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Canada

Walking the Line

Lesley Battler

A Thesis
in
the Department
of
English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
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Abstract

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Lesley Battler

In this thesis, the characters are all struggling with some form of powerlessness, and are searching for something they can call their own. All the stories involve movement, physical and/or emotional, from one world (class, city, profession) to another, and the characters feel some form of dislocation, or sense of being lost in transit. The changes in their lives result in feelings of transgression, and the development of a perspective which causes them to feel they are on the verge of betraying something — either the world they have “infiltrated,” or the world they have come from. The closest thing to a resolution offered in this thesis is the awareness of walking a line between the feeling of transgression and powerlessness, and the sheer joy of freedom of thought and movement.

*To find
and
the sixth floor of McLennan Library*

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What Might Come Out

Melaney hadn't intended to walk clear across town to Eddie Abramsky's house, march in, and invite herself to his cousin's bar mitzvah. She had started out just going for a walk, as she always did when she couldn't stand being in that House of Horrors one more minute with her family. She liked walking down Eddie's street, feeling she could be a different, better person, more like the Abramskys, just by passing the still and snow-covered houses, perfectly shaded like cartoon houses on the Christmas specials she loved watching. She imagined people living happy lives inside, all the little Whos in Who-ville tucked in their beds, framed by burning frosted Christmas lights. Huge tree branches cast solid, motionless shadows on brick walls, and Melaney thought how much more permanent they looked than her own elusive shadow, which grew and shrank, appeared and disappeared. Smaller branches brushing the streetlights glowed, making Melaney believe, the way she used to half-believe in Santa Claus, that the bark itself contained its own inner light.

Eddie lived in an overgrown frame house set back from the street. Melaney liked how half the house was lit up and lived in, the rest dark and private, hidden by bushes. On this walk, it struck Melaney there were no Christmas decorations of any sort, which made Eddie's house look formal, sternly set apart from its bright neighbours. Then she stopped short and said "Hold it" aloud to herself. Of course there were no decorations, she thought, and she couldn't believe how easily she had forgotten, or how easy it would have been to mention something about it to Eddie. Melaney knew she should have known better, and that was when she decided she had to go to the bar mitzvah. Instead of going home and calling

Eddie, or waiting until she saw him at school, she had to show up on his doorstep, flushed and breathless, as if carrying an urgent message. She hoped Eddie wouldn't think she was strange. It seemed like too much to get out of her mouth, trying to explain how Christmas was the worst time of year for her, when she could almost get carried away by its sheer dazzle, but it was like a party going on that excluded her, and the Abramskys were the only people she had to cling to.

Eddie was only too happy to have Melaney come along, even though he was already taking his girlfriend Carla. At school, he complained about being in the crocodile pit again with his family for the same old reasons — rotten marks and wanting to quit school. He mimicked the way “they” would swarm around him, drown him in polite chit-chat, and then move in for the kill as soon as they got him alone. Personally, Melaney couldn't understand what he was complaining about. She had never seen or heard of *his* father chasing him halfway down the street with the garden hose on full blast, at the sight of a bad report card. The Abramskys never had obnoxious cronies come over for marathon pinochle games. They didn't have friends who ran into the front yard with lampshades on their heads, pulling moons at appalled passersby.

Sometimes it seemed as if Eddie could read her thoughts, only the thoughts she wanted to think, or that he knew her family, but in a good way, the way Melaney wished they really were, because one day, out of the blue, Eddie told her Jews played pinochle, and drank Canadian Club and Smirnoff vodka.

“Yes,” Melaney said. “My parents do that, and they drink those exact same things — when they drink that is.”

They both clapped their hands and pointed at each other, their shtick whenever they discovered something in common. Melaney loved those moments, and she loved the way Carla looked at them when they made one of their discoveries. She could almost believe her parents were harmless pinochle players, a sweet typical Jewish couple. In reality, her father

hadn't been the slightest bit impressed when she repeated it to him. He called Eddie a *weisenheimer* and, completely missing the point, shouted "What does a shyster lawyer from Toronto know from pinochle?" But she didn't want Eddie to know any of this, and all she could think was Thank God they at opposite ends of town. She listened to him complain about the bar mitzvah, nodding as if she understood perfectly well what he was talking about, and as if the same type of relatives swarmed and kvetched during her brother's bar mitzvah. She thought she'd rather endure a public flogging than admit to Eddie she didn't have any relatives, her brother never had a bar mitzvah, and she had never been to one in her life. It also galled her to think that Carla, who wasn't Jewish, would attend one before Melaney did.

Eddie Abramsky moved to Brenton from Toronto when Melaney started grade ten. The first thing she had noticed about him, besides his long black T-shirt which said "Romper Room Reject," was that he used the same words she did, *meshuggeneh*, *goniff*, *shnorer*, *goombah*; all words she hadn't realized actually existed. She had always thought they were made-up words only her family knew, although some of them she had heard on "Bugs Bunny." Eddie got the same words underlined, the same red question marks on assignments as she did. No longer did she have to visit anyone from school and watch what she said, thinking that if one of the Kreutzmann words slipped out, no one would know what she was talking about. Either that, or knowing they would think she talked like a bus driver. When Eddie came, she couldn't put the feeling into words, but it seemed as if maybe her luck had begun to change, as it always said in books. She started spelling out her last name instead of scrawling only "Melaney K." It was Eddie who told her they were Yiddish words, and the reason no one else knew them was because no one else was Jewish. She had blushed to the roots of her hair, thinking double-time of a way of explaining why her parents never told her they were Yiddish, and why she had gone for such a long time thinking it was just because her family wouldn't talk properly.

"Why don't you know this?" he asked.

Eddie was the first person who had known her words, and he had been so thrilled to find out she was Jewish, instead of telling the truth, she hemmed and hawed and said, "Oh, I guess I just took it totally for granted."

To make matters worse, Melaney discovered Carla knew all those words too, and others Eddie didn't even use.

"Why do you know this?" Melaney asked, looking at Carla the same way Eddie had looked at her.

"Oh it's just because I think I've read every book about kids growing up in Brooklyn ever written," Carla said, blushing. "I love those books so much I always wished I was Jewish. I read *The City Boy* sixteen times in grade eight. I love them — the books I mean. They're so — interesting and funny — and real."

Melaney, who preferred reading stories about vampires, movie stars and people like Nicholas and Alexandra, nodded and said, "Ah."

Eddie picked Melaney up, and he stood on her doorstep looking like an old-fashioned date, dressed in a dark suit with a yarmulke clipped to his hair. He was even wearing polished dress shoes, and if it wasn't for the Walkman sticking out of his pocket, she wouldn't have recognized him at all. She couldn't believe how much older and more mature he looked, and she nervously opened the door, said "I'll be out in a sec," and then practically slammed it in his face. She would have been humiliated if Eddie saw the utter chaos inside her house, due to her father's Mr. Fix-It fantasies. But Melaney knew she didn't have that quite right. Her father's renovations went beyond any idea of home improvement. He had started turning the basement into a rec room, going as far as panelling half the room and, of course installing a bar, but he never finished the job. The rest of the room remained pure basement with exposed ceiling pipes, permeated by the smell of septic tank and musty concrete. Her mother discreetly hung a curtain to give the illusion of a finished room.

The last time the school-bus drivers went on strike, her father went large scale, spending the time he wasn't out Bronx-cheering on the picket lines, ripping out the carpet, and starting to paint every room a different colour. Just when Melaney thought he had torn up everything he possibly could, the drivers ended their strike, and he returned to his official job. Still, coming in from school, Melaney felt she was blundering into a bizarre dream, adrift, surrounded by that vast alarming floor stripped to the wood, unfinished walls with glaring patches of red, blue and orange, and six months later her father hadn't yet made any move to pick up where he left off. Melaney's mother used to hang a lot of curtains to hide the signs of struggle, but lately she had stopped bothering. From her bedroom window, Melaney saw Carla was also out on the porch, dressed up too, and the toque pulled over her forehead made Melaney remember to bring a head covering to wear inside the *shul*. She found an old scarf, the best she could do, then heard her mother going for the door, and she slammed the drawer on her thumb.

"Oh fuck," she snarled. She ran down the hall, a one-person stampede on the wood floor. "No," she shouted. "You can't — I'm ready. Don't let them in." But it was too late. Eddie, Carla and her mother stood in the hall, all three looking bewildered and guilty. "I just didn't want to hold you up any more," she said feebly.

"Like my parents are ready," said Eddie. "My mother has every dress she owns spread out on her bed, and that was when I left to pick up Carla."

Melaney saw Eddie and Carla looking around at the house, Carla trying to appear as if she wasn't really looking, and Eddie craning his neck exactly the way Melaney herself used to do it at friends' houses until someone told her it was rude. She saw his eyebrows raise. Then she saw Carla smiling, not out of pity or even sympathy, but as if she was excited, as if she was somewhere she really wanted to be. "You want this?" Melaney wanted to say. "Take it. You can have it." Above all, she was hoping for once her mother wouldn't say anything, would just keep her mouth shut.

"As you can see, my Dad's been busy renovating," said Melaney

"Renovating!" said Melaney's mother. "This she calls renovating. That man has destroyed this whole goddamned place. He's a one-man wrecking crew is what he is. But I must remember my manners. It's very nice from your family to take along Melaney to your cousin's bar mitzvah, Eddie. It'll get Melaney out of the house. She talks about your family all the time. She doesn't seem to like it here very much. Maybe you could adopt her and make her happy."

Knife me now God, thought Melaney. Go ahead, stick a big one in my back and get it over with. If her family had to be like this, was it really too much to ask of the powers that be that it could be kept hidden? I don't ask for much, Melaney said to herself, I gave up being like the other kids at school a long time ago and you're going to take this from me too? "Oh mom, you're a real riot," said Melaney, trying to laugh lightly. "Let's get this show on the road."

The whole scene was like a nightmare Melaney once had. She never showed up for appointments with the school guidance counsellor because she was afraid he would ask her personal questions, and once she dreamed she was walking into the House of Horrors and there was the guidance counsellor sitting at his desk in the middle of the hall, right where her mother and Eddie and Carla were clustered. It was as if the counsellor was welded to his desk and wherever he went, so did the desk. God she hated having to face men sitting behind desks. Unlike most people who appeared in her dreams, it looked exactly like him, and he was talking at her about something, she wasn't sure what, while the plaster flaked from the ceiling and her father's false teeth sat on the kitchen table in plain view, right beside the newspaper and his disgusting ashtray, and pieces of the floor were threatening to cave in and the counsellor would plunge straight down to the basement. "He's in my house," she kept on saying in the dream. "HE S IN MY HOUSE." All she wanted to do was vapourize and maybe just stop breathing and die, but because it was a dream all she did was stand there repeating "He's in my house" while he rattled on, and eventually the counsellor turned into Eddie, and she was finally rescued when the house turned into a bleak off-season beach.

"I know a short-cut," said Eddie.

"Never trust a man who knows a short-cut," said Melaney, gingerly placing one foot in front of the other, keeping to the path stamped through the schoolyard. Her skirt felt unfamiliar, like a heavy sheet worrying her calves. None of her movements felt natural, and she felt like she was re-learning how to walk. She heard the rolling sounds their boots made, their footsteps cracking the crust of snow. Their three silhouettes moved dreamily over icy surfaces; joining, separating. She almost wished something would happen, maybe a kidnapping, that would keep the three of them together, just like this, on their way to something without them ever having to return. She had to calm down, make like nothing happened, pretend things were normal. Otherwise all would be lost. Melaney hoped maybe they hadn't really noticed anything. Eddie would be concentrating on the bar mitzvah, and she could pretty much tell Carla anything and Carla would believe her. She started feeling things could have been a lot worse. Melaney was startled by some children trying to build a fort, their snowsuit colours vivid as flowers in full bloom against the blue-grey-silver around them. She had to be grateful there was, at least, a big big world that existed and knew or cared nothing about her and her family.

Melaney, Carla and Eddie squeezed into the back seat of Eddie's parents' car. Eddie's mother looked trim and elegant in her dark blue dress, and Melaney especially liked the square of lace pinned to her hair. She thought this was exactly how someone going to a bar mitzvah should look.

Eddie's mother greeted Melaney and checked out Carla. "I'm very pleased to meet you at last," she said to Carla. "Melaney I know."

"Uh — me too," said Carla.

Melaney leaned over and squeezed Carla's kneecap in support, knowing how intimidating the Abramskys could appear to someone who didn't know them. She also

hoped it looked, to Carla at least, that Melaney was among her own people, and that she knew her way around a bar mitzvah. What she most wanted was to walk into the *shul* and discover she had only forgotten a few of the details.

"It's nice to see Eddie's friends. We don't often have such a chance. We're glad you could come," said Eddie's mother.

Eddie rolled his eyes at Melaney and Melaney rolled hers back at him, even though she still didn't know what he was complaining about. She liked his mother, and if he only knew how often she wished the Abramskys were her real family.

Heading out of Brenton, Melaney saw three houses on a hill facing the highway, with so many Christmas lights, they looked like three glittering outlines, movie marquees, only the performances were private.

"Ever get the feeling Christmas is going out of control?" said Mr. Abramsky. "Every year it's louder and more obnoxious."

"It's way too commercial," said Carla.

Melaney agreed, although she loved the lights.

"Even we feel the pressure. The more lights go up, the more we cling to Hanukkah," said Mr. Abramsky. "This year we put up a Hanukkah bush."

Melaney didn't know what a Hanukkah bush was. Her own family put up a tree.

"Yeah we've got a *menorah*," said Melaney.

Technically, this was not a lie. Melaney's family did have a *menorah*, only it was in a box in the basement.

"I wonder if Hannah will be wearing her *sheidl*," said Eddie's mother.

Mr. Abramsky grunted.

"My Aunt Hannah, oh sorry, I mean *Channa*, is the world's biggest phony," Eddie muttered to Melaney and Carla. "She wears a *sheidl* but only in public, mind you. The old *yente* embarrasses everybody by making a huge foo-fa-rah about whether or not the food is kosher enough. The whole branch is 'nouveau *frum*,' and they've all got Hebrew names

now, don't you know. Get this. We all know that Mrs. Frummer-Than-Thou doesn't even keep a kosher kitchen. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if she noshes out on ham sandwiches and a glass of milk late at night when no one's around."

Melaney guffawed. She had seen her father do the same thing, looking like a guilty bear when caught. Then she *tsked*, and shook her head.

"A *sheidl* is a wig," Eddie explained to Carla. "If you're religious you're supposed to cover your head in God's presence."

"I know that," said Carla. "You don't have to patronize me."

Melaney studiously looked out the window.

"Eddie you have something to say everyone should hear?" said his mother.

"I'm speaking to my *friends*, mother."

"Well then excuse *me* for interrupting your important speech."

Melaney felt like kicking Eddie for being rude to his mother. As far as she was concerned, his mother sounded normal, the way real mothers, Jewish mothers, were supposed to sound.

"This is a tedious drive," said Mr. Abramsky.

"Maybe we shouldn't have moved," said Eddie's mother.

"We're not going through all that again."

"Melaney, your family must go to Toronto all the time," said Eddie's mother. "There are no synagogues in Brenton."

"Oh yes, we go all the time," said Melaney.

That was true, only her family went to Toronto to see the Nutcracker, or to go to the Ex, or Sam the Record Man. They never went to *shul*, and they never did anything Jewish. Melaney hadn't thought of that before — of course they could go to Toronto. If her brother had had a bar mitzvah, it would have been in Toronto. She wasn't even sure why he had never had one. All she could remember was a violent fight, which had taken place around the time Paul should have been preparing, her father shouting, "It's pointless. It's all fake,

a pretense," her mother sobbing. "No more pretense then," her mother — or was it Melaney's father? — had said, and in the morning all her mother's curtains and devices for hiding her father's "renovations" had been torn away and left right at the places from which they had been torn. She remembered how terrible that night had been, and the way she had lain with her head buried in her pillow and how she had given up all hope of ever being a normal person.

She looked out the window and saw the spot where the Gray Coach bus overturned during a blizzard last winter. She knew every kilometre of this highway, the stretch between Brenton and Toronto anyway. When she was heading toward Toronto the highway made her think of a race track, the cars all travelling at the same break-neck pace, leaning a little to the left because of the crosswinds, magnetized to the city. The entire countryside seemed to tilt down toward Toronto, and the closer they came to the city the newer and more streamlined the cars became.

"It's nice in Brenton though," said Mr. Abramsky. "You can't beat the peace and quiet. I can see why Jews would live there. I'm at the point where I feel I'm going home when we drive back from T.O."

Melaney murmured in agreement, but she never felt that the 400 could lead her anywhere she would call home. Instead, it turned into an unnamed frontier road heading somewhere vaguely North. The blue beacon and alternating lights of the snowplough always seemed to be twenty feet in front of her parents' car, ploughing the road into existence right before her eyes. If she looked out the side window, all she saw was white; winter winds gusting across, and stirring up the meticulously laid-out farmland. The blizzards began at the Simcoe County sign, which she knew was the beginning of the snow line. Although Brenton itself was only two hours from Toronto, Melaney thought it should be much farther north on the map.

When they reached the *shul*, she knew she wouldn't open the door and immediately

fit in, and all the Jewishness that must be buried deep inside her would suddenly bloom. Yet at the same time she hoped it would, that a miracle could take place. She couldn't help half-believing in miracles, in going along from day to day, and having one event happen that would change her whole life; that was the way she was. It was Carla who thought to ask if the women and men had to enter separately. Her question impressed Eddie's parents, and Melaney thought maybe she should start reading those Brooklyn books. But then, she couldn't have asked that question anyway without giving herself away. Melaney tied her scarf on her head, and was about to explain to Carla how she should take a yarmulke provided by the *shul*, fold it in half and clip it on as other women were doing, when she noticed Carla was already wearing a beret.

Melaney felt like her own grandmother with a scarf covering her head, long skirt at her calves. She was wearing the most conservative clothes she owned, and her ankles and calves suddenly looked thick and solid. She barely recognized them. Occasionally, she tried imagining having someone else's skin, and she was always shocked by how unimaginable it was. Seeing herself in her bar mitzvah clothes was the closest she had ever come to feeling she was in another person's skin. The same sort of feeling came over her last Halloween when she had dressed up as a Gypsy, wearing the same skirt and scarf only with gold earrings, and she ended up feeling more like an Old Country grandmother than an exotic fortune-teller. Her "Cross my palm with silver" accent kept turning into "Have some kugel."

Everyone in the *shul* noisily greeted each other, embracing, clapping each other on the back. Melaney marvelled at how all these people were members of Eddie's family, just one family with connections she would never be able to keep straight. She was the *shlub* who got laughed at in grade four for not knowing what the words "aunt," "uncle" or "cousin" meant in the Reading Lab. She had stayed awake one night, gnashing her teeth because she had written on a test that an aunt was an old lady. Women took each other by the arms and formed groups. Melaney watched enviously as children ran around, cousins, taking each

other's company for granted. The coat-check counter looked like an assembly line for fur coats. The *shul* was square and plain from the outside, set back from the street as if deliberately attracting as little attention to itself as possible. It could have existed in any time or place. Yet Melaney couldn't get over how uniformly bright and glittery the women's dresses were. They looked like fund-raisers, members of the Art and Culture Society pictured in the *Brenton Banner*, and it was Melaney who felt old-fashioned, a throwback. She almost felt more Jewish than the people surrounding her, but she couldn't think that, couldn't dare; she had no right. She stood back with Carla and watched people come over to greet the Abramskys.

It wasn't as if Melaney had never done anything Jewish, and she had to keep reminding herself of that. Two or three times a year her family drove up to Bracebridge to visit her only relative, a great-aunt, who died when Melaney was twelve. Her name was Thurza Norman, but neither Thurza nor Norman were her real names. Melaney's mother told her someone at England's immigration centre decided she had "Norman features," whatever they were, and neither Melaney nor her mother knew. All Melaney's mother knew was that her aunt was highly insulted because she knew Norman was a man's name. It was just the sort of thing Melaney could imagine herself thinking. Melaney's great-aunt's real last name was Leonetiev and no one knew where "Thurza" came from. Melaney didn't know what happened to the rest of the family, and if her mother knew she never told.

Melaney was always dressed in sober knee-length dresses for these visits, and Paul stuffed into a dark suit and tie. That was another thing she had in common with Eddie, the way their parents used to dress them. Great-Aunt Thurza's house was large and gloomy, full of antiques, including the high-backed chair now sitting in the Kreutzmann's basement, that used to remind Melaney of a guillotine. Before each meal they all lined up at the sink and poured water three times over each hand from a silver pitcher. Melaney's great-aunt would say the blessing, because her father wouldn't, and they all sat around the table

looking stiff and trapped. She had told Eddie about her Great-Aunt Thunza, and the handwashing ritual, but not about the endless dinners, the guillotine chair or the gloominess of the house.

Melaney's mother inherited everything, she was the only one left in her family. All Melaney's great-aunt's furniture, dishes and photographs were consigned to the basement. None of her family took any interest in it, but because she wanted to hold her own with Eddie, Melaney started poking around, looking for evidence of past Jewish life, for things she could take to school and show him: proof. She looked at the letters, but they were all written in languages she couldn't understand. As for the photographs, the names changed so often, Melaney couldn't figure out if Yuri Usachev was related or a friend, if Marjorie Norman was Maja Leonetiev. Her mother didn't know, and all her father said was "Who cares? They're dead."

Melaney wanted to invite Eddie over and show him the Czechoslovakian tea service, and the elegant pieces of furniture, relics, standing on the finished side of the basement. Most of all, she wanted to show him the Passover dishes. When she opened the glass door of the little cabinet and started handling the dishes, she cried, because they were beautiful and fragile, and she could imagine the tender care that went into making the frilly handles and scalloped edges, the tiny brushes that must have been used to paint the roses, the generosity, hope or maybe even faith it took to make something pretty. They had made it through God-only-knew how many places intact, only to end up in the basement of a House of Horrors. Melaney didn't even know their story, and couldn't even be completely certain they were Passover dishes.

She felt sorry for the dishes, as if staying there would do to them what nothing else had done, make them shatter or even dissolve into dust. She imagined them witnessing the terrible fight she had had with her father about flunking math for the second year in a row. He was in one of his moods and had put one of his favourite records on the stereo, one from his vast collection of marches and national anthems.

"Accept it! I can't do math," Melaney said.

"Accept it she says," bellowed her father. "Accept it! You learn how to do math. You learn how to do math better than anyone in that goddamned class and then you flunk it if you must. What happens when you accept? You fall into the hands of tyrants, murderers and are led to your death like lambs to slaughter. That is what happens when you accept."

"The only tyrant around here is you," shouted Melaney. "Tyrant! Nazi!"

Her father started shouting. She turned up the volume on the stereo. He shouted louder. She turned up the volume again. "The Marseillaise" roared along with her father's voice. When "The Marseillaise" ended, the German national anthem began, "Deutschland Deutschland über" — only to abruptly end with a screech. Her father had scratched out the entire cut by running a screwdriver across it. When she had asked why he did that he said, "So by accident I don't hear it." The house echoed with a hissing, sawing, crackling noise. Meanwhile her mother sat calmly at the table reading the newspaper. Then Melaney had said, "Here, you don't want to hear this? I'll sing it for you then. 'DEUTSCHLAND DEUTSCHLAND ÜBER ALLES ...'" That time when he chased her, she actually thought he might kill her. She knew she should never have done that. Unable to sleep, she spent the rest of the night in the basement with a bucket of lukewarm soapy water, cleaning the dishes, one by one, and arranging them in the cabinet. She hated herself for the things she said and did when her father was around. There had to be a way out of the House of Horrors, and she was not going to blow her chance with the Abramskys, and she stuck her chin out and squared her shoulders as if it had been another, completely different person who had called her own father a Nazi, and bawled out the one line she knew of the German national anthem at him. She would never ever have done something like that if she had a family like the Abramskys.

A sophisticated trio entered the *shul*, and Melaney watched Eddie straighten his

shoulders and awkwardly shake hands with the two men. He held his hand out to the woman, but she stepped past it and hugged him. Eddie flinched.

Melaney nudged Carla and said, "I know who they are. That's gotta be Eddie's sister, brother, and — and his sister's husband."

"You're so good at knowing who people are," said Carla. "That's what I really like about, well you know. It's that you guys really have a close community. I wish I had that."

You and me both, thought Melaney. "There's good and bad to that," said Melaney.

"Sorry we're late," said Eddie's sister. "We just made it to the house in time to dump our suitcases and change. It's been a real mad rush. Eddie, I hope when we return you'll play something for us."

"Yeah," said Eddie's brother-in-law. "Stella tells me you're first violin in the school orchestra."

"First of three, and one of them isn't even any good," Eddie said curtly. "Only Mom could tell everybody I'm first violin in a *high school* choir. It's a choir, with a few instruments in it."

"That's still good," said Stella.

Melaney shrugged at Carla. She didn't see why he had to be rude. They were just making polite conversation. Melaney liked Eddie, but he was so sure of himself, stood on such a solid foundation, she had a sudden, sharp urge to pull him off his foundation. She could do it too, and it frightened her. She concentrated on looking at the people around her, trying not to feel too frumpy and out-classed by Eddie's slender, stylish sister. Her husband fit Eddie's description, a crunchy granola with a straw-coloured beard and straggly hair almost down to his shoulders. She thought Eddie's brother was good-looking, with thinning dark hair and a sweet smile, a quieter, more reasonable version of Eddie. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Eddie's parents enter the sanctuary with a crowd of aunts, uncles and cousins.

After a long pause, Eddie's sister said, "I see I'll be waiting all night for Eddie to make

Intros. I'm Stella Abramsky. This is Bernie Abramsky, and this guy here is my husband Lonnie, Lonnie Messinger."

"Hi," said Melaney. "I'm Melaney and this is Carla Birney. Carla is Eddie's girlfriend, and I'm just a friend of theirs along for the ride. I really wanted to come because — This is a beautiful *shul*." Melaney almost got carried away. Sometimes she thought she'd be better off if someone just cut out her tongue, but she couldn't stop herself. "It looks a lot like the *shul* where my brother had his bar mitzvah."

"Oh you're Jewish," said Stella.

"Knock it off," said Eddie. "You don't have to patronize my friends."

"What patronizing?" said Stella. "Brenton's real small and Mom and Dad told me it doesn't have any synagogues. I asked a legitimate question. Did your brother have his bar mitzvah in Brenton?"

"No-o," said Melaney. "We went to Toronto."

"See, was that so patronizing?" said Stella. "Are you both Jewish?"

"I'm not," said Carla. She sounded so disappointed, Melaney wanted to laugh and say, "But she knows more than I do. Go figure this out."

"You're the one who's Eddie's girlfriend?"

"Yes she is," said Eddie, glaring at his sister.

"I wasn't implying anything so put your guns away," said Stella.

Eddie and the men entered the sanctuary through the main doorway. Melaney and Carla followed Stella through the side entrance. The barrier separating the men and women was not exactly impassable, it looked like a garden trellis, and both sides could clearly see each other. Melaney laughed to see a young couple passing a baby back and forth over the barrier. She laughed again when she noticed a cranky old man sitting in the middle of the women's section, as if rooted to the bench. A woman prodded him with her cane and he reluctantly rose, grumbled about not being able to hear in the men's section, and slowly

made his way to the centre of the room. Melaney watched him disrupt five people, trying to find the right seat.

"I'm not sure how much I should explain to you, Carla," said Stella. "Eddie hasn't exactly briefed me on how much you know, how long you've been going out, or any of that good stuff. It's kind of hard to explain our services, only that I know it feels like they go on forever. Just follow along with Melaney and me and you'll be fine. Oh yeah, it's a combination Hanukkah service and bar mitzvah."

Melaney nodded casually, and Carla looked as if she had already known this. Melaney stuck her tongue out at Carla behind her back. She saw Eddie, surrounded in the men's section. At first, she thought separating the men and women was sexist, but she actually preferred being among only women to being adrift in that mob of men. Melaney was surprised to see the *shul* had stained glass windows. Instead of saints and Jesus, it pictured a fragmented tree with hundreds of branches, the pieces of glass connected like jigsaw puzzle pieces. She had an urge to turn it upside-down and revolve it, like the top of her toy kaleidoscope, and watch the glass branches scrambling every which way. She thought the sanctuary was lovely with its warm lighting, and it gave her the same peaceful feeling she had when she went for walks down Eddie's street, that things didn't have to be the way they were. The deep blue bench cushions with Hebrew letters and stars looked mysterious, and reminded her of a fortune teller's curtain. What she liked most though was the *menorah*, which looked as if it had survived through thousands of years, as if it could have been the first one carved out of rock.

She wasn't sure if the actual service had started yet. Melaney had never seen such a rambunctious crowd. They didn't hesitate to call out, or shush each other. People continued arriving, thirty, forty minutes late, and not quietly. Late-comers greeted friends, and Melaney could distinctly hear a male voice asking the score for the hockey game. Her father grumbled about meaningless laws, but he wouldn't be out of place here at all, she thought in surprise. A woman wearing a *sheidl* pushed her way to the front of the women's

section, leading a small girl wearing an "Israel is Real" T-shirt over a puffy white blouse. The woman turned and waved to Stella. Melaney tried not to laugh as Stella sort of smiled, and moved her fingers in return.

Melaney nudged Carla. "The infamous Aunt *Channa*."

"Of course. I should have known," Carla whispered.

Voices and movement were ceaseless, and to Melaney, it was like a chemical reaction when the people all came together, with prayers buzzing around her, humming, chanting, reciting, as if from entirely different books. She tried to remember the things Stella told Carla, when they stood, how they prayed, but none of the instructions seemed to apply. Melaney realized she didn't have a word for what rabbis talked about. She didn't think Jews used the words "preach" or "sermon," and she didn't even know what the books were called.

She didn't feel badly about not knowing her place in the scriptures though. Since she got the hang of holding the book upside down and flipping the pages in reverse order, she was doing as well as anyone else, in the women's section at least, where everyone craned their necks and looked over each other's shoulders. Melaney wondered what would happen if those two or three women who did know their places weren't there, if the whole section would gradually become silent, or just go "la-la-la" as she was doing. Of course, no one but Melaney could consider themselves doing well just by remembering the Messiah hadn't come yet. She glanced at Carla's book, and was a little disappointed when she saw Carla had the same pattern on her page.

The service became even more chaotic, with some people turning to face Jerusalem, some turning to the opposite wall, some not turning at all. Others just turned to greet friends. Melaney and Carla shrugged at each other, and imitated Stella. Melaney thought the cantor's voice sounded like an ancient instrument, and she loved the dialogue between the cantor and the rabbi, the way their voices came together, for an instant merging both a question and a response. The bar mitzvah boy was called up for the Torah reading. Eddie's cousin was bright-eyed, and the prayer shawl draped over his shoulders as if it had been

made for them. He read his Haftorah clearly, and Melaney was glad the ceremony meant something to him. She tried to imagine her brother up there, but that was beyond her. She wondered how Eddie had looked. Before today, she wouldn't have been able to picture him there either, but after the initial shock of seeing him in a suit and *kippa*, the connection was there, and she envied the way he blended into the group as if claimed by them.

Melaney knew things must have been more like this for her family, when there had been a family, some time in the past. One day she came across an old photo, so old it didn't have a border around it; a square crammed with people. Some faded spidery writing, which looked like invisible ink, was scrawled on the back, in a language Melaney couldn't understand. Melaney's mother said the photo was her father's. She noticed the headscarves did not remove the strong personalities in the women's faces. If anything, the scarves added an air of disguise, as if they were capable of deeds Melaney couldn't even guess at. The furniture looked mossy, covered with lace, the walls crowded with pictures and possibly peacock feathers. Melaney had thought the room looked closed-in like her great-aunt's house, the kind of room black and white movies from the 1930s were set in.

After she bombarded him with questions, Melaney's father told her the photo was of his mother's family in Germany.

"I don't believe in speaking ill of the dead," he said. "But who could live such a life?"

"They're all dead?" said Melaney. "Even the babies?"

"To my knowledge they all died in the war. For many years after, my mother advertised in the special papers they had for finding missing persons, but no one ever answered."

"It would be nice to know who they are," said Melaney

For a moment she thought he was going to talk about them, tell her things she could tell Eddie in return, as if the chaotic walls of her house could be stripped down to reveal her real life, her real family, her real roots. But her father only jumped on his podium again and

pounded on the table with his fist and said, "That world is gone. Better to start over Melanska. Begin from the beginning. If you lived in that world, Melanoma, you'd have an arranged marriage, you'd spend your whole life doing tedious rituals that don't mean anything. They never helped any of the people in that picture."

He left the room. Just when she thought he wasn't coming back, he returned with a piece of paper, which he gave to Melaney. It was a very thin sheet like tissue or onionskin, and Melaney held it as if it was an ancient piece of parchment. There were three words written on it in faded ink, and again this was something Melaney couldn't read.

"What does it say?" she said.

"Help me please," said her father. "That's all it says. So you see."

Melaney didn't see, and before she could ask him where the paper came from or who wrote on it, her father took the sheet of paper and left the room and this time, didn't return. But there was one detail she had either forgotten, or had been too frustrated to pay much attention to at the time; the look of pain in her father's eyes even as he was lecturing. She wondered if it was possible he felt the same way she did when he saw the old things in the basement, and was that why he would never look at them? She looked at the *menorah* again, heard the ceaseless buzz of singing and talking, felt the wild sweetness of the service, and the people seemed utterly different from the modern people who had milled around the entrance, greeting each other. They became what Melaney thought being Jewish was, and then she felt as if she was at one with them, but it wasn't a peaceful feeling, more a scared kind of way, an electrical storm feeling. Maybe she could be one of the people the rabbi talked about who could reclaim what was lost, be someone who could mend the world. But at the same time, she had lost so much she shouldn't even be feeling this way, and she had called her father a Nazi.

After the ceremony, they milled into the hall, where tables were set up and ready for them, name cards at each setting. Even Melaney and Carla had their own cards, and

Melaney saw Carla slip her card into her pocket to keep as a souvenir. Melaney wanted to do it too, but was afraid Eddie might notice. Eddie's parents sat with the bar mitzvah boy's parents. Eddie, Melaney and Carla were placed with Stella, Bernie and Lonnie.

Looking at the Abramskys assembled around the table, Melaney felt overwhelmed and tongue-tied again. The feeling she had in the sanctuary had already waned, and she cursed herself for not being able to hold it. The tables with their white linen, sparkling glasses, two sets of plates and silverware, the people roaming from table to table, who seemed to know everyone in the room, didn't look Jewish any more. They reminded Melaney of those New York shows which were always on TV when she was sick with the flu: "What's My Line," "It's Your Life," "To Tell the Truth," where Melaney saw the same faces on each one. She knew all those people were on the TV, and yet she didn't know who any of the people in her father's photo were. She found it hard to believe she had just seen a bar mitzvah ceremony, and she looked at Stella, Bernie and Lonnie, as if expecting a stream of witty New York repartee to come out of their mouths.

In the centre of the room, four long tables were practically buckling under the weight of all the food.

"Look at those strawberries," Melaney whispered to Carla. "Out of season like this they must have cost a fortune."

"Do they always play such cornball songs?" whispered Carla. "I didn't expect 'Isn't She Lovely' or 'You're Once Twice Whatever a Lady.' I thought they'd play Jewish songs."

"You've just seen *Fiddler on the Roof* too many times," said Melaney, although she was thinking exactly the same thing. She was beginning to wonder if they even danced the hora any more.

"Melaney, I hope the food is acceptable to you," said Stella.

"Huh?" said Melaney. "It looks wonderful — a feast."

She barely stopped short of saying she had never seen anything like it.

"I don't know how observant you are, but most of our family is reform. Most of these

people never go to synagogue except on Yom Kippur or for bar mitzvahs."

Melaney noticed she pronounced it "Yom Kipper." She had always thought it was "Yom Kippoor." She didn't even know the rock-bottom basics about being Jewish.

"The food is kosher, but *some* people don't approve of our *hesher*." Stella glowered at Aunt Channa, who was inspecting the plates.

The only argument Melaney could remember in her family was whether or not they should celebrate Christmas. Her parents decided they would, just so Melaney and Paul would have something to do on a long boring day when all their friends were with their families, and every house on the street looked deserted. That had been a long time ago.

"Don't be shy," said Stella. "If there's something here you can't eat, just say so and we'll find something else. My bubba won't touch the fake crab meat."

"It's fine, I'm sure it's fine. My family is pretty reform." Who was she trying to fool, the only taboo food Melaney would immediately recognize was a suckling pig on a platter with an apple in its mouth. "We don't eat pigs or ham or lobsters or anything like that, and we certainly wouldn't drink milk with it, even if we did do that, which we don't." Shut up Kreutzmann, she thought to herself, of all the stupid things to say. She was unravelling, and stupid things seemed to be crowding into her mind.

Melaney could tell Stella was staring at her. She was sick of that expression, sick of having to pretend she was a different person just to make them stop. If she stared at people, someone would tell her it was rude. Yet it seemed to be just fine for other people to stare at Melaney. No one would understand how much work she had to do just to get through this one dinner, as if she fit in.

Stella, Bernie and Lonnie wandered off to the bar. Stella returned, bringing Melaney and Carla Cott colas. "Everyone all set?"

"All what?" said Carla. "Oh, yes. Thank you."

"So." Stella turned to Eddie. Eddie flashed Melaney an "I told you so" look. "How's

Mom? Is she happy? I'm a bit worried about her, being uprooted from the community like that."

"Why don't you ask her yourself," said Eddie, folding his arms across his chest and slouching.

"Melaney obviously lives there. There must be other Jews. Brenton seems like a nice little place, a good place to retire," said Bernie.

Melaney smiled; it felt like a Jack-o'-lantern smile.

"Mom hasn't mentioned, what's your last name Melaney?" said Stella.

"Kreutzmann."

"The Kreutzmanns. You know Melaney, my family and yours should get together and carpool to synagogue here in Toronto. Even if you go to a different one, it might be in the same area."

Melaney started. There was no way, she thought. She tried imagining her parents and herself trapped in the same car with the Abramskys. She wouldn't put it past her father to call Mr. Abramsky a shyster lawyer to his face. Her mother would babble about adoptions. Eddie would never speak to her again, and he would take Carla with him and Melaney would no longer have any real friends. It would be a disaster, thought Melaney. A disaster she'd never recover from. Mr. Abramsky and her father didn't even drive the same way.

When the Kreutzmanns left their great-aunt's house, Melaney's father took the back-roads from Bracebridge to Brenton, careening around rocks as if blasting his own path through the Canadian shield, plummeting over hills and occasionally becoming airborne, maple leaves storming over the windshield. Melaney had loved those drives from Bracebridge, and so had everyone in her family. She remembered how her mother's jaw tightened in the car, but not from tension, it was more a bearing-down, as if she was hoping Melaney's father would drive faster, even if what she said was "Be careful." Why had that been, Melaney suddenly wondered, and why was she wishing her family was there, and they would leave the *shul*, pile into the car and drive over the rocks?

"I'll suggest it. My parents would probably like that," said Melaney.

"You forget how much we take for granted," said Lonnie. "Like not having to commute to another city to worship."

He was looking at Melaney, and Melaney shrugged and said, "It's nothing. It's all in a day's work."

Eddie's relatives looked startled, and Melaney was starting to think maybe she needed a muzzle.

"If you will excuse me for asking, what exactly are your plans, Eddie?" said Stella.

"What do you mean?"

"Mom says you're talking about quitting school and joining a rock band."

"So what if I am. I can run my own life, thank you very much," snapped Eddie.

Melaney saw a large circle forming on the dance floor, then a smaller circle within the circle, and she nudged Carla and said "the hora," trying to sound as if she had known all along there would be one. Melaney could see Mr. and Mrs. Abramsky swept into the circle of their community. She looked at a whole gallery of European faces: Polish, Russian, German, not so different from her parents, yet bound by their sense of community. She looked back at Eddie. He had become part of his family. The remarks he made to his sister, which sounded so rebellious at school were just part of a never-ending script, and Melaney was surprised at how domestic and childish he now seemed. The Abramskys had lived in Brenton for three years now, and Melaney had the urge to just come out and say, "So adapt already." It was as if Eddie couldn't sneeze without his whole family knowing about it. There was no one for Melaney's parents to call when something went wrong, no family members to intervene when Paul quit school. Melaney's family was almost extinct, there was nothing except photographs, and maybe she had to figure things out for herself, do things her own way because there was no other way she could do it. Maybe that was what she was meant to do. She was going to join the hora. She didn't care if she didn't know how to do it, or even

if she couldn't break into one of the circles and had to stumble around by herself. For all she knew, she'd start singing the words to "The Farmer in the Dell," and she wondered what would happen if she pushed her way into the middle and bawled out "The cheese stands alone, hi ho the derry-o ..." This is just great, Kreutzmann, she thought. She couldn't trust herself not to actually do that.

"You should finish school," Bernie said in a voice of quiet, irrefutable reason that annoyed Melaney to no end. "What will become of you if you don't finish? You'll have no future."

"You'll lose all connection with your community and you won't know who you are. You'll fall off the edge of the universe," Melaney said slowly. She couldn't stop herself, and Kreutzmann words were coming out, deliberate and sarcastic, worthy of her father. "God forbid that should happen."

"Listen to her," said Stella. "She speaks the truth. Thank you Melaney."

It was the truest thing she had said all day, but the realer she was to the Abramskys, the phonier she was to herself, and what she most wanted to know was how she could keep herself from blushing with pleasure.

Sold Down the River

Helen La Valley arrived in Montréal in July, on moving day, when it seemed to her as if the whole city was on wheels, and furniture and large appliances had legs. The vans, trucks and trailers slinking down side streets, piled high with furniture, children sitting on boxes and laughing, made Helen think of migrant workers with all their worldly possessions piled around them. She felt she was part of a great communal event, although she didn't have any possessions yet — only her clothes crushed into two arm-breaking suitcases, which she alternately lifted and pulled along the sidewalk as if walking an uncooperative dog. Helen paused, looked around, and she felt the city in motion smiling at her in recognition, because she was moving too, and for once her movements were in sync with everyone else's.

She found a small room on the corner of Mont-Royal and rue de la France for ten dollars a night. She made the transaction in her cobbled childhood/high school Northern Ontario French, unable to make eye contact with the mean-looking man with the squashed nose at the desk. The room was disorienting to Helen, the way it smelled like the rooms in her parents' farmhouse. There was something both foreign and familiar too, about the furniture: an old iron bed, prim corner chair and a small rug which looked like a matted fake fur jacket. Helen thought if there had been a cross on the wall, it would have looked like a convent room — except for the rug.

After getting settled, which basically meant plunking her suitcases on the floor and opening them, she went for a walk, exploring the side streets around the tourist rooms.

Down rue de la France, she was amazed by how the doorways were right at street level. She glimpsed narrow wallpapered entrances and lace-curtained windows which made her think Europe couldn't look more European than this. Staircases spiralled up tall buildings, and she was thrilled to see how many "à louer" signs there were, attached to balcony railings and posted on windows. She thought of how soon she would be slinking up a spiral staircase, letting herself into one of those doorways, possessing a long four or even five digit street number. A city street number.

In an alleyway she passed postage stamp backyards containing sheds, old car husks, and even a boat which looked seductive to Helen, mysterious, as if it had somehow come to be washed up onto this one little backyard. Then she came to a hidden swimming pool, which took up the entire yard, and Helen paused, longing to slip into the still square of water, feel her entire body immersed in cool, liquid darkness without knowing where she was, and no one knowing she was there.

During the night, she heard footsteps scuffling outside her room. She got up to check the lock, and pulled the heavier suitcase over to block the door. Later that night, she stood on the prim chair and precariously balanced herself over the edge of the sink, wishing for a moment she was a man, and peed in the sink, afraid to leave the room to go to the public bathrooms. The only other people she saw staying there were shabby old men who looked like retired boxers, and the only women she saw made her wonder if they were prostitutes. She imagined the way they would laugh at her, and she couldn't bear the thought of passing even one of them to get to the bathroom.

Helen lay wide awake for a long time with her Walkman on, tuned to the French CBC, only it sounded far away, as if she had managed to discover a signal on a shortwave radio. "Moon River" came on, which she figured was just her luck and sure enough, tears streamed down her cheeks at the line, "There's such a lot of world to see." She couldn't believe she was finally somewhere else, not Timmins or Kingston, hearing the white-noise rush of city

traffic outside the window, yet still pining over that sappy song, as if there really was such a lot of world and she would never be able to see any of it.

Looking at the cracks in the ceiling made her think she was back in her old room in Timmins, unable to do anything but imagine the cracks in the ceiling were the Nile River, surrounded by faded wall-paper roses, vague shells of pink and traces of stems, so restless she was afraid she would burst through the ceiling, unable to comprehend how people could live, knowing how many places in the world they would never get to see. Helen wondered if she was the only person in the world who would leave Timmins for Queen's University, and then give up on Queen's where everything was taken care of for her, to fling herself on a city saying, "Take me I'm yours," the way other people chose lovers or careers.

As far as her parents knew, Helen was in Kingston. She was postponing telling them she had transferred to another university so she could live in Montréal. At least, the university was the only excuse she could give them for being in Montréal. Helen intended to write soon, when the term began, when she was settled somewhere and had a job. Her parents would not be pleased to know she was lying on a bed in a tourist room, staring at a cracked ceiling, listening to the building creak, water whispering, chattering and gurgling through the pipes, like subterranean voices mingling with the strange old songs coming through on her Walkman, like two radio stations competing for one frequency. If she called her parents now, their voices could blow her back to Kingston or Timmins as if she was a tumbleweed, and Helen was determined not to let that happen.

The first thing Helen realized while wandering around the city looking for an apartment, was how inadequate her French really was. She wished English words wouldn't come out of her mouth first, or so comfortably. She glared at the "Apartments for Rent" section of *The Gazette* she was carrying. This was a newspaper which advertised itself as the only English newspaper in Montréal, and she felt as if she had been tricked into buying something along with the paper, a kind of siege mentality, which Helen had every intention

of resisting. But all her good intentions went by the wayside when she entered a café and asked for, "un café pour apporter s'il vous plait." The woman behind the counter welcomed Helen to Québec and made a fuss over her pitiful line of French. "Vous êtes Américaine?" the woman had asked, and Helen blushed and said, "Oui."

It felt as if the French she heard while growing up, was only enough to give her an illusion of possessing an inside knowledge. From the political books she slogged through in high school, she picked up phrases like "le mépris du peuple," which she hadn't hesitated to lob at her bewildered parents, when she had been in her separatist stage. She read countless Simenon novels in French, and she supposed if she ever found herself in a bar full of French-from-France flics drinking Pernod and marc, she'd make out fine. Better than she was doing on the bus surrounded by day-to-day conversations. Her head full of childhood religion, politics and *policiers* had once been her badges of difference, both in Timmins and then at Queen's, and now they were irrelevant. Everybody in Montréal had read parables in French, knew politics and *policiers*.

To get to her first class, Helen had to cross the city. Her bus was full of students of all ages and nationalities, bearing book bags and back packs, reminding her of all the people she had seen moving on her first day in the city. From the window, she could see dark grey double-steeped churches contrasting with the luminous sky, and then the dome of an Eastern Orthodox church, rising softly in the background, as if carved out of soap stone. Helen was glad she had left Queen's University. She thought of the way her father sighed in satisfaction when her acceptance arrived in the mail and how he had said, "Now that's a *real* university. One of the top three in the country. McGill, *Queen's* and U of T. You're the first La Valley who's ever gone to a university and it's *Queen's*." But to Helen, it was an airtight fantasy of a university that didn't really include her. She wasn't wealthy enough, for one thing. Queen's made her think of a strange little European principality, segregated within a limestone city, in the heart of Loyalist country. Its crests were painted on the

sidewalks, and tri-coloured banners draped from every streetlight. Each academic discipline resembled a province with its own crest, motto inscribed in fake Gaelic, and arcane initiation rites. *This was real life*, thought Helen, and she looked around at all the people on the bus, as if their school books, back packs, and just all being on a bus in Montréal at the same time united them.

She noticed some men sitting together, heads bent over an orange work book, which Helen could see contained English grammar. One of the men looked up at her with such an expression of mute near-panic on his face, Helen smiled back at him, hoping he would feel she was sympathetic. All of a sudden she felt cowardly and taking the easy way out by selecting a Creative Writing workshop, in English no less. Only because she figured no one could flunk Creative Writing, and because it sounded like the type of class where she might meet friends, find out about doctors and dentists and all the things she needed to get a life. Just until I get settled, she told herself, as if apologizing to the men. Then I'll do something serious, like take French courses. But those men still made her feel like the world's biggest fake.

When she arrived at her class, she hesitated in the doorway, very surprised by how old some of the people sitting around the seminar table were. Then she spotted a woman and a girl looking at the horoscope section of *The Gazette*, which now seemed like the one thing in the city she was familiar with, and Helen slipped in beside them.

"So many movie stars were born on my birthday," said the girl.

"Hah," said the woman. "I was born the same day as Einstein."

"I share my birthday with Joseph Goebbels and the Wall Street Crash," said Helen.

"Thanks mom, I appreciate that."

When the woman laughed, Helen hoped this would be her first friendship in Montréal.

"I'm Debbie," said the woman.

Helen thought she looked a lot like Lily Tomlin.

"Have you ever heard of this prof?" said Debbie. "Frank Moore. Sounds like someone who writes cowboy stories."

"No," said Helen.

"Neither have I. Do you think we'll learn anything from a guy we've never heard of?"

"Well I don't know any writers," said Helen. "I just sort of assumed I wouldn't know who he is. I'm a History major. I've never written anything before — except propaganda of course. You know, me and Joseph Goebbels."

Debbie laughed and Helen blushed in pleasure.

"Maybe this Frank Moore guy used to be famous," said the girl on Helen's right. Helen thought the girl was attractive, but also looked high-strung. She was wearing a very low-cut blouse, and Helen wondered if she worked somewhere and had to dress like that, or if this was how she always came to classes. She leaned over Helen's notebook and said in a low intense voice. "Maybe he published his first book and all the money went into booze and drugs and he ended up in this hole just to keep going."

"I can see why you're taking Creative Writing," said Debbie, dryly.

"I'm Alanna by the way," said the girl.

Debbie and Alanna started talking about what a hole Concordia University was, with its broken escalators, bad air and lighting in the classrooms, registration disorganization. Helen tried to join in the conversation, but felt a little disloyal. She liked it that the Norris Building didn't look like a university building, but more like the kind of place that would house fly-by-night mail order companies, disreputable tabloids, correspondence schools, vague import-export businesses, all of which made Helen feel more comfortable than a university. It was the kind of place where she imagined the men on her bus would go to learn their second language, where she should really be, she thought.

When the professor entered, Helen was relieved he didn't look like a writer who had burnt himself out on booze or drugs. Frank Moore didn't look any different from some of the older students already clustered at the head of the table, and when he sat down, Helen found

it hard to distinguish him from them. The professor asked the students to introduce themselves, and Helen was dismayed by how serious the students were about writing, and how divided their opinions were. She tried not to gape as a woman named Donna lit a cigarillo and said she was publishing romances under the pseudonym "Vivienne Tierney." Another woman named Doris, sitting on the professor's right, said she was taking the course to refine her notion of fiction writing as craft. It sounded to Helen as if she had spent her entire life reading, and not Simenon novels in French either. Bruno Gentile was interested in moving his science fiction into mainstream fiction, and Helen silently groaned when the only person in the class who could have been younger than Helen, a fragile looking girl named Cynthia, confessed to the class she had been writing all her life and wanted to eventually enter the graduate program. By the time Helen found out Debbie had published stories in magazines, and Alanna had worked on the student newspaper, Helen figured the only honourable thing left for her to do was claim she was looking for Civil Engineering 220, and skulk out the door.

"Helen La Valley?" the professor said, and Helen thought she detected a note of uncertainty in the way he pronounced her last name.

"Yes — that's me," she said. Helen didn't have a single thing to tell the class. Confessing she took the course because she thought it would be an easy credit didn't seem the way to get into a professor's good graces. "I'm in second year, I haven't published anything anywhere and I really don't have anything to say about writing or anything else." She was startled, both when Debbie clapped her affectionately on the shoulder, and when Doris drawled, "Cop out."

After class ended, Helen stood in line to board the bus to return to the tourist room. As it patiently opened its doors to the lineup, she almost reached out to pet the side of the bus. She pulled out a book but couldn't read. The last time she had felt this intimidated was when she was on her way to Queen's University.

Helen's father must have told everyone in Timmins about her, because people she

didn't know approached her on the street and said things like "You're Joseph La Valley's daughter, the one who's going to Queen's." Helen was the youngest of four, the 1962 surprise as her mother said, and she hadn't been close to her father while growing up, had barely known him as a matter of fact. But when her acceptance to Queen's came in the mail, it seemed as if her father was hovering around her all the time, questioning her about registration arrangements.

He knew more about her residence and the meal plan than she did, and he sat across from her at the huge wooden kitchen table, plotting strategy, filling out one of his old green ledger books with how much and when her scholarship money and post office savings should be used. She knew how proud he was of that scholarship, but she could try telling him the real reason she got it until she was blue in the face and he would never hear it. Helen had been a terrible student, passing time in classrooms which were all the same to her, until her French teacher cornered her in the hall one day in mid-grade eleven and said, "Use your brain and *get out of here. Go to university and see the world.*"

Helen knew that was what had made her change. She would have joined the army, if it meant she would see the world. She started attending classes and handing in assignments. Her average rose thirty points in one term and when it climbed even higher in grade thirteen, it felt as bizarre and beyond her control or previous experience as the stock market. People who never used to give her the time of day were suddenly friendly to her. Teachers stared at her and wrote, "Miraculous improvement," and even a "What happened?" on her report cards. All of a sudden it was an assumption she would go to university. But she spent the whole time psychically holding her head and waiting for the crash, the stroke of midnight, the time when screw-ups would screw up again and the numbers would all shimmer back to forties and fifties. That was what her father would never understand. She completed the Queen's package late one night, and it was her father who threw his coat on over his pyjamas to drive to the Timmins post office, so the envelope would be in the next day's mail.

It was her father who drove her to Kingston in the Bobcat with the holes in the floor, with one of those pine air fresheners dangling from the mirror, and a frog on the dashboard. She thought of the jokes they made about it being the "Timmins Haywagon" and the "tit car ben ordinaire." Her father had been so excited when he saw the first engineering crest painted on the highway heading into Kingston. "Engineers!" he had called out. "Look Helen, it must be part of their initiation." He had a grade eight education but he knew everything about universities. Her heart had ached when she saw the Bobcat in the parking lot, how shabby it looked surrounded by a fleet of shiny station wagons, as if it didn't even have the right to be there. She and her father got out of the car to look around, and he stood there with his chest out, standing at attention exactly the way he did for the national anthem. His eyes were glistening, and she had never felt closer to her father in her entire life. Helen hoped that one day he would understand that being in Montréal made her feel the way he did at Queen's.

She was surprised the class had evoked all of these thoughts, as if she was now mentally trying to respond to that "cop out" comment, justifying to herself why she had even been in the workshop. Everything that had been said felt like an accusing finger, poking into something deep, soft and sore inside her. It wasn't a good sign, she thought. While resting dejectedly at the Métro station, someone asked her, "Où est la rue Waverley?" She opened her mouth to say, "Je regrette mais je ne sais pas," but instead said, "Je regrette mais je n'existe pas." The man's face lit up in puzzled surprise, and Helen hadn't realized what she said until she was standing on the platform. She burst out laughing, thinking, or hoping anyway, he looked like someone who would appreciate a good existential joke. On top of it all, by the way he had enunciated all the syllables, Helen was sure the man was English.

Helen found an apartment with room-mates, through the bulletin board at her new university. She could have saved herself a lot of pavement-pounding if she had gone there first, instead of facing landlords all over the city who, whether they laughed at her or offered

her tea and sympathy, all thought she was a bad risk as a tenant. Which she was, she knew, but everyone had to start somewhere. She wouldn't have ended up standing meekly in front of building owners like a poor wretch in a soup line, making a con artist's promises, or even resorting to inventing imaginary fiancés, trying to appear to a stranger as if she was about to become a newlywed, just to get a one room basement apartment for a year — until the wedding of course.

The new apartment was on May Street, but by the time she walked to what she thought had to be the Lachine Canal, she was doubting May Street even existed, that both the advertisement and voice she had spoken to on the phone were part of a practical joke. Helen began to think the only job she would be suited for was writing tour guides for the perpetually lost. Tired of your routine? she said to herself, while wearing out her shoes on a street called Bannantyne, which she could have sworn was a Westmount street name. Tired of doing things competently? she continued to grumble. Pick up La Valley's Guide to Doing Everything the Hard Way. See a city as no one else would want to.

When Helen finally found May Street, she discovered the street was actually the border street between Pointe-St-Charles and Verdun. Although the advertisement said "St-Henri," the half of the street which contained apartment buildings was technically in Verdun. She thought of the silly letters she could write from the trenches of Verdun. If he ever got over being angry with her, Helen's father would enjoy them. The other half of the street was the concrete wall of an elevated expressway, one of the approaches to the Champlain Bridge. She enjoyed how the old buildings looked gloomy and haunted, as if there should have been a full moon perpetually hanging over them, while just over her head, cars and trucks whizzed by ceaselessly as if they were part of another futuristic dimension existing at the same time. When she entered the building, she saw a rubber skeleton dangling at the top of the long deep staircase. A sign on the door, printed in Gothic lettering said, "Kastle Kaos. Abandon Hope Ye Who Enter Here."

Helen's new landlord, Mme Tellier came up to Helen's nose. She was solidly built,

"a line-backer," Helen's room-mate Jim said on the phone, and her eyes behind large pink-framed glasses, were very sharp.

"Elen La Valley," said Mme Tellier, puzzled. "Pas H  l  ne Lavall  e?"

"Je viens de Timmins, Ontario," said Helen, hoping that would explain it all.

"Fran  ais?"

"Uh out, uh sorti of? Sorte de? Mon famille est fran  ais mais mon fran  ais n'est pas bon — pas encore, anyway."

Helen blushed, and thought of pretending she was deaf, or had a speech impediment. She had already done worse since arriving in Montr  al. Mme Tellier was examining her with a rather stern expression on her face. Helen wondered if her room-mates had received the same third degree. They were English, students too, and Helen hadn't heard either of them speak a word of French. Jim Mancey and Gillian Bright, for God's sake. Helen straightened her shoulders and stood at full height, figuring not being short could sometimes pass for being tall.

"Moi, j'suis une Qu  b  coise de la Beauce," Mme Tellier announced. "Ma famille vivions ici pour six g  n  rations."

"Je suis une m  lange — rien pur." Helen shrugged, then laughed humbly.

Mme Tellier backed off, then wagged her finger at Helen and said, "Vous   tes trop mince. C'n'est pas un jour maigre la."

"Je n'y peut rien," said Helen. "Je mange comme un cheval." She hoped she hadn't just used the word for "hair." It's a Timmins dialect, she imagined explaining to Mme Tellier, who was smiling very wryly.

"Hey, you didn't mention you could speak French," said Jim.

"I should be a lot better," said Helen.

"You can be like our ambassador," said Gillian. "I can't get a handle on how much English she knows. I think she likes you."

Helen felt she had won over the landlord, even if it was by denying the Frenchness

of several generations of Ontario La Valleys. She could have said something like, "Ma famille était en Timmins pour un longtemps aussi." It wasn't exactly what she wanted to say, but she could have got the words out. Instead she backed down and sold out, doing exactly what she had once accused her parents of doing to live their lives in Timmins. It was even worse when she realized Mme Tellier had interrogated her because the landlord thought she, Helen, had sold out by anglicizing her name. She shuddered to think she had once been a militant separatist, a sixteen-year-old know-it-all pounding her parents' kitchen table, quoting Pierre Bourgault at them, and interrogating them as to whether they felt oppressed, insisting they needed a homeland, Québec. Her father, whose father had been born in the same farmhouse, pushed his wire spectacles to the end of his nose and just looked long-sufferingly at her throughout one of these diatribes. It occurred to Helen that her high school separatist sympathies wouldn't have mattered in the least to Mme Tellier. She could practically see the little smile her father would have on his face if he could have seen the encounter.

Helen had no furniture and she slept on the lumpy living room couch, which had been donated from Gillian's mother's rec room. She stayed up most of the night talking with her new room-mates. The couch and an old TV set appeared to be afloat in the large, almost empty living room. Facing the window, Helen could see the old-fashioned light fixture reflected in the glass, floating above Gillian's head like a spirit above a séance. Blue shadows circled Jim's eyes, and even the funny story he was telling about a course change seemed a little sad to Helen, creating a very tenuous connection between them.

When Jim and Gillian finally turned in for the night, Helen couldn't sleep. She looked out the window and felt a sense of living in the Wild West. The residential half of the street was deserted, and wind pinned drifting newspaper pages to the concrete wall of the expressway. She noticed how the telephone lines were patched, with some kind of electrical tape that draped off the lines like Spanish moss, and she wondered if that tape was really

all that kept the lines from snapping. Looking out the kitchen window into the alley, she saw tomcat fences made of soft, worn wood, telephone poles planted like crooked wooden beanpoles. A building stood, withdrawn from the world, and Helen squinted at it feeling if she could somehow see deeply enough, she could eventually glimpse the life it secretly contained, though the sombre bricks were locked so impenetrably together. Ever since she had come to Montréal, she had wanted to live on an alleyway, but she still felt she wasn't close enough to its real life.

She left the apartment, then rushed back up the throat-like staircase to collect her keys, remembering for once she had to lock the door. A Western-Country Club de rencontre stood on the corner of the next street, looking more like an 1890s saloon than a "club de rencontre." It was surrounded by a few tiny cube-shaped houses, making Helen think of fully detached jail cells, built low and close to the ground, with no steps or porch separating them from the street. Some of these little houses were connected together like train cars. A slender tree partially covered a porchlight, causing rays of light to refract into grainy darkness, and the light made Helen feel as if she was standing on a lonely train platform.

A Canadian flag appeared directly above a fleur-de-lys in an apartment building. She thought that was exactly how it would look if she had lived in an apartment building with her father upstairs. She thought of how much he loved Canada, how he only bought Canadian products, and how he had only allowed his children to watch Canadian television shows. Even though she professed to be a separatist, Helen wasn't sure she would ever be able to see the Canadian flag as a symbol of oppression, and she wondered when all the signs and slogans in windows, written on walls and decorating stop signs would mean the same to her as they did to everyone else. Helen had a shower curtain over her window as if "I believe in showers" was the only political statement she was capable of making to the street these days. She figured it was probably as coherent as trying to reconcile being a separatist and not wanting the country to break up. On a fragile balcony, lit by a single light, a pale shirt

fluttered from a mast-like pole, and to Helen it looked as ghostly as a faded and forgotten flag left behind after a surrender.

Helen was quite pleased with herself for having completed a story, one she thought had a perfectly respectable beginning, middle and end. She had got the message the class thought not much happened in her stories. In this story, she had her character, Valerie, move to Vancouver from a small town in Ontario. In class, it took Doris thirty seconds to fire her opening shot.

"I was lost right from the first paragraph, the opening description of the living room. What kind of character has a set of antiques and a black velvet picture of a Mexican in the same room? Whose room is it? We're not even told if this room belongs to what's her name — Valerie."

Helen bristled. Her room at Kastle Kaos was furnished with stuff from garage sales. A cherub lamp sat on top of a handyman special worktable. She sat on a lawn chair, and she slept on a mattress she had been lucky enough to scrounge at a Salvation Army, when her room-mates gave her a chance to get any sleep. Her floor was lined with piles of books Helen had bought for ten cents apiece at a church sale, all with titles like, *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea* and *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*. She supposed if she was a character in a story, she wouldn't make any sense to Doris either — a revolutionary with a cherub lamp and a lawn chair. Valerie's furniture was supposed to be like her own. It was assembled in a room Valerie was staying in, but Helen couldn't exactly say either the furniture, or the room belonged to Valerie. It's how students live, thought Helen.

"I have no idea if this character is even supposed to be English or French," Doris continued. "She reads these books in French, but she speaks English. At one point she's admiring Pierre Trudeau and then later she's going on about René Lévesque. There is absolutely no reason given in this story as to why this is. There isn't even any acknowledgment that this might possibly be a paradox."

Helen frowned at her own story, trying to grasp what Doris was saying, wondering how it could be possible for her to make Valerie any different. Helen didn't feel confident enough to make Valerie completely English, especially if she was Protestant. There were so many Protestant groups, Helen had no idea what to select. Maybe an Anglican, she thought. Yet Helen's French was so shaky, she couldn't stand on that ground either. She heard a loud sigh from Debbie, and Alanna was frowning and jiggling her leg. Good, thought Helen. They would know what the story was about and they would take on Doris.

"I thought it was totally realistic," said Alanna. "Valerie's a real person."

"I'm not talking about whether or not the story is *realistic*," said Doris. "A story isn't real life. You can't just toss in anything you want and then hope it turns into a work of fiction."

"Bull!" Debbie finally exploded. With her eyes narrowed and her jaw set, Helen thought she looked like a particularly tough Lily Tomlin character.

"It's not a difficult story," said Debbie. "It doesn't set out to be profound or anything. It's written for real people and not for people who just care about showing off how smart they are. Helen's just brought some characters to life, and I can relate to them. That's enough for me. I don't know what else you can possibly ask for. Are you trying to say some people and some situations are worth writing about and others aren't?"

Doris sighed and said, "I'm not saying that at all. Take that description of the west — please. No, really I had no idea what it was all about. Where is it coming from? Whose voice is this? I got stranded somewhere in Manitoba."

"Well," said a voice Helen hadn't heard speak out in class before. It was Cynthia Perry, the one person in the class Helen thought might have been younger and greener than Helen was. "I didn't have any problem finding my way out of Manitoba. I've been to Manitoba, and it looks just like in the story."

"There, you see?" said Debbie. "A neutral voice has just spoken. What's really going on here? Presumably we're readers, we're an audience and we're not having any problem

at all with Helen's story. Are we getting the message we're a bunch of Neanderthals for liking it?"

Helen pictured herself squatting in a cave etching figures into the ground with a stick, with all the other Neanderthals crowded around her, grunting and laughing.

"I am not making personal comments about anyone in the class," said Doris. "A critic talks about the work. I'm not debating any of this other discourse. All I'm saying is that without a clear cut narrative voice, it's not a story. It's a documentary or a travelogue. Sell it to PBS, but don't pass it off as fiction."

Helen frowned again. She was a student, not a professional critic, and she hadn't been trying to pass her story off as anything. No matter how bad it was, she didn't think Doris had the right to say that. She had only written what she was capable of writing.

"Didn't you like anything about the story?" said Steve Brownstone, another student Helen rarely heard speak in class.

"I like the names," said Doris. "And the last line. Keep that."

The names? thought Helen. She may not have been the world's best student, and her work probably did stink to high heaven, although it was hard to know who or what to believe at this point, but she did recognize it when she was being patronized. She looked at the professor, dismayed because he was actually agreeing with Doris about the names, and the last line in the story.

Debbie again spoke out. "You don't have to be patronizing. It's totally uncalled for."

Helen looked at Debbie with gratitude.

"I wasn't being patronizing," said Professor Moore. "I enjoyed the names and the scene with the farmer."

"Well you know farmers," Helen whispered to Debbie. "All that rustic humour."

She wondered if the professor had been prepared for this fight. Helen certainly hadn't been. It seemed to her as if he was trying very hard to be careful and wasn't altogether certain of himself. It was a two hour class, and the entire time had been taken up on Helen's

story. Helen was worn out, and thought a lot less energy could have been expended in dismissing her work. But really, it wasn't Doris who was surprising her so much. Doris didn't like anyone's work. It was the other students defending Helen which she had been so completely unprepared for.

"Maybe we can bring all this together somehow," said the professor. "Perhaps everyone is actually expressing the same qualms in different ways."

"Typical tactic," Debbie whispered to Helen. "Try and make like everybody agrees to disarm the opposition."

Helen nodded. "Yeah! I was going to major in the history of revolutions and that's a classic trick."

"A lot of people were satisfied by Valerie herself and the world created by the story," said the professor. "But maybe what Doris was trying to suggest is that the narrative voice is too passive. We don't get a sense that Valerie owns the story. I wanted to see concrete pressure, a force at her back for going out west. I couldn't help but feel Valerie's reason for going out west is a little — adolescent."

"I think he's just accused you of being an adolescent," Debbie whispered to Helen.

"An eighteen-year-old adolescent," said Helen to Debbie. "How unusual."

She glanced at Debbie, and suddenly had the uncomfortable feeling Debbie was turning into her lawyer. "Anything you can say can and will be held against you in a court of law," Helen could imagine Debbie saying out of the corner of her mouth.

Helen couldn't see how her heroine, who had just moved to Vancouver, could be considered passive. She wondered if she should take an assertiveness course, come in next week as Rambo. It wouldn't do any good, she thought. Doris and the professor were speaking from a level she simply wasn't at, and as far as she was concerned, they might as well have been speaking in code. It was clear to her the class was divided into two sides, armed with completely different weapons, and Helen was on Debbie's side by default.

After the class was over, Helen said to Debbie, "Well, I think the East German judge

just gave me a 4.2. Thanks for sticking up for me. Without you guys, I would have looked like a total goof.”

Debbie, Alanna, Donna and Cynthia gathered around Helen, and Helen thought maybe the class was worth it to make friends like them.

“It’s our pleasure,” said Alanna. “I think you’re really good.”

“I think you should just ignore them,” said Cynthia.

“You’ll make it,” said Debbie. “Some day you’ll be rich and famous and we can all say we knew you when. Are you sure you’ve never published?”

“Can’t you tell?” said Helen.

“I have a suspicious mind,” said Debbie. “Anyway, we’re just making an investment.”

“I appreciate all your nice words,” said Helen. “But why are you investing, so to speak, in me? You guys have published. I don’t even write. I’m a history student. Doris is nasty to all you guys too and I don’t stick up for you. That’s because I don’t even understand what they’re saying.”

“Because they dismiss us in twenty minutes and they hammer away at you for hours,” said Donna.

“They’re shooting all their cannonballs at a flea,” said Helen. “I don’t understand it at all. If they’re so smart why can’t they see that?”

“They just like the sound of their own voices,” said Cynthia.

Debbie narrowed her eyes and lit a cigarette. Helen thought she looked like a gangster. “I know why,” she said. “It’s because you’re one of us but they take you more seriously than the rest of us, because you’re good, and we like your work. They can’t have that, right? They’d lose power. Moore and his hired assassin would be right out of business. He planted her there, you know. She’s not even in the program. I checked. She’s an ‘independent student.’ She’s a fucking plant.”

“Jeez,” said Helen. “Wait a minute. I’m not in the program either.”

“You’re not a plant,” said Debbie. “I also checked on something else. He doesn’t have

tenure. Which means he can be fired. None of us paid to be bullied by Doris Dunstall. Let's face it, Frank Moore shouldn't be teaching at all. It is his responsibility."

Helen and Cynthia looked at each other, then nodded.

"Teachers shouldn't be planting people in classes," said Cynthia.

"Can't argue with that," said Helen.

Doris's criticisms bothered her, though. Helen didn't think she was an egomaniac, or a delicate little flower who wilted under the slightest criticism. She had been called stupid many times in her life, and she thought she had already experienced everything there was to being a student, having been on both sides of the bell curve. Most of all, the idea of owning a story bothered her. How, she wondered, could you own a story when you didn't own anything else, and didn't know where you stood in any respect? Helen couldn't even answer the most basic questions in her own life: Was she a good or terrible student? Was she French or English? It seemed as if ever since she had come to Montréal, she had been pulled from one side to another without having anything inside her that could resist. Everything she did had become political, in a way she would never have dreamed back when she quoted Pierre Bourgault at her parents.

She thought of how she had acquired her furniture. She and Jim had gone out to Pointe-Claire in his ancient wheezing Volvo, to scrounge through garage sales. Helen picked up her worktable, the lamp and a chapel chair from Scotland, which the room-mates all used as a telephone table. When she had bought the chapel chair, the woman at the sale explained to Helen the chair had been in the family for four generations, and was being sold for next to nothing to Helen only because the family *had* to move to Mississauga. "You know what things are like here," the woman said to Helen, in a tone of voice that assumed Helen knew exactly why the family had to leave.

She thought of the big house with its manicured lawn, its private, owned patch of green space, the way the sun slanted across the yards, accentuating their greenness and

tidiness, as if it too was owned and controlled. A younger Helen would have said, "No, I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't have the slightest idea why you would move." She had wanted to say it in French to show she was not exactly like them. But when she tested the words in her mind, "Je n'ai pas le moindre idée pourquoi vous pret éloigne," they seemed hopelessly convoluted. Helen had gone along with the woman at the sale because she needed the chair, and because she hadn't been able to break out of the cozy, assumed alliance the woman was creating between them.

But it hadn't stopped with the West Island either. Later, when she and Jim managed to move the furniture into her room, Mme Tellier came over with her little dog, and the excuse of having to check the fuse box. Helen had no doubt the landlord had watched her and Jim unload the Volvo and had come over to inspect.

"Tiens!" said Mme Tellier, on seeing Helen's newly furnished room for the first time. "Quel chambre!"

"C'est un mélange d'étudiante," said Helen, making a point of petting the little dog. "Concordia nouveau."

Mme Tellier laughed, but Helen had felt spent, and she wondered just how long the "mélange" joke would continue. In class, Helen sometimes found herself looking at Doris, wondering how anyone could be that self-assured. Helen was getting by on shrugging, smiling, looking wide-eyed and befuddled, speaking in convoluted French, wondering how hard she would have to work to stay in Montréal, how many times she would end up agreeing with English who accepted her only as long as she toed their party line, or how many times she would have to explain her last name to Mme Tellier, and apologize for her French, in the process selling her family down the river. Yes, they were (only) from Ontario, nowhere exciting like B.C. or the States. No, they didn't speak much French.

And now she was in a class where she was expected to write about a character who knew exactly who she was, and had everything figured out. Helen didn't think it was fair, to be asked for more as a writer than she could give, or even be as a person. She had no idea

how she could put what she didn't know into a story. Every comment Doris or the professor made about the story felt to Helen like qualities she lacked as a human being, never mind as a student.

She took the first job that came along, that of the Galaxy Photo chicken mascot. Just until she found real work, she told Jim and Gillian and Mme Tellier. She wished she could have taken a picture of Mme Tellier's face. Every day Helen donned 35 pounds of plastic, rubber netting, feathers and foam, a head the size of a beerkeg. The suit didn't fit her and she saw through the little mesh hole of the chicken's mouth. Helen felt like changing her name to "Anything-for-a-Buck" La Valley, as she galumphed up and down Ste-Catherine, distributing flyers, and photo-finishing coupons, saying what corporate head office made all the mascots say: "Here are your X-tra special photos." Sometimes she felt as if she might as well drop to her knees on the pavement and sing to the crowds on the street corner. She had wild thoughts of setting up a cardboard box in the park so people could make donations to the "Help Helen La Valley Stay in Montréal Fund." She wondered what sort of reaction she would get.

Helen was supposed to scan the customers, and if they looked French, say "Voilà, vos photos spéciales," so Galaxy Photo wouldn't get in trouble. Simon, the store manager told her that Language Police often came into retail stores pretending to be customers, but were really spying on whether store staff was speaking French.

"Well then why don't I just say it in French?" said Helen.

"I don't care," said Simon. "But head office doesn't want to offend the English because that's where most of our business comes from."

Helen had no idea how to distinguish French from English. If someone came along carrying a Vermont ETV canvas bag, she could guess correctly, the motor home was all hers. She thought she already recognized the faces of many of Galaxy Photo's customers, the same people she saw at the theatre or at the movies, as if they moved en masse from the

Centaur to the Élysée to the Rialto to Galaxy Photo, all looking a little shell-shocked. Helen was a little ashamed of herself for already knowing that circuit too well. On the other hand, if someone approached her, carrying a plastic bag with "J'aime français" written on it, wearing an Asterix or Philomène T-shirt, she could figure that out too, and likely trace their paths through the city.

Unluckily for Head Office, most people were not that easily categorized. A man who looked exactly like one of her old professors at Queen's approached her and she spoke in English. The man pulled out a notebook, and Helen thought she was looking at the first evidence that Language Police really existed. She was not in the mood for public service abuse. The heat inside that head was enough to make her sick, and she covered whenever a customer came near with a lighted cigarette. She was not allowed to remove her head during store hours, and had already received a reprimand from Head Office for making a small girl scream by unheading in the store. She needed the job.

"Écoutez monsieur," she said. "Je suis une poulet. Ce poulet dit 'Cluck-Cluck'. Je dois parler 'Le cluck-cluck'? Je ne pense pas. J'ai fait de mon mieux et je besoin d'argent comme tous les gens." Her words still needed work, but she thought her intonation was pretty good.

The man looked alarmed and backed off. "I was only noting down your prices." He pointed to his notebook, assuming Helen couldn't understand him. "Prix? Votre prix?" he said in a frightened little voice.

Helen apologized profusely, calmed the man by telling him she herself spoke English. She felt she was succumbing to paranoia by going after a fragile old man like some kind of chicken from Hell, conned into believing that a man with a notebook had to be Language Police.

After picking up her final story for the class, which contained the grade for the course, Helen slipped into a bathroom cubicle to look at it. Just like a cat, she thought, going

off to bury a carcass. The class had only grown worse throughout second term, the two sides so polarized, Helen could have set up a barbed wire fence to divide the students at the front from those at the back, and the biggest brawls always occurred when one of her stories was on the slab. She read the comments and grimaced, but when she turned to the back page, she found an "A", and her jaw dropped. Divine intervention? she wondered. Helen thought she would get a "C". She emerged from the bathroom, dazed, then picked up the garbage bag which contained her Galaxy Photo chicken suit and sloughed off to work.

After work she trudged down the alleyway, almost certain the alley kept changing, that all those fences, porches, yards and gardens switched places during the day. In the morning, on her way to Galaxy Photo, she passed two sinister yards, enclosed by a high fence. The yards were pits, the porch listed, and two Dobermans crouched below the fence. These places looked impoverished to Helen, both materially and spiritually, and she imagined the morose and violent men who lived there. At night, on her slow walk to Kastle Kaos from school, she never seemed to see this yard, or the one with the huge Québec sign she saw in the mornings, as if in her absence, all the little enclosures randomly scrambled so none of them ever seemed to be in the same places she left them. She sat down on a concrete block and looked at her story again. Although it was light enough for her to read, the streetlight in the alleyway switched on, as if someone was providing her with a reading light. She read the comments again, hoping this time she would understand them, but she didn't.

The grass was green, she suddenly noticed. It was luminous outside, and sunlight kindled the edges of trees. It looked to Helen as if they had been shaped from the light itself. She listened to children's voices splintering like glass in the alley as they told their mothers they were not going to bed. She heard their hockey pucks thudding against the walls, feet deftly skipping rope, a sudden solo scream forming and disappearing like a soap bubble. Listening to their words, Helen could have sworn she heard one call in French, "My mother is in the bathroom shooting dice," exactly the way she always misheard song lyrics. Then

she heard one of the hockey players shout, "Ferme-ta-yule." Shut your Christmas? she wondered. She had heard the phrase before, but still didn't know what the last word was, only that it was very rude. The "A" didn't mean any more to her than that phrase. She slowly rose, and walked under a negligee of new leaves, and she imagined the tenderness with which they could graze, and cut, her cheek.

As soon as she entered Kastle Kaos, the phone rang, and Helen answered, knowing it would be for her.

"So what's the bad news?" said Debbie.

"He gave me an 'A'." said Helen.

"What! Me and Alanna got 'C's. Cynthia got a 'C-' and she was crying. *Why* did you get an 'A'? Unless something's been going on that we don't know about, eh Helen? It really makes my mind start wandering, you know."

"I honestly don't know," said Helen. She could picture Debbie lighting a cigarette and narrowing her eyes in the way that always made Helen think of gangsters. "I wasn't expecting it. I didn't suck up to him. I figured I'd get the same as you guys. It's not my fault."

"I bet," Debbie muttered.

"Pardon me?" said Helen.

"Oh nothing. It has to be because he's dividing us," said Debbie. "Divide and conquer. He knew something was going on, and this is his ultimate tactic to break up the opposition. He thought he was so clever by picking you. That's why we think *you* should go in and speak to the ombudsman."

"Why me?" said Helen.

"Because you got an 'A'. You've got clout. No one's going to listen to a bunch of 'C' students, right?"

"And because," Debbie continued. "over half the class signed our petition. I'll tell you something. Bruno Gentile joined our committee because we told him you were going to get

a 'C'. Steve Brownstone signed because, and only because he thought you had been brow-beaten. He said so. Even Doris's minion at the front there, Tamara, liked your work. I overheard her telling Moore that one day. But did she ever defend you in class? No-o-o. We were the only ones who did. So will you do it? Speak to the ombudsperson on our behalf?"

At this point, Helen didn't think she had much choice. It was starting to feel as if she had sold her soul for their defence all year, and it was time to pay her lawyer's fees. Besides, if what Debbie had said about Bruno Gentile and Steve Brownstone was true, Helen couldn't let them down.

"Yeah, I'll be there," she said slowly.

The *dépanneur* just down the street from Kastle Kaos was burning. Helen joined all the neighbourhood people assembling in the street, lining the sidewalks, directing traffic, walking beside police cars. A woman stood on the corner with a blanket around her shoulders, cradling a cat, recognizable to Helen as someone who lived in the burning building. She noticed the way people gave her a wide berth, leaving her a respectful space on the sidewalk. Helen smiled seeing the red "Déménagement Elvis" truck, with the drawing of Elvis's face on the side, hustling its way past the official vehicles. The fire calmly raged on as people came and went, groups replaced by other groups. For Helen, the really frightening thing was not the tongue of flame blackening the wall, but seeing the adjoining apartment, a little sealed room with an insidious orange glow just beginning to reflect on the bluish wall. She wondered how long someone could be in that apartment before they realized there was a fire in their own building, and how long the fire had been going before they first detected the flickering light and sensed the smoke.

Jim and Gillian and Helen stood together, apart from the rest of the crowd. Helen saw Mme Tellier with her little dog in tow, making her way down the street as if she was on a state parade, pausing to talk with everyone she saw. Jim and Gillian seemed reluctant to leave Helen's side, and Helen suddenly realized they were depending on her to be

interpreter. God help us all, she thought. She broke away from her room-mates and started weaving through the clusters of people, not even sure if she could make herself understood in French, if something like this happened to her.

Earlier that day, Helen had left the ombudsperson's office to find Debbie and the others, to tell them about the victory she thought she had won. She felt she had spoken clearly about Doris, and how she thought the class had been a turkey shoot to the people in the class who really were second year students. The ombudsperson looked at her final story and told Helen she thought Helen's complaints were all legitimate. The others were not waiting for her in the hall, as they said they would be. Helen went to the cafeteria, but could not find them there either. She asked a porter if he had seen three women, or if anyone had left a message. He shook his head, and Helen sat down on the window ledge, trembling, but not completely surprised. She had been sold down the river, and she should have seen it coming a month ago. They had waited long enough to see her enter the office, and then vamoosed, leaving her alone and holding the smoking petition.

Idiot, she told herself. I should have got an I — for idiot. The ombudsperson would undoubtedly tell Professor Moore one person had spoken, and it was an "A" student. Narrows it down to either me or Doris, thought Helen. Wonder if he could guess which one. For weeks, maybe all year, she had been set up, plied with flattery, and all along she had been an investment, a big fat "A" with a target on her back. Did I mention a turkey shoot? she thought. Meet the chief turkey. She should have gone in, dressed in her Galaxy Photo costume. That would have been appropriate, she thought. It galled her to think she had traded her own voice for the security of the group. Helen knew she should have confronted Doris herself, should have said everything she said to the ombudsperson in class. A little late now to suddenly have a voice.

The crowd had become dense, until Helen thought it would be easy to forget why they were assembled. It could have been a Jazz Festival crowd. Maybe worst of all, Helen now had a bundle of work she could no longer look at. No one else she knew took classes for fun

and then ended up handing in work which caused brawls, pulled in grades they didn't understand, turned them into some kind of class martyr, or provoked veiled accusations that they slept with professors for marks. It seemed to her as if the work itself had caused all of this to happen, and not one single thing she had handed in all year was worth it. She thought of how you were supposed to "own" a story. Actually, she could now understand what that meant to her, although it was probably not how Professor Moore intended. She hadn't owned one single word she had given to that class. All it had meant was that Doris could play professor to her heart's content, and Debbie could continue her grudge match against people like Doris, and Helen had been conveniently sitting there. It was as if her work was a rickety little house, but it was situated on prime real estate. She had lived in this house all her life, knew it was rickety and not worth the property it sat on. But even so, she was not prepared for all the developers who swarmed into it, wanting pieces of it for their own reasons. Helen knew its faults better than anyone else, but it was all she knew, and she sold everything there was, piece by piece, until now she no longer recognized it.

Helen supposed she could go back to Queen's, study her revolutionary history, take Québec studies, resume her pose as a separatist, insisting on a French identity in Kingston Ontario, while knowing she wasn't sure if any of the words she could come out with in Montréal would be understood. In spite of the density of the crowd, there was also something in the air, a feeling Helen had of flux, that if the wind shifted so would the crowd, turning on a dime and heading the opposite way down the street. She couldn't guess if they would trample her, or if she could ever become strong enough, or nimble enough to keep her own path on the sidewalk.

The Bastille

I

I work with two men who hate each other, and who have been shackled together in the printing/colour correcting department for fifteen years. Every morning Constantine kicks Ivan's chair and says, "Retire dammit retire." Constantine opens Ivan's desk drawers and whispers "Retire, retire" into all of them, and then says to me with a wink, "This is my mantra." He places empty cardboard boxes on top of Ivan's desk and says, "This is Ivan's retirement box for when he cleans out his desk." The big joke there is that Ivan's desk is the cleanest, most impersonal desk anyone has ever seen, and if he ever did leave no one would be able to tell. Although I rather like Ivan, I always laugh when Constantine does this, because he is very funny — he'd make a wonderful slapstick comedian, and laughing at his jokes is the safest thing you can do around Constantine. Constantine's round cheeks become red as he continues, "Ivan is so stubborn — a stubborn Russian — he'll never retire, he'll stay on until he dies just to spite me." Constantine has a tendency to take everything personally.

Ivan doesn't say or do anything in response. He doesn't speak to anyone. I have never worked with a such a silent man in my life. But I have heard rumours. Apparently, before my time, Ivan once told Constantine he was nothing but garbage. Of course, I heard this from Constantine, who is not exactly neutral, and right now, the feud between Constantine and Ivan is the least of my worries. That's just the day-to-day, the mortar gluing together the brick wall of my days at PC Services.

The big problem is that I'm already on shaky ground with the union, and the shit is really going to hit the fan when they find out. Duchemin (or "Das Management" as Constantine calls him), has offered me the job of Printing/Colour Correcting Supervisor. The problems in this case far outweigh the benefits. In the first place, I've only been at the photo lab for three years and seven months and I have no seniority. Labour-management relations are so bad, it's dangerous to be any sort of supervisor around here. I don't like Duchemin. As far as I'm concerned he fits the complete stereotype of the turn-of-the-century capitalist swine boss. He used to brush past me the way he brushes past all his lowly minions. About six months ago, he started greeting me on the stairs. I honestly wish he would go back to ignoring me. At least then, I knew which side he was on, and which side I was on.

But maybe the biggest problem is that I was born and raised to be a union member. My father was the only German-Russian-Jewish-Socialist in Shakespeare, Ontario. He and his parents dedicated their lives to unions, to building and sustaining them in the roughneck businesses around New Hamburg. It was their mission. But now it seems as if I'm losing all of this, and my life is going to hell in a handcart. My father died two years ago, and the union hates me. All my trouble with the union stems from the fact that I now do slide-mounting, printing and colour-correcting. I started off as a lowly slide-mounter. The salaries are different for all three levels, but I make the slide-mounting salary, which is of course the lowest. The accounting department claimed they couldn't handle three time sheets, but I recognize the union's handiwork. No one thought I would do all this other work for that salary, but the simple question they forgot to ask themselves is, Who would mount slides all day if they didn't have to?

The worst part is, I was one of the union's staunchest champions. I was there with them from the start, when I was a new employee and everyone seemed to be cloaking and daggering around, photocopying fliers, and the word was "Solidarity." It hurts being called

a management spy. There really is a certain "je ne sais quoi" about walking past a union meeting and knowing the shouting and lunch-box pounding is about you. I can't quit either. For one thing it would be admitting defeat and giving them the satisfaction of chasing out the pariah. And to be perfectly honest, I don't have a lot of other job skills. But I could learn typing and WordPerfect and dBase. This is not impossible. I'm fairly young and can speak French — I could leave this place. I could go back to school if I was desperate. But thinking of leaving makes me feel I'm giving up on all my beliefs on what unions should be, and someone from my background doesn't give up principles so easily. My family's socialism was like a religion, and those wonderful principles on paper manage to make you unable to do the simplest things everybody else does without thinking. That's where socialism is the most like a religious belief. In my case, it makes me unable to quit, or tell the union to blow it out their collective kiesters, or to start sucking up to Duchemin. You know the way things are, but you can't let go of the way things should be and you end up in a total stalemate.

When my father died, I returned to Shakespeare, Ontario, for the funeral, and to collect some of his things he wanted me to have. The farmhouse, which my grandfather had built, looked larger after his death, with all its tacked-on additions, seemingly without any front or back or any clear way in. Unlike all the other farmhouses in the region, it refused to face the road, and there was no separation between house and barn. My grandfather re-routed the front door to the farmhouse, engineered to his belief that the private life of the family, and work, were on the same level. My father left me boxes full of my grandfather's charts and pamphlets. I pulled out one yellowed chart with the words "RATIONALIST WORLD = CAPITALISM." At the top, he had drawn the soul. One branch extended to Mind & Reason; another to Heart & Will. Mind & Reason ultimately led to Rationalism, to Mechanization, and eventually Capitalism. Heart & Will followed its own path to Land, Farming and ending at Socialism. At the bottom of all these lines and circles filled with his minuscule writing was "DRAWING BY GUS MECKLER."

I like the way he re-routed history the same way he engineered his house, making sure Land and Farming came out on top in his own scheme. This was the man who eliminated the front door and every vestige of what he called, with a curl to his lip, "the triumphal entrance." His house no longer faced the outside world, but was inward, concentric, a little like an office work station actually, looking to the farmyard, surrounded by its mandala of fields. I especially remember how proud he was of the giant kitchen, *ein flurkuchenhaus* he said proudly, which he created by removing most of the interior walls of the house. I always found the size of that kitchen disorienting. After all the work it took to find the entrance, making me feel I was casing the joint just trying to get in, there was that kitchen, like miles of open space spread out before my eyes.

I was also given the printing press, standing out in the open in the basement. I didn't know how I was going to transport it back to Montréal, much less find a place for it in my apartment, but it seemed important not to leave it behind. I wish I knew how it worked, and that I had been old enough to pay attention to how he set the type. During the last few months before he died, my father told me tales of how his father and other Socialists who had escaped Nazi Germany and settled in the farming area around New Hamburg rabbled around the press in their fedoras, filling the basement with smoke, arguing over their next project, the way he could always hear his father's voice over the crowd. "Vot kin you makh? Es iz Amerikel" was what he said whenever someone's brain-child was bellowed down. As for my grandmother, she spent more time in the basement than she ever did in the giant kitchen.

In my boxes are Depression-era photos, company pictures of newly-formed unions, workers in shabby suits, making me feel like crying for how young, eager and hopeful their faces were. Then more of my grandfather's pamphlets, including THE CAPITALIST BRAIN, which was an old Robert Fludd anatomy drawing, re-labelled by my grandfather. These pamphlets were printed on thin paper, very close printing, with plain grey and blue covers

with the texture of old soft construction paper, faded and yellowed. They wrote about Upton Sinclair, analyzed the teachings of Karl Marx, only annotated with their own improvements, and defended Trotsky. My grandfather's big project, for which he had only managed to create a title page and table of contents was LIBRARY OF POLITICAL CULTURE. SECOND SERIES. THE FORMATION OF UNIONS. THE CASE OF THE HAHN BROS. One mystery that still remains, besides the first series, is what on earth my grandparents actually farmed.

Sometimes on my way from work, I pick up a copy of *The Socialist Worker*, not only because people on the Métro always glance at it out of the corners of their eyes, but because it reminds me of my grandfather's work. It seems so familiar to me, I read it like I'm catching up on the news from home. When the Communist governments fell in Eastern Europe, *The Socialist Worker* denounced Stalinism, and revived pure Leninism. Now they're re-evaluating Lenin, because this latest issue is focusing on Trotsky. People denounce these revisions, but for me it's a lot like going home, seeing and hearing about all the changes, and how everyone has adapted. My grandfather would be very happy about the Trotsky revival.

I wish I was as rooted in my beliefs as my grandparents, or my parents. My father was humbler and more self-effacing than I am. Although he worked in the post office all his life, he never complained the way I do, especially lately, about work. He took genuine pride in being one of "the little guys," and during every election when his Marxist-Leninist Party of Canada sign was defaced, he would have my mother or me take a picture of him standing beside it. Practically every picture I own of him shows him standing beside a wrecked election sign, because those were the only times he would ever pose for pictures. When I make remarks to my friends like "Another day at that Worker's Paradise" or "We don't even get to spend hours at meetings snoozing under giant portraits of Lenin," I can almost see my father wince. If I took all the energy I spend in brooding over work, I could operate a dozen printing presses.

Constantine saw Duchemin say hello to me this morning — Constantine, of all people. The only way it could be worse is if Denis or Jerzy had seen it. I don't know how Constantine feels about the union. He tears up memos he receives from both management and the union with the same gleeful panache. Ivan glowers at any piece of paper placed on his desk and throws it in the garbage. But when I came in to do my printing and colour correcting, Constantine was right beside me.

"The head cheese spoke to you — his Majesty, King of the Limburger — did you fall on your knees and kiss his feet?"

"I don't know why he spoke to me," I said, which is quite true.

"I know I know," said Constantine. "I'm only joking."

But Constantine is not a stupid man by any means, and he has a long memory. He's also a cagey old survivor who has worked in this place for a long time. Like so many of the people who work here, he has a mysterious background. I know his sister was killed in an earthquake, he was in the Greek army for awhile and he lived in Germany for many years before moving to Canada. He speaks German the same way he speaks English and maybe even Greek, very quick and improvised. He's also moody, either funny charming and manic, or touchy tense and manic. Either way he's totally unpredictable and you never know what side of him you're going to get from minute to minute. I've been around long enough to know he'll hold that hello from Duchemin against me, and of course everyone knows Josh's position has to be filled. I can't stop thinking about work, how I feel I'm sitting on dynamite, steering around landmines. They've been practising their work tactics and resistance for years, and I'm totally at a loss and unequipped for dealing with any of this. I don't know what experiences they've survived and have brought into this workplace.

II

Even approaching the photo lab makes me tense. The lab is in an Industrial Age building, its grim brick and barred windows situated beyond the pale of the tinted office towers clustered downtown. There is nothing post-modern about PC Services. I call it the Bastille. I don't like what it's doing to my personality. First of all, it's the endemic, all-pervasive cynicism at work, the way it settles in and changes you, makes you more enduring and more passive at the same time. When Mohammad orders Jerzy to go ahead and process film even though the machine isn't up to temperature, what can you do but shrug or crack a joke, and save the story for when you're exchanging "How bad is it?" anecdotes about work with your friends. Because you know Mohammad will insist, Duchemin will back him up, Jerzy will shrug vindictively and do it, and twenty rolls of customers' films will be ruined.

Then there's the hypocrisy, the contrast between the public service area and the second and third floors where we work. The first floor, reception area, where customers drop off, pick up, and pay for their prints and slides is clean, presided over by people in suits who scuttle discreetly behind dividers with bills and receipts, desks covered with presumably unsightly paperwork concealed from view. There are now a couple of terminals on the counter, to make everything seem sanctioned by some even higher authority than Duchemin. All anyone has to say is "The computer says ..." and it's better than calling out a flesh and blood supervisor to interpret higher authority. Meanwhile, the second and third floors, where we actually work, are sweat-shops. Would I be able to change any of this if I was a supervisor? Would Duchemin listen to me any more than he listened to Josh, or Louis before him? It had never been my impression Duchemin even liked women, and the whole notion of him making a woman a supervisor is highly suspicious.

I start the morning on the second floor, at the slide-mounting table. These days I've been entering furtively, looking around for Jules. When I see he's in the processing room, I feel less alone.

"Good morning, Brother!"

"Ah good morning Sister and God bless you," says Jules. I adore Jules. To me, he looks like a sailor, with eyes that can be intense, wild, mischievous or kind under his genuinely beetling brows. He's an Egyptian who studied Folklore at the University of Bucharest. I want to ask him about that, and about his Orthodox grandmother he mentioned once in passing, but Jules is very private in his own gregarious way. He has selected some of the people at the lab and made them his friends, "La société des amis Jules Wahab," and his first gesture of friendship is to draw their names in Arabic. He managed to turn my name into a line of music, the last thing you'd expect from a name like Meckler.

I became a bona fide member of "La société" when I took communion and joined Jules' church. One morning when I was already weary and headachey at the slide-mounting machine, and Denis and Jerzy were holding an unofficial union meeting somewhere in the building, Jules approached me with a little jar and spoon.

"It's time Elie," he said.

"Time for what?"

"Time you joined my church."

"What church is this Jules?"

"Whatever church you want. Let's make it the church against the GST."

Jules is rabid on the subject of the GST.

"I'll join with pleasure."

"Then you have to take communion."

He spoon-fed me a delicious home-made peach jam. "In the name of the Reform Church, Real Everyday Folk for the Official Removal of Mulronev and his GST, I bless you, Elie Meckler."

That's how I became a Sister. The friends of Jules greet each other as Brother and Sister. The union doesn't really approve of this, but nobody has dared to attack or oppose Jules.

I drop my bag on the floor because I don't really have a place that's mine. The union stopped fighting for my own cubicle after I started doing colour correcting. "You don't need us," Denis had said. "Why don't you go and ask your *management* friends, Josh and Douche-Bag?" I take my place at the slide-mounting machine. It only takes an hour before my back starts hurting, and I'm developing a permanent stoop, the same kind of stool-posture as my father. I've started feeling bones where I've never felt them before, and I know I'm inheriting my father's dark circles around my eyes. Some thin people look elegant and svelte, but I just look like a plucked chicken. How do people like Jules, Jozsef and Ivan, who have been here for years, manage to endure? My father too. Do they have an inner strength I lack?

I mount slides until I'm replaced by Seta, who gives me her "I'm not too good to do this work" look, then move to the third floor onto the Video Colour Negative Analyzer, which takes negatives and projects a positive image on a TV-like screen. I adjust the colours with rotating knobs and make a test print. I like this work. I like appraising the images, pretending it requires the eye of expertise only I can provide, my head full of the technical details of the job which make me feel scientific. I feel a little like what my grandfather must have felt like at his printing press. Although anyone can do this job, I like imagining I'm the only one with these details memorized: the six-pointed star of colours: blue, cyan, green, yellow, red, magenta; subtractive, additive; 1 unit cyan and 1 unit magenta = approximately 1 unit blue. Then I take the settings from the VCNA, and put them into the machine that reads light coming out of the enlarger. I adjust enlarger filters and the f-stop, until the machine says I've got the correct VCNA setting. Stick negative in and make print. It's here where I feel I could do it, be a supervisor. I even sometimes think I deserve it. But when I'm downstairs mounting slides, it's inconceivable.

When I leave at night, like everyone else punching out not a second before or after

5:00, it feels as if I'm starting to look at the world the way I examine negatives and images, looking for the way light and shadow are manipulated to make a clearer contrast between rock and water, building and sky. I've always liked the wonderful mixture of the old and brand new in Montréal, the long city blocks crammed with buildings of all types, the collage of textures, the varieties of wood, different colours of paint, the way brand new beige brick and glass are joined, as if slapped on as an addition to the old dark red. I like focusing on details as if my eye was a camera, composing imaginary photographs, just by juxtaposing how different two windows or two balconies or even roof ledges can be, existing side by side. I pick up small script from two blocks away, my vision leaping skittishly over the surfaces and fixing on the edges of light and shadow. There's a dry, hard-edged clarity to my eyesight I can't remember possessing before the job. Coming out into the dark after a day in a dimly lit building, in darkrooms, the world is overwhelming. There's the squeak and hollow crunch of snow, minus-twenty air numbing my face, and the too-bright days, crisp sun-filled mornings and blinding noon hours.

Christmas is approaching, and some people who still have group spirit in them put up decorations. Constantine put a cardboard crown on his head and said, "I am the King of Correcting." A birthday card for Duchemin circulated. On the routing slip my name was printed under "Printing/Colour correcting," but someone had crossed it out and printed it, spelled wrong, under "Slide mounting."

"You have no country," said Constantine, passing me the card. Then he told me one of his "When I was in Germany" stories, this one about how he was on the autobahn and he had given the finger to a BMW and was almost run off the road. "Obnoxious," he said. "I'm so obnoxious — that's why everybody calls me Constantine the Crazy — the old supervisor, the guy that was here before Louis — he was such a bureaucrat, like a Customs guy — oh so proper and orderly like a German — he calls me over to his desk to tell me I'm

obnoxious — so I look at him and say I already know that, how can I not know that — but I can't change my personality.”

Things being the way they are I decide not to sign the card and I pass it on to Ivan. Ivan opens the card and glowers at it. He does not sign the card. Then he rises from his chair, looms over me and says, “What we need is a stamp that says ‘For whom it may concern,’ for the bosses.” He smiles, a wonderful radiant smile that lights up his whole face. Then he says, this man who has never said a word to me besides good morning or good night, “Don't become like *them*. Don't become a machine,” and sits back down at his desk.

Constantine flaps over to me and says, “What did he say to you?”

Against my better judgment I tell him, and Constantine says, “A stubborn Russian — Retire, retire — He's like the butler on *the Addams Family* — “You rang sir?”

But I can tell Ivan speaking to me shook him up almost as much as overhearing Duchemin greet me. I know when Constantine goes home he will tell his wife the whole story. This is the kind of thing that can keep Constantine awake all night.

At the slide-mounting table, the light strip is still burnt out, and has been for a week. Jules wanders over and says “Holy Mother Russia, that's still out. I'm an old man, Sister Elie. I'm going to be sixty this March. I can't see in this light.”

“Well Mohammad told Duchemin and Duchemin apparently waved his royal arm and said, “Yeah yeah.”

“It's all apparent isn't it,” said Jules. “My friend, I think it's time you and I became partners in crime.”

“Crime?”

“Duchemin's office has all the lights it needs. Just like Hydro-Québec in there. We'll just go and take one of his.”

Jules leads me up the firetrap back staircase to Duchemin's office. We warily skirt the tanks of compressed nitrogen, used for agitation in the chemical process. They look like

large scuba tanks and are supposed to be, by law as well as common sense, securely chained to the wall. They aren't, and if they fell and the valves broke, they would shatter with the force of a balloon letting go, only involving steel tanks and toxic chemicals.

"Shh," says Jules. "We don't want to wake the babies."

Jules clammers on top of Duchemin's desk, removes one of the lightstrips and hands it to me. With my luck, Duchemin should descend upon us at any second. I almost wish he would. Then he would stop speaking to me and I wouldn't have to worry about the supervisory job any more. But Jules and I make our way back down to the second floor without any mishaps. Jules climbs onto the slide-mounting table, removes the burnt-out strip, replacing it with Duchemin's.

"Voilà," he calls. "Let there be light! God bless America! God bless the Queen!"

"Brother Jules you are truly my hero."

"We make good accomplices Sister Elie."

Jules and I have just done what the union hasn't managed to do in a week. But I doubt if a supervisor would have managed it either.

The reason the windows of the Bastille are barred is because the building used to house a jewelry manufacturer. This means you can't jump out the windows in case of fire, or for any other reason. The lunchroom is in the old jewelry storage vault. An old cleaner who can't speak either French or English, but who smiles and nods at Jules and me, often eats lunch when I do. Every day he brings in home-made yogurt and pita bread, and he peels and eats grapefruits like oranges. I don't even know his name. Somewhere along the line, Denis started calling him "Jacques" and he answers to that now. When he cleans, he never rinses out his mop and creates lakes. When a chemical spill occurs you can't call him because he would spread it all over the floor, all over the building. Yet it's inconceivable to think of firing him. On the one hand I can, and often do, wave my arms wildly and declaim,

"Who hired these people?!" Yet on the other hand, I can't imagine firing them. Some of them, like this old cleaner and Ivan, are alone in the world.

Flammable plastic lightproofs the darkrooms. The fire marshal almost had an apoplectic fit the second time he dropped in and saw it hadn't been changed. He also wasn't too happy to see the fire escape ladder stuck in raised position. It's pretty easy to understand exactly how Chernobyl happened. And some people wonder why there are unions. But even I have to admit that although the union is great at standing up for salaries and vacation pay, their record on safety reforms is abysmal.

III

Denis throws his motorcycle helmet on top of my bag. Jerzy swaggers in, in his black leather jacket, and I can see a Scientology book peeking out of the pocket. Although his conversations usually centre around how much speed he can take and how fast he can drive his motorcycle. I saw him once in the little restaurant where we often go for smoked meat and Pepsi, sitting by himself reading *The Story of Philosophy*. Tarik and Ravil come through the door, already brawling. I've seen them on the Métro and can testify that they will fight anytime, anywhere, but in spite of that, they're practically inseparable.

Ivan enters in his ghostly way and disappears immediately into his darkroom, not to emerge again until exactly ten thirty, his break time, when he disappears to God-knows-where. He never goes near the lunchroom or the churchyard across the street where everyone congregates for a smoke. Ivan looks like a gentleman farmer and Constantine calls him "the Count" along with innumerable other names like "Uncle Charley," "Lurch," and even "my Sweetheart." He's on to something with "the Count" though, because Ivan does look like an old aristocrat. He also reminds me a lot of my grandfather, in his flannel shirts and pants hiked up high over his waist. To me, Ivan's a little like both the Ghosts of Christmas Past and Future rolled up into one. The past, because he does remind me of my grandfather, and the future because sometimes I think I can imagine myself being just like

him at that age. There's something about his stoicism and sheer endurance I relate to a little and fear a whole lot.

Constantine says Ivan is seventy, and I can tell his eyesight is failing. The only way I have of gauging it is by noticing how often he now puts on his glasses, slipping them in and out of his pocket as if they are shameful. He won't stop working until he is forced to retire, and although Constantine and I have to correct and reprint a lot of his work, and he hasn't fully adjusted to the new machines, who could tell a proud older man like that he should no longer be working, as Duchemin once tried to pressure Josh into doing. To its credit the union nipped Duchemin's campaign against Ivan in the bud. I also can't forget that if Ivan worked up to speed, I would never have been sent to the third floor in the first place.

I cut the film into rectangles, placing the slides and slide mounts carefully together, then insert them into the mounting machine, which compresses them into perfect little framed compositions. There are a lot of vacation and advertising shots, frame after frame of sumptuous beaches and seductive arrangements of food and other consumer goods. This is very simple quota work, which is probably why the slide-mounting table is the most dangerous area in the entire building, the site of brawls. For some reason, and I think it has to do with union complaints, just a guess on my part, Mohammad, Processing and Slides Supervisor, is hovering at my shoulder. He's a stringy, nervous and volatile man at the best of times, and the few times I hear Jules raising his voice, hinting at the volcanic temper I figure must be inside him somewhere, it is always at Mohammad.

"Go faster," Mohammad urges me. "You take too many steps."

"I'm going as fast as I can."

Jules once told me he could tell when I'm mad because I fry people with my eyes. "You get this look on your face like Einstein creating the bomb. If you don't smile at me, I'm going to start calling you Einstein Elie, and only you'll know and I'll know what I mean by

that." Mohammad isn't going away. I guess he's impervious to my Einstein look. Finally he pushes me out of the way to show me how it's done. I do not like being pushed.

"All very well and good," I say, taking the chilly approach. In a workplace full of hotheads, you can get more mileage out of the cool and cutting. "But I don't think the customer wants to see sprocket holes on the beach. He'll tell all his friends "These are the sprocket holes in the Bahamas and these are the sprocket holes of Katmandu? Notice the detailing ..."

Mohammad is not impervious to sarcasm and he wrenches the slide from me, swearing. I know curses in eleven languages. Jerzy hurls a metal film can from across the room, presumably at Mohammad although I'm never sure any more, and it grazes my head. Mohammad beats a hasty retreat. The photo lab is not for the faint of heart. I know all about flying film cans, screaming supervisors, union rules, brawling co-workers, flammable darkrooms, not to mention unchained tanks of compressed nitrogen. All conditions similar to the ones my grandfather fought against. Only here, both Duchemin and the union are perpetuating them.

Constantine is playing me and the union off each other. To me, he makes jokes about Comrade Denis and his partisans and tells hilarious stories about union bureaucracy in Germany. To Denis, he's one of the boys, griping about management and management spies, people who are after his job security. Meaning me, perhaps? One's back can certainly start aching when there are knives, arrows, double-headed axes, MX Missiles planted between the shoulder blades.

It only seems to take seconds for Jerzy to wrap a filmstrip around Mohammad's neck. Tarik, Denis, Seta and Jozsef are applauding. "Holy Roman Empire," Jules mutters from his cubicle. Mohammad is turning red, partially because his blood flow is being cut off, and partially because he is enraged. As soon as Jerzy contemptuously releases him, he

runs out of the room screaming that he has been strangled, and he wants justice to be done. Everyone laughs. Mohammad, predictably, runs straight to Duchemin and Duchemin makes one of his rare cameo appearances on the second floor. He starts making a speech about discipline and firing Jerzy, fuelling the fire by addressing Denis in English.

"Is that so," Denis replies in his machine-gun English, standing so his nose is almost touching Duchemin's. Duchemin backs off and Denis advances again. "Then the union will have no choice but to go on strike until Jerzy is reinstated, and don't you have a big advertising contract coming up?"

Duchemin lets Jerzy off with a reprimand and leaves the room almost as hastily as Mohammad. I pretend to resume working. I am not sorry Mohammad was strangled, and as for Duchemin, he is such a pasty-faced coward I would be ashamed to be associated with him. But just when I'm ready to rejoin my old comrades in the union in laughing at Duchemin and Mohammad, Denis whispers in my ear, "This is what happens to supervisors who go crawling to Duchemin." It appears as though I've received my first outright threat. Constantine must have told Denis about Duchemin greeting me during one of their union boy-talk sessions. How can Constantine continue to greet me every day on the third floor, regale me with jokes, stories and Ivan-baiting, and then denounce me to Denis? I knew these people once upon a time, and isn't there one person who will stand up for me? All my life I've dreamed of groups, of belonging to a network of people devoted to a common cause or purpose, transcending their differences and disagreements, being loyal and watching out for each other. What it's all come down to is excommunication and back-stabbing and threats. How can someone *do* that, smile and laugh and tell jokes, while you're standing side by side at a light table and then throw you to the wolves. I've got to find another job before it's too late, before this place turns me into someone who can't work anywhere without seeing treachery and ill-will.

I've been trying to reassemble my grandfather's printing press in the living room of

my apartment. I've discovered it is based on many of the models of old printing presses I've looked up in libraries. I now have some idea how to piece it together. Maybe I'm trying to hold onto something that no longer exists, or maybe it's important I reassemble the press to prove to myself I'm not a sell-out, a traitor or a management spy. Maybe it's just something to keep me occupied as I approach the Hour of the Long Knives. I've got to face the fact I now have real enemies: Denis, Jerzy, Tarik, Ravil and Seta. I feel particularly bad about Seta. When I was doing only slide-mounting we were both true believers in the union. Neither of us questioned it. Seta's an interesting person, and I feel terrible she is now my enemy. She is an observant Muslim and it used to thrill me, seeing her in her long scarf and tunic with her fist in the air, shouting solidarity along with the rest of us. Now she won't even speak to me. I can't side with anyone any more. When fights broke out I laughed or shrugged like everyone else, and figured it was inevitable in a place managed like something out of Dickens, and Duchemin was entirely to blame. On the Métro, surrounded by students and office workers, I liked sitting with my legs apart, showing off my old jeans and workie shirts, hoping I looked like the lean, mean, uncompromising union rabble-rouser I really believed I was. I don't know if I can get used to seeing myself as anything else.

Constantine had left for the day. Ivan and I were standing beside each other comparing our prints with standard prints showing skin tones. Constantine was riding Ivan hard all day. Where I just quietly re-do much of Ivan's work, Constantine makes a big production out of it, and has a well-practised martyr act worked out about all the extra work he has to do because of his "sweetheart." Earlier today I saw a flicker of anger in Ivan's eyes, a hint of the rumoured violence. But right now, he's as silent, stoic and faded as usual. Then he did something he has never done before. He looked at me and smiled, and I don't know how to describe this smile because it was both radiant and full of irony. He said to me, "This is an exciting job." I returned the smile, rolled my eyes and agreed. Meanwhile I was almost ready to faint because the only other time Ivan has ever spoken to me was when Duchemin's

birthday card was circulating. He quoted something in Latin, I think, to me and I told him I don't know Latin. I was afraid the conversation would dry up but he said, "It means, "There is no wisdom in this place governed by fools."

Then he asked me if I'd ever read *Penguin Island* and when I said no he said, "You have to. This is Penguinia." It was as if some sort of floodgate opened. He talked all afternoon about literature and languages, how various literatures have been influenced by their contacts with other languages and cultures. He spoke of Shakespeare, Beowulf, Cervantes and Spanish writers I have never heard of. After awhile I stopped even pretending to participate and just listened, trying to keep my jaw off the floor. The fact he has this whole other side to him, and his deepest passion is kept so separate from his work is no surprise, it's the extent of it that I wasn't prepared for.

He gestured toward his desk and said, "This is my credo. This place is filled with petty, bureaucratic minds. I show them nothing of my life." He was really telling me nothing I hadn't already guessed. But for some reason, hearing it from him made me uneasy. I haven't exactly been a happy little worker lately, but the disdain and bitterness with which he bit off "petty bureaucratic minds" makes me seem like a PC Services poster girl. It frightened me a little. Why doesn't he retire? Why doesn't he devote the rest of his life to his languages and literature? When Ivan first started here fifteen years ago, didn't anyone realize how much more intelligent he was than his job? He must have been more forthcoming fifteen years ago. What went wrong? Constantine may actually be closer than I thought when he says Ivan hangs on out of pride and stubbornness and just to spite Constantine. I almost feel I've imagined this afternoon with Ivan, as there was no one else around to hear it. It was the way Ivan gestured, a whole life force springing inside him, the way he expanded and possessed the space around him while he was talking. If I became supervisor would he take this as another instance of being governed by another in a long succession of fools? Josh was a well-meaning person who tried to be a good supervisor, and Ivan never acknowledged his existence one way or the other.

Things have gone from worse to unendurable. In the morning I get off the Métro and trudge down the Boulevard of Broken Dreams to enter what is nothing but a prison. I think I've been excommunicated by everyone now. Even Jules has stopped greeting me. He's looking older these days, more weary and harried. It was crazy for me to even think of taking that supervisory position. I'm not made of stone. No one could endure this. To lose Jules's friendship is the last straw. I don't want to be a management spy anyway, and I certainly don't want to associate with Duchemin. I have a few theories on why Duchemin picked me in the first place and none of them are good reasons. It could even be a union setup. Maybe the union got Duchemin to pick me so they could march in and crush me. But whenever I step outside I get this feeling that something has to change. The spring air is unassailable, strong, sweet and medicinal. The feeling of change is so strong I can hardly endure it, and there's something about the way light blithely manufactures more and more of itself that not even the Bastille can resist. I see dandelion and poplar seeds parachuting all over the city, the choreography of slight green city trees in the rain. Chrome bumpers and the stink of melting tar, a whiff of diesel exhaust enters my senses like anaesthetic and I see the blue-grey smoke, a beautiful spiralling hopeless exhalation.

I was upstairs on the VCNA, trying to concentrate on actually doing some work, when Jules approached me.

"I think it's time we two went for a smoke," said Jules.

I followed Jules out to the churchyard, wondering what he would say to me, sure he was going to convince me not to take the job and remain in the union. I wondered if he would threaten me in some way. Much as I love Jules, I get the feeling he's capable of a carefully-worded threat. At least when Denis threatens me I know where I stand. Although Jules is the kindest man in the world, I've seen him take on Denis, Jerzy and Mohammad alike, and his routine and habits have remained as intact as Ivan's and Constantine's.

"Let me tell you a story, Elie," said Jules. He lit his cigarette, then pulled out his wallet. He flipped it open to a photo and handed it to me. "This is a picture of me."

It resembled Jules, but the features were so vague I wouldn't have guessed it was him if I hadn't known it.

"In 1949 I was in Poland," said Jules. "I took photographs for passports, for documents to help people leave the country. My job was to prepare pictures of people that resembled them enough to be claimed as theirs, but where the features were so vague they could disown it if the need should arise. I did one for my Romanian grandmother. Here, I'll show it to you."

His hands trembled as he flipped through the wallet. The picture of his grandmother was even more ambiguous than his photograph.

"Incredible," I said.

"I got pretty good at it," Jules chuckled. "This is one of my best. Probably because I knew her and I knew exactly what I had to conceal. When she saw it she said, and I have to translate this for you Elie, 'It makes me feel as though I had met myself before but I can't remember where.' It loses in the translation."

He drew on his cigarette. "Looking at these old pictures makes me think many thoughts Elie, and since I am an old man now you will have to be indulgent with me. I had dreams of being a photographer, a great one. I wanted to show in pictures the lives of people after the war, poverty, suffering. I wanted the world to see these pictures. But I learned, Elie, that what I wanted to do would put their lives in danger. I had to get people out of Poland. And to do that I had to give up my pictures. I had to give up my name and my identity and become someone who hid in a basement, who people found out about the way people always find out about things.

"Before you can make a picture like this you have to see every line on the face, every movement of the head, every change in expression so you don't by accident capture it in the photograph. These things people do to survive, and it is not a crime to survive. The

photographer sees and then conceals and disguises it. It is a hard thing to do. You see, Elle, he is still a photographer but a different kind of photographer. Do you understand me? Do you get my drift?"

"I think so Jules. But what if the photographer can't hide what he sees? What if he's afraid his pictures won't change anything?"

Jules leaned in very close to me and said, "There's only one way. The photographer has to *love* his subject and focus only on that. That is the only way to change those things — " He was so close to me I could see the texture of his skin, the grey in his moustache, the way the hairs make up his eyebrows. I could see both the compassion and ferocity in his eyes.

"I can see you Jules," I said.

"That's a start. A good start," and Jules sighed in satisfaction as if he had done his job.

I take out the framed photo of the first union at Hahn Brass Co., the one with my grandfather standing so young and eager in the back, the little smile on his face full of hope and defiance. I look at all the men surrounding him, noticing for the first time how different they all are from each other. One man on the end has a corn-cob pipe in his mouth and his thumbs are hooked into his suspenders. Several men are wearing caps and they look like Artful Dodgers. Constantine has a cap which resembles the ones in the picture. One man on the end politely tips his hat for the camera, while the man beside him leans aggressively toward the lens with his arms folded across his chest. A haunted soldier in full World War I uniform sits on the steps, beside an old-world German standing erect, with a neat Freud-like beard, homburg on his head. His dark jacket is buttoned, but you can tell he's not management because like all the others, he's not wearing a tie.

You can tell just by looking at the photo how things were shifting, changes that were occurring right at that moment. Everyone is wearing a jacket, but only a few of them are buttoned up. Almost everyone, including my grandfather, is wearing a hat, but you could

tell the winds of change just by the different varieties of hats, and by those two men who are not wearing hats at all. There are two young boys standing in solidarity right in front of my grandfather. I wonder what the real story is behind this photo, because now I know there must have been one. I've looked at this picture several times and never noticed before the clash of cultures, the Old and New Worlds, the clash between classes, the young and the old. I wonder how they managed to bridge their differences, enough to form a union and pose for this picture with their proud and happy faces. What has changed from then to now, from a little brass company in New Hamburg to a photo lab in Montréal? As a supervisor I wouldn't be able to appear in such a photo. Is it even possible to be a Socialist supervisor?

There is a note from Constantine at the VCNA machine. "Its a beautiful afternoon — the Prophets not here — no one will get strangled — the Count has disappeared and is not doing his work — leaving it all for me too do — this is not fair — someone should inform Il Duce so he can come for a state visit and get laughed at//” He ends the note with a cartoon, a laughing figure which looks a lot like Constantine himself. It looks as if Constantine has already adjusted to a situation I've barely decided on myself.

On my way to work, clusters of office buildings gleam, their surfaces reflecting blue sky and sailing clouds. Men and women stride among them, spring clothing bright as pennants. I wonder for the millionth time if I should just fold my tent and leave PC and join these swiftly-moving people who do not have to worry about going to work and being strangled. But I simply can't imagine going to work and not hearing Constantine's jokes and stories. Having Ivan speak to me is like possessing some kind of nuclear power, something no one knows about and I'm kind of sitting on it without having any idea what to do with it, if there is one single damn thing I can do to change anything. I would miss Jules tremendously. I think I caught his drift about love, and what he was trying to say to me. There's something about my feeling for this dreadful photo lab that's almost as powerful as

the spring air outside, or the chemicals barely kept under control inside. Is it enough? Could what I feel for PC be something like love, and is it enough? Is it powerful enough to rearrange the third floor, move this supervisor's desk away from its privileged position by the door? Could it do anything about the all-pervasive cynicism around here? Would it enable me to say to Jerzy, "Yeah yeah tough guy. How about reading me a passage from *The Story of Philosophy*." Could any of Constantine's jokes or Ivan's alienation ever be translated and used to change the system? Right now, all I know is that maybe moving the supervisor's desk would hide me for awhile from the filmstrip nooses (yes, the usual suspects pinned a filmstrip noose over my stool at the slide-mounting table), and film cans I'm sure will be flying my way.

Leaving the Bulmer Library

I

"You could have stayed in Montréal," James finally said, when the silence between him and Sandy had grown too deep. "There's no guarantee I'll be hired on at any newspaper."

"Things couldn't go on the way they were," said Sandy. "Could they?"

"I don't think so," said James.

"Neither do I."

In spite of her words, James was sure he detected a tone of uncertainty, and he didn't know what to make of the way she was resolutely looking out the car window. He thought of how his own mother had picked up and followed his father across the country, and how his father's idea of sympathy was to utter one of his platitudes, "You chose the military when you married me." It was a rigid, outdated notion of marriage and before he met Sandy, James supposed he thought his choice was marriage like his parents or not to marry at all. Sandy had backed his decision to quit his studies and be a newspaper photographer, and said she wouldn't miss the adventure for all the world. But he found himself glancing at her, afraid he had manipulated her, and was even more afraid he would see his mother's look reflected in his wife's eyes. James did not want to be the kind of man his father was.

James and Sandy put what little furniture they had in U-Haul storage and set off down Highway 2. All he could picture were the Ryersons and Dawson Colleges churning out younger photographers than he was, budding Lois Lanes and Jimmy Olsons, who all had journalism diplomas, and all James's competition. He was getting such a late start. If he

was an athlete he would have been retired by now, looking for coaching or ice Capades work. It wasn't a good time to be setting out like this, he thought. All of the smaller newspapers were being gobbled up by enormous chains. Metroland, which was owned by TorStar, had around thirty papers. Thomson and Southam were even larger chains. He had been very discouraged by this, figuring the newspaper field was becoming like so many others, placing an appearance of professionalism and a pseudo-corporate structure above ability and enterprise. It was Sandy who had said, "Don't send out c.v.s. Go in person and knock on doors. I don't know anything about newspapers, but I'm sure that all those old-time newspaper people who came up through the ranks haven't all disappeared. Whatever you do, never underestimate small town resentment of Toronto or of head offices. We're not professionals — that's our biggest asset. Milk it for what it's worth." James sometimes wondered what he would do without Sandy. Without her, he probably would never have worked up the nerve to make this journey.

Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed light crinkling across the glass sides of office buildings along the side of the highway. The city gave way to the country, industrial hinterland turning into long grass rippling with gold, small houses afloat on vast reaches of land. But there was also a haziness and distant storm-warning in the air, and when he had a chance to glance out the window on Sandy's side of the car, the sky was a fine net of grey, as if revealing its other, secret, side to Sandy.

II

James had been feeling for a long time that he might as well set up a cot in the Bulmer library as he spent more time there than he did anywhere else, including his two and a half room apartment. He deposited his satchel on the carrel he had used almost every day for the past two years, figuring anyone who stole it deserved to haul in only some dry ponderous tomes, and page after page of his own chicken-scratch notes. He could have sleepwalked his way around the library without tripping over the rug which had buckled in several

places, and the really dangerous sections which were bandaged with electrical tape. The tile in the ceiling, which had fallen off during the first year of his Master's had never been replaced in his lifetime there, and a wire perpetually uncoiled from the hole. "And even twenty years later," James imagined himself telling the new crop of first year students, his grey beard reaching his chest, "you can still hear the sound of that poor grad student who couldn't finish his thesis."

He deftly avoided banana peels, pizza boxes, barbecued chicken bags, and the half-full cans of Diet Pepsi and bottled water placed behind, and shelved with the books. He used to wonder why he had never seen any cockroaches in the library, until a shelvee, the one with the PhD, told him the carpets were too toxic to harbour bugs. He never slipped over any of the buckets on the stairwell, set up under the leaky roof. In spite of it all, James had to admit he was rather fond of the Bulmer Library. If nothing else, it proved something he had thought for a long time: the university had been coasting for years on a past reputation and the library revealed its true state of affairs. All it lacked, he thought, was Spanish moss draping the bookshelves.

He had met Sandy in the Bulmer Library and although it had taken him a while to realize it, it had not been long after meeting her that he had become deeply dissatisfied with his studies. James first met Sandy at the Interlibrary Loans counter. He had filled in some request forms for journal articles, and she had complimented him on his complete references.

"You have no idea what a pleasure it is serving someone who fills these things out in such detail," she said to him. "Most people look at me like I'm some kind of faceless bureaucrat when I ask them the title of the article they want magically materialized for them right on the spot. I'm really supposed to be the great, all-powerful Oz."

James looked at her and wondered how anyone could see her friendly face with the blue eyes as that of a bureaucrat.

"Ever since I started working here," she continued, "I've seen profs take tantrums,

throw books in your face, fudge references all over the place, and half the time they're totally made up. It makes it hard going to school at night and taking the jerks seriously in class. What's the difference between God and a prof?"

"You mean there is one?" said James.

"Yeah, God doesn't think he's a prof. They should all be made to go out and do an honest day's work just for a week, a day even. They'd melt."

James blushed, feeling as if he had been personally reproached. His thesis was on miscommunication between the natives and federal government agents during the Treaty No. Nine negotiations and he felt like one of Duncan Campbell Scott's minions ineptly paddling along the coast of the James Bay, perusing *The Oxford Book of Verse*, while obviously misinterpreting everything going on around him.

"I'm sorry, I'm really sorry," she said. "I don't include you in my rogue's gallery. I don't even check your requests any more. You do all my work for me. I've ended my tirade — the medication's kicking in now."

"Don't apologize," said James. "I'm starting to feel the same way myself."

He hadn't even been conscious of how much he was feeling that way, until she said it.

"Not all profs are jerks," she said. "I know that. I just have this terrible tendency to shoot my mouth off to people who don't deserve it. I did have a sweetie music prof in here not too long ago. He wanted this rare piece of sheet music from the Soviet Union. I warned him we never get anything from the Soviet Union, but he was willing to pay, so I tried. They sent it! It was so neat just looking at these gorgeous old sheets in this hand-painted folder. The prof was so happy he gave me a bottle of champagne. All I did was write a personal letter instead of sending one of our usual requests, and I got someone from the sixth floor to translate it into Russian. That's all it took!"

Her cheeks flushed while she was talking about the sheet music. James was drawn to her enthusiasm, and to what he could only describe as a "down home" quality to her.

There was something about her that made him feel a little homesick, and it was not a feeling James was familiar with. He had never felt attached to any of the places he had lived in as an "army brat," not enough to feel homesick. He found himself missing her, long past their actual encounter, when she disappeared from the Interlibrary Loans department.

III

He was happier than he felt he should have been when he went wandering into the library's Copy Service in search of a stapler, and found her sitting behind a desk there. She was trying to conceal what was obviously not library work. Normally, James would have figured what she was doing was none of his business, and would have left without her noticing him. But right from the beginning, he didn't feel awkward, reserved or bookish around her; he had to remind himself he didn't know her very well, and he approached the desk and looked over her shoulder. He saw a piece of paper with a circle drawn in the middle, with red, blue and green lines crossing it, and symbols which seemed to float around the outside edge of the circle. She started, and when she noticed James, it was her turn to blush.

"Hi there," she said, trying to cover up the papers. "I haven't seen you for awhile. I miss my old regulars."

"Yeah, I suppose I'm pretty old and regular," he said. "At least, I haven't taken any Ex-Lax in a while. You don't have to hide that from me. I'm not your boss."

"I don't have to worry about my immediate boss. He does astrological charts. He's got an under-the-table astrology practice going on in here. It's a Copy Service tradition. He's also got at least three sci-fi manuscripts tucked away inside this desk. He's so cool."

James surprised himself by the jealousy he was feeling toward "Joe Cool."

"What happened to the interlibrary loans, the sheet music and the champagne?" he asked.

"I told you all that?" she said. "Lucky you. My mouth runneth over. Well, since you asked, someone in Loans got their librarian's degree and my old job went to that person."

James frowned. "That's awful."

"It could be worse, depending on how you look at it," she said. "I'm not permanent staff and I have no rights. I started in Loans as a six week replacement. That job stretched out for a year. What's-her-name got that degree. In theory, that would mean I'd be out of a job. *But* the prof who gave me the champagne complained — in writing, so they gave me this job to shut him up."

"But the two jobs aren't equal," said James, genuinely concerned.

"In the real world that would be true," she said. "But in this Wonderland I get paid exactly the same."

"What's this for?" said James.

"This isn't schoolwork," she said, looking as embarrassed as he had felt when she told him the professor joke. "I do astrology on the side, just like Joe. But I didn't learn it from him. Have you ever found life goes in circles?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when I first came to Montréal, the first job I got was writing an astrology column for the League of Astrologers of Montréal, and now I end up in this department with Joe."

"Montréal has a league of astrologers?" said James.

"So I found out. I found this orange flyer in my mailbox one day, addressed to the previous occupant. I snooped and saw it was from the League of Astrologers. They were looking for someone to write a column for their magazine. At first I took it as a joke, and I sort of collect weird mail I get in Montréal, but then I noticed it was a paying job. I know my sign but I don't like it so I always ignored horoscopes and anything to do with astrology. *But* what the hell — they were paying. How hard could it be, right? So I went to their meeting and became Madame Svet. You can't do anything with a name like Sandy. I wrote all these funny predictions about world mayhem and general gloom and doom. Anyway, things

snowballed and I ended up editing the magazine and then I created it on a Mac with PageMaker.”

James was fascinated. He wanted to tell her about his first job when he came to Montréal, which was photographing lingerie and sex aids for a chain of “Catherine” boutiques, named after Catherine Deneuve. He wanted to prove something to her, that he also had a life completely apart from Bulmer Library, and he could be as interesting to her as “Joe Cool.”

“You do charts too?” said James.

“I still do some on the side,” she said. “I quit the magazine to go back to school, but in retrospect, I don’t think it was the better choice. I’m reading a chart for a client tonight, one of Joe’s regulars, someone who works here. I think people who work in bureaucracies can really relate to astrology. My theory is it’s a whole lot more palatable thinking your life is controlled by planets than by an endless chain of bureaucrats. Joe’s got more clients from people who work here than he can deal with. You can make a lot more reading charts than you do boulder-rolling in this place. Hey, what’s your birth date?”

James hesitated, tempted to tell her it was classified information. He could not tell by her tone of voice how serious she was about astrology, or which was more real, his picture of her predicting world catastrophe while laughing her head off, or her seriously reading charts to Bulmer Library co-workers.

“June 24th,” he finally said, curiosity winning out.

“C’mon, tell Madam Svet what the year is.”

“1957,” said James, knowing he was blushing.

“Oh put away your scythe Father Thyme. That’s only four years older than me. Nothing in Bulmer Library time.”

She flipped through a large red book, which James saw was an ephemeris. He was fascinated by the way her casual joking manner was replaced by an intense focused

expression. He remembered noticing it in Interlibrary Loans too, the way she had scanned his forms.

“June 24th 1957,” she said. “You’re a Cancer. Home and family. You either have or you don’t have. It’s important to you whichever way it goes. Moon in Taurus. Fixed, lots of integrity. It would take a bulldozer to change your mind once you’ve decided on something. But you’ve also got a Mercury in Gemini. You’re very intelligent, and you’ve got a mind for detail. Your field is Communications after all. Mars conjunct Uranus. You’ve moved around a lot in your life?”

James nodded. His mouth was dry. For some reason, he wanted her to know all about the places where he lived, the schools he had started and never became part of, the sheer strangeness of the Canadian military base in Lahr, Germany. Yet at the same time, he didn’t want to tell her any of this. He had become so accustomed to his nomadic childhood as just being a fact of his life, a curious detail that made him different from other kids, he didn’t even know how to talk about it. Maybe he was afraid she would care. As if she sensed his unease, she put the ephemeris back in the desk drawer.

“Not bad,” said James.

“Well,” she said. “Anyone could tell most of that stuff about you just from seeing you in the library. If I had goofed and read off June 24, 1956, I would have said the same things, except maybe the part about moving around. So I don’t know. Astrology — Science or Snake Oil, the choice is yours.”

James couldn’t tell if she was putting on a show of undermining something she believed in, or whether she really was in it for the money she could make on the side and had picked up a slight interest in it along the way.

IV

She disappeared from the Copy Service as well, and just when he was starting to think Bulmer Library would be unbearably dull without her, she reappeared behind the

Circulation desk.

"We meet again," she said. "I really don't arrange it that everything you do in this library is presided over by me. I'm the Thing that Couldn't Leave. I work in three departments here now, but I'm not an employee of this university. Sometimes I have trouble believing I exist."

She disappeared from the Circulation counter as well. It was a long time after that before James saw her again. On the one hand, he found it easy to believe she didn't exist, that the thesis had driven him mad and he had conjured her out of the fumes of old books and the fourth floor smoking room. On the other hand, he couldn't believe she had suddenly left the library. He browsed through some bound back issues of *Critical Inquiry*, tried to scrape gum off the pages he wanted to look at, then wondered who he was trying to fool. Defending Duncan Campbell Scott these days was definitely going against the grain, he thought. Besides, his mind hadn't been on his studies for weeks. When he met with his thesis advisor, instead of discussing Scott's language and its role in developing federal Native policy, James found himself wondering how the professor behaved in the library, what kind of a person he was, if he took tantrums and threw books at women, or if he would be the type who brought them champagne.

When he was about to give up hope, he finally saw her again, leaving through the turnstiles. Instead of approaching her directly, he sped up, passed her then paused, pretending to rummage through his satchel with an annoyed expression on his face. She saw him and her face lit up. James was happy until he started wondering if she used to come into Copy Service in the mornings and smile at Joe just like that.

"You're still here," he said.

"So are you," she said.

"This is terrible," said James. "Two people who can't leave a library. Where are you now anyway?"

"Sixth floor," she said. "Maximum security. It's where the lifers end up."

"Does that mean you're permanent staff now?" said James.

"Hell no. It just means there's enough work up there for a life time," said Sandy. "I do have a permanent file though. They had to open one for me. That music prof wrote his complaint out in writing. Joe wrote me a letter of recommendation, and so did the Circ. supervisor. You know as well as I do no piece of paper can be thrown out around here, so now I'm the only non-employee with a permanent record. Basically, I'm a well-documented fictitious person. I really admire you for wanting to be a professor. When I think of what goes on at the non-academic level, you must be very brave."

"It's starting to seem more like the opposite," said James. "Can I ask you something? Are you from a small town?"

"How did you know?"

"I can make generalizations too, you know. Even if I don't have an ephemeris."

Sandy laughed and said, "I know what it is. It's my eyes, my down-home farm eyes. I've always wanted to be sexy, but when people look at me they see barns and fields and cows and the old folks at home."

She sounded so comically disappointed he wanted to laugh, but the difference between Sandy's appearance and Sandy herself was something he still found himself falling into. James invited her to see *Nosferatu* with him on campus. Of course, it wasn't until after he invited her and she accepted that he realized the only thing he knew about her was her first name. She had bits of his life on all those library forms: his name, address, phone number, the courses he took and taught, the research he was doing. She knew he was a Cancer with a moon in Taurus, and that he had moved around a lot. He couldn't even say the only thing they had in common was the Bulmer Library, because he didn't know anything about her.

Some of the Thousand Islands surprised James by their solidity, rock and earth not only surviving but somehow anchored in the shimmering emptiness of the river, which was so still, James could barely believe it was an earthly element. Flocks of Canada geese grazed along the edges of land and in the distance, he could hear the slow lowing of a ship. He wanted to stop the car and photograph the red and gold undertone to the fields, the scorched tips of leaves, the rust browns and dark golds, quiet deep colours on the verge of autumn, narrow gravel roads slicing into the heart of the countryside, but he and Sandy couldn't afford to have the pictures developed. The first thing he wanted, when or if they ever found a place, was his own darkroom.

Some of the houses he saw on the road were elegant old farmhouses, and others were well-preserved stone or brick estate houses, but now almost ghostly, flanked by shadowy trees, the kinds of Eastern Ontario houses people received Canada Council grants to photograph. James knew what a camera could do for the fading wallpaper and dusty antique furniture undoubtedly collected inside. The houses he was most interested in, and for which he would never receive a grant to photograph, were the small houses with new false brick entranceways grafted onto aging wood, lions guarding torn screen doors, miniature windmills flailing in front yards, and gnomes which fished by wishing wells. For the first time, James had an inkling of what these trappings must have meant to his mother, in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Halifax, Lahr, Germany, the way they were supposed to prove the Baileys had a background and were not outsiders — things that were supposed to add up to being a home. Out here, James could see it took a form of courage and optimism.

At a McDonald's in Cornwall, James changed into his suit and brushed his teeth. He didn't think he would ever criticize fast food chains again. Their bathrooms were clean, and it was their impersonal environments which made it possible for both of them to enter, freshen up and change their clothes. He was surprised when Sandy said, "Doesn't it make you feel like we're Bonnie and Clyde — fugitives changing identity?" He had certainly felt

that way, but he was surprised to hear Sandy say it. She was from Ontario, and he had thought they were on her turf. In fact, he had been thinking he saw a resemblance between Sandy, and her ability to adapt and make do, and the houses he saw along Highway 2. But when she made remarks like that, and whenever he saw the expression on her face which he could not read, he realized he didn't know how Sandy felt about Ontario.

The first newspaper office they stopped at was in a three storey building, which looked to James as if it hadn't changed since the early sixties. Sandy decided she wasn't ready to go in and try to talk someone into giving her a reporter's job. James was relieved, worried about how disappointed she would feel when editors asked for experience. He was surprised by how much time the photo editor gave him. The editor pored over his portfolio and praised the photographs, then informed James in such an apologetic voice there were currently no openings, that James felt he had walked in only to manipulate the man into reassuring him he was a good photographer.

The small towns along Highway 2 all seemed to James like stony little outposts anchored into the earth so they wouldn't fall into the river. Prescott in particular seemed to materialize out of nowhere, when suddenly the immensity of road and sky narrowed into a main street sheltered by buildings so square and symmetrical, it looked as if one long roof ledge shaded the street, and within a couple of minutes driving time, the whole town dropped out of sight. James thought of how besieged and closely packed the populated areas were across the land. He wondered how people managed to create and rigorously keep to this pattern, right down to the way kids in a sandbox, without being told, would create straight streets and square yards, as if they had no choice.

VI

Although James had friends who thought Sandy was shallow, he would have bet heavily on her being the more complex of the two of them. Sandy disappeared in people. He had seen her lead conga lines with couch cushions on her head and announce, "My one

ambition in life is to lead a conga line with a real pineapple on my head." She taught some of his grad student friends how to slam-dance, while James himself sat on the sidelines, painfully aware of how avuncular he looked, as if he was there only to oversee and bless other people's good time. Then worst of all, he would invariably attract some superior pompous ass, who would sit beside James and deconstruct the slam-dance. Yet when he did meet someone he enjoyed talking to, he revealed a lot about himself. He had heard Sandy tell stories about her hapless B.A., the library and the League of Astrologers, and not once could he tell how she felt about any of it.

It was Sandy who wanted to live together, and James who had implied to his friends that he was marrying her for her sake. Maybe he had wanted her to pressure him. He couldn't stop feeling that he wanted the marriage far more than she did, and he didn't like thinking of himself as desperate. He and Sandy were lying on the bed in his apartment listening to "Dark Side of the Moon," and while "Us and Them" blended into "Brain Damage," he proposed to her. James couldn't remember his exact words, only that he had rambled, sounding like his own thesis, and Sandy had to come out and ask if he was proposing marriage to her. She looked at him with her serious blue eyes, the kind of eyes that looked as if they knew more than she herself was ever willing to let on, and said, "I can't think of anyone I'd rather spend my life with, but do we really have to get married? Why don't we live together, try things out? Why sign things, face lawyers in wood-panelled offices, etc., etc." James appreciated the common sense of living together, and he was in no big hurry to face any lawyers in wood-panelled offices, but for some reason he became more and more determined to marry her. He bought her a ring, although she had never asked for one, and the last thing on earth either of them could afford were rings. "It's something I wanted to do," he told her, and it was true. Somewhere down the line she had given the ring back to him because she simply didn't wear rings, and he wore it, and it was part of his finger now.

The wedding was an on-again off-again affair, with the people she lived with in her co-op placing bets as to when or if it would ever occur. It eventually took place after being

postponed three times, due to Sandy's cold feet. It was held in the basement of Sandy's parents' house, in Patterson, Ontario. Her co-op crowd came up from Montréal for it, and James watched bet money change hands. One of Sandy's old student friends was best man and he signed in the groom's space on the marriage certificate, which James was sure was an unaccidental accident. One of Sandy's younger brothers got drunk for the first time.

An assortment of people, some of whom James recognized from the Bulmer Library, were there. He felt himself blush when they broke into their seemingly endless repertoire of professor jokes, although he found most of them funny. He met "Joe Cool" for the first time and felt very silly when Joe turned out to be a middle-aged man, who was accompanied by his wife. James's own parents sat at opposite ends of the room, his father enjoying the Bulmer Library crowd a little too much for his comfort, and his mother sat with the handful of James's grad student friends present, nodding and smiling any time one of them deigned to speak to her. James wished a trap door would open and swallow him up when both his parents started relaying unpleasantries to each other through Sandy's bewildered brothers.

Sandy's astrologer friends told fortunes. Her parents and her parents' friends managed to out-party the combined forces of Sandy's brothers, astrologers, student pals and the Bulmer Library Chain Gang. Tom Jones, Benny Goodman and Hank Williams on the living room stereo drowned out The Clash and New Order from the ghetto blaster in the basement. James's father spent the evening in the basement, being his most charming and chivalrous, dancing with Sandy and all her friends. James grudgingly admired his father on the floor, his straight back and neat moustache. He couldn't believe how Sandy and her friends glowed when he called them "lovely ladies." James couldn't understand why women went for his corny lines, his patented, practiced charm, his sheer manipulation. If he had been a woman, he would have seen through his father in a minute.

The Bachmanns put up half a dozen of the guests, and as soon as the ceremony was over and the Nazarene Church minister had left, Sandy shucked her wedding dress for tattered jeans and helped people set up sleeping bags, until the basement looked more to

James like a summer camp sleep-over than a wedding site. It was not how he pictured weddings, especially his own, but maybe a wedding this informal and full of commotion, a farce Sandy called it, was a good thing for him. If nothing else, living with Sandy was teaching him not to take life so seriously.

VII

Their last stop on the road was in Port Blair. It was around four in the afternoon when James pulled into the town, and the sun seemed to be setting inside the United Church, its windows and brick consumed by discreet flames. The bank and town hall were as silent as backless movie sets. When he passed a square-pillared library, he couldn't resist nudging Sandy. She drew back in mock horror and made the sign of a cross with her fingers. On Main Street, a realtor's corkboard display both frustrated and tantalized him with slightly blurred photographs of houses situated beside lakes that looked like Disneyland lakes, and forests that looked man-made. He and Sandy hadn't even discussed where they would live if one of them did find a job.

On the radio, tuned to the local station he heard, "Tomorrow is be nice to Brandt Russell day ..." then, "There was a fire at Peter MacArthur's house on the Four Corners ..." and finally, "The government hopes to ram Free Trade down everyone's throats by New Year's Day." James laughed at the last announcement and Sandy said, "Keep in mind these are the same nimrods who voted for the Conservatives just because they've *always* voted for the Conservatives."

James and Sandy entered the newspaper building, both weary and discouraged, tired of second-guessing whether a newspaper needed a photographer or a reporter. Sandy had been slouched with her feet up on the dashboard as James drove though Port Blair, but he saw she had rallied somehow. As soon as she got out of the car, she looked fresh-faced and eager, and James wished he could be that resilient. He wondered if teasing her about

the library had done it. He tried to keep his fingers still, as the editor of the *Port Blair Post* flipped through his portfolio.

"I like your work," Allen Innis said to James. "These pics are as good, really better than any we publish. I'm a little bothered by something though. I haven't had much time to look at your résumé, but you're obviously really well-educated."

"That's not important," said James. "I was going to go into teaching, but my real love is photography."

James felt a little kick on his ankle, but when he looked at Sandy, her face was expressionless.

"I'll tell you what bothers me," said Allen Innis. "You have all this education — a BA from somewhere in the States? A Master's degree from Montreal. You started a PhD. You're not going to fit into our hole-in-the-wall town. You'll just get started with us and you'll leave again. We don't have much to offer. We don't pay too good. You'll only get by. I don't even have a degree from Ryerson. I just worked my way up through the ranks."

"I've moved around a lot," said James. "I don't want to keep on moving. I'd like to settle somewhere, do what I really want to do, which is photography, and make a home."

He thought, but wasn't sure, he caught a look of alarm on Sandy's face. But her face was as neutral as it had been when he felt the kick on his ankle. Allen Innis picked up Sandy's c.v. and said, "You've sure done a lot of interesting things." James could tell by the editor's intonation he was far more interested in questioning Sandy.

"I'm versatile," Sandy laughed. "That's a good interview word for a résumé like mine, isn't it?"

James was startled by the ease with which Sandy had switched from the Québec "c.v." to the Ontario "résumé."

"The other word is adaptable, said Allen Innis. "I've used them both a dozen times myself."

"Typing — ninety words a minute," said Sandy. "Knowledge of fifteen foreign

languages, PhD in nuclear physics from MIT, hobbies — mountain-climbing, white-water rafting, striving for excellence. References available on request. Naturally, I have to send away to MIT.”

James listened, feeling he had no control over the proceedings, as Sandy and Allen Innis laughed and cracked jokes about job hunting. As soon as he could keep a straight face, Allen Innis looked seriously at them.

“I’m sorry to say we don’t have any openings for a photographer. We have two freelancers who have been around for a long time now. But ...” Allen Innis looked at Sandy. “We could use a reporter. I’ve got a good feeling about you. Are you interested?”

Sandy looked at James. Her eyes were alive, and James had never seen blue eyes that could look as warm as hers could. James tried to nod without moving his head.

“Yes, I am,” she said. “Thank you for taking a chance on me.”

After the interview ended, James was happy and tremendously relieved one of them landed a job, although he felt as if Sandy had got it through an unfair advantage of some sort. He even suspected both she and the editor were mocking him in some way, as if the whole interview had turned into a performance for the “over-qualified” professor. He wondered what he had to do to prove he was not that person any more, then thought he would have had better luck if he had gone in with a baseball cap over his forehead. While looking for an apartment, he bumbled on about how she would be sure to hear about any photographer jobs that came up. He knew though by the way her eyes were lasering him, that he wasn’t quite concealing his disappointment in himself, or his irritation with her.

VIII

Sometimes James would wake up and look at Sandy lying beside him, on her back, her feet sticking out of the covers, her right arm flung across her forehead, blocking out the light a beach towel partially covering the window let in. “I’m not exactly Sleeping Beauty,” she had told him. Every night they started out lying in each other’s arms, and every night

they ended up separating, moving to opposite sides of the bed, unable to make it through their sleep and dreams, together. He decided that sleeping with someone was the most definitive way of realizing he could never truly know another person. He thought of how she had told him she couldn't believe he was real, and how strange it had been seeing him outside the library. James was having every bit as much trouble reconciling the woman in his bed with the friendly girl he always encountered behind desks.

They had not made love until their wedding night, when Sandy spread out her foam camping mattress and sleeping bag in the back of the Bachmanns' station wagon, which James remembered bore bumper stickers saying, "Shaggin' Wagon," and "Don't Come A'Knockin' when this Car's a'Rockin'," undoubtedly contributions from Sandy's brothers. She drove them to an abandoned provincial park on the outskirts of town, and the sky was full of small flakes gently wafting and swirling, then filling the sky, steadily and almost imperceptibly accumulating and gathering force. At first he was concerned about them driving into a possible storm, but it became obvious Sandy knew how to steer a car through snow. "Besides, this car always comes equipped with a winch," she said. "And I know how to use it." He settled back in the car, fascinated by how the streetlights had become haloed globes of pale light, and by how easily the cheap cheesy neon signs and barracks of new housing in the town were transformed by snow. He thought it wouldn't be so bad living in a place like Patterson.

She guided the car down a winding trail through the trees and then over a frozen pond.

"I couldn't do that," he said.

"I've been on enough rallies," she said. "The one good thing about having only brothers is knowing how to do stuff like that."

"You're putting me to shame."

"Hey," said Sandy. "You've got talent. All I've got is know-how. There's a huge difference."

Some consolation, thought James.

She backed the car up into a grove of pine trees.

"This is my spot," she told James. "When I visit Patterson, I take this car and come out to sleep here whenever I can. Six years of coming here, I've only seen a ranger three times. You just have to watch out for hunting season."

Even though they had stopped in the middle of the park, James felt as if the forest remained as distant, inviolable and mysterious as when they just entered the park. He felt it wouldn't matter how far they penetrated into the forest, the trees would still gather and close rank as if he and Sandy were not even there. When they crept into the sleeping bag spread out in the back of the car, Sandy opened the hatch and James was overwhelmed by the feeling of protected intimacy in the shell of the car, and how the warmth and privacy mingled with the cold air and sounds of the outside world around them.

"Breathe," said Sandy. "Pine resin. You can't be mad or upset or depressed near those great old trees."

She slithered out of her clothes as if shedding a skin. James did the same when she was finished, trying not to bang his elbows, hip bones or knees into her. When he managed to get his clothes off, he slid on top of Sandy, and attempted to ease his penis inside her. She flinched.

"This is humiliating," he said. "But I can't find the opening."

"This is something I don't know how to do," she said, then lowered her voice to a whisper. "I'm a virgin."

"I'm the luckiest man in the world then," said James. "You won't know how bad I am."

"I didn't wait until I was married because of principles. It's just that before I try making love, the guy's really gotta love me," said Sandy. "I'm a virgin because no one can get in. There was only one other time I came anywhere this close to having sex and he couldn't get it in. It was incredibly embarrassing."

When he did manage to penetrate her, he saw she was grimacing with pain.

"I'm hurting you," he said. "I wish it was because I'm such a stud. I'll pull out."

"Don't," said Sandy. "It hurts, but I want you. I've wanted you ever since Interlibrary Loans. Why do you think I used to babble at you like some kind of maniac, telling you my entire life story every time I saw you? I guess I never thought it was really possible things would get this far."

She had bled, and he wiped her with the roll of toilet paper she had thought to bring. He remembered how he felt he had been entrusted with the most precious thing he could think of, how much he wanted to protect her and the memory of the inept but beautiful sex they had had. He looked at her now, lying like a shipwreck survivor on his bed, and he felt the same sense of guarding something beautiful and fragile, that nothing in the world would induce him to break.

He reluctantly got out of bed. When he glanced at the clock, he saw that Sandy should have been up by now, but he didn't have the heart to wake her. Besides, as she had pointed out to him innumerable times, getting to work on time was her problem. Instead he padded to the bathroom, which he could no longer refer to as "his," now filled with cotton balls, cold cream jars, pastel packages of Midol and menstrual pads, packages that took up aisles in grocery stores, which James never imagined seeing near his razor. He wondered where his mother had kept her personal items. An old vase now contained their two toothbrushes and two brands of toothpaste sat on the counter, hers with the lid off, and five brands of shampoo were lined up around the bathtub. He found himself stumbling into a wicker plant stand where a space should have been, then reaching blindly into the closet for a clean shirt and finding a lime green jacket in his hands.

IX

For the first few months of their marriage, they were both almost proud of their lack of money and their cramped apartment. It made James feel as if he and Sandy were younger than they really were, kids starting out. Sandy prepared her "mystery casseroles," and they

would eat on the bed, since their table was always covered with his school work. They both made jokes about their Bohemian lifestyle, and Sandy would sing, "I've Got You Babe," in her best Sonny Bono imitation.

After awhile, they both started feeling trapped in his apartment, which really was too small for the two of them. They couldn't afford to move, and James started feeling ashamed that he didn't even have an RRSP, like everyone else in the country. He and Sandy snapped at each other. Sandy suggested she continue living in her co-op until she had some savings and she and James could move into a larger apartment. He had made her cry by suggesting she really wanted to back out of the marriage. They were all but laughed out of a bank when they had gone in to inquire about a modest loan. James didn't know which was worse, him having to admit he was living off a bursary and the money he made teaching two classes, or watching Sandy squirm, trying to explain she worked full time and had done so for four years, in a place where the Personnel department had no record of her existence. Sandy told the banker to call the Payroll department, but he had called Personnel instead, and James could only watch helplessly as she sank into the chair. In desperation he said, "I saw her there every day for three years and she was definitely working." He was starting to sound more like Sandy every day.

X

After the episode at the bank, James noticed that Sandy had stopped talking about her work at all, no longer coming in through the door full of stories about her co-workers, many of whom James had met, or even with tales of bureaucratic incompetence and perfidy. One day James came in from teaching and saw that Sandy had divided the living room into three sections, using milkcrates and bamboo blinds as dividers. Part of the room contained his desk with books stacked around it, as there was no room for a bookcase. Part of the room had become his photography studio, containing his cameras, equipment, student press passes, and the college yearbooks which included his photographs. The third and smallest

section of the room contained a little filing cabinet. He opened one of the cabinet drawers and saw it was full of astrological charts.

Sandy eventually told him she had started what she called a resource centre for the League of Astrologers. She ordered cassette tapes from catalogues, on subjects which boggled James's mind, and she charged money to lend them out. On weekends, she lugged her bicycle out of the kitchen and down the apartment staircase to deliver the cassettes to members. She kept the cassettes in baskets which hung from the ceiling. All he could do was watch as she came in with an envelope of money and called out, "Grocery run!" or "Now we can get that electricity we've always wanted!" Between her job at the library and her resource centre, James was seeing less of Sandy than he used to, back when he spent all his time in the library.

He marvelled at how exhilarated she looked in the evenings when she brought her bicycle up the stairs and back into the kitchen. Feverish, he suddenly thought. Sandy was looking feverish, and she still hadn't said one word about Bulmer Library, and he could time it to the day they had gone to the bank. If it wasn't for the paycheque she brought in every week, he could almost start believing she didn't really work there. Although she kept telling him not to give up on his studies, he felt he was letting her down. Worse than that. He felt he was a parasite, a gigolo living off her wits.

He sat down on the floor of his photography corner and leafed through the yearbooks. He hadn't always been in this state, he thought. There was a time when he took chances. He was a good photographer if he did think so himself, and he missed being photo editor at Ann Arbor, processing film, making contact sheets to be ready for the next press night, deciding which photo to be used and what size. He missed the crowd of people in the newspaper office on press night and all the arguments with the reporters and editors who had very different ideas from James about what pictures they wanted in the paper. Before he had met Sandy, it was the closest he had ever come to feeling there was a family

surrounding him, the noise and commotion and the sense of it being on-going, something that never ended.

He looked at his desk, at the papers on it covered in his handwriting, or typed in the familiar eccentric typescript of his old portable typewriter. Sandy knew how to use a Macintosh computer, he thought. She could do everything. Meanwhile, he was sitting uselessly on the sidelines. This wasn't living, he thought. James walked to the window, then opened it and heaved his entire thesis out the window. He had no intention of telling Sandy what he had just done. He could have some secrets too, he thought. Besides, as Sandy herself said so often, he had a plan.

XI

James had finally revealed his plan to Sandy one night, while they were lying naked on the bed, listening to an old Harmonium album.

"I have an idea," said James. "Just something I've been mulling over. I was looking through some of my old yearbooks and handling my cameras, and I really miss photography. I've been completely wasting my time, our time on that thesis. I don't have a life and I can't stand it that you have two jobs. I can't live with that."

"And you don't even have to do the two jobs," said Sandy in a Groucho Marx voice. "It hasn't been a waste of time. You are not to give up your work for me. Haven't you ever heard of unspoken covenants between people? This is one of them. Did it ever occur to you that maybe what you do is more important than what I do? Some day that thesis is going to be a book, and you'll be a wonderful teacher. Besides, we are getting by. In case you haven't noticed, my little resource centre has grown into a business. I only started it to prove I didn't need that damned library and it's turned into a monster. I've got more business than I can handle. I can't do anything for fun. Everything — everything I ever try to do turns into a monster I can't control."

"That's just it," said James. "I'm jealous. I'm jealous of that resource centre. I'm

jealous of you. What I have in mind would mean a big change for us."

Sandy's eyes lit up. James had counted on that. "But not if you don't want to," he said. "I realize I'm being very selfish, but I want to go back to an early dream and try out being a newspaper photographer. That means going to Ontario because that's where all the newspapers are. I can't expect you to say yes, but would you come with me?"

"If that's what you want," said Sandy. "If you're really sure, and you're not doing it because of me. If you want me."

"Do I want you?" said James. "I don't want to do anything without you."

They rocked together on the bed.

"By the way," said Sandy. "Your desk is miraculously clean."

"You haven't mentioned Bulmer Library in three months," said James.

"I saw the super outside under our window."

"You tell me you got a permanent job and I'll tell you my thesis was passed, and it's in binding."

"I work beside the Binding department," said Sandy.

"I can find the Personnel phone number."

"Stalemate."

XII

James noticed the entire area from Port Blair to Whitby was made up of smaller places, which were all starting to expand and spill over into each other, so that Port Blair, Bowmanville, Oshawa and Whitby had all become one giant boom town. He saw legions of portable, pre-fab classrooms sprouting around every school, houses which all looked the same marching across every field, turning every private woods or vacant lot into an army barracks. All of the little places like Sandy's provincial park were vanishing, and soon there would be no more private places left. He saw how old farmhouses, instead of being torn down, were tartered up and turned into parodies of their former selves. Old brick was painted

purple and fuchsia, flags flew from former front yards, and signs proclaimed "Willow Creek Estates," although the houses were pathetically cheap and the creek had been filled in. There was no land any more, only real estate. This was such a different treatment of the past and history than what he saw in Eastern Ontario, James could hardly believe it could be part of the same province. He thought it was more American than America, in terms of fast drastic change, and he imagined the kind of magnet the area was for pioneers, fast-buck entrepreneurs, and people just like himself and Sandy, looking for better lives.

No wonder Sandy got the job, James thought, although she had absolutely no experience as a reporter. He realized that had been her ace in the hole all along. There was something enterprising about Sandy, he thought. She could also turn the past into something almost unrecognizable. In a way, he thought, growing up in an area like this wouldn't be so different from the way he had grown up.

There were few apartments in the whole Port Blair-Whitby area, and even fewer vacant ones. They found one vacant apartment in a highrise, which they could have had if they could place a down-payment of first and last month's rent. But they both knew they couldn't do that, much less afford the monthly rent.

"I knew we were going to Ontario," said Sandy, sighing. "I just didn't expect it to be exactly the way I remembered."

"I've been such an idiot," said James. "Why wasn't I out making a living like other normal people?"

"You had a dream at least," said Sandy. "Think about what a shmuck I am. I've been working all this time and not making a living wage. Is that stupid or what?"

James and Sandy sat outside the Whiteoaks complex on Highway 2 in Whitby, having gone as far as they could and still commute to Port Blair. James couldn't face Sandy, and Sandy finally said, "It'll work out. I got a job. Ms No-Experience Doofus. It was one lucky shot. Yours is just around the corner."

"It's like this story I read about," he said. "This branch of the Russian army was

ordered east by the Czar, so they left and started marching clear across Asia, heading for the Bering Strait and no one thought to call them back."

They both laughed, but he saw the way their knees stuck out of their shorts, how knobby and inexperienced they looked.

"I threw my thesis out the window," he said.

"I told Bulmer Library to kiss my ass," said Sandy.

"I knew that," he said.

"I knew that too," she countered.

"You did it," he said. "You always do it. You got a job. You can winch cars. You can run businesses. You were the one who had Allen Innis pegged."

"When he said right at the beginning he didn't have a Ryerson diploma and he had come up through the ranks, I knew where he was coming from. My c.v. was done up for that kind of person," said Sandy. "What I said was all smoke and mirrors. What *you* said about making a home and doing what you love was real. It came from your heart. I'd just like to think if I was in his position I'd recognize someone special. There's a million of me but you're one of a kind. I've always wished I could be more like you."

He hugged her and he didn't mind if she did see the tears forming in his eyes.

"I didn't know that," said James. "I had no idea."

He looked up and saw how tall the apartment complex was, the way the four buildings seemed to circle around a fireless hearth, the way their shadows formed fragile, intertwining shapes on the concrete, and especially the hundreds of windows stacked up to the sky, which he was starting to realize were totally inaccessible to both of them.

Imagining Oma

I

A long time ago at a family dinner, Martin's Oma had taken him aside and said that if he promised to stay exclusively with her and help with her house, she would pay his passage to The Netherlands. "Don't tell anyone," she had warned, "Or they'll all think I'm showing favouritism." Now that he had a job in which he was making double his former salary, and even had a secretary who referred to him as "Mr. Bouwman," he called his grandmother to cancel the old bargain. But when he tried telling her this, over an overseas telephone line which was acting like a faulty interpreter, she said, "Oh? Did I make a *deal* with you? Your poor old Oma is too old to remember everything she says." Since he couldn't see her face, Martin had no idea if she had genuinely forgotten the arrangement, or if she had every intention of paying his passage, and was being coy with him.

Oma had been like this for as long as he could remember. He thought of one of her stories about the time when she was a newlywed living in Barcelona, in those old-photo days when she and Opa posed beside cars, as if their entire lives were made up of glamour and intrigue. One of her servants was very poor, and according to Oma, one did not offer extra money to workers or domestic help in Spain in the late twenties. So Oma planted little surprises in the servant's room instead, and slipped things into her apron. Martin could picture the way Oma would open her eyes when confronted, the way she would say something like, "Oh! Well if you found it it must be yours." That was the way Oma operated.

Oma kept up the same act with her family, and sure enough, while Martin was

making flight arrangements, the Bank of Amsterdam notified him that money had been deposited into his account, enough to cover his ticket price. Martin wondered what she would do if he insisted he could pay. It occurred to him that no one in his family had ever turned down one of her surprises.

II

Rumours about his Oma's and Opa's wartime involvement in the Dutch Intelligence Service had circulated in the family for years, but it wasn't until Martin's last visit to his American cousins that he became convinced the stories were true. His Aunt Laura and cousins, Peter and Mindy, believed without a doubt that his grandparents had worked as intelligence agents for the American and Dutch governments in Indonesia. Peter told Martin about mysterious, last-minute Netherlands-Indonesia-U.S. trips both Opa and Oma had made at the height of the war. Mindy's voice lowered to a whisper, when she revealed that in 1941, her father had been given a telephone number from someone high up in the Philips company. If anything happened to his parents (Martin's Oma and Opa), or to himself and his sisters, Uncle Piet was to call that number as soon as possible. Martin couldn't believe that was a normal business practice, even for European multinationals like Philips.

Martin sat up all night with a book Peter lent him, which had his grandfather's name scrawled on the title page. The book was about the Coast-Watchers of Indonesia, and while reading it, Martin decided his cousins had to be right. From outposts along the coasts of the Indonesian islands, teams of two men signalled to the Allies in code while Japanese ships circled. Most of the signallers had not been military men, but sailors, fishermen and other civilians: Dutch, English and even Germans, who had left Europe for a variety of reasons. Martin knew Oma had grown up in Indonesia, a plantation owner's daughter, and although she rarely mentioned her life there, he knew she was deeply attached to the region and would have done anything to oppose the capture of Djakarta. Opa supervised the manufacturing of radio tubes, and he also knew how to make them. Martin knew these

would be valuable commodities during a war. He felt like a boy again, reading on into the night, the pages of his book like top secret information that had been unexpectedly delivered into his hands. Even at twenty-eight, he could still see the moonlight silvering the pages and imagine they were radioactive. He could still look out the window and see the blue-white light of the moon turning the yard into a checkerboard of illuminated grass and leaf-shadow, and think how good the yard would be for hide-and-seek or World War II games. And he could still shiver, realizing all the trips his grandparents made were to Coast-Watcher areas.

III

Martin wanted the stories to be true. He had always felt closer to Oma than he did to anyone else in his family, and finding out she had performed heroic deeds in the war made him feel as if he was also capable of the same thing. It could make him forget he was doing the kind of job he never thought he'd be able to stand doing. He had recently been promoted to the Public Relations (advertising) Department of the Trans Canada Transportation System, after having worked in another department for only a year. Martin found advertising both alluring and repulsive. Alluring, because he had always had a sneak feeling he would be good at it. Repulsive, because he found the idea of manipulating people to buy some product they didn't need completely unethical, and at best, a parasitical way of using one's skill. But right now, he was involved in a "Romance of the Railroad" campaign, designed to get people to take the train. Martin told himself he couldn't see any harm in getting people to take trains instead of driving or flying. He could even say it was better for the environment.

His fiancée, Deena Freiman, didn't like his new job in advertising. He had met her at TCTS, and she often told him she preferred his old job in Industrial Relations. He assured her that there was no way he would ever become a totally self-centred ad man, or strung out on cocaine, the way advertisers were always portrayed in books or movies. But he had to admit it was a strange way to spend his work days, sitting in a cubicle, tapping into his

own dreams and longings and making them public, insisting they be shared by masses of people he couldn't see, but had to believe existed, like a shadowy audience. It wasn't hard for Martin to compose slogans and images imbued with romance and longing about trains and the railroad. It was almost too easy for him to pick out aspects of the transportation business he didn't like, and make sure no one else saw those things either. In Martin's train romances, there were no business machinations, no conglomerates which swallowed up smaller railways across Canada, the American Midwest and Eastern seaboard. There were no small places whose existences depended on the vagaries of railroad business, and no ghost towns which lost out. Lay-offs didn't exist. No bewhiskered, mutton-chopped "Lords of the Line" exploited labour and amassed personal fortunes. After all, none of this came to his mind when he thought about railroads.

Instead, he evoked images of Royal Hudson engines pulling into lonely stations out west, thirteen-year-old boys standing by their bedroom windows hearing the train whistle, young women dressed the way his grandmother did in the old photos, carrying valises, on the verge of embarking on their first adventures away from their families. It was truly amazing, he thought, the assumptions he made about people these days, assumptions which also happened to line his pockets. Martin's world was full of people who dreamed of trains, of people who, instead of walking toward office buildings which stood grey as a post-winter sky, would take a wrong turn and find themselves in a train station, if someone came along to give them that image so powerful they couldn't stop themselves from acting on it. Martin sometimes found himself wondering if there would be a cost to spending so much time working with these old childhood dreams, and if it would end up affecting the way he saw the world now. He could well understand why so many "real" advertisers became swallowed up in their own fantasies. Martin was almost glad Deena disapproved of his job; she would keep him from going too far.

IV

Martin also wanted his grandparents' war stories to be true for the sake of his fiancée. Deena had no family. Her parents were both only children and to her knowledge, all of her other relatives had perished in the war. No one in Martin's family had died, or even suffered. In fact, the war only seemed to have inconvenienced them a little. Various members of his family had gone to the U.S. and Canada during the war. Then, except for his mother and Uncle Piet, they all returned to Holland and seemingly resumed their lives from where they had left off. Martin knew his family lived privileged, even pampered, lives compared to Deena's.

It was during a dinner with Deena and his mother that Martin became aware of the gulf between his and Deena's backgrounds. He had always been aware of it mentally, but this dinner was the first time he could feel it on an emotional level. His mother told Deena the story of her arrival to the United States in 1941. She had arrived in June 1941, and was supposed to start Barnard College in September. She couldn't speak a word of English, and the family, with a little help from Philips, decided to send her to a summer camp where she would learn English. As usual, his mother mixed up dates and places, and if Martin hadn't heard the story many times, he would have been completely confused by it. When his mother said she was sent to a camp in 1941, Deena gasped. It took Martin a few minutes to realize the first thing Deena thought of was a concentration camp. The gasp had been so instinctive and involuntary, he couldn't forget it. Whenever anyone in his family talked about the war now, Martin could hear Deena's gasp in his mind. It made him want to go to The Netherlands, hear the story confirmed by Oma herself, and then bring the story back to Deena, as if, although he knew it was impossible, he could in some way make it up to her.

V

Martin stood at the Amsterdam train station, *de spoorweg*, watching small yellow electric trains pulling in and out right on schedule. He noticed even the commuter trains

were divided into first class and general public cars, and that the bright blue diagonal stripes were actually designed to indicate which was first-class accommodation. He figured his "The Railroad is for Everyone," or *De Spoorweg is voor Iedereen*, couldn't possibly work here. Although he had vowed to himself he was not going to think like an advertiser, he wondered how he would see railroad travel here. When he boarded his train, he was delighted to see the train compartments and berths, and he settled into imagining the train as it might have been in 1940, during the war, the kind of train his grandparents must have boarded many times.

One day, on the Métro in Montréal, the lights were shut off during rush hour, and to Martin, the Metro train became a European train during wartime, shadowy, with people in long coats boarding, whom he imagined as soldiers, and embracing couples. He could practically see scarred wooden panelling, a heavy steel window latch, and a stretched net of luggage racks overhead. Although he got off at the same place every day, the name "Crémazie" had never looked more foreign to him. "Ever wonder why the movies you've never been able to forget always have trains in them?" he thought, knowing there had to be a way he could use his dark Métro journey in a presentation.

The train he was on now, pulling out of the Amsterdam station, looked like the wartime train he had imagined his Métro car was, but he couldn't use those images here. He couldn't reproduce the same make-believe, shivery wartime feeling. He tried to see the trains from Deena's viewpoint. His embracing couples would become loved ones receding into the distance, the soldiers would be Germans, the rush hour people in office clothes would be dispossessed and fleeing. Deena's grandparents would never see the train as passion, adventure or pioneering — only escape, split-second timing and terror. This was the real thing, he thought, and he was ashamed of his railroad romances. He concentrated on observing what was around him, determined to stop turning whatever he saw into dreams or copy or anything that could make a profit. Instead, he stared, stymied by a

pictogram which seemed to be instructing passengers not to throw bottles out the window. Martin couldn't imagine the Dutch having a problem with this.

VI

He could barely see Oma's house down the long driveway, walls and roof deep in a wilderness of clinging vine. It was the most amazing house he had ever seen, better than he remembered, as if an inn from the Carpathian mountains had been transplanted onto the reclaimed land of that region in Holland, surrounded by vegetation which looked nearly tropical. Although he could see it, he could hardly believe Oma's house was bordered by a polder, low endless land containing only tall silvery grass, which he knew had been planted to absorb sea salt from the reclaimed land. Yet along the sides of Oma's driveway, stone statues were hidden in the dense foliage, which made Martin think they could be clues to buried empires, to Indonesia, which Oma had placed there for him to find. A bearded medieval king gazed benignly at him from Oma's door, and he felt as if he was receiving some sort of benediction when the door opened.

Oma held him tight and said, "Welcome" so sincerely, he ended up saying "Welcome" back to her, and he hoped she would think it was a Canadian custom to welcome someone who had welcomed him. He was caught off guard by her warmth and sincerity. Martin then realized with a pang he had completely forgotten his grandmother's name was Wilhelmina. Min. All his life she had been Oma.

"What is this?" she demanded.

When Martin realized she was talking about his ponytail, he smiled and said, "It's a style now."

"Oh it's a very silly one," she said. "At least you're not wearing an earring. I can't get used to earrings on men. Men don't want to be men these days."

He took Oma's arm. According to his mother, Oma had fallen one day, while pruning a tree, and was supposed to be walking with a crutch.

"Oma," he said. "Where's your crutch?"

She gave him her wide-eyed innocent look. "I must have misplaced it. It's because of all my old brains that can't remember anything any more."

He smiled again, knowing her "old brains" were her favourite excuse.

"You've seen the walled garden of course," she said.

"That was so long ago I don't remember it very well."

They entered the house and she opened the door to her bedroom, then led Martin to another door which opened up to the secret garden.

"We bought the house in 1959 from a sculptor. The foundations go back to the 1600s. It used to be a farmhouse and he turned the stables into the big room. He was an excellent sculptor but a very poor businessman. He had signs up for sale but when your Opa and I went out to look at it he didn't seem interested in making the sale. Hmmph, he says, and I didn't think he was going to let us in the door. He did with *resentfulness* and not in a good spirit. He led us through and all he said was 'This is it.' Not a gentleman. It was the walled garden that sold me and not him."

"It would have sold me," said Martin.

"In the old days we would have parties out here, but I most especially liked coming alone, for a few hours of being by myself, privately. I'm a private person. It's taken me all my life, and learning the hard way, to be open." Her voice became a whisper. "That's why I think it's easier for me in some ways to be a woman alone."

The garden did seem to reflect a solemn side of Oma that the rest of his family never mentioned. The dense ivy tinted the garden with a blue-green light, and the ground looked half-submerged around a battered fountain. Martin thought he loved her best when she was revealing something only he was allowed to hear — or at least, giving the appearance she was doing that. She had a knack for drawing confidences out of him. Whenever he had problems with his parents or brothers, he would write a letter to Oma, and she always replied with a lecture or a story or advice, in a letter addressed only to him with "confidential"

scrawled on the envelope. He wondered if she would understand if he told her about his new job, and how worried he was it was changing the way he looked at the world, and how important her story was to him.

But there were things about Oma Martin had to remember. Sometimes her tremendous warmth was only an appearance, and she could withdraw and become sombre when he least expected it. He wondered if she consciously used that ability. Martin also knew he revealed far more to her than she ever returned. One evening when he was very young, he and Oma passed an electronics store, and looking in the window he could see both himself and Oma on a television screen. He looked at Oma in real life, then looked back at the screen, making sure the grainy black and white figure was really her. Oma was excited too, almost as excited as he was, and she made monkey faces, pointing at herself pointing from the screen. Then without warning her whole demeanour changed. She stopped laughing and making faces. She separated herself from Martin and started explaining how the television set worked. The ability to detach herself so swiftly was a very handy ability for an intelligence agent to have, thought Martin. Of course it had never occurred to him then to wonder how she knew so much about electronics.

VII

"I want you to come and look at a painting," said Oma. "I want you to tell me what you think of it, if you like it or don't like it."

She stood him in front of one of her Spanish paintings, which depicted a group of gnome-like peasants. He stood for a few minutes looking, trying to guess what Oma was fishing for, then said, "I like it," in Dutch.

He and Oma mixed English and Dutch, with her often switching mid-sentence from one to the other. Martin found it easier to make blunt, declarative statements in Dutch, or maybe the Dutch expected such statements without considering them offensive.

"Why?" said Oma.

He switched to English and said, "I like the faces. They're not pretty but they're strong and they have character. Ummm, it looks as if the artist liked them and that was what he was trying to show."

Martin knew she was capable of making him stand there all day until he gave a reason. Oma crowed in triumph.

"Finally someone who thinks as I do. When I bought this painting and took it home the family went into an uproar. 'Oh mother why did you buy that thing? It's so ugly.' I wanted to put it up over the piano but your mother and your aunt wouldn't play if it stayed there. I kept asking them: Why don't you like it? And all they would say was that oh, it's ugly. But you *have* to have reasons why you like or don't like something."

Martin thought of the way he reasoned out every word of his advertising copy. He had been trained by the best. Oma clapped him on the back and gave, what seemed to him, to be a mischievous conspirator's look.

"Now you can go back and say crazy old Oma made you look at a painting."

She guided him to her other paintings by the same artist.

"I love the Spanish painting," she said. "The Southern races are quicker, more intelligent than the Northern people. The Northerners know this deep inside so they go to school and study harder. Southerners don't care about school or study because they can rely on their own quick intelligence."

Martin was startled by her words. He knew Oma loved Spain, Indonesia, Bali and all the places she still regularly visited, but she also sounded like an International Business article, "The Perilous Far East," or "Doing Business with the Japanese," all written by people who had nothing but confidence in the intimate knowledge of "their" cultures, while never venturing beyond the perimeters of business protocol. Martin was a little disappointed in Oma's words, but she had lived in and travelled to more places than he had dreamed of. Besides, she was the one who had once told him, "You *never ever* just go into a country and throw money around. All people must be allowed to keep their dignity. If you see injustice

you *must* do what you can to stop it." He reminded himself that she was almost ninety, and her views of labour-management relations in the Philips factories were considered almost scandalously liberal for her time. Even so, he was a little relieved when she turned the conversation to his mother's health.

VIII

In the countryside around Domburg, where his grandmother lived, *sloten*, which Martin saw were halfway between canals and ditches, cut straight as rulers across land which was actually below sea level. Once when he was ten or so, he ran across a *slote* while playing hide and seek with his Dutch cousins, and was shocked when he dropped into water, completely camouflaged by green algae. He thought of the Dutch word, *droogmakerijen*, which not only meant "to make dry," but contained much more within its letters, and "the people in the factory/workshop making it dry," was the only way he could have explained the word in English. He loved words like that, which revealed what was really important to a group of people, or a place. Oma once told him the Dutch government had ordered the bombing of some of the dykes in the region when the Germans occupied The Netherlands, to flood their own country as a last defense. Martin noticed many of the houses in the countryside were built on slight rises in the earth, the very shape and texture of the land serving as a remembrance of wartime flooding. This fragility and tenacity were both simply unimaginable in Canada, he thought.

He was fifteen when he last visited The Netherlands, and Martin hadn't remembered either the abundance or lushness of Dutch gardens, and he looked at houses, especially old ones with thatched roofs, as if he was poling his way down the streets in a punt, peering up at the sides of huts through shimmering foliage. It wasn't just his grandmother's story, but the greenness of the countryside and its proximity to the sea which all evoked Indonesia to him. Then, two blocks later, the little town became so domestic, Martin almost believed he had seen it shift in front of his eyes, and he almost forgot he had thought of Indonesia.

The houses in Domburg were uniformly charming with their sloped roofs of orange or black tile, and he half-expected to see his own reflection in the tall staring window panes. He felt he had lost something elusive which had surfaced for only a moment and disappeared again.

IX

When Martin was a kid and subjected to his mother's bowl haircuts, people told him he looked just like the little Dutch boy on the paint cans. Even now, in Canada, people liked pointing out how Dutch he looked, and he knew Canadians thought being Dutch meant standing in fields full of tulips and windmills, plugging dykes with his finger while wearing wooden shoes. He was always amazed by people who denied they had an intelligent bone in their bodies, who admitted they found poetry and art impenetrable, yet would confidently inform him they could tell he was Dutch by the way he clipped the endings of his words, because his "eds" sounded like "ts," and his "vs" turned into "fs." The people in Domburg seemed as confident as Canadians in noticing what made him different from them, and they apparently felt just as familiar about pointing it out to him. Some people thought he was Frisian, and he noticed he couldn't make the "ach" sound as far down in his throat as the Dutch. Others complimented him on his knowledge of the language, all asking how and why he had come to learn it. Martin soon learned they were really asking who his family was.

Because he had learned Dutch at home with his parents, he spoke to everyone he met in the familiar vernacular. An elderly bookseller was the first to comment.

"We Dutch don't care, but don't be too familiar with Germans. They're much stricter about knowing your place. The Dutch aren't like that." The bookseller shook his head. "Our Queen just passed a law that says no one is to curtsy or bow to her, because she's a person no different from anyone else."

Martin enjoyed seeing himself as a free-wheeling Dutch guy who didn't know his place, even if in reality, he simply didn't know the Dutch equivalent of "vous."

Oma watched news shows and took notes, because she said her memory wasn't what it used to be. Martin watched her write, and saw a puzzled, sombre expression appear on her face, as if whatever she was writing could unlock the secrets of the universe to her. He was fascinated by her, by the way she was both utterly certain in who and what she was, yet at the same time deeply uncertain and self-critical, never at peace with herself or the world. He wondered how she could be both the undisputed matriarch of his family and yet talk about herself as being a black sheep, constantly misunderstood and thwarted by her family. In fact, Martin suspected she was especially fond of him because it had taken him longer to find a career than his cousins, and she had often taken his side against the rest of the family.

When Martin was in grade seven, he had suddenly started becoming moody. Depressed. He had crushes on several girls who all ignored him. He stayed up all night in his room listening to his short-wave radio. One night, he biked all around the West Island. He found a deserted side road near Senneville, and for some reason, he got off his bike and sat cross-legged in the middle of the road, gazing at the moon and listening to his favourite show on his transistor radio. He didn't return to his house until six in the morning. His father caught him, and tried to turn Martin over his knee to give him a spanking. By this time, Martin was almost the same height as his father, and easily broke out of his father's grasp. His father called him a "moral weakling," and threatened to send him to a Swiss boarding school. Martin wrote a letter to Oma. She called from Holland, and spoke directly to his father, and Martin never heard another word about Swiss boarding school.

Martin went through a similar period just after finishing university. He didn't have any idea what he wanted to do with his life. He spent months hitch-hiking, all over Canada and the U.S. His family was upset, to say the least. That Christmas, Oma was in Canada visiting his mother. When Martin came for Christmas dinner, Oma took him aside and whispered in his ear, "You're trying to find yourself. It has taken me all of my life, and I still

don't know who I am. I understand. I'm the only one who does." Martin had the feeling if it wasn't for Oma, he might never have come out of that phase, or depression, or whatever it was.

Oma was also the first person in his family who truly welcomed Deena as Martin's fiancée. She had come to Canada this time to meet Deena, and to meet Martin's brother's fiancée. Martin watched Oma greet the two fiancées and the husband, and he thought she had been equally gracious to all of them. But later, Martin found Oma sitting by herself in the dark backyard. She stood up when he approached, and she linked her arm with his.

"I like Deena," said Oma.

"Well I'm glad of that, Oma," said Martin.

Then he said teasingly, "I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have Oma's seal of approval."

"No, you're not understanding," said Oma. "I *sincerely* like Deena. I've gone to meet everyone's fiancées and spouses and I am always courteous and I always say I like everybody. But, most of the time it's not *special* for me to meet these people. But it was special to meet Deena. The others try too hard. Oh, we must humour poor old Oma. But Deena is her own self. I liked her from the very first moment."

Martin felt as if she had blessed him.

But her understanding and approval of him was another tricky thing he had to keep in mind about Oma. Taking his side, or Deena's, or any of her underdogs, was also all about family politics and power. Deena even said to him once, "Your Oma liking me really gets a rise out of your mother, doesn't it?" Oh yes, he thought. She was certainly capable of all the deeds Martin's American cousins attributed to her.

As soon as her news show ended, she switched the TV off with her remote control. Her medieval house was filled with remote controls, timers for her lights and all types of electronic gadgets. Martin thought the time was right to ask her about Indonesia when she said, "I want to hear all about your plans."

All evening he had hoped she would start talking about her childhood and give him an opening, but although she talked a lot about his childhood, she didn't say a word about her own.

"Well I want to see Utrecht and Amsterdam of course."

"What are you going to see in Utrecht?"

She moved in closer, and he wondered if more lay behind her question than what she actually said. It was difficult imagining anyone could be that interested in his tourist's itinerary.

"Whatever I come across."

"Oh, that is not a satisfactory answer. There's the Dome Cathedral you must see, and a very fine engineering museum. It's a real shame you missed the floral exhibition ..."

Martin held up his hand. "I don't have anything all planned out." He could have sworn he was making an excuse for missing a deadline.

"You'll go to these places and *not* know what to see and miss everything worthwhile."

"But Oma, I haven't been in this country for fifteen years. Everything is worth seeing. Besides, I'm tired of planning everything I do."

She pointed an admonishing finger at him. "No I don't agree with that. Some things are worth seeing and others aren't. Simple. You're thinking: Oh Oma's trying to boss me around. Marty's a big boy and he can do everything by himself and not listen to anyone. That is being immature."

"Ah but Oma, North Americans are immature."

"North Americans should be more mature, following the examples set for them," Oma said. Then she shook her head and chuckled. "I know it when you're teasing me, and that you're really saying, 'No Oma you're wrong, I disagree with you.' Not treating me like poor old Oma. You disagree with me and tease me and you're the only one I can tease."

He felt another surge of affection for her, and he wanted to embrace her. "I'm

Interested in the war, Oma, your life in Indonesia, and if you happen to know anything about the Coast-Watchers.”

Martin felt her staring at him, then noticed a hint of a smile playing at the corners of her mouth, a knowing expression which never failed to make him feel very young and naïve.

She disappeared into her study. Martin was sitting at her formal dinner table, which was covered in a clutter of photographs, news show notes and unfinished letters. Martin saw some letters written to her from someone in B.C., decorated with flowers, happy faces and peace signs, and he remembered how fascinated she had been by hippies, and how she shocked the family by admitting she picked up hitch-hikers so she could hear their stories. Many of these people continued to write to her. He knew she revelled in her correspondence, although she claimed she was too old to ever hope to keep up. Oma returned with an armload of maps. Martin's heart started to pound when she spread one out on the table, over the clutter. He looked down at the map. It was of Holland, not Indonesia, and she pointed out all the war memorials scattered throughout the country.

XI

He heard rain battering the old house, saw it sheeting the windows, and it started to feel like he was in a wooden ship. Oma conserved electricity as she conserved everything else (“You North Americans always want heat, so much suffocating heat”), and Martin was chilly. In the hall, which looked more like the lobby of a nineteenth century inn than a private house, a hanging lamp made of iron and scarlet glass cast a circle of red light on the black and white marble floor. To Martin, the light wasn't cozy or intimate, but uncanny, like being outside in twilight watching a harvest moon rising in the sky. He went out into the rain to check the garage, which was something Oma actually let him do for her. Once, nearly ten years ago, she had discovered two teenaged runaways had set up camp in her garage, and she had checked it every night since then. The garage doors had iron hinges which looked

like huge fleur-de-lys, and above, a lantern dangled, exposing ivy creeping on guerilla missions across the wall.

Entering the house again, now wet as well as chilly, Martin saw shadows gathered around the hall cabinets, which were so large they could have been made for giants, and Martin imagined crawling inside one, listening to the pounding of rain and possible rustle of footsteps. He could almost see the lean-tos stooped along the coast, a cloud wandering across the moon, a brief terrifying interval of darkness and then the signal illuminating the night like heat-lightning. Martin shivered, feeling the ceaseless sounds of the jungle surrounding him, the enemy's whereabouts unknown. He wondered why Oma's house evoked Indonesia so strongly to him, if it was more than the combination of rain, the old house itself, the ivy, the statues concealed in the garden, and he couldn't believe Oma hadn't been involved with the Coast-Watchers. Meanwhile in the distance, he heard the train bells yet again, like insistent dinner bells, or briskly clapping hands restoring order. These trains, he thought, pulled him from his imaginings, called him home to bed.

XII

"Shame on you for not noticing," said Oma.

Martin looked puzzled.

"I bought a new blouse yesterday."

The blouse was a shade of blue which set off her clear blue eyes and made her hair look whiter than usual. But she was always well-dressed, and he had never seen her in pyjamas.

"I'm sorry," said Martin. "I don't notice things like that."

"Ach," said Oma, looking sheepish, "neither do I. I've had to *learn* that people like and need to hear those things. It's a courtesy."

They were having a late lunch. Both were similar in their habits: late to bed, late to rise, preferring to eat whenever the spirit moved them. When Oma went to the kitchen for

her cup of coffee, Martin shaved off the mouldy bits on the ball of Gouda and buried them in the nearest plant pot. It had been raining all morning, and the ivy creeping over the windows was dark and alive with rain-water. Oma had just taken a sip of coffee when Martin finally said, "All day you've been telling me to ask questions about the family. Well I want to know something about you, Oma."

She set the cup down and looked squarely at him, as if meeting a challenge.

"I've heard all these stories about what you and Opa did during the war. I want to know if you were working for the Dutch or U.S. government in Indonesia."

He was shocked by the way Oma instantly began to shake. She lit a cigarette although it wasn't her usual time for a smoke.

"I can tell you about the war."

She certainly reacted to the question, but Martin wasn't going to let himself become too excited. Just mentioning the war was enough to upset her.

"Your Opa was director of Philips in Spain. During the Spanish Civil War, Opa stayed in Spain and the rest of us returned to Holland. In 1939 the Dutch Board of Directors were evacuated to New York City. There was a lack of skilled engineers in the U.S. and Opa was asked to go there. Your Opa was a *top* businessman and very loyal and he agreed to go. Arrangements were made to smuggle him and his family to the U.S."

"What arrangements?" said Martin.

"Oh you can't expect your poor Oma with her old brains to remember all those arrangements. We arrived in New York in June 1940. All our immigration papers and visas were taken care of by Philips. We were escorted through customs by Philips officials, *excellent* gentlemen, the kind you don't see any more. There was so much courtesy then, good manners. We got in touch with my brother in Djakarta, who was with the Indonesian Armed Forces. He wasn't happy to be in the army and wanted to follow his father's footsteps as a college professor. My brother and I had always been *simpatico*. I was his confidante as

I have the ability to keep secrets without telling anyone, not even your Opa who I loved dearly.”

Suddenly Martin almost jumped out of his chair. A man was standing at the window, peering in.

“Oh,” said Oma. “There’s the gardener. He was supposed to come yesterday when there was some sun. Today he comes and it’s raining.”

She rose, put on her high boots and rain coat to go to the garden, leaving her crutch on the chair.

“Uh Oma,” said Martin, pointing to it.

“It’s the hardest thing in the world, that crutch,” said Oma. “I can move around with it shopping, but not too far, and I cannot jump or kick any more. Maybe I could climb a ladder again, but that is prohibited by the family and I am an *obedient* person as you know. Everybody says: You are stupid, you should not climb any more at your age. Right they are, but wisdom is difficult to grow into. You better start now!”

She winked at him, but did not pick up the crutch. All week he had been offering to help her with the garden, but she said he wouldn’t know the difference between a plant and a weed. He already thought the story was curious. She had reacted so violently, yet her words had been carefully chosen. Then there was the little matter of all the arrangements she couldn’t remember — and since when had the U.S. lacked skilled engineers? She was a woman who admitted she was private and could keep secrets. Martin hadn’t known Oma’s father was a college professor. He was under the impression his *overgrootvader* had been a rubber plantation owner. The story of Oma running barefoot with the servants in the plantation fields was ingrained in Martin’s family history. Had she ever told it, he wondered, or did it also come from his American cousins?

Church bells were pealing when Martin entered Utrecht. Sunlight finally appeared, wheeling out of the drizzle, and for awhile Martin saw windows and weathervanes burn with a wonderful light. He looked into shop windows full of the clutter of silent fiddles, empty birdcages, clocks that had long lost track of time, wooden dolls and tailors' dummies hung with stiff uniforms or yellowed cobwebby wedding gowns. Ancient houses slanted down to the canal, wooden galleries like rotting decks of battered ships. Martin could imagine Oma's face if he was to say this to her, but the Dome Cathedral reminded him of a "Blade Runner" set design, its very age transforming it into science fiction. Martin thought his eyes were going out of focus, the way the delicacy of line and detail made it shimmer mirage-like next to the neighbouring walls of brick and stone.

He felt he was defying Oma by not entering the Dome. Instead, he walked into a smaller, less intimidating church, which he figured had been Catholic before being converted to Dutch Reform. Statues had been removed or decapitated, icons whitewashed. Martin could see the church was in the process of restoring the statues and removing the limestone wash, gradually revealing paintings which had existed underneath all this time. At eye or ladder-level, the church was whited-out, ghostly outlines of figures appearing through the limestone as if through a blinding snowstorm. Yet when he looked up, the ceiling was covered with curving designs and perfectly visible paintings of Christ, the apostles, and saints.

He had to admit that something about The Netherlands was making him uneasy, and he wondered when he would stop being surprised by how easily things seemed to turn into their opposites in this country. Earlier, he had passed an old synagogue, where the Star of David had been carefully cleaned and preserved, but the building itself turned into a chic clothing store, with the outline of a naked woman at the entrance. In a museum, he had seen a photo of an SS recruiting centre in Utrecht. It shocked Martin, seeing this gaudy building, resembling a more solid and sinister revival tent, beside the familiar brown brick on a street

he was sure he had just taken pictures of. If he felt this way, he could only imagine Deena's reaction.

He looked up at stone figures lined up furiously along the roof edges in an endless drill, their bulging breastplates reared to the pale streaky light, forever ready to hurl their lances against some form of enemy. Oma undoubtedly knew who the figures were, and would point out which ones were the best art and most worthwhile seeing, but to Martin they all looked equally intimidating. Looking down, he faced the sarcophagus of a prince or duke or baron, some privileged pillar of European society, now a life-sized statue laid out on a coffin lid, dressed for all eternity in yellow marble, among crowns and the requisite number of cherubim. The Dutch liked their successful members of society, thought Martin. Dukes, barons, mayors and businessmen. Yet nowhere did he see even one monument to the Coast-Watchers, or to any of the hundreds of Dutch who must have served in the Pacific.

He strolled past church windows glowing like jewels, stone buildings throwing down their shadows across spacious plazas and locked courtyards, past fortifications, walled schools and monasteries, all built, barely, over water. Twilight cast a blue light on the cobblestoned lane he was walking along. Swallows dove from the sky into the lane and he could hear faint piano music filtering from the shutters of a music school. When Martin was young, he loved the story of the Pied Piper, and he could actually imagine he was the Pied Piper here, leading the children into his own perfect dream of Europe.

XIV

Martin disconnected the odometer on Oma's car and joy-rode it kilometres out of the way, so he could have a picnic on the Afsluitdijk. In Canadian terms, he had driven the negligible distance between Kingston and Ottawa, but in European distance and in Oma's eyes he had crossed the country, and headed North. He had to admit there was a big difference between North Holland and Domburg. The towns were tougher, less prosperous,

and the dialect was different too, closer to Martin's own Dutch. Before sliding Oma's car back into the garage, he figured he'd better reconnect the odometer.

He sat alone on the dyke with his bread and cheese and bottle of Bitter Lemon, overwhelmed by the immensity of the sea, distant ships barely distinguishable from the clouds. The view reminded him of a map he had seen in the museum, "Antarctica," drawn when Antarctica was still a mythological continent like Atlantis, drawn as a dream by a Dutchman, with tentative lines forming the outline of an ice and mist-shrouded land. From the dyke, the whole world could have been horizontal, lines and planes, an abstraction of sea and the long narrow strip of man-made land he was sitting on. The light was lucid and steady, shining in cool cubes and planes, and Martin felt he was looking at the world through crystal, the North Sea silent and immutable, the horizon a hairline crack in the shell of the world, no sound anywhere except for the wind, no movement except for the ghostly ships.

He made his way back through Flevoland. The rain began again, and fields which in daylight looked like waterbed mattresses, turned grey and unknowable. Modern windmills stood, lonely outposts, their helicopter blades revolving wildly. Martin knew there must be sea stories, legends and plenty of phantoms lurking in this completely transformed geography. Oma must have felt something like this on the ship, although she had been so careful to give him just the facts. At night, in the rain, the land became sea, unmarked by the domesticity of houses and bike paths. Everything he had come to think of as being "The Netherlands" was washed away; all links, connections vanished, and Oma was an ocean away. He peered through sheeted glass into the ocean world, not knowing when, or if, he would see land again, almost forgetting that earlier that same day, he had been equally stunned by the clarity of his vision from the Afsluitdijk.

XV

On the piano was a photo of Oma as a young woman, smiling slightly, looking off to the side. Martin wondered how old she was when it had been taken. Never good at guessing ages, he found it even more difficult with European pictures. Had she been married then? Was it a university picture? Had she even gone to university? To Martin, she seemed educated in a formal way, someone with definite opinions. Did she receive her education in Indonesia or was she sent to school in Europe like so many others? This portrait was the only youthful picture he had ever seen of her, and it was the only one where she wasn't wearing a perplexed, "What am I doing here?" expression. She told him she hated pictures of herself.

XVI

"You never finished telling me about you and Opa in the war," said Martin.

Although she didn't react as dramatically as the last time, she flinched and rummaged for her cigarettes.

"Yes. Where did we leave off?"

"You arrived in New York and contacted your brother."

"Yes. After being set up in the U.S., Opa was asked to go to Sumatra to improve the setting up of factories there. He *refused* to go without me, for one reason because we had been separated during the Spanish war, and for another reason I was born and raised there. I had a brother, friends and contacts there."

Martin immediately picked up on the word "contacts," and thought surely that was the word an intelligence agent would use.

"We made a will, leaving everything to your mother and we sailed via Hawaii to Sydney. In Sydney we were very pleasantly surprised to be met by Opa's assistant director from Spain.

"In Djakarta we received word that Pearl Harbour had been bombed and the

Japanese were attacking the Philippines and Dutch East Indies. Refugees from Singapore were pouring into the country and that's how we could tell how serious it was, and we had to leave.

"There were no flights left, so we started looking for other ways out, and Opa used his contacts. One day we received a phone call telling us a certain ship was sailing that night and we should go to the port immediately. We were driven in a chauffeured limousine. When we arrived at the port, the officers didn't know anything about leaving. The ship sat for three days. Would you believe there were British there who had gone with golf clubs and evening dress in the middle of war? How stupid! There were some Germans there too and no one liked them. No one would take meals with them.

"A cargo of very heavy black stuff was taken on board. My driver went back and forth for my clothes and he had barely brought the last load when the ship was ready. Most people in Djakarta could not leave because they had not exit or entry visas. We were very lucky having papers to go anywhere."

Martin looked at Oma. For the first time he could remember, she truly looked tired and old. She seemed to have collapsed into a corner of the couch, and Martin couldn't bring himself to press her with questions, although he was frustrated and had hundreds of questions. He thought of Deena and her lost family, then became aware his disappointment in Oma was on the verge of turning into anger. What could he make of a woman who, in a dangerous time, made her driver go back and forth for her clothes, while in the same breath scorning the British with their golf clubs? But if she was just a rich European woman junketing around the world with her businessman husband, why were they doing it during the war? What about all her secrets, confidences and play-acting the innocent old woman which she admitted doing? He suddenly realized she was as perfectly capable of telling a story she knew would be endlessly interpreted by "those crazy North Americans" as she was of actually being an intelligence agent.

XVII

No matter where he walked around Domburg he found himself surrounded by pleasant countryside and bicycle paths which formed an entire alternative transportation network throughout the country. Railway lights flashed on schedule, the gates lowered without fail and Martin saw both yellow and blue passenger trains, and green and black freights hurrying by. He thought it was impressive the Dutch even had railways, because so much of the country was below sea level, and the ground was spongy and unable to bear weight. But then, everything around him looked pretty impressive.

He paused to watch new lines being painted on the street, although the old ones were still clearly visible. Trucks passed him, much smaller than the ones in Canada, and he noticed they all bore signs on the back saying they came with anti-lock brakes; simple common sense as far as Martin was concerned. Many of the loveliest houses in the countryside were kept with no signs of neglect, by old people; no firetrap sheds, overgrown yards, boarded up windows or sinking porches. He wondered about the country's tax structure, how it could be possible for a government to provide so much for its people. It would have been easy for him to believe there was no poverty. Yet in spite of himself, he was starting to find something almost eerie about all this perfection, and Domburg was starting to look like an advertiser's dream of a country. "The Netherlands — It Works." "Netherlands State Railway — The Engines That Could," Martin found himself thinking, as if it was a reflex action of his brain.

XVIII

He thought Amsterdam's Red Light District was sleazy, but in a curiously staged way. The prostitutes and addicts he passed were so much what he expected prostitutes and addicts to look like, they resembled actors in period costume. He saw a pimp wearing a pin-striped suit with 1970s heeled boots and the prostitute on his arm dressed in tight leather pants and a bustier. Oh come on, Martin almost said out loud. Another couple, who looked

like they had just stepped off the set of "Superfly," strolled down the street as if they were heading to their nine-to-five, and Martin actually looked around for the movie camera.

If he had wanted to, he could have bought Red Light District postcards, T-shirts and bumper stickers which said, "Good girls go to heaven. Bad girls go to Amsterdam." He was offered heroin, coke, speed and "very good opium." Martin had always thought the North American attitude toward sex and drugs was hypocritical, but here it seemed like a strange way of turning human tragedy into tourist revenue. Martin thought the Dutch government was certainly crafty to legalize drugs and prostitution and unleash tourist crowds into the area. He knew it was a master stroke of marketing. Did they charge admission to crack houses and mafia bars as well? he wondered. He was surprised sharp entrepreneurs hadn't already installed turnstiles at the official R.L.D. boundary. This was a place that posted signs saying, "No Photos" on the walls of the prostitutes' cabins, obviously preferring it if he bought the sweatshirts and postcards. Who posted those signs? he wondered. The prostitutes? The pimps? The mayor? The government? Was it a by-law?

Martin wondered who controlled the area, who had projected and manipulated this total image of "sin," all but charging admission and attracting so many people. Martin saw the hot young tomcats he expected, but also single men like himself who were roaming around looking bewildered, grandparents and family groups. He passed so many couples, he wondered if the place was being billed as some kind of honeymoon site. Martin watched girlfriends and wives promenading past the windows, looking at the prostitutes the same way their boyfriends and husbands did, laughing, evaluating their attractiveness, with none of the tugging on the arm or quick averting of the eyes Martin experienced with Deena or other female friends in Montréal on rue Bleury. All of these people seemed sheltered, looking but not involved, walking through the street life around them, as if it was some kind of virtual reality demonstration. Martin himself felt he had an eerie immunity, walking around as if he were in a museum.

Red lanterns lined the cobblestoned laneways, where women sat in picture

windows, dressed in garter belts, bustiers, bathing suits. He saw the infamous mirrors mounted by the windows, and on the ceilings inside the cabins. Most of the women were facing the street, or gazing at themselves in the mirrors, applying more makeup, touching up the merchandise. Martin saw how legalization did not remove any hierarchy of prostitution; the women in the cubicles were plump and older, while the ones working the streets, out on the corners, were thin and haggard, most likely young addicts.

Houses, housekeeping, the little woman at home waiting for her man, Martin thought with a start. He had never seen the connection between housewife and prostitute made more explicit. Images of June Cleaver with her pressed hair and starched dresses popped into his mind. These prostitutes were no more threatening than June Cleaver, he thought, in their little houses, safely behind glass, unable to pose any challenge to the snug notion of home and family, generated by legions of television writers and advertisers. This was the complete flip side to those TV shows, thought Martin. It was also the flip side to the entire town of Domburg, complete with lanterns, cobblestones and sparkling clean picture windows. He started feeling as if he was responsible for it. What did he do but sit in a cubicle all day long creating and upholding a fantasy world?

He turned a corner. A woman stood topless in a building named "That World," and she was beautiful and trapped and Martin gasped, this time passing quickly. He was aroused for the first time since entering the area but he felt ashamed. It was too much like seeing an exotic animal placed in a display case by savvy colonialists, and the bulge in his pants was just the reaction they were counting on from him. Just around another corner, he came upon a Christian Youth hostel, which also seemed strangely predictable to Martin. In the midst of red lanterns, sex museums and sado-masochism funhouses, he watched a Salvation Army service, also through a picture window, the Army of God vigilant in their stiff uniforms, singing hymns accompanied by uplifting brass.

Martin crossed the R.L.D. boundary line and found himself in an area choked with graffiti, sealed by grills and barred windows. There had been no graffiti in the Red Light

District, he suddenly thought, though it was everywhere else in the country. Kids batted balls against the windows of what was obviously a housing project. He had wandered a long way and decided to return by the subway. A drunken woman had broken her wine bottle and three cops made her pick up the pieces and throw them in the garbage, then they escorted her out of the Métro and Martin saw her stagger into a nearby snack bar. Signs telling people not to take photos were not necessary in a part of the city that was supposed to be concealed by the Red Light Dog and Pony Show. Martin knew this was an area that was supposed to remain unseen, forgotten, not designed for tourists, both uncontrollable and unmarketable, where every image did not make a profit.

XIX

“The ship finally sailed at midnight with two or three warships escorting it, heading for an unknown destination. Three other merchant ships left about the same time but none of them made it to safety. After several days at sea, Opa learned we were on the way to New York via South Africa for refuelling. The heavy black stuff was gold from Sumatra and the Dutch East Indies. It was storming when we reached South Africa — very fortunate as it provided protection from the U-boats and G-ships sneaking around the Capetown area. A telegram was sent to New York City to say we were safe, but censors removed the location so Phillips did not know where we were. Our ship finally arrived safely in New York City. We were reunited with your mom, aunt and uncle the day after we arrived.”

Oma finished her story and she slumped back in her chair, breathless and shaking. The house was in its element, dark except for the circle of lamplight around Oma and Martin. The door, keeping them from the creeping green damp of the backyard, creaked and the only working clock in the great hall ticked, relentlessly. Oma's Indonesian masks on the wall lunged out of the shadows like figureheads. He wondered what they represented, and if Oma herself knew. A statue stood with one arm broken, the other outstretched, her Oriental hairstyle perfectly sculpted and her black eyes unreadable. Martin couldn't tell if the statue

was perfectly serene, or if she was silently planning an escape and not giving anything away. Oma noticed him looking at the little statue and she said, "Do you like her?"

"I think she's my favourite," said Martin.

"Mine too. She is so sad."

Martin now heard all he figured he would hear of Oma's story. She had concluded it with finality. He knew if she really had been an intelligence agent she would have taken an oath of secrecy, that The Netherlands had an Official Secrets Act like Canada, but he did not know what to make of what she had told him. It should have ended differently, he thought. It was as if he couldn't possibly be sitting inside a house like that, beside a woman like Oma, encircled in the intimate light of an old lamp, and not have his story confirmed.

"Did all this have to do with Intelligence with the Dutch and/or U.S. governments?" said Martin.

"I should say it had to do with intelligence," said Oma. "Intelligence and luck and good timing."

Was she playing a trick on him, keeping it a secret and dodging his question after all these years, or was she being utterly straight with him, not understanding what he meant by "Intelligence?"

He thought of the Red Light District and looked at Oma's statues again, wondering if they were only colonial plunder, concealing nothing but business. He felt he had been tricked. Either there was no war story at all, or she was holding onto it, parcelling it out, just enough to keep him hanging on to the image of his Oma with the mysterious fascinating life, the great medieval house, her own dream of Indonesia represented by her statues and her wilderness of ivy. Martin knew that for every image, every dream there were ten other images to be forgotten and concealed. Maybe there was nothing he could tell Deena about his family. Could he himself accept Oma's story if it turned out to be only about business? Could he accept the fact that what he saw in his grandmother came from his own imagination, something he had to concoct and project, the "romance of Oma" no different

from his "Romance of the Railroad?" He could only too easily picture the way he would visit his American cousins again, sitting back in the chair, smiling knowingly as they told their version of the story, pretending he was keeping all the secrets she had confided in him. He also knew he was even capable of pretending to Deena that his rich, privileged family had been wartime heroes. Knowing Oma, she was depending on him to do just that, because he needed the story more than the truth and he could no longer stop himself from creating his romances.

Almost Familiar

I

Two weeks after her mother died, Eva returned to work, walking down to the bus stop with Richard, dodging road repair pits, gravel mounds and the slalom course of orange and black warning signs. She had to cross the service road of a highway, and the bus stop blurred at the other end, in a cloud of road and truck dust. A worker did up the zipper of his coveralls in front of Eva, looking brashly at her as he tugged. She felt light-headed and overwhelmed and she turned her head, looking carefully in all directions, as if she was a small child who had to be led by Richard across the street. Beyond the traffic flow, Eva could see only an empty grey-white sky. This area of the city was always busy, but now she felt if something happened to her she would not be able to shout for help. Or even if she did cry out, the words would remain in the back of her throat and no one would be able to hear her.

She walked gingerly down the stairs at Berri Métro station, joining the sound of nine o'clock people clip-clopping down to the track, turnstiles popping like distant gunshots. This station reminded her of an airport with its long passages, yet another corner to turn, another escalator to ascend or descend, signs she had to read again as if they were foreign, even though it had only been two weeks since she had last seen them. She had to stop herself from following the stream of people heading in the opposite direction.

She and Richard stood in their usual place by the door, facing each other, protected from the crowd by a pole. Eva started to mock-rant at Richard, as she did every morning, assuming her dictator's voice. "Where is the state limousine? I should not be inflicted with

the ghastly sight of people *working* before I've had my morning champagne and caviar, or had a chance to peruse my 'Daily Tyranny.' How can I enforce Total Quality Management in my labour camps now?"

A long time ago, Eva and Richard decided they were both dictators in their relationship. The dictator game started during a fight. They had reached an impasse about something or other, probably money, and Eva had brought home a picture of Napoleon she found at work and wrote out, "As I, the maniacal tyrant look down upon my pathetic peons, I reflect on how their puny lives mean nothing to me except as the brute labour necessary to execute my mad desires." She had taped this to Richard's computer screen, and when he saw it he laughed. The impasse was broken, and they had been playing the dictator game ever since.

She figured they kept up with the dictator game all this time, because in a way it told the truth about their relationship, and because it served as a safety zone. Instead of fighting over the upper hand Eva thought Richard had in their relationship, or inconsiderate things Eva did to prove she didn't need Richard, they made fun of themselves. They postured, exaggerated and laughed together, and Eva noticed that ever since the game had started, they had not had one serious fight.

On the Métro, Richard pretended to slump and said, "Oh no. I hear a speech coming on. I guess that means I can get some extra sleep. No wonder everyone in your country takes such long sestas, the way you jam the broadcast system with your speeches. All these poor people on the train are pretending to be asleep, hoping they can forget about your nightmare regime."

Eva laughed, but there was one big difference now. She had lost her sense of humour. Her morning Métro routines weren't funny any more, but she couldn't help it. It was as if she was compelled to make these morning speeches, and the only thing that saved her neck was that most of the people on the train spoke French. She gestured at the people

and said to Richard in her dictator's voice, "They all get vacations. What more can they ask for? Being leader of a country is an awe-inspiring responsibility. I don't get vacations."

Then she felt her dictator's voice slip and she was speaking in a half-normal tone. "I haven't had a vacation in five years. Unless you count my trip with Club Dead. It was such a treat I didn't even accept any pay for it. A week of lying on the beach, surrounded by all those black umbrellas and beach towels and that undertaker who served the black gins with the sprig of nightshade. I thought the whole place would die laughing."

"Everyone in your country should be given nightshade," said Richard. "Or cyanide."

"Cyanide is banned in my country," Eva said firmly, in her dictator's voice again. "People must die properly — blindfolded in the courtyard."

Usually the game would stop at this point, but she couldn't stop herself, nor could she stop her voice from sliding between her dictator's voice and her normal voice, so that it ended up sounding like the painful cracking voice of a teenaged boy. "The best part of the vacation was kicking back and visiting the family. My dad's a little mossy, but mom's there now too. Why can't some people take better care of themselves? Dying young is so déclassé, so un-middleclass. I say, make all those people buy Stairmasters. In my country, I send Fitness Cops to the rural areas. Don't get me wrong though. I enjoyed Club Dead immensely. I'm back now, truly regenerated. There's nothing like having your whole life rendered utterly meaningless to get you back in the swing of things."

Eva suddenly stopped speaking.

Lately, she had been lingering downtown after work to attend comedy shows, without telling Richard what she was doing. For all she knew, he could be imagining her having an affair, although she was really sitting by herself in Club Soda or The Comedy Nest, waiting for another stand-up comic to appear on stage. She was fascinated by them. To Eva, there was something incredibly brave about a comic appearing on stage, singled out in light. It was like seeing someone walking a tightrope and she sat on the edge of her seat, afraid the comic would slip up, afraid the audience wouldn't laugh, or worse, start heckling and

fleeing for the parking lot. On the Métro these mornings, she had a hint of what it must feel like to be on stage, walking that line between wanting to keep it funny and being capsized by the undertow of what went into that humour, all in front of people who went to comedy clubs to laugh.

Richard placed his hands on her shoulders and made her look at him. "We're taking a vacation," he said.

"You know I can't afford it," she said quietly. "I won't get paid and if I take too much time, they'll bring someone else in to do my job. That means Club UIC. UIC's a nightmare these days. If I go on a vacation and I lose my contract, that'll be a 'quit for unjust cause.'"

"Unjust cause!" said Richard. "That's ridiculous. Your mother has just died. You've worked for five years without taking a break, and a funeral is not a break. That's not unjust cause. You can appeal that."

Eva smiled. "You're so cute — naïve but cute. I've already checked with the Labour Board, with the Minimum Wage Commission, and with UIC. Basically, I'm screwed."

"We'll forget about the job then," said Richard. "I make enough, and if I can't even help out, what kind of person am I? We'll go on a vacation, anywhere you want."

"Is this what things are going to be like from here on in?" said Eva. "Me having nothing and depending on you?"

"Well that's how it works in my country," said Richard in his dictator's voice. "The peons have nothing, and I have everything. It works for me."

"Look over there," said Eva, pointing.

Richard turned his head and Eva said, "There's a coup going on in your country right now and I'm making a grab for your treasury. I don't really feel like heading into an abyss of anonymous failure just yet, so I think pistol-whipping you up a City Hall aisle is a good plan. I'll spend all the holidays sucking up to your family and forget it's because I have nowhere else in the world to go. I'll plunge myself into your career. I won't say a word about my childhood because no one is around to remember it anyway. We'll have kids and then

I'll throw all my frustrations into being a perfect mother and then, conscious of how my own life as an independent human being failed, make damn sure that kid gets into medical school. That's how it works isn't it? This is what happens to people like me."

"We'll look at the atlas tonight," said Richard.

When they got off the Métro, Richard linked his arm around Eva's, but she felt embarrassed, as if she had been on stage and the light had been turned on her at the wrong time and she was standing in front of an audience with tears streaking down her cheeks. Her mother died, she had no family, she was someone who had been working for six years in one place as casual labour. She was someone who had become what she most feared, a shadowy, weightless, useless half of a couple, and it was as if Richard had just seen her fall.

II

Eva resented the way Audis and BMWs owned the Autobahn, the way they expected tourists, lesser cars and particularly the Eastern European "peanut cars" to keep their places in the right lane. She wondered how the East Germans and Czechs felt, crunched up in their Trabants, Skodas and Moskvitches, pausing for frequent breakdowns and overheated engines, seeing the sleek Western cars sailing by them. She had a good idea by the way they always deferred, pulling over to the shoulders for Westerners, and she felt dismayed, jolted when the cars pulled over for her and Richard.

Richard received an angry blast from someone's high beams when he had the temerity to actually slow down to allow a Skoda to rejoin the traffic. Eva hated passing the little cars. Richard was right, they really were terrible cars with blackened exhaust pipes, and they smelled like naphtha. But she liked them, the way their shades of blue, green and yellow gave them a foolhardy, festive quality. Eva cheered whenever she saw a peanut car pull into the left lane, challenging an Audi's divine right. She would have been happier if they could have stayed in the right lane, keeping pace with them, or poking along behind them, but it didn't seem to be possible, either by the rules of the road, or the design of the cars.

A rented Opel wasn't an Audi but it couldn't sit behind a Skoda either, and Eva kept wanting to apologize every time they passed one.

The border crossing between West and East Germany was as eerie as Eva imagined, with all the state apparatus still in place, but deserted. Watch-tower windows were broken. Vines twisted around searchlights, turning them into Maypoles. Signs instructing people to slow down and stop had been painted over, so spectral *Achtungs* floated above cars flying past them as fast as possible, fading into the forlorn grey-blue of the sky. Eva had wanted an East German stamp on her passport, but there was no one in the booth to ask. All gone, thought Eva. With only hints it had ever once existed. She shivered, not knowing if it was miraculous or a frightening emptiness. She was sure she could hear the sound of speeding cars echoing for miles.

At the border crossing between East Germany and Czechoslovakia, on the German side, two guards stood by a painted line on the highway, and Richard pulled up to them. A man in a booth neither had noticed barked "Halt!" and ordered them over to the booth. "Don't shoot!" Eva cried, imagining the guards raising their guns. The poker-faced man examined their passports, then looked out the window at Richard and Eva, then at the Opel Richard had rented in Amsterdam with the Netherlands sticker on it. "Kanada!" he stated in a voice implying they had pulled a fast one on him. Eva heard the "K" in the word.

As soon as they felt they had passed the border, and were definitely in Czechoslovakia, Richard pulled over.

"You realize we don't have any Czech money and neither of us knows the word for bank?" said Richard.

He looked alarmed, but Eva couldn't stop herself from feeling pleased at his discomfort. She had hoped travelling like this, absorbed in momentary impressions and encounters would make her feel she and Richard were on equal footing. She had chosen Prague because she had always wanted to go there, but Richard had been unnerved by her choice, and it felt to her like an unexpected bonus.

"Aww," she said. "Don't tell me the poor dictator is scared. Prague-phobia can be cured with help. Don't you have support groups for overthrown despots in your country?"

Richard puffed out his chest. "I am not scared. I am merely concerned about my people."

They laughed and embraced, then Eva couldn't stop herself from saying in her normal voice, "Now you know how I've been feeling in Montréal these days."

Huge single family houses and old churches marked the countryside, looking like abandoned barns on the outskirts of Montréal. Walled villages gave Eva the feeling she was at a cold, off-season beach. The walls, which were the colour of wet sand, blended into an enflamed sky and burnished leaves, all blanketed by the haze of soft coal, burning wood, and scrub fires, until Eva had the impression the whole country was smouldering. A teenager, without jacket or helmet, shot by them on an antique motorbike, his long blond hair washed in diesel oil and dust. Eva held her breath, imagining how unprotected he was, and how nothing would cushion his fall.

They passed hundred of Liaz trucks, all smelling like Coleman stoves, and a massive industrial site, which looked to Eva like the ones featured in PBS documentaries about Eastern Europe, appeared out of nowhere. She thought of the refineries out past Pointe-aux-Trembles, the oil storage tanks painted in bright primary colours, pipes that snapped together, looking as cheery and harmless as if they had been designed by Fisher Price. Here, the statues of workers at the entrance were so coated with oil, coal and car exhaust, she could hardly tell what they originally depicted. They were honest if nothing else, she thought, these statues of workers reduced to shapes made of the substances that were killing them.

"God, the pollution," said Richard. "My eyes are stinging."

"Well why don't you march in and tell them they're offending your delicate sensibilities," snapped Eva. "There's plenty of pollution at home, you know. I can smell this

walking to the bus stop every morning.”

She knew she was reacting as if he had made a personal criticism, and she hadn't been thinking anything much different from what he had said. She saw Richard looking at the countryside, with a detached, almost smug look on his face, and she imagined him looking at her that way. Shaven hills swelled, advanced and receded, completely unlike the ones in West Germany which were so defined and anchored by their miles of forests and endless vertical rows of corn. The countryside looked bare naked, she thought suddenly. The villages made her think of camouflaged villages in wartime, designed to disappear into their surroundings, the family treasures covered in plain brown wrapping. The roadside shrines they passed cheered her a little. She was unable to imagine the shrines had all been removed, placed in some sort of storage, and then reinstated after December 1989. Maybe the churches were all abandoned, but someone had been carefully tending to the saints all along, and she liked that thought.

When they reached Karlovy-Vary and parked the car, Eva felt as if she had somehow gone back in time to the early sixties, but instead of seeing it as a young child, she had gone back with the eyes of an adult. Faded signs in store windows, resembling good-life 1960s "Drink Coca Cola" billboards advertised Russian vodka. The signs reminded her it was a resort town, but she couldn't help noticing it was inextricably mixed with poverty. The wide boulevard, grand hotel on the corner, casual clusters of people gave her a familiar holiday feeling, an echo of the feeling she had when her parents took her on trips when she was young, but mixed with the feeling it was an illusion. This must have been what things really looked like as a child, she thought. Everything she couldn't remember, or purposefully left out of the childhood stories she told Richard. The ragged patches of paint on the walls of buildings, the cardboard replacing window panes seemed very familiar to Eva. She almost stumbled over a mound of coal at a chute and watched, trying to be unobtrusive, as two elderly people loaded coal into two buckets on a wagon, then scuttled off with their booty.

Her family had once had their electricity cut off, and she had never wondered what would happen if her parents simply could not have paid to have it reinstated.

She and Richard were relieved the hotel on the corner could change money. The woman at the desk spoke some English, and Eva was touched by how proud the woman was about speaking English and having this job. Richard pulled out two hundred *Deutschmarks* and passed them to her. The woman blanched.

"This — you want changed?"

Eva and Richard nodded.

"Czech money you want?"

They nodded again.

"Currency regulations are — no more," the woman said carefully. "Spending in the country — you no longer have to do."

Eva and Richard looked at each other.

"We weren't sure about that," said Richard. "We have an old guide book."

"You still need?"

Richard nodded. The woman reached into a drawer and pulled out a wad of Czech crowns, peeling off what seemed endless bills.

"Here," said the woman. "A receipt I give you. Proof that you changed money at respectable place. You can change back into *Deutschmarks* anywhere, anytime. A guarantee."

Eva was glad to have the receipt, but she wanted to spend all the money in Czechoslovakia. She didn't want to know that two hundred *Deutschmarks* equalled that many Czech *koruna*. "Thank you very much," said Eva and Richard together, but Eva almost felt as if she and Richard were accomplices committing a bank robbery. She wanted to break away from Richard and tell the woman the money was all his.

Their pockets were now stuffed with *koruna*, stiff greenish bills with a man's portrait on them. Eva remembered reading somewhere, probably at work, that the new currency was

issued just before the change of government, and the pictured man was an old-guard Stalinist.

"Since we're here," said Eva, "let's go into the restaurant and get some swill. Ministry of Swill, there's no caffeine in my system. This outrage can't be allowed to continue."

In the restaurant, Eva half-expected women from the pages of old *Life* magazines to enter, dressed in slim suits and pink pillbox hats. Instead, a harried waiter tossed two badly typed menus on the table.

"Hmm," said Eva. "My guess is *káva*."

She made a stab at pronouncing the word, then pointed to it on the menu. The waiter disappeared. Half an hour later a small cup of coffee appeared on the table. Grains swirled from the bed of grounds at the bottom of the cup.

"Bubble bubble toil and trouble," said Eva. "I wonder if there's some way of reading coffee grounds."

"That really looks foul."

"Tastes like French coffee, only a little chewy. We coffee drinkers are a hardy breed."

"You've got some grounds caught between your front teeth," said Richard.

Eva started picking her teeth and Richard cleaned his glasses. He had only recently started wearing glasses and she thought he cleaned them obsessively.

"You look like a raccoon, constantly cleaning those things," she said.

"She says, picking her teeth in public," said Richard.

When Eva put on Richard's glasses so everything was just a little blurred and distorted, the hotel did look grand and resort-like with high ceilings and huge windows, people grouped leisurely at tables, but when she took them off again, she could see the dining hall was as austere as a church hall, overheated and drafty at the same time, permeated by the same smell of coffee. A creaking echoing building that seemed as if the wind could unfasten it from its foundation, and it would go sailing down the boulevard. It reminded Eva of her mother's house after Eva had moved all the furniture out of the living

room. She had stripped the old rug off the floor, shocked by how bare and strange the room had become, and how the layout of the rooms, without furniture, did not look like any house she could ever have lived in. The house was for sale, but Eva's mother hadn't wanted to let anyone in to see it, and had dreaded people seeing her so shrunken and diminished, with no more substance to her than a tiny bird, her skin frighteningly transparent with a faded greenish tint from the radiation treatments.

At night, Eva slept in her old bedroom which had become the spare room, and the rain echoed all over the house, and tree branches brushing against the windows sounded like townspeople in the bushes, villagers from old movies with torches and pitchforks, trying to peer in through the window at them. Eva understood only too well why her mother didn't want anyone to come inside, even if it was to help. She shuddered, trying to imagine what her mother would have done, or not done, if she hadn't had a daughter.

"What is it sweetie?" Richard asked.

His expression was so tender, almost beseeching, that Eva couldn't make a joke. She didn't know whether she wanted to cry or leave the table, or what she wanted from him. His sympathy was unbearable to her, but she knew she didn't want him not to care.

"Just thinking," said Eva.

The waiter finally returned, with a price scribbled on a scrap of paper.

"I don't know if we can keep squandering our money like this," said Richard. "Know how much that coffee cost you in Canadian?"

"No clue," said Eva.

"Somewhere between five and ten cents."

"Are you serious?"

"I think I understand why that woman at the counter reacted like that," said Richard.

"What should we do about tipping?"

"I think they add the tip on," said Richard. "I saw him write something down, then he erased it and wrote that. But it doesn't seem right not to leave a tip."

"But if we do aren't we sort of flaunting something? Here my good man, we're rich tourists, here's a penny for your trouble."

"It's such a little bit of money. He can use it so who cares," said Richard.

"That's not the point," said Eva, surprised by the edge in her voice. "Maybe he's a proud man, doing his job, getting by the best way he knows how and he's sick to death of people coming in with money and throwing it around as if it could help, as if it could do anything for his life and the way things really are, simply because they can, because they have power and he doesn't ..."

"Whoa," said Richard. "You were once a waitress. What did you call people who didn't leave you a tip?"

"Scum-sucking leeches," said Eva.

"Well there you go. I think our basic choice is we can be rich North Americans and leave a tip, or be rich North American cheapskates."

"Yeah but — there's no way around that is there?" It was the most complicated coffee Eva had ever ordered.

Outside the hotel, pairs of men Eva couldn't decide were policemen or soldiers strolled down the boulevard, their faces reminding her of soldiers' faces in World War II photos, aching young and unformed in their olive uniforms. A white palace at the center of a park made her feel chilled and lonely, although there was no particular reason for it. It was at the centre of a pleasant park where people sat on the benches, not as grandiose and authoritarian as many in Paris with their dictator balconies. The palace did not jar Eva with the collision of cultures like some of the buildings in Strasbourg, the way warm peach and pink walls would be weighed down with Germanic falcon crests or ebony-coloured beams. She couldn't understand her discomfort, or why every snapshot she took felt like something she was stealing from the city. It was a strange feeling of being in surroundings

that looked a little familiar, but changed so they were not quite the way she remembered them. Like the way she might feel if she returned to see her mother's house, even though it was only a month after her death.

"I think we should go on to Prague," she said, keeping her voice light. "Either that or I really need the spa that's supposed to be here."

"Yeah, those cops are giving me the creeps," said Richard.

III

She and Richard plummeted into a dark area of Prague where the buildings, as massive and impregnable as cliffs, overlooked long blocks without streetlights. There were very few cars on the road, and Eva thought it looked like an occupied city after curfew. She could imagine people sequestered in secret annexes. Streets circled and zig-zagged, cut to fit around great buildings, some as narrow and treacherous with as little margin for error as mountain passes. Richard guided the car into shadow-warped alleys, past tall silent buildings with their windows blanched bright in the moonlight. They seemed to stare out at Eva with the eyes of the blind. Looking down at her hands, she saw every vein and wrinkle stand out, and outside the car window, every leaf, brick and shadow stood out too, limned like a photograph in silver and black clarity. A large motionless merry-go-round in a public square made Eva think this could be a real Pinocchio city, one that could be severe and foreboding. She could imagine Pinocchio and his friend Lampwick being changed into donkeys because they were bad at their lessons.

After spending what seemed hours driving back and forth over every one of Prague's sixteen bridges, they found the tourist bureau, only to be confronted by a scrawled sign taped over the wicket which said, "No rooms." When Richard was almost ready to give up and was trying to resign himself to parking somewhere and sleeping in the car, they finally found the Hotel Savoy. Eva thought it looked and smelled like a post office, and it was so inexpensive, she again had the feeling she and Richard were committing a crime. She tuned

an old white radio on the cabinet and found only one music station, playing soft stately classical music. Eva supposed it was meant to be soothing, but she found it accentuated the strange mixture of the familiar and completely unknown, the sense she couldn't shake of being in the past, her own past but rearranged and with something missing. Many weary tourists had found the Savoy and it made her think of a dorm, the way the doors constantly banged, the way groups seemed interconnected with other groups in associations formed long before Eva's arrival. Police cars, visible from the window, barrelled down the empty streets, conjuring up all the police state associations her imagination could generate.

"Maybe they don't do much any more," said Richard. "Maybe they just drive around like cowboys now."

"I heard a lot of sirens in Paris," said Eva. "They weren't scary though. They were just part of the street noise and it almost sounded like party time, not this one drawn-out sound echoing through the night."

She was conscious of her own voice making conversation. It felt as if she had brought someone back to a dorm room after a dance, and they were tentatively sounding each other out. She thought she should be making coffee or offering him a beer or something, a few rounds of backgammon.

"Why do you love me?" she asked him suddenly. Richard looked surprised, because she didn't usually ask questions like this.

"Because I have to," he said. "I've been ordered to by the Great Dictator."

"No, seriously."

Richard paused, and Eva was aware of how silent the streets were. She thought of how quiet everyone had been around her at work, after she returned from her mother's funeral. She could describe to Richard the murmurs and rustles of uneasy condolence from her co-workers, and how the floor seemed to shimmer beneath her feet until she wanted to break a window and wave an SOS flag. But she couldn't make him feel the complete unreality, the way she would see someone on the street who looked like her mother, or father

for that matter, how her heart would start pounding as if it could be possible. But it came down to the fact she would never ever see them on a street anywhere, and while Richard was surrounded by flesh and blood family members, she could only see phantoms and touch photographs. Eva supposed she asked the question, hoping his answer would make her feel real.

He finally said, "Well you're sweet and cuddly."

"Yeah yeah, so are hundreds of people."

Richard drew back. He looked at her with the confused, tender expression which hurt Eva because he couldn't know what she wanted from him, when she herself didn't know.

"You see things differently than anyone else. You give me a conscience. You make me *think* about things."

It was the answer she always thought she wanted to hear from Richard, but she herself could no longer believe it was true. Or that it mattered even if it was true.

"I'm just really worried," she said. "I can't see any reason on earth why you would want to love me. It seems like I get by because of your support, your generosity, and I just plain don't have anything to offer."

"I think of us as a couple," said Richard. "When you're upset, so am I. I don't keep tabs on whose money is whose, how much I'm putting into this or how much you're putting into it. I'm being honest when I say what's mine is yours."

"That's kind of my point," said Eva. "You're even a better *person* than I am."

"Do you want me not to help out?"

"Of course not," said Eva. She was back to square one again. Of course she wanted him with her. Of course she didn't want him to be indifferent or callous.

They sat down on opposite ends of the bed. Richard started changing into his pyjamas and Eva looked at his body as if seeing it for the first time, as if she had never felt

his fine dryish skin before, or connected his moles with a felt pen, or felt his jaw bone pressed ardently against her cheeks or breasts.

"I'm feeling really inhibited," said Eva. "Strange, like I want to change in the bathroom."

"Yeah," said Richard. "I know what you mean."

He started cleaning his glasses.

"Oh no," said Eva in her dictator's voice. "It's the ritual cleaning of the glasses. Every night after you polish all your medals and have some peon lick your boots clean."

"I can't appear from my balcony unpolished," said Richard.

They looked at each other and started laughing. Their laughter sounded hollow and sad to Eva though, as if they really were two strangers in a hotel room, or two old friends who were about to have sex for the first time.

The door handle rattled in the night. Any time someone on the floor stumbled to the w.c., their door shook. Richard stirred. "Weird dreams," he mumbled. "I keep hearing those sirens. The S.Q. was in my dream. They stopped me on some trumped-up charge somewhere outside of Québec City, and I had no recourse." He wrapped his arms around her and drew himself close. She lay awake, feeling his heart beating like a little animal, and she held him, thinking of being in the hospital holding her mother, wondering why it had to be that the only times she experienced this kind of power, it had to be tinged with despair, the sense of holding someone's fragile life in her hands, feeling if she moved the wrong way or said the wrong thing, she could destroy someone. She wondered why it had to be that when she was strong, someone else had to be weak.

In the Malá Strana district, Eva passed an old house with a star-shaped plaque above the entrance in Czech, German, French and English, describing it as the house where Goethe might have lived if he had ever lived in Prague. In one morning she had been confronted by palaces and consulates with carved portals, tip-toeing to see high proud

windows and cornices glistening like ice, eye-level with lions' heads and heavy bronze door knockers, and then passing tiny houses she almost had to bend over to look at, houses so old they were rounded at the edges: the plaster covering their brick or stone seeming to frost them. Eva consulted the book on Prague she carried in her bag and was delighted to discover people had given them names like, "At the Golden Star," or "Golden Tree."

Before coming to Prague, she read the story of John Nepomuk, who refused to betray the Queen's confidences to King Wenceslas and was thrown off the Charles Bridge one night in 1393, into the dark waters of the Vltava. The King's henchmen pushed back the people with their spears, but when the holy man disappeared into the waves, five small blue flames appeared on top of the water as a sign to the people. Statues of John Nepomuk presided over every dark corner where the boat had stopped, and Eva was excited to see the same story she had read repeated on a plaque. These were exactly the kinds of stories, the kind of history she had hoped to find in Prague. It was a sly, miraculous and very human history, of an occupied people defying various forms of authority, from John Nepomuk right on down to the poor people naming their cottages, people holding on to their own in the best ways they knew how, and these were the stories that were passed on through the centuries so Eva could hear them too, whimsical defiance coming down the years and into the streets, working their way between the bricks and into the stone poetry of the architecture. Eva didn't know very much about Czech history but she thought she understood the stories better than she understood the grandeur in Paris, great deeds that might have been, great people adopted by the city whether or not they had ever even visited Prague.

While Eva was resting in a square a ragtag parade wended its way past her, a merry collection of jesters and minstrels, a man beating a big bass drum in a brightly coloured patchwork suit, and best of all an elephant that looked like Topo Gigio, distributing flyers advertising a brand new performance theatre. This seemed to Eva to be so connected with the stories she had read and the history all around her, she applauded. One of the jesters bowed, kissed her hand and gave her a flyer. She felt happier than she had in months, as

if she herself was part of, and even contributing to the history of Prague. It finally felt as if something was right.

Wenceslas Square was vast, a boulevard rather than a square, and Eva imagined what it must have looked like in December during the Velvet Revolution. She was delighted to discover the King Wenceslas of the statue was the hero of the Christmas song. She had always been fascinated by that song, able to picture the king on horseback, the snow lying deep and crisp and even all around him, the poor man gathering winter fuel the same way that little couple in Karlovy-Vary had scooped up the coal. A woman tending a memorial at the statue placed fresh flowers in the jars, wiped the plastic-wrapped photographs of people who had been killed in 1968, and straightened the vivid little shrines.

Eva wished she could do that for her mother. A photograph and a handmade cross were so much more poignant than straight rows of tombstones, a handful of wildflowers instead of decorously planted geraniums and shrubs. She supposed nothing short of a procession along a windswept field, mountains glooming in the distance, a holy man in ceremonial robe carrying a mysterious symbol, handfuls of earth, dirges and head-to-toe black would have satisfied her. When her time came, it was either that or to just walk into the river like the film-maker, Claude Jutras. She detested the stuffy little rooms full of polite chatter in funeral homes, more comfortable and sterilely middle class than anything she or her parents had known, with carpets muffling any sound of grief, the Kleenex box always at hand to absorb the pain.

She found Richard near the statue of King Wenceslas, taking pictures.

"There you are," he said. "I was a little worried you got lost."

"Like I can't walk across the street without you?" said Eva. She immediately regretted saying that and added, "Oh I did get lost, you know me. This street map I got at work is five years old and all the names have changed, which made everything fun."

"I got into a conversation with a German tourist about cameras. He had an old Leica, just like my father's," said Richard. "You didn't come across any postcard or souvenir shops in your wanderings, did you? I promised to send my parents and my grandmother postcards from Prague."

"I didn't see any," said Eva. "But I didn't even look. I don't have to send postcards any more. I could send some to friends, but it doesn't matter whether or not I do. I don't have to go to my home town ever again, I don't have to remember anyone's birthday, I don't have to buy souvenirs, I don't have to do anything any more."

She hadn't meant to sound as if she was wallowing in self-pity. The thoughts had just come to her mind and she was sounding them out, feeling her way around them, trying to get used to the whole idea of living without mattering to someone else, of not having anyone who *needed* her.

Richard massaged her shoulder blades and although it felt good, she suddenly felt stifled, as if he had been sensing her thoughts and had come to stop them, to prevent any sort of release. She drew away from him sharply, almost able to hear a tearing sound, and headed blindly down the boulevard, knowing how hurt he must be, and that he didn't deserve this treatment, yet she was unable to stop herself. She noticed how the faded glory of the art deco "Hotel Europa" existed beside dingy department stores, more 1960s style vodka advertisements, and the mood she had been in while looking at the statue and the shrines vanished, leaving her confused, disoriented. It was as if she couldn't reconcile the two sides of Prague. She didn't know if the glory of the Old Town disguised the bleak, uncertain present, or whether the Old Town was the real, true Prague, and the rest was temporarily imposed on it. It also felt to her as if Richard's sympathy had caused the great emotion she had felt in Old Prague to give way to a feeling of loss, of being trapped in a grey uncertain present. She couldn't even pretend to be a shadow of her old self if he was constantly pitying her.

Richard had been in an odd formal, even courtly mood since Wenceslas Square.

"I should have known you were upset," he said.

"You did nothing wrong," said Eva. "You never do. You were sweet — like you always are. I was mean to you — big surprise."

"I don't know what it's like. I've never lost anyone close. My grandmother is ninety-two."

She looked at his face. He had filled out since she first met him ten years ago. There was now a network of faint lines around his eyes, and the two lines extending from his nose to his chin were becoming ever deeper and more indelible, just as hers were. She had to think he looked happier, more content since they had become a couple. Ten years ago, she had advertised for a third room-mate and he had shown up on her doorstep, thin and hungry-looking, his beautiful dark hair practically shoulder-length, wearing a jean jacket which was at least two sizes too large for him. She thought it must have taken her all of five minutes to fall in love with him. They moved eight times in ten years — together. For five years they both worked contract office jobs. Times were good when they both had high-paying contracts. Times were bad when they were both out of work, the lowest point coming when she had goaded him into chasing her around Place Ville Marie, and they had thrown the bank books at each other, neither wanting to take responsibility for their bleak financial state.

Then Richard got his MBA, became an associate professor in a Management faculty, finally getting his PhD so he would be assured of being able to rise through the ranks. He had changed so much in ten years, thought Eva, and they were good changes. Friends often told her they had never seen a man who had flourished so completely being part of a relationship. But sometimes she found herself missing the old hungry Richard, and found the successful Richard oppressive. Her life hadn't changed in the slightest, she thought, except become worse.

"I can't take being nothing but a pathetic wretch any more. I just live on your charity and I can't stand it any more."

"You are *not* living on my charity."

She thought she detected a smug look to the set of his lips. He was developing a detached, above-it-all expression, and she felt an urge to hurt him, to wipe that look off his face.

"You've never thought of me as your equal, have you? I've always been your own private charity case, haven't I? Just someone to bug your mother, or give you comic relief from your stuffy professor friends. Maybe you figure you can score big points in the next life by being a saint to this big loser. I bet deep down, you secretly love this."

He placed his hands on her shoulders, and Eva found herself excited and aroused by the passion which appeared on his face, and in his voice.

"What brought this on? Just what crime against humanity have I committed anyway?"

"I'd rather live in a cardboard box in a park making speeches to innocent passersby than go on like this. I think we should split up. We're not a couple — just a host and a parasite. I'm leaving this hotel. I'm staying here in Prague. I could teach English. Yes, that is something I could actually *do* without your help."

She knew she had hurt Richard. The worst thing she could do was tell him their relationship was worthless. The biggest difference between them was, she thought, that he loved being part of a couple, and she loved Richard. If she ceased loving Richard, the relationship would end. Sometimes she suspected he could go on forever without ever wondering if he still loved her, Eva. His face became cold and he said, "Now you're just being silly."

"I've got news for you — people are silly. I'm leaving."

"There's an empty threat."

The door slammed when she left. She looked behind her and saw Richard following her. She started to run. Gradually he dropped back, then disappeared. The absurdity of it all finally hit her full force, and she wondered what the police would say if she flagged one down to complain about being pursued by a good man who wanted to help her. She could see it being a comedy in Paris, a farce with a happy ending, Eva knowing exactly how she felt and what she wanted from Richard, Richard understanding, and the two of them falling into each other's arms in the hazy twilight commotion at the Eiffel Tower. Here, she knew no one would understand her rejecting a man like Richard.

Eva felt watched as she made her way into the Old Town. The statues were more numerous than the people walking the streets. They stood on top of the highest buildings, lay down on the stone tombs, sat on horseback, adorned cornices like the figureheads of old ships. They stood in the hearts of fountains, glistening with water. Granite eye sockets shed tears of soot. She strolled down mysterious boulevards in the dusk, looking up at the narrow crooked houses with their charmed entrances, wishing she knew the word that would open the wooden doors and latched gates to her. Cobblestones shone as if they had risen from the sea. The moon came rolling out from behind the clouds and a golden weathercock pecked at the few small revealed stars. The rising moon filled the streets with a snowy light. Medallions above doors contained women's portraits and the moonlight brought them to life, their stone faces becoming tender to Eva, almost flesh and blood.

Everything people had ever dreamed was right there in Prague, on buildings, in public squares; angels, demons, mystic rabbis, holy saints, every vision of heaven and hell was painted or carved or sculpted, and right in front of Eva's eyes, depending on which corner she turned. She knew she had walked around in circles when she again passed the statue of the crouching man whose hunted face looked exactly like Kafka's. He was frightening enough at noon, she thought. White lettering on a garage door "Garaz Neparkovat!" floated in front of her, looking like mirror writing. She thought of the first day when she returned to work after her mother's death, coming up from the depths of the Métro

and noticing, as if for the first time, the office building she came out of was called "Aetna," a word that looked vaguely Greek, and that it might mean something if she could only find the right way of rearranging the letters. Feeling that way in Montréal had been alarming to her, yet in Prague it seemed natural.

Eva strolled down the Charles Bridge. There were plenty of tourists, but the crowds were not overwhelming, and Eva wasn't used to seeing so much space between groups. She stood in front of a black Christ with a sign saying "Inri," and some Hebrew words in gold hanging around the statue's neck like a Christmas garland. Eva had read the Jews had been forced to erect the statue and renounce their faith, but had slipped in some Hebrew words to the effect of "not really." She stood, thinking how it summed up everything she had seen in Prague.

It grew darker. Only a few vendors remained on the bridge, flicking matches and lighters to show their wares, one burning his hands while she selected an ink drawing. Making her way across the bridge, she passed some Czechs playing frisbee with Russian army hats. Someone tossed a hat to Eva, and she held it, unable to believe she could actually join in. Another Czech pretended to set his hat on fire and everyone roared with laughter. Without Richard, Eva suddenly felt free, as if she had emerged from a long convalescence. She pretended to stamp on her hat. She pounded her chest and strutted around, curling her finger under her nose as a moustache.

"Charlie Chaplin!" someone called out.

Someone flung her a general's hat with gold braid, and she put it on and postured, really imitating Charlie Chaplin. The Czechs couldn't stop laughing and neither could Eva. She thought of how this would probably not be happening if Richard were with her, and she laughed even harder as they did a Charlie Chaplin conga line down the bridge. Some of the Czechs were calling things out, and Eva called out in English, in her dictator's voice, "Hell with the Russians! Hell with the Germans! Hell with Richard!" She didn't have to worry about slipping into her normal voice, or saying anything that could wound another person.

or revealing too much, or appearing as if she was falling. She knew the Czechs couldn't understand her, and she didn't know exactly what they were calling out, but she felt they were united, and she could go on being Charlie Chaplin forever.

Lights switched off, the river flowed into history, jazz bands on the bridge continued to play softly in the dark. Eva stopped. Nowhere else had she ever experienced such a feeling of transition, of sheer open vulnerability, uncertain celebration; emotions mingling the way darkness mingled with light. Pain and joy on the verge of turning into each other, it was that precarious, and it hurt that much. She continued walking toward the castle, past boutiques, antique and china shops. A group of Czechs just ahead of her suddenly, spontaneously, started singing, in parts and harmonies, walking toward the castle, blazing against the black sky. She wanted to believe the poverty and scavenging she had seen was the illusion, and this beauty was what was real. She wanted to believe it was possible there would be a place in the world, where people could just start singing like this, and she could follow them to the ends of the earth, with tears streaming down her face, as if this was the most reasonable and natural thing in the world to be doing. She wanted to believe in the stories of resistance, of underdogs rewriting their own history, and it was exactly how she wanted to rewrite her own history, the difference she wanted to maintain between herself and Richard. As if just by playing Charlie Chaplin, or hearing the singing, she could believe in the validity of her own life. That her circumstances truly did not matter, but that she could, really could see, hear, touch, taste, and this could be enough. Just to exist could be enough.

Completely exhausted, she found the same restaurant where she and Richard had had morning coffee and afternoon lunch. Restaurants were still scarce enough that this one had become a real meeting place, although tourists sat on one side and Czechs on the other. She hesitated. After her experience on the Charles Bridge, she did not want to sit on the tourist side, but the Czechs were sitting in large interconnected groups, already deep in their

own conversations. The tourists sat spaced apart from each other, and Eva felt she didn't have a choice.

The staff worked long hours. She was served by the same waitress she and Richard had this morning, and the same man was sitting in the bathroom, collecting his two *korunas* and handing out generous sections of toilet paper. Earlier at lunch, she and Richard had entered into a conversation with a jovial German man about the food and bathrooms. Eva's initial response to the man in the bathroom must have been quite visible, for the German man laughed and said, "That was my wife's reaction exactly." Now the man in the bathroom seemed as familiar to Eva as a co-worker. She thought of how the German man had saved the table for her and Richard, and in spite of his complaints, left an enormous tip without having to think about it.

A group of British students sitting near Eva compared records they had bought, rare albums at incredible bargain prices, by the sounds of it. Eva examined the menu. Dinner was a choice between goulash and steak. She chose the goulash. The British students all ordered ice cream desserts, which all of a sudden looked unbelievably enticing, and Eva requested the same. The waitress very apologetically told her the restaurant had run out of ice cream. "Sorry. No more. Gone," she said. Her expression was so much one of "I can't do anything" that Eva longed to tell the waitress, "No, you shouldn't be apologizing to me. I'm the one with the gargantuan North American appetite."

The waitress brightened up when Eva ordered a beer. "Now that's something I can provide," her face expressed. Eva was given an enormous pitcher for what would have been something like twenty cents, and the look of relief on the waitress's face made Eva ache. No wonder all the tables were laden with these pitchers. She was overcome by the same feeling she had in the mornings when every day it seemed as if there was another homeless person standing at the top of the escalator with his hand out, or bundled up in foetal position on the floor, and even if she gave them everything she had in her pocket every morning, it would not do a damn thing. She thought of Richard and wondered if there was really any difference

between his kind fumbling attempts to help her, and the way she had been loving and pitying a poor but proud country, imposing her own self onto someone else's brave, creative underdog history. She was afraid she had made a terrible mistake, when Richard came in through the restaurant door.

To Eva, he looked just like he did the first time he had come to her apartment, his movements swift and direct, his black trenchcoat looking exactly like something he would have worn in the old days, even though she had picked it out herself.

"I was hoping you'd come back here," said Richard.

"I'm sorry," said Eva. "For all those things I said."

She saw his face soften, and she had always loved the way his face could almost imperceptibly change from being cool and distant to soft and tender, and how little it took to make it change. She remembered the way his heart had beat, how he had curled up as close to her as possible, how she had held him on that first night in the Savoy.

"Why the change of heart?"

"It's being here," said Eva. "The waitress's face, the police even — I can't explain it."

She started to tell Richard about her walk down the Charles Bridge, then picked up the hat from her lap and put it on her head.

Richard laughed. "Hah! They know a dictator when they see one."

"It has real gold braid."

"If you think I'm going to polish *that* every night."

"No no no," said Eva. "You've got it all wrong. It's got your name inside it. They gave it to me to return to you. It must have fallen off your head in '68. That was before your head swelled to the size it is now."

They walked back to the hotel, placing the hat on each other's head, taking turns posturing and strutting. But Eva was almost in tears, because of how much she really wanted him, how much she needed him, how much she loved him, and how those feelings crushed her, as if she could barely walk or even breathe without it hurting. She also couldn't

help being aware that they were the only two people who could afford to goose-step down a boulevard in Prague, wearing a dictator's hat.