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The Madness of History

N.J. Dodic

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

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ABSTRACT

The Madness of History

N.J. Dodic

My intent with this novel is, first, to create a well-rounded, believable and interesting main character/narrator; second, to explore how a person's past can adversely affect her chances at happiness and peace of mind; and, third, to use this main character/narrator as a vehicle by which I can try to make at least a little sense -- for myself and perhaps for others, as well -- of the atrocities that have been, are being, and will be committed in the former Yugoslavia

1

I'm not Joan of Arc, my hands and feet strapped to the stake, my skin crackling beneath the voluptuous flames and the clerics who condemned me as a witch now stare hypnotized by my silence and naked breasts.

I'm not Anne Frank, my youth swallowed in *die Nacht und der Nebel*, my sunken eyes seeking answers in the faces of ghosts who stumble about me, our common destination, ashes.

I'm not Eva Braun, my legs opening for a monster, my fat heart poisoned and then burned in the garden above the bunker.

I'm not Ethel Rosenberg, my lips shut tight and my faith unbroken, my body conducting electricity for the cause, for the working man who pulls the switch down on my life.

And I'm not Sylvia Plath, step back, overwhelmed by my own breathing and understood by no one and I like my head well done.

No, I'm only Mara Rustic, but consider my weakness for hyperbole, the poetic kind, when I say that I suffer the same awful heat. Autumn in Toronto is mischievous, a liar of a season. I walk home from the bookstore where I work, through Fairbanks Park and then along the deserted narrow footpath to Chester Avenue. The warm wind hits me from above, and then from another direction, cool. Then no breeze at all, only air, and the gentle waving of the orange and lemon-yellow leaves high up in the ancient oak trees.

The tenement building stands on the corner, nine stories tall with the elevator broken six months now and me living on the top floor. A tough call, whether or not to complain. All that movement and effort and face-to-face. The landlord is a shuffling diabetic and a public spitter, to boot. He never loved me.

I peer into my mail slot, slide my tin key in, and lift out a white envelope. My feet creak the wooden stairs while I study the thing, five-and-a-quarter by seven-and-a-quarter inches, an estimate. It may be a birthday card from my uncle; tomorrow I turn twenty-eight. I hadn't counted on anyone remembering. The postmark reads BEOGRAD, however, and I can't imagine Nick going back to the Old World, even in peacetime.

The sun -- a real trooper, look at him -- battles the heavy curtains into my one-bedroom apartment. The main room is furnished with a chair, a writing table and a shelf holding a few art books, surrealists mostly, Ernst, Magritte, Dali. Salvador's landscapes, brown-scorched earth and peacock-blue skies, deliver me always to strange places.

I lay down my backpack and fall into a chair, a black recliner that once sat abandoned in the hallway. A new wind knocks rickety branches against the windowpane. Outside, the sounds of children playing, laughing, fighting and I'm telling Mommy.

Here in my chair I slither a knife along the edge of the mystery envelope. The paper is thin. The knife is sharp. My humour is low.

* * * *

It's now one minute later. All of yesterday's riddles, nightmares and lullabies spill from the smeared mouth of a devil/clown giving his deathbed confession.

2

I began to feel that my parents did not love each other -- indeed, that they were indifferent not only to one another but to nearly all of life's pleasures -- on July 20th, 1969. *Life Magazine*, helpfully enough, further pinpoints it to 10:56 a.m., Eastern Daylight Time. Of course, *Life* wasn't documenting the domestic troubles of Anthony Rustic and his wife, Jelina, but rather the red, white and blue heroics of Neil Armstrong and the rest of the Apollo XI crew.

I was a four-and-a-half-year-old girl, kneeling in front of a black and white television set and tugging at my loose-fitting flannel pajamas. The spaceship landed, and the picture skipped up and down before righting itself. For once, my excitement was uncontrollable, and I jumped up and clapped and shouted, "The moon! The moon! The moon!"

Spinning away from the set, I turned to find my parents. The expression on my father's face was blank, uncomplicated by any lunar thoughts. He was

asleep on the couch, home since seven-thirty from his night watchman's job. I asked him once why he chose the couch over his bed when his long legs didn't fit comfortably. "It's bad luck to lie in bed when the sun's up," he said.

My mother's outstretched arms pulled a maroon sweater over her head. Beneath her sad eyes hung weary pouches of skin that added several years to the twenty-nine with which she had already struggled. The cotton sweater and black skirt, her usual workwear, indicated she would soon be on a streetcar, the red rocket scraping along King Street with my hand-wringing mother on her way to scrub the sinks and toilets of some rich family in Rosedale. She was looking for something, a comb, her three-inch wooden Virgin, something, and I guessed then, seconds after the flag-happy Americans had landed and probably during Neil's One Small Step speech, that my parents' lives were loveless. For these two Yugoslav immigrants, just five years in cold, clean Canada, love could wait until a house was paid off, and until it was guaranteed that they wouldn't have to worry about food, for themselves and for their daughter.

And now Mama put her hands to her mouth and ran to the bathroom. I heard the scattered splash of vomit hitting still water, like a handful of pebbles dropped in a pond. Two mornings in a row.

My father yawned, and I turned the television off.

"Look at the holes in your dress, Mara. A pretty girl should have a pretty dress. The boys will run away when they see this." Mrs. Pontich patted the top of my head while her spiteful little eyes sideswiped my mother, leaving a wreck of a frown where Mama's smile was. I gazed gloomily at my feet.

She broke my heart every time, yes, it was my fault, I should have taken better care of my mother. Meekly I replied, "I don't want boys to like me. I like girls."

Mrs. Pontich belched a laugh, her wide-open mouth showcasing teeth as white as pearls, and maybe as expensive. "Oh, Mara, you just wait and see."

"See what?"

"You'll see."

I hated her puffed up, ham-eating face, and her hands, the hands of a butcher, with those sausage fingers that never caressed another human being.

Each of her massive arms weighed more than me. Most of all I hated her cruel putdowns of my mother, veiled so lightly that a kindergarten baby washing her face in gravy could feel the daggers behind the words.

Our feet descended the front porch steps of the Pontich's four-bedroom, brick bungalow, and I couldn't wait to tell my mother what I thought of the evil woman.

"Shut up, girl," my mother hiss-whispered. "Olga looks out for us. She begged Danilo to give your father a job."

My mother, for perhaps the tenth time, explained that Mr. Pontich worked as a supervisor at the Mattel toy factory, and that he recommended my father for the night watchman's job upon his wife's insistence.

"Besides," she added, checking behind us to see if the Islington bus was approaching, "it's because your father works at Mattel that you have all those dolls. More dolls than a princess, I would think."

It was true. My father, while doing his rounds, would happen upon giant garbage bins where all the irregular toys were discarded. Once, he brought home three identical dolls and left them at the foot of my bed for me to see when I awoke. The dolls had straight, grim lips, upturned noses, and faces framed by long, blonde hairs. They had no eyes. Where the eyes should have been instead were dark tunnels burrowed into the back of the dolls' plastic heads. They spoke to me in squeaky, plaintive voices: "Mara, Mara, Mara, they took out our eyes! My God, they took out our eyes!"

When we returned from the evil woman's house, drenched from the early November rainfall, my father, lying on the couch, sat up groggily and asked us how cookies and Turkish coffee with Mrs. Pontich had gone

"Fine," my mother sighed, unbuttoning her grey overcoat

My father caught me scowling. "What about you, Soccerhead? Did you have a good time?"

"Don't ask her anything," my mother cut in. She ran both hands through her hair and let it fall behind her like a wet mop "Mara's becoming a critic "

My father rubbed the back of his neck and grumbled, "If she doesn't like Olga, it's for a reason."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

There was a quiet moment before my father shrugged his shoulders and said, "It means that animals and children have instincts about bad people "

"Olga's not a bad woman," my mother said, sounding astonished and offended by my father's implication. "Not a bad woman, at all."

"Come on. She's a witch."

My mother flung her coat to the floor, her wild-punching eyes aimed on my father. "In front of the girl. Fine, fine, wonderful. Nice lesson to teach your daughter." Then to me, full of reproach: "Go to your room!"

In bed, counting chips in the ceiling, I could hear them yelling back and forth until my mother's voice grew desperate and broke. She began to cry, and my father apologized, said he was sorry, he forgot how close she was, did she

feel alright, sorry, sorry, sorry.

* * * *

Two days before Christmas, my mother and I bumped into Mrs. Pontich at the supermarket. In her mock-magnanimous way she invited us to her home for a special treat. My mother politely said it was getting late, she was tired, she had to cook dinner. She said no, but Mrs. Pontich, that perfumed bully, she knew how to push people into it (even I knew her tricks), and together we forged our way to her home, our bodies bent against the wind and the snow and my brother less than a week away.

A courteous sniper, she led us to the room she always told us would someday be her baby's. I recalled being in the room a few months earlier: empty, all echoes; it gave me a chill. Now, only warmth, a lush, pink carpet cushioning our feet and candy-cane wallpaper hugging the walls.

In the middle of this fantasy stood an obscenely huge crib. It looked, even smelled, brand new. You could picture the tree. An elaborate mobile dangled above the crib, putting in motion blue bunnies and fairy chimes. Inside the crib, two teddy bears sat leaning against one another, one brown, the other white, both smiling. They were beautiful, glamorous as movie stars, the teddy bears all the other teddy bears strove to become.

"I'm expecting," Mrs. Pontich announced, gripping her stomach with pride.

"Expecting what?" my mother asked, bewildered by the extravagance.

"A baby, what else? We found out Monday Danilo and I are so happy. We've been sending cards back home all week."

My mother nodded absent-mindedly. Her eyes, and then her hands, clutched onto the crib. It was big enough for five babies. It was big enough for Mrs. Pontich.

"Lovely, isn't it, Jelina?"

My mother's fingers stroked the smooth bars.

The evil woman chuckled. "Too bad *your* baby will never see this kind of luxury."

In an instant my mother's eyes got glassy, blinking. Without a word, she found my hand and pulled me from the room, through the hallway and out the front door.

Behind us, Mrs. Pontich's voice rang out: "Where are you going? Jelina, I was only kidding! Come back, the coffee's ready. Jelina!"

Six days later, Danny was born.

4

Valerie, in my kindergarten class, told me to watch the moon that night. She said it would be full and that scary things happened under a full moon. We lived on the third floor of a four-storey walk-up, and from my bedroom window I had a clear, panoramic view of the street. That night, however, the world lay obscured by a thick fog, rolling in waves. The moon came out for a second, a vampire smirk shining its bloodless light on me.

It was a school night and I should have been in bed, but I wanted to see what Valerie meant. Was this it? What is there to see when there's nothing to see? My feet felt cold on the bare floor.

And all at once I saw her. I didn't know it was her then, but I saw her. She appeared from nowhere, from shadows, maybe from the main entrance downstairs. She had her back to me and the fog camouflaged her, she carried it with her as she went. I couldn't tell if she was walking. My eyes strained to

see, but beneath her blue flowing robe I saw no feet, no shoes. Her legs didn't move, it was some kind of conveyor belt like at the supermarket check-out that was gliding her along. My heart beat fast. I pressed my nose to the window. A cream-coloured hood covered her head and she wouldn't turn around. The fog, the dead silence, the way she floated against her will, made me feel her shame. She was fading, and nothing came out of my mouth, but in my head I called out something, I called out --

"Mara!"

Who?

"Mara, what are you doing awake? Tomorrow's school, you know." My father, all ready for work, held a paper bag with his tuna sandwiches in it.

"Sorry." I climbed back into bed, the warm blanket reminding me how icy my toes had gotten.

"You apologize too much," he said. "No one believes you. Anyway, I'm off to work. Go to sleep, and don't bother your mother in the morning. She has visitors in her head."

I didn't know what he meant, so I asked him; he put his hand up and gave me a never-mind shake of the head.

"I'm going," he said, his hand on the doorknob now.

"Tata?"

"What?"

I pointed to three books lying on the dresser. "Will you read to me?"

My father winced. He reached across the dresser and picked up one of the books. "Who gave you these?"

"Miss Henderson. She showed us how to take them out of the library."

"You can read?"

"Yeah, but I don't know all the words yet."

"Well, no. Of course you don't. That would be, you know, too much."

We looked at each other. Then, "Will you read to me, Tata?"

"Me? No. Your mother likes to read to you. Ask her."

"She only reads the Bible to me."

He bit his bottom lip. "Nothing wrong with that."

"Please, Tata. Just one story."

He sucked in a deep breath that used up half the air in the room. Then he put the book back on the dresser and said, "I'm sorry, Soccerhead. I don't have time for that. Maybe tomorrow, or next Christmas."

The wide skull of the moon winked at me.

My father stood in the doorway a moment, his blue polyester uniform sweating him, chin resting somberly on his chest. Then, as if touched by a genie, he brightened up and asked, "What if I tell you a story?"

"Okay, Tata." I pushed my pillow back and sat up.

"It'll have to be quick, though."

"Do you know Goldilocks? That's my favourite."

"No. No, I don't."

"How about Little Red Riding Hood?"

"No. I think I used to, but I forgot."

"The Little Engine That Could?"

"The Little Engine... no, never heard of it." He took off his cap and sat on the edge of the bed. The mattress sank under his weight, and I shifted over to keep from sliding. "You know what war is, don't you?"

"Like when the men on t.v. shoot everything?"

"Right, okay, but what you see on t.v. is people makebelieving war. This story's about a little boy -- "

"How old?"

"Twelve. And this boy wants to be friends with these older boys -- "

"Why?"

"I don't know, he just does. I have to go to work soon, so shut up."

"Sorry."

"Anyway, these older boys like to smoke. They tell the boy that they'll take him into their group if he gets them a pack of cigarettes. The boy asks, 'How do I do that? The Nazis have all the cigarettes.'"

"What're Nazis?"

"What?"

"Nazis. What're Nazis?"

"Oh, they were the soldiers who invaded the village. Bad guys. So this boy -- "

"Tata?"

"What? What? What?"

"Are you the boy in the story?"

An exasperated smile, he cupped his hand on my cheek so tenderly, like a lover. "You know, your mother's right, you're a *djevojka detektiv*."

"I'm not."

He started to rise. "Listen, I have to go to work -- "

"No, please, no. Finish the story. The little boy's trying to get cigarettes for the older boys."

"Alright, alright. Close your eyes and I'll finish the story. Good. Now, the boy decides to do something very foolish. He makes plans to steal a pack of cigarettes from a red-headed soldier guarding a barn."

• "Why was he guarding a barn?"

"I don't know, maybe the cows were up to something. Close your eyes. Where was I? Oh. The boy watches the soldier tip forward his helmet to shield his eyes from the sun. The soldier's leaning in a lazy sort of way, and the boy can tell he's fallen asleep. The boy tiptoes toward the soldier. He spies the sharp corners of a pack of cigarettes poking out from the soldier's shirt pocket. The boy bends down, too stupid to be frightened, and he undoes the snap on the pocket. He has the cigarette pack lifted almost all the way out when the soldier wakes up with a start. The boy grabs the cigarettes and runs."

He rapid-tapped two fingers on my forearm to simulate a running boy.

"Behind him, the soldier scrambles to his feet screaming ugly German words, but the boy doesn't care. The boy's laughing out loud, he knows his legs are young and strong and he knows that soldiers are too dignified to chase after little children. What the boy doesn't know, you see, is what's in the heart of a Nazi soldier. Three bullets -- three bullets! -- whistle past the boy's ears, and, though he doesn't stop running, he does stop laughing. He gets away unharmed, and he throws the cigarettes down a well."

He paused, to see if I was still awake.

"When the older boys caught up to him, he told them he didn't need friends like them. No. And the story doesn't end there. Two or three days later, the boy learned that one of his school chums had been shot dead by a red-headed Nazi. For stealing his cigarettes. This friend, he didn't even look like the boy, he was much shorter, he was even fat on account of his father being a pastry chef. Still, it was the friend who got killed."

He stopped, and this time he didn't begin again. I waited. I opened my eyes. He noticed me looking at him and he must have figured out that I wanted more, a proper ending, a moral like in the stories from school.

"Luck," he explained.

Simple.

5

One cold February day, my father returned home from work. Darkness lingered malevolently into the morning, and all life hung frozen in an ice age-like silence. I'd had another bad dream about the dolls, and I'd been awake the whole night praying for the sun to rise. So I heard my father when he opened the whining front door, when he kicked his shoes off, when he showered, and when he went in to check on Danny in his makeshift crib.

"You're up early, Jelina."

"Someone has to feed the baby. Put that cigarette out."

My father cleared his throat. "I talked to Danilo Pontich today."

A gasp from my mother. "Don't tell me you lost your job. Tell me I'm going blind, but don't tell me you lost your job."

"No, it's not that." He coughed. "It's Olga. She's had a miscarriage."

A quiet moment.

Then a giggle.

Then laughter.

More laughter. Full-blown, dangerous, insane laughter.

My father's head exploding apoplectic seeing it for the first time he said,
"Jelina! What, are you crazy? Quiet! Please, be quiet. Please! You're going
to wake Mara!"

The outline of the sun showed itself.

6

I'm a narcissist. I'm obsessed with my own face. Its boundaries change like a world map covering a thousand years. Come closer, gentle reader.

The mirror I'm looking into -- let's be honest, staring into -- is cracked in the upper left-hand corner. The frame is plastic painted black, so you can't tell how cheap it is until you touch it. I bought it at a yard sale a few -- what's the difference, a hundred -- years ago. The wobbly-eyed old man who sold it to me lied about how much he paid for it, and worse, he wouldn't even acknowledge the crack. He licked his lips as if there were honey on them.

"How much?" I asked.

He blinked twice and said, "The prince of a foreign country once combed his cascading blonde locks by the unerring reflection this mirror provided."

"Which prince?"

A quick lick. "He's dead now."

We eventually settled on eleven dollars.

Now, the reflection my mirror gives, contrary to previous information, is perpetually hazy. If you look into it late at night, with one candle burning dust, the effect is rather dream-like. I haven't any candles right now, and it's not late at night, but it doesn't matter, it's all memorized:

The top of me is five-and-a-half feet off the ground. My head's large for my body. Hair black, short, straight-banged and borderline greasy, it causes me to be mistaken alternately for a vagrant or a disaffected art student.

Eyes, brown. My mother used to call them detective eyes, sneaking around where they shouldn't. A lover once told me they move furtively, charting possible escape routes (he exaggerated; he was a poet) And scattered in the white of my right eye are dark pigmentation dots, something I've yet to see in anyone else, but no, it probably doesn't mean anything.

Hanging between my eyes is a somewhat oversized nose that hints at my Serbian side. A fleshy nose, a meaty nose, a real presence.

Cheekbones, high. For my first Hallowe'en, my father attached crow feathers to my hair and dabbed authentic red and black Indian war paint from Woolco on my ruddy little cheeks; so bold and fierce was the result that he pretended to be afraid for his scalp.

Lips, full. A detriment when I was younger (playground teasing), but now they're in vogue, sensuous all of a sudden. No lipstick, though, that'd be too sarcastic, even for me.

Arms and shoulders, slender. But deceptively strong, I swim sometimes. A strange, knobby bone protrudes from both my wrists. My mother told me a babysitter dropped me. My parents could never afford a babysitter.

Breasts, small. But I've received compliments, it's true, "pert," etc.

My stomach's getting kind of soft and lumpy, beginning to show age. Maybe that should bother me. It doesn't.

Above my vagina, a thick patch of hair curls into black knots. Most of my lovers say it looks natural, sexy even (or at least they used to, back then). One was turned off, a medical student, he might even be a doctor by now.

Want to come in? Right up inside me? Well, you gotta buy me dinner before you get that far. (Yeah, I know, bad joke. No refunds, though.)

My ass is round, nice to sit on, sort of disproportionate. My hips, too. Never could figure how I've always been thin, you know, slim waist, but have this chunky ass and wide-mother hips. The dreaded child-bearing years are upon me, now that's a bad joke.

My legs are okay; like I said, I swim. Don't have much to say about feet, except can you imagine someone washing your feet with her tears and drying them with her hair? No, never mind, that treatment's reserved for big shots.

I'm rambling away, that's a given, something I'll give you, but let me ask: Which is more tangible, a memory or a photograph? The only picture I have of me with my parents was taken the day my mother's friend Dinka got married. The three of us are standing in someone's garden, a grapevine curling opulently

in the background. My father looks elegant in a dark suit and tie, my mother pretty in a white jacket with big black buttons. Me, I'm in front, centred, maybe three years old, wearing a white dress with matching tights. No one's touching anyone, no one's smiling. The sun is behind us, and we all have shadows for eyes.

It's the only picture I have of them, and I can't remember a thing about that day.

7

The fluorescent lights in Honest Ed's department store illuminated the gauntness of her face. Since giving birth she'd lost her appetite, shrunk from plumpness to the angular skeleton of a shipwreck survivor. Grey-specked hair weaved tangles about her neck, skin flaked beneath her eyes and chin, crust formed along the sides of her nose.

Oblivious to the decomposition of her own body, my mother diligently steered Danny's carriage around the aisle corner and plucked several assorted undergarments from a pile of many. A cursory check of the price tags, a click of her tongue, and she dropped them and picked up some plain white t-shirts when her head twisted abruptly in my direction. The smile startled me, teeth exposed sharply behind pulled-back lips. In a sick, throaty voice I scarcely recognized, she asked, "What are you looking at?"

I was afraid to answer. Everything I said lately was taken for insolence.

Her hand swung up, to strike me, I thought, as primitive as faith, but she only brushed hair from her eyes. "Don't judge me," she said.

She stuffed the t-shirts under Danny's blanket. I'd witnessed this kind of thing before. Once she had me try on a rose-decorated spring dress in a fitting room and, after I put it on, told me to pull my old dress over top of it; we walked out undetected. Now, for the first time, it occurred to me that this was stealing, that we could get in trouble, maybe even go to jail. I began to shake.

"Stop shaking."

"I can't."

"Then wait outside."

I stood on Bloor Street in front of Honest Ed's double doors, doing my very best to look inconspicuous, when from inside the store a bronze-badged security guard with a lopsided moustache stepped out and barked, "Hey! Move along, girly, you're blocking the way!" I edged along the grimy display window where, from behind a checkered hunting coat and raised rifle, a mannequin grinned foolishly at passers-by.

Notions of being swept up into the downtown *mêlée* entered my mind. The hurried movements of strangers, the traffic noises, a scrawny stray dog, offered me new perspective. Almost anyone could grab me and take me away and, though the idea terrified me, it excited me, too. It seemed to me a high-risk game that kids played -- the people who stole you might be hungry, head-munching cannibals, but they also stood the chance of being kind, eccentric

millionaires who wanted to shower children with gifts and attention. Of course, no one noticed me, except for a couple of boys about my age who pointed before being yanked away by their mothers.

My thoughts were overtaken by the aroma of roasting hot dogs. I turned to see the vendor, a great big man with a Santa beard. He rolled hot dogs over on the grill with a pair of silver tongs. I walked over to him.

"Something for the young lady?" He put the tongs down and wiped his bear paws on a mustard-stained apron.

I tiptoed up to the side of the cart and saw the flames rising up to touch the glistening hot dogs.

The vendor picked his nose in a personable sort of way. He smiled and asked, "What, what's the matter? My hot dogs don't look so good to you?"

"They look good."

"Well? What are you waiting for, World War Three? You want a hot dog? You want a pop?"

"I have to ask my mother," I said.

I didn't ask.

During the long bus ride home all of the clues, everything that had been bugging my brain, fell into a discernible pattern. The apartment didn't belong to us; our home wasn't our home. The landlord with the key chains jingling from either hip could throw us out if we missed a payment, or if he simply didn't like the looks of us. Here, on Park Lawn Road, dozens of cars motored by the bus

we rode on, but we didn't have a car. My tired mother, sitting next to me in an unnaturally erect position, one hand on the carriage and one covering her eyes, wore hand-me-downs from Mrs. Pontich, who was twice her size, at least. I glanced at my running shoes, scuffed up and riddled with rips and holes, and I remembered that a few days ago, after a sloshing rainstorm, I'd stopped myself from telling my mother that water leaked into them, that my feet were cold, my socks soggy. I didn't want to make her look. What could she do? I began to see that what goaded her -- from wanting to craving, from hunger to starvation -- was that ubiquitous grass on the other side of the fence, taller and greener and flaunting jewellery, her Rosedale employers asking her (as if she had the option of declining), "Please, Jelina, would you be a dear and pick up after the dog? He made a booboo on the carpet."

Not nearly as bad as my mother, but I'd been pricked by it, too. Is this the way she started? I saw classmates with nice clothes, like delicate-necked Valerie, picked up at three-forty-five by her father in a cherry-red sports car that zoomed off in the opposite direction, leaving me to contemplate on a crowded bus the infuriating randomness of it all.

8

My father bought a purple convertible and drove us to the beach on a blue-sky day with summer songs playing on the radio Mama kissing Danny giggling in her arms and me bouncing on the back seat the wind whipping my face clean when a bladder full of apple juice interrupted my dream.

The sleep in my eyes eclipsed my vision, no moon on, the black so thick I had to feel the walls to get to the hallway. Our flat was a small three-roomer with a brown-tiled bathroom separating the two bedrooms. Tilting side to side, I made my way to the bathroom in a sort of airless trance, my body taking me on a route so familiar my mind wasn't needed.

Just as I closed my hand around the doorknob, I felt someone's breath warm the back of my neck. I stiffened. I released the doorknob and peeked over my shoulder.

Nothing.

No, a moan, ten miles away and muffled. Then Beneath the door to my parents' room a puff of mist, a piece of fog. My feet made soft, sucking sounds on the floor, in each step there echoed a whisper. The door leaned menacingly to the left, much higher than usual, swaying as if dancing a slow, slow dance. Using all ten fingertips, I nudged it open. Vapours of hot, humid air stung my face, distilling the stench of rotting flesh. With the curtains drawn, the room was as dark and heavy as the inside of a coffin.

But I had flashlights for eyes, and I squeezed my hands into round little fists and pressed them in.

To my right, Danny lay in his crib, pacifier in mouth and his hair matted down with perspiration. Six black flies flew circles above his head.

My flashlights beamed beyond the crib. To the bed

My father was on top. Shed of his clothing, he seemed younger, boyish even. His thin buttocks rose and fell into a pair of parted legs

I walked closer, came upon them in their embrace, just an arm's length away. The smell of them, the excruciating reek of an eternity. Glistening balls of sweat slid down my father's back, tensed and muscled, I saw his pubic hair every time he lifted. One white breast flopped to the side, the other cupped in my father's hand.

I moved to the headboard. My mother's eyes were shut against her own death, her mouth screwed up unbelievably. Without speaking I said, Read to me now, Mama, about your living dogs and dead lions, and her eyelids eased

open. Her eyes fell on mine, held them, and refused to let go. Tears mixed in with her sweat and streamed past her ears, and though she wanted mercy she wouldn't let me look away. He pushed harder and harder, hurting her, grunting, one more brute thrust and he collapsed himself on her.

She brought her hand to her mouth and gazed resolutely on the far wall, where a plastic Jesus with a protruding ribcage hung with head bowed, hands and feet glued neatly to the cross.

My flashlights flickered, failed, then came back on.

My father, inhaling and exhaling like a human engine, rolled off her, onto his back and nearer to me, introducing me to the male organ, his serpent-penis long and fat, the tip blood-rushed and beating like a mini-heart and my hand, I wanted to touch it, something unworldly about this life but no, Mama lying there crying and me growing bigger and bigger filling the room had to get out before the batteries in my flashlights and the whispers...

9

"Little Mara with the big nose, get on your knees and smell my toes" He followed me from the sandbox to the swings.

I backed into a seat, stuttered three steps and pushed myself into flight "Go away," I said, with as much anger as I could muster.

The earth lay under a band of bloated grey clouds, waiting for the rain. It was a cool September afternoon. The pale-green leaves of silver maple trees trembled in the faint wind. Justin Eton-Edwards, a large orange-haired, orange-faced boy from my class, was hitting me from behind.

His mother ("Mummy") shared a park bench with my parents. Words erupted from her mouth like stampeding buffalo, loud and burly and tumbling over one another; she stopped only to interject exclamatory noises. Mrs. E-E was one of those ineluctable women who managed to break bread with every teacher in whose class her children had ever been. In fact, Mr. and Mrs. Rustic

here happened to be the only parents of Justin's classmates whom she had not met. And now, having made their acquaintance, she found herself enjoying a pleasant, if one-sided, conversation with them.

"It's quite amazing, the diversity of people here in Toronto, I mean, just among the parents from Justin's class, why, there's you two from Yugoslavia, the Chans from Hong Kong, the Daigles from France, and many, many Italian immigrants and, I mean, just the sheer diversity, breathtaking, and I mentioned to my husband Charles that -- Justin, play nice now -- that, that, that, oh yes, that we're preparing next year for the arrival of three perhaps four new families from South America and come to think of it, I've never met anyone from South America, have you?"

My father sat between the women, a cigarette stub in his mouth and one eye squinting the smoke. My mother's left arm, a slow-moving piston, rocked Danny's carriage back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. She kept her eyes on me while trying to keep up with Mrs. E-E.

Suddenly the woman's head snapped back at a horrible and improbable angle, and she began howling at some joke she'd made. My father looked quizzically at my mother. Neither understood what possessed this woman, this babbling machine-gun whose English accent, turquoise eye-shadow and thigh-cut mini-skirts relegated them both to some black and white nether world.

"What are you looking at your mummy for?"

"What?" I had stopped kicking, was winding down.

Justin punched me hard in the back of the head. I tucked my legs in, straightened them out and swung higher so he couldn't reach me. He walked around to the front of the swing and stood close to where my feet came up on the incline, defying me to hit him. "How come girls in Canada are so ugly?" he asked, tossing sand onto my skirt.

"Please don't throw that at me."

"Okay." He threw more, and something got in my eye.

My feet dragged the ground and I hopped off the swing. I began to walk towards my mother, but Justin grabbed me at the elbow and pulled me back. He slapped me on the nose and I fell.

I stood up. I didn't want to yell or anything, but when I looked at the bench Mrs. Eton-Edwards was laughing again (at me?) and then Justin had a fistful of my hair, he was tugging it and wouldn't let go and I tried to speak but he kept on pulling and pushing and I reached for the swing brought it up over my head the chain rattling revenge the metal edge jutting out the seat and I drove it into his temple. Thin blood trickled down his cheek and he staggered, raised an eyebrow at me didn't say anything not even ouch. His mother came running oh very fast for a middle-aged lady in pumps and carried him off like an old suitcase whose handle had broken. I watched them get into a blue station wagon, recede into the distance, and vanish.

My heart double-thumped a thousand times before I could think. I felt terrible in my stomach for poor Justin, all that bleeding and now I noticed the

trail of red crumbs he'd left behind, like Hansel and Gretel, those poor kids.

The crunching rumble of carriage wheels on gravel quickly transformed my regret into selfish fear. I decided against running; I would wait. My parents had never spanked me in public before. Of course, I'd never attempted murder before. They advanced on me like faceless executioners. I lowered my head, and raindrops kissed my shoulders.

My mother put her arm around me. "What took you so long, Mara? The orange bastard had it coming."

My father lit a match and held it up to a fresh cigarette. "Let's go home."

10

An unrelenting snowfall greeted Danny's first birthday. My mother had planned a party for him, and Danny and I waited in my bedroom for Valerie to arrive. I shot slightly-deformed dinky cars around the plastic tracks laid out on the floor, but Danny didn't care. He lay on his back, sucking his fingers and sweating, unconcerned with the three-wheeled ambulance hobbling past him. Danny sweat all the time -- when he slept, when he ate, when he crawled to my room towing his milk bottle behind him. He sweat so much and so thoroughly that my mother and I could never tell when he'd wet himself. My father would nod and call it a good sign, saying that sweaty babies grew up to be bankers. My mother disagreed, saying that sweaty babies became lawyers.

I wiped Danny's forehead with a damp cloth. He slid two spit-covered fingers from his mouth and glanced up at me with lips parted and tiny tongue

sitting still. His eyes, big and clear, reflected the bare light bulb hanging dusty from the ceiling. The yellow bulb blistered the Sahara sun, and his were the mournful eyes of a camel forsaken in the desert. I brushed my nose against his lips, and he licked it like a lollipop.

Danny made hardly any noise at all, not when he was hungry, not even when he trapped his head in the bottom drawer of my dresser (I made sure to keep it shut after that). Perhaps the only thing my parents ever boasted about was how quiet and well-behaved their children were, never shouting or crying or knocking table lamps over. We were kids raised on silence.

Alone in the kitchen, my mother was baking a chocolate cake for Danny, her radio tuned to the station that played Macedonian music for one hour every Saturday. I could make out the song, a popular one I'd heard many times, with two men singing and making fun of each other's wives (one's ugly, the other can't cook). In the background there was accordion, mandolin and bleating. What I liked best about Yugoslavian records, at least in the folk songs, was the animal sounds, often sheep, but also riled-up dogs and braying donkeys. The cows were my favourite, a bass choir of mooing accompanied by clanking bells.

My mother rarely missed the program, probably because the songs made her think about her childhood. She was born in Macedonia in a village thirty miles south of Skopje, where a completely hairless aunt taught her to play a wooden flute. This much my father imparted to me, since my mother hated to speak of the past.

Late one evening, however, in the middle of reading the story of Ruth to me, she closed the Bible and laid it on her lap beside her wooden Virgin. "Did I ever tell you about my Tetka Zora?"

I had to shake myself awake, having already begun my astronaut dream where I go to the moon. "That's your bald aunt."

She looked mildly surprised. "Yes, Tetka Zora was bald."

She sat up in her chair. Save for the low, comforting drone of the odd car passing beyond the window, the night was serenely devoid of commotion

"Tetka Zora was beautiful," she began. "She didn't need hair. She was tall, probably the tallest woman in the village, and she had the strongest nose, by far. And her cheekbones, well, they were almost as pretty as yours, Mara "

"Mine aren't so pretty."

"Sure they are. Anyway, it doesn't matter. The point is, Tetka Zora -- "

"Is she dead?"

My mother leaned forward in her chair and looked at me like I was out of focus. "What are you, a gravedigger? When did you get so ghoulish? My, my It's television, I think. That box is the Antichrist."

"So, she is dead."

"No!" she said, firmly. "What did you see on t.v. today?"

"I don't know."

"What a question: 'Is she dead?'"

"Sorry."

"No need to be sorry. We're just talking."

"Will she ever come visit us?" I asked.

"No." The edges of her mouth tightened into a grimace, and wistfulness crept into her tone. "It's strange, Mara. It's all so strange."

"What is?"

"Well, Tetka Zora was always bald, even as a young girl. Some sort of scalp condition, I think, but nobody knew for certain. So no man wanted her. Because no man wanted her, she was free to do what she liked."

"I don't understand."

"You will." She stood up, drew the curtains, and sat down again.

She told me her aunt was the happiest woman she'd ever known, always dancing and singing, even making songs up. She said Zora used to sneak her candy bars that tasted like pieces of heaven, and that no one was supposed to know because chocolate was so hard to come by in Yugoslavia after the war. She told me that when she was sixteen, her family packed up and moved to Serbia, leaving her aunt and baby brother behind. She said her mother made her exchange her flute for a pair of decent shoes, and that she cried for three days. And then she sang to me, for the first time, a lullaby Tetka Zora taught her:

*Mala kuća kamena
sa tri mala prozora,
zeleni im kapci,
i krov sav od plamena,
a na krovu vrapci.*

The melody was sweet and lilting, my mother's voice thin, faraway and eerie. The words translate to this:

A little house of stone
with three little windows,
green their shutters,
and the roof all aflame,
and on the roof, sparrows.

Afterwards, she asked if I'd like to learn how to make *palićinke* pancakes with her. I said okay, and she said goodnight and left me. I felt so many things inside me -- peacefulness, sorrow, curiosity -- that I was unable to fall asleep again. I spent the entire night singing the song in my head. Those sparrows.

* * * *

My mother switched off the radio and called out, "Mara, your friend is here!" I lifted Danny onto my bed and went to the window, where I scanned the street below for signs of Valerie. The cars on the snowy road stirred cautiously, as if mines were planted in the pavement. I saw her father's car drive off and I ran downstairs to meet her.

"Hi Valerie."

"Hi." She handed me a box wrapped in blue and gold paper. "This is for Danny."

"What is it?"

"Who knows."

At the doorway, Valerie pulled her coat, hat and mittens off. I helped her with her boots.

My mother came out of the kitchen patting flour off her palms. She liked Valerie, and admired her family. She smiled and smoothed her hair down when she saw her. "Hello, Valerie."

"Hello, Mrs. Rustic," Valerie said. She tapped the box I was holding and added, "This is Danny's present."

"Oh, that's nice. Thank you very much. You didn't have to. But thank you. And thank your mother for me."

Valerie and I went to my room. We looked at Danny, lying on his back and waving his limbs like a turned-over turtle. "Your brother sweats a lot."

"Yeah."

She sat on the bed beside Danny and warmed her pink hands under the burgundy-coloured cardigan her grandmother knitted for her. "Did you get any toys for Christmas?"

"Not really."

"Oh." Her eyes travelled non-stop twice around the room; nothing caught her attention.

"Do you want something to drink?" I offered.

She shrugged no. Then, "Your brother really sweats a lot."

"Yeah."

She stretched out and put her feet up on the bed. Green woolly socks twitched out from her pant legs. "What kind of cake is your mom making?"

"Chocolate."

She itched her button-nose. "Cartoons?"

"Okay."

My father was sleeping on the couch, so we watched Bugs Bunny with the volume turned down. During a commercial break, I asked Valerie, "Which cartoon character do you like best?"

"I don't know. Bugs, I guess. Or maybe that fat rooster, whatever his name is. I guess you like Roadrunner."

"Yeah."

"Poor little Roadrunner never bothers anyone."

"But if he catches you, you're through."

"Roadrunner's too fast for him."

My mother's voice from the kitchen: "Cake's ready."

My father sprang up from the couch like he'd only been feigning sleep and said, "Chocolate cake, yum yum." He rushed to the bathroom.

My mother now wore her fanciest dress, white with lavender frills at the sleeves, neck and hemline. She'd been ebullient about Danny's birthday party all week, making decisions on the food and what toys to buy him, even getting my father to borrow Mr. Pontich's camera to take pictures.

Then my father emerged from the bathroom sporting a rubber nose and a polka-dot shirt, lipstick smeared all over his mouth, topped off by a fuzzy red wig. He goose-stepped around the room and did a pratfall, flat on his backside, and Valerie and I laughed at him; so did Danny, after an initial frightened look.

Valerie took a seat at the table. My mother lowered Danny into his high-chair and told me to light the big purple candle on the cake. I did, and then I carried the cake toward the table.

"Be careful," my mother warned, sounding anxious.

It wasn't a very big cake. No. I dropped it. It landed upside down, with gooey icing rubbed off on the linoleum and the candle broken in two. Everyone was quiet, except for Danny, who somehow chose this moment to giggle.

My mother gritted her teeth and seized my arm. My father said, "Jelina, come on, it was an accident," but she ignored him, she didn't hear anything, and her eyes, popping out tiger-ferocious, went berserk on me.

"You little monster! You're jealous of your brother, eh? What do you do to him when no one's watching?"

My father ripped off the wig and nose and with his lips so crimson said, "Leave her alone. She's just a kid."

With stunning speed, my mother scratched at him, leaving four rivers of blood flowing down his cheek. He dabbed the cuts with his fingertips and then reached out to her. She shoved me at him. I lost my balance on the cake and landed at his feet.

"Stop it!" my father pleaded, hooking me up by my armpits as my mother picked a saucer up from the sink and whirled it at him; it shattered against the wall like a crisp gunshot.

Valerie slipped away, swift and nimble as a cat in danger.

My father threw up his arms, but the second saucer bruised him below the eye.

Then Danny gurgled in a sort of peculiar way, like he was trying to say something meaningful, such a serious look on his chubby face, and my mother lunged at him, my father and I two open-mouthed statues while her claw-fingers crushed his throat with all her mad energy and then my father leapt into life and my God when I saw that he couldn't pry her off by himself I went over to help and together we unclenched her fingers one by one and the back of my father's hand struck her face with such impact that she crumpled to the floor and let out a low groan.

Danny was burping for air, his whole head bluish. My father whisked him to the bathroom, and I heard the faucet running.

I sat down beside her. Her belly swelled with her breathing, and she began to sob. I stroked her hair; it felt soft, and smelled like lilacs.

"I'm sorry, Mama."

She lay on her side, eyes closed, face pinched against the linoleum floor.

"I know, darling. I know."

* * * *

Later that night my father left Danny with me and said, "I'm going to the drugstore to get your mother some medicine. Take care of your brother. I'll be back soon."

Danny was asleep, wrapped in a blanket and sweating, back to normal.

It was after midnight when my father returned. I heard him rummage in the cupboard, a glass taken out and then tap water pouring in. He went and roused my mother from her sleep and told her to take two of the pills, that she'd feel better.

He walked into my room and eased Danny from my arms. "Is he okay?"

"Yes."

"I'll put him in his crib."

My father came back and sat on my bed. He looked worn out, his cheek scabbed red and some lipstick still on his mouth. "How old are you, Mara?"

"Six."

"Six." He said it like a sigh, bereft of all emotion. "A lot of kids your age don't know their heads from a stuffed pepper. That's how it should be, eh? No worries, just fun and games."

"What's going to happen, Tata?"

He squeezed my shin through the blanket. "I'm no fortune-telling gypsy, you know. I'm not a professor with a pipe. Your mother and me, we're simple people." He gave me a weak smile. "Your father's a stupid man, Soccerhead."

"No."

"Yes. I can't read or write in English. Even in Serbian, I'm not so good."

I started crying.

"Don't be sad," he said, and now he was crying, too.

"Tata?"

"Shh." He leaned over and gave my forehead a quick kiss. His finger touched the spot he kissed, and then he got up slowly and backed out of the room. "Goodnight, Mara."

* * * *

For hours I couldn't sleep, tossing and turning into dream after dream, mysterious dark images flitting before my eyes. But I fell asleep, I must have, because a voice, a female voice, awakened me.

I sat up. At the foot of my bed, with her back to me, stood the hooded figure in the blue robe, her head bowed. She was saying something, I couldn't make it out, either I was too drowsy or she was too quiet or the language was foreign. She kept murmuring, faster and faster, a violent incantation building in intensity and then her left arm came up and extended out straight, index finger pointing at the window.

I leapt out of my bed and looked down on the street, where an exhaust-puffing taxi idled. I heard the door to the main entrance downstairs click open. Into the moonless night stepped my father, his breath visible in the winter air, a duffel bag swinging from one arm, the other pressing a bundled-up Danny to his chest. I ran from my room, into the hallway and out the front door, and I bounded down the staircase, two, three steps at a time.

Outside, the tires of the taxi rolled. I followed, and in my bare feet fell on the ice, got back up, and ran after it. The taxi accelerated, and losing ground I screamed, "No, Tata, no!"

The brake lights blazed red in the lonely street. My father spun around in the back seat, looked out the rear window, and shook his head. His lips moved, and the taxi lurched forward again.

I kept running, sliding, my legs teetering, cold, heavy air filling my lungs and icicles stuck in the corners of my eyes.

The taxi went left at the intersection and disappeared.

My heart burst, and I faded in the bosom of a warm snowbank.

* * * *

She was already there, waiting. I turned my head. My eyes were level with her feet, as naked as mine. I wiped the tears away and stood up. She held my hand and walked me back to my room.

And she let me see her face.

11

21 Oktobar

Dear Miss Rustić,

Forgive me my English, I was told you might not read very well Srpski so I am trying to do best with my dictionary. My name is Zivko Pavić, and I am a lawyer from Beograd. It is unfortunate to tell you that your father and my friend, Tony Rustić, died on 7 July. I am sorry for your loss.

I also am sorry for not able to contact you sooner, but you were not easy to find and no telefon number, said operator in Toronto.

In my possession is things your father wanted you to have, but before sending I need to hear from your situation on these matters.

Please call me or write to me. My numbers are on my business card, enclosed.

Sincerely,

Zivko Pavić

September 6, 1980.

Everything in my life is so strange and I have no one to talk to really and if I don't write it down I'll go crazy.

It was last Monday, a week before grade eleven starts and ten days after Mama died. Loud knocking at the front door woke me up. I thought someone had the wrong address, since all the mourners had stopped nosing around after Mama's friend Dinka finally listened to me and moved out last weekend. She's a nice enough woman, and I appreciate how she tried to help, but I know I can take better care of myself than someone who misplaces her dentures at least once a day, plus all her bawling! Even her dog Mirko looked depressed when she brought him over.

Anyway, the knocking. I tumbled out of bed, opened the front door and saw a dark-haired man standing there.

"Hello," he said, quietly. He brushed past me, wheeling a black suitcase in from the hallway.

"Hello?"

He rammed his suitcase against the wall behind the door. He turned around, but he didn't look at me. His head, a regular turret, rotated slowly on his shoulders, his tank not moving at all. He wore a long brown suede coat and looked about twenty-five years old, maybe a little older. I'd never seen him before, I was positive, he had the kind of brooding face and thick eyebrows you don't forget. He kept sniffing at the air and squeezing his face like he smelled something he didn't like.

After a few seconds it dawned on me that I was still in my pajamas with this odd man in my living room. I stepped away from him.

He closed the door. "Mara, right?" He said it like he already knew.

"Yes. Who are you?"

He held his hand out to me, said, "I'm Nick," and still wouldn't make eye contact, like he was in the company of Miss Snakehead Medusa or something. Most unusual. I shook his clammy hand (only briefly, as he lost interest right away.

"Pleased to meet you."

"Sure, kid."

A quiet moment. Then I asked, as politely as I could, "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

His head tilted to one side and dangled from his neck, which I took to mean that he thought my question was stupid. He scratched his elbow, sniffed some more and said, "I'm Nick! Your uncle, for God's sake! From Yugoslavia, for God's sake!"

I nodded with what I hoped was a smile on my face. "Oh."

"Well?"

I rushed my brain and remembered that, yes, a long time ago Mama did mention a baby brother, the one her bald Tetka Zora raised after the rest of the family moved to Serbia.

He flopped on the couch like a tired and extremely grouchy octopus.

"Get the letter?"

"Letter? No."

"Well, I got one."

He didn't elaborate. And I didn't know what to say next. As he spoke English without even a hint of an accent, I said, real casually, "So, Nick, you speak English very well."

"So do you, kid," he said, bouncing hard against the back of the couch. (Testing the spring, maybe?)

I sat down next to him. "I really don't know what this is all about."

He stopped bouncing and looked me in the eye, finally. His eyes were the colour of elephants, just like Mama's, big and grey, I could actually see her in him. He said, "It's a long story," and started to say something else, but he

stopped. And then he added, sort of priest-like, "I'm sorry about Jelina. Your mother loved you very much."

My heart raced a little when I heard that. None of Mama's friends -- not even any of my friends -- had said anything half as comforting. "You talked to her? She told you she loved me?"

He looked away again. "Naw. Just a feeling. Whatever." He looked at his watch. "Where's the bathroom in this place?"

That was four days ago. Nick is not normal. I don't think I like him, and I'll probably hate him once I figure him out, but at least he's not crying all over the place like Dinka, that lawn sprinkler with bracelets.

He acts like he's the king of me, and he's incredibly rude. He goes to the grocery store and buys food that I'm supposed to cook for both of us, and I do, not because I'm a girl but because he paid for it and I have to do my share. One day I made hamburgers for him, and all the snotty punk could do was pick at the meat and say, "Shameful, kid, shameful." Then he plops the burger on his plate and pushes it way across the table, like the thing was contagious or something.

I got mad. "What are you saying, that my cooking stinks?"

He tipped his chin at the plate. "Smell for yourself, kid."

I know he doesn't want to be here. I'm not sure why he is, but this is what I think happened, based on the microscopic bit of information I've gotten out of him:

Someone, probably Dinka, called up Tetka Zora in Macedonia and told her what happened to Mama. Tetka Zora always liked Mama, and I think she may have wanted to take care of me herself, only she's seventy years old and can't get around very well, which is too bad because I'd love to meet her (and to never have met Nick). Anyway, she raised Nick, and I guess he has to do whatever she says, because he was living in Belgrade, making it big in a rock band (he says) when Tetka Zora wrote him and told him to go to Canada and look after me. And now here he is, the professional food critic, making faces at me over my cooking. What a jerk!

No, I shouldn't judge so fast. I mean, the guy crossed an ocean to be here with me, although sometimes I wish people'd just leave me alone. I know I'm only 15 (almost 16), but it feels like I'm much older. I have the summer job at the bookstore, and I could work full-time if I really had to. I can take care of myself.

I like this. I've never kept a journal before. I don't want it to be too girly, with Boys I Wish Would Notice Me sections and stuff like that. My goal is to write (and think) more clearly, and maybe even someday shape the events of my humble little life into a half-interesting novel.

Of course, what I should be doing is worrying about money. Speaking of which, Nick gave me some yesterday for school supplies, which was nice of him. Still, I can't help hating him for sleeping in my parents' bed. Am I weird?

* * * *

September 7.

I know it's not proper to feel this way right now, but for the first time ever I'm excited about school. Just before Mama died, I transferred from Vincent Massey Tech to an "alternative" school called Raoul Wallenberg, named after the hero who saved so many Jews in World War Two. The school's downtown, Spadina and Bloor, so I have to take the subway (nine stops, but I don't mind). I love the Annex area. Within one block of Wallenberg there're six bookstores, about ten cafés and The Bloor Cinema, which shows old movies for cheap.

Mama convinced my grade eight guidance counsellor to enroll me in a technical high school. She wanted me to get a practical education, stuff like sewing, cooking and clothes design, as well as "boy" things like auto repair and carpentry. Useful, I suppose, but all I wanted to do was read, especially poetry. I remember in grade five, Mrs. Taylor, with the booming, theatrical delivery, got me hooked when she would read from Tennyson and Wordsworth and Dylan Thomas. True, I may not have known what some of the poems meant, but the sound! "Rage, rage, against the dying of the light!"

Then I started signing out poetry books from the library and reading them out loud in bed. Once Mama heard me from her bedroom and sort of freaked, thinking demons had invaded me like the goop-retching girl in *The Exorcist*

My favourites right now are Sylvia Plath and Stevie Smith. I like Leonard Cohen, too, I took out one of his records. He has this amazing song, "Who By Fire," where he lists off all these ways to die, fire, water, avalanche, etc. When

the chorus comes up he gets formal, like a rich man's butler answering the door to Mr. Death, and he asks, "And who shall I say is calling?" It's rather morbid, but beautiful and simple, mostly acoustic guitar and strings. I listened to it fifty times without getting bored.

Okay, so there's that, the poetry, plus...

Wallenberg has creative writing classes. Maybe it's just a silly dream, but I want to be a writer. It's so lonesome and romantic, and I do believe I'd look rather fetching in a black turtleneck, although I despise cigarettes and have, as yet, not acquired a taste for alcohol.

I guess I also switched schools not just to read more and learn to write better, but because Wallenberg students look so cool and rebellious, carrying around raggedy copies of *The Portable Marx* and wearing berets. I don't have any friends I get along with, really, so it'd be great to meet some people who have serious ideas about the world. And the boys have to be better than the no-good, rotten ones I've come to know and hate at Massey, with their stupid Led Zeppelin t-shirts and pathetic blonde moustaches, always making fun of my big nose and small tits. It just doesn't get any worse than that. Dwayne Kerr, Ronnie Cowens, you will not be missed.

God, it's funny I was thinking about these things right after Mama died, not about how I was going to pay the rent or take care of myself. I guess I'm not very practical.

* * * *

September 8.

It's almost three in the morning. Tomorrow's the first day of school. I can't fall asleep. I feel nervous, but a good kind of nervous.

Nick asked me today if I have a gun. I said, "No."

He said, "Alright."

Then he took a small knife from the kitchen drawer, put it in his coat pocket, and left. That was this afternoon. I heard him come in at around one, but I didn't want to get up and see him, in case he was drunk or cut up or God knows what else.

So, he's probably a drug dealer, but he actually knows who Leonard Cohen is. We were eating breakfast (he said the eggs I made must have been hatched by some diseased chickens) when "Sisters of Mercy" came on the radio. Nick started singing along. I was shocked, not just because he knew the song, but that his voice wasn't so bad. In fact, it was pretty damn good. And I don't know if he's lying or not (I don't really know anything with Nick), but he says he saw Leonard Cohen perform live in Greece eight or nine years ago. Wow!

He also gave me more money, twenty dollars for clothes, not so much, but I managed to buy this cool purple and gold used vest in Kensington Market, along with a black turtleneck and some peace earrings and quite possibly I now look like someone Leonard Cohen would write a song about.

* * * *

September 9.

A big day. Wallenberg is unbelievably ugly and dirty and it looks like the janitors are on strike (they're not). I guess the filth gives the place ambiance or something.

My homeroom class is my best, because it's also Holocaust Studies. I may be grim, but I want to know the depths that man (as in men, not mankind) has sunk to. The teacher's name is Peter Schmidt, and he wants us to call him Peter, which is refreshing, no power trips. He's young and wears jeans, and he admitted he was a "rookie" teacher and we were his first students ever.

The desks are these old science-lab type things, seating two people with a skinny piece of plywood covering where the sink used to be. I took a seat by myself at the back of the room since I don't know anyone and, yeah, I'm kind of an anti-social introvert and all that.

The bell rang, and Peter started taking attendance when this beautiful dark-skinned girl walked in. She was wearing a poncho like in the spaghetti westerns, and her long black hair was flowing behind her, she was walking so fast. She took a seat next to me and smiled.

I said, "Here," when Peter called my name, and right after that he called out "Krushalya Samad" (I think that's how it's spelt) and the girl beside me said, "Here." Krushalya Samad. What a great name.

The rest of my classes were okay, except gym, with an insane, whistle-abusing drill sergeant named Mrs. Swan, who, even though more than half the

class (including me) didn't bring shorts or running shoes, made us run six laps around the track. Well, we only walked, really, but still. My period came today, too, cramps like a live pig, so that made the experience just a little more hellish than it could have been.

Creative writing class was cancelled. The teacher got into an accident on the way to school, she rear-ended a streetcar or something. Doesn't sound very promising, does it? The principal, he of the screechy patent leather shoes, came and told us the whole sordid affair before suggesting -- in the strongest possible terms -- that we use the fifty minutes to do some reading. Then he left, and two minutes later so did the rest of the class. I stayed, since I had nowhere to go, and started reading my book on the Third Reich.

There's no cafeteria at Wallenberg. Anyway, the school's right on Bloor, so there's all this fast food junk. I didn't have much money on me, so I bought some fries from a burger joint and ate them on the school lawn. That's when the girl from Holocaust Studies, Krushalya, walked by with this guy in a U.S. Army jacket (three stripes -- is that a captain or a major?) She smiled and said hi, which I guess isn't a big deal to her but it was nice, she's the only person in the whole school whose name I know and I think we'll be friends.

It's not even ten and I feel so tired. Nick's gone. I hope he doesn't wake me up when he comes home.

In general, I'm feeling optimistic. (Lots of ranks today. *Salut!*)

* * * *

September 10.

My right hand's killing me because Mrs. Swan made us play this barbaric game called dodgeball, the object of which is to hit people as hard as you can with a pumped-up volleyball (extra points for inflicting concussions). This truck of a girl, who can palm the ball, got me in her sights and let it rip. When I put my arms up to shield my face, the ball bent my hand all the way back at the wrist. Mrs. Swan blew her beloved whistle then, not to ask me why my hand was blue and double its normal size, but to declare me OUT.

Well, gym's the only class I hate.

The creative writing teacher made it to school today. Her name's Joan Tobias, and she's a published poet. She brought in one of her books, titled *Where the Mice Aren't*. It's a thin paperback with a mean-looking grey and white cat on the cover.

Joan -- another progressive first-name teacher -- said we'll workshop one poem or story each period, and then discuss writing techniques or anything else we want to talk about. For today's class we did a poem of hers, about a lonely old woman who finds her cupboards overrun with mice. She's disgusted at first, and she sets out traps and poison dust. After a baby mouse breaks his neck in one of the traps, the woman feels guilty. She falls in love with all the mice and lets them take over her house. I think the class liked it, although no one said anything specific (she is the teacher, after all). My turn to present is Monday, so I have all weekend to think of something.

At lunchtime, I sat on the school lawn again, eating my peanut butter sandwich in the cool shade of a red cedar. The sun shone brighter than God. Krushalya walked by and began talking to me, which was rather unexpected, since we didn't say a word to each other in class. She asked if she could join me, and I swallowed before I was ready and nearly choked saying, "Sit down."

She made a curtsy-type motion, holding up the hem of her poncho and sitting cross-legged beside me, just beyond the line of shade. "Great day for a revolution." She pulled a tangerine from under her poncho and started peeling it. "I don't remember you from last year," she said, eyes on her moving fingers.

"I went to Massey."

"Where's that?"

"In Etobicoke. That's where I live."

"Oh, by Lakeshore, right. Pretty far." She popped a tangerine wedge in her mouth and watched two boys playing catch on the side-street.

We didn't talk for a while, so I bit into my sandwich and stole glimpses of her. She has fabulous hair, long, pitch-black, like some Amazon warrior queen, combed over one side of her head, showing one ear. Her black eyes breathe, I swear she's not just seeing with them but hearing and smelling, touching and tasting. When she caught me staring, I lowered my gaze to her feet, where I saw these small runners, I mean really small, it made me think her beauty's too big for her shoes, which sounds like a line from a bad country song. I admit I'm getting carried away, but I've never been fascinated by anyone before.

She noticed my Third Reich book on the grass and said, "Do you like the class so far?"

I nodded (I had another bite in my mouth; perfect timing).

"Do you mind if I ask why you switched to Wallenberg?"

"No. No, I don't." For some reason the question caught me off guard.

"I just wanted a change."

She finished her tangerine and wiped her hands on a paper towel. "Are you a musician?"

I laughed. "Why, do I look like one?"

She looked me over closely, my eyes, my purple vest and blue jeans, my shoes. "You might be someone who possesses artistic talent," she concluded with a straight face.

"Why, thank you."

She finally cracked a smile and said, "Most Wallenbergers are either activists or artists. Basically, punks or poets."

"Alright, I confess: I like to write."

She smoothed out a crease in her poncho to reveal a red button pinned there, a yellow hammer and sickle on it. "And I like to protest capitalist swine."

The bell rang, and I waited while Krushalya collected the tangerine peels in her hand.

When we parted in the hallway, she waved and said, "See you tomorrow, Mara." In some indescribable way, it felt good hearing her say my name.

After school I strolled along Bloor, checking out a few of the bookstores I read some poems by Stevie Smith, including a neat one I hadn't seen before, "Not Waving But Drowning." I love the way she writes, so larky and whimsical on the surface that you get fooled, and by the end it dawns on you how bleak and shitty everything is. Don't know yet if I agree with that philosophy; I'm only a kid. I'm not even sure what to write for Monday's class I suppose poets in my position, i.e. virgins, stick to rivers and clouds and bright yellow daffodils. How about "Death of a Daffodil," by Mara Rustic?

Oh, God, I just remembered Last Sunday a strange one-armed man, whose front teeth were black (or maybe even missing, although he was quite young), asked me on the street if I was sleepwalking He had a dirty brown beard and what the olde-tyme poets call "the look of the dead" in his blue eyes, so I ignored him, kept on walking, and hoped he'd find someone else to haunt

But he followed me along Lakeshore for an hour, limping along, a tall, frail-looking man who for some reason I couldn't shake, he was always about ten feet behind me, like those Greek guys forever chasing each other in that mythology dream. He kept muttering, "Lies, lies, lies," over and over again

I had no idea what he meant, but I started to feel like I was sleepwalking, that it was all a dream, that everything I see is a painted mask and something horribly ugly lurks underneath.

I'm going to stop now, I'm crying. My mother's dead.

* * * *

I kept the journal for a couple of months. I've been sitting here reading it and drinking the blood of Christ, a 1989 vintage from California.

Do you recall, gentle reader, the inspirational tale of the Slaughter of the Innocents? Three wise men -- Gold, Frankincense, Myrrh -- travel many miles to ask King Herod, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him."

Nice going, wiseguys. Kings, by definition almost, like power. They like that giddy "Off with his head!" feeling. They don't want to lose that feeling. Not surprisingly, the present king wants to find the future king and kill him.

Now the twist. The wise men trick King Herod into believing they'll lead him to young Jesus. Incensed at being mocked (couldn't resist that one), the king orders his soldiers to slay every male child in Bethlehem under the age of two. The soldiers, following orders, slaughter all the baby boys in Bethlehem.

Except baby Jesus.

Say what you want against God, but damn, you have to admit He looks after His own. Prior to the slaughter, The Almighty sends one of His angels to earth, express. The angel commands Joseph, who is asleep as usual, "Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt."

You may wonder, gentle reader (as I have), if God can send an angel to save Jesus, why not the rest as well? And by way of an explanation, you'll be given the Mysterious Ways speech.

* * * *

For most of my life, when friends and strangers alike have tried to guess where I'm "from" (this happens to be a national pastime in Canada), I've heard Italy or Greece. Occasionally there's Hungary, Poland or the Ukraine. And in the summer, if I've been sunning myself -- and that's unlikely -- maybe Spain or Portugal. My point? First, I'm Canadian, but as I'm as patriotic as a vending machine I don't care, anyway. Second, no one has ever guessed Yugoslavia.

People in the West know nothing about Yugoslavia. Okay, perhaps two things, both related to the city of Sarajevo: the 1984 Winter Olympics, and the 1914 assassination of the archduke Franz Ferdinand (you know, the bullet that launched the First World War). Now, at the bookstore where I work, there's Sarajevo again, on the covers of newspapers and magazines, photographs of broken men and women, murdered, still clenching the loaves of bread they had waited hours in line to buy. The blood in the street, a gaudy red syrup, flows

through the veins of an otherwise-invisible monster. All of this occurs during a ceasefire, a nice compound word that has absolutely no meaning in Yugoslavia. Above these snapshots of wretchedness, baritone-voiced headlines announce SLAUGHTER IN SARAJEVO. (Amusing, the news media's silly infatuation with alliteration: were the cities changed, it might be MASSACRE IN MOSCOW, or KABOOM IN KABUL.)

I'm going to tell you about that 1914 bullet, fired by one Gavrilo Princip on June 28th. (Pay attention, gentle reader, you won't get this kind of info from Important British Historians like A.J.P. Taylor and Hugh Trevor-Roper.) Gavrilo, a handsome university student with excellent posture, was a member of *Crna Ruka* (the Black Hand), a gang of angry young men operating within the larger group People's Defense, who belonged to Young Bosnia, who in turn took their cue from the fearsome Union or Death, a national underground movement that sought independence for Slav states from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Union or Death (a catchy, succinct and self-explanatory moniker) advocated freedom for Slavic peoples by any means necessary, preferably violent. Their symbol -- a death's head, dagger, bomb and poison bottle -- covered most of the bases. Why Gavrilo would join forces with these rough-talking, chain-smoking men, who believed in God and facial hair but not in bathing or foreplay, is a routinely overlooked question. Until now.

Gavrilo had a big problem. His penis, when fully erect, was over a foot long. This impressed many people in his hometown; unfortunately, all of them

were men. No girl wanted Gavrilo. Even Anna Sakić, a kind-hearted prostitute who read musty translations of Dickens by candle-light, refused to service him out of a deep sense of self-preservation. What I am saying is, no one wanted to fuck Gavrilo.

So Gavrilo daily, hourly, dealt with this frustrated heterosexual energy bubbling up inside him. Soccer was just not release enough. Eventually he purchased a small French pistol and used it to destroy rats and squirrels. He shot branches off trees. He fired at clouds. It helped, but only a little.

Then one day, riding a multi-coloured bicycle his father had pieced together from the old parts of many dead ones, Gavrilo spotted an attractive green and white poster recruiting members for the local chapter of the Black Hand (and what a name!). He promptly dismounted and signed himself up.

I have no predilection for Austrians one way or the other. Couldn't care less. I should mention, though, that Archduke Franz Ferdinand wasn't all that bad a man, not the worst Austrian, anyway. In fact, he proposed the creation of a semi-autonomous region of Slavs within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Not total independence, no, but a more liberal stance than that taken by most of his imperious fellow countrymen.

Timing is crucial. Important British Historians steadfastly maintain that the date of the archduke's visit to Sarajevo was ill-chosen: June 28th, you see, is *Vidovdan*, a national day of mourning for Serbia's defeat at Kosovo Polje in 1389. This devastating loss relegated most Slavic peoples to Turkish rule for

five hundred years. Therefore, I.B H.s will tell you, the sight of the archduke being driven about town in his limousine on this holy day incited the people of Sarajevo, and specifically Gavriilo, to murder.

Wrong. Timing *is* crucial, that much can't be denied. The sun fell slowly on June 27th, leaving behind a warm, lazy evening. Stars twinkled against the blue-black sky. Crickets chirped. And, from across the lovely dandelion-filled meadow, Gavriilo heard the sound of several men, obviously imbued with spirits, singing to the notes of a badly-played accordion.

Gavriilo, tired of both the Black Hand and his own, had just made love to a slender teen-aged boy named Slobodan Kolić on the hay and dirt inside an abandoned barn. Lying back, arms folded behind his head, Gavriilo opened, then closed, then opened, then closed his eyes. He was naked and confused. He breathed the air.

In the darkness, to Gavriilo's left, Kolić dressed himself while whistling a nonsense tune. He thought about his mother's tasty beef stew, and whether his husky sisters would leave any for him.

Suddenly Gavriilo, his soft penis swinging like a pendulum between his knees, was on his feet and tweaking Kolić's Adam's apple with all his strength. Kolić's thin arms sputtered helplessly, and into his ear Gavriilo whispered, "If you tell anyone, I will kill you."

Kolić broke free of Gavriilo's grip. He buttoned his pants up and sneered, "You coward! Why don't you face what you are?"

Gavrilo quickly found his trousers on the ground beside him and pulled his belt from the loops. With eyes full of salty tears, he whipped Kolić savagely about the head and shoulders with the buckle end of his belt. A deep, bloody gash soon opened on the bridge of Kolić's nose. When Gavrilo stopped briefly to think about what he was doing, Kolić escaped. Gavrilo dropped back down to the ground, palms covering his throbbing temples.

On June 28th, Gavrilo Princip awoke to a new day. He no longer could look himself in the mirror. He wanted to shed his skin, and his tongue was a red devil that only reminded him. When his father called him to breakfast -- a hearty porridge cooled with goat's milk -- Gavrilo could not meet the old man's eyes. How was he to reclaim his manhood?

Along came Archduke Franz Ferdinand, sitting nonchalantly in the back seat of a shiny black limousine with his shiny white wife. Noonish. The early-morning mist had cleared from the valley in which Sarajevo lies. Gavrilo stood alone at the edge of the gravel road. He loaded his pistol with hands as steady as a sunset. He waited for the limo.

CRACK. The shot missed; the limo sped away unscathed as two shots followed quickly after it. CRACK CRACK. Nothing. Gavrilo was so furious he emptied the pistol into the nearest pear tree. CRACK CRACK CRACK.

Amazingly, the limo crossed a small bridge, circled, and returned. The archduke was determined to visit a friend of his in the hospital, and damn the snipers.

Gavrilo, surprised but grateful for the second chance, reloaded his pistol. He ran alongside the embankment of the bridge and waited for the approaching limo. He raised his pistol. CRACK CRACK CRACK CRACK CRACK CRACK.

The limo stopped. Gavrilo waited. He reloaded once more, just in case, and walked cautiously toward the stalled vehicle. All over. The archduke was dead, head buried ignobly in his ample lap. His poor wife, too, leaning lifelessly against the door she had attempted futilely to open. The chauffeur, who was of the opinion that the party should not return across the bridge but was too afraid to speak up on the matter, lay slumped and bleeding on the dashboard, dead as the others. Gavrilo threw his pistol into the grey Miljacka River. He smiled, looked up at the sun, and felt his penis harden.

Today, that bridge is called Princip's Bridge. Honest. The spot Gavrilo Princip stood and fired six shots is marked by footprints set in concrete. He is a national hero.

If we go back about nine hundred years from Gavrilo's time, we uncover the beginnings of the excessive violence so prevalent throughout Yugoslavia's history. In 1014, the Slavs were under attack from the east by the Byzantine Empire. Leading the Slavs was a square-jawed young man named Samuilo, fourth and youngest son of Nicholas of Macedonia. Samuilo was thrust into the role by three brothers who feared the Byzantine emperor, Basil the Second. Samuilo feared him just as much, but he had no younger brother to whom he could pass the throne.

Basil the Second's reputation for brutality was well-deserved. Often he trained the newest soldiers in his army himself. He enjoyed demonstrating to the fresh-faced lads the aggressiveness required for battle. Basil the Second demonstrated on a live goat. He would lift the unsuspecting animal high in the air and, with teeth he had shaved down to razor-sharp points, tear at its hairy throat until blood squirted forth. The goat's head jerked spastically, and Basil the Second would drop it to the ground and lick the blood from his greedy lips. The goat, lying on its side and unable to move, wasted its dying moments trying to figure mankind.

The two armies met on a warm spring morning. There was no humidity. Samuilo's men outnumbered Basil's two-to-one. Ten-to-one wouldn't have been enough. The Slavs lost resoundingly to their fiercer opponents, many of whom had emulated their leader's peculiar but intimidating dental style. Most of the Slavs, over fourteen thousand of them, were surrounded on the banks of the Sturma River. Some, including Samuilo, managed to flee to a nearby village. Little hope was held for the soldiers who were trapped, and their families went ahead and honoured their bravery in a solemn memorial.

A week later, a sentry reported to Samuilo that about one hundred men, apparently soldiers who were stuck on the Sturma, had been sighted making their way to the village. The news was a boost to the low morale of Samuilo's men, who wept openly upon learning that some of their brothers had survived the massacre.

The joy was short-lived. Basil was sending the men back, all fourteen thousand of them, one hundred at a time. Each one of them had had his eyes plucked out with daggers, except for one man, left with one eye to guide the rest back to Samuilo. Accompanied by a grotesque, low-buzzing moan -- the sound of a million angry bumblebees -- the men descended onto the village like ghosts of themselves, always in groups of one hundred, for six days and nights, all blinded but one. The terrible shock drove Samuilo to drunkenness, then to fever, then to God, then fever again, and, in the end, suicide.

Or consider Dušan, the revered Serbian emperor in the mid-fourteenth century. Dušan detested how time-consuming it was to determine the penalty for each new crime and criminal as they came along, so he founded the first *Zakonik*, or Legal Code. To ensure that the laws were just and humane and in keeping with the word of God, Dušan enlisted the assistance of the Orthodox Church in writing up the code. Thereafter, the penalty for every crime -- theft, adultery, murder, what have you -- consisted of the cutting off (or pulling out) of one or more of the following body parts: fingers, toes, hands, feet, arms, legs, breasts, buttocks, testicles, tongues, noses, ears and, perhaps with a nod to Basil the Second, eyes. The unofficial record-holder was one Goran Pavelić, a pickpocket with poor hand-to-eye co-ordination who lost both hands, one leg, a testicle, an ear, an eye, his tongue and upper lip. Goran was what is nowadays known as a repeat offender.

There is a saying among Slavic women when the well of luck dries up:

"I couldn't escape misery if I married a despot." It comes from Jefimija, a girl who knew misery like carrion knows flies. In appearance, Jefimija was average in every way. She was not exceptionally intelligent. Her personality did not sparkle like icicles in the sunshine. She knew few card tricks and her parents were indentured pig farmers.

So, how did a plain-looking peasant girl come to marry a despot?

Jefimija had one special quality -- a haunting, sepulchral singing voice. With her mouth open she mesmerized people, made them weep like newborn babies, even when she sang the alphabet (which she knew by heart, barely). Her twelve-fingered father, upon discovering this gift, volunteered Jefimija for the church choir. She sang every Sunday to an eager congregation.

Word soon reached Despot Ugljes the Unclean, who condescended to attend religious ceremonies for the first time in a dozen years. When his dark, tenebrous eyes met the incongruous image of the skinny, hollow-cheeked girl with the full-bodied wail, he was instantly enchanted. The Unclean waited for the song to end, wiped his tears away and took Jefimija to his castle, pulling her up a hill by a rope tied round her waist while he rode on horseback

The next day was the wedding day. Jefimija wore a white dress with a red velvet collar. Her family was proud, and her father kissed her cheek and said, "You're a lucky girl."

Two days later the Unclean, having concluded that Jefimija's parents and seven brothers were diverting her attention from him, had his in-laws hanged in

a festive ceremony that featured four lute players and eleven Egyptian-trained dancers. Jefimija did not cry out at seeing her entire family dangling from the gallows; she was certain it was all a strange dream. She was ten years old.

Jefimija liked to sing every day outside the castle walls. She sang and watched sparrows and dragonflies gliding over the green moat. At night, she sang in her husband's bed. The Unclean never abused her; he abused himself while she sang. Jefimija found her husband neither appealing nor repulsive, so that when he was slain in the Battle of Marica in 1371, she felt nothing.

After the Unclean's death, Jefimija was reluctantly permitted to remain with her in-laws, who thought of her as a servant. On the day of her husband's funeral, she was seduced by a doe-eyed stable boy who had loved her from the day his master brought her home. Jefimija became pregnant. Her in-laws believed it to be the despot's heir, and their treatment of her improved greatly.

Jefimija went into labour during a pitiless midnight blizzard. The baby was born with three growths on its tiny forehead, the shape and colour of walnuts. The growths, which were moist, gave the convincing and horrifying illusion that they were breathing. The baby's toes were webbed, as well, and its lips were joined so that the mouth could not be opened. The attendant midwife, upon recovering from her second fainting spell, was beaten to death on the spot. The baby was suffocated. Jefimija never saw her daughter's face.

In 1389 came the infamous loss at Kosovo Polje. Jefimija, a figure of the ruling class, was publicly raped by the Turkish soldiers. After they tired of

her and unchained her, Jefimija walked and walked, winding up in Serbia. She found refuge in Prince Lazar's court.

The prince was a generous man. He listened to Jefimija's story and felt a sincere sympathy for her. He invited her to live with him and he came to love her deeply, spending much of his free time teaching her to read and write. But in a year he was dead, killed by the Turks. And Jefimija finally wept.

A convent gave her shelter, and in time she became a nun. After a vow of silence that lasted twenty years, she requested a sewing needle, some silk and plenty of fine gold thread. For the rest of her life, Jefimija embroidered the eulogies of those she had lost into a giant silk quilt. When she died, no one at the convent knew she could sing. Like the other nuns, she was buried in an unmarked grave.

* * * *

What follows is the final paragraph of the first book I ever read about my ancestral homeland:

We hope the outline which we have given of the Yugoslav people will help our many English-speaking readers to understand some of the differences between our way of life and theirs. Their experience has been different from our own; because of it, their ways of thought have been cast in a different mould. Underlying these differences, however, is our common humanity. Every year, more and more visitors from the West are discovering the very beautiful land of Yugoslavia, and they are finding that they are received with warm hospitality and friendship. We would like to think that the foregoing pages will make some contribution to the furtherance of this special friendship. And, most happily, there is no doubt that the worst excesses of the struggle between the nationalists which once warped the development of Yugoslavia are now only a bitter memory of the past.

I will not reveal the author's name. That would be cruel. Indubitably so. Published in 1961, this exquisitely-bound, hard-cover book is imaginatively, if immodestly, titled *Yugoslavia*, and printed in Great Britain as part of a "Nations of the Modern World" series by a press that actually called itself Books That Matter. (Tragically, B.T.M. was recently the subject of a hostile takeover by long-time arch-rival, Tea'N'Crumpets.)

As an impressionable young girl wielding her library card -- "A passport to knowledge," Miss Henderson soberly informed us -- I dare say I used to look forward to that royal "we" found in so many British books about Yugoslavians and other "others." Share a common humanity with the English? Jolly good. And how about the charitable predictions for those warm, friendly and different Yugoslavs? Silly excesses? Pah! Thing of the past.

* * * *

I'm thinking about Gavriilo again, how the assassination of the archduke was so unusual in that he was a foreigner and the preferred targets for Slavs are other Slavs. Like Scepan Mali, a one-eyebrowed scamp who came to power in Montenegro by telling everyone he had made love to Catherine the Second of Russia (yeah sure, Scepan); he wound up sucking sword in 1774.

In 1860, Prince Danilo of Montenegro was strangled with his own pants.

In 1861, they found Prince Michael of Serbia face down in a puddle of blood; diamond rings adorned his little-lady fingers, but his heart and liver were gone.

Alexander Obrenović ruled Serbia for a while, until he made the mistake of marrying one Draga Mašin, an early European feminist. Thin-lipped Draga would hike up her long black skirt, climb the creaking soap-box and caterwaul away on universal suffrage and other assorted women's issues. Grated on the nerves, etc. So, on Christmas Day, 1903, ten brave army officials took Lizzie Borden's axe and administered forty whacks on Alex; Draga took forty-one.

My God, they must be genetically programmed. "Different." If this is how they treated their leaders, then I don't even want to dream about how they treated each other, especially during World War Two. Especially during now.

Now. I'll finish this bottle of wine and go to bed. Tomorrow, I'm off to Pearson airport for the early-evening flight to Belgrade. I'm going to meet my brother again.

September 14.

It's been a few days. Everything just got to me all at once. The tears began gushing that evening and didn't stop until the sun came up. Nick came in from wherever he goes at night and heard me. He knocked on my door and left a bottle of red wine for me in the hallway. I swigged it from the jug like an alley drunk, crying and drinking all night until I passed out.

When I woke up, my head felt like a flushing toilet. It was two-thirty in the afternoon; school was a missed train. So, food. And while making myself a sandwich, I noticed the t.v. was gone. Nick, coincidentally, was sprawled out on the couch, right in front of where it used to be, reading the paper, scratching his favourite parts. I bit into my grilled cheese and asked, "Where's the t.v.?"

Suddenly he looked convicted: "You never watched it! Plus it's bad for you, it makes you blind and sterile. Now be quiet, I'm reading the sex crimes."

He was right. About me not watching t.v., I mean "So, where is it?"

"I traded it for a guitar," he said, sounding more irritated than guilty now.

"Oh." I took another bite. "So, where's the guitar, then?"

"At... my... girlfriend's... house," he said, practically growling

But I'm a curious young woman. "What girlfriend?"

He lowered the paper and glared at me. "No one likes a nosy alcoholic "

"Oh, yeah." I felt my brain go squishy again. "Thanks for the wine."

He ignored me, so I made him move his feet and I sat down beside him.

I finished my sandwich peacefully and then asked, "Is it an acoustic?"

Marginally more cordial, he replied, "Yeah. You don't play, do you?"

"No. I'd like to learn though."

He turned his head and smirked. Then he went back to reading his rag.

And that's the whole story -- my first drinking binge and hangover. Pretty lame, I admit. No barroom brawl or sex-orgy antics or pissing in public fountains.

The next day, Friday, I was on the subway but I didn't get off at Spadina. I felt too depressed, all those glum morning faces. I stayed on until Yonge, where I got off, went to the library and read poems for a few hours, even ones by Ted Hughes. I should have come back for lunch and found Krushalya.

So here it is, late Sunday night. I wasted the weekend lying in bed and moping like a kicked dog. To top it off, the poem I've been working on for my writing class is -- thank you, Mr. Roget -- excrementy.

* * * *

September 15.

I almost threw up today in Holocaust Studies, and I wasn't the only one who got upset -- someone left the room, and I heard sniffing, too.

Peter showed us a documentary, black and white with no sound, about a concentration camp in Poland. The Allied Forces had defeated Germany and were freeing the survivors. It was sickening. I'm almost done the Third Reich book, and I've seen movies and studied the war in other classes, but seeing it up close on a screen, the faces of children, the snakepits full of spindly bodies twisted into one another, well, I don't have the words, it's so different.

One little boy, just pale milky skin stretched over bones, was so weak he couldn't walk, two stronger boys had to prop him up. After an American soldier lifted him onto the back of a truck, I stopped watching. It ruined my whole day. God, that's a selfish way to put it. What I mean is, I couldn't get all those faces out of my mind, especially that boy's. He was only about ten years old.

Krushalya invited me to Fatso's for lunch. Some kids from class were there, and none of us felt like talking. Or eating. The waitress came over, and between five of us we ordered only three soft drinks, which made her kind of mad, she put her hand on her hip. It was the window table, after all.

A furious rainfall erupted from nowhere -- I couldn't see a single cloud -- and I smiled at the pathetic fallacy, a term Joan explained in Creative Writing today. (Oh yeah, we did my poem, "Drunk Daffodil" -- a total write-off.)

Krushalya asked, "What's so funny?"

"Nature," I said.

She looked outside, where feet splashed puddles. She looked back at me, took a sip of my drink, and asked, "So where were you last week?"

I never thought she'd ask me that. "Measles," I blurted out. I'm lousy under pressure.

She nodded. "Quick recovery."

"Yeah, it was a false alarm."

We didn't say much after that. She knows I lied, but I hope she doesn't take it personally. If those other people hadn't been there, I might've told her

When I got home, it was surprise time. From Nick's room -- my parents' room! -- I heard a woman making sexual ecstasy-type noises. Great, I thought, a perfect ending to another rotten day.

And it got worse. I was doing math homework at the kitchen table. In walked Nick's girlfriend, naked and proud. "Hi," she chirped, all sunshine and smiles. "My name's Karen."

I said, "Hi," looked down, and glued my eyes to problem 5a.

"Kind of chilly out here, don't you think?"

She took some orange juice from the fridge, filled up two glasses, and made small talk with me -- what grade I'm in, what are my hobbies, blah, blah, blah. I mean, she was naked! Nothing but two tits and a bush and butt cheeks and what a total weirdo! "Chilly!" I wanted to shout. "You idiot, you're standing nude in front of a stranger with your nipples hard!"

Finally she sensed how uncomfortable I was and said, "Sorry to bother you, see you later." When she turned to leave, I saw bitemarks on her bum.

I feel so trapped. I almost want to call my old friends from Massey. I haven't seen any of them since the funeral. But I don't really, well, I never did, have anything in common with them.

And I can't talk to Nick, he hates me, or I should say he's incapable of, what is it, what's the word, that word, look at me, I can't even think of the word COMPASSION, I'm so frustrated and pissed off and where the hell am I going to turn? My life needs organizing. What are my goals? A list:

1. Some normalcy. Whatever that is.
2. Write more poems. And better poems. A lot better.
3. Do something about these gruesome cramps.
4. Dodge dodgeball. I won't see sixteen at this rate.
5. Learn to play guitar.
6. Stop this self-pity. Although it can be enjoyable.
7. Get closer to Krushalya.
8. Fix my bike. Maybe even ask Nick to help me. Maybe.
9. Eat less junk food. Fries = zits.
10. Stop wandering in my head.

Mostly number seven. I know she's a great person, and I really need a friend.

Or else I start lighting fires in my wastebasket again.

* * * *

September 16.

Karen was up before anyone, wearing only a t-shirt of Nick's (I wonder if she came over here without any clothes at all). She made coffee and French toast for breakfast. It creeped me a bit, like she was pretending to be my mom sending me off to school. But it smelled good, so I sat with her and ate.

Her bouncing brown hair and brilliant white teeth make her look so perky, like a t.v. weather girl: "Mister Sun will rise at six-oh-seven tomorrow morning and set at five-thirty."

So there I was, smothering my French toast in grape jelly, when out of the blue Karen said, "Nick tells me you're interested in guitars."

"Yeah," I said, stopping the bread an inch from my mouth.

"I play a little. If you want, I could give you lessons."

It seemed fishy. "I don't know," I said

She gulped some coffee and added, "Free."

That convinced me. "Okay," I said. "Thanks."

"Have you played other instruments? Can you read music at all?"

"I played the recorder in grade school. I've forgotten it all, though."

"No problem, you'll pick it up again. Can you come to my place after school?"

"Sure."

She wrote her address down for me and went back to Nick's room. I'm nervous about this, but I think Karen'd make a good instructor, she's so friendly.

School was better. No dodgeball in gym, since someone let the air out of the volleyballs (wish I'd thought of that). We just ran laps for forty minutes. I used to hate long distance running, all that useless, numbing effort, but it sure beats getting balls whipped at your head from two or three directions.

In Holocaust Studies, Peter had us discuss yesterday's film. (Krushalya wasn't there, and it felt so weird sitting alone at our desk.) Everyone said how revolted they were by the images, how outrageous it all was.

Peter brought in a stack of books, all personal accounts of the holocaust, and told us to choose one with the idea of writing an essay on it. *The Diary of Anne Frank* was there, but I read it years ago. I picked one called *Babi Yar*. I thought "babi" might mean "baba" -- grandmother in Yugoslavian -- but it's the name of a Ukrainian town where a lot of Jews were killed.

In Creative Writing this boy, Richard, brought in a story he'd written. And I thought my poem was bad! The plot was so immature: a space guy from "the future" has sex with hot robot babes from "a faraway planet" who want to keep him in a cage because he's such a stud lover. God! It seems to me that boys never grow up, they just get more subtle as they hit the post-adolescent years. Joan didn't look pleased. When Richard admitted he only reads science fiction, she recommended "Nineteen Eighty-Four," by George Orwell. I read it at the beginning of the summer and liked it, although I'll have to read it again since some parts were hard to understand. I don't recall any hot robot babies, either.

* * * *

September 17.

Just got back from High Park with Krushalya, where we hung out after seeing *A Clockwork Orange* at The Bloor Cinema. Krushalya suggested we go at lunch, saying she'd read the book and loved it. I thought it was a little too violent, and strange, especially with those Yugoslavian (?) words like *mleko* (milk) and *ruka* (hand).

After the movie we walked along Bloor towards High Park. We bought two cups of teas from a donut shop and then went into the park. Right away a mother raccoon, with three little ones following in a line, passed in front of us. They look spooky at night, all hunched over with crazy grins, like Doctor Jekyll cats after drinking the potion.

We found a nice hidden place to sit, just beyond the park's winding road. The grass felt cool and wet, and white moon fragments shone through the tree branches. Krushalya undid the buttons of her green army jacket and crossed her legs. "Are you sure it's not too late for you?" she asked. "I know you have a long ride home."

"It's okay," I said.

"Your parents don't mind?"

As much as I didn't want to talk about it, I had decided not to lie to her about anything. I want a friend I can be honest with, so I said, "My mother's dead. And I don't know where my father is."

Her mouth opened just a bit. "You live alone?"

"No, with my uncle."

She carefully lifted the tea bag out of her cup and clipped the lid back on. She could tell how tense I was; she changed the subject right away. "My parents are in Guyana," she said

"Really? Is that in Asia?"

"South America. A tiny country north of Brazil. We moved here when I was a baby, and then, two years ago, my parents wanted to go back."

"And you stayed here?"

"Barely "

"What do you mean?"

She folded her legs underneath herself now (she never settles on one position). "My father announced one day that we were going to Guyana for the summer. It sounded great to me, visiting the place I was born. Except that my father intended to live there forever, a fact he didn't share with me."

"Why did he want to live there?"

"Oh, he got fed up with Canada, I guess. He could never get a better job than cab driver. Plus, he said Toronto was turning me into a slut." She laughed when she saw my reaction: "You don't have to blush, you know."

"No, no, no, I think it was the tea, the tea's too hot," I stammered, trying to joke my way out of it. I'm such a virgin.

"You're funny, Mara." She unfolded her legs and suddenly got serious.

"Do you mind if I ask you about your mom?"

"No. Not really. No."

Her voice softened "When did she die?"

"The middle of August."

"Was she sick?"

"Sort of," I said, but I couldn't really go on, I already had a lump in my throat. I picked out a star playing peekaboo up in the branches

Krushalya ran her fingers through her hair and then leaned over to touch my shoulder.

We drank tea for a while and didn't talk. In the distance, bicycle tires made sizzling noises on the road. I wanted to say something I didn't want her to think I was having traumatic childhood flashbacks or anything So I asked, "How did you get out of Guyana?"

• "Long story."

"Great night for a long story."

She smiled, took one more sip, and laid her cup on the grass "Where to begin. First, I was only fourteen years old then, and I went nuts when I realized what'd happened. You ever been kidnapped?"

"No."

"It's very unpleasant, let me tell you. It sucks. For about a week, I was swearing and throwing tantrums, and my father, who's more religious than God, was swearing and hitting me."

"He was hitting you?"

"Oh yeah, he's not squeamish about that at all. He has this windmill move, both arms whirling around and around, slapping my poor head about a thousand times a second." She illustrated briefly, her arms cutting the air in front of her. "After a few days of that, we both got tired. And I was grounded."

And I was shocked. All I could think of to say was, "I can't picture you grounded "

"Yeah, me neither. Anyway, I wrote my friends here in Toronto for help. They started a collection for me and sent me a money order for a plane ticket back. The same day I got it, I put on a traditional black dress -- Muslim -- that covered everything but my eyeballs. I told my parents I'd seen how wicked I'd been, and that I wanted to go to the mosque and pray."

"They believed you?"

She gave me a wry little smile. "Sure. Tricking your parents is what evolution is all about."

"Darwin didn't say that."

"I inferred it."

I laughed. "You're pretty funny yourself, Krushalya."

"Maybe so, but it wasn't smooth sailing from there. I'd forgotten to call ahead for flight information. I'd hitch-hiked forty miles to Georgetown and there I was, all dusty and anxious to fly, and it turned out there wasn't a plane going to Toronto for two days."

"What did you do?"

"I slept on a bench at the airport. Murdered my back. The security guards gave me a hard time, too. One of them tried to steal my backpack, I was actually wrestling with this skinny goon while his pals watched. Another one kept coming on to me, trying to get me to go into the washroom with him. When I said I was fourteen, he said, 'So am I, baby.' He had a wedding ring, and 'Lily' tattooed on his forearm. A real ladies' man."

"That's gross."

"Yeah. It's an interesting phenomenon with men: normally they're pigs, but put any kind of uniform on them and they become pigs with fangs."

"And that's where you stayed for two days and nights?"

"Yeah. I expected my father, or maybe even the police, to storm down that ugly grey corridor and drag me away. But no one came for me. And when my plane finally took off, I was on it."

"Wow. So, did you ever find out if your parents tried to track you down or anything?"

"My mother wrote me a letter, all tear-stained, saying how when my father discovered all my stuff was gone he just said, 'Forget it.' Gave up on me, I guess. My mother still writes me letters, asking me to forgive my father and come back."

"Any chance of that?"

"Nope."

"Do you miss your mother?"

"Yeah, I do. She's old-fashioned, but I love her. I'd do anything for her. It's just, well, my father. He's such a bastard. There've been so many things." She stopped and looked at her cup of tea, and then at mine. "Well, I think our teas are nice and cold by now."

We sipped our cold tea and played with the twigs on the ground. It felt odd being out so late on a school night, just sitting in High Park doing nothing. It was getting kind of frosty, too, a breeze tingled my cheeks, but it felt good, made me feel alive, like Mother Nature shaking my hand.

Krushalya broke the silence by asking for the time.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't wear a watch."

"Neither do I, they make me feel so asymmetrical. Think it's after one?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Well, how will you get home after the subway shuts down?"

I half stood up, I was so panicked, but Krushalya tugged my shirt-sleeve and plunked me back on the ground beside her. "Whoa there, cowgirl; you can stay at my place if the trains aren't running."

"Really?"

"Sure." She laughed. "Gee, you looked like Jerry Lewis for a second there. All you needed were some crooked glasses and buck teeth."

"Very funny," I said, but I was laughing, too.

She walked me to the station, and I made it with about ten minutes to spare. I turned to her at the ticket booth and said, "Thanks for a nice evening,"

and right away I blushed, knowing I made it sound like we'd been on a date or something. But she didn't say anything, she just put her arms out and gave me a big hug. I didn't see it coming, so I was kind of stiff. When she let go, I said, "See you tomorrow," and she smiled and waved goodbye.

For the entire subway ride I tried to memorize her beautiful face, but the image kept slipping away. The only thing that stayed with me was the mothball and incense, used-clothing store smell of her army jacket, and it made me feel warm, safe somehow.

At home, I skipped up the stairs to the third floor. My key barely ticked the lock when the door swung open from the inside.

"Where have you been?" Nick asked, not exactly angry, but close. He wore only the bottom half of his pajamas and his hair was messed up. I think he'd been asleep awhile before waking up and finding I wasn't home.

"Hi there, Nicky," I said, walking right by him.

He closed the door behind me and fastened the chain lock. "And why are you smiling like that? You look like the village idiot we used to chase."

I hung my coat in the closet and had some fun with the old boy. "Were you worried? I'm sorry if I worried you. You were worried, weren't you?"

"No." He scratched his head and turned away, saying, "Just call next time, kid."

I think he was worried. What a great day.

* * * *

September 20.

Ooh, I'm a sucker. It was sunny outside, and I stayed home and cried reading *Babi Yar*. I broke down when I got to the story of Dina Pronicheva:

After witnessing many Jews, including her own parents, being shot and dumped into a huge pit the Nazis had dug up, Dina herself was lined up to be executed. She fell into the pit before the machine guns reached her.

The soldiers then hopped into the pit and shot anyone still moving. Dina, despite being kicked in the breast, gave no signs of life. However, when sand was shovelled into the giant grave, Dina decided that a bullet was better than being buried alive -- she moved a little for air, and no one noticed.

When darkness came, Dina crawled over the dead bodies with Motya, a young boy who'd also survived. They slept in the daytime and walked at night. Motya would run ahead and act as a look-out, shaking a bush if no Nazis were around. One time there were, and Dina watched in silence as they shot Motya.

Eventually Dina escaped the most dangerous zone, only to be ratted on by her fellow Ukrainians. She was again loaded onto a truck heading for Babi Yar. Only Dina wasn't returning to that nightmare no matter what. She took a chance and leapt from the back of the truck. Freedom.

Even though the author gave an update on Dina -- she's still alive and working in a puppet theatre -- it feels like she died. And what's the point, that humans are murderous, heartless pieces of scum?

* * * *

September 21.

Woke up this morning, my whole factory felt sick. What happened in *Babi Yar* disturbs me, it makes me afraid of people and what they can become. And I honestly can't see what the author's message is, since nothing seems to have been resolved after all that destruction. I'm starting to dislike non-fiction.

Anyway... I just got back from peeing and something highly unusual happened. Nick was in the living room, choking his guitar (the only way I can describe that noise) and singing in Serbian about a sexy gypsy lady with no shoes. I couldn't tell whether it was his, or if it's a traditional sexy-gypsy-lady-with-no-shoes kind of song. Oh, and it's the first time I've heard him speak a language other than English. When I passed him returning from the bathroom, he stopped me with his trademark, "Hey, kid " I think the asshole's forgotten my name, if he ever knew it. He lay on the floor, flat on his back. He stopped torturing his guitar (which he claims was hand-crafted by real Mexicans in American prisons, whatever that means). He looked at me, all worldweary-like, and asked me if I'd ever been to "Beograd" (he's told me before not to call it "Belgrade"). When I said no, he sighed and added, cryptically, "Everyone goes there sometime." I always knew he had serious mental problems (I just hope he hasn't had a fight with Karen, because she's the one thing I like about him; my lesson with her on Friday was lots of fun, and we're going to continue)

But back to this Nick person. This morning I was in the shower when he began pounding on the bathroom door. It sounded like a bass drum solo. Was

he having a heart attack? Was the place on fire? Was Leonard Cohen waiting for me outside in a limousine? No, no, and hell no. Nick didn't have any clean underwear, and he was ORDERING me to do the laundry. God, I was so angry I couldn't move. I will never wash his dirty underwear. I'm going to apply for a part-time job with the bookstores near Wallenberg. I want to be able to tell Nick off without worrying about money. I can't live my life as that man's slave.

Oh well. I have to get ready, I'm meeting Krushalya in forty-five minutes. I feel so shitty.

Later. . . What a difference a few hours makes. I feel great! I met up with Krushalya at Bathurst station (she was early), and we set out for By the Way. The sun was happy and shining, not much traffic, an old woman was walking a dachshund, etc. In short, a nice, cliché Sunday afternoon.

Or so I thought. The first strange thing happened about a block from the café. Krushalya and I walked by this appliance repair store with a t.v. flashing in the front window. As we passed it, I saw out of the corner of my eye that Krushalya was on the screen, sitting at a round table with about a dozen other students and a pencil-wagging, white-haired man. I stopped and stared at the picture for a second, then got spooked and looked at Krushalya, who had gone on a few steps and was now walking back.

"Oh," she said, calm as a snowflake. "I did a program last spring on the C.B.C. I guess they're re-running it."

"What was it for?" I asked, my eyes darting between the two Krushalyas.

"Nothing, really. Just one of those dumb shows where they ask teens what they think of the world." She sneered "Usually rich teens who own cars and dream of becoming scuzzy lawyers and accountants."

"So why did they want you? Are you one of those closet accountants?"

"No." She turned quickly and glanced down Bloor, like she expected to see someone familiar. She looked back at me and said, "One of my teachers knew the producer. He volunteered me for it, I guess because they needed some socialist perspective." Again she looked down the street, and sounding distracted she added, "It wasn't very interesting. I lost five I.Q. points."

I watched the screen for about half a minute. The boys wore suits with ties and all the girls, except Krushalya, wore dresses and lipstick. I couldn't hear anything, but it was easy to see that Krushalya was dominating the thing, everyone was looking at her and frowning. She was in the middle of a speech when she suddenly pointed threateningly at the guy sitting beside her.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"Him? I think his name was Russell. Soft shit from Oakwood Collegiate. He thought he had an opinion on the benefits of nuclear energy."

"Did you set him straight?"

"I set him straight. Watch."

The camera zoomed in tight on the boy's face. Pure fear, mixed with a fine, preppy haircut. Krushalya's brown finger poked into the frame, right under the boy's quivering pink nostrils.

"This," she narrated, pausing for dramatic effect, "is where I tell the little sponge monkey about plutonium."

A commercial for affordable mattresses came on, and Krushalya pulled me from the window.

At By the Way, we saw Dave O'Malley from Holocaust Studies sitting by himself on the patio. We went over to his table. I was confused when he said, "You're late." Krushalya hadn't said anything about him being there. We said hi and took a seat at his table.

I don't think I've mentioned Dave before. He's a writer, first of all, and he's in my creative writing class. He's joined Krushalya and me a couple times for lunch at Fatso's. He's got friendly green eyes, a pointy nose, light brown hair, wavy and never combed, and he's tall and thin. Sort of off-beat cute. He has a funny walk, like a hiccup, he takes a few normal strides, then his left leg kicks out, straightens itself and repeats the whole cycle in a few more steps (I'm no chiropractor, but I'd say it's a knee thing.) I really enjoyed the last poem he brought to class, a rhymer called "A Hundred Lies A Day," wherein a sleazy businessman gets hanged for telling one lie too many to the wrong person. In fact, businessmen get hanged in all of his poems. Joan called him a poet with a motif.

Anyway, Krushalya sat next to Dave and I sat across from him. No one talked for a while. Then Krushalya said, in a fake hey-I-just-realized-something voice, "You two have a lot in common."

Yeah. We were both blushing.

The waiter arrived at that exact moment and we all ordered falafels with a glass of water. "Excellent choice," the waiter said, sarcastically. He walked away shaking his dumb head. Maybe it was because we're young. Or maybe he used to wait in a fancy restaurant, and now the bitterness of working at By the Way is tearing at his guts like an electric cheese grater. Whatever.

While we waited, Dave brought up the poem I presented in class last week. I cut him off pretty fast and said I didn't want to talk about it.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because it's toilet paper."

"Joan liked it."

"Joan's nice to everyone."

"Well, I thought it was piquant and not at all opprobrious."

Krushaiya explained: "Dave does crossword puzzles."

"Oh."

"They're good for the mind," Dave said, defensively.

"Right, Dave," Krushaiya smiled. "Didn't your head used to be round?"

"Funny," he answered, sounding deflated now.

"How's the cut?" she asked.

Dave perked up right away and pulled his hair back at the forehead to reveal a whole mess of stitches.

"How did you get that?" I asked.

"Oh, ah, there was some trouble, ah, outside the club," he said, haltingly

"What club is that?"

Krushalya interrupted: "The Symbionese Liberation Army."

My brain felt like it was having a coffee two tables over. "So, what's that, some kind of ethnic thing?"

"No, just a bad Patty Hearst joke," Krushalya said, apologetically.

Neither of them said anything more about the club, so I dropped it.

"I almost died," Dave said, finally letting his bangs back down

Krushalya hit him pretty hard on the biceps. "Don't lie, Dave, it was only retrograde amnesia."

"That sounds serious," I said.

"It's not."

"Anyway," Dave said, grabbing the floor again, "Krushalya saved my life. No, really, she did. I stood there, totally dazed, I didn't know my name or my face. I was bent over, cradling the blood in my hands as it poured out like a psychedelic fountain. Krushalya took off her scarf and swathed my head up. The bleeding stopped. Miss Samad here saved my life."

"Now my scarf's ruined."

"Jesus, I'll give you mine," he said, totally exasperated. "I've never, ever met anyone like you before. You're a cross between Florence Nightingale and a wolverine."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Krushalya grinned.

The surly waiter brought the falafels. We ate and talked about how the holocaust class was going. I was doing my best trying to figure out what was going on between those two, when all of a sudden Dave shoved his half-eaten falafel aside and pushed his chair back. He stood up, fished some money out of his pocket, and dropped it on the table.

Then he looked at me, he was so nervous there was a tic on his cheek. Krushalya put her hands up and stared at her feet, and I just knew she had a big smile on her face.

"Mara," Dave said, "I'd like to, ah, invite you to a dance at the, ah, club."

I was stunned, and flattered. Also, it felt like I couldn't move my lips to speak, but when I realized that every second of waiting was agony for Dave, I forced myself to nod and say, "Sure."

"Great," he said, not looking at all relieved; if anything, he seemed even more nervous now. "See you at school, then. Bye."

"Bye," I said.

"Bye," Krushalya said, without looking up.

Dave almost knocked over a daydreaming busboy on his way out, before unlocking his bike from the parking meter across the street and pedalling away.

Krushalya smiled sheepishly at me. "I hope you're not mad at me."

"You planned this?"

"Sort of. Dave likes you a lot. And I like both of you. He just wanted to meet you somewhere away from school."

I wanted to wait awhile before my next question, but that was impossible
"When did he tell you he liked me?"

"Friday. I told him we were coming here for lunch, and he begged me to
let him come."

"Begged?"

"Offered me five dollars, too. I said I didn't need it now, maybe October
first, when my rent's due."

Krushalya and I went for a walk later, stopping off at a couple of used
bookstores on Harbord. I must have been thinking about Dave, because she
kept waving her hand in front of my face and saying, "Wake up, Mara. Hey.
It's Sunday. You're in Toronto."

I guess I'm not used to this. I've never had a date before. I remember
the grade eight field trip to Niagara Falls. Johnny Zanussi, Flash-card Champ,
sat beside me on the bus and held my hand when no one was looking. We
spent almost the whole day together, getting soaked on the Maid of the Mist
and laughing in the wax museum at the pasty-faced Dracula. We even took off
from the rest of the class for chocolate milkshakes at a cozy little diner that had
pictures on the walls of local hockey players who'd made it big. It was a sweet
day, full of promise. But when we got back home, some of Johnny's friends
began teasing him, and that was the end of that.

This is weird. My first date.

* * * *

September 25

This is the poem I brought in today:

The Snake's Face

*A snake is a thing
you cannot predict. When kissing*

*the pig's cheek he will not
smile or threaten or break down*

*into sobs of confession. A snake
is an engine that hisses all night.*

The comments from the class were positive for the most part, although some people thought the meaning was unclear. Can't argue there. Joan said it was an improvement over the first poem I presented, which isn't exactly a great feat, but it was kind of her to say, anyway. I wrote it a few nights ago after an especially twisted nightmare: I saw my parents walking in the Garden of Eden, naked, and when I called out to them, they turned around, and I saw that they had no eyes. They couldn't see me, of course, and they didn't recognize my voice, and .. well, I had too nice a day, forget all that depressing shit. I'll write about the dream some other time.

Krushalya, Dave, Ling Ling and I took off at lunch today and headed for Lake Ontario. Ling Ling's a cool girl, very pretty. She's also in the holocaust class and quite funny, cracking jokes about all the goofy guys who ask her out. Her parents own a clothing store on Dundas, so she's always wearing neat new skirts and sweaters, usually in red and white, her two favourite colours. (She's the most pro-Canadian person I've ever met -- she even likes hockey!)

Dave wanted to take the Bathurst bus down to the lake, but I suggested Islington and then the streetcar across. I wanted to bring them all to the shore near my apartment, because most people from downtown never see it, and it's a shame, it's so green and peaceful.

The ride dragged on a bit and Dave and Ling Ling complained, but when we got there all three of them were surprised by how gorgeous it was, the grey-blue water reflecting the sun and warm wind blowing softly over us. A postcard come alive. A few ducks squawked for crumbs, as did the McDonald's birds, who probably prefer fries.

We sat four across on three rocks, Krushalya and I on the middle one, Ling Ling beside her and Dave beside me. It was so quiet, our backs turned to the world, watching the waves roll in and Buffalo so far away we couldn't see the buildings burning.

Dave, who has something of a natural flair for strange questions -- once he asked Joan, "Would a poet who types with his nose have a better chance of being original?" -- asked us about the saddest day of our lives.

"You're such a fun guy, Dave," Krushalya said.

"Sadness is poetic," he said. "It's spiritual, and educational. You don't learn anything winning the lottery, or hitting home runs. What about you, Ling Ling?"

"Me? My saddest day? I'm afraid I'll have to disqualify myself."

"Why?"

"Because," she said, tossing her head back like a cover girl ready for her close-up, "I'm sixteen and beautiful and the saddest days are yet to come."

"Like next Wednesday?" Krushalya asked.

Ling Ling giggled uncomfortably and threw tiny black stones in the lake.

"Come on, don't bug me about that again."

"What's next Wednesday?" I asked.

"Ling Ling's getting her eyes done."

No one added anything further to this. It didn't sound so self-explanatory to me, so I asked, "What do you mean?"

"You may have noticed, Mara," Krushalya said, "that Ling Ling happens to be Chinese. She wants to change that."

"Come on," Ling Ling said, not giggling anymore.

Krushalya shook her head and sighed.

"They're just my eyelids. I'm not transplanting my head."

Krushalya sighed again, louder, and said, "Fine."

"Come on, I don't know what the big deal is. Two eyelids. One. Two."

"Fine, I said."

Ling Ling's voice became strained. "I just want to do it, okay? They're my fucking eyes, so stop making that stupid face at me. We can't all be like you, Krushalya."

A quiet moment. Then Dave whistled a couple of notes and said, "Are we finished with the eyelids, then? It's Ling Ling's business. Leave her alone."

"Thank you," Ling Ling said.

"You're welcome. Now, back to what we were talking about. If -- "

Krushalya interrupted: "You mean what *you* were talking about "

"I stand corrected. Boy, you're difficult today."

"I'm not on the rag, if that's what you're getting at "

Dave putt-putted his lips before saying, "God, no! Sometimes you've got no culture at all, Krushalya."

"My daddy was a caveman, and my mama cooked him stew."

"Evidently." Dave turned and raised his eyebrows at me, as if to say, Gee, Krushalya's giving me a hard time. Then he looked over at her and said, "So, what was *your* saddest day, Krushalya."

"Monday. When Ling Ling told me about the operation."

We all groaned.

"Alright, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I give up. You're so into this sadness thing, you talk, Dave."

It was obvious to everyone that that was what Dave wanted all along.

"Well, if you really want me to."

"That's not what I said," Krushalya laughed. "But go on, sad boy."

Dave ignored the dig and cleared his throat. "Three summers ago, my dad and I went up north to a cabin near Lake Killarney. We brought our dog, Vengeance."

"Nice name," Ling Ling said.

"Thank you, you're kind. Vengeance was a terrific beagle we had for six years, since he was a puppy. Very playful, and protective. When I was eight or nine, this nasty bully would frequently beat the crap out of me -- usually, but not exclusively, in a park near my house. Once, Vengeance followed me there without my knowing, and when the guy started fitting his knuckles in my ear, Vengeance jumped him. He knocked the guy to the ground and tore a bloody chunk out of his calf. What choreography! And, best of all, I never got beat up again."

"That *is* sad," Krushalya said.

"Ha, ha, very droll. Anyway, we had a great time at our cabin up in the woods. It was Vengeance's first trip to the country. He chased chipmunks and barked at loons and got kicked in the head by a moose he was harassing. He loved it."

Dave stopped a second and rubbed his eyes, and it began to dawn on us that maybe this was a sad story after all.

"The last day there, my dad and I woke up and we couldn't find him anywhere. We searched the whole area, yelling 'Vengeance!' over and over again, so hard our lungs ached. The other campers thought we were some runaway religious freaks. We even stayed an extra night, but we had to go back the next morning without him. My dad couldn't miss more than one day of work."

"So you lost your dog?"

"I'm not finished. On two different weekends that summer, i hitch-hiked north to look for him. The first time I went with my friend, Chris. We must have walked about a hundred miles looking for Vengeance."

"Did you find him?"

"No. But then, on Labour Day weekend, I went up alone. I found him. He'd been on his own in the wilderness for seven weeks. He was thinner, his coat was scruffy and dirty, but it was him. He was totally fucking wild. Vicious. He bared his teeth at me and growled like a lion. Thought I was food. I tried talking to him, I even brought his favourite tennis ball, but he didn't care. Didn't recognize me one bit. For two days I tried to calm him down, but it was no use. I had to leave him there."

"Wow, that's pretty sad," Ling Ling said.

"Thank you, but there's more. You see, a few months later, in December during the Christmas break, I dreamt that Vengeance was scratching away at our front door. It seemed so real, I swear I heard it. It was incredible. I ran to the door."

"Well," Krushalya said, leaning forward and actually sounding interested, "was it Vengeance?"

"Are you nuts? You think a dog's gonna walk six hundred miles in the dead of winter and find one little house in downtown Toronto?"

"Dave," Krushalya said, grinding her molars impatiently, "does this story have a point?"

"The point, dear Krushalya -- and I've never told anyone this before -- the point is that the dream was a message. I had to go back to Lake Killarney and find Vengeance. I hitch-hiked again, by myself."

"In December?" I asked.

"Yeah. And I made good time, because the drivers on Highway Eleven felt so sorry for me, rubbing my thighs like I was ready to drop from exposure, puffing cold air just as their cars were approaching. I hammed it up."

He paused, to make sure we appreciated his cunning.

"When I got there, it must have been minus twenty degrees. I walked along the shore of the icy lake for an hour. I almost tripped over Vengeance; he was dead. Frozen. Lying on his side with his eyes open, and they were not the hateful eyes of the beast I saw on Labour Day, but the loving eyes of my faithful friend. My boy. He looked so -- I'm sorry, I don't want to get emotional -- he looked so tortured and abandoned, just an orphan lost in the woods."

Everyone was silent. Only the cries of seagulls could be heard.

Dave went on. "I wanted to bury him. I really did. But I had no shovel, and the ground was harder than cement. So I collected some branches and twigs and built a fire. I peeled off a t-shirt and wrapped Vengeance up in it. I lowered him into the flames. I was in a trance by then, staring at the fire and remembering the good times we'd had, like when he maimed that bully for me."

Two feet in front of us, a seagull splattered an innocent rock with white paste, and we laughed, grateful for the comic relief. Dave continued, though.

"I had the fire going strong when, suddenly, there's this family standing next to me, a father, mother and three little brats cross-country skiing, singing 'Alouette' in about six different keys. The father slapped me hard on the back and said, 'Hey, a bonfire! Great idea, son! Mind if we join you?' I must have nodded, because they all gathered round Vengeance and pulled their mittens off. Imagine, ten hands -- fifty fingers, assuming no deformities -- warming themselves off my dog!"

He shook his head at the awful memory.

"And then something *really* gross. Fur and bones started popping up through the branches and t-shirt, and I was terrified that this family, this walking gum commercial, would see this and think I was some psychotic dog killer and barbecuer. So I quietly backed away from them, picked up my knapsack, and took off. I left them there with my poor dog."

No one said anything. I didn't want to look at Dave, because I was sure he was trying to hold back the tears. We watched a steamliner float by

We all came over here later and had camomile tea (except for Ling Ling, who was beat and took a nap in my room). I was glad that Nick wasn't around to spoil things, he probably would have insulted everyone. It felt strange having friends here, but it makes the apartment seem more livable now, less ghostly, if that makes any sense.

Krushalya saw the picture of me with my parents when I was three or so, and she said that Mama looked pretty, even a little like me around the mouth.

Dave asked me then if I'd ever been to Yugoslavia, and he seemed a bit taken aback when I said no.

"What's the big deal?" I said.

"I don't know, it just seems odd. My folks have flown us kids to Ireland three times already. And Ling Ling goes to Hong Kong every summer. Even Krushalya went to Guyana once, although you may have heard how badly that one turned out."

"Yeah, I told her that story," Krushalya called from the kitchen, where she was poking around for some sugar.

"So, what are you getting at?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing, really. I just find it curious that you don't seem interested in your Yugoslavian side. Like the textbooks say, we're a multicultural society. Hyphenated Canadians, and all that."

I shrugged. "It's not something I think about, I admit."

We changed the subject to poetry, and Dave borrowed one of my Sylvia Plath books. It turns out we both like the same poems of hers: "Daddy," of course, and a couple others from *Ariel*. Dave also asked me if I'd ever heard of Rachel Hadas, which I hadn't, but he says she's really good, so I'll look her up.

I had such a good time today, and tomorrow should be better -- another lesson with Karen after school, and then, of course, there's the date with Dave at the secret club. I really wanted to kiss him at the lake today.

* * * *

15

The first thing upon which my eyes land, after I slam the stiff door shut, is the sign affixed to the dashboard. It's a common sign, found in late-model taxis in cities all over the United States and Canada -- a cigarette enclosed in a red circle, with a red line slashing diagonally across the smoking white stick. The cab, gentle reader, smells like a Cabbagetown pool hall at midnight. And clean air is what my hangover needs.

"Hello, my friend." He says it *frent*. "What is your destination request?"

How formal. "The airport, please."

"A trip." A *treep*. "That is exciting. Better than chewing your toenails, to be sure. Terminal two, am I to assume?"

"Yes."

He's wearing a navy blue baseball cap, tipped at a most rakish angle. Whether he's curly-haired or bald, or even has horns, is a mystery. I glance at

the i.d. photo clipped in the corner of the inch-thick plastic, bullet-proof partition; immediately, I wish I hadn't. Oh, the humanity! A cubist face if ever I saw one, with sinister upside-down eyebrows, and a crazy left eye that droops lower than the right, close to the bottom of the nose, the proboscis of a boxer, a really bad boxer, a long, mangled, beat-up nose that's just praying for the end.

Then the name catches my eye. Branko Hrvatin. Yes, yes. But I have two one-word mottos by which I live my life: Civility, Privacy. I don't pry. I say thank you and excuse me and I'm sorry so fast my lips don't move. If I happen to be asked a question I deem too personal, I nod in silence, or look away, or mumble to myself, waiting for the awkward moment to die of negligence (and it always does). But today, for some reason, I cannot be me.

"I noticed your name," I say.

A big smile in the rearview mirror, a gold tooth gone dull. He flicks his cigarette at the rolled-up window; the ashes flake down the inside of the cab. "I build a monument to St. Christopher, wrestle greasy alligators in the swamps of Florida, and predict the winner of the Super Bowl ten years in a row, yet still the same, everyone wants to know the same thing. You were trying to determine, my friend, if I may extrapolate such a thing, how to pronounce my last name. The missing vowel, correct?"

"No." How to ask this. Are you Croatian? Yugoslavian? Been here long? "It's a Croatian name, isn't it."

The cab turns right onto busy Eglinton. His smile digs itself a ditch.

"My parents were from Yugoslavia," I say, with no idea where I want this bit of Hello-I'm-over-here to take me.

He sounds suspicious: "Vivisection hurts."

Once on the Allen Expressway, his foot presses hard on the gas. He almost misses the turn-off for the 401 West.

"You're not Croatian," he states with confidence.

"No. My mother was from Macedonia."

"Macedonia. A blind man trapped in an outhouse during a thunderstorm. The options are hilarious, but the view is divine. Beautiful moon. What about your father?"

I lie. "Slovenia."

"Ljubljana?"

"Yes."

The smile makes a partial comeback. "The Slovenians have the best *slivovitz* in the world."

"Yes."

"Not surprisingly, however, a steady diet of plum brandy and sausages makes them perhaps the world's unhealthiest people, at least among those with access to foodstuffs. Have you ever seen the liver of a Slovenian?"

"No." I've lost control of this. I'm not driving anything.

He stabs his cigarette butt into the overflowing ashtray and pulls his sun visor down against the last gasp of sun shooting through the darkening clouds.

"The situation, my friend: I came to this country twenty years ago. On a boat, correct. A tilting Italian ship infested with skinny Yugoslav rats. The Sicilian crew was a carnival of grotesques, not a non-rapist among them. The food was edible, but not digestible. The original source for the meat was anybody's guess. Toilets? We hung our dicks over the hull of the ship and pissed into the ocean like schoolboys, and never mind number two, my God, don't even ask! Still, even with this rather inauspicious beginning, leaving my homeland was the fourth smartest thing I ever did. The uppermost three are irrelevant to this conversation."

He turns the car radio on, spins the tuner without looking, and lands on something with harpsichords, maybe Bach. Delightful. Enchanting even, if I let it be. And I will, I want so much to forget everything: where I'm from, where I am, where I'm going. I close my tired eyes and escape into sleepy ruminations. Any ordinary fantasy will do. Say, me on a tiny tropical island not found on any map, awakened at dawn by a slow-rising, humming sun. I'm stretched out on a hammock, with pretty young boys fanning me and feeding me cool, fat grapes. Yes, I would be their not-altogether unattractive queen, and I'd be benevolent, I would break up their little quarrels before they grew serious, and I would kiss their angelic knees, whether they were scraped or not. We would bathe nude in the still, clear lagoon, the water would refresh us, and daring goldfish would nibble on our calves. We'd swim and splash, and afterwards we'd dry off in the sunshine and eat berries and coconuts and make love...

The cab driver's speaking louder now, like he's on the brink of being really mad. "Let me tell you, my friend, Yugoslavia was bad then, but not like this. Tito was still alive, or at least his twin was, for the first Tito lacked certain digits where the second did not."

He shows me the back of his right hand, five bulky fingers spread out and pointing to heaven. Then, slowly, purposefully, he bends the middle and ring fingers out of sight, leaving the horns of a bull.

"See? An impostor," he concludes. "Everyone, including me, believed the second Tito was a lousy dictator. And his generals were Satan's minions, you could tell by their excessive dandruff and diabolic fondness for cats. But what could there be besides a beast like Josip Broz, Marshal Minotaur?"

I'll shut up, it's a rhetorical question. It is. Stop. A red light. I will look over there, yes, that's what I'll do, in the park where two dogs of indeterminate breed are -- as a Victorian novelist might put it -- recreating themselves.

But in the rearview mirror, a pair of unmatched brown eyes stare back at me, waiting. I rub my chin and glance to the side, but too late, he saw me.

"Excuse me, my friend," he says, respectfully. He just won't let me go. "I said, 'What else could there be?'"

I don't want to be here. "I don't know."

"I do!" He raps his knuckles three times on top of the dashboard. "A hammer-fisted, son-of-a-bitch dictator is the *only* kind of leader for a race of bedwetters." He breathes in smoke and exhales a quick burst of laughter.

"Sometimes I get sick, it's true. Sometimes I go away from my mind, way up there somewhere, on another planet, another ferris wheel. And sometimes I slip into a big barrel of drink and lose myself. Don't worry, not when I'm driving. If you buckle up your seatbelt now, I will be offended beyond repair."

I slide my hand away from the seatbelt. How did he see that?

"We're a sick bunch. No foresight, just backsight. We live in the past. We eat the past. We want to take what's already burnt and cook it differently. Always the past, never the future. Who killed whom, who is to blame for what. Revenge, revenge, revenge, and then, when that's done, a *little more* revenge. Insatiable, bloodsucking leeches with opposable thumbs! Oh, forgive me, my patient friend, as I am susceptible to my own demented harangues. I used to be a literary critic. I wrote for an influential journal called -- but you would not have heard of it, never mind. Do you know George Orwell, the writer?"

"Yes." Coffee, I think: he's had ten thousand cups today, black.

"Mister Orwell was a decent man. He said that a nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them. Yes. I'm Croatian, I know. The Serbs are killers, so are we. Look it up. We did it better fifty years ago. Severed heads on parade. A fine, lusty tradition, began perhaps by that Biblical bitch, Salome, who won John the Baptist's head for shaking her fat boobs at King Herod. Correct. No one from my family speaks to me anymore. A big mouth is what I have beneath my mashed potato of a nose. I saw you

looking at my picture. Never mind. My brother calls me a pig and a traitor. He thanks his God that our dear mother is dead and cannot see me now. Such a sentiment would hurt, if I respected the cross-eyed bastard."

He snaps open the glove compartment and pulls out a folded copy of *Danas* (Today). He holds the newspaper up shakily in front of the partition while driving, his eyes turned to me for the first time, his lips curled up in an almost-comical expression of righteous contempt. The entire front page of the newspaper is an extreme close-up of a weeping, wrinkled babushka, with tears thick as mercury flowing down into the trenches of her cheeks.

"Lies!" he bellows, spanking the empty seat beside him with the woman's face. "Do you know what lies are?"

* * * *

The next ninety minutes blur into a second of airport escalators, opened passports and muddled daydreams. I'm a girl again, four, maybe five, sitting up in bed in the old Etobicoke apartment. It's dark, and quiet as a cat's paw. The vision is historically accurate, except for my memory, because I know then what I know now. I'm alone in the apartment, everyone's withered away, everything's still. The black telephone in the living room suddenly starts to ring, insistently. I'm terrified, of the peace-shattering noise, of who might be calling, of where they might be calling from. I sit still, holding tightly onto my knees, not knowing what to do. I wait. Finally, I decide to answer the phone, I'm so goddamned lonely, I have to find out, I *need* to find out. I climb out of bed and reach timidly

for the door. But the doorknob isn't where it should be. In the cold shadows I fumble for it, around and around the entire room, but no doorknob. The ringing grows fainter and I begin to panic, to cry, I'm rushing along the imperturbable walls, dizzy now, desperate for a way out, but there is none, there never was.

Wide awake again. I take my seat on the plane, a magnificent window seat with an unobstructed view of the Virgin Mary bending over and, no, no, I'm very tired, it's a mechanic in blue overalls checking the metal flaps on the wing.

A stewardess does some performance art with an orange life jacket, saying something about cabin pressure and emergency exits. She's grinning maniacally, a sanguine protector without eyebrows, she's really enjoying herself.

Take-off is fifteen minutes away.

The passengers begin to make small talk. Someone mentions casually that United Nations sanctions will soon forbid air travel to Serbia. Someone else wonders out loud if her sister in Dubrovnik is alright; she hasn't heard from "Lepa" in five weeks. Sarajevo is crumbling, a man says. Facts, neutral facts, plainly spoken and nonflammable. How carefully innocuous. No editorializing permitted, your neighbour may be your enemy. I want to stand up on my seat and shout, "I hear the Serbs have trained police dogs to rape Croatian babies," or, "Did you hear about the Muslim kindergarten class the Croats butchered and then tried to pin on the Serbs?" That would be funny.

"Please fasten your seatbelt, Miss." The stewardess; I was just drifting off when forty effulgent, white teeth jolted me back.

I'm so tired.

I begin to play a mental game that sometimes helps me fall asleep. I shut my eyes, breathe evenly and try to think of a hundred dead martyrs. They have to be in alphabetical order, too. For example, if I think of Alfred Dreyfus after I've already come up with, say, Gandhi, then I can't count him (Dreyfus, that is). And if I'm having trouble -- either falling asleep or coming up with the martyrs -- then I'll start to cheat and count people who aren't really martyrs but perhaps only misunderstood criminals, like, say, Rasputin, whom I often turn to because R is the eighteenth letter (useful, if I'm still observing my alphabet rule) and because I like to think of the ridiculous way in which he was murdered -- poisoned with cyanide-laced cake, shot point-blank in the chest, punted in the head, stabbed in the groin and, finally, drowned, a veritable marathon of pain. I can't believe how long it took his inept enemies to kill him, what a disgrace. And then the nutty legend spread that his huge veiny penis was cut off and kept in a jar by a wart-covered peasant woman who would, in time, pass the pickled prize down through her family like a secret recipe, generation to head-scratching generation, and what do you *do* with a preserved penis, however big and famous, except look at it, I guess, but wouldn't you get tired of that?

I'm so tired. I unbuckle my seatbelt and walk down the beige-carpeted aisle. There, in the last row, an ancient woman in a nun's habit furrows her brow in deep concentration. She's weaving gold-coloured thread in and out of some blue silk fabric, her graceful hands moving like ballroom dancers.

"Hello," I say.

She doesn't answer, she doesn't look up.

"Hello?"

An arm at my shoulder pulls me away and guides me toward the front of the plane; I offer no resistance.

Every seat I pass is vacant. No evidence exists of any passenger: no blankets, no magazines, not a single miniature bottle of complimentary cognac or vodka. I don't stop until I get to the pilot's cabin. I knock on the door.

"Come in." The voice is level and without emotion.

I enter the cabin. A dozen plants, heather, I think, line the top of the control panel, the bell-shaped pedals a striking purple against the black clouds that crash the cockpit window. A man sits in one of the chairs, facing straight ahead, and without turning motions for me to take the seat beside him. I sit down and keep my eyes fixed on the plants.

He sighs quietly. "I feel a deep, sincere pain reading your letters, as if I were looking at the grief of a girl abandoned by everyone and forgotten. Do not suffer and do not let bloodshot eyes reveal your sorrow. Think and work. One needs a lot of strength in order to live, and action creates this. My life is also full of bitterness and gall. My wreath has more thorns than others. I go from nothingness to nothingness, from day to day, and in me there is less and less of myself."

My hand, on the armrest, is joined by his; he squeezes with bony fingers.

"Why are you telling lies about me, Mara?"

Some instinct inside me says I should not face this man. I'm fearful and, somehow, ashamed. "Who are you?" I ask.

He lets go of my hand. "I'm the assassin."

Oh, God. "Gavrilo?"

"Yes, it's me."

So this is the end. I think intemperate thoughts. Guns. Knives. Coat hangers. Rape. Murder. "Are you going to kill me?"

"No."

Then what? "Is this hell?"

"No." His laughter is gentle and benign, not at all mocking. "Mara, you have an inflated opinion of yourself, don't you think?"

"Where am I?"

"Please, let me talk. And try to look at me. But if you can't, just listen." I won't meet his eyes. "I want to tell you about myself. No one..." He stops himself. "Did you know that I ended up in prison?"

"No."

"An Austrian prison. Theresienstadt. A mean little town where dreams go to die. They kept me chained to a grey wall in a darkened cell. The guards pitied me, yes, but they were ordered, under the severest penalty, not to speak a word to me. I was lonely. For a while I had a friend, a fellow inmate. He was a kind Jewish doctor who gave me all the candy his fiancée smuggled in

to him. We talked through the walls when we could, sometimes for hours at a time, about life and death, poetry and women. He was a brother to me, I loved him more than my own parents. I was crushed when he killed himself."

A quiet moment.

"But it was for the best. His life became agony. His fiancée died, I don't know of what, a broken heart. It was too much, for both of them. Doctor Levin was just beginning a twenty-year sentence for giving falsified health certificates to men wanting to avoid military service. He turned no one away, absolutely no one. I myself asked him a great favour, to amputate my left arm, and he did a good job, quick and professional, despite poor conditions and a lack of proper surgical tools."

I finally look at him. A thin face, covered by shaggy brown hair and an erratic, patchy growth of beard. A high, strong forehead. And his eyes, light-blue eyes, beautiful, sensitive, intelligent.

"The rest of me, too."

I close my eyes momentarily, and then I look. His body is long and frail, a buttoned white undershirt clinging to his caved-in chest, the left arm cut off at the elbow, the legs two lifeless twigs, leaning impotently against one another.

My eyes meet his again, and he nods, thanking me, I think, for looking at him. "I had no one to talk to for the final two years of my life. The Austrians," he says, with apparent reticence, "would not allow me any letters. I'm sure, *I am sure*, that people wrote to me. Somebody must have. I had many friends."

His head swings from side-to-side, as if he's trying to force a particularly bitter memory out.

"I couldn't walk," he begins again. "Tuberculosis. On the very day I was imprisoned, ulcers as big as hands appeared on my belly, full of thick pus." He opens his right hand and gazes meditatively into his palm. After a moment, he looks at me with a sad grin. "Yes, I winced as well. Actually, it was the first time I wept, seeing those abominations on me."

"I'm sorry," I say, and the words come out so puny and useless I want to take them back and grind them into dust.

"The disease spread rapidly through my body," he says. "The war had started. I was the enemy, and my treatment wasn't a priority for my captors. They did transfer me to a hospital for my last few days, though. They gave me room number thirteen, the scoundrels."

He laughs, and I almost join him, in spite of everything.

"They were only men," he says in a whisper. "I should forgive them."

When he doesn't go on, I ask, "What happened in the hospital?"

He makes an instant fist in his lap. "Nothing," he states. "The war was winding down. Many people had lost their families and their homes. It was an accepted truth by then, especially in Austria, that I was the catalyst for all the death and destruction. The doctors at the hospital were not exactly obsessed with saving my miserable life. And so, not without warning, one fine spring day in April of 1918, I died. What a relief."

When he stops and seeks my eyes out, I turn away.

"Don't be upset, Mara. They planted me in a pleasant enough Catholic cemetery, green grass and yellow butterflies, that sort of thing, but it wasn't what I wanted. Luckily for me, they exhumed my coffin two years later and sent me to Sarajevo, where I got a decent burial in my homeland."

I can feel his blood coursing through my veins. The look he gives me, straight in the eye, is almost a physical assault. Everything and nothing is there in those big blue eyes: hatred, anger, resignation, bewilderment, even love.

"Those are the facts," he says, "the neutral facts. I'm a glorious footnote, am I not? I'm guessing that the history books identify me as 'a radical Bosnian Serb terrorist,' or some such thing. But that's not me, that's not my life. I could talk about my life, if that would help you. Or we can talk about you, Mara."

"About me? No, I don't want that."

"Very well. Does my life interest you? Shall I go on, or back, rather?"

"Yes."

He crooks his arm against the armrest and sits up. The words leave his lips freely now, the tension in his face dissipated. "The beginning, then. I was born in the summer of 1894, a cloudy day, they say. My mother was milking a cow when she felt me coming up for air. She ran back to the house, kicking all of the lazy cats sleeping in her path, and she threw herself on the earth floor by the open hearth and screamed for help. My father's mother came and bit the cord. 'My, Baba, what strong teeth you have!' Only six, but six good ones."

His tone is warm and playful now. My fear is gone, I think I like Gavriilo

"Soon all the relatives arrived, and everyone was toasting my future with swigs of plum brandy. My mother wanted to christen me Spiro, which was the name of her dead brother. This didn't go over with the priest, a three-hundred-pound slab of meat with a voice as strong as the trumpet of the Archangel Michael. Father Bilbija licked my father's brandy off his lips and said it was wrong for a woman to choose the name. When no one spoke against the old fart maker, he looked up at the calendar and said, 'The boy was born on the day of Saint Gabriel, and therefore he will be called Gavriilo.' Because of this, I think, my mother never protested very much when I skipped Sunday Mass "

He lifts his eyebrows in a half-apologetic, half-so what? expression.

"I hated school almost as much as church, but I loved to read. Books on anarchy and socialism. Alexander Dumas, Oscar Wilde, and the exploits of Sherlock Holmes. My idol was Sima Pandurović, the poet. I read everything I could get my hands on. For me, books signified life. So it was very hard for me in prison, with nothing to read. I missed my books more than I missed my arm. I also wrote a little, but I wasn't very good, I confess. Roses blossoming for a lover at the bottom of the sea, that sort of thing. The last poem I wrote, I scratched on the soft walls of the Theresienstadt prison with a rusty spoon. A two-line poem, intended to spook the Austrians, whom, I believe, were given to superstition. I think I still remember it." He shuts his eyes and makes an I'm-trying-to-remember-it face. "Yes, yes I can. Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes, I would."

He smiles slightly and looks at his feet. "Our ghosts will walk through Vienna / And roam through the palace, frightening the lords."

For several minutes we sit in an odd silence together, watching clouds break on the cockpit window. A poet. This man I didn't know but still derided and, in my own way, hated. A poet. And a literature lover, a Sherlock Holmes fan, with those cool deductions and neat conclusions. I didn't know, I couldn't have known, all this about him.

But.

He did it. He killed a man, and his wife, and his chauffeur, killed people he had never met before, complete strangers, for nothing but *nationalism*.

"Why?" I ask him, and I don't care that my voice ruptures this lovely little moment of ours. "Why did you kill them?" I want him to tell me, I'm dying for some wonderful, soothing logic, yes, that might cure what ails me.

He ignores my belligerence and answers calmly: "Mara, you will never understand." He looks upset, perhaps with me for bringing it up, or maybe with himself. Either way, his answer isn't good enough.

"Please, I must insist. Explain to me why you did it."

He shakes his head roughly, breathing audibly through his nose. "The things you think about me, they're not true. But I can't make you see. You've never lived there. You don't know. What I did wasn't heroic. And I'm sorry for the lost lives, especially the woman's. But I'd do it all again, for my country."

The words "for my country" detonate something in the back of my brain. "You pathetic thing. You think everything's alright, everything's permissible and forgivable, as long as it's 'for my country.'"

"A country, when you don't have one to call your own, *is* everything. For God's sake, we needed a home!"

I'm disgusted. "You killed innocent people. An unarmed woman and a chauffeur. You coward!"

"Stop!" he shouts. "You don't understand anything. My country -- "

"Fuck you and your pitiful little country!"

His fingers clamp tightly around my wrist. "You've never had to fight for your identity. You take so many things for granted. You can't imagine -- "

"Fuck you!" I scream, taking my wrist back. "You're all monsters, all of you. There's nothing you wouldn't do for your stinking country. You'd cut the throats of babies and rape your babas and bite the balls off dirty street dogs."

His ugly eyes pop out of their sockets, and for a second his mouth is open and nothing comes out, and I see the black teeth. Then, "SHUT UP!"

He reaches over and tears at my shirt, leaving me with one sleeve and my bra exposed. I knock away his gnarled crab of a hand and stand up, but as I do this he feels for the armrest, finds it, and lifts himself up. He falls clumsily onto me, pushing me to the floor. He hits my nose. I punch his ribs. He tries to shove my nose into my brain, his sharp thumb in my eye, and then he twists my breast so hard it pops out of the bra. I flop my stomach to throw him off, a

furious beached whale, but he's so unbelievable heavy, he hits my nose again, fills my eyes with tears, I can barely see. He moves his legs somehow, pinning my arms, and he reaches way back, pulls up my skirts and feels me, *touches me*, he's laughing, and now I know.

I flop my stomach again. He flies off me. He bangs his mangy head on the control panel and a potted plant slips from the ledge and cracks him on the base of the skull. He fells for the spot, pats it once, twice, and then I'm on him, punching, punching, and I stand up, he tries to shield his head, I kick him hard in the neck and he cries out, I kick him again and again until he stops begging, until his body stops flinching from the blows, until he is dead.

The plane's wheels touch down in Belgrade.

16

September 26.

What a day! School was a major brain pain -- two tests and an in-class essay in Holocaust Studies, interrupted by a fire drill -- and then I had my very first meeting with the Young Communist League. Yes, that's right, the Young Communist League of Canada. Here's how:

I met Dave at By the Way after meeting Karen for my second lesson (it went okay, except for that trouble with the C chord). It was chilly out, so Dave and I had hot apple cider with real apple chunks. Dave was nervous and jittery, it was quite funny how he could only look me in the eye for about two seconds before glancing away. We talked about our families for a while. Dave's father owns a small construction company, where Dave's worked part-time the past two summers. His "pear-shaped" and "pretty" mother (his adjectives) stays at home and takes care of the brood. She cooks Irish stew nearly every night and

tries valiantly to teach her children to play the piano, which none of them wants at all. I can tell Dave really loves her a lot, the way his face brightens up when he talk about her. He's the oldest kid, with three younger sisters who actually join together, hold him down and sit on his head if he treats even one of them badly.

I told him a little about my own family, too, even mentioning Nick, which surprised me, thinking of him as part of my family, which I suppose he is. In fact, that bossy, weasel-lipped cretin is my *whole* family, for now. I think Dave found my family history interesting, especially Danny, and speculating on what he's like now, a ten year-old boy, wherever he is.

Krushalya, Ling Ling and a couple other guys joined us as we finished our apple ciders. No one wanted to divulge anything about where they were taking me, so I just played along like the good sport I am. (And besides, I liked the air of mystery cloaking the evening.)

We headed over to Bathurst and then onto a dark, deserted sidestreet, Cecil or Cyril or some English uncle name like that. A giant old church stood, or rather leaned, on the corner there, with most of its stained-glass windows broken, and black graffiti spray-painted everywhere ("ANARCHY," "MARGARET IS A FAT ORANGUTAN," "EURIPIDES PANTS, EUMENIDES PANTS"). It looked post-earthquake, very depressed, suicidal even, if that's possible for a building. We all stood outside for a minute, and then I followed the gang down some crooked steps and into a basement.

Inside, people crowded together in a long, low-ceilinged room, lit only by dim blue spotlights. This curly-haired guy wore a huge red hockey sweater that reached almost to his knees, and when he turned around I saw that it wasn't a Montreal Canadiens jersey, which is what I assumed it would be, and it wasn't that other red team, the one with the great big Indian head. In fact, there was no emblem at all on this guy's jersey, just four letters sewn across the upper chest -- C.C.C.P.

All the seats were taken, so we stood against the back wall. Ska music blared from some hidden speakers, "Tears of a Clown," by Krushalya's favourite band, The English Beat. A bunch of people started dancing in the cleared-out space in front of the stage, and Krushalya immediately elbowed her way to the middle of it all (which is sort of the way she lives her life, I guess). She looks really cool when she dances, so happy and energetic, holding her poncho up and pumping one leg into the ground like she's stomping out an army of red ants.

I was busy admiring Krushalya's technique when someone touched me on the arm. I turned around, and there was Dave with a cup of beer for me. I thanked him and took it, and then he kissed me on the chin. The whole thing was very fast, and awkward. He looked embarrassed (because he was aiming for my lips?), but I just smiled and thanked him once again for the beer. I can't believe he kissed me like that, without any warning, but I'm glad he did. It must have been hard for him to muster the courage.

When the music stopped, this guy with badgers for sideburns climbed up on stage. He clicked on the microphone and blew on it, welcoming us all to the meeting and calling us "comrades," which is when someone even as dense as me started to clue in. He gave a speech on the atrocities in Chile, an odd thing to bring up at a dance, I thought, but no one else seemed to think so. Finally, he finished talking and introduced a band, I forget their name. These five guys -- one in a wheelchair who was lifted onto the stage by the other four -- started playing these beautiful Chilean folk songs. One guy played the wooden flute, one a drum and the other three strummed guitars. The songs were in Spanish, of course, with the wheelchair guy singing lead and the others harmony. When some couples began to dance during a slow song, Krushalya whispered in my ear to ask Dave to dance. When I looked over my shoulder, he waved at me. I knew right away that he'd asked Krushalya to ask me. God, he's so shy! I went over and took his hand and we danced.

Maybe it was the romantic music, or the beer, or the whole underground-type mood of the evening, but I began to feel really close to Dave. He held me so lightly, high up on my back like a perfect gentleman. I put my hand around his neck and pulled him nearer to me. I kissed him on the corner of his mouth, and then pressed my cheek against his. His skin felt warm, and smooth. We stayed in that position, touching cheeks and swaying to the rhythm, until the song ended and a faster one started. Then Dave stepped back and suggested we go outside for some fresh air.

We walked two blocks to a parkette and sat on a bench. We'd left our coats in the church and it was pretty cold out, so I slid over and asked Dave to put his arm around me (not subtle, I admit, but it got the job done) We gazed up at the stars together, and I don't care if that sounds corny. He stroked the back of my hand with his fingertips. I rested my head on his chest and wished we could be like that forever. Smelling his deodorant turned me on: pine trees I really wanted him to kiss me again, but he didn't. So I kissed him.

Krushalya and the others found us, lugging our coats with them. A tall, orange-haired guy had his arm around Ling Ling. He looked familiar. When I spotted the scar above his temple, I realized it was my old enemy from grade school, Justin Eton-Edwards, covered in pink zits. He didn't recognize me. No wonder, since we haven't seen each other in -- seven years? How Biblical!

We went to an all-night café on Queen. Dave and I missed some slide-show on torture in Chile. Krushalya seemed distant, and when I asked her what was wrong she said she's worried about her mother, because her father had a mild heart attack two days ago. This other guy, Andy, wasn't too cheery, either, since he's getting evicted from his apartment. Overall, everyone was pretty down, and it took an effort for Dave and me not to smile at each other.

I really like Dave a lot, and I'm certain now that he'll be the one. I'm so horny right now. Over two years of masturbating, and I've never thought about someone I knew, it's always been some nebulous fantasy lover. Not tonight

* * * *

September 27.

Four-fourteen a.m., and David O'Malley sleeps in my bed. I can't believe it, I'm not a virgin anymore! I'm writing this by the hazy moonlight, I don't want the desk lamp to wake him up. My hand is shaking like, SHIT!, never mind the similes, it's shaking, it's shaking! I'm sitting here wearing just a t-shirt, and my bum's sweating on the vinyl chair. I smell raunchy. I'm an overcharged battery, I want to swim and climb mountains and shoot skeets, and I'm not even sure what skeets are, birds, maybe, or tin cups? I don't know, I don't care.

Oh God, where to start. Just as I settled into my pre-sleep relaxation (see above), the phone rang. It's been ringing at night a lot lately, always for Nick. After about twelve rings, I answered it, and it was Dave.

"What's going on?" I asked, pleasantly surprised.

"Oh, I went home and couldn't sleep. It's a marvellous night, and I'm just around the corner at the donut shop. Do you want to come meet me?"

"Sure," I said. And then I thought about Nick: light bulb. "Why don't you come over? My uncle's gone," I said, not caring if it sounded like a come-on.

"Okay. I'll be right there."

I put on some jeans and my last clean t-shirt. As soon as I opened the door, I mashed my lips against his. He tasted sweet. He smiled and handed me something. He'd actually remembered to bring that book by Rachel Hadas (it's beside me right now, he said I could keep it). I kissed him again, and then I took his hand and led him to my room.

I felt so giddy I thought I'd laugh out loud. We sat down on the bed and necked. I could tell he didn't want to rush me, he was waiting for me to let him know it was alright. I eased him back on the bed and then unbuttoned his shirt, touching his chest, feeling his ribs (he's so thin!). We took nearly forever to get undressed, kissing passionately through it all, and when we finally got my shirt off I felt so horny that I wasn't thinking about how small my tits were, but that I was going to share them with someone for the first time. He kissed my nipples; I unhooked his belt while he unzipped my jeans and pulled them to my knees, underwear, too. He put a finger inside me, saying it was all warm and gushy like the inside of a pumpkin (which he assured me is a compliment).

I pulled his pants off. There was already a wet stain on his underwear, which were being stretched considerably. I whipped them off and felt his cock, it was hard and straining, holding its breath. He kissed my stomach tenderly, the kindest, sexiest thing imaginable. Then he asked my permission(!) to make love to me, and I said yes, of course. He took a condom from his wallet and put it on. It looked funny, almost glow-in-the-dark. I leaned back and closed my eyes. He put it in, and it hurt but only for a second, and then it felt great. I liked the feel of him on top of me. I liked him in me. I love him. I love his lips, his eyes, his thighs, the way he kisses my body everywhere. I love him.

We slept for an hour together before I woke up (a bad dream). He's so beautiful, look at him! I'm going back to lie down with him, I can't resist.

* * * *

September 28.

Sunday night. I just re-read the last two entries, and I feel ashamed. Krushalya was going through a rough time and I barely noticed. I'm so selfish.

Yesterday morning (okay, early afternoon), Nick woke me up with a loud rap on my door. Nick is very fond of this manoeuvre. "Phone!" he shouted. "Phone for the lazy girl who sleeps all day!" I'd been dreaming all night about Dave, and I half-expected it to be him calling. (We saw *Casablanca* at The Bloor Cinema last night, and we both cried like saps at the end. No x-rated sex on this date, though, just good clean making-out in the park after the movie.)

"Hello," I said, with Nick three feet away from me, chapped lips smirking.

"Hi." It was Krushalya. She sighed. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

"Yes. No. Well, yes. What's up?"

I heard a low, muffled noise, like she was covering the receiver with her hand. Then, "I made some vegetable curry. Want to come over for lunch?"

I went over after a quick shower. Krushalya rents a room on Humewood from these old-style hippies (tie-dyed shirts, weed, "man" at the end of every other sentence). I could smell the sweet mix of curry, cumin and marijuana even before the door opened.

Krushalya thanked me for coming over and gave me a big hug. She looked awful, her hair messed up, her eyes puffy and red. Even her poncho seemed extra creased, and she wore no tights beneath it, just her bare legs sticking out.

We went to her room. A single mattress lay on the wooden floor. Even without a carpet, the room still felt cozy. Two skulls sat atop a dresser. The skulls were dirty, and looked real. (They are real!) But Krushalya didn't want to explain them just then.

She sat at the head of the mattress, against the far wall, and motioned for me to sit beside her. When I did, she said, "My father died." She tipped over in slow-motion, like a cowboy shot dead in a high-noon shoot-out. She buried her head in my lap.

I put my arms around her shoulders and asked her what happened.

"He had a second heart attack," she said. "My mom called this morning. She wants me to live with her, says she can't even stand up, she's so upset."

"You can't do that," I said, surprising myself with how fast it came out.

Krushalya sniffed and said, "I know."

We laid down, our heads sharing the only pillow. Krushalya started crying, and she was in so much pain that I turned my head and caressed her chin and kissed her tear-stained cheek.

For a long time we didn't say anything. The house was quiet, all the hippies gone away. The big window facing west framed the slow, languid sunset. I thought Krushalya had fallen asleep, her breathing was heavy and even, her facial muscles relaxed. All of a sudden, a sharp, angry peal of thunder exploded from nowhere.

I sat up and asked, "What was that?"

Krushalya laughed. "It's Jimmy-Joe next door, lighting his cherry bombs. His uncle's a travelling salesman, gets them in the U.S. Stupid, jug-eared kid's going to blow off his little weeny before he ever gets a chance to use it."

My stomach grumbled loudly just then.

"Oh, Mara, I'm sorry," she said. "I forgot all about the curry. Let me go downstairs and warm it up."

In a couple of minutes she came back with a brown tray holding two plates of curried vegetables on a bed of rice. We sat cross-legged on the mattress, eating and talking. The food was delicious, and very spicy.

Krushalya asked me how things were going with Dave, and I told her I really liked him. "He's great," she said. "The day I met you, I figured you two would get along."

We finished eating and returned our plates to the tray. Krushalya's lips trembled, and she began crying again.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," she said, wiping the tears away quickly. "I haven't cried in years."

"It's alright," I said, stroking her arm.

She snorkelled back some snot and said, "You must think I'm a mental case, going on like this after telling you how much I hate my dad."

I shrugged. "Not really."

"God. He used to beat me so much, Mara. Do you sleep in the raw?"

I was a little taken aback by the question. "Ah, sometimes. If it's hot."

"Well, I have this thing against wearing pajamas; I like to be naked in my cool sheets. When I was little, my mother bought me a thick, flannel nightgown and expected me to sleep in it. I hated it. It made me feel claustrophobic and strangled. I told my mother this, but she only shook her head and said that if my father found out I was sleeping in the nude, he'd kill me. But I just couldn't stop, I had to be naked."

"Let me guess: your father found out."

"Yeah. He whipped me good with that fake alligator belt of his. Cheap green shit. I felt sorry for my mom, really, because it hurt her more to watch then it did for me. She tried to stop him, but the big asshole just flicked her a nasty back-hander and she ran out of the room bawling."

"That sounds awful."

"The worst thing is that she made me wear that damn nightgown. Of course, my father checked the very next night. As predictable as a morning piss. When he saw that I was wearing it, he smiled and patted my head like I was a good little doggie who'd learned her lesson. I was so mad that, after he left, I took my school scissors and cut out three holes, one for each breast and one for my crotch."

I smiled. "Did he catch you?"

"Not for a couple months, and then, surprise surprise, he whipped me again. But he did finally give up on getting me to wear anything to bed." She looked over at her dresser. "I noticed you looking at my skulls."

"Yeah," I laughed. "I never thought someone'd say that to me. Are they real?"

"What do you think, I'm going to have phony skulls in my room? Sure they're real. They're from Guyana. My mother and I worked on a garden when I was there, and we dug these up. They were attached to skeletons, of course. My mother went psycho, saying we should call the police, but my dad said no, it'd just cause trouble. He was right, too. The cops hate us Pakis. They're so racist, even though they suffered the same thing when the British were around."

"What are the cops?"

"Black, mostly. Anyway, my father, before he went to work the next day, told us to bury the dirty skeletons even deeper. When he left, my mother the chicken asked me to do it alone, and I did, after pulling the skulls off first. It was real easy, like plucking apples from a tree. Do you want to touch one?"

She carried them to the bed in a way that reminded me of how Valerie used to show me her new dolls. I put my hands out and she placed one of the skulls in my palms.

"Smooth heads, don't you think? Good, strong craniums, can't go wrong with that," she said, knocking on the one she was holding. "Teeth are crooked, though. And rather unsightly overbites, I must say. In my opinion, these two were delinquent in their visits to the dentist."

I examined the one in my hand. It was weird holding a live dead skull.
"You brought these through customs?"

Krushalya smiled. "It would've been great trying to get out of that jam: 'I can explain, sir. You see, I attended a double beheading, and afterwards they held a raffle for the heads and I won, really, I did, and it's the first time I've ever won anything in my whole life, sir, so please let me keep them, please, please, please.' Yeah, that would've worked."

It was dark by now. Krushalya lit a tall green candle and put an Animals record on. A moody version of the Rolling Stones' "Paint It Black" played first

Krushalya took the tray downstairs and came back with a bottle of red wine. We both drank straight from the bottle, and it felt special and ceremonial somehow, like we were becoming blood-sisters because our lips shared the same bottle. We talked about music and stuff and eventually she got around to asking me if I'd done it with Dave yet.

I thought she'd never ask. "As a matter of fact... "

"I knew it," she said, punching my shoulder. "Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"Well, I won't embarrass you with any questions of a personal nature, as they say. I'm happy for both of you."

"He was my first," I said, looking at the flickering candle. I guess I felt a bit immature admitting this to Krushalya, since she's been around more than I have, but I know she's not the kind to think less of a person based on that sort of thing.

Krushalya nodded and said, "Dave's a good guy to lose it with."

I laughed and felt up her knee. "How would you know?"

"Oh, nothing like that," she said. "But I can just tell. My first time, I was thirteen and the guy was seventeen. Sort of a prick, which I already knew, but I was curious and he was such a hot-looking beast that I didn't want to wait."

"Was it good?"

"As a learning experience. You know, touching a penis for the first time, and all that. But it's better with someone you like, middle-class as that sounds."

"Do you have a boyfriend now?"

"I don't really have boyfriends," she explained, sounding sad and proud at the same time. "I can't have attachments. I'm not lonely, though. I have my little stable of lovers. Mostly guys in the Y.C.L."

For some reason I blurted out, "Have you had any female lovers?"

She laughed out loud and stroked my cheek in a mock-sexy way. "Gee, Mara, you're not trying to seduce me, are you?"

"No, no," I said. "Sorry, I didn't mean to offend you or anything."

"Offend me? You think you're talking to a nun? The truth is, there have been a couple times. Want to hear about it, or would that gross you out?"

"No, it wouldn't gross me out."

"Well, the first time was two years ago with this girl I met at my old high school. Natalie. She looked like a cuter version of Janis Joplin, including the wire-rimmed glasses. We got into an intense conversation on communism one day. I said I had a great book on Che Guevara she should look at. She asked

if she could come by and pick it up, and right then I knew. As soon as we got in the door, she kissed the nape of my neck."

"Wow. What was that like?"

"Different. But nice. We started Frenching. Her lips were so soft, not like any boy's I've ever kissed. She was a fast worker. She had her hand up my shirt and she was squeezing my breasts, and then we fell on the bed. She pulled off my tights and, ah, are you sure you want to hear about this?"

"Yeah," I said, not wanting to seem so eager but I couldn't help it.

"Well, she ate me out and made me come in about five minutes, despite the fact that she kept calling me her 'brown bunny.' Then she came back up and sucked my nipples. I figured it was my turn to go down on her, but I was nervous about it."

"You?" I said, pretending to be bowled over. "Nervous?"

"I'm not Cleopatra, you know! I get nervous, too. Natalie was such an expert, and I was a beginner. I was afraid I'd screw up. But I did it."

"And? What was it like?"

She made a funny face. "Bizarre, really. Almost narcissistic, like doing yourself. I didn't care for it. And the smell wasn't too appetizing, either."

"Gee," I laughed, "just like what the guys always say."

"Yeah. I have to resolve that dilemma."

"So," I said, not able to hold off teasing her, "didja get her off? Huh?"

She shot me an indignant look. "You serious? Me? Of course I did."

She stood up and flipped the record over. She never did get around to talking about the other time, and I wasn't about to ask for more details.

We sat there, drinking in silence, our backs against the wall, looking at the pale stars outside the window. Every time Krushalya handed me the wine after taking a swig, I put my lips gently to the bottle, like a kiss. It's strange to think about it twenty-four hours later, but I got turned on being with her, though I knew it was innocent.

She put another record on, something by Bessie Smith, all scratchy and soulful. When the side finished, Krushalya didn't make any move to change it. Neither of us was asleep, but we were both beat and drunk. The candle went "psst" and died.

"I think I should go home," I said, trying not to slur my speech.

Krushalya sat up so alertly she must have been on the verge of passing out cold. "Sleep here."

"On *this* bed?" I asked, not meaning to sound tactless or ungrateful.

"I'm not going to rape you," she said. "I'm too tired." She yanked off her poncho and flung it to the floor in one easy motion. She wore no bra, and her breasts swung from the effort. I was so drunk that I didn't realize I was staring. "You like 'em?" she asked, her eyes already closed for the night. Her head hit the pillow and she pulled me closer.

I slept in her arms the whole night.

* * * *

October 4.

Something's wrong. I went to Karen's for my lesson yesterday. I rang the bell. No answer. I went around back and looked in the window. She was lying in bed with a pillow on her head. She was breathing, so I left it at that.

I came home and realized I hadn't seen Nick in a couple days. I'm sort of worried now. I have mixed feelings about the bum, but in general I think he's okay, and he does look out for me, maybe not like a parent, but considering the circumstances, I don't know, I think he's not so bad.

I was getting ready to meet with Dave when I heard a knock at the door. No one ever knocks here, especially at night. Bad omen. Once I witnessed a wedding procession -- happy, honking, paper-flower covered cars -- held up at an intersection by a funeral procession, two dozen dark, sober cars passing so slowly it was sadistic, rubbing the newlyweds' noses in all that death.

I opened the door. A burly man, whose jaw may have been wired shut, grunted "Nick." (Ah, brevity.) Though his arms were behind his back, he still conveyed menace: sweat on his brow, beer on his breath, and hair on his nose.

"He's not here," I said. "Can I take a message?"

He took a step forward and glanced inside the apartment, giving me the impression that if he thought Nick was here, he would have shoved me aside and searched the joint. Luckily, he seemed to believe me; he walked away.

I called Dave to cancel. I have to be alone when things fall apart.

* * * *

October 12.

It's been over a week. Everything's a piece of shit. My fucking period's something from a horror movie. There's been no word from Nick. I don't know where he is, if he's okay, anything. I call Karen fifty times a day, but she won't answer, assuming she's even home.

I missed four days of school this week. Feeling lethargic. I went Friday, and it rained. Richard in Creative Writing brought in this moronic war story that first made me laugh, and then cry. I read it at lunch in Fatso's, before anyone joined me. Called "Eight Days Till Midnight," it's about a butt-kickin', tobacco-spittin' American spy (from "the future") who infiltrates K.G.B. headquarters and, when he's uncovered, goes on a manly killing rampage in Red Square. Jesus! Glorified violence makes me sick, especially after seeing all that horrible stuff in Holocaust Studies. Were it not for the black electrical tape holding Richard's eyeglasses together -- I must admit, I do like the pathos of that -- I'd punch his face in.

Krushalya, it turned out, was the only one who came for lunch, all long-faced and depressed. I hate to see her like this. If someone as intelligent and beautiful and brave as her can be sad, then what chance is there for ordinary folks like me? She's fallen behind in school (sounds familiar), and her mother's on some sort of tranquilizers back in Guyana, calling Krushalya at all hours with her "crazy talk."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Oh, she thinks my father's ghost is roaming the halls. One night he was an evil ghost seeking revenge, although I couldn't guess for what. Another time he was a penitent ghost, begging forgiveness. And last night he was a hungry ghost, looking for chick peas."

"Chick peas?"

"My father's favourite."

The waitress brought my fries. I asked Krushalya if she'd seen Ling Ling lately.

She looked out the window and said, "Not since Monday."

"Do you know if she had her operation?"

"Oh, her eyelids?" she said, in a sarcastic tone. "She sure did."

"And?"

"And what?"

"How does she look?"

"Surprised."

"Very funny."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to be flippant about it. Ling Ling and I had a big fight the day before she checked into the hospital."

I couldn't believe I was hearing this. "God, don't tell me you bugged her about it again?"

"Bugged her?" she said, almost shouting. "It's mutilation! It's insane! I tried to talk her out of it."

The guys at the next booth stared at us a moment. I waited a bit before saying, more quietly, "It's her life, Krushalya. I know you care about her -- "

"I do," she said, and she put her hand over her eyes. Although she may have been close to tears, she recovered fast and came back swinging. "I think Ling Ling may have done it for that prick she's seeing."

"Justin?"

"They're in love. What a joke."

The waitress came and Krushalya told her she didn't want anything.

"I saw you giving him some strange looks that night in the café."

"I used to know him," I said. "A long time ago."

"Lucky you," she said, stealing some of my fries.

"How'd he ever get involved in the Young Communist League?"

She shook her head. "He started hanging around a couple months ago. Probably heard that red chicks were easy." Her shoulders rose and fell. "That smarmy anglophile somehow impressed Ling Ling. Him and his white trousers. Quoting *Churchill*, as if anyone gives a shit. Drinking Earl Grey, eating scones. What torpor! Life's unfair, Mara."

"You really think Ling Ling did it for him?"

She crossed her arms on her chest and gave a dejected sigh. "If not for him, then for his kind."

I hope it's not true.

That night, there was a demonstration at an aluminum factory in East

York. A bunch of us from the Y.C.L. took the Keele bus north to lend support (Dave, for some reason, didn't show up). The plant illegally locked out all its workers about twelve days ago, and the shop steward (whose son, Ray, is in the Y.C.L.) thought it'd be good to have us there. Forty or so workers walked the picket line, with about twenty of us.

When nightfall came, the workers lit fires in some big metal trash cans. I stayed close to Krushalya, being new at this. We walked in front of the chain-link fence surrounding the factory.

Sometime around eight o'clock, this flashy silver Camaro pulled up and parked near the fence. Everyone instantly stopped to watch (I figure because the monotonous, circular motion favoured by strikers the world over makes just about any diversion welcome). The passenger door opened first, and even in the dark and at a distance I recognized Ling Ling's red windbreaker. The door opened on the driver's side and a long, white pant leg extended to the ground. Justin Eton-Edwards, Esq. Everyone, except for Krushalya and me, resumed the clockwise shuffle to nowhere.

Justin and Ling Ling walked up to us. Finally, finally, I understood why Krushalya was so upset with Ling Ling's decision. From the time I first heard about it, I'd equated her eyelid operation with putting make-up on or wearing a new dress -- just another change of looks. But now, up close, this was evil and macabre, sort of like *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*. She looked different and otherworldly, more like the pod replica of Ling Ling than the original.

We said hi and acted coolly, but civilly, toward one another. Someone came over and handed picket signs to Ling Ling and Justin. Ling Ling heaved hers up on her shoulder, while Justin leaned on his.

I debated inwardly over whether or not to comment on Ling Ling's new look -- "Like your new eyes," "Good job," whatever -- but before I could decide, Justin smiled right at me and said, "You're Mara Rustic, right?"

"Yes."

"I asked Ling Ling who you were when we met a couple of weeks ago, but it didn't sink in until just now. We went to school together at Southwood, remember?"

"Yes, I think I do," I said, with a not-too-genuine smile.

Ling Ling frowned at me for not being more friendly, and I'm sure she thinks it's because Krushalya told me to hate Justin. I suppose I could have told her about the swing incident from ten years ago, but I don't come off much better than Justin in that one. (Odds and ends department: there was blood on Justin's chin from where he'd attempted to scrape off one of his zits. I wonder if he bleeds this much when I'm not around.)

Just then a rock landed close to us, having been thrown from inside the fence. A shadow moved quickly across the factory rooftop and disappeared. Some of the workers got angry. Then a police car pulled up -- no siren, but lights flashing -- and stopped just short of the picket line. This made everyone even angrier, since the whole thing looked orchestrated now.

Another rock flew from the rooftop and struck the side of a burning trash can, causing a reverberating clang. Everyone turned around to see what the two police officers seated safely in their cruiser planned to do about this. The cops did nothing.

The workers huddled together and talked about climbing the fence and catching the rock-thrower, whom they suspected was a foreman they called "Banana Jerry" (I didn't think to ask why).

Two more police cars arrived, and then two more. Ray called the Y.C.L. gang over and explained that there might be some trouble.

Justin asked, "What kind of trouble?"

"If anyone wants to leave," Ray said, diplomatically, "that's okay."

Justin looked at Ling Ling and said, "We don't need this, do we?"

Before Ling Ling answered, Krushalya said, "Just go home, rich boy."

Justin said, "Well, I don't see the point. I don't want to wind up in jail for nothing."

"Let me tell you something," Krushalya said. She lowered her picket sign and let it rest against her thigh, and I knew something nasty was coming. "They can lock you up in jail, but they can't keep your face from breaking out."

A few people laughed pretty loudly (Justin's not very popular). I looked at Ling Ling and I felt sorry for her, she looked really anguished, not knowing what to do.

"Clever," Justin huffed. "But you still haven't told me why we're here."

"You wouldn't understand, Mr. Camaro, but there happens to be a need for strong unions in this country."

"Get to the point," Justin said, in a supercilious way.

"The *point*?" Krushalya repeated, gaining some steam now. "The point is that for over a hundred years proletarians have been crapped on by fat, greedy bosses, capitalist pigs who snort that their workers need jobs to make a living when it's the bosses who make *their* livings off the workers' backs. Can you understand that, rich boy? Slaves are sold only once, but proletarians have to sell themselves by the hour, and the one protection they have against further debasement is the union. Read your Marx, rich boy. It's all there. The union. The union. The union!"

When she finally ran out of breath and stopped, some of the workers who'd overheard actually clapped. Ray said, "Boy, Krushalya. You don't just get to the point, you beat the shit out of it once you get there."

Justin, unable to think of a decent comeback, turned and walked away. Ling Ling exchanged a look with Krushalya before she left to go with Justin.

The whole thing makes me sad. It seems anti-climactic to mention that the demonstration ended with nothing big. The cops told everyone to go home, and we did.

The next day, Saturday, I stayed home waiting for news about Nick. And I couldn't get hold of Krushalya, Dave or Karen. Where is everyone?

* * * *

October 26.

I'm sick. I started working at the bookstore again. I'm going to have to ask John for an advance so I can pay the rent Friday. Karen finally answered her phone and told me not to expect Nick back. She said he's okay, but he's in some kind of serious trouble. She mentioned that he's going to try to mail me some money. I wanted to ask her about my guitar lessons, but from the tone of her voice I could tell that was history. Whatever Nick did really hurt her.

Speaking of men hurting women, I found out Dave's back together again with a girl he met in the summer. He's been avoiding me, not even showing up to writing class. When I called him last Saturday, he acted weird and told me he'd have to switch to another line. Then, whispering, he told me "Elaine" was there. They'd had a hot summer fling before breaking up in September. Then, when he ran into her at a record store a few weeks ago, the sparks they flew.

I surprised myself by not breaking down and crying. It hurts, though. I thought I loved him. Krushalya's amazed I'm taking it so well. I guess I'd be more upset if this other junk weren't happening. Imagine not having time for a broken heart! Krushalya's kept me busy with the Y.C.L. I don't care much for all the reading she's "assigned" me (Marx, Lenin, yuck!), but I do like the people there. Krushalya's going through a rough time, too (her mother), so we're both trying to keep our minds occupied. I've been thinking of asking her to move in, since we spend so much time together anyway. I think we'd get along great.

* * * *

November 1.

This is the end of my journal. No more talking to myself. Making noises in my head for no reason. I'm sixteen years old. Sweet. Birthday Thursday. Today's Saturday. Or Sunday. Sunday morning, technically. I feel ridiculous. And alone. I am alone. Oh God, this isn't what I wanted.

In August, a thick, sticky morning where I felt the awful humidity in my nightmares, I awoke and found Mama in the bathtub, lying in water and blood. What a picture. What a poem. Written with a breadknife. A lifetime of agony captured in one final, pink moment.

After the initial shock -- because no one wants to wake up first thing and find her lunatic mother naked and shrivelled and floating dead in the tub, when all she really wanted was to splash cold water on her face, and maybe take a piss -- and that first spinning half hour, and after the ambulance attendants, and the policemen, and the nosy neighbours, after everyone had gone, I returned to my room and fell backwards onto my bed, arms stretched out blissfully, and I was laughing, I couldn't contain myself, I was laughing because it was over, I was free, free of the madness and depression, getting my mother out of bed and dressing her and reading the Bible to her, feeding her, cooking, cleaning, and the late-night sobbing for her husband and son, the father and brother I wanted only to forget. Mama, I'm sorry. I am sorry. I miss you so much.

No, I deserve all this. I'm dirty. The tears rolling down my cheeks leave muddy tracks. Sounds like the beginning of an old blues ballad:

*The tears rollin' down my cheeks leave muddy tracks.
And I can cry all I want, they ain't never comin' back.
Please mister, please mister, I feel so black.
Shoot me in the field, and bury it in the grass.*

Ah, an asinine rhyme for an asinine girl.

Mama's buried in a lovely green cemetery not far from here, about two miles away. The maintenance staff keeps the lawn neatly trimmed, I am told, and I'll go down someday to pay my respects. And maybe if I can find some I'll put two or three white roses on her grave, that would be nice. "Jelina Rustic," the tombstone probably reads. "Born May 1st, 1940. Died August 13th, 1980."

Lately I have not felt myself. What a cheap double entendre. Lately I've been feeling like shit. School is a pit. Nick and Karen are both out of my life now. (Nick did send a money order for about eight months' rent, but the note enclosed said nothing about what's going on or if he's ever coming home, just "Hang in there, kid.") Dave is gone, too. I still see him, of course, but he's not there the way he was before. He looks vaguely embarrassed whenever I try to approach him. It's no use.

So here I am, the sad little orphan girl (BOOHOO!!) with no boyfriend, no uncle, no big-sister figure. A few days ago those things, as upsetting as they are, wouldn't have mattered so much because I still had Krushalya. Now, that's over, too. It's all over. But before concluding this curse of a journal, I shall put to paper faithfully, to the best of my abilities (doesn't that sound formal and full of meaning?), the record of the end of my friendship with the kind-hearted and beautiful Krushalya Samad:

I'd been working a lot of nights recently, since I was unsure whether any money was forthcoming from Nick. Krushalya'd swing by the bookstore some of those evenings and walk me home. Friday night she came by with a strange look on her face, like someone who'd won the lottery the same day she found out her house burned down.

We walked for a while along Lakeshore, getting honked at by ignorant drivers and barked at by joggers' dogs. The racket. I kept asking her what was up, but she wouldn't tell me. She'd always been extra-honest with everything else, and I couldn't guess what'd make her hesitate to talk now.

We got here at about ten o'clock. Krushalya eased her backpack from her shoulders and took out a bottle of red wine. We hadn't had anything to drink since the night she told me her father died, mainly because neither of us holds our liquor very well. When I asked her what the special occasion was, she said she wouldn't talk about it until all the wine was gone.

In my room, where I'd moved Nick's stereo and record collection, we listened to Van Morrison's mellow *Astral Weeks*. With the curtains drawn, I draped a purple t-shirt over my desk lamp. We sat on the bed and drank in the dark violet, passing the bottle back and forth. Krushalya insisted on silence, shushing me every time I tried to speak.

As the bottle emptied, we started swaying into each other, clumsily, but with affection, first our knees touching, then elbows, before finally putting our arms around one another. Krushalya took a deep swig, looked me in the eye

and whispered, "I love you." I cannot, I am not a good enough person or writer, I cannot describe exactly the way I felt when I heard those words. A rush of warmth and happiness went straight to my heart, and I had tears in my eyes. Krushalya wiped them away with a tender finger, and I smiled and told her that I loved her, too. She smiled back and said, "I know."

When I asked her what the big news was that she didn't want to discuss, she told me it could wait until morning.

"It's not something terrible, is it?"

"Tomorrow," she said.

I got up and flipped the record over, and when I returned Krushalya was standing beside the bed. "Where are you going?" I asked.

"Do you mind if I sleep over? I really don't want to go home tonight."

"Sure. I'd like that."

She began undressing, and it was an effort for me to pretend I was engrossed with the album-cover art. After she crawled under the blanket, I grabbed my pajamas and headed for the bathroom to change. I felt like a big sucky prude. When I came back, Krushalya laughed and called me just that.

"Can I ask you for a favour, Mara?"

"Yeah?"

"Would you, ah, feel uncomfortable sleeping in the nude with me?"

It took me a full five seconds to answer. "No, I guess not."

"I'm not being weird or anything."

"No, it's alright."

I took off my pajama top while Krushalya looked at me and grinned. I turned away from her to pull off the bottoms, and then, not wanting to even stop and think, I took off my underwear, too. Krushalya held the blanket up for me to come join her. I took a deep breath and climbed in.

I laid there on my back for a couple minutes, looking petrified, I imagine, with the sheet pulled up to my neck and Krushalya propped up on her elbow, staring at me.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing. I'm just looking at you. Don't be nervous."

"I'm not."

"Good."

She moved closer and put her hand on my cheek. Then she leaned in and gave my eyelids wet, lingering kisses.

I was rather enjoying this strange sensation, when Krushalya stopped. She laid her head against my chest and said, "Oh, Mara. I'm afraid to tell you."

"What is it?"

She sighed a few times. Then, "I'm leaving tomorrow for Guyana."

I thought about this a moment, trying to keep the panic away. I stroked her hair and said, "You're going to visit your mother?"

"No. I'm going to live there."

This was the bullet. "Oh."

She didn't speak right away. I think she was waiting for me to say that it was the right thing to do, her mother needed her, that I was going to miss her a lot but that we could still write letters. When she saw that I wasn't going to say a thing, she asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yes," I said, forgetting in an instant whether I'd said yes or no, because it didn't matter, anyway.

"I'm sorry."

She held me close, our bellies pressed warmly against each other. She kissed me on the lips, and put her hand gently on my breast. I moved my hand up and down her back, caressing her skin, it was soft and warm.

We cried and made love, and in the morning she left me.

* * * *

Mr. Pavić, attorney and gentleman, wants me to call him Zivko.

"*Dobar dan, Zivko,*" I say. "*Kako si?*"

Zivko smiles at my feeble attempt at Serbo-Croatian. "You speak very well, Mara."

"Thank you. *Hvala.*"

He shows me into his home and holds a cushy brown chair out for me at the dining room table. His slippers are ducks. That is unavoidable. A thing I could not avoid. The rest of his attire -- a cool blue Italian suit, a matching silk tie, a buttoned-down shirt so immaculately white it makes me want to bathe -- more than compensates for the yellow waterfowl hugging his feet: the overall effect is one of wealth and elegance. He sits down opposite me and begins, as if someone pressed PLAY on his mouth machine, to defend various Serb army actions in a language I barely remember.

Zivko's grinning, non-stop wife, Jagoda, wears her long grey hair in a ponytail. She wipes the table thoroughly, scrubbing hard, like she's prepping for surgery. "Lie down, Miss Rustic. We'll remove that memory in no time." She leaves the room and returns with a plate of walnut-filled pastries rolled in icing sugar. Next, she serves us strong-smelling Turkish coffee in dainty, hand-painted cups sporting scenes from the Bible in black, gold and red. Zivko's cup features David hoisting Goliath's huge, blood-dripping head high above his own. Mine depicts the crucifixion under a big, golden sun. David and Jesus look like twins, the only difference being David's biceps are pronounced, while God's son apparently follows no work-out regimen. I can't believe any connection between the two is intended; the artist likely draws all faces the same.

Zivko switches to English when he notices my mind straying "I am sorry for talking about this. Tell me, how was it your airplane trip coming here?"

"I slept through most of it."

"Good, good. It can be very, how do you say, boring? Many hours to do nothing." He clears his throat and looks longingly at the crystal ashtray centred on the table. He calls to the kitchen: "*Molim Jagoda, donesi moj cigarete.*"

Jagoda brings him a pack of cigarettes. Even before handing it to him, she is wiping the table where he's spilled pastry crumbs.

"*Hvala,*" he says, returning her permanent smile without actually looking at her. He fumbles in his jacket pocket, pulls out a silver lighter, and lights his cigarette. After taking a few puffs, he asks, "Do you smoke?"

"No."

"Your father smoked very much. Two or three packs on the day."

"Is that how he died? Lung cancer?"

"No," he says after a brief hesitation, as if he contemplated lying to me.

Jagoda brings me a tall glass of freshly-squeezed orange juice to wash down the Turkish coffee I have not touched. I say "*Hvala lepo*" and drink it, figuring that oranges don't grow on trees in Greater Serbia, and therefore must be imported, and therefore are expensive. She stands right over my shoulder and quietly watches me until the glass is half empty; satisfied, she leaves again for the kitchen.

The flimsy cloud of cigarette smoke winding itself slowly around Zivko's head gives him the haughty air of a café intellectual. He is about fifty-five years old, grey at the temples, quite handsome in a beefy sort of way, inexplicably tanned, with bushy dark eyebrows that nearly meet above a prominent nose.

I take a sip of my orange juice, set the glass back down on the table, and ask, "How did you know my father?"

"We had a friend in common," Zivko says after another hesitation, and I can't tell whether he's choosing his words so carefully because of his difficulties with English, or for another reason. He averts his eyes and adds, "That friend, too, is gone now. The three of us used to work in the same building."

He adds nothing more. I can see that he doesn't want me to pursue this line of questioning. Fine. "How did my father die?"

His wide face contorts into the dictionary definition of consternation, all frowns and twitches. Jagoda, who doesn't speak English, walks in with a bottle of *slivovitz* and two shot glasses pressed to her bosom. She places everything on the table with the clink-clink of glass colliding. She's about to pour when Zivko waves her off. Confused, she looks first at me, and then at her husband again. "*Netreba*," he tells her. She picks up the three pieces and carries them back to the kitchen, her smile never waning.

"I don't mean to be rude, Mr. Pavić, but I'd like to know -- "

"Please," he says, "call me Zivko. Your father was my best friend."

"Very well, Zivko. Please forgive me if I'm being ungracious. I just want to know what happened to my father."

He reaches for his second cigarette, shoves it in his mouth, and lights it. "Your father was murdered."

"What?" I say, not at all prepared for this (which, of course, begs the question, What the hell *am* I prepared for?). In my fantasies, stretching back like a lonesome desert highway over twenty years, my father gets killed over and over again in typical, everyday accidents: run over by a Dodge, drowned in a river, choking on a disagreeable lump of porridge, maybe crushed to death by industrial equipment in a factory with low safety standards. Something painful, yes, but ordinary just the same. Murdered? *My* father? Of all the possibilities, all the variations I played with in girlhood and adolescence while lying awake at night, murder is the one ending I never imagined.

"There was trouble on his street," Zivko says, after giving me what he must feel is enough time to absorb the news. "All the Croatian families were ordered off the premises. And they left, all except for one man and his wife. These people sent their sons to Zagreb, but they would not leave their home. They were," he says, closing his eyes to think of the word, "stubborn."

"Stubborn," I repeat stupidly.

He nods. "When it became clear that they were not going to leave, a man from the military handed your father a pistol and ordered him to kill these people, since they were his neighbours. Unfortunately, your father was also stubborn. He told the soldier, 'Never.' The soldier told him to think it over, and that he would be back the next day. Your father was advised by all his friends, and especially me, to do it. Those people were going to die, anyway. There was no reason for Tony to die, too."

"My father wouldn't kill them?"

"No. The soldier returned the next day with several other soldiers. I was there. They gave your father one final chance. Next door, the Croatian couple shook like rabbits behind their curtains and watched. I begged your father to shoot those awful people. But he wouldn't. And the soldiers, they killed him."

I put my head in my hands.

No.

This isn't the place. I take a deep breath and look at Zivko. "You said in your letter that my father left me something."

"Yes." He gets up and walks to the gigantic white china cabinet, looming over the table like a polar bear stuffed on its hind legs. He pulls a small brown parcel from the top drawer and holds it out to me with a sad look.

I take it and thank him. Then, "Where can I find my brother?"

He massages the lines on his forehead. "I'll give you his wife's address. Talk to her."

I thank him again and leave. We do not shake hands. Jagoda does not come out to say goodbye.

A cab had taken me directly from the airport to this house. I am now for the first time walking outdoors in Yugoslavia. The sun is shining

Here I am, walking in lovely downtown Belgrade. Now there's a swell opening line for a postcard. Close with, "P.S. I'm missing you terribly and wish you were here." Who would I write that to? Having finished reading my teen journal, I'm thinking of Nick, a former Belgrade resident -- "*Beograd*," he'd say. In the past few years, I've heard from him more and more infrequently, skimpy envelopes out of the blue, never a return address. Somehow the old boy's tracked me down through a dozen or so moves, even during my doomed two-year flirtation with university in Montreal. No paucity of eccentric postmarks, either: MEDICINE HAT, ALBERTA; EDNA, TEXAS; BONANZA, NICARAGUA. He's always cheerful ("Hey, kid!") and he still sends cash, although how he earns, or rather obtains, money still remains a mystery to me. I wanted to write him, or even talk to him, but he never called, not once. Somehow I picture him hideously disfigured, courtesy of a knife fight with a guy named Lucas or Rico.

Everything here amazes me. The traffic lights, for example: people obey them. No blatant lawlessness -- the compact cars stop and start according to the normal red-green conventions. On the sidewalk, well-dressed pedestrians window-shop and laugh, not at all distressed by, say, the genocide and rape being carried out in their names.

From the main street, I pass two smaller ones and find the address I'm looking for. It's a modest, one-storey house, surrounded ominously by a black iron fence. I lift the latch on the gate. The hinges creak loudly; rust crumbles off in my fingers. I walk in and ease the gate gently back in place, fearful that a hard-enough push will bring the whole fence crashing down and wake the dead.

Closer, the house becomes less bleak. Three white lawn chairs take up space on the cluttered porch. Toys lie scattered about. It suddenly occurs to me that I may be an aunt. Aunt Mara. Crazy Tetka Mara. They'll make fun of me, I know it. And look over there, plastic dolls with big hair and stuffed pink creatures: they're girls' toys -- that's worse, they'll notice the cracks right away.

I knock on the door, a good, solid door, oak perhaps, what do I know, fucking oak. I'm going to wake Edgar Allan Poe with my beating heart. I knock again, again.

A black-haired woman holding a dishcloth opens the door. A pretty little girl hides behind her, tugging tenaciously on the woman's blue skirt. The mood is one of apprehension, even I can see that; they're expecting bad news. They look at me like I'm the blood-on-the-smock doctor who walks gravely into the

waiting room to tell them their daddy didn't quite make it, that we did the best we could, and hell, he would've been a vegetable anyway, it's better this way.

The woman works a tired smile onto her face. After trying, and failing, to slap the girl loose from her dress, she nods almost imperceptibly and greets me warmly in her own language.

I smile and say, "*Dobar dan*," and then I ask her if she speaks English.

She turns her head and yells, "*Sestra!*" She smiles and steps back into the shadows of the hallway, taking the girl with her.

Another woman comes to the door, younger, without the smile. Like her sister, she has a strong chin and black, wavy hair. The sullen look on her face only intensifies when she is told I wish to speak to someone in English. She curls her lip at me and, with only the slightest trace of an accent, asks, "What do you want?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you. I'm looking for Danny Rustic's wife, Katya."

"That's me," she says, her voice uncertain now. "Who are you?"

A strange, tickling feeling enters the back of my throat. This is my brother's wife. My sister-in-law. I feel a fog lifting from heart. After more than a decade, I'm looking a relative of mine in the eye. Katya's beautiful. Dark hair comes down in soft, child-like wisps over haunted green eyes. Her skin is pale, especially when set against the long black sweater that hangs loosely on her thin body. She's my height, about twenty, twenty-one years old. "My name's Mara Rustic."

Suspicion creeps momentarily into her eyes, before her mouth, pouty and small, yet rebellious, softens into a smile. "Danilo's sister? My God!"

She bursts out from the doorway and wraps her arms tightly around me. This unexpected kindness startles me so much that my eyes instantly well up with tears. Soon the household's other members -- Katya's sister Malina and her daughter, Tina -- join us on the porch for coffee and biscuits.

Katya says, "It's incredible. That old lawyer told us about you in the summer, but we didn't believe him. You look like your brother, I can see the resemblance now, you have the same nose."

I'm only too happy to answer question after question about Canadian winters and what Danny was like as a baby (Katya laughs when I say "Danny," since he's always been "Danilo" to her). But after talking for almost an hour, the conversation slows to a grim, heavy silence. Malina leaves with Tina to pick up another daughter from school. An unspoken sorrow exists between Katya and me. She hasn't yet mentioned where my brother is. Zivko Pavić wouldn't say anything, either. Something is very wrong.

Katya asks, "Would you like more coffee?"

I shake my head no. I don't want to pressure her. Already, I feel close to her. I can sense her bravery in the way she bites the inside of her cheek and looks away when our eyes meet. The last thing I want to do is bring any more pain to her life. She loves Danny. She loves her Danilo. But I've waited so long, and I've come so far. I have to ask. "Where is my brother?"

She closes her eyes and keeps them closed. After a few deep breaths, she says, "He's in Gorjemesto."

The name sounds familiar. I've heard it on the radio before, or perhaps read of it in the newspapers. "Is that in Serbia?"

She doesn't want to talk about it, but I can see that she will; she knows how much it means to me. "It's in Croatia," she says, quietly. She opens her eyes and looks at me. "When Danilo received an offer to teach two years ago, we moved to a Serbian town near the border. Everything was going well. We were married a year ago last June."

She holds her hand up to show me the ring. An odd exchange of weak smiles.

Katya suddenly covers up the ring with her other hand and continues. "The army -- the Serbs in Croatia -- began recruiting men, everyone who could walk, and some who couldn't. Danilo didn't want to fight. He tried to explain to these soldiers that he was Yugoslavian, not Serbian, and that he refused to go to war against other Yugoslavs. Our friends were mixed, Mara: Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, even Muslims. We tried telling this to the idiot soldiers, but they only threatened to kill him if he didn't join. When Danilo told them to go ahead and shoot, they said they would kill me, too. And that's when he left with them."

I think of a coffin in Gorjemesto, and I cannot bear it. "Is he dead?"

A look of horror: "Oh, Mara, I'm sorry." She gets halfway out of her lawn chair and hugs me. "No, Danilo's not dead. I'm sorry to make you think that."

My heartbeat returns to normal.

Katya sits down again. She picks up her cup and cradles it in her lap.

"We made a mistake, Danilo and I. We thought he'd be exempt because of his teaching. His students loved him. His boys won the soccer championship last year. He was the youngest and most popular teacher at the school. None of it mattered. They dragged him off in broad daylight. We had just moved into our new apartment. Without him, I had to leave it behind. I came back here to live with my sister and her family. And then Danilo's father -- " she catches herself " -- your father was murdered. Danilo took it badly. He wrote to me, he was so despondent, he said he'd take his own life before he allowed the soldiers to kill him like they did your father. He said they were trying to make him do things, things he would never do. He's a sweet man, Mara. He's not a soldier."

She sweeps hair from her eyes and waits for a slow-moving, bent-over old woman to walk by on the sidewalk in front of the house.

"He stopped writing five months ago. I didn't know where he was, if he was alive, nothing. Six weeks ago, I got a letter from a nurse in Gorjemesto. She told me he was in a hospital bed and that he wouldn't eat or sleep. I wrote him many letters, I even told him about you, that Zivko had found a sister in Canada. I thought it might raise his spirits. I told him I missed him. And I told him I loved him," she says, looking into her cup. "But I didn't hear anything for a long time. Finally, the nurse wrote me back herself, saying Danilo wouldn't read my letters. And when she read them to him, he showed no reaction."

"Did you go see him?"

I feel ashamed as soon as the words leave my lips. Katya lowers her head and speaks in a whisper. "No. Crossing borders isn't allowed. I thought of it, of course. But I was afraid. And I had no one I could ask to go with me."

"Katya," I say, and before I say anything else, we both know.

19

The next day, an overcast, windy Monday, Katya and I get up early and walk to the bus station. After a restless night in a room with Malina's daughters (they shared a bed to accommodate me), the cool morning breeze on my face invigorates me. This long, quiet walk with Katya is just what I need. Malina's husband, Slobodan, had offered to give us a ride in the colourless Volkswagen Beetle his father's been driving since the glory days of Tito. Katya thought about it and declined. Gasoline is rationed and very expensive. Slobodan looked relieved.

Late last night, Malina brought out a map and showed us the best route available. First we'll take the bus to Novi Selo, the town Katya and Danny lived in up until last March. Then, either by sneaking across or bribing whomever controls the border, we'll try to negotiate our way into Croatia. From there, it's about ten miles to Gorjemeslo.

At first, Slobodan scoffed at our plan. When he realized how determined we were to see it through, he urged us in a very earnest, almost touching, tone to reconsider. He didn't have to spell out what horrors may await us.

Katya and I make decent time and get to the bus station by nine o'clock. We sit in silence in the grey waiting area. She pulls from her inside coat pocket a tattered copy of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. She asks me if I mind. I smile and say no, I don't. She says she's reading it for an English literature class she's enrolled in. (Poor Maggie and Tom, brother and sister, die together in a flood; that much I remember.) Once immersed in the book, the tip of her tongue peeks out between her lips, an anchor to her concentration. The pages turn quickly. Me, I'm writing to you in my book of madness. The ink in my pen is running out. We have an hour to wait.

Before we went to bed last night, Katya showed me her photo albums. I saw pictures of Danny at all the different stages of his life. (Weird, like seeing one of those missing children computer-graphic enhancements, illustrating what the kid might look like today.) Danny's metabolism problem, the profuse and unprovoked sweating, evidently continued until at least the start of high school. All his school portraits -- artless mugshots, really, just like in North America -- are notable for the perspiration-soaked forehead and the damp, greasy hair. In his teens he was thin and gawky, all elbows and knees, and big ears poked out from behind a bad haircut I recognized at once, from personal experience, as my father's handiwork (my mother didn't trust herself with sharp instruments).

Katya beamed when we got to the wedding pictures. She wore her grandmother's beautiful old gown, with a train as long as a swimming pool. Danny, in his black tuxedo, looked handsome and confident, the adolescent awkwardness gone. My father was in the pictures, too, a spent ghost staring back at me. It shocked me to see him like that, the same man but not, older, grey-haired, stooped, weaker. Imagine finding the devil in a retirement home: horns worn away, tail limp, pitchfork too heavy to carry anymore and cream of mushroom soup dribbling down his lips. Do you call upon the armies of God to smite him down, or do you wipe his chin for him? After a few more pictures of him -- making toasts, kissing Katya, standing between the happy couple with tears in his eyes -- the shock wore off, and I began to see my father for what he was, a very average man, proud of his son and new daughter-in-law on their wedding day. I never thought I'd come to that conclusion about him.

Katya told me about him reluctantly, since she could probably see the turmoil in my eyes as I thumbed through the album. My father was a janitor in a legal building, which is where he met Zivko. The two men were inseparable, drinking home-made wine together on weekends, playing games of chess for cigarettes, my father entralling his friend with tales of the New World. When Danny reached the age when such things are considered, Zivko encouraged him to become a lawyer. Katya said my father was all for it, but Danny was set on working with children, either as a teacher or a pediatrician. Teaching won out when Danny's marks failed to meet medical school standards.

All this information, this instant history, is hard for me to absorb. It's too much to fit into my brain at once. I've decided not to open the parcel that Zivko gave me, at least until after I see Danny. I'm worried that whatever it is, it will upset me tremendously.

* * * *

Our bus lumbers into the station, announcing itself with the shriek of a sharp left turn. Fifteen passengers and a baggy-panted driver climb out. They look exhausted, like they just finished a double-shift down in the mine.

Katya says the driver will freshen up, and in a few minutes we'll be off. Her voice, so small in the echo-filled station, reminds me that this is my idea. She's a child. Although she's dying to see Danny, I know that if it weren't for me she'd be safe at home right now, typing an essay for school. She's twenty-two years old, a year younger than Danny. The realization that I'm the "adult" here -- chronology-wise, anyway -- fills me with a dread and responsibility I've never felt before. I want to ask her if she's certain she wants to do this. But if I do, she'll be insulted; she wants this as much as I do.

On the bus, Katya lets me have the window seat. "You're the guest in this country," she says. In fact, there are no windows. Katya explains that all the panes have been removed as a precaution against sniper fire.

Within twenty minutes, the bus leaves Belgrade's city limits, and there's a swift drop in the quality of the road; we're in the rural regions now. Despite the chilly, late-autumn afternoon, the farmers have their sheep and cows grazing in

the pastures. All the cows seem ludicrously skinny to me, malnourished, even. When I point this out to Katya, she gives me a funny look, like it's impolite to notice such a thing.

After more than three hours of bump-ta-bump-ta-bump on primitive back roads, the bus stops at its final destination, Novi Selo. Katya and I are the only ones left, the thirty or so other passengers having disembarked at earlier stops. It's just past two o'clock. There's no station here. The driver says it was blown up two months ago, by which side nobody knows for sure. He waves goodbye and pulls the door shut from the inside. He leaves us in the middle of nowhere.

Once the cacophony of the bus dies in the distance, the change in Katya is visible. She's thinking about the times she and Danny shared in this town. She stands on the road and spins a slow circle, looking all around her before facing me again. "This way," she says, without much conviction.

We cut across an abandoned field and walk towards the Croatian border. Reddish-brown, dried-up stalks snap loudly beneath our feet. I find it hard to believe this big chunk of nothing was once a vibrant cornfield. We trudge into it dutifully, no complaining, our arms held up to deflect the sharp sting of dead and brittle vegetation on our faces. The map is in Katya's hands. I follow her.

Katya's lugging a bulky knapsack, probably filled with treats for Danny. I'm carrying a light overnight bag, and beginning to feel guilty. After a while, I ask her if she wants to switch. She doesn't respond, and when I ask her again she shakes her head no without turning around.

How strange this is, almost surreal, walking the old country with a sister-in-law I met yesterday. Getting to know her now would be difficult; everything is tainted by this mad war. You hear inspirational stories about people returning to their ancestral homelands and finding some measure of, I don't know, peace, self-knowledge, something. Look at this. I'm with an intelligent, warm-hearted young woman, and I can't even have a normal conversation with her. Can't ask her about her studies, about the music she listens to, whether she's travelled much in her life, nothing. Small talk is out of the question; it would be obscene in this backdrop.

We're about halfway into this enormous field -- a mile behind us, a mile ahead of us -- when Katya stops without warning. I bang into her knapsack, nearly sending us both tumbling to the ground. Katya doesn't speak. I step around her to see what's wrong. There, on the ground, partially hidden by the weeds and cornstalks, lies a pile of dead babies, heaped naked on top of one another, five, seven, ten of them. Some look like newborns, others could be two years old. All of their tiny skulls are dented in. Thousands of flies and maggots feast greedily on soft baby flesh. Katya puts her hand to her mouth and points to a copper-headed mallet lying nearby, blood-stained. She falls to her knees and throws up. I bend down and clasp my arms around her back.

Afterwards, neither of us says a thing. I wonder, though. Were they rape babies? Or did someone see a star in the east?

* * * *

We emerge from the field onto a barren strip of highway, brushing burrs from each other's hair and clothing. It looks like rain. There's a checkpoint up ahead, fifty yards from us. Katya says it's Serbian, she can tell by the torn flag draped over the low roof. Tucked securely in the side pocket of her knapsack are papers proving Katya was born in Belgrade. Slobodan warned us that this identification might not be enough, that the soldiers might take one look at us and decide we weren't Serbs at all. Katya, however, thinks the papers, plus a bit of money (especially my American dollars), will be enough.

In the end, it doesn't matter, anyway. No one's manning the tin-shack checkpoint, which happens to be riddled with golfball-sized bullet holes. So is the portable outhouse twenty feet behind it. These guys play for keeps. Katya and I look at each other and actually smile. We walk across the border and, just like that, we're in Croatia. We're too fast, and the coyotes are sleeping.

The sun makes a surprise appearance. Unfathomable to me, that it's the same sun the world over, that kids in Toronto play road hockey beneath it, and that wealthy tourists in Monaco smear sunscreen against it. We take off our coats and wipe our brows. Krushalya says we'll be in Gorjemento in two hours.

I'm tired. Did Krushalya say that? No, Katya. Everything's so bright. I think I see her in the distance. A speck of blue on the horizon. The air hangs dense and hazy, mirage-making. We're walking towards her. Katya and I are the sole survivors in this comedy. She's my partner. What will I do? I can't tell her what I see. I can't be insane now. She thinks I know what I'm doing.

My God, Gorjemesto! I finally make the connection; I *have* read about it. The Burning Village. It's the place those children see the Virgin. I feel relieved and, in a way, vindicated. The visions I had as a child stopped after my father went away. In an effort to recapture the visions of Mary -- because I no longer felt special or blessed or whatever that feeling was -- I used to light small fires in the wastebasket in my room and gaze into it, trying to conjure her up. There were times when I thought I saw her in the flame, the blue in the orange and red, and once I burned myself reaching out to touch her; but it wasn't her. She never came back again. By the time I was ten or twelve, I'd convinced myself that I'd hallucinated it all.

I tap Katya on the shoulder and say, "Look over there." But when we look, she's no longer there.

"What was it?" she asks.

I'm confused, and leery. "Katya," I say, looking to the left and the right, "isn't this place -- Gorjemesto -- isn't this the place people see Mary?"

She shoots me a sideways glance and keeps walking. "The Catholics believe it, if that's what you mean. Some kids say they've been seeing her for years. Why do you ask?"

I keep my head down and follow her.

At the outskirts of Gorjemesto, it dawns on me that we are in a Croatian zone. We've crossed sides, like in an espionage thriller. Katya asks the first person we see, a woman walking up the grassy hill we're descending, where

the hospital is. The woman, covered by so many layers of rags she could be my age or a hundred, mutters something unintelligible and never breaks stride.

We go forward, to the more inhabited parts of the village. On one street, the remnants of a Catholic church and a mosque lie opposite each other, both buildings burned to the ground. In the soot and shattered glass of the mosque, a blonde-haired boy picks through the rubble. His legs straddle a bench and a tipped-over, blackened minaret. Katya walks over and asks about the hospital

"*Tamo je bolnica,*" he says, pointing beyond a conspicuous (because they're standing) group of one-storey houses, huddled together as if out of fear.

Katya thanks him. She calls me over and asks me to pull a pear out of her knapsack for the boy. "*Voliš kruške?*" she asks him.

The boy says yes, and I drop a fresh pear in his small, dirty hands. In fact, Katya's knapsack is packed full of fruit, and I feel like a thoughtless pig for not bringing anything myself.

We arrive at the hospital. I had thought, as anyone might when hearing the word, that "hospital" automatically implied a clean, sterilized medical facility with doors, windows and an intact roof. This isn't a hospital; it's a hurricane.

About fifty feet from the "main" entrance (that is, "the hole in the building), Katya rushes wildly ahead of me and enters the hospital. I follow her in a half-trot. She spots a haggard-looking doctor leaning back in a chair, eyes closed and arms folded behind her head. Katya, panting and speaking quickly, asks the doctor about Nurse Lovic, the one who wrote to her about Danny.

The doctor opens her eyes. Bloodshot. She informs us, in a hoarse whisper, that the nurse we're looking for is in the cafeteria.

Katya asks if Nurse Lovic is eating dinner.

The doctor grins knowingly and tells us Nurse Lovic is *making* dinner.

Bugs fly everywhere in the cafeteria. It's a large, cold room. Sparrows make their way in through the holes in the roof. At the far end of the room, a nurse stirs a giant pot of soup cooking over a fire. The soup doesn't smell.

Nurse Lovic is nothing like I pictured her: I'd imagined big and sturdy; she's barely five feet tall, and bone-thin. Katya speaks with the nurse in their own language, and the tears that quickly form in her green eyes sink my heart. The nurse nods sympathetically and goes on in a caring tone, stirring the pot with a long wooden spoon as she speaks. Her speech is loaded with medical and military terminology, and though I hurt my head trying, I cannot follow what she's saying.

Katya thanks the nurse. She motions for me to go outside with her. We sit on the steps leading into the cafeteria. "Mara," she says with a disheartened sigh, "Danilo's been in a coma for a few weeks now. It doesn't look good."

I bow my head, focus my eyes on a red stain on the ground, and try to brace myself. "Can we see him?" I ask.

"The nurse will take us to his room when she's finished making dinner. She told me what happened, how Danilo came to be here. She was afraid to tell me in a letter; she thought someone, our side or hers, would censor it."

She pauses, sticks her head between her knees, and lets out a moan

"It's bad. Very bad."

I cannot look away from the stain, nor can I close my eyes "Tell me."

She lifts her head. Out of the corner of my eye I see a sparrow hopping on the ground in front of us. "They took Danilo to Sarajevo He was posted up in the hills with the Bosnian Serbs there. I don't know if I can tell you this. No, I can't," she says, in a flat voice.

The sparrow claws at the red stain. "Tell me."

Katya waits a moment and says, "Alright." She sighs again. "The nurse told me the Serbs in Sarajevo were decapitating people with chainsaws. One morning, a commanding officer sent an entire unit into one house He ordered Danilo to execute the family. I don't know if I can say this Danilo had a gun held to his head. The officer said he'd shoot him if he didn't obey "

Stop, I want to say. Stop. Stop.

Katya's crying now; I can hear the tears hitting the ground like raindrops at the start of a storm. "Danilo killed the father. Then the mother and the older child. When it was the younger child's turn, something came over him, and he turned and charged at the commanding officer, plunging the chainsaw into his belly. Before the other soldiers could react, Danilo took the child, a nine-year-old Muslim girl, and escaped. Six days later, they arrived here together."

This can't be. When I speak again, it feels as if someone injected a fat dose of novocaine in my lips. "What happened to the girl?"

Katya doesn't say anything for a while. We watch the sparrow poke its beak in and out of empty paper cups. "The nurse said Danilo and the girl were taken care of here. Both were sedated. But the girl, whom they thought was in a severe state of shock, just vanished one night. She got out of bed, put her clothes on, and walked out. No one knows what happened to her."

We go back into the cafeteria. Nurse Lovic finishes ladling the odourless brown soup into brown plastic bowls. We help her load the cart with the trays. Danny's room is not the first on her rounds, so we have to wait while others are served their meals. It seems, to my untrained eye, that many of the patients have no physical wounds. When I mention this to Nurse Lovic, she proceeds to give me a running commentary on the patients.

This man found his four year-old son blown to bits by a mortar round; he was found trying to piece together the dead boy's body, thinking it might bring the child back to life.

That young woman, a Muslim, had a good-looking Serb fiancé before the war; now that he's on the other side, she thinks that he is stalking her, slinking murderously behind every corner, and she has a burning sensation in her back to prove it.

That girl came home from school one day to find her mother being raped by soldiers; when the mother begged her attackers not to do it in front of her daughter, they laughed and sat the girl down in the middle of the room, where she witnessed her mother being beaten to death.

Nurse Lovic says the patients are, for the most part, harmless, staring glassy-eyed all day long at nothing in particular. Many of them no longer flinch when the bombs land and the hospital trembles like a wet, hungry dog left out in the cold. She tells us this is what Danny was like, before the coma.

The next room is Danny's. The large policeman guarding the door sits in a straight-backed chair with a look of rancour on his face. A recently-polished revolver rests in his hand. For just a second, the gun frightens me, and then I almost laugh: in all my years living in Canada, I've never come face-to-face with a gun. Here, it must be commonplace, even for the youngest child.

When Katya and I try to pass into the room (following Nurse Lovic), the policeman stands. He's about to bar us from entering when Nurse Lovic snorts and says, "*Familje!*"

We walk into Danny's room, or rather, the room he is in. My brother shares cramped quarters with five others -- three men, one woman, and one burn victim wrapped up so completely that I can't tell. The thick stench of overflowing bedpans is suffocating, an assault on the nose, the eyes and the stomach. I look around the room a second time, and am embarrassed to say that I don't know my brother.

Katya knows. She goes to her husband and reaches out for the bare arm hanging over the side of the narrow bed. She pulls back and looks at the nurse, whose nod tells her it's alright to touch him. She caresses his arm, and then takes his hand in hers, bending over to rub his fingers on her cheek.

He's my little brother. I walk to the other side of the bed. His eyes are closed. Flies swarm his head. He doesn't look at all like the pictures Katya showed me just yesterday. He's rotted away. His arms, in the sleeveless blue hospital pajamas, are white and spindly; his fingers are crooked yellow pencils. Even his bearded face, ostensibly at rest, is twisted into a grotesque, agonized smile. Danny. The handsome young man in the wedding pictures. My father was right -- it's all luck, look what bad luck did to my little brother. But I can't. My arms are stuck at my sides. I can't. I cannot touch him. I cannot connect this man -- this unconscious, hairy war criminal with the weird, shiny grease on his forehead -- I cannot connect this man to the baby who used to lick my nose.

This is not my brother.

When Katya throws her head on his chest and begins sobbing loudly, I feel like an intruder. I step out of the room.

The policeman looks up at the click of the door opening. He gives me a look of unblemished hatred and tightens his grip around the gun. *Hello, I know you, you're related to the Serb madman; he's my enemy, and so are you.*

I walk quickly down the long corridor and arrive at an unexpected exit. I peek outside and see a vacant courtyard. The debris-filled lawn is surrounded on all sides by dilapidated hospital walls.

Behind me, I see the policeman advancing rapidly, my heart a magnet to his gun, held high and leading the way. *Hello.* Every angry footstep pounds a rivet into the floor.

I go into the yard. It's bright outside. I scramble along the peeling walls, thinking there may be another doorway I can pass through; there is nothing.

The policeman walks into the courtyard.

"I'm not from here," I say, too quietly to be heard. "I want to go home." I fall to my knees and keep my eyes lowered.

In a few seconds, the policeman's shoes trample the grass and garbage directly in front of me. *Hello*. Without looking up, I know the gun is aimed at my heart. I stare at the ground.

Smoke rises from beneath his shoes. And then more smoke, and more, until he himself notices and moves his feet. In the cleared-out piece of earth he has revealed, a tiny spark appears. The spark erupts into a huge flame, rising a hundred feet in the air and spanning the width of the entire courtyard.

Through the orange and red, I see him step back slowly in wide-eyed astonishment. He turns and runs back into the hospital.

In the orange and red, I see the blue.

20

We make it back across the border easily. Although my plane ticket has an open return date, I want to leave as soon as possible. Katya understands.

When we arrive at the bus "place" in Novi Selo, Katya asks me if I'd like to go into town with her. It's still early, and she wants to take me to the café where she and Danny used to go almost every Sunday. "They have very good sangria," she says, trying to convince me.

Well, red wine laced with sugar and assorted fruits just might hit the spot right now, so I agree to join her.

We walk into town. In the past few days, I've racked up more mileage on my feet than I have in the past ten years. I don't mind it here. The people, the buildings, even the dogs and cats of Novi Selo, seem sleepy and peaceful. I can see how Katya and Danny could have been happy here, with a bit of luck. Katya says she will not forget him, and that she'll wait forever, if necessary.

Upon entering the café, I experience a strong sense of *déjà vu*. We sit by the window. A ratty old speaker pipes out a folk song by someone I used to listen to. After a lengthy period of time, a waiter comes by and asks us, with a sneer on his pointy face, what we want to order. I think of *By the Way*, my old hangout from high school, and I think of Krushalya, and how I didn't return her letters for two whole years after she left because I was so mad. But eventually I smartened up and wrote back. The last time I heard from her, about a year ago, she was attending university in southern California, environmental science, I think, and urging me to stop wasting my life on old ghosts and come visit her. I'll look her up when I get home. We have a lot to catch up on.

It's been so long since I've looked forward to anything. My life has been a sleepwalk. Eating, working, even dating, like a zombie. History is a terrible burden to carry around. But can I know anything else? Sisyphus would be temporarily confused if someone released him from rolling that rock up the hill, but wouldn't he eventually learn to live again?

We drink the sangria in relative silence. Katya asks me if I've opened the parcel my father left me. I tell her I haven't, that it's still in my overnight bag. She smiles and gives me an understanding look.

Just as we finish the tall pitcher -- it was quite tasty -- Katya spots a boy walking alone on the sidewalk outside. She bangs hard on the window with her fist (the waiter gives us a nasty look). The boy sees Katya, runs into the café, and hugs her.

His name is Alex. He's wearing a green and black striped t-shirt with number seven on the back, black shorts with matching knee-high socks, and clicking cleats. He's full of energy, shuffling his small but stocky frame back and forth on his feet, the spikes scratching the café floor (another nasty look from you-know-who). Katya says Alex was Danny's favourite pupil when he was teaching. Alex blushes when he hears this, and Katya messes up his hair for him. There's a bright, puckish quality about this boy; I find myself unable to wipe the smile off my face. I can just see him hiding under a younger sister's bed at night, waiting for her to fall asleep, and then making scary, deep-voiced, I'm-going-to-get-you monster noises. And when his bleary-eyed parents show up in their nightgowns to investigate the ruckus, he charms his way out of a spanking, too.

Katya asks him how his soccer team is doing. He shrugs half-heartedly, looks down and doesn't say anything, and Katya and I both laugh.

An enthusiastic smile splashes onto his round face when he suddenly remembers something. He tells us his team, the one Danny coached last year, is playing this afternoon. He's on his way to the stadium now, and he wants to know if we'll come and watch him. The idea excites Katya, but she waits for me to answer.

I say yes.

It's a beautiful day. The sun is out again. Alex walks between Katya and me, holding our hands while coaxing a speedier pace out of us.

At the stadium, Alex leaves us for the dressing room. Katya and I climb into the stands and see that the playing field is muddy from the previous day's rain. The stands are packed with the classmates and parents of the players, some of whom are loosening up on the sidelines with deep-knee bends. Katya points out Alex, number seven, who stops doing the warm-up exercises every time his coach looks away. He's easily the shortest player on the team, though he's more robust-looking than most of the others. A real Soccerhead.

The referee blows the whistle, and the game begins. Alex is almost lost in the crush of jerseys, dwarfed by the bigger players who elbow him aside for the ball.

After a while my mind wanders to other things. What day is it? I decide to open my father's parcel. In the crowded stands, a bunch of black and white photographs spill into my lap. The pictures are of my parents, of Danny, and of me. In one of them, I'm sitting in the park holding Danny in my arms. There is a big black dog sniffing around in the background. I show the photo to Katya, and she smiles.

In the final picture, my mother is posing alone in front of a glaring statue, a general, perhaps. It had to be taken in Yugoslavia, she looks so young, only eighteen or twenty. Her eyes are hopeful.

I look in the envelope for anything else, and see that a single sheet of paper is stuck at the bottom. I scoop it out. It's written in a shaky, old man's handwriting. It's in English. "Forgive me."

A small tremor rushes through the crowd, and some of the people close by stand up. Katya nudges me in the ribs and says, "Look! Number seven! Breakaway!"

We both stand.

I see Alex racing towards the other team's net, with no one between him and the goaltender. He's smiling from ear to ear. A few strides back, a much taller defender unleashes his long legs and gains ground on him.

Alex runs steadily, if unspectacularly, onward. The goaltender, crouched and ready to pounce, edges out of the net for a better angle. The defender has almost caught up to Alex by now, and people are yelling for him to shoot before it's too late, even Katya shouts for him to kick the ball, and this looks like what Alex intends to do, except at the last moment he's tripped up from behind. His knees give out and he stumbles, and he's going to land on his face, but as he's falling he stretches his leg out as far as he can. He gets the toe of his shoe in under the ball, and he chips it up over the lunging goaltender. The ball flies up, eludes the goaltender's grasp and comes down in the net, lost in the mesh.

Number seven is mobbed by his happy teammates, who slap his back and help him brush the mud off his shorts.

Katya and I turn and embrace one another. The warm autumn sun feels good on my face.

THE END.