkworms in the mulberry."

After he'd left, Harriet thought: I don't know what the dream was all about, but it surely wasn't that.

* * *

The ghost thrush was singing. He seemed to pick only the hottest times of the hottest days to sing. Alice Shufelt had told Harriet it was a thrush, and they called him the ghost thrush because neither had ever been able to see him.

His song sounded very much like the opening of Strauss' *Tales from the Vienna Woods*. Harriet wondered if Strauss had actually heard the thrush and used its song, or whether the bird, lighting on the windowsill of some salon, heard the waltz and appropriated the tune for himself. Would the other thrushes have been impressed?

She turned on the television set. Minnie Caldwell and Ena Sharples walked into Rovers Return Inn. Mrs. Walker

poured them each a glass of milk stout. Harriet imagined how the wood of the bar would be cool to the touch, how the rings the glasses left on its surface would tug at the skin of her fingertips if she tried to lift them away.

"Happy to see you with us again, Mrs. Sharples," Annie Walker said, grimacing at the sight of the older woman's hairnet.

"I'm sure," Mrs. Sharples said.

"What brings us back to this part of Weatherfield then?"

Ena sipped her stout and moved away from the bar.

"Just waiting for passage out," she said.

* * *

Harriet waited by the bay window. In a few minutes, Mr. and Mrs. Michaels came out of their apartment and stepped into the courtyard. He took her arm and guided her slowly past the mulberry tree and down the six cement steps to the street. Bauer's taxi was waiting. The day before, Mrs. Michaels' doctor telephoned to say that there was at last a place for her. Harriet remembered her sister's wedding. Hilda was driven from the church in a Model A, one of the first cars the town had seen. It made so much noise

that even the dogs ran for cover. Hilda sat like a statue all the way down Dennison Avenue. It was windy and she lost her hat.

As the taxi pulled away from the curb, Harriet waved.

* * *

"Ye gods and little fishes!" Harriet said suddenly, but Annabel didn't hear because she was napping again in the spare room.

The kettle whistled, drawing Harriet from her armchair, across the living room, and into the kitchen. The whistle grew to a shriek. She flipped the hood up over the beak of the kettle and shut her eyes.

Her mother had once warned her that inhaling hot steam would cause a nosebleed, so Harriet held her breath as she let the rising vapours soothe the lines in her face. Slowly, she was being lulled to sleep.

Then her body began to rise, though no more than an inch or two off the floor.

Harriet opened her eyes and looked up to the ceiling.

"Oh my," she said, "oh my."

She straightened her dress and poured her tea. The windmill painted on the cup seemed to be spinning.

Annabel appeared in the doorway, rubbing her back.

"I wish you'd watch the kettle a little more closely,"
she said.

* * *

One night after Annabel had gone home, Harriet decided to bake some shortbread. It had been so humid during the day that the air was visible and the outlines of the quiberry tree seemed to be a mirage.

As she took the shortbread from the oven, the sudden wave of heat made her dizzy. Everything went black for an instant, then she heard a voice that sounded much like her husband's.

"Hello, Margaret," it said.

Harriet dropped the baking sheet.

"Hello?"

She listened for a moment, but the voice was gone.

"What nonsense," she said. "A ringing in my ears."

She stooped to pick the rest of the shortbread off the floor.

"Who's Margaret?"

* * *

Annabel arrived early the next morning. Harriet let her in and watched as she removed her billy boots. Annabel took one look down the hallway and sighed.

"Oh, look," she said. Shreds of soiled toilet paper littered the carpet and marked a trail between the bathroom and Harriet's bed.

"It's the same thing every morning. Don't you see what you're doing at night? Do we need more light?"

"I'm hardly blind," Harriet said.

"Do you have trouble when you...?"

"Are you trying to say I'm incontinent, Annabel?"

"What I mean is, you don't always make water where you should."

Harriet went into the living room and left Annabel to take care of the mess.

"You can be an awful woman, Mrs. Hamilton," Annabel said, under her breath.

Apparently I'm also deaf, Harriet thought.

She looked out the window. The sparrows were just waking up. One of them had had a hard night. While fixing his feathers he fell out of the tree.

Annabel came into the room. Her sleeves were rolled up to her shoulders and she was barefoot.

"Would you like me to fix us some tea now?"

"I beg your pardon?" Harriet shouted. Annabel ran water in the kitchen sink.

"So," she asked, "have you heard how Mrs. Michaels likes it at the Villa?"

* * *

Charles was a lieutenant in one regiment or another; Harriet never could remember which one. In the picture atop her rosewood dressing table, he is dressed in his WWI soldier's uniform. He wears his hat, and his ankles are wrapped in ceremonial puttees. The lower right corner of the photograph reads: For My Harry. See you soon, love Your Charlie.

Harriet wondered if he might have died of boredom after all of the wars were over. He had come back from his first one missing a finger on his left hand, and he liked to say -- no matter what the company -- that he'd lost it sticking it up the Devil's bum. That always got a laugh, but Harriet was left trying to explain the real cause.

"Are you still in the bedroom?" Annabel called.

"He was a God-fearing man," she told Annabel. "In his own way."

* * *

Harriet and Annabel sat at the kitchen table reading the morning newspaper. Annabel had the Lifestyles section, Harriet the Letters to the Editor. A woman who lived on the other side of the river was upset because the local politicians kept putting off the construction of the sewage system that was supposed to replace it.

"Listen to this," Annabel said. "*Fenwick, Phillip and Freda, are thrilled to announce the birth of their first daughter, Harriet Phoebe...*"

Harriet looked up from the Letters page.

"Isn't that funny? Someone's got your name."

"What?" Harriet said.

"Isn't that funny? Someone's got your name!"

Harriet glared.

"I knew quite a few Harriets when I was growing up. It was quite a popular name."

"But you don't hear it so much these days."

"Once a name has almost disappeared, someone's bound to come along and try it out again."

"Replace the old ones," Annabel said.

Harriet folded her paper and got up from the table.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that..."

"I'm sure you didn't; Annabel," Harriet said.

That night, after Annabel went home, Harriet shredded an entire roll of toilet paper, and scattered it all over the bathroom floor.

* * *

It was Annabel's day off, and Mr. Michaels had just left to visit his wife. He'd promised to stop off at the corner store on his way home to pick up some things.

Harriet settled herself in the armchair and gazed out into the courtyard. She'd just begun to daydream when she thought she heard her husband's voice.

"Harry?" he called.

I am not going to be fooled this time, Harriet said to herself. The boy next door was digging in the dirt at the base of the mulberry tree. The sparrows were watching.

"Harry?"

Harriet closed her eyes. The mulberry tree rattled as the birds, in a group, rose.

"You still like lilac, I see," her husband continued.

"Hello, Charles," she sighed.

Charles told her he was fine, there was no reason to

worry on his account, and although his hand still bothered him, he was very happy.

"What was it like?" Harriet asked him.

"Frightening at first," he said. "And terribly difficult to get one's mind around. Not the smoothest of trips, in retrospect."

Harriet got up and adjusted the curtains.

"Why didn't you come back sooner?"

"I don't know, really. I just couldn't."

There was a pause in the conversation. Neither of them could think of what to say next, and Harriet knew Charles would soon start to fidget.

Finally Harriet said she'd like to ask two last questions, if he wouldn't mind. Her husband replied that indeed he wouldn't.

"Does one get tea?"

"If you're good," Charles teased. "Next?"

Harriet sat down on the chesterfield.

"Who's Margaret?"

* * *

On Coronation Street that afternoon, Albert Tatlock, who had a gray moustache no thicker than an eyelash and a

jaw that drooped over his shirt collar, walked into Corner Shop and asked Rita Littlewood for a packet of seed.

"I hardly think that'll sustain you till morning, Albert," Rita said.

"Don't be so sure," Harriet said.

"You're in danger of getting on my wrong side, Miss Littlewood," Albert said.

The door chimes jingled and Ena Sharples entered the store.

"For your information," Albert continued, "this packet is for my pigeon. He's got the makings of a champion. There's good money in that, you know." Albert always had a scheme to make money.

"Sometimes you get under my skin, Albert," Harriet said. Albert turned away and pocketed his seed.

Ena Sharples trudged up to the counter, pushed Albert aside, and opened her purse.

"Put a ring around my leg, then let me loose and see if I'm fool enough to come rushing back," she said.

Harriet ran her nails along the scalloped edge of the tea table, over the painted tin soldiers on horseback arranged on top, and across her ribs, making sure she was still among the things of her world.

* * *

The last trip Harriet and Charles took to England was Harriet's first by airplane. The weather was poor the whole time and on the way back they ran into a stream of air pockets. Charles got Harriet some ginger ale to settle her stomach and then went up to the cockpit to see the pilot. He was smiling when he came back, until he saw that Harriet had been sick. He wrapped a blanket around her shoulders, placed a pillow behind her head, and said:

"This is nothing. Imagine if someone were shooting at us!"

Harriet tried to smile. Charles took her hand, and held it for the rest of the flight.

* * *

The ghost thrush was singing in the courtyard again, camouflaged by the branches of the mulberry tree. Harriet filled the kettle. While waiting for the water to boil, she tiptoed to the door of the spare room. Annabel was fast asleep.

The steam began curling up into the air. Harriet flipped up the little hood over the beak of the kettle and

shut her eyes. When the steam started to rush through the opening, she held her breath.

What would it be like to rise right to the ceiling? she wondered.

As her feet left the floor, she began to feel dizzy.

What would it be like to pass right through the roof?

She could smell lilac in her clothes. The apartment grew smaller and smaller.

"Let me take one last look," she said.

* * *

The kettle was whistling. Annabel started to groan, and she groaned so loudly that the birds flew from the mulberry tree.

Mrs. Sharples turned from her stove, kettle in hand.

"Tea?" she asked.

"Please," Harriet said.

Mood and Rumour

To the surprise of no one, a recent *Nitely News* editorial suggested that the prevailing mood in this town is such that action on the river question must be taken. Recognizing this, at the last City Council meeting, after voting unanimously to adopt official city colours, the City Fathers confirmed that the question of the new and advanced filtration system, intended to replace the river as a sewage treatment facility, is the most pressing they've faced in a long, long time. Construction, they have promised, is just around the corner. They are only waiting for provincial approval of their final plans, and promise to pass on any and all information the minute it comes into their possession.

The *News Leader*, however, reports that men of vision in

the provincial capital are considering a comprehensive proposal submitted by a well-connected architect from Paris. Rumour has it that this plan would see the river cleaned up and the reservoir put to many recreational uses, such as boating, swimming, sunning, and various other water sports. Picnic tables and tether ball courts have also been mentioned. Many people, the *News Leader* claims, enjoy tether ball.

The arguments for the rumoured plan are compelling. It is, first of all, resource-efficient: silt dredged from the river bottom could be used, it is said, to fill in the river's marshy shores, hence improving its overall appearance. The plan is also ecologically sound. Biologists commissioned by the government point out that, should the rumours prove correct, circumstances would be incredibly favourable, as there isn't really any wildlife in the area left to protect.

The *Nitely News* editorialist reveals that his people had long ago heard and discounted these rumours, and that in any case there was still a problem concerning the power lines that sag across a bottleneck in the river. The *News Leader* maintains that Hydro officials are being consulted. Indeed, they claim, preliminary studies to determine the cost and feasibility of repairing all of the power lines near the river are about to begin. The *Nitely News*

editorialist replies that of course he was aware of that.

The *News Leader* also reports that, according to a usually reliable source, the planners are further thinking about dismantling the buildings on the river's south bank. An Olympic-sized cinder track, with built in sand pits for those interested in the jumping events, could be laid on the land vacated by the Malory Arms. Some reservoir silt could also be used for this project, filling in the huge hole that the basements of the Malory Arms would leave.

The *Nitely News* editorialist wonders about the price such a project would exact. The *News Leader*, in a feature article titled "Tennis, Anyone?" insists that upkeep costs would be negligible.

There is also talk of erecting fiberglass stalls, painted maroon and white, the newly chosen city colours. In these stalls both budding and accomplished athletes could rub shoulders, exchange training tips, and change into their track clothes which, along with refreshments, may or may not be sold on the premises. One local entrepreneur, who prefers not to be identified, hints that a call for tenders has already been issued.

According to a *News Leader* poll, there would be substantial interest for this plan, in some official quarters. It seems that many people have taken to running.

Despite a press release from the mayor's office, in

which all of these speculations are categorically dismissed, the editorialist with the *Nitely News* salutes the fitness trend. Considering the mood of the populace, however, he also suggests it might be best if we all made a concerted effort to live our lives within reason.

Lunar Observation

Bauer's on his balcony, mapping out the moon. It is an autumn night, and cool. The courtyard of the Malory Arms is quiet, but down at the river bullfrogs are croaking so loudly -- a last hurrah -- that Bauer can barely hear himself think. Cars inch across the lighted bridge in the distance. Bauer unfolds a 21" square sheet of paper, spreads it out on the table at his side, and weights it at each corner with stones.

He's remembering how his grandmother explained the tides to him when he was a boy. She said the moon was once, and for quite a long time, part of the earth. But then the moon boasted that it was too massive to be moved and God, angry, ripped it away, tore it from its moorings in the sea, and rolled it, slowly, like a gigantic rock, into the sky.

For a long time, she said, it had hovered very close to Earth.

How close, Bauer asked.

So close a very tall pine could have grazed its surface, his grandmother said. And since then it's had a single purpose: to draw those seas back to itself. It hasn't happened yet, she told him, but that's why it was wise never to take anything for granted. Someday the moon, if its orbit brings it close enough, and the water is high enough, just might succeed.

Bauer scans the constellations, accustoming his eyes to the night sky. For the moment it's absolutely clear and the stars glow without a flicker. He extends an imaginary line from the Pole Star through the western side of Cassiopeia, to Pegasus, who's stretched out across half the sky, then down to the eastern horizon, where dead Cetus floats. Bauer fixes his telescope in its mounting, fits an eyepiece to the telescope, and screws up his face. Though the legs of the tripod are six feet long, he still has to stoop.

Three days after first quarter, the great walled plains are thrown into relief by the cut of the earth's shadow. The Mare Vaporum appears near the western edge of the moon. He's found that this is the best time for observation. A few days more into the moon's cycle and its glare will be so bright that the details of its surface will be washed out.

Bauer gets it in his sights. He'll be there for hours.

Bauer's on his balcony, mapping out the moon. What looks to him like a tiny bay extends from the northern edge of the Mare Vaporum. Bauer sketches in its outline, as precisely as he can. He's made this drawing dozens of times. The act of sketching, he's found, disciplines the eye, trains it to pick out details it might otherwise miss. Each time he re-maps a particular area of the moon, more craters, ring plains, valleys, and clefts appear. He's followed the moon many times over, evening after evening, from first crescent to full, charting the entire surface. He's named almost two hundred features.

The lake Bauer and his wife used to sail is actually a part of the river, a section where it widens and the current slows. The lake isn't very big, but it's ideal for small craft, as moderate winds blow from the southern shore all summer long. Bauer and his wife used to launch their boat at a point on the river barely a hundred yards from their apartment door. From there they'd sail the mile or so to the lake.

A power line sags across the bottleneck where the river bulges — one of the poles was tipped off plumb by an earth

tremor. The city hasn't yet made repairs, but Bauer knew where the lines were and how to avoid them.

On the first Sunday in April, as Bauer and his wife approached the narrows in their boat, Bauer's wife stood up to adjust the mainsail, which hadn't been pulled taut enough. There were still traces of snow on some of the mountains in the area, so the water level of both lake and river was high. The boat swayed slightly as the bow plunged into a tiny whirlpool, and she leaned against the mast to steady herself. When the boat popped out of the whirlpool the tip of the mast brushed against the power lines, and snagged. Bauer looked up from the tiller, directly into the sun's glare. His wife was standing very still, looking as if she'd forgotten what she was supposed to be doing. Bauer released the tiller, threw his weight to starboard. The mast tilted free.

"Secure the sail," Bauer said.

His wife's grip on the mast loosened, one finger at a time, and she slumped toward the starboard gunwhale.

"The mast can't be metal," she said. Then she disappeared into blue light.

Well after midnight, the police brought Bauer back to his apartment. It took them that long to get him home because they couldn't find out where he lived. Whenever they asked Bauer, he acted as if he didn't know.

"Good God," Bauer repeated, "there's been a mistake. Do you hear me. I know there's been a mistake."

The police assured Bauer that his wife's body would be recovered. He told them they were wasting their time. City crews searched both the lake and river for two days, but to their embarrassment, his wife's body could not be found. The current, they said, was too swift at this time of year.

"Ha," Bauer said. This only convinced him that he was right, that a mistake had been made.


The night the search was called off, Bauer lay, fully-clothed on the couch, staring out the window at the darkness.

"You've made a mistake, and I've found you out," he said. "Confess."

The moon, through the night, passed across his line of vision. The next day, Bauer bought a telescope, a three-inch refractor.

"So be it," he said.

Bauer drives a taxicab, but after the accident his sense of direction suffered. He often gets lost, or mistakes where he is for where he's supposed to be. He's mounted a compass on the dashboard of his car. This helps, but due, he believes, to unstable atmospheric conditions, the compass is occasionally unreliable. One night, after driving three miles out of town along the airport road, he



found himself knocking at a farmhouse door. A young man answered, dressed only in shorts. He clearly wasn't intending to go anywhere.

"You've come to the wrong place," the young man said after Bauer explained what he was doing there.

"There are many ways to navigate," Bauer replied. "Some better than others."

Bauer's on his balcony, mapping out the moon. He's got three-quarters of the bay drawn in, and he'll compare it later with the maps he's drawn before. A solitary mass of cloud moves through the sky, and it starts to rain. Car tires sizzle on the wet asphalt of the bridge.

He discovered the tiny bay off the Mare Vaporum while sketching the sunlit crater walls that clustered all over the southern hemisphere of the moon. It appeared just on the periphery of his vision. He re-aligned his telescope. The bay looked to narrow sharply where it met the sea.

"Eureka," Bauer said.

Not long after this Bauer spotted the city workers going down to the river with shovels and surveyors tools. He followed them, watched them set up their equipment. They took samples of the soil from the banks and the mud from the

river bottom. One worker was jotting down numbers and making a rough sketch of the terrain.

Bauer asked them what they were doing.

The city workers said they were conducting preliminary studies.

Bauer asked them what the preliminary studies were for, but they told him they weren't at liberty to say. He would have to phone the city supervisor.

The worker who was sketching the terrain walked over to the pole that had been tipped off plumb. He knocked it with the heel of his hand. Bauer stepped back.

"Please be careful," he said.

Then Bauer turned abruptly, and left. The memory of the last time he'd been to the river had suddenly grown so sharp that he'd had almost told the workmen that they were wasting their time. That she wasn't there.

Because it's cool on the balcony, Bauer is wearing a white wool hat. It looks like a tea cosy and tightly hugs his head. He knitted it himself and, sometimes, wearing this hat, he feels like an astronaut.

He knows he looks absurd, he knows that's how others see him. He's knocked on apartment doors in the Malory Arms, by mistake, or found himself wandering in the wrong hall, and somebody has come along to help him back to his apartment, taking him by the arm, as if he were infirm.

Once, a young man, walking his dog in the courtyard, looked up to Bauer's balcony and asked him if he'd found any ghosts on the moon. "It's a struggle," Bauer told him. A boy who lurks behind the mulberry tree in the courtyard mimics him, making a telescope out of his fist. He puts it to his eye whenever he sees Bauer coming out of the building, and he tracks Bauer with that telescope, all the way down to the street.

Bauer knows all of this, but he's also dead certain of what he's doing. On no two nights are the features of the moon the same.

It will draw the water back to itself, he thinks. One only has to be patient.

Bauer's on his balcony, mapping out the moon, but the isolated mass of cloud has thickened and covers the whole sky. He loses sight of the little bay at the northern edge of the Mare Vaporum. It starts to rain harder; he covers the telescope with a canvas tarp.

Bauer goes inside, lies down on the couch, and reads. He's fond of science fiction, but this story, "The Distance of the Moon" is different, it intrigues him. It's about a group of beings who live at a time when the moon's tight

elliptical orbit brings it close enough to the earth to be reached by ladder. For a few days every month, when the moon is at perigee, these beings go out to sea, climb onto the disk, and harvest its milk.

One month, as the moon's cycle takes it away from the earth, a woman the main character is in love with climbs the ladder. In an attempt to rescue her, the main character follows her up, but he is too late: by the time he is securely on the moon's surface, they have veered miles away from the sea. They are up there on the moon, alone, for a month, and during that time they realize that its orbit is widening.

At the end of its cycle, as they glide towards the earth again, their friends, riding the sea in fishing boats, make a rescue attempt. They extend an impossibly long bamboo pole to the moon's surface. The main character knows that this is their last chance, that from this point on no pole will be long enough to reach them. He has to make a choice. The woman makes no move to leave. He leaps for the length of bamboo, and scrambles to the earth just as the moon spins out of their reach forever.

"I'm sorry," Bauer says. "I had to stay here."

He puts the book down. The apartment building is perfectly quiet, so quiet he wonders if he's somehow made it all up. He stares at the ceiling and watches the stars

glow.

When the sky clears Bauer goes back out to the balcony. He takes the tarp off the telescope, pulls his white wool hat down over his ears. In the distance, the bridge hums; in the sky, within the Square of Pegasus, galaxies are coming back into vision. The moon is near the horizon, so it looks closer than it really is. Its surface is unruffled, it looks close enough to touch. It only takes Bauer a minute to get the northern bay in his sights and adjust his focus. For the next hour he follows the moon across the sky, looking through the telescope, then to his map, and back again.

A flash of blue erupts from one of the tiny craters by the bay. It burns for almost three minutes, then retreats from sight.

Bauer keeps dead aim on the craters, and waits. They are strung together like beads, almost too small to see, and he has a lot of trouble drawing them because he tries to give them individual shapes.

"Closer," Bauer says.

The blue flame, no larger than the tip of a hair, again flares to the surface, burns for a few minutes, and retreats.

Bauer leans over the balcony railing and stretches his arm out, stretches it out as far as he can, until it looks

as if he's touched the moon. When he draws his arm back he rubs his fingers together and imagines they're covered with a damp chalky paste.

He marks the location of the blue flame on his map. He puts his pencil down and hesitates for a moment. Then he picks it up again and writes beneath the flame's marking: Transient Lunar Phenomena.

Optical illusions, he thinks. Ninety-nine out of one hundred such sightings turn out to be imagined. That's what makes lunar observation a struggle. As soon as you start expecting to see something, you do. Hope makes an observer unreliable, subject to the tricks played by the senses, the tricks played by the mind.

Bauer touches his fingers to his tongue.

At dawn, Bauer's still out on the balcony, his map of the moon neatly folded up and lying on the table at his side. He adjusts the angle of the telescope so it will be in the correct position for the next night's viewing, covers it with the tarp, and ties the tarp down to the balcony railing.

Below, far below, a young couple from the centre block of the building are crossing the courtyard, on their way to

work.

They look up to his balcony.

"Good morning," they say.

Bauer takes off his white wool hat and tucks the map under his arm. He smiles at them.

"The struggle is enough," he calls out. "All is well."